

Conference „Posthuman Encounters: Desires, Fears, and the Uncanny“ – Collected Abstracts

The Promise and Peril of Digital Brain Enhancement

Kevin LaGrandeur, New York Institute of Technology

Neuralink, a company founded by Elon Musk three years ago, is the most notable of several companies developing a new type of Brain-Computer Interface (BCI): a direct, two-way, digital system that is robust, compact, and wireless. A big reason Musk's company has received so much attention is because he has stated that its long-term aim goes beyond current therapeutic uses to the merging of humans with AI. A related cognitive enhancement has been developed by a team at the University of Southern California led by Theodore Berger: a prosthetic digital memory that can be implanted in the brain. It holds the possibility not only to replenish lost memories for those who have memory problems, such as Alzheimer's patients, but also to artificially enhance the memories of healthy people. These advances present great promise, but also dangers. BCI is already being used for emotional and mood therapy in psychiatric patients, and some posthuman ethicists want to use it, among other technologies, for moral enhancement of the human species. It could also radically increase a user's thinking speed and abilities to interact with digital machinery, allowing humans to compete with AI for jobs (a key hope of Musk's); however, it also presents ethical problems related to who gets it, to safety, and to privacy. Similarly troubling, prosthetic memory has already been used by Berger to give rats and primates false memories of experiences they never had. Some of these uses of intelligent technology have been anticipated by fiction—especially science fiction. My talk will address the promises and pitfalls of these emerging technologies as represented in fiction and in the real world, and possible solutions for the dangers.

Monstrous Wombs, Artificial Births, and Uncanny Mothers in the HBO Series *Raised by Wolves*

Jana-Katharina Burnikel, Saarland University

Raised by Wolves, a series co-produced and partly directed by Ridley Scott, reduces the genre of the posthuman and ecological dystopia to another bleak scenario: In order to preserve humanity from becoming extinct, two androids – Mother and Father – are entrusted with the mission of raising six human children on a foreign planet. The twist: Mother is revealed to carry in her the repressed identity of the deadliest weapon ever built. *Raised by Wolves* is replete with representations of both artificial and natural motherhood, many of them nesting in the cultural category of the ‘monster’. This paper will investigate the series’ uses of motherhood as a socio-cultural (and biological) prism reflecting on contemporary cultural battle fields, including feminism and the role of women in society, but also the posthuman, the monstrous, and the uncanny. My first claim will be that, with all forms of maternity in *Raised by Wolves* being staged as either artificial or monstrous or both, the series successfully fuels the fear of AI absorbing humanity’s meaning-giving purpose of producing and protecting its offspring. However, the series also uses its own visual aesthetics to offer imaginations of posthuman parenthood as a potential – and presently uncanny – future scenario. Secondly, I will tie my first claim concerning representations of monstrous motherhood to the series’ excessive surplus of body fluid representations. In terms of theory, I will enter into a dialogue with ideas by Rosi Braidotti, Barbara Creed, and Julia Kristeva.

The Posthuman in Fungal Gothic Fiction: Aliya Whiteley’s *The Beauty* (2018) and Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic* (2020)

Susanne Groß, University of Bonn

In recent years, fungi have become paradigmatic for the wonders, the adaptability, and the resilience of the nonhuman. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing uses the matsutake mushroom to think through the ‘possibility of life in capitalist ruins’; Merlin Sheldrake emphasises the potential of the mushroom world to ‘shape our futures’; and Doug Bierend scrutinises the ‘untapped potential of mushrooms’ to propose a ‘mycotopia’. In literary texts, however, encounters of the human and the fungal worlds and the creation of a fungal posthuman have veered towards the gothic. In this paper, I will analyse the productivity of the fungal gothic in Aliya Whiteley’s *The Beauty* (2018) and Silvia Garcia-Moreno’s *Mexican Gothic* (2020). In both novels, a fungus takes control over the human mind and creates a posthuman form of life, an ‘other’ intelligence (rather than an AI) that is conceived of as threatening in its uncanny otherness. Garcia-Moreno’s symbiosis between fungus and human is dependent on a human host, a human mind because the fungus “held no real thoughts, no real consciousness” (256). The mushroom-creatures in *The Beauty* are more resolutely other, but remain voiceless despite the narrator-protagonist’s attempt to give voice to his own experience of community with a fungal companion. It is, as I will show, the monstrosity of the posthuman fungal other that both texts position as a new iteration of the classic gothic monster.

