Journal of Posthumanism
Summer 2024
Volume: 4, No: 2, pp. 61–70
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/jp
TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 29 June 2024 Accepted: 7 June 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v4i2.3356

Introduction

Jana-Katharina Burnikel, Joachim Frenk, Anne Hess[1]

In parallel to the evolution of the multivocal critical debate around it, the posthuman has increasingly invaded everyday life over the last 50-odd years. In the 2020s, posthuman encounters are, for large parts of humanity, occurrences in multiple areas of everyday life. The number of artificially created entities, some of which are ever more indistinguishable from their human creators, has multiplied. The human body has become the focal point of enhancements that call hitherto largely unchallenged notions about its humanness into question, from prosthetic joint replacements and the medical procedures enabling them to the promises of genetic engineering and neurotechnology. In diverse realities, some of them augmented and virtual, the human brain is constantly challenged to decide between who is organic and what is artificial, what is technological and who is made of (genetically unmanipulated) flesh, and whether the analysis of the what and/or the who can help to decipher the language of human emotions and behaviour. Imagined encounters between the contested human and its posthuman others provide a contact zone between two categories. As some of the essays in this special issue argue, in this contact zone new entities may emerge that collapse any rigid binary, and the cultural imagination has long been at work conceiving their opportunities and dangers.

The core terms and categories of the posthuman debate are vigorously contested while the mediated omnipresence of artificial intelligence (another contested term) applications, both real and, for the time being, fictional, takes up more and more space of the public discourse. Prominent examples from the early 2020s include autonomous vehicles, the 'metaverse', Sora, DALL-E, ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri. At the same time, the human body's posthumanness is revealed to be one of its oldest features, which cautions against any understanding of the posthuman that is too fixated on technology: "Only about ten percent of cells in the human body contain human DNA; most of the rest are part of a vast community of companion species, particularly bacteria and viruses" (Smart & Smart, 2023, 1; see also Raffaeta 2022). Has the human always already been informed by non- or posthuman others? Is the posthuman a feature (not a bug) of the human itself? Are posthuman encounters more than anything else confrontations of the human with itself – always in search of its own definition? It is one of the aims of this special issue to analyse and interpret cultural productions that imagine a multitude of posthuman encounters and that constitute significant interventions in a multiplicity of discursive fields. Closely reading these posthuman encounters in their different contexts, the following essays pay particular attention to the intricately encoded desires and fears attendant on them, which together engender the uncanny.

[1] All three are located at the Universität des Saarlandes, Germany. E-mail: anne.hess@uni-saarland.de; frenk@mx.uni-saarland.de; j.burnikel@mx.uni-saarland.de

A google search for "posthuman encounters" yields about 1380 results,[2] so the term itself is already established – there is only a slim chance to come up with a new critical term in the age of digitally exploded intertextuality. Ihab Hassan's seminal 1977 essay "Prometheus as performer: Toward a posthumanist culture?" is considered to be one of the very first academic publications in which the adjective "posthumanist" and the noun "posthumanism" were used.[3] Hassan shows that some of the underlying claims and questions of this special issue have been asked and put forward for quite some time:

Will artificial intelligences supersede the human brain, rectify it, or simply extend its powers? We do not know. But this we do know: Artificial intelligences, from the humblest calculator to the most transcendent computer, help to transform the image of man, the concept of the human. They are agents of a new posthumanism. (Hassan, 1977, 846)

Certainly, we must bear in mind the essay's self- and academia-mocking subtitle: "A university masque in five scenes": Hassan couched his reflections on the posthuman condition in a mock-dramatic script, and this applies also to his lament about the all-too-familiar fragmentariness of the 1970s:

[T]he more Marshall McLuhan proclaims 'the global village,' or Buckminster Fuller 'spaceship earth,' or Norman O. Brown 'the mystic body of mankind,' the more Jacques Derrida and his *confrères* insist upon *différance* and the metaphysics of fragments.

