

‘I will not die a monster!’: The Transformation of the Human Body; its Portrayal, Interpretation and Storytelling in Contemporary Mainstream Anglo-American Cinema¹

Caleb Turner

University of Kent

To see someone is to see a body. (Glover 1988: 70)

The portrayal of the body in the mainstream blockbuster ‘movie’ is one of a duality, with the limitless potential of how it might be audio-visually depicted on the one hand and, on the other, a more limited structure behind what that presentation might be *designed* to achieve in its expressive meaning. The argument of this article will focus on *how* and *why* the body is presented in films by concentrating on examples of that presentation at its most excessive and extreme. The article will also discuss how the human body is pushed to its very limits in terms of its representation, when this entails not so much definition and characterisation but more distortion and manipulation, as the body is forcibly altered by being extended, compressed, deconstructed or, quite literally, *reconstructed*.

According to Scott Bukatman, the superhero story is one such type of mainstream film that particularly centres obsessively upon the body, presenting a *bodily* narrative and fantasy, with the body potentially becoming both:

[an] irresistible force and unmoveable object [...] [It is] enlarged and diminished, turned invisible or made of stone, blown to atoms or reshaped at will. The body defies gravity, space, and time; it divides and conquers, turns to fire, lives in water, is lighter than air. The body takes on animal attributes, merges with plantlife, is melded with metal. The body is asexual and homosexual, heterosexual, and hermaphroditic. Even the mind becomes a body; it is telepathic, telekinetic, transplantable, and controllable. Brainiac’s brain sticks out of the top of his head, on display as part of a visible, external body. (Bukatman 2003: 49)

Hence, the area that will be explored is that of the *transformation* of the body, and what it means for the human form to be transformed from one entity into another within the storytelling process of mainstream Anglo-American cinema. This article will examine the phenomenon in mainstream films (including those which incorporate elements of ‘fantasy’, the ‘supernatural’, ‘horror’ and ‘science fiction’) of bodily transformations or ‘transformative bodies’, that is, bodies which undergo a visual ‘re-construction’ from one original template to another differing model, by means of cinematic technology and special effects (including prosthetics, animatronics, digital animation/Computer Generated Imagery, performance, etc.);

¹ This article is a winner of the *Skepsi* 2011 Postgraduate Essay Competition (see Foreword).

in the course of this, issues concerning the spectator's understanding of and reaction to such entities will also be explored.

1. The pro-filmic² 'human' body versus the digitally constructed mutable 'monster': How do we engage/disengage with such entities as perceiving spectators?

Consider the scene a large, deep pit in the ground, filled with sand and small rocks, inert and lifeless. Suddenly, a few grains begin to move almost imperceptibly, sifting alongside each other, until a large mass is ultimately shifting from one side to another. The sand begins to coalesce into a large heap, struggling to maintain its cohesion. Eventually, a recognisable shape begins to emerge, a shape with traces mimicking a human form: a head, a torso, limbs resembling arms with hands and legs with feet; but with each attempt, the figure finally disintegrates. After a while, this process of constantly maintaining integrity of form transforms this mass of sand, this 'body' of discrete elements; it begins to resemble something more tangible and whole: a literal body, a *human* body. This sequence from *Spiderman 3* (2007) depicts the initial portrayal of the 'Sandman'³, and one might notice just how the elements of the sand attempt to gain a physical integrity over the course of the action, showing a desperation to become humanised, soon achieving not only limbs or a torso but also facial features, skin texture and even an outer layer of clothing.

This transformation is one of a non-human entity gradually becoming humanised over time, eventually materialising into a conventional idea of the human form, (i.e. closely resembling our own collection of two arms, two legs, a torso and one head, etc.). As the figure walks into shot, and so towards the audience, he is no longer merely lifeless material or even only a semi-conscious entity that attempts to rise above its station but is now a *human being*. During the film *Transformers* (2007), pleasure is taken from specifically robotic transformations, with various mechanical devices including cars, planes, and other industrial machinery somehow being able to mimic the human form, reconstructing themselves with a head (and face), torso and shoulders, the limbs of arms and legs accompanied by their own individual hands and feet. While the true human form can never totally be attained, it is close enough for us to recognise it as being such, achieving a sense of acceptable familiarity associated with a preferred type of existence: one that incorporates a 'humanity'.

² The term 'pro-filmic' was coined in the 1950s by French film academics (led by Etienne Souriau in his discussion on diegesis and the seven levels of filmic reality), denoting everything (or the selection of elements) intentionally placed in *front* of the camera and recorded on film as reality; including actors, costume, props, décor, etc.

