

“AND MAN IS BECOMING?”:

Exploring what it means to be Human against the Backdrop of *Avatar*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.

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Several theories and positions inclusive of various moral stances and frameworks have been postulated with reference to what it means to be human. “The definition of the human is itself a historicized undertaking subject to the evolving conceptual resources and saliences of human thought” (Margolis, 5). From as early as the fifth century BC, philosophers like Plato grappled with the definition of human. Diverging from pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato proposed a “metaphysical/anthropological definition of human nature” (Gonzalez, np). He sees a clear distinction between the soul and the body. According to Giannakopoulou, “Plato’s interest is to distinguish effectively the soul from the body, and as a result prove its immortality” (94). Following on the heels of Plato, Christian and Greek frameworks developed. Augustine reworked Plato’s concept into a Christian framework. According to Mendelson “One of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition was the eventually widespread merging of the Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions. Augustine is one of the main figures through and by whom this merging was accomplished” (np). For him, the individual human being is a body-soul composite, but in keeping with his Neoplatonism, there is an asymmetry between soul and body. As a spiritual entity, the soul is superior to the body, and it is the province of the soul to rule the body (Mendelson, np). Descartes has been quoted by Smith as theorizing “that consciousness doesn’t arise from physical matter; it somehow coincides with it in human beings” (41). Ryle, a critic of Cartesian Dualism conjectures that “Body and mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function” (1). This separation of mind and body – dualism - has been described by Ryle as “Ghost in the machine” (Smith, 41). Discounting Plato, Margolis postulates that Plato’s theory “misperceives the sui generis nature of the human, which is fluxive and artifactual or hybrid” (4). According to him “Plato never realizes that what is provisionally normative in our practices is not merely discernible but actually part of

the formative forces that determine the very mode of human being” (10); a being that cannot be “conceptually captured by categories that ...refer to anything less (or more) than the distinctive processes of history and culture immediately display” (7). Freud sees Human nature in conflict between an unconscious mind which is the Id, a conscious rational mind which is the Ego, and “an agency that promotes guilt in order to tame the Id, a superego” (*Theories of Human Nature*, np). It was Foucault who differentiated between the human and the man. Drawing from Kant, he postulates that humans possessed the ideas that represented the world, thus making them the locus of knowledge, while man is an epistemological notion of this locus of representation; not the source (Gutting, np). “Man, Foucault says, did not exist during the Classical age (or before). This is not because there was no idea of human beings as a species or of human nature as a psychological, moral, or political notion” (np). Instead, “there was no epistemological consciousness of man as such” (Foucault, 309).

Attempts by theorists to define what it means to be human are ongoing. The dawn of the postmodern era has ushered in new discussions on this age old question. Patrone quotes Kass (1972) who says that “new biomedical technologies are challenging many of the formulations which have served since ancient times to define the specifically human” (27). Such developments have warranted a return, according to Jürgen Habermas (2003) and Leon Kass (1972, 1998), “to the ethical question of what it means to be human” (cited in Patrone, 27).

Three texts, literary and filmic, will be used to interrogate this age old question against the backdrop of the theories outlined above. These texts are *Avatar*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. These texts all touch on a range of issues central to any conceptualization of what it means to be human. The issues arising from these texts include but are not limited to, race, cultural rights and cultural identity, human machine interaction, consciousness and genetic modification. Issues of ethics and morality are also germane to any interrogation of what it means to be human and also arise in the texts under discussion.

Ghost in the Shell epitomizes the dualism - the mind/body split - alluded to by Plato and built on by Descartes. This dualism is present in current western conceptions of the human. *Ghost* refers to the mind, the soul, spirit.

Shell sometimes refers to the human; the body. In this instance, the body, albeit in the form of a human, is a robot or the machine, the shell, whether program or system (computer), in which the ghost exists. For Descartes the “body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function.” (Ryle, 1). This is pretty much what happens in *Ghost in the Shell*. Hence the reason the protagonist, Kusanagi exists. Her mind/spirit exists in a shell, a machine.

