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Upload, Cyber-Spirituality and the Quest for Immortality in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film and Television

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Abstract: As a genre, science fiction has long played with the idea of all-powerful virtual beings and explored notions of transcendence through technological advancements. It has also been at the forefront of exploring our anxieties and hopes regarding new technologies and the ethical and moral consequences of scientific advancement, raising deeply philosophical and theological concerns about an age-old question, namely: what makes us distinct as human beings and what lies beyond our own existence? This article aims to provide an overview of recent themes that have emerged in science fiction film and television, especially with regard to extending our lives beyond their natural biological age. As the article will outline, these ideas generally appear in notions of cyborgization or mind uploading into cyberspace. Both indicate a deeply human desire to avoid death, and the films and shows discussed in this article offer a range of different ideas on this. As we will see, the final case study, the Amazon Prime television show *Upload* (2020–), brings both of these elements together, touching on a broad range of ideas about cyber-spirituality along the way. The article concludes that although many shows raise interesting questions about the ethical challenges inherent in transhumanist fantasies of mind uploading, they ultimately remain ambiguous in their critique of the dream of digital immortality.

Keywords: cyber-spirituality; artificial intelligence; mind-uploading; transhumanism; *Upload*

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1. Introduction

Science fiction as a genre has always aimed to push boundaries. Ever since its foundational work—Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (see Graham 2015)—the idea of transcending human mortality through artificial creation was firmly established as a key theme of the genre. This notion of 'playing God' emerged alongside a technocentric idealism that put human endeavour in the foreground and at odds with religion, at least in its more traditional forms. Yet, as scholars such as John D. Caputo have long argued, religion has shown 'every sign of adapting with Darwinian dexterity' and 'of flourishing in a [ever] new high-tech form[s]' (Caputo 2001, p. 68).

Over the last century, space travel, alien encounters, ecological disasters, scarcity of resources and, more recently, genetics emerged as important themes in science fiction, in line with socio-political developments over the decades[1], and films often focussed on humankind's survival in the face of external threats. However, more recently the emergence of trans- and posthumanist discourses have brought the ancient quest for individual immortality—rather than mere survival as a species—back into the foreground of science fiction narratives, especially in film and television. With this quest also comes a reassessment of deeply philosophical and spiritual questions regarding human nature, life after death and the ability of human beings to 'play God'.[2]

While 'Transhumanists hope to be gods, not creatures', as Burdett and Lorrimar (2019, p. 253) claim, posthumanism 'takes us to the very boundaries that demarcate the biological from the technological, organism from machine, "reality" from virtuality, in order to consider their fragility', as Graham (2015, p. 362) suggests. She further wonders

whether 'contemporary science fiction might be inviting us to undertake a similar journey to another (final) frontier: that of secular and sacred, human and divine, belief and unbelief' and wonders 'what some of the consequences might be' (Graham 2015, p. 362).

This article, then, as well the special issue of which it is part, aims to address some of these frontiers and the various aspects in which religious themes and ideas have re-emerged in many of the recent on-screen offerings of the genre. Many of these films and television shows have attempted to provide creative answers to the ethical consequences and challenges inherent in the technological optimism of transhumanist ideals of human enhancement and advancement.

2. Cyber-Spirituality—The Difficult Relationship between Science and Religion

First of all, it might be noted that despite the large amount of research that has been produced recently on the theme of cyber-spirituality, defining the term has not become easier.[3] For example, a number of books (e.g., Campbell and Tsuria 2022; Cobb 1998) have explored how religion and spirituality more broadly have adapted to a new media environment where social media has become the default way of accessing information and building communities. Other scholars, such as Slavomír Gálik (2015) and Tijana Rupcic (2023) have explored spirituality in computer games. Here, Gálik (2015, p. 11) notes, for instance, that unlike other spiritual experiences such as meditation and prayer that aim to remove external stimulation and focus us inwards and towards the divine, cyber-spirituality keeps us highly stimulated and bound to the world (even if it is a virtual one).

