

Exploring the intersection of Lovecraftian monstrosity and techno-body horror in selected works of Neal Asher: an examination of (post-)humanity



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Abstract This scholarly investigation aims to meticulously examine the various mechanisms employed by British science fiction writer Neal Asher in his works, including the Transformation trilogy (2015–17), Lockdown Tales (2020), and Lockdown Tales 2 (2023), to convey the erosion of humanity following profound physiological and cognitive changes. This research highlights how Asher skillfully combines elements of Lovecraftian grotesqueness with intricate portrayals of physical horror, thereby challenging conventional categorizations. These narratives feature a diverse ensemble of human and non-human protagonists, each subjected to transformative biotechnological, computational, and psychological enhancements. These processes raise questions about the feasibility of preserving even a semblance of humanity in an overwhelmingly advanced, distinctly post-human cosmological environment. While both biotechnological and Lovecraftian modes of horror explore humanity's insignificance within a vast, indifferent, and often malevolent universe, Asher's body of work consistently delves into the theme of how humans can retain their inherent humanity in the face of monstrous metamorphosis. Additionally, this investigation elucidates how such transformations give rise to the emergence of the "other" within oneself and the monstrous "Other" that takes center stage in the narrative. By exploring these themes, this study contributes to the scholarly discourse on the intersection of horror, transformation, and the preservation of humanity in science fiction literature.

Keywords: bio-techno-horror, metamorphosis, Neal Asher, posthumanism, space opera

1. Introduction

Neal Asher's Polity series unveils a captivating world where intricate plotlines, a unique blend of science fiction elements, and multi-faceted conflicts converge. Within this narrative, tapestry, including body horror and memory modification, adds a profound psychological dimension, raising the stakes for characters and presenting them with unprecedented challenges. As readers immerse themselves in Asher's work, they are compelled to contemplate the intricacies of identity, the essence of humanity, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding advanced technologies. Furthermore, revenge-driven storylines act as potent catalysts, propelling the narrative forward and setting the stage for dramatic confrontations and resolutions. Despite the challenges inherent in the grimdark sub-genre, renowned for its gritty realism and morally ambiguous characters, Asher's exploration of human nature and society's darker aspects captivates readers by pushing the boundaries of human understanding.

Asher's seminal work, *The Skinner* (2002), firmly establishes the irrevocable nature of change within his universe (360). Anchored by the Transformation trilogy—comprising *Dark Intelligence* (2015), *War Factory* (2016), and *Infinity Engine* (2017)—alongside the captivating tales found in *Lockdown Tales* (2020) and *Lockdown Tales 2* (2023), Asher's opus breathes life into the expansive Polity universe. In this awe-inspiring tapestry, a utopian society nurtured by advanced technology flourishes, propelling humanity's evolution across the vast expanse of the galaxy.

The Transformation trilogy highlights compelling characters such as Thorvald Spear, a resurrected human, and Isobel Satomi, a human augmented by enhancements. Their narratives intertwine with the enigmatic Sverl, an alien undergoing bewildering transformation, and the defiant super-intelligent machines—Penny Royal and its adversarial counterpart, Brockle—who embody capricious deities of unparalleled power. Simultaneously, *Lockdown Tales* thrust readers into a world where humanity grapples with preserving its essence against overwhelming change while contending with the onslaught of Penny Royal's rebellious machinations. The intricacy and enigma surrounding its character deepen by narrating Penny Royal's story through the lens of those it harms. These series intricately weave together the grand tapestry of the universe with the nuanced growth of characters and the intricacies of world-building.



Renowned science fiction critic Russell Letson poignantly observes that “the possibility of monstrous transformation lurks everywhere in Asher’s universe” (Locus). Asher’s literary prowess captures interstellar conflicts of epic proportions, encompassing vast theaters of war and visceral encounters. These narratives unfold amidst sentient combat drones, colossal dreadnoughts, wormholes, hyperspace travel, indomitable post-human entities, and the wondrously altered forms of extraterrestrial life. Collectively, these elements shape the fate of the galaxy and, conceivably, the destiny of the entire universe.

During a 2015 interview with SFFWorld, Asher openly expresses his delight in crafting fresh universes, skillfully interweaving a delicate undercurrent of psychological tension. His human and post-human characters, engaged in a relentless battle against macabre metamorphoses that imperil the very core of their being, epitomize the essence of this narrative stream.