The story happens in 2029, when biotechnology has developed to such an advanced degree that it, together with cybernetic technologies, enables human beings to “upgrade” their bodies with astonishing capacities and strength. The world has been connected by a “Net” of electronic surveillance and communication. Under this condition, crime has also become highly sophisticated and intertwined with computer hacking across nations. Major Kusanagi, the protagonist, is a benefactress of this science—almost all of her original body parts have been replaced by cybernetic components—and in return for this enhanced body bought by her unit, she must act as a maintainer of the social order to protect the organization’s interest... In the pursuit of the Puppet Master [a mysterious hacker] (Shirong, 4).

Kusanagi, a cyborg is also on a quest for her own identity. When one of the victims of the hacking, prevalent in 2029, is informed that his memory of his home, wife and daughter, a representation of which he carried around in the form of a picture, was nothing more than simulation, Kusanagi, who is observing the scenario, is notably disturbed. Her troubled features are framed and brought to the focus of the viewer at the moment that the victim is told in a matter-of-fact tone that his original memory will never be restored in addition to which, he will get residual simulation. The focus of attention remains on Kusanagi as the cyborg tonelessly ends, “That’s all it is; information and simulated experience. Memory erased. Any way you look at it the information a person accumulates in a lifetime is just a drop in a bucket...” *Ghost in the Shell*. The created memories served to shatter and destroy the victim. This obviously troubles Kusanagi for thereafter we see her, in the dark of night, engaging in diving, not a good pastime for cyborgs if floaters don’t work. Upon surfacing, when questioned about what she feels when she swims in the ocean she confesses that she feels fear, cold, alone and admits that sometimes she even

felt hope in the cold dark waters. Her desire to be human is shared when she admits that “when I float weightless back to the surface I imagine I am becoming someone else...” *Ghost in the Shell*. But in an emotionless cyborg tone, she blames her desire to be someone else on the effects of decompression due to rapid surfacing after a dive, and in the same breath asks her partner, how much of his body is original. She then goes on to list the benefits of technological implants and boasts that they were state of the art, even articulating what humans would do provided with the opportunity and access to the implants and technology that benefitted her; yet the next second she wistfully soliloquizes,

There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind like all the components that make up me as an individual with my own personality – sure I have a face and a voice to distinguish myself from others but my thoughts and memories are unique only to me and I carry a sense of my own destiny. Each of those things are just a small part of it. I collect information to use in my own way. All of that blends to create mixture that forms me and gives rise to my consciousness. I feel confined only free to expand myself within boundaries (*Ghost in the Shell*).

Kusanagi’s musings will be considered in the light of substance dualism advocated by Descartes which implies that “consciousness doesn’t arise from physical matter; it somehow coincides with it in human beings” (Smith, 41). The capacity of the human brain/consciousness/memory, represents humanity. That being the case then, is Kusanagi a human being? Is she flesh and blood? Does she have a consciousness born of flesh and blood? The question posed by Smith is significant at this juncture – How does flesh and blood give rise to a conscious mind? (41).

Physicalists generally hold that consciousness supervenes on material brain states, prompting the search for the “neural correlates of consciousness,” that is, the specific brain states which correlate with – and thus are plausible candidates for the causation of – conscious states of mind. But as many skeptics would maintain – physicalists among them – we still don’t have a clue as to how it could be that a physical event, no matter how complex, could give rise to glimmers of consciousness (41).

This begs additional questions. Who created the program? Who generated

the information? Who simulated the experience? Kusanagi herself admits, "We've both signed our ghosts and bodies away to section nine. If we ever quit or retire we have to give back our augmented brain and cyborg body. There won't be much left after that" (*Ghost in the Shell*).