However, what I am interested in here is more akin to what John Caputo discussed in his 2001 book *On Religion* cited at the start, namely the conceptual intertwining of technology and digital environments with spiritual themes and expressions in science fiction. Of course, as we have seen at the start, the presence of spiritual and religious themes in science fiction film and television is not new. For example, very early on, encounters with aliens have been framed in either distinctly apocalyptic or messianic tones. We also saw supercomputers playing God, such as HAL in Kubrick's seminal 2001 *Space Odyssey*, presenting an (almost) omnipotent and omniscient entity toying with human lives. However, as this example indicates, this version of God(s) is by no means positive and it has been noted that 'science fiction has generally regarded religion as uncivilized and regressive' (Graham 2015, p. 361).

Despite this, a number of authors have highlighted the deep connection between science fiction and spirituality. As noted, Caputo outlines the increasingly blurred boundaries between the material and the spiritual when it comes to cyber-spirituality. When I picked up this threat a decade later to analyse works of science fiction in the preceding years, these themes loomed large with regard to cyborgs and virtual worlds (see Magerstädt 2014). Now, another decade later, the ethical challenges inherent in both these elements have only intensified as both technologies become ever more present on screen as well as in our daily lives. It seems that cyber-spirituality at the start of 2024 is more than ever pre-occupied with our mortality and the ever-increasing power of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and virtual worlds. Moreover, it seems that in 'an era of declining affiliation to formal, creedal religious institutions, alongside signs of enduring interest in matters of personal faith and spirituality . . . popular culture has become one of the most vivid vehicles of re-enchantment' (Graham 2015, p. 365). As we will see, although many of the films and television shows discussed below do not overtly deal with religious themes, notions of spirituality nevertheless loom large. As Graham (2015, p. 361) notes, these more sympathetic treatments of the relationship between religion and technology illustrate 'the emergence of a "post-secular" culture, in which new and enduring forms of religiosity co-exist, albeit in certain tension, with secular and atheist worldviews', and where faith 'is regarded as both inimical to progress and an inescapable part of what it means to be, and become, fully human'. In a broader sense, all these questions to some extend deal with the question of the meaning of life.

In recent years, the expanding volume of television streaming services has also created new outlets for innovative science fiction narratives alongside traditional science fiction cinema. While space travel and alien encounters remain a staple of screen science fiction television, as seen in the Apple TV+ shows *Foundation* and *Invasion* (both 2021–), threats to human flourishing now appear much closer to home, as computers increasingly take over our lives. For instance, Sky Cinema's 2018 film *Anon* (dir. Andrew Niccol) deals with all-powerful cybersurveillance that eradicates any sense of privacy, a theme that also looms large in the iconic *Black Mirror* series (2011–), created by Charlie Brooker. Many of the more critical science fiction shows challenge the optimistic hope espoused by transhumanists such as Ray Kurzweil, that technology can solve almost any problem, including the problem of death. Contemporary science fiction addresses these challenges, according to Stephen Cave (2020, p. 309), mainly through two key narratives, 'cyborgization and mind uploading'.

This article will examine both these aspects with regard to recent films and television shows. Although my main focus will be on the television show *Upload* (2020–), which might suggest a focus on mind uploading in this paper, I will aim to demonstrate that both cyborgization and mind uploading are intimately connected and that against the assumptions of some Transhumanists, escaping embodiment is not as easy—or desirable—as it might seem.

3. Sentient Humanoids and the Question of the Soul

As we have seen at the beginning of this article, the idea, if not the name, of a cyborg—a human–machine hybrid—is as old as the genre itself.[4] In addition, the idea of robots emerged very early on in science fiction (the term first appeared in Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*, published in 1921), and in 1942 science fiction author Isaak Asimov introduced his famous Three Laws of Robotics in his short story *Runaround*, laying the foundation for many of the more contemporary discussions about ethics and sentience with regard to artificial beings.

