



Ghost in the Shell, the (Im)possibility of the Posthuman: Comparing Japanese Anime (1995) to Hollywood Film (2017)

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the theme of the (im)possibility of the posthuman by analyzing two forms of *Ghost in the Shell*: the 1995 Japanese anime and the 2017 Hollywood film. Although both works are based on the same source material, Masamune Shirow's 1989 manga, many fans were deeply disappointed by the live-action movie that came out almost 20 years later. These polarizing reviews of the anime and the movie should be understood in the context of the discourse of the postmodern and the posthuman. For this purpose, this article attempts to explore whether the SF imagination of twentieth-century Japan, as it moved to twenty-first-century Hollywood, has returned to the identity logic of the modern subject.

Keywords: *Ghost in the Shell*, Convergence, Posthuman, Anime, Hollywood

1. INTRODUCTION

The animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) [1] was released and was enthusiastically received [2], [3]. By showing the possibility of the posthuman, the anime proclaims the emergence of a new life that is not limited to the concept of the modern human, body, and life form. Unlike the anime, which actively accepts and positively declares the birth of a new life as well as subject, especially represented by the fusion of the heroine Kusanagi Motoko and the Puppet Master, the Hollywood film (2017) [4] ends with a story of modern self-loss and self-recovery by the heroine Major. This kind of theme of self-identity, or the politics of identity is too simplistic and one-dimensional. In this sense, the film is not skeptical of the anthropocentric view intended in the original work by Masamune Shirow [5]. In other words, the Hollywood film ironically shows the impossibility of the posthuman. To analyse this difference and support this assumption, this article takes a quick look at some of the most prominent scenes.

2. OBJECTIVES

This article discusses and compares two versions of *Ghost in the Shell* with the question of the (im)possibility of posthuman.

3. THEORETICAL REVIEW

In 1962, James Watson, Francis Crick, and Maurice Wilkins were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their discovery of the DNA helix. This trio credited Erwin Schrödinger's book *What Is Life?* (1944) as a source of inspiration for their exploration of life's mysteries. In this book, Schrödinger predicts that the phenomenon of life will eventually be explained by physics or chemistry, and this prediction inspired the trio to solve the secret of life [6]. If all living phenomena are governed by the laws of physics, it leads to ask this question: is it possible to even human life replaceable? In the era of posthuman, this question directly links to the reason why the main character in *Ghost in the Shell*, Puppet Master, is eager to have a complete life [7], [8].

4. METHODS

The research for this article employed a multi-faceted approach, drawing upon the question of the (im)possibility of the posthuman with *Ghost in the Shell*. Firstly, cultural studies provide a foundational framework for analyzing the broader socio-cultural context surrounding the two forms of *Ghost in the Shell*. Secondly, a close reading of the text was conducted to delve into the intricate details and nuances present in both the animated and Hollywood renditions of *Ghost in the Shell*. Thirdly, the research incorporated elements of reader-response criticism, seeing to understand how audiences engaged with and interpreted the animated and Hollywood films.

5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The first main scene we will look at is from 1995's anime, where a character named Puppet Master, who can ghost-hack individuals over the network, reveals the meaning of his existence and asks for a political asylum. While authorities (including Nakamura) argue that Puppet Master is just a program, obviously he is free from human control. By declaring "I am simply a being brought forth from the data," Puppet Master points to the limits of life as defined by modern science. If we follow the 20th century definition of life science, "Life is characterized by a self-replicating system." Then question is rising: can Puppet Master be considered a living being? This is a philosophical question [9]. To deal with this question, it is necessary to take another scene.

The next main scene is Puppet Master approaches (technically accesses) Kusanagi and demands "a complete fusion." Puppet Master suggests his own philosophy about the relation between life and copying. Puppet Master confesses that he is currently in an incomplete state as a living being, or life-form. According to him, this is because life can only continue to survive and thrive when it encounters and combines with a variety of other beings. By fusing with Kusanagi, Puppet master hopes to achieve a complete life form, and this transcends the concept of the modern subject. Then why did Puppet Master come to Kusanagi? There is other cyborg character in the anime like Batou. But Puppet Master specifically wants to merge with Kusanagi. We can get a clue from the dive scene. When Kusanagi dives into the ocean, (or the ocean of data) and resurfaces, she wonders if she can become something else entirely. This scene implies that Kusanagi recognizes her identity as changing, not fixed. As Kusanagi also hopes for a transformation (or metamorphosis) beyond her existing body, shell, identity, and subject, the two meet and eventually merge into a new being. As in Kusanagi's response to Batou, after the fusion, "there is no longer Puppet Master nor a woman called major." In this sense, the anime depicts the possibility of the posthuman. Unlike the anime, the Hollywood version takes the simplistic binary of good versus evil, false memory versus true memory, original versus replica, and ultimately narrows the possibility of the posthuman. Technically, Puppet Master is replaced by a character named Hideo Kuze. He warns that Kusanagi, in the film Major, is being used by the Hanka Robot Company. With the help of Kuze and Dr. Ouelet, Major tries to find her real experiences and memories. Above all, the film ends with restoring their original names: Kuze as Hideo Kuze and Major as Motoko Kusanagi. This kind of simplified narrative ultimately ends up being trapped in a cycle of self-loss and recovery, the politics of identity. In this way, the Hollywood version turns its narrative as a story of revenge.

6. CONCLUSION

Why did the Hollywood version of *Ghost in the Shell* fail despite of its spectacular technology? *Ghost in the Shell* poses the question of life form, but there is a significant difference between the anime and the film in terms of problem-solving as well as critical awareness. In contrast to the original manga, which embraces the critical and skeptical perspectives of anthropocentrism and the modern subject, the live-action film makes the theme of self-identity too simplistic and one-dimensional. Perhaps based on the contrasting reviews of the Japanese anime and the Hollywood film, it is possible to assess that the posthuman imagination, which flourished in the 1980s-90s with the discourse of postmodern, regresses to the logic of identity in the 2017 version. For this reason, fans of the original have harshly criticized the film. The two versions illustrate the possibility and impossibility of imagining a posthuman beyond the modern subject, respectively.

7. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

This article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and publication process itself.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Te-Gyung Kim is the main author of this article.

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