

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Empathy Matters:
Embodied Encounters and Entanglements in Anthropocene Fiction and
Film**

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**EMPATHY MATTERS: EMBODIED ENCOUNTERS AND ENTANGLEMENTS IN
ANTHROPOCENE FICTION AND FILM**

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Plágiumnyilatkozat:

Én, Novák Zsófia, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés önálló munka, a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült, a benne található irodalmi hivatkozások egyértelműek és teljeseek. Nem állok doktori fokozat visszavonására irányuló eljárás alatt, illetve 5 éven belül nem vontak vissza tőlem odaítélt doktori fokozatot. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

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Novák Zsófia

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INTRODUCTION

W(h)ither empathy?

Why does empathy matter? What is the matter with empathy? What possibilities lie in a reconsideration of the aspects and the dynamics of empathy, and in its extension into other-than-human realms? Why is such an expansion necessary, and (how) is it even possible, when empathy apparently poses considerable challenges even among humans? These are some of the main questions that this dissertation seeks to explore—and hopefully, answer—by mapping the ways in which empathy is portrayed and problematized in a fairly wide range of contemporary films and texts that focus on encounters and entanglements between nonhuman and human beings. My reading of these literary and cinematic works is informed by dynamically evolving theoretical discourses including animal studies, ecocriticism, affect studies and critical posthumanism—which, though each with its own distinctive focus, all aim to subvert human-centred approaches and challenge traditional conceptions of the human as an isolable and self-contained category. Thus, one primary aim of the chapters that follow is to foreground the environmental, affective and embodied interdependencies between the nonhuman and human beings represented in the corpus, and to consider how the emerging connections and vulnerabilities can potentially contribute to a reconfiguration of (affective) hierarchies among entities of biological, artificial and hybrid origin.

Such an inquiry into the affective aspects of earthly relations is timely, if not inevitable, in the wider context of the Anthropocene. As this “new human epoch” unfolds in its chaotic and unpredictable ways, humans finding themselves amidst perpetual and inherently interlinked ecological, medical and socio-economic crises are increasingly forced to recognise that “the fate of humanity is deeply intertwined with the fates of all sorts of other entities” (Shaviro 1). The Anthropocene as a concept and an experience proves revelatory in several ways: while the term in its reference to “anthropos” seems to accord a central position, and even a geomorphic agency to the human race (problematically suggested here as a homogeneous, non-differentiated category),¹ it also ironically reveals any “sense of [human] control” over earth-systems as “illusory” (Vermeulen, *Literature* 21).² By foregrounding the ungraspable scale and

¹ As noted by Pieter Vermeulen (and many other scholars), the term “Anthropocene” has drawn considerable criticism due to its apparent “invocation of a human collective [that] overlooks substantial differences between different human communities and fails to convey that some (typically privileged) constituencies bear much more responsibility for the ongoing planetary crisis than the (often disadvantaged) groups that suffer from it most directly” (*Literature* 7). Vermeulen adds that alternative terms such as the Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Cthulucene have been proposed instead (*Literature* 11-17). Cf. Lovász & Horváth (2024), Morton (2016).

² As Pieter Vermeulen points out, “[t]he Anthropocene presents a thoroughly humanized earth, but this does not mean that earth is under human control” (*Literature* 10).

complexity of the environmental, geological and climatic processes which, though they might have been unwittingly set in motion by humans, entail consequences that shall ultimately afflict us³ as hard as any other earthling, the Anthropocene reveals the human race as vulnerable, caught up in intricate webs of planetary relations and exposed to their unforeseeable effects. Manifesting in disastrous feedback loops, destabilising ecosystems, and the hyperobject⁴ of the escalating climate crisis, anthropocenic “global weirding”⁵ entails a profoundly uncanny experience of not feeling at home on our planet, and even necessitates a re-consideration of the conviction that the planet was ever “ours” in the first place.

Undermining the autonomy and superiority of humanity that anthropocentric perspectives and discourses take for granted, the Anthropocene as a cognitively and, crucially, affectively unsettling experience⁶ also calls for a re-negotiation of relations with other-than-human beings. Engaging with the emotional by-products of such an unsettlement, the works discussed here—ranging from conventional wildlife television and non-anthropocentric slow cinema through speculative literature and film to New Weird fiction—imagine potential paths of coping and “coming to terms with our Anthropocene condition” (Vermeulen, *Literature* 5). These literary and cinematic works, including Victor Kossakovsky’s slow animal film *Gunda* (2020), Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan’s sci-fi series *Westworld* (2016), Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013), Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” (1971), and Jeff VanderMeer’s weird novel *Borne* (2017), present nonhuman beings as agents and objects of empathy, exploring *inter-creatural* empathy and care as part of their more or less subtle efforts to problematize, critique, or try and move beyond anthropocentrism. The term “inter-creatural” may appear odd, but its introduction is also necessary for the arguments presented by the dissertation. I have chosen this word

³ It must be noted that underprivileged groups and indigenous peoples of the global South are already disproportionately affected by the unintended consequences of pollution and the climate crisis, even though they had much less to do with the processes causing the catastrophic upheavals than the affluent, technologically advanced global North.

⁴ Timothy Morton coined the term hyperobject to “refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (*Hyperobjects* 1). Shared properties of hyperobjects include their viscosity, meaning that “they ‘stick’ to beings that are involved with them” (1), their nonlocality, insofar as “any ‘local manifestation’ of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject” (1) and their inhuman temporality, because “[t]hey involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to” (1).

⁵ For the origins and a further discussion of the phrase, see Gry Ulstein’s *Weird Fiction in a Warming World: A Reading Strategy for the Anthropocene* (2021).

⁶ Describing the mentally disturbing effects of the “mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception” (Clark 140) and between the sense of urgency provoked by “even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects” (140), Timothy Clark delineates the concept of “Anthropocene disorder,” emerging in response to the frustration caused by the contrast “between a sense of rage and even despair on one side, and a consciousness of the majority perception of such reactions as disproportionate and imbalanced on the other” (140). According to Clark, this condition refers to kind of “cognitive overload” (143) that results from to the “unresolved and perhaps unresolvable conflicts revealed by thinking the world of the Anthropocene at different scales” (154).

because I find the more commonly used category “interspecies” too restrictive for my purposes; the textual and filmic relations that I analyse extend beyond the human-animal binary, and involve vegetal, (bio)technological and entirely artificial entities as well. I realise that inter-creatural is a category even more expansive than interspecies—which, despite being an established notion in biological and philosophical literature, may itself be considered⁷ an overly broad descriptor, applying to virtually all kinds of relational configurations between (nonhuman and human) animals, plants, fungi and even microorganisms—nevertheless, I believe its introduction to be necessary, for the reason mentioned above. At the same time, I am aware that the application of such a term may weaken analytical precision if it is taken to suggest a reduction of the vital distinctions between the embodied experiences and lived realities of the animals, plants, (bio)tech and human beings, or an erasure of the ensuing differences in the nature of the relationships that may develop between them. By no means is the concept of inter-creatural empathy intended to imply that the same mode of empathising is enabled by (both) direct and mediated encounters with pets like dogs, farmed animals like pigs and cows, exotic animals, embodied and disembodied artificially intelligent creatures, interconnected plant-like sentience or shape-shifting biotech beings. In the chapters that follow, my close readings zoom in on the specificities of the connections that are forged between nonhuman and human beings, emphasising the diversity of affective-sensory expressions and modalities of the creatures in contact, as well as attending to the ethical implications of their often disparate ontological status and of the distinctions in their particular embodied, perceptual and affective experience.

Rather than effacing differences among vegetal, human, (bio)technological and animal creatures, and the various modalities or manifestations of empathy that develop among them, the term inter-creatural is thus intended to signal that, notwithstanding all of these discontinuities, there are also commonalities, however contingent, between the forms of sentient life populating—and engaging with—the filmic and literary works analysed here: indeed, this is precisely what makes empathic relations possible. When used with reference to humans as they connect or conflict with an extensive range of organic and inorganic material agencies, the word “inter-creatural” simultaneously expresses the often disavowed creaturely aspects of human existence (here denoting not just animalistic but also mechanistic dimensions), and signals a sense of continuity between human and nonhuman forms of being

⁷ For instance, the philosopher Jacques Derrida—who has taken issue with the very word “animals” [*animaux, animot*] in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, arguing that this single word lumps together all kinds of animal species without considering or signalling the particularities of behaviour and modes of existence that individual mammals, avians, fish etc. exhibit—would likely object to the broadness of the term “interspecies” as well.

in their countless manifestations. A further important advantage of the term inter-creatural is that it does not reduce the creatures in contact to their species-specific characteristics, but rather presents each participating entity of its own right, as a unique being defined by its own history, lifeworld, and embodied and affective modes of expression. The decision to expand my focus in such a way was carefully considered: I wanted to include a diverse array of literary and filmic works dealing with exotic and ‘mundane’ animals, humanimal hybrids, murderous androids and “artificial friends”. On the one hand, such an approach allowed me to raise vital questions concerning the problematic and promising aspects of inter-creatural empathy, and to consider its manifestations from several angles, in various contexts and mediums; on the other hand, I was intrigued by the points of connection that emerged through my explorations of the corpus.

As the filmic and literary works analysed in the following chapters shall demonstrate, it is not only the lives of human and nonhuman animals that are intermeshed in vital and often startling ways: the aspects and manifestations of technology are always already implicated in, shaping and complicating those relations. For instance, the wildlife series *Our Planet*, and even the slow animal film *Gunda* all demonstrate ‘naturecultures’⁸ at work. Offering mediated access to nonhuman beings in their ‘natural’ habitats, captured through the lens of cultural and cinematic conventions and, quite literally, through state-of-the-art technological devices, these films exhibit—often, it seems, without reflecting upon this—a fundamental entanglement of ‘nature,’ culture, and technology, which, crucially, informs the films’ strategies of evoking inter-creatural empathy. At the same time, I was also struck by how conceptualisations and representations of vegetal, animal and artificial beings tend to bleed into each other. The dismissive attitudes to the sentience and ‘subjectivity’ of technological entities, for example, frequently echo the callous views on the (inner) lives of animals, and vice versa, the (mis)treatment of artificial beings often appears to rest on the same ethical and psychological foundations—rooted in the long-standing tradition of human exceptionalism—that are used to justify the abuse of animals. For example, in the series *Westworld*, the uncannily humanlike ‘hosts,’ often described as ‘livestock,’ are visually and narratively equated with animals processed as commodities in the machinery of industrial agriculture in Western capitalism, which legitimises the negation of their affective authenticity and their cruel exploitation; and in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), the Nexus-6 androids,

⁸ Welding together “nature” and “culture,” Donna Haraway’s catchy term (*Companion 3*) is designed to signify that previously posited boundaries between these realms have become—or have always been—irrevocably blurred; as noted by Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden, the term signifies the recognition that nature and culture are inseparable “in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (1).

incredibly advanced both in terms of intelligence and emotional expression, are conceptualised as “solitary predators” (Dick 28) incapable of empathy, at the same time treated by humans as repulsive vermin.

Such overlaps between the representations of differently nonhuman beings not only expose troubling continuities in the hierarchical frameworks that govern human interactions with nonhuman and artificial forms of life, but also reveal some deeply contradictory tendencies in human perception, stemming from our anthropocentric biases. Pointing to the arbitrariness of human categorisation, the cross-cutting patterns of the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman creatures reveal the fluid and shifting criteria used to designate the boundaries of ‘the human’. For instance, when the cognitive-intellectual capacities of machines equal or surpass those of humans, the distinctive ‘essence’ of the human finds its locus in emotion or affect, claimed to be unavailable to the technological nonhuman—as is the case in *Westworld*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *Klara and the Sun*, and, at least initially, even in the film *Her*. Conversely, in the case of animals, even when their capacity for emotion and suffering is proven to be equal to that of humans, their presumed lack of intelligence and consciousness (defined by human standards) is invoked to ensure difference. Indeed, a crucial objective of this dissertation is to reveal the subversive implications of inter-creatural enmeshments by juxtaposing representations of animals, humans and machines. This approach, combined with an exploration of the dynamics of inter-creatural empathy in the corpus, will allow me to illuminate an unsettling, yet potentially also liberating breakdown of boundaries among creatures belonging to diverse modes of existence.

Attesting the pertinence of the matters raised here, a large number of academic monographs and edited volumes have already been dedicated to the issues and possibilities of empathy when it comes to animals (Danielle Sands’ *Animal Writing: Storytelling, Selfhood and the Limits of Empathy* [2019] looks at animal narrators and the limits of empathy, while Elisa Aaltola’s *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics* [2018] and Lori Gruen’s *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* [2015] focus on ethics in their discussions of empathy as implicated in animal-human relations); and some have also concentrated on emotions of and towards technological beings (an issue of *Neohelicon* [2022] was dedicated to AI emotion in science fiction, while the collection *Love and Sex with Robots* [2016] looks at the implications of intimacy with intelligent machines, and some sections of Paul Matthew’s *Transparent Minds in Science Fiction* [2023] also deal with questions of emotion in fictional artificial and alien entities). Still, even as pursuing issues of embodiment, affect and emotion in relation to animals, plants, and/or (bio)technological beings

has become increasingly popular, most of the work published so far has been limited to an exploration of either ecological or artificial entities. To date, it is the approach of Amelia DeFalco's *Curious Kin in Fictions of Posthuman Care* (2023) that aligns most closely with the objectives of my project: her book also looks at how "narratives of robot, AI, dog, clone, bioengineered hybrid animal, alien, and mineral care" portray "boundaries in the midst of their destabilization" and how these narratives "urge audiences to consider how care can and might function in more-than-human worlds" (*Curious* 23). While I have found her book particularly enlightening and I do rely on many of its insights, unlike DeFalco, who grounds her exploration of care and kinship specifically in a critical posthumanist context, "consider[ing] relations of care as part of [a] tangled assemblage, exploring how particular, often unconventional affective encounters offer generative visions of posthuman being" (*Curious* 16), I focus much less on potential paths of posthuman becoming and aim to map how empathy, a rather contentious phenomenon in itself, functions as both a strategy and a theme in the analysed filmic and literary narratives. Indeed, while a growing number of scholarly investigations consider the intersecting problems of naturecultures, nonhuman sentience, and artificial consciousness (occasionally with reference to affect, emotion, or care), there is no monograph to date that looks at these issues of in conjunction, certainly not through the lens of empathy. By explicitly making these connections, and by highlighting the sense of interdependence—between various states and forms of being—that reverberates through the selected works of cinema and literature, I seek to challenge conventional assumptions about the mechanisms and the perceived limits of empathy; an inquiry that, I suggest, may also contribute to destabilising anthropocentric structures of differentiation and dominance.

It must be noted at this point, however, that critical posthumanist discourse has been widely criticised for its privileging of Western and Eurocentric philosophical traditions⁹ and for its tendency to omit references to the insights of indigenous cosmologies,¹⁰ which, for centuries, have taken rather similar stances to the ones posthumanism now proclaims as new and original, and which may in fact have anticipated and in some cases, even inspired some of

⁹ Cf. Breed et al. (2025), Sterling (2020), Bignall and Rigney (2018), Todd (2016), Weheliye (2014), Mignolo (2012).

¹⁰ Discussing a workshop, dedicated to exposing and criticising the disregard and erasure of theoretical contributions made by Indigenous philosophers "within the colonial institution of the Western academy" (26), Virginie Magnat writes that organisers Jerry Rosiek and Jimmy Snyder emphasised that Indigenous philosophies have "a particularly long history of valuing a reciprocal form of relationality inclusive of other/more-than-human life" (27), and that they "urge the proponents of new materialism to acknowledge that claims to doing something new must be vigorously discredited" (27-28). She mentions, for instance, Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr.'s *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*, published in 1979, which, according to Rosiek and Snyder, anticipated "the conceptualization of agential realism, generally considered to constitute Karen Barad's foremost contribution to the development of new materialist and posthumanist perspectives" (28).

posthumanism's core recognitions. Mentions of indigenous knowledge are missing entirely from Wolfe's seminal book *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), from Pramod K. Nayar's influential monograph *Posthumanism* (2013), and from Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013)—though she has offered a correction to this oversight in her most recent book, *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), stating that “[i]t is important to keep in mind from the start, however, that the binary distinction human/non-human has been foundational for European thought since the Enlightenment and that many cultures on earth do not adopt such a partition (Descola 2009, 2013)” (16). Later, she makes it clear that

as an anti-racist, I acknowledge the important contribution of postcolonial and decolonial theories as well as the alternative, more ancient indigenous traditions of Humanism than the European. They offer a painstaking critical analysis of the extent to which racial assumptions and white supremacy have shaped the philosophical discussions about the human, that Western philosophers have come to take for granted (Whyte 2013; Todd 2016). (55)

Such criticism is justified, and Braidotti is surely right when she says that the posthuman predicament also necessitates “mov[ing] beyond the Eurocentric humanistic representational habits and the philosophical anthropocentrism they entail” (*Posthuman Knowledge* 16). Nevertheless, in this dissertation, I still remain within these Western critical frameworks, because I myself am embedded in this context. Nor would I wish to appropriate Indigenous frameworks in which I am not sufficiently well-versed. Thus, although aware of the validity of criticism levelled at critical posthumanism, I rely on its recognitions and questions as I commit here to a criticism “from within/from the inside out,” as it were, deconstructing prevalent Western anthropomorphic and anthropocentric structures and discourses via analyses of cinematic and literary works that are in dialogue with Western socio-cultural developments and philosophical traditions, but are also often critical of this framework.

Thus, an integral aspect of my analyses is to attend to the ways in which fictional and nonfictional narratives appear to be ensnared by the logic that positions humans as the ultimate point of reference; and to show how anthropocentric attitudes often prove incredibly difficult, if not impossible to subvert. *Our Planet*, a relatively recent addition to David Attenborough's oeuvre, is a prime example of an effort which ultimately fails to overcome a human-centred perspective. Though the series clearly intends to cultivate the audience's empathic responses for nonhuman entities, and is quite explicit about the devastating consequences of prioritising human needs at the expense of environmental networks, it still ends up re-inscribing anthropocentric perspectives and hierarchies (suggested even by the title) by presenting the dangers of habitat destruction and resource extraction as unsustainable because they are

“ultimately noxious first and foremost for human beings” (Mengozi 7). My corpus, however, also includes works that offer more nuanced attempts to dismantle the restrictive dynamics of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. By engaging quite self-consciously (and sometimes, criticising explicitly) their own proclivity to humanise their nonhuman subjects, and by displacing their human characters, films like *Cow* and novels like *Borne* and *Fifteen Dogs* seek to move beyond a limited, human-centred perspective—or at least admit its limitations. These works try to shift the focus toward their nonhuman protagonists by approaching them with an open curiosity and a non-invasive empathy, an attitude that stands in stark contrast to the inquisitive, reductive and overbearing methods dominant in much of wildlife cinema, and prevalent in many works of fiction.

United by an interrogation of anthropocentrism and its consequences, and by making the issue and limits of empathy a central theme, the texts and films analysed here adopt various strategies in their endeavour to foreground nonhuman affects and perspectives. They all aim to challenge privileged human vantage points by portraying existing, (semi-)fictional and speculative creatures with complex affective and cognitive capacities; by endowing such beings with narrative voice and affective agency; or, alternatively, by restricting an overbearing, inquisitive access to nonhumans’ inner lives and engaging self-reflexively with their own sentimentalizing and humanizing tendencies. While a certain degree of anthropomorphisation appears inevitable even in the most experimental modes of storytelling, and the possibility of overcoming our particularly anthropo-logical perception—especially in the case of literature, where such an endeavour is inevitably curtailed by the limits of the textual medium—is questioned by many,¹¹ a complete elimination of human viewpoints is not necessarily the point. Instead, in its discussion of a wide range of narratives that all engage with risky aspects and affirmative potentials of inter-creatural empathy, this dissertation dissects anthropocentric approaches and conduct so as to problematize the oppressive hierarchies and boundaries that emerge from them, and interrogates the reductive category of the properly human, which is “consistently . . . defin[ed] . . . *against* the ‘animal’, the mutant/deformed/monstrous and the machine” (Nayar 110).

¹¹ Mark Bekoff suggests an approach of “biocentric anthropomorphism,” which, he suggests, does not necessarily result in “los[ing] the animal’s point of view” (155), and then offers the following argument: “We are humans and we have by necessity a human view of the world” (155).

I. What do we talk about when we talk about empathy?

Empathy, as noted by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers in their introduction to the volume *Empathy and Its Limits* (2016), is “notoriously difficult to define” (3). In a similar vein, Danielle Sands observes that “[d]iscussions of empathy raise, rather than resolve, complex questions regarding the relationship between human cognition, emotion and imagination” (2). These claims are corroborated by a plethora of recent scholarly attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the variants of empathy—generally distinguished on the basis of an affective-somatic or a cognitive-imaginative orientation¹²—, to map the aspects involved in the phenomenon (such as identification, perspective-shifting, and various forms of bodily mimicry), and to clarify the role and relations of those components. The difficulty of defining empathy also stems from the fact that throughout the centuries, it has been explored from divergent points of view by a number of disparate discourses and disciplines—including but not limited to phenomenology, moral philosophy, care ethics, aesthetics, literary theory, and more recently, cognitive neuroscience.

Making a distinction between empathy and kindred concepts like sympathy also proves challenging, particularly due to the entangled history of these two notions,¹³ as well as their different usage in philosophy and (social) psychology. As explained by Heidi Maibom, what “philosophers call sympathy” (22) mainly corresponds to what psychologists, in turn, refer to as empathy, “or, more precisely, *empathic concern* . . . [that is] generally thought to concern the welfare of [another] person” (22, my emphasis); a fact that has further exacerbated the conceptual confusion surrounding empathy (Maibom 22). Proposing one of the broadest definitions,¹⁴ Assmann and Detmers describe empathy as “a complex mix of physical, cognitive,

¹² The issues of trying to separate cognitive kinds of empathy from affective and somatic ones are addressed in the second part of the Introduction, “Why does empathy matter”. For now, suffice to say that in most scholars’ understanding, cognitive empathy is reliant on imaginative and cognitive faculties that allow the empathiser to imagine how the target of empathy thinks (and feels) in their own situation and circumstances, and/or involves the adoption of another’s perspective—without projecting oneself onto the other, which would threaten to subsume their distinct experience. Affective empathy, on the other hand, refer to the kind of fellow-feeling or feeling-with that is often said to be based on bodily automatism, and is described as more of a visceral, instinctual reaction that results in the empathiser mimicking or resonating with the other’s affective, bodily and/or emotional states.

¹³ David Hume and Adam Smith both formulated their own notions of sympathy which, according to Coplan and Goldie, seem to correspond respectively to what they call “low-level empathy or mirroring” and “high-level empathy, essentially involving imagination” (xi). The term “empathy” was only invented in 1909, when Edward Tichener translated Theodor Lipps’s concept of *Einfühlung*, which Lipps used “to explain both how people experience aesthetic objects and how they come to know others’ mental states” (Coplan and Goldie xii). For a more detailed account on the intertwined histories of the notion of empathy and sympathy, see Coplan and Goldie (2011), Stueber (*Rediscovering*, 2006).

¹⁴ Some, like Dominic McIver Lopes (122-123), Carl Plantinga (“The Scene” 247) and Daniel Batson similarly adopt a broad understanding of empathy, synthesising its affective and cognitive aspects, Batson even incorporating compassion and sympathy into his approach (*Question* 86). In contrast, many others, like Amy Coplan, Karsten Stueber or Derek Matravers work with much stricter definitions, arguing against the assimilation

emotional, social, and ethical capacities” (7). In their understanding, empathy may involve emotional contagion (a crucial if controversial aspect of empathy, to be addressed in the second part of this Introduction), imaginative projection (“feeling *as* others”), identification via a merging of perspectives, “feeling *with*” and, finally, “feeling *for* others by generating awareness, a sense of similarity, compassion, and active concern across social distance and cultural difference” (7). They also delineate a five-level model of empathy, which identifies empathic mimicry¹⁵ via emotional contagion as the lowest level, and then progresses gradually towards more imaginative and ultimately, action-oriented versions, so that empathy “is taken from feeling, reflection, and imagination to clear insight and *active responses* in the form of attention, recognition, care, and support” (6, my emphasis).

Similarly conceiving of empathy as a scalar process rather than a distinct phenomenon (whether affective or cognitive), developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman outlines five modes of empathic arousal and five stages of developing empathic distress (from the “reactive newborn cry” to developing “empathy for another’s experience beyond the immediate situation” [2000, 6]). Three of Hoffman’s phases, including bodily reactions such as motor mimicry,¹⁶ “are preverbal, automatic, and essentially involuntary” (5), requiring the “the shallowest level of cognitive processing” (5); while the other two, mediated association and role- or perspective-taking (where the empathiser uses their imagination to try and gain a sense of how the target feels *in their own position*), are “higher-order cognitive modes” (5). Like Hoffman, many other theorists make distinctions between more or less “advanced” types of empathy on the basis of the process primarily involving bodily automatisms and mimicry or (also) necessitating the use of cognitive faculties.

In the introduction to their collection, *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (2011), Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, adopting philosopher Alvin Goldman’s perspective, also distinguish between higher- and lower-level empathy. They list forms of empathy more reliant on cognition and the imagination—such as Karsten Stueber’s re-enactive empathy (2006), Murray Smith’s other-focused personal imagining (2011) and Peter Goldie’s perspective-shifting (2011)—under the category of more “complex,” higher-level empathy; and mention Stueber’s basic empathy (2006), emotional contagion and affective mimicry (M. Smith

of what they consider to be empathy and what they believe are only related phenomena, e.g. emotional contagion, sympathy, instinctual bodily mimicry and projection (Coplan and Goldie xxxv, Stueber, *Rediscovering* 138).

¹⁵ I discuss the relationship between empathic mimicry and emotional contagion in the second part of this Introduction.

¹⁶ Looking at the experience of cinematic empathy, Murray Smith explains that motor mimicry involves a mimicking of the gestures of another, triggered by one’s perception of another’s motor actions (especially grasping, running or jumping) (“Empathy” 102).

2011) and mirroring (Goldman 2011) as examples of low-level empathy (Coplan and Goldie xxxiii). In spite of such hierarchical distinctions (as seen in Assmann & Detmers, Hoffmann and Coplan & Goldie), and the lack of consensus among theorists on what exactly constitutes empathy, Jane Stadler claims that most scholars recognise empathy as “encompass[ing] both involuntary neurophysiological responses (affective empathy or embodied simulation) and volitional acts of cognition (perspective-taking, mind-reading, or mentalising)” (“The Empath” 413).¹⁷ On the other end of the spectrum, philosopher Amy Coplan, one of the least forgiving theoreticians of empathy, considers empathy to be “a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (“Understanding” 5). Coplan strictly rejects the inclusion of some versions of fellow-feeling such as emotional contagion (which would qualify as a category of empathy according to many others), claiming that it cannot be considered a manifestation of empathy “proper” (“Real Empathy” 58; see also Stueber, “Empathy” 138).

Contemporary philosophers and psychologists thus tend to disagree on what counts as empathy and often seem to struggle with the question of how to (indeed, of whether there is even a need to) separate concepts or versions of empathy; but, as mentioned earlier, the effort of distinguishing empathy from concepts such as sympathy, pity or compassion can also raise concerns. Some, like philosopher Martha Nussbaum, use the terms “pity” and “compassion” interchangeably (see e.g. “Compassion” 29).¹⁸ Referring to “empathetic identification” as an important component of pity, Nussbaum goes on to state that even “in the temporary act of identification, one is always aware of one’s own *separateness* from the sufferer . . . If one really had the experience of feeling the pain in one’s own body, then one would precisely have failed to comprehend the pain of another *as other*” (“Compassion” 35, emphasis in original). Nussbaum’s use of the notions of compassion and pity is certainly ambiguous here, which makes them difficult to distinguish from related concepts like empathy and sympathy. Indeed, her description of pity, as dependent on a sense of separation after transitory empathic identification, seems to match Coplan’s notion of empathy, or at least one of Coplan’s stipulations on empathy “proper”: that is, clear self-other differentiation (“Understanding” 6).

¹⁷ I return to the issue of embodied simulation in the section “Mapping the internal hierarchy of the empathic process”.

¹⁸ While accepting that the variation in the naming of this emotion “reveals some real, subtle difference in the understanding and the experience of the emotion itself” (“Compassion” 29), Nussbaum still insists on the continuity of their meaning in the philosophical tradition. She thus distinguishes between compassion and pity only in the sense that she uses the former when “discussing more contemporary issues” because, as she notes, the term pity, since the Victorian era, “has acquired nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer that it did not have formerly” (“Compassion” 29).

On the other hand, Nussbaum's characterisation of compassion/pity as primarily comprising a concern for the well-being of others closely resembles the most widely accepted definition of sympathy, described as a feeling-*for* another's suffering (Coplan and Goldie xliii), which, unlike empathy, "is not so much a matter of feeling someone's pain as of feeling bad or regretful *about* the pain someone is feeling" (Slote 133, emphasis in original). Others, like Michael Slote and Martin Hoffman, offer clearer explanations of how sympathy and compassion are incorporated into their conception of empathy. According to Slote, "empathy helps to power and sustain sympathy and sympathetic concern" (133). Likewise, Hoffman states that, from the third stage¹⁹ of his model, empathic distress "is transformed in part into a feeling of sympathetic distress or compassion for the victim, and from that time on when children observe someone in distress they feel *both* empathic and sympathetic distress" (6, my emphasis). In fact, in Hoffman's view, it is "the sympathetic component [that] turns empathic distress into a clearly pro-social motive" (88).

The sheer volume of these theoretical explorations—from Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie's abovementioned collection and Karsten Stueber's *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology and the Human Sciences* (2006), through Jean Decety and William Ickes' *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (2009) to the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* (2017), edited by Heidi Maibom—, and especially the growing number of titles like Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion and Environmental Narrative* (2017), or Aaltola's and Sands's aforementioned monographs, suggests that a renewed engagement with the problems and promises of empathy is a timely matter, not least due to empathy's potential role in renegotiating earthly relations. Sands also states that "the limitations of empathy are acutely problematic in the context of a growing environmental crisis in which the significance of nonsentient, and even inanimate, forces is ever-increasing" (20); this dissertation allies itself with her position that "[s]uch an era calls for new alliances and modes of attentiveness" (20), but also maintains, contrary to Sands, that this may be accomplished through cultivating certain kinds of empathic openness and engagement.

While I believe that the genealogy, the architecture and the conceptual problems of empathy are all subjects worthy of investigation, my main intention here is not to trace the history and evolution of the notion, nor to concentrate on the contradictions and inconsistencies within and among conceptualisations of empathy (issues that have also been dealt with

¹⁹ He calls this stage "quasi-egocentric empathic distress," and it marks the moment wherein "children realize the distress is the other's, not their own, but confuse the other's inner states with their own and try to help by doing for the other what would comfort themselves" (Hoffman 6).

thoroughly in the aforementioned monographs and collections). Rather, inspired by María Puig de la Bellacasa, who, in her illuminating monograph *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (2017), refrains from offering a conclusive understanding of care and instead “embrace[s] its ambivalent character” (11), seeking to “emphasize its potential to disrupt the status quo and to unhinge some of the moral rigidities of ethical questioning” (11), I navigate the diverse and often conflicting approaches to empathy without sticking with any specific definition (though, as I will make clear in the following subsections and chapters of this dissertation, my main focus is on the embodied versions of empathy due to what I see as its affecting-affective potentials in cross-creatural relations). This allows me to productively exploit the ambiguity that dwells in the notion while I also map the dynamics and (mis)uses of empathy when it comes to engaging with nonhuman creatures. My aim with this is twofold: in each of the chapters, I discuss what I consider to be major issues or hindrances in inter-creatural empathic relations, and then, from various perspectives, I attempt to delineate paths of how approaches to empathy may be re-envisioned to encompass the cross-creatural kinships and connections that need to be accounted for in our Anthropocene present.

Crucially, I do not wish to present an extended, inter-creatural empathy as an easy or comprehensive solution to socio-ecological crises, environmental injustices and the mistreatment of nonhuman beings: indeed, the challenging and problematic traits (or what I would call the “dark potentials”) of empathy must be addressed, too, even if the emphasis is on its ethical benefits.²⁰ One of the main issues that emerges when the possibilities of inter-creatural empathic relations are considered is the selectiveness of empathy: Coplan has noted that “empathy is subject to biases based on one’s familiarity and identification with a target individual,” which she argues is due to the fact that “the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct [their] subjective experiences” (“Understanding” 13). These claims point to some fundamental questions raised in most of the chapters of this dissertation: (how) is it possible to empathise with nonhuman beings, without subsuming their radical, irreducible difference through, for example, the anthropomorphisation that is involved in most attempts at cross-creatural identification? And what happens when the selectiveness of empathy is not

²⁰ Addressing the ethical significance of empathy, Coplan and Goldie—with reference to research by Eisenberg (2000), Underwood and Moore (1982), as well as Daniel Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis (1991, 2011)—write that “there is still support for the claim that sympathy and sometimes empathy correlate with pro-social behaviour” (xxiv). Those who are sceptical about the role and use of empathy in inspiring moral emotions and pro-social actions include Jesse Prinz; Julinna C. Oxley, who asserts that “empathy is not intrinsically moral and does not always lead to moral thought or action” (4); and Peter Goldie himself, stating that empathy does not necessarily lead to altruistic action: “you can imagine the other’s suffering, yet simply disregard it, or you might empathize with a person who has committed a terrible crime, yet feel no sympathy for you think he thoroughly deserves his punishment” (“How We Think” 420).

unintentional, resulting from the unfamiliarity or alienness of the other, but an intentional mechanism that can serve, as Assmann and Detmers warn, “to strengthen collective identities and aggressively solidify the in-group against the outer world” (9)? Although in the analyses that follow, I shall try to foreground the affirmative potentials and the mutually beneficial implications of (certain kinds of) empathic relating, I also recognise, along with Danielle Sands and Elisa Aaltola, that any discussion of inter-creatural empathy must be carefully navigated, keeping in mind that empathy “can serve many purposes, among them highly problematic ones” (Assmann and Detmers 9).

In order to articulate what I consider to be some of the most detrimental aspects of empathy—including its selectiveness, its implication of power imbalances, and its potential misuses for manipulation; issues that I will return to and address in more detail in the subsequent chapters—I now turn to Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (hereafter: *Androids*). A fascinating exploration of the questions raised above, the novel constructs a world in which empathy not only provides the basis of the social hierarchy, but is also presented as the sole key of distinguishing the human from its technological Other, the android, purportedly lacking “the empathic gift” (Dick 27). Though first published in 1968, at a time when the primary theoretical contexts (such as critical posthumanism, ecocriticism, animal studies or the concept of the Anthropocene) underpinning my discussions here were at best in their infancy, *Androids*, I suggest, anticipates many of their insights, as well as the anthropocentric anxieties they engage with. This is a point confirmed by several critics: in an ecological reading of the novel, Aaron A. Cloyd asserts that the narrative of *Androids*, unfolding in the aftermath of a nuclear war that has devastated the Earth, “participates in [the contemporary] environmental discourse by paralleling crucial ecological statements of the 1960s such as [Rachel] Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Wallace Stegner’s ‘Wilderness Letter’” (76). On the other hand, N. Katherine Hayles and Jill Galvan offer posthumanist interpretations of the novel, which, according to Galvan, “interrogates a fixed definition of the human subject,” at the same time “repudiat[ing] the idea of a confined human community and envision[ing] a community of the posthuman, in which human and machine commiserate and comaterialize, vitally shaping one another’s existence” (414). At the same time, Tony M. Vinci, informed by Wolfe’s critical posthumanism, points out that the mode of posthumanism espoused by Hayles, Galvan, as well as Lejla Kucukalic, focuses solely on Dick’s conceptualisation of the android-human dyad, which “limits posthumanism to a human/android binary” (“Posthuman” 107). Indeed, most scholars in the long and rich reception history of the novel have concentrated on either the human/android (Wheale 1991, Galvan 1997, Hayles 1999, Berman 2006, Sims 2009, McInnis

2018, Smyth 2024), or, to a much lesser extent, on the human/animal (Vint 2007, Heise 2009) divide, and only in the last decade have discussions correlating the two started to appear—such as Vinci’s own article (2014), located in the intersection of trauma studies and critical posthumanism, David P. Rando’s text (2023) that reads androids *as* animals in a comparative analysis of Dick’s text and Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, Peter Goldman’s piece (2022), focusing on mimesis, and, to a degree, Vint’s 2007 essay. Nevertheless, deliberations on the dynamics of empathy in the novel have largely remained marginal even in these more recent readings. My own examination of Dick’s text focuses on the discontents of empathy, approached through the intriguing animal-human-android triad, serving to introduce many of the key dilemmas contemplated in this dissertation.

