



The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema

Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on representations of gender vulnerability and resistance in recent popular science fiction films, as they are embodied by the posthuman character. The issue of the posthuman has proved to be complex and contradictory and has been approached from many different perspectives. The posthuman is an ideology that makes us rethink our taken-for-granted modes but attending to the specificity of the human and its way of being in the world, its body and its relationship to non-human forms of life (Wolfe xxv). In spite of its diversity, and “whether imagined in biological, technological, or cultural terms, [posthumanism] represents a radical difference from the rules of human thought and human embodiment” (Milburn 1).

R. Carrasco-Carrasco (✉)
COIDESO, University of Huelva, Huelva, Spain
e-mail: rocio.carrasco@dfing.uhu.es

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M. I. Romero-Ruiz and P. Cuder-Domínguez (eds.),
Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance,
Thinking Gender in Transnational Times,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95508-3_10

The science fiction genre—especially literature—has long speculated on the posthuman condition by offering scenarios and bodies that question the humanist paradigm. In terms of representation on screen, the posthuman has frequently been aligned with the other; a marginal, vulnerable and passive figure that evokes human fears and/or desires. Yet, and as it will be argued in this chapter, there is a trend of contemporary movies in which the posthuman subject offers alternative ways of living/thinking the world, disrupting the understanding of difference on a humanistic self-other logic. This portrayal of vulnerability can be read, then, as a means of resistance that leaves viewers with a grasp of post/in/trans human subjectivities. The vulnerable posthuman on screen—present in recent films like *Never Let Me Go*, *Her*, *Under the Skin*, *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, or *Ghost in the Shell*, among others—further encourages viewers to question the meaning of gender and/or race in our transnational times. The posthuman subject is understood, therefore, as an alternative way of resisting normative ideas regarding gender and race. In this sense, my approach to vulnerability follows feminist critical posthuman thinking (Braidotti, Ferrando, Vint) and considers the subject as “nomadic”, that is, transversal, relational, affective, embedded and embodied (Braidotti 2013). It also relies on Butler *et al.*’s idea of the active role of vulnerability in practices of resistance to oppressing power structures (2016).

In order to discuss these ideas, I will focus my analysis on two recent popular science fiction movies portraying female characters that embody the concept of what I refer here as the vulnerable posthuman: Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013) and Sanders’ *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Significantly enough, the posthuman character is performed in both movies by popular actress Scarlett Johansson, whose normative (yet alien) body serves as a starting point for criticism. The posthuman is constructed as an unnamed and impassive alien who abducts and kills men around Scotland in *Under the Skin*; and as a human-machine hybrid working for the police in an unspecific Asian city who eventually discovers her true identity in *Ghost in the Shell*. In spite of the fact that in these two movies the posthuman (female) characters are depicted as vulnerable beings apparently doomed to privileging and perpetuating the normative idea of the body in terms of gender and race, they still manage to somehow disrupt established configurations of power by offering audiences an unfamiliar experience. Viewers see life through the posthuman perspective thanks to filmic strategies such as identification or sympathy,

enabling us to temporarily refuse normative human ethics and to understand the posthuman subject as it is, with its alien/transhuman body and non-normative actions and desires.

Before I turn to discussing the depiction of the vulnerable posthuman in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell*, my approach to the posthuman subject needs to be clarified, due to the multiplicity of its meaning, as suggested above. The posthuman subject has been considered by critical thinking as a means to eradicate traditional configurations of power, contesting the old binary logic that assumed the subject to be rational, universal and ethical as opposed to the other. In this sense, Rosi Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject is “no longer cast in dualistic frame but aims at displacing the understanding of difference” (2013, 92). In line with critical posthumanism, my concern here relies heavily on the notions of subjectivity and difference. Braidotti takes an affirmative and vitalist Deleuzian approach to difference to argue that we exist in a plenitude of possible “becomings” that are continually changing and transforming. When dealing with the idea of “becoming”, Braidotti contends that “the intensities this engenders create pleasures and affirmative and joyful affects that open the subject up to a multiplicity of possible differences” (2002, 71). Hence, examining subjectivity not as a universal consciousness but as a process is crucial for this (and any) analysis of the posthuman. Thus, I position my analysis of the vulnerable posthuman in recent science fiction films in relation to this liberatory politics proposed by critical thinking, specifically by Braidotti’s ideas, yet being aware of the limitations and contradictions that this character encounters when represented on screen, as I will develop in the next section.