The news, alas, seems to favour Derrida. Our planet continually splinters, breaks, according to ideology, religion, class, race, language, sex, and age. (Hassan, 1977, 833)

Over the last five decades, more thinkers, theorists and critical vocabularies have been added to the list, but Hassan's general observation still holds true in the ongoing twenty-first century, in the face of unequally distributed wealth and looming ecological collapse. The idea of posthumanism tends to come with a macabre punch line, which enriches its fascination for all kinds of neo- or postapocalyptic cultural products, in a phantasmatic range from exclusive high culture to technologically cutting-edge and commercially successful mass culture – streaming-service dystopias delivered to living rooms and portable screens and thus made consumable, displaceable, perhaps even manageable. At the same time, the posthumanist debate and the posthuman encounters that it entails continue to hold immense utopian potential.

The jury is still out on what the "post" in posthumanism actually indicates. Can we read this "post" in analogy to the "post" in postcolonialism? "Post" would then signify on two main levels: firstly, in direct translation of the Latin prefix *post*, on the level of a chronological and intellectual "after" / "following" humanism, and secondly, on the level of an oppositional "counter" / "against" humanism. In any case, posthumanism (like its discursive other, transhumanism) remains dialectically tied to humanism. Humanism is, of course, another free-floating signifier that has meant and continues to mean different things to different people at different times in different cultures. As can be expected from a relatively new critical discourse such as posthumanism that centres on a protean term like humanism, the critical vocabulary and the arguments surrounding posthumanism are copious. Francesca Ferrando describes the discursive proliferation:

'Posthuman' has become an umbrella term to refer to a variety of different movements and schools of thought, including philosophical, cultural, and critical posthumanism; transhumanism (in its

[2] The result dates from 14 April 2024.
[3] See for instance Clarke and Rossini, 2017, xi-xiii and their reference to McGurl, 2012.

variations of extropianism, liberal and democratic transhumanism, among others); the feminist approach of new materialisms; the heterogeneous landscape of antihumanism, metahumanism, metahumanities, and posthumanities. Such a generic and all-inclusive use of the term has created methodological and theoretical confusion between experts and non-experts alike. (Ferrando, 2013, 26)

The mushrooming of isms that surrounds the posthumanism debate is reminiscent of the debate about modernism with its flurry of post-impressionism, futurism, fauvism, imagism, vorticism, Dadaism, formalism, cubism, surrealism – at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were isms wherever one looked. This inflation of isms was at best a vigorous debate in the search of the much-needed new, at worst, a succession of intellectual marketing exercises. One may harbour a similar suspicion with regard to the twenty-first century's multitude of isms, but one may also extend the analogy to modernism to the serious core of the debate: What unravels in real time is no less than a negotiation of our understanding of ourselves and of the world around us whose complexity constantly increases as it is shaped by us, and a negotiation of the encounters between the two. The handbooks on posthumanism that have been published over the last years help us grasp the definitional scope and disciplinary bandwidth of posthumanism that has evolved over the last thirty years or so, a bandwidth that runs across a spectrum extending from a rather mild dissatisfaction with the project of humanism all the way to visions of a future without human beings.[4]

Posthuman encounters come with and are performed as focal points of desires and fears. Analysing the encounters between the human with its supposedly post-other, we are also revisiting Katherine Hayles's question: "What to make of this shift from the human to the posthuman, which evokes terror and excites pleasure?" (1999, 4). Hayles's question is part of, and subordinated to, her pursuit of *How We Became Posthuman*. Desires and fears are phenomena of nature and nurture, anthropologic and psychological givens as well as culturally variable phenomena that can only be analysed and interpreted via thick descriptions and an astute critical awareness. Desires and fears also feed into the uncanny, the third term in the subtitle of this special issue, which has become particularly productive for the analysis of posthuman encounters. In an essay first published in 1970, the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori proposed the term "the uncanny valley" to describe a range of responses of human beings to humanoid robots – arguably, a form of posthuman encounters. Up to a certain turning point, Mori claims, humans see robots as appealing, but from that point onwards, the more humanoid the robots become in look and behaviour, the more rapidly the illusion collapses, and humans find themselves disturbed and repelled by their technological others. In his essay, Mori starts from an observation: "I have noticed that, in climbing toward the goal of making robots appear human, our affinity for them increases until we come to a valley […], which I call the *uncanny valley*" (Mori, 2012). Locating industrial, non-humanoid robots at the point of indifference to humans, Mori proceeds:

[…] a toy robot's designer may focus more on the robot's appearance than its functions. Consequently, despite its being a sturdy mechanical figure, the robot will start to have a roughly human-looking external form with a face, two arms, two legs, and a torso. Children seem to feel deeply attached to these toy robots. Hence, the toy robot is shown halfway up the first hill. (Mori, 2012)

In the following, Mori seeks to explain when and why this attachment can flip into its opposite:

[4] See Herbrechter et al., 2022; Mangattu, 2023; Rosendahl Thomsen & Wamberg, 2022.