³ This figure might indeed be considered as a *contemporary* version of the Sandman in E.T.A. Hoffman's short story 'The Sandman' (1817), a figure which Sigmund Freud in his discipline of psychoanalysis claims to be associated with ideas of the 'Uncanny' or an entity that is simultaneously both strange yet familiar to us.

However, one might also acknowledge several examples that support an argument based on the inherently repulsive nature of the body undergoing transformation. One instance includes that of a non-human entity becoming only partially humanised over time or, in a sense, *humanoid* rather than fully ‘human’ proper. There is one creature from the 2005 film *Constantine* who is a demon figure, made up solely from rats, crabs, flies and other insects, and, while we recognise the being as possessing limbs, a torso and even facial expressions, its lack of any true concrete or solid form tends to disgust us, especially its repulsively incomplete mimicking of the human form. It is interesting how, during the sequence in which this creature appears, it is the human body of Constantine, and so the actor Keanu Reeves, who is shown as the hero attempting to disrupt and disintegrate the demon’s form, eventually succeeding in dismantling and so deconstructing this only *partially* constructed semi-human body back into its original material state of several different entities. The creature’s dual nature, both far too human and yet not human enough in its appearance results in its being both threatening and repulsive.

The character Balthazar (Gavin Rossdale) is another villain in the film, or in this case a ‘hybrid’ as Constantine calls him, being a figure of pure evil hidden under a skin-deep layer of a human façade. When Constantine confronts this ‘man’ and throws holy water in his face, the hidden profile of a repulsively frightening texture of green decaying flesh and rotting teeth crafted through ‘inhuman’ designs is revealed, and we are given a transformation of the ‘threatening’ being unveiled by the removal of the ‘familiar’, of an evil being realised for what it truly is. The audience is being shown an obligatory formula found in more conventional/mainstream films, one that conforms to the spectrum of the ‘good’ human body overcoming the ‘evil’ hybrid monster. Instances such as those mentioned above are cinematic examples of a ‘preferred’ expression of the bodily transformation, with clear-cut notions behind what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘evil’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘intolerable’, the ‘tolerated’ and the ‘abhorrent’: the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’.

Initially, a distinction must be made between the differing concepts of the pro-filmic body (an actual ‘flesh-and-blood’ human actor or actress on screen) and a figure that has undergone a construction of sorts (in an attempt to alter that figure’s physical form), either by way of make-up and prosthetics, performance itself or digital manipulation. The essay by Lisa Purse ‘Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body’ raises a series of pertinent questions concerning the transformation of the body on film. Purse declares how both critics and spectators alike frequently tend to reject a body

that has strayed too far from its original human form. With this in mind, Purse analyses the Ang Lee film *Hulk* (2003), in which the stark juxtaposition of the Hulk's body with the actor Eric Bana results in the opposition of a 'real' human protagonist versus an animated creature protagonist counterpart. Bruce Banner is recognised by his human body, but the Hulk is not, causing this green beast not to possess any 'pro-filmic body referent', meaning that both are *two* sides of only *one* individual, and the transformation between the two actually achieves a *separation* of two disparate entities: 'setting up a "before and after" opposition that emphasises their physical differences' (Purse 2007: 13).

In spite of this, the most important point to realise is the apparent *unease* that exists, not with the duality of this superhero (from vulnerable human to alter-ego beast) but in what Purse deems to be 'the inherent visual *instability*' felt by most viewers towards the body of the fictitious Hulk (Purse 2007: 13). Fascinatingly, it is the intriguing question of *why* this unease is felt towards such an obviously fictional character that must be considered in depth. Rob White declares that any instabilities/inconsistencies that impact upon the perceptual realism of the Hulk's behaviour or interactions with his surrounding story-world and environment are *fully intentional*, alluding back to the contextual nature of its original subject matter (and textual roots) of the comic book (Purse 2007: 14). Purse points out that it is the very presentation of digital animation in a *live-action* context, and the 'expressionistic use of digital effects' designed simply to portray a 'virtually' unstable body (such as that of the Hulk) that viewers find most 'challenging' to accept as well as greatly undesirable (Purse 2007: 14).

At this juncture, it is necessary to set out what I believe to be the most important statement in Purse's argument pertaining to the issue proposed in this discussion. Concerning her views on the cinematic influence of the *mutable* body, she declares:

[O]nce the comic-book body, frozen in arrested motion, is recreated in film – that is, once the *unstable, unpredictably mutable* body is *in motion* in a live-action film – it *problematizes* our instinctive expectations about the physical behaviours of bodies in a live-action environment. The animation of the human body in a live-action context modifies the potential limits and behaviours of that body. Indeed, it re-figures the human body as *disturbing* and *unnatural* in its elasticity and capacity for infinite transformation and *reconfiguration* (Purse 2007: 15; added emphases)

