
In this remarkable study, Michael Grantham identifies transhuman antiheroes as protagonists whose strengths, intelligence, skills and/or abilities are superior to everyday individuals and who reject the normative moral and social conventions of their societies. Particularly in speculative fiction, Grantham argues, these protagonists are often rendered paradoxical in order to demonstrate the failure of technoscientific development in transcending human nature.

Speculative fiction offers an alternative social reality in which “the dynamic and complex relationship between individuals, society and technoscientific development” is explored (p. 3). In Grantham’s view, transhuman antiheroes as protagonists are often hybrids of “polarised categories” (e.g. biology and technology) and therefore help to deconstruct existing notions of morality and social convention (e.g. good and evil, right and wrong) (p. 3).

Using a series of renowned speculative narratives as examples, Grantham investigates “the antihero” and “the transhuman” as literary concepts and character archetypes. In the former case, a considerable literary review reveals how the inevitable failure of the antihero reflects traditional literary expectations for authors – and therefore their readers – to pursue the heroic ideal. Yet Grantham’s view is refreshing as he focuses on speculative fiction in which the antihero acquires transhuman qualities through technoscientific advancement and often relies on violence to achieve his/her goal, which in turn forms a comment on the real world.

More importantly, Grantham pays specific attention to the transhuman as “transitional human”, which can be interpreted “as an individual in the process of reducing imposed limitations” until the final stage of human evolution is reached so that he/she is “no longer bound by physiological constraints such as sickness, aging, fatigue or even death” (pp. 7-8). By granting the antiheroes such transhuman qualities in speculative fiction, authors seek to explore – and further challenge – existing notions such as subjectivity, identity, equality and the essence of humanity in the context of their social reality.

Of particular interest to this reviewer is Grantham’s selection of speculative narratives to support his argument. Clearly aware that his personal views and observations are structured around his own social reality, Grantham transitions rather fluently from chapter to chapter, tackling the complex yet fascinating interrelations between speculative fiction, antiheroes and the concept of transhumanism from as many perspectives as possible. Readers are introduced not only Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Richard Morgan’s Takeshi Kovacs trilogy, but also the idea of “natural transcendence as providing an alternative to the integration of biology and technology in the development of the transhuman” (p. 31 - a philosophical manifestation of Frederick Nietzsche’s conception of the Übermensch. Further blurred are the lines between
utopia and dystopia, sanity and madness, salvation and condemnation, and survival and self-destruction, as the myriad impacts of transhuman antiheroes on their social realities in a wide range of speculative narratives are investigated.

The Transhuman Antihero may be seen as a brief survey of the history of speculative fiction from the perspective of the “monster”. Indeed, in the book’s last and perhaps most important chapter, Grantham considers the image of the monster as being particularly important in offering “new insight into the crisis of identity as well as the generalised fear and anxiety surrounding the emergence of transhuman theory and the possibility of transhuman individuals” (p. 170). Closely examining Morgan’s Black Man, whose protagonist is a genetically engineered human with the kind of natural aggression and predisposition to violence that is particularly suitable for engaging in war and conflict, Grantham is able to guide readers back to Shelley’s Frankenstein in which the fate of individuals defined and discriminated against as monsters may give some hint as to the potential consequences of life-creating technologies on a global scale. In the same way that readers of Shelley’s story may wonder whether Frankenstein is more monstrous than the monster he creates, Grantham correctly points out that in the case of transhumans in Morgan’s book, the boundaries between polarised identities (e.g. human and non-human, man and monster) are deliberately crossed. That the transhuman antiheroes in both narratives come to adopt their monstrous identities, in spite of their clear awareness of how monsters are feared and loathed by men, fully indicates how human-like they are. In Grantham’s words, for all their limited capacity to effect change, the antiheroes reflect “a unique form of courage, one that is perhaps more accurately suited to contemporary social reality” (p. 5).

Therefore, it seems fair for this reviewer to suggest that Grantham is likely to agree with Theodora Goss’s conclusion in her valuable essay “The Invention of the Modern Monster”:

Our willingness to listen when the monster speaks indicates an openness to hybridity and ambiguity, to voices that tell us what we may not want to hear... In that future, at once frightening and exhilarating, we will have to acknowledge that the boundary between self and other has always been something we create. How we perceive and present monsters will continue to change in response to our cultural needs – but monsters will always signify. They will always function as cultural barometers that allow us to gauge who we think we are, what we do or do not wish to become. Because monsters are always, finally, about us.

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