These are some of the ethical dilemmas raised in the text. If created consciousness exists through information then how is the information processed? According to Smith, "a great deal of cognitive theory has concerned itself with information processing which is always or normally nonconscious" (39). It may be posited that Kusanagi's consciousness is not empty; for consciousness is never empty. Sense perceptions are learned and are carriers of memory. According to Holland, "Without memory there is no consciousness...Consciousness involves learning, which depends on the ability to save and recall information and to develop new behavior in response to environmental challenges. Consciousness also includes exploration, emotional states such as fight or flight...mimicry, courtship, and social exchange" (np). In light of this Kusanagi possesses a human quality because she exhibits all of these mentioned emotional states in her functions and interactions. And she is creating memory as she engages in her daily interactions much the same way a person does even after former memory has been erased through whatever means. Such memory however will more than likely be "declarative" (Smith, 43) and not "representational" (43) since "representational memories...are elusive but potent states" (43) which are triggered by sights and sounds. No memory was triggered by the "emotional marker", the hollow echoing sound of empty steel during Kusanagi's soliloquy, because she had none to be triggered to draw the viewer's attention to either an emotion or an earlier memorable event/memory. The empty sound was as a result of the absence of early memories. Kusanagi's quest is not just a quest for consciousness, but self-consciousness. As Smith posits "Fully fledged self-consciousness involves a level of awareness well beyond, even if continuous with...basic levels of consciousness. To have self-consciousness is to have knowledge of, and to attend to, the nature of one's being in the world...our awareness of ourselves as thinking, free-willing agents, transcending our status as physical...beings" (42). Having signed her body and ghost away to section nine, Kusanagi is "confined" and can expand herself only within "boundaries" (*Ghost in the Shell*). Thus we encounter her floating to the surface imagining that she is becoming someone else in spite of her prior boasts of the benefits she has gained from her technological

implants.

It may be prudent at this juncture to bring into the discussion the term “posthuman,” a condition used by Martin “to describe the cultural effects of the expansion of science and technology in computerized societies” (61). An example of a posthuman is a cyborg.

The neuroscientist Manfred Clynes described cyborgs (cybernetic organisms, or organisms whose biological functions are enhanced by electronic mechanisms; also called borgs and sometimes posthumans) as representing a synergy between the human and the machine such that operation of the machine does not require conscious thought or effort on the part of the human. Humanistic intelligence (HI) theory has made the cyborg concept more precise. HI is defined as intelligence that arises from a human being in a feedback loop of computational processes in which a human and a computer are inextricably intertwined. This inextricability usually requires the existence of some form of body-borne computer. When a body-borne computer functions in a successful embodiment of HI, the computer uses the human’s mind and body as one of its peripherals, just as the human uses the computer as a peripheral (Mann, 376 - 377).

Kusanagi epitomizes the synergy between human and machine alluded to above.

This reality raises another issue, if humans can become robotic, can robots become humanic? There is little doubt that ‘cyborgs’ will change the conceptions of human and the world we live in. According to Mann, “the ambiguous identity of the cyborg body has moved the world away from the modernist ideal of universally agreed-upon global objective reality to a postmodernist vision of fragmented, indeterminate, subjective, collective individualism” (378). Enter the term ‘posthuman,’ a condition which according to Martin, “provides a better expression to connote the interaction between science, technology and culture in computerized societies, because it captures the new perspective on the “postmodern condition” implied by Lyotard’s notion of the “inhuman” (61). This condition articulated by Lyotard not only “refers to the dehumanising effects of science and technology in society (Woodward, np)” but also “affirms the dehumanising forces that open up our thinking to more than a simple definition of the human. (np)”

The film *Avatar* provides another interesting interrogation of the meaning of human. The film is a questioning of western civilization; more specifically a utilitarian principle that gives rise to the ethics of war, science and crimes against humanity. It also raises the ethical and moral questions that delve to the core of humanity. Can one justify the consequences of a course of action like killing for wealth and experimenting with people who are perceived to be nothing more than savages; persons who possess a history and culture, albeit different from the imposing 'colonizer'? Ironically the perpetrators of the act should themselves be termed savages and not humans.

Paraplegic Marine, Jake Sully, takes the place of his dead twin brother and participates in a mission to the distant world of Pandora which is an idyll much like a lost Eden, and is clearly a prelapsarian setting. The human greed of the West encapsulated in Parker Selfridge spurs his intention to mine Pandora for the precious material, unobtainium, a rare earth mineral, scattered throughout the Na'vi's rich woodland. In order to do so he has to displace the natives of Pandora, the Na'vi humanoids. In exchange for the spinal surgery that will fix his legs, Jake gathers intelligence for the cooperating military by infiltrating the Na'vi with an Avatar identity. The toxic atmosphere of Pandora makes it uninhabitable for humans. Jake bonds with the tribe and falls in love with Neytiri, one of the Na'vi. He is forced to choose and ultimately fights back on the side of the Na'vi in a battle for Pandora, ultimately choosing their civilization over his.