While many earlier works paint a sympathetic picture of humanoids as victims of human corruption or abuse (e.g. *Blade Runner* 1982, dir. Ridley Scott or *I, Robot* 2004, dir. Alex Proyas), more recent films like *Ex Machina* (2014, dir. Alex Garland) complicate the picture. While Ava, the main android of the film, originally appears as the victim of a manipulative CEO, she later turns, seemingly unconcerned, on the only caring human she has encountered. Similarly, the omniscient operating system in *her* (2013, dir. Spike Jonce) also seems to be ultimately more focussed on selfish interests rather than service to its human developers and users. In a slightly more humorous take on the subject, the 2023 science fiction romcom *Robots* (created by Ant Hines and Casper Christensen) explores the destinies of two love-struck android servants that steal the identities of their affluent human owners and go on the run.

Many of these films raise the difficult question of what counts as sentience. Foremost among the properties characterising a sentient being in science fiction narratives, as Scerri and Grech (2016, p. 14) argue, 'is human level intelligence (sapience) but [also] . . . desire, will, consciousness, ethic, personality, insight and humour: Sentience is used in this context to describe an essential human property that unites all of these other qualities.' It is important to note, especially for the more philosophically minded reader, that the ways in which science fiction, especially on screen, uses highly charged and complex terminology such as sentience or consciousness within its narratives, is not always conceptually sound. As Scerri and Grech (2016, pp. 14–15) point out, words such as '"sapience", "self-awareness" and "consciousness" are used in similar ways and sometimes—confusingly—interchangeably in science fiction'. To complicate matters, this broader understanding of sentience is also often connected to the notion of a soul, a term used in science fiction to capture the idea 'that both conscious life and material bodies are a function of a more subtle third thing that is not quite matter or spirit' (Caputo 2001, p. 73). For example, Rupcic (2023, p. 10) notes the references to the soul in the computer games she analyses, suggesting that

in these games 'the soul is posed as a spiritual concept [that] . . . has distinctive individual life and a unique personality' and that 'with the digitizing of consciousness, the sanctity of a person as a unique individual is shattered, and the soul is "killed"', a point we will return to in the next section.

Many of these ideas appear also in the recent film *Simulant* (2023, dir. April Mullen). In a key dialogue towards the end of the film, the android Evan (Robbie Amell), an artificial replica of the deceased original human Evan, clashes with Kessler (Sam Worthington), a police officer who has been chasing android Evan for breaking the film's version of Asimov's Three Laws. After deadly wounding Kessler, Evan asks him: 'Are you a god-fearing man?'. When Kessler answers no, Evan continues: 'You probably don't believe in a soul . . . Few people truly believe in a soul anymore. Yet those same people still consider me inferior', suggesting that the soul might still be the dividing factor between humans and androids even if they may otherwise consider it an outdated religious concept. Like *Ex Machina*, *Simulant* is also morally ambiguous as Evan kills his human wife Faye (Jordana Brewster), who rejects Evan's android version, so that he can instead resume a new life with Faye's replica. Ironically, the reason for Evan and Faye to acquire artificial copies of themselves in the first place is so that their love can go on forever, even if one of them dies. But, as Faye quickly realises, android Evan does not erase the grief and sense of loss she feels for her human husband, and the artificial copy seems to amplify this loss rather than mitigate it. Nevertheless, Faye seems to recognize that parts of the 'old' Evan has moved into the new body, noting: 'I can't help but think my husband moved in there, like part of his soul is inside of him.' This, however, seems to increase the alienation, rather than console her, possibly linking her emotional response to what Masahiro Mori described as the 'uncanny valley' (see, for example, Kendall 2023). The story of *Simulant* also connects this part to the next, not just because actor Robbie Amell is the lead in both *Simulant* and *Upload*. What both the film and the show have in common is the purpose of creating artificial copies of oneself—physical or digital ones—that indicate the desire to continue living forever.

A couple of recent television shows have also explored the ethical and conceptual challenges posed by what we might call artificially created humans rather than robots. For example, the British series *Humans* (2015–2018) features a range of complicated human/synth[5] relationships, abusive humans, murderous synths and a movement to extend human rights to artificial humans, not unlike the ideas develop later in *Simulant*. In contrast, the Netflix show *Altered Carbon* (2018–2020) does not so much create a conflict between humans and artificial entities, but posits that a human identity/mind/soul is stored on a small disc inserted in the cortex, so that humans can change bodies as and when needed. The show here combines the idea of mind upload with that of cyborg bodies, clinging to the idea of embodiment rather than a virtual afterlife.

