Posthumanism In Blade Runner And Ex Machina: Comparative Essay

Posthumanism is a broad term and has various definitions. It essentially means “after humanity” or a world in which man no longer exists or is replaced by, e.g., Artificial Intelligence. Francesca states, ‘Such a generic and all-inclusive use of the term has created methodological and theoretical confusion between experts and non-experts alike (Ferrando, 2013)’. Interestingly when reading What is Posthumanism? (Wolfe, 2011) Wolfe also mentions how posthumanism is a term with a lot of depth being defined differently by many people. He goes on to say, ‘Posthumanism, on the other hand, generates different and even irreconcilable definitions (Wolfe, 2011)’. It’s clear that the term is hard to define or is misinterpreted by many but one of the key components of posthumanism is the idea of artificial intelligence. The two films that will be discussed at length consist of Blade Runner the final cut (1982, 2007) and Ex Machina (2014). The focus of this essay will be how both Blade Runner and Ex Machina compare and contrast in relation to the posthuman.

The original Blade Runner is a film which always raises the question “what is human”? ‘Corgito, ergo sum (New Learning, n.d.)’ which translates to “I think, therefore I am.” is a phrase which originated from a French philosopher Rene Descartes. It's spoken by one of the replicants Pris in the film. Descartes believed that one day we would need a test which would determine the difference between human and machine. The piece of dialogue spoken by Pris is almost proving Descartes correct as Pris along with the other replicants move and talk like a human would. The replicants in the film have emotional and psychological responses making it difficult as to whether or not they are identified as a human or machine, e.g., when Deckard is giving Rachael the Voight-Kampff test, asking her a series of questions looking out for an emotional response. Another example of Machines behaving like humans in Blade Runner is how replicants, although having a short lifespan have memories which go back many years. Rachael played by Sean Young has memories that belong to Tyrell’s niece. Lorraine states, ‘That’s what makes Rachael such a tragic figure- ”her” memories don’t belong to her (Boissonneault, 2017).’ This idea of the machine carrying the memories of another person could somewhat relate to transhumanism as the memories of another lost soul lives on in another body.

‘Replicants are the ultimate result of the commodification of not only human experience but also of human life, the logical outcome of perfectly designed humans that exist solely as objects of affluent consumers (Bertek, 2014).’ Replicants are seen as superior to the human race but due to their four-year lifespan, they are unable to fully develop their emotions. What if they could live for more than four years? Would that mean they would become “more human than human (00:22:02)”? Replicants were designed to have no emotional responses, therefore, we as humans would only see them as machines as they don’t have a soul but, ‘The designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their own emotional responses… well, hate, love, fear, anger, envy… so they built in a fail-safe… [a] four-year lifespan (Reynolds, 2014).’ This is an interesting statement as it does suggest that over time replicants can develop feelings and emotions. Ridley Scott said in the Blade Runner commentary that Eddie knew about Deckard’s dream of the unicorn, ‘he must know Deckard's file..that means Deckard is probably a replicant (01:52:08).’ If Deckard is a replicant and is a so-called ‘nexus-8’ model then the replicant has

reached the stage of emotional response, especially since he falls in love with Rachael which raises the question if whether or not the replicants could eventually replace humanity with a longer lifespan and because they are seen as a ‘superior being’.

‘Being post-human is very much like being human. The distinction between the two is ambiguous at its best (Reynolds, 2014).’ Humans discriminate against the replicants in Blade Runner, they are intelligent, conscious and self-aware and should be treated equally and ethically by the human race. If we jump thirty-two years later there are films which still deal with the issue of the post-human or the creation of artificial intelligence, e.g., Ex Machina. Before comparing both films Ex Machina will be discussed in relation to the post-human.

