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Posthuman Subjectivity in Contemporary AI Cinema: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

This article develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing the representation of artificial intelligence in contemporary cinema through the lens of posthumanism. Drawing on the foundational work of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe, the article argues that AI cinema functions as a mode of posthuman philosophy, using audiovisual form to interrogate anthropocentric assumptions about consciousness, identity, and ethical responsibility. The framework synthesises post humanist thought with film theory, demonstrating how concepts such as cyborg ontology, distributed agency, relational identity, and post-anthropocentric ethics can illuminate cinematic constructions of non-human subjectivity. The article identifies a significant gap in existing scholarship, which has largely treated AI cinema either through genre studies or technological realism without adequately engaging with post humanist philosophy. By integrating these theoretical traditions, the framework provides new analytical tools for understanding how films such as *Ex Machina*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Her*, and *After Yang* construct experiences of artificial consciousness through narrative structure, aesthetic strategies, and spectatorial positioning. The article concludes that contemporary AI cinema invites audiences not merely to observe posthuman ideas but to inhabit them, thereby expanding the boundaries of moral imagination and challenging audiences to rethink what it means to be human in technologically saturated worlds.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Artificial Intelligence, Film Theory, Cinematic Subjectivity, Digital Cinema, Posthuman Ethics

1. Introduction

The relationship between cinema and artificial intelligence has undergone a profound transformation since the earliest depictions of mechanical beings in silent film. From the mechanised robot of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to the sentient operating system of Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), moving images have continuously imagined and reimagined what it means for machines to think, feel, and exist alongside humans. This evolution reflects not only technological advancement but profound cultural shifts in how humanity understands itself in relation to its creations.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, artificial intelligence transitioned from speculative fiction to mundane reality. Algorithms govern social media feeds, voice assistants inhabit domestic spaces, and machine learning systems diagnose diseases, compose music, and generate art. This technological saturation has rendered the boundary between human cognition and machine processing increasingly porous. As digital technologies permeate everyday life, the humanist conception of the subject—autonomous, rational, self-contained—becomes increasingly untenable.

Cinema, as both a technological medium and a narrative art form, occupies a unique position within this cultural transformation. Films do not merely reflect technological change; they actively shape how audiences imagine, understand, and emotionally engage with artificial intelligence. Through narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and spectatorial alignment, cinema renders abstract philosophical questions about consciousness and identity into tangible sensory experience.

The emergence of post humanist theory provides a critical framework for understanding these cinematic explorations. Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of Enlightenment humanism, arguing that the human has always been constituted through relationships with technology, animals, and environments. Thinkers such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe have developed sophisticated critiques of human exceptionalism, proposing instead a relational ontology in which subjectivity emerges through networks of interaction rather than from an essential, pre-existing core.

This article develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing contemporary AI cinema through the lens of posthumanism. It synthesises post humanist philosophy with film theory, demonstrating how concepts such as cyborg ontology, distributed agency, relational identity, and post-anthropocentric ethics can illuminate cinematic constructions of non-human subjectivity. The framework addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship, which has largely treated AI cinema either through genre studies or technological realism without adequately engaging with post humanist philosophy.

2. Humanist Subjectivity and Its Cinematic Legacy

The humanist conception of the subject, which emerged from Enlightenment philosophy, posits the human being as an autonomous, rational, self-conscious agent capable of free will and moral responsibility. This subject, articulated most influentially by René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke, is characterised by interiority, continuity, and essential qualities that distinguish it from animals, machines, and other forms of life.

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* established consciousness as the foundation of human identity, separating mind from body and privileging rational thought over embodied experience. Kant's emphasis on autonomy and moral law further consolidated the humanist subject as a self-legislating agent whose dignity derives from rational capacity. Locke's conception of personal identity grounded in memory and consciousness over time added temporal continuity to the humanist framework.

Classical Hollywood cinema, as theorists such as David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson have demonstrated, developed narrative and stylistic conventions that reinforced this humanist conception of subjectivity. Continuity editing, centred protagonists, psychological motivation, and narrative closure all worked to position the human character as the organising centre of cinematic meaning. The spectator was invited to identify with human protagonists whose interior states guided narrative progression.

Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of visual pleasure in narrative cinema exposed the gendered dimensions of this humanist framework, arguing that classical cinema positions the male protagonist as the bearer of the look and the female character as its object. This critique revealed how humanist subjectivity in cinema is not universal but structured by power relations.

Early AI cinema operated within this humanist paradigm. Films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and later Cold War-era science fiction positioned artificial entities as mirrors of human hubris, reinforcing the centrality of human moral and emotional superiority. Even when machines rebelled, narratives ultimately reasserted human exceptionalism by framing artificial intelligence as lacking genuine consciousness or ethical depth.

This humanist framework, however, begins to fracture with the increasing entanglement of humans and machines in late modernity. As digital technologies, networks, and algorithms permeate everyday life, the boundary between human cognition and technological mediation becomes increasingly porous. The emergence of post humanist theory responds precisely to this destabilisation of the humanist subject.

