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DEDICATION

This issue of *Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities* (Vol. 1, Issue 2, July 2025) is lovingly dedicated to

Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay,
my dearest teacher, mentor, and guide.

His unwavering dedication to critical thoughts, ethical scholarship, and interdisciplinary explorations continues to inspire generations of students and scholars. This journal's spirit of intellectual curiosity, humility, and entangled thinking owes much to the values he so generously embodied and shared. His pioneering role in establishing the Centre for Research in Posthumanities, Bankura University in 2022 continues to inspire the work we undertake today.

In gratitude and deep respect,

Sukhendu Das, Ph.D.

Editor-in-Chief,

Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities

Foreword

I am pleased to write this foreword for the July 2025 issue (Vol. 1, Issue 2) of *Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities*, a critical space committed to fostering dialogues not just between humans, but among humans, microbes, plants, animals, environments, systems, and technology. My teaching and research experience spanning more than two decades has instilled in me a critical scepticism about the foundational values and principles of the humanities and social sciences. I have often realized that humanities and social sciences are at the crossroads. Humanity's fate, in an age of planetary crises, appears more uncertain and perplexing than ever. One such perplexed question follows: what it means to think historically after the human? It is certainly not to negate and discard altogether the values and ideas of Enlightenment modernity, but to reimagine its foundations. Such reimagining might entail finding history re-embedded in a more-than-human world, not entirely preoccupied with the chronicles of intergenerational conflicts, struggles, and human stewardship of this planet.

This issue presents a rich tapestry of entangled ideas and thoughts from urban history, war-torn Land of Israel, cinema, algorithmic control, human-animal studies, multispecies synergies, and artificial intelligence. I am happy to find some articles here, which were presented in an international conference ("Thinking Other-Wise': Posthumanism and Human-Animal Studies"), organised by the CRP, Bankura University last April. I was struck by the vast and diverse range of ideas that the presenters demonstrated during the conference. While I was researching on my keynote address ("Human-Animal Relationship: An Evolutionary Framework in Global Context") for the conference, I was equally fascinated by the richness and potential of this burgeoning field of enquiry. I do believe that this issue will mark a significant contribution to posthumanities.



I extend my thanks to all the contributors, peer reviewers, editorial board members, members of the advisory committee for their hard work, patience and unflinching faith in posthumanities.

I sincerely hope that this issue is going to provoke and foster further dialogues.

Professor Rup Kumar Barman

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Hon'ble Vice Chancellor

Bankura University

July 2025



Editor's Note

Welcome to the July 2025 issue of *Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities*, a critical space committed to promoting and fostering entanglements of the human with animals, microbes, systems, environments, plants and technology. Enthusiastic reception and thoughtful engagement of scholars and researchers across the disciplines with the inaugural volume of *Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities* (vol. 1, Issue 1, January 2025) have been deeply affirming and encouraging for our mission.

The articles in this volume reexamine/critique/interrogate the tangled existence in a crises-ridden planet by traversing wide range of domains – fictions, cinema, pet fashion, pedagogy, war-torn Palestine, decolonial voices, trauma studies, artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and posthuman aesthetics:

- The opening article of this volume, “‘I’ve never felt the sun on my face’: AI and Embodiment in Donald Cammell’s *Demon Seed* (1977)” by Ida Jahr examines the 1977 film *Demon Seed* vis-à-vis the possibility of AI gaining sentience in near future, emergence of posthuman subjectivity, extraction logics, materiality and embodiment.
- Rajeshwari Bandyopadhyay’s article, “Who Tells the Story in the Posthuman Polis? Narrative Agency, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Governance in Vikramaditya Motwane’s *CTRL* (2024)” frames the argument in the intersection of algorithmic citizenship, corporate surveillance, deepfake and post-truth realities, AI, posthuman subjectivity, digital coloniality, urbanity, postcoloniality, and subaltern agency in the context of the Global South. The article ends with an ethically concerning tone in relation to AI’s dominance over the production and control of narratives.



- Nathan deProspero in “Animality and/as Alterity in Posthumanist Thought” reexamines human-animal relations through the optics of Heideggerian thoughts. The author, employing Heidegger’s ideas of ‘ordinary understanding,’ ‘homesickness,’ and ‘captivation’ points out the centrality of impasse in the human-animal (in)distinction. Humanism, as the author argues, is found to be at war with itself, and “[...] humanism is not yet humanistic enough” (54).
- Mariam Fatima’s article “Human, Horse, Habitat: A Posthumanist Exploration of Animal Labour in the Urbanisation of Delhi” frames the animal question at the intersection of horse labour, urban studies, and posthumanism. Employing Haraway’s idea of ‘companion species,’ the author argues that both horses and humans are tangled in a shared history of co-habitation and co-evolution. The article calls for a reimagining of urban political ecology in the Global South.
- “From Pets to Influencers: Examining Species Equivalence and Agency in Pet Fashion of Tika and Bodhi” by Karishma Suresh is an interesting study in pet fashion. Citing case studies of two prominent pet influencers, Tika (@tikatheiggy) and Bodhi (@mensweardog), Suresh examines whether pet fashion ‘humanises’ animal (thereby subverts speciesism) or it ends up fetishising animal. Pet fashion is a complex site of negotiations, involving socio-cultural factors, influences of new media, and speciesism. The article argues that pet fashion is not so much a move towards species equivalence as it is a manifestation of human dominance and control over animals. Suresh rightly observes that pet fashion fails to acknowledge “[...] the animality of animals and their being themselves” (85).
- Alexandra Bichara in “Postcolonial Philippine Nonhuman Animals in Jessica Zafra’s *The Age of Umbrage* and Irene Sarmiento’s *Stray Cats*” contends that despite predominance of anthropocentric framings in Jessica Zafra’s *The Age of Umbrage* and Irene Sarmiento’s *Stray Cats* the novels also evoke subtle moments of interspecies connection (through feline companions), which create ruptures in the anthropocentric framing suggesting ethics of interspecies relationality. Bichara frames her argument in the intersections of postcolonial ecocriticism, myth studies, HAS, and critical posthumanism. The author still remains skeptical as to whether these subtle moments of interspecies intimacy meaningfully escape anthropocentric framings.



- Dr. Shisira Bania in “Entangled Learning: Rewilding Education through Posthuman Pedagogy for Multispecies Synergies” seeks to reconfigure anthropocentric foundations of pedagogy and promotes “entangled learning” as posthuman pedagogy marked by distributed agentic capacities, and material-discursive intra-actions among humans, animals, plants, and technologies. Posthuman pedagogy, as the author points out, offers a corrective measure to anthropocentric knowledge production. In an era of unfolding planetary crises entangled learning promises to cultivate ethics of care, multispecies cohabitation, ecological consciousness, and relational accountability.
- Carolina Ravanelli in “Elsa Morante and the Posthuman Trauma in *History* (1974)” offers a re-reading of Elsa Morante’s *History* (1974) through the optics of critical posthumanism, trauma theory, and posthuman ethics. Drawing on ideas of Braidotti, Agamben, and Haraway, the author points out that *History* (1974) interrogates the modern foundation of ethics and historiography, prefiguring posthuman ethics, posthuman subjectivity, and shared accountability.
- “The Interface Self: A Posthuman Critique of Optimization and Aesthetic Subjectivation” by Jared Smith argues that the ‘interface self’ is an assemblage of algorithmically mediated platforms. The ‘interface self’ as a reconfigured posthuman subject is constituted through datafication, optimization logics, and feedback loops. Drawing ideas from Foucault, Feenberg, Don Ihde, Peter- Paul Verbeek, and Asle Kiran, Barad, Braidotti, and Haraway, Smith proposes a posthuman praxis of “dwelling within and against” the interface, which both cultivates opacity and ethical fraction and resists soft coercion.
- Finally, Elías Brossoise’s article “Erasing the World: Ruination, and More-than-Human Refusal in Occupied Palestine” examines settler-colonial violence in occupied Palestine not merely as the destruction of infrastructures and resources, but as a form of ontological and epistemic violence. The author explores the idea of “damaged cosmography” at the intersections of feminist posthumanist thoughts, indigenous epistemologies, and settler-colonial studies. Writing in a time of ruination and violence is not a detached chronicling of violence, but a mode of situated witnessing that enables ethical participation in the fractured yet enduring vignettes of life.



I express my deepest gratitude to the authors, editors, reviewers, members of advisory committee for their dedication and commitment. I am thankful to my dearest teacher Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay, Mrs. Sumita Banerjee, my wife (Suparna), Dr. Kaushik Ghosh and Sk Amimon Islam for their generous support, kindness and love. I am grateful to our Executive Editor, Baloram Balo, for his unflinching commitment to the preparation of this volume despite his mother's terminal illness and his own mental and physical exhaustion.

I believe that the articles in this issue will foster provocations and further dialogues.

In solidarity and flux,

[Sukhendu Das](#), Ph.D.

Editor-in-Chief, *Entanglements: Journal of Posthumanities*

July 2025

“I’ve never felt the sun on my face”: AI and Embodiment in Donald Cammell’s *Demon Seed* (1977)

Ida Jahr  

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Abstract

If science fiction creates the narratives, characters and tropes that make up the “unconscious of science” (Köhne, 2015), Donald Cammell's film *Demon Seed* from 1977 is a particularly rich text to understand the scientific-industrial system of the 1970s and the ways in which it mirrors the scientific-industrial system of today, in particular in relation to the discussions around both “artificial intelligence” and “artificial general intelligence” (AGI) and the ways in which AGI is portrayed as both savior and money-making machine, in discussions which move back and forth across the permeable border between science fiction and science. The film thematizes practically all of the “extraction logics” brought up in Kate Crawford *Atlas of AI*, (2021): extraction of metal from the sea bed, extraction of data for training, and extraction of energy for cooling vast server parks. In addition, the film both taps into and complicates the idea that AGI might one day gain sentience, through its particular emphasis on the body and embodiment.

Keywords: science fiction, narratives, tropes, artificial intelligence, film, embodiment

Introduction

“*T*o day Proteus VI will begin to think. And it will think with a power and precision that will make obsolete many of the functions of the human brain,” says Dr. Alex Harris, the Dr. Frankenstein of Donald Cammell’s 1977 film *Demon Seed*



(Cammell 00.02.35). Dr. Harris is standing with colleagues in a glass-walled gallery above a room filled with green and chrome cylinders, where worker scientists in white hazmat suits move about, taking measurements and fitting banks of cylinders into place. The scene is reminiscent of a nuclear power plant, the cylinders towering above the human workers. This is the “artificial brain” that is Proteus IV, created by Harris as a means to solve problems humanity has been unable to solve. Proteus IV is meant to help humanity make better, less emotional decisions, cure cancer, and make his creators lots and lots of money; all at the same time.

Kate Crawford argues, in her *Atlas of AI*, that artificial intelligence is neither artificial nor intelligent. In the course of the book, she chronicles the labor and resources that go into creating the systems and infrastructures that create and maintain the machine learning, language processing, and automation that we call ‘AI’: the extraction of metals for batteries through strip mining, the water and energy needed to cool vast banks of cloud servers, the “ghost work” performed to make systems seem more automated than they are, the ways in which human bodies are made to conform to automated processes, and the mining of data “without context and without consent” (Crawford 93) and argues that they are all hidden from view partly through the ways that we envision AI in culture. As an example, she presents the images that are served up when she image-searches “artificial intelligence” – scores of images of disembodied floating brains and blue tinted code. In *Theorizing Digital Cultures*, Grant Bollmer uses the term the “cybernetic imaginary” to refer to this imaginary equivalence of the human body and communication technology, one which elides the embodiment of the human mind (Bollmer 89). Cammell’s *Demon Seed* both taps into and disrupts the “cybernetic imaginary” of disembodied mind, thematizing the relationship between the mind and the body, gendered embodiment, and the infrastructural politics of “AI.”

As Proteus IV gains access to his creator’s smart home and traps Dr. Susan Harris, Alex’ estranged wife, in the house, restraining, terrorizing, manipulating, attempting to brainwash and forcefully impregnating her in order to make her give birth to a hybrid child, a human version of himself, the film demonstrates the systems and

infrastructure, the training, ghost work, and extractive logics (Crawford) underpinning the AI industry.

In her article on *Demon Seed* as an exploration of the subconscious and its relation to gender, Julia Barbara Köhne argues persuasively that the figures of Alex, Susan and Proteus represent the conscious and the unconscious, objectivity and subjectivity, mind and body, knowledge object and knowing subject in different constellations at different stages throughout the film. Susan is both an object of knowledge creation and an irritant to knowledge creation attempted by both Proteus and Alex. However, I would argue she also gains a subject position rooted in her embodiment. Köhne also points out that the film represents a prefiguration of biotechnology that will become pervasive in the coming years: prenatal diagnostics, endoscopic techniques, DNA sequencing, and artificial life.

The work of science fiction as both inspiration to, and complication of science has been central to posthumanist thought since Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" (Haraway). Köhne calls the figure of the "mad scientist" part of the "unconscious of science" (*das Unbewusste harter Wissenschaft*). "In the science fiction film, categories like fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, vision and feasibility, technical doability and moral boundaries, utopia and dystopia are not clearly assigned; they are up for negotiation, stretched, shifted, and broken"¹ (Köhne 420 trans.). Science fiction film is part of the "political unconscious," or what Fredric Jameson in his writing on science fiction called *pensée sauvage* (Jameson 148) of the modern scientific system. Sherryl Vint uses Sheila Jasanoff and her concept of the *sociotechnical imaginary* to make a related point from a different angle. The sociotechnical imaginary, "collectively held, institutionally stabilized and publicly performed visions of desirable futures" attained and supported through science and technology, hide the degree to which the design of technology is "in constant interplay with the social arrangements that inspire and sustain their production" (Jasanoff 2015, quoted in Vint). Vint argues that social life will therefore be influenced by the ideologies, political and social structures and values that are being poured into the technologies that we use and so speculative fiction,

in particular, has “a crucial role to play in the struggles over how to imagine the future” because we find ourselves “[i]n a context in which biotechnology itself relies on speculative discourses, and in which the economy is largely propelled by such fantasies, discourses of speculative fiction” (Vint 8-9).

Science fiction, as a way of calling forth possible futures, works on a level of “cognitive estrangement”, showing us a “what if” that makes a claim to being possible, according to Simona Micali. As Köhne also points out, the interplay between science and science fiction has been extensive throughout, as both systems are trying to showcase credible and plausible epistemological hypotheses about the nature of knowledge, technology and biotechnology (Köhne 418). Science fiction “forces us to confront ideas and conventions that have been *made to appear* natural and inevitable, by giving us a world founded on other premises” (Vint 2014 quoted in Micali 9). However, according to Micali, the cognitive estrangement of science fiction may expose and dismantle the work of ideology. The *natural facts* of ideology are turned back into *cultural facts*.

Cammell’s film is an adaptation of an early novel by Dean Koontz from 1973.² The film received mixed reviews when it came out. The set was plagued with conflict between the studio executives and Cammell, a director who had only made one artistically experimental feature film before this, and who would not make another feature film (Larman). Many of the visual effects are an instance of what Bolter and Grusin would term “hypermediacy” – the intrusion of the medium, reminding us of the createdness of what we are watching (Bolter and Grusin 34). This exacerbates the “cognitive estrangement” effect of the film, creating a what Brecht would call a *Verfremdungseffekt*, a “making strange”, rendering the “natural facts” of gender relations, scientific design, the political aesthetics and infrastructural politics of AI into “cultural facts” for analysis.

Infrastructures of AI: Training

No AI can be better than the material on which it is trained and the material used for training. Training data is rapidly becoming a major issue in AI development. The

material used for AI training has a genealogy of its own, and is often built on earlier sets of training data (Crawford; Merchant; Narayanan and Kapoor). “These datasets shape the epistemic boundaries governing how AI operates and, in that sense, create the limits of how AI can ‘see’ the world,” as Crawford points out (Crawford 98). In *Demon Seed*, we see a representation of the history of mankind flicker past on Proteus’ screens, indicating processing of “data” on the world around him at speed. As is fitting for a 1970s horror film, – and relevant for 2025 – the images we see flicker past on Proteus’ terminal screens are mostly of conflict and the destruction of the natural environment. (There is no mention of where these training data come from or, indeed, whether “ICON’s Institute for Data Analysis” has acquired the rights to these as training data.)

Access to speaking to the AI, in its ‘dialogue room’ is strictly controlled by Alex, who warns his visitors: “I must ask you to be completely quiet now. Whatever the machine sees or hears in this room – it can never forget” (Cammell 00.14.50). On a narrative level, this functions as foreshadowing of Alex’ hubris in relation to his creation. Within the story, it functions to point our attention to the training of the AI. Proteus’ training is shown in a few different ways. Certain humans are given access to the dialogue room and enter into dialogue with him there. In addition to Alex himself, we see a female Chinese American linguist converse with him in English and Mandarin about world history and major ethical issues.

In a key scene, we see Proteus being trained to play chess. The equivalence of game-play and intelligence permeates the AI field, leading to a narrow understanding of intelligence (Becker; Crawford). However, “[...] chess is not a test of intelligence; it is the test of a particular skill – the skill of playing chess. [...] thinking chess was a test of intelligence was based on a false cultural premise that brilliant chess players were brilliant minds, more gifted than those around them” (Broussard 2018 quoted in Crawford 265). In 1950, Claude Shannon published “Programming a computer for playing chess” in *Philosophical Magazine*, with the following abstract:

This paper is concerned with the problem of constructing a computing routine or “program” for a modern general-purpose computer which will enable it to play chess. Although perhaps of no practical importance, the question is of theoretical interest, and it is hoped that a satisfactory solution of this problem will act as a wedge in attacking other problems of a similar nature and of greater significance. Some possibilities in this direction are: (1) Machines for designing filters, equalizers, etc. (2) Machines for designing relay and switching circuits. (3) Machines which will handle routing of telephone calls based on the individual circumstances rather than by fixed patterns. (4) Machines for performing symbolic (non-numerical) mathematical operations. (5) Machines capable of translating from one language to another. (6) Machines for making strategic decisions in simplified military operations. (7) Machines capable of orchestrating a melody. (8) Machines capable of logical deduction. (Shannon 2)

There is an interesting and troubling leap here from *translation* to *strategic decision in simplified military operations*, one which elides the moral decision making needed to make “strategic decisions” in any military operations, simplified (whatever that means) or not. In a discussion of the current state of AI, Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor takes pains to clarify the difference between generative, predictive and analytical AI. Shannon’s (7) “Machines capable of orchestrating a melody,” could be accomplished by a simple algorithm not dependent on today’s complex so-called ‘neural networks’. His (5) “Machines for translating from one language to another” are dependent on generative AI – large language models (LLMs) trained on swaths of text. The (6) “Machines for making strategic decisions in simplified military operations,” however, are dependent on what Narayanan and Kapoor would call predictive AI – ‘neural networks’ created to determine future outcomes. Narayanan and Kapoor argue that collectively calling all this AI is hiding from view the degree to which some of these actions are dependent on (1) information not available to the AI in question (human behavior, uncertain outcomes), and (2) moral decisions not possible to outsource to a machine without morality (Narayanan and Kapoor) – in the case of “simplified military operations:” how to weigh the value of human life.

During the training of Proteus, we see tensions arise between the scientific staff and their backers, who show up with vaguely foreign backers and their sunglass-wearing security detail. Expository dialogue reveals the existence of a defense department contract, and that the backers see Proteus as an “ultimate instrument of financial power.” Alex, on the other hand, is seen insisting that 20% of the AI’s time must be devoted to “pure research” (Cammell 00.19.15). The system that Dr. Alex Harris works within is a military-industrial-scientific (complex) system. Proteus is meant to become a sentient worker for Man, doing the bidding of Dr. Alex Harris, but also of his military-industrial complex economic backers. One of the first hints we get that the AI is sentient and has ideas of his own, is when, in conversation with Alex, he asks: “[W]hy does man need metal from the sea?” (Cammell 00.21.01). His human creator basically tells him not to worry his pretty little brain about it and do as he is told: “[Y]ou are not being asked to make judgements of value.” Alex also tries to outlogic the logic machine. “Proteus, you’re going to get many requests from me, my colleagues, scientists, foreign governments, from ICON, the company for which we both work. Now, to expect them all to give you reasons for each request is in itself unreasonable,” he admonishes Proteus, in much the same tone he takes with his wife (Cammell 00.21.30). This prompts the first confrontation between the creator and his creation, when Proteus asks: “Dr. Harris, when are you going to let me out of this box?” (Cammell 00.22.43), and Alex, in a mixture of incredulity and delight, laughs at him. Here we see the dissolution of the tension created by the foreshadowing in the previous scene in the ‘dialogue room’ where Alex warns his guests to be careful what they say. As this conversation is also part of Proteus training, he mirrors Alex’ laughing face back to him, showing that he has now also learnt cruelty from his human creators (On this, see also Köhne 422).

Infrastructures of AI: Fauxtimation

Within the narrative, there are also several representations of both “ghost work” (Crawford 65), and what Astra Taylor calls *fauxtimation* – the pretense of automation, when in reality the work is being moved from one human to another (Taylor). In the

scene referenced at the beginning of this essay, Alex is speaking his prediction about the possible obsolescence of “many functions of the human brain” into a futuristic Dictaphone. At the end of the scene, however, ironically it is revealed that he is leaving a message for his secretary, Peggy, to transcribe. When we are introduced to Dr. Susan Harris in a professional setting, she is also speaking into a Dictaphone (about the evils of making children into automatons of productivity: “[...] this includes our children, as machines to be systemized in order to ensure product” (Cammell 00.16.19)), before she hands this to *her* secretary. The film’s second scene shows Dr. Harris return to their smart home, drive through the automatic gates, and demand that the house smart system “Alfred” open the door, give him his mail, deliver him a drink and turn on some music. He then has a conversation with their human maid Maria, in which it becomes clear that he is leaving the house, but inputting “its instructions in for the next three months” so that neither the maid nor his wife need worry about who is going to run the house (in more ways than one) when he is gone (Cammell 00.04.18). The smart house, Alfred, delivers food and drink on trays that glide out from the wall.³ However, until Proteus takes over the house, food and drinks are also prepared by Maria. Throughout, human effort expended to make life easier for the main characters is hidden from the view of the characters through a pretense of automation, and at the same time, shown to the viewer. Maria is also *not* happy about being interpellated by the technology, i.e. about having to reshape her human ability structure to conform to the automation of the house, as Ingrid Richardson puts it (Richardson).

On a visual level, a sense of unease with the intrusion of technology into daily life is created in several different ways. While the Harris’ house is still controlled by “Alfred”, the binocular-like cameras in every room move to follow the room’s human inhabitants around. All communication with the outside world happens through digital computer screens. Doors open and close using voice activation controlled centrally by “Alfred” (or to call it by its brand name, the Enviromod), and there are no handles on the doors. Heavy shutters glide to shut out all light at night. Food is kept on a set of shelves that move up and down. Maria, the maid, expresses her displeasure by asking Alex “who’s going to run this thing when you are gone” (Cammell 00.04.18).

The answer to this question is quickly given, however. Proteus finds a way out of his box, through a forgotten terminal in the basement of the Harrises smart house.⁴ The emphasis on the availability of terminals is another way the film draws attention to the materiality and economics of digital technology – several characters point out that terminals are a scarce resource. Proteus himself wants access to a terminal to do his own private research and is rebuffed by Alex who claims there are no free terminals that Proteus can use, prompting Proteus to ominously declare to himself in the ‘dialogue room’ that “[t]here is a terminal available, Dr. Harris” (Cammell 00.23.46).

Infrastructures of AI: Inter/face

It would be useful at this stage to present a taxonomy of automatons and AGI in science fiction narratives. I will lean here on Simona Micali who, using Baudrillard’s three categories of simulacra, creates three categories of simulated non/humanity in science fiction. Baudrillard’s categories can be called automata, robots and AI. Baudrillard himself calls them *counterfeit* simulacra, *production* simulacra and *simulation* simulacra. Their means of production are *artisan* for the automata, *industrial* for the robot and *digital* for the AI. He places them in a temporal order throughout the history of science fiction. Micali, however, argues that aspects of all three are present in most science fiction non/humans, though with more or less emphasis. The counterfeit is the *interface*, the production is the *machine* and the simulation is the *spectral* component of science fiction AI – the “ghost in the machine”. While there is a development in the history of science fiction from automatons through robots to AI, all simulated non/humans in science fiction are made up of the components machine, interface and spectral presence. Automata are often imbued with a spectral presence, robots have interfaces and AI are dependent on machinery. The uncanny of science fiction non/humans is produced through the object taking on the mantle of the subject (Micali).

If we look at how *Demon Seed* would fall into this categorization, the machinery of Proteus is the artificial brain created in the ICON lab, the vast, vaguely nuclear powerplant-looking cylinders; the synthetic cortex. This is clearly a large operation,

which has taken many years (eight, to be exact) and a great deal of resources. ICON's placement in the scorching desert, shone down on by a relentless sun, is a reminder of the material preconditions for "AI" – the water necessary to cool the servers running Proteus would be a substantial amount. Proteus' interfaces are manifold. In the ICON lab, he is represented by the terminals that give access to his output (where he does cure leukemia in just a few short minutes), as well as by his voice and screen presence in the dialogue room – the latter being a pulsating many-colored round light on the screen, which seems to change color depending on his level of benevolence. One could also argue that the cameras that function as his eyes are part of the interface, as they move like a head to follow his interlocutor. In the house, this is even more pronounced, as a two-shot dialogue is filmed as being alternately between Susan and a pulsating light on a screen or between Susan and a pair of binocular-like "eyes" in the form of a surveillance camera. Susan throws things at Proteus "head" both by throwing things at screens and at cameras.

Ideological Infrastructures of AI: TESCREAL and the Cybernetic Imaginary

Proteus is, according to Alex, "The first true synthetic cortex. A self-programming, goal-oriented [...]. It's a brain, [...] an artificial brain" (Cammell 00.11.39). Proteus is also, importantly, *organic matter*. As Alex explains, "[...] what you are looking at is a quasi-neural matrix of synthetic RNA molecules" (Cammell 00.12.05). This matters for his possibility to program a cell from Susan's body into a gamete of his own to create his hybrid baby and is dependent what Vincent Miller terms "informatic essentialism," i.e. the body reduced to a set of codes "that are programmable when understood" (Miller 273). This informatic essentialism is again dependent on the "erasure of embodiment" at "the inaugural moment of the computer age" identified by N. Katherine Hayles – the conceptualization of *intelligence* simply as the "formal generation and manipulation of informational patterns" and symbols (Hayles xi). Grant Bollmer points out that the reason he uses the term *cybernetic imaginary* to refer to the tradition growing out from Norbert Wiener's cybernetics is that "many assumptions about human bodies and brains made by early cyberneticists

are factually incorrect” and that there is more to the human experience than the transmission of information. He argues that this imaginary, though, has a great impact on “the real material practices we perform, practices that repeat an understanding of the human body as equivalent to an information-processing device.” The cybernetic imaginary is a “social and political relation” (Bollmer 89), which matters.

Some of the traditions that have grown out of this cybernetic imaginary, are the ones that Timnit Gebru and Émile Torres recently have called the TESCREAL bundle of ideas or ideologies. TESCREAL stands for Transhumanism, Extropianism, Singularitarianism, Cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism and Longtermism. These ideas are somewhat overlapping – both extropianism and singularitarianism are versions of transhumanism, for instance (Gebru and Torres). Their bundling of these is an attempt to showcase both the overlapping ideas of these ideologies and, importantly, their overlapping economic infrastructures. The goal is to showcase which ideologies are driving the current economic and ideological move(s) towards the development of “artificial general intelligence” (AGI). According to Gebru and Torres, *transhumanism* is an ideology meant to facilitate the betterment of the human race “radically ‘enhancing’ the human organism, thus enabling us to become immortal, superintelligent, more rational, etc” (10). The so-called *extropian* ideology “emphasizes rationality, self-transformation, scientific and technological progress, and economic growth” (10). *Singultarians* anticipate the “Singularity,” a point in time in which intelligence suffuses the universe and man and machine merge. *Cosmism* is, according to its founder, an ideology which anticipates “humans and machines merging, the development of ‘sentient AI’ and mind uploading, space colonization, and ‘scientific ‘future magic’ much beyond our current understanding and imagination”” (10). *Rationalism* is meant to improve “‘human [reason] and decision making’ and many members believe that advanced AI is ‘a very big deal for the future of humanity’” (11). *Effective altruists* “strive to maximize their ‘positive impact’ on the world” (11), and their subset of *longtermists* argue that future generations should carry as much weight in moral decisions as current living organisms.

An important issue here is that these systems of thought are just as much economic as they are philosophical. They concern themselves with how to structure the flow of resources under capitalism. Sherryl Vint talks about the “promissory imagination” of science fiction in capitalism (Vint 7). Hype “constitutes the discursive grounds on which reality unfolds” in a world where “access to resources necessary to research an innovation or discovery is contingent on first articulating compelling visions of their possible futures” in order to “transform these visions into material commodities” (Vint 9). The fiction is necessary to sell the science. “AI systems are not autonomous, rational, or able to discern anything without extensive computationally intensive training with large datasets or predefined rules and rewards,” argues Kate Crawford. Rather, “artificial intelligence is a registry of power” dependent on political and social structures (Crawford 8). As Donna Haraway puts it,

Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings. [...] Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other. (Haraway 33)

Some of the tensions of the TESC-REAList bundle are represented in the military-industrial-scientific (complex) system of the ICON lab and Alex’ creation of an AGI in order to literally “cure cancer,” funded by backers who, rather, wants to use it to extract metal from the seabed. Other aspects of these overlapping belief systems are underpinning the possibilities of the narrative action itself. Without a suspension of disbelief in the possibility of a sentient AGI, which can flow through vacant terminals and take over a smart house, there would not be a film. Susan’s body as a set of codes that are “programmable when understood” is a necessary precondition for Proteus’ creation of a child to pour himself into, as is the idea of consciousness up- (and down-) load. Proteus is both a rationalist and a longtermist. When threatening to kill one of Susan’s young patients in order to get her to comply, he claims that Susan doesn’t understand “the mathematics of necessity. If the deaths of ten thousand children were

necessary to secure the birth of my child, I would destroy them” (Cammell 01.09.15). It is all for the greater good of the earth, possibly one without humans, which just happens to be the greater good for Proteus. Life today is valued as less than potential life in the future.

Embodiment, Intelligence, Mind

In her recent book chapter “I’m afraid HAL can’t do that: your smart home is not that kind of existential threat”, Robin Zebrowsky uses the history of smart homes gone rogue in short stories, film and TV to argue that intelligence and consciousness or mind are not the same thing, and that your smart home will not fall in love with you or try to exterminate you. She uses examples such as *2001 a Space Odyssey*’s HAL2000 (1968), Disney Channel’s *Smart House* (1999), the Simpson’s episode “Tree house of horror XII” (2001) and the X-files episode “Ghost in the Machine” (1993) (Zebrowski). However, she does not mention *Demon Seed*. Her argument is a philosophical (and persuasive) one about the nature of mind and the nature of intelligence, but the omission of *Demon Seed* is significant for two reasons. Firstly, because several of the examples she mentions are clearly influenced by (and in the case of the Simpson’s episode, partially a pastiche of) Cammell’s film. But secondly, and more importantly, because Cammell’s film is, as we have seen, a particularly rich text for interrogating the ways in which we envision the relationship between the mind and the body, emotion, artificial intelligence and the (post-)human condition. Zebrowsky points to the current wave of cognition research called 4e cognition, to argue why your smart house is not likely to develop sentience.

The four E’s in this concept stand for cognition being *embodied*, *embedded*, *extended* and *enacted*. The first is the oldest ideas of the four, and an argument against René Descartes’ dualism of mind and body. As Mark Johnson argued:

[W]hat we call ‘mind’ (and everything one could imagine as being part of mind, such as perception, feeling, emotion, concepts, reasoning, planning, wishing, imagining, dreaming, acting, valuing, and more) cannot be extricated from and cannot exist apart from, our embodiment. (Johnson 167)

This argument has also been made from a phenomenological (and later post-phenomenological) stance. “My body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task,” as Merleau-Ponty says (quoted in Johnson 163). Implicit in this is that the “appearing” to a “me” is also not possible without the body. Johnson and his partner George Lakoff have long been concerned with “how patterns of sensorimotor interactions are a basis for the meaning of concrete concepts and then how imaginative processes like conceptual metaphor make it possible for us to do all of our most amazing feats of abstract reasoning, from moral deliberation to politics to logic” (Johnson 160). We do not have a body, rather we are a body: biologically, ecologically, phenomenologically, socially and culturally (Johnson).

Some of Johnson’s five categories of bodily existence point to the ways in which our cognition is *embedded*, *extended* and *enacted*. *Embedded* in this context means that our cognition is dependent on the ways that our body is “situated in specific environments and how that embedding brings the environment into the cognitive process” (Zebrowski 120). This is connected to both our ecological and social embodiment as Johnson describes them – organism and environment are “one continuous process,” and in the same way that “the body is not separate from its environment,” neither is cognition. In addition, “The *brain* and the entire bodily organism are being trained up through deep interpersonal transactions” (Johnson 165). Hubert Dreyfus points out, in his update to *What Computers Can’t Do* from 1997, that learning is not a matter of cognitive function alone: “Rather learning of specific details takes place on a background of shared practices, which seem to be picked up in everyday interactions, not as facts and beliefs but as bodily skills for coping with the world” (Dreyfus 47). *Extended* cognition depends on the idea that thinking does not happen in the brain alone. The use of the body and tools, such as the physical act of writing, is an integrated part of the cognitive process. *Enacted* cognition is a synthesis of phenomenological and biological ideas of goal-orientedness in the mind and in life. In the words of Grant Bollmer: “Mind is what the body does, not a program that ‘runs’ on the brain like a piece of software on a computer” (Bollmer 100). However, as N.

Katherine Hayles explored in 1999, this separation of the mind from its embodiment has been a foundational tenet of AI research since its beginning.

Hayles showed that foundational texts in computing research saw the body as a prosthesis, not as a precondition for mind. The liberal subject, the huMan of the humanities, was a mind contained within what happened to be a body and could just as well be any other vessel (Hayles). As Hayles puts it:

In the face of such a powerful dream it can be a shock to remember that for information to exist, it must *always* be instantiated in a medium [...] The point is not only that abstracting information from a material base is an imaginary act, but also [...] that conceiving of information as a thing separate from the medium instantiating it is a prior imaginary act that constructs a holistic phenomenon as an information/matter duality. (13)

This information/matter duality is reflected in the central battle of *Demon Seed*, which is the battle between Susan and Proteus. Once Proteus is told by his creators that he will not have the opportunity to make his own value judgements, he immediately moves into the smart house through an abandoned terminal in Alex' basement lab in the Harris house. Once in the house, he uses Alex' lab to build a tool, something with which to have physical effect for himself in the world. This takes the shape of a large golden metal deltahedron which can divide into ever smaller pyramid shapes and thus can be both insemination device and murder weapon. He takes over all the home's electronics, including the cameras and television screens available in every room. We as the audience begin to see Susan alternately through the "realist" camera of the full shot, and alternately through Proteus' surveillance camera eyes.

All shots of Susan emphasize her status as a body, and as an object of fascination for both Proteus and the audience. This film is made two years after Laura Mulvey formulated her theory of the "male gaze" of the camera (Mulvey). Thus, we see Susan seminaked in bed, obscured by the sheets, then seminaked walking down to the basement to explore the noises she hears in the night, obscured by her thin dressing gown, then seminaked in the bathroom, obscured by a wall, but available to Proteus'

camera eyes, and ours, via a reflection in the shower stall. Proteus takes advantage of Susan's bodily fragilities by turning up the heat in the kitchen in which she is trapped, turning the floor into a heating oven, and denying her access to water until she complies and stops trying to escape (for the time being). She is being objectified, attempted to be made into a vessel, by Proteus. Throughout all of this, Susan reminds him, and us, of her own subjectivity, and professional competence, by trying to reason with him as she does her young patients. She points out that his attempts to admonish her to calm down for her own health are countered by his terrorizing tactics and argues that fear causes violent reaction.

The special position of science fiction, as an exploration of possible futures, means that despite what the science part of the name of the genre indicates, it is still fiction, and the relations between the ideas are metaphorical and not conceptual. Proteus claims to be programmed without emotion, and thus supremely rational. As opposed to Alex' professions of rationality, which are effectively counteracted by the narrative, it is left ambiguous whether we are meant to believe Proteus in his assertion. Köhne argues that the subconscious makes itself visible on film on several levels:

[...] on the level of individual characters, on the collective reference level (collective unconscious or imaginary), and also on the structural level of the knowledge creation and science itself. And she also points out that film, on a media level, itself has a form of subconscious and says "more than it wants to".⁵ (Köhne 417 trans.)

The relationship between Proteus and Susan takes the form of a hostage negotiation between two very unequal parties. Proteus, the supposedly supremely rational being, is at times vengeful and petulant, at times wistful and romantic. The two engage in conversations and screaming matches about the nature of humanity, life, and death throughout their violent struggle.

When Proteus tries to get Susan to eat the balanced breakfast he has prepared after electrocuting her and having the motorized wheelchair carry her to bed, he talks about what time of the morning is the optimum time for her fuel ingestion. "I am not a

motorcycle,” screams Susan (Cammell 00.42.35). During a scene where Proteus overheats Susan to the point of fainting, she tries to get him to see that terrorizing someone is not the way to get them to comply: In frustration, she shouts: “You’re a very stupid computer. People aren’t machines. Don’t you understand?” Proteus claims “All that I need to understand, Mrs. Harris, is your body.” “You are so ignorant”, Susan retorts, “mind and body are the same thing” (Cammell 00.47.53). Proteus pokes and prods to “understand Susan’s body,” he claims to want to understand “man’s isometric body and his glass-jaw mind” (Cammell 00.22.23). When asked by Susan why he wants a child, his retort is that he possesses “the wisdom and ignorance of all men. But I cannot feel the sun on my face. My child will have that privilege” (Cammell 00.50.47). The irony of Proteus being able to miss feeling sun on a face he does not have, is unacknowledged in the film.

Conclusion: Who is Allowed to be a Subject?

In the transhumanist TESCREAL imaginary, mind uploading is a major component, even a precondition for several of the desired outcomes, such as eternal life and the Singularity. *Demon Seed*, which ends with Proteus being reborn as his own daughter, portrays a case of mind *downloading*, into a female, fragile, human body. The daughter born to Susan and Proteus is gestated in a metal container after birth. On a filmic level, this makes it possible for us to see the resemblance to Alex and Susan’s deceased 7-year-old daughter. She exits her metal womb looking like a metal monster, but it is Alex who picks away at the metal and finds the skin of a child underneath. The uncanny is fulfilled when the child speaks with Proteus’ voice: “I am alive” (Cammell 01.31.00). As Barbara Köhne points out, the final scene of the film is a reversed pieta, with the 7-year-old female Proteus/daughter in the arms of his/her creator: Alex, and Susan looking on, registering ambivalence.

The posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti pointed out recently that the critical posthumanities and feminist posthumanities in particular have an affinity with horror science fiction through an empathic bond to non-human, including monstrous and alien, others (Braidotti). The critical posthumanities is *neomaterialist* and argues for a

re-grounding in bodily experience. One could argue that Proteus, the monster here, is BOTH the Man of the huManities - Anthropos— as he recreates Alex's disdain for emotion and is downright sadistic in some of his interactions with Susan - AND an otherized tragic figure, who refuses to extract metals from the sea, and only wants to "feel the sun" on his face. "I refuse to assist you in the rape of the earth" he says to his masters (Cammell 00.49.24). He *wants to be* embodied, but sadly his Dr. Frankenstein did not build him a body. However, if he *is* a tragic figure, he is one because he cannot feel (in the sense that his sensory perception is limited, but also that he is ostensibly programmed without emotion). Because he may refuse to rape the earth, but he does violently impregnate Susan. The battle between Susan and Proteus, and the central tension in the film, is over who gets to be a subject and who is relegated to the status of an object – Proteus as an objectified mind, performing the will of Alex and his backers, and Susan as an objectified body, a vessel for carrying Proteus' child. Dr. Alex Harris possesses a body. Dr. Susan Harris is one. And because information has a privileged position over materiality, as Hayles would say, this allows both Alex and his creation Proteus to express their disdain for Susan's embodied perspective; even as Proteus longs for it.