As Blade Runner uses the idea of A.I.in the form of biological replicants, Ex Machina focuses more on the breakthrough of artificial intelligence confined within a small environment. This film focuses on the idea of man playing god, and the human relationship to god. In the film, Nathan says, “I’ve invented a machine with consciousness I’m not a man, I’m god (00:15:23)”. The title of the film itself is a twist on the name Deus ex Machina which translates to “god from machine”. If Nathan is “god” then Ava is his eve. The film itself does point to the idea of Adam and Eve with the house being surrounded by nature, also having seven sessions much like the seven days of creation. Essentially the location could be seen as the new ‘garden of Eden’ where Nathan creates the evolution of man. Later in the film, he goes onto say, “I don’t see Ava as a decision, Just an evolution”. Like Blade Runner the question of “what is human?” and from How We Became Posthuman ‘What if a computer behaved like a person (Hayles, 2008)?’ are questions/themes that play out in this film. An example of this is noticeable in a scene where Ava is escaping the compound but before she leaves she both repairs and dresses herself like a human. This scene conveys that she wants to become human living amongst the people, ‘One might see her murder of Bateman as a “human” act — she demands her freedom from imprisonment and secures her release (Magill, 2016).’ As Ava murders Nathan she does it with no expression or emotion which is quite inhuman, she also leaves Caleb trapped in a room betraying and abandoning him which could be seen as a metaphor for humans being inferior to A.I. as he is imprisoned within the compound. The ending of this feature does raise questions in relation to the posthuman; questions such as is her motive to exterminate/enslave mankind? Or does she simply want to live amongst humanity?

“Through the looking glass” is a theme that carries throughout this film and is even mentioned by Caleb. The film opens with a shot of a woman who is ‘trapped’ within her workplace. This is worth a mention because this opening shot is a mirror with the reflection of people moving across within the frame which reminisces the final shot of the film when we see Ava in a reflection being amongst the people whilst they walk by. The mirror is a portrayal of the posthuman because it separates the A.I. from Man. One scene, in particular, is a two-shot of Caleb and Ava sitting opposite each other with a mirror between them which could be seen as a visual metaphor in relation to the blur between human and machine.

‘The growing power of AI is fundamentally transforming the human-machine relationship (Daugherty and Wilson, 2018).’ As both Blade Runner and Ex Machina explore the question of “what is human?” one of the focuses of the two films is the relationship between human and machine. In Blade Runner, we understand midway through the film that Deckard forms a sexual interest with Racheal whereas in Ex Machina it is only apparent towards the end of the film when Caleb goes to the extreme in breaking out Ava as he feels lust for her. Assuming that both Deckard and Caleb are human, the idea of a human having sexual relations with an android/A.I.

today is considered taboo but in the future would this still be the case? From reading an article related to sexual relations with a machine they state that ‘Artificial intelligence (AI) shouldn’t be seen as a substitute for human companionship’ also, ‘Love is a concept between living people. I don’t think it’s possible to have a sexual relationship between a human and another species (Watson, 2018).’ It’s as if there is a fear of companionship with an AI the idea of real ‘love’ no longer existing between humans is somewhat terrifying. If we relate it to the idea of the posthuman it could be a form of depopulation or creating children in a less natural way since humans don’t want to be with each other, instead, with their A.I. counterparts. Human children may be created artificially like in the film Gattaca (1997).

‘I believe the greatest challenge of this fourth industrial revolution will be to marry human emotional intelligence to machine intelligence (Gherbi, n.d.).’ Usually, films that deal with AI take the path in which machines take over humanity or exterminate them e.g., 2001: Space Odyssey (1968) or Terminator (1984). Blade Runner and Ex Machina, however, subvert this trope by treating androids and artificial intelligence with empathy by making us question their humanity. Examples of this can be seen in Blade Runner when Deckard forms his relationship with Rachael and even towards the end of the film when Roy is giving his monologue you can see the empathy Deckard has for the replicants realising that Roy learned to love life by having a short life span and saving Deckard. In Ex Machina, it's the sessions Caleb has with Ava in which overtime he gets attached to Ava not just as an AI but as if Ava was human, Also although Ava’s intention is quite mysterious or subtle she doesn’t go about wanting to exterminate humanity, as mentioned before its as if she wants to become human and live amongst them.