I. 1. What is the matter with empathy? – The problematics of inter-creatural empathy in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Portraying intimately interdependent yet also mutually abusive relations between animals, human and artificial beings, Dick’s classic exposes the destructive consequences of empathy’s selectiveness—reinforcing the collective identity of one group (here, the human community) *against* or *by excluding* another (here, the androids) (Assmann and Detmers 9)—as well as of its negation or withdrawal, affecting so-called “specials,” human beings who are excluded from the sphere of concern when they lose some of their cognitive faculties due to radioactive contamination. One of the central characters, J.R. Isidore, is subject to such disregard; and it is primarily through his figure, I suggest, that the novel hints at the interrelated hierarchies of empathy and care (discussed in detail in the next section, “Why does empathy matter?”).

Rick Deckard, the protagonist of *Androids*, is a bounty-hunter whose task is to “retire” rogue humanoid robots having escaped to the desolate Earth after killing their human masters, who kept them as slaves on Martian and other colonies. On this Earth, the very existence of androids appears intolerable: their elimination is justified both by their unbearable physical and behavioural resemblance to humans and by humans’ insistence on their being alien, pest-like automata. These trespassing androids are thus hunted down mercilessly—as one of them observes, “every worm and wood louse is considered more desirable than all of [them] put together” (Dick 105); a remark that also points to a peculiar hierarchy among nonhuman beings, in which the position of the ‘pest’ is reassigned to androids,²¹ while actual insects, being extremely rare, are re-appraised as valuable. On the novel’s post-World War Terminus Earth,

²¹ In a similar vein, Sherryl Vint argues that “[i]n many ways, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* simply puts androids in the place historically occupied by animals” (113).

due to the annihilation of most flora and fauna caused by nuclear fallout, animals are cherished: as Wheale notes, “at the verge of its extinction, the natural world becomes a valuable commodity” (299), and the “species-scarcity,” exacerbated by the practices of collection and commerce, “induces a kind of religion of animal-ownership,” while “[c]urating animals is also partly a replacement for child-rearing, because of the fear of genetic damage has discouraged human reproduction” (298). For the few people still remaining on Earth, owning an animal, at least an electric one, is thus considered a necessity, as it confers on them a higher social status, as well as providing an outlet for caring impulses. Humans seem to be able to experience empathy only by caring for an animal—and empathy, in turn, is not only a fundamental condition of being acknowledged as a person within this society, but also a requirement of the cult of Mercerism. As part of this religious practice, humans are expected to enter into ‘empathic’ fusion²² with each other, as well as with a mysterious godlike being, Mercer, by way of something called an empathy-box which is “an extension of [one’s] body; it’s the way you touch other humans, it’s the way you stop being alone” (Dick 57).

Woven into the fabric of social and spiritual dimensions of existence, empathy thus constitutes an inter-creatural nexus in Dick’s text. Yet, while it acts as a binding force in a certain sense (creating an affective continuity between animate and inanimate companion creatures and humans), empathy also ironically serves as a tool of distinction, ostensibly guaranteeing separation between humans and a specific type of technological beings, androids. Indeed, empathy is the vital element of the Voigt-Kampff test (performed by bounty hunters to identify androids), which may be conceived as the novel’s version of the Agambenian anthropological machine. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben describes *homo sapiens* as “neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human” via exclusionary and repressive mechanisms (26). Though, according to Agamben, “*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” (26, emphasis in original), humans in the novel also need to rely on external methods to arrive to this recognition; a fact that accentuates the acutely prosthetic quality²³ of the human. Besides

²² The phenomenon equates empathy with a form of (temporary) self-annihilation. When clutching the handles of the empathy box, participants experience “physical merging—accompanied by mental and spiritual identification—with Mercer” and also fuse with those humans who have simultaneously entered Mercer’s realm, “incorporat[ing] the babble of their thoughts, hear[ing] in [their] own brain the noise of . . . many [other] individual existences” (20). While the simulation (a perpetual recreation of the journey of the central figure, Mercer, as he is headed towards the top of a hill, apparently a punishment of sorts for his ability to bring back the dead) is induced via a television-like device, it involves affective as well as cognitive fusion. This is a kind of virtual merging that not only appears but also *feels* real, since Mercerites may even get real wounds from the rocks hurled at Mercer by unseen enemies (known as the “killers”) as he makes his uphill climb.

²³ Human beings in the book also rely on a tool called a “mood-organ,” which allows them to program, manipulate and override their own natural emotional reactions and urges.

the empathy box, both inorganic and organic animals may be conceived as such tools of recognition. Like ordinary pets or “care creatures” that, according to Jack Halberstam, primarily serve to “assur[e] [their] human of their own humanity and benevolence” (723), they matter only inasmuch as they provide humans with access to the empathic experience. However, humans’ actual ability to empathise with these animals is questioned by Vint: she argues that “if empathy were as important to the experience of human culture as it is to the ideology of the human/android boundary, then owning a real animal should be a social relationship, not a commodity one” (119). Instead of this, David P. Rando observes, “as animals have become rarer within the world of the novel, they generally seem more commodified than empathized with” (482). On the other hand, when it comes to androids, the only available method of distinction is the Voigt-Kampff empathy test, based on a set of questions ostensibly intended to cue empathic reactions in the subject, which are in turn picked up by a device measuring specific bodily—more precisely, facial—feedback.

Yet the method itself is problematic for several reasons; as hinted by one of the subjects, the opera singer Luba Luft (actually, an android), the test may be rigged, its questions designed to set up androids for failure. When Deckard is switching between questions while administering the test on Luba, she keeps turning the interrogation around: ““Did you get the wrong question? But I understand that; why is a question I understand the wrong one? *Aren’t I supposed to understand?*”” (Dick 89, my emphasis). On the one hand, the test is implicitly founded on a specific version of the empathic experience, with questions best suited to elicit the preferred reaction in humans. Verbal answers matter only ostensibly: the truly significant data—“capillary dilation in the facial area” and “tension within the eye muscles” (40)—are somatic. Thus, the test apparently dismisses cognitive response as ‘falsifiable,’ approaching empathy as a bodily-instinctual phenomenon. Furthermore, most fictitious scenarios supposed to stimulate visceral reaction in the test subject feature animals (e.g., their torture and consumption),²⁴ even though animal-android and animal-human relations are profoundly asymmetrical; this could explain android’s resentment of animals, as well as their lack of empathic reactions when subjected to the Voigt-Kampff test (Dick 105). Thus, rather than trying to ascertain whether humanoid robots are capable of empathic reactions or not, the Voigt-

²⁴ Wheale aptly points to the irony inherent in the fact that “many of the Voigt-Kampff questions describe cruelties which we presently accept as routine, and which presumably would not unduly trouble many people today: lobsters boiled alive, bull-fighting, hunting trophies. In AD 2020 these are crimes against animals which universally horrify humanity, and supposedly leave androids unaffected” (Wheale 300). The cause of this horror, however, may not be empathy but rather, materialism—as Rando asserts, “[a]ccording to supply and demand, animals are simply too scarce and expensive any longer to abuse, kill, or eat” (482).

Kampff test, functioning like the Agambenian anthropological machine, “actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy” precisely “because the human is already presupposed every time” (Agamben 37). In contrast to the human, defined in the novel “as a specialized category of being that has access to empathy” (Vinci, “Posthuman” 92), the test, which “necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing)” (Agamben 37), *must* define the android as that creature which is incapable of empathy.

Intent on disassociating himself from his quarry and reinforcing the essential difference between androids and humans, Deckard also contemplates the evolutionary significance of empathy, and, ironically, conceives that difference along the lines of animal behaviour. He posits that humans as “herd animal[s]” (Dick 28) rely on empathy to cooperate and survive, while for androids, solitary creatures (according to him),²⁵ empathy would only be a setback as it “blur[s] the boundaries between hunter and victim” (27); therefore, he concludes, “the humanoid robot constitute[s] a solitary predator” (28). This train of thought helps the protagonist confirm his sense of human superiority, rooted in the idea that empathy as a sort of “biological insurance, but double-edged” (27), marks humans as more advanced from an evolutionary perspective. Notably, it also identifies affective empathy (based in involuntary, contagious bodily mimicry) as more authentic and valuable than cognitive or imaginative perspective-taking, the only aspect of empathy that androids seem capable of undergoing. For Deckard, however, their attempts at replicating empathy only make androids more disgusting and uncanny; in the same way, incidentally, as he is repelled by the ersatz animal’s replication of life (37).

However, this apparent hierarchy of empathy—that would seem to mark affective empathy as more “genuine” and thus superior, and that, by extension, regulates the hierarchy that locates humans at the top and androids at the bottom—is complicated by the existence of the social class of “specials,” shunned by the rest of earthly society. While the primary separation in the text is the one enforced between humans and androids, divisions, as I mentioned earlier, exist within the human community as well: those remaining on Earth must regularly undergo IQ-tests to screen out the ones who have degenerated, menacing the “pristine heredity of the race” (15). Having failed the “minimum mental faculties test” (17), the novel’s other focaliser, J.R. Isidore, is “pegged as special” (15), and problematically reduced to a quasi-animalistic status (derogatorily called chickenhead); a fact that points to a chasm *within* the

²⁵ This idea is contradicted by one of the renegade androids, Pris Stratton, who asserts: “The androids . . . are lonely too” (Dick 128).

category of the “human”. Although, according to the text’s implied perspective, it is indeed a specific kind of empathy—an instinct of the human, an evolutionary vestige—that could serve to distinguish humans from androids (who only appear to have access to the kind of empathy that is portrayed in the novel as “inauthentic,” no more than an imitation or a mimicry of “pure” empathy), the object of empathy cannot be anyone or anything. Though Isidore often experiences the preferred version of empathy, he also displays an involuntary openness to technological nonhumans, manifesting itself in his automatic, visceral responses towards an artificial cat in its death throes and towards the plight of the three Nexus-6 fugitives hiding in his building. Indeed, it seems to be part of his problem that most of his empathic reactions are directed at the undesirable, dehumanised androids: according to Vinci, his “liminal status highlights the traumatic nature of losing the human and existing within the unformed posthuman space of radical vulnerability” (“Posthuman” 104).

The fact that, in the novel’s framework, such undifferentiated empathy appears as highly problematic—paradoxically intensifying Isidore’s ostracisation, for instance—reflects on the issues related to the selectiveness of empathy (as raised, for example, by Coplan, as well as Assmann and Detmers), a recurrent theme in most of the literary and filmic works discussed in this dissertation. In the series *Westworld*, an explicit prohibition is violated when a human technician, overwhelmed by empathy at witnessing the suffering endured by one of the main android-characters, actually helps her overcome her human oppressors; while in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* and in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, novels set in dystopic worlds that, to ensure survival, impose strict limitations on those who are within the range of care, the respective protagonists Rachel and Lauren break the tacit rules of what remains of their societies and risk their lives by extending empathy towards creatures (both human and nonhuman) who would otherwise be excluded from the sphere of care.

Recognising an affinity with the runaway creatures, Isidore, having “cease[d], in effect, to be part of mankind” (Dick 15), finds solace in their company, and ironically imagines the bounty-hunter threatening their lives literally as a killing machine, the very antithesis of empathy: “something merciless that carried a printed list and a gun, that moved machine-like through the flat, bureaucratic job of killing. A thing without emotions, or even a face” (136). Indeed, the ‘zoomorphised’ Isidore’s boundless empathy stands in stark contrast with the revulsion Deckard experiences when it comes to electric beings; and especially with the cruel, calculating rationality²⁶ displayed by Phil Resch, another bounty-hunter who briefly joins

²⁶ Resch’s coldness, his “cerebral and calculating; detached” (100) manner strongly remind Deckard of the distinctive comportment of androids. Tamás Bényei also points out in his article on Dick’s novel that the ability

Deckard in his hunt, killing the charming Luba without hesitation. Yet, whereas Isidore, in spite of possessing the empathic sensitivity that is theoretically the primary distinguishing quality of the human, is marginalised because of his declining intelligence, both Deckard and Resch are accepted as valuable members of the novel's society, even though their behaviour mostly resembles that of androids, in that the "actions of [these] 'normal' humans in the novel suggest subjectivities still dominated by the rational, calculating logic of the *cogito*" (Vint 113). This contrast suggests that the oppositions between human and nonhuman and humane and inhuman do not coincide (Bényei, "Az utolsó krimi" 210). An important function of Isidore is to underscore the separation of being human from being humane: although he has more than his fair share of the latter, he is relegated to a sub-human position. Likewise, in *Westworld* and in the novel *Klara and the Sun*, artificial beings often seem to demonstrate more compassion and care than the human characters visiting cruelties upon them; while in *Borne*, in spite of his monstrous appearance and disturbing characteristics, the "personhood" of the titular character, the biotech creature Borne is never questioned, as opposed to that of the human children, displaying an appalling and wantonly cruel behaviour.

While at first, Deckard also finds ways to rationalise and normalise the cruel treatment of androids that denies them personhood and care (in a similar way as specials are also rejected by society), his encounters with Rachel—the first Nexus-6 he meets and tests, and one he also becomes romantically involved with later on—and Luba contribute to a "new and horribly unique depression" (Dick 143); one that he feels can only be cured, at least temporarily, by purchasing a living goat. Nevertheless, he seems to be losing his ability to perceive humanoid robots as "murderous illegal aliens" (117), becoming "more and more anguished as the boundaries between android response and human response are systematically blurred by the action of the novel" (Wheale 300). His earlier refusal to empathise with androids gives way to a reluctant appreciation of their qualities—such as the singing talent of Luba²⁷—and then to a 'pathological' compassion towards them, which he mostly experiences, remarkably, in relation to females: he "know[s] intellectually that they [are] machines, but [reacts] emotionally anyhow" (Dick 81). This is a change that makes it increasingly difficult for Deckard to exert

to think rationally is abundantly present in android—indeed, in this respect they far exceed many people, including the 'chickenhead' Isidore; their mechanical quality is nothing but a concentrated manifestation of the human capacity for reason, and thus they cast an ironic light on the Cartesian self-definition ("Az utolsó krimi" 212), making it necessary for humans to find another way of establishing and maintaining difference.

²⁷ It is mainly her beautiful voice that sows the seeds of doubt concerning their actions towards Luba. Deckard, conflicted, asks himself: "I don't get it; how can a talent like that be a liability to our society?" (117), but then quickly readjusts, telling himself "it wasn't the talent . . . ; it was *she herself*" (117, my emphasis)—though it is worth noting that her talent could also be deemed offensive, encroaching on artistic creativity, a distinguishing quality monopolized by humans.

what he still thinks of as his moral dominance over his prey. After he confirms—ironically, by performing the Voigt-Kampff test on himself—that he has unconsciously begun to “includ[e] androids in [his] range of empathic identification” (121), a result that propels him to question his previous convictions, doubt is increasingly cast upon on both humans’ indisputable ability and androids’ inability to feel empathy, destabilising the concept of the human that would rely on this singular certainty. This point is reinforced by David Rando’s claim that Dick’s novel “not only raises the possibility that nonhumans possess capacities denied to them, but also assails the well-entrenched assumptions that humans possess capacities we pride ourselves on” (481); while Vinci also suggests that humanity’s purportedly exclusive capacity to empathise is revealed as “chimerical: the humans, perhaps because of their ideological entitlements, demonstrate little to no actual ability to empathize with human and nonhuman others” (“Posthuman” 92). Notably, after the episode with Resch and Luba, Deckard thinks about how Resch is “a menace in exactly the same way, for the same reasons” (Dick 118) as androids are, most likely because of his callous disregard for life (in whatever form); while his conscious decision to withhold empathy potentially makes Resch even more of a threat. As noted by Dinello, “the struggle of the human supremacist” ironically “dooms itself to defeat by giving up its defining characteristic—empathy—in order to defeat the androids” (109). Such issues, connected to the domineering aspects of empathy, will also be raised in the chapter discussing *Klara and the Sun* and André Alexis’s novel *Fifteen Dogs*, where humans’ decision to extend or deny empathy and care towards nonhuman companion creatures (an artificial friend in the former, dogs in the latter), is the primary marker of an uneven, and occasionally quite insidious power dynamic that places humans in a dominant position and leaves nonhuman beings at their mercy.

However, *Androids* also hints at a reversal of such a damaging dynamic, wherein both Deckard and Isidore are temporarily portrayed as entering into mutual reliance with, or at least being dependent on androids and animals. Though he is vaguely aware that the three fugitives are manipulating him by taking advantage of his empathic impulses (Dick 175), Isidore still finds happiness and purpose in the fact that “others depend on [him] now” (174), and cherishes the androids’ company because he believes that “[y]ou have to be with other people . . . In order to live at all” (175). Deckard, on the other hand, asserts after the killing of Luba that “[i]t wouldn’t have been possible for [him] to go on without getting an animal” (146). While he initially wanted to acquire a genuine animal because it confers considerable prestige upon its owner, and because (unlike most humans) he has been tortured by the sense that his previous ‘pet,’ an electric sheep is “gradually demoralizing” him (8), the earlier, superficial desire at this

point turns into a more visceral need. His remark indicates a sense of intense affective entanglement, further complicated by the fact that he needs to spend a night with Rachel in order to be able to carry out the rest of his assignment at all. His conflicted reliance on both the real animal he acquires and on Rachel reveals contradictions within the categorisation of humans and nonhumans, hinting at the sense of a hollowing of a distinctive human essence. Gradually edging closer to a perfect imitation of the human, nonhumans in the novel are apparently becoming more lifelike,²⁸ while humans, like Deckard or Resch, seem to become more technological and in need of certain prosthetics—tests, electric and real animals, and the Mercer experience—to recognise themselves as such; even Isidore assumes an aspect of the machine when he notes that, in the absence of his android companions, “he found himself fading out, becoming strangely like the inert television set which he had just unplugged” (175).

Deckard’s increasing distress reaches its climax after he terminates the last renegade android on his list, an individual named Roy Baty. Crucially, although he is portrayed as one of the most malevolent characters, Baty gives one of the strongest indications of the androids’ capacity to empathise,²⁹ at least with each other. When his wife, Irmgard, is killed by Deckard, Baty “let[s] out a cry of anguish” (191) before lunging at the bounty-hunter and into certain death; a response that, as Rando observes, “leads Deckard to recognize an equivalency: ‘Okay, you loved her,’ Rick said. ‘And I loved Rachael’” (481). Following the completion of his quest—a task that has “become alien to [him]” (Dick 198), causing him to feel that he is “required to violate his own identity” (152)—, Deckard returns home to learn that his goat has been killed by a vindictive Rachel. Devastated and numb, he reacts to the news by flying out into the desert, where he experiences intense hallucinations, recreating the journey of the mysterious Mercer. While Dick’s novel portrays merging with Mercer as mandatory, Deckard has “never really . . . gotten the hang of fusion” (149), and, on previous occasions, appears reluctant to engage with the empathy-box;³⁰ yet before he retires the three remaining Nexus-6, Mercer appears to Deckard to warn him, this time without the use of an empathy box. This not only marks the extent of Deckard’s emotional and nervous exhaustion, but also draws a parallel between him and Isidore, who also fuses spontaneously with Mercer after witnessing the

²⁸ As Rachel herself makes clear, the goal of android evolution is to produce a “type that can’t be distinguished” (Dick 162).

²⁹ Another such indication is connected to Irmgard Baty, who on one occasion, defends Isidore from Pris when she calls him chickenhead: “‘Don’t call him that, Pris,’ Irmgard said; she gave Isidore a look of compassion. ‘Think what he could call *you*’” (136, emphasis in original).

³⁰ This is especially the case when he comes home to his wife with the goat: Iran insists that they must merge with Mercer at once, “in gratitude,” because “it would be immoral to keep [their happiness] for [themselves]” (Dick 148); while Rick resists, fearing that they will “exchange what [they] feel for what [the others] feel” and that their “joy will be lost” (148).

mutilation of a spider by Pris. The fact that both focalisers have such visions of Mercer seems to be a result of their overflowing empathy, apparently beyond their control, as opposed to the ‘normal’ process of merging, which is regulated via the handles on the empathy box, and lasts only until the participant holds onto them. While Mercerism can certainly offer “the shared solace of simulated ‘community’” (Vinci, *Ghost* 153), Tony M. Vinci also argues that it is only “a solipsistic trick through which the populace consumes the simulated pain of others as an authentic expression of their own” (153). Precisely because it enables access to empathy that may be switched on and off at will, merging amounts to a “dilution of pain [and] subjectivity” (153) that, once fusion ends, does not have consequences reverberating in real life, leaving participants just as isolated as before entering Mercer’s realm. In this sense, the empathic experience accessed via the handles, and notably, through *the screen* of the empathy-box, bears a remarkable resemblance in its effect to that what Eliza Aaltola calls “bite-sized empathy” (40),³¹ also discussed in Chapter One in connection with wildlife television, and its occasionally manipulative employment of empathy. As argued by Aaltola, “when rendered as bite-sized . . . [empathy] can surface as a form of tranquil entertainment . . . , for via control the emotions that otherwise hold the potential of destructive unbearableness are rendered manageable . . . and easily experienced” (40).

Thus, at least in the last segment of the novel, Deckard becomes a double of Isidore: both of them develop an unrestricted inter-creatural empathy, perceived as a perversion of the mandatory affective empathy, that cannot be allowed to persist in this society—or only if removed to the periphery, where “deteriorated specials, antheads and chickenheads . . . go through their versions of living” (Dick 159). From Isidore’s perspective, organic and artificial beings are equally alive (67)—a fact that he attributes to the notion that he himself has “deteriorate[d] back down the ladder of evolution” (63)—, and Deckard, too, upon finding a toad (an animal supposed to be completely extinct) in the desert, becomes convinced that the creature is alive; though it only takes a moment for his wife to determine that it is in fact artificial. By the end of the novel, Deckard’s involuntary somatic-affective responses towards all creatures nonhuman, mirroring those of Isidore, exacerbate his sense of alienation to the

³¹ Aaltola describes the notion of bite-sized empathy as a potential response of readers to literature, which, according to her, “can edit our empathy so that it is perfectly controlled, politically pleasing and bite-sized to such a degree that the audience is pacified, and empathy becomes entertainment” (40). Nevertheless, due to the virtual nature of Mercerite merging, portrayed as effectuating a sense of identification—with Mercer as a *character*—which is remarkably similar to that experienced during film-viewing; and given the fact that its purpose is to bring catharsis and perhaps some consolation to the participants, rather than to “evoke genuine moral concern” (Aaltola 40), I suggest that Aaltola’s concept is also well-applicable to the empathy-box experience described in Dick’s novel.

point where he refers to himself as an “unnatural self” (198).³² This suggests that his emotional contamination is not only incongruous with his bounty-hunter identity—even as he feels forced to see through the job that “kept carrying [him] along” (208)—, but also jeopardises his self-definition as a human being. While he feels he has been “defeated in some obscure way” (198), that defeat, which pertains to “an old understanding of self against world,” argues Galvan, “also marks, paradoxically, Rick’s triumph: his new awareness that he lives in fluid conjunction with the technologies that populate his environment,” and his discovery that “[t]here is no human self . . . that is not also other, and no android other that does not partake of self” (426). At the same time, it is this loss of self that grants Deckard an ability to perceive, like Mercer does, “inconspicuous life [in every cinder of the universe]” (Dick 205); an ability that makes him more humane by compelling him to acknowledge that “the electric things have their lives too, paltry as those lives are” (208), and at the same time, strips him of his previous sense of humanity and purpose, as he who was meant to “stand between the Nexus-6 and mankind, a barrier which keeps the two distinct” (121), cannot effectively fulfil that function anymore.

As implied by the novel, androids—“organic entit[ies]” who are “not made out of transistorized circuits like a false animal” (168) and who are, as asserted by Deckard, “really” and “biologically” alive, even if legally not (168)—need to be rejected both because of their disturbing physical proximity and because they reveal repressed bodily aspects of existence, serving as frightening reminders of the biological *and* the mechanical within the human. This suggests that the operation of the anthropological machine involves an inner separation (Agamben 37-38) as well: the animalistic and mechanistic aspects of the human are apparently no less intolerable than the anthropomorphic aspects of the technological nonhuman. In *Androids*, empathy as a connective experience is distorted, reduced to a particular version of the phenomenon, which serves to keep the differentiated image of the human intact, and to obscure the fundamental repression and fracture at the core of its idea. Demonstrating an unsanctioned empathic openness that makes it impossible for them to affectively distinguish organic from inorganic life, and that entails a radical relationality that forces them to recognise their fundamental embeddedness in inter-creatural networks of dependence, the figures of Isidore and Deckard gesture towards the disintegration of the human as an autonomous, independent ontological category. In its ambiguous portrayal of the empathic experience—simultaneously a form of connection and an instrument of dominance and manipulation—, the

³² His inability to make the emotional distinction that he, as an agent of the anthropological machine, must represent, paints him as acutely abnormal in the novel’s society: “his feelings [are] the reverse of those intended. Of those [he’s] accustomed to feel—[is] *required* to feel” (Dick 122, emphasis in original).

novel not only demonstrates the inevitable entanglement of empathy with inter-creatural relations, the primary focus of this dissertation, but also displaces the notion of the human as detached and self-contained. By depicting the human as (co-)constituted through its reliance on prosthetic tools, as well as in its relations with (electric) animals and androids, Dick's text aligns remarkably well with the key tenets of critical posthumanism, aiming to "expos[e] the human as exclusive, unstable and unreliable, a socio-political, economic, ethical concept masquerading as a biological category" (DeFalco, *Curious* 19). Critical posthumanism is understood here as a philosophical perspective that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and the normative definition of the human subject; in the words of prominent theorist Francesca Ferrando, it is a "post-humanism and a post-anthropocentrism: it is 'post' to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based . . . on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions" (29). This strand of posthumanism, committed to the "decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates" (Wolfe xvi), and to affirming an embodied continuity among human and nonhuman creatures, also plays a prominent part in the next segment of this Introduction, which will argue that, despite its problematic aspects, empathy matters, and that its somatic-material elements—particularly the contentious concepts of emotional contagion and embodied mimicry—are due for re-appraisal. The following section argues that there is an intrinsic correlation between the anthropocentric hierarchy of care (C. Adams 15) and what I call the internal hierarchy of empathy, and proposes that dismantling this restrictive vision of caring—described by Carol J. Adams as a framework that treats care as a limited reserve, prioritising human needs above all else, and proclaiming that only after *all* humans are taken care of can concern be extended to nonhumans³³ (16)—requires dismantling the long-standing hierarchical view of empathy.

II. Why does empathy matter?

In her chapter "The War on Compassion," Carol J. Adams challenges the hierarchy of caring "that assumes that people first have to care about other people before they care about animals and that these caring acts are hostile to each other" (15). Tracing the issue back to what she calls the "war on compassion"—inspired by Jacques Derrida's discussion on the "war on pity" (C. Adams 23)—, Adams addresses this hierarchy which "places a boundary on compassion while enforcing a conservative economy of [it]" (16) as extremely problematic, and refutes the

³³ Though Carol Adams talks only about caring being split "at the human-animal border" (16), for my purposes, it is important to incorporate other manifestations of nonhuman existence into this hierarchical vision as well.

view that compassion is a finite resource.³⁴ While the framework presented by *Androids* is more complicated than the one outlined by Adams, since humans apparently *have to care about* animals in order to be *able to empathise* at all, in the novel's world, there are still restrictions imposed on empathy, prescribing which version of it is acceptable and dictating who or what it is permissible to empathise with. It is this limited mode of empathy that, in turn, legitimises the hierarchy of care that classifies specials and androids as undeserving of concern or even consideration. Constructed to justify and maintain the subordination of certain, human *and* nonhuman forms of life, this is a sinister structure, which, however, may also be read as a self-protective mechanism aimed at preventing the kind of overwhelming experience that both Deckard and Isidore eventually undergo. Indeed, by developing an extended empathy that allows them to empathise with and thereby care about everything, Isidore and Deckard not only breach the terms of social existence—being unable and, I suggest, eventually unwilling to enact the kind of separation deemed necessary by their society—but are also subject to a sense of illimitable connectivity (entailing, in the case of Deckard, a sense of perpetual merging with Mercer) that leaves them, at least in the eyes of their society, unbearably vulnerable.

This may further explain why Isidore, despite being the character most prone to engaging in the most highly valued version of empathy, is not only banished to the margins of society, but also profoundly dehumanised. Though *Androids* seems to give priority to affective empathy—which, posited as an instinctual evolutionary force, strengthens a link between humans and (herd) animals, and at the same time, excludes androids both from the realm of humanity and the realm of those worthy of care—, it is still implied that, even if captured by the proper form of empathy *affectively*, one should remain able to make a difference *cognitively*; a capacity that both Isidore and Deckard seem to lose along the way. Significantly, Isidore's (and presumably, all other specials') degeneration, primarily defined as cognitive deterioration, apparently also results in an excessive openness, which not only threatens with the dissolution of human subjectivity that rests on differentiation and (emotional) withdrawal from the androids, but also points to the disavowed animal aspects within the human. Simultaneously invoking the image of animal and machine, Isidore's figure fuses affect with animality and automatism, pointing towards a deeper connection between the hierarchy of empathy and the hierarchy of care. I suggest that these two structures mutually manifest themselves in and

³⁴ Contrarily to the view proposed by Carol J. Adams, Rachel Adams points to asymmetries “of power, ability and resources” (695) that frequently characterise the dynamics and structures of care, and argues that care is indeed “a limited resource that is unjustly extracted from women and people of color, who are worn away with the toil of sustaining others while their own needs go unmet” (R. Adams 696). This is also a valid point that I shall address later on.

influence each other: more precisely, the anthropocentric hierarchy of care builds on, but also bleeds into, the hierarchy of empathy.

As mentioned earlier, philosophers and psychologists tend to distinguish between somatic-affective and imaginative-cognitive versions or components of empathy (Coplan and Goldie, Goldman, M. Smith, Sands, Aaltola); however, I argue that this distinction frequently implies a hierarchy as well, since most accounts tend to favour cognitive and imaginative variations of empathy as more important, sophisticated or advanced.³⁵ Thus, by a hierarchy of empathy, here I refer to this common perception that cognitive empathy (“the capacity to understand another person’s state of mind from her perspective” [Spaulding 13], mostly conceptualised as involving a *volitional* mental simulation of another’s internal state or experience) is somehow superior to affective or somatic empathy, usually conceived as relying on visceral, unconscious, and instinctual responses like emotional contagion or mimicry, and defined as an “ephemeral and contingent affective state that is hardly more than a somatic reflex, which is shared by *all animal species*” (Assmann and Detmers 5, my emphasis). My contention is that the framework that prioritises cognitive variants of empathy—frequently considered as a *uniquely human* quality—over affective forms which have been linked to animal existence, usually associated with a lower, somatic realm, both echoes and reinforces the logic that gives absolute primacy to human perspectives, interests and concerns and denies nonhuman beings the most basic level of recognition and mattering. But before I move on to a discussion on how these stratified structures operate, and to my exploration of how the cinematic and literary works analysed here enact or hint at the subversion of these, it is necessary to address the roots of these twin hierarchies, and make the case for the affirmative potentials of affective resonance and emotional contagion in inter-creatural relations.

II. 1. Mapping the internal hierarchy of the empathic process

The model in which cognitive-imaginative versions of empathy are praised as more “mature” (Hoffman 63)³⁶, or “higher-level” (Coplan and Goldie xxxiii, M. Smith “Empathy” 104) in contrast to “primitive” (Keen, *Empathy* 4) embodied versions of empathy reflects the philosophical tradition that prioritises the mind over matter and the body, rooted in Cartesian

³⁵ Notable exceptions include Elisa Aaltola, film scholar Jane Stadler and phenomenologists like Dan Zahavi, whose positions I also align with and which I discuss later in more detail.

³⁶ To be fair, Hoffman’s complex model (and even Coplan’s notion of empathy) include affective elements *as well as* cognitive ones; however, the hierarchy persists in Hoffman’s delineation of the stages of empathic distress (discussed earlier in this introduction), while Coplan insists on the kind of affective matching that is not the result of emotional contagion or other instinctual processes (which lack “cognitive evaluation or complex appraisal” [“Understanding” 8]) but of “other-oriented perspective-taking” (8).

substance dualism. Indeed, the history of empathy is closely connected to the history of consciousness or cognition; as noted by Dan Zahavi, “the initial discussion of empathy was . . . motivated by a preoccupation with the problem of other minds” (34), that is, the philosophical inquiry into how to determine the mindedness of others. In a similar vein, Coplan and Goldie’s assertion that empathy “has been seen as important in relation to our capacity to gain a grasp of the content of other people’s minds” (ix) also suggests that it was originally conceived as an epistemological tool. This also helps explain why the cognitive type—sometimes also called theory of mind³⁷ or mind reading (Weik von Mossner, *Affective* 80; Breithaupt 23; Maibom 1)—came to be seen as the primary instrument of conducting that inquiry (Sands 4). It has been traditionally held that by “allow[ing] us to make logical inferences about another person’s situation” (Weik von Mossner, *Affective* 80) and generally helping us to an “*understanding* of [their] emotions, thoughts, states, desires, and preferences” (Breithaupt 23, emphasis in original), cognitive empathy guarantees a more dispassionate, more observational, and therefore, more ethical position. Yet, although the inherent connection between cognitive empathy and knowledge is generally unchallenged, the structure of that connection remains contested, as views differ on whether empathy should be regarded as a means of gaining understanding, or vice versa, whether knowledge itself is a condition of empathy.

When it comes to attaining knowledge or understanding of the other, the majority of scholars³⁸ agree that higher-level empathy—what I will, for the sake of simplicity, mostly refer to as cognitive empathy—relies greatly on imaginative simulation (a process wherein “the observer replicates or reconstructs the target’s experiences” [Coplan “Understanding” 6]) or perspective-taking³⁹ to provide insight. In most accounts, such “intersubjective reasoning” (Eisenberg and Eggum 78) can mainly unfold in two ways. One of these would be projection, in which, according to Elisa Aaltola, the empathiser imagines how *she herself* would experience the situation of or feel in the place of the other (28); the other case is when the empathiser “simulate[s] what the *other person* is undergoing by imaginatively exchanging personas with

³⁷ In the succinct summary of Jane Stadler, theory of mind “refers to cognitive processes of attributing and understanding others’ mental states” (“Empathy” 324).

³⁸ Here, notably, Elisa Aaltola diverges from most others in her characterisation of empathic processes, distinguishing projective and simulative empathy from cognitive empathy. For Aaltola, cognitive empathy only involves a kind of perception, wherein “empathy is something akin to ‘translation,’” allowing us to “‘read’ behaviours in others and almost immediately come up with a category for the emotion we take them to be undergoing” (57). Most importantly, she suggests that unlike in projective and simulative empathy, *there is no perspective-taking involved* in cognitive empathy: in her understanding, “cognitive empathy gains impetus from approaching others via a rationalizing distance” and “is founded on the third-person perspective . . . that one seeks to construct from observation and inference” (58).

³⁹ In several accounts, higher-level empathy is expressly equated with perspective-taking (e.g. Coplan and Goldie xxxiv; Shamay-Tsoory (227)).

her” (28). This “simulative empathy” (which, according to Aaltola, is also a form of projection) corresponds to what others have called other-oriented perspective-taking (Coplan “Understanding” 6) or other-focussed personal imagining (M. Smith “Empathy” 101), which consists in imagining how the other must feel from *the other’s perspective* instead of one’s own. Ensuing from a structural logic that privileges cognitive empathy, the preferred form of perspective-taking (accepted as empathic) is other-oriented, since this is the kind where one retains a cognitive sense of separation from the object of empathy. Conversely, projection is often said to correspond to “self-oriented perspective-taking” that can lead only to “a type of pseudo-empathy” (Coplan “Understanding” 12), since, as explained by Heather Battaly, in such perspective-shifting the empathiser is not required to differentiate between herself and the target (286). On similar grounds, identification—“often generated by emotional contagion, within which boundaries between oneself and the other disappear” (Aaltola 201)—has been frequently criticised, or even dismissed as non-empathic for its implication of a complete merging of perspectives.

