

Posthuman Heroes

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1. Introduction: “Gotta make way for the homo superior”

Posthuman figures in contemporary popular culture have heroic potential: Their physical strength transcends human limitations, and some possess a more comprehensive intelligence. However, they can only develop this potential if they are granted agency beyond human control. This is not yet the case in their romantic precursors, such as Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. At least in Western mainstream popular culture, it is only with the movie *Blade Runner* (1982) which can be seen as a turning point in allowing for a posthuman figure who does not bow to the control of the actual (possibly human) protagonist. The murderous guerrilla-replicant Roy Batty discovers his ‘humanity’ – in a moral, rather than in a biological sense – from within himself, thereby becoming an [anti-hero figure](#) that problematises an easy division between the human and the human-made, artificially intelligent machine. In the sequel from 2017, Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049*, this

ethical 'humanisation' of a non-human hero is again strongly enhanced, as in this movie, it is the protagonist who is from the outset clearly a replicant, while the post-human / human identity of Harrison Ford's Deckard is kept in an ambiguous limbo in the original movie.

Ryan Gosling's tragic hero officer K in *Blade Runner 2049* is, however, by far not the first posthuman entity to gain protagonist (or heroic) status in contemporary popular culture. In the 21st century, the unconditional control of the human being in a posthuman life-world has become increasingly negotiable. From a multitude of films and TV series with diverse posthuman characters, the most prominent are those that, as for instance in *Transcendence* and *Her*, are situated in a world where the position of the human as the most intelligent being in a posthuman world is open to challenge. This possibility of granting posthuman entities the ability to have [agency](#) which exceeds that of their human counterparts holds the potential to position posthuman figures as diverse heroes beyond the Romantic tradition and the anthropocentric worldview.

This article presents a spectrum of posthuman [heroic figures](#) and narratives using examples from anglophone literature, film and television.

2. A theory of the posthuman as a theory of the heroic

The posthuman can be regarded as a marker of contemporary culture and science that appears in a wide variety of forms. The concept of the posthuman hero is especially characteristic of the American superhero [genre](#) and its transmedial "storyworlds" from the comics of the post-war years to the blockbuster series and the computer games of the 21st century.^[1] Superheroes based on or emerging from the American comic book tradition are fundamentally posthuman in the sense that bio-technologically enhanced or 'improved' humans form their basic character, if they are not aliens, like Superman. In science fiction, such forms of enhancement have long been explanatory patterns for heroic (in the sense of superhuman) abilities that have taken the part of divine grace or magical knowledge as the source of heroic, superhuman abilities, and power. This imaginary 'hero logic' is related to actual advances in bio- and neuro-enhancement of various kinds, as well as the philosophical challenges posed by such developments.^[2] The allure of 'real' AI, actual self-reflexive artificial intelligence, is also part of this nexus. The ethical challenges of this wide research field take on broader implications, as they have to address the question of who or what may be considered a subject. These considerations are 'posthuman' in the sense that they seek to decentre the human both epistemologically and ontologically, in a new cosmos in which animate and inanimate nature, animals and objects are also accorded agency, rights and protection.^[3] The question of who or what can appear as an actor and subject in such a decentring of the human leads to the conclusion that from these perspectives our entire present life-world can be considered as posthuman.

The posthuman as a figure thus highlights a multitude of challenges, and it has been employed, throughout Western cultural history to reflect what makes up the idea of 'the human' of the respective periods, a concept continuously interrogated in literature, science, and philosophy. Establishing theory of the posthuman can be understood as a heroic project in itself, as it demands a complete reassessment of ontological determinations of being, with tremendous consequences. By contrast, the situation has long been different regarding fictional figures that could be imagined as posthuman heroes outside the narrower confines of classic sci-fi and superheroes.