Whereas *Altered Carbon* sets its story significantly into the future (350–400 years ahead), Amazon's *Upload* keeps it much closer to home, trailing the idea that mind upload might be a common feature of our lives by 2033. The former seems more realistic—if the idea is to be considered realistic at all. As Patrick Stokes (2021, p. 165) points out, technologically, 'we are no doubt a very long way from any of this ever happening, or even from understanding what it would be to copy the information that makes someone the person they are from brain into an electronic format.' Despite such philosophical objections, science fiction writers continue to be fascinated by the idea, as are real life companies currently exploring the options for commercialisation (see Leaver 2019). The next section will examine some of the ways in which this idea has been translated onto the screen.

4. Transcending Death

Overcoming, or at the very least delaying, death as much as possible seems to be at the heart of much of transhumanist thinking. For instance, Kurzweil argues in the documentary *Transcendent Man* (2009, dir. Barry Ptolemy), which explores his transhumanist ideologies, that those who say they have learned to accept death are merely fooling themselves, and he

not only espouses the desire to avoid his own death, but also—eventually—to resurrect his dead father (Rennie 2011). As we have seen above, the idea is that this can happen through replacing and extending the lifespan of the human body by replacing it with an artificially created one. However, the idea that your mind, memory and soul could be stored on a microchip or hard drive also leads some to speculate that we should free ourselves from embodiment—human or artificial—altogether and upload ourselves into a computer or more likely a worldwide digital network. In cinema, this idea was already explored a decade ago in *Transcendence* (2014), which outlines some of the potential ethical challenges inherent in the idea, as I have argued elsewhere (Magerstädt 2014).

The problem with the idea of mind uploads, as Stokes (2021, p. 165) points out, is that 'we don't even understand how consciousness arises from the brain . . . let alone how to take it out of the brain and into a different medium.' Apart from these more technical challenges, philosophers 'have also doubted whether mind-uploading, were it possible, would produce a life worth living' (Stokes 2021, p. 165). These philosophical debates also touch on deeply spiritual questions that confront our fear of death. Many religious systems provide ideas about what happens to us after we die, from oblivion to reincarnation to resurrection. For instance, Christianity has a strongly developed conception of an afterlife, which (depending on the particular denominational interpretation) provides reward or punishment after death, but also an idea about a final judgement that may or may not involve bodily resurrection. This is highlighted, for instance, in the famous New Testament line, 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). However, the history of Christian theology is full of the debates on how exactly this eternal life works and who and how to qualify for the afterlife (see also Daniel Conway's article on Eschatology and Final Judgement in this special issue). Similarly, many assume that if there is a Heaven there also needs to be a Hell, but this view also is not uncontroversial (for an illuminating genealogy on the concept of Hell, see Sweeney 2014).

Islam also teaches that there is life after death, known as Akhirah. On *Yaum al-Din* (the Day of Judgement) the bodies will be raised from their graves and brought before Allah who will decide if a person enters *Janna* (Paradise/heaven) or *Jahannam* (Hell) (see Smith 2010). In contrast, most Hindus believe that humans are in a cycle of death and rebirth called *samsara* that assumes that when a person dies, their *atman* (soul) is reborn in a different body (Bowker 1997, p. 431). However, there are conflicting views of when that happens, i.e., directly when one dies, or if a soul can also exist in other realms such as Hindu heaven *svarga* or *naraka* (a hellish realm in both Hinduism and Buddhism) for a period before rebirth or even indefinitely. Despite the continuity implied in the cycle of rebirth, there is also a notion of afterlife and salvation. Following a path of enlightenment will eventually lead to *moksa*, which most Hindu scriptures describe as the atman becoming absorbed with Brahman, which might be described as absolute reality or spiritual whole of the universe (see Bowker 1997).