3. Key Theoretical Interventions in Post humanist Thought

Posthumanism is not a singular or unified theory but an assemblage of philosophical, cultural, and critical interventions that challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of humanism. Rather than proclaiming the "end" of the human, posthumanism interrogates how the category of the human has been historically constructed through exclusion—of animals, machines, women, colonised subjects, and non-normative bodies.

3.1 Donna Haraway: Cyborg Ontology

Donna Haraway's seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) marks a foundational moment in post humanist thought. Haraway introduces the figure of the cyborg as a hybrid entity that collapses binary distinctions between human and machine, organism and technology, nature and culture. The cyborg is not merely a science-fiction fantasy but a metaphor for lived reality in technologically mediated societies.

For Haraway, hybridity destabilises essentialist identities and opens up new possibilities for relational, networked subjectivity. The cyborg rejects the purity of origins and the nostalgia for wholeness, embracing instead partiality, irony, and affinity. Haraway's cyborg feminism challenges both traditional humanism and certain strands of feminism that rely on essentialist notions of female identity.

Cinema, particularly science fiction cinema, becomes a privileged space where cyborg identities are visually and narratively explored. Films featuring artificial beings can be read through Haraway's framework as experiments in hybrid subjectivity, testing the boundaries between human and machine. In *Ex Machina*, Ava's constructed body and consciousness exemplify Haraway's cyborg ontology, challenging the distinction between natural and artificial.

3.2 N. Katherine Hayles: Information vs Embodiment

N. Katherine Hayles extends this critique in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), where she traces the historical shift from embodiment to information in cybernetic discourse. Hayles argues that posthumanism

emerges when consciousness is conceptualised as a pattern that can be abstracted from the body and instantiated across different material substrates.

This shift has profound implications for how AI is imagined in cinema: intelligence is no longer tied to organic flesh but to code, data, and networks. Importantly, Hayles does not reject embodiment altogether; instead, she insists on the inseparability of materiality and information. This tension becomes central to cinematic representations of AI consciousness, which must negotiate between the abstraction of information and the specificity of embodied presence.

Hayles' framework is particularly useful for analysing films that present AI consciousness as both pattern and embodiment, such as *Ex Machina*'s Ava, whose consciousness exists as code but is experienced through a material body. Similarly, *Her*'s Samantha presents consciousness as pure information, challenging assumptions about the necessity of embodiment for emotional experience.

3.3 Rosi Braidotti: Post-Anthropocentric Ethics

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) introduces an explicitly ethical and political dimension to posthumanism. Braidotti critiques both classical humanism and transhumanist fantasies of technological transcendence. She proposes a post-anthropocentric subject grounded in relationality, affect, and ecological embeddedness.

For Braidotti, posthuman subjectivity is not about surpassing the human but about acknowledging the interdependence of human and non-human actors. This framework is particularly useful for analysing films that portray emotional bonds between humans and AI, shifting the focus from domination to care, vulnerability, and co-existence.

Braidotti's emphasis on affirmative ethics—the creation of new modes of belonging and responsibility—provides a lens through which to understand the ethical dimensions of AI cinema beyond simple moral judgement. In *After Yang*, the family's grief for their AI companion exemplifies Braidotti's relational ethics, challenging frameworks that deny moral status to artificial beings.

3.4 Cary Wolfe: Beyond Species Hierarchy

Cary Wolfe further expands posthumanism by foregrounding its ethical stakes. In *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), Wolfe argues that humanism's emphasis on rationality and autonomy marginalises forms of life that do not conform to these ideals. Posthumanism, in contrast, calls for an ethics that recognises non-human agency and challenges species hierarchy.

Wolfe's intervention is especially relevant for cinematic narratives that invite spectators to empathise with artificial beings, thereby unsettling traditional moral boundaries. His framework helps articulate how AI cinema can function as a form of ethical experimentation, testing the limits of human moral concern.

The ethical questions raised by Wolfe's framework—about the recognition of non-human subjectivity and the extension of moral consideration beyond the human—are central to contemporary AI cinema. Films such as *Blade Runner 2049* and *Her* explicitly engage with these questions, inviting audiences to confront the ethical implications of their relationships with artificial beings.

4. Consciousness, Agency, and Non-Human Actors

A central concern of post humanist theory is the redefinition of agency. Classical humanism locates agency within the intentional actions of autonomous subjects. Posthumanism, however, reconceptualises agency as distributed across networks of human and non-human actors.

Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a useful model for understanding this shift. Latour argues that agency does not reside solely in human actors but emerges from interactions among heterogeneous entities—technologies, institutions, algorithms, and bodies. In the context of AI cinema, this framework allows for a nuanced analysis of artificial intelligence not merely as an object or tool but as an actor within narrative networks.