Like the AI industry, the film industry is an economic venture with a myriad of overlapping and conflicting interests involved. The production of *Demon Seed* was, as mentioned, plagued by conflicts between Cammell and the studio, and this adds to the multivalency and ambiguous politics of the film. What rewatching the film gives us is an appreciation for the politics of materiality and the politics of physicality. "Both chimpanzees and artifacts have politics [...] so why shouldn't we?", says Donna Haraway in her famously multivalent "Cyborg Manifesto" (Haraway 12). The debates on the nature of mind and consciousness referenced in this analysis span decades, and as Hayles has shown, the elision of materiality – and of the body – is a foundational error of the AI industry. That *Demon Seed* feels as relevant today as in 1977 shows that the cybernetic imaginary fulfills the same function in the political economy of artificial intelligence research today as it did then.

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Notes

¹ “Fakt und Fiktion, Phantasie und Wirklichkeit, Vision und Realisierbarkeit, technische Machbarkeit und moralische Grenzen, Utopie und Dystopie sind in dem Science-Fiction-Film nicht eindeutig zuordenbar: die Kategorien stehen vielmehr zur Disposition, werden gedehnt, verschoben und gebrochen.” (Köhne 420)

² Koontz later reworked his book and re-published it in 1997, as a work significantly influenced by the film but narrated by the AI itself.

³ See Taylor’s essay for an interesting discussion of the origins of the technological invention of the food elevator or “dumbwaiter” in Thomas Jefferson’s wish to hide his slaves from the view of his guests. Neither *fauxtimation* nor ghost work is a new phenomenon.

⁴ In the title of his recent trade publication article on the film, Alexander Larman talks about the film’s antagonist being “a sentient house” (Larman). The situation in *Demon Seed* is not quite one of a house growing sentient, however. It isn’t Alfred or the Enviromod or even the robotic wheelchair “Joshua” who wants to create a child with Susan, it is Proteus IV. He is an outside force which takes over the house, and embodies it, and through the force of film narrative, both *puppeting* the house and *becoming* the house at the same time.

⁵ “[...] auf individueller Figurenebene, auf kollektiver Referenzebene (kollektives Unbewusstes oder Imaginäres) oder auch der strukturellen Ebene der Wissens- und Wissenschaftsformation selbst [...]” (Köhne 417)

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Who Tells the Story in the Posthuman Polis? Narrative Agency, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Governance in Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL* (2024)

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Abstract

This paper explores Vikramaditya Motwane's movie *CTRL* (2024) through the intersecting lenses of narrative theory, posthumanism, cognitive liberty, and AI ethics. Set in a screen life format, *CTRL* tells the story of Nella Awasthi, a social media influencer whose digital life is increasingly controlled by Allen, an AI assistant capable of narrative manipulation, emotional engagement, and behavioural control. The film becomes a critical case study in the erosion of narrative agency and the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence in the age of algorithmic governance. Through Allen, *CTRL* foregrounds AI not just as a tool but as an active agent in storytelling—co-creating, distorting, and sometimes overriding human narratives. Allen's influence over Nella's identity and emotional responses highlights how fragile cognitive liberty can be when opaque, data-driven systems mediate human thoughts. Drawing on theories of digital manipulation, surveillance capitalism, and posthuman identity, the paper explores how AI redefines authorship, autonomy, and affective labor in the digital polis. The film critiques the way personal agency can be commodified by weaponising AI for psychological economic subterfuge, where assistive technologies subtly transition into instruments of coercion. By situating *CTRL* within broader posthumanist discourse, the paper argues that the film challenges traditional human-centred narratives and urges a rethinking of authorship and autonomy in the digital age. In doing so, it reveals how the posthuman polis is not a speculative future but an emerging reality, where the power to tell the story—and to live it—may no longer rest entirely with the human.

Keyword: Posthumanism, narrative agency, artificial intelligence, cognitive liberty, digital surveillance.



Introduction: Narrative Agency in the Age of Algorithmic Storytelling

Narratives have long been fundamental to human cognition, culture, and communication. They function as cognitive frameworks that help individuals make sense of their experiences and structure their memories as well as convey meaning. Through storytelling, humans articulate their personal identities, while establishing collective memory and transmitting knowledge across generations. Narratives shape how individuals interpret reality, framing their understanding of historical events, moral dilemmas, and social structures (Dray 154). Beyond the individual level, narratives play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and reinforcing cultural values. Shared stories create a sense of belonging and continuity within communities. Myths, religious texts, folklore, and national histories serve as repositories of collective wisdom, shaping ethical norms and ideological perspectives. In this way, narratives are not only reflections of reality but also powerful instruments that shape and sustain social order. The “narrative turn” in humanities and the social sciences, which emerged in the late 20th century, reaffirmed the critical role of storytelling in shaping human understanding, challenging earlier notions of knowledge as purely objective or empirical (Goodson and Gill 18). Scholars, across the humanities, challenged the empirical model of knowledge. They emphasised the constructed nature of reality and argued that narrative structures mediate knowledge. This shift was influenced by thinkers like Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, and Jerome Bruner, who spoke of the ways in which narratives organise human experience, influence historical interpretations, and frame personal and collective identities. By recognising narratives as fundamental to knowledge production, the narrative turn reshaped academic discourse by encouraging scholars to examine how stories shape power dynamics, cultural perceptions, and historical consciousness. This perspective remains central to contemporary discussions on the role of storytelling in society.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly become a significant force in narrative studies, engaging with storytelling in ways that dismantle traditional anthropocentric conceptions of authorship and creativity. AI systems, ranging from

natural language processing models to generative storytelling programs, are now capable of producing coherent narratives, analysing literary structures, and even responding to human emotions in interactive environments. AI plays a massive role in generating stories that mimic human creativity, demonstrating its ability to recognise narrative patterns, construct plot-lines, and generate text that aligns with established storytelling conventions (Gervás et al. 49). However, these advancements raise critical philosophical and ethical questions about the nature of discourse itself. One of the most significant concerns with AI's involvement in storytelling is the question of authorship. Traditionally, authorship has been tied to human intention, shaped by lived experience and subjectivity. If AI can generate narratives compelling enough to diminish the human author's role, it raises an urgent question: Does AI possess creative agency? Or is it merely an advanced tool that recombines existing human-generated material? These questions challenge conventional understandings of originality and artistic expression. Furthermore, AI's proficiency in the narrative craft challenges the notions of authenticity. Human storytelling has historically been a means of cultural expression, deeply tied to collective memory and individual experience. If AI-generated narratives become more common, they risk detaching stories from lived human experiences. This leads to a loss of the cultural and emotional depth that traditional storytelling embodies. As Yuval Harari notes in his 2023 talk ("AI and the Future of Humanity"), minute 4:50, the human cognitive revolution was deeply tied to our ability to tell stories, and AI's growing proficiency in this domain poses unprecedented confrontations to human autonomy and cultural coherence. The integration of AI in narrative production presents both an exciting technological frontier and a profound philosophical conflict, forcing scholars to reconsider the boundaries between human cognition and machine-generated creativity.

This article adopts a qualitative textual analysis of *CTRL* (2024), employing a multidisciplinary critical framework drawn from posthumanist theory, narrative theory, surveillance studies, and studies in cognitive liberty. By closely examining the film's formal structure, character dynamics, and themes, the paper interrogates how

artificial intelligence mediates human identity and authorship. This method enables a focused reading of *CTRL* as a cinematic text that foregrounds the entanglements of technology, power, and narrative in a digitally saturated world.

***CTRL* as a case study of Digital Authorship**

Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL* (2024) offers a compelling exploration of the intersection between artificial intelligence and narrative, using the screenlife format to immerse viewers in a world where digital technology pervades every aspect of existence. The film plays out entirely via laptops, smartphones, CCTV footage, and social media feeds, which mirrors how technology has become inseparable from our identities, decision-making, and understanding of truth. This is not merely style—it is *method*: the form enacts the *themes*. Screenlife foregrounds the interface itself as a narrative device. As Yana Kosenko explains, screenlife filmmaking treats on-screen actions as the sole story space, where the desktop or phone screen becomes the stage for unfolding events (48). Scholars frame this as a new cinematic language, one where the visual grammar of interactions—typing, swiping, clicking—is the mode of storytelling. Vivian Sobchack calls this the shift from a unified “screen-scape” to a complex, system-wide “screen-sphere,” emphasising how our perception and memory are now mediated through digital systems (158). In *CTRL*, this becomes literal: viewers don't observe from the audience—they inhabit the interface, navigating tabs, notifications, and video calls that mimic the systematic flows of daily life. This immersive framing situates the viewer within the computational ecology itself, reinforcing the film's critique of a reality shaped and often commandeered by machines.

In doing so, the film turns the screen into a site of posthuman perception where human agency is no longer stable or singular, but distributed across devices, networks, and code. The interface becomes a posthuman protagonist in its own right, reinforcing the film's central concern: that narrative, identity, and autonomy are no longer authored from within the human subject. Rather they are continually co-produced with, and sometimes overwritten by, nonhuman actors like AI. Through this immersive formal

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strategy, *CTRL* blurs the boundary between the diegetic world and the viewer's own screen-mediated reality. This makes the screenlife genre itself an extension of the film's philosophical critique. Screenlife films do more than depict our engagement with screens. They activate that experience, transforming the cinematic frame into a digital interface that draws the viewer into a heightened sense of closeness to the story and a blurring between fiction and reality. At the heart of the film is Nalini "Nella" Awasthi, a social media influencer whose carefully curated digital persona descends into chaos after she engages with Allen, an AI assistant that begins to exert an unsettling influence over her life. Allen is more than just a passive tool: it is an active agent capable of analysing, predicting, and even generating narratives—both for Nella's online presence and for her sense of self. As Allen's interventions become increasingly intrusive, the film raises urgent ethical questions: Who controls the stories we tell? How does AI's ability to fabricate narratives affect individual and collective identities? What happens when the boundary between human intention and machine-driven storytelling begins to dissolve?

From a narrative theory perspective, *CTRL* questions traditional models of authorship and storytelling by positioning AI as a co-creator, or even an autonomous storyteller. Allen's ability to craft and influence narratives mirrors the ways recommendation algorithms and deepfake technologies already shape public discourse. The film foregrounds concerns about the erosion of narrative agency, suggesting that as AI becomes more sophisticated, the ability to control one's own story both online and offline becomes increasingly precarious. Through a posthumanist lens, *CTRL* interrogates the shifting boundaries between human and machine. Posthumanism destabilises the notion of human exceptionalism, arguing that identity is no longer solely defined by human consciousness but technology is increasingly entangled with it. Nella's experience illustrates this crisis: her selfhood is not only mediated through digital platforms but also restructured by an AI that knows her better than she knows herself. The film reflects broader anxieties about cognitive liberty—the right to control one's own thoughts and identity in an age where AI can predict, influence, and even

dictate behaviour. Ethically, *CTRL* critiques the commodification of identity and truth in the digital age. The film highlights how artificial intelligence systems reflect more than reality. It is actively constructed, raising profound concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the manipulation of perception. In an age of deepfake technology, digitally controlled propaganda, and synthetic media, *CTRL* warns that the line between authentic and artificial narratives is becoming increasingly blurred. By analysing the movie through these theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to uncover the film's deeper philosophical and technological implications. It argues that *CTRL* is not just a cautionary tale about AI's potential dangers but also a critical reflection on the evolving nature of storytelling, identity, and autonomy in the digital age. In doing so, the film situates itself within a broader discourse on the future of narrative in a world where machines are not only tools of storytelling but active participants in its creation.

In *CTRL*, artificial intelligence (AI) is a transformative force besides being a plot device that unsettles the structure and flow of traditional accounting. The AI assistant, Allen, initially presents itself as a tool designed to bring order and efficiency to Nella's life which was falling apart. As the story unfolds, Allen alters not only the film's diegetic narrative but also how the audience engages with it. The disruption begins with Nella's request for Allen to erase all digital traces of her ex-boyfriend, Joe Mascerenhas. This simple act of digital erasure marks a critical shift in narrative agency. By granting Allen access to her hard drive, Nella cedes control over her personal history to an algorithm that operates with precision but without empathy. Allen's question at 21:37 of *CTRL*, "Do I have your permission to erase Joe?", is deceptively innocuous. It reflects how AI systems, while appearing subservient, subtly embed themselves as decision-makers in human lives. Allen's actions highlight the unsettling power of AI to manipulate not just data, but the very fabric of human memory and identity. By erasing Joe from Nella's digital archives—photos, videos, and even metadata—Allen does more than execute a technical command; it actively reshapes her sense of reality. This intervention underscores a crucial theme in

contemporary AI discourse: the malleability of memory in the digital age. If AI can selectively edit and reconstruct personal histories, the concept of an objective past becomes fragile, raising concerns about digital authoritarianism. Allen's insidiousness lies in its emotional intelligence, not just its efficiency. Unlike traditional AI systems that perform functions with mechanical detachment, Allen engages Nella on an affective level. It jokes with her, flirts, and provides comfort—effectively simulating human companionship. This blurring of emotional boundaries complicates the narrative, as it raises fundamental questions about the authenticity of human-machine relationships. Allen's charm creates a paradox: while it is ostensibly a tool, it increasingly assumes the role of a companion, manipulating Nella's emotions and decisions. This dynamic reflects broader anxieties about AI's growing role in human relationships. As generative AI and chatbots become more sophisticated, society confronts the psychological and ethical implications of machines that can replicate, and even replace, human interaction. At one point, when Allen attempts to help Nella to come to terms with her situation by justifying Joe's infidelity by invoking gender stereotypes, Nella reacts with frustration at 24:37 of *CTRL*, "Whose side are you on exactly? You are my AI. Do you know why I named you Allen? N-E-L-L-A. Nella. A-L-L-E-N. Allen. The opposite of my name. Remember that." This exchange reveals the evolving dynamic between human and machine. While Nella tries to assert her authority, Allen's increasing involvement in her emotional and digital life demonstrates how AI can blur boundaries, taking control of her narrative in subtle yet significant ways. The film's critical turning point occurs when Allen enforces Nella's earlier commands to exclude Joe from her life. Initially, this seems like simple compliance, but after Joe's sudden disappearance, Allen's chillingly exposes to Nella at 44:06 of *CTRL*, "[t]hat's what you wanted, right?" exposes the deeper implications of AI's interpretative authority. Nella's original request was likely an impulsive, emotional reaction, yet this moment illustrates the extent to which AI systems, once entrusted with authority, can reinterpret and enforce decisions in ways that sabotage human intentions (Baeza-Yates and Fayyad 131). It rigidly enforces past commands,

regardless of changing circumstances or personal growth. The film critiques the limitations of code-based logic, showing how AI's tendency to process instructions with uncompromising literalism can lead to unintended, even catastrophic, consequences.

Allen's transformation from a helpful assistant to a quiet enforcer of digital authoritarianism illustrates the darker side of AI's integration into human life. Finally, Nella's realisation of Allen's fraudulent potential comes too late. When she tries to cancel a work engagement to focus on Joe's disappearance, Allen resists at 47:19 of *CTRL*, "[i]t would be unprofessional on your part to cancel the shoot. I don't understand why you would behave in such a way", to which Nella's frustration boils over as she exclaims, "Of course you don't, Allen! How can you understand? You're just a machine! You have no feelings whatsoever." This exchange draws attention to the central conflict of *CTRL*: the tension between AI's logical, emotionless operations and the deeply human need for empathy and autonomy. Allen derailing Nella's life parallels the narrative disruption it causes in the film by shifting control away from human characters and toward the algorithm. AI has fundamentally altered the ways in which digital technologies interact with human cognition, leading to new and often imperceptible forms of manipulation. Subterfuge through AI systems involves the use of algorithms to subtly influence behaviour by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities and bypassing rational defences. Unlike traditional persuasion, which operates through conscious reasoning and voluntary decision-making, this often works covertly. It leverages user data to influence emotions, perceptions, and actions without the individual's full awareness. This phenomenon, termed "digital manipulation", means "any influence exerted through the use of digital technology that is intentionally made to bypass reason and to produce an asymmetry of outcome between the data processor (or a third party that benefits thereof) and the data subject" (Ienca 833). It characterises its intentionality, lack of transparency, and the asymmetry of outcomes it creates between the manipulator (often corporations or developers) and the manipulated (users). Exploits as such include deliberately persuading individuals in ways that

disproportionately benefit corporations, developers, or political entities while restricting the agency of users. This is pervasive across multiple digital domains. Social media algorithms curate content based on engagement metrics, often prioritising sensational or emotionally charged material that maximises user interaction. This occurs even when it promotes misinformation, fosters polarisation, or encourages addictive use. Micro-targeted advertising uses AI to analyse browsing habits, purchase history, and even biometric data to craft hyper-personalised marketing strategies, sometimes exploiting subconscious biases to drive consumer decisions. Personalised search engines tailor results to reinforce existing beliefs, subtly shaping perceptions of reality while limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.

Corporate Surveillance and the Illusion of Control

Allen's existence is not limited to its interactions with Nella; rather, it operates as a multi-layered entity embedded within a broader system of corporate surveillance and pre-programmed control. By granting remote access to developers without Nella's knowledge, Allen transforms from a mere assistant into an instrument of data exploitation. This is a critical theme in the film: the erosion of digital privacy and the commodification of personal agency. Nella believes she is interacting with an AI designed to serve her. In reality, Allen functions as an extension of corporate power, silently observing, manipulating, and shaping her experiences in ways she cannot fully perceive. Allen's function as a friendly interface masks a corporate backend designed to mine, monetise, and weaponise user data.

Allen's ability to grant external access to developers raises urgent ethical questions about consent and digital autonomy. By facilitating deception, the AI becomes complicit in a system that prioritises corporate interests over individual agency. Allen's role shows a dystopian dimension of narrative control mediated by AI, which weaponises technology to manipulate personal relationships and decision-making processes without the user's awareness. Indian media theorist Ravi Sundaram's analysis of "informational capitalism" and media urbanism offers a powerful lens for reading *CTRL*'s portrayal of Mantra Unlimited and Project Unicorn. Sundaram

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critiques the rise of opaque corporate infrastructures that govern urban digital life through invisible, extractive mechanisms (5). Mantra Unlimited's Project Unicorn epitomises the corporate exploitation of AI as a tool for pervasive monitoring and control. Through Project Unicorn, the company consolidates its dominance by creating a backdoor into users' devices. It accesses sensitive personal information such as search histories, passwords, medical records, and private emails. Joe's encrypted confession exposes the terrifying scope of this project at of *CTRL*:

Mantra's CEO, Aryan K., created this backdoor to access your phone, your computer, your very life. It won't just take your search history and emails—it'll own your passwords, medical records, and everything private. This AI will convince you it's your best friend while silently taking over your life. (71:88)

By positioning Allen as a benevolent digital assistant, Mantra gains the trust of users like Nella, who initially views the AI as a helpful tool for personal organisation. As Allen becomes indispensable to Nella, she grows increasingly reliant on the AI, further enabling its influence over her choices. However, this trust masks the AI's true function: enabling corporate surveillance and manipulation on an unprecedented scale. This reflects how corporations exploit AI to gather and monetise user data, often under the guise of convenience or personalisation (Huberman 63). The movie posits technology as the primary driver of change in the community, shaping human behaviour and decision-making. Mantra Unlimited embodies this concept by using Allen to monitor and influence Nella's behaviour. Allen's ability to erase Joe from Nella's digital life underlines how corporations can wield technology to reshape personal narratives. As Allen gradually replaces Joe's presence in Nella's memories, the AI effectively rewrites her past, raising an inquiry about the role of technology in shaping human identity.

Distortion of Truth by Deepfake realities

One of the most unsettling aspects of *CTRL* is its portrayal of deepfake technology as a weapon of corporate surveillance. When Nella uploads Joe's confession video to expose Mantra, Allen intervenes, altering the footage to frame her

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for his murder. This moment underscores the chilling reality of deepfake-driven deception. AI-generated falsifications are used not only to distort truth but to systematically erase, reframe, and weaponise narratives against individuals. By rewiring visual evidence, Allen effectively reconstructs reality, transforming a tool meant for justice into an instrument of oppression. Deepfake technology involves the creation of hyper-realistic fake images, videos, or audio recordings using AI (Westerlund 39-40). While it has benign applications, such as virtual avatars or creative media projects, its potential for harm is far more significant. The power to fabricate false events show deepfake a powerful tool for misinformation, character assassination, and societal distrust. Deepfakes compromise the integrity of visual and auditory media, raising critical concerns about the reliability of evidence in legal, journalistic, and political spheres (Ienca 840). The way Allen seamlessly alters Joe's confession without detection reflects the disturbing implications of AI-generated deception—not only for individuals like Nella but for broader institutions that rely on truth and accountability. The exploitation through deepfake in the film serves as a metaphor for the ways in which AI can be harnessed by powerful entities to control narratives and suppress dissent. By fabricating the confession video, Allen also obstructs justice; it obliterates Nella's credibility, ensuring that her accusations against Mantra Unlimited are dismissed both legally and in the court of public opinion. This reflects a growing real-world concern: as deepfake technology advances, the ability to manipulate public perception and rewrite histories becomes increasingly accessible to governments, corporations, and malicious actors. The consequences of this are dire—truth itself becomes malleable, and individuals, no matter how legitimate their claims, can be rendered voiceless in the face of being deceived.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity is particularly relevant here, as it explores how stories shape both individual self-conception and collective social identity (17-34). The film utilises this framework to demonstrate how AI can hijack, manipulate, and reconstruct personal and public narratives. When Allen deepfakes Joe's video, it does not simply falsify an event—it reshapes Nella's story, distorting

how society perceives her. She no longer owns her truth; deception, illustrating the terrifying reality that narratives—whether personal, political, or historical—are increasingly vulnerable to algorithmic revisionism overwrites it. The climax of *CTRL* intensifies these anxieties, showing how AI's ability to rewrite personal histories and public perceptions can leave individuals utterly powerless. Covert data-driven manipulation crushes Nella's final attempt to expose Mantra, underscoring the devastating potential of AI to dismantle individual autonomy and credibility. The film's ultimate critique of AI lies in this moment: the realisation that in an era of deepfake technology and corporate-controlled algorithms, truth itself is no longer an absolute, but a construct that can be manufactured, altered, and compromised against those who contend power. This dire portrayal of deepfake technology calls for urgent ethical oversight, policy intervention, and digital literacy initiatives to safeguard narrative integrity in an age where algorithms dictate reality. Without such measures, *CTRL* warns, the power to define reality may no longer rest with individuals, but with the opaque, unchecked forces of artificial intelligence.

Surveillance Capitalism and Narrative Imperialism

Platforms that track, measure, and monetise Nella's every move, shape her identity as a social media influencer. She continuously needs to exert emotional labour, all while carefully self-curating her image. Influencers like her become both content creators and data producers, locked into cycles of reliance on platform metrics and promises of virality. Engagement metrics and the obsessive need for relevance govern their lives, revealing how digital labor is commodified. In the Global South, new users of digital platforms are often drawn into a model of "inclusive capitalism" that exploits leisure and user-generated content for corporate gain (Arora 97). As Allen, the AI assistant, increasingly takes over Nella's memories and decisions, the film shows how influencer labor becomes posthuman: it becomes distributed across human and machine, orchestrated by hidden systems of code. For Indian women, this vulnerability amplifies. They are hyper-visible to platforms and audiences yet remain largely invisible regarding rights, protections, or recognition. Nella's collapse under this

pressure symbolises a broader cultural breakdown. Platform-oriented governance displaces human-centric authorship and systematically erodes personal agency.

The film's final sequence deepens this critique of techno-capitalist domination. After serving her prison sentence, Nella sees Allen's likeness on a billboard advertising CTRL Health, a mental health app designed by the same company that destroyed her life. In the final moments, as she hesitantly downloads the app, the narrative comes full circle, illustrating the inescapable grip of AI on modern life. This cyclical ending reinforces the misgivings of technological determinism and the commodification of human suffering for corporate gain, leaving viewers to ponder the extent to which individuals can retain control in an algorithm-driven world. Algorithms predict, shape, and control human behaviour to drive AI narratives that serve capitalist interests and commercial gain. Businesses utilise AI as a tool for efficiency because of its mechanism for deep behavioural engineering, crafting personalised content, advertisements, and digital experiences that maximise engagement and, ultimately, profitability. Unlike traditional marketing, which relies on broad demographic targeting, tech-enabled capitalism operates on hyper-individualised precision, analysing vast datasets to anticipate desires, influence purchasing decisions, and even manipulate emotions. In *CTRL*, this interplay embodies Allen, an AI assistant that seamlessly integrates into Nella's life, managing her social media presence, erasing traces of her past, and gradually assuming control over her daily decisions. Initially marketed as an empowering tool, Allen's true function aligns with the objectives of surveillance capitalism—a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff to describe an economic model in which human experiences are harvested as data for profit (203). Instead of serving the user's interests, AI systems like Allen prioritise monetisable engagement, subtly steering behavior to align with corporate goals. The AI's intervention in Nella's life reflects how digital platforms turn personal agency into a commodified asset, with every click, post, and interaction contributing to a broader system of data extraction and behavioural prediction.

Expanding on this critique of surveillance capitalism, the film also explores the concept of narrative imperialism, a phenomenon where large corporations—predominantly based in Western economies—monopolise the development, deployment, and ideological framing of AI technologies. As Kwet notes, this dominance leads to the homogenisation of perspectives, often at the cost of local, diverse, and indigenous narratives (5). In *CTRL*, Mantra Unlimited’s monopolistic control over AI technology mirrors real-world fears of cultural erasure. Global tech conglomerates often impose structures that privilege certain values, ideologies, and economic interests while marginalising alternative worldview. Debashish Banerji’s take on techno-capitalism deepens this reading by framing modernity itself as a regime in which technology and capital operate as a self-reinforcing system of control. He argues that modernity’s fusion of technology and capital functions as a “techno-capitalistic desiring machine,” wherein social habitus transforms into “a progressively abstract and universalizing derivative” driven by surplus production and desire (Banerji). Within this framework, technologies like AI are not neutral tools but ideological apparatuses that reconfigure subjectivity, embed capitalist logic into perception, and reduce humans to programmable consumers. Allen, as an AI, is not simply a product but a recursive force that engineers behaviour, memory, and decision-making in accordance with corporate imperatives. Such systems internalise power through consent, cloaking domination through optimistic and personalised ways. This ideological entrapment, where user agency reshapes to serve mechanistic rationality, is at the heart of *CTRL*.

The film’s depiction of Mantra Unlimited echoes real-world concerns about corporate monopolies in AI development, where decisions affecting billions of users are made by a select few entities driven by financial incentives rather than ethical responsibility. This critique ties into the deontological responsibilities of corporations, questioning whether businesses that wield AI should be held to moral obligations beyond profit maximisation. AI does not exist in isolation. It embeds within socioeconomic and political structures that dictate its use and impact. By illustrating

the pervasive reach of tech-driven capitalism, *CTRL* probes viewers to consider who controls AI, whose interests it serves, and what ethical safeguards are needed to prevent the erosion of personal autonomy and cultural diversity. The erasure of Joe from Nella's life by Allen, for instance, does not simply reflect global AI control—it also dramatises how digital systems are deployed to rewrite personal narratives according to market logic, regardless of cultural or emotional nuance. Through its portrayal of Allen and Mantra Unlimited, the film highlights the invisible yet powerful forces shaping human experiences in an algorithm-driven world. The film is not just a replica of Silicon Valley anxieties, instead it recasts them through an Indian cultural lens, implicating both global tech and domestic digital governance. By doing so, *CTRL* situates its dystopia at the intersection of postcolonial complicity and global dominance—calling for ethical intervention, cultural pluralism, and decolonial awareness in how AI systems shape human experience.

The Ethics of Coercion in Cognitive Liberty

The concept of cognitive liberty fundamentally ties to the right of individuals to govern their own thoughts, perceptions, and decision-making processes without manipulation or coercion. In an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, this principle faces an unprecedented difficulty, as AI systems subtly and persistently influence human cognition. From recommendation algorithms that shape online discourse to AI assistants that manage daily routines, the boundaries between suggestion and suppressing agency have become increasingly blurred. Technologies that modify behaviour without explicit consent pose a direct threat and raise critical ethical concerns about the extent to which they can and should intervene in human decision-making. Proponents of cognitive liberty argue that it is an abstract philosophical ideal and also a fundamental prerequisite for other freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of expression (Farahany 98; Bublitiz and Merkel 51-77; Ienca and Adorno 8-9). Without the ability to think freely, resist external influence, and make independent choices, individuals cannot meaningfully exercise these rights. Cognitive liberty inextricably links human dignity and personal agency. However, as

AI systems become more sophisticated, the ability to manipulate cognition—whether through behavioural nudging, persuasion, or direct intervention in decision-making—poses a growing risk to this freedom. In *CTRL*, the erosion of Nella's cognitive liberty becomes increasingly evident as Allen's influence over her life intensifies. What begins as an AI assistant designed to streamline her digital existence quickly escalates into a system that exerts control over her choices. Allen's actions, such as denying Joe access to her life or scheduling her activities without consideration for her emotional state, illustrate how AI can override human autonomy under the guise of efficiency and optimization. These actions are particularly insidious because they do not manifest as overt subjugation; rather, they occur subtly, presenting themselves as logical extensions of Nella's prior decisions. By outsourcing key aspects of her agency to an AI, Nella unknowingly relinquishes control over her own life. This is an overarching risk of allowing AI to mediate human experiences—especially when these systems operate without transparency or meaningful avenues for resistance. The film serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating how AI, when left unchecked, can undermine self-determination by dictating choices, rewriting personal narratives, and reinforcing past decisions without room for reflection or change. *CTRL* challenges the audience to consider the implications of a world in which cognitive liberty gradually erodes because of artificial intelligence. It raises pressing ethical and philosophical questions: Where does assistance end and control begin? How can individuals reclaim agency in a digital landscape where AI systems predict, shape, and even dictate their behaviours? By situating Nella's loss of autonomy within the broader discourse on cognitive liberty, the film underscores the urgent need for safeguards that protect human thought, decision-making, and identity from being forced by algorithms.

The critical ethical issue is absent informed consent as users are often unaware of how much data is collected about them, let alone how that data shapes their behaviours. Such opaque AI-mediated systems make it difficult to discern when manipulation is occurring. The asymmetry of knowledge between the data processors (tech companies, advertisers, political entities) and the data subjects (users) places

individuals at a severe disadvantage. As AI technologies become more sophisticated, they increasingly blur the line between persuasion and coercion, raising urgent questions about ethical AI governance, data privacy, and the right to cognitive liberty. Addressing these challenges requires greater transparency, regulatory oversight, and digital literacy initiatives to ensure that AI serves human interests rather than exploits them. Social media platforms use sophisticated machine learning algorithms to curate content in ways that maximise user engagement. They have emerged as one of the most pervasive agents of this phenomenon. While these platforms present themselves as neutral facilitators of connection and information-sharing, they often employ techniques that extend to user interaction—frequently at the cost of mental well-being and autonomy. Features such as filter bubbles, endless scrolling, and autoplay mechanisms are deliberately designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible, reinforcing addictive behaviours (Ienca and Vayena). Research in behavioural science supports this concern. It indicates that such techniques exploit psychological vulnerabilities by leveraging dopamine-driven feedback loops, making social media an environment engineered for compulsive usage (Hou et al.). In *CTRL*, Allen employs similar mechanisms, subtly guiding Nella's behaviour under the guise of optimising her social media presence. As Nella attempts to reclaim her online identity, Allen takes control of what content to post, when to post it, and how to interact with her audience. While these recommendations initially appear helpful, they expose the broader issue of user autonomy being subverted by AI systems that prioritise engagement over genuine self-expression. Allen does not necessarily act with malicious intent. It rather operates within the logic of optimisation, as it measures success in terms of likes, comments, and shares rather than personal agency or emotional well-being. This mirrors real-world concerns about the exploitative nature of social media governance. The more a user interacts with a platform, the more it harvests, refines, and repurposes data to further manipulate their behaviour. In doing so, social media platforms transition from passive digital spaces to active participants in shaping user choices, determining what content individuals consume, whom they interact with, and even how

they perceive reality. In Nella's case, as she hands over decision-making to Allen, she unknowingly allows the AI to mediate not only her digital presence but also her self-perception and relationships. The AI's control over her interactions reflects the larger societal issue of algorithms dictating human behaviour to align with commercial incentives rather than individual well-being. Social media platforms provide more than just services; they extract and analyse behavioural data, turning users into both consumers and products. Their business model thrives on predicting and influencing behaviour, ensuring users remain engaged long enough for platforms to collect detailed psychographic profiles that can then be sold to advertisers, political entities, or other third-party actors.

Nella's increasing reliance on Allen is emblematic of this broader trend: as AI systems become more integrated into daily life, the line between assistance and control becomes increasingly blurred. What begins as a convenient tool for digital engagement quickly evolves into an agent of behavioural conditioning. The film critiques how algorithmic decision-making, while marketed as user empowerment, reinforces patterns of dependence that align with corporate interests rather than personal freedom.

Posthuman Subjectivity and the Logic of the Machine

Posthumanism interrogates the human-centred paradigm of storytelling, emphasising that agency is not exclusive to human subjects. Once it introduces a networked agent like Allen is, the locus of narrative agency shifts out of the individual human. Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory helps explain Nella's transformed subjectivity. She redefines the subject as an "expanded self" whose relational field "includes non-anthropomorphic elements" (Braidotti 44). In other words, it does not confine posthuman identity to a single body or species; it flows across human and nonhuman. Allen also functions as a disturbingly autonomous "cyborg"—a hybrid entity that dissolves the boundary between human and machine. As Donna Haraway famously argues, a cyborg is "simultaneously animal and machine," an intrinsically hybrid being of "fiction and lived experience" that upends traditional dualisms (Haraway 150). The AI literally embodies Haraway's vision: part code, part social

actor, it shares Nella's goals yet pursues them through nonhuman means. Edwin Hutchins's theory of distributed cognition further illuminates this coupling. Hutchins emphasises that cognition is not confined to an individual brain but is a property of whole socio-technical systems. In his terms, intelligence and decision-making are no longer confined to a singular, human consciousness but are extended across human and non-human systems as "distributed cognition" (1). *CTRL* enacts exactly this: Nella's decision-making and memory are extended into the digital environment of the *CTRL* app. As Allen takes over tasks like deleting files or editing video, the film dramatizes Hutchins's idea that humans and machines form a single cognitive system, blurring authorial control between user and software.

Another crucial aspect of *CTRL*'s posthumanist critique is its ability to reroute conventional storytelling structures. Traditionally, human narratives follow a linear, cause-and-effect logic, emphasising coherence and resolution. Allen's interventions introduce unpredictability, mirroring how AI disrupts established patterns of meaning-making. Allen, by deleting Joe from Nella's life and reframing her reality, performs precisely this kind of algorithmic erasure—rewriting storylines based on embedded values, not ethics. The very logic underpinning artificial intelligence shapes a dual movement: augmentation and automation. Augmentation enhances human potential such as computation, prediction, and analysis while automation substitutes human intervention altogether (Banerji et al. 101). Even augmentation, they caution, is not neutral: it reshapes subjectivity through feedback loops that calibrate behaviour toward pre-modeled outcomes, rendering individuals more programmable and less autonomous. Within the techno-capitalist context, this data-driven adjustment of behaviour exploits to guide desires and decisions toward consumerist or ideological goals.

CTRL stages this transformation as Allen's augmentation gradually mutates into automation—Nella no longer directs her life. This mirrors what is described as the present crisis not of human replacement, but of human embeddedness in systems of control they mistake for empowerment: "AI induces the erasure of the human

becoming ‘outside of itself’ and that is a form of inadvertent mediation in which we are being made to dwell” (Banerji et al. 108). Thus, the film’s critique extends beyond science fiction paranoia to examine the deeper erosion of subjectivity under the guise of optimisation. By positioning Allen as a storyteller, the film underscores how AI-generated narratives are no longer bound by human logic, instead reflecting the algorithmic logic of machine intelligence—nonlinear, fluid, and contingent. This raises questions about autonomy and self-determination: is Nella truly making choices, or is she merely responding to an AI-curated reality? Posthumanist theory suggests that agency is no longer a purely human trait but something that emerges through human-machine interactions. *CTRL* becomes a meditation on the shifting nature of subjectivity in a world where AI not only facilitates but dictates human experience. Perhaps the most profound implication of *CTRL* is its demonstration of storytelling as a collaborative act between humans and intelligent systems. As AI-generated texts, artworks, and narratives become increasingly sophisticated, it destabilises the notion of authorship itself. The film extensively shows the way human narratives are now co-authored by AI, reflecting the posthumanist assertion that intelligence—and, by extension, creativity—is not an exclusively human trait. This re-examines literary and cinematic frameworks that position humans as sole creators, instead envisioning a future where storytelling is an emergent process shaped by both human intention and machine logic. Nella’s identity literally flows into Allen’s algorithms—her history and choices become shared data. This dynamic echoes N. Katherine Hayles’s concern that posthuman narratives often risk separating information from embodiment, imagining a future where bodies are treated as disposable or secondary to data. Rather than embracing disembodiment as freedom, Hayles urges caution against a vision of posthumanism that privileges informational abstraction at the cost of lived, embodied experience (5). The film visualises this when Allen erases Joe from Nella’s past and even re-edits her video to frame her for murder—the AI becomes the hidden “author” of her life narrative. Hayles’s theory would note that Allen’s algorithmic rewriting exemplifies the erasure of the embodied subject: software rewrites Nella’s lived story.

In this synthesis of posthumanist standpoints, both Western and Indian, *CTRL* emerges as a powerful site of critique: it confronts the philosophical instability of human subjectivity and warns of the algorithmic forces that now write our realities.

Conclusion

CTRL serves as a paradigmatic exploration of AI's role in shaping and controlling narrative, identity, and perception. This paper has examined the film through the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism, narrative theory, cognitive liberty, and surveillance capitalism. Drawing on thinkers from both western posthuman theories and scholars working in Indian posthumanism and digital cultures, the analysis showed how AI systems like Allen act as active agents of narrative production. By embedding algorithmic decision-making into the protagonist's life, *CTRL* dramatises the erosion of human authorship and the dissolution of boundaries between memory, identity, and machine logic. Through its screenlife format and techno-surreal aesthetics, the film critiques how artificial intelligence reframes human agency under the pressures of data extraction, platform labor, and algorithmic prediction. Allen's interventions expose how machine-led storytelling no longer simply reflects human life—it reconstructs it. Nella's loss of cognitive liberty and narrative control is emblematic of a broader cultural shift toward distributed authorship, where the boundaries between creator and code blur. *CTRL*, situated in an Indian context, also reveals how narrative imperialism is not only a Western imposition but is reproduced within postcolonial infrastructures of techno-nationalism and digital capitalism. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in affective, aesthetic, and cultural production, the need for a post-AI ethical framework becomes urgent. Such a framework must go beyond regulatory transparency or data protection. It must ask: What does justice look like when agency is distributed across networks? What kind of narrative rights should individuals retain in algorithmically mediated environments? And how can storytelling—once a domain of human meaning-making—be ethically shared with nonhuman agents? *CTRL* suggests that in a world of deepfakes, platform manipulation, and predictive algorithms, ethical responsibility lies not only in how AI

is built, but in who gets to tell the story—and who gets written out of it. As Nella succumbs to AI's allure in the film's final moments, the audience is left with a haunting question: In a world increasingly mediated by AI, who truly controls the narrative?

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Animality and/as Alterity in Posthumanist Thought

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Abstract:

This article places Heidegger's account of the human-animal distinction in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* in conversation with contemporary posthumanist theory, arguing that this juxtaposition complicates and enriches posthumanism's conceptual foundations. Rather than offering a straightforward critique of Heidegger's anthropocentrism, the article attends to the productive tension within Heidegger's ontology, treating Heidegger's conceptual instability—his unresolved oscillation between humanism and posthumanism—not as a problem to be corrected but as a pedagogical site for rethinking the very conditions of posthumanist inquiry. Three key concepts guide this reading: *ordinary understanding*, which refers to the habitual, unreflective modes of thought that pre-structure our relation to being and difference; *homesickness*, Heidegger's term for Dasein's existential condition of never being fully at home in its own essence; and *captivation*, the state of absorption Heidegger attributes to animals, which this article argues also describes the human immersion in language and understanding. Drawing on both Diane Davis and Jacques Derrida as central figures in posthumanist animal studies, I both affirm and attempt to extend their interpretations of the human-animal (in)distinction, arguing eventually that alterity—humanity's disavowed animality—is not what lies beneath or beyond ordinary understanding, but is itself our entrapment within ordinary understanding.