The very notion of posthuman subjectivity has many ethical implications, since it is not simply a state of being but an active and deliberate positioning. The posthuman subject is a process in constant change, it has the desire to be, and for that, the body represents this complex structure of subjectivity. Embodiment, is, then, crucial for understanding the posthuman. Throughout her work, Braidotti also recognises that the figure of the posthuman is ambiguous and that it is stuck in projections of desire or fantasies of domination and disembodiment. Braidotti is cautious when it comes to contemporary developments on science and technology, although she makes a call for a positive posthuman thinking: “these non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated” (2013, 61).

In a similar line of thought, Sherryl Vint argues that some versions of the posthuman repeat a few errors of the previous discourses. Yet, the posthuman in its embodied form can be also used as a liberating force that overcomes the negativity of contemporary practices. New forms of posthuman subjectivities should be the focus of contemporary analyses. These approaches to the posthuman have much to contribute to the ongoing debates over controversial topics such as gene mutation, cloning, transgenderism, hybridity, biological enhancement and many more.

When dealing with the posthuman being as a site of resistance, I rely on Butler's notion of vulnerability, which she uses to theorise how the subject is constituted through social norms and relation to others. In *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay revise the notion of vulnerability and relate it to practices of resistance. They describe possible strategies of bodily resistance that do not deny forms of vulnerability, such as practices of self-defence, hunger strikes, transgressive enactments of solidarity and mourning, etc. In a similar way, the normally precarious position of the cinematic posthuman being leads to meaningful ways of resistance, in the sense that these characters foster an understanding of difference. The feminine posthuman subjectivity developed in some recent narratives of cloning (*The Island*, *Never Let Me Go*), artificial intelligence (*Ex Machina*, *Her*) and transhumanism (*Lucy*, *Ghost in the Shell*), to name a few, disturb normative understandings of gender, race, and humanist ethics and rules, yet within their own vulnerability and alienness.

Thus, and as it will be argued in the next section, the possibility of having a posthuman subjectivity is suggested in some contemporary films, opening a space for reflection and deconstruction of certain humanist values in the search for alternative modes of understanding difference. In this sense, the posthuman subject can be then regarded as a powerful tool for fighting against hegemonic discourses. As Braidotti contends, "the others are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject positions" (2013, 139). It is precisely this idea what I intend to highlight in this chapter, how the alienated/vulnerable female character offers an alternative position that is offered to audiences, who become closer and momentarily share the posthuman experience. This idea coalesces with the notion of subaltern identity developed by Hidalgo-Ciudad's chapter in this same volume, in which he discusses the way certain vulnerable LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters are given voice and agency within the ballroom community they live after they have been deprived of liveable conditions in homo and hetero communities.

10.2 GENDER VULNERABILITY AND POPULAR CINEMA: THE POSTHUMAN CHARACTER

Frequently, science fiction portrays the posthuman as the object of cultural admiration or aberration, offering a dystopian reflection of the biogenetic structure of contemporary capitalism, impeding hence fruitful interactions between the human and the non-human. Indeed, early representations of the cinematic posthuman body—linked to the figure of the mechanical cyborg—were strongly related to politics of fear and domination. This is what has been called “teratogenesis” or “monsterisation” of the posthuman: the monster is regarded as a symptom of human fears and desires, as an embodiment of the other, as a projection of our phantasms, becoming a political-cultural metaphor. Braidotti regards our current state of posthumanisation as “techno-teratological” and encourages us to find a politics of representation that is able to resist this “techno-hysteria” and overcome the humanist fear of a posthuman subjectivity. Many popular science fiction films rely on the triumph of the restoration of humanism after presenting dangerous and devastating posthumanist scenarios. In relation to this issue, Herbrechter notes that in the teratology or the creation of monsters, inhumanity can be used to inscribe and uphold a system of differences and hierarchies, supported by a mystical notion of human nature with its insistence on uniqueness and exceptionalism, a device which sanctions and perpetuates processes of inclusion and exclusion (29). This insistence on the supremacy of human qualities over technological/biological rationality accounts for the humanisation of the other in order to preserve a “safe” or “uncontaminated” world. In films like *AI*, *I, Robot*, or *Minority Report*, anthropocentrism is privileged over a true posthuman subjectivity. Indeed, the paradox of the posthuman has been pointed out by many authors (Clarke 2009), who recognise that science fiction films consciously present these contradictions on the topic of the posthuman (Clarke 2).