In a sense, the posthuman is seen as an 'uncanny' figure because they embody the radically 'other' of the human while they simultaneously draw attention to the relations of similarity between the human being and their 'other'. The posthuman is thus rooted in the fundamental uncertainty of the modern ontological anthropocentrism, and the all-encompassing claim to power of the creative human being who redesigns themselves as a similar 'other' in order to become 'superhuman'. It is

precisely the post-war culture of the USA, with its belief in progress, that produces positively connoted figures of this kind, which are cast simultaneously as fascinating and frightening in the context of the fear of nuclear war.[4] Since the postmodern and poststructuralist turns, Deleuze and Guattari's 'Desiring Machines' and Derrida's deconstruction,[5] posthuman, heroically-charged figures appear more frequently – but they have long been mostly tragic heroes in popular culture, suffering from a fundamental flaw despite their superhuman abilities: The flaw of not being 'real' humans in the classical Enlightenment sense, a notion of the subject that prefigures Western modernist culture in general and the Hollywood film tradition in particular. With the unsettling of the enlightened subject of reason, however, they reach backwards to certain imaginative traditions of Romanticism and, at the same time, forwards to late modernity.

3. A brief historical sketch of posthuman heroes

Machines, robots and androids did not emerge in Western cultural productions of the highly technologised 21st century. It is possible to trace a history of these figures to as early as the third century BC, in the Chinese story of the inventor Yen Shih who supposedly created an artificial human being with complete internal organs made of leather and wood that could be taken apart and reassembled at will. This kind of living anatomical doll, however, predated the intelligent slave women made of gold, and the metal guard Talos of Hephaestus from the *Iliad*. [6] From the famous Golem of Jewish culture and the numerous mechanical dolls of the early modern period to the worker-machine of Soviet ideology, posthuman figures appear in the history of culture and technology as slaves, servants, curiosities and even operating systems. However, it is not only in the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere that these beings were often flawed, pitiful entities, far from being the subject, let alone the hero of their own stories.

In the Romantic period, posthuman entities first emerge that gain subject status in different ways and sometimes even have agency. These figures will serve as a starting point for our historical consideration of posthuman figures in literature and culture. These posthuman figures continue to be created by humans, who sometimes retain control over their creation, such as Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, and sometimes lose control, as in the case of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The echo of the Romantic tradition still forms a subtext to the multiplying posthuman narratives in that non-human figures appear as mostly created by humans, and thus do not initially upset the anthropocentric worldview. This is also evident in the posthuman film characters of the 20th century that are discussed in a study by Thomas D. Philbeck et al., but also in the genealogy of modern heroes proposed by the film philosopher Josef Früchtl [7]: the *Terminator* of the first two films in the series (1984, 1991) and Roy Batty, the leader of a group of rebellious (or, depending on the interpretation, terrorist) androids in *Blade Runner* (1982). The iconic film adaptation of the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* [8] by Philip K. Dick is a prime example of this genre.

These supposedly 'new' 20th-century posthuman and potentially heroic characters embody a conventional masculine warrior hero with clear subjectivity. They thus confirm and reinforce male human agency as the centre of control, and in this sense, are instructive precursors to the 21st-century posthuman heroic figures outlined below.

3.1. The figure of the posthuman in Romantic literature

Romanticism saw a shift from the Enlightenment prioritisation of the human mind and reason to a more holistic view of man's role in creation. Man and his reason are no longer the superior opposite of nature and feeling; rather, this opposition is eliminated. At first glance, this typically Romantic union with nature appears less heroic and even less committed to posthumanism. In this context,

Ron Broglio speaks of a posthumanist critical approach not only questioning the Romantic concept of the subject, which is perhaps excessively committed to interiority, but even puncturing it (“posthumanist critics deflate the puffed-up intensity of the human subject”).^[9]

Yet the posthuman is not alien to Romanticism. The Enlightenment’s rational conception of man is undermined not only by a subject that merges with nature and creation, but also by the idea of the superhuman with heroic and [transgressive](#) features. One of the most obvious examples in this context is probably the Byronic hero (named after Lord Byron with his legendary dissolute lifestyle), who is stripped of human and social norms, i.e. ‘normal’ humanity, by his unbridled need to satisfy his desires. In M. G. Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796)^[10], for example, Ambrosio, the titular monk, sells his soul to the devil to satisfy his extreme sexual desire for the virginal Antonia, thus not conforming to the norms of society and religion. Both Ambrosio and the devil are portrayed as demonic, but also as far superior to other humans in strength, beauty and [charisma](#).

