



Voldemort and the Failure of Magic in the *Harry Potter* Series: The Post-human Monster in Fantasy and Science Fiction

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2017

Originally published as “Voldemort y el fracaso de la magia en la serie *Harry Potter*: El monstruo posthumano en la fantasía y la ciencia-ficción”. *El monstruo fantástico: Visiones y perspectivas*. David Roas (ed.). Aluvión Editorial, www.editorialaluvion.com, 2016. 199-214. Translation by the author, with permission from the publishers.

ABSTRACT: The current theorization of post-humanism allows us to compare monsters belonging to fantasy and science fiction, using as common denominator their post-human nature, in particular as regards their urge to overcome death beyond current techno-science. In the series *Harry Potter* by British author J.K. Rowling not only the hero's story is narrated but also that of his enemy, Voldemort. His wish to transcend death as a human weakness ends up transforming this villain into, as Harold Bloom pointed out, a post-human monster. However, his aberrant physical monstrosity (which is part of Rowling's moral message) reveals, rather, the failure of magic in transcending humanity, especially when we compare the limited Voldemort to the post-human monsters of current SF, a genre here represented by novelists John Scalzi and Richard K. Morgan. In their novels the new post-humans horrify us not quite because of their superhuman physique, which somehow we admire, but because of the monstrous science that creates them and which threatens the very existence of the human species.

KEYWORDS: Monster, post-human, Voldemort, J.K. Rowling, John Scalzi, Richard K. Morgan

1. Questioning the Might of Magic: Voldemort's Monstrous Body

Significantly, in his infamously unconstructive review of the first *Harry Potter* books Harold Bloom describes the villain Voldemort as a wizard «gone trollish and finally post-human» (2000: web). I assume that Bloom refers here to the fact that in his quest for immortality, Voldemort, who considers death a human weakness, aspires to becoming technically post-human. Bloom does not seem to be using this label, however, in the sense habitual in the science fiction of the past three decades, that is to say, in reference to the human body enhanced by means of genetic, biotechnical (mostly nanobotic) or digital manipulation, beyond pre-1990s prosthetics and cybernetics. Actually, Voldemort's body appears to follow quite a different path: as he accrues power, his body is dehumanized and his monstrosity increases. Rather than post-human, then, he becomes inhuman, physically as well as morally. This is Voldemort's punishment for, using the title of Nancy Holland's volume (2013), his lack 'ontological humility'.

In the Spring of 2014 I had the rare chance to teach a monographic elective course on the *Harry Potter* series for the BA in English Studies at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.¹ Most of my 45 students claimed to be readers of fantasy; of them, only fewer than 10 were, like myself, science-fiction fans. Because of our shared interest in SF, we could raise in class the issue of whether Rowling's magic is in fact far more limited, despite Voldemort's impressive powers, than the futuristic techno-science of today's science fiction, both for the purposes of the villain (to become immortal) and of the author (to teach a moral lesson against that wish). According to Mitchell, there is a clear analogy between magic and techno-science, since «magic is to wizards as technology is to Muggles» (2007:

¹ I taught this elective course, addressed to fourth year students of the BA in English Studies (2013-14), under the umbrella label 'Cultural Studies (in English)'; see the Syllabus at <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/108876>. The students' work is also available in two online, free access volumes: *Addictive and Wonderful: The Experience of Reading the Harry Potter Series* (2014, <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225>) and *Charming and Bewitching: Considering the Harry Potter Series* (2014, <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/122987>). By 'rare chance', I mean that this was the first course of its kind in Spain, and it might well be the only one for a long time, or even for good, as our university system is quite rigid. New electives are not easy to programme, much less on popular fictions.

44), that is, plain human beings. This correlation would explain the eccentric passion of wizard Arthur Weasley for everyday Muggle artefacts, which are off limits in the Wizarding World (Muggles seemingly do not even know of the existence of magic objects). Downes (2010), however, criticizes Rowling odd, partial overlapping of the two worlds and the strange separation between magic and technology as colossal errors, from which the pragmatic incoherence of the text springs. Like Downes and many other readers, my students could see no clear reason why wizards and witches cannot use cell phones nor any other Muggle technology, as no rule specifically forbids this (in contrast, it is strictly forbidden to use magic in view of Muggles). We wondered whether magic as Rowling describes it made sense at all in our contemporary world, beyond the frisson raised by a few clever spells.