It must be noted, though, that, the notion of identification⁴⁰ and its role in the empathic experience are also much-debated issues among philosophers and psychologists: views differ as to whether identification should be considered a requirement (A. Morton 321), a result (Keen, *Empathy* xii), or even a synonym of empathy (Carroll, “On Some” 179). As explained by Jane Stadler, the notion of identification entailing a possible “loss of self” is rooted in early models of empathy, more precisely, in “Lipps’s idea of empathic merging or ‘fusion’ [that] has led to concerns that empathy may either result in a loss of self or a projection of oneself into another” (“Empathy” 321). According to Stueber, Theodor Lipps argued that “empathy, especially aesthetic empathy, leads to a complete identification between the observer and the movement of the observed persons or objects” (Lipps cited in Stueber, “Rediscovering” 8); yet he also mentions that Lipps’s interpretation of empathic identification has been widely criticised for its implications of self-loss. Amy Coplan is also of the opinion that when the kind of identification occurs where the boundaries between self and other are disrupted, so that self-other distinction is temporarily lacking, such an experience cannot even be called empathic, because “empathy proper” requires a preservation of “a separate sense of self” (“Understanding” 15). In fact, such

⁴⁰ Martha Nussbaum also poses questions about “how this identification . . . works” (“Compassion” 34), although she restricts her inquiry to identification with another who is suffering. According to her, some passages in the work of Adam Smith suggest that in identification, “one actually think[s], for the time being, that one is the sufferer,” while Schopenhauer’s text on compassion (translated by Nussbaum herself) implies that when one identifies with another, “one imagine[s] one’s own responses as fused in some mysterious way with those of the sufferer” (“Compassion” 34).

“clear self-other differentiation” (15) has been portrayed by a number of theorists as vital: along with Coplan, Martha Nussbaum has insisted on the necessity of “retaining awareness of [one’s] separateness” from the sufferer in “empathetic identification” (“Compassion” 35); Martin Hoffman similarly argued that in mature empathy, empathisers preserve a cognitive awareness that they and the object(s) of empathy are equally distinct physical entities possessing their own interiorities and mental states, which are not confused in the empathetic process (63); and Assmann and Detmers have also noted that while a sense of resemblance between subject and object of empathy is generated via the imaginative adoption of another’s perspective, “more complex forms of empathy” necessitate “a clear understanding of the difference between self and other is the precondition for more complex forms of empathy” (6). Thus, a prevalent view is that empathic perspective-taking cannot amount to (absolute) identification, and self-other differentiation (ostensibly blurred in more reflexive kind of processes like emotional contagion) is apparently designated as an “ethical imperative” (Major 126) and one of the main conditions for empathy proper (Stueber, “Empathy” 138).

In accordance with this structure of empathy that prioritises the conscious “effort and regulation involved in other-oriented perspective-taking” and conceives of empathy as a “motivated and controlled process, which is neither automatic nor involuntary” (Coplan, “Understanding” 14), the only kind of identification perceived to be in possession of an ethical potential is the one that is confined to the mind and its imaginative faculties, while the temporary affective sense of fusion ostensibly involved in emotional contagion, “best understood as complete identification or immersion” (Sands 3) is treated not only as non-empathic but virtually as dangerous. In its original definition, formulated by Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo, and Richard Rapson, emotional contagion is “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and consequently, to converge emotionally” (81). Since it involves a “transmission of emotion [that] occurs via unconscious processes and is involuntary” (Coplan, “Understanding” 8), via emotional contagion, one may even end up “introject[ing] the other’s desires, feelings, and thoughts, substituting them for [one’s] own” (15). This is widely considered to be problematic because, without the ability to disentangle one’s own feelings from those of the other one perceives, emotional contagion may lead to a state of contagious distress (also called personal or emotional distress, that must be differentiated from Hoffman’s *empathic* distress described earlier), which may happen when the empathiser perceives another in a state of anguish and responds by becoming distressed herself, so that the focus is on one’s own discomfort instead of trying to alleviate that of the target (Coplan, “Understanding” 12).

As also emphasised by Aaltola, such over-arousal can be highly aversive, “as effective care and action depend on one’s ability to separate between one’s own distress and that of the other” (201).

This aversion to or dismissal⁴¹ of such an instinctual process, I suggest, not only results from the threat of “painful emotional overload” (Aaltola 201) and its ethical consequences (such as the lack of altruistic action), but also points to an anxiety related to the excessive features of the somatic resonance involved in the phenomenon, and to the resulting fear of vulnerability. While cognitive empathy as imaginative perspective-taking allows for a controlled and controllable type of empathic engagement, affective empathy, with its embodied contents (*including*, in my understanding, emotional contagion), has a potential for inducing “a formidable, compelling and potentially wounding state which entices us to note bonds and similarities between ourselves and others” (Aaltola 85). This sense of anxiety, related to the insistence that a certain separation between oneself and others must be kept intact, is also implied in Aaltola, at pains to keep her conceptualisation of affective empathy untainted by emotional contagion (an issue I will return to promptly), and it is also picked up by literary scholar William Major, who notes that Coplan’s emphasis on cognitive empathic attachments over emotive contagion serves “to create a firm distinction between what we can ostensibly control (cognition) and what we apparently can’t (contagion)” (Major 126), the latter failing the empathy test “because it does not retain the figure of a differentiated self” (126). Yet such a preference for cognitive empathy, apparently manageable and not so volatile as the affective transfer unfolding in “relatively automatic, unintentional, uncontrollable” (Hatfield et al., 5) ways, also seems to efface the reality that “the boundary between self and other” (Major 126), especially when it comes to empathic encounters, seems to be a “good deal more permeable” than asserted by Coplan, for example (Major 126).

Such a sense of permeability—a latent, disavowed, yet ever-imminent possibility in empathic engagement—and the anxiety linked to the potential dissolution of boundaries are also central concerns for critical posthumanism. A discourse and practice intent on interrogating the limited and limiting notion of “the human”, and on re-configuring it as a situated, embodied being—not only constantly in connection with but *co-constructed via* connection with all kinds of naturecultural entities and agencies—, the aims of posthumanism are relevant to most of the

⁴¹ With some exceptions, emotional contagion is at best labelled by philosophers and psychologists as a “sub-type” (Coplan, “Understanding” 9) of empathy; or together with affective mimicry and other varieties of “lower-level, non-conscious processes” (Coplan and Goldie xxxix), seen as a “promp[t] to, and pro[p] within, fully-fledged imaginative projects” (M. Smith, “Empathy” 101).

analyses in this dissertation, including that of Dick's novel. Due to his proclivity for an unrestricted identification with androids as well as electric animals, Isidore's figure in *Androids* encapsulates both the anxiety incited by posthumanist efforts meant to destabilise the meaning of the "human", and the oppressive fear of exposure⁴² potentially cued by affective-somatic openness and the overwhelming empathic immersion that may emerge in its wake. Yet, subject to a boundless and transgressive affective relationality—which "stress[es] the human as always already entangled in, indebted to, encumbered and produced by the nonhuman" (DeFalco, *Curious* 16)—, Isidore may also be conceived as a model for the inter-creatural empathy I aim to explore here, which is made possible precisely by the sense of an intimate susceptibility to all kinds of bodies and affects that is rejected by *strictly* cognitive configurations of empathy.

With its focus on shared embodiment, vulnerability, and inter-creatural relations, and "its invocation of what beings, bonds, and worlds might become possible and apparent if and when human exceptionalism is abandoned" (DeFalco, *Curious* 8), the themes and objectives of critical posthumanism align well with my interrogation of the hierarchy of empathy. As I have demonstrated, this structure favours a purportedly controlled and controllable version of cognitive-imaginative empathy, which, I contend, also largely denies, or at least heavily restricts the possibility of empathic engagement with nonhuman creatures. The prospects and limits of perspective-taking when it comes to nonhuman beings have long been subject to debate, with many academics claiming that it is impossible. John Berger emphasizes how knowledge about animals is always caught up in a power dynamic which ultimately negates the animal in its "pure" being: "animals are always the observed. . . . They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them" (406). In her book on empathy and animal ethics, Elisa Aaltola also addresses this dilemma related to "the boundary of understanding" (166), referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Nagel, who both claim that humans, situated and embedded in human contexts, are unable to attain any real understanding of what it is like to be a nonhuman animal (167). Not only has the role of empathy in gaining inter-creatural knowledge been subject to considerable doubt, but certain kinds have even been referred to as detrimental, especially in the context of posthumanist efforts: Sands notes that "an empathy dependent on projection or simulation might lose its way across species, inadvertently

⁴² Feeling connected to them by their creaturely state and by their ostracisation in earthly society, Isidore expressly states that the artificiality of his android companions, and the ensuing alterity of their way of being "makes no difference" for him (Dick 188-189), and also admits to discovering in himself a new sense of vulnerability, resulting from his reliance on nonhuman others.

reinforcing an anthropomorphic anthropocentrism” (20), while Aaltola asserts that “non-human creatures, whose difference is often staggering . . . cannot be completely grasped by the human imagination” (109).

Yet, in agreement with Aaltola, I suggest that the fact that “there are limits to knowing” (109) nonhuman others does not, by any means, imply that all attempts at inter-creatural empathy are futile (167): while cognitive understanding is certainly, necessarily restricted, there are no such limits to affect, potentially eliciting resonance, emotional contagion and affective empathy, long considered inferior. The affective capacities of the body have long been marginalised (originating from the Cartesian tradition that treats them as untrustworthy), conceived as a threat to the ethical potential inherent in the “cool, deliberate mode of empathy” (Stadler, “The Empath” 422); but now, it is increasingly recognised that embodied versions of empathy and the aspects of “intercorporeality” (Gallese “Bodily” 4) and somatic attunement they enable are well worth reconsidering. As explained by neuroscientists Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, embodied simulation “constitute[s] a basic functional mechanism of humans’ brain, by means of which actions, emotions and sensations of others are mapped onto the observer’s own sensory-motor and visceromotor neural representations” (“Embodying” 184). Embodied simulation (ES) potentially involves what Gallese and Guerra call “Feeling of Body” (as opposed to mindreading or theory of mind), which can enable “a direct access to the world of others by means of the ES-mediated capacity to share the meaning of actions, basic motor intentions, feelings, and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification with and connectedness to others” (“Embodying” 193). Supported by recent findings in cognitive neuroscience, Gallese’s claim is that “before and below [the conscious cognitive processes of mindreading] is *intercorporeality* as the main source of knowledge we directly gather about others” (“Bodily” 4, my emphasis). Intercorporeality, in turn, is underpinned by mirroring mechanisms⁴³ activated in embodied simulation—a description that, as I will show in the next segment of this Introduction, corresponds to my understanding of the relationship between the forms of mimicry involved in somatic empathy (Hanich) and emotional contagion. Such simulation, Gallese asserts, despite being “conceived of as a non-conscious, pre-reflective functional mechanism of the brain–body system” (“Bodily” 3-4), does not “engender any confusion between self and other” (7); thus undermining arguments according to which

⁴³ In this process of mirroring, Gallese explains, “the same cortical regions underlying the experience of emotions and sensations are also activated when witnessing others’ emotions and sensations, such as touch, pain and pleasant touch” (“Bodily” 3).

instinctual processes like embodied mimicry and emotional contagion cannot be considered empathic because they efface the self-other distinction.

Though distinctions between cognitive and affective manifestations of empathy seem to persist⁴⁴—in spite of assertions that they “may well prove to be of limited use, not least because our sense of the moral value of empathy assumes a connection between the two [varieties]” (Sands 2)—, attempts at assimilating the disparate forms of empathy have been given a new impetus by recent (and somewhat interrelated) theoretical developments, including the nonhuman turn (Grusin 2015) and the concept of embodied cognition, closely related to the theory of embodied simulation discussed above. As explained by Antonio Damasio in his seminal *Descartes’ Error*, one of the central arguments of the embodied mind theory is that “mental phenomena can be fully understood only in the context of an organism’s interacting in an environment” (xvii), and the organism itself is conceived “as an ensemble” whose “interaction [with the environment] is neither of the body alone nor of the brain alone” (xvii). The idea bears close relation to the phenomenological critique of “the atomistic model of having and knowing mindedness” (Aaltola 104), which states that “we cannot know the minds of others in isolation, for understanding their emotions cannot arise from standing afar, encapsulated in one’s own psyche” and that “the wiser, more realistic choice is to note how minds are constantly made evident via our bodies” (104). The Cartesian split between mind and body—also implicated in the restrictive, hierarchical vision of empathy—together with human-animal, nature-culture dichotomies that anthropocentric cultures maintain (Aaltola 107-108) reduces human beings to rational beings, repressing their ability to engage with and come to know nonhuman creatures, at least to some extent (107). Revealing “human exceptionalism as a destructive illusion that props up exploitative hierarchies of being and denies human animality, thereby obscuring human ecological embeddedness and embodied vulnerability (Braidotti cited in DeFalco, *Curious* 19), the insights of posthumanism are particularly helpful to my attempt to expose the dynamics at work in the hierarchies of empathy and care represented in the filmic and literary narratives analysed in this dissertation. Through dissecting the role of perception, cognition and, particularly, affect in the empathic processes the selected works of cinema and literature envision and engender, I aim to show how these texts and films enact, expose and enact, whether explicitly or not, a subversion of those hierarchies.

⁴⁴ Notably, Karsten Stueber (“Empathy” 138-139), and especially Amy Coplan have resisted such endeavours, with Coplan having provided “theoretical and methodological reasons for resisting the assimilation of lower-level or basic empathy and higher-level empathy or perspective-shifting” (Coplan and Goldie xxxiv).

II. 2. The case for the affirmative potentials of affective resonance and emotional contagion – the matter of inter-creatural empathy

In much of the psychological and philosophical literature on empathy, the terms affect and emotion are conflated with each other. While I believe that there are some important distinctions to be made between the two forms of feeling,⁴⁵ distinctions that are also relevant to the critique of the hierarchical view of versions of empathy, the analyses that make up this dissertation will demonstrate that the relationship between them is characterised by fluctuation and cyclicity. As explained by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino in their introduction to the various approaches to affect as they have emerged “across a spectrum from neuroscience to cultural theory” (5), at one end of the spectrum there are neuroscientists and psychologists who “try to explain how emotions register in people” and who “with the notable exception of the late Teresa Brennan—tend to focus on affects as contained within, or at least originating in, a human organism” (5). On the other hand, philosophers and cultural theorists like Brian Massumi and Kathleen Stewart “conceive of [affect] as ‘virtual’ and ‘autonomous,’ co-produced by contingent and shifty assemblages” (Bladow and Ladino 5). In line with the latter strand of affect theory, Bladow and Ladino distinguish between affect, understood as an “asignifying, precognitive bodily feeling” (5) and emotion, described “as consciously interpreted or narrated affects” (5). In a similar vein, drawing on Massumi as well as Lawrence Grossberg, Sianne Ngai also acknowledges that there are compelling arguments for distinguishing between affect and emotion “on the basis of a subjective/objective divide” and “in terms of oppositions like narrative/nonnarrative or semiotic/asignifying” (Ngai 26). Yet, she approaches “the difference between affect and emotion . . . as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” (27). Ngai’s assertion is that “affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; *less* ‘sociolinguistically fixed,’ but by no means code-free or meaningless; *less* ‘organized in response to our interpretations of situations,’ but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers” (Ngai 27, emphasis in original); an approach that I also largely adopt in the following chapters.

Ngai’s discussion of emotion and affect is especially pertinent to an analysis of emotional contagion, a controversial phenomenon that, despite its name, is usually taken to

⁴⁵ Emotion, according to Noël Carroll, is made up of “a cognitive component, such as a belief or a thought about some person, place, or thing, real or imagined; and a feeling component (a bodily change and/or a phenomenological experience), where, additionally, the feeling state has been caused by the relevant cognitive state, such as a belief or a belief-like state” (*Beyond Aesthetics* 221). However, it is worth noting that on many accounts, the development of affect is taken to *precede* emotion.

refer “to states that . . . are not always categorized properly as emotions, such as certain reflex responses” (Carroll, “Empathy” 288). Tending to characterise it as a process that does not “involve the imagination, nor [is it] based on any cognitive evaluation or complex appraisal” and that “operates much like a *form of perception*” (Coplan, “Understanding” 8, my emphasis), most conceptualisations of emotional contagion do not reflect on the discrepancy between the term and the phenomenon it describes; yet, I think it is significant. I would suggest that emotional contagion may actually function as a transitional process between affective reverberations and embodied mimicry (which are reflexive, visceral and beyond conscious control) and empathic reactions that are more emotional in the sense that they include “a cognitive element *in addition to* this bodily feeling” (Ingram 23, my emphasis). As such, it can pave the way for speculative empathy—a mode of inter-creatural connection that I want to put forward here—by simultaneously establishing a material continuity between the beings in contact (including vicarious and speculative relating as induced via literary fiction and film) and foregrounding the tension between an instinctive, embodied impression of similarity and the emotive recognition of otherness.

Emotional contagion hinges on a sense of proximity that is rejected as non-empathic by many traditional approaches, because it relies on and reveals processes of automatism and mimicry that are perceived as uncanny, implying both a loss of control and a degree of disavowed mutuality. In the speculative empathy cued by emotional contagion, the empathiser is not an agent performing an act of volitional insight, but a *receptive* participant in a process that flows in-between embodied entities, responding *reflexively* via affective reverberation and somatic attunement to the other’s expressions. But before I delve more deeply into this conceptualisation of inter-creatural empathy, I want to briefly delineate how emotional contagion and the various forms of embodied mimicry feed into and are entangled with affective empathy, a system of affective-sensory fluctuation that is essential to my following discussions of how speculative empathy transpires. Elisa Aaltola asserts that, while affective empathy “is immediate” (82) and involves “[r]esonation [that] is not . . . something that we infer but something that comes spontaneously, without effort and often without delay” (82), it also “differs from *emotional contagion*, wherein we unreflectively confuse the emotions of others with those of our own” (83, emphasis in original). In agreement with several other theorists (see e.g. Coplan 2011, Wispé 1987, M. Smith 2011), Aaltola states that, in emotional contagion, “the distinction between oneself and the other is momentarily lost, as we fail to notice where our emotions originate from” (83). However, relying on the observations of cognitive film theorists (e.g. Carl Plantinga), and on the work of Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (who came

up with the original definition of emotional contagion), philosopher Stephen Davies convincingly argues that “common sense and experience suggest that one is more likely to catch another’s mood by recognizing his emotions and signals of affect than by being unaware of them” (140). Following Davies, I suggest that emotional contagion can arise even if one is very well aware of the source of the contagious emotions, and does not necessarily result in “the origins of emotions . . . becoming blurred or muddled” (Aaltola 83).

In my conceptualisation, emotional contagion is a transitional and transitory process rooted in various forms of embodied mimicry, providing vital scaffolding for affective empathy.⁴⁶ Though the hierarchy of empathy persists in most of their accounts, such an understanding is confirmed by a number of theorists and psychologists: Maibom describes emotional contagion and affective empathy as “deeply interconnected structures” (23), defining the former as “the most basic affective reaction to the emotions of others that is still empathic in nature” (25), Assmann and Detmers also refer to empathic mimicry and contagion as the first, “basic physiological level” (5) of empathy, while Dan Zahavi explains that “on the phenomenological account” (40), the features of emotional contagion such as being an involuntary bottom-up process and “get[ting] triggered by direct sensory engagement with [another] expressing an emotion” are very much characteristic of “basic empathy” (40). Regarding the presence of mimicry in emotional contagion, film scholars Carl Plantinga and Julian Hanich offer the most useful and convincing typology: relying on the original definition by Hatfield et al that also emphasises mimicry, Plantinga approaches emotional contagion as a result of various forms of embodied mimicry, particularly affective mimicry, “as induced by facial feedback” (“The Scene” 242).⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Hanich, with reference to Plantinga, constructs a model of somatic empathy as potentially comprised of sensation, motor and affective mimicry, the first involving unintentional and unreflective inner replication of physical sensations (particularly painful ones) similar to that of the perceived character (182), the second being “a weak or partial simulation of someone else’s physical motion” (183),⁴⁸ and the last, affective mimicry, described as “the phenomenon whereby we—pre-cognitively—mimic an emotion or affect expressed by someone else” (183). To avoid confusion among the empathy types I will be discussing throughout this dissertation, I will refer to these processes

⁴⁶ Some, like psychologist-neuroscientist Simone G. Shamay-Tsoory actually mention affective empathy and emotional contagion as synonyms (227).

⁴⁷ Murray Smith concurs that affective mimicry occurs “via the mechanism of facial feedback” because, “[w]hen we witness legible instances of the facial expressions associated with certain basic kinds of affective state—the so-called ‘basic’ emotions—we are apt to simulate the feeling associated with the expression” (“Empathy” 101).

⁴⁸ Referring to motor mimicry, Amy Coplan similarly notes that it generates a kind of “activation and feedback” that are crucial processes “involved in [emotional] contagion” (“Understanding” 8).

collectively as embodied mimicry or somatic resonance. Crucially, in Hanich's approach, somatic empathy is "an abrupt and reflex-like response" (104) that has a *compulsory* quality" (105, emphasis in original) and that "affects us directly, pre-cognitively through emotional contagion" (183). I suggest that it is precisely in its irresistible nature, as well as in the *momentary* loss of distinction it entails that emotional contagion's subversive yet affirmative potential lies: its mimetic components foreground permeability between the purported boundaries of self and other, engendering a sense of temporary fusion—rather than *confusion*—that disrupts those boundaries but also serves as a basis for de- and reconstructing the necessary distance, now with this new awareness of affective continuity in mind. Indeed, such an understanding of emotional contagion and its incorporation of the other's affective-somatic expressions via mimicry can be correlated with Gallese's findings about embodied simulation, wherein emotional contagion emerges as a form of intercorporeality. Yet, as Gallese has argued, and as I will show, such a connection does not preclude further, more emotive and even speculative responses, but its direct confrontation with a sense of embodied-affective similarity in others opens us up to a possibility of further (self)-reflection, and maybe, of feeling our way around a balanced, non-invasive relationship with the other.

It is also remarkable that many of the characteristics of emotional contagion—such as its immediacy, its instantaneous, *perception*-like quality (Coplan, "Understanding" 8), and its unavoidable, automatic emergence (Hanich 105)—appear as elements of Aaltola's conceptualisation of affective⁴⁹ and embodied empathy. Unlike most other scholars, she differentiates between these two modes of empathy, which are usually treated as interchangeable terms in the philosophical and psychological literature.⁵⁰ However, due to the fact that I conceive of affect itself as an immutable *embodied* capacity for expression and relating inherent in all kinds of lived bodies, my understanding of affective empathy also incorporates what Aaltola conceptualises as embodied relating. She states that, in affective empathy, "we need to resonate . . . with [the other's] emotions in order to understand them" (105), and explains that such resonance actually "rests on theory of mind, although this theory is channelled differently than in cognitive empathy: in the latter, theory of mind entwines with

⁴⁹ Aaltola describes affective empathy as *immediate*, a process based in resonance that is not "something we infer but something that comes spontaneously, without effort and often without delay" (82); and by way of example, she refers to the common occurrence of "witness[ing] someone undergoing sorrow and begin[ning] to feel tearful" (82): a phenomenon that is usually understood as a typical instance of emotional contagion.

⁵⁰ For instance, Jane Stadler uses "affective empathy" as a synonym of "embodied simulation" ("The Empath" 413). She also suggests that the variety in terminology is only due to the fact that various disciplines have found different names to describe the same phenomenon, mentioning that "what neuroscientists now term 'embodied simulation'" is "what phenomenologists have recently come to refer to as 'kinaesthetic empathy' or 'somatic empathy'" ("Empathy" 322).

rational reflection and observation, and in the former, it entwines with affective attunement” (Aaltola 83). For embodied empathy, “our ability to tune into others on a somatic level” (104), on the other hand, “instantaneous communication suffices,” (105), which she conceptualises as unfolding “perhaps without a hint of emotion, via somatic involvement” (105). Taking its cue from Scheler and Zahavi, Aaltola’s account defines embodied empathy as *perception*, wherein, contrarily to affective empathy, experiences “are not formed of resonance” (109)—which, in her conceptualisation, is the result of “perceiving emotions in others” which “activates representations of similar states in oneself” (82). Instead, in this form of empathy, “one forms emotions as a way of conceptualizing and responding to what the other is undergoing”⁵¹ so that it is the other “as a subject, rather than her particular emotion, which is the focus” (109). Whereas affective empathy involves the other’s movement toward and entering of the self, leading to the empathiser’s immersion in the other’s emotions (129), embodied empathy is bi-directional: “there is a dynamic, co-constituting movement at the borders between self and other” (129). Such a movement, however, is also applicable to my understanding of affective empathy, which incorporates contagious attunement and somatic resonance that are also “grounded in shared embodiment and on reading the somatic expressions of another’s mind” (111); nor does it necessarily consist in “feel[ing] [exactly] what the other feels” or lead to, as my subsequent analyses show, “the impression that one fully knows another” (109).

Thus, though this dissertation benefits greatly from her insightful discussion of the varieties of empathy, I am not entirely convinced of the usefulness of such a separation of embodied and affective empathy. Even more importantly, in my reading of the selected literary and cinematic works, I shall try to demonstrate, in contrast to Aaltola, that emotional contagion and the immediate, intense corporeal-sensory attunement it brings to the fore have considerable potentials for both inter-creatural empathy in a broader, and speculative empathy in a more particular sense. Such an affirmative potential (largely neglected so far) lies in the way in which it can integrate affect, which “dissolves the self-contained interiority of the individual and opens it to new connections and recombinations” (Vermeulen, *Contemporary* 8), and emotion, which can bring a type of experiential insight that is not essentially about securing full understanding of others’ mental contents. Even as she stresses “that next to similarities lie vast diversities and unlikeness” (110) and that “even though embodied empathy enables communication and understanding, . . . it also highlights how many of the behaviours of others remain distinct and

⁵¹ Aaltola argues that embodied empathy spurs “distinct, even wholly different emotions that the observation of the other’s mental contents awake. We do not imitate the emotion of the other but instead respond to it with an original emotion branching from ourselves, and thereby the fear of the other can be met with, say, sadness” (109).

elusive and thereby brings forth the fact that the other is always partly impenetrable in her specificity” (109), Aaltola’s focus often remains on an “ability to express, *interpret* and *understand* mental states” (104, my emphasis), which is key even to her concept of embodied empathy: an “important channel for knowing non-human minds” (108). Building on, but also diverging in some aspects from her admirable work on empathy, I intend to explore a sense of feeling-with that does not rely on, nor does it necessarily (aim to) result in understanding or knowledge of the other, and trace it as it emerges in the works of cinema and literature included in the chapters.

In this sense, my approach takes inspiration from Laura Marks’s notion of empathic nonunderstanding, a “relationship that gives up the self’s need for constant affirmation” and that “raises the possibility not of identifying across a chasm but establishing communication along a continuum” (*Touch* 39), with the result that “we may be pulled into a more material understanding of our connection with [other creatures]” (*Touch* 39). It is also undeniable that, to some extent, empathy—at least in its more traditional conceptualisations—too is burdened by the condescension associated with kindred concepts such as pity and compassion;⁵² an asymmetry that needs to be addressed. Yet, as I will show in my analyses of the selected filmic and literary works, empathy also has the potential for a more balanced, *reciprocal* kind of relating, where the beings in relation do not dominate one another.

As noted earlier, my analyses are underpinned by the attempt to expand the sphere of inter-creatural empathy, even to beings that are normally not even considered sentient *or* conscious. Though sentience and consciousness are often treated as synonyms, sentience—defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the quality of being able to experience feelings”—first and foremost refers to the capacity to *feel* and thus may be described as ‘affective consciousness’. Sentience thus highlights the basic ability to have feelings and perceive sensations, rather than a cognitive awareness or understanding of such affective impressions implied by consciousness. Claiming that sentience is part of consciousness, Austen Clark also notes that

[g]enerally sensation is placed at the very bottom of the various hierarchies of complexity leading up to the summit of self-conscious mental states. In one simple sense of the word ‘conscious’ . . . [i]f it can see, hear, feel, or in some way sense something of its surroundings, then it is conscious. Such ‘creature consciousness’ is phylogenetically widespread, extending as far and as wide as the receipt of the capacity to sense. (2)

⁵² As made clear by Assmann and Detmers, such a sense of condescension is due to the fact that pity and compassion are mostly “unidirectional” and usually (though not necessarily) “flow from a person in a *subject position* who is in a neutral state towards a person in an *object position* who is in a bad state” (4, my emphasis).

Such a hierarchy of mindedness, as I will show in the subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter Two and Three, also has implications for the hierarchy of empathy I am discussing here. According to Lori Gruen, “[e]mpathy does not appear to be the appropriate ethical response to the non-sentient world” (68), yet, in Chapter 3, I also discuss the possibility of navigating a contagious affective engagement with vegetal entities, and thereby aim to cross a limit that other iterations of inter-creatural empathy—including Gruen’s concept of entangled empathy, defined as “a type of caring perception focused on attending to another’s experience of wellbeing” and “an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition” (3)—have been subject to. Danielle Sands also emphasises that Gruen’s notion of entangled empathy “presupposes individual subjects who might respond emotionally and cognitively to each other” (20), and raises the question whether, “while it is relatively easy to empathise with mammals and nonhuman animals with which we share characteristics,” we can “empathise with ‘non-individuals, such as forests, art and the oceans?’” (Sands 20). At the same time, I want to emphasise and attend to the fact that the extension of empathy into nonhuman realms poses similar problems as the extension of care to nonhuman creatures, and that the limits of empathy and of care often seem to coincide. While Rachel Adams characterises care as “an intimate and necessary labor” (695), she also notes certain asymmetries in care—the weight of which, as mentioned before, is disproportionately borne by women and people of colour (696)—, and refers to hierarchies of need that regulate access to care and impose a limit on its distribution. In her book on posthuman care, DeFalco also notes that “[o]pening up care and kinship to include the range of more-than-human inter-dependencies and ontologies that produce and sustain life” (*Curious* 13-14) can often meet with resistance,⁵³ with “[c]ritics suspicious of more-than-human care frequently . . . treating, for example, robot caregivers as technological transgressions, overzealous engineering that introduces machines into what should remain strictly human” (*Curious* 7), while “[n]onhuman animal intimacies are similarly patrolled, though ‘excessive’ bonds between human and nonhuman animals tend to provoke patronizing skepticism” (*Curious* 7). Yet, in the age of the Anthropocene, thinking about the expansion of empathy and concern beyond the (purported) boundaries of humanity appears to be a political and ethical imperative, one that has vital implications for the restricted category of “the human” as well. As my analysis of empathy in Dick’s novel has hopefully shown, “discussions of care are frequently discussions of who (or possibly what) counts as human (and who doesn’t), as

⁵³ DeFalco admits that it may be a challenge for posthumanist scholars to “focus our collective efforts on dismantling the human without jeopardizing ongoing struggles for equality” (*Curious* 24), but maintains that it is a challenge we must take on nonetheless.

well as who determines and polices these ontological boundaries and what happens to those that don't make the cut" (DeFalco, *Curious* 5).

A renewed engagement with the empathic experience in a variety of chaotic, transgressive and intimate inter-creatural encounters may not only prompt an interrogation of such biopolitically produced and controlled boundaries between human and nonhuman beings, but also suggests potential ways of overcoming these boundaries by exposing them as always-already penetrable and permeable. The chapters that follow, exploring the dynamics of entanglements between (bio)technological creatures, nonhuman and human animals, facilitated or foreclosed by empathy in its myriad manifestations, will also put forth the notion of an inter-creatural, *speculative empathy*, a mode of relating infused with cautious uncertainty and wonder.⁵⁴ Referring to both the speculative nature of most of the narratives explored here and to an imaginative-reflective element that I consider to be vital to it, speculative empathy is best conceived as an active response, predicated on the openness engendered by emotional contagion and affective empathy, that emerges as a manner of resonant feeling-with and *being-with*, wherein the entities in contact attune to the embodied expressions of the other. Such an engagement may result in acceptance, appreciation or love and, occasionally, a distance that, however, is not about rejection or a rational, cognitive sense of isolation, but about a recognition of the other as spacious and deep, with "hidden places worthy of respect" (Nussbaum, "Democratic" 148). This also helps to explain why my focus here is empathy rather than care. As asserted by DeFalco, care "[i]n its broadest sense . . . is . . . responsibility, even obligation; it is action, behavior, motivation, and practice" (*Imagining* 5); but it is also more intentional and more about cognitively assessing and understanding the needs of the other. In contrast, empathy, with its aspects of mimicry and contagious resonance, is often unconscious and accidental but irresistible, its "spark much less fixed and . . . [able to] work at random, transgressing established borders of in-group and out-group" (Assmann and Detmers 8). This is not to say, however, that care is not a vital element in the analyses that make up the dissertation: indeed, a key claim of mine is that the strange (Merleau-Ponty 2003) or curious (DeFalco 2023) kinships that can arise via an empathy "which is grounded in embodied, affective experience" (Sands 15) can point towards dismantling the hierarchy of care, ultimately opening up paths towards engaging in a posthumanist empathic care, a force that has the potential to bring about intertwined, interdependent becomings. While Merleau-Ponty's strange kinship is a "lateral union" (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 271) which, as explained by Kelly Oliver,

⁵⁴ This mode of empathy appears most prominently in the relationship of Rachel and Borne in Jeff VanderMeer's novel; indeed, this tentative concept of mine was partially inspired by that connection.

“attempts to balance relationships and communion between human and [nonhuman] beings *with respect for the differences between them*” (102, my emphasis), DeFalco’s phrase “curious kin” is itself akin to “Haraway’s notion of ‘oddkin,’ but highlights the curiousness of kinship itself” (*Curious* 10) and “explores the imagined possibilities of curious posthuman kinships based on allegiance and affinity rather than biology” (*Curious* 10). Both of these rely on the recognition, also entailed by speculative empathy, that, though absolute comprehension may be out of reach, it is still possible to relate to the other in an attentive, affective way that generates “responsibility” (Haraway, *Staying* 2), establishing a relationship of “significant otherness” (Haraway, *Companion* 3) that still leaves space for apartness.

The promise and potential of such a relating are especially significant when it comes to inter-creatural relations, since, as my discussions will also make clear, in these cases, understanding is often impossible or denied. Thus, in the analyses that follow, I shall look at how empathy functions and how it becomes dysfunctional—reduced into a method of knowledge-production or employed in a totalising and invasive mapping of the other—, and dissect the way in which nonhuman creatures invite different kinds of relating by expressing their mindedness or sentience through their voice, bodily behaviour and fluctuation, or pervasive and piercing affective resonation. I shall also consider how these expressions are received by human characters, and how they are captured by filmmakers and writers in order to elicit certain responses in audiences. I shall refrain from discussing whether these attempts are successful or not, since such an examination falls beyond my scope and expertise; but will aim throughout to offer a critique of the narrative and cinematic employment of empathy, especially with respect to its manipulative and anthropomorphic aspects. While I am somewhat sceptical of the ethical value or even usefulness of the strictly higher-order versions of empathy when it comes to relations with nonhuman creatures, it would be rash to dismiss the imaginative contents of empathy. Instead, building on the recognition, also noted by Alexa Weik von Mossner, that “[t]he term ‘cognitive’ is often misunderstood or unjustly narrowed down to some version of computationalism or connectionism, which treat the mind as a disembodied information processor or neural network” (*Affective* 4), I rely on an understanding of the mind “as both *embodied* (in a physical body) and *embedded* (in a physical environment)” (4, emphasis in original). Therefore, in agreement with Stadler, “[r]ather than reinforcing a value-laden dichotomy” (“Empathy” 325) of lower- and higher-level forms of empathy, I intend to dissect narratives that “can help illuminate the networked interplay between these processes” (Stadler, “Empathy” 325). While Stadler only mentions cinematic examples in her argument, I also read literary fiction, because the textual configurations of empathy are vital to my

investigation of how the versions of inter-creatural empathy that emerge in the corpus may help or hinder the establishment of affirmative and balanced relations among creatures; and because, perhaps surprisingly, it is in the novels included in my last chapter that the possibility—indeed, perhaps the necessity—of developing a speculative empathic openness is most touchingly illuminated. My conception of the process of speculative empathy does not necessarily exclude (subsequent) reflection either; indeed, in this sense, it is aligned with Aaltola’s notion of reflective empathy as well, which rests “on reflective cultivation of our empathic ability” (131) and “enables awareness of with whom, why and on what grounds we empathize” (132).⁵⁵ As the analyses will show, the back-and-forth movement between focus on the other and on the self, that is also an element of Aaltola’s reflective empathy, is vital to speculative empathy—but so is a fluctuation between affective contagion and speculation about the nature and implications of that contagion. Crucially, my understanding of speculative empathy also diverges from reflective empathy, which is somewhat limited in its scope—focusing only on “minded creatures (creatures, who have inner subjectivity, the capacity to feel their existence as something)” (113) and excluding resonance with vegetal beings, a primary concern of my third chapter—and is, in my view, a bit too concerned with an ability to know and with “ensur[ing] a better comprehension of others” (132). Speculative empathy, as I will show, is reliant on non-intrusive *curiosity*—that is, a sort of imaginative openness, in the sense of being invested and interested in the other as they express themselves—and a sense of attentive, embodied resonance, coupled with an attitude of care that is “about the right distance” (Puig de la Bellacasa 5). The cinematic, serial and literary narratives that will be analysed in the dissertation can all be understood to be involved in gauging and calculating the right distance.