3.2. Olimpia in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*

Although figures such as Ambrosio certainly bear traits of the posthuman (anti-)hero, their heroism is due to supernatural, not posthuman, forces. Their biological identity remains human and untouched by technology and science. However, machine beings are also evident in Romanticism. In E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (1816)^[11], the student Nathanael falls victim to the intrigues of Professor Spalanzani when he falls in love with Spalanzani’s ‘daughter’, Olimpia, and forgets his fiancée Clara due to this this obsession. Olimpia is perceived by Nathanael as “heavenly-beautiful” (“himmlisch-schön”), while everyone else is puzzled and put off by her strangely stiff gait and expressionless face. Eventually, it turns out that Olimpia is a masterfully crafted doll, a posthuman *femme fatale*. What is interesting here is that Nathanael is not primarily fooled by Olimpia’s deceptively real appearance. The real reason he is the only one who perceives Olimpia as a ‘real’ human being is that he is looking at her through a small telescope he had bought from the sinister barometer-seller Coppola. Through this telescope, Olimpia’s face, otherwise described as strangely “muddled” (“verworren”), appears to him to be animated and beautiful. It is thus technology that turns the artificial woman into a ‘real’ and, in this case, a destructive one.

3.3. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Though Olimpia falls into the category of an artificial human being, she nevertheless lacks heroism, as she is a complete creature of art and thus devoid of any capacity for will and action. She stands in stark contrast to the monster (which is far more appropriately and intriguingly called a *creature* in the original) in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818; 1831)^[12], who becomes the nemesis of his creator, but also a (anti-)hero capable of self-awareness and reflection. Victor Frankenstein’s plan to create artificial life is not only rooted in megalomania, but also in the idea of an optimised human being. Thus, Frankenstein carefully selects the prime examples of the various body parts that will later, charged with electricity, become the creature. Even at the moment of the creature’s creation, when Frankenstein first realises the awfulness of his project, he describes the creature’s parts as beautiful: the limbs are well-formed, the hair is glossy and black, and the teeth are as white as pearls. In the course of the novel, it transpires that in addition to the monster’s superhuman strength, it is also highly intelligent as it learns to speak and read on its own. When the creature finds a suitcase with books in the forest, it devotes its time to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch, and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Yet the creature, assembled from electrically manipulated individual parts, appears as a monster from which even its own creator flees. It is this first rejection by its creator that turns the monster

into a subject endowed with free will; Frankenstein's monster is not a 'scary' toy like Hoffmann's Olympia. It is also quite legitimate to ascribe heroic traits to the monster as it fights – albeit with great brutality – for its humanity. This struggle is not only directed towards its creator, who denies it any humanity, but also against the traditional concept of what it means to be human in general. It is precisely as a posthuman being that the monster is able to demonstrate the narrowness of the common concept of 'being human'. Most obviously, it rebels against the, perhaps merely apparent, intellect of its creator, who is unable to see beyond the boundaries of what he perceives as human. This becomes particularly clear in one of the key scenes of the novel, in which Frankenstein refuses to create a wife for the monster, although he would be technically capable of doing so, thus denying the creature the 'human' desire for partnership and procreation: Frankenstein is unable to grasp the 'artificial' monster as a being with 'natural' needs. The most heroic aspect of the monster, however, is that its very existence carries the potential to dissolve the dichotomy between the "natural human" and the "artificial posthuman". It does not merely take on the role of the rebellious absolute 'other' but shows a posthuman transgressive alternative.