One might say that the prosthetic hand has achieved a degree of resemblance to the human form, perhaps on a par with false teeth. However, when we realize the hand, which at first sight looked real, is in fact artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. For example, we could be startled during a handshake by its limp boneless grip together with its texture and coldness. When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny. (Mori, 2012)

Discussing the uncanniness of prosthetic hands, Mori does not take into account that the hand is first and, we would argue, foremost, experienced as detached from a body. Onlookers may realize only afterwards that the detached hand is robotic. For Mori, the eerie sensation caused by the hand only sets in when the human realises that the hand is artificial. This seems questionable: A number of horror films, for instance, have shown severed human hands moving at their own volition, independently from their owner's body. Mori's following point also seems debatable:

I don't think that, on close inspection, a *bunraku* puppet appears very similar to a human being. Its realism in terms of size, skin texture, and so on, does not even reach that of a realistic prosthetic hand. But when we enjoy a puppet show in the theater, we are seated at a certain distance from the stage. The puppet's absolute size is ignored, and its total appearance, including hand and eye movements, is close to that of a human being. So, given our tendency as an audience to become absorbed in this form of art, we might feel a high level of affinity for the puppet. (Mori, 2012)

At this point, Mori disregards the fact that non-Japanese readers will likely not know *bunraku* puppets, let alone their specific cultural import. They may never have become "absorbed in this form of art", and hence their culturally differently coded responses will not be the same as Mori's. Their theories and perception of what constitutes a perspectival size, a total appearance, and hand and eye movements that are close to a human being may be different from his. Overall, Mori's line of argument, first put forward more than 50 years ago, is generally impressionistic and more attractive when taken in its most general form, as food for thought, and not all too convincing in its details. The uncanny valley is not a substantiated scientific model; it is a rough-hewn yet open idea – which is probably the reason why many keep finding it intriguing and/or provocative and are using it to imagine the category of the human that is invested, preserved or annihilated in human-made, non-human technology, running the gamut between the extremes of full identity and complete otherness, illustrated by figures like the *Doppelgänger* and the monster – and of course, both of these can collapse into each other.

Mori's uncanny valley invites us to sound its signifying potential on different levels. Anna Wiener, for instance, has fathomed the uncanny valley by applying the term to her experiences working at a Silicon Valley start-up from 2012:

Depending on whom you ask, it was either the apex, the inflection point, or the beginning of the end for Silicon Valley's startup scene—what cynics called a bubble, optimists called the future, and my future coworkers, high on the fumes of world-historical potential, breathlessly called the ecosystem. A social network everyone said they hated but no one could stop logging into went public at a valuation of one-hundred-odd billion dollars, its grinning founder ringing the opening bell over video chat, a death knell for affordable rent in San Francisco. Two hundred million people signed on to a microblogging platform that helped them feel close to celebrities and other strangers they'd loathe in real life. Artificial intelligence and virtual reality were coming into vogue, again. Self-driving cars were considered inevitable. Everything was moving to mobile. Everything was up in the cloud. The cloud was an unmarked data center in the middle of Texas or Cork or Bavaria, but nobody cared. Everyone trusted it anyway. (Wiener, 2020, 3)

At first glance, Anna Wiener's uncanny experiences in the weird world of Silicon Valley, in the belly of the high-tech-beast, seem rather removed from theories of the uncanny, for instance from Sigmund Freud's seminal definition of the uncanny as the return of the repressed. But are they really? In Freud's own words from his 1919 essay "The uncanny": "The uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed" (Freud, 2003, 155). The return of the abject, of what has been repressed, obscured, marginalized, is unsettling and fascinating (see also Kristeva, 1982). Those who experience it vacillate between repulsion and attraction – which corresponds to Anna Wiener's experiences and eventual rejection of Silicon Valley's posthuman (and at the same time, all-too-human) sociotope.