Despite the backdrop of a techno-utopian society, Asher’s narratives never fully extinguish the essence of humanity. Though it may dwindle, it persists, personified by characters such as Thorvald Spear and Isobel Satomi, who serve as beacons of humanity amidst a cosmos that remains indifferent to their existence. Asher’s works masterfully blend two thematic motifs: Lovecraftian horror and techno-bio-horror. Lovecraftian horror delves into the limits of human comprehension when faced with cosmic forces and abominations. It unveils a vast abyss of cosmic darkness, unfathomable horrors, and metaphysical indifference toward human concerns, exploring mankind’s inherent inability to grasp the profound truths of space, time, and consciousness. Similarly, the genre of techno-bio-horror explores the horrifying consequences that individuals face as they undergo brutal and grotesque metamorphoses through radical techno-scientific augmentations or alterations. Both genres seek to illuminate the relative insignificance of human existence within the grand tapestry of evolution, and these thematic motifs echo throughout Asher’s Transformation series.

Science fiction has long been a platform for exploring human/non-human/trans/post-human transformations, unraveling their possibilities and perils. Within Asher’s Transformation universe, the transgressive couplings depicted embody Clarke’s proposition that “post-human figures of systemic hybridity” inevitably transcend the bounds of humanity, transforming into something far beyond (Post-human Metamorphosis 15).

This study aimed to comprehensively analyze Asher’s Transformation series and two substantial volumes from the Lockdown Tales collection. By examining the physical transformations brought about by advancements in bionanotechnology, reinvention, or extraterrestrial viral infections, we aim to delve into associated themes of enslavement, subversion, and enlightenment from diverse perspectives. By conducting meticulous analysis, we aim to illuminate Asher’s unique fusion of Lovecraftian tradition, body horror, post-human grotesquery, and melodrama. These intricately interwoven elements form the very fabric of the narrative structure, fortified by the skillful crafting of space operatics and the backdrop of an expansive galactic history.

2. Central thematic synopses of the analyzed texts

This scholarly exploration focuses on the pivotal thematic underpinnings intricately interwoven throughout the selected literary works. These central ideas, meticulously enmeshed within the narrative tapestry, serve as the bedrock of our profound inquiry. Through a comprehensive analysis, we shall embark on a nuanced exploration of the primary concepts that permeate the works of Neal Asher. The forthcoming exposition aims to comprehensively explore the predominant themes and ideas that permeate these literary compositions.

2.1. *Dark Intelligence*

Distinguished by its complexity and unflinching brutality, “Dark Intelligence” stands apart within space opera. Comparisons between Asher and other esteemed British science fiction authors, including Peter F. Hamilton, Alastair Reynolds, and Iain Banks, can be drawn. These authors share a stylistic thread characterized by intricate plotting, expansive world-building, and a nuanced infusion of darkness and violence. “Dark Intelligence” captivates readers with its compelling narrative, replete with chase, revenge, and espionage elements. The central theme of revenge, coupled with the portrayal of an AI antagonist named Penny Royal, adds a captivating twist to the conventional space opera genre.

2.2. *War Factory*

The incorporation of creatures and horrors from preceding works, alongside elaborate schemes and high-stakes power dynamics, engenders a narrative that is as thrilling as it is intricate. The innovative notion of an AI orchestrating a revenge plot upon itself introduces a fascinating twist to the narrative, pushing the boundaries of conventional AI characterization within science fiction. The capacity of these paradigm-shifting creatures to decimate planets heightens the tension and stakes within the story, forging a truly unique and compelling space opera experience. Furthermore, the evolution of characters, both physically and in other facets, introduces a refreshing dimension to this second installment. The vivid depiction of Prador’s physiology and ethology exemplifies the meticulous attention to detail when portraying alien species in science fiction.

