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Of Dreamers and the Damned: A Posthuman Reading on Two Divergent Cinematic Journeys

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Abstract:

Posthumanism rejects the traditional concept of (hu)man, especially its anthropocentric view. Posthumanism as a movement in critical theory analyses the future as open or at least subject to human influence rather than accepting time as a cyclical or predetermined variable with a fixed endpoint. Through a comparative analysis of the movies, *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), this paper explores how posthumanism is represented in the cinematic universe from two disparate aspects. The research employs a close textual analysis to deconstruct each film's narrative to construct a distinct vision of post humanism as it juxtaposes a feel-good drama and a gothic horror which represents two entirely different visions of dystopian and utopian futures respectively. The protagonist of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, Walter Mitty is not being transposed of his human abilities or uniqueness but he undergoes a fundamental ontological redefinition. At the same time, the protagonist Louis from *Interview with the Vampire*, experiences alienation and existential loneliness in a highly humanistic world. While both works deal with the transcendence of human body and consciousness, Walter Mitty's journey shows cognitive enhancement whereas Louis's story reveals the dystopian outcome of self-annihilation. This paper examines posthumanism's hope and horror through the comparative study of the movies and explores how the concept need not be necessarily optimistic or pessimistic, rather a mix of how the humans experience it, similar to life in a highly humanistic world.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, cognitive enhancement, self-annihilation, transcendence, ontological redefinition.

Introduction

Humanism, as a movement, originated during the Renaissance and solidified during Enlightenment, led to placing the human being at the centre of the universe. It views them as

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the autonomous, rational subject. Humanists called for a process of continual self improvement and believed that man could eventually gain complete knowledge of the world. Humans became the subject and object of study in the developing disciplines, the humanities. The humanist 'Man' simultaneously excludes many and over-universalises the human experience. It is with these universalising shortcomings in mind that posthumanism emerges. It seeks to place the (hu)man back into a more attentively framed network of non-human others, whilst recognising the exclusions and injustices that pervade enlightenment-era humanist thinking.

Posthumanism is a move beyond humanism, which has its origin in the late 18th and 19th centuries. It is considered as a philosophical movement that challenges the traditional humanist concept of the "human" subject, decentralizing it from its position of supremacy. The dualistic view of a human mind separate from the body (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*), as portrayed in Cartesian philosophy, being dismantled by rejecting the fixed and challenging the idea of human exceptionalism, serves as the base of posthumanism. Posthumanism circumnavigates the confinement laid out in Darwinian evolution, by viewing humans as fluid and historically contingent rather than a superior entity at the centre of existence.

The core idea is that humans are not autonomous individuals but are relational beings, entangled with non-human life, technology, and the environment. This Nature-Culture Continuum falls as a central concept of posthumanism that rejects the traditional Western idea that nature and culture are two opposite realms or separate entities. Instead of seeing this difference, nature-culture continuum views them as a single, entangled reality. Nature and its existence is always shaped by cultural forces and what we define as culture is dependent on, or limited by nature. This move from nature-culture dualism to nature-culture continuum paved the way for posthumanism which argues that if nature is no longer inferior to culture, then anything associated with nature is not 'lesser' or inferior to humans.

In literature and popular culture, this revolutionary move led to the creation of characters which defied boundaries. When we analyse a novel as old as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) or a movie like Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), we are looking at characters that exist on continuum, forcing the humans to rethink 'natural' and 'normal'. From age-old myths of vampires to evolution of cyborgs, this has redefined humanism and led to a vaster, inclusive outlook of the world.

Though posthumanism in abstract portrays an optimistic view of the world, literature and popular cinema has treated it with a dystopian identity, which could be a result of 'fear of the unknown'. Also it can be optimistic because it is 'liberation' and that freedom from the age-old beliefs in itself can create fear. Humans think that if they get rid of anthropocentrism, they might become obsolete. We feel a deep, biological revulsion towards things that are almost 'human' as it can lead to the philosophy of the uncanny valley. Cinema portrays loss of free will or soul in a posthuman world because they lose their absolute control.