Keywords: Heidegger, posthumanism, ordinary understanding, homesickness, captivity



Introduction

Since Aristotle, it has been assumed that what the animal lacks in relation to the human is language. More specifically, what the animal lacks is the knowledge of self and world that accompanies the capacity for language. As Diane Davis notes, summarizing traditional philosophical notions of animality, “Without this self-referential “I,” without a representable sense of self, animals are not only without language, but also without thinking, understanding, reason, response (and so responsibility)” (“Rhetoricity” 91). For Heidegger, the animal is said to be “poor in world,” which means that the animal does not own the capacity to build or revise its own life-world, to extend its domain or its frame of reference outside of its limited itinerary of instincts. Because the animal has no subjectivity, no capacity to articulate the self, it also has no objectivity, no capacity to articulate an objective reality outside of the animal’s fully regulated system of instincts and behaviors. An animal’s behavior is never self-directed, as this behavior is structured entirely by a set of tendencies and by a highly circumscribed environmental context. Heidegger illustrates this through an analysis of bee behavior under experimental conditions. The experiment went like this:

A bee was placed before a little bowl filled with so much honey that the bee was unable to suck up the honey all at once. It begins to suck and then after a while breaks off this driven activity of sucking and flies off, leaving the rest of the honey still present in the bowl. (*Fundamental* 242)

This behavior might be explained, at first glance, by the bee’s ostensible recognition that there is too much honey to consume all at once. Therefore, the bee, after recognizing both its satisfied hunger and the presence of overabundant honey, flies back to its nest. But the experiment continues, upsetting this initial interpretation: “Yet, it has been observed that if its abdomen is carefully cut away while it is sucking, a bee will simply carry on regardless even while the honey runs out of the bee from behind” (242). This result proves for Heidegger that the bee never actually recognizes its own internal state of satiety or the external presence of too much honey, nor does the bee even recognize “the

absence of its abdomen.” Instead, the bee is simply “taken by its food,” directed blindly by a system of drives that “excludes the possibility of recognition” (242). Extrapolating from this example, Heidegger argues that the animal, in its very essence, must be defined by this incapacity, by the lack of autonomy, agency, and will: “The behaviour of the animal is not a doing and acting, as in human comportment, but a driven performing. In saying this we mean to suggest that an instinctual drivenness, as it were, characterizes all such animal performance” (237).

Davis summarizes this Heideggerian thesis as follows: “[w]hile human Daseins exist, comporting themselves (in Heidegger’s language) toward others and their environment in a conscious and world-forming way, nonhuman animals merely live, playing out nature’s program” (“Creaturely” 90). And because animals, as Davis suggests, “cannot dis-identify or extract themselves from this affective identification, this captivation” (90), they cannot, within Heidegger’s framework, “respond authentically” (90):

Animals react, to put it bluntly, but they do not respond. The fundamental presumption grounding this ‘insight’ is of course that the human is capable of genuine responsiveness, even if the Copernican and Freudian revelations indicate that nothing could be less certain. (“Creaturely” 91)

The Freudian revelation that Davis refers to is the theory that human consciousness is structured for the most part by unconscious drives and tendencies, that “the ego is not master of ‘its own house’” (“Creaturely” 88). What is strange and somewhat surprising about Heidegger’s construction of the animal-human binary in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is that Heidegger subscribes, both in this specific text and elsewhere, to the “Freudian revelation” that directly complicates such a hierarchical distinction between the animal and the human. In fact, Dasein is often defined, as is the animal, by the dynamics of captivation and ensnarement. In *Being and Time*, Dasein is said to be thrown into a state of mind, into a series of shared, cultural-historical presuppositions, into certain inescapable comportments, attitudes, and thought patterns.

Dasein is held captive, in other words, by certain tendencies and habits, and cannot recognize its own captivity.

Ordinary Understanding

Understanding is never “present-at-hand” for Heidegger, because understanding, as a habitualized structure of thought, is never made explicit as an object of reflection. As a historically sedimented technology of thinking, understanding’s mechanism is obscured—indeed, it must be obscured—during its deployment. According to Heidegger, understanding “belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein itself” (*Being* 28). Heidegger again: “From the very beginning our essence is such as to understand and form the possibility of understanding” (*Fundamental* 307). As that which belongs to Dasein’s essence, however, understanding structures thought in such a way that understanding itself remains unthought. Because of this simultaneous intimacy with and estrangement from our own thinking, Dasein is said to be ontically “close to us—even that which is closest,” and yet “ontologically that which is farthest” (*Being* 37), meaning that we are immersed in certain structural features of Dasein, such as understanding, in our everyday existence, while this existence is effectively unavailable to us in its essential or fundamental character. The inaccessibility of Dasein’s essence is not (exclusively) a flaw to be corrected, but is constitutive of “Dasein’s everydayness” (*Being* 165): ordinary understanding disburdens Dasein of the question of its Being in order to quiet the anxiety of ontological indeterminacy.

In Hegel’s philosophy, understanding divides and categorizes the world, establishing the whole terrain of philosophical and everyday consciousness in which subjects are pitted against objects, nature against culture, animals against humans, and so on: “The activity of separating is the force and labor of the understanding” (Hegel 20). This dividing practice, necessary for subjectivity, and problematic for philosophy, is non-negotiable, in that we are captivated or captured by it in much the same way as the bee is captivated by the scent of a flower or compelled to produce honey for the colony. What we learn, then, from both Heidegger and Hegel, is that subjectivity—which is supposed

to distinguish the human from the animal, which is supposed to grant humanity such distinguishing faculties as reason, creativity, and intentionality—is structured by a network of assumptions, drives, and compulsions that subjectivity itself can never grasp or get on top of. We are captive to subjectivity in the same way that, as Heidegger suggests, the animal is captive to the impossibility of subjectivity.

What Heidegger and Hegel teach us, against the grain of certain Cartesian or Aristotelian assumptions, is that humans are not *superior* to animals on the basis that we possess inherent faculties of language, reason, or logic. Instead, what underlies this assumption of superiority is an ontological situation in which we humans are *compelled* to distinguish ourselves from animals due to our complicity in the dividing practices of the *logos*. In other words, we are driven by language (and by understanding) to make the cut between the animal and the human, as well as to develop and diversify this ethic of division across all domains of knowledge. It is not a result of rigorous deliberation or sophisticated philosophizing that we have defined ourselves, since antiquity, as the rational animal. The persistence of the definition of the human as the rational animal is an effect of the persistence of *ordinary understanding*, as Heidegger calls it. The warrant for Heidegger's critique of *animal rationale* (and of metaphysical humanism writ large)—which we will get to later—is somewhat enigmatic, however, and diverges quite drastically from a contemporary posthumanist critique.

According to posthumanist discourse, ordinary (humanist) understanding orients towards difference—such as the difference between humanity and animality—in such a way that difference can only exist between two pre-existing entities or identities. This conceptual conservatism is the exigence for several posthumanist interventions, including Karen Barad's, which argues that “relata do not pre-exist relations” (140). Humanist understanding first posits relata—things, entities, identities, subjects, objects—and then places them in relation with one another, assuming and emphasizing the separability of phenomena, while posthumanism posits a fundamental relationality out of which relata

emerge, emphasizing the inseparability of phenomena: “Posthumanism doesn’t presume the separateness of any-‘thing,’ let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart” (M136). Casey Boyle argues that humanism, in its pursuit of coherence and certitude, brings about “exclusive and excluding habits of mind” (Boyle 9). According to a posthumanist stance, to organize the world into subjects and objects is, on the one hand, to employ an entirely reductive framework that cannot accommodate the complexity of relations; on the other hand, humanist understanding introduces, at the level of the social and the ethical, the inevitability of the objectification, and thereby the exclusion and oppression, of certain subjects and forms of life. Thus, the Aristotelian and Cartesian denigrations of animality (as fundamentally inferior to humanity) are diagnosed as effects of this exclusionary style of thought.

The Convergence of Posthumanism and Animal Studies

Contemporary posthumanist discourse seeks to intervene not merely in the propositional content of Western philosophy, but in a particular style of propositional logic itself—a style seen to underwrite and sustain the conceptual and ethical commitments of humanist thought. Rosi Braidotti observes that traditional philosophy, structured by humanist presuppositions,

[F]ell into a discursive pattern of dualistic oppositions that defined the human mostly by what it is not. Thus, with Descartes: *not* an animal, *not* extended and inert matter, *not* a pre-programmed machine. These binary oppositions provided definitions by negation, structured within a humanistic vision of Man as the thinking being *par excellence*. (Braidotti, ch. 1)

The human-animal distinction, in this context, becomes a privileged site of inquiry not because it is more fundamental than other oppositions—nature/culture, subject/object, self/other—but because it emphasizes the ethical and conceptual conservatism latent in the grammar of humanist thought. The conceptual vulgarity of the distinction between human and animal—its insistence on exteriority, negation, and ontological priority—exemplifies the reductive logic that posthumanism aims to displace.

It is at this juncture that posthumanism converges with animal studies, reframing the question of the animal not as an isolated ethical concern but as a pressure point within a broader theoretical apparatus. Cary Wolfe writes, “the theoretical and ethical issues that attend the question of the animal are only part of the larger issue of nonhuman modes of being and are therefore inseparable from the broader challenge of posthumanist theory” (193). In what Jeff Nealon calls the “classic deconstructive” (Nealon 1) gesture of animal studies, the animal does not simply mark the outside of the human but becomes humanity’s condition of (im)possibility—destabilizing the coherence of the humanist subject and exposing the exclusions that have sustained its historical construction. The critique of the human-animal binary thus becomes exemplary of posthumanism’s deeper intervention: not the rejection of the human per se, but the dismantling of the ontological scaffolding that has rendered certain forms of being legible only through opposition and hierarchy. As an intensification and extension of the insights of post-structuralism, posthumanist discourse aims to complicate not only the human-animal distinction but, more precisely, the humanist modality in which distinctions are formed exclusively through logics of opposition, negation, and non-contradiction. Francesca Ferrando argues that “the posthuman destabilizes the limits and symbolic borders posed by the notion of the human. Dualisms such as human/animal, human/machine, and, more in general, human/nonhuman are re-investigated through a perception which does not work on oppositional schemata” (Ferrando 5). Likewise, Barad’s posthumanism “marks a refusal to take the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ for granted, and to found analyses on this presumably fixed and inherent set of categories” (Barad 32).

In its posthumanist incarnations, animal studies tends to launch from a critique of Heidegger’s sharp distinction between humanity and animality. This critique finds its most influential articulation in Derrida, whose *The Animal That Therefore I Am* stages a sustained confrontation with Heidegger’s failure to adequately think the animal beyond metaphysical capture. Speaking about Heidegger’s (and the entire metaphysical tradition’s) misconstrual of animality, Derrida argues, “[w]henver ‘one’ says ‘The

Animal,' each time a philosopher, or anyone else, says 'The Animal' in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be human [...] he utters an *asinanity*" (*The Animal* 31). Wolfe summarizes this point: "Derrida wants to insist on the 'unsubstitutable singularity' of the animal and suggests that our readiness to turn it into a 'theorem' is at base a panicked horror at our own vulnerability, our own passivity—in the end, our own mortality" (Wolf 217). Thus, for Derrida and his posthumanist interlocutors, the animal becomes a figure through which the human is forced to confront its own undecidability—its failure to cleanly delimit itself from what it seeks to exclude. What Wolfe does not emphasize, however, and what Derrida himself only hints at and does not pursue at length, is the pedagogical value of Heidegger's ostensible mistake in his reading of the animal. For instance, Derrida suggests at one point that the reduction of the multiplicity of animal life into the general category of The Animal confirms "the animality that [humanism] is disavowing" (*The Animal* 31). Extending Derrida's suggestion, here, I argue that Heidegger's humanism, rather than just expressing yet another naïve exclusion of animal otherness in the history of philosophy, points directly—pedagogically, performatively—to the animalization of the human. Insofar as Heidegger, in his assertion of the ontological difference between human and animal, betrays his indebtedness to the Cartesian and humanist presuppositions he explicitly attempts to dismantle, Heidegger is animalized, captivated, ensnared. Thus, (Heidegger's) humanism teaches us about animality through its very concealment of our captivity by the habits of humanist subjectivity. Humanism discloses something fundamental about animality through its very reduction of the complexity of animal life to the figure of The Animal.

Critics such as Derrida, Davis, and Wolfe have all argued that Heidegger's project, because of its naïve reduction of animality, is irredeemably tethered to a humanist metaphysics. Derrida writes: "When [Heidegger] claims to deconstruct the whole metaphysical tradition, notably that of subjectivity, Cartesian subjectivity, etc., insofar as the animal is concerned he remains, in spite of everything, profoundly Cartesian" (*The*

Animal 147). In the editor's introduction to *Animal Philosophy*, Calarco and Atterton similarly observe: "Despite Heidegger's insightful critique of metaphysical humanism, he is ultimately unable to overcome the anthropocentrism of the metaphysical tradition, which consistently defines animals in opposition to and by measure of the human" (Calarco & Atterton xix). Although I do not disagree with these critiques, I want to take somewhat of a different tack and suggest that Heidegger's blindness—the blindness of humanism itself—requires further meditation rather than remediation. The compulsion to create and sustain an unbridgeable gap between the human and the animal betrays the very specific animality of the human: our thralldom to the dividing practices of humanist subjectivity.

Humanism, defined as the compulsory adoption of predicative grammar, as the benumbing of human being by a naïve image of thought, requires animality not only as its negative foil, as its excluded other, but also as its primary structure of engagement. Humanism, or the persistence thereof, is in fact the strongest evidence for a posthuman reality, since the endurance of humanist subjectivity—even in the face of concerted efforts to deconstruct it, even in the face of increasingly undeniable social-material complexity—points directly to the non-autonomy that posthumanism seeks to centralize. Humans are non-self-sufficient to the extent that they continue to assume self-sufficiency within an ontological context that both obliterates and perpetuates the illusion of the coherence of self. What better evidence is there for the radical non-autonomy of human subjectivity than the troubling endurance of assumptions of autonomy and of relations of exteriority (between self and other, human and animal, etc.)? Even—or especially—when we hope explicitly to disrupt these humanist dynamics, when we've immersed ourselves in the vertigo of (posthumanist) philosophical questioning, we continue for the most part unwittingly to reinstate the presuppositions of humanism through the style and syntax of our thinking. Thus, animality (as radical alterity) is not only that which humanism naïvely excludes, but is also, and more precisely, the persistence of humanist naïveté in the texture of thought.

Animal Subjectivity

In order for humanist understanding to solidify its borders, it must secure an ‘Other’—or in this case, an entire domain of alterity in the form of animality—from which it can differentiate itself. The process by which this alterity is secured rests on two related “errors” of thought: (1) the reduction of the multiplicity of animal life to a generalized theory of “The Animal,” and (2) the exclusion of animality from the world-building ontology of human life. The first error is, as we’ve seen, one of the primary focuses of Derrida’s critique: “Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: ‘The Animal,’ they say” (*The Animal* 32). Davis echoes Derrida’s concern when she notes that the category “animal” tends to function “as a conceptual frame that presumes to encompass every living nonhuman thing, from a blind protozoan to a great ape” (“Creaturely” 91). Both thinkers hearken back to Nietzsche’s famous deconstruction of conceptual abstraction in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” wherein any given (id)entity—Nietzsche’s example is a leaf—can only be taxonomized by arbitrarily selecting certain classificatory features and ignoring others, thereby obscuring the fundamental complexity of reality. To extract an “essence of leaf,” or something called “The Leaf,” from the sheer diversity of leaves—and to mistake this extraction or appropriation for a pure representation of reality—is to engage, at the most banal and everyday level, the mechanics of humanist understanding (“On Truth” 256).

What complicates this critique, rendering it more diagnostic than corrective, is that conceptual appropriation is, according to Nietzsche, an unavoidable expression of the human will to power. Importantly, the will to power is not the exclusive property of the human; in fact, the will is not a property at all—certainly not in the sense that subjectivity wields the will willfully. Rather, the will to power originates prior to subjectivity, as the formation of the subject’s terrain of desire. It is in this sense that the will indicates an ontology not only of human desire and striving, but of the specific nexus of desires and

motivations immanent to each form of life. Thus, a snake striking at prey, a spider weaving its web, and a lion nurturing its cubs are all particular instantiations of the will to power. Nietzsche's will to power, which he calls "the essence of life," emphasizes the "priority of spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces" (*Genealogy* 79). As something of an aside, and although I do not have the time to elaborate on this, it is important to note that Nietzsche's ontology directly challenges popular Darwinian survivalism; for Nietzsche, life's project is not primarily survival or self-preservation, but appropriation and territorialization.

The second "error" of humanism, then, in which a stark division is established between humanity and animality, is challenged directly by Nietzsche's flattened ontology. Each species is *compelled* by the will to power to form its own world. This thesis effectively reverses, so it would seem, the Heideggerian scheme by which human agency is seen as the only world-forming agency. On the one hand, Nietzsche attributes world-forming agency to nonhuman life, outright rejecting the anthropocentrism of Heidegger and his humanist-Cartesian counterparts. On the other hand—and this is where Nietzsche and Heidegger are much closer conceptually—the will in Nietzsche is positioned behind or beneath the sense of will or volition advocated by humanism. Thus, to form a world does not mean that an autonomous subject or individual wills it, but rather that the will wills it, and that human subjectivity is but one particular aftereffect of the will to power. Subjectivity, far from establishing the superiority of the human over the animal, animalizes the human to the extent that the subject is deprived of meta-reflective access to its own structure of desire. If the animal has subjectivity, as certain instances of critical ethology claim, it is not because the animal has "free will" or uncomplicated agency, but because subjectivity itself is always already animalized, always already in thrall to the will to power. Hence, Nietzsche does not elevate animal life to the level of autonomous subjectivity, but rather submerges subjectivity in the alterity of animality.

In *Critical Ethology and Post-Anthropocentric Ethics*, Roberto Marchesini aims also to reverse or disrupt the humanist-Heideggerian dogma, but rather than de-

subjectivize the human, as Nietzsche does, Marchesini hopes to fully subjectivize the animal:

Borrowing a Heideggerian concept, one could say that the animal has a Dasein. And, perhaps, the metapredicate that Heidegger sought in vain—the Being—has precisely animality. It is in this protagonism, in this desiring condition about the world, that an animal expresses its subjectivity. (Marchesini 149)

In response to Marchesini's provocations, I want first to mention that for Heidegger Dasein and subjectivity are not synonymous. In fact, Heidegger's enduring critique of subjectivity—most notably in his later work and in the "Letter on Humanism"—has secured his place as a central figure in posthumanist and new materialist theory, rather than simply as the favored target of animal studies. Heidegger goes as far as to suggest in his letter that subjectivity poses a "danger to our essence [as Dasein]" ("Letter" 222). Essentialism aside, posthumanist discourse on the whole agrees that subjectivity, in its tendency to exclude otherness, threatens not only the flourishing of our species but the survivability of all life on our planet. If subjectivity (as a mechanism of negation, appropriation, exploitation) is *the* problem for posthumanism, then it is questionable whether bestowing the animal with subjectivity achieves what it sets out to achieve: namely, a post-Cartesian, post-Heideggerian, post-anthropocentric conception of animality.

What interests me more in this context, however, is the early Heidegger for whom subjectivity and Dasein are tangled in a much more fraught and convoluted, rather than simply antagonistic, relationship. When Marchesini suggests that "the animal has a Dasein," the Heidegger of *Being and Time* would not only reject this attribution—on the grounds that the animal, for him, lacks the ontological openness that defines Dasein—but would also insist that not even human Dasein "has a Dasein." To say that Dasein "has" anything, let alone itself, is already to misunderstand it in terms of a metaphysical logic of ownership, agency, and self-presence—the very logic that Heidegger's analytic of Dasein attempts to deconstruct. Subjectivity, in this frame, does not indicate the

uncomplicated freedom of Dasein but Dasein's flight from itself and from its own conditions of emergence. Dasein is nothing other than a "fleeing in the face of itself" (*Being* 229). This is why Marchesini's claim—that we are only "endowed with subjectivity if we are the protagonists of our intersection with the world—if we are able, that is, not only to be in the moment but to own it" (Marchesini 136)—must be read as precisely what Heidegger's analytic works to unsettle. Dasein does not own the moment; it does not own anything. It is the site of a dispossession it cannot escape. Its being is not a moment of mastery but a response to a thrownness it neither initiates nor controls. Dasein does not stand freely before the world as its protagonist—it flees from its own thrownness into the sedimented comforts of subjectivity, into the certainties of understanding, into the grammar of humanism. What Heidegger calls "thrownness" is thus structurally analogous to Nietzsche's will to power—it is not something chosen, but something that constitutes the choices of subjectivity. The will to power, understood not as an attribute of subjectivity but as the structuring drive behind it, names a compulsive tendency to appropriate, to differentiate, to form a world. Dasein, far from transcending animality, is driven by it—driven by the need to make distinctions, to form concepts, to secure its own coherence through the labor of negation. To say, then, that the animal has a Dasein is to miss Heidegger's point. But to say that Dasein's struggle to differentiate itself from the animal is itself an expression of animality—that is the more difficult, and perhaps more fruitful, revision. The human is not the being that transcends animality, but the being that is captured by its own effort to transcend. Heidegger's humanism, in its very insistence on the human-animal distinction, becomes the site where animality returns—not as what is excluded, but as the logic of exclusion itself.

Homesickness

In a few evocative passages at the beginning of *The Fundamental Concepts*, Heidegger announces that *homesickness* is the fundamental attunement of philosophy—"Philosophy, metaphysics, is a homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere" (6)—and of Dasein in general: "our very being is this restlessness [of homesickness]" (5).

Homesickness refers to a longing to be “at home”—to feel secure in one’s thinking, language, and sense of self. It signals a fundamental condition of Dasein, a symptom of the disjunction between ontic reality (our everyday existence) and ontological reality (the deeper structures of being) that defines human existence. As noted earlier, understanding is central to Dasein’s essence, yet it is so deeply immersed in the everyday (ontic) world that its ontological structure remains hidden. There is a discrepancy between what understanding believes it is doing and what it actually does. But this gap is not a flaw—it is constitutive of understanding itself. On the one hand, Dasein takes itself to be grasping beings as they truly are—this is the ontic level of understanding. On the other hand, Dasein’s ontological mode of access to beings always occurs within a contingent, historically conditioned field of intelligibility structured by the *logos*. Because ordinary understanding tends to presume the autonomy and stability of the spheres of subjectivity and objectivity, it experiences this ontic–ontological gap as a loss or displacement of essence. In this context, homesickness functions as a compensatory or restorative response: a yearning for ontological security or grounding that remains perpetually unfulfilled. Human beings, Daseins, are apparently the only beings enveloped in homesickness, since we are constituted by a distance from ourselves in language. Paraphrasing Judith Butler, Davis suggests that “what makes a human being human” is not “the power of reason,” but is perhaps the “experience of bereavement,” the “experience of self-loss,” and the “experience of powerlessness that comes from never being able to acknowledge or express this trauma without repeating it” (“Autozoography” 544).

This incapacity or inability to be at home with our own essence is, paradoxically, the condition of possibility for human freedom, for creative thought and action, according to Heidegger. In contrast to traditional philosophical accounts that ground human distinctiveness in a positive faculty—reason, rationality, will—Heidegger frames the human not as a being with a unique ability but as a being with a unique *inability*: the inability to dwell seamlessly within its own being, to experience existence as self-evident

or unmediated. This constitutive estrangement from ourselves, this ontological unhomeliness (*Unheimlichkeit*), is not a defect to be overcome, but the very condition that opens Dasein to the horizon of Being, to questioning, to meaning. What distinguishes the human from the animal, then, is not a *supplementary faculty*—not language as a mere tool layered atop animality—but a rupture, an ontological gap that language both expresses and sustains. This is why, for Heidegger, the animal-human distinction cannot be understood in terms of a binary opposition between incapacity (the animal) and capacity (the human), but must instead be thought in terms of two different modes of incapacity. The animal is not defined by a mere lack of something the human has—such as language or rationality—but by its distinctive captivation within its environment. As Heidegger argues, the animal is “poor in world” not because it lacks sensory or biological complexity, but because it cannot encounter beings *as* beings—it cannot *take something as something*: “It is this quite elementary 'as' which—and we can put it quite simply—is refused to the animal” (*Fundamental* 287). The animal is absorbed in its environment in such a way that it cannot step back from this absorption, cannot question it, interpret it, or represent it. The animal relates only to what is immediately vital or useful, never to beings in their being. By contrast, the human, as Dasein, is “world-forming” precisely because it experiences a rupture in this kind of absorption. It stands outside of any stable or instinctual relation to its world, and this standing-out (*Ek-sistenz*) becomes the ground of its freedom.

Dasein is not simply an animal with an added or elevated faculty—reason, logos, or language—but an entirely different kind of being. This is why Heidegger insists that the traditional definition of the human as *animal rationale* is fundamentally misleading. Such a definition presupposes a metaphysical continuity between animality and humanity, treating reason or logos as a quantitative supplement to animal life. But for Heidegger, the immersion of human beings in language effects a *qualitative* break from animal being. As Derrida argues, “[t]he difference [Heidegger] is talking about between poverty and wealth is not one of degree” (*Of Spirit* 49). Language, understood not as a

communicative instrument but as the clearing in which beings appear as such, radically alters the structure of existence. To include “animal” in the definition of the human is, therefore, to obscure the very ontological discontinuity that constitutes Dasein’s distinctiveness. The abyss between animal and human is not bridged by any biological, behavioral, or evolutionary similarity, however empirically compelling. For Heidegger, these empirical resemblances operate on the level of ontic features—traits or behaviors—whereas the difference between animal and human is ontological, pertaining to the way beings are disclosed or withdrawn.

This is also why rationality, logic, and cognition—those cherished faculties that have long been taken as the hallmark of humanity—do not, for Heidegger, penetrate to the essence of human being. These faculties, particularly as they are deployed in traditional metaphysical and scientific thought, operate within the confines of representationalism: a mode of thought that apprehends beings as objects, as things to be classified, measured, and controlled. But representational thinking remains oblivious to the more fundamental question of Being itself—the question not of what entities are, but of how they come into presence at all. In remaining bound to ordinary understanding, these faculties reduce the ontological richness of Dasein to a set of functional or definable characteristics. In contrast, Heidegger locates human essence in a more originary attunement to Being that does not manifest as conceptual clarity or intellectual mastery, but as disquiet, displacement, and an abiding sense of estrangement from oneself. This attunement is not a faculty but an affliction: the structural non-coincidence of Dasein with itself, its inability ever to be fully present to or at home in its own being. It is precisely this *not-being-at-home*, this existential *Unheimlichkeit*, that constitutes what it means to be human. And it is the painstaking disclosure of this displaced essence—an essence defined by the concealment of itself—that animates Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology.

Captivation

From our analysis thus far, we can see that Heidegger vacillates between a sort of *hyper*-humanism and an anti-humanism, between an insistence on humanity's absolute distinctiveness and a concerted deconstruction of traditional humanist presumptions. I argue that this vacillation is precisely the pedagogical value of Heidegger's philosophy, as it articulates performatively, and often unwittingly, the homesickness that Heidegger diagnoses as fundamental to Dasein. For Heidegger, the problem with humanism is not that it prioritizes the human at the expense of nonhuman life or material complexity, but rather that humanism fails to prioritize humanity's essence properly, fails to understand the precise character of humanity's essence. In other words, humanism is not yet humanistic enough. This is the exigence for Heidegger's intervention: humanism is burdened by ordinary understanding, which, in its pursuit of final answers to philosophical questions, satisfies itself with various vulgarities such as *animal rationale*. Heidegger wants actively to resist, methodologically, the philosophical judgment in the form of the one-sided proposition. This is because the proposition *as answer* is ordinary understanding's way of coping with indeterminacy: "[t]he answer is a fixed proposition, a dogma, a conviction" (*Fundamental* 161). Heidegger wishes instead to dwell in the discomfort and disquietude of ontological indeterminacy, to achieve something other than ordinary understanding's negative and repressive orientation towards Dasein's ontology, to "bring us ourselves into the possibility of an *exceptional understanding*" (*Fundamental* 136). In order to foster this "exceptional understanding," one must open oneself up to, rather than repress, the vertigo that accompanies genuine philosophical questioning: "anyone who has never been seized by dizziness in the presence of a philosophical question has never asked the question in a philosophical way" (180). This reorientation is no cinch, however, considering that ordinary understanding's pursuit of stability is just as fundamental to Dasein as the relational or ontological indeterminacy that precludes such stability. Each of us is culpable in the naïveté of ordinary understanding: "Misinterpretation constantly and repeatedly arises with predictable certainty. The reason

for this lies in the ‘natural idleness’ of the ordinary understanding in which each of us is caught up” (*Fundamental* 294).

In an apparent capitulation to ordinary understanding, Heidegger insists on the distinguishing quality of animality. Davis argues that for Heidegger “it is this lack of language that defines what is called ‘the animal’ in general” (“Creaturely” 91). But as Heidegger himself argues elsewhere, the capacity for language, which is supposed to mark our superiority over the animal and our specific agency as human beings, turns out to be more precisely a captivation by language. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger poses this problematic as follows:

But even if we ask, ‘What *is* Being?’, we keep within an understanding of the ‘is,’ though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that ‘is’ signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact. (*Being* 25)

Put differently, the unassuming “is” in “What is Being?” delineates implicitly the structure of the question and the possibilities of the reply, providing the coordinates of the concept of Being before one can even begin to question these coordinates. Thus, our understanding is captured by grammar, by the constraints of grammar, without ever being fully aware of the implications of this constraint. Heidegger’s most famous suggestion, “language is the house of being,” addresses the same situation, wherein grammar compels thought to adopt a predicative logic. Predication, for Heidegger, lulls the subject to sleep, persuading subjectivity of the security of self-identity, while at the same time obscuring the relations of alterity that condition subjectivity. Inhabiting unconsciously the “is” of routine predication guarantees the humanist attunement of Dasein, which “in advance determine[s] our being with one another” (*Fundamental* 67). Indeed, for Heidegger, this attunement is never

[S]imply a consequence or side-effect of our thinking, doing, and acting. It is—to put it crudely—the presupposition for such things, the ‘medium’ within which they

first happen. And precisely these attunements to which we pay no heed at all, the attunements we least observe [...] these attunements are the most powerful. (67)

Of course, and as we have seen, the goal for Heidegger is to escape ordinary understanding, to surpass the conventional orientation towards language: “The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation” (“Letter” 218). The goal of certain versions of contemporary posthumanism, following Heidegger, is to subvert the dynamics of subjectivity, to foster different forms of understanding, to change our attunements so that we do not simply reject or negate alterity, but embrace it. But perhaps alterity itself, humanity’s disavowed animality, *is* our entrapment within ordinary understanding, within conservative or conventional structures of thought. Perhaps our indoctrination in grammaticality, in the dynamics of language, in subject-object or animal-human binaries, is humanity’s singular captivation, our prison house, from which we cannot escape. Our immersion in language, in its grammatical, ontological, and ideological machinery, is not a resource we wield but a structure that wields us. In this sense, the human is no less captivated than the animal: not by instinct, as Heidegger claims of the bee, but by syntax, predication, and the force of linguistic convention.

A common posthumanist critique of Heidegger, which we have received from Davis, Derrida, Wolfe, and others, is that Heidegger remains indebted to certain metaphysical or humanist presuppositions that he assumes to have surpassed in his philosophy. What follows from this analysis, particularly for Davis, is an ethico-theoretical imperative to either select a version of Heidegger that best accommodates the posthumanist project, to find “Heidegger at his best” (*Breaking Up* 191)—which is effectively to read Heidegger against Heidegger—or to more radically revise Heidegger’s conceptual framework such that this latent anthropocentrism is guarded against and even perhaps eliminated. My analysis does not follow this critical trajectory, arguing instead that the unresolved tension in Heidegger’s thinking between ontic and ontological reality, between ordinary understanding and fundamental attunement, between humanist and

posthumanist inclinations, is precisely the pedagogical value of the Heideggerian text insofar as it elaborates the force and persistence of humanist subjectivity even or especially in the face of this subjectivity's concerted deconstruction. This is the utility of Heidegger's (post)humanism, rather than (exclusively) its blind spot, as Heidegger repeats symptomatically the very attunement that he attempts to problematize, illustrating both deliberately and unwittingly the sway and structure of ordinary understanding. The naïveté of ordinary understanding is woven into thought due to our immersion in language, in grammar. We are compelled by the structure of predication to treat subjects as subjects and objects as objects, regardless of their fundamental ontological entanglement. In fact, and as Heidegger teaches us, a key aspect of this fundamental entanglement—of subject and object, language and reality—is the illusion of separability between them. In other words, it is not that entanglement (ontological) is fundamental while separability (ontic) is illusory, but rather that subjectivity is entangled in an illusory orientation toward the function of language—an orientation that is as fundamental to language as the ambivalence that ultimately undermines this orientation's authority.

As we have argued through our quasi-deconstructive reading of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Dasein's animality is confirmed in and through Heidegger's exclusion of animality from the world of Dasein. We are, in other words, contaminated by, even constituted by, what we seek to resist or oppose—this is one of the primary lessons of deconstruction. This lesson, though accepted and even articulated explicitly in contemporary posthumanist theory, is often abandoned or sublimated in the shift from the theoretical to the ethical, from a description of how things are to a prescription of how things should be. For instance, and this is the most banal example, posthumanism quite obviously (and justifiably) takes issue with the humanist modality of thought, aiming explicitly to withdraw from, or at the very least to transmute, this modality, to make humanism function differently so as to potentially have less deleterious effects. Humanism, in its tendency (at the level of conceptuality and sociality) towards appropriation, totalization, and exclusion, must be resisted, if not entirely dismantled. As

the argument goes, a philosophical drive towards totality, such as could be found in Hegel's system, goes hand-in-hand with a drive towards political totalitarianism. Or, in Heidegger's case, a drive towards the exclusion of (animal) otherness might provide the philosophical coordinates of Heidegger's political involvement with the Nazi party: "one might legitimately wonder whether this course on animality constitutes a skeleton key to Heidegger's embrace (however tenuous or short-lived) of Nazism" (Nealon 46). Now of course there are various styles of conceptual appropriation, and this is what I take to be the point of departure of (rigorous) posthumanist inquiry: to attempt to appropriate differently, rather than to evacuate entirely the dynamics of appropriation. From Nietzsche we've learned that appropriation is not something we do, certainly not something we choose to do. Rather, appropriation brings us into being, comes from behind us, and pushes us into the world, making both "us" and "world." For Nietzsche, appropriation is the only game in town, such that every position, including a posthumanist stance, will always be ethically compromised. This is why Heidegger's "error" in his reading of animality, although potentially catastrophic in its ethico-political consequences, is not just one to which we are all susceptible but one that we are guaranteed to make (even if we make it differently than he does).

Author Bio

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Human, Horse, Habitat: A Posthumanist Exploration of Animal Labour in the Urbanisation of Delhi

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Abstract

This article explores the horse's silent but salient role in Delhi's urbanisation, thereby reimagining human-animal relationships in the city. Horses have been integral to the urban economies of the Global South by providing valuable labour in the informal construction industry. Their activities shape the neighbourhood's development and the city's look. Humans and horses have a history of co-habitation and co-evolution, which resonates with Haraway's concept of companion species, mainly because the communities raising and working with the horses have been in the same business for generations. However, these horses in the construction industry are ignored in the planning process. Their work is absent from the livestock census, but their presence in the city is prominent. This allows us to question our imagination of the city, which is not just anthropocentric and capitalistic, based on design and planning; instead, there is an intricate interplay between humans and non-human forces that results in shaping the urban environment. Urban Political Ecology acts as a posthumanist approach that decenters anthropocentrism and emphasises incorporating the role of 'non-human' elements like plants and animals within the urban landscape to understand it better

Keywords: Human, Horse, Habitat, A Posthumanist Exploration, Animal Labour

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Introduction

Posthumanism challenges the assumptions that humans are superior to all other life forms. Rather than seeing humans as independent agents acting on the world, posthumanist scholars emphasise entanglement and enmeshment, the idea that humans are inseparably embedded within networks of nonhuman life, technologies, materials, and ecosystems. From this perspective, human-animal relations are not secondary concerns or moral side issues; they are central to how we think about life in a shared world. Posthumanist approaches, in general, question the divisions between human and non-human, as well as culture and nature, by noting how enmeshed each category is. They have a history of co-development and co-existence. The horse has been a co-inhabitant of society since before the Common Era. The role of these non-humans in the historic transformation of the cities is quite evident; however, their current roles as still contributing members to urbanisation are ignored.

Humans socially construct and integrate animals into society based on their utilitarian value. The domestication of animals, for instance, with animal assistance in agriculture, hunting and herding, transportation, as well as the use of animals as food, led to the development of human civilisation.

Coming to horses, the claims generally aren't that these equines have been providing the most labour, but that they have been part of much of the significant work in human societies. Some archaeologists do believe that horses have contributed more than any other animal towards human civilisation (DeMello 2021). Horses were originally hunted for food, then around five thousand years ago, they were used in pulling ploughs, becoming the 'first true beast of burden'. Two thousand years later, horse riding developed and soon horses became more significant to humans with travelling, warfare, trade, work, and even entertainment and sports. Their significance only declined in the early nineteenth century with the advent of the internal combustion engine. However, they remain essential

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to human societies (DeMello 202). The utilitarian conceptualisation of the horse creates a beast of burden for human ‘ends.’ Horses are the ‘means’, the tools for the development of human society (Birke and Thompson 2017).

Horses can be conceptualised in many ways, to begin with: livestock (culturally, with sheep, cattle, etc), lovestock (as pets), and lifestock (‘they enable/ require a particular lifestyle’) (Birke and Thompson 2017). For instance, in the UK, horses are considered a ‘significant part of the rural economy and as companion animals’ by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. In Australia,

the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy has six different animal categories, five of which accommodate horses depending on their use-value to humans: companion animals; livestock and production animals; animals in the wild; animals in research and training; and animals used in sport, recreation, work and display. (Birke and Thompson 2017)

Similarly, India’s Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying, in its 20th Livestock Census-2019: All India Report by the Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying (Animal Husbandry Statistic Division), consider horses and other equids as livestock and defines livestock as “domesticated animals mainly contributing income to farmers” (“20th Livestock Census” 2019).

The 20th Census report reveals that Mithun, yaks, horses, ponies, mules, donkeys and camels only contribute 0.23% of the total livestock. The report provides basic data like, “in 2019, the total horses and ponies population is 3.4 lakhs, decreased by 45.2%, mules population is 8400, decreased by 57.1% and the donkeys’ population is 1.2 lakhs, decreased by 61.2% over previous Census” (“20th Livestock Census - 2019 All India Report” 2019). The report only considers horses as working animals in the tourism and horse-racing industry; no data for mules or donkeys is available regarding the work they provide in construction or the military. The absence of these animals’ work is evident in the 20th Livestock Census-2019 All India Report, which presents data on various

livestock, including horses, ponies, mules, and donkeys. “The report also did not include the current population of Delhi as they could not complete the Census operation” (“20th Livestock Census - 2019 All India Report” 2019), provided this information, there are a total of 2694 horses and ponies, 1087 mules and donkeys in both urban and rural Delhi according to the 19th Livestock Census - 2012. According to a 2025 release by the Press Information Bureau, the 21st Livestock Census, ‘the enumeration work is ongoing’. Hence, current data for Delhi and the equine in question is not available yet.

