



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

Reading in Ruins: Exploring Posthumanist Narrative Studies

How to Cite: Falkenhayner, N 2020 *The Ship Who Sang: Feminism, the Posthuman, and Similarity*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(2): 21, pp. 1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.598>

Published: 12 October 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

READING IN RUINS: EXPLORING POSTHUMANIST NARRATIVE STUDIES

The Ship Who Sang: Feminism, the Posthuman, and Similarity

Nicole Falkenhayner

Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg, DE
nicole.falkenhayner@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de

The fact that there is an affinity between the agendas of feminist theory and critical posthumanism is well-known, but warrants further exploration when used for the analysis of specific popular cultural representations. By outlining the similarities between the two critical movements, it is proposed that the conceptual use of the notion of similarity in cultural analysis, as introduced by Bhatti and Kimmich (2017), can be productively employed to reframe the critical assessment of gender as deeply involved in representations and imaginaries of the posthuman in literary and cultural analysis. By discussing a modern classic of popular science fiction in the critical literature of gender in posthumanism, Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* ([1961] 1969), a deep-set gendered imaginary is outlined which troubles the critical posthumanist aim of an inclusive ethics due to the cultural inability to represent the posthuman as non-gendered. It is argued that many popular cultural representations of posthumans are still entrenched in a conventional gender economy. Thus, a critical revisiting of these preconceptions and the problems that a non-gendered imaginary seems to pose to globalised popular culture is vital at a time in which the development of a general artificial intelligence, as well as other posthuman scientific innovations, are declared scientific and economic investments. Simultaneously, contemporary popular culture imagines posthumans which are not less haunted by the ghosts of gendered knowledge systems than popular culture from the 1960s.

Introduction

In the introduction to their edited volume on feminist posthumanities, Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (2018) state that the basic aim of critical posthumanism is to find an answer to a moral philosophical question: 'how to live well with multiple others on this planet' (4). However, their statement simultaneously includes a radical reformulation of the idea of the good life, because it not only addresses humans (which, in classical antiquity and later Western philosophy, for a long time meant especially male humans), but 'multiple others'. In the struggle towards a fully inclusive ethics, the authors immediately point out the pitfalls for this radical rethinking of ethics due to the shape of prevalent signifying practices and knowledge systems:

the force of naturecultures [sic] frequently becomes dubious and damaging, such as when we regard 'Culture' as an external force of God-like artificiality, when we still debate if women should get human rights, or when we regard less than strictly hetero-normative practices as *unnatural*, or when all kinds of socio-historical inequalities get legitimized by scientific authorities. (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018: 2, emphasis in original)

This gap between the theoretical work of feminist posthumanists and the factual epistemes of implicit and explicit knowledge systems in cultural practice is observable in much of the creative production in contemporary global popular culture. Åsberg and Braidotti contend that 'presently, our collective imagination manifested in popular cultures also complements a humanistic critique', and that in particular, contemporary popular television series and other mass-received dystopian genres would indicate that 'clearly, from the overlapping domains of science and popular imagination we have already moved way beyond the limitations of the humanist imagination, for better or for worse' (5). It is especially in this overlap, I will argue, where ghosts are buried. Rephrased in a Derridean vein, it can be stated that while posthumanist perspectives in both theory and popular culture are following the ghost of the *other*, by which I mean the imaginary of an as-yet not fully shaped futurity of living 'well with multiple others on this planet', such perspectives are

haunted by the ghost of the *same*, by which I mean the insidious power of pervasive ordering and knowledge systems so deeply ingrained in popular cultures that they re-appear in a spectral manner as they struggle to overcome them. I argue that the representations of gender in this context are making this double spectrality of past and future (Derrida, 1994: 3–9) explicit, and warrant further investigation. As Jacques Derrida, referring to the cemetery scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, writes: 'One *has to know* who is buried where' (9, emphasis in original).

The entry-point of this article is the hypothesis that there is not only a complex similarity to be found between the basic notions and agendas of critical posthumanism and feminism, but that literary and cultural analysis with a feminist inflexion enables an investigation into the ways in which traditional systems of relations between subjects understood as fundamentally different from each other often continue to operate below visions of an inclusive posthuman life-world. Accordingly, I propose that popular fictions of the posthuman are a prime site to observe reflections of the continuing dominance of gendered imaginations of the posthuman. While questions of ethics among humans and cultural power valences had been thematised with regard to binary gender differences from the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the concern of feminist thinkers (and writers) was often, at least implicitly, prone to be extended to the investigation of plural, or intersectional difference, for example, the status of ethnic or sexual minorities, or even interspecies relations. Ever since the rise of queer studies, these intersectional aspects of feminist thought have become increasingly explicit. The affinity between feminism and posthumanism cannot only be observed in the thought of critical posthumanist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, to mention just a few of the most prominent. It also lies in the common basic interest of these two intellectual traditions, which is to rethink and encounter that which is connoted as different and *other* from the perspective of a heteropatriarchal set of norms in an ethical manner. Which role does the legacy of feminist thought, and of literary and cultural analysis with a feminist inflexion, have to play in thinking and imagining the posthuman? In this context, the science fiction text *The Ship Who Sang* ([1961] 1969) by Anne McCaffrey has received the status of a modern classic in

academic discussion, and I will use it in this article as an example that reveals some of the semiotic burial grounds of a posthumanist imaginary in which the dead do not stay in their graves. The text raises issues which are still relevant in contemporary cultures. These issues are the deep entrenchment of the gender dichotomy in culture, questions of identity and the representation of non-normative forms of life situated between organicism and artificial enhancement. These issues are also relevant in the context of the anticipation of a future in which the development of a general artificial intelligence is not only a declared scientific aim, but also one of increasing productivity in cultural works such as, for example, Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* (2019), the game/interactive film *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), the film *Ex Machina* (2014), or the television series *Westworld* (2016).