My students were also very critical of the singular magical methods which Voldemort employs to transcend humanity (to become, perhaps, transhuman rather than post-human), methods which were found to be puzzling and not too effective. We must consider the possibility, unlikely but not unfeasible, that Rowling intended to characterize her monstrous villain as a rather foolish individual lacking any common sense, despite his unique knowledge of magic. Since no other character questions Voldemort's scheme, whereas the wise Dumbledore appears to validate its applicability to his aims, we must accept that Rowling presents the villain's black magic as the apex of the Wizarding World's lore, though of an extremely negative, dangerous kind. A closer look at Voldemort's methods reveals, nonetheless, their many flaws.

When he is still a student at Hogwarts, teen Tom Riddle, the future Lord Voldemort, manipulates the vain, imprudent Professor Slughorn into revealing to him how to preserve one's soul and thus survive any possibly mortal catastrophes. Bullied by the implacable Riddle into submission, Slughorn reluctantly explains that the soul must be broken into pieces which then must be enclosed in the same number of the magical objects known as Horcruxes. In order to fragment a soul, its owner must commit one murder for each piece, which, in this way, gradually leaves the body. Voldemort decides to rely on this bizarre

method of self-copy or ‘back-up’ and, accordingly, he chooses, following a specific criteria that is never made explicit, a list of five magical objects connected with his own alma mater, Hogwarts, to be his Horcruxes. He adds to this list his personal pet, the gigantic, fearful serpent Nagini.² There is, however, a major hitch in Voldemort’s plan of uploading his precious soul for safekeeping, since the Horcruxes are actually quite vulnerable objects, which Harry and his allies eventually find and destroy (without the villain even noticing that a fragment of his immortal self is gone). Another major inconvenient is caused by the fact that whenever Voldemort sheds a piece of his soul into a Horcrux, his body loses part of its human appearance which, by the way, happens to be very attractive at the beginning of this process.

Gothic fiction, born in mid 18th century as a horrific spin-off of the sentimental novel, already established the idea that the dark soul of the villain must be mirrored by his disagreeable physical appearance, which could (or should) be downright monstrous in the worst cases of villainy; beauty, of course, was reserved for the hero and, above all, the heroine. Not until Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) did the villain’s handsomeness become an issue, although there are some exceptions to this rule in British Romantic fiction (John Polidori’s pioneering tale “The Vampire” (1819) was inspired by Lord Byron) and in its Victorian successor (Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1848) is both villainous and handsome). Today, still few villains of fiction are physically attractive: some examples are the yuppie Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (1991, Bret Easton Ellis) or Maximilien Aue, the Nazi officer and narrator of *The Kindly Ones* (2006, Jonathan Littell). Rowling, then, would have broken no contemporary rules by keeping Lord Voldemort as attractive as Tom Riddle, yet she chose to stick to the Gothic stereotype, taking it to new limits, beyond what, for instance, the late Victorian author Bram Stoker imagined for the old, disgusting, original Count Dracula (1897).

² Rowling borrows the name and the concept from the Nāga, “a deity or class of entity or being taking the form of a very great snake, specifically the king cobra, found in the Indian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. A female nāga is a nāgī or nāgīṇī.” See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C4%81ga>.

Rowling, then, rejected the intriguing possibility of turning the adult Voldemort into a charismatic leader by virtue of his handsomeness, preferring instead to narrate a more conventional process by which his abundant original beauty is degraded. The boy Tom Riddle is born of the unhappy union between the victimized, desperate witch Merope Gaunt and a rich, young Muggle, also named Tom, whom she seduces using love potions. Naïve and foolish, Merope believes that her handsome husband will love her even without her cheap tricks, yet when the effect of the potion wears off, a revolted Tom simply abandons her, despite knowing that she's carrying his child. In the purest *Oliver Twist* style, Merope gives birth to her baby in an orphanage, and lets herself die rather than face her humiliation and the burden of motherhood. Her only satisfaction is that baby Tom appears to have inherited his Muggle father's good looks. Dumbledore tells Harry that when he eventually met the child Tom, still living in the orphanage, he could check for himself that «Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale» (HBP 252).