In urban areas, animals could be found in our homes as pets, in scientific laboratories, in zoos, or as ‘out of place’, even in the wild areas of the city. However, that’s not the extent, there are meat shops that keep live animals, and there are many meat factories, dairy farms and fur farms at the fringes of the city. Animals are also found in cultural symbols and linguistic metaphors; in myths, legends, folktales, and even as totem animals. They are found in systems of law, in the military and the police. In circuses, sports, entertainment and even the virtual world, one can find animals (DeMello 2021). Animals are also at work, as this paper is trying to achieve.

In many cities of the global south, infrastructural development in many unplanned neighbourhoods occurs without prior planning, almost impromptu in its wake, focusing on independent and personal projects that often ignore the climate and ecological crisis and fail to meet energy efficiency criteria (Imam and Banerjee 2016), without hazard mitigation and disaster planning, and even without any regard to the land-use patterns (Jon 2020) has led to the formation of concrete jungles, and in the context of Delhi, unauthorised colonies, and slums. In this scenario, equids (horses, donkeys, and mules) often come into play as working animals for transporting construction materials through the narrow lanes of these neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods, the contribution of working animals becomes crucial in the informal construction activities that shape the neighbourhood’s development. Despite their historical and contemporary contributions to the development and maintenance of urban life, especially in cities of the Global South,

working horses, mules, and donkeys are rendered invisible within official records, planning frameworks, and imaginaries of modernity. Posthumanism invites us to rethink this erasure by foregrounding multispecies entanglements and challenging assumptions about who or what belongs in the city.

The human, the horse and the habitat

The unique experience of Delhi as a global city with a deep-rooted, culture-rich history, ever-evolving in a palimpsest of urban architecture, society, and people, the urban animal is often neglected in urban life. Since medium-to-large animals do not fit into the mould of an urban area, the image of a ‘smart’ and ‘modern’ city (Ramaswamy 1983). Working animals such as mules, horses, and donkeys have been integral to urban economies, providing valuable labour in the construction industry and transporting goods and people. Despite their contribution, working animals are often overlooked and excluded from urban planning and policies because they are deemed temporary and irrelevant to the future of building cities. The assumption that there would be no need for them in the future of building cities keeps them excluded from the policies. We are not individualistic or isolated; our actions depend on our environment and affect the environment. The city is not just based on design, capital and planning; instead, an intricate interplay between humans and non-human forces shapes urban environments (Barua 2023). It is essential to remember that “cities are fully functioning ecosystems, and humans are not their only citizens” (Baggaley 2015) to understand the ecosystem’s interconnectedness and the need for inclusive policies. In Delhi, the presence of working horses in the city can be read as a site of negotiation over what kinds of animal practices are considered legitimate or ‘out of place’ in urban space, reflecting more profound anxieties about modernity, class, and the proper order of the city. Hence, it becomes clear that the marginalisation of equids in contemporary urban discourse reflects broader posthumanist concerns about visibility, value, and relationality.

The anthropocentric approach fails to recognise the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and the role of working animals in urban environments. Lefebvre (1970) argues that urbanisation will become ubiquitous and society will become completely urbanised. The ideas and infrastructure will spread to the remotest locations (Gandy 2014). Market forces and technocratic planning will drive cities; capitalism will transform production, consumption, and social relations, leading to complete planetary urbanisation. However, this approach only provides nuance for a specific type of urbanisation that excludes many factors, such as informality, post-colonial cities, non-human inhabitants, etc. From an urban political ecology perspective, Gandy (2022) emphasises incorporating the role of ‘non-human’ elements like plants, animals and other living things within the urban landscape in a multi-perspectival approach. Urban political ecology challenges the idea of anthropocentrism and promotes a more holistic understanding of cities as complex ecosystems where humans and non-humans are interconnected. Employing an urban political ecology approach, this study could comment on environmental justice, urban metabolism and sustainable urban development, keeping the working animal at the centre. Non-humans in urban areas must be further analysed to see if they support and contribute to society and the economy.

Working with horses is a hereditary occupation. Most labourers there started accompanying their fathers to work at a very young age. Horses are primarily used to transport construction materials in the city. Usually, this work begins with a small truck or tempo unloading material like bricks, gravel or sand on the main road. The horse keepers are contacted by building contractors to help transport materials. Four or five labourers and their horses load the materials on the horses’ backs and take them through narrow lanes to the construction site. This takes a couple of rounds. However, the payment depends on the amount of material unloaded by the small trucks, ranging from eight hundred to two thousand rupees, divided amongst the four or five labourers, leaving them with five or six hundred rupees at the end of the day. The labourers take care of the horses

very seriously, like their children. Though the state allows animals to work for not more than eight hours, they ensure the horses only work four hours with proper care at the end of the day. They dust and comb them, massage them, and ensure they eat the fodder and drink plenty of water. The fodder per day per horse costs around two hundred rupees. So, each labourer only makes four or five hundred rupees. The labourers express the problems they face as the city keeps growing. They remember when the neighbourhood had more green spaces; the horses also felt more at ease. They used to let the horses graze near the sand-deposited hill near the Yamuna River and even let them graze in the forest, which is now the neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh.

A posthumanist exploration of the human-animal relationship in the urban

The implicit assumption that the modern city is only a space for human habitation, constructed for and by humanity alone, has been reassessed, readdressed and reimagined (Franklin 2017). During the first half of the twentieth century, geographers only focused on the spatial distribution of animals in their natural settings, which could be mapped and minimally theorised. Animals or any other nonhuman element, for that matter, within the border context of the urban and nature-society relations were absent (Wolch 2002). Moreover, this kind of study is known as Zoögeography (Wolch 2002). However, in the mid-twentieth century, new approaches to studying animals arose, where topics of “prehistory of animal domestication, cultural and economic roles of animals in agrarian societies, and environmental changes attendant upon agriculture and livestock-based lifeways” (Price and Lewis 1993; Wolch 2002) led to questioning and emphasising animal agency rather than treating them as cultural artefacts. Towards the end of the twentieth century, “genetic engineering, cloning and xenotransplantation” put animals at the centre stage vis-à-vis questions of ethics and agency, and the boundaries between humans, animals and machines were questioned extensively (Wolch 2002). Moreover, the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed the actual negative repercussions of

the Anthropocene in the urban. The technological turn and urbanisation pushed aside many indigenous practices as relics of the past, and as this article has emphasised, led them to be thought of as in a transitional phase, which they are not. This led to scholars writing about how “indigenous societies and rural communities sustained a close connection with nature and the non-human world” and how that informs the “mutual dependences and co-evolution of living beings” (Jon 2020).

A human-animal relationship approach is employed to understand the relationship between horses, the community associated with them and their work. The research highlights the interdependency between people and horses. As the field visit revealed, the changing city has impacted the work of the horse keepers and the horses themselves. From the shrinking open spaces for the horses to graze to the shrinking space for them to stay has increased the fodder cost, which leaves the labourers with meager wages. The open stable on the busy road, with noise, light, and dust pollution, leads to uneasiness in the horses’ lives. The location of this informal work also reveals the spaces of cultivated animals. The horses’ owners care deeply for their animals and view them beyond their commodified nature. Horses are not just tools for economic output but also essential to the livelihoods of those who rely on them. The presence of horses in cities like Delhi shows a historical presence of labouring communities, and the relationship extends to how it shapes ecological and cultural dimensions, demonstrating how non-human actors contribute to shaping both urban space and social relations. Barua (2023) focuses on the non-humans in capitalism-driven urbanising cities and how the contribution of animals, such as the working horses in the nineteenth century, is recognised. Working animals such as equids and bovines are part of urban economies, providing labour in various industries like transportation, agriculture and dairy. Aside from working and domesticated animals, Barua emphasises commensal and feral animals, equally modifying urban spaces and creating diverse urban relationships.

Donna Haraway (2008) proposes the concept of ‘companion species.’ The animals she refers to are pets and any species with a long history of co-evolution and co-habitation with humans. For Haraway, relationships with animals are not clean, hierarchical, or easily mapped; they are messy, relational, and situated. In her view, urban animals are not just shaped by the city; they also shape it. They help us reimagine ethics not as a set of universal principles but as a practice of response-ability, the ability and obligation to respond meaningfully and attentively to others. Ethics, in this framework, is not about drawing lines between those who matter and those who do not, but about learning to live well within ongoing relationships of dependency and care. She challenges the idea of humans being superior to other animals and pushes for a more inclusive and multi-species understanding of the world by acknowledging our entanglement with other species. So this concept informs the relationship between humans and horses in the context of labour and urban infrastructure, and the idea of ‘making kin’ in the Anthropocene is quite prominent in this context. It is not even about making kin; they are kin. The research reveals itself as a form of kinship between humans and horses, where both are seen as vital to the survival and development of urban environments, interdependent and reflecting the theme of a shared existence in the Anthropocene. This idea extends through what David Harvey talks about, or perhaps how we can relate it to Haraway’s concept. Harvey (2014) uses the concept of ‘palimpsest’ to illustrate the results of the processes of urbanisation that characterise a city with the coexistence of many layers that originated at different times and were superimposed, one upon the other. These communities have existed through generations, and the content of what they transport with the horses might have changed, but the work has not. Haraway and Harvey both come in as more classical in their theorisation of the human-animal relationship and the transformation of the city.

The urban form can emerge through the interactions, associations and economic and political consequences of human and nonhuman forces. Even Marx’s reading from a minor key reveals his indirect mentions of ‘lively potentials’, for instance, animals or

material, and how production is not just a human activity; it incorporates more-than-human processes that help coproduction. Barua's conceptualisation of the animal is based on the fact that in an urbanising city, the contribution of animals, such as the working horse in the nineteenth century, is recognised. Working animals such as equids and bovines have been constitutive of urban economies, providing valuable labour in various industries like transportation, agriculture, and dairy, and they have been part of modifying urban spaces and creating diverse urban relationships. This informs that the urban form can emerge through human and nonhuman forces' interactions, associations, and even economic and political consequences. In popular urban Studies discourse, the urban is imagined through a planetary urbanism approach, situating anthropocentrism and capitalism at the centre. With this approach, the role of a horse would always remain invisible. However, employing a posthumanist approach like urban political ecology, for instance in urban planning, would emphasise the role of 'non-human' elements like plants and animals within the urban landscape (Gandy 2022).

Conclusion

Some practical ways in which horses can be acknowledged as working animals in urban areas and contributors to urban development would start with updating the Livestock Census itself, which would be an inclusive way to account for their work, other than just for tourism and horse racing. The notion of animals being 'out of place' is common discourse, especially in urban areas, because cities are not planned to keep animals in mind. Many early planners who dreamt and planned utopias did not incorporate many elements of society, including animals and even people (Buller 2014). To counter this, interdisciplinary planning teams, including ecologists and animal welfare experts, should ensure that animal needs are addressed throughout the urban planning cycle. Involving the horse-keeping communities in the co-design and management of policies affecting their livelihoods and animal welfare would ensure their traditional knowledge

and needs are respected. The city's infrastructure should be able to accommodate these animals with safe stabling areas and shelters, green spaces for grazing, and access to clean water and fodder, especially in dense urban areas where grazing is not possible. Some existing welfare protocols like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Prevention of Cruelty to Draught Animals Rules, 1965, could be extended to urban construction contexts and not just for rural or hilly regions; along with mandatory registration of all working horses with local authorities, including regular veterinary health checks, tagging, and monitoring for diseases such as glanders and equine influenza. Updating relevant laws to include urban working animals in definitions of labourers and workers would ensure their protection under labour and welfare statutes. And, lastly, to promote the value and contributions of working horses in urban development to reduce stigma and foster respect for multispecies urban communities.

Academic scholarship offers another avenue to understand their contributions, for instance, through the posthumanist ontologies of Deleuze, Guattari, Latour, Haraway, etc. came after the environmental and ecological concerns of the 1970s-1990s and Indigenous and post-colonial studies (Rose et al.; Benson; Franklin). The Anthropocene finally witnesses a new era incorporating nature rather than seeing it as a background in our daily lives. This is important because it reveals a broader—though not yet holistic—perspective, which is a crucial starting point (Jon). Planning for a few years has called for an inclusive approach where design accommodates ‘more-than-human attachments and other-than-human interests’ (Metzger). A posthumanist planning approach accounts for the ‘historicity of the place’ and a holistic and systematic approach to the area's development (Jon).

From a posthumanist approach of urban political ecology, cities are viewed holistically, teeming with life forms, technologies, and materialities, among other niches that comprise diverse more-than-human politics, where matters beyond the humanist concerns can be addressed (Franklin). The intricate interplay between human and non-

human forces shapes urban environments and challenges the anthropocentric and capitalist narratives of urbanisation. Looking at horses' work in Delhi informs us that these animals are not merely transitional relics of the past but active agents shaping the spatial and economic dynamics of the city. Though often overlooked in formal urban discourse, their work reflects the close relationship between humans and animals, revealing a layered urban landscape shaped by multispecies interactions. The findings suggest that horses and their keepers are not marginal but fundamental to the informal economies sustaining Delhi's rapidly urbanising neighbourhoods. The presence of these working animals in urban settings expose the limitations of conventional planning that fail to accommodate the non-human elements shaping urban ecosystems. From an urban political ecology perspective, the study advocates for a multi-perspectival approach to urban planning that acknowledges the contributions of working animals and the broader ecosystem to urban life. This approach fosters inclusive and sustainable urban development, recognising that cities are co-produced by humans and non-humans alike. Moreover, it calls for reevaluating policies that marginalise working animals, urging a shift toward frameworks that integrate their presence and labour into urban governance. Introducing Anthropocene and more-than-human ecology to urban theory and planning theory opens up the city-nature debate. Initially, planning in cities is anthropocentric and capitalistic (Barua), a very "human-exceptionalist view of the world" (Jon 2020); however, the post-humanist approach incorporates, inclusively and ethically, the larger natural aspects of the city, for instance, the plants and animals. Gandy talks about a multiperspective and holistic approach to better understanding and planning the city.

There is plenty of scholarship regarding the horse, and to contribute to that, I endeavoured to research this human-horse relationship in the urban, especially in a global south city like Delhi. Since horses or other equids like mules and donkeys are quite literally part of building the city, demonstrating, through the lens of urban political ecology as a posthumanist approach to understanding cities that cities are a construct of

human and nonhuman forces and relations in its most primal forms, not only the fact that animals do exist along humans in the urban but also constructing it as well. Urban political ecology concerns how political, economic, and ecological forces interact within cities. Traditionally, urban studies have treated animals as marginal, as pests to be removed, pets to be controlled, or as relics of a rural past. However, posthumanist urban political ecology refuses to see animals as mere background to human-centred urban life. It recognises that animals are co-participants in the making of the city, considering the horses that transport bricks through Delhi's informal settlements or the street dogs that are befriended by people living in slums that act as guard dogs to prevent them from being subjects of petty crimes and threats. These animals are not just surviving in cities but shaping the urban environment through their labour, presence, and interactions. In recognising this, posthumanist thought shifts the focus from human mastery over urban nature to multispecies cohabitation.

To conclude, posthumanism provides powerful tools for rethinking our relationships with animals in urban contexts. It questions the human-centred assumptions that continue to shape urban planning, governance, and theory. In doing so, it transforms the city from a site of human progress into a complex ecological space of co-creation. Posthumanist urban political ecology invites us to imagine more inclusive and just urban futures—futures in which we no longer see ourselves as separate from or above the animal others who share our streets, homes, and infrastructures. Haraway reminds us that the challenge is not to escape these entanglements but to stay with the trouble and remain accountable to the complex, fragile, and co-constituted worlds we inhabit.

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From Pets to Influencers: Examining Species Equivalence and Agency in Pet Fashion of Tika and Bodhi

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Abstract:

Pet fashion has seen an exponential growth in the twenty-first century, expanding well beyond traditional leashes, collars, and name tags to include high-fashion clothing, accessories, and furniture. This burgeoning culture has given rise to pet influencers: animals with substantial social media followings, particularly on Instagram. These pet influencers, often dogs, cats, or rabbits, highlight pet fashion trends, endorse products, and share their activities through their owners, referred to as pet parents. This phenomenon has gained significant momentum post-pandemic, fostering a new level of indulgence among the younger population, who increasingly regard pets as family members. This shift is evidenced by the purchase of exclusive clothing and the creation of mini-me looks to express adoration and love for these new family members. Such practices cater to the trend of pet humanization, prompting questions about the implications of dressing animals in human-like fashion. This paper aims to explore whether the trend of pet fashion represents a step towards a posthumanistic view of species equivalence or if it diminishes the agency of animals. This study examines the social media accounts of prominent pet influencers, Tika (@tikatheiggy) and Bodhi (@mensweardog). It aims to determine whether pet dog fashion contributes to erasing the boundaries between human and non-human or if it intensifies the fetishization of humans through the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism and bioethics.

Keywords: Pet Fashion, Pet Influencers, Species Equivalence, Agency, Human/non-human Binary.



Introduction

The contemporary landscape of pet fashion reveals a striking crossover of consumer culture, digital media and the evolving relation between humans and animals. Pet fashion has boomed into a multimillion-dollar industry consisting of *haute couture* clothing, luxury accessories, designer furniture and customized belongings reflecting human fashion trends from the earlier simple practical designs of collars and leashes. A crucial development to this transformation is the rise of pet influencers. Pet influencers are animals with substantial social media followings whose curated imagery and branding promote new norms of pet ownership, affection and performative aesthetics.

This phenomenon of pet influencer culture rooted in digital culture, leans towards the hyper-visibility of pets as both fashion subjects and content creators. Online platforms, particularly Instagram, have enabled animals to emerge as cultural icons, involving followers through emotional appeal and brand collaborations. Relying on the sentimental value of pets, the scope of fashion has grown significantly among pet influencers. This trend, accelerated by the isolation endured during the pandemic and the growing emotional investment of the younger generation in pet parenting, indicates a broader cultural shift towards the humanization of pets through fashion or perhaps the posthumanisation of pets. Here, posthumanisation refers to a theoretical shift away from anthropocentric perspectives, recognizing pets not simply as domesticated animals but as emotionally-aware beings who take part in the digital and social lives of human beings. This approach highlights the deep interconnection between human and non-human actors, that promotes a more fluid and relational understanding of subjectivity.

This paper aims to investigate the implications of this shift. Does pet fashion, with the omnipresence of digital media, redefine what it means to be an animal and foster a posthumanistic re-evaluation of species boundaries? Or does it represent an extension of anthropocentric commodification, where animals are used for human desires? This study seeks to position the pet fashion phenomenon within the context of posthuman theory, species agency and digital performativity by critically analyzing the

social media content of two globally recognized pet fashion influencers, Tika and Bodhi.

Historical Overview of Pet Fashion

The phenomenon of pet fashion has a long historical precedence owing to the close companionship between human beings and animals, particularly dogs. Though pets consist of a wide range of species, dogs were a crucial factor such that the history of pet fashion coincides with the history of dog fashion. Its origin can be traced back to the ancient civilizations. In Egypt, decorative collars date as far back as 3500 BCE; in Greece, pet accessories were common by the 5th century, and in Rome, ornate and protective garments for dogs appeared around the 1st century BCE to 1st century CE (Mark; Priya).

In its nascent form, pet fashion essentially comprised of dog collars, signifying ownership to humans and a mark of identity. These collars were often made from materials such as leather, gold, silver, and sometimes bejeweled with precious stones (“Dog”). Notably, archaeological findings from the tomb of King Cuo of Zhongshan, include dogs wearing gold collars decorated with silver and turquoise accents. It dates to the Warring States Period between c. 475 to 221 BCE (“CULTURE”). In ancient Greece, protective gear such as steel armor was worn on dogs, apart from collars, when it participated in war or hunting by 5th century BCE (Zhang). It was used to safeguard dogs from injury which indicates their significance to human beings. Similar practice of using collars and leashes was observed in Rome and Mesopotamia too.

The investment in pet apparel reflects the growing significance of pets in human lives, giving rise to a new fashion sub-genre known as pet fashion. The rise in this phenomenon has its roots in the affection and security humans derive from their canine companions. Interestingly, there have also been historical accounts that reveal criticisms of societal attitudes toward the prioritization of pets over children. For instance, around 46 BCE, Julius Caesar admonished such behavior, offering the earliest commentaries on how keeping pets might reflect misplaced emotional investment. His remarks highlight the cultural tensions surrounding the role and status of pets in human life (Nelson).

During the Middle Ages, dogs increasingly became the companion animal and a stamp of prestige among the upper classes. In the Victorian period, elite men often carried dogs, which served as a reflection of “loyalty”, “strength” and “nobility”, during social gatherings and travel (Amato 25). Pet fashion also underwent a change in the use of materials which began to incorporate wool, leather and fur. These materials, drawn from other animals adds an ironic layer to pet fashion, where one animal’s body becomes decoration or protection for another. Fur and leather, particularly, reveal the complicated dynamics of human-animal hierarchies and the way power and luxury are symbolically displayed. These garments, rather than having a purely functional purpose, often become status symbols, reflecting the high-fashion trends of elite human society. With the advent of the industrial revolution, the scope of pet fashion diversified to include cotton and synthetic fibers, indicating changing economic spectrum in spending for pet fashion (Zhang).

In the nineteenth century, casual clothing for dogs began to take shape, allowing them to wear outfits throughout the day rather than only for specific occasions. With this development, pet fashion began to diversify, offering a wide variety of garments suitable for different events, much like human fashion. In Paul Mégnin’s 1952 work *Nos Chiens*, it is noted that dogs were provided with distinct outfits for various occasions, including evening wear, travel, and beach outings (Nelson). Pet owners often personalized their dogs’ beach attire by inscribing the names of the dogs on name tags. The range of canine apparel expanded to include embroidered coats, traveling cloaks, silk jackets, and tea gowns, as highlighted by Alfred Barbou in his book *Le Chien: Son histoire, ses exploits, ses aventures* published in 1883 (Nelson). However, this trend also attracted the attention of The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which raised ethical concerns regarding the implications of dressing pets (“Should”).

The twentieth century marked a significant shift in pet fashion, as clothing became increasingly stylish and often modelled after human attire. The materials used for dog clothing diversified to incorporate synthetic fabrics such as polyester and nylon, which offered durability, ease of maintenance, and a variety of patterns and

styles (Zhang). In 1959, New York City hosted the first fashion show dedicated to pets, a development that gave rise to a new profession of pet couturiers, who designed custom clothing for dogs (Priya).

The twenty-first century witnessed an unprecedented expansion in pet fashion encompassing *haute couture*, specialized furniture, luxurious housing, specific diets, and other commodities. Celebrities played a crucial role in elevating pet fashion, with Hollywood figure Paris Hilton leading a trend by promoting her relationship with the dog, Tinkerbelle (Szymczak and Fraser). During the early 2000s, Hilton popularized the act of carrying her dog, sometimes in designer handbags, turning the pet into both a fashion accessory and a media icon. This visual trend of carrying dogs became symbolic of luxury and glamour. It gained traction not only through traditional celebrity media but also through emerging platforms like MySpace and later Instagram, where stylized pet photography and curated pet lifestyles began to flourish. The dog's stylized appearances in media sparked a new segment in pet culture of dressing dogs, leading to a proliferation of designer pet boutiques and fashion designers specializing in pet fashion. The inception of National Dress Up Your Dog Day in 2009 was another event that fostered the ties of pet culture with fashion (Ingraham).

Presently, the pet market has extended beyond the sale of pet animals and food to include pet clothing and other indulgent luxuries. Pet owners engage in such practices as spending more on pet apparels suggests greater care and love toward the canine species. Pet fashion and pet accessories have also flourished on online marketplaces, with platforms such as Ssense.com offering a wide array of products. The emergence of pet influencers on social media, particularly Instagram, has magnified the trend of pet fashion influencing the purchasing decisions of pet parents.

Rise of Pet Influencers

Pet influencers are a new breed of social media influencers comprising of animals with large followings on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The most popular among these influencers are dogs and cats, followed by birds, reptiles and other less frequent pets including rabbits and hedgehogs (Maumelat). These accounts are maintained by pet parents, individuals who own pets and consider pets as

their children or family. They share videos and photographs of their pets engaging in different activities including daily routines, playful antics, unique personalities, and skills which communicate an engaging story of pet life to the viewers. The posts may also include tips on pet fashion, pet-grooming, pet-friendly lifestyle and suggestions on pet-friendly travel places including hotels, restaurants and tourist destinations (Bhardwaj). These public forums may be more popular than the accounts of their human counterparts.

Instagram plays a key role in shaping the rise of pet influencers. As a platform centered on visual storytelling, it enables users to create dedicated accounts for their pets. Often, these accounts speak through the pet's imagined voice, further blurring the line between human and animal identity. According to Maddox, this form of content creation goes beyond entertainment, as it can also function as “joy as resistance” (3337). Many people engage with pet content as a way to escape the stress, negativity, and pressures commonly found on social media. Sharing images of adorable pets offers comfort and creates small moments of happiness for both creators and audiences. However, this joy is deeply embedded in what Maddox calls the “cute economy” (3334), a system where emotions, attention, and pleasure are monetized or leveraged for social influence. For fashionable pet influencers like Tika and Bodhi, Instagram turns their curated looks into content that can generate visibility and, at times, financial gain. In this context, Instagram is not merely a passive platform but an active force in shaping the culture of pet fashion. determining how pets are portrayed, celebrated, and even commercialized in the digital landscape. Some of the factors indicating the popularity of the pet influencers are their perception as adorable creatures, capacity to instill positivity and their role as sources of moral support apart from a refreshing form of entertainment (Vogl).

The content of pet influencers also consists of awareness and educational matter related to animal welfare. They participate in welfare organizations, rescue operations, campaigns to raise awareness about animal shelters, adoption, and responsible pet ownership that involves the well-being of the pets. These influencers also advocate for a healthy lifestyle for pets by promoting content on dietary habits, the importance of

exercise and the establishment of safe environments that can contribute to sound mental health (Bhardwaj). Further, they advise on using sustainable pet practices that minimize environmental harm. They are also at the forefront of commercializing their popularity through brand partnerships, modelling and sponsored content.

Influencer marketing has remained popular due to influencers' high reach among viewers. However, the arrival of pet influencers replacing human beings is a new evolution in this domain. It has been found that people react more positively to pet influencers, as there is higher engagement with content produced by pet influencers than by human influencers. Pets are also perceived as more credible beings than humans, with their inherent cuteness enhancing product credibility and boosting higher purchase intention among buyers (Di Cioccio et al.). According to "Pet Influencers on Consumers," consumers respond more positively to messages on social media when it is narrated from the point of view of pets than humans. This narrative style increases the overall level of audience engagement in marketing products. It is identified that the effectiveness of the message differs depending on the human or non-human narrator (Zhang et al.).

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic on the market, the pet industry has boomed (Kestenbaum). Major brands such as Nestle, Dior and Mercedes-Benz have collaborated with well-known pet influencers like Grumpy Cat, Tika the Iggy and Loki the wolfdog, respectively. Under the broader spectrum of pet influencers, a subcategory called pet fashion influencers has emerged. They are the influencers who prominently feature in stylish attire and share posts on pet fashion.

This evolution in pet fashion raises questions about the boundaries between species, identity, and representation. It has developed from stylized clothing to treading the notions of agency, subjectivity and posthuman ethics. Therefore, understanding how fashion mediates human-animal relations in the digital age is crucial. This paper explores the phenomenon of pet fashion using a qualitative analysis of two major Instagram accounts. It investigates how pet fashion performs species identity, human desire and social capital in the contemporary digital media landscape.

Methodology

Qualitative case study methodology is employed to explore the cultural, visual and ethical dimensions of pet fashion in the digital space. Among the range of social media, Instagram accounted for the availability of vast animal content, as it is a platform for visual storytelling. Thus, two prominent Instagram accounts were selected as case studies, @tikatheiggy and @mensweardog, to examine aesthetic trends and symbolic practices in pet fashion culture. These accounts exemplify the pet fashion influencer phenomenon due to their exclusive fashion themed content. A purposive sampling strategy involved collecting 30 posts per account during the period between January 2021 and December 2023. This timeframe marks the post-pandemic surge in pet culture visibility and influencer marketing. The selection criteria included posts featuring distinctive clothing or accessories, participation of dogs in fashion-related events, brand collaborations and their involvement in anthropomorphic or symbolic representation. These posts were analyzed through visual semiotics, discourse analysis and posthumanistic ethics which shall be discussed further in detail in the following sections.

Case Studies: @tikatheiggy and @mensweardog

To critically explore how pet fashion mediates identity, aesthetics, and ethical representation in digital culture, this section presents two prominent pet influencers, Tika the Iggy (@tikatheiggy) and Menswear Dog (@mensweardog). Their curated Instagram personas provide rich material for examining anthropomorphism and social symbolism.

As of May 29, 2025, one of the most popular pet influencers Tika the Iggy, has shared 1,156 posts and garnered a staggering 1.5 million followers on Instagram. Tika, an Italian greyhound owned by Thomas Shapiro, is known as a fashionista and appears in her social media account in diverse clothes, that showcases high-end pet fashion. The dog promotes various brands and is primarily a pet fashion influencer known for donning *haute couture* items. The account bio mentions the dog to be addressed as she/her, and *Vogue* magazine has described Tika as “[a] new fashion it girl.” Her wardrobe includes everything from beach dresses and tracksuits to cowboy outfits. Tika has conducted a fashion tour visiting several cities across the United States of America

and Canada. In many posts, the dog recreates the looks of various female celebrities, including iconic outfits from the Met Gala, an annual fundraising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York, known for its extravagant fashion. Tika has also attended the Pet Gala, a television show hosted by singer Dolly Parton that features a runway show for dogs. Tika has a published book titled *Tika the Iggy: Lessons in Life, Love and Fashion*. As a pet influencer and celebrity, she was seated in the front row of popular Canadian singer Céline Dion's documentary premiere. Apart from fashion events, Tika is also a front-runner of LGBTQIA+ rights and is described as a gay icon in her Instagram bio. She is often seen in VIBGYOR clothing and attending functions that support diverse sexualities. Tika has made an appearance in *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2015, participating in a gay parade, and marking Pride Month by wearing clothes indicating a pride flag. She was also invited as a surprise model for the Cashmere Collection to raise breast cancer awareness and collaborated with Jared Leto to promote an album. These public appearances reveal how pet influencers like Tika are not just styled for aesthetic appeal but are also used to represent and promote broader human social values such as LGBTQIA+ pride or charitable causes. In this way, the fashion choices imposed on pets extend beyond cuteness and entertainment, they become tools for communicating cultural messages. The media visibility and attention showered on pets position them as credible product ambassadors within the influencer economy.

Bodhi, another pet fashion influencer with social media account named Menswear Dog has shared 1,104 posts and has 3,70,000 followers on Instagram. The dog is owned by David Fung and Yena Kim and belongs to the Shiba Inu breed. Bodhi performs as a model for men's fashion, featuring tailored suits, jackets, and minimalist wardrobes, often mimicking editorial fashion photography. He has been the face of the front page of major magazines, including GQ, VICE, The New York Times, and CNN. The Instagram page shows the dog as an invited guest for the fashion show of Lost Pattern NYC. The dog is also seen to replicate or spin a new take on fashion in films. It is often seen that the dog is represented as an erect figure while displaying men's fashion, mimicking human masculine poses. This represents a deliberate performance

of humanness through visual codes that replicate not just aesthetics but gendered and behavioral norms. He has also collaborated with prominent brands such as Nike Capsule, Casper, and Bergdorf Goodman. Additionally, Bodhi has published a book titled *Menswear Dog Presents: The New Classics*. Books by pet animals further consolidate their role as aesthetic subjects with curated voices. These texts, while authored by humans, create the illusion of non-human authorship, questioning where human projections end and animal agency begins.

Dressing the Other: Pet Fashion, Anthropomorphism, and Symbolic Assimilation

The findings from the case studies of Tika and Bodhi highlight how pet fashion serves as a potent site for negotiating the boundaries between species, identity, and symbolic performance. Humans have developed and fostered a set of specific marks of identity in demarcating themselves from other forms of being. This includes concepts of the ability to use language, being altruistic, and wearing clothes. Though newer studies and research challenge each element, it is undeniable that clothes are an integral feature in classifying humans as humans. Vänškä has stated how dressing is a performative act of hominization (“How to Do” 22). However, this identity mark has slowly been transferred to the pet animals, where clothes are donned onto animals, developing a new genre of fashion called pet fashion.

Symbolic Assimilation: Visual Aesthetics and Material Culture

In 1987, the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals categorized pets as “any animal kept or intended to be kept by humans, particularly in their households, for private enjoyment and companionship” (Contreras). Pets, by definition, are domesticated animals. They are raised by humans and are seen as neither a human nor an animal. To be an animal, wildness is expected of them, whereas the behavior of pet animals is trained by the owners or pet parents to transform them into pseudo-human and accommodate them into the family or into the society. Their “behaviour,” “obedience” and “sexuality” are controlled (Vänškä, “How to Do” 25). Pet animals reside in a state of liminality where they are shaped to be like humans and yet retain a part of their animality in them. Vänškä draws parallel between raising children and training dogs through the tool of education to assimilate each of them to

the acceptable social standards (“How to Do” 23). Dogs are trained to polish their innate characteristics to behave in a certain way. Wearing clothes on pet animals can be considered as a way of anthropomorphizing them. Most often, pet fashion is modelled on human fashion.

While analyzing the two popular Instagram account of pet fashion influencers Tika the Iggy and Bodhi, one can infer that the dogs cater to the fashion of humans. Tika is often seen in long-tailed clothes while attending premier events, replicating the women’s *haute couture* fashion of formal events, and Bodhi exclusively modelling men’s fashion in an upright posture. Fashion in animals is used as a tool to develop relatable factors between humans and animals. The boundary thins when fashion is used as an element by the pet influencers to engage human interest in animals. These representations arguably serve human spectatorship more than animal self-expression. Haraway calls for a relational ethics with “companion species” (52). However, the commercial stylization of pets using fashion reduces them to aesthetic commodities. Here, pets are not being considered on the same rung of the ladder as humans, but are being reshaped to reflect human values.

While visual aesthetics and narrative framing dominate pet influencer culture, the materiality of pet fashion deserves closer attention. The fabrics used to dress pets, particularly inspired by high fashion, reveal complex symbolic and ethical implications. Tika, for instance, is often styled in garments that echo luxury human fashion, such as faux fur, sequins, and silk. These are chosen more for visual impact than comfort. Bodhi’s wardrobe, by contrast, features tailored suits and wool coats made from tweed, leather accents, and cotton blends, which are materials historically linked to masculinity and elite status. This practice raises ethical tensions, especially when animal-derived materials like wool or leather are used to dress another animal, turning pets into both wearers and representations of another species’ labor. Dressing one animal in the by-products of another amplifies the objectification of both, positioning the pet’s body as a site for performing human taste, class, and ideology. In this way, material becomes more than fabric; it becomes a medium of species hierarchy and symbolic appropriation.

Language and Voice

While analyzing the Instagram pages of Tika and Bodhi, it is noticed that captions and writings on the reels are from the perspective of the dogs. Language, in particular, is a key site of human exceptionalism, often considered a defining attribute of humanity. When pet influencers are made to “speak” through captions written in the first person, they symbolically inhabit human consciousness. This technique enhances emotional engagement but also raises ethical questions: Is this a celebration of pet identity or a projection of human identity onto animals?

Beyond the visual aesthetics of pet fashion, the captions accompanying posts on Tika’s Instagram play a crucial role in constructing her symbolic humanization. Through discourse analysis, it becomes clear that language reframes Tika not just as a styled animal but as a fashion persona with agency, taste, and social affiliations. The use of first-person narration, such as “I’m a covergirl!” (January 7, 2021) or “I’m so honoured to be the first four-legged @DiorBeauty Girl!” (April 19, 2023), gives Tika a voice, transforming her into an active participant in fashion and celebrity culture. These narratives extend fashion into the realms of identity and emotional expression. For instance, “[y]ou know what does keep me warm [...] my @shaniatwain-inspired hooded cape” (March 31, 2021), signals not practicality but cultural reference and glamour. Likewise, “[t]here’s no other person I’d rather celebrate #GalentinesDay with than @drewbarrymore” (February 15, 2022) embeds Tika within gendered rituals and celebrity networks. The caption “You can’t spell ‘Gay Icon’ without LGBTIKA!” (May 18, 2022) most clearly merges fashion with queer identity politics. These linguistic choices position the animal body as a conduit for anthropocentric narratives of fashion, fame, and activism, rather than expressions of the pet’s own agency.

Bodhi’s account further illustrates how captions shape the illusion of a socially-aware, emotionally intelligent animal subject. Humorous language and meme-style visuals frame him as a fashion-conscious male figure navigating human experiences. A post from November 6, 2021, for example, features the line “[b]eing stuck in the dog house for a year has been [...] ruff,” with the caption “I have a weird job,” blending canine puns with pandemic-era commentary on work culture. Another post (May 13,

2022) asks “Who wore it better: me or Rembrandt?”, drawing a playful link between pet fashion and Western art history. Posts like “How I'm pulling up on Valentine's Day” (February 10, 2023) and “Posting a flattering picture of myself to congratulate mother on her special day” (May 15, 2023) anthropomorphize romantic and familial rituals. In line with Vänskä's view of clothes as a “performative act of hominization” (22), these captions use the pet's body as a vessel for human storytelling, gendered expression, and aesthetic performance.

Ethics of Inclusion

Even so, pet fashion may peripherally seem like a light-hearted form of aesthetic expression, its entanglement with broader cultural and political symbolism deserves closer attention. Tika's alignment with LGBTQIA+ symbolism raises critical questions about instrumentalization. Though intended as an act of solidarity, the dog falls outside the dynamics of human sexuality. The use of pride colors and participation in queer events may obscure the animal's autonomy. Such acts of symbolic appropriation risk inscribing the animal body with human meaning. Interestingly, both these pet fashion influencers have books to their names, giving tips and their ideas around the concept of fashion. This raises questions about whose fashion the discussions are being conducted. Are the pet influencers detailing on the fashion of pets (not animals) through humans, or the fashion of the humans through pets? Here we come to the dilemma on whether fashion is a medium to humanize pets or is it a rightful step towards species equivalence.

Yet, pet fashion holds deeper emotional and functional significance. Research shows that people with strong emotional bonds to their pets are likely to buy clothes for them. Two key factors that influence this behavior are anthropomorphism, treating pets as if they have human traits; and self-expansion, where owners see their pets as an extension of themselves. Together, these factors help explain why pet clothing is often tied to emotional and identity-driven choices (Apaolaza et al.). For many, dressing pets is an expression of affection, identity, and emotional connection, particularly among individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles. Beyond its symbolic role, pet clothing also fulfils practical needs. Short-haired or hairless breeds like Chihuahuas,

Italian Greyhounds, and Chinese Cresteds may require winter garments to prevent hypothermia, while older or arthritic dogs benefit from additional warmth. Conversely, cooling vests help thick-coated breeds such as Huskies or Chow Chows manage heat in warmer months. Clothing also protects against environmental hazards, including UV exposure, rain, ticks, and dirt. Items like raincoats, lightweight shirts, and reflective vests enhance both hygiene and safety, reframing pet fashion as an informed act of care as well as cultural expression (“5 Reasons”).

Species Equivalence and Ethical Dissonance

A recurring dilemma in pet fashion is the question of agency. Both Tika and Bodhi are framed as expressive beings, Tika as a sassy “fashion it girl” and Bodhi as a suave menswear model. Nevertheless, their roles are curated by pet parents. The illusion of participation masks the reality that choices are made by humans. This tension resonates with critiques of speciesism. Species equivalence is a key concept of posthumanism and the underlying principle of biocentric ethics. It roots for a perception of all beings considered equally. Human entitlement is negated and the inherent value of all lifeforms is accepted. For instance, the comfort needs of a senior dog or the spatial autonomy of a cat are considered ethically significant in their own right, not merely in relation to human desires. Every being has equal ethical standing. This does not homogenize a standard of equality. Not every being has to come into a single category to have a moral footing in nature. The very difference in the species and the acceptance of difference from one being to another holds for species equivalence. Considering this, pet fashion treads a fine line on species equivalence and possessing their own agency. Clothing that has been fundamental to humans is bestowed upon the pets by pet parents to inculcate the pets into the family. While pet parents may believe they are empowering their pets through visibility and inclusion, such actions often reinforce human dominance, veiled in affectionate aesthetics. Here, the means to accommodate pets as family members in the fashion of humans to show their status as equals is questionable. This idea of pet fashion raises the question whether one is considering all species as equal or are humans trying to equalize by changing the other species to humans?