The terms '*disturbing*' and '*unnatural*' are starkly fused with that of the potential a mutable body might possess for 'elasticity' as well as a capacity for an 'infinite' transformation into a 're-configuration' of the originally pro-filmic body. Again, another important comment from this argument states how this fearful reaction is founded upon a far deeper set of prejudicial concerns:

At base, the animated body's inherent malleability generates anxieties that are rooted in primal cultural fears about metamorphosis and its characterisation of the human body as mutable [...] in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, metamorphosis signifies 'instability, perversity, unseemliness, monstrosity [...] in the Christian heaven, nothing is mutable, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams... breeding hybrids, monsters – and mutants'. Purse 2007: 15

Within the threshold of this reasoning, the animated virtual body apparently draws to itself (through the act of 'a rather contingent photorealism') an awareness of its 'instability' and 'mutability', unfolding an even greater sense of dread towards this 'instrumental realisation of physical metamorphosis' resulting in a feeling of being obliterated and only left with our 'shattered and dispersed selves' (Purse 2007: 15). This inherent mutability of the virtual action body must by default 'reverberate' with prejudices and fears of an equally 'phenomenological' instability, with the distinct self being *lost* somehow (Purse 2007: 16).

These ideological notions echo past concerns voiced by philosopher René Descartes, when discussing how certain automata have become increasingly 'lifelike' in contemporary societies, or what Sigmund Freud describes as being the 'Uncanny' (Short 2005: 111). With regard to cinematically-altered bodies, as verisimilitude begins to threaten our concept of what constitutes human uniqueness, it also shakes the very 'foundations' upon which the alleged superiority felt by human beings rests (Short 2005: 111). This threat is felt most within such films that embody science fictional narratives or other fantastical tales such as the supernatural, extrapolating fears by presenting a multitude of creatures and creations that are able to mimic the human appearance almost fully in an increasingly accurate manner (Short 2005: 111).

With this in mind, a series of questions begin to emerge. Is the pro-filmic body considered as the inherently *preferred* human body? Is the mutable transformation presented as no more than a non-human hybrid? Is there a distinction between a 'virtuous' type of humanness and a 'monstrous' or villainous type? Are there actually several differing versions of humanness in existence? This assumed preference for the pro-filmic body over the mutable one is potentially problematised and nuanced by instances in which these two conditions appear to be the extremes of a spectrum (so change from one to another is gradual), whilst being portrayed in the guise of oppositions.

For example, consider the 1999 film *The Mummy*. Our very first introduction to the Mummy causes both revulsion and horror. The incompleteness of this supernatural being testifies to how unnatural and monstrous it truly is, a feat achieved by the image of a corpse acting as would a living person. As the monster is resurrected and enacts the curse that

created it millennia ago, it begins to take form from the cursed grave-robbers who unwittingly brought it to life their flesh, their skin, their eyes and even their internal organs, so that the gaps in the abomination's make up are soon filled. In time, after it has hunted down the team of excavators one by one, yet more tissue exists where previously there was none. Later, yet more layers of living tissue are acquired, leaving only slight traces of a monstrous decomposition on the face and body of this creature.

Eventually, the transformation is complete, with the Mummy appearing in the fashion of a complete human being. In spite of this, while this being has been transformed into a pro-filmic human form, the character still evokes a sense of disgust because it is seen as 'unnatural'. Indeed, this character is presented as a villain by his actions: torture and murder, and though his body may still potentially become mutable in the form of sand manipulation, this is not the only reason why we feel repulsed by him. The deep-seated memory of the character's origins (that of the monster at the film's beginning) is all too strongly situated in our interpretations at the level of his ongoing behaviour, actions and appearance: his pro-filmic form snarls, scowls and grimaces in a fashion both reminiscent and evocative of the mutable monster underneath.

The pro-filmic body, in this instance, not so much masks as *extends* the Mummy's monstrous visage, gestures and mannerisms, by acting as a reflecting echo as well as concealing veneer. While the monster is played by a pro-filmic actor (Arnold Vosloo), the original incomplete creature still lies under the human textures of muscle tissue, flesh and skin, with the potential to reappear at any given moment: perpetually posing as an unfamiliar threat. In this way, the pro-filmic body is not always in itself a guarantee for establishing a sense of positive familiarity against an unfamiliar mutable force of erratic unpredictability. The Mummy has been transformed from an entity of unfamiliarity (the mutable monster) into a being of familiarity (the pro-filmic human being), but this does not achieve the transformation of a renewed sense of toleration towards the character, as his external appearance is not enough to displace those memories of his former monster self.