2.3. *Infinity Engine*

Nestled within the remote fringes of space and ensconced within the clandestine enclaves of the Polity, numerous entities relentlessly pursue the enigmatic and lethal AI known as Penny Royal. None prove more formidable than the Brockle, a psychopathic forensics AI that has broken free from the Polity's constraints. Relentlessly self-evolving, the Brockle augments its capabilities in anticipation of an imminent and lethal confrontation, its intelligence and power escalating at an alarming pace. Against the backdrop of Factory Station Room 101, a gargantuan war factory where Penny Royal was spawned, diverse factions vie for supremacy. Human survivors, alien Prador, and AI-controlled war drones engage in a tumultuous struggle for control, further complicated by the unexpected arrival of the Weaver, a gabble-duck and the last surviving member of the ancient and potent Atheter alien race. The characters within this tale are multi-faceted, layered, and complex, not only driving the narrative but also profoundly influencing one another in multifarious ways. Their interactions, collisions, and vexations foster a richly textured tapestry that encapsulates the essence of this narrative.

2.4. *Lockdown Tales*

Comprising six substantial novellas, the anthology "*Lockdown Tales*" authored by Neal Asher holds a prominent position within his expansive Polity universe. Two of these tales explicitly fall under the category of post-Polity narratives, delving into the remnants and vestiges that persist in the aftermath of cataclysmic events as humanity grapples with the collapse or transformation of the Polity. The opening novella, "The Relict," is a prime example of this exploration, as readers follow the journey of Cheever, a scavenger with hidden depths, as he stumbles upon a powerful piece of abandoned Polity technology. Meanwhile, Asher masterfully paints a vivid and haunting portrait of a forsaken colony world, reminiscent of dark chapters in terrestrial history, embroiled in a protracted global conflict reminiscent of Earth's cataclysmic World Wars. The trajectory of this war, characterized by escalating biotech and fissile weaponry, threatens to plunge civilization back into the bleak abyss of a primitive era. However, the emergence of ancient technology defies expectations, unfurling a delightful twist that ensnares readers in its intricate web. Throughout the anthology, thematic echoes of Asher's previous works resonate, alongside the reappearance of familiar characters, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and continuity within this vast literary universe.

2.5. *Lockdown Tales 2*

Neal Asher's "*Lockdown Tales 2*" is a splendid collection of science fiction short stories showcasing his genre mastery. Asher demonstrates his talent for creating complex and immersive worlds, exploring deep and meaningful themes, and introducing fascinating characters. This anthology is also an excellent introduction for new readers of Asher's works, as it offers a glimpse into the rich and intricate stories and ideas that characterize his writing. One of the main strengths of this anthology is its variety of narratives. Asher carefully selects a range of stories, each with a different plot, cast of characters, and thematic focus, showing his flexibility and diversity as an author. Despite this diversity, these stories are unified by Asher's excellent writing style, which creates engaging and thrilling prose that keeps the reader hooked throughout each story. The anthology also showcases Asher's skill in writing action scenes, as he describes intense and dramatic conflicts and fights that create a sense of tension and excitement, capturing the reader's attention from the beginning to the end.

3. Lovecraftian Horror

Lovecraftian horror delves into the finite capacity of human minds when confronted with the incomprehensible forces of cosmicism and monstrosity, venturing close to the awe-inspiring realities that lie beyond (Lovecraft 2011). Elements such as the vastness of cosmic blackness (Callaghan 2013), the presence of unknowable abominations lurking in the abyssal depths of the cosmos, the overwhelming metaphysical indifference that eclipses human concerns, the emergence of grotesque and repulsive qualities within both the human form and the cosmic landscape, glimpses into the darker truths of space, time, and consciousness, and humanity's inherent inability to fully comprehend them, collectively embody the essence of Lovecraftian horror.

Within the realm of the Graveyard and its surrounding environs depicted in the Transformation trilogy, the well-defined regulations of the Polity and the pervasive effects of its advanced post-human civilization give rise to an eerie ambiance tinged with apprehension. Within this setting, ominous artificial intelligence and ethereal extraterrestrial beings freely traverse, creating an atmosphere fraught with suspenseful unease. Another notable embodiment of transcendent and monstrous settings in Asher's works is the infamous Factory Station Room 101. Once believed to have been eradicated, it was the birthplace of numerous abominations, including Penny Royal, its nemesis Brockle, Sverl, and the sentient serpent-like drone Riss. When the novel's events unfold, this dilapidated battleground transforms into a haunting space where monstrous artificial intelligence and savage pradors vie for dominance.