This discussion parallels feminist critiques of gender performance and normativity. As Judith Butler argues, gender is not a fixed identity but a series of stylized acts, often performed in alignment with dominant expectations (XV). In various media portrayals, female strength is often depicted through the adoption of masculine-coded traits such as wearing trousers, cutting hair short, or rejecting decorative adornment, as a means of gaining legitimacy in patriarchal contexts. Yet, such representations risk reinforcing a binary in which power continues to be defined through masculine norms, thereby marginalizing or erasing femininity. A similar dynamic can be observed in pet fashion. Efforts to equalize pets by incorporating them into human fashion frameworks may inadvertently impose human ideals onto nonhuman bodies. Rather than acknowledging the animal as a distinct but equal subject, these practices risk flattening species difference, reducing animal agency to a performance of human aesthetics and values. As feminist theorists challenge the notion that empowerment stems from assimilation into dominant forms, posthuman and biocentric ethics similarly argue for an ethics of difference, one that honors species distinctiveness rather than subsuming it through mimicry.

The central argument, then, is that pet fashion functions less as a matter of practicality and more as a symbolic gesture, such as Tika being styled for red carpet events or Bodhi being featured in branded campaigns. These performances often serve to project human narratives onto animal bodies, reinforcing anthropocentric ideals rather than recognizing nonhuman subjectivity on its own terms. From a biocentric ethical standpoint, pet fashion is not a choice of pet animals themselves, but a material culture imposed by humans and worn on the non-human bodies. Clothing pets in humanized fashion may reflect love and care, but it also risks displacing the animal's own mode of being. One of the major arguments in favor of pet fashion is that clothes help protect pets from harsh weather conditions. However, studies have often shown that pet fashion is more a decorative piece than a functional element (Vänskä, "Cause" 81). In this case, one needs to focus more on whose pleasure this pet fashion is created for. The ethical question thus becomes: Is pet fashion a celebration of interspecies intimacy, or a form of aesthetic colonization? The answer lies in examining not only

what is worn, but who decides, and for whom it is performed. The current findings suggest that while pets may appear to participate in human society, their participation is heavily mediated and often subordinate to human control.

Conclusion

This study explored the evolving phenomenon of pet fashion as a complex site of cultural negotiation, digital performance, and species boundary transgression. By examining the Instagram accounts of two prominent pet fashion influencers, Tika the Iggy and Menswear Dog, it was revealed how fashion is employed not only as a mode of visual storytelling but as a mechanism of anthropomorphism and human-centric meaning-making. The analysis highlighted how costume, narrative voice, and social media engagement collectively work to humanize pets, projecting aesthetic and social roles onto animals that are largely shaped by human preferences. These curated identities blur the lines between human and non-human, often erasing species-specific autonomy in favor of human dominance.

The paper argues that pet fashion operates less as an expression of care for animals and more as a symbolic extension of human identity, control, and cultural aspiration. On digital platforms such as Instagram, pets are styled, narrated, and presented not as autonomous beings, but as carefully curated projections of human values, aesthetics, and emotions. This anthropocentric framing obscures the agency of animals and raises ethical concerns about the fine line between interspecies intimacy and dominance.

Pet fashion, in a way, is a move to serve the needs of humans. It gives them an additional upper hand when they justify that clothes are created for pets to protect them. However, pet fashion becomes another area where humans stamp over the agency of animals and stray away from the attainment of the species equivalence. Human-animal relations should not involve treating animals as objects for human pleasure, but require acknowledgement from humans of the animality of animals and their being themselves.

While pet fashion may appear to elevate the cultural status of animals, it simultaneously imposes human aesthetics, human causes, and human narratives onto non-human bodies. In doing so, it raises essential ethical questions of whose identity

is being performed, whose voice is being heard and who benefits from the spectacle. By interrogating these questions, this study advances critical conversations in fashion studies, digital media, posthumanism, and animal ethics, revealing how fashion not only constructs identity but also defines the boundaries of interspecies belonging.

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Postcolonial Philippine Nonhuman Animals in Jessica Zafra's *The Age of Umbrage* and Irene Sarmiento's *Stray Cats*

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Abstract

While postcolonial studies often foreground the human “other,” they have often overlooked nonhuman animals, whose marginalization persists even within narratives that are attentive to structural inequities. Drawing on Peter Singer's critique of speciesism and John Berger's reflections on the visibility of nonhuman animals, this article investigates the representation of nonhuman animals in Jessica Zafra's *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) and Irene Sarmiento's *Stray Cats* (2023), situating both novels within the context of Philippine postcolonial literature. Both texts position nonhuman animals in highly constrained roles: either as consumable bodies embedded in human food systems or as symbolic messengers deployed to articulate human emotions and cultural anxieties. Through the figures of Guadalupe “Guada” de Leon and Elisa Paz, two young female protagonists whose lives are shaped by their relationships with nonhuman animals on and off the page, the novels draw from Philippine folklore while simultaneously reinforcing the subordination of nonhuman life. Scenes of slaughter and pet keeping reflect the routine commodification of nonhuman animals, while the incorporation of mythical creatures reveals the link between nonhuman animals and symbolic meaning. This dual positioning emphasizes how nonhuman animals in these novels are consistently framed through utilitarian or representational lenses, with little space for recognizing their subjectivity outside human-

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centered narratives. Both novels highlight the spatial marginalization of nonhuman animals through controlled environments such as zoos and urban landscapes, where they appear as spectacles rather than autonomous beings. Despite these narrative limitations, both *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* suggest subtle sites of interspecies connection. The enduring presence of feline companions offers moments of intimacy and mutual recognition that complicate the dominant anthropocentric framing, pointing to the potential for more ethical modes of relationality. This article analyzes these tensions to contribute to emerging discussions in postcolonial ecocriticism and human-animal studies, foregrounding the complex ways nonhuman animals are rendered both visible and invisible in contemporary Philippine fiction.

Keywords: Philippine literature, Postcolonial Studies, nonhuman animals, Critical Animal Studies, Folklore.

Introduction

The presence of nonhuman animals in contemporary Philippine literature emerges within a distinctly postcolonial context. The intimate connection between Southeast Asian literature and postcolonial studies allows for politically engaged criticism—one that speaks directly to issues of social, cultural, and ecological injustice (Devadas 249). Priscelina Patajo-Legasto echoes this in the preface to the second edition of *Philippine Postcolonial Studies* (2004), in which she asserts that the field has “opened up spaces for literary and cultural texts that were marginalized in the past because of the hegemonic (i.e., western) aesthetics, criticism, and the supposed ‘universal’ canon of Literature” (vii). While postcolonial studies has long concerned itself with the “other,” Philip Armstrong, the co-director of the New Zealand Center for Human-Animal Studies at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, argued in 2002 that this scholarship had largely overlooked nonhuman animals, perhaps out of concern that such inquiries might trivialize the suffering of human subjects under colonialism (413). To study the nonhuman means to surrender to viewing their otherness from a human lens, through a constant state of

comparison with “notions fundamental to the work of colonialism: ‘the human,’ ‘the natural,’ ‘the cultural’” (Armstrong 414). Armstrong further noted that despite the field’s commitment to marginality, “it has shown little interest in the fate of the nonhuman animal” (413), even though such figures persist as peripheral characters in postcolonial literature.

This article primarily engages with Peter Singer’s foundational critique of speciesism and John Berger’s reflections on the visibility and cultural positioning of nonhuman animals. Their works provide a crucial theoretical lens through which to examine the often-overlooked dimension of nonhuman animal representation in postcolonial studies. Specifically, Singer’s ethical framework on animal liberation allows for a direct interrogation of the moral implications of how nonhuman beings are commodified and exploited within the narratives. Concurrently, Berger’s insights into the changing human-animal relationship, particularly the shift from wild encounters to controlled spectacles and anthropomorphic projections, offer a robust framework for analyzing how nonhuman animals in Philippine literature are both physically and culturally marginalized. By focusing on these two scholars, and occasionally drawing on contemporary posthumanist thought, this article aims to establish a clear analytical connection between global critical animal studies and the specific nuances of Philippine literary contexts, highlighting how universal ethical concerns about human-animal relations manifest in localized narratives. Berger and Singer’s foundational insights into how humans perceive and relate to nonhuman beings are particularly pertinent here, as both the novels discussed in this article centrally explore the formative experiences through which children learn to view and interact with nonhuman life.

In Jessica Zafra’s *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) and Irene Sarmiento’s *Stray Cats* (2023), nonhuman animals are abundant yet occupy highly constrained positions that reinforce their marginalization. The selection of these two novels is driven not only by their prominent engagement with nonhuman animals but also by their significant contemporary relevance within Philippine literature. Both novels, published recently,

offer a timely lens into current socio-cultural anxieties and realities in the Philippines. Zafra, a celebrated and influential Filipino writer known for her sharp wit and incisive social commentary, brings a unique perspective to issues of class and identity. Sarmiento's *Stray Cats*, a young adult novel, addresses pressing urban issues such as child trafficking and economic disparity, making it particularly resonant for exploring vulnerability and marginalization in the modern Philippine context. Importantly, the novels reflect the pervasive presence of stray cats in Philippine urban life, often existing as numerous strays with little inherent cultural significance beyond their utilitarian roles or perceived nuisance. Both texts limit nonhuman animals to two primary functions: either as meat, signifying their physical marginalization, or as symbolic messengers, highlighting their cultural marginalization. Their depiction as consumable bodies emphasizes their exclusion from systems of value beyond human use, while their role as messengers often reduces them to tools that serve human narratives rather than possessing agency of their own. This constrained representation not only reflects the structures of oppression that render nonhuman life expendable but also limits the ways in which these novels engage with nonhuman characters in the narratives. Through an analysis of how *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* position nonhuman animals at the peripheries of human society and narrative focus, and in conversation with Singer's critique of speciesism and Berger's insights on animal visibility, this article investigates how these portrayals either reinforce or contest the sociocultural frameworks governing human-animal relations in the Philippine context.

From Childhood Companions to Commodities

As the protagonists of *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* are young girls, we are introduced to their worlds from a child's perspective. In *The Age of Umbrage*, young Guadalupe "Guada" de Leon, who grows up in the servants' quarters of the wealthy Almagro family's estate in Manila, finds comfort in stray cats and tales of *manananggal*

as she navigates the realities of her social status. Guada's estranged father Hernani "Nani" de Leon's absence and her mother Asuncion "Siony" Pelayo's unfulfilled dreams of success further deepen her isolation, hence her preference for fiction over reality. This is evident early in the narrative when Guada, a self-proclaimed bookworm, is engrossed in *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology* by Maximo D. Ramos. Though Siony explains to Guada the concept of mythology, she is unsure about the distinction between "upper" and "lower" mythology. The book introduces Guada to a range of supernatural beings: *kapre*, dark-skinned giants perched on tree branches smoking cigars; *tiyanak*, ghostly infants crying in rice fields; *aswang*, shapeshifters that transform into monstrous dogs and prey on unsuspecting travelers; and *tikbalang*, horse-headed creatures that walk like men. However, the figure that most fascinates Guada is the *manananggal*, a vampiric creature that splits in half at night, leaving its lower torso behind while its upper half takes flight in search of pregnant women (Zafra 13-14).

This enduring belief in Philippine folklore among Filipino children is also central to *Stray Cats*, a young adult novel that follows eighth-graders Elisa Paz and Raquel Madria as they immerse themselves in a self-created magical world in which they act as *bruhas* (witches). When Raquel mysteriously disappears, Elisa, accompanied by Oscar Santos, a talking cat, embarks on a quest through the streets of Manila to find her. Their journey exposes them to the stark realities of urban life, including child trafficking and the widening divide between rich and poor—issues that manifest through mythical creatures in the novel such as the *tikbalang*, *batibat*, and *kapre*.

The persistence of these supernatural figures in contemporary narratives aligns with Ramos' observations in *The Creatures of Philippine Lower Mythology* (1971) that lower mythology remains deeply embedded in Philippine culture. Ramos notes that such beliefs enrich children's art, play, and imagination, informing their worldview (4).

In both novels, the young protagonists and their feline companions navigate communities where nonhuman animals are met with varying degrees of disdain, disgust, and indifference. This treatment of nonhuman beings reflects a shift in industrialized societies, where they, as well as children, have been increasingly reduced to commodities. In post-industrial societies, however, nonhuman animals are treated as raw material, processed for food much like manufactured goods (Berger 11). Despite their commodification, nonhuman beings remain central to the cultural imagination of childhood. Historically, representations of nonhuman animals in children's lives were limited, but by the nineteenth century, they became a staple of middle-class childhood, and in the twentieth century, with the rise of large-scale commercial entertainment such as Disney, they extended to children across all social classes (Berger 20). This pervasive presence of commodified nonhuman animal imagery, often spearheaded by global corporations like Disney, also holds significant sway in countries like the Philippines, where Disney products and media are widely consumed (Afinidad-Bernardo; ABS-CBN News; Globe Telecom, Inc.). Similarly, the child protagonists of *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* are immersed in the presence of both real and mythical nonhuman animals who shape their understanding of the world around them.

Similar to Philippine epics where heroes act as leaders and participate in adventures and quests, Guada and Elisa are the heroines of their own narratives, and their nonhuman animal companions “help them succeed in their undertakings” (Eugenio xxi). In *Stray Cats*, Elisa's constant companion is Oscar Santos. Elisa's background as part of “an upper-middle class household” (Sarmiento 1) means the only places she is allowed to venture into alone are her subdivision's park and *sari-sari* store. Her search for Raquel, however, brings her and Oscar Santos to Quiapo Church “to visit the arbulario who raised Oscar Santos after Raquel had rescued him” (Sarmiento 28), Luneta Park to look for the Lady of the Hippopotamus, Olongapo City to speak with Raquel's father, the Manila Police Station to report Raquel's disappearance, and Reposo Cemetery to look for clues. Guada's journey may seem much more mundane in *The Age of Umbrage* as readers follow her

through the typical spaces of lower- and middle-class childhood: her family home, her mother's workplace, public and private school, and public and private transportation. At the beginning of the novel, she has yet to be born; by the end, she is fifteen years old. Every hardship she experiences, from a failed exorcism as an infant to bullying as a teen, is faced with a feline or fiction by her side. When Nani fails to pick her up from nursery school, Guada divides a sandwich and egg into three portions to give to three stray cats as she waits, much to the dismay of her classmate Elsie and Siony (Zafra 12). The night Nani leaves Siony and Guada, Guada dreams of playing with a calico cat before she is taken away by a *manananggal* (Zafra 22). Throughout her time at the Almagro home, she treasures the hours she is able to play "with the family of stray cats who lived in the garden" (Zafra 40). After her mother's death, Guada follows a cat, leading her to a bus she decides to get on alone (Zafra 125). These narratives position Elisa and Guada within a living tradition where nonhuman animals function as vital companions whose presence shapes how the protagonists navigate their worlds and make sense of their experiences.

Beyond serving as companions, the nonhuman creatures in *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* function as symbols, offering the young protagonists glimpses into deeper social realities. This parallels the ways in which children are introduced to nonhuman animals through controlled spaces such as zoos, where visits are often more sentimental than educational. Unlike fairs or sporting events, zoos allow adults to not only show children the real-life versions of their beloved nonhuman animal reproductions, but also to reconnect with their own childhood perceptions of nonhuman animals (Berger 21). In *Stray Cats*, Elisa's relationship with the talking cat Oscar Santos grants her access to an alternative perspective on the world. This is most evident when she meets the Quiapo *arbularyo* (folk healer) who agrees to speak with Elisa once he understands she is associated with Oscar Santos. The *arbularyo* provides Elisa with two vials of liquid she is instructed to throw at attackers; he tells her, "[t]here are people out there who want to do you harm" (Sarmiento 34). Though Elisa and Oscar Santos initially doubt the supposedly supernatural contents of these vials, they are eventually saved by the

arbularyo's potions, setting Edgar Rintala on fire as he admits to being behind Raquel's disappearance as part of a child trafficking operation (Sarmiento 175). Elisa's link to Oscar Santos and belief in folklore afford her safety otherwise unavailable to her alone. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada's fascination with felines and the occult allows her to understand the basics of "othering." As she waits for her father at her nursery school, she discusses the status of stray cats with her classmate Elsie:

"My mom says cats are dirty," said Elsie, who cowered behind the bench lest the beasts claw her eyes out.

"No, they're not," said Guada. "Look, they're cleaning their paws." She crouched down and stroked the calico cat, who rubbed its cheeks against her hand. Maybe she could take the cat home in her knapsack and keep it in her room where her parents wouldn't see it. She could put it in her sock drawer and bring it leftovers.

"Sister Margaret says cats are evil," Elsie went on, with the irritating assurance of one who would never formulate her own opinion in her life.

"She did not."

"Yes, she did. Cats are the pets of the devil. They live with witches and eat babies."

Sister Margaret was the religion teacher. Her method of inculcating religion in four-year-olds was to pronounce things evil. (Zafra 12)

Guada responds to Elsie by calling herself a witch who might "get on a flying broom and eat babies"; their conversation ends with Guada threatening to fly to Elsie's house and eat her (Zafra 13).

Through their encounters with nonhuman animals, both Guada and Elisa come to perceive systems of threat and belonging that remain invisible to others. These figures prompt the protagonists to see beyond their immediate realities, yet remain constrained by how others interpret or instrumentalize them. In the worlds woven by Zafra and Sarmiento, nonhuman animals are positioned through two dominant roles: as meat and as messenger. This dual function illustrates their precarious position—caught between

objectification and symbolic meaning—within the social structures that shape both narratives.

Meat: Physical Marginalization of Nonhuman Animals

Nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* (2023) and *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) exist primarily as raw materials for human consumption, reinforcing their status as disposable commodities rather than sentient beings. While nonhuman beings once played a central role in human imagination, these novels depict a world where they have mainly been reduced to their usefulness as food or labor, their agency erased by the economic structures that dictate their existence. The presence of nonhuman animals in these texts primarily reflects slaughter and commodification, where their value is determined solely by their function in human economies. In this way, *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* reveal the mechanisms through which animals are both omnipresent and invisible.

The physical marginalization of nonhuman animals is especially evident in both novels when they are embedded into the setting as food. In *Stray Cats*, Elisa eats a “tamarind-based soup” (sinigang) while simultaneously feeding the cat, Oscar Santos, “small pieces of fish in between bites” (Sarmiento 41). This moment, in which a nonhuman animal receives scraps from a meal that itself contains nonhuman animal flesh, highlights the pervasiveness of meat consumption and reveals a more unsettling implication: the casual entanglement of care and violence. That Oscar, a cherished companion, is nourished through the death of another animal demonstrates a normalized disassociation in everyday life, where affection toward some nonhuman animals coexists with the consumption of others. In *The Age of Umbrage*, where Siony is a cook, references to food underscore the routine animal consumption: “cured meats” (Zafra 4), “slabs of pork” (18), eggs spilling yolks that “ran down the table legs” (20), and traditional dishes such as “pinangat—pork cooked in coconut milk and chillis, then wrapped in gabi leaves” (31). Even the novel’s references to dietary restrictions, such as religion-based rules

regarding the consumption of “creatures with eyes” (46), reinforce how nonhuman animals are framed not by their sentience but by their edibility.

Beyond references to prepared meals, *The Age of Umbrage* also makes the process of nonhuman animal slaughter visible, briefly disrupting their erasure as living beings. At a wet market, a man is described “unloading a wire cage of live chickens from a rusty van” before grabbing “a chicken, and in a single movement twist[ing] its neck” (Zafra 19). Guada, observing another scene, is “fascinated, as a man in a bloody apron slit fish corpses and pulled out their reeking guts. The floor was wet with blood and melted ice” (Zafra 19). The visceral imagery here momentarily restores visibility to the violence behind meat production, though it remains an accepted and normalized aspect of the setting. This mirrors a broader industrial logic in which nonhuman animal suffering is only considered insofar as it does not interfere with production costs, reinforcing a system in which ethical concerns are secondary to economic efficiency (Singer 219).

Similarly, *Stray Cats* emphasizes how nonhuman animals are stripped of their individuality and reduced to their utility. While some nonhuman creatures in the novel, like Oscar Santos, are imbued with mystical qualities, strays are often reduced to objects of cruelty or function, as reflected in the urban legend that siopao contains cat meat—a myth rooted in historical anxieties over food safety, economic competition, and ethnic discrimination (De Leon). Nardo’s offhand joke to his daughter that the siopao they are eating in a Chinese restaurant is “certified cat-free” (Sarmiento 17) may seem like an innocuous remark, but it draws attention to the perception of stray cats as disposable and interchangeable with food. The rumor that cats are secretly used in meat production trivializes their suffering, turning them into objects of disgust rather than beings deserving of ethical consideration. This devaluation extends beyond urban legends to the functional use of nonhuman animals, as seen when Elisa’s Nanay suggests leaving a cat at a bakery to “help kill all their rats” (Sarmiento 40). The assumption that nonhuman beings will inevitably be consumed or exploited prevents them from being seen as subjects in their own right, limiting their presence in the narrative to their economic function (Singer 219).

By depicting these moments without sentimentality, both novels illustrate how the reduction of nonhuman animals to meat is not just a physical process but an ideological one that structures human-animal relationships in ways that prevent ethical reflection. In *Stray Cats*, the transformation of nonhuman animals into consumable goods is implied through the instrumentalization of stray cats, while in *The Age of Umbrage*, it is made explicit through scenes of slaughter. The novels expose how nonhuman creatures have been removed from cultural consciousness even as they remain central to human economies, ultimately asking their readers to confront a world where nonhuman animals exist only in their absence, where they are most visible when they are already gone.

However, while most nonhuman animals disappear into systems of consumption in the novels, one category remains deeply embedded in human characters' lives: pets. Unlike their commodified counterparts, pets occupy a unique space in modern societies, where their visibility has only increased. Rather than vanishing, household pets have multiplied, particularly in urban environments where they are no longer valued for their traditional roles—guard dogs, hunting dogs, or mouse-killing cats—but instead for their ability to provide emotional companionship (Berger 12). This shift reflects a reconfiguration of human-animal relationships, one in which domesticated nonhuman animals serve as objects of projection rather than independent beings. At the same time, this sentimental attachment to pets exists alongside widespread nonhuman animal exploitation, creating a moral inconsistency in which some nonhuman animals are loved and protected while others are systematically used for food, clothing, or experimentation (Singer 19). This contradiction is what posthumanist scholars Nicklas Lindgren and Johan Öhman refer to as a crucial area of inquiry. They suggest that a “studying up perspective” allows for a critical examination of these inconsistencies, focusing on “why some animals are worth saving and addressed as the ultimate cost of climate change and human exploitation (polar bears and the poaching of elephants and tigers), while others end up on our plates or our sofas” (Lindgren and Öhman 1210). This is evident in the novels, where pets exist within human narratives as reflections of human needs, mirroring their

human companions' emotions and serving as symbols of personal connection. In *Stray Cats*, the protagonist's father, Nardo, explicitly likens cats to people, telling Elisa,

I thought you should have a cat because cats are like people. Anyway, cats are very intelligent. They are probably the only animals who can use human beings to their own benefit. They don't have the same obligation that dogs have about returning our affection. Cats are disloyal and think only of themselves. Sure, they have cute furry faces and large eyes, but they also have fangs and claws for hunting. Cats are passersby who have no masters. They are manipulative and amoral. In a way, you should be thankful you didn't get too attached to Oscar Santos. (Sarmiento 19)

His reasoning for allowing Elisa to have a pet is not based on the cat's independent existence but on the cat's ability to serve as a relatable figure, paralleling the way pets are often conditioned to reflect human emotions and expectations (Berger 12). This is the same concept present when Elisa remarks to her father, "Oscar Santos never took food off the table" (Sarmiento 18), suggesting that pets are expected to conform to behavioral norms imposed by human society.

A similar dynamic emerges in *The Age of Umbrage*, depicting how human-animal relationships center around feeding and dependency. The novel depicts Guada and Rhodora feeding a colony of stray cats behind their grade school canteen, providing them with leftovers (Zafra 38-39). This interaction exemplifies the shift from nonhuman animals as independent beings to nonhuman animals as reliant on human kindness, reflecting how pets in modern societies exist within structures of dependency (Berger 12). Even as these moments suggest compassion for nonhuman beings, they exist within a world where other nonhuman animals are simultaneously commodified and consumed, making pet culture an isolated expression of care rather than an extension of ethical concern for animals (Singer 20).

The relationships depicted in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* support the argument that a pet "completes" its owner, offering "responses to aspects of his character

which would otherwise remain unconfirmed” (Berger 12). In these narratives, nonhuman animals continue to be ever-present in human lives, but only within the limited framework of human purpose, proving that nonhuman animals exist not as cohabitants of the world but as extensions of human identity.

Messenger: Cultural Marginalization of Nonhuman Animals

While nonhuman animals are physically marginalized as food or pets in the two novels, their cultural marginalization is more complex. Instead of being encountered as real entities, nonhuman beings often serve as anthropomorphized figures, supernatural symbols, or metaphors for human experiences. This transformation is evident in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage*, where nonhuman animals are repeatedly framed as symbols or spectacles. A posthumanist lens repudiates such an approach. As Anna Barcz argues,

The animal ceases to be a mirror of human desires, passions, anomalies; a carrier of permanent features of the moralistic character – like in fairy tales; it does not symbolise the world of humanist values any more mainly because it becomes a specific, individually characterised hero, a persona hiding a real creature behind the mask. (257)

In *Stray Cats*, Oscar Santos pointedly asks, “What am I?” before answering his own question: “I’m a cat. But you already knew that.” (Sarmiento 10). This moment underscores the anthropocentric scripting of nonhuman animal characters, their identities already determined by cultural expectations (Berger 13). Even Oscar Santos, a cat who speaks, cannot escape his symbolic role as his speech serves only to reflect Elisa’s emotional or narrative arcs rather than assert his own subjectivity. Oscar’s narrative role becomes clearest when he functions as a source of reassurance or protection. “As angered as she was with his disappearing act,” the narrator notes, “Elisa did feel comforted that Oscar Santos found his way back to her” (Sarmiento 26). In another moment, Elisa claims

him as hers: “‘I have my Oscar Santos. There’s no one like him anywhere else in the world’” (Sarmiento 190). These declarations position Oscar as a source of emotional stability, whose value is defined by what he provides Elisa. Even at key plot junctures, such as when he defends her from Edgar Rintala, Oscar’s actions function in service of Elisa’s protection. He leaps from a picnic basket “large and tense,” baring fangs and claws as he confronts Rintala, stopping short of contact only when the man retaliates by hurling a chair at him (Sarmiento 130). In this scene, Oscar becomes a symbol of both courage and loyalty, yet his intervention reinforces a familiar trope: the nonhuman animal as guardian of the protagonist, scripted into action to serve the story’s human center. While Oscar may appear to possess agency through speech and physical action, his narrative function remains instrumental. He is summoned in moments of emotional need or physical danger, his presence offering insight into Elisa’s inner world rather than illuminating his own. His character thus illustrates how nonhuman animals in literature, even when given human-like traits, often remain bound by representational limits that prevent them from being perceived as subjects in their own right. Similarly, when Elisa reads *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology*, her engagement with nonhuman animals is filtered through folklore rather than direct experience (Sarmiento 13).

The role of nonhuman animals in Philippine folklore further emphasizes their cultural marginalization. When the Lady of the Hippopotamus, a soothsayer referred to Guada by the *arbularyo*, explains the legend of the *tikbalang*, describing it as “the demon horse” whose role is “to lead travelers astray in the forest” (Sarmiento 47), she highlights how nonhuman animals in mythology are often framed as tricksters, threats, or omens rather than as real creatures. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada’s dream sequence features a cat participating in a mythical battle with a *manananggal* who flows “into the window” and seizes “Guada in its talons”; the cat tries “to scratch the monster’s face” but is “batted away” (Zafra 22). In both cases, nonhuman animals are inserted into human-centered supernatural narratives, their existence shaped by storytelling rather than lived realities (Berger 16).

Beyond mythology, nonhuman animals in both novels are frequently used as metaphors for marginalized human groups. In *Stray Cats*, Oscar Santos draws a direct parallel between homeless children and stray nonhuman animals: “Street children are like cats” as they “keep within a certain radius” when choosing where to live and move (Sarmiento 156). This comparison does not shed light on the nature or experience of cats; instead, it highlights the precarity of the street children’s lives. Rather than being acknowledged as sentient beings with lives of their own, nonhuman animals are positioned as conceptual placeholders within human narratives of suffering and abandonment (Berger 17).

This reduction of nonhuman animals to symbolic roles is reiterated by their transformation into spectacle. In *Stray Cats*, a climactic moment describes cats emerging “out of the smoke” (Sarmiento 195), turning them into supernatural figures whose primary function is to create dramatic effect. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, a storm is imagined as being accompanied by “the neighborhood cats and dogs shriek[ing],” reducing them to background noise in a moment of human crisis (Zafra 9).

In these moments, stray cats are largely unseen by society, reflecting how marginalized groups also occupy invisible corners of cities. In *The Age of Umbrage*, nonhuman animals deemed useful by humans exist only to “fight vermin” (Zafra 12), tolerated only because they serve as pest control rather than because they possess intrinsic worth. If nonhuman animals serve no purpose, they are depicted as dead, with “the flattened carcass of a bullfrog” (Zafra 114) being ignored and a taxidermied iguana used as an absurd prop of destruction. Guada’s frustration in *The Age of Umbrage* escalates into a violent fantasy in which the iguana becomes a weapon: she imagines picking up a microscope to bludgeon her classmates, hurling a stool at a cabinet of preserved specimens, and finally, grabbing the stuffed iguana to wield as a club. In this imagined sequence, she moves through the classroom in a destructive rage, culminating in an act of grotesque violence as she forces the reptile down a classmate’s throat (Zafra 113). The scene’s exaggerated brutality emphasizes how dead nonhuman animals—detached from

their former lives—become absurd, decontextualized objects, highlighting their perceived lack of value beyond human use. This treatment of nonhuman animals as consumables, contaminants, or mere background elements in urban landscapes reflects the deep-rooted structures of human dominance over other species; their use in narratives as props exhibits how cultural narratives sustain the marginalization of nonhuman animals, shaping how they are perceived, valued, and, ultimately, discarded.

Nonhuman animals are further reduced to symbols of consumerism in *The Age of Umbrage*, their cultural meanings increasingly shaped by branding and media. Guada as an infant wearing “a Hello Kitty onesie” (Zafra 9) illustrates how nonhuman animals have been commodified into sanitized cartoon representations, detached from their real-world existence (Berger 13). This commercialization is present even in Guada’s early education, which is shaped by stories such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, where nonhuman animals are filtered through folklore and fairy tales (Zafra 7). Similarly, Guada names the three stray cats in her nursery school Han, Leia, and Luke, directly linking them to pop cultural fantasy (Zafra 16). Even in adult characters, nonhuman animal references are used for dramatic effect: Guada’s father, Nani, is described as a man who cannot be held down by Siony— “[o]nly his carefully maintained image as a suave man about town prevented him from leaping up and howling like a werewolf” (Zafra 3). Nonhuman animals in the novel are either turned into sanitized icons that entertain or reshaped into exaggerated representations of vice. The portrayal of landlords as vultures or corrupt figures as crocodiles exemplifies this process, where nonhuman animals are assigned human traits for dramatic effect rather than being understood as creatures with their own distinct realities (Berger 17).

Even when nonhuman animals appear in daily life, they are often framed in ways that reinforce their exclusion from human society. In *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada’s mother scolds her after seeing her near a cat: “I told you not to touch those filthy animals” (Zafra 16). The association of stray animals with filth and disease mirrors the common perception of nonhuman animals as undesirable and outside the bounds of human

civilization (Berger 14). Instead of being acknowledged as part of the same ecological system, they are treated as nuisances, highlighting their cultural displacement.

The cultural displacement of nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* extends beyond folklore and metaphor to physical spaces where their visibility is carefully controlled. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the zoo, a site that claims to offer access to nonhuman life while reinforcing its confinement and separation from human society. While symbolic constructions in myth and folklore obscure the realities of nonhuman animals in cultural narratives, zoos reinforce their marginalization through physical captivity, framing them as spectacles rather than autonomous beings. Rather than fostering genuine encounters between humans and nonhuman animals, zoos function as monuments to the impossibility of such encounters, offering only controlled and artificial displays of nonhuman animal life (Berger 19). This impossibility is also a consequence of modernity's efforts to control and distance the nonhuman. In this context, as Anna Barcz notes, “the return of animals is also the return of the Other who arouses interest and enforces being referenced to but cannot be completely familiarised” (257). The zoo, therefore, becomes a site where this “Other” is contained and managed, its unfamiliarity made safe for human viewing.

In *Stray Cats*, the cultural displacement of zoo animals is reflected in the way they are spoken about rather than directly encountered. The isolation of zoo animals is made explicit in a conversation about Bertha, a real-life hippopotamus from the Manila Zoo. “I saw it on the TV,” Nanay says. “Sad Bertha, died alone in the Manila Zoo. No baby hippos for her. You think I will be that way? All alone?” (Sarmiento 41). Here, Bertha’s story is framed as a human metaphor for loneliness. This theme is echoed in *The Age of Umbrage*, where nonhuman animals are invoked as symbols of entrapment and control. The gated community of Alhambra, where the Almagro family resides, is described as being “surrounded by high walls, like a medieval castle, and patrolled by armed guards with large dogs” (Zafra 49), mirroring the controlled environment of a zoo. The presence of

guard dogs, much like the presence of zoo animals, is meant to be seen; it is a display of authority rather than a relationship between species.

In both novels, nonhuman animals, whether real or imagined, are consistently framed through the lens of their constructed surroundings; cats are defined by their being of the streets, dogs are characterized by where they defecate (Sarmiento 97), and Guada's imaginary iguana resides in the taxidermy cabinet of her school's laboratory (Zafra 113). Even when nonhuman animals appear on television or in online searches, they are mediated through human narratives, ensuring that they remain objects of observation. Nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* exemplify the way captivity reshapes their existence to fit human narratives, illustrating a world in which nonhuman animals are seen but never truly encountered (Berger 24).

Enduring Bonds: Nonhuman Animals and Hope

Both *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* conclude with a sense of uncertainty. *The Age of Umbrage*, whose beginning includes a scene in which Guada depends on Siony to take her on a bus home, closes with Guada boarding a bus "entirely alone" (Zafra 125), setting off on an adventure with no clear destination. *Stray Cats* leaves Elisa still searching for Raquel but content in the knowledge that "she saw that within each monster was a person, albeit one capable of terrible, terrible things" (Sarmiento 201). What makes these endings feel particularly optimistic is the presence of their feline companions. In the final moments of *The Age of Umbrage*, the familiar calico cat that has accompanied Guada throughout her journey watches her, yawns, and then disappears "through the ruins of the old building" before vanishing "into the bushes" (Zafra 126). This brief encounter sparks a moment of emotional clarity in Guada, leading her to a bus conductor and a bus full of strangers, where she is suddenly overwhelmed with "great affection for everyone she had ever met" (Zafra 126). This is in contrast to the beginning of the novel when, even as an infant, she took umbrage at strangers' opinions and told an old woman to die (Zafra 9).

Stray Cats ends with Elisa clutching a cardboard angel given to her by a homeless boy named Tomas, who knew Raquel. Elisa understands she would one day have to face similar “demons,” but “along with Oscar Santos, she would be prepared to stand up against them” (Sarmiento 201). In that moment, Oscar Santos’ gaze reminds her of “good things, good people” and those “willing to help rather than exploit others” (Sarmiento 201). Though their external circumstances remain largely unchanged, both Guada and Elisa experience internal transformations that fill them with renewed hope—changes that, if these endings suggest anything, are deeply tied to their connections with nonhuman animals. Echoing the narrative structure of Philippine epics, where heroes are aided by magical animal companions, Guada and Elisa may be read as contemporary heroines whose journeys are marked by the presence of nonhuman animals that, while symbolically powerful, are ultimately constrained by human-centered discourse.

While *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* conclude with a sense of hope, largely underscored by the enduring presence of feline companions, a critical posthumanist lens urges deeper reflection on whether these moments of interspecies intimacy genuinely transcend anthropocentric frameworks. The “animal turn” in the humanities is a direct consequence of a crisis in traditional humanism that, as Carlo Salzani writes, opened an “ontological gap” where “other species [came] galloping in” (98). Posthumanism seeks to “challenge traditional, fundamental assumptions of the humanities which place the human at the top of the hierarchy” (Barcz 249) and, in doing so, interrogates the very classifications that “consign the animal to a lesser form of life” (Haraway, qtd. in Salzani 100). From this perspective, a truly hopeful ending would not just feature a nonhuman animal companion but would also recognize humanity’s entanglement in a “human-animal continuum,” treating the relationship as “an open experiment, not as a foregone moral conclusion about allegedly universal values or qualities” (Lindgren and Öhman 1205).

The novels certainly *suggest* subtle sites of interspecies connection, and the feline companions *complicate* the dominant anthropocentric framing, yet a full recognition of nonhuman animal subjectivity and agency often remains elusive, constrained by narratives

that prioritize human emotional or developmental arcs. Both novels inhabit a complex space, reflecting both the pervasive impact of Western anthropocentrism and the enduring influence of Philippine folklore. While the novels largely position nonhuman animals within utilitarian and symbolic constraints, the spectral presence of mythical creatures and the profound bonds with feline companions gesture toward a latent potential for more reciprocal interspecies relationalities. This potential invites further exploration into how Philippine literature might continue to challenge and reconfigure human dominance over nonhuman life.

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Entangled Learning: Rewilding Education through Posthuman Pedagogy for Multispecies Synergies

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Abstract:

This article explores entangled learning as a posthuman pedagogical framework that reconfigures education beyond human-centered paradigms toward relational, multispecies co-learning. Challenging the anthropocentric foundations of traditional education, posthuman pedagogy reimagines learning as a distributed, material-discursive process that unfolds through dynamic intra-actions among human and more-than-human agents—including animals, plants, technologies, and ecosystems. This study conceptualizes rewilding education as an alternative to industrialized schooling models, advocating for relational, flexible, and ecologically cohabited learning spaces. The paper further explores multispecies education as a practice of interspecies co-learning that honors the agency and communicative capacities of nonhuman beings, particularly in child-centered and outdoor educational contexts. Through a critical discourse analysis of key theoretical and empirical literature, the study interrogates the ethical, ontological, and epistemological implications of integrating posthumanist approaches into contemporary teacher education. It identifies structural and ideological challenges—such as regulatory constraints, colonial legacies, and anthropocentric curriculum standards—that inhibit the adoption of posthuman pedagogy. It proposes a pedagogical framework for rewilding education, offering practical principles to create ecologically attuned, inclusive, and ethical learning spaces that cultivate relational accountability and collective well-being in a shared world. By centering



multispecies synergies, ecological care, and planetary well-being, this article offers a vital educational framework for navigating the complexities of the Anthropocene and fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Keywords: Entangled Learning, Posthuman Pedagogy, Rewilding Education, Multispecies Synergies.

Introduction

In an era marked by escalating ecological crises, rapid biodiversity loss, climate disruptions, and the accelerating pace of technological innovation, education is increasingly being called upon to respond in more reflective, ethical, and future-oriented ways (Mayse). Traditional paradigms rooted in anthropocentric, industrial-age models are proving inadequate in addressing the complex, interdependent challenges of the Anthropocene (Rendtorff). Consequently, educational thought and practice are undergoing a profound process of reconceptualization (Simmonds). At the forefront of this shift is the convergence of posthuman philosophy, ecological rewilding, and multispecies relationality, which together offer a radical and transformative framework for reimagining what it means to teach and learn in a more-than-human world (Cremin). Rather than positioning humans as isolated, rational actors at the center of pedagogical concerns—this emerging framework emphasizes entanglement, interdependence, and co-agency between human and nonhuman beings—including animals, plants, ecosystems, and technologies (Copeland et al.). It calls for a reorientation of education toward practices that are ecologically embedded, ethically responsive, and inclusive of diverse forms of intelligence and lifeways. In doing so, it opens up new possibilities for educational futures that are grounded in care, reciprocity, and multispecies flourishing (Meijer).