The critical theory of post humanism that questions pursuits to breaking and exceeding human exceptionalism has been the crux of various literary works for years now. But this dream for exceptionalism has always been laced with warnings that persuades us not

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to follow this false hope since dystopia is what could be found in this utopian pursuit. Greek Poet Pindar cautions us in his work *Isthmian Odes*, “Seek not to become Zeus! / You have everything, if a share / Of these beautiful things comes to you. / Mortal ends befit mortal men”.

This dichotomy is easily disregarded by man, who dreams to extinguish and move beyond human exceptionalism, when daunted by mortality. This research delves into two very varied perspectives on how post-humanism is viewed. One that is affirmative of a pursuit to transcend human exceptionalism and another that which is pessimistic of a post-human existence. How the ancient myths of vampires and the story of a modern man is collocated to analyse how posthumanism is not limited to a narration of dystopian future as portrayed in popular cinema but a narration of transcendence of human limitations to a more fulfilling and liberated existence.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, be it James Thurber’s short story or Ben Stiller’s movie adaptation, offers a strikingly affirmative vision of transcending human exceptionalism, not through technological enhancement or biological modification, but through dreams and openness to the world. The more humane transformation of Walter Mitty is by breaking away the rigid boundaries between ‘self’ and the world, much like the philosophical attainment of salvation. Posthumanism, particularly in its critical and affirmative strands, resists the idea of the autonomous, rational, self-sufficient human subject inherited from Enlightenment humanism. Walter Mitty begins precisely as such a diminished modern subject whose existence is largely reduced to a replaceable cog within capitalist modernity. This model is destabilized by the glimpses of imaginative flights that you can see throughout the movie. Dreams allow him to lucidly experience alternative modes of existence and pseudo reality where courage and vulnerability matters more. In this sense, Walter’s imagination does not elevate him above the human; rather, it decenters the human ego by exposing him to interdependence with new things.

The philosophical orientation of transcending human exceptionalism is crystallised in the film’s recurring line: “To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other, and to feel, that is the purpose of life.” When read through a posthumanist lens, this statement functions as a pronouncement of posthuman becoming. It dismantles the hierarchical separation between subject and object, human and world, observer and observed. In the context, “To see the world” does not imply mastery over it, but attentiveness; “to come to dangerous things” signals vulnerability rather than conquest; and “to feel” foregrounds embodiment, affect, and relationality over rational control. Thus the manifesto thus rejects human exceptionalism’s fixation on transcendence through superiority, replacing it with encounter and shared existence.

The movie’s emphasis on Walter’s transformative physical travel through multiple terrains, lands and cultures reinforces a post-anthropocentric ethic. Nature is not presented as a backdrop to human heroism but as an active participant shaping Walter’s transformation in the movie. When Walter skateboards across Icelandic roads or waits patiently for the snow leopard that is never photographed, the film quietly rejects human dominance over the natural non-human world. These moments echo posthumanists calls to recognise agency beyond the

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human, where meaning emerges through coexistence rather than conquest. Sean O'Connell's philosophy of photography, capturing moments without possessing them, further reinforces this ethic, offering an alternative to extractive, human-centred ways of seeing. Crucially, Walter Mitty's posthumanism is encouragingly optimistic rather than dystopian. Unlike many narratives where transcending human limits results in alienation or loss, Walter's journey culminates in reconnection with himself and a sense of self awareness, with others, and with the world. His dreams do not alienate him from reality but acts as a medium for him to go towards it. This aligns with the critical posthumanist thought that views posthumanism, not as an escape from humanity, but as an ethical reorientation towards humility and empathy. Walter does not become "more than human" in the transhumanist sense; he becomes less exclusively human, and therefore more alive.