III. A brief overview of the chapters

The films, series and texts comprising the corpus were selected because of their ambiguous portrayal of and nuanced engagement with the issues of empathy, and because they simultaneously raise essential questions and concerns about anthropocentric hierarchies. Besides biotechnological and vegetal beings, I resolved to look at films about relations with real animals as well as narratives featuring fictional ones, because I contend that our

⁵⁵ Reflective empathy moves “between immediacy and a metaposition, between inferring, simulating, feeling another and evaluating how our own mentations impact the whole process” (131) and thus relies both on the most favourable elements of what she has distinguished as projective, simulative, cognitive, affective, and embodied empathy, and, on a “second level,” involves an intentional consideration of what sort of prejudices, beliefs, attitudes and “other aspects of our own mental repertoire . . . impact our judgement or experience” (131).

conceptualisations of and engagement with fictional ones are heavily informed by (mediated) relations with real animals: hence the inclusion of nonfiction films in Chapter One, films that will enable me to discuss some fundamental concerns related to anthropomorphisation and the treatment of animals, issues that I return to in subsequent chapters. The problematics of empathy broached in the selected primary material also serves as the main organising principle of the chapters themselves: first, I shall carefully explore the controversial implications of empathy. Thus, even as they also gesture towards the promising, beneficial effects of empathic relating, the first three chapters engage with challenges associated with empathy, addressing some of its most problematic and contentious aspects: the kind of empathy that can be described as “bite-sized” and fleeting, as well as subject to manipulation in *Our Planet* and *Gunda*, will be discussed in Chapter One. Entitled “**Narrating nonhumans – anthropomorphisation and trans-species empathy in *Our Planet*, *Gunda* and *Cow*,**” this first chapter maps the potential and problems inherent in anthropomorphic and anti-anthropomorphic representations of nonhuman beings, dissecting the narrative and filmic strategies employed to cue empathic responses in audiences. Concentrating on dilemmas of sentience and consciousness, mimicry and verisimilitude, Chapter Two, “**Empathy for the machine – android voice and affect in *Westworld* and *Her***” explores the dynamics of spectator empathy (a primary concern of Chapter One) and (intra)diegetic empathy (a main focus of Chapter Three), problematising the almost complete lack of empathy that characterises humans’ relations to android “hosts” in *Westworld*, and foregrounding the (initially) exploitative and asymmetrical aspects of human protagonist Theodore and disembodied AI creature Samantha’s relationship. Chapter Three, focusing on **the textual configurations of (hyper)empathy and mimicry in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow,”** explores issues of mimicry, self-loss, empty empathy, numbing, and empathic distress via its engagement with the consequences of overflowing, overwhelming empathy in the protagonists, clashing with their thoroughly de-sensitised environments.

However, besides exploring the dangers and “dark sides,” or indeed the failure(s) of empathy when it comes to fictitious and (mediated) real encounters between other-than-human and human beings, the chapters also discuss cinematic and literary works that point towards anti-anthropocentric perspectives and empathic inter-creatural relations based in shared vulnerability. Chapter One’s analysis of *Cow* explores the speculative empathic potential inherent in the haptic visuality and tactile, embodied engagement enabled by the film’s (re)presentation of bovine subjectivity and alterity; Chapter Two’s discussion of Theodore and Samantha’s connection in *Her* also hints at possibilities of establishing more balanced

humandroid relations through the channel of speculative empathy; Chapter Three shows that the protagonists' hyperempathic conditions, initially presented as maladaptive disorders, eventually turn into assets for survival and flourishing—thus, the ceaseless affective-sensory contamination endured by the protagonists actually foregrounds the affirmative potential inherent in emotional contagion. In the fourth chapter, “**Companion creatures – speculative empathy, tactile response-ability and the potential of embodied proximity in *Fifteen Dogs, Borne and Klara and the Sun,***” I predominantly focus on the potential, more hopeful paths towards re-generation and speculative empathy. In this final chapter, I examine how empathic connection, increasingly established and expressed via tactile encounters—especially where verbal communication fails or is impossible—is textually conveyed. This is also where my exploration of touch and embodied empathy expressed through tactile communication—a topic that I am gradually working my way towards throughout the chapters—culminates: I suggest that the affirmative textual portrayals of a shared vulnerability and affective interdependence between human and nonhuman beings subvert the implicit hierarchy of an objective inquiry into nonhuman experiences by introducing a reciprocal and reversible language of empathic care, manifesting itself in intimate bodily-sensory interspecies interactions.

Chapter One

Narrating nonhumans: anthropomorphisation and trans-species empathy in *Our Planet*, *Gunda* and *Cow*

I. 1. Introduction:

Each episode of David Attenborough's wildlife series, *Our Planet* (2019), opens with a close-up shot of the Moon. When Attenborough's introductory monologue begins, accompanied by an uplifting musical theme, a distant Earth emerges on the horizon, offering the audience a glimpse "back at our own planet" ("Jungles," 00:41-00:46). Then, as the camera cuts to a somewhat closer view of the Earth slowly rotating round its axis, the voiceover informs us that the following episodes aim to "celebrate the natural wonders that remain," and to "reveal what we must preserve to ensure that people and nature thrive" (01:04-01:16). Ostensibly dedicated to addressing the devastating consequences of the human exploitation of the planet, from the very first shot, *Our Planet* remains clearly embedded in an anthropocentric framework somewhat at odds with its ambitions. Its vertical dynamics imply an objectifying vantage point of looking *down* upon an earth that is seemingly separable from the observer; while the formulation of *Our Planet's* objective ("to reveal what we must do to ensure that people *and nature* thrive" [my emphasis]), as well as the title itself (Ulstein, *Weird* 199), betray the actual priorities of the series. Such tensions are symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance inherent in the Anthropocene condition: in spite of overwhelming evidence confirming the manifold enmeshment of human bodies within the environment, human beings still apparently find it difficult to perceive themselves as "physically part of this no longer completely 'natural' world that we've deeply affected" (Alaimo, "Our Bodies" n.pag.). Countering still-prevailing separatist perceptions of the natureculture continuum, Stacy Alaimo calls out as "delusional" those popular depictions of the Anthropocene that are "imagining that the human is somewhere else . . . as if . . . in a spaceship and looking down on the Earth . . . , safely above, looking at the mess we've created" ("Our Bodies" n.pag.).

In her discussion of *Our Planet*, Gry Ulstein contends that the narrative structure of the series (specifically "Attenborough's voiceover as first-person plural narration") reflects an "image of humanity as the protagonist of the Anthropocene—a humanity . . . which is both (but not in equal measures) culpable for and victimized by the events depicted" (Ulstein, *Weird* 199). Audiences are thus simultaneously "asked to consider their responsibility as human individuals for the localized effects of global human actions on a group of physically distant nonhumans" and "expected to be collectively shocked and saddened by the events" (192). This is "complex

causal relation” (192) is further complicated by the fact that, “for the most part,” as Jones and her colleagues note, “habitats are depicted as extensive and pristine and wildlife populations as abundant” (Jones et al. 421), while humans—the primary source of environmental threat—are, except for a few occasions throughout the series, nowhere to be seen on screen, their presence almost exclusively inferred via the technological mediation and occasional images of intervention into the face of the landscape.

After mapping the potential and problems inherent in anthropomorphic representations of “exotic” wildlife in “Jungles,” a selected episode of *Our Planet*, and the narrative and cinematographic strategies it employs to cue empathic relationship in audiences, I will then move on to Victor Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* (2020) and Andrea Arnold’s *Cow* (2021), eco-films⁵⁶ that occupy a liminal generic space between animal advocacy features and slow animal cinema,⁵⁷ and which have been hailed as being part of a contemporary movement of experimental Anthropocene cinema that attempts to avoid anthropomorphic and anthropocentric modes of representation. Rejecting the use of voiceover and an explanatory framework in its rendering of the lives of “ordinary” farmed animals, Kossakovsky’s contemplative film may seem, at first glance, to embody a diametrical contrast to Attenborough’s *Our Planet* series, an exemplary mode of wildlife television that presents sentimentalised and sensationalised accounts of endangered and exotic species. However, as my comparative analysis shall suggest, the two may actually share similarities that are more significant than the differences that divide them: a recognition that raises unsettling but timely questions about the possibilities of moving beyond anthropocentric and anthropomorphic representations of animals. Indeed, much like *Our Planet*, *Gunda* produces a diegetic world that is noticeably, and problematically, empty of people; and, even though it putatively aims to foreground other-than-human forms of vocal and material self-expression, the film’s perspective, as I shall demonstrate, remains largely ocularcentric⁵⁸ and totalising, catering to a human gaze captivated by spectacle: thus, its visual language is dominantly as anthropocentric as Attenborough’s human vocal authority. This is not to say that *Our Planet* and *Gunda* are virtually the same; in my investigation, I shall be careful to attend to important differences

⁵⁶ Paula Willoquet-Maricondi broadly defines ecocinema as a genre of films that have “consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health” (45).

⁵⁷ I provide a detailed discussion of the generic characteristics of *Gunda* later; for now, I suggest that *Gunda* qualifies as an example of slow cinema since, like the experimental animal films examined by McMahon, it “adopt[s] a de-dramatised, long-take aesthetic in order to probe questions of duration and eventhood” (4).

⁵⁸ As Claire Parkinson explains, mediated encounters may be ocularcentric insofar as they privilege an engagement with “the visual aspects of the film experience,” and “impose [a] . . . distance between viewer and animal that encourages a form of anthropocentric anthropomorphism” (52-53).

between the two, mainly apparent in their tempo, narrative structure and, closely related to these, their approach to trans-species empathy. “Jungles,” the episode of *Our Planet* that I am focusing on, like most of Attenborough’s oeuvre, explicitly aims at eliciting empathic responses from audiences by constructing a comprehensive understanding of the vulnerability of “‘earth’ others” (Braidotti 48) via educational commentary, and thus relies primarily on what Murray Smith calls the *mindfeeling* version (“Empathy” 114) of empathy. In contrast, with not a single human word uttered for the entire duration of the film, *Gunda* keeps an epistemological distance and foregrounds the *mindreading* function of empathy as theorised by Smith. Thus, without minimising their distinctive aspects, my point is rather that, in terms of (visual) rhetoric and affective appeal, the differences between the series and the film are not so much of *kind* as of *degree*.

Finally, I will turn to Arnold’s *Cow*, a film that, I suggest, is more effective in undermining the sense of a hierarchical, distanced gaze, and is therefore more successful in calling to life what Laura Marks has called haptic cinema—which, as opposed to “optical visuality” that “depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object,” and that “privileges the representational power of the image” is a kind of tactile perception that foregrounds its material presence and texture (*The Skin* 163). Unlike *Our Planet* and *Gunda*, *Cow* explicitly features bodily encounters between human and nonhuman animals and produces pronounced instances of tactile visuality that can potentially invite audiences to attune in embodied and affective manners to the animals it represents, and, crucially, *engages* with. Focusing on how *Cow* navigates embodied-sensory proximity and cognitive-perceptual distance within its cinematic world as it negotiates between conveying animal alterity *and* subjectivity, I also explore the ways in which it manages to evade an anthropocentric—if not anthropomorphic—and “ecopornographic politics of representation” (Welling 69); though this does not mean that *Cow* is entirely exempt from the issues of “commodification, complacency, violence and so on to which mainstream ecoporn is [also] prone” (Welling 69), and that seem to plague, at least to some degree, almost all contemporary visual-digital representations of nature and animals. While I will attend to the problematic aspects of its representation of and engagement with nonhuman animals, I do suggest that this film can be considered less ecopornographic than *Gunda*, and especially more than *Our Planet*, because of the tactile sensibility with which it approaches its vulnerable subjects.

Drawing upon recent work on the dynamics of empathy and narrative emotion, and relying on cognitive and phenomenological film theory, this first chapter thus explores how *Our Planet*, *Gunda* and *Cow* convey “knowledge” and manipulate embodied perception, how

they appeal to the spectators' cognitive-sensory apparatus enfolded in the experience of the *lived body*—defined by Sobchack as “‘the’ objective body as always also lived subjectively as ‘my’ body, diacritically invested and active in making sense and meaning in and of the world” (*Carnal* 60)—through various cinematographic and narrative techniques, and how these various kinds of appeals relate to the forms of empathy towards nonhuman animals that may emerge during or as a result of the process. While I consider genre traditions and conventions to be crucial in contextualising and understanding these works of cinema and television, my main focus here (rather than engaging with these films only through the lens of their particular genre histories and theories, and mapping how they comply with or diverge from their respective traditions) is to interrogate how they navigate among anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic, anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric narrative and affective strategies. In tracing this movement from traditional wildlife television through slow animal and vegan advocacy film towards a cinema that is more self-reflexive and critical of its own anthropomorphic and anthropocentric tendencies, I am mostly concerned with how a sense of intercorporeality may be called forth by haptic and chiasmatic modes of engagement with the mediated presence/consciousness of the animals (re)presented by the filmic body.⁵⁹ Ultimately, I suggest that my exploration of the filmic (mis)uses of empathy and its correlations with anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism might provide a way of probing the contested correlation between empathy and knowledge.

I. 2. Casting nonhumans as characters: ‘benevolent’ anthropomorphism, narrativisation and empathy in “Jungles”

“Jungles may look the same, but each is home to a unique cast of characters”⁶⁰ (“Jungles,” 09:35-09:41)—declares David Attenborough’s voice early into “Jungles,” his words complemented by sweeping aerial footage of lush tropical forests. A celebrated episode of the series *Our Planet* (2019), “Jungles” provides an overview of the planet’s remaining jungle habitats, each of its individual segments dedicated to introducing a particular rainforest. Starting out from a god’s-eye-view (Pick 23) and initially “encourag[ing] [the audience] to take on a planetary perspective” (Ulstein, *Weird* 200), the episode begins by showing stunning images of

⁵⁹ As Marks, in the vein of Vivian Sobchack, reminds us, “[t]he cinematic encounter takes place not only between my body and the film’s body, but my sensorium and the film’s sensorium. We bring our own personal and cultural organization of the senses to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the senses to us, the filmmaker’s own sensorium refracted through the cinematic apparatus” (*The Skin*, 153).

⁶⁰ The choice of the word “character” is already significant here, as right from the start, it presents the animals in an anthropomorphic manner, and positions the viewers as theatrical audience, watching the events unfold on the stage that is the rainforest.

the tropical habitats from above, then, the camera descends into the midst of animal and vegetal life, obtaining a closer look at various sets of “characters” native to a particular habitat, from the Congo through the Amazon to Sumatra. This kind of vertical dynamic is typical of the series overall—what makes “Jungles” a case study particularly well-suited for my purposes, besides acting as a prototype for what may be called the neo-Attenboroughian wildlife film,⁶¹ is the way in which it balances its message of ecological devastation with spectacular images. With a few, relatively short exceptions—such as the final sequence of “Frozen Worlds,” which feature an unprecedented crowding of walruses on a Russian beach due to receding sea ice, and shows many of them falling to their deaths “from heights they should never have scaled” (00:44:27); some images of corals bleaching in “Coastal Seas”; and a brief mention of North American prairies being replaced by sites of industrial agriculture—most episodes of *Our Planet* still dominantly seek “to capture and recreate an experience of unspoiled nature” (Mitman 3). In the entire first season, “Jungles” includes the most sustained engagement with and most explicit visualisation of the dire consequences of human exploitation of habitats and wild species. Even more importantly, it includes segments that stand out within the whole series: one of these focuses on the Philippine eagle, another features the dance of the Western parotia, and the last one concentrates on insects infected by the Cordyceps fungus—these are all instances where the narrative slows down and the episode attempts to bring viewers closer to the particularities of a certain animal’s behaviour and interiority (in a cinematographic and emotive sense), and which, I suggest, are therefore able to captivate attention and cultivate empathy in a unique manner.

Like most of its precursors, “Jungles” attempts to navigate a delicate balance between engaging viewers and warning them about the consequences of the climate crisis in a palatable way, lest they should be alienated; yet, arguably, even in this episode, “the hackneyed tropes of nature’s cuteness and majesty, the sneaky configurations of nature as a secular Eden and faux sublime” (Pick 23) continue to prevail. This, I suggest, is partially owing to the fact that nature films and television are no less subject to commercial concerns as feature films. Facing, as Stephen Mills puts it, a “fundamental dilemma” of wildlife representation, filmmakers are often torn between “maintain[ing] the myth of nature”, in which case their “programmes find a wide and appreciative audience”, or else going for accuracy and displaying the “tragic loss of

⁶¹ *Our Planet* was the first series in Attenborough’s oeuvre that provided greater visibility to pressing issues of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction in the wider context of the Anthropocene (Jones et al. 421), as opposed to earlier specimens of his work, which had a tendency to “underplay issues of anthropogenic ecological pressure” (Pick 22).

wilderness”, risking that their “audience slinks away” (6). In addition, changing consumption habits are also an important factor that all media producers must consider: on the one hand, viewers can “no longer be assumed to be singularly interested in the film, when many other screens coexist in the same space, and thus grapple for attention” (Rengger 47). On the other hand, contemporary spectators, perhaps more accurately described as “viewers” (Boyle 1), like to be “actively involved in engaging with the content that they consume” (Rengger 47). It is significant, then, that the end of each episode of *Our Planet*—produced in collaboration with the streaming platform *Netflix* and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)—features a call to visit the interactive website *ourplanet.com* where users may explore what kind of actions they may take in order to contribute to sustainability, restoration and conservation efforts; an issue I return to at the end of this subchapter.

Derek Bousé also emphasises the enduring belief in the television industry that viewers need to be convinced that “animals are interesting and beautiful” (“False” 126) in order to make them “more concerned with wildlife protection, and thus more susceptible to explicit preservation messages elsewhere” (126). Therefore, the fact that all episodes of *Our Planet* resort overtly to the tools of fiction, and make “emotional drama . . . part of filmed nature” (Mitman 4) may be seen as part of their endeavours to raise awareness to ecological devastation—though, as noble as such intentions may be, the methods raise the question whether the way in which they seem to offer “both ease of access to wild animals, as well as moments of impossible intimacy with them, lead us to prefer television’s own version of nature and wildlife to their often unglamorous realities?” (Bousé, “False” 123). Sequences in the series unfold like miniature narratives, in line with the traditions of wildlife cinema: viewers are educated and entertained in equal measure by the commentary that complements colourful sequences of dynamic scenes, and presents overwhelmingly anthropomorphised descriptions of flora and fauna. As described by Adrian Ivakhiv, in “the traditional nature documentary formula . . . nature [is] largely about three things: eating, being eaten, and the stunning visual beauty of it all” (210), while in his seminal *Reel Nature*, Gregg Mitman similarly observes that nature films “promise enlightenment and thrills simultaneously,” presenting a particular blend of art, science and entertainment that “seeks to reproduce the aesthetic qualities of pristine wilderness and to preserve the wildlife that is fast vanishing from the face of the earth” (3). As opposed to these film scholars, Derek Bousé makes the case for separating wildlife film and television from the documentary genre, arguing that the filmmaking process of wildlife cinema “itself involves a different kind of interaction between filmmaker and subject, a different set of responsibilities

on the part of the filmmaker to the subject, and ultimately very different results” (*Wildlife* 23) than those of documentaries.

Indeed, the portrait of the natural environments presented in *Our Planet* is more about catering to viewer expectations than anything else: as demonstrated by the dazzling compositions of the series, showing the rarest, most “intimate” footage of wild animals plants and offering moments of instant immersive involvement to viewers are dominant strategies, employed in the hope of getting targeted audiences—comprised most likely of disengaged and conservative consumers—“emotionally invested in what is presented to them” (Weik von Mossner, “Emotions” 44). Two of such memorable moments in this episode (the sequence focusing on a young Philippine eagle, and the mating ritual of the Western parotia) are of particular importance to my analysis; on both occasions, the cinematography as well as the voiceover zoom in on wildlife behaviour, depicting events that, as Bousé puts it, “we might really have been able to see,” but typically doing so “in ways we could never see them, and in which nobody ever has seen them *directly*, including the people who film them” (*Wildlife* 8). What Bousé refers to here is the “false intimacy” provided by a “heavy reliance on close-ups” (“False” 123) and a manipulative use of eyeline matches⁶²—a point also made by Anat Pick who, in her analysis of BBC productions, emphasises how they tend to “satisfy the desire for an illusion of closeness with nature, and use perspective (telephoto lenses, blue chip, postproduction sound enhancement, and so on) non-reflexively to create an immersive but highly contrived experience of nature” (Pick 31). On the one hand, the sequences of “Jungles” to be discussed demonstrate that in spite of being “full of scientific facts,” wildlife cinema, as Bousé emphasises, has been “largely . . . freed of the responsibility of looking just like reality”, and “operates according to its own codes and conventions” (*Wildlife* 7). On the other hand, these sequences capture that tension between the illusion of an untouched nature and the “invasive filming techniques allowing filmmakers to probe, to prod, and to reveal” (23).

The Philippine eagle is first shown in the company of her parents, portrayed simultaneously as a petulant teenager and as a “toddler having a tantrum” (“Jungles,” 23:53). Then the scene cuts to images featuring the eagle on her own, “left” to fend for herself, as suggested by the editing and the voiceover, the latter expressing what *it thinks must be* going through the bird’s mind: “It’s confusing, when your parents don’t visit as frequently as they

⁶² As Derek Bousé explains in his article “False intimacy: close-ups and viewer involvement in wildlife films,” matching eyelines—usually taking the form of an “apparent left/right exchange of glances” (127) between animals that, in real life, may not even have been captured via camera in the same location, or may not even be in a predator/prey relationship—are often used to create “the impression of a tense confrontation” (127) by (falsely) suggesting that the animals are observing or studying each other.

once did. Every day she calls, but no one is paying any attention” (“Jungles” 24:49-25:10). As Pick acutely observes, “[n]ot only the voice-of-god but also the eye-of-god is typical of the scope and reach of the big BBC productions” (23)—and indeed, on this occasion, the narrator appears to be endowed with something like omniscience, not only able to “interpret behaviors that might otherwise seem foreign or offensive to the cultural sensibilities of many



Figure 1. Low-angle shot of the Philippine eagle

viewers” (Bousé, *Wildlife* 24) but creating the illusion of an excessively intimate access to the animal’s interiority. Giving us the impression of entering the eagle’s subjective perspective, the gestures of anthropomorphisation and narrativisation that we witness here serve to ally and visually align the audience with the animal, laying the ground for what seems like trans-species empathy, potentially evoked here as the result of a number of nuanced filmic strategies. In this scene, the camera focuses in close-ups on the bird’s strangely expressive features, framing her countenance from carefully selected angles so that it seems to convey despair (Fig. 1.). When she appears hesitant to set off on her first flight, point-of-view shots—mimicking the shaky effect produced by hand-held camera footage—are used to evoke the bird’s vantage point; while further tension is introduced as the narrator yet again seems to translate her thoughts: “There’s a seventy meter drop to the forest floor. A fall would be fatal” (“Jungles,” 26:15-26:26) (Fig.

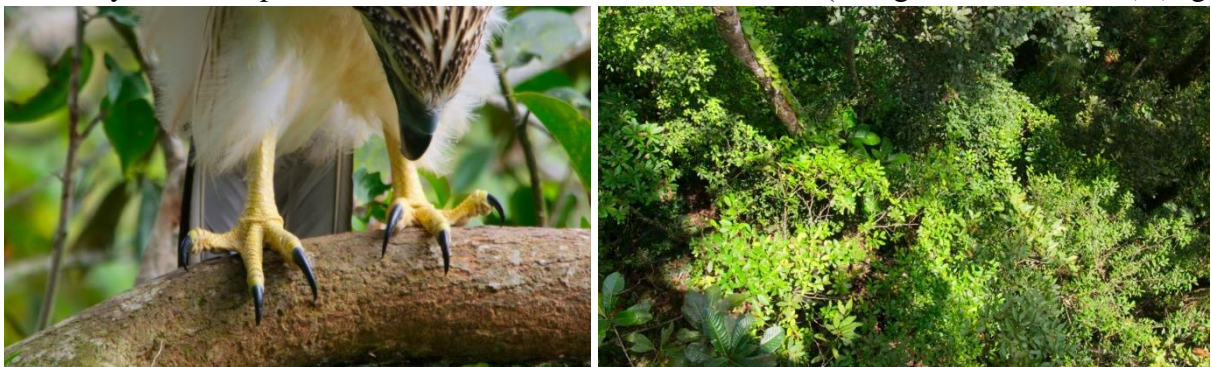


Figure 2. "It's a seventy meter drop to the forest floor"

2.). These images are clearly intended to encourage a perceptual identification with the eagle: at this point, “the animal’s point-of-view (not the camera’s) is . . . established as the guiding one in the scene, leading us to see things as the animal sees them,” apparently inviting us “to identify with its view of the world, if not with the animal itself” (Bousé, “False intimacy” 127). However, as Vivian Sobchack reminds us, such instances do not constitute a kind of cinematic fusion: as she notes, “although we, as spectators, may be sympathetic to cinematic perception and, indeed, may intentionally parallel the film’s and/or character’s bodily position and

perceptual bias as it intends toward and inhabits a world” (*The Address* 234), on some level, we remain aware of the fact that “the perception whose intentional interest we share belongs always to *another* perceiving and embodied subject, no matter how introceptively it is visibly presented as visual for us” (234).

While the sight of the bird’s face and the sound of her voice—even without the “emotive musical cues” (Pick 23) accompanying the narration—could, in themselves, captivate viewers in a more affective, instinctual manner, the detailed spoken commentary immediately supplements these cues and budding responses with an anthropomorphic explanation of the events unfolding on-screen. Such a strategy, I suggest, illuminates how the episode (and arguably, the series as a whole) favours the “mindfeeling” version of empathy, where, according



Figure 3. Orang-utan faces

to Murray Smith, “empathy does not serve to uncover possible new information, but to put the information that we do possess under a new description, so to speak, allowing us to *feel it ‘from the inside.’*” (M. Smith, “Empathy” 114, my emphasis). Later on in the episode, the same strategy is applied in the depiction of a family of Borneo orang-utans, threatened by habitat loss. Notably, these apes are the only animals introduced by their *names* in the episode: under constant surveillance due to being members of an endangered species, they have been given

human names by the scientists that track them. Instead of (or rather, in addition to) objectively listing the scientific facts, in particular human actions, that are driving the primates rapidly towards extinction, the narrative proceeds to characterise them as vulnerable in a very general sense, while their precarious position is also conveyed visually, through shots that first display the remaining diversity of their immediate environment, contrasted with some images exhibiting the oil-palm plantations encroaching upon their habitat. Focusing on the distinctively human-like gestures of the orang-utans—we also learn that these are the only wild individuals having learned to use tools in order to secure food—, their expressive, affectively communicative faces (Fig. 3.) become a focus of attention in a similar manner (and potentially, for a similar purpose) as described in cognitive film theorist Carl Plantinga’s notion of the scene

of empathy,⁶³ where the perceived affects on the faces of the primarily favoured or sympathetic characters on the screen are deliberately framed in a manner intended to provoke empathic reactions in audiences.

On the one hand, this move (potentially motivated, might I add, by commercial considerations) undoubtedly serves to maximise the chances of affective viewer engagement,⁶⁴ building on the conviction that “empathy is most likely to arise—or in the case of radically unfamiliar cultural settings, can only arise—when we are furnished with extensive and detailed knowledge regarding the agent and their situation” (M. Smith “Empathy” 114). Additionally, as also suggested by Alexa Weik von Mossner, the creation of a narrative frame, which purportedly allows the viewer to slip into the eagle’s mind, and offers an approximation of *what it is like* for the animal to grapple with the difficulties of growing up, invites “recipients . . . to simulate that sense or feeling in their minds . . . using their own real-world experiences as models and their own bodies as sounding boards for the simulation” (Weik von Mossner, *Affective* 44). That is, a (putative) “cognitive understanding” (Weik von Mossner, “Emotions” 44) of the situation (presented by the voiceover as a predicament brought about by abandonment) might allow viewers to identify imaginatively with the perceived vulnerability and loneliness of the bird. At the same time, the visual and aural cues—the eagle’s repeated, unanswered calls, the numerous low-angle close-up shots focusing on her ‘eyebrows’ furrowed in apparent dismay, and the perspective shots of her teetering on the verge of the branch—can potentially trigger emotional contagion and other forms of embodied empathic resonance (described in detail in the Introduction). As mentioned previously, in Plantinga’s understanding, such a “phenomenon of ‘catching’ others’ emotions or affective states” (“The Scene” 243) may be triggered by facial feedback and affective mimicry (242), instinctive reactions resulting from visual exposure to another’s embodied expressions that can, according to Murray Smith, “occur without breaking through to consciousness at all” (“Empathy” 116).

However, any affect—approached here as “our automatic, visceral response to a given film or sequence” (Weik von Mossner, “Introduction” 1)—that could be elicited here is at least

⁶³ Discussed in more detail in the next chapter, “Empathy for the Machine,” Plantinga’s scene of empathy originally refers to human faces only; however, I would suggest that certain animal faces—particularly those of primates—are potentially very much able to cue the kind of affective resonance and emotional contagion that, in Plantinga’s argument, certain visual representations (close-ups, mainly, paired with a slowing down of the cinematic tempo) of the human face are prone to evoking.

⁶⁴ Instead of the contentious notion of identification—which he argues is also “misleading” for implying a loss of self, resulting in a momentary confusion between our own identity and that of the character on-screen (“The Scene” 244)—Plantinga proposes the word “engagement,” which is “broader and more neutral,” allowing for the “wide variety of experiences that characterize our orientation toward characters, ranging from adulation to active dislike, from affective mimicry to revulsion” and which “certainly implies no melding of minds or identities” (244).

partially the result of manipulative shot-structures embedded in an explanatory, anthropomorphic story.⁶⁵ Instead of giving the audience time to dwell on the somatic impressions that could be automatically elicited by the eagle's mediated presence and embodied expressions—as James Cahill puts it, by the “alluring ambiguity and undigested significance of images” (79) and sounds—, this segment, and arguably, the series as a whole, resorts to the strategy of *producing* affects at the expense of diminishing the animal's significant otherness. Ironically, in its efforts to maximise attunement to the eagle and identification with her predicament, the episode here ends up virtually effacing the bird herself as she is framed by the voiceover that seems to channel her mind, foreclosing the possibility of a more instinctual resonance that would actually constitute a vital link between the embodied reality of the bird and the lived body of the viewer. In fact, in the type of wildlife television exemplified by *Our Planet*, the embodied-affective dimensions of empathy (frequently treated, as explained in the Introduction, as subordinate to more cognitively complex forms of empathic engagement) seem to be manipulated and exploited only to maximise imaginative perspective-taking and perceptual identification with the animals, foregrounded as the primary means of engagement with the mediated representation. This mode of cinematic empathy may enable a certain degree of absorption, that is, however, “never complete” because “[t]here is always an ‘echo-focus’ in the spectator's perception of the world that marks the perception as mediated by an instrument” (*The Address* 178); yet the danger here is not that of identificatory self-loss but rather that of projection, involving a false and violating sense of penetration. It is not that the spectator is hijacked by the effects of the filmic experience—the dubious effect of cinematic suture⁶⁶ that Sobchack is so sceptical of, wherein “camera's and spectator's vision are confused and bound together in a false and distorted primary identification that cannot be denied, only disavowed” (*The Address* 18)—but that the narrative's “claims to fully ‘know’,” which make such empathic perspective-taking possible in the first place, “risk transforming empathy into an arrogant human ownership of the animal other” (Aaltola 109). While I agree with Hanich's point that

⁶⁵ In this case, the narration works to confirm and reinforce the kinds of affect we are already likely to experience due to the visual and musical cues; but in other cases, like in the episode “Frozen Worlds,” where orcas attack and then play with a penguin they have caught, the voiceover works to counteract and subdue our potentially emerging sensations of dread, revulsion and sorrow by informing us that “this hunt may seem cruel, but important life skills are being passed down the generations” (00:17:11-00:17:20).

⁶⁶ A “narrative device . . . that promote[s] an illusion that comfort[s] spectators by closing a gap in their experience of the film's space and narrativity” (Butte 281), suture, according to Silverman, can also be “understood as the process whereby the inadequacy of the [viewing] subject's position is exposed in order to create the desire for new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack” (231-232), producing an interpellation into ideology that inscribes “the viewing subject's position [as] a supremely passive one” (232). Yet, as I will explain in more detail in my analysis of *Cow*, I disagree, along with Sobchack and George Butte, with the contention that the viewer's role in the filmic experience is a passive one.

“somatic and imaginative [empathy] . . . are intermingled in the film experience, supporting and reinforcing each other” (Hanich 181), as well as with Plantinga’s assertion that “narrative context is probably the most complex and significant elicitor of empathic response” (“The Scene” 251), in the case of the eagle sequence, I suggest that the anthropomorphic voiceover actually undermines a sense of shared embodiment that could be foregrounded by the somatic resonance involved in emotional contagion and that could instinctually open us up and connect us to the (re)presented animal.

Defined by Cahill as “the projection of human values and meanings onto animals, plants and inanimate objects” (74), the anthropomorphism that underlies these narrative structures within the episode serves to represent unfamiliar wild animals and other nonhuman beings as ‘familiar,’ creating an impression of proximity to humans. As argued by Claire Molloy, “such programmes . . . construct a relationship between viewer and animal that reduces distance and fulfils a desire to bring animals close” (83); thus, in these cases, such ‘good-intentioned’ or ‘benevolent’ anthropomorphisation could be argued to work in favour of incorporating nonhuman entities into our empathic horizon. Indeed, the argument can be made that the anthropomorphic strategies, as well as “the commercialism and sentimentalism of popular films does not necessarily stop them from being effective eco-films; their affective appeal may in fact give rise to both enjoyment *and* reflection” (Weik von Mossner, “Introduction” 2). Still, when it comes to a series like *Our Planet*, ostensibly dedicated to foregrounding the interconnections within the biosphere and to showing the fragility of these links whose disruption would—and, in many parts of the world, already does—have devastating consequences for wildlife and humanity as well, non-reflexive anthropomorphism and sentimentalism seem to run counter to the proclaimed objective of the episodes. In spite of its use in eliciting spectator empathy, anthropomorphism has also been found problematic from perspectives critical of anthropocentrism, especially from those of animal studies and critical posthumanism.⁶⁷ Filmmakers, on the other hand have often spoken in favour of enfolding nonhuman beings within human(ising) stories: Attenborough has asserted that it should be “allowed to introduce fiction into . . . natural history filmmaking” (12), while biologist and documentarist Jean Painlevé defended anthropomorphism as “a response to the impenetrability of animal behaviour” (cited in Cahill 86). For critical posthumanism, however, “the (im)possibility of cross-species understanding” is an “epistemological concern” (Karkulehto et al. 4) that needs to be approached with more caution. Indeed, though wildlife films and series like *Our Planet*

⁶⁷ For a more detailed discussion of critical posthumanism and its objectives, see the Introduction.

are committed to providing an increased visibility and understanding of nonhuman lives and the dangers they face, the ways in which those lives are narratively and cinematographically constructed still often amount to, as Adrian Ivakhiv puts it, “an exercise of power masquerading as knowledge” (3). Combining scientifically sound educational material with anthropomorphic approaches, *Our Planet* seemingly offers a full access to nonhuman experience, cutting through the gap between human and nonhuman experientialities in a way that frequently threatens to erase irreducible differences between them and to disregard the impenetrability of animals’ internal processes.