As we have seen from the brief sources above, bodily resurrection is only one of many forms of survival after death, and even then it is not always clear to what extend the former body is resurrected. As McGrath argues with regard to the television show *Altered Carbon* mentioned above, the idea of an afterlife and what exactly that might entail is not easy to answer even in a religious context. He notes that *Altered Carbon* 'highlights (while simultaneously challenging) the angelic or quasi divine status of those who can go on living endlessly' (McGrath 2023, p. 190). Moreover, McGrath (2023) suggests that for 'the various biblical authors who envisage eternal life in terms of bodily resurrection, there is no indication of awareness that memory storage could present a problem for ongoing bodily existence without death' (p. 196), arguing that we might 'ask in what sense is it *bodily* resurrection if the brain of the envisaged resurrection body has infinite capacity to store memories and thus transcends bodily limitations' (p. 197).

The spectrum of conceptions of the afterlife outlined above has recently been explored in a number of films and television shows. For instance, in the 2014 film *I, Origins* (dir. Mike

Cahill), a molecular biologist researches the evolution of human eyes. This research will, so he claims, disprove the existence of God. Yet, as film critic Mark Kermode (2014) has suggested, what 'starts out as an irritatingly quirky portrait of love at first sight gradually mutates into a debate about the singularity of the soul, the spectre of reincarnation rearing its unexpected head under laboratory conditions'. This provides an interesting example of how spiritual themes emerge on screen even when characters within the film take a distinctly antireligious position that aims to reinforce the modernist idea of science and religion at odds with each other.

A similar pattern is evident in *The Discovery* (2017, dir. Charlie McDowell). Where *I, Origins* explores the idea of scientifically proven reincarnation, in *The Discovery* scientists prove (or so it seems) the existence of an afterlife. This, however, has unexpected consequences, namely that it leads to a spade of mass suicides. Although characters in both films stick to the traditional science fiction pattern of prioritising science over religion, both films indicate that this focus on scientific study may not get us closer to understanding the human condition, leading to an exploration of deeply spiritual questions, either directly or indirectly. What both these films show is that there are tendencies in contemporary science fiction that

> 'trace a different, perhaps post-secular route: of the endurance of the sacred, spiritual and transcendent, as a dimension of human apprehension and of the cosmos; of the stubborn refusal of the gods to die, for good and ill; and of the power of religious and mythical symbols and narrative to provoke our cultural and moral imaginations for asking ultimate questions of identity, purpose and meaning.' (Graham 2015, p. 370)

The idea of people deliberately ending their current life in preference of the afterlife indicated in *The Discovery* also reappears in the television show *Upload*, which I will explore in more detail in the next section.

5. *Upload* (2020–) and the Search for Happiness in the (Digital) Afterlife

The very first episode of the series ('Welcome to Upload') introduces us to 'Lakeview by Horizen', the premium offer in a commercial market full of competing virtual 'heavens'. Lakeview's advertising slogan boldly claims that 'The best days of your life could be after it's over'. This plurality of afterlives together with its commercialisation indicates from the outset some of the challenges with relating these ideas of afterlife to previous spiritual notions. Rather, it seems to connect more closely to the transhumanist ideals of recent start-up companies discussed by Leaver (2019). *Upload* seems to take this idea and pushes it towards its boundaries, exploring the socio-economic and ethical consequences of those ideals. As one reviewer shrewdly observes, although

> '*Upload* isn't flawless . . . it makes an argument that's hard to counter. As technological and scientific advancements bring humans closer to the concept of the digital afterlife—where souls can be uploaded to live peacefully in a simulated universe and even continue communing with the living—the stakes of such an existence move beyond ethical concerns to existential ones: Do people have the capacity to conceive of an online utopia, given the frailty of human nature and the imperfectability of the real world?' (Gilbert 2020)