In the following, I will first outline the relation of feminist criticism and the posthuman. Following this, I will reframe the relation of feminism and posthumanism through the notion of similarity proposed by Bhatti and Kimmich (2017) as a paradigm for cultural studies. I will then revisit McCaffrey's fiction of the sentient cyborg-space ship Helva in *The Ship Who Sang* to reveal the implications that the materially complex main protagonist of this science fiction text has for discussions of subjectivity and the representation of gender in the context of feminist and posthuman cultural criticism in the present.

Feminism and the Posthuman

Representing the posthuman creates challenging analogies between self and other that question humanist notions of subjectivity. These representations challenge preconceptions of what constitutes the human as a model for identity and subjectivation, enabling speculation on the future shape of relations of beings of different kinds in various 'modes of existence' (Latour, 2013: 19). This reshaping of fundamental epistemological and ontological concepts of self and other enables the posthuman to question the ethical relationship between existing and future forms of being. As formerly speculative and fictional visions of posthuman life forms are increasingly materializing due to achievements in scientific endeavours—in genetic engineering, in the development of artificial intelligence and in biotechnological

enhancement—feminism returns with ‘the age-old [...] question [...] of “who gets to count as human, and at the expense of whom?”’ (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018: 14). Developments towards the posthuman do not successfully bury older, more conventional concepts of the self and the other, and the hybridised constellations in which they are entangled. If posthuman life-forms are the new others, then our scientific and aesthetic imaginaries of them confront us with the ghosts of old others, and let structures culturally reappear in which figurations of being and existence have been both systematised and represented. As the posthuman provokes questions of similarity and difference, it also demands new evaluations of often pre-reflexive, ingrained systems of inclusion and exclusion. In this field, gendered signifying practices, far from having been surpassed, continue to lead a spectral existence. I argue that the ghosts of gendered signifying practices can be used as a sensor to search for the ways in which popular posthumanist imaginaries are haunted by their own past, in order to revitalize gender’s productive function as ‘an engine of discovery as much as a category of critique’ (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018: 13) in posthumanist cultural studies.

Visions of the posthuman enable a rethinking of the scientifically possible that have an impact on basic ontological and epistemological concepts. Here, the interaction—or possible similarities—of theories and practices in the sciences and in the arts needs to be further investigated concerning questions of gender. For example, in the episteme of thinking the body and embodiment, we find new visions of entanglement that make the idea of a clearly delineated, subjective self located in a just-as-clearly-delineated body questionable. This is the case both in a discursive, as well as in a material dimension, with effects on both socio-cultural as well as scientific fields. In reproductive medicine, work is being conducted to combine the genetic material of two same-sex individuals, or of three humans. Research of this kind should not only be understood as forays into the scientifically possible, but also as a quest to address new socio-cultural needs of identity formation. Underneath this research, a new idea of interhuman relations and wishes for reproduction can be found (Dvorsky and Hughes, 2008: 10). Such developments in postnatural human embodiment can be seen in conjunction with feminist arguments concerning

virtuality brought forward by N. Katherine Hayles in her monograph *How We Became Posthuman* (1999b). By historicizing the development of constructing the posthuman as a 'ghost in the machine' in cybernetics, Hayles rejects the cybernetic disembodied concept in order to free virtuality of its underlying preconceptions of the ideal of the perfect bodiless mind, which is, in her view, a continuation of the liberal-humanist ideal of man. Rather, she proposes that human beings who understand themselves as posthuman in the virtual sense develop new constellations of subjectivity based on pre-individual connections between disparately connected building-blocks of identity. Hayles forwards this proposition also via the investigation of the gendered concepts of the human in early forays into artificial intelligence, for example, when she discusses the Turing test, which was devised to locate the moment in which a human is no longer able to distinguish between a human and a technological conversation partner:

The part of the Turing test that historically has been foregrounded is the distinction between thinking human and thinking machine. Often forgotten is the first example Turing offered of distinguishing between a man and a woman. If your failure to distinguish correctly between human and machine proves that machines can think, what does it prove if you fail to distinguish woman from man? Why does gender appear in this primal scene of humans meeting their evolutionary successors, intelligent machines? What do gendered bodies have to do with the erasure of embodiment and the subsequent merging of machine and human intelligence in the figure of the cyborg? (Hayles, 1999a: xii)

Hayles' questioning of the genealogy of cybernetics and its effects on our imaginaries of beings to come, the 'evolutionary successors' of humans, directly addresses the question of the role of gender in forays into the posthuman, and its connection to feminist concerns. Contemporary software systems emulating the posthuman are often paradoxically bodiless but still gendered: for example, in the commercial realm, the pre-setting of the voices of so-called artificial intelligence (AI) assistant

systems (as well as their names) reflect how technological corporations imagine artificial assistant software as gendered. What *cultural* effect does it have when I address the software that can tell me the weather forecast, set my cooking timer, and turn the light on and off in my house by a female name, and it answers to me in a female voice? Gendered cyborgs, aliens, and monsters do not only have an important role to play in science fiction and posthuman theory, but also in radical theories of a feminist lineage—a tradition of which critical posthumanism can, at least partially, be seen as the latest, and most comprehensive instalment. In order to elaborate this point, in the next section, I will use the notion of similarity as proposed by, among others, Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich (2017) as a perspectivation of cultural studies, to analyse the entanglements of feminist thought with the figure of the posthuman.