However, and at the same time, science fiction films mean a point of departure for our critical understanding of our convulsive times since they encourage us to find new (more positive and inclusive) cartographies for the posthuman. Herbrechter has argued in this sense that “the return of the repressed body under techno-teratological, posthuman conditions has to be a time of vigilance as well as of new possibilities” (105). It is in this more positive line of thought in which I want to focus my attention. As I see it, there is a trend of recent movies that aim at offering an

alternative understanding of difference. Indeed, the vulnerable posthumans in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* develop their own voice and offer new paths to envisage embodiment, in spite of their alienness and marginality. They cannot be considered resilient in the sense that they do not overcome suffering to adjust to humanist standards, but they manage to somehow resist their hostile circumstances and offer a unique posthuman viewpoint. In these films, the narrative does not try to humanise the other but attempts to keep a true posthuman subjectivity, which resonates with Butler's idea of alterity/precarity developed in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016).

10.2.1 Posthuman Femininity

The posthuman characters in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* are both linked to notions of vulnerability and precarity and are performed by Scarlett Johansson, an actress that has become, according to some critics, “a global icon of posthuman femininity” (Massimi 147). Indeed, the so-called ScarJo phenomenon has been read as herald of the cultural anxieties about human materiality in the contemporary world, and her white femininity as a “transuniversal posthuman form” (Jelaca 398), a controversial idea if we take into account that the movie *Ghost in the Shell* is a version of the Japanese anime of the same name, yet starring a white female character (Johansson). Apart from the two films under analysis here, she has performed the posthuman in *The Island* (2005), *Her* (2013) and *Lucy* (2014). In them, the characters she incarnates are ambiguous, “hypermutable” (Brown and Fleming 187), and unnatural if we consider her “not so-called natural feminine behavior” (Vint 2015, 4). Whether a disposable clone, a dangerous extraterrestrial, a disembodied operating system, a drug mule with superpowers or a troubled cyborg, Johansson's characters in these films are precarious, vulnerable and alien. In them, the posthuman is rejected or cannot take lovers, killed for her difference, designed as a dangerous fighting machine or considered a mere commodity. However, their vulnerability is not associated with passivity in the sense that these characters do not seem to be in need of active protection from the “powerful” ones. Instead, they develop agency and autonomy, which is in line with the idea of vulnerability in resistance proposed by Butler *et al.* Moreover, their femininity is never regarded as a given, natural category, but as artificial, dangerous and, ultimately, alien.

The posthuman is embodied, then, by Johansson's normative body in these movies. Thus, instead of a fluid, hybrid and vitalist conception of the body advocated by materialist critical thinkers, in which "the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore can best be described as a bond of mutual dependence" (Braidotti 2002, 223), the movies under analysis rely on the iconic figure of a young white woman in which the bond human-inhuman/ flesh-machine is alienating. In relation to this issue, Francesca Ferrando argues that "when we think of the bodies, the human body is the first signified to come to mind, exposing the human-centric dialectics of the term. Body is a human concept created in a human language" (213). In a similar way, Johansson's body is sexualised, following normative standards of representation for femme fatales or action female cyborgs, found in uncountable popular science fiction movies and series. At this point, and as Ferrando argues, "technology and science are not free from sexist, racist and Eurocentric biases". The body "is ascribed within the frame of speciesism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, classicism, ageism, elitism and ableism, among other -isms" (222-3)".