As is often the case in mind upload narratives as represented in science fiction narratives, Cartesian body/mind dualism is taken quite literally. This reference is made explicit when main character Nathan (Robbie Amell) dies in suspicious circumstances and is awakened in the virtual afterlife by his digital 'angel' Nora (Andy Allo). At the start of the upload procedure, she tells him: 'I want you to think of yourself, the I in the sentence, I think therefore I am'. He is then told that this first thought will be the 'password' to his identity. While an afterlife modelled on Victorian era American resorts is not quite what Nathan had imagined, much of it is customizable to the individual user, even the seasons outside his window. Customization also includes places of worship available to residents, although

this seems more likely to appeal to habit rather than genuine religious commitment as the highly commercialised digital afterlife that Nathan has entered is likely to be anathema for any true believers in one of the visions of afterlife outlined in the previous section. When eternal bliss after death can simply be achieved by uploading into a digital Heaven, where the quality of your personal paradise depends not on faith or deeds or saving grace, but merely on the size of your bank account, there seems little space left for religious commitment. Yet, the presence of these elements also hints at what Graham (2015, p. 369) notes with regard to religious elements in many contemporary science fiction narratives, namely that in 'heralding and harnessing the postmodern sacred, such post-secular representations of the posthuman [often grasp] indiscriminately at whatever religious archetypes are to hand, at the expense of theological coherence or authenticity'.

When Nathan is rather frustrated and disillusioned with his first few days in the apparent paradise, which is more akin to a giant golf resort—Nora argues that 'maybe the imperfections make it more like life'—indicating that this conception of afterlife is really much more like a second life than an *after*life in the sense conceived by most major religions. Although she adds that 'if there is a God, then he is amazing', it is not clear if she suggests that God may also have had a hand in creating digital afterlives. It seems that once we try 'imagining a kind of heaven designed by and for humans . . . the scenarios immediately get darker, as though we're unable to conceptualize an afterlife that won't eventually ruin us', as (Gilbert 2020) notes. Moreover, comparing *Upload* to another recent show that explored the afterlife, Gilbert (2020) suggests that even 'in an unbranded, un-monetized, truly blissful afterlife, even surrounded by the people they loved, *The Good Place*'s characters couldn't accept the idea of actual eternity', making '*Upload*'s man-made version of heaven, with its radical inequality, peskily perennial adbots, tiered social system, and glitchy digital assistants, seem even more fated to be hell'.

However, there are still those that believe in what we might call a more traditional notion of heaven, such as Dave Antony (Chris Williams), much to the frustrations of his daughter Nora. When Dave virtually visits Lakeview on a kind of 'Open Day' in a later episode (S1/E7 'Bring Your Dad to Work Day'), he compares notes with Nathan. Despite having seemingly settled into his new 'life', Nathan points out that 'Digital life extension is not what you'd expect. It's not real life and it's not heaven.' Dave explains that he thinks that is because, 'when you died your soul went to real heaven, so whatever simulation I'm talking to right now has no soul.' As noted above, science fiction film and television often evoke a (loosely defined) idea of the soul in order to describe something distinctly human (although it can also apply to artificial beings), something that transcends 'mere mind'. However, Nathan is not convinced by Dave's argument that his soul is no longer with him. In fact, he suddenly challenges the very idea of it, arguing that in fact, maybe 'there is no soul, you know, and there never was. And in a sense both of our consciousnesses are simulations, mine on a silicone computer and yours on a computer made of meat, your brain.' Here, he draws strongly on transhumanist ideas that often seem to perceive of human minds as mere data sets. This seems to be in contrast to a comment Nathan makes in an earlier episode, when he tries to determine if his virtual angel Nora is a real person or an A.I. After her impassioned speech about the beauty of this new, virtual life, he concludes that she has to be a real person because an 'A.I. doesn't talk like that, you know. Pain, passion, soul.' Yet, it seems that although he recognises a 'soul' in the vague sense of indicating something distinctly human—often a combination of thoughts, emotions and sensibilities, not unlike what was outlined above with regard to sentience—he seems at pains to distinguish it from the more spiritual understanding that is inherent in Dave's view of a soul. When Dave insists, 'But there is a soul', Nathan dismissively asks him if he expects to 'be playing a harp on a cloud or something?' Dave explains that the only way he can be reunited with his wife (who died without a digital upload) is if they are both in what he considers 'real heaven'. Here, however, Dave's conception of the afterlife becomes a bit more vague. When Nathan asks him what he believes about heaven, his answer is 'I believe I was happiest whenever we were all together, and the only way for us to be together again,

including Nora, is after we're all dead.' Although this conception of afterlife still makes no reference to the Divine, it acknowledges death as a distinct step in the process as well as the element of the Unknown that is inherent in more traditional conceptions.