Rather than a straightforward opposition between the pro-filmic actor (human/hero) and the mutable creature (non-human/potential villain), the space between these two extremes is peopled with several differing variations. It is essential, therefore, to pursue this question on what is considered as being a 'human' or a 'non-human' visual representation of the body in the cinema. From there, the discussion will 'bridge the gap' or, better, identify the spectrum between so-called 'non-human' bodies that are plainly 'humanised' and, conversely, almost

completely ‘humanised’ bodies that are just as plainly presented as being ‘non-human’. In this way, it should become clear that there exists between the two extremes a ‘grey area’, and it is this issue that will be extensively explored. Although a demon born of fire and brimstone has always traditionally been seen as a monstrous ‘hybrid’ foreign to the heavenly body of the wholly complete and ‘pure’ human being, the divine angel nonetheless still possesses a pair of animalistic wings.

2. A focus on cyborgs, androids, hybrids and other such ‘undesirables’ within Anglo-American cinema/Western society and culture.

The term ‘hybridity’ itself was originally used as a definition to describe the process of ‘cross-fertilisation’ in botany and zoology, in which an ‘inter-breeding’ takes place between two different species, either plant or animal (Short 2005: 107). In relation to the influence of cross-cultural integrations around the world, however, its meaning takes on a far more multi-faceted and controversial series of interpretations (Short 2005: 107). By applying the term to humans, a subjective reasoning is suggested by some critics in attempts to confirm the idea that fundamental distinctions exist between different peoples, additionally implying that these should in no way at all be ‘traversed’ (Short 2005: 107). The critics Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes equally declare how ‘hybridity signals the threat of “contamination” to those who espouse an essentialist notion of pure and authentic origins’ (Short 2005: 107).

The ‘cyborg’, or more specifically the ‘cybernetic organism’, is indeed such a hybrid, consisting of both organic human flesh and electronically-powered synthetic bionic technology. Films that feature the cyborg explore the notion that, as we, the viewers, watch onscreen the process of making these figures, we additionally ‘on occasion, unmake our conceptions of ourselves’ (Pyle 2000: 125). Indeed, the cyborg serves not only as a ‘focal figure’ of American techno-science popular culture but, more importantly, as ‘a figuration of post-human identity in post-modernity’ in general (Balsamo 1996: 18). Those inorganic components replacing various parts of the body such as limbs, internal organs and so forth often provide a ‘super-human’ ability compared to their original organic counterparts. The cinematic cyborg is also the progeny of a dual heritage, constantly ‘tested’ in cinematic narratives by being asked to prove the allegiance they hold to their human creators and to ‘humanity’ itself, through the means of a reiteration of specific ideals supposedly held dear to human beings (Short 2005: 108).

This is explained at length by J. P. Telotte, when he says:

Centering on the artificial, technologised body – [such as] the robot, [the] cyborg, [or the] android [...] [we might] examine our ambivalent feelings about technology, our increasing anxieties about our own nature in a technological environment, and a kind of evolutionary fear that these artificial selves may presage our own disappearance or *termination*. At the root of that fear [...] is a blurred or ‘weakening [...] sense’ of the human, a loss of distinction. (Telotte 1992: 26)

In relation to the transformative process taking place with the cinematic cyborg, the ‘manufactured bodies’ of these hybrids should not merely be classified as a medium for special effects displays (prosthetic, digital or otherwise) but should, in point of fact, be realised as ‘measures’ for our *own* ‘human level’ of manufacture and our *own* constructedness (Telotte 1992: 28).

Notions of the ‘organic’ as opposed to the ‘technological’ (that may also function in a bidirectional or potentially alternating fashion), bound up as they are with connotations of the ‘human’ *versus* the non-human’, have resulted in an inherent fear of and, consequently, prejudice against the latter; hence acceptance of the physically integral pro-filmic body (the supposed ‘human’ state) and revulsion towards the mutably transformative body (the apparent ‘non-human’ state). Using the context of the cyborg, this article will now discuss how Western culture holds prejudices against certain types of transformation and how this is expressed in the narrative text by mainstream cinema, a discussion underlined by the distinctions between ‘man’ and ‘machine’, the ‘organic’ and the ‘technological’, hence between the flesh-and-blood ‘human being’ and the partially flesh-and-blood human construct or ‘de-construction’ or ‘re-figuration’ of concepts epitomising the human persona as it is known.

When the character Doc Ock in *Spiderman 2* (2004) is closely analysed, it is noticeable how several cues, actions and devices occur in the storytelling that present a narrative of inner turmoil, particularly in the depiction of how his internal emotional state is materialised externally by way of a technologically-aided transformation. First, however, it is necessary to put the character in context with some background information. Before the actual act of Doctor Octavius’s (Alfred Molina) transformation, the man is shown to be a scientist whose dedication verges on an obsessive concern with his work. By building a set of four mechanical tentacles, Ock has constructed an extension of himself designed for the sole purpose of allowing him to progress further in his project of achieving a nuclear type of sustainable fusion. These mechanical tentacles, being a series of bionic extensions (designed to access nuclear radiations and temperatures intolerable to the human touch) are fitted with

claw-like pincers, with the lower portion of these metallic arms designed to be inserted directly into the spinal cord of the host.