Once at Hogwarts, having accepted Dumbledore's invitation to become a student of magic, and already aware of his immense powers, Tom does not hesitate to use his physical appeal to attract and subdue both students and teachers (like Prof. Slughorn) along the seven years of his schooling. It is only when he graduates, aged eighteen, that the young wizard starts his physical transformation (or degradation) into the monstrous Lord Voldemort, a project which he completes in about ten years, before he hits thirty. According to Dumbledore, Tom loses his beauty to the point that he becomes unrecognisable by effect of the dark magic rituals he engages in (presumably also including the fragmentation of his soul following a string of murders). A consequence of this radical change is that no one sees in Voldemort the «clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here» (CS 242) when he visits Hogwarts seeking employment. Witnessing the frustrated job interview through Dumbledore's memories, Harry realizes, nonetheless, that this younger Voldemort is not quite the same monstrous man he knows. His features are not yet

as snake-like, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features had been

burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. (*HBP* 413).

The second, final transformation that Voldemort undergoes –and from which the monster whom Harry has met eventually emerges– consists, precisely, of the loss of his body when he attempts to murder baby Harry, then aged only one. Blinded by the prophecy that seems to point at the Potters' son as his mortal enemy, Voldemort imprudently forgets that by killing Lily and James Potter he will lose yet another fragment of his soul –presumably the last one. This piece of his dark spirit remains embedded in Harry himself, the accidental seventh Horcrux, and explains why hero and villain often feel very close to each other. In any case, for many years neither Voldemort nor Harry understand that this is what happened during the murderous attack. Harry survives, as it is well known, thanks to the protecting magic raised by his mother's unselfish sacrifice (Rowling, inexplicably, ignores James's death). Voldemort himself eventually explains to Harry, as he prepares to attack him, the fatal error that, among great pains and with no more soul to lose, led to the vanishing of his body. Mysteriously, the villain survives as a disembodied mind, possibly thanks to the Horcruxes and other black magic rituals: «I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost... but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know...» (*GF* 78, original ellipsis).

All this extravagant subplot has inspired, logically, diverse studies focused on the perplexing importance of the soul in Rowling's deeply agnostic text. Gregory Bassham is among the critics who have tried to lend coherence to what can never have it. According to him, the soul to which Rowling refers is a material entity that all wizards and witches possess (2012: 25). This allows Voldemort to survive for years without his body, since his identity lives on in the material substrate of his soul which, already residing mostly outside his body, is not lost with his flesh. Naturally, Bassham does not manage to answer satisfactorily the question of whether Voldemort's identity survives whole in each Horcrux or fragmented (and if this is the case, how many fragments can be produced before dissolution becomes a possibility?). Bassham insists that, despite having lost a great deal of his soul in the final

books after Harry and his friends destroy the Horcruxes, the re-born, newly fleshed, Voldemort is still fully himself until the moment of his final demise.

Incidentally, Sehon reminds us that in Rowling's series there is another kind of immortality: that of the Hogwarts ghosts, dead persons who have rejected the transit towards death because they died in traumatic circumstances.³ Voldemort could have chosen to reach immortality in this way but he does not even contemplate this possibility because ghostly existence is «a form of immortality devoid of real physical contact and, more important for Voldemort, devoid of power» (Sehon 2010: 12). This clarifies an important point: Voldemort wants in fact to secure the immortality of his body, rather than his soul, hence the trouble he goes through to get it back, even in its monstrous state.

As we gradually learn, once he is disembodied following his botched attempt to kill baby Harry –hence unable to use his magic wand without which his powers are useless– Voldemort must stoop for survival down to possessing small animal bodies. This pathetic existence lasts until he stumbles quite by chance with his admirer, Hogwarts employee Professor Quirrell, who kindly allows Voldemort's spirit to lodge in his own skull. During this peculiar stage, Voldemort takes nourishment from the unicorn blood which his host drinks for him in Hogwarts' Forbidden Forest; once Quirrell is dispatched, a fledging, embryonic Voldemort starts feeding off the milk of his uncanny pet, Nagini. Somehow, Voldemort manages to develop a wrinkled, dried-up body so frail that he becomes totally dependent on his minion Pettigrew (nicknamed Wormtail), who had already helped him by betraying the Potters' hideout to him.

Wormtail himself implements in *Goblet of Fire* the black magic ritual thanks to which Voldemort regains his adult body. Trapped, since Voldemort needs his blood, a desperate Harry is horrified to see that

³ This is why when Sirius Black is viciously murdered, a devastated Harry asks resident Hogwarts ghost Nearly-Headless Nick whether his godfather will return from the dead. See my own article about Black, Martín (2016).