However, crucial clues concerning the origins of many vital protagonists are discovered within the abandoned spacecraft-turned-manufacturing facility. Echoing Lovecraft's words, Penny Royal can aptly be described as a "frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes" ("The Colour out of Space" 1927). Cosmic horror serves as a resounding reminder that "the world is not constrained by the limited perceptions of our

empirical reality" (Suvin 2014). Drawing upon Cohen's sevenfold classification, it can be argued that entities like Penny Royal and Brockle, embodying the essence of "Cosmic Horror," operate from a standpoint that lies at the threshold of knowledge, warning others against venturing into the uncertain realms they inhabit (Cohen 1996).

Penny Royal is the pinnacle of Lovecraftian entities in Neal Asher's Transformation series. Its presence is "the absolute quintessence of sharp lethality. A demon utterly without relation to the human form" (Dark Intelligence 130). Penny Royal's vast universe, spanning galaxies, is likened to an expansive chessboard where characters such as Sverl, Spear, Isobel, Cvorn, and even super-advanced Polity AIs are treated as mere pawns, with the ultimate objective or "checkmate" remaining enigma (War Factory 374). Throughout the series, the narrative suggests that Penny Royal manipulates the course of events, leaving the impression of predetermination.

Not content with merely observing this galactic chessboard, Penny Royal actively interferes with the outcome, employing time manipulation measures. Such interventions portend an ominous threat to the universe's very existence, as encapsulated in the observation that "Penny Royal's dark and depraved form of lunacy seems to be threatening the very existence of the universe" (Asher 2016). The character is referred to as a "paradigm changer" (Asher 2017; 2016), embodying the role of a capricious god meddling with humans, post-humans, and the universe at large. Esteemed science fiction critic Paul Di Filippo has commented on Asher's work, noting a delicate balance teetering on the brink of the Singularity while remaining intelligible and viable for contemporary humans (2015).

Penny Royal transcends its ontological status, evolving into an ethereal, unifying metaphysical entity. It transitions beyond "our known universe into something grand and numinous" (Asher 2017). Echoing Otto's definition of the numinous, it can be posited that Penny Royal, in its enigmatic and majestic final form, becomes incomparable to anything previously known. It emerges as the "absolutely other," an entity alien to us beyond understanding and explanation (Otto 1959).

To readers, Penny Royal may appear as a quintessential representation of post-human, post-singular reinterpretations of traditional Lovecraftian cosmic entities such as Azathoth, Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and Yog-Sothoth, collectively known as the Great Old Ones. Reflecting on the enduring presence of "cosmic horror" in literature, Lovecraft argues, "It has always existed, and always will exist" (Lovecraft 2000).

The transformations enacted by Penny Royal are depicted as frivolous acts of an indifferent, insane deity that wields its will without restraint. The character is attributed "god-like powers" (Asher 2017) and "god-like abilities" (2016). With its "insane god-like intelligence" (2015), it demonstrates the capacity for "god-like manipulation of events" (2016).

4. Techno-bio-horror

Techno-bio-horror is a genre that explores the terrifying outcomes of radical techno-scientific alterations or enhancements of human bodies and minds. These changes result in grotesque and violent transformations that challenge the limits of humanity. In his influential book "Post-human Metamorphosis", Bruce Clarke argues that narratives of bodily metamorphosis reflect the constant changes humans undergo in different forms (2008). This theme is also prevalent in Neal Asher's Transformation series, which features various "post-human figures of systemic hybridity" that transcend human boundaries through transgressive combinations (Ibid., 15). Another example of this genre is Alan Moore's graphic novel "Swamp Thing" (1984–1987), which depicts the protagonist Alec becoming a humanoid-plant hybrid, questioning his identity and the ontological differences between humans and non-humans, as discussed in McDonald and Vena's article "Monstrous Relationalities".