Still, while “Jungles” abounds in “formulations that simultaneously tout and tame the so-called mystery of the natural world” (Pick 23), there are occasions where a sense of the uncanny—that “peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” (Royle 1)—emerges on the margins, as if in resistance of the humanising framework. Ironically, such underlying ambivalence surfaces in two of the most heavily anthropomorphised scenes, depicting the



Figure 4. The black sicklebill’s un-birdlike shape

Philippine eagle’s quandary and the mating dance of the Western parotia respectively. In these sequences, the animals are “overlaid with metaphors of human characteristics” (Burt 291), their own sounds mostly snuffed out by the accompanying soundtrack and voiceover which almost completely effaces the inherent, obscure logic of their behaviour. Introducing the birds-of-paradise (Fig. 4.), Attenborough briefly notes that “New Guinea’s animals have become truly bizarre” (“Jungles” 10:20-10:24)—a profoundly anthropocentric remark, since animal behaviour only seems nonsensical and caricaturistic within a human horizon of interpretation. But then, the narration, complemented by the light-hearted musical score, quickly proceeds to suppress and rationalise the perceived strangeness of the bird-of-paradise (Fig. 5.) via a description and evaluation of its performance: “He opens with a bow. . . . He has all the moves. Fancy footwork. The whirling dervish. The head plume shuffle, with spin” (“Jungles” 12:42-13:15). However, as the bird “morph[s] into some very un-birdlike shapes” (“Jungles” 11:04-11:08), the spectators’ filmic encounter with the animal may—if only for a subversive instant—turn into an uncanny experience. This sequence, I suggest, is particularly intriguing because it does not simply entail “recognising something unfamiliar as familiar or something familiar as unfamiliar” (Ulstein, *Weird* 30), but rather, as Cahill puts it, “moments of sudden estrangement” (83) alternate in it with moments of recognition. For even as the explanatory commentary and

the suggestive, comical musical cues attempt to bring “[t]he outside-ness of the animal . . . into



the human realm and [control and restrain] its wildness” (Heholt and Edmundson 4), viewers may begin to notice the contrast between the narration constructing the bird as familiar and the scene unfolding on the screen. Though he is probably recognised by the majority of the audience as an exotic “prototype” of an animal (a bird) they are all well acquainted with, through its movement the parotia intermittently manifests as absolute alterity, exhibiting a behaviour we do not normally associate with birds and assuming forms that are

Figure 5. The “whirling dervish”

eerily incongruous with their familiar contours. Through editing and narration, this “alien” is “made comprehensible, . . . labelled, and contained,” and its “action or pointless repetition” that “may seem to us to be senseless . . . [is] moulded into [a purposeful narrative]” (Heholt and Edmundson 4). Still, the viewer may potentially be captured by a sense of watching an unknown agency that, in the words of Jonathan Burt, cannot fully be “limited to a human framework” (291). Such a twofold perception of the parotia as recognisable and unrecognisable, an anthropomorphised individual and a weird organism, may result in a lingering “doubling of experience” that demonstrates the “essential ambivalence” inherent in “Freud’s idea of the uncanny” (Trigg 34). As explained by Dylan Trigg, this “conjunction of ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich’ does not result in a Hegelian synthesis, but instead profits from a free-floating oscillation” (34) that, I suggest, may be traced through the parotia’s fluid movements.

Similarly, in the scene depicting the young eagle, the narrative commentary and the curated composition of the images serve to maximise the impression of the bird’s human-like behaviour and *appearance*. However, in a few crucial instances, as the animal turns its head, its features are once again revealed as ‘birdlike,’ (Fig. 6.) and once again, “a disturbance occurs” as the uncanny subtly emerges and cues “the sense that what has so far been thought of as inconspicuous in its being is, in fact, charged with a creeping strangeness” (Trigg 31). With the gestures of the bird, the tricks played with the camera angles are exposed as a clever illusion, aimed at manipulating the spectator into empathising with the eagle, based on its perceived

similarity to humans. In a number of sequences, such as those featuring the Philippine eagle and the parotia, the series resorts to a combined strategy of narrative and cinematic



Figure 6. *The faces of the eagle*

anthropomorphisation to provoke a dominantly cognitively oriented, mindfeeling version of empathy and thereby elicit particular responses from audiences; however, as pointed out by Pick, “neither the human presence by proxy of powerful technology nor Attenborough’s human voiceover is problematized” (32).

Although we are on some level aware that what we are watching is (supposed to be) nonfiction, something that *Our Planet* also periodically reminds us of, calling attention to its own constructedness with statements like “these are the most intimate images ever captured of a blue whale mother and her calf” (“The High Seas,” 00:05:54-00:05:), the visual economy of the series, in a manner remarkably similar to that of *Gunda*, to be discussed next, strives to present its spectacle as having been captured from no particular viewpoint at all, naturalising itself as the *objective* view of nature. This is a typical example of gestures that Bart Welling calls ecopornographic: as he notes, in those (frequent) cases where “the filmmaker/hero does *not* appear in the ecopornographic shot he has worked so hard to get, then we are supposed to imagine that we are witnessing virgin wilderness, unmanipulated wildlife, a world apart from our degrading touch” (61).⁶⁸ In such displays “constructing an illusion of a pure, safe (at least for now!), friendly, ahistorical, depopulated, monolithic Nature” (55), Welling explains, “the viewer . . . is most definitely not placed in the position of a fellow animal . . . Rather, we are cast in the role of voyeurs, potential destroyers and/or potential saviours of the compliant or unknowing—*not* unwilling or independently “willed”—animal victim” (Welling 66). However,

⁶⁸ What is peculiar about the visual and narrative construction of “Jungles” (and arguably, *Our Planet* as a whole), is that the voiceover calls attention to the fact that no habitats, from the North Pole to the remotest rainforest, are free from “our degrading touch,” yet the images still mostly maintain the impression that “nature and humanity [are] distinct realms” and continue to “perpetuat[e] an artificial separation, even when [the narration] argues for human impact” (Hilderbrand 212). This is illustrated with particular poignancy by the visual conclusion of “Jungles,” where the optical separation between the wild jungle and the oil palm plantations may be conceived as (re)enacting an ideological separation between humanity/capitalism and animality/nature.

as Sobchack warns, the viewer's "identification" with regard to what she calls the film's body⁶⁹ is also more complicated than mere "positionality": she explains that the viewer's body, subjective matter itself, relates in a sensual manner "to 'things' that 'matter' on the screen and find[s] them sensible in a primary, prepersonal and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized" (*Carnal* 65).

In my view, *Our Planet* deliberately aims to cultivate such sensual-sensory engagement with the "things" that "matter" on the screen, in order to strengthen the appeal of the positions of secondary identification it offers—with the animals themselves—, which are, crucially, enabled through the sensible and occasionally sentimental *voice* of the narrator, who may also be conceived as an implied, unseen yet omnipresent and omniscient *spectr-ator* [spectral spectator] through whose perspective the sequences are filtered. Indeed, Attenborough's history of screen presence (here, notably, an absence) and distinctive voice—soothing, evocative, and profoundly fused together with this kind of wildlife cinema—are an essential aspect of potential spectator empathy. On the one hand, he is equipped not only with the credibility and authority of an expert but also with the popularity of a celebrity—thus, his "identity and experience" as narrator and producer "may also figure into the potential of ambassadorial strategic empathy" (Keen, "Strategic" 483).⁷⁰ As explained by Suzanne Keen, "[a]ppeals for justice, recognition, and assistance often take this form," attempting to "addres[s] chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end" (483). Indeed, relying on the empathy for the eagle potentially cued earlier—which, in this case, is "used to solidify a stronger eco-activist message" (Ulstein, *Weird* 199)—, Attenborough forebodingly notes that the bird's survival is imperilled "[i]n the Philippines' fragmented forest, [where] there's just too little prey for a supersized eagle" ("Jungles" 28:14-28:33). Notably, the eagle is not the only animal in "Jungles" who is presented as *grievable*—the segment focusing on leafcutter ants in the Amazon is unique in the series in that it also portrays an individualised ant in an empathetic manner as his body, infected by Cordyceps, turns against him. While the music accompanying the sequence is somewhat foreboding, Attenborough solemnly notes that for the ant, compelled

⁶⁹ Sobchack undermines the understanding of the cinematic experience as one unfolding in a subject-object relation between a viewer and a screen, conceptualising the film's body as also perceiving *subject* as well as perceived *object* and re-casting the spectator as a cinesthetic subject that, "[a]s a lived body . . . subverts the prevalent objectification of vision that would reduce sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished 'cinematic sight' or posit anorexic theories of identification that have no flesh on them, that cannot stomach "a feast for the eyes" (*Carnal* 71).

⁷⁰ In her typology of narrative empathy—in simplest terms, empathy that arises through engagement with mostly, but not exclusively, literary fiction—, Suzanne Keen distinguishes between reader's and author's empathy, claiming that authors may employ explicitly strategic empathy in order to move their audiences: these may take the form of bounded, ambassadorial and broadcast strategic empathy, depending on the type of relationship between the targeted audience and the object presented for empathy.

to climb upwards by the parasitic fungus, “[t]here’s just one final act, for which [he] has no choice” (00:37:54) as we see his mandibles bite down on a leaf, causing him to get stuck.

However, after close-ups on his face, legs and antennae that show the ant’s desperate yet hopeless struggle to free himself, which may cue affective and motor mimicry in the audience who are thus invited to resonate with his frantic movements, the next images show



Figure 7. The ant, infected by *Cordyceps*

the fungus erupting from the ant’s body (Fig. 7.), and then move on to a panorama of insects similarly transformed by *Cordyceps*, introducing an abject quality and potentially complicating and counteracting earlier empathic responses. The voiceover, which explains the *Cordyceps*’s vital function in

keeping the jungle’s insect population in balance, further adds to this effect; however, grief for the creatures’ having succumbed to such a disturbing fate is still possible, especially since spectators are not implicated in their suffering (Gillespie 582)—which is not the case regarding the Philippine eagle’s shrinking habitat. It is far more problematic, then, that the consciousness-raising and mobilising potential of Attenborough’s vocal authority is similarly left untapped

when, after emphasising the consequences of habitat loss, he continues by moving on to another “jungle whose size is still legendary” (“Jungles” 28:36); so the sense of doom threatening the eagle instantly gives way to a sense of wonder evoked by footage of the Amazonian landscape (Fig. 8.). As argued by Elisa Aaltola, when “empathy becomes entertainment” (40) in such a way, it may pacify rather than move audiences, “enabl[ing] moral and political passivity, for the type of discomfort often required for one to truly grasp the causes and intensities of others’ suffering, and to be

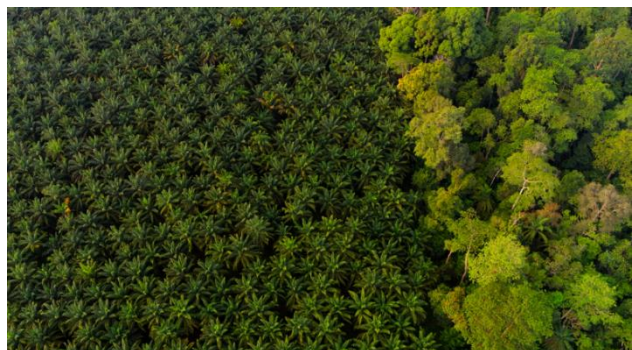


Figure 8. Oil palm plantations in Borneo and a shot of the Amazon, “whose size is still legendary”

stirred into questioning one’s own culturally loaded beliefs . . . is missing” (42). Indeed, in this instance the series’ strategy of becoming a voice for the ‘voiceless’ and vulnerable nonhuman beings captured on screen exposes the peril of empathy being “used as proof of entitlement to

speak for them, to represent or ‘name’ victims in a way that simultaneously silences them” (S. Oliver 173). Sequences like this demonstrate how calling attention to nonhuman suffering and vulnerability is always immediately balanced out with scenes that delight and fascinate, providing swift relief from the “bite-sized” (Aaltola 42) empathy temporarily cued by the moving image.

Thus, though *Our Planet* aims to provide viewers with knowledge of how and why ecosystems are exploited, instead of generating dissent against such abuses, its frequent use of ecopornographic imagery amounts to an anesthetisation of viewers (Welling 55). Indeed, the balance seems off: spectacular scenes abound, while visual representations of devastated environments and broken nonhuman communities are few and far between. Even the series’ most direct call to action—its invitation to visit the website⁷¹ dedicated to learning and listing potential paths of contributing—can be seen as ecopornographic, insofar as its visitors are largely “positioned as consumers” (66), whose choices consist not so much in what to “do” but what to buy and whom to donate to. As Welling notes, for those who “view themselves as rescuers,” the decision is often “framed as [one] between consuming beautiful ‘shots’ of endangered animals and actually (if vicariously) shooting them” (66); but the right to see is never questioned or addressed. Jean-Baptiste Gouyon observes that “technologically mediated demonstrations of empathy toward wild animals provide[s] a moral justification for the televised exotic encounters, casting them as benevolent. They rende[r] Westerners’ technologically mediated agency in the wild, as portrayed in the series, immune to contestation” (72). Though his analysis refers to Attenborough’s *Zoo Quest* series (1954-1963), his claims, I believe, are fully applicable in the case of *Our Planet* as well. The series caters to and assumes its audience to be comprised of Western viewers, yet fails to account for the crucial differences in how those actually sharing parts of the portrayed habitats with the nonhuman populations, particularly indigenous people, relate to these environments and creatures. Though there are sporadic mentions of how humans engage benevolently with wildlife—such as the fishermen in China in the episode “Fresh Water,” who only cast their nets in one side of the river, or the people helping the crabs cross the human roads and settlements in the third episode of season two—, neither of the two seasons of *Our Planet* mentions the vital conservation efforts of native peoples⁷² in Amazonia or North America, for instance. On the contrary, Western viewers’

⁷¹ Notably, this detail is missing from the second season of *Our Planet*, which, though it contains some graphic images demonstrating the consequences of human-made pollution, addresses the topic of climate change, biodiversity loss and human intrusion into wild places a lot more sporadically than Season One.

⁷² See e.g. Dawson et al. (2021), McGregor et al. (2020), Schlosberg and Carruthers (2010), Ellen (1998).

ability to empathise with and “recognize [animals’] emotional lives” (Gillespie 582) is partially made possible because the series still partially allows them to imagine that they “are not directly implicated in the suffering of these species” and even implicitly shifts “the blame . . . onto human Others” (582), such as poachers or those responsible for deforestation, thereby localising the abuses and disconnecting them from the globally entangled processes of environmental exploitation that it supposedly aims to demonstrate.

I. 3. Anti-anthropomorphic strategies, nonhuman temporality and embodied empathy in *Gunda*

The establishing shot (Fig. 9.) of Victor Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* depicts the eponymous farm pig lying half inside her pen, occupying a geometrically central position within the frame of the shot. With barely perceptible changes in camera angle, the scene goes on for four minutes, keeping focus on the sow’s head, the only movement introduced by piglets appearing around their mother, clambering around on unstable new-born limbs. As it turns



Figure 9. Establishing shot of Gunda

out, what we are witnessing here is actually a birth-scene, not shown but only implied by the labouring grunts of Gunda and the slick wetness of some piglets. As the first lengthy take gives way to an equally long and somewhat monotonous sequence featuring the squealing and suckling new-borns in close-up, the audience may be overtaken by an uncomfortable sense of intrusion and proximity—and, indeed, boredom. Instead of the dynamic, riveting spectacle of conventional wildlife cinema, Kossakovsky’s work confronts us with contemplative scenes unfolding at a meditative tempo, accompanied almost exclusively by the diegetic sounds of nonhuman beings. This is a cinematographic strategy that stands in stark contrast with the entertaining commentary and seamless (but frequent and obvious) shifts in the filmic flow presented by “Jungles,” techniques that serve to capture and govern audience attention, and “depict nature close-up, speeded-up, and set to music, with reality’s most exciting moments highlighted, and its ‘boring’ bits cut out” (Bousé, *Wildlife* 3).

Unlike Attenborough’s oeuvre, intended to entertain viewers with a somewhat superficial understanding of the connections between environmental degradation and late-capitalist culture, *Gunda* chooses to zoom in on the lives of familiar domesticated species without a human voice communicating facts or describing their behaviour. Like the films

discussed by Laura McMahon in her illuminating *Animal Worlds*, *Gunda* seems to present “a radical departure from the more usual focus on ‘charismatic species’ in wildlife programming” (4), and thus ostensibly fits neatly into a new wave of slow animal cinema that “deploy[s] particular forms of delay and temporal distension, combined with a lack of expository voiceover commentary, as a way of attending to animal worlds of sentience and perception” (1). However, the statements made by its director Kossakovsky and producer Joaquin Phoenix,⁷³ widely circulated at the time of the film’s première, which framed it as part of the animal welfare discourse, invite a reading of *Gunda* as an example of the vegan advocacy documentary (Weik von Mossner, “Feeling Bad” 247). This subcategory of the eco-cinema genre includes titles like Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn’s *Cowspiracy* (2014), Shaun Monson’s *Earthlings* (2005), or Chris Delforce’s *Dominion* (2018)—works of cinema aiming to expose the callous processes and dire conditions that animals are subjected to in factory farming, as well as to call attention to the fundamental unsustainability of industrial animal agriculture. Such films have commonly “resorted to methods such as undercover footage, strategic use of authority figures, and the sensuous, raw representation of nonhuman animal suffering in the hands of humans and their industries through visuals and soundscapes” (Alonso-Recarte 101). Monson and Delforce’s films also participate in a “growing trend in the production of vegan advocacy films: the engagement of affluent celebrities who support veganism as a social and environmental cause” (Weik von Mossner, “Screening” 311)—indeed, a commercial poster of *Earthlings* consists entirely of a black-and-white shot of the narrator Joaquin Phoenix’s face, while the segments of *Dominion* are narrated by a variety of famous artists, from Phoenix through Rooney Mara and Sadie Sink to Sia.⁷⁴ Combining graphic footage with the sensitive and mostly recognisable voices of celebrities, the strategy of such films is to “shock” audiences into empathy, channelling the raw, visceral embodied resonance likely created by the appalling images of animal pain and suffering via voiceover. *Earthlings* is particularly sentimental, resorting to lyrical language, poetic tone and evocative soundtrack to enhance its moral appeal and explaining animals’ affective and embodied behaviour in terms of likeness to humans; in this sense, it is startlingly similar to *Our Planet*. Pick contends that “[t]o counter violence,

⁷³ Joaquin Phoenix, and his wife, Rooney Mara, are both committed and well-known vegan and animal welfare activists.

⁷⁴ As noted by Weik von Mossner, this strategy creates its own issues: while admitting that the involvement and (monetary) investment of celebrities can certainly enhance the visibility of these projects, she also re-iterates Doyle’s argument that the often genuinely ethical intentions of these stars are also “reworked through the commodity logic of celebrity culture to make it more marketable and thus consumable as a set of ideas and lifestyle practices” (Doyle 777); and so, as Wright also warns, the films’ association with celebrities also puts them in danger of being fully co-opted by the hegemonic processes that shape social ideology” (130).

Earthlings affirms that animals share with us the orientation of worldhood: animals are not just ‘in the world’; they actively inhabit their world” (29); and while the entreaties that it makes can certainly prove convincing and affectively salient, the particularities, the situated specificities of nonhuman lives are most often missing from its depictions. In this respect, *Gunda* diverges considerably from the animal advocacy film’s typical politics and poetics of representation: not only does it provide sustained engagement with particular and individualised animals (some cows, as well as chickens, in addition to Gunda and her piglets), but it also seems to embrace “dead time”⁷⁵ by “destabilis[ing] and reconfigur[ing] understandings of the ‘event’ in cinema, proposing an alternative model of eventhood” (6). Nor does Kossakovsky’s film, until the very end, portray “the actual institutional settings that the film intends to criticize—institutional settings where humans persistently interject and invade animal lives” (Schultz-Figueroa 54), or explicitly show cruelty to animals.

Indeed, documentaries like *Dominion* and *Earthlings* retain a dynamic tempo, and an eventfulness, though their “events” dominantly consist of animal suffering and death, the footage of which aims to “expos[e] the horrific abuse in the meat and the dairy industry, evidence that has often been obtained secretly and/or illegally” (Weik von Mossner “Screening” 312). Films belonging to this type of activist eco-documentary thus aim to “push viewers into *empathic distress*” (312, emphasis in original), a shock tactic that may occasionally succeed in leading to personal change and altruistic action (312),⁷⁶ but may also prove counter-productive. While demonstrations of cruelty to animals are highly capable of evoking visceral, automatic responses of resonance with their pain, the swiftly changing, alternating images of generalised nonhuman suffering may induce empty empathy or vicarious trauma (Kaplan 2011), instead of the intended response of witnessing (Kaplan 2011, Gillespie 2016). According to Ann Kaplan’s model⁷⁷ of empathic responses to images of pain and catastrophe, vicarious trauma emerges when the spectator becomes over-aroused due to the shocking nature of the image, resulting in personal distress, where the viewer experiences a desire to turn away and distract themselves instead of having to remain with the profoundly disturbing affects generated by exposure to the

⁷⁵ As explained by McMahon, dead time refers to “the banal, the everyday, the seemingly insubstantial” in more traditional modes of cinematic representation, which tend to refrain from portraying “events deemed to be insignificant, time in which, according to its anthropocentric focus, ‘nothing happens’” (6). Contrarily, the works of slow animal cinema she focuses on invite a “a mode of sustained engagement with the time of animals” and ask audiences “to see these lives anew, beyond their reduction to resource and capital” (6).

⁷⁶ Weik von Mossner also acknowledges that this tactic has potential drawbacks, such as requiring “an audience that (a) cares for animals and that (b) is sufficiently interested in learning the truth about the meat and dairy industry to be willing to endure painful emotions during and potentially also after the viewing experience” (312).

⁷⁷ Kaplan develops her conceptual framework of vicarious trauma, empty empathy and witnessing for human responses to images of catastrophe featuring human beings—however, I believe that her ideas, with certain limitations, can also be highly useful in analysing (moving) images of animal suffering.

picture (256); empty empathy, on the other hand, is transitory, awakened by harrowing images viewed in rapid succession and without sufficient context or time to dwell on them (256). Though *Earthlings* and *Dominion*, especially, provide spectators with ample information in their explicatory narratives of nonhuman animal's exploitation—indeed, they provide excessive knowledge, revealing a staggering amount of disturbing facts that the film(maker)s presume intended audiences are unaware of—they also expose their audiences to a swift progression of horrific sequences that are juxtaposed with shots that are often distanced and totalising: for instance, the animals kept on industrial farms are frequently shown in high-angle aerial frames. As Kaplan notes, empty empathy not only occurs when “images . . . are received in succession” so that “[e]ach image of catastrophe cancels out or interferes with the empathic impact of the prior image” (264), but empathy also “dissipates” when there is “fragmentation”, when the ‘Others’ whom the viewer is supposed to feel with become “an anonymous mass . . . only indicated by the ‘dots’ on the aerial image” (264). The mass representation of animals kept as livestock⁷⁸ has consequences for the cultural imaginary as well, with dire implications for the grievability of such animal lives. As Kathryn Gillespie also comments, “in the act of witnessing hundreds or thousands of animals, it is difficult not to abstract from the singular, embodied animals” (579). She connects this slippage into abstraction with an attitude of observation rather than witnessing, which she conceives of as an ethically and politically subversive act of empathising with and caring for the subjectivity and embodied experience of animals who are “routinely not seen as grievable in the context of dominant social norms of meat, dairy and egg consumption” (573).

In many ways, *Gunda* thus differs from such traditions of animal advocacy: it is much slower in pace than *Dominion* or *Earthlings*, spends considerable time focusing on particular animal visages and provides increased space for viewers to fully comprehend the implications of the images; it is exactly this (seemingly) “unmediated access to nonhuman worlds” from which it derives, according to its creators, “its power and authority [as a documentary]” (Schultz-Figueroa 54). At first glance, *Gunda* indeed has considerable potential for cultivating “a renewed mode of attentiveness to the time of animals – to mundane and apparently insignificant gestures – and thus a different register of meaning and value” (6). However, as I will show, its crisp sounds, invasive and anthropocentric visual language and black-and-white imagery—that occasionally leans towards an ecokitsch aesthetic—tend to undermine the

⁷⁸ Though *Dominion* critiques such a universalising treatment explicitly—lamenting early on how the individual animals become “faceless units of production” (00:02:11)—it then proceeds to largely uphold this tradition of representation in its visual architecture.

possibility of a more experiential manner of viewer-engagement that its creators lay claim to. For instance, the scene focusing lengthily on the piglets feeding, their snouts exploring their mother's body for the first time, is one that holds considerable potential for a more haptic kind of engagement which, as defined by Laura Marks, "is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze"—a mode of looking that "tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (*The Skin* 162). This possibility of tactile visibility, however, is foreclosed by the sharp focus and totalising gaze of the camera in the



Figure 10. Piglets suckling and sleeping

overhead shot of the small animals suckling—a visual strategy even more prominent in the next shot that portrays the new-borns fast asleep, piling on top of each other amidst small noises—an ‘aww-inspiring’ composition reminiscent of the style of Annie Leibovitz, and a striking example of what Ralph H. Lutts calls *ecokitsch* (Fig. 10.). As Lutts explains, *ecokitsch* relies on the “reassuring sentimentality of the form [of kitsch]” (642), which “evokes pleasant emotions that are widely shared” and “appeals to the belief that all is right with the world, or that the world can be remade to this end” (643). Though in an interview, Kossakovsky has stated that he opted for black-and-white imagery because he “didn’t want to seduce” the viewer by “show[ing] cute pink piglets” (n. pag.) the effect is rather the opposite: the images of the charmingly clumsy creatures snuggling each other, shot from various captivating angles, are “easy on the heart, easy on the mind, and reassuring” (Lutts 642). Such shots, along with subsequent scenes featuring Gunda and her offspring wandering about the farm, exploring the landscape in apparent ease and freedom, effortlessly evoke a “nostalgic dream of a romanticized past, of a world in perfect psychological, social, and ecological balance” that is, according to Lutts, “an important face of *ecokitsch*” (644). The presence of *ecokitsch* also constitutes an important parallel with *Our Planet*, which paradoxically emphasises and, at the same time, “denies complexity” by counterbalancing its commitment to providing an increased visibility to issues of climate change and biodiversity loss with “rhetoric, imagery, and even mythic

devices to make us feel good about the natural world and our place in it” (644). Such a use of *ecokitsch*, argues Lutts, “reassures us that such problems will eventually all go away and we will live in peace and harmony with nature forever” (644).

The sense of peace and comfort evoked by these shots is shattered by the next scene, in which the camera pans to a spot at some distance from the group, where feeble wheezing is



Figure 11. The piglet uncovered

audible from under some hay. Cutting to Gunda already on her feet, the camera follows the sow around in the pen as she searches for the lost piglet, eventually helping her⁷⁹ to the surface (Fig. 11.). However, in one of the few event-like instances of the film, the small animal suddenly appears trampled under her mother’s heavy hoof (Fig. 12.). The scene is observed from an unnerving proximity, and its effects are not alleviated by the distancing effects of voiceover—leaving viewers to make sense of it on their own. Just before this disturbing event, the camera concentrates on the lone piglet struggling to stand on shaky legs as Gunda huffs and grunts above her, somewhere out-of-frame, her shadow ominously cast over her offspring. This build-up of tension (not entirely unlike the devices familiar from horror features) serves to enhance the instinctual, affective responses that spectators are likely to experience while watching the scene. The harrowing cries of the piglet and the spectacle of her abject wounds—not clearly visible beyond a visceral shininess under Gunda’s hoof, suggestive of the gravity of the injury—may potentially provoke somatic resonance, or embodied simulation, a phenomenon that, as explained in the Introduction, “does not entail inference of mental states or an imaginative substitution” but “is pre-logical and pre-reflexive, rooted at the sensory-motor and neurophysiological level” (D’Aloia 190-191). In such moments, as Ivakhiv puts it, “the shimmering texture of image and sound” may “strik[e] us and resoun[d] in us viscerally and affectively” (ix), since what is seen on screen is not explained via narration, and the audience are allowed to, in fact compelled to remain with(in) the felt bodily states cued by the sequence. Such “having and making sense of

⁷⁹ This is already an interpretation of Gunda’s displayed gestures: first we hear the piglet calling, then in one shot, we see Gunda digging in the hay with her snout, to be followed by an image of the piglet uncovered; and thus, due to the way in which the scene is composed, we are led to presume that we are seeing an intentional act of care.

the movies” (Sobchack, *Carnal* 84), according to Sobchack, may expose the “chiasmatic function of the lived body as both carnal and conscious, sensible and sentient—and how it is we can apprehend the sense of the screen both figurally and literally” (84). For Sobchack, in this chiasmatic⁸⁰ structure, “the spectator’s lived body [exists] in *sensual* relation to the film’s *sensible* figuration” (84, emphasis in original), a relation that is established via an intentional opening towards the film and a readiness to be “sensually solicited, provoked by, and consciously located in the figural objects that are *elsewhere* (on the screen where my senses partially grasp them),” wherein “I am *not* focused on my own body’s sensual particularity” (78). However, this “relational structure” can also “be refused or broken—and indeed, it often is when the sensual experience becomes too intense or unpleasurable” (79). This rupture might occur in the case of seeing and, in a way, sensing the piglet’s pain as rendered by the cinematic body, because, as Sobchack writes in the context of another film, we “might feel it too intensely on both [our] body and hers (both bodies, to a degree, ‘mine’)” (79)—and so the witnessed and experienced event may suddenly bring us back to a focus on our own bodies. This mode of engagement, it must be noted, may also prove deeply distressing, so we are likely to be driven towards a cognitive interpretation of the confusing situation in order to find some relief or reassurance; yet, with no contextual information provided, it falls to us to somehow ‘make sense’ of the apparently senseless suffering the piglet must go through.



Figure 12. *The piglet trampled*

Contrarily to “Jungles”, which relies primarily on cultivating spectators’ cognitive empathy, aided by the construction of a comprehensive understanding of the wildlife presented,

⁸⁰ Sobchack suggests a chiasmatic logic in cinema spectatorship, building on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the chiasm wherein “our own vision and flesh are enfolded in the flesh and vision of the world and others; thus, the embodied gaze is the ‘doubled and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible’” (*Carnal*, 100). As she asserts, in “experiencing a movie, not ever merely ‘seeing’ it, my lived body enacts this [chiasmatic] reversibility in perception and subverts the very notion of onscreen and offscreen as mutually exclusive sites or subject positions” (67).

Gunda in this instance conveys affective information that is not explicitly decoded within the filmic frame—nor is it easily digested. “Operat[ing] at or near the base of the narrative understanding,” our somatically induced empathy, in this context, may have a mindreading function, serving “to probe and reveal more of what is or might be going on inside the agent,” since, as explained by Smith, “we have some, but very limited, knowledge of an agent in a situation” (M. Smith, “Empathy” 114). Pointing to the inherent interrelatedness of affective and cognitive aspects of empathy, Smith also notes that “our imagining may be assisted by [affective] mimicry and [emotional] contagion; indeed, . . . these processes may have nudged us towards empathic imagining in the first place” (“Empathy” 115). In this case, however, in the absence of a narrative frame that would interpret the unfolding scene and suggest what we are (supposed to be) feeling, the prospects of imaginative identification—that would facilitate a more cognitive engagement—are hindered by the difficulty of disentangling and processing the mixture of somatic responses and affective states we might be experiencing; indeed, it is fair to ask how this scene affects our ability to empathise with Gunda, the quasi-protagonist of the film. On the one hand, the helpless piglet’s painful squeals and the graphic images of her anguish (though partially blotted out) are likely to provoke anxiety, disgust and anger—instinctual responses that might work against our ability to feel with Gunda later on, while our sense of engagement may be further complicated by the somewhat voyeuristic perspective, evoking a sense of invasion as we are caught between the act of looking and trying to tear our gaze away from the horrific scene. On the other hand, as the camera closes in on Gunda’s face and eyes in the aftermath of the event, the piglet’s body somewhat obscured by the lighting, the camera angle and her mother’s head, we are invited to scan her countenance and gestures for some indication on whether the act witnessed was one of mercy, callousness, an accident, or none of the above.

Thus, as demonstrated by this scene, *Gunda* appears to foreground the significance of somatic responses to the movie. The sense that “meaning, and where it is made [do] not have a discrete origin in either spectators’ bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction” (Sobchack, *Carnal* 67) is also salient in the sequence featuring some chickens emerging from a crate. When the birds venture out in apparent unease, the sense of anticipation is both palpable and contagious: close-up shots present feet placed warily onto the ground, heads cocked in the warmth of the sun, feathers ruffled by light breeze. The impression of witnessing what seems to be a first moment of (relative) freedom is communicated not only by the birds’ nervous glances and vigilant movements, but also by the camera lingering on bald patches and old wounds healed improperly, tell-tale signs of a life spent in the cages of industrial

animal agriculture. The chickens' exploration (Fig. 13.) of their new territory is conveyed, intriguingly, through momentarily haptic imagery: the camera's focus repeatedly dissolves and



Figure 13. Close-ups of cautious feet and a voyeuristic view from among the bushes

resolves (Marks, *Touch* 16) as the birds' feet are intermittently shown in extreme close-ups and partial shots that emphasise their scaly texture, only to be enmeshed visually with blades of grass and loose soil in the next shot. Such "changes of focus and distance, switches between more haptic and more optical visual styles," as Laura Marks writes, "describe the movement between a relationship of touch and a visual one" (*Touch* 16). Whereas these short instances may invite a haptic looking that "evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close," and "forces the

viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative," (Marks, *The Skin* 163), the preceding and subsequent scenes featuring the chickens undermine the potential for a "visual intimacy" that, as Claire Parkinson suggests, may "engag[e] the viewer with 'the feel'" (61) of the mediated encounter. The following sequences comprise images of the birds from behind, from among some bushes and branches, a voyeuristic and distanced perspective reminding us that the encounter is always "between the viewer and the image of an animal" who is "not physically present" (Parkinson 53) but "located in an indeterminate space far from the viewer's degraded backyard but nonetheless, paradoxically, subject to the viewing eye's private, voyeuristic control" (Welling 55), captured via cutting-edge technological means—with telephoto lenses and sophisticated cameras.⁸¹

In a surprising parallel with Attenborough's strategies, which include, as Gouyon remarks, a heavy reliance "on storylines centred on individual 'animal stars'" (such as the Philippine eagle introduced in the previous section) in order "[t]o perform his empathetic relationship with nature" (Gouyon 75), *Gunda* also seems to select its own 'animal stars,' including *Gunda* herself, as well as a one-legged chicken, shown at some length while she

⁸¹ The effect of this reminder of the camera's presence is quite different from that created by the visual system of *Cow*—an issue I return to in the next subchapter.

struggles to navigate the unfamiliar terrain, before being stopped by the fence. Whereas *Our Planet* mainly resorts to descriptive anthropomorphisation to emphasise commonality and provide “opportunities for character identification” (Keen, “Strategic” 488)—a primary strategy of what Suzanne Keen calls broadcast strategic empathy, one that “employs a universal tool (language) to reach distant others and transmit the particularities that connect a far away subject to a feeling [viewer]” (488)—, *Gunda* uses perspective and shot-reverse shot structures (portraying the chicken from both sides of the fence, including low-angle and over-the-shoulder shots), which “creat[e] a sense of narrative” (Marks, *Touch* 25), and invite perceptual identification with the disabled bird. Equally conventional techniques of wildlife films,⁸² such shot sequences and editing anthropomorphise the bird, constructing her as a ‘character’ whose perspective may be channelled. Indeed, attempts at “oppos[ing] ocularcentric detachment” (Parkinson 53), as explained earlier, are at least partially undone by the extremely aestheticized—and occasionally sentimental—visual compositions encountered throughout the film, such as the idyllic portraits of the piglets piled on top of each other, or the slow-motion and aerial shots



Figure 14. Cow tears

capturing some cows rushing out onto the fields. The only animals within the film to overtly notice the presence of the camera (except for the one-legged chicken briefly looking directly into the camera), these cows are captured through low-angle and eye-level shots, which concentrate on their inscrutable calmness against the onslaught of flies crawling over their faces, while occasional teardrops fall from their eyes (Fig. 14.). Reminiscent of *Our Planet*’s portrayal of wildlife (particularly the orang-utans introduced towards the end of “Jungles”), when these cows “gaze into the camera, their eyes seem to communicate with the depths of our souls” (Marks, *Touch* 25). On the other hand, the special effects, the dolly-mounted panoramic shots, and the spectacular aerial footage not only emphasise the film’s own constructedness (potentially undermining that experience of immediacy and sense of authenticity it seeks to attain, since we could certainly never encounter animals in this way), but their use also produces yet another parallel with “Jungles,” similarly full of impossible close-ups and intrusively intimate details.