Nevertheless, as suggested above, Johansson manages to evoke alienness and unfamiliarity in these films in which she performs the posthuman. In *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell*, Johansson's character remains alien, in spite of its recognisable gendered traits and white skin, suggesting how the presence of this star can trouble the distinctions between body and machine, person or animal (Loreck 168). This is partly achieved because Johansson's "feminine" body is considered either as an artifice, a mere suit, that the posthuman appropriates intentionally (*Under the Skin*), or as a mere shell whose artificiality the posthuman is conscious of (*Ghost in the Shell*). In reference to Glazer's film, Massimi affirms: "her body, assembled to match the cannons of alluring femininity, reveals itself a mere shell, an anthropomorphic cover that can fool the eye but nothing more" (156). In a similar line of thought, Loreck argues that "Johansson's voluptuous body actually works to terrify because it is not natural" and that her body is but an "opportunistic camouflage; a tool of mimicry and deception" (175). The same idea of artificiality is suggested in *Ghost in the Shell* as Major Mira is presented as a cyborg designed for killing dangerous criminals. Brown and Fleming also recall Johansson's alienness in this film when they affirm that "Johansson/the Major is here to be looked at, while also being incapable of fitting into a patriarchal

society because of the threatening nature of her combat skills, intelligence and her animality/squid-like nature" (189).

Even Johansson's whiteness has been interpreted as alien and alienating. Some authors (Redmond) talk about an idealised whiteness that combines with her star image: "if brought together, they construct a powerful narrative about privilege and belonging in the world, one that places white identity at the apex of civilized and successful life" (203). Yet, and at the same time, her idealised white star image is simultaneously recognisable and alienating, since, Redmond continues, "this hyperperfect conjunction" renders the white star both unattainably immaculate, and as a consequence, essentially non-reproductive (203). Indeed, Johansson embodies and expresses these inherent reproductive tensions in all her posthuman incarnations (*Under the Skin*, *Ghost in the Shell* or *Her*), "since her whiteness is both accentuated and rendered a dangerous form of progeny" (204). Hence, "through Johansson, idealized female whiteness is alien because it is out of this world, non-or anti-reproductive (...) and because it threatens its own ontological coherency" (217). However, the issue of racial politics remains, I think, rather ambiguous in these films, especially if we take into account that whiteness stands as the norm for the representation of the posthuman. In any case, her skin as a beautiful white woman in both films is only a mask.

The cinematic feminine posthuman is, then, full of contradictions. In "Alien Feminism and Cinema Posthuman Women", Dijana Jelaca examines the controversies of "female posthuman subjectivities" as depicted in *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*. Her aim is to devise a new social, ethical and discursive scheme as a way to theorise new feminist epistemologies along the lines of what she calls "alien posthumanism". She uses the term "feminine alien posthuman" to address issues concerning the spectatorship uncertainty when viewing alien or unrecognisable discourses that, nevertheless, foster identification. My analysis of the vulnerable posthuman equally relies on this notion of a cinematic female alien that occupies the centre of spectatorial identification and that offers us instances of valuable (female) posthuman subjectivities. In this sense, both *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* do offer an understanding of the posthuman subject by means of filmic strategies that refuse to humanise the alien. They keep the posthuman's point of view, resisting this way some humanist assumptions, which can be considered as the first step towards the posthuman predicament postulated by materialist thinkers. Although the old human issues remain, the vulnerable posthuman

manages to break with cinematic and representational conventions and vindicate the existence of an alternative subjectivity.

The next two sections focus on the strategies the films under analysis use in order to project the posthuman experience. Both texts have the posthuman at the focus of spectatorial identification and offer instances of empathy, especially at moments when the alien posthuman is seen as vulnerable. In other words, the films defy structures of power that underlie discrimination of the vulnerable other by promoting empathy, a strategy that encourages spectators' self-reflection and fosters criticism. While in *Under the Skin* the narrative refuses to impose humanist ethics and allows for a true posthuman space, *Ghost in the Shell* follows a more humanist logics in order to precisely denounce certain bodily practices present in neoliberal societies. Albeit in different ways, each film illuminates the idea of the feminine posthuman subjectivity.