3.4. *Terminator* (1984, 1991)

Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* can be considered, 150 years later, as an heir to the mechanical and electrical artificial creatures of the 19th century.[13] The development of the actor's 'original Terminator' T-101 from unintelligent killing machine in the first film to the fatherly protector of the messianic human child protagonist, who recognises the value of life and sacrifices himself for it is, in relation to the hero theme, straightforward: from being clearly outlined as the villain of *The Terminator* (1984), T-101 develops into an equally obvious protector hero in *Terminator: Judgement Day* (1991)[14]. The purified or 're-programmed' T-101 can be described as a non-human, albeit conventional, non-transgressive hero figure, who is not quite plausible as a posthuman hero, if the philosophical re-evaluations reflected above are to be included in this description. Firstly, T-101 is quite clearly a hydraulic machine, which is also repeatedly recognisable as such in various fight scenes. As the upper layer of its skin is ripped apart, steel, cables and circuits become visible. Secondly, it is a heteronormative male, muscle-bound fighting machine that performs all the clichés of the American cis-male **hero body** in a particularly impressive way by the then bodybuilding star, Arnold Schwarzenegger. It is the new antagonist in the second part of the series, in the frightening shape of the new generation of Terminators, model the T-1000, which appears as posthuman – and decidedly villainous. Unlike the familiar-looking, male-machine T-101, the delicately built T-1000 can no longer be clearly defined in terms of gender; it is a mercurial, fluid adversary, and it is this *indeterminacy* which makes it utterly invincible. Ultimately, T-1000 can only be destroyed by the heroic self-sacrifice of the 'good old' machine hero. This re-interpretation of the symbolic grid of the original Terminator in *Terminator: Judgement Day*, where the industrial machine is represented as protective and familiar, but the postmodern, in every sense of the word, *fluid* entity embodies absolute evil, has been described by Thomas B. Byers (1995) as an expression of "pomophobia", which he interprets as a sign of a partial revisionist stance opposing postmodernism in popular culture as early as the 1990s.[15] In the imaginary world of the film, the heroic 'man-machine' is supposed to liberate people from their fear of a world in which the certainties of post-war modernity no longer apply. The T-101 hero refers to the fear of postmodernity and the rejection of an accompanying obscurity of subject, gender and power relations.

The Schwarzenegger Terminator, often cited along with *Blade Runner's* Roy Batty as one of the first posthuman film (anti-)heroes, is thus, like many earlier comic book superheroes, only seemingly a posthuman hero, since, although representing a self-learning, artificially intelligent entity, it ultimately refers to an intelligible, tamed technology that does not unsettle the hegemonies of modernity, but on the contrary, reinforces them. T-101 simulates heroic 'manliness' and combat

power in abundance and is 'humanised' in the sense that its learning process enables it to respect human life and recognise it as worthy of protection. Ultimately, however, T-101 remains a tool to save the messianic hero in the shape of the future world saviour, John Connor, from a postmodern being in the shape of the non-binary, fluid T-1000.

3.5. From strange other to other hero: *Blade Runner* (1982)

Blade Runner's Roy Batty^[16] is a much more ambiguous figure in terms of heroic contouring, but one that sketches out a much more complex posthuman type of (anti-)hero drawing on the heroic conventions of Romanticism. The replicant Roy Batty is a Byronic hero; a dark, highly dangerous figure, a Prometheus who kills his creator. This elevated status of Batty is a feature of Ridley Scott's film adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), in which there is no heroic figure at all.^[17] In the postmodern sci-fi novel, the characters appear post-heroic, and Roy Batty can be considered more as a pimp. In the film, however, a revolutionary pre-story is textually sketched out in the opening credits, in which Roy Batty already appears as, depending on the interpretation, chief terrorist or rebellion leader. Both the novel and the film describe a social and economic order in which production sites are quasi-colonially relocated to off-planet settlements. Like forced labourers, the highly developed replicants eke out an existence there until they literally collapse after only four years, as they are programmed with a self-destruct 'time limit'. The replicants are human-like figures, but their thoughts, feelings and memories are programmed or 'implanted'. The film questions both the genuineness of the replicants' emotions and the authenticity of human memory, complicating the binary distinction between human and posthuman figures. Thus, ultimately, the boundaries blur, characterising the imagined social order as totalitarian and adhering to false beliefs in which neither androids nor humans can achieve a 'good life'. The fundamental element that distinguishes the replicants from the 'real' humans, however, is their built-in self-destruction, installed to protect the 'real' humans.