The post humanist lens shifts the movie from a 'man vs. boredom' narrative to a 'fragmented assemblage' of human mind, technology, media and rest of the surroundings. The day dreaming nature of Walter becomes a 'hybrid state' as nature becomes a co-existing force with its own identity and agency and the ending of the movie leads to Walter's integration into a wider social and natural network. In the end, Walter doesn't 'fix' his life but he simply accepts his existence in multiple planes of the physical world and the imaginary, simultaneously.

In contrast, *Interview with the Vampire* presents a pessimistic and dystopian vision of posthuman existence, where the transcendence of human limits results not in liberation but in grave existential despair for the protagonist. The film's vampires embody a form of posthumanity rooted in biological enhancement with immortality, heightened senses, and physical superiority and still these qualities are experienced as curses rather than achievements, by the protagonist. Louis de Pointe du Lac's narrative voice is saturated with loathing for his posthuman condition, exposing the moral and emotional costs of surpassing human exceptionalism. Louis is unable to accept the alterations and conditions that his body and mind are experiencing and the fact that he can't lead a life of his choice makes him go through an existential dread that arises from contemplating life's fundamental questions. There is a deeper philosophical implication in the changes that he experiences, rather than a superficial alteration in his behaviour or appearance. When he clings to deeper humanist ideals like guilt, soul, living etc., the narrative consistently deconstructs the value system, suggesting that 'human' is just a temporary stage in a much larger, indifferent system, which can be viewed as a critique of the core of humanism.

From the Gothic tropes of 'monsters' and damnation to a posthuman subject, the vampires in the film exemplify the dangers of posthuman exceptionalism rather than its critique. Although they are no longer human and moved past the biological and ethical boundaries of 'human', they reflect the hierarchical structures of power, domination, and thereby exploitation. Lestat, in particular, represents a grotesque extension of human mastery as he treats humans as consumable resources and celebrates immortality as entitlement. This mirrors the posthuman anxieties about technological enhancement reinforcing existing

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inequalities rather than doing away with them. Instead of dissolving the human and post-human divide, vampirism in the film hardens it into a scenario of predator and prey.

Louis's despair stems from his inability to reconcile his immortality with moral responsibility. His posthuman body demands violence for his survival which damages the ethics of his former human self. Unlike Walter Mitty, whose transformation deepens his association, Louis's posthuman condition isolates him from both humans and vampires alike. Time, which posthuman theory often frames as nonlinear and expansive, becomes a burden for Louis, rather than a gift. Immortality strips life of urgency, meaning, and morality, leading Louis to experience existence as an endless repetition.

The figure of Claudia in the *Interview with the Vampire* intensifies this critique. Trapped eternally in a child's body, she exposes the ethical monstrosity of posthuman conditions. Her immortality freezes development, agency, and consent, revealing the violence inherent in denying finitude of being human. Through Claudia, the film suggests that mortality is not a defect to be overcome but a condition that enables growth, accountability, and ethical choice. In this sense, *Interview with the Vampire* operates as a cautionary tale against transhumanist fantasies of eternal life, aligning more closely with critiques of posthumanism that warn against technological or biological transcendence divorced from ethical reflection.

Ultimately, the film frames posthumanity as a state of ontological exile. Louis despises his enhanced body because it estranges him from suffering, death, and vulnerability, the very conditions that make moral life possible. His story rejects the assumption that surpassing human limits leads to progress. Instead it is portrayed as a hollow victory that erodes empathy and meaning. Where Walter's posthuman becoming is gentle, relational, and hopeful, Louis's posthuman existence is lonely, violent, and morally corrosive.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and *Interview with the Vampire* are narratives that move in opposite existential directions. Where Walter Mitty begins from absence and moves toward embodied presence, Louis's story in *Interview with the Vampire* begins with excess of time, memory, and consciousness and it collapses inward into paralysis. Observed together, the two texts present a striking contrast between imaginative escape as emancipation and immortality as entrapment.