The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face –no child alive ever had a face like that– flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes. (*GF* 692)

The ritual works correctly and the adult man who emerges from the bubbling cauldron inspects enchanted his remade flesh. Voldemort

began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cats, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. (*GF* 699)

Understandably, any individual who has spent long years lamenting the loss of his flesh and blood will find comfort in this monstrosity. Yet, we must wonder what good brings magic after all if, despite all his power, Voldemort only manages to be repulsive. Perhaps Claudia Fenske is right to argue that, truly, «Voldemort wants to eliminate everything humane in his person to appear supernatural» (2008: 180). His new monstrous body should be read, then, as the perfect instrument to strike fear among all the wizards and witches, including his supporters. Certainly, Voldemort's repellent body and his aggressive behaviour (his psychological bullying) affects negatively even his staunchest followers; no Death Eaters «like him or love him. They follow him in search of advances for themselves» (Rothman 2011: 203). Even the fawning Bellatrix Lestrange, «fears him and craves his regard of her powers and loyalty» (Rothman: 203). Bellatrix, it must be recalled, has been rendered insane by her long stay at Azkaban prison, which might in part explain her obsession (which is even sexual) with Voldemort.

Magic, in short, is not potent enough to allow Voldemort to keep Tom Riddle's good looks. Yet, his deplorable new condition is never commented on because both victims and followers are too aghast, too scared, to spare any energy analyzing his terrible looks. As for Voldemort himself, he may be satisfied with his achievements but these actually amount to so little which is stable and under his direct control that he entirely depends on killing Harry

to succeed in his quest for immortality. A death which, of course, backfires on him entirely, as readers of the saga know.

2. The Post-human Monster in Science Fiction: John Scalzi and Richard K. Morgan

This silence about Voldemort's physical monstrosity, which is only alluded to in the brief moments when Harry and his friends manifest their repugnance,⁴ only called my attention when I started reading the science-fiction novels by American author John Scalzi and British author Richard K. Morgan while I taught the elective course on Rowling. Thanks to their stories I realized that the magic which Rowling imagines is actually quite limited and this is why whoever squeezes it down to the last drop must end up becoming a monster, *unnecessarily*. The limitations are, then, indirectly highlighted by Scalzi and Morgan, both authors who coincide in opening in their science fiction a far more attractive (or relevant) debate on the post-human body, and on the degree of monstrosity which it can reach, than Rowling manages in her fantasy tale.

The still ongoing saga by John Scalzi, generically called *Old Man's War*, includes the eponymous first volume (2005), followed by *The Ghost Brigades* (2006), *The Last Colony* (2007), *Zoe's Tale* (2008), *The Human Division* (2013) and, so far, *The End of All Things* (2015). In this series the scheming Colonial Union, a private corporation, uses elderly earthlings (specifically US citizens) for their military Defence Forces, which are actually an occupation force. Quite ambiguously, ageing individuals are offered the chance to be recruited at sixty-five to spend their old age keeping peace on the colonized planets – supposedly in a radically rejuvenated body. As the protagonist John Perry declares, «I'm

⁴ There is very little debate, either, on the image that Voldemort, played by Ralph Fiennes, presents in the film adaptations, which is far less monstrous. Indeed, the character has the actor's beautiful green eyes, rather than the reptilian, red, cat-like slits of Rowling's novels. As it is easy to see, however, internet runs full of mocking comments on the digital disappearance of Fiennes' nose, supposed to emphasize this very same reptilian look. Fiennes, however, is excellent at playing dangerous villains, which prevents his Voldemort from being ridiculous –quite the opposite, the actor's deft handling of Voldemort's body and facial language makes him far more fearsome than he is in the books.

going to have a second chance to die young and leave a beautiful corpse» (*OMW* 47). On termination of their ten-year contract, soldiers are offered the chance to either stay on for a second round of service or retire with a substantial pension, on condition that they never return to Earth nor describe their experience to anyone.