10.2.2 *The Alien Body: Under the Skin (2013)*

The posthuman character in *Under the Skin* is an unnamed, lonely extraterrestrial being who, after taking the form of a white young woman, drives a van around Glasgow in search of single, isolated men, that she seduces and takes to a house to be later consumed by a strange force. Johansson's character remains unknowable and uncanny throughout the film, and her true nature is only revealed at the end of the film, when viewers see her as a black alien form as she is aggressively attacked in the forest by a man. Glazer's film is about an alien posthuman subjectivity, and cinematography works to evoke this experience to spectators, who temporally forget about humanist logics and adopt her perspective. Ultimately, the film encourages us to reflect upon certain humanist/sexist/racist elements at work in our globalised societies. In this sense, Johansson's character, in spite of her recognisable (and normative) physical human features, displays a true posthuman subjectivity that resists the rules of our world. Unlike other science fiction texts where the alien is humanised, she remains posthuman throughout the whole film, with her own desires and ethics, allowing spectators to experience empathy through difference.

The posthuman subjectivity is evoked from the opening scenes of the movie, which are hypnotic and puzzling for viewers. We get a long take offering only blackness, with a tiny dot that slowly grows bigger, until it is transformed into kinds of rings that resemble a lunar eclipse seen through

a telescope, followed by a shot showing a big eye occupying the centre of the frame. Spectators do not really know what is happening or what to expect. The same happens with the following scenes in which we see a man on a motorbike taking the body of a young woman lying on the road and putting her in a van, where a naked woman gets into her clothes. Later, this woman takes an insect from her finger, which we see magnified in the next shot. These opening scenes are dark, shot with unconventional camera angles and mostly silent, as only unconnected words and annoying sounds are perceived, as if we were waking up from a deep long sleep. Hence, Glazer's film offers an alienating atmosphere and perspective from its opening sequences.

The posthuman is presented to audiences as an alien in a humanoid body. The narrative favours the understanding of difference by means of different visual strategies that gradually foster our identification with the posthuman. Throughout most of the film, but especially at the beginning, the alien's gaze is that of the camera, allowing viewers to share the posthuman experience. The camera embodies the alien's point of view as she drives her van in search of her male victims. We get recurrent subjective shots oriented towards male pedestrians, which offers us an intriguing look at how the posthuman subject may see our world. This way, the camera/the alien tends to ignore women and focus on men, who are followed and panned, and become objectified. This reversal of conventional ways of looking in film empowers the posthuman, who becomes active in the production of meanings, giving voice to the subaltern, a strategy also used by the series *Pose*, as argued by Hidalgo-Ciudad in this volume. The result is that spectators feel confused and disoriented when watching these scenes, in a similar way as the posthuman character may experience our world. She seems to be learning about a new environment, yet her presence in it is disturbing both for other characters and for audiences. Apart from the camera movement and the use of subjective shots, other elements of the mise-en-scene contribute to create this alienating, oppressing effect: we get lots of silent scenes with no dialogue at all, innovative camera angles and unconventional soundtrack. Vint refers to all these techniques that "not only mirror the alien's own difficult interactions with a strange human culture but also prevent the viewers from falling into any normative framework for interpreting her actions" (2015, 3).

Later in the film, we will learn that her skin is a mere artefact, a tool she uses to seduce men. In her hunting mission, she has no expression