Walter's world is initially defined by fragmentation. His imagination compensates for a life rendered small by routine, economic stability, and emotional timidity. Fantasy here is not delusion but rehearsal. Each imagined heroism foreshadows a future act of courage, suggesting that his imagination or dream is a transitional space between fear and action. The film ultimately redeems fantasy by allowing it to mature into movement. Walter's journey marks a reconciliation between inner desire and external life.

By contrast, *Interview with the Vampire* presents a consciousness that cannot escape itself. Louis is trapped not by lack but by abundance. He is arguably blessed or cursed with infinite time, heightened perception, and the unbearable persistence of memory. Immortality strips experience of urgency. Where Mitty's imagination propels him into the world, Louis's introspection imprisons him within it. His narrative voice circles endlessly around guilt, grief,

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and moral hesitation, revealing how self-awareness, when unmoored from finitude, becomes corrosive.

A key divergence lies in how each text treats time. In *Walter Mitty*, time is scarce and therefore meaningful. The ticking clock pushes Walter towards decision, risk, and even intimacy. Life matters because it ends. Mortality is a key factor in the entire narrative in the movie. In *Interview with the Vampire*, time is excessive. Moments do not accumulate towards purpose but dissolve into repetition. Immortality flattens experience due to eternal suffering. This contrast reveals a central finding that limitation is what gives purpose.

The ethical orientations of the protagonists further sharpen the contrast. Walter's morality is quiet and connected. His courage expresses itself through care towards his mother, Cheryl, and even the anonymous photographer he seeks to honor. Action restores ethical clarity for him. Louis, however, is ethically immobilized. His refusal to kill, while seemingly noble, isolates him from both human and vampire worlds. Moral absolutism, in this context, becomes another form of self-absorption. The text suggests that ethics detached from lived compromise can become sterile.

From a post-human or existential lens, both narratives interrogate what it means to be human, but they arrive at opposite conclusions. Louis, though post-human in form, longs for humanity as a loss. Walter, fully human and painfully ordinary, discovers humanity as a practice. One mourns what he has become; the other learns to inhabit who he already is.

The visual and narrative structures reinforce this divide. *Walter Mitty* expands spatially with wide landscapes, open skies, mirroring Mitty's internal expansion. *Interview with the Vampire* contracts with dark interiors, nocturnal settings, intimate monologues mirroring Louis's inward collapse. Imagination saves when it leads outward, and destroys when it turns inward without limit. Walter's fantasies are provisional as they dissolve once life begins. Louis's memories are permanent since they prevent life from continuing. One narrative affirms becoming and the other mourns being. Louis who can be referred to as a 'failed humanist' (as he tries to fit in to human moral frameworks in a non-human existence) whereas Mitty can be the 'hope' as he accepts himself as a part of the larger picture and doesn't try to fix himself nor tries to fit in to the defined 'human'.

Conclusion

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and *Interview with the Vampire* operate as inverse meditations on existence. Together, they suggest that the purpose of life is neither endless reflection nor heroic fantasy, but the courage to step into uncertainty, to accept loss, and to feel deeply despite impermanence. Where Walter teaches us that life begins when we stop watching ourselves live, Louis warns us of the tragedy that follows when consciousness outlives consequence. The comparison of these characters through the lens of posthumanism's hope and horror reveals that posthumanism isn't just about cyborgs, aliens or monsters but it is a shift in perspective from seeing oneself as a master to a participant in a web of biology, technology, natural and socio-cultural aspects. Posthumanism need not necessarily be optimistic or pessimistic but an abstract perception that is quite similar to humanness. The

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protagonists are riddled with the same thoughts, insecurities, joy as well as despair that humans experience. How is this any different from human life in all its glory? The attributes that define the innate nature of life in transhumanism and posthumanism might be different, however the base experiences are one and the same.

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