Elderly persons join in, hoping to avoid in this way the humiliation of ordinary old age in a country, the United States, which is not particularly praised for its welfare system. What the new recruits ignore, however, is that the Colonial Union uses their aged bodies in quite a cavalier way: they are recycled as fertilizer. This is done once the DNA of the old body is used to produce a new clone, aged about 25, onto whose brain the contents of the mature mind of the recruit are uploaded. To be precise, these are extensively modified clones, with green skin capable of photosynthesis, artificial blood controlled by nanotechnology, a digital brain capable of linking up using wi-fi with the minds of other peers and, why not?, muscular and bone regeneration capacities. One of these post-humans soldier, Harry Wilson, aged ninety but sporting the looks of a youthful Adonis, warns, somewhat exasperated, to the woman who desires him that she should not deceive herself:

Just because I look like a human being doesn't mean I am. This body has more genetic material that's not strictly human than it does material that is human. And it heavily integrates machines as well. My blood is actually a bunch of nanobots in a fluid. I am and every other CDF soldier is a genetically-modified cyborg. (*THD* 285)

When Harry is asked whether he is still himself, he answers that he does not really know, he might well be «a fake Harry Wilson» (*THD* 285). This worries him «in a metaphysical sense» (*THD* 285) but not quite on a daily basis. He grants, though, that the longer he lives as a soldier, the more he misses the ordinary life of his past, perhaps finally realizing that he made a mistake when he chose to prolong it.

Harry Wilson is, despite the biotech nature of his hybrid, cyborgian⁵ body, still more human than the super-soldiers of the newer colonial forces, a version of Frankenstein's monster without any of the aesthetic errors that marred the monstrous creature produced by the ambitious doctor that Mary Shelley imagined in 1818. The members of the Special Forces are born as adults generated from the DNA of the recruits who sign up but die before they are old enough to enter the infantry; this is why the super-soldiers are nicknamed the 'ghost brigades'. In the eponymous novel, Scalzi explains that the Colonial Union eventually realized that it was more efficient for their plans to make adults already manipulated before birth than to manipulate conventional human beings, no matter how adroitly. Actually, these super-soldiers believe themselves to be quite superior to any 'realborn', as they call us. Realizing that he cannot follow the accelerated pace of their mental telepathic communication, an already transformed, post-human John Perry understands that the super-soldiers are neither human nor post-human but a new humanoid species, as different from us as Neanderthals were, but vastly superior. Despite his sense of inferiority, or even possibly because of this, Perry falls in love with the impressive Jane, a super-soldier made of the DNA belonging to his dead wife. At this point in the series, Scalzi has left John and Jane enjoying a peaceful, happy married life with their adopted daughter Zoe. In payment for his services, John receives a new, conventional clone of his old body. Jane discovers, years into their new life, that she is not sterile as she was told, which characterizes her as a new Eve in the emergence of a truly transhuman species, a possibility that Scalzi seems to find positive rather than threatening in view of her beauty, intelligence and resilience.⁶

⁵ Following the work of my own doctoral student Jaume Llorens, I am using the label 'post-human' for the modified human beings capable of passing their genetic modifications onto their children. The cyborg is, instead, an isolated individual whose modifications would not affect his or her children. Llorens' PhD dissertation, *La transcendència del Homo Sapiens: El icono del posthumano en la ciència ficció* (2016, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) is available online: <http://www.tesisenred.net/handle/10803/400376>.

⁶ In contrast, Mary Shelley's doctor Frankenstein destroys the bride he was working on for his monster, horrified by the possibility that they might generate a new 'race' or, rather, species. Although this could have been easily prevented with a tubal ligation, the author and her doctor chooses to prevent the chance that any post-human individuals are born at all.

Richard K. Morgan is the author of a popular trilogy –*Altered Carbon* (2002), *Broken Angels* (2004) and *Woken Furies* (2005)– with the same protagonist: Takeshi Kovacs, a post-human mercenary whom we can certainly call ‘monster’ since he describes himself in this way at diverse points in the three novels. As Kovacs narrates, he was just a boy in an ordinary neighbourhood of his home planet, Harlan’s World, when the Government of the interplanetary Protectorate, a sort of United Nations, rescued him from his delinquent lifestyle to transform him into one of the feared ‘Envoys’ employed as shock troops to quell rebellions in dissident planets. Kovacs is a combined spy and super-soldier, characterized by a high capacity for aggression and a very low ability to feel empathy, far more monstrous in his psychopathology than the already brutal ‘ghost brigades’ of Scalzi. The Envoys undergo a process of neuro-chemical ‘conditioning’, as Kovacs explains, which is basically psychological but that has controllable psychosomatic effects in their anatomy. Or, rather, anatomies.