During the public unveiling of his experiment, and as we are shown the arms attaching themselves to his spine, several needles implant themselves along the length of his back, penetrating the skin and forcing together a bodily fusion of both man and machine. This action elicits a negative reaction from the surrounding crowd, all of whom visibly and audibly express a gesture of disgust and outrage, presumably echoing that of the audience watching the screen. Once attached, the mechanical arms seem to become serpents as they move like animals around Ock's body, snapping out threateningly when Ock explains how he has prevented their artificially-intelligent minds from overpowering his own by way of an inhibitor chip. As the experiment proceeds, all goes horribly wrong: the inhibitor chip is broken, with the result that the arms fuse themselves with his neural pathways and nervous system. The consequence of this is even more catastrophic: when a surgical operation to separate Ock from his new technologised limbs is attempted, the metallic tentacles instinctively kill doctors and nurses. As Ock comes round and realises what has happened to him, he cries out in horror, causing the arms to mimic the same emotions (they additionally show his surprise, his rage, his sadness, etc., whenever he does). Now the two entities are both one and the same: in effect, inseparable.

In an abandoned church, situated way out on a pier in the harbour, Ock contemplates taking his own life; disgusted and outraged by his new body, he considers killing these monsters which slither and hiss around him like snakes. Sensing their imminent deaths, the leering claws cry out, snapping and declaring their own outrage; they take over Ock's consciousness by renewing his obsession with the reason behind their creation, so prompting him to resume his failed and dangerous experiment. A sinister circle of mechanical arms menacingly surrounds and dominates Ock, who realises that inside his head there are voices, foreign to his own body and speaking to him compellingly.

It is important to note here that, as Ian Burkitt points out, popular culture in the Western world has 'grown accustomed' to 'Cartesian dualism': the concept that the free will and 'clarity of thought' allowed to us by our rational mind puts us close to the divine, whereas, so far as our body is concerned, this is no different from those of animals, a mere physical automaton (Burkitt 1999: 7). Burkitt, however, challenges traditional notions that the mind and the body are separated from one another, reiterating that if 'damage occurs to our bodies we do not just note this, we *feel* it. The mind records this occurrence as if *it* has been injured,

so that the relationship we have with our bodies is an intimate and necessary one' (Burkitt 1999: 11). For Burkitt, the mind is actually 'an *effect* of bodily action in the world' (Burkitt 1999: 12; added emphases). The body, when viewed in this way, might evoke the perspective of 'a multi-dimensional approach to the body and the person, which conceives of human beings as complexes composed of both the material and the symbolic [...] rather than as divided between the material and the representational' (Burkitt 1999: 2).

The interactions between Doc Ock's human mind and mechanical body could be construed as having implications for Cartesian dualism, perhaps as an attempt to destabilise its approach as the emphasis on a degree of interrelatedness between mind and body blurs the distinction between them. When Ock stares directly at one of the claws, it subtly opens and shuts, almost as if mouthing at him, whispering or even, perhaps, speaking to him. The man moves to the right, but his path is blocked by one arm; he moves to the left and, again, is barred by yet another. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the serpent-arms collectively tempt Ock, telling him to steal, to kill, to do anything to rebuild his experimentation. 'The real crime would be not to finish what *we* started' is Ock's response; he has begun referring to himself as a collective.

Towards the end of the film, Ock is back in the rundown church on the old pier repeating his deadly procedure, in the course of which his tentacles are damaged by Spiderman. The mechanical arms themselves shy away in self-pity but Ock is now shown to have a greater degree of control over them: he soon agrees to stop his experiment for the safety of the entire city and commands them accordingly; at this, bionic limbs look at him in shock, cowering simultaneously. Although the mechanical arms are still not only a part of his body but also a part of his mind, he is now in total control. This turn of events now suggests that the mind has *regained* dominance over the body, perhaps *reaffirming* traditional assumptions of Cartesian dualism. Thus, although these films might attempt to destabilise notions of the mind/body duality, their endeavour to define any universal conception of 'human being' by presenting the myriad of contradictions inherent throughout Western popular culture in effect cannot also but help to reaffirm such notions. In writing about popular culture such as this, Elaine L. Graham suggests that, indeed, any attempt to affirm a solid definition of humanity or 'to delineate an absolute 'human nature' as a form of ontological purity cannot fail, paradoxically, to invoke [also] its others, thereby subverting its own stability and fixity' (Graham 2002: 228).