Sci-Fi Waste Spaces as Incubators for Uncanny AI

Anne Hess, Saarland University

Humans effectively ‘other’ and marginalize their waste spaces. This designation as a forgotten, othered, alternate place has inspired sci-fi writers to (re-)present dumps as sites of subversion in the otherwise ordered fabrics of their secondary worlds. One facet of this othering I will discuss in my paper are the presentations of these spaces as incubators for new, and often dangerous, posthuman forms of life. In the *Doctor Who* episode *The Doctor’s Wife* (2011, written by Neil Gaiman) we encounter a waste space that gave rise to artificial intelligence. This AI came into being without any direct human intervention, thus subverting any creator’s myths humanity might cling to, but it also created itself out of the (technological and organic) material of the dumps, giving what human society deemed waste a new purpose – a process that even includes the reanimation of corpses. My claim is that the totality in which this and other AIs rethink the potential value of waste material accessible to them is radical, uncanny and challenging to human sensibilities, especially in regard to humanity’s relationship to natural/technical resources. Theoretical underpinnings will be based on theories by Julia Kristeva, Henri Lefebvre and Marco Armiero.

The Sentimental Disposition of (Popular) Trans- and Posthumanism

Christian Krug, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

My contribution looks at popular trans- and posthuman TV fictions in the second half of the 2010s – in the US, the first three seasons of HBO’s *Westworld* (released in 2016, ’18, and ’20), and in the UK, Channel 4’s *Humans* (2015–18). Mainly as a contrast, I will briefly touch on two films, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), as well. All these productions are replete with sentimental tropes and scripts – those inherited from an 18th/19th-century sentimental tradition and the affective-political ones that allow sentimentality to continue to operate today, as a communicative code in an arena of ‘public feelings’. Here, it is activated in times of crises and to hedge in experiences of radical contingency. Uncanny encounters with trans- or posthuman forms arguably constitute such moments of crisis. But how can sentimentality do its cultural work if these encounters threaten to decentre its humanist foundations as well? I will look at how in the texts in question, sentimental scripts are partially revised, develop ambivalent, multi-coded forms and are employed self-reflexively, both in the TV shows’ diegesis and in the way they address their audience: In ‘quality TV’ drama, posthuman fictions seem to engender a ‘meta-sentimentality’. My paper will conclude with possible points of connection between critical posthumanism and sentimentality’s potential for self-reflexivity.

Enter a Robot: What Shakespeare can teach us about AI

Stefan Laqué, Free University of Berlin

The early modern period may not have had silicon chips and football-playing androids, but, as I want to argue in this paper, it was debating the very same questions about the interstices and transitions between humans and machines that govern our engagements with AI today. Looking at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, I will be arguing that the ghost is not the only uncanny apparition of questionable humanity on the battlements at Elsinore, but that Horatio is another and arguably a no less challenging uncanny character with whom the Danish prince is confronted. While the ghost is situated between the full humanity of a living human being and the inanimate materiality of a corpse, Horatio seems to be situated between the full humanity of a being "passion's slave" and the mechanical functioning of a recording device. The play, then, stages Horatio as an experiment in artificial intelligence *avant la lettre* by only giving us "a part of him" as he cryptically introduces himself the very moment we first see him in act 1. This paper will be considering how his reduced / partial / artificial humanity is explored as the play exposes Horatio's inadequacies.

Klara and the Vagaries of Human Hearts. What Kazuo Ishiguro's AI tells us about the Uncanny Valley

Diane Leblond, University of Lorraine

The challenge that technological advances pose to the boundaries between humans and their creations has inspired stories throughout the history of Western fiction. In a recent development of this process, contemporary British novels have mapped out the ambivalent place conceptualised by Masahiro Mori (1970) and designated in English as 'the uncanny valley,' where the once attractive almost-but-not-quite-human suddenly repulses us. The protagonist of Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) seems like a perfect candidate to take us through the uncanny valley. Klara is a lifelike doll whose AI capabilities make her the best 'Artificial Friend' to Josie, a teenager afflicted with a potentially fatal condition. She is also a first-person narrator and internal focaliser whose perspective we embrace—until the suggestion that she might 'continue' her little charge after her demise suddenly presents her in an entirely different, ominous light. Told as it is from the android's viewpoint, the fable informs our experience of the uncanny valley. While Mori's original model focused on appearance, our discomfort in the face of Klara's uncanny proximity seems to be elicited by her inner discourse. This brings up the hypothesis of an 'uncanny valley of mind' (Gray & Wegner, 2012). Yet through most of the story, as we inhabit the AI's consciousness, we perceive her similitude and difference as exhilarating rather than offputting. Ultimately, our encounter with this peculiar narrator reminds us of the role that storytelling plays in allowing us to theorise about, imagine and rejoice in the inner lives of others, human and not.