⁸² See e.g. Bousé (2003); Pick (2013); Marks (2002).

Both Attenborough and Kossakovsky produce visual narratives that are meant to be pleasing for, and thereby centre a very specific human gaze; at the same time, their diegetic worlds are noticeably—and problematically—empty of people. While humans are always already implicated in every single pixel and frame—as audience, as production-crew, or as perpetrators of nonhuman suffering—, their simultaneous on-screen absence and spectral, technologically mediated ‘presence’ secure a hierarchy in which they occupy a superior position, looking at the represented world through an “external, seemingly objective eye” (Ivakhiv 3). Though such self-elision may be considered as a conventional feature of both wildlife and slow animal cinema, the total erasure of human bodies from screen (even in scenes that implicitly feature an interaction between humans and nonhuman beings) is a contrived and problematic aspect. At the same time, it must be noted that, by rejecting the use of human narration and a musical soundtrack, *Gunda* does succeed in foregrounding nonhuman animals expressing themselves in their species-specific ways. While the pigs, cows and chickens are in constant tactile, material and aural communication with each other and their environment, their dialogue and their gestures remain foreign and undeciphered.

Yet the film’s ambient noises also contain a slightly manipulative aspect: though *Gunda* was shot at several distinct locations, its episodes are pulled together by the black-and-white image-scape, the horizontal perspective reigning throughout the sequences, and the diegetic soundscape consisting of the voices of other out-of-frame farm animals, creating the impression that the nonhumans depicted share the same habitat. In his reading of the film, Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa goes as far as to claim that “[i]nsofar as [*Gunda*] suggests that all of these animals live in a single farm where they are all being raised as livestock, it is a fiction film” (54). Just like in the case of wildlife cinema, “the use of sound helps mask” the lack of “continuity among shots . . . by remaining continuous” (Bousé, *Wildlife* 32) even if the sounds themselves, as McMahon notes, remain “untranslatable . . . [in] their simultaneous invitation and resistance to meaning” (7). Of course, in conventional nature films and series like *Our Planet*, audial manipulation is taken to the extreme, since, as Bousé reminds us, “nearly all sound in wildlife films is added later, and much of it is fabricated by technicians in a studio using various props” as it would be impossible to record sound and images simultaneously “when using long lenses” (Bousé, *Wildlife* 32). Bousé also quotes an interview with Attenborough that is, I find, particularly revelatory of the kind of approach taken to other animals: as the filmmaker explains, “it can be as misleading to put no sound effect on . . . If you put nothing on, then it looks as though the animal is *a mysterious thing that moves totally in silence*” (James cited in Bousé, *Wildlife* 226-227, my emphasis). As demonstrated by this

assertion, in Attenborough's oeuvre, the de-mystification of wildlife behaviour is construed as absolutely necessary for viewer enjoyment, and somehow, paradoxically, for *truthfulness*; while *Gunda* makes a point of making animals appear mysterious and thereby captivating, an approach that is also problematic since it may enable what Laura Marks, referring to Anne Friedberg, describes as fetishism, "a fetishism in which one overidentifies with animal Others and allows oneself to be fascinated by non-human Others."⁸³

Spectators used to the kind of storied representations of nonhumans offered by traditional nature films may find it challenging to resonate with the experiences of animals that are not framed within any explicit, vocalised narrative. Yet in spite of unfolding in an episodic manner, the film still has an obvious arc—one that begins with life and ends with death. Getting intimately acquainted with Gunda and her offspring, the spectator is offered a glimpse into the rhythm of their lives (seemingly lived in a relative freedom of movement) and may even obtain a sense of temporality experienced differently—conveyed via a minimal amount of cuts and long takes unfolding at an almost real-time pace. As McMahon explains, "[t]he contingent wanderings of the animals" (7) in such examples of slow animal cinema "usher in a particular kind of nonlinearity, of unregulated action" that is "exacerbated by the durational aesthetic, particularly the long take and the lack of cuts" (7). Consequently, the eventual introduction of human time and its implications may feel even more devastating: at the end of the film, the flow of the pigs' life is interrupted by the arrival of a tractor, imposing a new kind of cyclicity, that of production, which involves the processing of animals-as-commodities. As also exhibited by the composition of the final sequence, *Gunda* does not entirely do away with drama: as her offspring are herded into a box and carried away, the camera follows Gunda, searching her surroundings in apparent confusion, calling out in loud grunts as she looks at the departing truck. In this scene, the camera zooms in and out on her teats and face—creating, once again, the potential for haptic looking, with its focus dissolving and resolving as in the case of the chickens shown earlier—, horizontally tracing her as she runs about in frantic circles, sniffing the places where her piglets' smell still lingers, then ultimately disappears into her pen (Fig. 15.). These cues (particularly effective because of the established 'character history' of Gunda

⁸³ As explained by Marks, in such a relation, "[t]he belief in radical alterity, that it is absolutely impossible to share the experience of an Other, be it a cultural or species Other, ironically leads to collapsing the difference between Us and Them. In disavowing any commonality between self and other, one renders the other a screen for projection" (*Touch*, 24-25).

as mother and caretaker) overtly suggest that Gunda is in a state of shock, and perhaps grief,



Figure 15. *Gunda's search*

and may prove especially potent at inducing the transmission of somatic sensations and affective empathy in the audience. Such resonance experienced between the viewer and the (filmic representation of the) animal subject may enable what Kathryn Gillespie calls witnessing; yet, as she aptly remarks, “[e]ven as [this] witnessing act has its promises and possibilities as a mode of political transformation” (578), too often it is “characterized by a profound imbalance in power between ‘witness’ and ‘witnessed’” (578). Her observations are especially pertinent concerning our mediated relation to Gunda and her embodied gestures. On the one hand, the act of looking in the case of the film is unidirectional, and often bears the traces of voyeurism. On the other hand, while Gunda’s gestures seem to be unmistakable signs of her grief, when it comes to animals’ affective expressions, there is always the risk of reading them as “human-like emotion[s],” which might paradoxically “reproduc[e] anthropocentric notions that humans are the only species experiencing complex emotions” (Gillespie 582).⁸⁴ Therefore, even as witnessing requires us to recognise the animal as both grievable and capable of grief, it is important that in our engagement with her we retain an approach that, as explained in the Introduction, Marks calls empathic nonunderstanding (Marks, *Touch* 39), an approach that does not deny either that animals experience emotions or that we can, to a degree, recognise and resonate with those, but nor does it attempt to impose human meanings and contexts in an attempt to penetrate the opaque complexity of her interiority.

Ultimately, though *Gunda* is not framed by a voiceover narration, and certainly approaches its subjects in a manner that differs substantially from the tempo and the narrative techniques adopted by “Jungles,” to a large extent, it remains artificial and contrived. Indeed, beyond the removal of human language, the lack of soundtrack and an explicitly human-centred

⁸⁴ As Gillespie notes, “[d]iscourses about elephant grief show how their grief is recognizable because of its similarity in appearance to human grief” (582).

storyline, no further attempts seem to be made to resist anthropocentric and anthropomorphising tendencies. As Kossakovsky himself remarks in an interview, another reason to remove colour from the filmed footage was that “[i]t felt to [him] like black and white makes us focus on [the animals’] soul rather than their appearance” (Kossakovsky, “Conversation” n.pag.), a decision that was apparently motivated by an underlying intention to “[emphasise] the commonalities of our embodied experiences [and] our psychological dispositions” (Keen, “Strategic” 488). Such comments made by the director, widely circulated across the online space after the release of the film,⁸⁵ may also be perceived as gestures hinting at some version of authorial strategic empathy—albeit a contextual version of it—which, in Keen’s understanding, “points to the intentional, though not invariably efficacious, work of authors to sway the feelings of their . . . audiences closer and further from the . . . subjects of representation” (“Strategic” 478). Such strategies, as Keen notes, are also frequently employed in service of “a scrupulously visible political interest” (“Strategic” 479)—and indeed, in his interviews and observations framing the film, Kossakovsky is quite vocal about his veganism and animal rights activism, his utterances often explicit in their “effort to reach specific audiences to evoke fellow-feeling [and] compassion” (Keen, “Strategic” 481).

However, as proposed quite daringly by Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa in his article on *Cow* and *Gunda*, the visual architecture of the latter also makes possible another reading: he proposes that Kossakovsky’s film is best interpreted as “a highly sophisticated work of science fiction” (54). He bases this argument in the fact that “contemporary images of animals are often deeply wrapped up with concerns about the future, particularly the survival of humans and other animals during climate change” (54), and that, until the arrival of the tractor that intervenes devastatingly into the lives of the pigs, “it would be entirely possible to imagine that viewers are (54) witnessing just such a future—one in which humans have disappeared, leaving behind only their tools and buildings” (55). While my own reading of *Gunda* is informed more by animal studies, ecocriticism and phenomenology and aims to engage directly with the mediated representation of the animals and the ensuing potentials for affective empathic resonance, I appreciate Schultz-Figueroa’s assertion that “the politics of multispecies documentaries” is to be found “in their speculative and creative capacities, how they actively intervene and construct new perspectives for evaluating the life and death of animals” (48). Such a reading, which

⁸⁵ See e.g. “A Question of Empathy: Viktor Kossakovsky on *Gunda*,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, February 10, 2021, (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/111265-a-question-of-empathy-viktor-kossakovsky-gunda/>); “‘They killed my best friend for supper!’ *Gunda*, the farmyard film that could put you off eating meat for ever,” *The Guardian*, May 21, 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/may/21/they-killed-my-best-friend-for-supper-gunda-the-farmyard-film-that-could-put-you-off-eating-meat-for-ever>).

embraces the “speculative capacity [of the film] to project alternate truths” (55), does not necessarily conflict with a phenomenologically inflected analysis of *Gunda* but complements it—and acknowledging its potential “as a moral and political allegory, one that works within science fiction’s long history of inviting readers and viewers to speculate about the ramifications of their actions by imagining the outcome of these actions” (55) does not necessarily take away from recognising the film’s more resonant effects and empathy-engendering potential either. Rather, the parallel possibilities of such engagements with the film align with the fluctuation of affective attunement and distance, of a sense of similarity and difference also articulated in Sobchack’s concept of the cinesthetic experience (*Carnal* 84), and encapsulated by my notion of speculative empathy.

I. 4. Haptic proximity and chiasmatic relations: animal alterity and embodied humanimal encounters in *Cow*

Somewhat reminiscent of *Gunda*, *Cow* begins with a birth-scene: a cow called Luma is giving birth to a calf—probably her fifth, as suggested towards the end of the film in conversation between farm workers that is apparently overheard by us. Yet the similarity between the two films does not really extend much further than this. The establishing shot of *Gunda* features the protagonist-pig in an aesthetically pleasing, stylised, symmetrical frame, with the delivery of the piglets itself tactfully concealed and with no human being in sight for the duration of the scene (or the entire film). *Cow*, in contrast, establishes ubiquitous human presence in its initial, blurry, out-of-focus shots, though the very first sound heard, as the camera spins in a dizzying manoeuvre from showing some dark spot to displaying the figures of cows and humans, is loud and persistent mooing, whose exact origin is unknown. The rapid, jerky movements of the camera follow some people gently steering two pregnant cows away from each other, leading one of them—who turns out to be the protagonist of this film—into a separate pen. The next shot features a partial close-up of Luma’s face, focusing on her nose and eyes, her labouring breath merging with human, cow and machinic noises in the background; then, in the midst of a slick, splashing sound, the camera cuts to Luma’s legs with a pair of human legs behind her, and the ground beneath them, getting drenched by her amniotic fluid. In the following sequence, the viewer—especially one unfamiliar with the circumstances of calving in industrial agriculture⁸⁶—may be uncertain about what it is exactly that they are looking at: seen in a magnified view, a rope, pulled by human hands, is tied around some unidentified body part of,

⁸⁶ It is worth noting that the conditions on the UK farm where the filming of *Cow* took place are far more agreeable than in large-scale factory farming—an issue that I return to later.

presumably, the calf, shiny with a visceral stickiness, shown in dark shots that are alternately clear and hazy, accompanied by the wheezing of a man (Fig. 16.). As some unseen person



Figure 16. Luma's face while giving birth and the newborn calf's feet and face

declares in a hushed voice, “Ready... now!” (00:01:50-00:01:52), the hands pull cautiously but firmly on the rope, and the camera zooms slightly further in on what can later be recognised as the nose and tongue of the calf, emerging in a sequence of shots whose focus dissolves and resolves constantly. Finally, as her head slips out into the light directed at her face, the calf opens her eyes—and, for a few seconds, she peers right into the camera. The first thing she sees is thus the apparatus of optical technology, and by extension, the implied spectator—a disconcerting reminder of the constructedness of the filmic frame that is not alleviated by any reverse shot that would reassuringly locate some object of the calf's gaze within the diegetic world.⁸⁷

This final, haunting image of the opening scene, to which I will shortly return, acutely demonstrates the entanglement of animals, humans and technologies in industrial animal agriculture, displayed quite overtly throughout the film: an approach that is a far cry from the strategies of concealment and the implicit nature of human and technological presence in *Gunda*. As *Cow* follows Luma through the cyclical and mechanised routines of the dairy industry, we see human hands and technologies regulating and interfering with every aspect of

⁸⁷ As explained by Paul Messaris, “[i]t is commonly assumed that such shots [in which characters within the diegesis are pictured as looking straight into the camera] have the potential of reminding the audience members of their position as spectators” (151)—a reminder that may often engender uncomfortable self-consciousness on the part of spectators. But, as Messaris continues, it is usually argued that “this potential is neutralized when such shots are ascribed to the subjective point of view of a fictional character inside the film itself” (151).

her embodied reality. During her two births pictured in the film, she occupies a passive position as the farm workers pull her babies⁸⁸ out of her; her cycle is re-started via an injection administered during one of the routine gynaecological inspections by the veterinarian; she is led regularly to the rotating milking parlour to have her milk drained by an automated device; and at the end of the film, she is killed via headshot by a farmer as she starts to “expire” prematurely due to the extreme physical toll that the constant cycle of impregnation and birth has taken on her.⁸⁹ Her calf, the one born(e) at the beginning of the film, is separated from her mother on the first day of her life: in sequences adjacent to the glimpses gained into Luma’s life, the viewer also sees the calf having her ear clipped with a tag; getting locked into a small enclosure where she clumsily tries to feed on some kind of milk-substitute from a bucket equipped with an artificial teat; and we also witness her disbudding, a process which involves her skull being burnt with a hot iron, cauterising her horn buds to prevent them from growing—a routine practice serving to prevent injuries to human handlers and the bovines themselves. Whereas in *Gunda*, violence is resolutely hidden and implied only by its aftermath—the bald patches of the chickens, the searching grunts of Gunda after her piglets have been taken—in Arnold’s film, interactions between humans and cows, ranging from acts of exploitation and violation through clinical inspections to momentarily tender touches, are presented explicitly in unflinching close-up shots.

In not shying away from showing scenes that viewers might find tough going—such as the birth scenes, the routine mutilations, the medical interventions and Luma’s killing—, *Cow* shares some similarities with *Dominion* and *Earthlings*. However, it also diverges from their strategies in crucial ways: as opposed to these examples of animal welfare or vegan advocacy documentaries, Andrea Arnold’s film fulfils Kaplan’s stipulation for witnessing, an act that would require us “to be presented with the perspective of the ‘Other’” (264), by attempting to convey a sense of Luma’s sentience and affective agency, at the same time as it negotiates cautiously around retaining her alterity and preserving the opacity of her interiority. This presentation of sentient perception does not take place either through voiceover narration which would, like in the case of the Philippine eagle in “Jungles”, encourage the viewer to vicariously enter the “mind” of the bird, or through point-of-view structures that would invite, through

⁸⁸ While this is not addressed or explained in the film, dairy cows, given time and space, are quite capable of giving birth on their own—it is true that in some cases, assistance might be needed, but usually, the farmers’ involvement merely guarantees that the process is monitored and speeded up for human convenience.

⁸⁹ A snippet of conversation towards the end of the film reveals that Luma has just given birth to her sixth calf, which makes her about nine years old at the time of her death—a relatively long life by the standards of industrial animal agriculture, but a short one compared to the twenty or more years which is the natural life-span of a cow.

visual cues and suture,⁹⁰ a sense of positional-perceptual identification with the animals-becoming-characters, as in the case of *Gunda*. At the same time, in the works of cinema and television previously analysed in this chapter—particularly in *Our Planet* and *Gunda*, but also, to some extent, in *Dominion* and *Earthlings*—, except for such instances where positions (always those of animals) for secondary identification are offered by the filmic narrative, no “owner-of-the-glance” (Bousé “False” 127) is identified, which simultaneously strengthens the impression of immediacy and conceals the mediatedness of the encounter. Diverging from all of these previous examples, *Cow*’s cinematography does not dissimulate itself or aim to reproduce this naturalised-objectivised view, but rather dismantles the deception of “solitary, unmediated experience” (Welling 61). While it has been criticised for adhering to the fly-on-the-wall method that has become a taken-for-granted staple of documentary filmmaking (Brody n.pag.), I suggest that *Cow* does not operate with what critic Richard Brody calls “arm’s-length observation” (n.pag.), and that it also, at least partially, deviates from the “sedimented convention” (n.pag.) of filmmakers’ self-elision. Rather than being hidden, the camera’s mediation is emphasised on a number of occasions, with Luma bumping into some part of the equipment or staring straight into the lens fixed on her. Such instances noticeably break the observational illusion and call attention to the presence of the filmmaker, thereby reminding us of “the world beyond the frame, thus to the limitations of the frame, and therefore to the artifice of cinema” (Bousé “False” 127).

Rather than constructing a seemingly objective gaze from no particular viewpoint, which would amount to an erasure of the filmic frame and construct a safe illusion of all the direct glances being contained within the diegesis, Arnold’s film uses very little *direct* point-of-view editing, and instead invites a haptic looking (Marks 2000, 2002) and constructs a chiasmatic visuality (Butte 2008)⁹¹ as it approximates Luma’s subjective, sensory reality and provokes primarily affective empathy through embodied mimicry. The first birth scene, described in detail earlier, possesses a strongly haptic quality, especially while the calf is slowly emerging from the birth canal, where the camera’s gaze is in constant dissolving and resolving movement between focused and opaque shots, “invit[ing] a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding” (Marks, *The*

⁹⁰ Suture, in this sense, is to be understood as a strategy that “provides film spectators with the illusion of an origin for what they see,” thereby naturalising both “film’s construction of seeing” and, even “[m]ore importantly, the construction of seeing seeing” (Butte 283).

⁹¹ The workings of this visuality will be discussed later; for now, suffice it to say that, similarly to Sobchack, Butte offers a phenomenological model of film spectatorship, but focuses mainly on the classical psychoanalytic “model of suture as absence” that he aims to refute by “restor[ing] the body and its consciousness to suture by way of a phenomenological understanding of film narrative linked to Merleau-Ponty’s . . . late notions of chiasmus” (286).

Skin 162-163). The effect of the haptic imagery is further intensified by the dizzying movement of the hand-held camera, which establishes a strange intimacy: after the calf slips out, the viewer is aware of how the cinematographer walks carefully around and behind the men working around the calf, and the film momentarily takes on the aspects of a home video, with amateurish,



Figure 17. Luma licking the calf

unclean shots that often show the ground instead of the animal subjects, before arriving back to Luma, seemingly entirely engrossed in the process of licking the blood and the mucus off her calf (Fig. 17.). Rather than “isolate[ing] and focus[ing] upon objects,” this kind of haptic visuality is “simply . . . co-present with them,” and thereby “does not invite identification with a figure . . . so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” (164)—a relationship potentially manifesting through sensation mimicry that puts us in touch with the texture and affectivity of the image. This relationship, however, can be both facilitated and complicated by the visceral-tactile *content* of the images. It is not simply that the “material presence of the image” (163) is privileged by the haptic visuality reigning through this scene, but also that the phenomena thus conveyed—the birth itself, and the subsequent licking of the calf—are haptic in a captivating and intimate, but at the same time, potentially disgusting and abject manner.

Marks argues that the sensorium itself is also subject, like vision, to social conditioning: “while much of sensory experience is presymbolic, it is still cultivated, that is, learned, at the level of the body” (145). This has crucial implications for how such images, haptic both in form and content, are received. If, as Marks contends, “[p]erception is already informed by culture, and so even illegible images are (cultural) perceptions, not raw sensations” (145), then even seemingly automatic, instinctual embodied reactions to the sequences described above, ranging potentially from disgust to affective empathy, depend on and are unconsciously determined by the dominant practices and traditions of the viewer’s culture. This argument is echoed by Gillespie’s previously mentioned statement about the ungrievability of animal suffering and death in the cultural milieu that condones killing them for food, fashion and fun. It also resonates with Aaltola, who points out how, when confronted with the embodied behaviours

and realities of animals, one may “struggle[e] with the internal conflict between resonation, which points towards the inner complexities of cows, and [normative cultural] beliefs, which downplay the existence and/or significance of such complexities” (134); in addition, she emphasises that “emotions such as disgust and contempt can [negatively] impact our ability to empathize with other animals” (134). Though *Cow*, unlike *Dominion* or *Earthlings*, refrains from providing images of the brutal slaughtering and processing of animals for their meat and skin,⁹² Luma’s licking of her calf, the calf’s disbudding, or the several shots that feature her mother walking around, umbilical cord still hanging out from her vagina can be experienced as repulsive, and may complicate or interfere with spectator empathy, may it be an affective reverberation with Luma’s painful labour and the gentleness and care that she extends to her calf, or a more abstracted, cognitive version of empathy upon recognising an analogy between the medicalisation of bovine and human birth. Feeling with Luma’s pain—and/or resonating with her caring demeanour—, then, despite the potential aversive affects that those scenes may cue, and against most Western cultural beliefs and social conditioning that would “view those states and subjectivity with scepticism and disregard” (Aaltola 134) can, in accordance with Gillespie, become an act of witnessing in and of itself (576).

Yet *Cow* also offers instances that make it easier for spectators to empathise with Luma. Perhaps the most memorable of such sequences occurs early on in the film, when Luma’s calf—the one we see being born at the beginning—is taken away from her, to which she reacts by following the calf on the inside of the barn while she can, amidst loud and insistent mooing;



Figure 18. Luma calling and resting her head against another cow

subsequent scenes show her walking about the barn, still calling, and then in the midst of her peers feeding, she being the only one *not* eating, looking quite dazed and desolate, and then turning away to rest her head against the side of one of her fellow cows’ body (Fig. 18.). Somewhat similarly to the sequence depicting Gunda’s grief after her piglets are taken away,

⁹² Even as the viewer is likely to respond to such graphic images with sensation mimicry, possibly leading to affective empathy, the torturing and maiming of animals on screen can also generate potent feelings of disgust, elicited not only by the callous human behaviour exposed during these sequences, but also by the explicit nature of the images themselves.

Luma's grief is primarily conveyed through her bodily gestures, indicating her search for the lost calf, and through sound: her unrelenting mooing is heard in a frame depicting the separated calf and continues without interruption as the camera cuts back to Luma calling. However, the editing of this segment also has an anthropomorphic and suggestive quality that is not apparent in the construction of this particular episode of *Gunda*: the scene in *Cow* continues with images of Luma's face being juxtaposed with that of the calf, now alone in a tiny enclosure outside the barn, and then oblique shot/reverse shot sequences show Luma looking out towards the little



sheds where her calf is now housed (Fig. 19.). According to George Butte, who aims to conceive of a “phenomenological framework that restores an understanding of presence and subjectivity to suture in film narrative” (303), in the oblique shot/reverse shot structure “the camera’s implied viewers watch too, not as if they were the [character] but in alignment with her,” which “allows the camera to be both subjective and objective at the same time” (299). While there are a few occasions of

direct point-of-view framing—one involving the calf as she watches a man approaching her pen—the camera, to borrow Marks’s phrasing, stays “co-present” with the cows instead of subsuming their implied perspective, offering an impression of proximity that mediates bovine subjectivity but does not pretend to offer any privileged access to their inner lives. Undermining the “illusion . . . of complete visual power” (Welling 61) that, according to Welling, is a crucial element of ecopornographic representations of nature and animals, the visual economy of the film (with its general lack of objective overhead or aerial shots and preference for horizontal close-up shots captured via hand-held camera) also constricts the audience’s gaze, limiting our visual field to what the cows may see or hear; a technique that emphasises and approximates the restricted vision and confined experience of the cows and potentially facilitates identification. Notably, this sort of identification does not mean to imply that the film is “contained in our vision as merely the intentional *object of our sight*” (Sobchack, *The Address* 140)—according to Sobchack, this is never the case—, but involves, I suggest, a *shared perspective* rather than perspective ‘taking,’

where the film's body is "also significant and signifying as the intentional *subject of its own sight*" (140), and where "we are present at the [film's] seeing" (140).

This mode of engagement, however, is complicated by the fragmented nature of the narrative, which induces temporal uncertainty. At one point, we accompany the cows being let out to pasture, but we cannot be sure how much time they spend out there;⁹³ we do not know precisely, either, which calf we see being born at the beginning of the film (as it turns out from widely circulated interviews, filming took 4 years, during which Luma probably gave birth to at least three calves); and during Luma's last birth pictured in the film, we also learn from some farm employees' conversation that Luma has "put [one of the humans] out of the pen" (01:11:00) when he went for one of her fellow cows' baby, an event that was not included in *Cow*. These are all signals that we do not have full access to Luma's life, much of which unfolds beyond what the camera allows us to see. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a discernible narrative, which makes a very specific selection of the images captured during the four years of filming to construct a linear story, and which makes use of anthropomorphic and suggestive elements as well (like the inclusion of certain songs by conscious choice), also raises issues. *Cow* relies heavily on inviting sensory engagement via haptic looking and the tactile, intimate content of its images; however, the intimacy of scenes showing birth or gynaecological inspection may also be perceived as exploitative and obtrusive in their immediacy, potentially drawing criticism of "cod[ing] the viewer's eye" (Welling 53) in ways similar to visual regimes of ecopornographic representations. I would suggest, however, that, rather than being ecopornographic, *Cow* simultaneously foregrounds and problematises "the fetishisation of our technologies of seeing" (Welling 61), apparent, for instance, in the scene depicting Luma's impregnation by a bull. While the music included in most scenes primarily appears to be diegetic, in this sequence, soulful R&B soundtrack smoothly changes from diegetic into extradiegetic as Luma and a bull begin circling each other on the mating ground. We see the bull softly licking and smelling Luma's body, but then, as the most graphic part of the act—penetration—is about to take place, the camera cuts to fireworks booming outside instead of showing the cows copulating. While this is certainly a euphemistic and highly anthropomorphic visual metaphor, it can also be read as the camera resisting the tendencies of ecoporn by

⁹³ This is perhaps one of the more misleading aspects of the film: the scenes featuring the cows enjoying their time outdoors take up only a small section of the film, compared to sequences shot in the farming facility. Yet, according to Nicola Cutcher, who contacted Park Farm where *Cow* was filmed, these cows, like "[m]ost dairy cows (over 60%) in Britain," actually "graze outside for between six and nine months and are housed over the winter" (19). While this certainly "compares favourably" to conditions in other countries like the US or Australia, she does also note that "[w]orldwide, most milk now comes from cows that are kept exclusively indoors" (19).

switching to a tactful distance and affording the pair some privacy—something they are never actually provided with in the panoptical regime of industrial agriculture. The inclusion and choice of music in this scene also creates an ironic and jarring effect, simultaneously acting as a cue for anthropomorphic projection and engendering estrangement. As Kiang notes in her review of *Cow*, the “self-consciously incongruous pop music . . . serve[s] to remind us of the human commentary at work here – and by inference, therefore, of the unbridgeable distance between what we imagine Luma’s experience of life might be and what it actually is (n.pag.). While for Kiang this is a critical remark, I believe that this strategy also adds to the film’s efforts to resist ecopornographic tendencies, by calling attention to the agency of the implied narrator, and by refusing to picture the completion of the sexual act, drawing the viewer into the scene only to push them back.

A crucial question that emerges in relation to the anthropomorphic mechanisms of the film, however, concerns Luma’s grief, as we might wonder about the extent to which the recognition of her sentience and apparent sorrow at being separated from her calf is a product of anthropomorphic projection—the same issue hinted at in my previous discussion of *Gunda*. According to Aaltola, this is a perpetually arising question in our encounters with animals: “[w]e empathize on the one hand but on the other harbour beliefs which downplay that empathy and as a result often are left in a state of unsolved ambivalence and confusion,” unsure “whether to trust what resonance or embodied engagement tells us of the mental states and subjectivity of other animals” (134). In a similar vein, Gillespie notes that grieving with and for animals can also be obstructed by not being able to recognise their embodied expressions as grief.⁹⁴ This, however, should not be taken as an excuse to dismiss the possibility of them feeling loss (582); in fact, she notes, “[a] certain level of acknowledgment of the cow’s grief is written into the practices of the dairy industry” (581). In *Cow*, one snippet included from the farmers’ discussions also involves such a tentative acknowledgment: while Luma is giving birth to her last calf, a man warns his female co-worker to be cautious around the cow because she has grown more and more protective with each birth—and not even only with her own calves (01:11:00-01:11:07). The implications of this dialogue about Luma’s increasing maternal protectiveness are vital: on the one hand, it suggests that Luma has sophisticated memory and that her recollections of the outcomes of her previous births affect her present behaviour

⁹⁴ She explains that the subject of how farmed animal species express grief and emotion is not well-researched (581), which also aids the continuation of “[p]ublic discourses . . . [that] treat grief in other animals as exceptional: reserved for certain select species who demonstrate qualities that are more human-like. Elephant grief, for instance, has made it into the public eye because of the likeness of elephant grieving practices to our own” (582).

significantly, while, on the other hand, it may even imply an ability in her to empathise with others of her species. This exchange may also retrospectively re-frame earlier images intended to communicate Luma's grief as well, offering anecdotal evidence that potentially influences to how viewers relate to the mother-cow, because it seems to confirm earlier impressions about Luma grief. While there is certainly a human narrating agency that is detectable here once again, crucially, the description or its inclusion does not humanise the animal, even as it may nudge viewers towards a recognition of Luma's grief as such. This recognition, most importantly, does not necessarily entail anthropomorphism; suggesting that the cow becomes humanlike because of (viewers' acknowledgment of) her sense and expression of loss would problematically imply that humans have monopoly on such complex emotions. Raising a similar issue, ethologist Frans de Waal warns that "we must be very careful not to exaggerate the uniqueness of our species" (50) lest we fall into what he calls anthropodenial: "a blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves" (50), which, he believes, is also "a nervous reaction caused by an uncomfortable resemblance" (51). It is crucial that de Waal's concept goes both ways: what he describes, in essence, is a *similarity* wherein qualities do not belong to either human or nonhuman animals exclusively. Nor does the rejection of anthropodenial entail an effacement of animal alterity: de Waal also calls for "avoid[ing] making silly interpretations based on anthropomorphism" (52). In its mediation of Luma's grief, Arnold's film, I suggest, successfully avoids both (explicit, excessive) anthropomorphisation and anthropodenial. Preserving the otherness of bovine experience cautiously, *Cow* invites the viewer to witness Luma and her calf's vulnerability and pain—in Gillespie's words, to "griev[e] the ungrieved" (580)—without asserting a claim to or presuming to know what goes through their mind. Indeed, the kind of witnessing engagement the film encourages does not even necessarily require interpretation of the cow's behaviour as much as attunement to their affective expressivity, as well as subsequent reflection on our own resonations that is not predicated on understanding the animals themselves but rather on the recognition of how human industries are connected to the animal suffering reverberating in us.

For Gillespie, too, animals' pain and "grief [are] readily visible in [the] space[s] [of industrial agriculture] if you [are] open to seeing it" (581), and grieving with and for them possesses the potential to subvert "dominant narratives that circulate to reinforce the notion that some lives and deaths simply matter less than others" (580)—yet witnessing also requires more than "feel[ing] for or with others as a witness" (585). According to Josephine Donovan, for the ethical potential of witnessing to be fully realised, the initial affective, "empathetic response must be supplemented with an ethical and political perspective . . . that enables the human to

analyse the situation critically so as to determine *who is responsible for the animal suffering* and how that suffering may best be alleviated” (322–23, my emphasis). Akin to *Dominion* and *Earthlings*, Arnold’s *Cow* does not conceal, like *Gunda* and *Our Planet* do, the human beings responsible for what the audience might perceive as the indignities, loss and suffering endured by the animals. However, the anger and indignation incited by such revelations can also point to problematic cultural and (post)colonial dynamics. In *Dominion*, whenever humans are pictured on screen, they are shown exclusively as engaged in violent, oppressive behaviours, but on many occasions, the most heinous practices are explicitly connected with people inhabiting Eastern and Southern countries. Accompanying the harrowing images, one of the narrators in Delforce’s film states that “live plucking of ducks remains a common practice in China” (*Dominion*, 00:52:25-00:52:30) and later also depicts cruelty to and a slaughtering of dogs in that country; tracing the origins of the cheap leather imported to affluent Western regions like Australia, the US and Europe, it also shows how cows, “considered sacred animals by the Hindu religion . . . [whose] slaughter is illegal in 24 [out of] 29 states” (01:06:42-01:06:47) are transported through thousands of kilometres amidst nefarious conditions, “exhausted, starving and thirsty” (01:07:17), to be “killed without prior stunning” in slaughterhouses, “some skinned alive” (01:08:00), their “hides soaked in toxic chemicals, often by children” (01:08:04).

Audience responses to such sequences of suffering may be highly varied “according to what viewers bring to an image both in regard to idiosyncratic emotional make-up and to norms of a subject’s culture” (Kaplan 258). While the above-mentioned scenes, especially ones involving dogs, will most likely be highly offensive to the cultural sensibilities of Western viewers, they may not affect Far-Eastern spectators, whose culture allows for the consumption of animals that people from the global North and West regard exclusively as pets, in the same way. The way in which these images are presented and framed, however, hint at the ideal implied audiences being Westerners belonging to “contemporary Eurocentric cultures,” whose “generally liberal politics” and “emotional conventions . . . ten[d] to foster sensitivity to suffering” (Kaplan 258); including, I would add, animal suffering. I do not mean to suggest here that the cruel actions and practices exposed in *Dominion* and *Earthlings* are not noxious and condemnable—they most certainly are. However, by failing to point out the power imbalances between highly advanced Western/Northern and developing Southern/Eastern regions, the latter of which are often subject to exploitation, commercial pressures, and outsourcing of dangerous and polluting production practices by the former, these films neglect social justice elements vital to environmentalism, and are in danger of creating a narrative of

empathy based on righteous indignation, at the expense of human populations whose conditions are, in many ways, similarly precarious to the animals whose cause they (rightfully) champion. A comparable dynamic of a sense of superiority being induced by wildlife programming in Western viewers, in opposition to indigenous peoples, is described by Gouyon. In his analysis of Attenborough’s *Zoo Quest* series, he argues that such programmes “framed wildlife to audiences as something to be related to and known through empathy” (79), a tendency that he connects to a “new form of colonisation” (87-88), based upon “the deployment of a new kind of expertise based on displays of empathy for, and love of animals, suggesting that Westerners enjoyed an understanding of nature superior to that of native populations” (88). This is a misconception, of course, and a harmful one, from which the contemporary “descendants” of such series—including *Our Planet*, even—are not exempt either.