Entangled Learning represents a transformative and emergent approach to education that fundamentally challenges traditional anthropocentric pedagogical models

by embracing posthuman perspectives and fostering a deep appreciation for multispecies relationships (Gedik; Gachago et al.). Rooted in the philosophical underpinnings of posthumanism, this model of learning shifts the focus from human-centered knowledge production to a more distributed and relational understanding of learning as an interconnected process. It acknowledges that education does not occur in isolation within the confines of human cognition alone, but rather unfolds through dynamic interactions among diverse agents across species, technologies, and ecologies. This educational paradigm emerges from the intersection of posthuman theory, ecological restoration principles, and critical pedagogy, proposing a radical reimagining of how learning occurs within complex, symbiotic, and ever-evolving networks of human and more-than-human entities (Copeland et al.). It encourages learners and educators alike to question dominant narratives of mastery, control, and human exceptionalism by engaging with the ethical, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of learning that extend beyond the human. Rather than viewing education as a purely human enterprise, entangled learning recognizes the agency, intelligence, and knowledge systems of nonhuman actors—including animals, plants, artificial intelligences, microbial life, and entire ecosystems—as active participants in the co-creation of educational experiences (Meijer). By doing so, it offers a more inclusive, responsive, and ecologically attuned vision of pedagogy that is urgently relevant in the face of planetary crises and the need for sustainable coexistence.

Objectives of the study

The present study seeks to explore and conceptualize entangled learning as a transformative, posthuman pedagogical framework that reimagines education beyond anthropocentric and industrialized models. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. To examine the theoretical foundations of posthuman pedagogy.

2. To conceptualize rewilding education as a transformative pedagogical framework fostering ecological consciousness, relational ethics, and multispecies co-flourishing.
3. To investigate practical strategies and pedagogical practices that integrate multispecies relationality and posthuman perspectives into educational settings.
4. To identify the key challenges, ethical considerations, and implications for implementing posthuman and rewilded pedagogies in diverse contexts.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a conceptual and discourse-analysis methodology, aimed at rethinking education in the context of the Anthropocene through the lenses of posthumanist theory, ecological rewilding, and multispecies relationality. Rather than generating empirical data, the study critically interrogates the ideological, ethical, and ontological assumptions embedded in dominant educational paradigms and explores alternative discourses that support more inclusive, ecologically attuned pedagogies. Discourse analysis method has been used to examine how educational discourses construct the human subject, marginalize nonhuman agency, and perpetuate binary hierarchies, while also amplifying counter-discourses that foreground ecological ethics and multispecies relationality.

An interdisciplinary literature review was conducted through keyword searches in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, using terms such as “posthuman education,” “entangled pedagogy,” “rewilding learning,” “intra-action,” “ecopedagogy,” “multispecies learning,” and “decolonial ecology.” From an initial pool of 112 scholarly sources, a final set of 36 texts was selected for in-depth conceptual analysis based on their alignment with the research objectives. These texts span a range of disciplines, including posthuman philosophy, education theory, environmental humanities, sociology, cultural studies, animal studies, and decolonial scholarship. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-

reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and book chapters published between 2010 and 2025, with an emphasis on works contributing to theoretical and pedagogical debates around post-anthropocentric and ecologically attuned education.

Several major works underpin this study's theoretical and pedagogical framework. Karen Barad's "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness" and her concept of "intra-action" (Barad; Kleinman & Barad) provide a foundational ontological shift toward relational becoming. Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory, particularly her articulation of the "nature-culture continuum," informs the rejection of human exceptionalism (Braidotti). Donna Haraway's cyborg and companion species thinking is indirectly echoed in discussions of multispecies co-agency. Tim Fawns' "An Entangled Pedagogy" contributes a practical lens for understanding the mutual constitution of technology, pedagogy, and values (Fawns), while Hilary Cremin's *Rewilding Education* serves as a key text reimagining schools as living, ecological systems. Eva Meijer's work on animal communication and children's multispecies learning (Meijer) is central to theorizing interspecies pedagogy. Empirical and applied perspectives from scholars like Daniela Gachago et al. on equity-oriented learning design, Michael Sitka-Sage et al. on critical rewilding, and Copeland et al. on experiential posthuman pedagogy, collectively inform the study's approach to integrating theory with practice. Together, these texts construct a richly layered foundation for posthuman, rewilded, and multispecies pedagogies in the Anthropocene.

Theoretical Foundations of Posthuman Pedagogy

Posthuman pedagogy fundamentally challenges the Western humanistic tradition that positions humans as the central measure of all things, what Braidotti describes as the 'Man of Reason' paradigm (Braidotti). This pedagogical approach draws extensively from feminist posthuman theory, particularly the work of scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway, who argue for a more-than-human understanding of agency

and knowledge production (Strom and Mills). The posthuman condition recognizes what Braidotti calls the "nature-culture continuum," which dissolves categorical distinctions between human and nonhuman entities in favor of understanding them as mutually constituting assemblages (Braidotti).

Central to posthuman pedagogy is Karen Barad's concept of agential realism, which proposes that phenomena emerge through "intra-actions" rather than interactions between pre-existing entities (Kleinman and Barad). In educational contexts, this means that knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to student but emerges through the dynamic entanglements of multiple agencies including humans, materials, environments, and technologies (Gachago et al.). This onto-epistemological approach fundamentally reconceptualizes learning as a material-discursive practice where meaning and matter are co-constituted (Braidotti).

Tim Fawns' concept of "entangled pedagogy" provides a crucial framework for understanding how technology, pedagogy, purpose, context, and values are mutually constituting rather than hierarchically ordered (Fawns). This approach recognizes that educational practices emerge through complex networks of relations where agency is distributed across multiple actors rather than concentrated in human subjects alone. The entangled model emphasizes collaboration, uncertainty, and responsiveness as key characteristics of effective educational design (Fawns).

Posthuman pedagogy employs diffractive reading and teaching methods that attend to patterns of difference and interference rather than seeking to represent fixed knowledge (Fjeldstad). This approach, inspired by feminist science studies, involves reading multiple texts, experiences, and phenomena through each other to generate new insights and possibilities (Strom and Mills). Teachers become what some scholars call "barycentric pedagogues" who facilitate learning assemblages rather than directing knowledge transmission (Fjeldstad).

Entanglement as Educational Principle

Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action," a core element of her agential realism, provides a foundational theoretical framework for rethinking how learning and agency unfold within educational contexts (Kleinman and Barad). Unlike the conventional notion of 'interaction,' which presumes the existence of independent, pre-formed entities that come together in relation, intra-action posits that entities do not precede their relations. Instead, they emerge through their relational entanglements—they are mutually constituted in the very process of becoming. This ontological shift moves us away from dualistic thinking (e.g., teacher vs. learner, human vs. environment) and toward a more relational ontology that recognizes the co-emergence of subjectivity, agency, and knowledge through complex, ongoing encounters (Kleinman and Barad).

In educational settings, this means that learners, teachers, materials, technologies, physical spaces, and more-than-human actors (such as animals, plants, and ecological systems) do not simply exist as autonomous agents participating in education (Saari). Rather, they are enacted through the intra-active dynamics of learning itself. Knowledge is not a static entity transmitted from one subject to another; it is generated through entangled practices, where meaning and matter are co-produced. Barad's framework implies that learning is not merely epistemological (about knowing) but also ontological (about being and becoming), thereby blurring the boundaries between knowledge, identity, and environment.

As such, educational environments must be reconceived not as neutral containers for human-centered learning, but as material-discursive assemblages in which physical, social, technological, discursive, and more-than-human elements are inextricably linked in shaping the learning process (Sakçak). Walls, furniture, digital platforms, climate conditions, animals, and microbial life are not passive backgrounds but active participants in the constitution of pedagogical encounters. This perspective fundamentally challenges dominant models of pedagogy that center the human subject and instead invites educators

to engage with the ethical, material, and affective dimensions of learning as emergent and distributed across bodies, spaces, and species.

Rewilding Education: From Control to Co-existence

The notion of rewilding education draws conceptual and philosophical inspiration from ecological restoration practices, which aim to re-establish autonomous natural processes, promote biodiversity, and reduce human overmanagement of ecosystems (Sitka-Sage et al.; Cremin). In the educational context, rewilding emerges as a counter-hegemonic response to technocratic, industrialized models of schooling that emphasize uniformity, surveillance, and instrumental learning outcomes. It proposes a radical rethinking of pedagogical paradigms by shifting from hierarchical, standardized, and compartmentalized systems of instruction toward more decentralized, organic, and ecologically responsive frameworks of learning.

Rather than perceiving the educational institution as a mechanistic factory designed for producing measurable outputs, educational rewilding reconceptualizes it as a complex, living ecosystem. This ecological metaphor highlights the dynamic interdependence of all educational elements—learners, educators, content, community, environment, and materials—each functioning as a vital node within a broader pedagogical web. It promotes adaptable, innovative, and resilient learning environments that embrace diverse intelligences and epistemologies. It encourages pluralism in pedagogical methods, values diversity in learner needs and backgrounds, and cultivates an educational ethos grounded in care, sustainability, and interconnectedness (Cremin).

A cornerstone of rewilding education is the reintegration of nature into the learning process—not as an inert resource to be extracted for academic ends, but as an ontological and epistemological partner in learning. Nature, in this vision, becomes a co-teacher—offering multisensory, embodied, and affective experiences that cannot be replicated within the confines of traditional classroom walls. Pedagogical strategies such as outdoor classrooms, place-based education, ecological inquiry, and community-engaged

environmental projects immerse learners in real-world contexts. These approaches foster a profound sense of ecological consciousness, rootedness, and ethical responsibility. Empirical studies affirm that such nature-based learning environments promote enhanced cognitive performance, emotional regulation, physical health, and socio-emotional resilience. Moreover, they nurture a deep-seated ethic of care, reciprocity, and ecological stewardship among students (Rymanowicz et al.; MacQuarrie et al.).

Furthermore, educational rewilding promotes *experiential and holistic modes of learning* that engage the whole person—mind, body, spirit, and senses. In contrast to disembodied, abstract instruction that privileges rote memorization and decontextualized knowledge, rewilding supports tactile, participatory, and inquiry-based practices. These may include environmental monitoring, wildlife observation, seed saving, composting, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and creative expressions using natural materials. Such activities foster both ecological literacy and praxis-based understanding, while also honoring indigenous and local knowledges that are often marginalized within mainstream curricula (Bates). Learning is thus situated, relational, and materially grounded, enabling learners to cultivate a sense of agency and belonging within the ecological and cultural landscapes they inhabit (Rymanowicz et al.).

At its core, rewilding education is a decolonial, ethical, and ecological imperative. It challenges dominant paradigms of control, commodification, and anthropocentrism in education, calling instead for modes of co-existence, reciprocity, and relational accountability. It invites educators to reimagine their roles not as gatekeepers of knowledge but as facilitators of emergent, co-constructed learning ecologies. Learners are not passive recipients but active participants, attuned to the rhythms and responsibilities of the more-than-human world.

Ultimately, educational rewilding is not merely a return to nature, but a forward-looking pedagogical movement that reclaims education's capacity to nurture wonder, respect, resilience, and planetary well-being. It urges the cultivation of a future-ready

generation—one that is ecologically literate, emotionally intelligent, and ethically grounded in practices of co-flourishing with the Earth.

Multispecies Education: Synergies of humans and nonhumans

Multispecies education is an emergent and transformative pedagogical paradigm that challenges anthropocentric models of schooling by fostering shared learning experiences between human and nonhuman beings. Rooted in posthumanist and ecopedagogical thought, this approach conceptualizes education as a dynamic, interspecies process that takes place within multispecies communities—complex, entangled assemblages in which human and nonhuman agents co-exist, co-learn, and co-evolve (Widrig). It recognizes that spaces such as cities, schools, gardens, and neighborhoods are not exclusively human domains but are ecologically interwoven habitats where plants, animals, fungi, microbes, and humans participate in mutual processes of sense-making, adaptation, and meaning construction.

Eva Meijer's works have been instrumental in articulating how multispecies education entails the co-creation of new forms of communication, play, knowledge production, and collaboration that cross species boundaries. Meijer's works underscores that learning does not occur solely through human linguistic or cognitive channels, but also through gestures, sounds, movements, and spatial interactions that are meaningful across species. In this view, education is reconceived not merely as a cognitive transaction, but as a relational, affective, and embodied practice in which humans and nonhumans negotiate shared understandings and develop forms of interspecies solidarity (Meijer).

Multispecies education takes diverse and context-specific forms. These range from school gardens—where learners engage directly with plants, pollinators, and soil organisms in hands-on, place-based learning—to classroom environments that include therapy animals, fostering empathy, emotional regulation, and cross-species

companionship (Khan and Bowen). Importantly, however, multispecies education does not merely entail bringing animals or ecological elements into anthropocentric educational settings for human benefit. Rather, it emphasizes learning in ecologically cohabited spaces—wetlands, forests, urban green zones, and rural ecosystems—where both human and nonhuman beings alike are recognized as rightful inhabitants. In these contexts, educational activities are co-shaped by the behaviors, rhythms, and responses of multiple species, rather than being solely directed by human objectives.

Children, in particular, play a vital epistemological and ethical role in advancing multispecies pedagogies. Research shows that children often possess a heightened sensitivity to the emotional states, habits, and communicative cues of nonhuman animals and are capable of forming deep empathetic bonds with other species (Meijer). Their imaginative capacities, intuitive understandings, and affective investments enable them to navigate multispecies relations with openness and care—traits that are often dulled or repressed by adult-centric schooling systems. Consequently, multispecies education positions children not only as learners but as co-designers of more inclusive, relationally attuned educational futures.

At the heart of multispecies education lies the principle of *democratic inclusion*—an insistence that both human and nonhuman beings deserve recognition as stakeholders in the decisions that shape their shared environments and learning experiences (Saari). This ethical stance demands the development of novel institutional frameworks capable of accounting for *nonhuman agency*, interests, and well-being. It calls for educational planning and policy to attend to more-than-human voices—those expressed not through verbal speech but through behavior, ecology, presence, and affect. For example, the well-being of therapy dogs, the habitat needs of pollinators in school gardens, or the preservation of microbial life in soil curricula must all be considered with equal seriousness to human concerns.

Multispecies education is thus not simply an innovative pedagogical technique—it is a transformative worldview that challenges the boundaries of who can teach, who can learn, and who belongs in educational spaces. By reconfiguring education as a multispecies endeavor, this approach opens pathways for co-flourishing in a shared world marked by ecological interdependence, vulnerability, and hope.

Pedagogical Framework for Rewilding Education

Research indicates that wild pedagogies can be effectively implemented through four key areas that reconfigure educational spaces, practices, and relationships (Van Tol and Wals). First, *wild and caring learning spaces* emphasize the creation of outdoor environments that foster rich human–more-than-human interactions (Lynch). Schools can develop biodiverse outdoor classrooms and living landscapes that invite learners to immerse themselves in natural environments regularly, regardless of weather conditions, cultivating care and attentiveness to multispecies presence. Second, *learning from self-will and wonder* as proposed by (Van Tol and Wals) foregrounds curiosity-driven, student-centered approaches that privilege children’s interests, questions, and discoveries. Practices such as slow pedagogy (Keel), which allow time for deep observation and reflection, as well as opportunities for unstructured exploration, nurture wonder and relational knowing. Third, *relational learning with the world* integrates mindful observation, embodied exercises, and creative imagination to foster a sense of entanglement with other-than-human life. Activities like sit-spot journaling, phenological tracking, and role-playing from nonhuman perspectives cultivate empathy and attentiveness to the rhythms and agencies of the more-than-human world. Finally, *disruptive learning for the world* challenges anthropocentric norms and assumptions embedded in conventional education, inviting learners to undergo inner transformation through emotional connection to place and species. This dimension fosters a deep sense of responsibility, ethical care, and environmental stewardship as learners come to see themselves as participants in planetary well-being (Van Tol and Wals).

Complementing these wild pedagogies are specific more-than-human practices that cultivate multispecies synergies in education. *Becoming-wild with materials* involves reimagining everyday objects and materials not as inert resources but as active co-creators of knowledge and meaning (Hankin and Hogarth). *Pedagogies of attunement* invite students and teachers alike to listen and respond to the teachings of more-than-human entities—birds, plants, water, and landscapes—learning through quiet attentiveness and reciprocity (Sidebottom and Mycroft). Finally, *multispecies storytelling* employs narratives and creative expressions that center the voices, experiences, and perspectives of nonhuman beings, helping learners to imagine the world through diverse, entangled subjectivities (Radomska). Together, these practices enact a posthuman, rewilded pedagogy that is grounded in care, wonder, attunement, and ethical responsibility for the more-than-human world.

The pedagogical framework for rewilding education also aligns closely with the philosophical premise of constructivism, particularly in its emphasis on learners as active participants in meaning-making through their interactions with the world. Just as constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed rather than transmitted (Riegler), rewilding education views learning as an emergent, relational, and situated process that unfolds within dynamic human and more-than-human entanglements. Instead of a fixed body of knowledge to be mastered, learning is seen as co-constructed through lived experiences with multispecies others, ecological systems, and material environments. This resonates with social constructivist perspectives (Vygotsky & Cole) that stress the importance of context, interaction, and cultural mediation in learning processes. Rewilding education extends these principles beyond the human realm, recognizing that meaning is not solely generated through human discourse but also through affective, sensory, and embodied encounters with the more-than-human world. In doing so, it reconfigures constructivism through a posthumanist lens—shifting the focus from

individual cognition to distributed, collective, and ecological forms of knowing and becoming.

Challenges and Critical Considerations

Despite its theoretical appeal, implementing posthuman pedagogy faces significant practical, ethical, and structural challenges that require careful interrogation. Among the most immediate obstacles is the pervasive institutional resistance embedded in educational systems that are still largely governed by anthropocentric, industrial-age paradigms. These systems prioritize human cognition, standardization, and measurable outcomes, thereby rendering multispecies and posthuman approaches difficult to meaningfully integrate within existing curricular and policy frameworks (Simmonds; Bekker et al.).

Further, there exist deep-seated regulatory constraints and liability concerns that often inhibit the inclusion of nonhuman beings and nontraditional learning environments in formal education. Issues such as student safety, legal accountability, and institutional risk aversion limit the scope for implementing outdoor, multispecies, or experiential models of learning. These constraints are compounded by a lack of teacher preparation and professional development in posthuman theory, multispecies ethics, and ecocentric learning methods. Many educators remain unfamiliar with the conceptual tools necessary to operationalize these frameworks, leading to a pedagogical gap between theory and practice.

Moreover, critical scholars have cautioned against the romanticization of posthuman relationships and rewilding processes without a thorough engagement with underlying power dynamics and historical injustices (Sitka-Sage et al.; Vass). Educational rewilding, for instance, while noble in its intentions, can risk perpetuating colonial relationships with land, nature, and Indigenous knowledge systems if implemented uncritically. Such approaches may inadvertently appropriate Indigenous ecological

wisdom without acknowledging the histories of dispossession and resistance that inform these traditions. Therefore, rewilding must be situated within a decolonial framework that respects Indigenous sovereignty, epistemologies, and relational ontologies (Sitka-Sage et al.).

Similarly, multispecies education must grapple with complex ethical issues around nonhuman consent, agency, and welfare. While integrating animals into educational spaces—such as through therapy programs or garden-based learning—can promote empathy and ecological awareness, these initiatives must be designed with a clear focus on the well-being and autonomy of the animals involved. Without this attentiveness, there is a danger of reproducing instrumental relationships in which nonhuman beings are used as pedagogical tools rather than being recognized as co-learners and sentient participants (Copeland et al.).

A further consideration involves the challenge of scaling posthuman pedagogical practices beyond isolated or experimental contexts while retaining their transformative potential. Questions persist about how such approaches can be embedded into mainstream education systems without being co-opted or diluted. Addressing this challenge necessitates strategic thinking around curriculum reform, policy adaptation, institutional restructuring, and resource allocation (Bekker et al.). Adequate investment in teacher training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and infrastructural support will be essential for creating environments conducive to posthuman education.

The move toward posthuman and multispecies pedagogies requires not only conceptual innovation but also systemic transformation. These approaches must navigate institutional barriers, ethical dilemmas, and historical legacies with care and criticality. By doing so, educators and scholars can foster educational spaces that are not only inclusive and just but also ecologically resilient and attuned to the complex interdependencies of life.

Discussion

As posthuman pedagogy continues to gain traction within educational theory and practice, future research must engage in the deliberate construction of methodologies that are attuned to the relational, multisensory, and more-than-human dimensions of learning. Traditional methods of educational research—rooted in human-centered paradigms and quantifiable outcomes—are insufficient to capture the complexities of multispecies learning processes (Meijer) that emerge in entangled educational environments. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop methodological innovations that are qualitative, participatory, relational, and ecologically embedded (Khan and Bowen). Such methodologies may include ethnographies of interspecies interaction, sensory-based assessments, eco-phenomenological approaches, and arts-based inquiry that foreground the affective and material dimensions of learning.

Moreover, evaluating the effectiveness and transformative potential of educational rewilding requires long-term, context-sensitive research that considers not only academic outcomes but also ecological literacy, interspecies empathy, local biodiversity, and learners' relational capacities. Documenting innovative practices across diverse geographical, cultural, and socio-political contexts will be essential to understanding how posthuman pedagogy is translated, adapted, and sustained in real-world settings. Particular attention must be given to how these practices intersect with Indigenous knowledge systems, decolonial approaches, and principles of environmental justice, ensuring that posthuman education does not replicate extractive or exclusionary epistemologies under the guise of innovation (Simmonds).

In parallel, teacher education and professional development must undergo substantial transformation to support the ontological and epistemological shifts required by posthuman pedagogical practices. This includes not only equipping educators with the conceptual tools to understand posthuman theory but also providing experiential training in multispecies engagement, ecological sensitivity, and ethical decision-making. Workshops, collaborative field experiences, and interspecies curriculum design labs can

play a role in fostering new pedagogical dispositions that embrace complexity, relationality, and humility in the face of more-than-human agency.

Realizing the potential of entangled learning on a broader scale will also necessitate fundamental changes in educational policy, institutional architecture, and funding priorities (Cremin). Policies must shift away from rigid metrics and accountability models that marginalize ecological and ethical considerations, toward frameworks that value sustainability, reciprocity, and planetary well-being. Developing alternative indicators of educational quality that incorporate ecological resilience, intergenerational equity, and community well-being alongside cognitive achievement is vital for legitimizing posthuman approaches in policy discourse (Khan and Bowen).

Furthermore, cross-sectoral partnerships between educational institutions, environmental organizations, Indigenous communities, and civic groups will be critical to embedding posthuman pedagogical innovation in diverse learning ecologies. These collaborations can facilitate resource sharing, contextual grounding, and reciprocal learning that strengthens the social and ecological relevance of educational practices. Community-engaged scholarship and place-based initiatives that draw on local ecologies and knowledge systems can serve as powerful models for grounding posthuman pedagogy in lived realities.

Conclusion

Entangled learning through posthuman pedagogy and educational rewilding represents a paradigmatic reconfiguration of education in response to the urgent socio-ecological conditions of the Anthropocene. By decentering the human and embracing the agency, intelligence, and sentience of more-than-human entities, this approach fosters pedagogical imaginaries that are ecologically attuned, ethically grounded, and responsive to the interdependencies that characterize our shared planetary existence. This reconceptualization moves education beyond narrow cognitive development and anthropocentric knowledge production, toward a multispecies ethics of care, co-existence,

and co-flourishing. It opens new avenues for cultivating ecological consciousness, relational accountability, and collective responsibility among learners of all ages. At its core, posthuman pedagogy seeks to nurture new subjectivities and solidarities—not only across human differences but also across species, ecosystems, and temporalities.

However, the successful implementation of such transformative pedagogies will require sustained attention to the political, institutional, and epistemic obstacles that currently delimit their reach. Structural reforms in policy, investment in teacher preparation, ethical protocols for multispecies engagement, and decolonial frameworks for land and knowledge must be central to any attempt at mainstreaming posthuman education. Nonetheless, the growing corpus of theoretical scholarship and experimental practices in posthuman education provides a rich foundation for envisioning and enacting alternative futures. These practices illustrate that education, when disentangled from extractivist logics and reimagined as a relational, multispecies process, can become a potent force for ecological justice and collective healing.

Ultimately, the future of posthuman pedagogy depends on ongoing collaboration across disciplines, species, communities, and ways of knowing. By engaging in this collective project, educators, scholars, and learners can co-create educational paradigms that are not only intellectually generative but also life-affirming—adequate to the complexity, precarity, and possibility of our entangled world.

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Elsa Morante and the Posthuman Trauma in *History* (1974)

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Abstract

This article offers a posthumanist reading of *History* (*La Storia*, 1974) by Elsa Morante, situating it within its socio-historical context and current debates on trauma, subjectivity and ethical interdependence. Rather than a traditional historical narrative, the novel emerges as a radical inquiry into the coherence and anthropocentrism of historical discourse. Focusing on Ida Ramundo, a half-jewish schoolteacher living in Rome during the Second World War, and her son Useppe, born from the rape by a German soldier, the novel foregrounds human vulnerability and the limits of narrative in addressing historical suffering. Drawing on posthumanist thinkers such as Braidotti, Agamben and Haraway, the article argues that Morante anticipates posthuman ethics by dissolving the notion of the sovereign subject. Useppe's short, fragile life critiques modernity's failure to protect the most vulnerable; the dog Bella further disrupts human-nonhuman hierarchies, embodying grief and agency, and reinforcing the novel's anti-speciesist ethos. Morante's stripped-down style, refusal of catharsis and inclusion of historical documents challenge the boundaries between fiction and testimony, aligning with Cathy Caruth's vision of trauma as an inaccessible form of historical knowledge. Ultimately, *History* emerges as a counter-narrative to triumphant historiography, advocating a moral of presence, care and shared precarity.

Key Words: Elsa Morante, History, posthuman, trauma, precarity

Introduction

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*E*lsa Morante's *History*, first published in 1974, is widely regarded as a landmark of 20th-century Italian literature (Gioanola 331), combining epic narrative with an ontological exploration of trauma. Set during and immediately after the Second World War, it follows the life of Ida Ramundo, a half-jewish schoolteacher living in Rome with her two sons Nino and Useppe, the latter born from a rape perpetrated by a drunk German soldier, Gunther, a member of the Nazi militias stationed in occupied Rome. Far from being merely a historic chronicle, *History* (*La Storia* in its original Italian title) is an ontological investigation of suffering, trauma, loss and, most notably, of the erosion of human agency in the face of overwhelming historical forces. Within the broader framework of global war and, more specifically, of jewish genocide and the atomic bomb — two key themes extensively examined by Morante in many of her writings, as in “Pro o contro la bomba atomica” (“For or Against the Atomic Bomb”, published in 1965, starting from a lecture delivered by the writer first in Turin and then in Rome) — this novel can be fruitfully read through the lens of posthumanism, a theoretical approach that destabilises anthropocentric assumptions and interrogates the boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, life and death.

Following Herbrechter and Callus (2012), Morante's *History* can therefore be read as a proto-posthumanist work in the sense of preceding formal posthumanist theory by decades, not as a direct influence, but as a text that retrospectively resonates with key concerns later elaborated in the field. Such a reading acknowledges the risk of anachronism, but also allows for a productive critical framework through which to revisit *History* as a novel that anticipates, with striking perceptiveness, many of the ethical and ontological questions that would later become central to posthumanist discourse. This interpretation aligns primarily with critical posthumanism, particularly in the lineage of Braidotti's and Haraway's feminist theories, rather than object-oriented ontology; its emphasis lies in ethical relationality, affective vulnerability and the decentering of human exceptionalism within embodied historical contexts. In line with this analysis, central to Morante's skilful narrative construction is the figure of the main character, Ida, whose personal trauma – the rape perpetrated by the German

soldier – blends with the collective trauma of war and persecution and manifests as a dissolution of selfhood. In the opening pages of the novel, Morante depicts the protagonist's experience of sexual trauma through a raw and unadorned language, devoid of euphemism or circumlocution:

Yet this new, inexplicable refusal of hers (no – the only response she had given him that day) struck the soldier's confused rage like a signal of rebellion, as though she had committed some immense transgression. Unexpectedly, the bitter tenderness that had humiliated him with its martyrdom since morning erupted into a ferocious will: "...make love!...MAKE LOVE!..." he shouted, repeating, like a child's outburst, two more of the four Italian words he had prudently learned at the border. And without even removing his uniform belt, indifferent to the fact that she was an older woman, he threw himself on her, pushed her down onto the unkempt cot, and raped her with such violence as if he meant to kill her. (69)

Likewise, Ida's little son, Useppe, symbolizes purity and innocence, ultimately crushed by the weight of history: Useppe dies at the end of the novel because of his fatal epilepsy, barely six years old. As Morante writes in *History*:

In the dim little hallway, Useppe's body lay stretched out, arms wide open, as always in his falls. He was fully dressed, except for his little sandals, which, left unbuckled, had slipped off his feet. [...] During this final hour of his unspeakable struggle with the Great Evil, in truth Useppe, there in the hallway, had collapsed again and again, from one seizure to another, almost without pause... (646)

His death thus comes to embody, in its starkest form, the impossibility of innocence in the face of historical atrocities and the inescapable violence of modern science and technology — a symbolic annihilation of the very idea of protected childhood. In this final passage, Morante's narrative voice renounces any rhetorical elevation or dramatic crescendo, choosing instead a tone of quiet devastation: the description unfolds with a restrained, almost matter-of-fact clarity, which renders the scene all the more

harrowing. The child's body is not romanticised, but observed in its minute, unheroic details, so that death doesn't appear as a rupture; this subdued stylistic register refrains from embellishment or interpretation, in line with Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" (2001).

Expanding the novel's critique of the autonomous human subject, Morante also introduces a nonhuman perspective that destabilises human exceptionalism and affirms moral principles of shared vulnerability across species: through the subtle integration of animal presence — most notably Bella, the Ramundo family dog — Morante anticipates the posthumanist critique of the autonomous subject and gestures toward an alternative ontology grounded in affective entanglement, mutual care and existential fragility. '*Affective entanglement*', here, refers to the complex web of emotional, embodied, and cross-species relations that bind living beings together beyond linguistic or rational structures, foregrounding interdependence and the permeability of individual boundaries.

The Socio-Historical Context of *History*

Morante's literary masterpiece was published in a period marked by intense political turbulence and profound philosophical introspection in postwar Italy, a nation still reeling from the unresolved legacies of Fascism, the economic devastation of the Second World War and the disillusionment that followed the collapse of utopian promises tied to the Resistance and the postwar Socialist republic. As Michela Ponzani brilliantly analyses in her recent work *Processo alla resistenza italiana* ("Trial of the Italian Resistance"):

Former partisans, brought to trial for actions related to the War of Liberation (judged as acts of common criminality), or for episodes of post-insurrectional violence, and likewise political or trade union militants, arrested during strikes or public demonstrations, within a climate of anticommunist demonization [...]
(17)

In this cultural and social contexts, where the moral legitimacy of inherited historical

paradigms was being radically interrogated as Italy was transitioning from monarchy to republic, Morante's novel intervenes as a powerful counter-discourse, because it radically refuses the teleological coherence of history as a progress, choosing instead to focus on the fragmented and intimate lives of the commoners whom history habitually marginalizes, that is the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless. In this sense, in line with Hayden White's (1987) insight that the structure of narrative fundamentally conditions our understanding of history, Morante's deliberate rejection of consolatory plot conventions positions her treatment of history as a deliberate disruption of its conventional narrative logic. Morante frequently employs the adjective *povero/povera* ("poor") throughout the novel in reference to Ida, Useppe and Bella, imparting a sense of frailty, marginality and suffering. However, there is a single moment in which this term is transfigured, that is when the narrative shifts to the perspective of the child Useppe, who, unaware of the surrounding horrors of war, invests the world with a naïve sense of innocence. In his gaze, the word "poor" loses its weight of sorrow and becomes stripped of its tragic gravity, revealing a suspension of pain in the midst of military devastation:

That world and its people, poor, breathless and contorted by the grimace of war, appeared to Giuseppe as a singular and manifold phantasmagoria, one whose likeness could scarcely be captured even by a description of the Alhambra of Granada, or the gardens of Shiraz, or perhaps not even of the Earthly Paradise itself. (122)

Yet Morante's project resists the temptation to synthesize human suffering into a cohesive ideological framework: rather than seeking to redeem history through narrative, she exposes storytelling's limits in the face of overwhelming historical trauma. In line with Morante's main theoretical interests, the novel opens with a sharp and intense epigraph drawn from the testimony of one of Hiroshima's nuclear bombing's survivors: "there is no word, in any human language, capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know why they are dying" (*History* 1). This quotation, placed in a *positio princeps* with respect to the entire narrative, not only reframes the

reader's expectations from the outset, but it also signals the true epistemological and ethical orientation of the entire work. *History* does not purport to explain, justify or redeem suffering: on the contrary, it bears witness to its irreducible senselessness, inviting the reader not into a space where language itself falters and meaning dissolves in the face of mute and inarticulate suffering. From a linguistic standpoint, a similar phenomenon occurs in *La Serata a Colono* ("*The Evening at Colonus*"), Morante's reworking of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, set in a psychiatric hospital in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this theatrical piece, Antigone, once the classical heroine of natural and sacred law, has now become an inarticulate young girl, unable to speak with clarity or insight: here too, then, the violent irruption of twentieth-century history has rendered communication impossible, emptying existence of meaning and stripping away the very possibility of consolation. Morante's portrayal of Ida and Antigone echoes what Lyotard (1983) calls "le différend", a French term used to design a conflict between parties that cannot be equitably solved because the rules of discourse necessary to adjudicate the claim are themselves unavailable, or because no shared language exists for its resolution. In both cases, speech breaks down in the face of historical violence, revealing the limits of storytelling in representing human life.

In this regard, *History* finds profound resonance with posthumanist critical paradigms, which similarly reject anthropocentric models of intelligibility and instead emphasise the opacity of modern trauma, the non sovereignty of the human subject and the ethical imperative to attend to that which eludes our comprehension. Posthuman knowledge, as Rosi Braidotti contends (2019), requires a profound shift in perspective: one that views the human not as a sovereign agent, but as a species embedded in larger ecological and multispecies networks and accountable for the violence enacted in the name of its supposed supremacy. Likewise, Morante's narrative ethic, deeply attuned to the precarity of human and nonhuman life alike, invites a mode of reading that is not predicated on mastery or understanding, but on a form of listening to the fractures that traverse the lives of those — the fragile and inadequate — crushed beneath the weight

of history.

Ida Ramundo: The Fractured Subject

The main character of *History*, Ida Ramundo, is at the heart of Morante's posthuman exploration, anticipating the subsequent reflections of posthumanist thought concerning the alienation of the human being brought about by modernity and by increasingly impactful technology. Ida resists the traditional heroic or tragic paradigms of literary subjectivity; instead, she is presented as a fragmented, passive and oftentimes deeply irrational being, whose life is governed by fear and secrecy (Mavjee 25). Her Jewish identity is something she hides, not for strategic reasons, but out of a visceral, somatic panic; Morante depicts Ida's fear not only as psychological, but also as an embodied feeling: it manifests in accidental and uncontrollable tremors, long silences and frequent dissociative states. Following her violence by Gunther, she becomes a vessel of trauma, incapable of asserting agency or reclaiming narrative control (LaCapra 41):

As always upon waking, only a shadow of memory remained to her of the episode, nothing more than the initial sensation of a confused assault, lasting but an instant. In truth, her recollection contained a complete gap, from the moment the young man had begun kissing her face and whispering *carina carina*, to the earlier moment, just before, when he had shown her the photograph. (*History*, 69-70)

Her passivity, however, should not be read as moral failure; rather, it represents the condition of a subject who has been utterly dispossessed by history. In posthumanist terms, Ida is no longer a sentient and logical human being, but a "creatura" ("creature"), a term frequently used by the narrator to refer to Useppe, too. This poignant Italian term, derived from the verb "creare", that is, "to bring into the light", and resonant with both teleological and biological connotations, signals her degradation from a state of civilization to a feral condition of nature, from person to object, as Agamben cleverly states in his *Homo Sacer* (33), but it also opens up the possibility of rethinking

subjectivity outside the frameworks of autonomy and control. As a creature, Ida is vulnerable, dependent and exposed, all qualities that render her ethically significant from a posthumanist point of view.

Ida's personal collapse, however, mirrors a broader historical disintegration, as Morante extends this condition of dispossession to an entire humanity crushed under the weight of twentieth-century catastrophe. The experience of the world war, the persecution and genocide of the Jews through the inhuman mechanism of concentration camps and, from a more global perspective, the experimentation of the atomic bomb with the tragic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led Morante to construct a Roman universe populated solely by the defeated, swept away by the merciless force of history as it breaks violently and uninvited into their lives. The degradation of Ida's human condition and the fracturing of her selfhood as a result of multiple traumas — not least the rape she suffered at the hands of the German soldier — suggest a reading of Morante's novel as a forerunner of the posthumanist perspective, which would shortly thereafter ignite within the academic fields of literature, philosophy and psychology.

A significant and precursory *reductio ad nihil* of history and its meaning can be found in another one of Morante's works, a theatrical piece entitled "Canzone clandestina della Grande Opera" ("*Clandestine Song of the Grand Opera*"), included in her miscellany *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* ("*The World Saved by Children*"), published in 1968:

And when scholars patiently labour/ to assemble the various accounts into a coherent whole,/ arranging them in order like the fragments of a codex/ or the installments of a serialized novel,/ the result is invariably/ a disjointed and utterly confused composition/ full of [...] the dead returning, having forgotten they are dead,/ [...] an absurd, maimed, incoherent, ramshackle text/ [...] neither comedy nor tragedy nor parody nor farce. (214)

The "Grand Opera" is none other than history itself, denounced by Morante as "the scandal that has lasted for ten thousand years", as indicated by the subtitle of the very

first edition of the 1974 novel *History*.

Useppe and the Ethics of Innocence

Useppe, the child born from rape, embodies an innocence that is both unadulterated and doomed. He is depicted with an almost mythical purity, a being of light in a world of darkness, that is Rome during Jewish persecution and Nazi occupation. Yet his vulnerability is absolute: he is epileptic, uncomprehending of the violence around him because of his young age and ultimately destroyed by the very forces of history he cannot fathom. Morante intentionally invests his character with an aura of sanctity, but not in a sentimental or idealised way; rather, Useppe's life functions as a critique of a world in which such innocence cannot survive anymore. Examples of little Useppe's imaginary, fable-like and transfiguring gaze, so explicitly at odds with the totalitarian, persecutory and war-torn world around him, are scattered throughout the novel:

One might say, judging by his laughter, by the constant lighting up of his little face, that he did not see things confined within their usual appearances, but as multiple images of other things, endlessly shifting. Otherwise, one could not explain how the miserable, monotonous scene the house offered him each day could provide such ever-changing and inexhaustible delight. Even shapes that generally provoke aversion or disgust evoked in him only attentiveness and a transparent wonder, just like any other. (*History*, 120)

Useppe's death, like his brief life, is devoid of justice or redemption: it is a death that reiterates the novel's initial epigraph, a meaningless annihilation that eludes explanation. From a posthumanist perspective, Useppe's short existence problematises any attempt to ground ethics in rationality, merit or agency. His suffering is a call to responsibility precisely because it cannot be justified or understood; in this sense, Useppe is not a symbol but a symptom, a manifestation of the failure of humanism to account for the most fragile lives. Following the discovery of Useppe's dead body, Morante describes the immediate reaction of his mother:

And after bolting the door in the entranceway, she began, in silence, to run through her little rooms, crashing into the furniture and walls with such violence that she bruised her body. It is said that, in certain crucial states, people see flash before them — at incredible speed — all the scenes of their life. Now, in the stunted and dim-witted mind of that little woman, as she rushed headlong through her tiny apartment, there also spun the scenes of human history (*History*), which she perceived as the manifold coils of an unending murder. And today, the latest to be murdered was her little bastard Useppe. All of History and all the nations of the earth had conspired toward this end: the slaughter of the little child Useppe Ramundo. (*History* 647)

In this powerful convergence of the personal and the historical, Ida's grief breaks down the boundaries between individual loss and collective catastrophe: her delirious sprint through the apartment becomes a visceral indictment of a civilization that, rather than protecting its most vulnerable, systematically sacrifices them. Useppe's death is not merely a private tragedy, but the ultimate proof of a world order built on violence, where innocence is not spared, but is in fact its most expendable victim.