Again, Wiener's focus on technology is at the same time illuminating and potentially limiting. As Nicholas Royle points out, the signifying potential of the uncanny far exceeds the digitech revolution:

The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird, and the mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself […] seems strangely questionable. […] It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was 'part of nature': one's own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (Royle, 2003, 1)

The "feelings of uncertainty" that are characteristic of the uncanny come to the fore in the observation of posthuman encounters whose oscillating between the human and the posthuman corresponds to that between the natural and the supernatural. The denaturalizing and decentring experience of the uncanny, its questioning of human identity, links it to Pramod Nayar's definition of critical posthumanism as the "*radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent, and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines*" (Nayar, 2014, 2; italics in the original).

But is the human still evolving with new forms of existence at a pace that allows it to remain recognisably itself, or is the transition from the human into the posthuman inevitable in a world of endless exponential acceleration? What cultural phantasms are being generated to speculate into the posthuman void? Answers to these questions are attempted, revised and discarded in many fictions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, for instance in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), a cinematic variation on Philip Dick's 1968 post-apocalyptic novel about the receding borderline between human beings and their humanoid creations (see Dick 2010). One of the film's posthuman encounters is set in a derelict hotel in the ruins of Las Vegas. It is replete with human and posthuman reverberations. K, an android blade runner who kills his own kind and hopes that he may be somewhat human and have 'real' memories, encounters the aged Rick Deckard, a retired human blade runner. Deckard has had an affair with an android which has led to the birth of a daughter, considered impossible since androids are sterile. K finds Deckard in an abandoned luxury hotel. When Deckard tries to kill K in the hotel's abandoned concert hall, the entertainment programme starts running in the darkened room, and K finds himself surrounded by malfunctioning holograms.[5] The hologram apparitions recreate the golden age of the US entertainment industry: Marilyn Monroe flashes up, and the intradiegetic soundtrack of the scene is provided by a hologram of Elvis Presley, anything but live from Las Vegas. The hologram Elvis first sings highly fragmentary

[5] The passage of *Blade Runner 2049* extends from 01:42:38 to 01:56:42 (Fancher, Green and Villeneuve, 2017).

bits of "Suspicious minds" and then, in more identifiable fragments, "Can't help falling in love with you", both song titles commenting on the film's plot. The fight between K and Deckard is staged against the background of Elvis and early 1970s show dancers literally on stage, stuck in an endless loop. The posthuman hotel encounter between killer android and killer human is suffused with memorabilia of a way of living that is, in the film's fiction, nostalgically recreated, sublimated and ironized by the presence of iconic figures and sounds of classic US-American popular culture. In the same vein, Frank Sinatra, a hologram under glass, sings "Summer wind", and K watches another Sinatra hologram performance of "One for my baby (and one for the road)." While the bygone entertainment icons sing of love, the only romantic relationship beyond power interests in the film develops between two non-human entities, an android and a disembodied artificial intelligence.

The derelict hotel in post-nuclear war Las Vegas in which K and Deckard meet can be read as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a place and space in a dystopian world that has not eliminated the human biologically, but ethically. The human and the humane have largely been wiped out; they merely linger on in nostalgic simulacra and in occasional actions of both humans and posthumans. The uncanny valley of this posthuman encounter seems to be created not by the android who learns to be human, but by humans who seek to eliminate their humanity as best they can. The most humane act in the film is K's enabling of the reunion between Deckard, the human father, and his half-human/posthuman daughter, an act that seems to entail the loss of K's own physical existence. In the end, we see K lying in the snow, probably dying, but at peace with himself (Fancher, Green and Villeneuve, 2017, 02:30:19–02:31:57). K's death scene in *Blade Runner 2049* is also a respectful filmic gesture towards a previous posthuman encounter in the same storyverse, the death scene of the replicant Roy Batty in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* film from 1982. Like K later, Batty also saves Deckard's life and delivers his famous "tears in rain"-monologue before his programmed death (Fancher, Peoples and Scott, 1982/2007, 01:46:20–01:47:20). Posthumans like K and Roy Batty know how to die good deaths in sentimentally saturated scenes.