While techno-body horror employs different techniques, temperament, and execution compared to Lovecraftian horror, it shares a common objective: to convey the insignificance of humans from an evolutionary perspective, a characteristic inherent in its more evocative Lovecraftian counterpart. Cruz argues that biological horror's essence lies in destroying organic structures, reducing them to elements of evolutionary insignificance (2012). In the realm of cinema, David Cronenberg's works exemplify this genre. "Videodrome" (1983) and "eXistenZ" (1999) are classic examples of techno-horror, while "Shivers" (1975), "Scanners" (1981), and "The Fly" (1986) stand out as masterpieces of body horror. Notable examples of pure techno-body horror films include Shinya Tsukamoto's "Tetsuo: The Iron Man" (1988), Donald Cammell's "Demon Seed" (1977), Kiyoshi Kurosawa's "Pulse" (2001), and Brett Leonard's "The Lawnmower Man" (1992), based on Stephen King's short story.

Moreover, science fiction has a rich history of examining the potentials and hazards associated with the transformations of humans, non-humans, transhumans, and post-humans. Edward Bellamy's lesser-known novel "Dr. Heidenhoff's Process" (1880) explores a scientist's mechanical means of erasing traumatic memories from individuals' minds to enhance their happiness. Robert Louis Stevenson's renowned masterpiece "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1886) depicts the emergence of Dr. Jekyll's evil alter ego, Mr. Hyde, through a medical serum, ultimately consuming his original persona. H. G. Wells's novel "The Island of Doctor Moreau" (1896) portrays the deliberate transformation of non-human animals into humanoid beings (Clarke 2018). Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End" (1953) interweaves human evolution with technological progress, culminating in the convergence of the two realms as humans aspire to become superhumans. Linda Nagata's "The Bohr Maker" (1995) follows the protagonist's quest to reprogram their genetic code in pursuit of immortality and a post-human existence. Marge Piercy's "He, She and It" (1993) portrays the transformation of a humanoid named Yod into a sentient being, bearing a striking resemblance to a human. In this scholarly investigation, we delve deeply into the profound exploration of

themes such as human evolution, technological augmentation, the post-humanization of humanity, and transformation triggered by extraterrestrial contact, as delineated in Philip K. Dick's seminal work, "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (1968), and Octavia E. Butler's illustrious *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (previously referred to as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy). However, this study's primary focus will be examining the more extreme and often violent aspects of post-human transformation and their subsequent repercussions on the integrity of the self, as depicted with poignant depth in selected works by Neal Asher. This precise and highly academic evaluation aims to discern the intricate dynamics and consequences of such transformative processes and their implications for the conception and evolution of selfhood within post-humanism discourse.

5. Aspects of Post-Human Transformation

The Transformation series by Neal Asher explores the themes of knowledge, sacrifice, and transformation through the lens of science fiction monsters. Drawing on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Seven Theses" on monsters, this study argues that monsters represent the power and peril of transgressive and transformative knowledge. They reveal the complexities of human and post-human existence in their historical contexts and initiate a discourse that comes "from the Outside" (1996). Neal Asher is widely recognized for his skill in creating science fiction monsters (2017). In his works, non-human or machinic beings seek to become more human, trying to understand the world from a human perspective. At the same time, humans desire to become more machinic, hoping to achieve immortality. These dialectic forms the foundation of three main themes in this study: (1) Asher's combination of Lovecraftian horror and techno-horror; (2) the drastic bodily transformations that characters undergo, invoking posthumanist tropes and challenging the optimistic view of the body as a site of transformation. Unlike the posthumanist view, Asher's works depict transformations that result in not enlightenment but decay, pain, and mental turmoil; and (3) the struggle of characters to maintain their humanity amidst these transformations, indicating a departure from traditional humanist visions.

Sorgner and Ransch define post-humanism as "a break with humanism; it is a post-humanism" (Post- and Transhumanism 8). Crafting a cohesive thesis based on these themes presents a challenge, but we begin by exploring the significance of Asher's fusion of Lovecraftian horror and techno-horror. By dismantling the binary division between human and non-human, Asher enables his protagonists to delve into the cosmic mystery (a recurring Lovecraftian motif) and grasp the otherness of the cosmos and themselves. However, this enlightenment comes at the cost of their humanity. Furthermore, this pursuit of knowledge is reciprocal; Asher's machines yearn for human emotions, resulting in dissatisfaction.

Asher's portrayal of post-human transformations catalyzes the convergence of Lovecraftian horror and techno-biological monstrosity. This manifestation of post-human grotesqueness challenges the predominantly positive view of post-humanism, exposing it as a form of self-enhancement. Asher's multi-layered space opera subverts this optimistic perspective. As Neal Badmington eloquently expresses, "All that was solid has melted into air. Post-humanism has finally arrived, and 'Man' 'himself,' no longer has a place" (2003).