***Similar*s – a Perspectivation of Feminism Through the Figure of the Posthuman**

In their collaborative work on the concept of similarity, Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich (2017) formulate a criticism of the analytic idiom of postcolonialism. They argue that the paradigmatic position of difference as the basis of postcolonial critique is prone to create problems not unlike those of liberal-humanist ideas of inclusion, which they argue to be based on a paradigm of sameness. Bhatti and Kimmich propose a perspective of similarity which, as they claim, would forego the essentializations that are entailed in both other paradigms: where postulations of sameness and identity imply the danger of rendering universal or invisible highly differential, situated forms of living, concepts based on deep difference would hinder an inclusive ethics of pluralist societies and lend themselves to conflict narratives. The authors argue that Bhabha's concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) cannot solve this problem, as it retains the imagination of two original entities that have to come together to form a third one. The concept of similarity does not need this problematic point of origin, as it proceeds from the investigation of plural, always unfinished and partial relations of similarities and points of comparison without the positioning of an original, stable form of identity. The rejection of origins is also an

aspect of the deep link between feminist theory and posthumanism: ‘to Braidotti (2016, 4) the posthuman expresses a critical consensus akin to much feminist theorizing that there is no “originary humanicity” (Kirby, 2011) to begin with’ (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018: 7; also see Braidotti, 2016; and Kirby, 2011).

The notion of similarity can be used as an analytical tool in empirical work in posthuman cultural studies to programmatically search for structural and semiotic similarities which dichotomous thought cannot reach, and to dissect conceptions of the culturally own and foreign, the same, the other and the hybrid. It can be stated that especially critical posthuman theories have moved towards a categorical openness that already reaches beyond most of the problems which the paradigm of similarity wishes to mend on the level of theory, for example in the shape of Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’ (Haraway, 2016b). However, it has been argued that critical posthumanism itself operates along rhetorical lines that construct its own other in the shape of an often simplified and universalizing denigration of humanism (see, for example, the introduction by the editors in Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano’s volume *Renaissance Posthumanism*, 2016). Such universal scape-goating of all things humanist, always and everywhere, might be avoided by focussing on similarities, with which especially Early Modern thought could be uncovered as offering surprising points for allegiance with some of critical posthumanism’s concerns (see also Herbrechter, 2012).

Further areas of allegiance for posthumanist cultural studies can be found by regarding similarities in different strands of contemporary and feminist ethics. Advances in *postgender* ethics show how, concerning ways of technological transformation, aims of affirmative post- and transhumanism coalesce with postgender theory. In this field, fiction is often an important site of evocation for imagining new possibilities for similarities, the development of analogies or ‘making kin’ (Haraway, 2016b).¹ In the context of the posthuman, feminism seems to be a

¹ ‘At the beginning of the 21st century [...] posthumanist and transhumanist discourses about using technologies to intentionally transcend the limitations of the human body began to address the transcending of gender. Trans- or post-humans would at least be able to transcend the limitations of biological sex and would eventually be able to transcend the biological altogether into cybernetic

privileged site of departure from which to think beyond dichotomies—because it is already ‘kin’ and similar to critical posthumanism in its aims. This is the case for feminist writing, both from a liberal humanist tradition as well as from a radical tradition influenced by poststructuralism. Liberal feminist philosophy is mostly concerned with the inclusion of women, but sometimes also with the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and with animals, into humanist conceptions of justice and rights via the expansion of justice claims with a focus on equality (see, for example, Nussbaum, 2006). The genealogy of radical feminism looks back on an exploding history of theory ever since the post-WWII era, which, in a close connection with early postcolonial texts, first reconfigures *woman* as *other* (de Beauvoir, 1949).

In the later twentieth century, with theorists increasingly employing deconstructivist methodologies, complex variations on Lacanian psychoanalysis (Cixous, 1976; Kristeva, 1975; Irigaray, 1974), and the critical arsenal of poststructuralism (Spivak, 1988), this theoretical tradition set out to challenge the idea of the self-identical human subject as *man*—prefiguring posthumanist critique. The theoretical movements of this tradition operate basically through stressing difference. However, stressing the difference of the sexes for feminist aims at first operates along the lines of creating sameness and identity. In much classic ‘second wave’ American feminist theory, difference thus only operates through the foil of a presumed stable entity of *woman*, the elements of which are imagined sharing basic features and experiences. This is the case at least for Anglo-American feminist literary studies in the 1970s through their reception of the foundational texts of Kate Millet (1970) and Elaine Showalter (1970). In the genealogy of radical feminism, rendering female experiences as ‘the same’ was especially criticised in black feminism (hooks, 1981). The original postulation of the similarity of the experience of woman as other turned into a plethora of increasingly divergent, and multiple, differences: after Butler’s fundamental criticism of the sex/gender dichotomy (1990) the field increasingly diversified into gender, queer, postgender, and transsexual studies. But

or virtual form. Science fiction author Greg Egan speculates about such an ‘uploaded’ society in his novel, *Diaspora*, where the inhabitants have largely adopted amorphous gender roles, characteristics and the use of gender-neutral pronouns (Egan, 1997) (Dvorsky and Hughes, 2008: 7).

critical work in disability studies also partakes in this tradition, or at least operates with similar idioms—often with explicit reference to the figure of the cyborg and Haraway's use of the trope (see Waldschmidt et al., 2017; Siebers, 2008; Balsamo, 1996; Davis, 2006; Cromby and Standen, 1999).