Of Moving Pictures and Sexbots: The Delights of the Uncanny

Cordula Lemke, Free University of Berlin

Theoretical approaches to the position of artificial intelligence within the Uncanny Valley have been just as diverse as the engagement with the phenomenon in the arts. Is a humanoid AI perceived as a threat at second glance or do users react more favourably? What is at stake is in how far AI fits into frameworks of knowledges and how these frames can be stretched in order to accommodate new technologies. Posthumanist theory has offered a number of solutions to othering at the borders of the human that happens in the contact zones, yet the truly radical utopian and dystopian approaches can be found in the arts. In my paper I want to take a close look at how questions of ‘uncanny’ AI have been dealt with in different genres of literature and how this affects reactions to the seriousness of the perceived threat of AI. My main texts will be J.K. Rowling’s popular fantasy series *Harry Potter* and Jeanette Winterson’s dystopian novel *The Stone Gods* and I will interrogate how their twists cover the poles of the spectrum. In a second step I will consider AI in the context of its mediality and ask how theories of the Uncanny Valley are connected with questions of AI as a medium.

“They are here. They are everywhere. They are us.” – Posthuman Encounters in Samanta Schweblin’s *Little Eyes* (2018)

Heike Mißler, Saarland University

In Samanta Schweblin’s novel *Little Eyes* (2018), the latest technological hype that stretches across the globe comes in the shape of cute, pet-like little robots with cameras for eyes. These so-called kentukis are remotely inhabited and controlled by their human users via an online connection which is established at random. As the novel’s blurb - “They are here. They are everywhere. They are us.” - suggests, a kentuki is at once a familiar and unfamiliar creature and users’ experiences range from comforting to unsettling. The novel revolves around the theme of stranger danger and reports several uncanny encounters between humans and not-quite-humans in places around the world, both from the perspective of the kentukis’ owners (so-called keepers) and the voyeurs (so-called dwellers). The representation of these posthuman interactions in the novel remains ambiguous: Even though the potential to challenge or even transgress the human/non-human binary is addressed, the novel follows a classic dystopian narrative, which posits that it is not the technology itself which is inherently good or bad, it is us humans.

Homo Crispr and the Uncanny Art of Self-Reproduction

Dunja Mohr, Erfurt University

Taking recent biotechnology of the 21st century as a cue, this paper examines the interrelations of literature and science with regard to the relationality of real and fictional posthumans. I will look at a selection of literary precursors, namely the art of self-construction in four major texts from the 19th and 20th century and trace the allegorical trajectory from externalized self-creation (the artificial other) to the recovery of dormant material and mental parts of the self. I read the art of self-reproduction in E.T.A. Hoffmann's dark literary tale *The Sandman* (1816), Mary Shelley's gothic proto-science fiction *Frankenstein* (1818), Villier de L'Isle-Adam's fin de siècle *Tomorrow's Eve* (1886), and Angela Carter's carnivalesque *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) as essentially autoerotic, poetic/scientific self-fertilizations and imaginative precursors of the genetically changed, self-replicating, and sexually reproductive Homo Crispr. The spectre of Homo Crispr, I argue, is the material result of literary imaginings of an improved human.

The Racial Origins of the Non-Human: an analysis of monstrosity in the afterlives of Masahiro Mori's "Uncanny Valley"

Jenny Moran, Cambridge University

Despite the attendance to race in scholarship responding to the Freudian uncanny, and despite similar scholarly attention to the racialisation of non-human, humanoid robots, Masahiro Mori's influential "Uncanny Valley" graph has received surprisingly-little scrutiny from critical race theorists. In the case of Freud, the original delineation of the *unheimlich* invokes both monstrosity and foreignness (1919). This formulation has been interpreted, primarily by postcolonial scholars (Bhabha 1990, Fanon 1952, Bergland 2000, Ahmed 2000), to be co-produced with the discourses of race, ethnicity, and nationhood that construct the imaginative boundaries of belonging. The construction of these imaginative boundaries is similarly taken to task in the realm of gothic horror, where literary scholars note the racial undertones of fear which certain non-human, humanoid monsters embody (Cohen et al. 1996). Given these trajectories, a thoughtful interpretation of uncanniness, race, and monstrosity in robots is evidently called for, and yet Mori's original essay (which is only three pages long) does not reflect on the reasons why he assumes some objects/figures to be so terrifying to all viewers (1970). This paper suggests it is inadequate to surmise, as Mori does, that a universal, biological fear of death is the sole cause of discomfort produced in the encounter with non-human, humanoid objects, parts, or monsters. Focusing on the historical origins of the humanoid, and placing this history in conversation with dominant literary representations of racialised non-humans, it locates the colonial encounter as a moment which produces the uncanny effect. It uses this positioning to analyse Mori's *zombi* – the Black-coded figure determined to be most terrifying in his graph – as the dispossessed double to the (white) coloniser, at least in the Western imperial imaginary, and the afterlives of Mori's graph.