The Na'vi humanoids possess human qualities. They have language, consciousness of self, culture and religion, social practices and history. They love, interact and intermingle. Even the ecology works and communicates like a nervous system. However, like the 'natives' in *Heart of Darkness* they are referred to as savages, their belief systems seen as foolish, they are referred to as stupid blue monkeys and their language is interpreted to be nothing more than gibberish and they are considered primitive. This leads to the attempted imposition of one's self on another in bringing someone up to a 'civilized human level' reminiscent of the *Myth of the Noble Savage*. Attempts are made by the people of the Earth to trample on the cultural rights and identity of the Na'vi who are seen as less than human who should be willing to bow to their demands once an appropriate 'carrot on a stick' is provided. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Avatar* also represents a journey into the darkness of the human psyche. For though Pandora is represented

as idyllic, and luminescent, boasting of the floating hallelujah mountains and the rare unobtainium, this magical landscape serves as a telling counterpoint to a dark, sinister foreboding, created by the advent of influences who are attracted to the idyll by nothing more than greed. The physical, emotional, cultural and political components and structure of the society are overlooked. Jake himself, initially, is spurred on by his own human need for perfection through the restoration of his limbs. His brain, a key human function, controls the movement of his avatar. It allowed him to overcome his physical disability, both mentally and physically with an avatar body. Recent research (2014) conducted by Shanechi, Hu and Williams has demonstrated “the potential of brain machine interfaces to be used in restoring purposeful movement to people affected by paralysis”. There is little doubt of technology’s impact on our lives and humanity. According to Patrone,

Genetic modification and enhancement of human beings has recently become one of the central issues in biomedical ethics, since today technology could be used to change and to shape our biological characteristics, our cognitive and psychological capacities, and even our dispositions. The ethical implications of this technological leap are still far from being clear: should we embrace technology and make the best of its new promise, or should we (at the very least) pause and reflect on what this would entail for us as humans? (1).

Avatar also raises ethical issues much like those raised in *Ghost in the Shell*. Each time as Jake transfers to his avatar body and assumes life in a new culture and society, there is a rewriting of memory. His memory is thus shared between two variant cultures and settings. Is that humanly possible? In choosing the Na’vi what of his past life? What implications exist for his selfhood and self-consciousness as earlier articulated? What about the duty to remember? The notion of “decentralized personhood” is of significance at this juncture. One of the possible effects of human machine interaction on the human as articulated by Mann “is probably that of decentralized personhood, as the site of one’s persona is no longer limited to one’s physical body. The concept of an ambiguous and fragmented identity is not new; rights and benefits conferred by personhood without having all the accountability associated with a single individual” (378).

In *Avatar*, genetic intervention is spurred by greed. The lab becomes a churner of avatars for the sole purpose of infiltration much like the black

woman's body and womb were nothing more than receptacles and vessels for churning out slaves for the plantation. Such acts were unethical and immoral. The war waged on the Na'vi to force their cooperation was not justified.

Habermas questions the ethical justification for genetic interventions, embryo research and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). And while he agrees that "Genetic interventions might be able to be approved under certain circumstances, he distinguishes between therapeutic genetic interventions and genetic enhancements. He talks about ways in which the former can be justified within the terms of a liberal morality, and reasons why the latter cannot" (np). *Avatar* serves as an interrogation of why the latter, genetic enhancements, cannot (np).

In his contribution to the discourse on genetic modification of human beings, Patrone contends that:

In particular, in today's discussions of genetic modification of human beings the divide between the liberal and the conservative approaches to ethical questions in technology is both stark and clear. Those who favor genetic enhancement ('trans-humanists') tend to hold that there is nothing special about being human, if by 'human' we mean 'being member of the species *homo sapiens*'. They reject the arguments of 'bio-conservatives' as prejudiced toward humankind, and they argue that species-membership in general is morally irrelevant (2).

Grau echoes Williams who posited, "our species membership – our humanity – figures importantly in our ethical thought" (Sensible Speciesism, 3). What others call speciesism, Williams calls humanism (Patrone, 27), a membership which "share[s] a fundamental moral status" (Grau, *Moral Status*, 396).