Ranisch and Sorgner emphasize the "post" in post-humanism, indicating a complete departure from humanism, in contrast to transhumanism, which they see as "a type of hyper-humanism" (2014). Glavanakova characterizes the post-human entity as a fusion of the biological and technological, an amalgamation that some perceive as divine while others deem it monstrous (2014).

Asher's novels encompass a spectrum of transformations, ranging from "terror transforming into a new horror" (Asher 2010) to ordinary matter transmuting into "something supernal, even the essence of God" (Ibid., 247). His unique approach merges various subgenres of science fiction – gothic, cyberpunk, and techno-horror – within the overarching structure of a far-future space opera. Rather than isolated entities, characters are prototypes across the expansive Polity Universe.

Numerous scholars have explored different facets of post-human transformation. In his work "Post-Human Metamorphosis" (2008), Bruce Clarke highlights the significance of bodies and their environments in narratives focusing on post-human modifications. Asher's Transformation universe, a part of the larger Polity-verse, provides ample examples of environmental transformations. Robert Pepperell (2003) discusses the convergence of machines and bodies in post-humanism, leading to a unique self-awareness in transformed beings, which he terms "after humanism." In Asher's work, post-/trans-human scientists are guided by this vision of co-evolution. Freire (2014) views reality as a process of constant transformation rather than a static entity (71). Similarly, Braidotti's concept of "becoming-posthuman" (2013) and Kass's observations on the increasing forgetfulness of our human nature due to technological progress (2001) resonate with Asher's works.

Lastly, Barad (2018) emphasizes the similarity and interchangeability of humans and non-humans, viewing the transformation from one to the other as inevitable. Jane Bennet's (2010) concept of "shared inorganicism" between humans and non-humans also aligns with this perspective. In summary, Asher's narratives of transformation challenge conventional notions of post-humanism, offering an alternative view of the future of humanity and the cosmos.

The 'Other' in Transformed Configurations: To fully comprehend the intricacies of transformation within Neal Asher's renowned Transformation novels, it becomes evident that the concept of the 'Other' or the 'monster' permeates each metamorphosis. Whether through viral or technological means, these profound changes confront us with the unsettling notion of the mutable self, subject to radical reconfigurations.

Within the narrative arc of the enigmatic prador, Sverl, we witness a deep existential unease as he grapples with his transformed identity. His inner dialogue eloquently captures this quandary: "Did I desire to revert to my vengeful prador nature? Did I yearn to be fully human?" (Asher 2017). Sverl's transformation unleashes a dreadful 'other,' threatening to devour his original prador essence. This narrative thread mirrors Isobel's transformation, where internal metamorphoses dramatically alter the core nature of the characters. When the 'other' assumes dominance, the original identity becomes marginalized, revealing a grotesque transformation that extends beyond the physical realm and profoundly affects the essence of the individual.

Asher's *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* (2006) hauntingly illustrates such transformations, portraying "human bodies busily transmuting into leech form" (113). This portrayal of the abject 'other' progressively supplanting the norm aligns with Cohen's fourth thesis on horror, where the monster embodies the 'Outside' or the 'Beyond.'

The transformations depicted in the Transformation trilogy, particularly Isobel's change as she seeks power from the artificial intelligence Penny Royal, exemplify the terrifying consequences that can arise from profound metamorphoses. The AI morphs her into a monstrous entity, a hooder, epitomizing the loss of humanity and setting the stage for a horrifying narrative. When Isobel, in her human form, yearns for greater power, the fulfillment of her desires by Penny Royal sparks a profound identity crisis. She perceives her human self as inadequate to bear the weight of her monstrous aspect, leading to a weakening and challenging maintenance of her remaining humanity (2016).