Despite the apparent alignment between the show's main premise and transhumanist thinking, the hope expressed by transhumanists that to 'upload our minds to a computer would allow us not only to transfer our existence to a more durable substrate [but] would allow us to roam the world of cyberspace without any clearly marked physical constraints or time limits', as Hauskeller (2012, p. 90) notes, is soon challenged. It seems that rather than providing absolute freedom, we instead become absolutely depended not just on technology, but also on the people that operate it. For example, when Nathan upsets his girlfriend Ingrid (Allegra Edwards), who is bankrolling his virtual heaven (S1/E3 'The Funeral'), she threatens to delete him and thus indicates that she can erase his entire existence with the click of a button. In the third season, thousands of destitute people queue up to voluntarily upload to Freeyond, meant to be a free for all virtual heaven that turns out to be merely a front by big business to remove an undesirable proportion of voters. The hard drives on which their identities are stored are never uploaded and merely discarded.

Considering this technological vulnerability, it is not surprising that this show, like most other science fiction shows and films that explore mind uploading, returns to the idea of embodiment. Early in season one we get the first glimpse of attempts to download a person back into a clone body, thus 'bring[ing] us closer to endless corporeal life', as a news anchor enthusiastically notes. This seems much more akin to the premise of *Altered Carbon* outlined above and *Upload* brings forward a similar socio-economic critique of the idea that those who have the most, can (effectively) live forever while the poor are destined to die. Although the experiment goes awry very quickly, the idea is picked up again at the end of season two, when Nathan is bodily resurrected, indicating that ultimately being without a body, mere minds in cyberspace, is not as desirable as it may seem to some. Although Rupcic (2023, p. 5) argues that when it comes to 'technologism', ideas 'such as bioengineering . . . are only a step towards the ultimate goal—a transcendence of material form and, finally, the achievement of immortality', *Upload* seems to indicate that this ideology is more likely to be circular. While the show draws heavily on both virtual reality and A.I., it also presents bioengineering as a step beyond, rather than towards, these digital goals, a means to achieving immortality by transcending our dependence on one particular biological body, but not embodiment altogether.

Despite its critique of materialism, the show overall seems to be bound up in the modernist idea that progress at all costs would always be preferable to the status quo. For example, in episode four of season one, Nathan discovers the so called 2Gig floor of his digital afterlife, where those with less financial means linger in a sort of statis deprived of anything that makes life stimulating in any way. Limited data mean that if you spend too much time 'thinking' or 'feeling' you run out of data and freeze until next month. This seems more akin to purgatory, limbo or even hell than any sort of desirable form of afterlife. This raises the question, although surprisingly this is not actually raised by any of the characters in the show, why anyone would deliberately choose the endless tedium of the 2Gig environment. However, this existence at a basic level might actually align more closely with what philosophers consider a possibility when it comes to mind uploads. As Hauskeller (2012) argues throughout his article, if we were to eventually be able to upload a mind into a computer, the most we might get is a very basic version of ourselves that may not at all be desirable. The 2Gig level might give us a taste of this.

In the concluding episode of season three, Ingrid argues in court that digital uploads are persons like any other and not just things, although the season ends on a sinister note with Horizen rebranding itself into an even more exploitative entity that goes hunting for digital doubles. Here, the show seems to embrace what Gilbert (2020) criticises about it at the start: 'Rather than parse the ethical and psychological concerns of extending human consciousness beyond life, *Upload* simply extends reality to its logical conclusion. *If humans can't fix our own world, it wonders, what hope do we have of creating the structure of an equitable*

afterlife?' Although it touches upon many deeply spiritual and philosophical themes about the soul and the value of human life, it ultimately also embraces a naïve techno-optimistic ideology that promotes all that A.I. and cyberspace have to offer, if only we could separate it from the forces of market capitalism.