in her face, except when she wants to seduce her preys and needs to pass as a woman. Apart from that, she shows no interest in becoming human, only curiosity at times. Moreover, she has no empathy for humans, which is evident in the scene of the beach, when she simply ignores the presence of a baby desperately crying after both his parents have drowned in the sea. The alien shows no sign of emotion, unmoved in a situation that may have moved even the most inhuman of all humans. She shows to be inhuman and lacking any sign of maternal protection towards the vulnerable baby. This is precisely why Johansson's character has been read as terrifying, unnatural and linked to sexual cannibalism. In relation to this issue, Jelaca argues that "the film refuses to anchor our viewing experience in recognizable discourses that we can attach back to humanist ethics" (Jelaca 382). Similarly, Vint argues that "the film is powerful because it both compels the viewer to stay with the alien point of view and refuses to impose normative human ethics upon the action it shows us through her eyes" (2015, 8). The film resists the humanist logic through a posthuman perspective that does not see difference, nor does understand our hierarchies, rules and ethics. The alien's inability to channel difference is evident in a sequence in which she encounters a man with a severe skull deformity. The posthuman does not feel his difference and does not understand why he is socially rejected. However, for some reason, she sets him free. Jelaca interprets this act as an encounter with her own alterity, since they share an alien displacement: "in her encounter with disability, the alien discovers that the definition of 'humanness', and masculinity in particular, is fraught with ableism" (388). As I see it, this action also means that the alien is free to take decisions that may deviate from her original mission, and that she has her own desires.

It is precisely from this moment onwards when the posthuman becomes visibly vulnerable. Unable to understand how our world works, with its ethics and rules, she seems to pay the consequences for not becoming human. In the final scenes in the forest, she gives the impression of feeling the wind, the coldness and the rain; she looks tired, fragile and frightened when the guard is hunting her. It is at this moment when she best suggests the idea of the vulnerable posthuman, and when spectators experience empathy. The female alien's viewpoint is redirected, and she becomes subjected to the male gaze. Roles are reversed and, after having been asked by her future aggressor if she is alone in the forest, her position as a victim seems inevitable. The ending sequences, opposed to the repetitiveness and slow pace of the first half of the movie, are

nightmarish, and, as Loreck affirms, “rather than even more insistently naturalizing the character in femininity and humanity, this climax fully estranges her body as a disposable exterior” (175). She grows vulnerable until she is aggressively destroyed. The final attack is a moving scene, shocking for audiences who at this point feel sympathy for her. This idea has been recalled by Vint, who argues, “gendered and racialized difference is violently destroyed, shocking us into sympathy with our inhuman protagonist” (9). Here the alien does not become like us, and “we have to find ways to engage ethical community across difference rather than create ethical community via its elimination” (Vint 2015, 9).

Johansson’s character remains and dies alien. Precisely because of this negative ending, the film ultimately articulates strategies of denouncing the elimination of difference in the hands of patriarchal systems. The film makes us think about the need to change our system of values, while reminding us how we are still intolerant towards difference. As Vint suggests, the film shows the limitations of an ethics of similarity but does not enable us to move towards an ethics that could accommodate difference (2015, 10). The vulnerable posthuman allows for a positioning which, if not radical, still resists some masculinist models as depicted on screen.

10.2.3 *The Transhuman Body: Ghost in the Shell (2017)*

Sanders’ *Ghost in the Shell* constructs the vulnerable posthuman through Major Mira, a cyber-enhanced character that eventually discovers how her life was stolen in the past to create a perfect soldier capable of ending up with the world’s most dangerous criminals. Mira is tied to alterity and her feminine body presented as artificial at all times. As happened in *Under the Skin*, her posthuman subjectivity is shown to audiences, who experience some glimpses of the trans/posthuman experience, and ultimately empathise with her, in spite of her difference. Mira remains alien throughout the film, and, although she is offered the opportunity of disembodiment, she finally decides to continue being a mere weapon at the service of a technologised neoliberal society. The film cannot, then, avoid engaging in humanist/sexist frameworks, offering a rather negative ending that, nevertheless, enables spectators to reflect upon future societies and the need to find more sustainable options for our bodies and our planet.

Major Mira has a human brain in an artificially enhanced body, which troubles her existence in the world in which she has been forced to live, a pan Asian metropolis. According to Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz, one of the suggested methods of life extension in transhumanist thought is mind uploading, which consists of transferring the human mind to a computer, so that the original consciousness and personal identity can be maintained (121–2). This way, the mind should be freed from the fragility of the human body. The movie relies on these premises but, interestingly enough, the mind is uploaded into a humanoid cyber-body, which further talks about the impossibility of totally abandoning human/sexist references in the future societies. Major Mira is considered as a miracle, the first human mind inserted into a cybernetic frame, the first of her kind. But she is also the object of greedy capitalism, the future of Hanka robotics, a corporation funded by the government to fight criminals, a fact that resonates with other movies depicting mechanical cyborgs, like *Robocop*.