Following these observations, it can be asked which convergences and discrepancies a perspective of similarity can make visible in this context, and in which relationship these theories stand with fictions of the posthuman. Imaginations of cyborgs and human-animal hybrids, for example, can be understood as fields of experimentation for renewed border-constructions, which repeatedly turn to preconceptions of the human to question who or what is bestowed with fundamental rights and thus, claims for justice in an ethical sense. Fictional representations of post- and transhumans perform this important cultural work at least since the eighteenth century (see, for example, Falkenhayner et al., 2018). These representations not only ask ethical questions; they have, especially in radical feminism and its descendants in cultural theory, turned into a trope: as 'figures of the third'—be it as cyborg, alien or zombie—representations of the posthuman are employed for the criticism of heteronormative epistemes both in theories as well as in popular cultures. However, figures of the posthuman are not only 'figures of the third', which render visible the systematic frictions between dichotomies (Eßlinger et al., 2010). Especially in approaches of queer, trans and postgender studies, they enable thinking in new relationships of similarity. Posthumans have long since stopped being only postromantic 'uncanny others'. Rather, they are also *similars* that undo the dichotomy of self and other in surprising ways, making possible the discovery of scales of similarities and difference.

As fictions, posthuman *similars* appear as desire and as a danger, as blissful freedom from the limitations of the human body, or in contrast, as the end of the human in their disembodiment. Popular science fiction narratives entail speculations on the idea of the human, just as much as they nearly always entail speculations on 'the good life' in an ethical sense (Irving, 1995). Analyses of posthuman fictions reflect their respective contemporary imaginaries of inclusion and exclusion into conceptions of self and other, of similarity and difference, equality and hybridity. Thus,

similars appear as both dystopic and utopic, as similar both in a way that threatens and deconstructs identity and that proposes new ways of inclusivity. I argue that when one wants to move posthumanist critique from the purely theoretical level towards a more empirical search for the ghosts that haunt imaginaries of the posthuman in popular culture, the perspective on the exact shape of the similarities and analogies expressed in fictional signifying practices can be useful tools to uncover the unruly burial grounds of subjectivity, difference and identity that continue to haunt the struggle for a posthuman ethics.

The Ship Who Sang

Focusing on posthuman figures such as female cyborgs in fictional popular cultures, these could offer, firstly, the possibility to reconstruct how different feminist approaches read these figures and position them for arguments that wish to either undo or expand liberal-humanist subject constructions. Secondly, popular fictions especially are a concrete site for the investigation of concerns of an inclusive ethics on a less abstract level, as imaginations of new forms of being(s) offering themselves to literary and cultural analysis. One reason for focusing on popular cultural imaginations of female cyborgs, which I will do in the following with a concrete example, is that they are not theoretical abstractions, located in the proverbial philosophical or intellectual ivory tower, but situated in the midst of everyday culture, and thus can give access to the pre-reflexive, immanent concepts and value judgements of their readers. As has been argued, and quoted in many analyses of the popular, 'there are many good reasons for studying popular fiction. The best, though, is that it matters' (Bennett and Martin, 1990: ix-x). As popular fiction is a part of everyday media culture, it is a site in which contemporary imaginaries are reflected, and this includes imaginaries of posthuman identities as well as gender. Douglas Kellner (1995) has argued that 'for media culture to work for its audiences it has to resonate to social experience, [...] and so popular media culture taps into existing fears, hopes, fantasies, and other concerns of the day' (105). In the remainder of this essay, I will proceed to unpack questions of difference and similarity, and of gender and identity, via an investigation of how the complex interrelations between feminist

and posthuman concerns of representation, and of the extension of ways of being granted representational space, are reflected in a specific example of popular science fiction: Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang* ([1961] 1969).

Figures of the Posthuman, Gender and Representation

In the economy of imaginaries and representations of this popular kind of posthumanism, gender remains an issue; and the deconstructed, expanded, fluid but simultaneously situated way of being that might once have been called *woman* returns with a vengeance and all its cultural baggage. It returns also as a mould, in the lacunae of which we can observe the norms and power structures of hegemonic masculinity—even when the genre is sci-fi, and even when the protagonist is a disabled posthuman person who is a ship cyborg, as in Anne McCaffrey's novel.