‘I will not die a monster’ Doc Ock cries out, whilst destroying the machinery that makes up his experimentations, and so falls through the floor and down to the ocean bed as the pier collapses. Although Doc Ock dies as part man, part machine, both physically and mentally, his decision to go down to the sea bottom with the destructive power of his experiment and personal obsession shows that he still retains a last remaining shred of his humanity. He may have become a monster of technology and a product of abused science but he still attempts to die as some form of ‘human being’.

What is most interesting about his transformation is that it is one of an internal obsession which becomes externally materialised by way of science and technology. When Ock tries to quell this obsession, he cannot do so, and both his torment and demented fury find expression in the actions of his transformation (the violent, animalistic, sinister, dominant control and aggression of the claws themselves). Being self-aware, the arms are able to respond to the consciousness of his human body, which, in turn, reflects the selfish emotions felt by the snake-like arms: although faceless, the tentacles themselves not only express their own personal emotions but also mirror Ock’s own expressions, and vice versa. Ock is presented as a character that has lost his humanity by becoming too much of a part of and consciously influenced by artificially-intelligent mechanical technologies, only regaining his higher functions after being allowed to overcome his bionic counterparts. The type of narrative expressed here is one concerned with a fear or dread of becoming too much of a part of the technological or the scientifically constructed entity and thus, as in Ock’s case, forsaking the human soul for the purpose of an obsession.

Although the Doctor was shown to be an obsessive *before* the transformation took place, in time he still acts and behaves like a ‘human being’ complete with a ‘human conscience’ (thus retaining a sense of his ‘humanity’), as his being allowed to overcome the bionic arms completely shows; however, he is also part of a technological cyborg body, albeit not completely subsumed by the dangers of that condition. This implies that while the arms are a negative influence on Ock, causing us to see him as a villain, we can also engage with him as a figure of good, rather than purely evil. It is his own ability either to forsake his humanity for his obsessions or to abandon his experiments for the sake of humanity itself that has the greater impact on the artificially-intelligent mechanical tentacles, rather than the influence of the technology alone. He is a hybrid, yes, he is also a cyborg, but he is not simply a man who became a monster, with a duality existing between the (good) human and the (evil)

technologically non-human: the character caused the transformation due to his own nature, and that transformation could only ever be a reflection of that very same disposition.

The cyborg is thus a useful catalyst for calling into question both the degree to which identity, including factors of race, gender, class, nationality or political orientation, is itself a construction, the pertinence of such definitions and the criteria upon which they are based (Short 2005: 106). Cinematic portrayals of the cyborg should be considered not just as potentially utopian or dystopian predictions: they are, alternatively, ‘reflections of a contemporary state of being [...] [with such a body constituting] in its fundamental structure the multiple fears and desires of a culture caught in the process of transformation’ (González 2000: 58).

Within fictional stories concerning the cyborg, an imminent danger exists that any imitations performed by this entity might become far too ‘close for comfort’, in effect threatening the ‘uniqueness’ of human beings (Short 2005: 110). Such examples as the differently grooved fingertips possessed by the androids in *Westworld* (1973), and the replicates in *Blade Runner* (1982), unable to express a ‘blush response’ are explorative devices, highlighting an inherent anxiety behind the question of ‘what if the gap between ‘us’ and ‘other’ narrows? What if we can no longer tell each other apart?’ (Short 2005: 110-11) The Western ideology of ‘Imperialism’ in particular, has historically legitimised itself by establishing a spectrum of opposing entities, with ‘humanity’ utilised as a differentiating tool to exclude ‘Others’ (Short 2005: 106). There is a conceit that exists in the narratives of science fiction, whereby positive traits (compassion, tolerance, empathy, understanding, etc.) are ‘claimed’ as being human, while more negative traits (aggression, megalomania, ruthlessness, unfairness, etc.) are associated with a ‘convenient’ Other: a historically-rooted process of subjugation (Short 2005: 110).

When Doc Ock declares, ‘I will not die a monster!’, his statement should be understood not just as merely a desire to return to the original template of his former self but as a wish to be accepted as he is in his current identity. His outcry is one that echoes not only the perception, in mainstream Anglo-American cinema, of all transformations but also the fundamental inadequacy of inaccurately representing as oppositional the spectrum that ranges from human/pro-filmic to non-human/mutably-altered. Just as a transformative process causes the human identity to become re-constructed as another entity, so the notion of what it is actually to possess a human identity is potentially a transformative construction in itself: and this is also true of its expression in the storytelling process.