Mira's body is manufactured, and she is fully conscious about it. Cinematography reinforces this idea from the opening scenes, in which we see how her brain is inserted into an artificially created body. Indeed, she is presented to audiences as a perfect crime-fighting device, or as a "war machine", in Brown and Fleming's words. Yet, Mira has a beautiful body according to western standards, reinforced by Johansson's fine physicality. In spite of her condition of a weapon, she is modelled after a young white woman: she has a fashionable haircut and uses make-up, perfectly noticeable in the recurrent close-ups showing her face. She is constructed following the pattern of representation of the action female hero on screen, present in movies like *The Matrix*, *Tom Ryder* or *Wonder Woman*, to name some popular examples. Thus, the Major is brave, resourceful and strong, is seen carrying weapons and is depicted as a skilled fighter, as a mechanical cyborg who gets damaged and needs reparation. Her manners are tough, as when she coldly implores the doctor that created her: "maybe next time you can design me better", or to her boss: "I wasn't designed to dance", "I will fight him. I will kill them, it is what I am brought for, isn't it?" (*Ghost in the Shell*, 18:50–28:55). Conscious of her constructed nature, she places herself as opposed to humans, a fact evidenced when she complains about her lack of intimacy: "I guess privacy is just for humans" (*Ghost in the Shell*, 19:00). She is associated to otherness and marginality, and her inhuman condition is even insulted at, as when she is told "it is just a robot", or "you have no heart" (*Ghost in the*

Shell, 13:50). In this sense, the movie relies on familiar filmic conventions and places Major Mira on a disadvantaged position. Spectators adopt a humanist framework and associate otherness with difference and alienness, which are embodied by her transhuman body.

However, what is interesting for the purposes of this analysis is that the Major remains alien throughout the whole movie, and, in spite of that, spectators sympathise with her and get to know her posthuman subjectivity. The narrative does not try, then, to humanise her but, rather, presents us with a vulnerable character that resists in her role of the other. Her transhuman experience as a cyber-enhanced being is offered to spectators, who adopt her perspective by means of recurrent subjective shots, in which we get distorted images, interferences that allow us to see her vision of the world through “glitches”. Mira sees the world as fragmented, and her posthuman subjectivity is shown to us, destabilising this way the binaries human/alien and self/other.

This idea of experiencing her sense of the world goes a step further when Mira (and audiences) learn that she is but a product of experimentation. The moment in which Mira finds out that she is a disposable product at the service of advanced capitalist societies, she feels betrayed, fake and anxious, as even her past is unreal, evident when she complains “nothing I have is real”. It is precisely at these moments when spectators mostly sympathise with her, sharing her vulnerability and articulating ethical debates on the future of science and technologies. In line with Butler *et al.*’s theories, her vulnerability leads to active ways of resistance and from this sequence onwards, we see Mira having agency, not following orders and being the ultimate responsible of her actions and desires. Her body becomes visibly damaged in this search of her past. This illustration of “embodied resistance” (Butler 6) calls the attention, then, to the unjust effect of some neoliberal practices. Thus, the depiction of embodied otherness ultimately offers a space for critical reflection and for the denunciation of the cruelties inflicted upon certain bodies by a greedy capitalism. Mira finds out about her real past and family, how her name was Motoko, a Japanese rebellious girl living in the lawless zone, who used to write manifestos against enhancement until the government arrested her. The bodies of the so-called Project 2571 were but experiments to improve the social wellness of the privileged ones. The consequence was social stigmatisation for these rebellious people living in the lawless zone and resisting human enhancement, who were inevitably positioned as secondary citizens. As Butler contends, the vulnerability to

dispossession, poverty, insecurity and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance (12).