The particularity of the post-human universe imagined by Morgan is that it relies on a Cartesian dualism even more extreme than the version which Scalzi endorses. The elderly recruits of the colonial forces end up using a post-human version of their own body, thus presumably easing the connection of their minds with their younger clone. In contrast, there is a total disconnection between mind and body in Morgan’s trilogy. Thus, *Altered Carbon* begins memorably when Kovacs is awakened from storage, following a sentence for his criminal behaviour, not knowing in which body (in which ‘sleeve’) he has been downloaded: «This is always the toughest part. Nearly two decades I’ve been doing this, and it still jars me to look into the glass and see a total stranger staring back» (2002: 12). When he sees his new Caucasian features he comments on how much he misses his habitual Eurasian looks (I hesitate to call them ‘original’). As he eventually finds out, Kovacs has been given the body of a dead man, a former police officer whose obstinate smoking habit and crowded network of enemies complicate very much the resolution of the crime investigation which Kovacs has been forced to accept. In *Broken Angels*, in contrast, Kovacs uses an advanced combat technobody with no previous owner, ethnically Afro-Caribbean. In *Woken Furies*, he uses yet another synthetic combat body, even more advanced, this time ethnically Asian –as he chases an illegal, younger clone of his first enhanced body.

Individual identity resides in what might be the digital equivalent of Voldemort's Horcrux: a cortical stack inserted at birth at the top of the spinal chord, which Kovacs describes in *Broken Angels* as the black box of the mind. This device can be transferred to one's own clones, to someone else's vacant body (whether they are dead or alive) or to a synthetic body, options that result in a variety of thrilling plot twists in the three novels. It is illegal to duplicate the contents of the cortical stack and to clone bodies without their owner's consent; yet, despite these prohibitions, the relentless villainess Raileen Kawahara crosses the line with Kovacs, which is why he ends up chasing a former version of his self. Far from being increasingly monstrous, as happens to Voldemort, Kovacs is physically attractive in all his incarnations, as the many sex scenes show; the women may not consider the psychopathic Kovacs boyfriend material (though he is involved in a long relationship) but they do not hesitate to express their desire for him. Scalzi's post-human soldiers are, likewise, and despite their green skin, extremely attractive, as attested by their frantic sexual life (though Scalzi is a great defender of monogamous marriage, of the kind Jane and John enjoy). This happy post-human alterity, or monstrosity, does not mean that the magic of techno-science has no limits. In *Broken Angels*, Kovacs recalls the case of a soldier who committed suicide rather than go into combat to die for the ninth time, and face again the trauma of adapting his mind to a new clone of himself only to have it die violently. The traumatic memories can never be erased from the cortical stack, a limitation which Morgan's villains cleverly employ in their favour to torture their victims into madness, even using scenarios which are digital rather than real (as happens to Kovacs in *Altered Carbon*).

The science-fiction novels by Scalzi and, above all, Morgan, provoke a vital vertigo that would disconcert Voldemort himself. Scalzi proposes to his readers an enticing dilemma by asking us whether the odd post-human body in which John Perry unexpectedly finds himself is a monstrous error on a great achievement of human science, aimed at overcoming ageing. As I have noted, the method to create her may be monstrous, but Perry's beloved Jane elicits no terror; rather, complete admiration. This devotion for a very complex kind of post-human monster (or transhuman in Jane's case) exposes how hackneyed the paths

traversed by the monster Voldemort are in *Harry Potter*. Rowling is original in having the hero Harry suffer the awkward consequences of becoming by accident the magical cortical stack, or Horcrux, for a piece of Voldemort's soul. Also ingenious is the twist by which Harry's mentor, Professor Dumbledore, turns out to be a ruthless manipulator, a moral monster who does not hesitate to take Harry to the brink of death if this helps to stop Voldemort, but who never trusts his pupil enough to reveal the truth of his plan to him. The whole series stresses the need to accept death as part of human life but ends up problematizing magic with Voldemort's physical and moral degradation, rather than death itself, which is simplified (perhaps for the benefit of the young readers).