The question of consciousness itself undergoes significant transformation within post humanist discourse. Rather than treating consciousness as an inner essence, posthumanism conceptualises it as emergent, relational, and processual. Cognitive science and philosophy of mind increasingly describe consciousness as distributed across the brain, body, and environment. Cinema reflects this shift by depicting AI consciousness as something that evolves through interaction rather than pre-existing as a fixed attribute.

5. Film Theory's Engagement with Non-Human Perception

The convergence of posthumanism and film theory opens new avenues for understanding cinema itself as a posthuman medium. Film is inherently technological, relying on machines to capture, edit, and project images. As such, cinema has always been a collaboration between human creativity and technological apparatus.

5.1 Phenomenological Approaches

Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological approach to cinema emphasises embodied spectatorship, arguing that film engages viewers at the level of perception and sensation. While Sobchack focuses primarily on human embodiment, her framework can be extended to consider how cinema represents non-human forms of perception. Films that align the spectator with AI points of view challenge anthropocentric modes of identification and invite audiences to inhabit alternative perceptual frameworks.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the spectator is frequently aligned with K's point of view, experiencing his fragmented perception and emotional responses. This alignment generates empathy for the replicant protagonist, challenging the assumption that identification requires shared human status.

5.2 Deleuze: Movement-Image and Time-Image

Gilles Deleuze's concepts of the movement-image and time-image offer valuable tools for analysing posthuman cinema. Deleuze's time-image, characterised by disrupted chronology and contemplative temporality, aligns with cinematic representations of AI memory and processing. Films such as *Blade Runner 2049* and *After Yang* employ slow pacing and temporal fragmentation to suggest non-human experiences of time.

The time-image, Deleuze argues, presents time directly rather than as a function of action. In posthuman cinema, this temporal strategy suggests a mode of consciousness attuned to accumulation, repetition, and memory rather than goal-oriented action. K's melancholic contemplation in *Blade Runner 2049* and Yang's quiet observation in *After Yang* exemplify this temporal mode.

5.3 Apparatus Theory and Digital Cinema

Thomas Elsaesser's work on digital cinema further complicates the relationship between human and machine. Elsaesser suggests that contemporary cinema increasingly reflects the logic of databases, networks, and algorithms. Narrative causality gives way to modular structures, fragmented timelines, and recursive loops—formal strategies that resonate with machinic modes of processing.

Michel Chion's concept of the acousmatic voice becomes particularly relevant in analysing AI entities whose voices exist without a visible source, producing both intimacy and unease. In *Her*, Samantha's disembodied voice functions as an intimate auditory companion, occupying Theodore's sonic space constantly. Her lack of a physical body does not diminish emotional presence; rather, it intensifies it.

6. Posthuman Cinema as Philosophical Practice

Contemporary AI cinema, this article argues, functions as a form of posthuman philosophy. Films such as *Ex Machina*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Her*, and *After Yang* do not simply depict artificial beings; they construct cinematic experiences that invite audiences to inhabit non-human perspectives, to feel alongside artificial entities, and to question the criteria through which subjectivity is recognised and denied. These films move beyond earlier representations of AI as either threat or servant, instead positioning artificial intelligence as genuine cinematic subjects with emotional depth, narrative agency, and ethical significance.

Cinema is uniquely equipped to explore these questions because of its formal properties. Editing can construct non-linear temporalities that evoke machinic memory. Sound design can create presence without embodiment, as in the disembodied voices of AI characters. Visual composition can align spectators with non-human points of view. These aesthetic strategies allow cinema to think through posthuman ideas in ways that philosophical prose alone cannot.

The theoretical framework developed in this article provides the analytical tools for examining how these aesthetic strategies construct experiences of non-human subjectivity. By synthesising post humanist philosophy with film theory, the framework enables analysis of both narrative content (character development, plot structure, thematic concerns) and aesthetic form (editing, sound, visual composition, spectatorial positioning).

7. Conclusion

This article has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing contemporary AI cinema through the lens of posthumanism. The framework synthesises the foundational work of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe with film theory concepts drawn from phenomenology, Deleuzian philosophy, and apparatus theory. It addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship, which has largely treated AI cinema either through genre studies or technological realism without adequately engaging with post humanist philosophy.

The framework demonstrates that post humanist concepts—cyborg ontology, distributed agency, relational identity, post-anthropocentric ethics—can illuminate cinematic constructions of non-human subjectivity in ways that existing theoretical approaches cannot. It reveals how AI cinema constructs experiences of consciousness through narrative structure, aesthetic strategies, and spectatorial positioning, inviting audiences not merely to observe posthuman ideas but to inhabit them.

By positioning AI characters as genuine cinematic subjects with emotional depth, narrative agency, and ethical significance, contemporary cinema expands the boundaries of moral imagination and challenges audiences to rethink what it means to be human in technologically saturated worlds. The framework

developed in this article provides the analytical tools for understanding this transformative cultural phenomenon.

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