As such, *Upload*, like many other films and shows mentioned in this article, presents some of the ethical consequences of technological advancements while simultaneously embracing its creative possibilities. This ethical ambiguity can be frustrating at times, but also opens up space for discussion and reflection. In doing so, recent works of science fiction have arguably been more open to considering spiritual and religious themes, but often do so in an eclectic and superficial fashion. Here, scholars and creative practitioners with a genuine interest in the theme of cyber-spirituality still have some work to do in developing our understanding of how technological advancements, digital worlds and artificial intelligence contribute to or hinder our exploration of spirituality in the contemporary world.

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Notes

1 For example, a number of writers (e.g., Biskind 1983; Sardar and Cubitt 2002) have pointed out the rise in alien invasion narratives in US cinema in the 1950s and 1960 that happened alongside the fear of communism during this decade. As ecological awareness grew, so did stories about the destruction of environments in these decades, reflected in films such as *Silent Running* (1971), while Films like *Soylent Green* (1972) and the *Mad Max* trilogy (1979–1985) reflected increasing scarcity of resources and the oil crisis of the 1970s (see, for instance Kuhn 1990 or Hughes 2013). The 1990s saw a rise in science fiction films exploring the ethics and consequences of genetic manipulation, most prominently in Andrew Niccol's film *Gattaca* (1997).

2 For a helpful overview of the distinctions between transhumanism and posthumanism with regard to human flourishing, see (Burdett and Lorrimar 2019).

3 For a good introductory overview on the key research regarding spirituality and virtual spaces, see (Rupcic 2023).

4 The ide of an 'android' emerged very early, with the Oxford English Dictionary tracing its origins back to the seventeenth century (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 'android,' July 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/android_n?tab=factsheet#3787544, accessed 5 January 2024), while the term 'cyborg' was coined in the 1960s (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 'cyborg (n.),' July 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/cyborg_n?tab=factsheet#7612775, accessed 5 January 2024).

5 The show uses the term 'synth' to refer to androids or synthetic human beings.

Filmography

1. *Altered Carbon* (2018–2020), created by Laeta Kalogridis, Netflix.
2. *Anon* (2018), directed by Andrew Niccol, Sky Cinema.
3. *Black Mirror* series (2011-ongoing) created by Charlie Brooker, Channel 4 (2011–2014) and Netflix (2016-present).
4. *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, Warner Bros.
5. *Discovery, The* (2017), directed by Charlie McDowell, Netflix.
6. *Ex Machina* (2014), directed by Alex Garland, A24/Universal.
7. *Foundation* (2021-ongoing), created by David S. Goyer and Josh Friedman, Apple TV+.
8. *Gattaca* (1997), directed by Andrew Niccol, Columbia Pictures.
9. *her* (2013), directed by Spike Jonze, Warner Bros.
10. *Humans* (2015–2018), created by Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent, Channel 4.
11. *Invasion* (both 2021-ongoing), created by Simon Kinberg and David Weil, Apple TV+.
12. *I, Robot* (2004) directed by Alex Proyas, 20th Century Fox.
13. *Mad Max* series (1979, 1981, 1985), directed by George Miller, Warner Bros.
14. *Robots* (2023), directed by Ant Hines and Casper Christensen, Neon.

15. *Silent Running* (1971), directed by Douglas Trumbull, Universal.
16. *Soylent Green* (1973), directed by Richard Fleischer, MGM.
17. *Simulant* (2023), directed by April Mullen, Mongrel Media.
18. *Transcendence* (2014), directed by Wally Pfister, Warner Bros.
19. *Transcendent Man* (2009), directed by Barry Ptolemy, Docurama.
20. *Upload* (2020-ongoing), created by Greg Daniels, Amazon Prime Video.

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