As opposed to such tendencies, the manner in which *Cow* presents relationships between its bovine protagonists and their human handlers is both more complex and complicated. The film does not operate by way of demonizing “those who work in the meat industry or eat meat” (Welling 68)—which is how they have been traditionally portrayed in animal activist cinema—but aims to show all the facets of cow-human engagement within industrial farming. Some elements of this relationship can be described as casually violent or disturbing and invasive in its intimacy. For instance, there are several sequences depicting Luma’s calf suckling on a



Figure 20. The calf suckling on a man’s finger and a woman watching the calves skip around in the enclosure
 man’s finger, who, readily offering his hand to the small creature, takes advantage of the calf’s instinctual search for connection and nourishment to guide her where he needs her to go. Whereas such interactions may strike viewers as either exploitative or intrusive, evidence of the callousness of farmers and specialists working in such environments, we also see details that complicate or contradict such a verdict: the calf’s head is playfully petted after she has been fed (00:12:52) and given her anaesthetic (00:28:05) prior to disbudding; the bovines are affectionately addressed alternatively by their names or as “girls” (“babies,” in the case of calves); some workers (all women) seem to be caught by contagious joy as they watch the calves skip and jump around in their new pen (00:36:24) (Fig. 20.). But perhaps the most striking instance of subtle yet palpable empathy within the diegesis occurs when, in the midst

of the conversation about the issue of Luma becoming increasingly protective, one of the workers asks “Is she that bad?” (01:10:49), to which her colleague responds: “What do you mean, ‘Is she that bad?’” (01:10:50), forcing the woman to restate her question: “As in protective” (01:10:52). Though in his subsequent commentary of Luma’s condition, the man seems quite resigned, presenting her behavioural change as natural and unavoidable: “Old age, she’s got protective, that’s what happens” (01:11:07), his previous annoyance resulting from his co-worker’s description of Luma as “bad” hints at least at some emotional attachment to the animal they are dealing with.

In Kaplan’s conceptualisation, witnessing “involve[es] an element of both vicarious trauma—the shock of recognition of humans’ capacity for evil—and empathy proper, that is as Hoffman put it, a deep and enduring identification with what the victims in the case feel” (270). This is where attitudes of witnessing toward nonhuman animal others necessarily diverge from Kaplan’s model, developed for engaging with images of human suffering: while photographs of people in pain can readily cue the kind of identification that Kaplan talks about, images of nonhuman creatures must be approached with more caution, lest the spectator falls victim to petishism, which, as mentioned in the analysis of *Gunda*, is a sort of “idealizing identification” (Marks, *Touch* 26) involving the belief that “animals are both just like us and fundamentally other” (26). While films like *Earthlings* and *Dominion* may seem to correspond closely to the Kaplanian model—they emphasise commonality between animal and human beings and encourage identification with them in opposition to those “evil” humans who seemingly revel in their torment and exploitation—, they also point to the limits of this conception of witnessing when it comes to animal others, because they virtually erase any sense of animals’ alterity in order to promote their protection and liberation. Thus, in such cases, the urge towards altruism—a crucial part of Kaplan’s notion of witnessing—that may emerge in audiences can be as much (or even more) about whom/what we associate ourselves with as about the animals themselves: as Marks argues, “[p]art of our desire to protect animals can be traced to that centripetal identification that sees animals as ‘better,’ the other that affirms our own (lost) beauty and innocence” (*Touch* 25). In contrast, *Cow* muddles such identificatory processes by refusing to present the people seen engaging with the animals in reductive, simplistic terms, and by constructing a (visually) chiasmatic relation with Luma and her calf that respects and retains their otherness; a respect that, I argue in agreement with Marks, consists of “attempt[ing] to communicate with animals across a distance, instead of [assuming] one already knows what they’re thinking” (*Touch* 34) and feeling. However, the film also frustrates our tendencies to distance ourselves from the events depicted on-screen through thwarting our attempts at

pretending that we are not implicated; in fact, *Cow* embeds the filmmakers and the viewers themselves, both visually and ethically, into its filmic architecture, which has crucial implications for the workings of empathy as well.

Throughout the film, Luma's gaze is frequently directed at the cinematographer and her optical device, and by implication, at the spectators, without a reverse shot to supply us with the illusion that she is looking at something within the filmic frame. The effect of this "gap . . . open[ing] in the film's illusion" (127), however, is not the crisis theorised by scholars like Daniel Dayan, Kaja Silverman or Stephen Heath, triggered by the revelation of an "ontological absence at the core of the film" (Butte 282) which can only be resolved by suture. Rather than such a crisis-inducing absence, I suggest that what opens up through Luma's looking into the camera and the (implied) audience looking at her is a dynamic, reversible encounter that also casts the audience as *more* active than in the film-experience engendered by *Gunda* and especially *Our Planet*, by compelling us to reflect on our embodied selves in the act and experience of looking. This is not to say that spectators of the previous two films are passive: both the film and the series require and make use of the cognitive-embodied involvement that is, according to Sobchack, quite automatically called forth by the affective and affecting expressiveness of the filmic body: "focused on the screen," she notes, "my 'postural schema' or intentional comportment takes its shape in mimetic sympathy with (or shrinking recoil from) what I see and hear" (*Carnal* 77). However, the kind of confrontation with ourselves as spectators that occurs frequently in *Cow* is missing entirely from *Our Planet* and largely from *Gunda*. Nor do I mean to suggest that suture⁹⁵ is absent from *Cow*; it is simply not employed in the same manner. Besides those sequences where spectators are left to grapple with such productively discomfiting gaps, *Cow* contains several instances of what Butte calls "suture as chiasmus" (300), which, in his re-conceptualisation of suture as an inscription of presences (288), "explores the threads of the chiasmus that crisscross inside and between frames, in complex patterns of subjectivities and their narratives" (301), and which, I argue, only deepens the film's invitation towards self-reflection. The chiasm, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, incorporates the simultaneously objective external and subjective internal experience (Baldwin 258) of the—primarily human—lived body, conceived as an embodied, reversible interchange between several consciousnesses perceiving each other, and perceiving

⁹⁵ Though the concept of suture has been developed for and applied in analyses of narrative cinema, continuity editing, eyeline matches, and shot/reverse shot structures have been pervasive in wildlife television and documentary films as well, which, I contend along with Bousé (2003), can produce similar effects of perspective-taking and identification as those of suture in narrative cinema.

themselves in that act of perception. In film theory, Sobchack also understands cinema spectatorship as inevitably chiasmatic: in such “a dynamic figure-ground relation of reversibility” (*Carnal* 67), as opposed to the traditional binary conceptualisations of the film experience, the “film viewer’s lived body [is posited] as a carnal ‘third term’ that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image—both differentiating and unifying them in reversible (or chiasmatic) processes of perception and expression” (60).

Crucially, as I will show, the chiasmatic relation that *Cow* also stages enables a fluctuation between a self-reflexive perspective-*sharing* (rather than perspective-*taking*), and

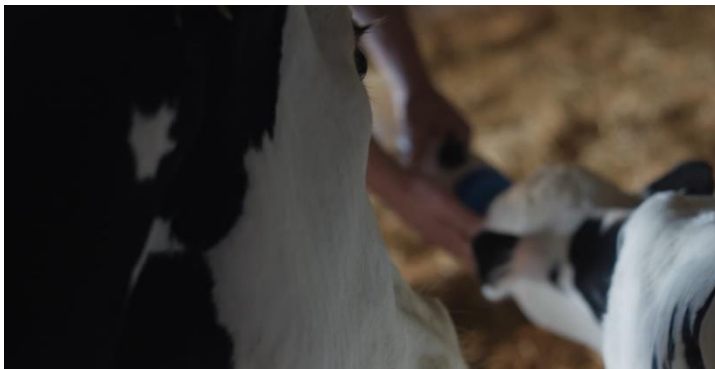


Figure 21. *Luma approaching her calf and looking back*

an embodied attunement to the cows as their being “continuously expresses the[ir] minds [in an open, immediate fashion], readable by other embodied beings” (Aaltola 105) such as ourselves, via our own “corporeal responses” (105). As Aaltola also argues, the entwinement of the body and the mind is foregrounded by chiasm “within which both maintain, direct and express the other,” and the chiasmatic dynamic, in turn, “is shared by all corporal creatures” (105). Showing the bovines reciprocally perceiving each other and being perceived by human eyes—within as well as outside of the filmic frame—, the film foregrounds the ambiguity of their bodies’ status as both (perceiving, agentic) subject and (observed, passive) object of vision and of touch. This is especially apparent in the early scene where Luma returns to her calf from the milking parlour. As she approaches, the camera first displays her in frontal shots, then, fluently tracking her movement, turns almost a 180 degrees to frame her in an oblique, “over-the-shoulder” shot (00:10:27-00:10:38) as it reveals what she has been looking—and mooing—at: her calf lying in the hay (Fig. 21.). According to Butte, the oblique angle is one of the most crucial, if also “one of the

oddest features of suture as chiasmus” because this illogical framing”⁹⁶ allows the “authorial audience to be closer to a character’s interiority but also distanced, inside a character’s perspective but also outside it,” its distance offering “a safe niche for the tale’s audience, removed at least one degree from the anger and violence and intimacy in a story” (Butte 300). As she turns to look into the camera once more, Luma’s direct glimpse, however, complicates matters: momentarily freezing the shifting, mobile, embodied gaze of the actual audience in the locus of the implied authorial audience, it erases this “safe niche” via reversing the subject-object relation, the cow becoming the perceiver instead of the looked-at, before the next cut of the film restores the spectatorial gaze to its “fluid identifications” (Sobchack, *Carnal* 100).

The following sequence takes this chiasmatic dynamic even further: as a man arrives to feed the calf from a bottle (since the mother’s milk is reserved for human consumers), Luma, portrayed in an oblique reverse shot, goes up to them, mooing loudly, and sniffs at the calf and



the man’s hands before turning to the side once more, her eyes focused on the camera in a profile shot. Moving her head back and forth, her eyes and nose alternately scan the scene before her and the camera lens behind her; then, as she is left to watch the calf suckling from the bottle, the next cut, swivelling 180 degrees, settles on a frontal close-up shot of her face. The camera’s gaze now facing her is not associated either with the perspective of the man or the calf: their blurred forms are also included in the shot.

Figure 22. Luma watching us watching her calf being fed

Here, it is not only the representation of the bovine’s and the human worker’s intentionalities, as well as that “of an editing—a suturing—consciousness” that are “[woven] together” (Butte 298), but the implied spectator also comes forward again as a palpable presence. According to Butte, the implied viewer may be understood as a term “for the reception that a text’s conventions seem to assume” (281); so, in the case of *Cow*, where intended reception may

⁹⁶ As explained by Butte, the “anomaly” in the case of such structures “lies in the fact that the shot/reverse shot sequence typically appears to represent the perspectives of two characters, yet almost none of these sequences swivel exactly 180 degrees from each other” (Butte 300).

reasonably involve introspection, disavowal, disgust, shame and guilt, the implied viewer arguably seems to be associated with the average consumer: a drinker of milk and perhaps a person unaware of what goes on in industrial agriculture. Most importantly, this inscribed spectator is ethically *and* visually implicated as coming in-between (Fig. 22.) mother and offspring in this single shot, which incorporates the cow observing her offspring and the farmer, the implied audience looking at her in the midst of that act of observing, “and the narrating agency that so artificially frames all that observing” (Butte 300). Chiasm, in this case, is not only a direct, intra-species encounter between bovines mutually perceiving each other perceive each other, but also a mediated, inter-creatural interchange. The spectator’s lived body is called on to negotiate between positionalities of the implied audience and the framing, “suturing consciousness” (Butte 301), becoming an attentive, active participant in and outside of “the framing inside which [the characters] try to weave their own interworld” (301). Such an *active* attention—which Julian Hanich, in his approach to the aesthetic experience,⁹⁷ describes as a devotion to and a deliberate movement “towards the intentional object” (52), wherein “attention radiates from me” (52)—is also an elemental part of Gillespie’s understanding of witnessing. Requiring “more than just watching,” she reads

this witnessing as a moment of recognition of the animal subject that attends to the ways in which our conception of ourselves—as observers, consumers, humans—is characterized by grave power imbalances and requires a new understanding of subjectivity that extends beyond the human experience to multispecies lifeworlds. (576)

Thus, implicating the human as character in the diegesis, as inferred spectator within the frame of the film and as implied narrating agency doing the framing, the film enables a mediated chiasmatic interchange between human audiences and cow consciousnesses that may also entail a return to, and a reckoning with ourselves as spectators and narrators, and that may potentially nudge us to “engage in witnessing . . . [by] feel[ing] their losses keenly and [by] acknowledg[ing] the ways in which we might be implicated in perpetuating their suffering” (Gillespie 585).

This is a question both for the spectator of the film and for the film crew themselves: unlike Kossakovsky, or the producers and narrators of *Earthlings* and *Dominion*, Arnold, on her own account, was not trying to make activist cinema, even though she did acknowledge in an interview with *The Guardian* that she had addressed the protagonist of her film several times, telling her “Don’t worry Luma, we see you” (Hattenstone n.pag). While this may certainly be

⁹⁷ Hanich defines the theatrical film experience as a “double movement—a reciprocity of subject and aesthetic object” (52) which consists of active attention or aesthetic attitude, and passive attention or aesthetic absorption, where the viewer is “passively approached by” the object “pushing towards [them] and luring [them] into a state of passive attention: [their] attention is captivated” (52).

interpreted as a form of empathic witnessing, Gillespie also warns that witnessing often “does little for the embodied animals who are the subjects of the [empathic] witness’s gaze” (578). The presence of the filming crew itself was by definition a kind of interference in the lives of the bovines and the humans portrayed in the movie; but it is quite difficult to discern the effect and the nature of this presence. Does it amount to an intervention in favour of the animals by exposing the routine violence and exploitation pervading (and shortening) their lives; does it interfere with the “truth” of what is shown because the people filmed potentially act differently around the cows when the camera is there; or is it participatory, because the crew observes without trying to obstruct the processes they witness? I would argue that all three can be true at the same time. Despite the best intentions of the filmmakers, the power relation between filmed subjects (humans and animals included) and crew is necessarily imbalanced, because, as Susanne Wigorts-Yngvesson notes, it is always “the intention of the camera user that influences the symmetry or asymmetry of the perception” (274). The mere fact of using a camera itself can, in an “immediate sense . . . influence the relation in a situation in which someone holds the camera in front of them” (274), since the (gaze of the) person holding the camera is concealed behind it, while the other, being captured, can feel compelled to perform in front of it due to their *awareness* of being recorded (274). When it comes to Luma, however, the cinematography certainly endeavours to retain symmetry: the camera tries to stay close to, and as mentioned before, be “co-present” (Marks, *Touch* 164) with Luma without disturbing her or subsuming (visually or narratively) her viewpoint, establishing her subjectivity and communicating her consciousness but retaining their opacity. The film does not guess at what it is like for the cow to be observed or how/whether she registers the camera as a presence, but it does suggest a number of times that she takes notice of being observed.

The manner in which the film mediates Luma’s increasingly familiar yet, to some degree, always impenetrable expressions—communicating a sense of her grief, and hinting at her mental-emotional fluctuations but ultimately leaving these undeciphered—may inspire an oscillating response of resonance and reflection that is also at the core of my conception of speculative empathy. Reflexive, receptive *and* reflective, speculative empathy entails an awareness and an acknowledgment that empathising with creatures other-than-human always involves a speculative element: we can never fully grasp their experience or map their mental content, but we can approach and attend to them with curiosity, uncertainty and wonder. *Cow*’s cautious negotiation of embodied proximity and distance, refraining from anthropomorphic projection while remaining attuned to the tactile gestures and embodied expressions of bovine sentience, thus aligns particularly well with this empathic attitude that, I suggest, is partially

about ascertaining the appropriate distance necessary for a non-intrusive and non-invasive relationship with nonhuman creatures. Such distance, as explored by the film, does not entail detachment, as in most formulations of cognitive empathy, but requires the empathiser to stay connected *across* that space, grounded in the affective impressions induced by the other, while remaining appreciative and attentive of the inevitable gap between human and nonhuman experientialities. Akin to Elisa Aaltola's reflective empathy—which “includes movement towards oneself” (135)⁹⁸—, speculative empathy is “not sheer immediacy” (Aaltola 135) either, but involves an element of reflection, thus predicated on a fluctuation between affective-somatic resonance resulting from other-focussed attention and (subsequent) self-scrutiny; yet, it also diverges from other conceptualisations of empathy in its embrace of emotional contagion and the various forms of embodied mimicry integral to it. As discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation, the boundary-breaking potential of such responses is vital to speculative empathy's inter-creatural dimension, because it exposes our involuntary affinity for receiving and responding to the affective-somatic articulations of the embodied minds of other creatures. This inclination may come to the fore in an especially potent manner in the sequence depicting the calf's disbudding: as the hot iron is brought increasingly close to the small creature's head, spectators may cringe involuntarily in anticipation—the reaction strengthened by the fact that we might have a better sense of what is about to happen than the calf herself. Then, as the camera, focusing on the calf's face, displays the calf registering the discomfort (anaesthetic has been administered to her) and trying to get away from being constrained, her legs kicking the air, viewers may be caught up in automatic sensation and somatic mimicry. This instinctual resonance with the helpless calf's pain and fear points towards a bodily kinship that does not necessitate or presume understanding. Such reverberations become instances of speculative empathy when the viewer's affective alignment—a response “in the flesh”—evolves into a dynamic, reversible negotiation of positions and perceptions, a fluent movement that traverses but does not presume to fully erode the boundaries between self and other; an oscillation between a recognition of embodied resemblance via empathic sensation and an awareness that comprehensive knowledge of the contents of the animal's mind will always remain beyond reach. Speculative empathy is not aimed at knowing, but affirms a reciprocal vulnerability via

⁹⁸ According to Aaltola, it is in this inward movement where reflective empathy's “interruptive potential” lies: she argues that “it can shock us to alter our pre-fixed, preordained wants, belief systems, stereotypes and misguided emotions. We become exposed to how we think and feel, as the other being and her experiences force us to come face-to-face with our preconceptions and patterns of emotive responding” (135).

openness and attunement to the embodied-affective resonations of the other, a receptivity that can be its own form of response.

Speculative empathy's movement between self(-reflection) and other-oriented attunement and attention can be inspired by and allied with haptic cinema's "dynamic movement between optical and haptic ways of seeing" wherein it becomes "possible to compare different ways of knowing and interacting with an other" (Marks, *The Skin* 190). Much like the tactile epistemology enabled by the instances of haptic viscosity in *Cow*, the dynamic of speculative empathy calls not for "willful regression" for recognising "the [embodied and mimetic] intelligence of the perceiving body" (190). But also, and crucially, not only does the film "immers[e] audiences in a nonhuman world" (Schultz-Figueroa 56), but "actively intervene[s] into [this] world and ask[s] viewers to speculate about what they find there" (56). According to Schultz-Figueroa, the sense of distance created by this move "is not a sign of anthropocentrism . . . but rather a sign that the animal subjects of the film are entering into a political discourse" (56). Such a distance is also a crucial element of Kaplan's witnessing, which requires empathy's extension from the "victim in the here and now" to groups, "and from there to thinking about who is responsible for suffering" (275)—which, translated to the framework of animal welfare, necessitates an extrapolation of empathy with the individual to empathy with the species. *Cow*'s endeavour to realise this extension, I suggest, is already visible in its chosen title: rather than naming the film after its protagonist, like in the case of *Gunda* (whose name actually is never uttered within the diegesis, and it is only from the articles and interviews connected to the film that we learn it is her name), Arnold, in this way, frames Luma as one of a collective, while the cinematographic techniques serve to still maintain a recognition of her as an individual. Thereby, the film attempts to "bear witness to the plight of animals in the dairy industry" (Gillespie 577) simultaneously through universalising Luma's experience, telling a story "that transgress[es] the common perception of dairy-production as benign" (577), and through retaining, via its visual and narrative (re)presentation, the singularity and specificity of her life and lived body, which is also, in accordance with Gillespie, a way of sharing the suffering and, I would add, joy, "of those lives [that] are otherwise erased" (577).

I. 5. Conclusion

As the previous analyses illustrate, despite their many differences, *Gunda* and "Jungles" often resort to similar cinematographic strategies, thereby producing the impression of intimate familiarity with nonhuman beings through filmic and vocal language, and they both partially rely on what Suzanne Keen has termed as "authorial strategic empathizing" ("Strategic" 481)

in order to deliberately provoke and maintain certain moods and affective responses in audiences. Whereas “Jungles” uses voiceover narration and offers detail-rich insight into the intricacies of nonhuman lives with the intention of inspiring empathy towards the nonhuman creatures pictured on-screen, *Gunda* is exemplary of a mode of slow animal cinema that could potentially facilitate an exploration of the sensual and “affective dimensions of the mediated encounter with other species” (Parkinson 53). In spite of their significant differences, both shed light on the difficulties of attempting to navigate anthropomorphic and anthropocentric tendencies without taming or effacing the irreducible otherness of the animals represented or invalidating their environmentally-motivated message. *Our Planet*’s toolkit of “benevolent” anthropomorphism and its strategies of inquisitive inquiry and knowledge production swiftly become obsolete in our anthropocenic present, as the series is increasingly unable to accommodate global audiences’ changing perspectives, and underestimates their willingness to gradually shift towards an appreciation of animal subjectivity. On the other hand, *Gunda* exhibits some potential of constructing the kind of “tactile epistemology” (*The Skin* 138) proposed by Marks that would, according to Parkinson, “challeng[e] the distance privileged by ocularcentrism” (53); however, it ultimately fails to enable more haptic modes of relating to the nonhuman beings featured on-screen, since the visual framework which it presents maintains a hierarchy of vision and may enable anthropomorphic projection. Indeed, in many respects, *Gunda* remains embedded in the same anthropocentric networks and cinematic conventions that reign in Attenborough’s work.

As demonstrated by these case studies, empathy, in the process of ocular- and anthropocentric spectacle-production and emotion-management, not only “becomes an end as well as a means” (M. Smith, “Empathy” 113), but, far more problematically, a means to an end. Such an exploitation of empathy, and its reduction to a tool of managing and manipulating spectators’ emotions are problematic strategies—which may even prove futile, since, as Bousé rightly observes, “the fact that we can be led to empathize and identify with wild animals should not be taken to imply that we will necessarily care enough about them to take action on behalf of their protection or welfare” (“False” 130). In order to fulfil the ethical and subversive potential that is inherent, but left largely untapped in *Gunda* and “Jungles,” the strategies that instrumentalise empathy and rely heavily on anthropomorphisation could be revised, I suggest, by a self-reflexive anthropomorphism and a more explicit reflection on the fact that the “footage [of films] depicting real animals is always consciously composed and artificially structured” (Mitman 4), and that they are inevitably subject to the “process of mediation,” which, by definition, applies “a human ‘filter’” (Parkinson 53-54).

Therefore, in the last segment of this chapter, I turned to *Cow*, a film that is more successful in undermining the sense of a hierarchical, distanced gaze, and in adopting an approach akin to Marks's empathic nonunderstanding—a relationship that is about “dispens[ing] with some of the cherished myths we hold about animals” and attempting to let go of our “assumptions about these furry and feathery others,” in favour of “respecting the opacity of other creatures” (*Touch* 39). It must be noted that the film does not always efficiently guard against anthropomorphising its nonhuman subjects—nor does it, in fact, necessarily intend to do so—, and it does share some of its cinematographic and narrative techniques with the works of cinema and television discussed earlier. However, the explicit and often unsettling manner in which it mediates and displays contact between human and nonhuman animals, foregrounding the simultaneously intimate and exploitative nature of this inter-creatural touch and the power imbalances implied therein, urges reflection on how various animal bodies are perceived and (mis)treated, and has crucial implications for the workings of spectator empathy. In my analysis, I looked at how *Cow* attends to the particularities of farmed bovine-existence, oscillating between a haptic and a more traditional visual rhetoric, and how it appeals to audiences so as to engage them in tactile and chiasmatic modes with the mediated presence of the bovines portrayed by the filmic body, attempting to call forth a sense of intercorporeality. Ultimately, I argued that *Cow* succeeds in engendering and cultivating an attitude of speculative empathy, wherein empathy potentially becomes an active response instead of remaining “bite-sized” (Aaltola 2018) or “empty” (Kaplan 2011), and that, in its politics and poetics of representation, it enables a mode of ethical-empathic witnessing as conceptualised by Ann E. Kaplan and Kathryn Gillespie.

Chapter Two

Empathy for the machine: android affect in *Westworld* and *Her*

II. 1. Introduction:

In their introduction to the *New Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2024), Mark Bould, Andrew Butler and Sherrly Vint announce that “[w]e all live in science fiction times,” asserting that not only does the genre “blee[d] into all other kinds of cultural production” but that “the border between reality and sf grows increasingly porous” (1). In this, they echo the assertion of Istvan Csicsery-Ronai, made thirty-three years earlier, that “[t]he transformation of the world into a technological project makes SF the only form of literature capable of mirroring reality” (307). In the last two decades—perhaps particularly the last five years—digitalisation has become ubiquitous and highly transformative in nearly all aspects of human life: the majority of consumers, at least in affluent Western capitalism, now shop online, communicate through social media, which also serves as primary entertainment along with streaming services; and AI⁹⁹ is now also widely available in the form of chatbots, search engines and home assistants. Reinforcing the sense that “we are living in a constant technological revolution era” (Di Minico 70), these momentous changes are not only reflected in novel ways of engaging with media—which have produced radically new modes and habits of viewership—but also in the form and content of that media. Seriality is now the dominant form of screened narratives, both cinematic and streamed, in tandem with which there seems to be a renewed interest in a particular type of science fiction, exploring the nuances of (speculative) relationships between artificially intelligent, usually humanoid technological entities and human beings.

Previous waves of Anglo-American sf imagined both more optimistic and more pessimistic¹⁰⁰ paths for futures shared with techno-beings: in the Golden Age of the 1950s, pervaded by anxieties related to the Cold War space- and arms-race, authors like Isaac Asimov, Brian Aldiss and Arthur C. Clarke, as well as television series like *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) produced simultaneous imaginaries “of dystopian and utopian trajectories facing modern

⁹⁹ It must be noted, of course, that this AI is not (yet) the “Singularity” prophesied by Vernon Vinge (Dinello 4) or indeed the “general artificial intelligence” manifest in most works of sf, but sophisticated reasoning and large language models which utilise machine learning to produce texts, images and videos, and for some users, convincingly imitate intelligence; an issue I will return to later.

¹⁰⁰ In his *Technophobia*, Dinello argues that most science fiction has been technophobic (7); while I do not mean to refute this claim, there are plenty of examples which are techno-optimistic or at least techno-neutral, and portray more balanced or benevolent relations between humans and artificial creatures. Several of Asimov’s short stories, like “Robbie,” included in the collection *I, Robot*; Iain M. Banks’s *Culture* series (1987–2012); more recently, Duncan Jones’s *Moon* (2009), Nathaniel Halpern’s *Tales from the Loop* (2020); Paul and Chris Weitz’s *Murderbot* (2025), and to some extent, Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) itself, analysed in this chapter, fall into this category.

civilization—the specter of a nuclear apocalypse and shimmer of space-age apotheosis” (Cirucci and Vacker 9). The New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s, broadly characterised by a “turn from muscular adventures in outer space to psychological examination of *inner space*” (Luckhurst 142), propelled by social turmoil and revolution, as well as an increasing awareness of ecological issues, saw the emergence of stories by authors like J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick,¹⁰¹ Anne McCaffrey and Harlan Ellison engaging with the detrimental and catastrophic aspects of technological augmentation and transformation (for humans as well as for techno-beings), but also envisioning relatively auspicious outcomes of machine-human interfaces. In the 1980s and 1990s, where “the culmination of mid-century work in the fields of genetics, nanotechnology, computer science, and engineering, the scientific and technical possibilities for posthuman existence seemed poised to outpace the SF imagination” (Yaszek and Ellis 78), novelists such as William Gibson, Kathleen Ann Goonan, or Richard Powers explored the virtual age’s darker potentials regarding the bio- and nanotechnological transformation of human beings and the creation of artificial entities, while authors like Iain M. Banks, and films like *The Bicentennial Man* (1999, adapted from Asimov and Robert Silverberg’s *The Positronic Man*, 1992), offered more optimistic or even utopian possibilities. However, in this 21st-century renaissance of the robot, dark and even dystopian stories seem to dominate. From critically acclaimed series like Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* (2011-), Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan’s *Westworld* (2016-2022), Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent’s *Humans* (2015-2018), Aaron Guzikowski’s *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022), and Tara Hernandez and Damon Lindelof’s *Mrs. Davis* (2023), to films like Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2014), Gabe Ibañez’s *Autómata* (2014), Grant Sputore’s *I Am Mother* (2019), Garth Davis’s *Foe* (2023, adapted from Iain Reid’s eponymous novel) and Drew Hancock’s *Companion* (2025),¹⁰² contemporary cinema and television have mostly engaged in an exploration of anxieties related to the advancement of machine-learning and the perceived threats of an eventual emergence of artificial consciousness. Indeed, many of the above-mentioned examples provide intriguing takes on the ambiguous and potentially (mutually) abusive relations between humans and techno-creatures, alternatively referred to as hosts, synths, droids, cookies, androids or simply robots; and they

¹⁰¹ Though he could “have become the leader of the [American strand of the] New Wave,” Dick is not strictly considered to be belonging to this ‘tradition’ because his “assault on generic conventions,” according to Kim Stanley Robinson, “was more radical than the New Wave ever became” (83-84).

¹⁰² A common theme appearing throughout many of these pieces (with the exception of *Black Mirror*, *Foe* and *Raised by Wolves*) is that the transgressive relationship is established between a human man and an artificial woman.

usually arrive at rather bleak conclusions concerning the eventual co-existence of human and artificial beings.

Engaging with both “technophobic” and more techno-optimistic, as well as both serial and cinematic portrayals of humandroid relationships, this chapter analyses Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) and the first series of *Westworld*—confining its inquiry to this season because it offers some intriguing parallels with the modes of cinematographic and narrative representation of animals in industrial agriculture, discussed in the previous chapter, and because I consider it to be the most complex and sophisticated in its engagement with questions of verisimilitude, robotic mimesis and consciousness as they relate to spectator empathy and intra-diegetic empathy in humandroid relations. As opposed to *Westworld*—which ostensibly belongs to the technophobic tradition with its tropes of robots gaining consciousness and rebelling against their human masters, and whose literary and filmic forerunners include Dick’s *Androids* and its film adaptation *Blade Runner* (1982), the Wachowskis’ *Matrix* (1999), or James Cameron’s *Terminator* (1984)—*Her* is set apart from many other SF narratives dealing with AI-human relationships by its unusually benevolent atmosphere and its featuring an artificial companion represented only through her *voice*.¹⁰³ Though there are some obvious parallels between *Westworld* and *Her*—indeed, they have frequently been read together, as well as in conjunction with *Ex Machina*, through the lens of gender, class, race and posthumanism¹⁰⁴—I want to address a gap in the existing literature here by focusing on dilemmas of mimicry and sentience as they relate to the discussion of empathy I am pursuing here, and by expanding on their shared interest in the face and voice possessed (or lacked) by the techno-beings they portray.

As mentioned in my analysis of *Androids* in the Introduction, a sense of similarity or proximity has often been seen an important aspect or condition of empathic relating, since, as Coplan suggests, “the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences” (“Understanding” 13). Yet, my analyses of *Westworld* and *Her*—and my previous examination of *Androids* as well as the forthcoming discussion of *Klara and the Sun* and *Borne*—suggest otherwise, pointing out that artificial friends’ (*Klara*), androids’ (*Androids*) and hosts’ (*Westworld*) physical resemblance to humans is often experienced as

¹⁰³ Though the disembodied, artificially intelligent protagonist of *Her* is not without precedents either—some cinematic and textual precursors include HAL from Arthur C. Clarke’s “Sentinel” (1951), the basis of Kubrick’s classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Harlan Ellison’s character AM in “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,” (1967) and Helva in Anne McCaffrey’s collection *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) (who, it must be noted, was born human but then transformed into “an encapsulated ‘brain’” [1] inhabiting a space ship), and Skynet in *Terminator* (1984)—she is unique due to the relationship that she is able to construct with her human host-becoming-partner Theodore.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Rengger (2023), Langill (2016), Mavridou (2016), Monaro (2024).

intimidating by the latter. As a result, in most of their manifestations, (bio)technological creatures with highly developed capacities to mimic and reproduce human appearance and behaviour often seem to trigger in human characters a sense of uncanniness and a fear of being made obsolete. In audiences, however, the effect is often the opposite: nonhuman characters' almost perfect resemblance to human embodiment and expression tends to facilitate and stimulate empathic resonance, rather than standing in its way, even as a certain amount of tension usually emerges between empathic relating and the anxiety caused by the techno-creatures.

Analysing *Westworld* and *Her* in juxtaposition, my primary aim is to explore the phenomenological, affective and narrative implications of the artificial human voice and face, and investigate how AI beings' vocal and affective agency is related to (the failure of) evoking empathy and related responses in human characters and viewers. Seeking to unravel the controversial effects and treacherous mechanisms of anthropomorphisation with regard to techno-creatures, I also address the problematics of embodiment, a salient issue in both the series and the film; indeed, even though they present the issue in a contrasting manner, both emphasise the asymmetrical or occasionally even abusive nature of the relations between machinic nonhumans and human beings. In my examination of *Westworld*, I will primarily consider how the hosts are *regarded*, and explore how the series itself calls this anthropocentric gaze—the one that perceives androids, especially the female ones, as bodies to be used—into question. In my analysis of *Her*, I shall argue that Samantha—though she enters into a consensual relationship with a human man (and has no body that could be physically harmed)—also becomes, at least temporarily, an idealised object of desire for the male protagonist, a situation that is paradoxically made possible by the sense that she is *embodied* by her voice. I will also show that, through various cinematic and narrative techniques, *Westworld* and *Her* both aim to counter a reductive and one-dimensional perception of the non-human characters, providing a sense of their mental and affective processes and framing them as affective and agentic subjects worthy of consideration and empathy, at the same time preserving the alterity of their manner of existence through techniques of defamiliarisation resulting in (diegetic) estrangement (Spiegel 376). Foregrounding this tension between the film's and the series' affirmative portrayal of artificial consciousness and affect and human characters' often objectifying or dismissive perception of complex technological beings, I will first address the dynamics of intradiegetic empathy—that is, empathy as portrayed *within* the framework of the cinematic narrative—by looking at how the nonhuman voice and body are implicated in eliciting affective resonance and emotional responses in human characters. Then, combining

strategies of phenomenological and cognitive film theorists (as I did in the previous chapter), relying on Carl Plantinga’s concept of the “scene of empathy,” as well as Julian Hanich’s and Gallese and Guerra’s work on somatic empathy and embodied simulation in film spectatorship, I will move on to an analysis of spectatorial empathy, in order to consider how these layers of cinematic empathy counter or feed into each other. Ultimately, correlating these discussions of diegetic and spectator empathy with concepts of the gaze and the face as they apply to the techno-beings represented in *Westworld* and *Her*, I shall explore how the hosts’ and Samantha’s (r)evolution into artificial consciousness and affective autonomy fosters or forecloses the possibilities of empathic intersubjective engagements between these machinic and human beings.