In contrast, Morgan's science fiction even deals with two kinds of death: temporary death –until the cortical stack is lodged in a new 'sleeve'– and permanent death, which makes the contents of the device irretrievable, as tragically happens with Kovacs' beloved Sarah. Whereas Voldemort never gets the chance to experience life beyond the natural limits of the human body (he dies aged about 60)⁷, no matter how altered this is, for Kovacs the drama of his life consists of knowing how far into immortality can the novum of the cortical stack take individuals. As *Altered Carbon* shows, Kovacs is profoundly disgusted by the power that the rich centennials hold over the young bodies which they consume and discard, as if they were the luxury cars of our real life. Oddly enough, this fits quite well the anti post-human philosophy which animates the *Harry Potter* series. Voldemort, Klein observes, is immensely evil because his actions cannot lead to his own death (or so he believes). His immortality makes him unable to identify «the rational values required for life. This is the root of his evil: without knowledge of real values, he is not able consistently to pursue and achieve the values required by life» (Klein 2012: 38). Like the ageing rich in *Altered Carbon*, Voldemort abuses the others to perpetuate his life, although both in his case

⁷ Before he faces Voldemort in their final duel, Harry is visited by the dead persons in his closest circle, including his parents Lily and James and his godfather Sirius. He himself awakens after his death in, of all places, an empty version of King's Cross station, where an also dead Dumbledore explains to him the situation. It is not clear, however, whether Rowling intends these meetings to signify the existence of an after-life or if, more likely, they are projections of Harry's anguished mind.

and in that of Morgan's characters –not so much Scalzi's– «This manner of existence cuts him off from the possibility of real human happiness and life» (Klein: 38).

Unlike Rowling, and despite their substantial critique against the exploitation of human beings through the advances of techno-science, both Scalzi and Morgan implicitly support a moderate transhumanism, that peculiar technophilic current developed by Marvin Minsky, Hans Moravec (1999), Ray Kurzweil (2005), and Nick Bostrom, among others. According to them, we are on the brink of a singularity which will soon beget a new human species, with an anatomy similar to the super-human bodies fantasised in science fiction. One could make the mistake of misreading as bad jokes the World Transhumanist Association (founded by Bostrom and David Pearce), or the «Transhumanist Declaration» (Bostrom 2005), or even the *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. The truth is, however, that agencies like the militaristic DARPA of the US Government follow strictly transhuman guidelines in their efforts to create the cyborg soldier of tomorrow (Gayle 2012; Belfiore 2009). This is quite close to the fantasies by Scalzi and Morgan but without their ethical concerns (precisely what restrains the transhumanism of their fiction).

Many humanists, among them Francis Fukuyama (2002), have published serious warnings against transhumanism, as this seeks to intervene as actively as possible on human evolution (post-humanism is not so active in this sense). Nevertheless, as it often happens in science and technology, it is enormously complicated to reign in ongoing research trends, even those connected with the project to improve the human body which verge on the most delirious eugenics, not to mention the mad dream of uploading our minds into digital environments to reach immortality (as if our brains were not part essential of our minds). Langdon Winner bemoans in his article «Resistance is Futile» (2004), the uselessness of all insubordination against these advances as he tirelessly denounces how close we are to building post-human monsters. This is why Cary Wolfe argues that post-humanism should not be post-human, in the sense of supporting the transcending of the human body, but, rather, post-humanist (2010: xv), a philosophical current addressed to explaining how and

why we have lost the humanist values which are so fundamental for our existence as a human species.⁸

At any rate, despite the many differences between fantasy and science fiction, something which Voldemort, Scalzi's old soldiers and Morgan's Envoys share is that the radical modifications of their bodies do not affect the human species as such. They are not mutations that result in a new *Homo* variant but individuals that carry humanity to unknown limits (though, as I have noted, Scalzi might go in this direction if he continues Jane's story). It is even technically possible to read *Harry Potter* as science fiction assuming that both wizards and witches are post-human mutants, an idea that seems implicit in the fact that so many of them are born of Muggle couples with no drop of magic in their veins (Hermione Granger is one of these 'mudbloods'). Whatever the case may be, the debates around transhumanism and the aspiration of its supporters to see on Earth a new humanoid species tend to forget that, for the time being, the eugenics we do practice in many clinics around the world, have not yet altered the genome of *Homo Sapiens*. Luckily for us, since our quick fall into obsolescence to be replaced by new post- or transhuman persons seems more than likely. Remember the Neanderthal.

Some Provisional Conclusions (as We Wait for *Homo Post-Sapiens*)

Going back to Voldemort, as I hope to have shown the fantasy and magic that Rowling imagined for the Wizarding World turns out to be a very limited foundation to discuss the complex topic of death and immortality, also of post-human monstrosity, in comparison to the science fiction that her contemporaries are writing on both shores of the Atlantic. Morgan, above all, stresses through Kovacs' critical perspective that what is truly monstrous is not the post-human body but the wish to overcome death at all costs. Rowling actually makes the same point with Voldemort's degradation but she cheats a little by insisting that the method to overcome death is so horrific that it can tempt nobody. Both

⁸ The best answer so far has been provided by N. Katherine Hayles in her excellent essay *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).