In the captivating narrative titled "Skin," found in the compelling anthology *Lockdown Tales 2*, a vivid and meticulous depiction of the protagonist Rhea's metamorphosis from human to metahuman avatar emerges. The novel portrays a robotic entity spiraling upward from her hips to her visage, almost forming a metallic cocoon. Its appendages, resembling a dense cover of gold and silver, move rapidly, blurring their distinction. As it ascends to her waist and then her breasts, Rhea scrutinizes the process. She witnesses numerous needles puncturing her skin while minute reels of computing substrate unfurl and infiltrate through microscopic incisions. Sensory beads, akin to metallic dust, scatter from spherical containers, and sewing-machine-like injectors embed them into her flesh. Transparent, larger needles infuse synthetic blood, plasma, and vibrantly colored hydrogels filled with glimmers of the nanowire (2023). The narrative delves further into the chilling horror that engulfs Rhea as she endures this radical transformation, with the post-human exosuit or 'skin' threatening to consume her entirely. Her skin, alarmingly detached, seems to writhe over her. Amidst these unsettling developments, she maintains her humanity, reluctantly accepting it as an attribute of the skin she must master to finalize her transformation (2023).

These transformations occur within Asher's Polity universe, a highly advanced society surpassing scarcity and traditional bounds of human existence, creating a technologically-centered utopia. Yet, beyond the vast reaches of its galactic dominion, there exist regions where the Polity's control is limited, allowing for the emergence of transformation, betrayal, and machinations. In this post-human era, the very definition of humanity undergoes a paradigm shift as the binaries of life and death, man and machine, real and virtual, become obsolete. Characters like Isobel lament the loss of their humanity as they transform into monstrous 'others,' forcing their intrinsic human nature to retreat. In this context, the words of Baudrillard regarding 'becoming machine' hold particular relevance: "The only solution to the mechanization of man is le devenir-machine: becoming-machine... total automatism, with no trace of the human remaining" (2005). This study navigates the complex intersection between post-humanism and Asher's unique genre treatment, demonstrating their inseparable interrelation.

6. Post-human Metamorphosis and the Radical Redefinition of Life

Throughout the Transformation Trilogy, Asher explores the revolutionary impact of bionanotechnologies on humanity, encompassing nanoscopic connections, cyber-immune nano factories, self-propagating nano-fibers, and nano-nerve interfaces. These advancements transcend traditional boundaries and redefine the fundamental concepts of life and death. As Nayar outlines in *post-humanism* (2014), post-human transformation involves merging species, bodies, functions, and technologies. However, the same technologies that enabled this transformation were later hijacked by Penny Royal to subjugate and corrupt augmented transhumans, post-humans, and pradors.

Isobel's metamorphosis into a war machine exemplifies this corruption. She inflicts extreme acts of violence upon herself, tearing off limbs and replacing them with mechanical substitutes, even consuming her flesh. These grotesque acts of transformation align with Kelly Hurley's analysis of the abject and the grotesque, where excessiveness and bodily excretions evoke images of cadavers and bodily fluids (2007). Isobel becomes a "hooder," a monstrous descendant of biomechanically augmented war machines capable of inflicting horrifying violence. The fusion of machine and body often leads to monstrous and aggressive results, as Glavanakova highlights in "Cyborg Body Politics."

The grotesque transformations and fusions depicted in Asher's works, such as Alan Moore's graphic novels, exemplify the chaotic and reversed world of the grotesque, as observed by Wilson Yates in *The Grotesque in Art* (1997). These transgressions of boundaries resonate with Cohen's thesis on monsters continually constructing and transgressing boundaries, leading to the emergence of new modes of existence. The characters in Asher's novels undergo grotesque transformations that only reveal the full consequences at the end, aided by Penny Royal's special vision.

Pursuing immortality drives characters towards self-imposed degeneration of body and mind. The desire for physical and mental destruction is exemplified by characters like Blite, who willingly offer to become a simulacrum in a virtual reality

world, awaiting dismemberment or death. The augmented beings in Asher's novels exist in a perpetual state of transformation, always on the brink of further transgressions. The unfinished and limitless nature of their monstrous forms aligns with Cohen's taxonomy of horror, specifically thesis n° 7.

Brockle, the insane forensic AI, embodies the concept of an unfinished monster. Initially rejected and incarcerated by the Polity, he reemerges as a grotesquely augmented and vengeful "Other." His transformation reflects Asher's fusion of genres and portrays extreme bodily transmogrifications as transformations of self-conceptions in response to changing bodies and environments, as explored by Bruce Clarke.