There exist *several* versions of humanness, then, rather than a singular universal model. Bukatman reminds us that many writers and theorists of post-modernism (i.e. in challenging ‘absolutes’) are quite ‘fond of cataloguing the crumbling of [any] foundational oppositions’, questioning such binary oppositions as: ‘organic/inorganic, male/female, originality/duplication, (image/reality, artifice/nature), human/nonhuman’ (Bukatman 1993: 10). It seems that to formulate a construction of humanness, especially in a mainstream Hollywood text, is to also create a set of narrative devices that not only *mimic* human behaviour but also positions that behaviour within the threshold of a context designed solely to elicit a *specific* meaning upon them: this, in itself, is by no means a ‘natural’ process’ (Wood 2002: 134). This is similarly the case for transformations. To be properly ‘human’ does not simply mean to be either biologically or physically human but also to *behave* in recognisably human ways or to possess behaviour that at least constitutes a particular degree of *humanness*, regardless of whether or not that humanness is preferred (Wood 2002: 118).

It is additionally prudent to realise, though, that none of these behaviours are fundamentally universal, even if a Western mainstream text portrays them to be so (Wood 2002: 118). The humanist ideal, being the assumption of ‘an absolute difference between human and the inhuman [...] with only the former [having] the capacity for rational thought’ supposes that while as a collective society we may all be made up of very different types of varying body, because ‘reason is a property of the mind, deep down *we are all the same*’ (Badmington 2000: 4; added emphases).

This particular conception of what constitutes humanness or that of a ‘core humanity’ with ‘common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood’ is very much elevated to the status of ‘common sense in contemporary Western culture’ (Badmington 2000: 4). If one were to declare an entity as being human, or ‘human-like’ or to possess humanoid characteristics, such distinctions need the further realisation of the ways in which these qualities both relate to and are defined by (as well as being founded upon) a specific set of cultural paradigms (Wood 2002: 118). Several instances of humanness and bodily transformations from one type of humanness to another in mainstream Hollywood cinema are based solely around Western, and in particular American interests and concerns, predominantly featuring ‘middle-class’ and ‘white’ characters who undergo such experiences (Wood 2002: 118).

A mainstream motion picture will pre-emptively validate one type of behaviour and bodily transformation over another, constituting a suitable and ‘appropriate’ condition of

being human, with other less preferable transformations and resultantly unconventional types of humanness as being invalidated in the text (Wood 2002: 118). This of course means that texts such as these cannot represent an absolute or definitive classification of a truly universal humanness, but in fact gives cause to acknowledge that to be human is to abide by a formula of representation, established by: ‘a series of behaviours that exist in relation to a set of normative values embedded in social relations’ (Wood 2002: 118).

3. Conclusion: What constitutes ‘humanness’ itself as a concept?

Initially it was argued that the pro-filmic body is considered as the inherently *preferred* human body and the mutable transformation as no more than a non-human hybrid, although a simple distinction is made between, on the one hand, a ‘villainous’ type which is basically monstrous and, on the other, a ‘virtuous’ type which manifests traits of humanness, although humanness exists in several different versions. Many of these are, however, dominated by a selected few, an acceptable set favoured over others because they conform to ideals propagated by Western, and particularly Anglo-American, culture. Our reactions to a bodily transformation may consist of fear of a body that has become excessively mutable and strayed far from the human form, but this is not simply due to an innate love for the ‘sacred’ pro-filmic profile and an instinctive prejudice towards anything outside that margin: it is because in mainstream cinema most mutable bodies are *designed* to elicit repulsion, disgust, fear and outrage.

Dominated by conventional assumptions and expectations associated with most of its popular genres, Hollywood repeats this established formula of pro-filmic hero versus mutable villain time and time again. Western prejudices focus on the acceptable ‘self’ and the unacceptable ‘other’, so human bodies battle against physical alteration into anything foreign: the technological, the supernatural, the organically alien and so on. This formula dictates how, in these texts, a character that has undergone a transformation acts and behaves, so that the humanity retained by the transformed body is seen to be limited; it is no longer entirely human. Since ‘other’ entities are deemed intolerable, only a particular type of conventional humanness, then, is allowed to prevail over forms they manifest. Hence, both our reactions to a transformation and what that transformation is able to say and do within the mainstream cinematic storytelling process are dominated by the paradigms and prejudices of Western-based values and ideologies particularly those defined by American, white, middle-class and mostly male comprehensions.

As the human body is a template epitomising a preferred version of what it is to be human, possessing a preferred humanness, *any* movement away from this form and *any* movement not close enough to or able to *totally* attain this form is portrayed as a threat. As an audience, we are only allowed by this system to engage positively with what is deemed to be a ‘human’ body hero, and only undergo partial positive engagements with so called non-threatening semi-human forms. Villains/monsters appear to constitute strictly any entity situated outside of this threshold. If one is to look more closely, however, each of those characters who potentially evolve into a differing version of humanness are not monsters per se but merely human beings with a transformed identity of their own, still possessing a degree of humanness, just not necessarily an ‘acceptable’ Western version. The implication of this apparent contradiction is that, as Western popular cultural attempts to define humanness as a universal concept, it inevitably results in destabilisation.