The movie engages with Braidotti's calls for a new vision of the subject that is "worthy of the present", denouncing the commodification of certain bodies by advanced capitalist societies: "these are the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others" (2013, 15). The belief that some humans are more "mortal" than others, which is pivotal in this film, has been forced upon us by the cultural imaginary. Some Japanese bodies are considered disposable in the movie, and the characters of Mira and her friend Kuze regarded as alien, marginal and/or non-human beings. It is important, therefore, to do media critique, or, in Braidotti's words, to "detox" our world from false assumptions. These concerns are also in line with critical perspectives on transhumanism, which examine the main problems derived from this idea of life extension, such as social justice, acceleration of global ecological breakdown, production of conservative subjects, etc. As Pastourmatzi argues, despite its universalising rhetoric and its posture as a global new philosophy, transhumanism (...) "is actually a historically-specific, culture-specific, masculinist, technocentric, American-inspired, capitalist framework with roots in the two-hundred-year-old industrial-military-scientific complex" (272).

As happened with *Under the Skin*, Sanders' film has a rather negative ending in the sense that, although the Major finally chooses to keep her alienness, she decides to do so under the same oppressing conditions, assuming her destiny as a mere weapon. So, after finding out that her "ghost" cannot be controlled and belongs solely to her, she still decides to return and work for the police, instead of claiming an alternative existence. While in *Under the Skin* difference is violently destroyed, in *Ghost in the Shell*, it is commodified by the dominant culture. Both texts ultimately suggest the impossibility of dealing with difference in contemporary societies and remind us of our need to develop empathy and develop new lenses from where to judge the world.

10.3 CONCLUSIONS

As I have attempted to illustrate, the vulnerable posthuman stands as a useful cinematic device from where to articulate critiques to dualistic thinking, encouraging audiences to think of new and more productive

possibilities for our bodies and worlds. *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) present (feminine) posthuman characters as authentic subjects, within their otherness and vulnerability. Their subjectivities are complex, hybrid and processual, escaping most of the time human understanding. Yet, the movies have succeeded in providing the posthuman with a valuable representational space by giving these characters the opportunity to develop their own voices, which audiences share by means of certain filmic strategies such as identification and sympathy. This alternative and unique posthuman point of view enables us to experience difference, and ultimately activate strategies to find more inclusive spaces in our globalised and transnational times. The portrayal of the posthuman leads us, then, to a re-consideration of established hierarchies, as well as to judge the body of the other as a powerful tool for fighting against hegemonic discourses.

The posthuman characters in these filmic texts contest their otherness and, although this resistance inevitably leads to negative endings in both movies, their powerful presence also offers a space for understanding the post/transhuman subject, engaging with issues like gender, class, ethnicity and specism in our societies. The movies ultimately encourage us to find just and sustainable solutions for our problems since, as William Brown contends, “posthumanism must still do political work because humans continue to ignore the ontological nature of our human posthumanism/our posthuman humanity” (18).

Acknowledgements The author wishes to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (Research Project “Bodies in Transit 2”, ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P), the European Regional Development Fund, the Spanish Research Agency and the Regional Ministry of Economy, Knowledge, Enterprise and Universities of Andalusia (Project “Embodiments, Genders and Difference: Cultural Practices of Violence and Discrimination”, ref. 1252965) for the writing of this essay.

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Trans* Vulnerability and Resistance in the Ballroom: The Case of *Pose* (Season 1)

Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad

11.1 INTRODUCTION

“New York City. 1987”. This text, which opens the pilot episode of *Pose*, leads the spectator to a fictional world populated by LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters who are part of the ballroom community and look for success and praise competing in the ball scene. The series focalises the two main elements of the 1980s ballroom culture—houses and ball competitions—through the House of Abundance, dictatorially led by Mother Elektra, and the House of Evangelista, led by Blanca, one of Elektra’s children who, tired of continuously being despised and humiliated by her haughty mother and after being diagnosed as HIV-positive, decides to leave and create her own family as a way to find a purpose in life mothering others in love and care, something neither Elektra nor her biological

J. C. Hidalgo-Ciudad (✉)
University of Sevilla, Sevilla, Spain
e-mail: jhidalgo@us.es