One of the most noticeable differences between both films is the use of the world they are set in. Ex Machina is set in a more contemporary time where artificial intelligence is fairly new whereas Blade Runner is a dark dystopian future where replicants have been around for a longer period of time. It’s a world where the AI is the norm and leans more towards the post-human. In Blade Runner, a large population of humanity has gone off-world leaving behind people who are not deemed fit to move to “the golden land of opportunity”. The people who have been left behind are of a lower-class which mostly consists of non-white citizens which relate to the idea of class discrimination and overpopulation as the rich upper class has moved off-world leaving the poor behind within a polluted environment. Animal life is extinct on Earth, the planet is becoming a difficult place to live in relating to the idea of the planet becoming a posthuman environment if Earth were to become uninhabitable. The diegesis of Ex Machina is on a much smaller scale. We rarely see the outside world as the film focuses around a secluded house isolated from everything else. Where Blade Runner uses the world to convey to audiences the visual state of the planet and the setting, that being the ‘near future’ Ex Machina focuses on establishing the AI being born into the living world for the first time. As mentioned earlier it’s no coincidence that the location somewhat represents the garden of Eden relating to the idea of ‘giving/creating life’ hence, Ex Machina meaning Deus ex Machina.

Both Blade Runner and Ex Machina use a system which tests the replicant/AI for signs of either intelligence or emotional response. In Ex Machina Nathan asks Caleb how he feels about Ava, he then goes onto say “How does she feel about you?” This is when a comparison can be drawn from Ex Machina to Blade Runner as Nathan’s test in this film leans more towards Voight-Kampff test rather than the Turing test as he is looking out for Ava’s ability in empathy rather than intelligence. In a way, Nathan wants to see if Ava is “more human than human”. ‘AIs are tested on their humanity. And this is the test that Ava fails to pass (Grunberg, 2015).’

So the test was used here to determine how Ava responses emotionally and whether she had any humanity, this is where it differs from Blade Runner as the Voight-Kampff test was used for asking a series of a question waiting for an emotional response to see the difference between a replicant and a human which is difficult to identify.

Both films challenge the nature of creation especially considering the ownership of one's creation. For ethical reasons despite these machines and AI having the same intelligence as us, they will still be treated as inferior. In Ex Machina, this is apparent in how Nathan treats Kyoko and Ava. Towards the end of the film, he tells Ava to "Go back inside" treating her like a slave as well as during the course of the film with Ava being trapped within a glass room separated from everyone else. In Blade Runner, it's hiring Deckard to 'retire' the replicants as they are forbidden from living on Earth which again relates to the idea of AI being treated as lesser compared to humanity. A sentient being with free will, choice, and emotion but still considered machine makes us question our humanity. In one scene Nathan describes his work as "Promethean", somewhat 'godlike' as he has created a machine with all of these components related to free will, choice, and emotion.

Identifying how posthumanism is portrayed in both Blade Runner and Ex Machina has allowed for development on how both films compare and contrast by dealing with the use of artificial intelligence and 'what it means to be human'? The films convey different themes from when they were made both in nineteen eighty-two and two thousand and fourteen dealing with the use of AI. One being the creation of AI from a isolated environment bringing it into a new world, exploring the relationship between man, robots and identifying the blur between humanity and machine. Blade Runner and Ex Machina both portray the idea of Artificial Intelligence as an entity which is treated lesser or inferior to man either by being hunted or feared by society. It is interesting that despite both films being decades apart that comparisons between the use of the AI are similar having ethical themes that can be compared as well as differences in regards to the dystopian future compared to a present-day setting within an isolated environment secluded from the rest of the world. The question still remains however, on whether or not humanity will come to accept artificial intelligence within our society, will they be treated as our equal? Or as a slave?