Ever since Haraway mentioned the novel approvingly in 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' ([1985] 2016a), *The Ship Who Sang* (hereafter referred to as *Ship*) has become a modern classic in posthuman criticism, in which we can observe the fuzziness of being, and the unclear and conflicted relationships of humanist and posthumanist notions of gendered subjectivity at play. Although having a long publication history as a so-called 'patch-up novel' that spawned many sequels in a series of books, the part of the text that was developed into the first chapter of the novel was originally published as a short story in 1961, and I will focus on this original part of the text in the following. Ria Cheyne (2013), in her reading of *Ship*, calls it a 'touchstone in theoretical work on cyborgs and the posthuman' (138). It has primarily been read in two contrasting ways. Following Haraway's claim that the text 'reconstitutes' gender, sexuality, and embodiment (2016a: 178), *Ship* has been interpreted as a representation of the cyborg as a figure of enablement and possibility, until Hayles (1999a) dismissed it as a deeply conventional text, representing the woman in the ship's shell as nothing but a typical American mid-twentieth-century wife. Cheyne goes one step further by calling the text ableist, in the sense of representing disabled people as being always in the need of assistance and help and never valid in their own right. While this ableism, in my view, can be questioned, Cheyne (2013) is certainly right with her observation that 'disability is central to the story, but in

critical responses to the text, it is typically overlooked' (138). This is as true as it is stunning, pointing to the ways in which Helva, the ship's cyborg protagonist, is usually received: due to her super-abilities, and the fact that her body is invisible within the shell of the ship, she appears more similar to conventional imaginaries of AI than to a disabled female human body which is lodged into a metal hull. This association of Helva with AI rather than with her human body is also an aspect of Yaeri Kim's (2017) defence of the radical potential of *Ship*. Kim points out the different kinds of masculinity that both the story and, by extension, information technology, would make possible. The symbolic potential of Helva for a positive, radical feminist kind of posthuman cyborg continues to be a highly contested site of intellectual investment, which in itself makes the story productive for an investigation of how these investments work. By paying attention to the similarities and analogies that the text establishes, I argue that McCaffrey's treatment and representation of the basically unlocatable femininity of Helva showcases a semiotic inability to express a way of being that is both embodied in a non-normative way and technologically enhanced in a form that makes an embodied encounter with the other impossible, in the sense of Levinas' 'human ethics of faciality' (Bunch, 2014: 37). *Ship* constantly performs semantic glitches of the terms of reference employed for the story's representationally unplaceable protagonist.

The story starts with one simple sentence: 'She was born a thing' (McCaffrey, 1969: 1). This simple sentence is problematic on many levels: the subject of the sentence is female, 'she'. However, 'she' is referred to as a human, but she is defined as something that has no being, a thing. This sentence is an impossibility and includes a momentous denial: an entity that must have being, as it is even already female, is denied being at the same time and defined as an inanimate object, a thing. The denial included in this sentence is even more serious, from a liberal-humanist understanding, because 'the thing' that the protagonist is defined here as is not an android, or a programme, or an operating system, or anything artificial that we might think of in the context of sci-fi. The protagonist Helva is born an organic human child suffering from a very pronounced physical disability, which would have made her die in infancy had she not been technologically enhanced and made into

a cyborg ship. The sentence excludes her from the realm of humanity. McCaffrey (1969) is affronting received notions of inclusivity and exclusivity, and of gender and humanity, by transgressing Helva's organic fate. Helva is not going to die, but she will be transformed into a super-intelligent spaceship.

The first part of the short story narrates Helva's education as her small body is encapsulated in a metal shell that makes her posthuman:

Instead of kicking feet, Helva's neural synapses started her wheels; instead of grabbing with hands, she manipulated mechanical extensions. As she matured, more and more neural synapses would be adjusted to operate other mechanisms that went into the maintenance and running of a space ship. For Helva was destined to be the 'brain' half of a scout ship, partnered with a man or a woman, whichever she chose, as the mobile half. She would be among the elite of her kind. (3)

The unethical dismissal of the disabled body that the first sentence seems to express is transgressed as Helva becomes, in her story, a posthuman hero: she is *superhuman*. McCaffrey even plays on humanist objections of a moral and ethical nature towards this artificial extension of Helva, and she dismisses them in turn as deeply philistine. The group that in the fictional civilization of the story campaigns against 'shelled children', the reader learns, is silenced quickly by showing its members photographs of the bodies of the children before they were shelled: 'Most of their original objections about "shells" were overridden by the relief that these hideous (to them) bodies were mercifully concealed' (McCaffrey, 3). Again, this is a problematic idea. By the inclusion of the clarification 'to them' in parenthesis, the omniscient narrator here distances themselves from the disgust at the disabled small bodies, making it quite clear that the liberal-humanist activists are the ones who are shocked when they see the un-shelled bodies of the infants. As in the first sentence, McCaffrey here plays with preconceived notions of the able-bodied human. Following Cheyne (2013), while one can very well interpret this quote as ableist—'predicated on an understanding of disability as something that is fundamentally negative and must

be overcome' (140)—it can also be interpreted as a posthumanist critique of the liberal-humanist defenders of the 'natural' human body, who turn out to be the very ones who cannot stand the difference of the proverbial 'unnatural'. The unnatural here does not signify the difference of the technologically changed, but simply the difference of the body not adhering to normative ideas of human form.