Desiring AI in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction

Lena Steveker, University of Luxemburg

Jeanette Winterson's novels *The Stone Gods* (2007) and *Frankissstein* (2019) negotiate the human engagement with posthuman existence and artificial intelligence, both tracing it back to the late eighteenth (in *The Stone Gods*) and the early nineteenth centuries (in *Frankissstein*) and speculatively casting it forward into different dystopian versions of the future. In my paper, I will first argue that the two novels focus on the notion of desire in order to explore the boundaries between humans and posthumans/AIs. The texts challenge their human characters – as well as their readers – to reflect upon the defining markers of human existence. They do so by conceptualizing their posthuman/AIs characters as uncanny objects and agents of intellectual, emotional and sexual desire. In the second part of my paper, I will discuss the ideological framework that determines the history of human-posthuman/AI desire which the novels establish. In this history, the existence of AI is the inevitable consequence of patriarchal heteronormativity. As I will show, it is not the posthumans/AIs that are the 'others' in *The Stone Gods* and in *Frankissstein*, but the human characters who do not conform to the norms enforced by patriarchy.

Breaking the Boundaries of Flesh: Medical Procedures and the Uncanny in Contemporary Literature

Aleksandra Szugajew, Warsaw University

Contemporary Literature When describing the uncanny valley, Masahiro Mori posits a boundary between what is essentially human and what is not. More precisely, he writes of a loss of affinity which occurs when a healthy human being realizes that the hand, they had believed to be real is in fact a prosthetic (99). It is this familiar which suddenly becomes unfamiliar that evokes "an eerie sensation" (99). Likewise, medicine and medical procedures, can elicit uncanny feelings, particularly when the boundary of flesh is broken. In my paper, I will focus on the uncanniness experienced by people in a liminal phase, brought to or kept in life, using the examples from some contemporary novels and self-life writing which address issues like medical procedures and the artificial prolongation of life, especially in reference one's perception of self. I would like to demonstrate that medicine's precarious existence between life and death, despite its ability to save life, often makes us uncomfortable (as in: unheimlich) because death and vulnerability of the flesh is not something humans necessarily like to contemplate. In short, between the alive (top of the uncanny graph) and the dead (in the valley), there now usually lies medicine, a harbinger of the posthuman.

The Digital Hereafter or a Nirvana in the Cloud

Dirk Vanderbeke, University of Jena

In the discussion of posthuman encounters, the focus is more often than not on artificial intelligence, robotics, and the implementation of technological features into the human body. Less often explored is the no less uncanny complementary vision of the uploaded mind as a technological promise of life extension or even immortality. The concepts of brain emulation, imaging or scanning raise a multitude of theoretical, technological, philosophical and ethical concerns, and these have, of course, also been explored in literary works. The technological options described range from memory transfer to whole brain emulation or simulation, and, unsurprisingly, the assessment varies from enthusiastic celebration to dystopian visions. In my paper I want to touch upon some of these literary works – probably including Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Greg Evans's *Permutation City*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* – and possibly also one or two filmic examples like the TV series *Years and Years* or the respective episodes of *Black Mirror*.

Fear Not, or, the impressive limitations of modern AI

Jilles Vreeken, CISPA Helmholtz Center for IT Security

It has been hard to miss that there are rapid developments in the field of artificial intelligence -- not a day can go by without yet another, even more impressive result of some AI-based system solving some task with human-like performance or better. In recent years we saw AI beating humans at games like chess, go, and StarCraft, matching the best human professionals in recognizing cats and tumors, in translating texts, and answering questions, and besides endless promises of self-driving cars, we most recently read about AI writing eerily coherent texts and generating professionally looking images based on just a few keywords. It makes you wonder, how long do we have before we as a species are superseded altogether? In this talk I will pull back the curtain of modern AI and provide a reality-check. I will seek to explain how AI works, when it works, why modern AI has trouble recognizing cows on a beach, does not understand the concept of blue block on a red block, and why for a very long time to come we will only see (truly) self-driving cars in science-fiction movies.