Are fictions of posthuman encounters efforts to grasp what constitutes the human in high modernity? They could then be seen as attempts to solve the definitional conundrum of the human *ex negativo*. Or are they crystallizing points of a discourse that speculates about the possibly impending demise of the human? As the following essays demonstrate, the genres, contexts and ideological investments of fictions of posthuman encounters change, but many of the ideas and questions they pose have been around for a long time, and many fictions of the 21st century offer intertextual references to other fictions, and this intertextually rich discourse, which extends into discourses commonly accepted as non-fictional, deserves the keenest critical attention.

In the first essay of this special issue, Christian Krug traces the dispositions of sentimentality in pop-cultural TV series featuring posthuman encounters. His essay, "*Westworld* and *humans*: The sentimental disposition of popular posthumanism" explores how these examples of 21st-century quality TV drama borrow from scripts of 18th-century sensibilities and 19th-century sentimental texts, such as melodrama, to construct and challenge the posthuman condition. Krug's essay highlights how these shows employ tonalities of sentimentality not merely to reproduce them in the posthuman context. Rather, the self-reflexive nature of the narratives of *Humans* and *Westworld* reveals how the series' sentimentalizations of themes such as family bonds and suffering are riven by contradictions and ambiguities, thereby challenging our notions of empathy towards posthuman relationships. As such, sentimentalizations serve not only as strategies of containment but also as rhetorical instruments that reflect on questions of social hierarchies and that create a sense of longing for human exceptionalism in posthuman fictional universes.

Human exceptionalism, tied to the idea of human self-optimization, lies at the centre of Dunja Mohr's essay "Homo CRISPR and the uncanny art of self-reproduction." Mohr traces notions of transhuman self-enhancement in selected texts from the *fin de siècle* to the second half of the 20th century, including E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Villier de L'Isle-Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve*, and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Mohr reads all of these as literal prefigurations of artificial body- and self-modifications and as showcases of how the inner striving for the perfected (male) human self is constructed and reproduced through the means of the externalized, female, artificial and uncanny 'other'. These artificial 'others' are imperatively bound to the composite selves of their creators and, in some texts, self and other even are merged, giving rise to a monstrous self-other identity inherent in both the genre of the (neo-)gothic and in the posthuman condition. Mohr's primary texts can thus be interpreted as precursors to the dangerous and promising potential of gene editing techniques like CRISPR that will ultimately pave the path to "new human 'germlined' selves."

Textual prefigurations of human enhancement, especially physical devices created to stimulate the brain and humans' cognitive abilities, are examined in Kevin LaGrandeur's article on "The promise and peril of emerging technology for brain enhancement." LaGrandeur explores the boundaries between the transhuman and posthuman conditions by raising issues concerning the societal and ethical implications of supposedly enhancing technologies when these are coupled with the human brain. While brain-stimulating devices and computer-brain interfaces, such as Elon Musk's Neuralink and transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), promise the expansion of physical and cognitive capabilities, the essay highlights the questions of (post-)human autonomy and agency that arise concomitantly. LaGrandeur weighs the potential threats of these advancing technologies against the chances of extensions of human health- and lifespans, embedding this debate into popular sci-fi texts preceding and announcing the arrival of these technologies, such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Dick's short story "We can remember it for you wholesale."

While encounters with androids and humanoid AI bear the potential to evoke unease in human observers, Cordula Lemke's essay "Of information superhighways, sexbots, friends: The delights of the uncanny" suggests a different approach: According to Lemke's argument, higher and more intense engagements between humans and posthuman agents will gradually lead to a greater familiarity and acceptance of our artificial counterparts. Although humanoid AI is rendered ultimately uncanny through its almost-but-not-quite perfected reproduction of human mimics, gestures, and behaviour within Masahiro Mori's concept of the uncanny valley, Lemke draws on the fictional AIs in Spike Jonze's *Her*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* as representations of philanthropic posthuman entities. Linking humans' seemingly inherent scepticism towards novel technologies to preconditioned historical attitudes rooted in, for example, postcolonialism, Lemke discusses how these fictional imaginings of AI highlight our lack of knowledge regarding the predictability and control of AI agents. Lemke argues that due to this lack of knowledge and genuine interest, humans may miss the opportunity to view AI as a potential avenue for peaceful posthuman coexistence. She calls for more human openness in the encounters with posthuman others.