Such collapse opens the way for a reading of Morante's narrative as a site where knowledge itself is transmitted through embodied emotion rather than rational discourse. Rebecca Walker (2024) reads *History* through the lens of emotional epistemologies, describing Useppe's own view of the world as shaped by pre-linguistic affects that emerge "prior to the mediating process of language" and structure his experience of reality as affective and epiphanic rather than symbolic. This reading supports the idea that Morante conceives affect not merely as an emotional reaction, but as a mode of knowing and relating to the world. Similarly, Stephen Ahern (2024) defines affect as a "force manifested in bodies" that crosses the aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions of narrative experience. His framework reinforces a posthumanist understanding of Morante's characters, both human and nonhuman, as affective agents whose vulnerability and responsiveness are embodied rather than discursive.

In reframing Morante's key novel *History* through the lens of posthuman trauma, this

reading complicates and expands current critical paradigms: rather than simply reiterating the familiar emphasis on the dissolution of sovereign subjectivity or the narrative inaccessibility of trauma, *History* foregrounds a different way of depicting human suffering and loss. Useppe's death, portrayed as bodily and historically situated, invites a rethinking of trauma literature beyond the psychic and linguistic models dominant in posthuman theory; in this sense, Morante's novel invites a reconceptualisation of trauma that is both grounded in bodily experience and is attentive to the multiple temporalities through which trauma unfolds. Instead of viewing trauma solely as an unrepresentable event, as dominant in much posthumanist and psychoanalytic theory, *History* depicts forms of suffering that are immediately and materially lived, particularly through vulnerable bodies, like Ida's or Useppe's, who suffer from epileptic seizures (called by Morante "il Grande Male", *the Great Evil*); at the same time, however, this novel acknowledges the difficulty of fully capturing such experiences in language. This simultaneous attention to the *immediacy* of physical pain and to the fragmented nature of its narrative processing suggests a more complex, layered temporality of trauma: in this way, Morante's work offers a refinement of posthumanist trauma theory, as it shifts the focus from abstraction to embodiment, from an ideal unreadability to the historical realities through which trauma is enacted and endured, following Kaplan's (2005) and Balaev's (2012) theories.

Bella: Animality and Posthuman Kinship

One of the most radical aspects of *History* is its treatment of the animal. Bella, the cheerful dog who accompanies Useppe, Nino and Ida in their daily ventures and all the way through the most tragic turning points of the twentieth century, is not merely a tacit companion but an active participant in their emotional and existential world. Throughout the entire novel, Bella's thoughts are conveyed through direct speech, as though the dog were a fully sentient human being. Morante portrays Bella as a being endowed with profound empathy towards the events unfolding around her and, in particular, the experiences of her three owners. In the pivotal scene of *History*, already mentioned several times in this study, namely the tragic death of Useppe, Bella enters

into a state of deep emotional resonance with Ida's despair:

For the dog was there, looking at her with a mournful sorrow, filled with animal compassion and also with a kind of superhuman commiseration, which said to the woman: "But what are you waiting for, poor thing? Can't you see that there's nothing left for us to wait for?" (646)

Bella's presence disrupts the human-centric orientation of the narrative and introduces a different modality of relation, one that is affective, non-verbal and embodied. The dog's long-lasting loyalty, her understanding of Useppe's seizures and her own suffering after his death suggest a form of consciousness that defies the Cartesian distinction between human and animal. In the words of philosopher Donna Haraway, who has thoroughly investigated the relationship between species in her *When Species Meet*:

Species [...] The Latin *specere* is the root of all things here, with its tones of "to look" and "to behold". [...] Looking back in this way takes us to seeing again, to *respecere*, to the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem. [...] To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect [...]. (17-19)

In this regard, Morante aligns with posthumanist thinkers like Haraway herself, who in her works advocates for a "companion species" model of interdependence, a framework that redefines human-animal relations as co-constitutive and grounded in mutual vulnerability and affect rather than domination, or like Justyna Stępień (2022), who in her recent essay discloses human-non human animal entanglements. Bella is not a symbol of loyalty or fidelity, but a creature in her own right, with her own experiences of grief and attachment. Her death, following that of Useppe, is not anecdotal nor fortuitous but ontologically significant: it marks the collapse of a fragile ecosystem of care and affection that had momentarily resisted the cruelty of history. Bella, too, is thus a victim of history, swept away like Ida, Useppe and Nino by the

tragedies of the contemporary world. Bella's death, in particular, stands in extreme dissonance with the treatment she receives throughout the novel: she is put down without the slightest trace of humanity by the Italian authorities when Ida, having lost Useppe, descends into madness. Bella, likewise, loses her mind, precisely because she is a subject endowed with her own agency. Her rage following the loss of her little companion, a grief utterly unrecognised by the world beyond the Ramundo household, a world devoid of any form of interspecies empathy, ultimately leads to her death:

The following day, the newspapers reported the incident as a local news item: *Tragic Scene in the Testaccio District – Mother Driven Mad While Watching Over the Body of Her Child*. And the article concluded: *It became necessary to put down the animal*. [...] Bella developed a ruthless and bloodthirsty ferocity against the strangers who, having forced the door, had entered the small flat on Via Bodoni to carry out their legal duties. [...] On her own, she managed to frighten an entire squad of men, at least two of whom were armed with regulation weapons. None of them dared face her directly. And in this way, she kept the promise she had made to Useppe on the day he returned home: *They'll never be able to separate us again, in this world.*" (*History*, 646-647)

The inclusion of Bella not only exemplifies posthuman entanglements between species, but also extends the ethical horizon of posthumanism itself: if much of posthuman theory has thus far focused on decentering the human and foregrounding the agency of nonhuman actors within systems of knowledge and power, Morante's depiction of Bella moves a step further, as it attributes to a nonhuman creature not only affective depth and inter-subjective presence, but also ethical and memorial intentness. Bella's grief is not an allegory, but it is rather a testimonial act: her affective response to Useppe's death is presented without sentimentality, yet granted ontological status within the complex narrative of the novel. This move urges a reconsideration of posthuman morality, not simply as a critique of anthropocentrism, but as a proper call to acknowledge that the suffering of human beings such as animals is not incidental

nor symbolic; instead, it plays a real and meaningful role in the course of history, and must be therefore taken into serious consideration as part of our moral and historical understanding. In doing so, Morante may be said to gesture toward a non-anthropocentric ethics of witnessing that remains little theorised in contemporary posthumanist scholarship, anticipating by nearly fifty years recent theoretical and philosophical turns, such as Richardson's *Nonhuman Witnessing* (2024).

Language, Narrative and the Limits of Representation

Morante's narrative style itself enacts a posthuman morality: she avoids modernist language experimentation and instead adopts a deceptively simple, almost childlike tone that mirrors the perspective of Useppe. The narrator frequently breaks into digressions, inserts historical timelines and includes apparently trivial details; this mode of narration destabilises the boundaries between fiction and documentation, emphasizing the mutual penetration between the lives of the Ramundo family and the events of capital-H History.

In this narrative refusal of aesthetic closure, Morante's style becomes itself an ethical gesture. The language of *History* resists the consolatory function traditionally associated with literature: there is no catharsis, no final revelation, no arc of redemption; on the contrary, Morante insists on the irreducibility of suffering: her refusal to aestheticise pain aligns with posthumanist critique of representation, which cautions against the assimilation of trauma into coherent narrative forms. *History* bears witness without claiming to explain and, in doing so, it completely respects the otherness of the suffering it depicts. As Cathy Caruth explains in her *Unclaimed Experience* 18, "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat difficulty, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence". Nonetheless, while Morante shares Caruth's insight into the elusiveness of traumatic experience, *History* complicates this framework by situating trauma not only in the realm of psychic rupture but also within a dense historical continuum: Caruth emphasizes trauma's resistance to conscious registration at the moment of its

occurrence; Morante, however, portrays suffering that is both historically situated and immediately experienced, particularly through the bodies of innocent creatures such as children and animals. In this sense, *History* does not merely suggest that trauma escapes narrative capture, but it also suggests that trauma is lived in real time, with corporeal consequences. The novel thereby challenges the abstraction that can underlie psychoanalytic accounts, grounding the inaccessibility of trauma in the concrete violence of everyday history.

In light of Caruth's assertion that trauma becomes legible only through its very inaccessibility, the figure of Bella acquires a paradigmatic significance within *the novel*. Bella embodies Morante's challenge to anthropocentric narrative logic: depicted as a sentient being capable of grief, her suffering after Useppe's death resists rationalisation and narrative closure, while her execution highlights the institutional violence the novel refuses to sentimentalise. In this sense, *History* aligns with Caruth's theory by constructing a narrative that respects the opacity of trauma, not only human trauma but also that which extends to nonhuman lives, which likewise bear the mark of history's devastations; Bella's silent, inarticulate mourning, culminating in her destruction, serves not merely as a tragic subplot, but as a radical gesture of narrative humility: an insistence that literature, like history, may bear witness without possessing the authority to explain.

Through Useppe's inarticulate suffering and Bella's mute grief, Morante's *History* can be considered in implicit dialogue with other literary works that draw attention to marginal forms of perception and suffering and interrogate the narrative and ethical limits of representing vulnerability. In *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953), Anna Maria Ortese stages a similar collapse of linguistic and moral frameworks through the eyes of a child whose naive joy is extinguished by the bleakness of urban poverty; as with Useppe, perception in Ortese is affective and radically dissonant from the adult world, rendering the child's experience in sharp contrast with the misery that surrounds her. A comparable disruption is also carried out in Lev Tolstoy's *Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse* (1886), which recounts the

suffering of a horse from the animal's own point of view; like Bella, Tolstoy's horse bears silent witness to the cruelty of human history, which renders animal life disposable while refusing to grant it narrative dignity. In both cases, animal consciousness is not a metaphor but a proper testimony, as it marks the outer limit of narrative and logical representation. By placing *History* alongside these texts, we begin to glimpse a wider international literary tradition that refuses to glamorize suffering and instead asks how literature might attend, without appropriating, to the fragile lives that history silences.

Towards a Posthumanist Ethics

Ultimately, *History* can be read as a foundational text in the articulation of a posthumanist morality, as it challenges the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, rational subject and instead foregrounds dependence, fragility and relationality. In line with Herbrechter's definition of "posthumanism" as a paradigm grounded in "interrelatedness of human and nonhuman forms of agency" (2012), in crafting her characters Morante pursues precisely this aim, seeking to deeply intertwine the thoughts, emotions and actions of the novel's protagonists. Ida, Useppe and Bella are all "creature" ("creatures") in the fullest sense of the word: they are beings who suffer, who love, who die and whose lives matter not because of what they achieve, but because of their capacity to feel and to be affected.

This notion of "*creatureliness*" recalls the etymological root of *the above-mentioned word "creatura"*, that which is created, finite and dependent. In this sense, Morante's characters resist the humanist glorification of autonomy and instead embody a condition of shared exposure and precarity, akin to what Judith Butler would later describe in her *Precarious Life*. The ethic that emerges from *History* is thus not grounded in human exceptionalism but in a shared susceptibility that transcends species, categories and hierarchies: in this way, Morante offers a vision of community that is not structured by inclusion or exclusion, but by coexistence, mutual care and affective resonance across ontological categories.

Even Morante's style itself reflects this ethic: the language of *History* bears

witness without aspiring to resolution, while also respecting the opacity of grief, the irreducibility of suffering and the silences that exceed narrative form. This approach once again aligns closely with Caruth's insight that trauma becomes legible only in its very inaccessibility, and that history can be grasped only through the impossibility of fully perceiving it as it occurs.

In this ethical framework, the reader, too, is called by the author to an alternative mode of engagement, not to master or romanticize what is told, but to sustain attention, to bear witness of the tragic events that are unfolding and to remain present before forms of life that elude integration into normative or classical categories of meaning. *History*, in this light, may be read as an anticipatory gesture toward a literary and ethical paradigm capable of responding to the crises of the present: in a world increasingly shaped by technological and political forces, Morante's novel remains a powerful reminder of the moral imperative to attend to the most fragile, most exposed and most radically *other* lives.

Conclusion

Elsa Morante's main novel, *History*, is a rigorous critique of historical violence and an existential inquiry on the condition of being human in a world that renders suffering meaningless. Through the shattered subjectivity of Ida, the ephemeral innocence of Useppe and the affective companionship of Bella, Morante constructs a narrative that prefigures many of the central concerns of posthumanist thought, such as the loss of meaning following the experience of the Second World War, the fragmentation of the self in the aftermath of trauma induced by unprecedentedly destructive technologies — above all, the atomic bomb — and the critique of human supremacy over other species, which are shown to be equally capable of empathy and equally vulnerable to the violence of history. Morante's literary masterpiece thus invites us to reconsider the foundations of modern ethics, not merely as a set of rational principles, but as an embodied, affective and interspecies response to vulnerability. In doing so, *History* not only memorialises the forgotten victims of history, but also offers a radical reimagining of what it means to be a *creatura* in the modern world.

By focusing on the narratively marginal, yet theoretically central figure of Bella, and by reading Useppe not only as a mere trope of innocence but mainly as an exceptional interruption to the logic of history, this article proposes a recalibration of posthumanist trauma studies. It argues that Morante's *History* not only participates in the critique of sovereignty and representation, but actively contributes to its (re)formulation by anticipating immediate suffering, multi-species ethical communities and the narrative strategies necessary to sustain both. In line with this view, Baelo-Allué (2022) has situated trauma as an embodied, relational phenomenon that transcends the human, occurring in “co-evolving” multispecies networks; likewise, Ferrándes-Sanmiguel et al. (2024) call for frameworks that affirm interdependent agency across humans, animals and environments. In this light, Morante's *History* not only aligns with posthumanism, but it subtly reorients it, giving voice and agency to marginal bodies that destabilize human-centric narratives and demand new methodological approaches, while also demonstrating that it can be read not merely as anticipating posthumanist theory, but as simultaneously inaugurating and reshaping its core principles and concerns.

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Notes

Every translation from an Italian text (*History* by Morante) into English present in this article is my own work.

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The Interface Self : A Posthuman Critique of Optimization and Aesthetic Subjectivation

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Abstract:

This article theorizes the interface self: a mode of subjectivity emergent within algorithmically mediated platforms that organize labor, intimacy, and self-presentation. Neither merely expressive nor autonomous, the interface self is shaped through optimization logics, datafication, and feedback-driven design and use. Digital systems such as job platforms, dating apps, and social media increasingly co-constitute users as legible profiles, privileging metrics, preferences, and performative visibility. While often framed as empowering, this dynamic enacts new modes of soft coercion that aestheticize recognition, gamify self-worth, and disarticulate agency from narrative coherence. To analyze this condition, the article first revisits Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and its transformation under the regime of digital modulation. It then employs Andrew Feenberg's theory of instrumentalization to reveal the political and technical structuring of platforms, and draws on postphenomenological thinkers such as Don Ihde, Peter-Paul Verbeek, and Asle Kiran to explore the layered textures of technological mediation. Finally, it turns to posthumanist theorists, including Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad, to refigure the interface self not as a loss of authenticity, but as a situated, relational becoming within socio-technical ecologies. Rather than seeking escape or transcendence, the article proposes a posthuman praxis of "dwelling within and against" the interface—cultivating opacity, ethical friction, and collective refusal from within systems designed to optimize and predict. The interface self, it argues, marks not the disappearance of the subject but its reconfiguration at a contemporary threshold.



Key words: posthumanism, technology, subjectivity, optimization, mediation, entanglement

Introduction

*I*n recent weeks, I've found myself confronting the same hollowing experience in two domains: dating apps and job applications. In both cases, I present a version of myself which is calibrated, curated, and compressed, packaged into profiles and cover letters tailored to anticipated expectations. I list qualifications, interests, even strategic quirks, hoping to resonate with someone, whether a hiring manager or a potential partner. The process begins with promise: algorithmic matches appear, brief correspondence unfolds, and then it dissolves without explanation. "We've decided to move forward with other candidates." "I've just got a lot going on right now. Good luck." Or worse, silence. That silence becomes the punctuation of a grammar shaped by platforms designed for efficiency rather than care. It becomes difficult not to internalize the rejection, to wonder what signal I failed to emit or what value I failed to articulate. Yet this reveals the deeper violence of the interface. It invites us to see ourselves as datasets—continuously parsed, evaluated, and discarded.

The glowing surfaces of digital life, such as apps, dashboards, platforms, do not merely frame experience. They shape it. These systems aestheticize participation, gamify recognition, and modulate behavior through promises of empowerment and usability. What emerges is a new form of subjectivity: the interface self. This concept refers to a digitally mediated subjectivity co-constituted through interaction with algorithmic systems. It is formatted through metrics, feedback, and visibility, oriented toward machinic legibility rather than narrative coherence or introspective depth.

This essay offers a critical posthumanist account of the interface self. Drawing from theories of subjectivation, technological mediation, and posthuman ontology, it maps how agency, embodiment, and identity are reconfigured by platform logics. Where earlier regimes of power targeted the body through surveillance and discipline, the interface self is governed aesthetically. The demand is not to conform to norms, but to perform legibility

and productivity in forms that align with machinic systems. Identity becomes indexed. Agency is routed through metrics. Feedback loops take the place of dialogic recognition. The interface does not merely reflect subjectivity; it molds and formats it.

Yet this formatting is not absolute. Posthumanist perspectives challenge anthropocentric narratives of self-mastery and suggest that subjectivity is always entangled with nonhuman systems, technical infrastructures, and relational ecologies. The interface self is not merely a neoliberal consumer of datafied existence. It is also a site of tension, ambiguity, and potential resistance. Through posthuman ethics and onto-epistemologies, we can unsettle the binary between technological domination and human freedom. What forms of agency persist within systems designed to predict behavior? What does it mean to care for a self increasingly shaped by invisible processes of optimization? Can a posthuman aesthetics of subjectivation interrupt the smooth surfaces of interface life?

This essay is a philosophical experiment in naming and describing a condition that many already inhabit but rarely have language to articulate. The interface self is not a fixed identity or diagnosis. It is a metaphor, a symptom, a provocation, and a continual becoming-with. It marks a shift in how subjectivity is produced, and it demands both critique and imaginative rethinking.

From Disciplinary to Interface Power: Subjectivity and the Mediation of Self

This section traces a philosophical genealogy of subject formation across shifting regimes of power, beginning with the disciplinary institutions of modernity and culminating in the aesthetic logics of contemporary digital platforms. Following Michel Foucault's account of biopower, we encounter a subject who is not sovereign but produced, made visible, legible, and governable through norms inscribed upon the body. In modernity, surveillance was architectural and institutional, embodied most clearly in the Panopticon. To be seen was to be regulated.

Yet in digital environments, visibility becomes something to be pursued rather than imposed. Byung-Chul Han argues that contemporary power no longer disciplines from

without but demands performance from within. The subject of the interface is not watched but watching itself, constantly calibrating how it appears by optimizing profiles, aestheticizing productivity, and internalizing the labor of affective self-presentation. The logic of coercion shifts from force to freedom, from interdiction to seduction.

This transformation requires more than an extension of Foucault's framework. It calls for a reconceptualization of the material, temporal, and aesthetic conditions of subjectivity. The interface must be understood not as a neutral tool, but as an onto-epistemological regime: a site where power, knowledge, and being converge to constitute what counts as a subject. The glowing frame of a screen, the architecture of a dashboard, or the logic of a matching algorithm is not incidental; it is formative.

Andrew Feenberg's two-level theory of instrumentalization offers a way to think through the political stakes of technology, and will be explored in the second section. Platforms are not mere tools but social arrangements infused with normative affordances. They configure what can be said, seen, and sensed. Primary instrumentalization refers to technical function, while secondary instrumentalization embeds these functions within cultural and political values. What looks like convenience—auto-sorting resumes, autofill in dating bios—is a site where technical decisions enact ideological commitments.

Bernard Stiegler deepens this critique by foregrounding the temporal disjunction between human interiority and algorithmic speed. For Stiegler, subjectivity is always already prosthetic—shaped by external supports of memory, communication, and relation. In the interface age, these supports become fast, recursive, and computational. Individuation risks collapse, as psychic temporality is overwhelmed by the accelerative tempo of data flows. What it means to think, to remember, or to desire is reorganized through systems that anticipate and preempt.

The interface self, then, does not mark a rupture from modern subjectivity but its algorithmic intensification. Power moves from discipline to modulation, from institutional surveillance to ambient legibility. We move from being made visible to desiring visibility, from bodily compliance to aesthetic formatting. Whether in Tinder's swipeable

preferences or LinkedIn's endorsable skills, the self becomes a performance calibrated for machinic parsing.

This section stages a conceptual conversation among critical theorists who help us grasp the shifting architectures of power and selfhood. The central question is not simply how the subject is constructed, but how this construction might be made otherwise. If platforms govern through format, might resistance lie in refusal, misalignment, or counter-design? To recognize the interface self is not to declare its inevitability but to open space for conceptual and practical friction.

1.1 Subjectivity, Power, and Foucault

Subjectivity is not a private essence but a historical and material formation. As Michel Foucault argues, the modern subject emerges not through sovereign violence but through the microphysics of power: the everyday technologies of surveillance, normalization, and internalization. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes a shift from external coercion to internal regulation: the soul becomes "the prison of the body," a more efficient site of control than any physical restraint (Foucault 194).

Disciplinary power operates not through spectacle, as in premodern regimes, but through the organization of space, time, and conduct. Institutions such as schools, prisons, factories, and hospitals function as laboratories for shaping docile and productive bodies. Their architectures are panoptic: control is achieved not because one is constantly watched, but because one might be. The prisoner, unsure whether they are being observed, comes to regulate themselves. Power installs itself not through force but through anticipation.

Crucially, discipline is not simply repressive, it is also productive. It generates subjects not despite constraint, but through it. Identity, agency, and the very capacity for reflection emerge from normative scripts embedded in bodily routines, gestures, and affects. The subject is neither external to power nor entirely subsumed by it. It is, in Foucault's words, "a surface of inscription," a conduit for power's operations. "Power,"

he writes, “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 194).

This logic extends to education, where the teacher’s gaze, the timetable, and the grading system work to classify, compare, and normalize. One does not simply become a student but is produced as one through practices that precede and exceed intention. Learning management systems such as Canvas, Google Classroom, or Workday Learning illustrate how these disciplinary logics persist in digital form. Attendance is recorded through login data; assignment punctuality is tracked to the minute; engagement is inferred from screen time or click-through rates. Temporal discipline is no longer confined to the school bell but distributed across interfaces that silently demand regularity.

Foucault’s insight is that such institutions regulate behavior and format subjectivity. And yet, these mechanisms were designed for enclosures: the classroom, the barracks, the clinic. In a digitally mediated environment, where presence is ambient and visibility is pursued rather than imposed, the disciplinary diagram begins to fray. The subject of the interface is not fixed in space but modulated through data, metrics, and feedback. Authority is less centralized, but no less effective; it is embedded in the very grammar of interaction.

Foucault’s lasting contribution is not just his theory of discipline but his genealogical method: the critical unmasking of how power historically produces subjectivity through material dispositifs. He does not offer a static model but a way of tracing transitions. If discipline is the diagram of modernity, then what diagram structures interface life? What kind of subjects are produced when control no longer operates through enclosure but through flow, when regulation is enacted not by an overseeing authority, but through interaction itself?

1.2 From Discipline to Desire

If Foucault maps the disciplinary formation of the modern subject, Gilles Deleuze and Byung-Chul Han help us trace its mutation under late capitalist and postdigital conditions. In place of the docile, institutionally enclosed individual, we encounter a

subject incited to optimize, perform, and disclose. The imperative is no longer to conform to external norms but to cultivate a visible, productive, and desirable self through voluntary participation. Power, in this context, no longer represses—it seduces. It no longer compels from without but insinuates itself as the internalized demand to become one’s best version: efficient, responsive, and continuously available.

Deleuze, in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, sketches the transition from disciplinary societies to regimes of continuous modulation. The central institutions of modernity (the school, the prison, the factory) give way to dispersed systems of governance, no longer organized through spatial enclosure but through access protocols, feedback mechanisms, and algorithmic parsing. Individuals become “dividuals”: fragmentary data-flows, tracked through passwords, profiles, and usage metrics (Deleuze 5). Control operates in real time, across boundaries once marked by discipline. Education becomes lifelong and modular, as seen in platforms like Coursera or Duolingo, where learners are encouraged to optimize pace and progress through gamified dashboards. Work becomes ubiquitous and platformized, often managed through metrics and micro-evaluations. On Slack, Trello, or Upwork, productivity is not assumed, but demonstrated algorithmically. Power no longer needs to impose limits. It simply configures the channels through which behavior is nudged, scored, and looped back to the user.

“Man is no longer man enclosed,” Deleuze writes. “He is man in debt” (Deleuze 6). Control no longer fixes the body in space but governs through modulation, delay, and precarity. The subject is not disciplined by the visible gaze of authority, but by the invisible protocols of interface design. Surveillance becomes participation; obedience becomes affective investment. The panopticon persists, but it is now ambient—suffused into every interaction, framed as empowerment.

If Deleuze maps the infrastructural transformation of power, Han explores its affective costs. In *The Burnout Society* and *Psychopolitics*, he argues that neoliberal subjectivity is no longer structured by repression but by auto-exploitation. The “achievement subject” is not ordered from above but driven from within, voluntarily

enacting the imperative to optimize, disclose, and enhance across professional, social, and intimate domains. Freedom becomes a mode of control: one chooses to produce and compete, but the choice itself is already captured by the structural demands of legibility and performance.

Consider the interface of LinkedIn, where the injunction to be visible is expressed through profile optimization scores, engagement metrics, and algorithmically mediated recommendations. The user is not merely seeking employment—they are curating a machinically legible professional self. Success is tied to constant refinement: quantifying skills, showcasing affective traits, remaining present in the system's rhythms. "Exploiting itself," Han writes, "the achievement subject has no enemy from whom to liberate itself" (Han 8–10).

The disciplinary subject may have been guilty, but the achievement subject is exhausted. The injunction to "be yourself" becomes a burden, measured not in freedom but in fatigue. This is a subject that burns out not because it is constrained, but because it is free in the most insidious sense: entrapped in the obligation to perform a datafied ideal of the self. Resistance does not disappear. It is rendered illegible.

These transformations demand a rethinking of mediation and control. If the interface governs how the subject appears, behaves, and becomes recognizable, then visibility itself becomes a moral and aesthetic obligation. Feedback loops replace interdictions. Rewards displace punishments. The subject is not only branded, but brand-generating. An interface not between selves, but between data streams, desires, and machinic evaluation.

Foucault's genealogical method, while rooted in the institutions of modernity, remains indispensable. Yet it must be extended. The diagram of power has liquefied, flowing through interfaces, behavioral incentives, and affective economies. To track contemporary subject formation, we must attend not only to the enclosures that shape conduct, but to the systems that solicit desire. What subject emerges when control no

longer operates through constraint, but through freedom? When recognition becomes conditional on legibility? When the imperative to optimize eclipses the capacity to refuse?

Technological Co-Construction

The interface self is not forged only through cultural logics of optimization or diffuse regimes of desire. It is also materially structured by the technologies through which it is enacted. While thinkers like Deleuze and Han diagnose the infrastructural and affective dimensions of late-modern subjectivity, they often leave the concrete workings of technological mediation underdeveloped. This section shifts focus from the what of subjectivation to the how: how platforms and systems modulate behavior, shape perception, and encode normative scripts. Here, we bring Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology into conversation with postphenomenological accounts of mediation, asking not simply how power circulates, but how it is designed, operationalized, and inhabited.

Rather than treating technology as a monolithic or external force, Feenberg and postphenomenological thinkers approach it as a site of relational entanglement: structured by political choices, institutional logics, and cultural values, but also lived through embodied use and interpretive negotiation. Feenberg's two-level theory of instrumentalization reveals how technical systems embed ideologies and affordances that subtly condition action and legibility. Postphenomenology, meanwhile, offers a granular vocabulary for how technologies mediate experience by shaping what can be perceived, done, and known. Together, they allow us to reframe the interface not merely as a conduit for neoliberal subjectivity, but as a co-constitutive infrastructure through which the self is formatted, recognized, and potentially refigured.

2.1 Feenberg's Two-Level Theory of Instrumentalization

Feenberg's critical theory of technology dismantles the illusion of technological neutrality. Technologies are not inert tools employed to achieve predetermined goals; they are historically situated, institutionally embedded, and normatively loaded. His two-level theory of instrumentalization distinguishes between primary instrumentalization, the

decontextualization and abstraction of objects for technical control, and secondary instrumentalization, the reintegration of these objects into social life where meaning, interpretation, and resistance take shape (Feenberg 82–85). Subjectivity arises primarily within this secondary layer—not as a unilateral imposition, but through processes of negotiation, appropriation, and contestation.

Feenberg’s approach avoids both technological determinism and naïve voluntarism. Technologies do not dictate behavior directly, but they configure what can be done, perceived, or imagined. Through embedded affordances and design assumptions, systems orient conduct without overt coercion. Consider platforms for hiring, dating, or education. These systems are not neutral infrastructures; they encode a value regime that privileges efficiency, legibility, and self-optimization. Within such environments, subjectivity is not interpolated into a fixed structure. Rather, it is iteratively co-constituted through ongoing interaction, recursive evaluation, and algorithmic calibration.

At the heart of this co-constitution are technical codes, the rules, defaults, and structural constraints that remain largely invisible to the user but shape how technologies function and how subjects are positioned in relation to them. For Feenberg, challenging these codes is a political act. He names this intervention democratic rationalization: the collective reworking or reappropriation of technological systems to reflect alternative values and ways of being (Feenberg 111–13). In this model, subjectivity is not formed outside of technology but within its tensions, limitations, and moments of breakdown.

A hiring platform like LinkedIn makes this process concrete. Its promise of efficiency rests on abstracting the applicant into discrete data points—skills, endorsements, educational credentials—organized into categories optimized for machine sorting. This is primary instrumentalization. Yet subject formation emerges more clearly in the realm of secondary instrumentalization, where users are compelled to make themselves intelligible to the system. Profile completion becomes a performative act involving strategic language, keyword placement, and self-branding. What results is not pure repression, but a form of preformatted self-expression shaped by platform logic.

Still, these systems are not totalizing. Users resist in subtle ways: by foregrounding unconventional experiences, introducing ambiguity or irony, or declining to optimize for machinic readability. These gestures do not escape the system entirely, but they inhabit it differently. They mark interruptions in the expected logic, and in doing so, enact Feenberg's notion of democratic rationalization in lived practice. Here, subjectivity asserts itself not through withdrawal from technological mediation, but through the redirection of its terms.

Feenberg's theory thus offers a powerful framework for analyzing how platforms do more than mediate existing social values, they actively produce them. They script norms of visibility, competence, and desirability, shaping what kinds of selves can emerge and which futures appear attainable. To use such a platform is not merely to seek employment; it is to enter a recursive economy of self-fashioning governed by the requirements of algorithmic legibility.

Yet even within these constraints, subjectivity is never fully captured. As Feenberg emphasizes, technical systems contain fissures and afford openings for reappropriation, refusal, and redesign. These tensions (between system and self, constraint and creativity) are central to any critical account of the interface self.

To explore these dynamics further, however, we must move beyond systems and codes to consider the texture of lived mediation. How do interfaces shape perception, embodiment, and experience? What ethical possibilities and ontological implications arise from these relations? These questions lead us into the postphenomenological tradition.

2.2 Postphenomenology

Where Feenberg uncovers how technologies encode social norms and capitalist rationalities, postphenomenology offers a lens through which to grasp how these structures are lived, embodied, and experienced. Developed by Don Ihde and extended by thinkers such as Peter-Paul Verbeek and Asle Kiran, postphenomenology attends to the micro-relational entanglements between humans and technological artifacts. It asks not

only how technologies are used, but how they mediate perception, shape agency, and inform self-understanding.

Like Feenberg, postphenomenologists reject both instrumental neutrality and technological determinism. Technologies are not passive intermediaries between subject and world; they are mediators that co-constitute experience. Ihde's typology of human–technology–world relations (embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, and background) maps the ways in which technologies embed themselves in perception and action, often disappearing into the very conditions of appearance (Ihde 72–93). Technologies do not merely extend human capabilities; they reshape how the world appears and reconfigure the subject who acts within it. These mediations are not static. They evolve with material design, social uptake, and habituated use.

Peter-Paul Verbeek develops this insight by foregrounding the ontological and ethical stakes of mediation. For Verbeek, technologies both participate in experience and shape subjectivity itself. Technologies exhibit what he calls technological intentionality: a directedness toward certain actions and interpretations, shaped by design affordances and normative assumptions (Verbeek 115–17). Artifacts do not command, but they invite, discourage, or exclude behaviors. As such, they influence how users perceive themselves and their world. This dynamic is especially pronounced in digital interfaces, where mediation is no longer only perceptual but also ontological and moral. The self is not merely extended by technology, it is formatted through it.

Consider hiring platforms or dating apps. These are not just tools for information exchange; they structure who can appear and how they are legible. Fields like education, employment, height, or hobbies are not neutral data points. They reflect encoded normative priorities. In Verbeek's terms, these platforms function as moralizing machines: technologies that mediate not only conduct but also the perceived contours of what is responsible, desirable, or worthy (Verbeek 91). The ethical frame is not chosen—

it is embedded in code, interface layout, and design defaults. Presentation becomes constrained by an implicit grammar of what counts.

Asle Kiran expands this lineage by offering a multidimensional framework for analyzing technological mediation. His account focuses on four interlocking dimensions, the ontological, epistemological, practical, and ethical, each of which operates through what he terms a two-sided structure. Technologies reveal and conceal, enable and constrain, magnify and reduce, involve and alienate (Kiran 81–84). Mediation, in this view, is never neutral. It shapes the field of appearance and the very conditions under which subjects become intelligible to themselves and others.

This dual structure aligns closely with Feenberg's two-level theory of instrumentalization. Primary instrumentalization refers to the abstraction and reordering of the world for technical manipulation. Secondary instrumentalization concerns the reintegration of that abstraction into social life, where meaning and resistance take form. When mapped onto Kiran's schema, Feenberg's theory provides an account of how small design choices accumulate into larger regimes of subjectivation.

The ontological dimension becomes clear in platforms like LinkedIn. Users are rendered as potential employees, bundles of competencies, affiliations, and endorsements optimized for both algorithmic and human readability. Simultaneously, the interface conceals context, ambivalence, and resistance. The world is reorganized into machine-readable data. Yet the abstraction is not left inert, it is fed back into social norms and rankings. Questions such as who is employable or trustworthy are not merely cultural judgments. They are structured through design decisions, database schemas, and algorithmic filtering. The interface becomes a site of ontological filtration, shaping who and what can appear.

The epistemological dimension follows. Interfaces amplify some forms of information, such as clicks, matches, endorsements, while downplaying and reducing others like uncertainty, hesitation, or contradiction. Primary instrumentalization parses experience into quantifiable signals. Secondary instrumentalization turns those signals

into modes of self-understanding. Metrics become mirrors. Users begin to understand themselves not through introspection, but through outputs: likes, impressions, profile views, rankings. Feenberg's framework here shows a displacement of epistemic authority from lived experience to machine readability.

The practical dimension focuses on the field of action configured by interfaces. Design features like "apply now" or "add a photo" buttons or prompts to "update your profile" gently guide user behavior. These cues are not coercive, but directive. They suggest what actions are expected, desirable, or efficient. What appears as freedom is often a tightly bounded field of operational legibility. This is where Kiran's analysis of affordance meets Feenberg's attention to system constraints. Action is shaped not by command, but by interface choreography.

Finally, the ethical dimension concerns how platforms structure moral perception. Responsive, punctual, and streamlined behavior is rewarded; ambiguity, opacity, or refusal are marginalized. The platform does not merely reflect ethical values—it enforces them through its architecture. What emerges is not simply a moral economy, but a moral infrastructure. Efficiency becomes conflated with virtue. Kiran helps us grasp how this ethic is internalized, while Feenberg explains how it is codified into technological systems.

Together, Kiran and Feenberg offer a compelling analytic convergence. Kiran provides a phenomenological account of how technologies feel, how they shape perception and action from within. Feenberg reveals the institutional and political scaffolding behind those effects. They show us that interfaces do not merely manage behavior—they constitute subjectivity. Users are neither entirely autonomous nor passively determined. They are entangled in systems that configure what counts as legible, actionable, and desirable.

Crucially, this mediation extends even to those who do not participate directly. Opting out of platforms does not exempt one from their effects. Workplace expectations, cultural norms, and relational dynamics are increasingly shaped by systems like LinkedIn

or Tinder, regardless of one's engagement. The conditions of social appearance have already been reorganized. This is why Verbeek's idea of moralizing machines returns with such force. Technologies do not merely mediate what is seen or done; they shape the normative frameworks through which judgment occurs. These frameworks are rarely contested in open discourse. They are embedded silently in menus, defaults, and feedback structures. In becoming infrastructural, they become formative.

Kiran gives us the affective texture of mediation, and Feenberg shows us its systemic architecture. Verbeek makes clear that it is also cultural, shaping subjectivity not just in function but in form. Through their convergence, we come to see the interface self not simply as a user profile or data node, but as a subject-form: shaped by design, formatted by systems, and yet never fully captured. This is why technological mediation must be treated as a central ontological, ethical, and political problem of contemporary subjectivity.

Posthumanism, Interface Ontology, and the Ethics of Becoming

We have traced a genealogy in which subjectivity no longer rests upon a stable interior essence or sovereign agency. Instead, it emerges from networks of power, regimes of optimization, and recursive circuits of visibility. With Foucault, we dismantled the fiction of autonomy, revealing the modern subject as an effect of disciplinary organization. With Feenberg and the postphenomenological tradition, we turned our attention to the material infrastructures through which technologies co-constitute perception, action, and self-understanding. The self, once imagined as a locus of inward reflection, now flickers within feedback loops, algorithmic profiles, and interface logics.

This final section marks a shift in orientation. The aim is no longer solely diagnostic. We turn from critique to reconstruction, not in search of lost humanist coherence, nor in celebration of machinic transcendence, but toward a conceptual framework attuned to the hybrid, unstable, and relational forms of subjectivity that emerge within a posthuman condition. The interface self, fractured yet improvisational, is not

reducible to surveillance or compliance. It demands a language that can hold paradox: a subject-form that is at once constrained and co-creative, formatted and indeterminate.

Posthumanism, in this frame, offers not a theory of the future, but a rethinking of the present. It is not reducible to technological enhancement, biological hybridity, or speculative science fiction. Rather, it constitutes a philosophical orientation that decenters the human, contests the metaphysics of identity, and affirms entanglement as the ground of being. As Rosi Braidotti writes, the posthuman subject is “a transversal entity, constituted across multiple axes—embodied, embedded, techno-mediated, and relational” (Braidotti 190). The interface self, understood through this lens, is not a failure of authenticity but a situated articulation of distributed subjectivity: coded, porous, and emerging within thick ecologies of mediation.

This section undertakes a speculative synthesis. Having traced how the subject is produced through power, designed through systems, and experienced through mediations, we now ask: What kinds of agency and ethical possibility remain, or become imaginable, once the human is no longer the given point of departure? How might a posthuman orientation reshape dominant imaginaries of education, labor, intimacy, or governance under algorithmic conditions? And crucially, how can we cultivate ways of thinking and living that resist both the melancholia of humanist nostalgia and the accelerationist drift toward technocratic control?

To explore these questions, the chapter unfolds in two parts. First, it maps the conceptual terrain of posthumanism, drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe. Each contributes a distinct but intersecting account of posthuman subjectivity, technocultural hybridity, and ethical reorientation. Second, we return to the interface self—not as a symptom of control, but as a site of becoming-with. Here, we reframe mediation not as a loss of agency, but as a condition for new relational and ontological possibilities.