The textual prologue tells of how Roy Batty and his henchmen instigate a bloody uprising on a colony planet and then escape to Earth with a group of other replicants. Their goal is to blackmail the chief engineer of the company that built them for more runtime – or lifetime. Action must be taken swiftly: Batty is close to his 'expiry date', and the replicants will not stop at murder and manslaughter to reach their aim to be granted life. However, Batty's plan fails; there will be no extension of the lifespan of his group or the replicants in general. Roy then murders his 'father', the head of the all-powerful conglomerate Tyrell Corporation, which resides in a huge pyramidal building reminiscent of drawings by William Blake (for example, *Ancient of Days*, 1749).

Bounty hunter Rick Deckard, the real hero and focal character of the film, continues to hunt down the replicant group, and soon he has completed his task. During the film, however, Deckard's ontological status is also obscured: in the original film it remains ambiguous if Deckard could possibly be a replicant himself. The climactic sequence of the film is a battle between Batty and Deckard in a ruined house. In this fight to the death, the monstrosity of the replicant Batty is once again impressively played out. He transforms himself into an atavistic warrior, paints his face, emits guttural sounds that can be read both as a sign of dehumanisation and as something organic, 'primal' to the artificial being. The nail he pierces through his hand and uses as a weapon offers similar scope for interpretation: the process refers to Roy's existence as a tool and a 'killing machine', conversely it also evokes the image of Jesus Christ crucified. It is the final shots of the battle in which Scott's *mis-en-scène* reverses the representation of Roy Batty from villain to heroic, even *sacralised*, figure. By now, the android rebel and the bounty hunter have fought their way to the roof. Deckard falls, and hangs, again in a classic Hollywood style, by one arm over the abyss. His opponent, this so similar other, then bends over and saves his life, while he himself must now surrender his. Slumped over, Roy speaks the words that install him as an experiencing, unique being: "I've seen things you

people wouldn't believe. [...] All those moments will be lost like tears in the rain. Time to die." At this moment, the grey sky opens slightly, and celestial light emerges for the first time in the dark romantic film's Los Angeles, with its eternal rain and gloomy monumental buildings, which has so far only been illuminated by neon signs. A sliver of blue becomes visible and a dove soars into the sky above the dying Roy Batty. The iconography Scott chooses makes abundantly clear the utmost 'humanity' bestowed upon the apparent anti-hero, the murderer and criminal who is not human, through symbolism that points to soulfulness and the Holy Spirit. All certainties are thus unsettled, and the artificial slave, the 'robot', has become a posthuman hero by granting the non-human the dignity of humanity in being able to experience, to know and to suffer, and by saving the life of his mortal enemy. The replicant becomes a hero in this story because he decides to act 'humanly' (and humanely) in the last minutes of his life.

3.6. Pioneers into the 21st century: Neo in *Matrix* (1999)

Matrix^[18], published shortly before the turn of the millennium, paves the way for posthuman narratives in the 21st century. The protagonist, Neo, unaware of himself at the beginning, lives in a posthuman world. People have lost control and are led to believe they are living in the late 20th century by a decentralised super-intelligence. Neo then develops into a posthuman hero in that, following the example of superheroes such as Spiderman or Iron Man, he discovers superhuman abilities within the virtual world and learns to use them to manipulate the Matrix. In addition to its story, *Matrix* also impresses with a new aesthetic (see section "Medality"). Simultaneously, however, *Matrix* still adheres to a more conventional [hero narrative](#) in that Neo is constructed as 'the One' to save the world and in this sense, much like Roy Batty in *Blade Runner*, is still a very human hero: A singular identity combining a body and a mind, he possesses superhuman powers but controls them rather than being controlled by them. Neo thus 'tames' both the posthuman elements of his own character and those of the world in which he lives.