Stephan Laqué's essay "AI at Elsinore: What Horatio can teach us about artificial intelligence" explores how discourses on artificial intelligence and posthuman agency traverse one of the most canonical texts of early modern theatre. Laqué proposes a reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which the manifestation of the ghost of Hamlet's father and even more so the character of Horatio can be

interpreted as examples of performative configurations that serve as arenas for assessing human intelligence and the human itself. Through carefully contextualising close readings, Laqué carves out how Horatio's reduced and highly artificial mimicry of human behaviour qualifies him as a prototype of a primitive software program or a robot operating on an algorithmic sequence of low complexity. As such, Horatio is incapable of understanding or interpreting the motives of his fellow characters on stage. His ultimate failure to comprehend the complexity of human motives prefigures today's inadequacies and limitations of AI in reproducing the richness of the inner lives of human beings.

The inadequacies of AI, with a particular focus on its potential monstrousness and resulting ambiguity, are investigated by Jana Burnikel in her essay "Screening posthuman procreation and uncanny motherhood in *Raised by Wolves*". In the HBO series *Raised by Wolves*, a female android is programmed to fulfil the social role of a mother for a colony of human children. However, as Burnikel argues, the portrayal of the maternal performances of the protagonist character 'Mother' is framed as uncanny and gives rise to a shapeshifting monstrous-feminine figure, a *femme castratrice*. To enhance this notion, the series aesthetically ties the artificial mother-monster to representations of hyperbolic cleanliness, particularly in a birth scene, as a twisted version of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. Ultimately, Mother's triple identity of mother, monster, and machine is constructed as a weapon against the power claims of patriarchal science, thereby inviting viewers to consider the future of the female body and its procreative function in a posthuman world.

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2021 novel *Klara and the Sun* sheds light on future posthuman-human relationships and the artificial enactment of care. In her article "Posthuman encounters and patterns of care in *Klara and the Sun* (2021) or, what Ishiguro's AI tells us about the uncanny valley", Diane Leblond examines how the novel's rhetorical style, presenting the AI Klara as a narrative voice with internal focalization, subverts readers' notions of AI as distant and complete others. Thus, Klara becomes the representative of what Leblond calls the "uncanny valley of the mind": Klara's existence is rooted in the young girl Josie's illness, which is caused by genetic enhancement, and Klara's prime purpose is to serve as a backup of Josie's consciousness. Ishiguro's novel confronts us with the unsettling potential of humanoid AI to replicate individual human identities, or souls, rather than merely becoming their physical doppelgangers.

Heike Mißler's "'They are here. They are everywhere. They are us.' – Posthuman encounters in Samanta Schweblin's *Little Eyes* (2018)" offers a close reading of a 1984 scenario of an updated and unnervingly cuddlified kind. In *Little Eyes*, consumers across the globe are happy to survey themselves – or choose to be the ones surveilled. The vehicles for this surveillance are kentukis, animal-shaped cute little robots that are presented as posthuman others. Not quite domestic animals, not quite robots and inhabited with a seemingly human consciousness, the kentukis blur the ontological boundaries, recalling Donna Haraway's concepts of the cyborg and the companion species. The novel's set-up allows for the analysis of the undefinable status of technology in its user's lives, the implications of capitalism and relentless commodification especially of new technologies. For Mißler, *Little Eyes* leaves its readers with the question whether it offers a truly posthuman vision of the world – or whether its conclusions fall back on classic dystopic (and anthropocentric) narratives.

In "Fungal intelligence and the posthuman: Mycohuman art, entangled theory, and fungi in (eco-)gothic narratives", Susanne Gruß analyses fiction's and non-fiction's current fascination with mushrooms and fungi. She showcases how the ever-present fears of the instability of identity and bodily integrity are figured in mycohuman fictions, where fungi, protean and transgressive forces, dissolve the boundaries between the human and the fungal other. Building on the scientific

capabilities of fungi and their (utopian) representations in popular non-fiction texts, especially in art, Gruß investigates fungi in recent fiction, drawing in particular on Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty* (2018) and Silvia Garcia-Moreno's *Mexican Gothic* (2020). The texts approach their fungal others in quite different ways while sharing an interest in the representational and symbolic powers of these posthuman others, which seem to question patriarchal structures via the Gothic. Gruß's essay contextualises these gothic influences and the parallels between the posthuman fungi hybrids and gothic monsters.