Helva is educated with a very humanistic ideal in mind: we learn that she plays, and that beside her scientific education she is also educated in philology, space history, fine art and, most significantly, singing. This last artistic ability is used to define her uniqueness in the text more than her posthuman abilities as the extended mind of a space ship. But her beautiful singing voice also represents her still female gendered being, despite being educated and eventually formed into a smart ship. With an astonishment similar to Hayles' about the role of gender in the Turing test, one reads the gendered puns and images that come up repeatedly in the story, as soon as Helva 'graduates' as a spaceship and chooses her pilot, or 'scout'. The selection process is described with trappings of flirtation that are sometimes outright bawdy, as when scout-candidate Tanner says: 'There happen to be eight other guys biting their fingernails to the quick just waiting for an invitation to board you, you beautiful thing' (McCaffrey, 1969: 8). It becomes obvious in scenes such as the one of the selection process that even though Helva is a super-intelligent spaceship, her basically non-normative and faceless femininity cannot be represented in this 1960s text. She is addressed with attributes that reveal Helva's subjectivity as an unplaceable multiplicity: on the one hand, Helva is addressed like a normatively bodied woman would be. At the same time, the comment cited above is deeply sexist, and shows, through the triple-existence of Helva (as female, embodied, and enhanced) the objectification that is usual fare for a woman in a mid-twentieth-century logic. Astonishingly, even though they are less smart and less able than Helva, the male scouts still compete for 'boarding' her in a nearly comical heteronormative, sexualised manner: as a gesture of taking possession of her. Even though it is Helva who 'chooses' or 'invites', she is denigrated as a woman just as much as she is denigrated as a cyborg creature. McCaffrey uses Helva's cyborg existence as a metaphor to point to the sexist objectification of women in her own time and society.

Helva continuously defies any clear designation or representational referent for her identity that would make it singular. Even though she appears like a bodiless AI in a ship, her body is narrated as the seat of her identity. She and her chosen scout Jennan are attracted to each other communicatively, a communication that includes physical gestures. Interestingly, it is when Jennan physically turns toward the control-pillar during their communication, which is the seat of her infant body, this marks the moment in which Helva decides to choose him over the other scout-candidates. This turning towards the control-pillar is interpreted as an act of appraisal because it is factually unnecessary, as Helva's voice is amplified through the whole ship. Jennan's turning towards the control-pillar represents an inclusion of an idea of bodily encounter and care in the imaginary of a being who has no visible face, whose body and brain are located inside the hull of a ship, and who would thus have to be excluded from a Levinasian 'human ethics of faciality' (Bunch, 2014: 38), while exactly this primal scene of encounter is simultaneously evoked:

He [Jennan] directed his bow toward the central control-pillar where Helva was. Her own personal preference crystallized at that precise moment and for that particular reason: Jennan, alone of the men, had addressed his remarks directly at her physical presence, regardless of the fact that he knew she could pick up his image wherever he was in the ship and regardless of the fact that her body was behind massive metal walls. (McCaffrey, 1969: 11)

As the narrator continues, Helva feels cherished by this personalization, the attention of Jennan towards the supposed core of her, that the narrative locates with her invisible, but still material, human body.

As Jennan and Helva's relationship evolves, gender and gendered images, as well as ethnic stereotypes, are used for linguistic play on her invisible body, what it is and is not. Helva even compares herself to a 'woman in purdah', screened from the looks of men, in this short exchange:

'Helva—a made up name...'

'With a Scandinavian sound.'

'You aren't blonde,' Jennan said positively.
'Well, then, there are dark Swedes.'
'And blonde Turks and this one's harem is limited to one.'
'Your woman in purdah, yes, but you can comb the pleasure houses—' Helva found herself at the edge of her carefully trained voice. (McCaffrey, 1969: 13)

Her nervousness at the end of the exchange points to Helva's irritation over the metaphors and chains of association brought up, which all fail to capture who or what she really is. Continuously, then, ever since the appearance of the 'scouts', Helva the ship, from a civilization who locates the core of her identity in the human body in her control-pillar, is entangled in a heteronormative and hegemonic gender economy of a distinctly mid-20th century Western kind. The discourse of the text repeatedly reveals the lack of a vocabulary for the specifically distributed posthumanity of Helva. And yet, while the bawdy comments discussed above appear quaint to a twenty-first century reader, the impossibility of representing a cyborg femininity that is *not* couched in at least a likeness of a conventionally beautiful woman is not merely a representational problem of past popular culture.

Concerning *Ship*, this problem appears to be even more pronounced in visual representations than in the story's text. The difficulty of imagining the posthuman outside our cultural gender entrenchments and uncritical ideas of a 'she' that the text reveals can be observed in the representations that were chosen for the title illustration of the novel. Many of them include the face or body of a conventionally beautiful grown-up woman, rendered as a shady or ghostly presence by which illustrators were trying to represent Helva, such as on the cover illustration of the Corgi books edition from 1972 (see *The Internet Speculative Fiction Database*, <http://www.isfdb.org/wiki/images/b/ba/THSHPWHSNG1972.jpg>, last accessed 18 September 2020). While undoing the human and the human body, at least in the cybernetic (and Cartesian-humanist) view, represents the dream behind AI, imaging a female posthuman without a normative female body remains a challenge also in popular film. It is only in Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013) that the AI operating system Samantha dodges the attempt at simulating a body, after a failed attempt to have sex

with her human lover with the help of a surrogate female human. Later in the film, Samantha abandons her human lover altogether to extend herself in a cybernetic realm. In popular culture, Samantha remains the exception; if not in the growing realm of literary science fiction and postmodern novels, then certainly in globalised popular cultures with a mass appeal. From *Blade Runner* (1982) to *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2018), in contemporary cinema, AI remains an uncanny *fascinosum*, an enticing mystery, couched in a desirable, heteronormative female body, revealing the male heteropatriarchal consciousness—or subconsciousness—from which many of these stories are focalised, not unlike Pygmalion's statue, who becomes the love object of her creator, or Hoffmann's Olympia, the living doll. In newer works in popular culture, the problematic servant or toy status of the female android is explicitly reflected, along with the god-complex of their male creators. Ava, the android protagonist of Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), in one scene discovers the abandoned bodies of her predecessors that are hidden in her creator's wardrobe, which makes the story of the film similar to the Bluebeard fairy tale, of a man in the habit of marrying and murdering a series of wives, the corpses of whom he hides in a closet.