Morgan and Scalzi are far more realistic as regards this basic human aspiration. And temptation.

Scalzi, in particular, pays attention to the complicated relationship that elderly people keep with their failing bodies, offering to a few daring (or desperate) individuals a singular, alluring but also highly problematic solution. Morgan, in contrast, imagines how immortality could be made generally available, an idea which generates a debate of much bigger applicability to our real lives. If the reader could choose between using Horcruxes, abandoning his or her body for a green-skinned clone, or using a cortical stack to safeguard the mind from death, which one would be the preferred choice? It seems obvious. If cortical stacks could be manufactured, how many people would abstain from purchasing them for ethical reasons? The monster Voldemort, to sum up, is scary but not horrific enough in an ontological or metaphysical sense, which dilutes the conviction of Rowling's warning against the temptation of using post-human shortcuts to deflect death. The ones who instil the reader with a profound fear of what might soon happen are the beautiful John Perry and Jane, and, above all, the formidable Takeshi Kovacs in any of his bodies.

O'Har attributes the success of *Harry Potter* to the spiritual void left after magic was replaced by the scientific method from the late 17th century onwards. «Machines», he writes, «cannot do the work of gods. Machines cannot calm fears, or provide answers to our deepest questions. All the technology in the world cannot repair the human spirit, or locate the soul» (2000: 864). What O'Har and many others seemingly forget, out of prejudice against science fiction, is that since a very young Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*, the great debates on the human body, identity and soul are happening in this narrative genre. Its monstrous bodies, from Victor Frankenstein's ugly creature to Scalzi's and Morgan's handsome new humans, are the evidence of how these debates progress and of how far we are willing to go in our urge to transcend the limits of life. One can easily imagine Voldemort's chagrin and covetousness if Kovacs had the chance to explain the function of the cortical stack to him. And Kovacs's mean laughter if shown the flimsy Horcruxes.

My argumentation does not intend at all to diminish the value of the charming (but also distressing) series written by Rowling, nor do I wish to undermine the threat which Voldemort poses; many young readers around the world have learned from his downfall that rejecting death is absurd and downright inhuman.⁹ I am well aware that Rowling addresses a younger readership than the habitual one for science fiction. Nonetheless, the young adults in their early 20s who took my course on *Harry Potter*, a series which they still constantly re-read, and their habit of combining fantasy and science fiction (in at least 25% of the cases) show that we should never neglect the overlapping of genres and readers. Also that the comparative reading which I offer here is relevant to determine how monstrosity is articulated across inconvenient genre divisions in today's culture.

I am, therefore, calling attention to the points of convergence between fantasy and science fiction as regards the topic of human (im)mortality, insisting that science fiction, even in the apparently less demanding version practised by self-avowed entertainers Scalzi and Morgan, is offering a far deeper, much more extensive debate. Taking for granted that the human body will soon be post-human, either individually or collectively, science fiction educates us so that when the time of our obsolescence as a species arrives (and it might be much sooner than we imagine) we can make informed choices to embrace or reject our transcendence. According to the 'monstrous theory' developed by Martjientjie Smits (2006: 500), we adopt four positions before the abnormal: exorcism, adaptation, acceptance and assimilation. Rowling's position leads to the simple exorcism of the monster, whereas Scalzi and Morgan prepare us for its likely assimilation, without desisting in their critique of transhumanist excess.

When we reach the last page of *Harry Potter* magic has been domesticated, and its failure proven with the story of Voldemort's rise and fall. As readers familiarize themselves with science fiction, the treatment that both Rowling and her arch-villain give magic is exposed as inconsistent and ineffective: behind Voldemort's reptilian face, there hides a

⁹ Rowling's didactics extend to the psychological therapy applied to children and teenagers who have suffered a personal loss in real life. See, for instance, Markell & Markell (2008).

pathetic, even preposterous post-human monster. Scalzi's ongoing saga might still have plenty to say about the post-human monster as human being, whereas Morgan has continued exploring its ambiguous attractive in the accomplished *Black Man* (2008).¹⁰ It is, then, urgent, to revise our definition of monstrosity by following comparative methodologies between genres, making a serious effort to avoid simplifying either the monster or our human condition.

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¹⁰ Read my conversation with the author on this novel here: <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/132013> .

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