The essays that end our collection thematically move towards the end of the universe or even beyond, tackling spatial and ecocritical as well as posthuman concerns. In "'The scrapyard at the end of the universe': Waste spaces as incubators for uncanny AI in the *Doctor Who* episode 'The Doctor's wife'", Anne Hess discusses how this episode raises questions of anthropocentrism and human survival amidst ecological disaster via its setting on a trash asteroid outside the universe. The wasted and ruined asteroid space is ruled over by an entity called House, who hunts TARDISes as power sources and poses a grave danger not only to his ship, but also to the Doctor himself, thus opening up the debate of trans- versus posthumanism. The confrontation becomes even more pronounced when the embodiment of the TARDIS represents an idealised posthuman other. Negotiating between posthuman theory, abjection and waste theory, Hess questions the representations of consumption and sustainability, trash and recycling, and the eventual containment of posthuman others screened in "The Doctor's wife."

From the (trashed) end of the universe it is just a small step to the last essay in this collection, which offers afterlives the eschatologies of the ancient world could not have dreamed of: In "The digital hereafter, or: Nirvana in the cloud" Dirk Vanderbeke is concerned with fictional variations and imaginations of mind-uploads and mind transplants which enable life after death. Setting out from a discussion of the technological and biological preconditions of such uploads, Vanderbeke analyses and compares different literary fictions from the last 20 years, in particular Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, and Greg Evans's *Permutation City*, touching on episodes of *Black Mirror*. Vanderbeke posits that the different approaches come back to one question: Where is our humanity located? And following from this: What are humans? Are they matter, meat, flesh, or are they electrical impulses, immaterial data, ghosts in the machine? Do they evade and exceed all these categorisations? Vanderbeke thus ends on the question raised, in one form or another, by all these essays on posthuman encounters and which we, for now, remain incapable of answering.

References

Clarke, B. & Rossini, M. (Eds.) (2017). *The Cambridge companion to literature and the posthuman*. Cambridge University Press.

Dick, Philip K. (2010). *Do androids dream of electric sheep?* Gollancz. (Original work published 1968)

Fancher, H., & Green, M. (Writers), & Villeneuve, D. (Director). (2017). *Blade runner 2049* [Film]. Alcon Entertainment; Columbia Pictures; Scott Free Productions.

Fancher, H., & Peoples, D. (Writers), & Scott, R. (Director). (2007). *Blade runner: The final cut* [Film]. The Ladd Company; Shaw Brothers; Blade Runner Partnership. (Original work published 1982)

Ferrando, F. (2013). Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms: Differences and relations. *Existenz*, *8*(2), 26–32.

Freud, S. (2003). *The uncanny*. (D. McLintock, Trans.), (pp. 122–62). Penguin. (Original work published 1919)

Hassan, I. H. (1977). Prometheus as performer: Toward a posthumanist culture? A university masque in five scenes. *Georgia Review*, *31*(4), 830–50.

Herbrechter, S., et al. (Eds.) (2022). *Palgrave handbook of critical posthumanism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press.
Mangattu, M. (Ed.) (2023). *A critical companion to posthumanism and digital humanities*. All India Forum.
McGurl, M. (2012). The posthuman comedy, *Critical Inquiry*, *38*(1), 533–53.
Mori, M. (2012). The uncanny valley. *IEEE Spectrum*, 12 June 2012. https://spectrum.ieee.org/the-uncanny-valley (Original work published 1970)
Nayar, P. K. (2014). *Posthumanism*. Polity Press.
Raffaeta, R. (2022). *Metagenomic futures: How microbiome research is reconfiguring health and what it means to be human*. Taylor & Francis.
Rosendahl Thomsen, M. & Wamberg, J. (Eds.) (2022). *The Bloomsbury handbook of posthumanism*. Bloomsbury.
Royle, N. (2003). *The uncanny*. Manchester University Press.
Smart, A. & Smart, J. (2023). *Posthumanism: Anthropological insights*. University of Toronto Press.
Wiener, A. (2020). *Uncanny valley: Seduction and disillusionment in San Francisco's startup scene*. 4th Estate.