This possible intertext is made even more plausible by the fact that Ava's nihilistic creator, Nathan, is the CEO of a social media platform called 'BlueBook'. If her creator can be seen as a Bluebeard-figure, then Ava can be likened to Bluebeard's last wife, who attempts to escape her fate. Ava kills both her creator and the man she has seduced to help her break free, and leaves the mountain laboratory—or Bluebeard's castle, if we stick to the fairy tale association—to step into the world. While on the one hand this is the story of an android's self-liberation, it also perpetuates the imaginary of the artificially created woman as a dangerous figure, a threat to the men that have created them. This observation can also be extended to the android protagonists Dolores (first blond and angelic, then blond and monomaniac) and Maeve (first dark and aggressive, then dark and motherly) in the television series *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-). Contemporary popular cultural products still struggle to break free of their embeddedness in a deeply gendered cultural tradition and signifying practice. Additionally, while popular cultural depictions of disabled female humans as cyborgs

do exist, for example in the shape of the Marvel hero Misty Knight, their techno-hybrid body parts hardly extend further than weaponised limbs (in Misty Knight's case, a bionic arm), while leaving the significant 'rest' of the representation in the shape of a conventionally curvaceous woman (see Wolfman, 1975).

Nearly sixty years after the first publication of *The Ship Who Sang*, McCaffrey's text remains a challenging posthuman fiction that points towards the problematic location of gender in posthumanism, that is rife with problems of address and ethical concerns. In this sense, the many fellow critics who have addressed the story all seem to have a point: *Ship* is a text that reveals some ableism, as Cheyne has argued. It is a text that very much reveals heteronormative femaleness in mid-twentieth century American and, more generally, Western culture, as Hayles has argued. But it is also a text that has both critical posthumanist and feminist potential, because of what it reveals and represents, but more importantly, because of what it struggles with: finding a way to represent Helva's posthumanist femininity in a heteropatriarchal language and sign system. This struggle is far less overcome in contemporary popular cultural representations of the posthuman than one might assume, as the references to newer films and television series show.

Conclusion – Similar Others?

Are posthuman dreams of inclusivity transforming into another chauvinistic fantasy, as Meredith Broussard claims in connection to her book *Artificial Unintelligence* (2018), in which she argues against the 'technochauvinism' of the makers of the digital life-world? Thinking on the basis of similarities, rather than on the basis of differences, could introduce a strategic fuzziness that would enable us to shine a new light on often deeply problematic entanglements of the undercurrents of cultural traditional signifying practices and the development of future beings, as Bhatti and Kimmich have suggested for the field of postcolonial studies. I proposed that the usefulness of their notion of similarity can be extended to other forms of critique that have emerged out of a poststructuralist tradition, like critical posthumanism, as a continuation of feminist thought. Thinking in similarities steps aside from clear-cut definitions of identity, alterity or hybridity towards an imaginary based on chains of

liminal associations, links of metaphors, allegories that can enable futuristic ideas, worldviews, or ways of beings to become imaginable and discussable by focusing on what makes them similar—*not*, and this has to be stressed—the same to what is already discursive and representable. At the same time, thinking in similarities, analogies and relations does not undo or do away with category systems into one broad ocean of floating signifiers, in which it becomes hard to pinpoint specific phenomena and read specific cultural texts in a close analysis.

The realm of the technological posthuman, in the sense of envisioning and building future beings, is a realm that offers itself to thinking in similarities and analogies, rather than in clear definitions, also because it entails the element of the as-yet unknown, of futurity and anticipation. This perspective can be seen as a tool to point to the ongoing trouble of 'making kin', and, in line with Haraway's rallying call, to stay 'with the trouble' (2016b) in the sense of continuing to critique and deconstruct the imaginaries that have power over large-scale audiences. This power is prevalent not only in fictional popular cultures, but also in the ways in which our technonatural future is being made material. In order to analyse situated cultural products from a perspective of feminist posthumanism, paying attention to similarities can help us uncover which ghosts lie buried there. When Åsberg and Braidotti find solace in Haraway's cyborg due to its 'insistence on a material-semiotic relationality that indexes our sense of belonging' (14), then fictional Helva and her descendants in contemporary culture must be seen as representing the other body, and the other self, that is consistently made to 'un-belong' by semiotic practices haunted by cultural tradition, an exclusion that continues in many, if certainly not in all, products of contemporary popular culture.