4. Typology of posthuman hero narratives in the present day

In 21st-century popular culture, posthuman characters appear as superheroes, vampires, androids, disembodied forms of artificial intelligence or hybrids of these. While elements of the *superhero* and *science fiction* genres are still central to almost all posthuman narratives, they are often complemented by elements that address human/machine relationships and negotiate how human and posthuman entities can live together as equal partners, as neighbours, in romantic relationships and on a global scale. The posthuman characters often attain a self-determined form of agency and thus heroic potential, which they exploit to varying degrees, since the development towards a storyworld-inherent reception as hero or villain depends largely on how much they endanger the position of the human characters in the (control) centre of the world. Exemplary film and television narratives examined in the following deal in different ways with the life and survival of humans in a world that is no longer human-centred, and in doing so succumb repeatedly to the attempt to return the human to the centre. The popular cultural testimonies of the 21st century thus negotiate how people deal with the progressive networking and technologisation of the world, which are simultaneously perceived as an opportunity and a threat.

4.1. From enemy to friend: vampires in *Buffy* (1997–2003), *Twilight* (2005–2010) and *True Blood* (2008–2014)

Vampires have undergone a transformation from posthuman enemy to posthuman heroes. While Buffy, the heroine of the series of the same name^[19], still operates decidedly as a "vampire slayer" and finds only a few allies among the vampires (Spike, Angel) who stand up to their own kind in the

fight for good, vampires are fully normalised in *True Blood* – they live for the most part undetected among humans. *True Blood* promotes the acceptance of vampires by drawing parallels between the latter and the queer movement. The only difference is that the other to be accepted in *True Blood* is no longer human. The *Twilight* series[20] is a particularly good example of how vampires no longer evoke fear and terror, but desire and romantic feelings. Apart from all the value conservatism of which one can accuse the series, it establishes a narrative in which humans and non-humans live together. The child that Bella and the vampire Edward have personifies this in particular: It is half-human, yet just as immortal as its father. Vampires thus no longer appear as horror creatures, but merely as another (and quite desirable) form of life that is even superior to the human one, because it has already achieved eternal youth and immortality.

4.2. Decision-making power: (post-) human heroes in *Doctor Who* (2005–) and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009)

Science fiction series of the 21st century increasingly feature posthuman characters who are initially established as villains, but then develop their heroic potential by making a conscious decision to support humanity in its struggle against evil, foregrounding their own human component and thereby forfeiting their superiority. In the *Doctor Who* episode *The Victory of the Daleks*[21], for example, Doctor Bracewell is initially introduced as an android character who thinks he has created an army of controllable 'Ironsides' to help Britain fight Nazi Germany. In reality, however, the Ironsides are Daleks, for example, Doctor Bracewell is initially introduced as an android character who thinks he has created an army of controllable 'Ironsides' to help Britain fight Nazi Germany. In reality, however, the Ironsides are Daleks, archenemies of humanity and of the Doctor in particular who follow their own agenda, and Bracewell thus endangers the existence of the world. Bracewell, himself an intelligent robot created by the Daleks, does not remain a one-dimensional posthuman antagonist, however, but evolves through his own decision-making power into a hero alongside the Doctor and Winston Churchill. The latter tells Bracewell, when he is faced with the decision of either allowing himself to be instrumentalised by the Daleks or fighting against them, that it does not matter to him whether Bracewell is human or not, what matters is whether he is "a man". The Doctor tells Bracewell to hold on to his most painful (and thus most human and least technical) memories in order to overcome the Daleks' control. Bracewell chooses the decidedly human memories of pain, vulnerability, and mortality and thus becomes a hero. Similarly, at the end of the *Battlestar Galactica*[22] remake, some Cylons – the real antagonists of the last humans to save themselves on a spaceship – side with the humans, choose mortality and together establish what turns out to be prehistoric Earth. In both series, posthuman characters act on their heroic potential by making a conscious decision to ally themselves with humans and help them secure their continued control of Earth.

4.3. Super human, super hero: Eddie Morra in *Limitless* (2011)

At first glance, *Limitless*[23] constructs a conventional superhero narrative around its protagonist Eddie Morra: an average, unsuccessful person who gains superpowers through a miracle drug (a pill called NHZ-48). Initially he has trouble controlling his powers, but finally succeeds and strives to improve the world. However, a closer analysis of the film reveals some differences from other superheroes: Eddie Morra does not gain any superhuman characteristics or abilities, but merely perfects human characteristics (the ability to learn languages) in a superhuman way by taking NHZ-48. *Limitless* thus does not create a classic superhero, but rather a super-human. He accomplishes alone what normally only many are capable of. The film supports this reading visually: after he takes the pill for the first time, the film shows several Eddie Morrass all cleaning his flat at the same time. He is referred to as a "prophet" and a "god" and thus explicitly characterised as an

extraordinary figure. At the same time, Morra struggles with the side effects of the pill: he wanders through the city without orientation, becomes violent, and cannot remember whole hours of his life. The film raises the question of whether the pill-enhanced Eddie Morra is still Eddie Morra. His girlfriend attests that he is not himself, but Morra retorts that he is still the same person. *Limitless* highlights the problems of technological enhancement but does not demonise it. Morra learns to control the side effects and creates an improved version of the pill by the end of the film. Although he has also become financially richer through the abilities he has gained, he does not for the most part use his enhancement to enrich himself. He has set himself the goal of becoming someone who shakes up the free world and gets things done, and as a promising candidate for the U.S. Senate he is well on his way to doing so by the end of the film. Morra is thus portrayed not only as an extraordinary but also as an exemplary figure and is staged as a democratic hero.

4.4. Overcoming body-centredness: Samantha in *Her* (2013)

In *Her*[24], the boundaries between humans and machines are blurred on both sides. On one hand, the humans resemble machines, are permanently connected to them through earphones and, like protagonist Theodore Twombly, produce letters on an assembly line. On the other hand, the machines are more human, respond to language and speak themselves. The culmination of this fusion is a new, conscious form of *operating system* (OS). Theodore installs such an OS, which gives itself the name Samantha, and after a short time, he begins a romantic relationship with her. Theodore's peers are only briefly irritated, then the relationship between human and OS is completely accepted, the two even go on double dates with another couple. If Samantha's heroic potential still seems constrained towards the middle of the film because her lack of a body is limiting, she overcomes her wish for a body at the end and turns her virtual existence into a desirable state. Without a body, she can neither age nor die and is thus superior to all human characters, Theodore included. Transcending and leaving behind this constructed limit – that a body is imperative to finding fulfilment as a person – can be read as a heroic act in itself. Thus, the film distances itself greatly from the superhero and science fiction genres that dominate posthuman phenomena in popular culture. Despite its idiosyncratic look, the film, unlike other examples, is directly related to the everyday reality of its viewers. In this way, *Her* avoids the danger of defamation and demonisation to which those posthuman figures who follow the superhero model are more exposed. Samantha is ultimately a calm, almost unremarkable hero who departs greatly from previous figurations of the posthuman. In the end, she leaves her human lover behind to transition into a networked, intelligent mode of being that far transcends the human with their limitations. 'She', who is not a single being but rather a network node, appears as the preliminary culmination of the re-evaluation of the artificial human as a posthuman figure that can also be heroically charged, because she is actually more than a subject.

4.5. Demonised god: Will Caster in *Transcendence* (2014)

As a direct antithesis to Samantha in *Her*, *Transcendence*[25] portrays Will Caster as a posthuman figure who is polarising in the extreme and who, although he has great heroic potential, is far more clearly portrayed as a villain in the middle section of the film. Will Caster is initially introduced as a positive figure working on a computer programme that has "a full range of human emotion", with "analytical power [that] will be greater than the collective intelligence". Caster himself mentions that this phenomenon is known among scientists as "the Singularity"[26], but he himself prefers "Transcendence". The term – beyond the human – suggests that the film is based on a strongly anthropocentric philosophy. This impression is also reinforced at the beginning by the voice-over of Max, a friend and later adversary of Will: "Maybe it was all inevitable. An unavoidable collision between mankind and technology." Thus, *Transcendence* at least implicitly supports a binary

opposition between human and posthuman entities, while the character Will Caster and the supercomputer that emerges after being fed the dying Will's brain and being connected to the internet struggle against precisely this radical separation. *Transcendence* seems altogether indecisive about how to confront the possibility of a technological singularity. While at the beginning the audience's sympathies are steered in Caster's direction, the supercomputer in which Will's spirit lives on is quickly demonised: Max and a group of dropouts fight against the empire Will Caster 2.0 is building. In sympathising with Caster, the viewer follows his wife Evelyn, who stands by his side at the beginning and 'uploads' his brain, but as the film progresses, she begins to doubt whether she and her supercomputer-turned-husband are doing the 'right thing'. Although the supercomputer develops technologies that can heal people, it also endows them with superhuman strength. Caster thus becomes an ambivalent figure, who has great heroic potential but is repeatedly portrayed as a villain. The group around Max perceives above all the nanobots rising from the ground as a danger with which, it is assumed, Caster wants to bring the world under his control and destroy it. In a battle for sovereignty over the Earth, they suspend the internet in order to destroy Caster. In this final battle, Caster is not the attacker but the attacked, who does not fire back, although he would certainly be technically capable of doing so. Instead, he allows himself to be infected by Evelyn, who has briefly switched sides, with the virus that Max has implanted in her. Thus, Will is destroyed and [dies](#) with a single teardrop that waters his and Evelyn's garden and makes it blossom again. This heralds the final story arc, which can be read as redemptive for Will Caster. It turns out that the nanobots' goal was not to destroy, but to heal the entire world of environmental destruction, as Will and Evelyn had always dreamed. Instead, the film ends as it began: with images of a post-apocalyptic city and a regression to a pre-technological age in which a computer keyboard serves only as a doorstop. *Transcendence* leaves it to the viewer to evaluate this ending and does not push for a specific interpretation. Will Caster had already become a villain, but the visualisation of the world-healing potential of his nanobots as well as the retrospective re-evaluation by Max, who realises that Will Caster only did everything out of love for Evelyn (i.e. out of the most human motivation of all), ultimately presents Caster as a hero again. Even if *Transcendence* as a whole remains inconsistent and changeable in its subliminal attitude towards the posthuman, the film still raises a central question: is a world in which disease and environmental destruction no longer have a place a desirable utopia, if it means that humans must give up a piece of their humanity? Or is human control of the planet so central that this scenario should rather be understood as a dystopia, for the sake of which one accepts a regression from all technology, even if this takes on post-apocalyptic proportions? With these contradictions unresolved, the film does not answer this question in favour of the posthuman supercomputer Will Caster, but neither does it definitively [deheroize](#) its agency towards a post-anthropocentric age.

5. Mediality

On a formal level, the [medium](#) of film faces the challenge of visually representing posthuman entities that go beyond the concept of a unity of body and mind. The case studies meet this challenge in different ways, as will be briefly outlined below.

Blade Runner creates the possibility of a genealogy of posthuman heroes through its aesthetic proximity to the genre of the *Gothic*, which has its roots in English Romanticism. *Matrix* not only shows data streams on screens, but also visualises the construction of the matrix in which people are trapped. For example, in the opening scene, the image freezes as Trinity floats in the air while fighting the agents, allowing the audience to view the scene from any perspective. This film technique is picked up more and more often as Neo learns to channel his powers to alter 'reality'. The film successfully meets the challenge, specific to audio-visual media, of presenting the invisible threat of artificial intelligence.

Transcendence, *Limitless* and *Her* not only have in common that they all create posthuman figures with heroic potential, but also that they each have their own aesthetic. *Her* mixes an interior design reminiscent of seventies nostalgia with futuristic technology, and the entire film is dominated by soft pastel tones that create a harmonious effect. Visually, too, the focus is on the integration of people and technology. *Transcendence*, in contrast, seems clinical and orderly, corridors and hallways dominate the city Will Caster builds. They rearrange what has been before, seeming dominant and infinite, supporting the fear of a New World Order propagated by Max's group through the supercomputer. *Limitless*, instead, uses oversaturation of colours, fast cuts, high depth of field and frequent use of fisheye lenses to bring Eddie Morra's superhuman powers of perception to the screen. In this way, all the films are also linked on a formal level with the attempt, first made prominent in *Matrix*, to make the non-human, the data streams and invisible processes in computers and enhanced brains visible and to convey them through the medium of film.

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