Speciesism is the idea that being human is a good enough reason for human animals to have greater moral rights than non-human animals (Ethics of Speciesism, np). Singer labels it a prejudice or bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species (2). People who oppose speciesism say that giving human beings greater rights than non-human animals is as arbitrary (and as morally wrong) as giving white people greater rights than non-white people. (The Ethics of

Speciesism, np). Some philosophers have cautioned though that the position articulated by Williams leans towards “an apparent preference towards human beings in virtue of a biological fact like species membership can look a lot like other biology-based prejudices we now reject as unjustified, such as racism and sexism” (Grau 4).

The *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* allows for an interrogation of racism against the backdrop of the aforementioned. It is now a known fact that the Nazis considered Jews a different species. According to Cesarani,

What made the Nazis’ hatred of the Jews so unusual is that it was racial and it was biological. They believed that the Jews were not just the followers of an abhorrent religious doctrine, or that the Jews had grabbed too much economic influence, or even that they were too intrusive in politics or culture: what made the Nazis hatred of the Jews so different is that they believed that the Jews were biologically and racially distinct (np).

While some have posited that the hierarchy that allows for human animals to have greater moral rights than non-human animals has facilitated the classification of various human species and allows for racism, Grau hastens to posit that the justifications put forward for racism ‘don’t hold water’ (4). Prejudicing humans over animals is structurally different from racist and sexist prejudices (Hettinger, np). According to Grau, “all human beings are rightholders by virtue of their species membership (rather than their possession of the genetic basis for moral agency) granting that membership in the species ‘human being’ has moral relevance ... all human beings can be viewed as possessing the moral status needed to qualify as rightholders. We have no worries about some humans being left out” (Moral Status, 396).

Notwithstanding the above, there is a dark side to human nature. Being human is not synonymous with being perfect or moral. Certainly the question that is raised here is ‘are we as humans inherently good or bad?’ According to Hettinger, “suffering is intrinsically bad, pleasure intrinsically good. Being a human is not intrinsically good” (np). Are the qualities depicted by the father and Nazis human qualities? Yes they are. To be human is to be flawed much the same way that “to be human is to be capable of morality” (np), as posited by Habermas. So what of the ethics of the action meted out to the Jews, which was also similar to the actions meted out to the Na’vi?

Vile and inhumane acts are outcrops of the human condition. The same father who can be labelled inhuman(e) by allowing the young soldier to beat the old Jewish Doctor to death while he looked on without emotion, became a victim of his own evil and loses his sanity when his son is incinerated and burnt alive in the oven created for the Jews. The same young soldier who heartlessly and unfeelingly comments that 'they smell even worse when they burn', *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is obviously a victim of emotional and psychological trauma brought about by his father's desertion of both himself and his country, a desertion which can be read as a moral act, an act of rebellion, (which is also interpreted as weak), against Hitler's eugenics. This is another reason why in contemporary society, genetic modification and engineering and other genetic diagnoses and experimentations, alluded to above, have fueled intensive ethical debate or silence on the part of some philosophers. Habermas is one such philosopher. He posits that:

The various traditional understandings of what it is to be human converge in a minimal ethical self-understanding which provides the foundation and justification for morality and procedural justice. Central to our contemporary (post-metaphysical) understanding of what it is to be human and members of a moral community is the capacity to see ourselves as ethically free and morally equal beings, guided by norms and reasons. In our social arrangements we prioritize the autonomy of the individual and draw limits on the impositions that can be made on others" (np).

Habermas therefore brings to the fore that who we are as humans also hinges on meanings of ethics and morality. Humans are different from animals. "Our lives (are) more psychologically complex" (Hettinger, np). Included in this complexity are not just morality and ethics but also,

"superior mental powers, self-aware(ness), rationality ... autonomy (and) ... seeing (ourselves) as continuing selves; self-aware beings existing over time...Humans use highly articulated languages, have developed non-genetic learning to an unparalleled extent via culture; possess literatures and historically cumulative technologies (Hettinger, np).

Against the backdrop of this ongoing discourse, doubtless we would continue to grapple with the question of what it means to be human in this constantly changing society. The text is a vehicle of ideology. The ideas presented in three texts have been drawn upon in this particular discussion.

No doubt literary works past, present and future, would keep these sociological, psychological, cultural, religious, mental, technological, educational and emotional ideologies alive in this fluid environment.

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