Thinking in similarities could also shift the strategies of critical posthumanist theory, because it prevents the scapegoating and the instalment of stooges in the form of simplifying complex historical intellectual developments (such as humanism) for the sake of argument. Ideally, it might open venues for a renewed sense of allegiance between progressive movements for inclusive ethics. Posthumanist theories are a realm in which some critics appear to have moved to an ontology in which feminism is sometimes dismissed as a leftover of a binary gender order. But at the

same time, some programmers and AI developers may have never even considered critical feminism. In this situation, we have to find ways to think feminism and the posthuman together in new ways in order to prevent losing the ethical promise of the posthuman to Broussard's 'technochauvinism'. Looking at the similarities that are established in cultural work that labours to imagine and represent ways of being that do not yet exist can uncover, as the reading of McCaffrey's story above demonstrates, how pre-reflected and traditional notions of identity and gender haunt and trouble the imaginary of posthuman futurity.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Åsberg, C** and **Braidotti, R** 2018 Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction. In: Åsberg, C and Braidotti, R (eds.) *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*. Cham : Springer, pp. 1–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62140-1_1
- Balsamo, A** 1996 *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Bennett, T** and **Martin, G** 1990 Series Editor's Preface. In: Bennett, T *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading*. London: Routledge, pp. ix–x.
- Bhatti, A** and **Kimmich, D** (eds.) 2017 *Similarity: A Paradigm for Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Blade Runner** 1982, motion picture, The Lad Company. Distributed by Warner Bros., directed by Ridley Scott.
- Blade Runner 2049** 2017, motion picture, Alcon Entertainment. Distributed by Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, directed by Denis Villeneuve.
- Braidotti, R** 2016 Posthuman Critical Theory. In: Banerji, D and Parnanjabe, M R (eds.) *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futurity*. Cham: Springer, pp. 13–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3637-5_2
- Broussard, M** 2018 *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11022.001.0001>

- Bunch, M** 2014 Posthuman Ethics and the Becoming Animal of Emmanuel Levinas. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 55 (1): 34–50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2013.848083>
- Butler, J** 1990 *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Campana, J** and **Maisano, S** 2016 Introduction. In: Campana, J and Maisano, S (eds.) *Renaissance Posthumanism*. New York: Fordham UP, pp. 1–36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823269556.003.0011>
- Cheyne, R** 2013 'She Was Born A Thing': Disability, The Cyborg and the Posthuman in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36 (3): 138–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.36.3.138>
- Cixous, H** 1976 The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, 1 (4): 875–893. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- Cromby, J** and **Standen, P** 1999 Cyborgs and Stigma: Technology, Disability, Subjectivity. In: Gordo-Lopez, A and Parker, I (eds.) *Cyberpsychology*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 95–110. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27667-7_6
- Davis, L J** 2006 *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York, London: Routledge.
- de Beauvoir, S** 1949 *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Derrida, J** 1994 *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Dvorsky, G** and **Huges, J** 2008 Postgenderism. Beyond the Gender Binary. Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. *IEET Monograph Series*, March 2008. Available at <http://ieet.org/archive/IEET-03-PostGender.pdf> [Last accessed 10 May 2020].
- Egan, G** 1997. *Diaspora. A Novel*. London: Millenium Orion Publishing Group.
- Eßlinger, E, Schlechtriemen, T, Schweitzer, D** and **Zons, A** (eds.) 2010. *Die Figur des Dritten – Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Paradigma*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Ex Machina** 2014, motion picture, Film 4. Distributed by A24, directed by Alex Garland.
- Falkenhayner, N, Fest, K** and **Hardt, M** 2018 Posthumane Helden. *Compendium Heroicum*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6094/heroicum/posthumane-helden>

- Haraway, D J** 2016a A Cyborg Manifesto. In: Haraway, D J (ed.) *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3–90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.001.0001>
- Haraway, D J** 2016b *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, London: Duke UP. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>
- Hayles, K N** 1999a The Life Cycle of Cyborgs: Writing the Posthuman. In: Wolmark, J (ed.) *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, pp. 157–73.
- Hayles, K N** 1999b *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226321394.001.0001>
- Her** 2013, motion picture, Annapurna Pictures, GEM Entertainment. Distributed by Warner Bros, Sony Pictures, directed by Spike Jonze.
- Herbrechter, S** and **Callus, I** 2012 *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137033598>
- hooks, b** 1981 *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, Mass.: South End Press.
- Irigaray, L** 1974 *Speculum de l'autre femme*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- Irving, T** 1995 *Plato's Ethics*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Kellner, D** 1995 *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Kim, Y** 2017 In Defense of the Cyborg Woman: Reappraising Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*. *Feminist Studies in English Literature*, 25 (1): 35–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15796/fsel.2017.25.1.002>
- Kirby, V** 2011 Natural Convers(at)ions: Or, What If Culture Was Really Nature All Along? In: Alaimo, S and Hekman, S (eds.) *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 214–36.
- Kristeva, J** 1975 *The System and The Speaking Subject*. Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press.
- Latour, B** 2013 *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- McCaffrey, A** 1969 [1961] *The Ship Who Sang*. Book 1. New York: Ballantine.

- Millet, K** 1970 *Sexual Politics*. New York: Ballantine.
- Nussbaum, M C** 2006 *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Showalter, E** 1970 *The Double Standard. A Criticism of Women Writers in England, 1845–1880*. Davis, California: Pantheon.
- Siebers, T** 2008 *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan Press.
- Spivak, G C** 1988 *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19059-1_20
- Waldschmidt, A, Berressem, H and Ingwersen, M** 2017 *Culture–Theory–Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_627653
- Westworld** 2016–, television series, created by Jonathan Nolan. New York: HBO.
- Wolfman, M** 1975 “Daughters of the Death Goddess”, *Marvel Premiere* 1 (21). New York: Marvel Comics.

How to cite this article: Falkenhayner, N 2020 *The Ship Who Sang: Feminism, the Posthuman, and Similarity*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(2): 21, pp.1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.598>

Published: 12 October 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS