Sci-fi for the Soul: Diagnosing the Posthuman Condition

*Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject* by Victoria Flanagan. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. 205 PP.


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What does it mean to be human in the twenty-first century? Should our relationship with technology be a cause for celebration or concern? These questions are often at the heart of contemporary literary texts, especially science fiction novels. Victoria Flanagan’s *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject* and Justin Omar Johnston’s *Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels* discuss these questions in relation to contemporary science fiction. Whilst Flanagan seeks to show how twenty-first century young adult fiction highlights the benefits of our relationship with technology, Johnston analyses dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives to discuss the disciplinary techniques imposed upon our bodies through the use of technology. Reading these academic texts alongside each other gives a more balanced view of both the utopian possibilities and the potential dystopian consequences of our posthuman future as presented in contemporary science fiction.

*Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject*

Flanagan’s monograph is part of the “Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature” series edited by Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford. In this text, Flanagan argues that young adult fiction which discusses technology and the concept of the posthuman before the mid-2000s is very negative and sceptical, whereas young adult novels published since the mid-2000s are much more positive in tone. Flanagan suggests that this change is partly due to authors reflecting young adult’s real-life experiences with technology, which are largely positive, and also because since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in posthumanism. The literary texts Flanagan analyses are all English-language young adult novels from UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand and are mostly science fiction texts.

In chapter one, “Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction”, Flanagan outlines the theoretical impetus of her research that she will use for the rest of the book, clarifying what she means by ‘posthuman’ and ‘posthumanism’. Flanagan defines the term ‘posthuman’ as
describing bodies which are technologically enhanced and ‘posthumanism’ as the “critical ideology that seeks to deprivilege the status of the humanist subject” (14). Flanagan views humanism as an ideology that depicts the human as a stable, self-contained, (often male) subject at the centre of all things, unaffected by other humans, animals and the environment. Posthumanism, like anti-humanism, rejects the notion of the stable, self-contained subject. Posthumanism goes further than anti-humanism by deconstructing the ideology of humanism and stating that humans are affected by their individual markers of identity, their relationships with other humans and other species, the environment and social and historical conditions. Flanagan states that transhuman ideology, a concept closely related to posthumanism, advocates for the improvement of the human subject through technology. Flanagan does not analyse transhumanism in this volume because she argues that transhumanism has an ethical dimension, which states that people have the right to choose whether to undergo enhancement. This is not portrayed in young adult fiction because the protagonists have their decisions made for them by parents and authorities. Flanagan acknowledges that her interpretations of the posthuman subject, posthumanism and transhumanism are influenced by the work of Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Pramod Nayar and Cary Wolfe. The theoretical basis of Flanagan’s research outlined in the first chapter is clear, well-defined and informative, meaning it can be easily understood by a lay audience. At the same time, the connections Flanagan draws between the many different theories are remarkably sophisticated and woven together deftly.

The rest of the volume is devoted to analysing literary texts in relation to posthumanism. One of this book’s stand out chapters, “Reworking the Female Subject: Technology and the Body”, uses examples from novels such as Scott Westerfield’s Uglies (2005) and Mary E. Pearson’s The Adoration of Jenna Fox (2008). As Flanagan notes, the relationship between embodiment and posthumanism has been overlooked by scholars of children’s literature and her chapter is rectifying this gap in scholarship. In Westerfield and Pearson’s novels, the young females undergo surgery, which enhances their mental and physical capabilities as well as their beauty and femininity. According to Flanagan, the transformations of the young women in these texts do not reflect the ideology of transhumanism because the characters do not get to choose whether to undergo this enhancement. Instead, these transformations show that female posthuman subjects are still defined and restricted by their gender.

Flanagan focuses on the form, as well as the content, of young adult novels published after the mid-2000s, examining their depictions of posthumanism and agency. In “Narrating Posthuman Subjectivity”, Flanagan compares two science fiction novels by Tanith Lee: The Silver Metal Lover (1981) and its sequel Metallic Love (2005). Flanagan chooses these texts—written by the same author at a distance of over twenty years—in order to show how much young adult literature’s depiction of technology and posthumanism has evolved since the late twentieth century. The main developments Flanagan identifies in contemporary young adult fiction are the inclusion of posthuman characters as narrators, and critiques of humanist ideology in both the content and form of the experimental, fragmented novels. By comparing these novels and analysing more recent young adult science fiction, Flanagan demonstrates how authors of young adult fiction experiment with language and form in order to “position their readers in critical interpretative roles” (69). For example, the fact that the novels are narrated by a posthuman subject, such as a cyborg, is often revealed to the reader towards the end of the novel. This means that the reader is deliberately misled into presuming that the narrator is human and treating them as such. This late revelation encourages the reader to re-evaluate their opinions concerning what makes someone human.

Flanagan builds upon her observations on narration and subjectivity in another chapter, “Subjectivity in Cyberspace: Technorealism and the Merging of Virtual and Material Selves”, which explores realist young adult cyberspace narratives. In novels, such as Being Emily (2012) by Rachel Gold and ttyl (2004) by Lauren Myracle, the authors often mimic “linguistic and narrative techniques” (155) associated with blogs, instant messaging and chat rooms. Flanagan claims that these
texts use “fragmented narratives, polyfocalised narration, genre mixing [and] linguistic experimentation (155). The form of the narratives, as well as the content, mirrors both the fragmented posthuman subject, which exists in the separate dimensions of cyberspace and real-life, and the ideology of posthumanism, which emphasises the fragmentation of identity and our connections to others and the environment. By portraying cyberspace as an experimental place where we can reveal others sides of our personalities and engage in online communities, Flanagan argues that these young adult realist novels show the exciting potential that cyberspace has to empower young adults whose rights are restricted until adulthood in the real world.

Flanagan goes on to explore young adult science fiction that depicts how digital technologies and surveillance practices can empower young adults. She contributes to an emerging area of scholarship by engaging with key theorists of surveillance and technology, such as David Lyon, Kevin Haggerty, and Mark Andrejevic, and applying their ideas to contemporary science fiction. Aside from Peter Marks’s critical text Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film (2015), there has been little critical attention paid to the relationship between surveillance theory and contemporary science fiction. In the chapter, “Surveillance Societies: Privacy and Power in YA Fiction”, Flanagan analyses Cory Doctorow’s Little Brother (2008) alongside Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games (2008) to show how young people can enjoy participating in surveillance and how they can empower themselves against oppressive surveillance practices. In her analysis of Little Brother, Flanagan discusses Doctorow’s portrayal of online video games and chat forums as spaces for young adults to communicate with each other and form a community. She connects this to her discussion of cyberspace as a place where young adults can exercise their rights. Later, in her analysis of Collins’ text, she shows how the protagonist Katniss Everdeen is able to win the games and capture the heart of the nation by seeing herself from the point of view of the audience and acting for the camera, which ultimately leads to her inspiring a rebellion against the government’s cruel, oppressive regime. In these chapters, Flanagan shows how science fiction texts aimed at young adults depict types of surveillance and communication technology as empowering, inverting their portrayal in the media as unsafe, scary and problematic. Flanagan’s positive interpretations of surveillance and communication technology as depicted in science fiction is refreshing as scholarship in this area tends to emphasise the dystopian aspects portrayed in the literature.

Throughout her book, Flanagan convincingly argues that contemporary young adult fiction presents the relationship between our species and technology more positively than earlier young adult fiction. The themes of surveillance, cyberspace and gender, which Flanagan chooses to focus on, are all very topical amongst contemporary literary and science fiction scholars. Flanagan’s monograph is an important text for scholars of young adult literature and posthumanism, which addresses an underdeveloped area of scholarship in its exploration of the overlap between posthumanism and poststructuralism, and feminism and transhumanism in relation to children’s and young adult fiction.

Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels

Johnston’s monograph is part of the “Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine”
series and as such focuses more strongly on theories of science and technology in relation to the texts under discussion. Like Flanagan, Johnston chooses to discuss surveillance, technology and posthumanism. However, he focuses on more critical, negative portrayals of biotechnology and the harsh treatment of posthuman subjects. Johnston analyses contemporary dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels, which depict posthuman characters such as clones, animal-human hybrids, toxic bodies and cyborgs. Throughout the volume, Johnston uses human capital theory to argue that citizens of the twenty-first century are controlled and disciplined by governments and organisations who persuade us to improve ourselves using the logic of transhumanism.

Johnston explains that human capital theory “understand[s] all acts of consumption and leisure as opportunities to grow or invest in one’s human capital” (17). Examples of investing in human capital include self-training, exercise, education and parenting. He claims that biotechnology in the twenty-first century has made the redesigning of and the improvement of humans possible. According to Johnston, this means that we live in the biotech century, where we are compelled to invest in our bodies and constantly improve ourselves in order to become “more human” (2). The outcome of this logic is that: “if one can always become ‘more human’ then one can never, finally, become human enough or fully human” (2). In this way, human capital theory is connected to the self-improvement logic of transhumanism, which Johnston describes as “a sci-fi techno-powered rebranding of neoliberal humanism” (emphasis added, 21). In statements like this, Johnston shows his scepticism of and disapproval of transhumanism, which he suggests originates from dystopian science fiction. Human capital theory and transhumanism are also connected to biopolitics, a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe the control and discipline of entire populations. The loss of agency and control, as well as the loss of our humanity, are at the heart of Johnston’s book, which delves into the nightmarish world of science fiction in order to warn us about the potentially negative consequences of our relationship with technology.

In the introduction, Johnston claims that, in all the novels he has examined for this book, surveillance practices are the driving force behind the control and discipline of the posthuman characters, and the cause of social inequality (3). He argues that neoliberal capitalism and surveillance practices increase inequality because profit is ultimately valued above people. Similarly, surveillance theorists claim that social sorting surveillance practices, which are connected to neoliberal capitalism and human capital theory, increase division and inequality. The term “social sorting”, which was coined by David Lyon, is used by surveillance theorists to describe how surveillance technologies sort people into categories based on factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and wealth. Social sorting, then, describes both “soft” surveillance practices, such as targeted advertising, and “hard” surveillance practices such as border control. Johnston could demonstrate the connections between surveillance practices and human capital more explicitly by engaging with the scholarship concerning social sorting, as this shows how surveillance is connected to neoliberal capitalism and biopolitics, as well as how surveillance permeates all aspects of everyday life. Johnston’s arguments regarding the control and discipline of people and growing social inequality are expanded on in Johnston’s analysis of the novels.

In the rest of the volume, Johnston examines key contemporary science fiction texts in relation to a specific type of posthuman subject, using the theories and themes he outlined in the introduction. He covers the subject of human clones through an analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), focusing on the setting of the novel in 1970s to 1990s Britain. The clones in Ishiguro’s novel are reared to give away their organs and they work as carers to other clones before they undergo the operations themselves. Johnston argues that the time and setting of the novel is significant as this period in Britain is categorised by the rise of Margaret Thatcher and neoliberal ideologies, which contributed to the privatisation of public services and funding cuts to social services like the NHS. Reading the novel through this lens enables Johnston to compare the clones to other groups who, like the clones, are underappreciated by society. Johnston draws our attention to the passage in the novel where
the clones speculate on the humans that they were copied from and suggest that they are clones of homeless people. He argues that Ishiguro is commentating on the poor groups of people who sign up for medical trials for money. In his interpretation of Ishiguro's novel through the lenses of posthumanism and human capital theory, Johnston criticises the monetary value that is placed on humans who depend on public funding for healthcare and who are exploited by pharmaceutical companies. In the other chapters, Johnston expands on his claims regarding the nightmarish consequences of a world which values profit over people, through his analysis of other popular contemporary science fiction texts.

Overall, Johnston's monograph makes a significant contribution to contemporary science fiction studies. Whilst analysing science fiction texts in relation to posthumanism, biopolitics and dystopian and post-apocalyptic genre theory is not new, by reading these texts through the lens of human capital theory Johnston is able to say something original and thought-provoking. Like Flanagan, Johnston is able to present his arguments to both literary scholars and a general audience by clearly outlining his argument and the different theories which influence his research.

**Concluding Remarks**

Johnston and Flanagan's texts are must reads for scholars of posthumanism and contemporary literature regardless of whether they study science fiction or young adult fiction. The authors both discuss surveillance and control in order to ask questions about the level of autonomy and agency we as a species will have in the future. Flanagan puts forward a positive view of our relationship with technology by showing how cyberspace can be a space for young adults to discover their voices and opinions and by arguing that young adult fiction can instruct readers to empower themselves against authorities, which seek to take away their agency. On the other hand, Johnston is sceptical of governments and organisations that perpetuate an ideal image of the human, which is exclusionary, unattainable, and which gives authorities an alibi to treat some people as less than human. He shows the potential negative consequences of our relationship with technology, particularly biotechnology and surveillance technology, through analysing dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels. Both Flanagan and Johnston agree, however, that dystopian elements in the novels are the result of the way governments and corporations use technology. Reading these texts alongside each other gives the reader the impression that the human race is going to become increasingly connected to technology going forward and that we have a duty to recognise and critically analyse this whilst also embracing the exciting possibilities.