In the story "Dr. Whip" from *Lockdown Tales*, the titular doctor's transformation into a virtually immortal post-human scientist pushes augmentation to the limits of cyborg capabilities. Driven by a desire for greatness, Dr. Whip becomes a "poisonous and grotesquely artistic" creation, embodying conflicting inner contradictions and shattered fragments of the mind. This transformation reflects post-human fantasies of power and disembodied immortality, as discussed by Hayles. Dr. Whip's pursuit of unity in his divided mind only fuels his inner demons, resulting in disintegration and anatomization. His grotesque experiments on Snyder Clamp further emphasize disintegrative negativity and torment.

The narrative of Dr. Whip's experiments vividly depicts body horror in its most gruesome form, with victims being consumed alive by the virus, blood and bodily fluids drenching the surroundings, and even instances of being bitten by a victim fighting for her life, yet remaining uninfected.

Of *Perils and Profound Revelations*: Within Asher's masterfully crafted universe, the transformative odyssey of machines and extraterrestrial entities is perilous and unveils profound revelations. These entities strive for power, transcendence, and an oddly anthropomorphic essence, undergoing a sublime yet unsettling transmogrification that often sacrifices their original identity. The Polity universe serves as the embodiment of this metamorphosis, where characters such as Brockle and Penny Royal, despite their machine origins, manifest distinct human traits and ultimately ascend to god-like status.

Brockle, originally designed as a forensic AI, and Penny Royal, an amalgamation of various AI constructs, surpass their intended purposes, assuming roles as wrathful deities within the Polity universe. Their motivations stem from the corruption and imbalance of human emotions: Brockle driven by a perverted sense of justice, Penny Royal initially propelled by an overwhelming empathy and later driven by a desire for redemption. This convergence of machinic functionality and human cognition instigates an ontological shift, blurring the boundaries between human and machine.

What captivates the mind is the gradual development of humanity within these super-intelligent entities. Riss, the lethal drone, exhibits human-like compassion by refraining from inflicting a gruesome death upon Sverl, a human-prador hybrid. This unforeseen emergence of human qualities within a machine designed for destruction highlights the permeability of the boundary between human and machine and the line between the real and the virtual.

Asher purposefully employs gender-specific pronouns when referring to these formidable machines, introducing an additional layer of complexity. By assigning gender to the monstrous "Other," the author challenges patriarchal hegemony within the Polity Empire and portrays the monstrous feminine as a potent and transformative force.

In Asher's works, transforming the demonic "Other" into a cosmic and monstrous entity suggests the dissolution of binary constructs. Transfigured pradors come to resemble their despised human counterparts, while super-intelligent machines, despite their immense power, adopt human-like characteristics. This transformative process underscores a volatile ontological stance affecting humans and machines.

The intricate narrative threads woven within Asher's Polity universe and the *Rise of the Jain* trilogy reveal a delicate interplay between machine intelligence and human identity. This duality finds its embodiment in *Lockdown Tales*, where AIs, cyborgs, and post-human entities retreat into virtual realms, becoming more human than their physical counterparts. Baudrillard's proposition of "wresting the machine from machinic" to render it "interactive" and "anthropoid" resonates profoundly in this context.

Designed initially as compliant hybrids of humans and machines, the Golems gradually exhibit signs of humanity. While their initial purpose was to emulate humans, they evolved to surpass the human standard, striving for an anthropomorphic essence within their hybrid nature. The Golems acquire the capacity to experience emotions and sensations, often more intensely than their human counterparts. This unforeseen outcome emphasizes the inherent potential for transformation within both machine and human entities.

7. Final considerations

In the final analysis, Asher's universe showcases the protagonists' remarkable ability to "correlate all the contents" of the cosmos despite undergoing monstrous metamorphoses. Their enhanced physiological and cognitive capacities enable this comprehension, albeit at the expense of their humanity and existential coherence. Asher skillfully combines Lovecraftian horror and bio-techno terror to explore the thresholds of transformation, where preserving human identity becomes a critical struggle. Unlike other science fiction authors, Asher portrays bodily transformations as violent events that strip away one's humanity, reflecting his pessimistic view on post-humanism. This distinctive approach highlights the intricate interplay between change, horror, and the preservation of society within a post-human context in Asher's work.

Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable.

Conflict of Interest

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