In terms of how anthropocentrism⁴ is represented in these films, what is important is not necessarily *how* humanness is expressed by a transformation in mainstream cinema but *what* variation of humanness is imparted upon an audience. A transformation of any kind is not merely a progression away from or towards the essence of what it is to be human but is simply no more than another type of human construction, another version of humanness. This version, however, if not placed firmly within the confines of a culturally tolerable or preferred margin (i.e. that decided by Western society), is deemed to be utterly unacceptable. The transformations discussed in this article have a common theme, namely the lack of acceptance felt by an ‘other’ and also by those beings who have felt displaced by their societies for whatever reason, a displacement manifested by way of a bodily transformation; such a being as Doc Ock, after losing his identity with what makes him human, does indeed, as a result, attempt to overcome the prejudices against him and rejection that he experiences but often only succeeds in merely being accepted as a tolerated abnormality.

Therefore, just as Hollywood figuratively expresses notions of the hero and the villain, of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, so does this form of cinema portray its equally prejudicial ideas and doctrines through its portrayal of bodily transformations which result in constructed ‘demonic’ monsters against which are pitted ‘angelic’ pro-filmic actors. This form of cinema thus pre-emptively projects its society’s paradigms and prejudices pertaining to notions of the acceptable ‘human’ body and the unacceptable ‘non-human’ body: of those entities

⁴ A view or doctrine regarding man as the central fact of the universe, to which all surrounding facts have reference (OED).

considered ‘preferable’ and those merely ‘tolerated’. Perhaps what is being presented to be most threatening in mainstream Anglo-American cinema is not a bodily transformation from the human to a non-human form but the transformation from one identity to another, from a sense of the conventional to the intangible. In all of the films discussed, the body of a fictional character determines who that character is, symbolising what that individual and their society or culture represents.

Nonetheless, while these films typically affirm established assumptions and expectations about a concept of ‘universal humanness’, to an extent they also still seem capable of at the very least being subversive, since at times they choose to question the firm validity of these paradigms, while operating from within the constraints of mainstream conventions. To alter a body, then, is to alter a series of connotations, an association of ideas as well. In the same way that Doc Ock refused to die a monster, regardless of his mutable-alterations, the messages expressed in these films also explore the importance of what a character *wishes* to morally stand-for, to *ethically* embody at any given moment: both physically and mentally. These individuals choose to aspire towards an ideal of being better in some way, or perhaps ‘improve’ the association of ideas that they previously embodied beforehand, challenging prejudices expressed against them, which is ultimately the most significant of the transformations to recognise.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1982, U.S.A.)
Constantine, dir. Francis Lawrence (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005, U.S.A.)
Hulk, dir. Ang Lee (Universal Pictures, 2003, U.S.A.)
Spiderman 2, dir. Sam Raimi (Columbia Pictures, 2004, U.S.A.)
Spiderman 3, dir. Sam Raimi (Columbia Pictures, 2007, U.S.A.)
The Incredible Hulk, dir. Louis Leterrier (Universal Pictures, 2008, U.S.A.)
The Mummy, dir. Stephen Sommers (Universal Pictures, 1999, U.S.A.)
Transformers, dir. Michael Bay (Paramount Pictures, 2007, U.S.A.)
Westworld, dir. Michael Crichton (MGM, 1973, U.S.A.)

Secondary Texts

- Badmington, Neil (ed.), *Posthumanism* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave, 2000)
 Balsamo, Anne, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996)
 Bukatman, Scott, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 21st Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)
 Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-modern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993)
 Burkitt, Ian, *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999)
 Glover, Jonathan, I, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* (London: Allen Lane, 1988)

- González, Jennifer, 'Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research', in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, edited by Gill Kirkup, Linda James, Kath Woodward and Fiona Hovenden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 58–73
- Graham, Elaine L., *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: Rutgers University Press, 2002)
- Purse, Lisa, 'Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood: Exertion, Identification, and the Virtual Action Body', *Film Criticism*, 32, 1 (Winter 2007), 5–25
- Pyle, Forest, 'Making Cyborgs, Making Humans Of terminators and blade runners', in *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 124–37
- Short, Sue, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)
- Telotte, J. P., 'The Terminator, Terminator 2 and the Exposed Body', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 20, 2 (Summer 1992), 26–34
- Wood, Aylish, *Technoscience in Contemporary American film: Beyond science fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002)