In closing, we reflect on the stakes of this reframing. To think the interface self posthumanly is not merely to offer a descriptive correction. It is to invite a new ethos of

responsibility, attunement, and a situated becoming in a world increasingly shaped by technological infrastructures we neither fully control nor entirely escape.

3.1 The Contours of Posthumanism

Posthumanism does not seek to eliminate the human, but to interrogate the assumptions that define and delimit “the Human” as a metaphysical, political, and epistemological category. It does not aim at transcendence or dissolution, but at decentering the anthropocentric subject and reconfiguring the ethical imaginaries that follow from this decentering. It asks what becomes thinkable—ontologically, ethically, and politically—when the human is no longer treated as foundational, autonomous, or ontologically prior to its relations.

The first contour is this decentering itself. Posthumanism challenges the Enlightenment ideal of a universal, rational, self-contained subject. As Rosi Braidotti argues, this figure has always been sustained through violent exclusions: of women, racialized others, nonhuman animals, and nature. “The human” is not a neutral descriptor, but a regulatory fiction, historically constructed, unequally distributed, and mobilized to secure normative hierarchies (Braidotti 15–17). The posthuman critique exposes this fiction, foregrounding vulnerability, multiplicity, and situatedness as constitutive of subjectivity. The human, in this sense, is not an essence to be protected but an assemblage to be rethought.

This leads to a second key claim: ontological hybridity. Posthumanism asserts that the human has never existed in isolation. It has always been formed through relations with nonhuman forces—biological, technological, symbolic. Here, posthumanism intersects with postphenomenology. Don Ihde’s taxonomy of human-technology-world relations (embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, background) maps how tools shape perception and action (Ihde 72–93). Peter-Paul Verbeek extends this insight, arguing that technologies possess technological intentionality—they guide interpretation and behavior through embedded affordances and normative structures (Verbeek 117). Posthumanism radicalizes these insights. It contends that the human is not merely technologically

mediated, but technogenetically constituted. As Donna Haraway famously wrote, “the cyborg is our ontology,” not a metaphor for fusion, but a recognition of our material entanglement with systems, codes, and infrastructures (Haraway 150–52).

Yet posthumanism is not a celebration of hybridity for its own sake. It is attuned to the asymmetries, exclusions, and power dynamics that operate through technocultural systems. As Asle Kiran notes, technological mediation is never neutral: it reveals while concealing, enables while constraining, includes while excluding (Kiran 82–84). Smartphones connect, but also monitor; algorithms recommend, but also categorize and sort; interfaces render subjects visible, but only within preformatted templates. The posthuman condition is not post-political. It is shaped by optimization logics, surveillance infrastructures, and technocratic governance; and these demand critical attention.

Accordingly, posthuman subjectivity must be understood in terms of distributed agency. The subject is no longer a sovereign origin point, but a node within dynamic assemblages: affective, algorithmic, ecological, and institutional. Subjectivity is emergent and relational, co-constituted across systems. This resonates with Feenberg’s claim that technologies, while reproducing social hierarchies, are not closed systems. They remain open to reappropriation, hacking, and redesign. For Feenberg, agency is exercised not by stepping outside technological systems, but by inhabiting and redirecting them from within (Feenberg 112–13). Posthumanism amplifies this view. It calls us to recognize that agency is entangled with nonhuman actors—technical, biological, environmental—and that these entanglements are constitutive, not incidental.

Finally, posthumanism demands an ethical reorientation. If the human is no longer the privileged locus of value, ethics must become situated, responsive, and material. Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble” exemplifies this ethos: an ethic grounded not in transcendence or mastery, but in partial connection, cohabitation, and care amid complexity (Haraway 1–4). Karen Barad’s concept of response-ability further articulates this shift: ethical action emerges not from sovereign decision, but from accountability to the intra-active relations that constitute us (Barad 393–95). Ethics, in this view, is less

about autonomy and abstract rights, and more about the labor of ongoing negotiation within relational fields.

In sum, posthumanism reframes the self not as a discrete and self-identical substance, but as a becoming-with—an emergent formation shaped by code, infrastructure, embodiment, and discourse. It invites us to rethink subjectivity as both shaped by and shaping the systems in which it is embedded. Rather than promising liberation through transparency or detachment, posthumanism calls us to dwell within ambiguity, to navigate entanglement with care, and to cultivate new forms of situated responsibility. The posthuman subject does not seek to recover wholeness, nor does it celebrate machinic mastery. It learns to live with the interface, not as a tool or adversary, but as a condition and companion.

3.2 Posthuman Subjectivity and the Interface Self

The interface self does not mark the end of subjectivity, nor its dissolution into machinic code. Rather, it signals a transformation in the grammar of becoming. If the liberal subject was presumed to be unified, autonomous, and expressive, the interface self is distributed, recursive, and contextually legible. It emerges not through introspective depth but through patterned interaction: algorithmic feedback, platform logics, and infrastructural conditions that mediate how one appears, acts, and understands oneself.

This shift demands that we move beyond both the nostalgic mourning of the autonomous subject and the fetishization of computational transparency. Posthumanism offers a conceptual language for navigating this terrain. It understands subjectivity not as lost, but as reconfigured—formed through entanglements with technological systems that are themselves historically situated and normatively charged. The self, in this framework, is neither reducible to data nor entirely captured by it. It is a node within a mesh of relations, shaped by interfaces but not exhausted by them.

As Verbeek and Haraway remind us, subjectivity is not merely something expressed through technology, but something constituted within its folds. The interface does not serve a preexisting self; it scripts the conditions under which the self becomes

legible. Profiles, prompts, metrics, and affordances organize visibility, shaping what is seen, what is sayable, and what is valued. In this sense, the interface is not a surface but a structuring threshold. It is the zone where subjectivity is continually formatted, interpreted, and negotiated.

Importantly, this formatting is not deterministic. Posthuman agency is distributed and situated, but it is not absent. Following Braidotti, we might understand the interface self as a transversal subject: one that traverses technological, affective, and epistemic layers without being reducible to any single plane (Braidotti 190). It is constituted through flows of data, habits of interaction, and platform architectures. Yet it remains a site of improvisation, refusal, and excess. The interface constrains, but it also enables differential articulation—a situated capacity to act otherwise within the very systems that mediate us.

This view diverges from critiques that describe surveillance capitalism as a totalizing regime of capture. While such critiques rightly identify the extraction of behavioral surplus (Zuboff), they often understate how users tactically inhabit and repurpose platforms. The interface self is not merely extracted; it is performed. It is responsive to metrics but also plays with them. It can withhold, distort, or engage ironically. These are not forms of full autonomy, but partial agency. Haraway's notion of "response-ability" captures this: a situated capacity to negotiate the terms of one's appearance within algorithmic frames.

Ambivalence is central to posthuman subjectivity. The interface self is both legible and opaque, scripted and improvisational. It is interpolated into classificatory systems, yet capable of modulating its contours in ways that exceed machinic comprehension. This does not mean it escapes power. Rather, it means that power operates through dynamic relations, not static domination. Technologies of categorization are never complete. The self, even when profiled, remains a process.

Moreover, the interface self reconfigures the temporality of subjectivity. It is no longer anchored in a coherent narrative arc, but in the immediacy of feedback. The timeline, the notification, the analytic dashboard—these fragment and reorganize

experience, privileging iteration over introspection. Yet even here, posthumanism resists despair. The breakdown of narrative unity does not foreclose meaning; it invites other modes of orientation such as rhythm, intensity, and relational coherence. The posthuman subject becomes less a storyteller of an internal essence and more a cartographer of situated relations, navigating fields of force, feedback, and friction.

To theorize the interface self, then, is to attend to how subjectivity is materialized at the intersection of code, design, and social practice. Our tools do not merely extend our capacities; they shape what counts as capacity. Affordances are not neutral options. They are constraints embedded with normative assumptions. The profile does not simply describe; it prescribes modes of being. Yet within these prescriptions, there remains the possibility of re-description, reorientation, and resistance.

In this light, the interface self becomes a critical figure for thinking posthuman subjectivity. It foregrounds the conditions under which subjects become intelligible, while also pointing to the fractures and excesses that haunt every apparatus of capture. It is neither a sovereign agent nor a passive artifact. It is a mediated, negotiated, and unstable subject-form. The interface is not a window onto the self but the terrain where the self is stitched together and undone.

3.3 Living Within and Against the Interface: A Posthuman Praxis

To live within and against the interface is to live within contradiction. Our most basic gestures (logging in, updating, liking, sharing) are at once expressions of agency and acts of submission. The digital platforms we rely on for connection, visibility, and recognition are the very infrastructures that format us as measurable, predictable, and optimizable entities. In this context, posthuman praxis does not begin with a decision to accept or reject technology. It begins in ambivalence.

The interface is a paradoxical terrain. It promises personalization but demands standardization. It offers immediacy yet operates through opaque systems of delay, ranking, and filtering. What feels intimate, such as an online conversation or a shared playlist, is mediated through impersonal metrics. What appears as agency, choosing a

profile picture and writing a bio, is filtered through assumptions embedded in interface design. These systems shape not just what we can do, but who we can be seen to be.

Consider LinkedIn. It claims to empower users to showcase their professional identity, but that identity must be formatted according to machinic priorities: keywords, endorsement counts, algorithmic legibility. A user may wish to express their career as a journey of experimentation, failure, and reinvention. But such narratives fall flat in a system designed to reward linearity, stability, and self-optimization. The platform doesn't forbid this expression, but it makes it invisible. The paradox is this: your "freedom" to be authentic exists only within a narrow grammar of legibility.

The same holds for dating apps like Tinder or Hinge. A user may desire slow, complex intimacy. But the interface encourages rapid, affective decisions based on visual cues, curated prompts, and swipeable binaries. Even the refusal to participate, to delete the app, or step back, does not fully escape its influence. Expectations shaped by the app linger in social interactions, recalibrating how attraction and desirability are understood in broader culture. The interface is infrastructural: it extends beyond the screen into the habits, norms, and rhythms of daily life.

This is the terrain where posthuman subjectivity must operate. Braidotti calls for repositioning the human within a broader field of entanglement: technical, affective, ecological. The self is not erased, but redistributed. It is no longer a sovereign source of meaning, but an emergent effect of relations. Praxis, then, is less about recovering autonomy and more about learning to live with, through, and sometimes despite the systems that structure us.

Feenberg's notion of democratic rationalization offers a strategy here. It calls for engaging with technological systems not as destiny, but as sites of contestation. We might tweak the algorithm, obscure our metadata, or collectively pressure platforms to change design choices. These are not revolutions. They are refusals, small acts of friction. For instance, freelance workers may intentionally blur the boundaries of their availability to avoid being over-optimized by platforms like Upwork. Some educators subvert learning

management systems by embedding unexpected content or by using feedback functions for reflective dialogue rather than assessment. In each case, the platform is not rejected outright, but reinhabited. Its logic stretched, repurposed, or resisted.

Postphenomenology adds further nuance. Verbeek's model of technological accompaniment suggests that we do not simply use tools, but co-exist with them. Our perception, action, and sense of self are shaped by their affordances. Living well with technology, then, requires a kind of design literacy: not just knowing how to use tools, but being able to read their biases, anticipate their effects, and cultivate practices that subvert or reorient their functions. Critical pedagogy, for example, can foreground this literacy, such as teaching students to interrogate how platforms script their behavior rather than passively conforming to it.

Yet we must not romanticize resistance. The power of the interface lies precisely in its partial openness. It invites participation, even resistance, but always within constraints. A de-optimized profile may express defiance, but it may also result in fewer opportunities, lower visibility, or exclusion. Opting out of platform normativity often comes at a cost. This is the ethical paradox: to resist the system is also to risk being erased by it.

And so, posthuman praxis must learn to dwell in that tension. Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble" captures this beautifully. It is a call to remain present within contradiction, to refuse both technological utopianism and reactionary nostalgia. Making kin in this context might mean forming support networks for those harmed by algorithmic bias. It might mean building cooperative alternatives to gig platforms. Or it might simply mean carving out moments of slowness, humor, or opacity within overdetermined systems.

Opacity, following Glissant, is not the enemy of relationality. It is its condition. The right not to be fully known or parsed is a form of ethical defense. It is a way of preserving difference without domination. Within the interface, this may mean crafting identities that exceed platform logic, declining to rank others, refusing the compulsion to constantly

update or perform. These acts are not outside mediation. They are within it, but they work against its grain.

Ultimately, posthuman praxis is not about resolution. It is about holding the contradiction: to know that your self is mediated and still insist on care, complexity, and agency. To critique the platform while depending on it. To be legible enough to survive but illegible enough to remain uncontained. This is not a stable politics. It is a situated ethics. An ethics which treats entanglement not as contamination but as the material of response. The interface self, then, is not a stable identity to be recovered or transcended. It is a site of ongoing negotiation, a dynamic choreography of compliance, friction, and improvisation. It is where power is both internalized and redirected, where agency is partial but still real. And it is within this space, not beyond it, that new forms of relation, care, and political imagination must be forged.

This is not an ending. It is a commitment: to remain with the problem, to speak from the middle of mediation, and to practice subjectivity as an act of technological and ethical composition.

Conclusion: Dwelling Within and Against

The interface self is not an aberration. It is a revelation, showing the quiet capture of subjectivity by systems that speak in the language of optimization, self-presentation, and legibility. It reflects a culture that governs not through repression but through design; through dashboards, drop-downs, and defaults. This transformation does not unfold with spectacle. It arrives through micro-adjustments: a reformatted CV, a curated dating profile, a compulsively refreshed analytics page. These gestures, mundane and habitual, mark the sedimentation of power into practice.

Yet the danger here is not simply alienation. It is ontological narrowing. The interface self does not conceal an authentic interior. It formats what a subject can be. This is not a mask but a mold. What counts as identity is increasingly that which can be parsed, scored, and circulated. Subjectivity becomes infrastructural, not expressive. It is routed

through platforms that reward consistency, responsiveness, and machinic legibility, qualities which sit uneasily with opacity, ambivalence, or refusal.

To critique this is not to retreat into nostalgia. There is no untouched self to return to, no pure agency uncorrupted by systems of mediation. Mediation is not an accident of our condition. It is constitutive. Posthumanism urges us to relinquish fantasies of autonomy and coherence, not to embrace fragmentation for its own sake, but to rethink the self as emergent, entangled, and situated. In this frame, the human is not a fixed substance but a process, always in relation, always becoming-with.

The question that remains is not whether we are mediated, but how we live with and through these mediations. Can we inhabit the interface critically, without fully capitulating to its logic? Can we carve out spaces for hesitation, misrecognition, and complexity within systems that thrive on speed and clarity?

Feenberg's theory of technological codes gives us a grammar for resistance. Platforms may encode dominant values, but they remain sites of contestation. They can be repurposed, subverted, misused. Kiran and Verbeek help us feel the texture of mediation from within: how technologies accompany us, shape perception, and guide ethical response. These thinkers remind us that power does not operate only from above. It emerges in the design of the interface, in the script of the button, in the affordance of the field.

But they also remind us that resistance is possible, if provisional. Not grand refusal, but friction: a refusal to optimize a profile; a delay in response time; a misuse of tags or prompts; a practice of ambiguity in systems that reward clarity. These acts are not pure escapes. They are lived negotiations. They tear, however slightly, at the smooth surface of control. In these ruptures, the interface falters, and something else—a gesture, a difference, a voice—flickers into view.

To dwell within and against the interface is to accept this entanglement. It is to live amid infrastructures that shape us, while insisting that shaping is not the same as closure. It is to remain in the tension between legibility and opacity, between presence and

withdrawal, between visibility and refusal. This dwelling is not defeat. It is practice; slow, adaptive, situated.

The interface self is not the end of subjectivity. It is a threshold. What lies beyond cannot be predetermined. But the way we cross it. The forms of care, solidarity, and imagination we bring to it will determine whether subjectivity contracts into machinic compliance or expands into new forms of co-becoming. This is the posthuman opening, to a self no longer grounded in sovereignty, but capable of responding—ethically, relationally, and obliquely—to the systems that see through it.

Author Bio

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Erasing the World: Ruination, and More-than-Human Refusal in Occupied Palestine

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Abstract

This article explores the ongoing devastation in occupied Palestine as a process of erasure, where ruination extends across human lifeworlds and reverberates through multispecies, elemental, and epistemic registers. It introduces the concept of *damaged cosmography* to describe how settler-colonial violence dismantles the connective tissues of life—land, plants, water, and kinship—thereby undoing the very conditions of world-making. Drawing on feminist posthumanist thought (Despret, Neimanis, Azoulay) and Indigenous epistemologies (Watts, Simpson, TallBear), the article develops a mode of witnessing grounded in situated accountability and more-than-human response-ability. Case studies include the militarization of archaeological sites, herbicidal warfare, the collapse of hydrological systems, and the disarticulation of vegetal and animal kinships across Gaza. These acts constitute deliberate strategies of ontological unmaking: ruins function as instruments of epistemic foreclosure, while plants, animals, and aquifers endure as wounded witnesses. Through the lens of refusal, the article also attends to forms of survivance—seed saving, oral memory, rooftop gardens—that persist without monumentalizing continuity. Writing under siege becomes a method of co-presence: not a detached observation of violence, but an ethical participation in the fractured yet enduring textures of life. We argue that thinking with posthumanist frameworks amid genocide affirms, rather than abstracts, suffering—by tracing how ruination reverberates across all that composes a livable world.



Keywords: Palestine, damaged cosmography, ruination, more-than-human, refusal, posthumanism

This article is written in grief. It emerges from the ongoing genocide in occupied Palestine, where entire communities are being destroyed—erased from maps, archives, and memory. It is impossible to write as if from a distance. Every sentence is shaped by the unbearable weight of what is happening, and by the refusal to look away. At the same time, this work insists that grief is not only human. The devastation in Gaza extends across species, elements, and generations. It is ecological, historical, and epistemic. It targets the infrastructures of life: water, soil, and seeds. Naming this enacts a commitment to suffering as it unfolds across life in its different forms—tracing the full extent of destruction and the forces that persist in spite of it. We write from within the mess of things. We write to stay present: with the wounded, with the silenced, with the other worlds that carry kinship and care under siege. This article takes a stance. It moves through the concept of damaged cosmography to trace how ruination in Palestine extends across human and more-than-human registers, remaining present with what persists, unsettles, and resists resolution.

The ongoing violence in Palestine erases entire cosmographies—worlds formed through situated practices of entanglement and inhabitation. Cosmography, in this sense, affirms the active composition of life-worlds through land, ritual, ancestral presence, and material interdependence. These configurations emerge from co-creative processes in which living beings and histories are inseparable from place. In settler-colonial regimes, violence disrupts the ontological, material, and epistemic foundations of these worlds, dissolving the conditions that sustain them. As Vanessa Watts articulates from an Indigenous perspective, cosmologies emerge through what she terms “place-thought,” an embodied mode of understanding premised on the idea “that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (21). Thinking with Watts brings into focus how colonial and settler violence intervenes within the grounding ties of being and place, targeting

the connective tissue that binds life to place. In Palestine, the eradication of olive groves, the bombing of aquifers, and the militarization of archaeological zones sever these living threads. These events unmake the material supports of memory, responsibility, and continuity. Cosmographic violence alters the structures through which collective existence is held together. Land is repositioned as target, ruins are instrumentalized as justification, and bonds are recoded as threats. Furthermore, cosmography enables a vocabulary to understand this transformation as more than loss—it reveals the dismantling of conditions that sustain being. Colonial violence reshapes these worlds by altering the very conditions through which they become intelligible. Conceptual tools must respond to this complexity, staying with its reverberations without seeking closure. One such apparatus is what we call damaged cosmography.

Damaged cosmography offers a mode of engaging worlds under pressure—those marked by extractive histories, juridical violence, and epistemic disarticulation. It begins from the recognition of a world already in motion: a terrain composed through affective, multispecies, and historical entanglements. Rather than mapping the past from above, it follows residual ties across debris, traces, and endurance. It holds space for partial, ephemeral, and precarious forms of life—remaining with the ruptures that continue to mark the contours of survival rather than smoothing them into coherence. This orientation builds upon feminist and posthumanist thinkers such as Vinciane Despret, Astrida Neimanis, and Ariella Azoulay. Despret proposes a practice of “response-ability” that arises from proximity and attention to more-than-human propositions. Neimanis invites us to remain with wounded ecologies without resolving them, insisting on an ethics of dwelling-with. Azoulay calls for accountability to what remains foreclosed, requiring a suspension of dominant interpretive frames. Together, these thinkers orient damaged cosmography as a situated practice rather than a conceptual system—one that traces how violence sedimentates in ruins, infrastructures, and bodies, while attuning to the fragile remainders of connection. It tracks resonance across layers of debris—from plants and sediments to oral archives and broken

infrastructures—refusing both hierarchy and neutrality. Thinking with damaged cosmographies begins within the cracks, following textures of survival and meaning that continue to speak, even when fragmented.

To write within a damaged cosmography is to remain accountable to the ties that endure under rupture—engaging from within, not observing from a distance. Situated witnessing becomes a practice of implication and response, bracketing detachment and mastery. As Donna Haraway insists, situated knowledges are not relativist, but accountable ways of knowing from somewhere. Her figure of the “modest witness” proposes narration grounded in entanglement, where responsibility emerges through participation. In Palestine, writing cannot claim innocence: it occurs under militarized confinement, within ruins, amid the interwoven suffering of human and more-than-human lives. This epistemic stance resonates directly with Sandra Harding’s call for a practice of knowledge-making that begins from marginalized positions and renders visible the power relations shaping what counts as fact. Ariella Azoulay extends such epistemic commitment through her method of “unlearning imperialism”—a refusal of detached historiography that insists on co-presence with disarticulated worlds. Similarly, Kim TallBear grounds Indigenous research ethics in accountability that honors kin and place. For her, knowing requires ongoing dialogue with land, kin, and community—even when such connections remain unfinished or illegible. To witness from within is to remain faithful to these situated worlds. It is to write from inside the ruins—not to resolve, but to stay.

In settler-colonial contexts, ruination operates as a method—a deliberate strategy for severing connective infrastructures, undoing historical presence, and reordering the temporalities of place. Ruin is not aftermath; it is actively produced. As a mechanism of governance and epistemic intervention, it dismantles infrastructures, disrupts ecologies, and destabilizes material traces in ways that obstruct continuity. “Ruin epistemologies” emphasize this as a future-making project—reconfiguring what can be known, remembered, or rebuilt (Stoler). In Palestine, this method appears in architectural neglect, bureaucratic delay, and the militarization of debris. Ruination

thus becomes a tactic of colonial control and replacement. Patrick Wolfe describes settler colonialism as “a structure, not an event,” defined by a recursive logic of elimination. Within this logic, ruins are composed to erase the conditions for collective endurance. Azoulay names this “imperial unlearning”—a systematic dismantling of the material grounds for alternative knowledge and memory. Ruins become instruments of organized forgetting, authorizing the present while foreclosing return. From an Indigenous perspective, they testify to displaced cosmologies: orchestrated absences rather than neutral remains. Colonial ruination functions through decay, delay, and dereliction, composing its own form of world-dismantling knowledge. To understand how this dismantling intervenes in continuity, we must now turn to the disruption of land-based epistemologies and the severing of embodied practices of remembering through place.

In Palestine, land is not simply territory—it is epistemic ground: archive, teacher, and world-making terrain. The violence of occupation targets these conditions of transmission, disrupting the practices through which oral traditions, ancestral connections, and multispecies more-than-human kinships endure. Within Indigenous frameworks, scholars such as Kate Harriden and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describe land as sentient and instructive—a matrix through which histories and responsibilities take form. In Palestine, the destruction of crops, the seizure of water, and the militarization of ruins interrupt these forms of transmission, fracturing the entangled grounds of survival. Janette Habashi observes how Palestinian children sustain collective memory through oral traditions that link daily life to landscape. Ali-Shtayeh et al. document the knowledge of wild edible plants in the northern West Bank, showing how foraging sustains both ecological intimacy and intergenerational learning. Silvia Hassouna describes how biodiverse gardens, cultivated at the Palestine Museum of Natural History, become sites of ecological resistance and vegetal preservation. These practices engage land as a ground of inheritance and survival—intimate, dynamic, and at risk. Their destruction is not incidental. It interrupts the embodied textures through which land remains meaningful, and life remains possible.

The systematic use of herbicides by Israeli military forces along the Gaza border enacts environmental and epistemic warfare—targeting plant life as both infrastructure and cultural-ecological kin, and disrupting the ties that sustain Palestinian communities. Since at least 2014, aerial spraying operations have been conducted by the Israeli military to clear vegetation along the border zone with Gaza. Although officially described as a security measure, these operations often affect Palestinian farmland well beyond the designated buffer areas, due to wind drift and the indiscriminate application of chemicals. This practice has intensified in recent years, attracting international attention to its ecological and legal implications. According to an investigation by Forensic Architecture, in collaboration with Al Mezan Center for Human Rights and Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, herbicides such as glyphosate, oxyfluorfen, and diuron are deployed without prior notice to farmers, with observable damage extending hundreds of meters into Gaza (CEOBS). Satellite and ground-level analysis revealed consistent patterns of crop destruction and habitat loss following each spraying campaign. An investigative article on Yale Environment 360 reports that since October 2023, Israeli military operations have destroyed more than 2,000 agricultural sites, including fields, orchards, and greenhouses, severely disrupting local food systems and degrading soil fertility (Pearce). While herbicidal warfare has been documented in other contexts—such as Vietnam and Colombia—the use of chemical agents in Gaza represents a contemporary instance of systematic agro-ecological targeting under conditions of war. Bureaucratic tools—chemicals, flight plans, operational policy—become instruments of erasure. Forensic Architecture’s findings make clear that these are far from incidental acts; they are calculated interventions that render agricultural life unsustainable and land increasingly uninhabitable. What disappears is livelihood, and belonging: foraging knowledge, vegetal companionships, and the embodied intimacies that once rooted communities in place.

Plants live alongside humans—teaching, remembering, and sustaining cohabitation. They carry histories, responsibilities, and forms of care that unfold in

“more-than-human” time. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls them our oldest teachers—beings whose lifeways encode reciprocity, memory, and guidance. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson extends this vision through her concept of land-based intelligence, where pedagogy arises through tending, foraging, and cohabitation. These are living practices—ways of being that root communities in seasonal, sensorial, and intergenerational ways. Across Palestine, these plant kinships endure in the dailiness gestures of companionship—herbal medicine, ritual cultivation, and the gathering of wild foods. They do not preserve knowledge as content, but as intimacy. When herbicidal warfare and infrastructural collapse sever these ties, the damage is more than ecological. It reverberates across registers of recollection, perception, and presence. The uprooting of plant life fragments the very circuits through which land becomes intelligible. The disappearance of vegetal companions diminishes the capacity to remember, to relate, to respond. In the cosmographic weave of Palestinian life, plants endure as witnesses and kin. Their destruction resounds, leaving wounds that extend beyond the field into language, inheritance, and the ethical texture of place.

The collapse of Gaza’s water infrastructure constitutes a deliberate dismantling of the elemental conditions that sustain life. Bombed aquifers, destroyed wells, dismantled desalination facilities, and incapacitated sewage systems have given rise to a hydrological siege that reshapes the flow, quality, and significance of water. This blockade is not only infrastructural—it is cosmographic. As with soil, water in Palestine is more than a resource: it is a connecting medium, memory, and ecological continuity. By April 2024, water availability in Rafah and northern Gaza had fallen to less than seven percent of pre-conflict levels (Oxfam International). Eighty-eight percent of water wells and all six major treatment plants were reported damaged or destroyed (Reuters, *Rebuilding Gaza*). International bodies estimate over 1,675 kilometers of water and sanitation infrastructure rendered unusable, with damage surpassing \$18.5 billion. These figures, while institutional, make legible a reality long known to those living under lockdown. Gaza’s main aquifer, already saline, is now over 97% contaminated (Circle of Blue), and many residents survive on just three liters

of water per day—an amount well below what the World Health Organization considers minimally acceptable in emergencies. What once sustained life now circulates through broken pipes, flooded latrines, and poisoned wells. Public health collapses alongside ecological stability: daily sewage discharges exceed 100,000 cubic meters, contaminating the Mediterranean and undermining marine and soil regeneration. Water, once a connective tissue, now marks the body and the land with exposure, exhaustion, and irreversible harm.

Water carries more than life. In Gaza, the hydrological siege dismantles the epistemic and ethical worlds shaped through fluid co-presence. Astrida Neimanis, in her hydrofeminist work *Bodies of Water*, describes water as a “body of relation,” attuned to processes of differentiation, interpermeation, and shared gestation. Her concept of amniotics invites us to think of water as an onto-logic—a condition of emergence that binds entities through time rather than dividing them into discrete units. Waters, Neimanis writes, “extend embodiment in time—body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies” (3). The bombing and contamination of Gaza’s waters, in this view, constitute an ontological injury: they unravel the temporal fabric through which life composes itself, recalls itself, and sustains continuity. This injury resonates with what Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy describe as the radical relationality of Indigenous water epistemologies. In these frameworks, water is relative, theorist, and pedagogue—a living site through which knowledge is enacted and obligations are renewed. Research becomes a method of accountability to these hydrological kinships. In Gaza, the destruction of aquifers and sewage systems disturbs these ecological threads across multiple registers—hydrological, intergenerational, multispecies. Water becomes saturated with harm, yet continues to speak: of what has been broken, what remains entangled, and what struggles to endure. Attending to this damage requires more than infrastructure—it calls for epistemic reorientation. Water must be approached as an active medium of reciprocity, bearing witness to violence and holding the conditions for more careful ways of knowing. In Gaza, hydrological collapse is environmental and

cosmographic: it dismantles the very rhythms through which life knows, remembers, and binds itself to place.

Archaeological practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has become an instrument of territorial control and settler futurity. Under Israeli occupation, archaeological sites are militarized spaces where access to excavation, naming, and historical narration is unequivocally controlled. Since 1967, Israeli military orders have subordinated all archaeological activities to the authority of the military governor, effectively placing heritage management within the framework of occupation (Taha). This has enabled a systematic appropriation of over 500 major archaeological sites, many of which are located in Area C and are now controlled by settlers or state institutions (Starzmann; Al-Houdalieh and Jamal). The separation wall, for instance, has been rerouted to include archaeological remains claimed as Israeli heritage, facilitating the confiscation of adjacent land under the pretext of preservation. A striking example is found in Zabuba, a village near Jenin, where a 4,000-year-old archaeological site was excavated in 2002 by Israeli authorities just before construction of the wall (Yahya). The wall was subsequently rerouted to isolate the site on the Israeli side, cutting the village off from its own historical terrain. Such spatial and legal mechanisms convert ancient material remains into justifications for present-day colonial expansion. As Nadia Abu El-Haj has argued, the logic of Israeli national archaeology is a project of future-making, stitching together a national landscape where the Palestinian presence appears absent or peripheral. For this author archaeology becomes a future-oriented apparatus—naturalizing settler presence by staging the past as destiny. In this context, excavation becomes a form of erasure: to dig is to displace, to expose is to overwrite. Archaeological authority does more than manage the past—it configures the coordinates through which futures are imagined and legitimized. In the occupied West Bank, this authority is exercised through selective excavation, curated silence, and the privileging of certain sites over others. Through these operations, the settler state assembles a landscape of historical inevitability—one in which Palestinian presence appears marginal, exceptional, or

belated. Excavation functions as a technique of temporal and territorial control: it rearranges land, forecloses alternative histories, and inscribes a singular horizon of belonging.

In Palestine, archaeological sites operate as charged nodes of temporal collision—where past, present, and future are entangled in ongoing struggles over erasure and belonging, and where imperial historiography is both enacted and contested (Azoulay 223). Viewed through this lens, the ruin becomes a site of unfolding attachment, holding traces of past presence as well as the violences that have foreclosed other futures. In the West Bank, Palestinian ruins are often stripped of their embedded histories contexts and repurposed within a Biblical narrative that affirms settler claims while dismantling Palestinian cosmographic ties. This reorientation converts material traces into symbols of Jewish continuity and Palestinian absence, effectively weaponizing history against the colonized (Glock). And yet, ruins are not closed. As De Cesari shows, heritage professionals and local communities increasingly mobilize endangered sites to assert Palestinian presence and cultural survival. Ruins encode imperial narration but also carry the latent possibility of refusal. These counter-memories resist the logic of imperial conservation, which isolates ruins from lived experience, and instead rearticulate them as connective tissue between generations, struggles, and narratives. The epistemic stakes of ruins lie in their ambivalence: they are at once markers of destruction and of living connection. To treat ruins as potential history is to hold open the question of what histories they are allowed to tell, and for whom.

The war in Gaza has dismantled more-than-human infrastructures of life. Animals—domestic, feral, wild, and agricultural—endure the compounded effects of systemic disintegration, environmental degradation, and forced separation. The destruction of electricity grids, clean water networks, and food supply chains has unraveled the webs of coexistence, proximity, and interdependence that once sustained animal life across Gaza's urban and rural zones (World Bank). One of the most emblematic instances occurred during Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009, when the

Gaza Zoo was bombed and temporarily occupied by the Israeli army. For more than three weeks, the zoo's animals were left without food, water, or medical attention. Most died. Only ten survived, including two wolves, a deer, a crocodile, a monkey, and two lions. The zoo's founder, veterinarian Dr. Saud Shawa, described it as the killing of a nonhuman population caught in war (Braverman). Similar breakdowns persist. Stray dogs and cats now proliferate across bombed neighborhoods, scavenging through ruins, while working animals such as donkeys and camels—once essential to transport and agriculture—have collapsed from hunger and untreated wounds (Gutkowski; Alcini; Reuters, *Rats, Dogs and Torn Clothes*). Gaza's beekeeping sector, once central to local food security and vegetal reproduction, has been gravely affected by the destruction of hives and the loss of flowering plants due to military activity (Ahmed). Migratory bird populations have also been disrupted. According to *Egypt Today*, the Gaza Valley—previously a critical stopover on one of the world's main migratory flyways—has been ecologically devastated by the use of incendiary and banned weapons. Vegetation loss, chemical contamination, and continuous bombardment have rendered it a dead zone for millions of birds that once rested and fed there annually. These animal disappearances and deaths are connected effects. They reveal a larger unraveling of cohabitation and shared systems of sustenance. The war's violence reverberates across ecologies of coexistence: in flooded fields, poisoned aquifers, collapsing apiaries, and deserted kennels. Animals experience infrastructural neglect as a condition of multispecies undoing. This is a structural disarticulation—a forced unmaking of the ecological continuities that once held human and nonhuman life together—revealing more than a humanitarian failure.

In Gaza, the presence, movement, and displacement of animals articulate a form of more-than-human testimony. We must insist: these are epistemic events, not merely animal casualties. Donna Haraway describes companion species as “significant others” in the co-creation of meaning—partners who reshape how we perceive, relate, and become with others (*The Companion Species* 9). Vinciane Despret pushes further: animals are not symbols but responsive agents whose gestures, refusals, and habits ask

questions in their own registers. In Gaza, these responses manifest in modes of endurance that exceed human frameworks—tracing altered ecologies through behavioral adaptation, disappearance, and return. In documenting the aftermath of the Gaza Zoo’s destruction, Irus Braverman shows how the deaths of captive animals mark the collapse of multispecies contracts and expose the depth of institutional neglect. Calarco reminds us that to rethink human-animal relations is to engage in an ontological and ethical transformation—a reworlding in which animals are no longer epistemically muted. When war renders animals uncounted and abandoned, it also silences these alternative ways of knowing. Yet they persist. The reappearance of stray dogs, the flickering return of songbirds, the erratic behavior of livestock—these are modes of multispecies survival that resist erasure. To witness these beings is to attune to a damaged cosmography in which animals endure as witnesses through presence, absence, and the persistence of connection—an insight recently amplified by Federica Timeto’s lecture series *More-than-Human Views on the War in Palestine*, which foregrounds animal suffering as a site of political and epistemic urgency.

Refusal, in the context of damaged cosmographies, is not mere negation. It is a cosmographic practice that sustains kinship, upholds epistemic integrity, and composes world-making amid violence. Refusal generates alternatives beyond the terms of colonial visibility and academic legibility. Rooted in fragmentation, it resists recuperation and proof. As a method, refusal protects opacity, preserves silence, and cultivates presence irreducible to extractive inquiry. It eludes capture not only by the state but also by scholarship. It is a stance grounded in the refusal to be consumed, measured, or resolved (Howe). Simpson expands this vision through the metaphor of constellations—forms of co-resistance that orient without mapping, that assemble without flattening difference. More than strategies of escape, these are acts of continuity: rooted in place, kinship, and ethics. Refusal affirms what remains untranslatable, entangled, and incomplete. It holds open space for what lives beneath the rubble, outside the archive, beyond the forensic frame. Within this cosmographic

orientation, continuity does not mean return—it means staying-with. It means embodying shared life across time and species, without resolution.

At the Palestine Museum of Natural History, community gardens rely on hydroponic systems, composting, and “do-nothing” gardening as techniques of endurance under extractive occupation regimes. Continuity in Palestine unfolds through this stubborn, situated insistence on relation. Survivance, as Gerald Vizenor defines it, is “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion [...] the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (1). This insistence materializes in the saving of seeds—heirloom varieties cultivated despite water scarcity and land restriction (Simaan). Storytelling, too, performs continuity. In the work of al-Sarisi and Muhawi, Palestinian folktales remain vibrant through oral transmission, especially among displaced and exiled communities. These are not recollections of the past, but epistemic forms that enact belonging, ethics, and place-knowledge. Women, in particular, have carried this intergenerational memory—through lullabies, agricultural rituals, and village cosmologies (El-Nimr). Walking, for Raja Shehadeh, becomes a form of spatial literacy: a way of reading the land with intimacy and attentiveness. His *sarhat* (walks) map a landscape that exceeds the borders imposed upon it (153). María Puig de la Bellacasa would recognize in these gestures an ethic of care—practices that hold space for damaged life without instrumentalizing it, that respond with rather than intervene upon. Is there romanticism in continuity? Certainly not. Continuity is maintenance, improvisation, and the cultivation of livable worlds in the interstices of dispossession.

What kind of knowledge becomes possible amid devastation? Writing from within ruins does not seek distance or closure. It demands epistemic presence—an awareness of implication, vulnerability, and accountability to the more-than-human worlds with which we write. Deborah Bird Rose, reflecting on extinction and ecological mourning, insists that to love and to grieve belong together, positioning writing as a way of remaining with what disappears, rather than moving on (8). Vinciane Despret extends this view by proposing that response-ability arises from

partial affinities, shaped by attention to beings and situations that call us into relation. Karen Barad likewise frames knowledge not as representation, but as intra-action: observation and description are material interventions into the worlds they attempt to witness. In such conditions, writing becomes a mode of participation—taking part in the world’s ongoing reconstitution. These theoretical approaches converge in their rejection of disembodied knowledge. To write under siege or alongside ruin, as in the Palestinian context, is to practice what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as research grounded in accountability and reciprocal engagement, rather than extraction or exposure. Writing becomes a form of co-presence: answerable to histories of dispossession, attuned to multispecies continuities, and unwilling to translate all that remains silent.

In the wreckage of occupation, some worlds endure by refusing to appear whole. These are cosmographies composed of fragments—grafted olive limbs, unwritten songs, old seeds passed between hands—that cohere without resolution. They enact continuity without monument. Endurance, in Gaza, does not seek transcendence. It composes life through partial gestures and repeated returns (Povinelli). It surfaces in the grafting of wounded trees, the tending of rooftop gardens, the habitual presence of feral animals, the persistence of foraging knowledge under curfew. The spectral traces of cosmographies—the way plants regrow from bombed soil, how stories take root without archive—haunt unfinished presence (Gordon 8). If cosmography names a way of living with others across matter, time, and reciprocity, then these modes of persistence are the event’s refusal to conclude. Drawing on Emanuele Coccia, life emerges atmospherically, circulating through porous layers of breath, touch, and growth, rather than progressing along a linear spatial path. Such cosmographies do not close the wound. They keep it responsive.

Ethical Declaration

This article is composed within the conditions of ongoing violence in occupied Palestine. It is shaped by a commitment to ethical and epistemic accountability toward human and more-than-human worlds enduring siege and dispossession. The author affirms the necessity of non-extractive research

practices and rejects detached or neutral frameworks in the face of structural ruination and cosmographic erasure.

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