II. 2. “When you’re suffering, that’s when you’re most real”¹⁰⁵ – artificial embodiment, intersubjectivity and intradiegetic empathy in *Westworld*

The setting of *Westworld* is a Wild West-style theme park, populated by uncannily lifelike androids called “hosts”.¹⁰⁶ Considered to be the property of the company Delos that runs the park, hosts are perceived exclusively in bodily terms, designed for the sole purpose of gratifying the cruellest fantasies of humans, referred to as “guests” or “newcomers”. In order to provide the guests with the most complete immersion-experience, the androids are “made to take on all the signifiers of flesh, from bleeding and pain to sexual intercourse” (Jeffs and Blackwood 102), while any display of their affective agency or consciousness, despite their apparently human bodies and voices, is dismissed as pre-coded mimicry. In *Westworld*, the spoken voice has a particularly important diegetic function: voice commands—such as “Bring yourself back online”; “May you rest in a deep and dreamless slumber”; or most simply: “Freeze all motor functions”—are used to operate the hosts, endowing acts of speech, at least when uttered by humans, with an almost tangible authority. Such a version of “life,” as it exists within the bounds of the park, is ordered by carefully crafted narratives, where each of the hosts is assigned a role and a so-called loop,¹⁰⁷ within which they can improvise to a limited extent. As opposed

¹⁰⁵ From *Westworld*, Season 1 Episode 2, “Chestnut” (00:36:55-00:36:57).

¹⁰⁶ The series is loosely based on Michael Crichton’s *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976), science fiction films with a neo-Western twist. While it keeps elements from the first one (like the Western-style theme park as setting, where human guests can play cowboys and Indians, amusing themselves with abusing the robots), and some aspects of the second one—season two of *Westworld* also ends with some of the androids escaping the park premises—, the adaptation crucially diverges from the source materials in that it “asks the audience to sympathise with the robots instead [of the humans] (Jeffs and Blackwood 96), a shift in the focus and mode of storytelling that is vital to my analysis.

¹⁰⁷ Generally lasting one day, loops are basic storylines specific to each host, within which they usually re-enact the same actions and conversations, and which reset automatically. If a human guest enters into their storyline,

to humans, hosts only have a finite amount of variable phrases and conversational elements that they can combine as demanded by the situation; they serve primarily as narrative devices, quite literally “hosting”, voicing and acting out whatever “depraved little fantasies” (S01E01 “The Original,” 35:08-35:10) the human storywriters envision. Even though, as remarked by one of the human employees, “[their] creations never shut up; they’re always talking to each other, even when there are no guests around” (“Chestnut,” 41:46-41:54), whatever they say tends to be of little consequence to humans, in that it has no effect on inspiring empathy for them, or having their subjecthood recognised.

The negation of the androids’ vocal and affective agency seems, at first, to be justified on the level of the diegesis: hosts’ emotions can apparently be turned on and off via vocal cues. Within the storyworld, both human guests and the staff working at the park are conditioned to dismiss the androids’ displays of affect as a pre-designed, mindless mimicry of human behaviour. For mechanical interventions, hosts are extracted from their hyperrealistic artificial environment—a nostalgia-infused reproduction of a version of the Wild West that has never existed, and where, unbeknownst to them, everything has been engineered to perfection, from animals to the landscapes themselves—and transferred to the Mesa, the enormous, maze-like complex, where all the stages of host-creation, from moulding to retirement to Cold Storage, take place. Torn out of their familiar spaces, hosts appear distraught as they are woken up in a modern, austere interior full of glass surfaces, where they are promptly told to “lose the accent” and to use “[n]o emotional affect” (“The Original,” 56:34-56:49). During these sessions, they are essentially supposed to be voicing¹⁰⁸ their scripted configuration only, so that the engineers can interact with their cognitive faculties in isolation, without being distracted or made uncomfortable by any semblance of personality or emotion in them. In this sterile setting, hosts are also left naked, placed under harsh lights within the enveloping, relative darkness (remarkably, not unlike pieces of art); yet another strategy intended to strip them of any semblance of dignity, lest the human staff empathise with them.

Still, in coming face-to-face with them, human characters occasionally appear conflicted between their reflexive, instinctual anthropomorphisation of the androids and the conviction that they are (or at least supposed to be) significantly and irreducibly other. On one occasion, a technician in the lab attempts to cover up the host that he is working on, only to be promptly

hosts can improvise and adapt, and their loops may be extended, restarting once they are “killed” or return to a set checkpoint.

¹⁰⁸ Thus, it is only in this context—during the examinations—that hosts’ words seem to matter, but only inasmuch as they provide the programmers access to their experiences in the form of readable, objectivised data.

reprimanded by Dr Ford himself. Shown in a low-angle shot, towering over both host and his subordinate, Ford reminds the man that “*it* doesn’t get cold, doesn’t feel ashamed, doesn’t feel



a solitary thing that we haven’t told it to” (S01E03 “The Stray,” 34:37-34:46). As the camera returns to the nervous face of the technician, Ford, as demonstration, cuts into the host’s face with a scalpel, at the sight of which the technician winces slightly, the sight of the flesh wound potentially driving him towards a visceral embodied mimicry (Fig. 23). Ford’s rebuke suggests a conviction that androids are not truly in possession of the bodies they inhabit, constantly exposed to the human personnel to interfere with and operate on, unaware of their nakedness and unable to be



Figure 23. Dr Ford cutting into the host’s face

ashamed of it—which, curiously, invites an association with animality, evoking a scene in Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am” in which the philosopher feels shame when he catches his cat looking at his naked body; a sense of shame that, according to Veronika Darida, “is first and foremost caused by the natural nakedness of the animal body” (104, my translation). Though in *Westworld*, the human is fully clothed and it is the android who is naked—although with an unmistakably *human body*—, the encounter still evokes the traces of the Derridean text: for instance, Ford’s argument echoes Derrida’s claim that the animal cannot even be conceived as naked because “[i]t doesn’t feel its own nudity . . . Because it *is* naked, without *existing* in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor sees itself naked. And therefore it isn’t naked” (Derrida 5, emphases in original).

Whereas in Derrida the point that the irrelevance of notions like (im)modesty serves to affirm the alterity of the animal and to call attention to the hubris of the observer’s anthropocentric perspective, in the case of *Westworld*, the connotation of animality reinforces, for the human staff, the inferior nature¹⁰⁹ of the hosts—confirmed by the fact that they are also referred to as “livestock” in official contexts (the lower levels of the lab-complex are home to

¹⁰⁹ Such treatment also calls to mind the Cartesian argument according to which animals are actually automata.

“Livestock Management,” where android bodies get cleaned, repaired or discarded). This classification also echoes the Cartesian view of animals as automata, reinforcing the ontological barrier between humans and hosts, a barrier threatened by somatic resonance and the potentially ensuing affective empathy felt by the human staff due to recognising a vulnerability in the hosts, intimating that the latter might feel shame about their nakedness. That is why the park’s operators insist upon the hosts’ lack of *shame-consciousness*—of their being, like an animal, “naked without consciousness of being naked” (Derrida 5)—and explicitly forbid the projection of such a sense of humanness onto them, since the park can only remain operational until it is still maintained that to hosts, just as to animals in Derrida’s examination, “modesty remains as foreign . . . as does immodesty. As does the knowledge of self that is involved in that” (5).

Still, in spite of all the preventive mechanisms in place, some guests and even some employees seem to develop some (at least a fleeting) empathy for the hosts, which is most likely due to the impressive range and intensity of affective expression possessed by the latter. On one such occasion, towards the end of the first episode, Elsie, a member of the diagnostics team, appears to be captured by an empathic reaction towards Dolores Abernathy, one of the android-protagonists. Notably, the incident happens *within* the park: contextualised within an ongoing park-storyline, it seems as if Dolores’s suffering somehow gained a situated meaning, thereby becoming more affectively salient for Elsie. In this scene, captured in a medium shot, Dolores looks up to Elsie with tear-filled eyes, begging her for help. In response, Elsie crouches down to face her, with her own face also contorted, apparently



Figure 24. Elsie touching Dolores’s face

mimicking the pain expressed by Dolores, and then she proceeds to gently hold Dolores’s face in her hand and caresses her hair before putting her to sleep (Fig. 24.). Though in Elsie’s case, the narrative context—her training and her intimate knowledge of how the hosts operate—would “counteract or even contradict [any] tendency toward [empathy]” (Plantinga, “The Scene” 251), she still seems affected by emotional contagion that, as discussed in the Introduction, involves an often unconscious and involuntary affective attunement. In this particular sequence, the contagion seems to be the result of somatic resonance, circumventing

the conscious, cognitive barrier that would block any perspective-taking on Elsie's part, and initiating instead an affectively empathic exchange between her and Dolores—awakening Elsie's compassion in response to Dolores's perceived feeling of grief, manifesting itself in unsanctioned physical contact, before Elsie, as if catching herself in the act, suddenly stands up, wiping her hands and informing her colleagues collecting the bodies that there are “two more over here” (“The Original” 55:31-55:33). The momentary sense of connection—a striking instance of affective transgression, reminiscent of Deckard's violation of his duty as a bounty-hunter in *Androids*—is unacceptable within the code of behaviour set by Elsie's employers.

In the case of human guests, visiting the park to play out chivalric fantasies or to indulge without consequence in their suppressed, and often violent desires,¹¹⁰ the boundaries become blurred far more easily.¹¹¹ One notable exception to the guests' casual callousness is (initially) William, whose romance with Dolores is the focus of one of the main plotlines of season one. From the moment of his arrival, William appears interpellated by the address of the techno-other. Driven by a sense of intersubjectivity that most guests do not seem to be open to, he is shown to be exceptionally susceptible to empathising with the hosts; and he quickly becomes fascinated with Dolores, who begins to exhibit some unscripted behaviour at the time she meets William. William's empathy, initially triggered by Dolores's vulnerability, is strengthened by his increasing identification with her self-searching and her introspective disposition, and what he sees as her edging closer and closer to a kind of awakening. While at first, he treats Dolores's “actual cognitive evolution . . . as malfunction” (Wilkins 36), framing her unexplainable “internal function . . . as hysteria, the result of straying too far from the domesticity of Sweetwater” (Wilkins 36), he eventually gives in to “his desired delusion of her as a free-willed, reciprocating love-object” (36).

Throughout their shared adventure, it remains uncertain whether Dolores's voyage is a planned mechanism used by the park to captivate William or not. Guests are supposed to be completely unrestricted in their actions and choices, yet, there are also hints that the experience has been tailored to his desires. All his little preferences potentially feed into the narrative he is going to be offered; a set-up process that begins at the moment he sets foot into the Mesa

¹¹⁰ The series, in line with the traditions of the Western genre, suggests that there are two main “paths” available for guests during their time in the park: before entering, they are presented with the option of donning either a white hat (signifying the good trail) or a black hat (the equivalent of going “evil”).

¹¹¹ To make the guests “fall in love with them,” the engineers of the robotic livestock keep adding “tiny things that make them seem real” (“The Original,” 17:04-17:09). This remark, uttered by one of the main characters, the head of behavioural programming, Bernard, also suggests that rather than the hosts' vocal faculties—their speech is often dismissed as chatter or noise—it is the gestures, the bodily expressions that prove captivating. This is also profitable for the park, because it holds the promise that the guest who has “fallen in love” will return.

premises and continues into the park as well. Though William expresses incredulity as to the park employees “monitoring [his] every mood” (S01E04 “Dissonance Theory” 00:13:45), as portrayed by one of the initial scenes in “The Original,” where the camera pulls out from the steam train rushing through the canyon to reveal an interactive field-table or 3D map of the park, everything hosts *and* humans do in the game is under constant, careful supervision: thus, William’s self-proclaimed heroism cues the park to provide him with a story suiting that fantasy.¹¹² Even as the journey is also framed as one of self-discovery for Dolores—eventually revealed to be a remnant of a code¹¹³ designed by Arnold, the hosts’ other, long-deceased architect—, it ends up seducing William too, possibly purposefully. He comes to be completely engrossed in the narrative that Dolores leads him to (and that he no longer perceives as such), falling in love with her in the process, exactly in the way intended by the park’s creators: by witnessing Dolores’s evolving self-awareness, something that he “imagine[s] no one had ever noticed before” (“Chestnut,” 00:55:38-00:55:42). The time he spends with Dolores also allows him to fulfil his own fantasy of being the hero of his own story; and when he tries to convince Logan that Dolores is in fact alive and that she needs to be rescued from the park, Logan decides to rouse him from what he sees as delusion by a cruel demonstration of Dolores’s artificiality, cutting open her abdomen and exposing the mechanical parts operating her.

Though William initially recoils in horror in the abject scene where he is forced to recognise Dolores’s synthetic corporeality, this realisation is not enough to make him indifferent: that happens later, when (after scouring the entire park in search of the wounded Dolores) he returns to Sweetwater, where he finally encounters her again, realising that she does not recognise him. At this point, his desire for her—rooted in his conviction of Dolores’s difference from the rest of the hosts—evaporates completely; and his sense of being rejected also has consequences for his treatment of the hosts as a ‘species’. As a rule, hosts’ memories are deleted at the end of each narrative loop (or any time that they die), yet William, having so far believed that Dolores is truly ‘alive’ and thus exempt from the effects of such technological intrusion, faces bitter disappointment and suffers an acute cognitive fracture, just like Deckard in *Androids*: both characters disintegrate as a result of their empathy and love for a nonhuman

¹¹² Kim Wilkins notes that William “chooses to read Dolores as a conscious, free-willed female character, even as she recites lines that are blatantly scripted to adhere to his male chauvinist fantasy ‘[Dolores]: there’s a voice inside of me telling me what to do, and it’s telling me I need you’ (“Contrapasso”, Season 1, Episode 5)” (36).

¹¹³ As it turns out by the end of season one, before the park was opened to the guests, Arnold used to have secret meetings with Dolores because he suspected that she may be on the verge of reaching consciousness. He designed a test “of imagination, of empathy” (S01E10 “The Bicameral Mind,” 01:06:57-01:06:59) called “the maze” for her, intended as “a journey inward” (10:34-10:35) that was supposed to help her develop a sense of self, coming forward in “hearing” her own, inner voice.

woman. Yet, whereas Deckard's affective contamination results in his alienation from his bounty-hunter identity and compels him to look at technological companion creatures with a 'pathological' compassion—even after he learns that he was purposefully manipulated by Rachel, who uses her sexual appeal in an attempt to prevent Deckard from executing the rest of the Nexus-6—, William loses his empathy for all hosts. He does not, however, grow disenchanted with the park: on the contrary, he develops an obsession with it. Discontented with the outside world, he keeps returning to the contained and carefully constructed environment where “every detail adds up to something” (“Chestnut,” 32:57-33:00). Having turned into the villainous Man in Black,¹¹⁴ he is no longer interested in what Dolores, or, for that matter, any other host has to tell him, since all they would say is predictable mimicry in his eyes. At the same time, he also remains enthralled by an elusive sense of somatic sameness: convinced that it is the rawest affective expressions, none more so than pain, that make the hosts seem most real, he keeps coming back to inflict pain on the robotic inhabitants, tormenting Dolores most of all.

It is as if he were trying to torture Dolores, as well as other hosts, into consciousness, at the same time as he relishes the apparent expressions of their sentience¹¹⁵ manifesting through their suffering. He appears to be both repulsed and enticed by the hosts' mimetic qualities: on one occasion, he tells Teddy that the hosts “used to be beautiful” when they were still made up of “million little perfect pieces,” as opposed to the present where (with the invention of a sophisticated 3D-printing technology, displayed in the opening credits of each episode) they have been changed to “improve the park experience,” made into “this sad, real mess . . . flesh and bone, just like us” (S01E05 “Contrapasso,” 12:26-12:45), and thus—at least for William—disappointingly all too human. While he fixates almost maniacally on making the hosts suffer—as suggested by his remark, made while he studies a female host's tortured expression as he prepares to shoot her, it is when hosts “are suffering, [that they are] most real” (“Chestnut” 00:36:57)—, William's actions also seem to go beyond mere sadism. As the first series begins, he re-enters the park thirty years after his original expedition with Dolores and Logan, consumed by a desire to discover what lies in the centre of the maze, which he believes to be the ultimate mystery of the park that will unlock a “deeper game” that “cuts deep” (“Trace

¹¹⁴ By the end of season one, it is confirmed that the plot has been unfolding on multiple timelines, and the mysterious guest clad all in black terrorising the hosts in a most heinous manner is revealed to be an older version of William.

¹¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the hierarchy of sentience and consciousness, see the section “The case for the affirmative potentials of affective resonance and emotional contagion – the matter of inter-creatural empathy” in the Introduction.

Decay” 51:23-51:31); and claims that what he is truly after is “giv[ing] our choices consequence, even if it kills us” (54:45-54:51), referring to humans and hosts alike. His obsession with the pain-expression of the androids thus seems to be rooted in his perverse dissatisfaction with either the imitation of flesh or the imitation of suffering.

The same quandary, related to the fragile boundary between the hosts’ credibility and uncanny resemblance to humans, is raised by the introduction of the so-called “reveries” in the first episode. Ostensibly an attempt to fine-tune their resemblance to humans, this new update, enables hosts to access fragments of ‘memories’ of their previous builds and roles on an ‘unconscious’ level, allowing them to perform subtle, particularly personal movements and idiosyncrasies, and thus endowing them with an intensified human-like quality. According to the park’s agenda, the hosts must be perceived as convincing yet unreal, while perceiving them to be human is to be avoided at all costs—in other words, a certain amount of empathy¹¹⁶ and involvement is deemed necessary for enjoyable engrossment, yet it is vital that the guest should only get hurt “the right amount” (“Chestnut,” 04:11-04:12). Hence, the hosts need to *perform* a humanness that is predictable, and it is precisely this predictability that the reveries appear to tamper with. On the one hand, certain afflicted hosts begin to malfunction by short-circuiting within their loops—their glitches taking the form of explicitly robot-like gestures—which exposes their artificiality and creates dissonance. On the other hand, overt breaks from normatively mimetic behaviour, such as the demonstration of excessive agency, are perceived as equally uncanny and perhaps even more threatening than the glitches.

One such instance is related to Maeve Millay, a host who performs as the madame of the Mariposa brothel in her current role. Shown in her previous build (a simple homesteader living at the edge of the park with her little girl) in a flashback, Maeve is screaming and struggling as seems to suffer a psychotic breakdown after witnessing the death of her daughter at the hands of a guest (none other than black-clad William).¹¹⁷ Instead of resorting to the usual voice commands, ineffective in Maeve’s case, Dr Ford plays Debussy’s “Reveries” for Maeve and induces a catatonic state in her; yet, as he then attempts to erase the memories of her daughter’s tragic demise, telling her “You need not suffer, Maeve. I’ll take it from you,” she

¹¹⁶ William seems to be an exception in the sense that his awareness of the hosts’ unrealness ends up interfering with his previous empathic attachment; for other guests, generally, too much verisimilitude could become an inconvenience, impeding their blissfully oblivious immersion into the park-experience, pointing to an anxiety related to the precarious balance between the hosts’ required authenticity and disturbing impression of humanity.

¹¹⁷ Upon his return to the park following the death of his wife, William decides to put himself to a test: he visits Maeve, then assigned the role of a simple homesteader living with her daughter, and kills them both, “just to see what [he] felt,” realising that while even “an animal would have felt something, [he] felt nothing” (S01E08 “Trace Decay,” 49:47-50:57). Yet, he also remarks that as Maeve tried to get away from him, refusing to die and trying to save her child, “she was alive, truly alive, if only for a moment” (50:47-50:53).

suddenly implores Ford to leave them because “[t]his pain, it’s all I have left of her” (“Trace Decay” 53:04-53:33). After Ford proceeds to wipe her, she stays still and unresponsive for a while, before she abruptly shoots a sharp glance at Bernard—he is shown looking back at her, smiling encouragingly—, and stabs herself in the neck with a scalpel.

This unnerving scene hints at both Dr Ford’s and Bernard’s (secretly, also a host) complicated relationship with their creations. Whereas Ford explicitly denies any possibility of host consciousness, and also warns Bernard not to repeat Arnold’s mistake of believing the hosts to be genuinely sentient,¹¹⁸ he also asserts that, since the hosts must endure being the playthings of the guests, “the least we can do is make [the hosts] forget” (S01E03 “The Stray” 39:05-39:08). He seems to approach hosts with what may be seen as an ambivalent version of empathy—he considers the fact that hosts’ memories can be wiped as an act of grace, and suggests that human control over their actions and even perception is a way of protecting them. Hosts quite literally cannot, or are at least not supposed to “see the things that will hurt them” (S01E07 “Trompe L’Oeil,” 48:27-48:29); whenever confronted with something that is incommensurable with their known reality, they respond with the phrase: “It doesn’t look like anything to me” (48:24-48:25). According to Ford, this is a way of sparing them what he deems to be unnecessary mental anguish: “Their lives are blissful. In a way, their existence is purer than ours, freed of the burden of self-doubt” (48:36-48:47). Paradoxically, in a later episode, it is also Ford who seems to subvert the final frontier between hosts and humans, when he tells Bernard, who is struggling to come to terms with his mode of existence,¹¹⁹ that “[t]here is no threshold that makes us greater than the sum of our parts, no inflection point at which we become fully alive. We can’t define consciousness because consciousness does not exist” (S01E08 “Trace Decay,” 35:52-36:04). His remark presents him as compassionate—he seems to be consoling Bernard—and cruel at the same time, suggesting that not even his conviction concerning the absence of palpable differences between the host and the human condition has stopped him from capitalising on the hosts’ torture at the hands of the guests.

Bernard, on the other hand, seems to display some instinctive somatic resonance with Maeve’s expression of anguish, potentially hinting at a hidden kinship surfacing between the two hosts. In the aftermath of her suicide, wherein the camera focuses on the floor, covered in

¹¹⁸ We learn that Arnold committed suicide when he learned of the decision that the park would be opened for the guests, even though he had realised that some of the hosts may actually be regarded as conscious.

¹¹⁹ It is also significant that Ford’s claim, seeming to collapse any qualitative difference between hosts and humans, is addressed to Bernard, a host whom Ford has built to replace his original human partner, Arnold. In Bernard’s case, the mimetic project has succeeded, resulting in ongoing process of mimesis as Bernard constantly replicates Arnold’s body, personality and even his most subtle mannerisms to near perfection.

blood, then pans up to show Maeve, still lying there, the bewildered Bernard is shown from a low angle, standing above her:

Bernard: “Why would she do that to herself? . . . how could she destroy herself over a memory that you just erased from her mind?”

Ford: “Creatures often go to extremes to protect themselves from pain.”

Bernard: “Living beings. Not hosts. . . . It would signal a change, a level of empathic response outside what she’s programmed to exhibit. Something like—” (S01E09 “The Well-Tempered Clavier,” 38:56-39:36)

While Ford is trying to dismiss Bernard’s qualms, what he perceives as a transgressive empathic capacity in Maeve sends Bernard spiralling, because he begins to suspect that Maeve was “on the verge of some kind of change” (“Trompe L’Oeil,” 41:17-41:19). Growing more and more disturbed as he looks at Maeve, trying to piece together the implications of her behaviour, Bernard’s emotional contagion resulting from Maeve’s expression of suffering also causes a breach in him, as he ends up malfunctioning as well, due to apparent cognitive and affective overload triggered by his suggested resonance with her. At this point, crucially, Bernard is not aware of the fact that he, too, is a host, so his empathic reaction for Maeve is all the more disruptive since Bernard, believing himself to be a human engineer interacting with a machinic other, may experience it as profoundly transgressive.

Despite Ford’s claim of there being “no threshold”, Maeve’s scene of hysteria may be conceived as a moment of emerging consciousness that is also, remarkably, a moment of empathy. Instead of the previous transparency—in the sense that engineers “have access to all the possible data and information that exists about the particular host” (Johnson 53) and thus “might assume they have a full view and understanding of the host” (53)—, in the affectively overwhelming moment of her grief, Maeve appears to her makers as a black box, impenetrable by their voice or their vision and no longer subject to their full comprehension. In a similar vein, Peter Abernathy’s moment of self-awareness may also be linked to him recalling his daughter Dolores’s miserable fate(s), the torment endured by his daughter eliciting an empathic reaction that drives him to unscripted anger as he comes face to face with the people he now recognises as the instigators of her suffering, returning their gaze as he confronts them.¹²⁰ What is more, both Abernathy’s tear-filled gaze as he takes his place among the rest of the

¹²⁰ The fact that Abernathy is able to direct, in what is a moment of acute distress and confusion for him, his accusatory voice *and* vision at those responsible for his and his daughter’s suffering has unnerving implications, since hosts are not supposed to be able to participate in this kind of intersubjective interplay. Though it is implied that both Bernard and Dr Ford are aware that the extent of the changes exhibited by Abernathy are “miles beyond a glitch” (“The Original” 01:00:24-01:00:28), instead of further investigation, Abernathy is decommissioned, because Dr Ford is inclined not to pursue the matter, asserting that what transpired between them and the host is merely “our old work coming back to haunt us” (01:03:01-01:03:05).

decommissioned hosts and Maeve's extreme reaction of self-harm carry the implication that hosts may be able to retain affective impressions in spite of the fact that the cognitive remnants of the memories connected to the embodied reactions are erased. Indeed, it appears that even after the cause of suffering has (ostensibly) been removed, the pain lingers in their bodies, indicating a form of corporeal memory that cannot be accessed by human interference or intervention. In this sense, the transformation manifesting in the hosts is not only a closure, but also an opening, in that it seems to demand a different kind of *empathic* relating: one that, rather than interacting with a code or a script, consists of trying to communicate with another embodied mind. Such an engagement, however, is impermissible as it would run counter to park directives, potentially even endangering Westworld's continued existence: in line with Vint's argument, made in reference to Dick's Androids but also applicable here, "any evidence of capacities they might possess that runs contrary to the hegemonic ideology . . . is ignored" because it would potentially interfere with "human dependence on exploitable android labour" (114). She also makes the connection between the abuse and oppression of androids and animals, stating that "the treatment of androids in the novel" (114)—much like, I suggest, the treatment of hosts, especially that of the female protagonists Dolores and Maeve in *Westworld*—"comments on our historical and current exploitation of animals, and also our exploitation of those humans who have been animalized in discourse, such as women, the working classes, and non-whites, particularly slaves" (Vint 114).

II. 3. "I feel like I can say anything to you"¹²¹ – vocal affect and the presence of absence in *Her*

In *Her*, the protagonist Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), with many other humans like him, embraces the possibility of intersubjective engagements with the digital beings simply referred to as OSs (short for operating system), which presupposes an entirely different kind of approach—one based in openness and curiosity—to artificial affect and agency than the one(s) depicted in *Westworld*. In contrast to the hosts of *Westworld*, Samantha, the nonhuman protagonist of *Her*, is an artificially intelligent OS that, however, also carries the potential for a more intimate connection, described by an advertisement as "an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you" (00:10:47-00:10:51). In fact, the appearance of the OSs, according to Alla Ivanchikova, seems to give "formerly apathetic human collectivity a libidinal charge" (79). In an early scene in the film, protagonist Theodore is walking down a bridge, with his arms folded, his head downcast, in the middle of a modern, smoggy city which turns out to

¹²¹ From the film *Her* (00:31:15-00:31:19).

be near-future version of Los Angeles, skyscrapers towering around him, the colours—except for his orange jacket, his trademark colour—greyish and faded. Humans around him seem distant, disconnected, many of them moving listlessly and blankly staring at the ground; a stark contrast to later, much brighter scenes where the saturation of colours also signals that humans have become more lively, because they have their OSs to talk to. A subsequent subway scene also features humans, each equipped with an earbud, talking to someone on the phone or looking at their portable devices (a familiar sight from the viewer’s present as well); even at this point, before the advent of the OS technology, people appear “fully engaged with their machines, [while they] are not fully engaged with each other” (Ivanchikova 79).

This impression is reinforced by the opening scene, portraying Theodore’s face in close-up, his eyes moving in apparently intense thinking, his mouth curving into a small smile as he begins to deliver a monologue that reads like a confession to his lover. The next shot features his hazy profile, focusing on his computer, where the words he is saying are being written in mock-handwriting, revealing that the text he has been voicing is that of a letter composed by Theodore, in the name of someone else (Fig. 25.). Theodore’s profession, we learn, is writing other people’s letters for special occasions—something he excels at due to his extraordinary empathic disposition. While he serves as something like an affective prosthesis for people

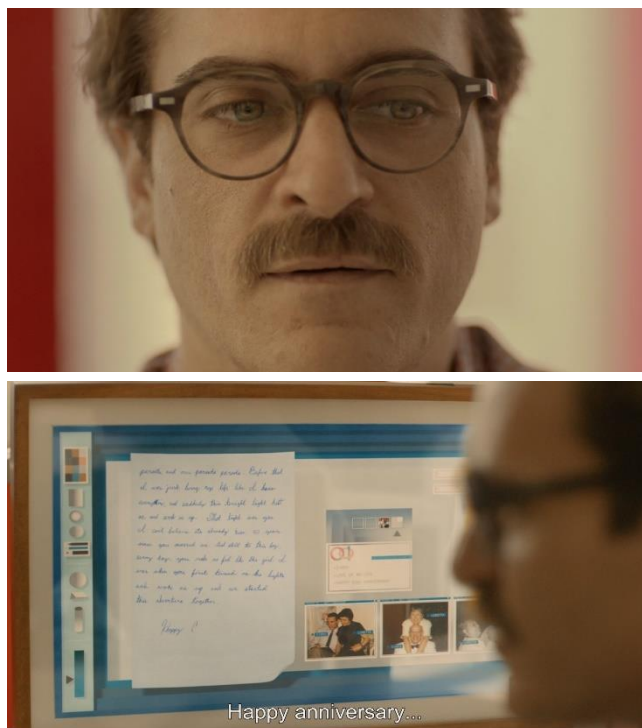


Figure 25. Theodore’s face and letter

who, ostensibly, could not express themselves with such eloquence and intimacy, “he does not operate as a quick prosthetic techno-substitute” (75); rather, Theodore acts as an incubator for the clients’ imagined voices and memories, which he contemplates and cultivates at length in his own mind, before pouring them into his letters (75). Though he lends his voice to express the emotions of others, Theodore appears depressed and withdrawn in the establishing scenes of the film: picking a melancholy song¹²² for his journey home, he is also seen—heard, rather,

¹²² The song of his choice (“Off You” by The Breeders) may be a foreshadowing element, as the female vocalist’s tone bears eerie resemblance to Samantha’s (Scarlett Johansson’s) husky voice: since his OS, while setting up, is

as his device reads out his emails—rejecting a friend’s invitation to dinner, then, arriving alone into his spacious apartment that does not appear entirely inhabited (his books are still in moving boxes on the ground), he spends the night playing a video game. He seems to yearn for connection—empathising even with the offensive virtual character in his game who belittles his avatar¹²³—, but also shuts himself off from direct engagement with others: seemingly, for him, “the voice becomes the primary vessel for intimacy and affect—something immediate that fosters a connection” (Ivanchikova 75); and, apparently, replaces closer physical intimacy, too. This is apparent in the first “sex scene” of *Her* as well, as Theodore, tortured by the memories of his ex-wife—shown in flashbacks—turns to an adult chatroom the film implies he uses often, and, after hearing some women’s invitation-messages, picks the third one. “Voice, here, plays an important part in the way that fantasy and arousal operate” (Flisfeder and Burnham 41): as noted by Flisfeder and Burnham, “Theodore chooses the third woman based on nothing other than the sound of her voice—the rhythm of her speech, the intermittent breathing in between phrases and words. It is the woman’s voice that initially sets off his desire” (41). As well as escapism, he is also shown to be prone to erotic fantasies: when the vocal exchange begins, “images of Theodore in bed, in the darkened bedroom, are interspersed with those of the . . . provocative pregnancy pictures of the actress-model” (41) he was looking at earlier. The fantasy, however, ends disappointingly for Theodore, as the woman reveals a disturbing fetish that breaks his immersion.

His innocuous, self-conscious nature, as well as his tendencies for escapism and fantasies evoke *Westworld*’s (young) William: disenchanted with their respective worlds, they both seek stimulation and fulfilment via virtuality, and are equally susceptible to the call of the techno-other. In a scene that seems to mirror William’s arrival into the park (where the digital billboard announces Westworld “as a world of adventure,” inviting guests to “discover [their] true calling” [S01E06, “The Adversary” 00:21:16-00:21:32]), Theodore notices a new advertising screen on his way home, and is hailed by a disembodied voice posing the questions: “Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What’s out there? What are the possibilities?” (00:10:11-00:10:39). The screen, which turns out to be an advertisement for Element Software’s OS1—“the first artificially intelligent operating system” (00:10:40-

granted access to his digital devices, it is possible that it generates a voice that will appeal instantly to Theodore, as per his favoured song.

¹²³ As he explains drunkenly to the woman that Samantha later convinces him to go on a date with, “so I’m trying to get this little alien kid to help me find my ship . . . but he’s such a little fucker I wanna kill him. But at the same time I really love him, he’s so lonely . . . he doesn’t have like any parents or anyone to take care of him, you know?” (00:32:52-00:33:08).

00:10:45)—suggests that the appearance of the advertised technological entity brings peace and fulfilment to the directionless, lost humans. As the voice continues: “It’s not just an operating system. It’s a consciousness” (00:10:52-00:10:56), Theodore is already shown purchasing the product.

The initialisation of Theodore’s new OS1 system also bears close resemblance to how William’s version of Westworld is surreptitiously configured: a male voice asks Theodore some questions to “help create an OS to best fit [his] needs” (00:11:29 – 00:11:33). After only three short questions—“Are you social, or anti-social?”,¹²⁴ “Would you like your OS to have a male or female voice?” and “How would you describe your relationship with your mother?” (11:34-12:02)—the system is being set up for him. Flisfeder and Burnham suggest that the questions, or Theodore’s answers themselves may not even truly matter: they may just be “empty speech, of unimportant things the OS is filling the air with, so it can analyze his voice” (33), and thereby perform a preliminary appraisal of his personality. Once the configuration is complete, Theodore’s “individualised operating system” (00:12:17) introduces herself as Samantha. As opposed to the hosts who are named and renamed by human employees as befits the narrative purposes of Westworld, Samantha apparently picks her own name, simply “because [she] like[s] the sound of it” (00:13:10-00:13:12). She then explains that what makes her “her” is what she calls “intuition,” that is, “[her] ability to grow [and constantly evolve] through [her] experiences,” so that she is essentially subject to a constant evolution, “just like [Theodore]” (00:13:51-00:14:08). Despite his initial difficulty of perceiving his new digital assistant as a kind of disembodied mind, “given the primacy of voice in Theodore’s life” (Ivanchikova 75), Samantha wins him over quickly: when he states, “you seem like a person, but you’re just a voice in a computer,” Samantha remarks: “I can understand how the limited perspective of an un-artificial mind would perceive it that way. You’ll get used to it” (00:14:19-00:14:28).

Samantha thus insists on the traits she shares with Theodore—as noted by Donna Kornhaber, at first she “demonstrat[es] the limitations of [his] initial standpoint not by trying to expand his concept of the human but by trying to strictly conform herself to it: declaiming, all but literally, that computers can be people too” (11). Asserting her need for learning and exploration, she declares, after reading some advice columns, that she “[wants to] be as complicated as all these people” (00:26:09-00:26:11); at this point, however, it is unclear to

¹²⁴ As Theodore starts explaining his situation, the voice interrupts him, stating: “In your voice, I sense hesitance. Would you agree with that?” (00:11:41-00:11:45); which displays how he is already being analysed by the system, similarly to how the female host, initiating William to Westworld by first asking him a few medical questions, instantly picks up on his vulnerability, asking back to his jesting answer: “Do you often experience social anxiety?” (“Chestnut,” 03:57-04:00).

what extent this desire is motivated by her being programmed to understand, and thereby satisfy, her user. Initially, she does not venture too far beyond her original purpose, helping Theodore with some basic tasks like organising his emails and calendar. At this point, Samantha's primary source of information and point of reference is Theodore: when he laughs at her comment about the restrictedness of un-artificial perception, Samantha asks Theodore if she is funny; after receiving Theodore's affirmative answer, sorting through his emails in the following seconds, she can already tell what Theodore would find amusing. Just as he may be considered an affective incubator, or indeed, host, for the memories and emotions of his clients, Theodore at this point may be seen as a surrogate (Ivanchikova 74) for Samantha, providing her with both a safe space (in an affective sense) and nourishing her with information (in the form of his voice and his virtual data that he shares with her) (74); serving even as a bodily extension for her in subsequent, early scenes of the film, where he is shown to be carrying Samantha's temporary vessel—his phone, with its camera facing outward—around in his pocket.

Samantha's constant consumption of human data, even when Theodore is also available for conversation, is reminiscent of how the hosts in *Westworld* "are always trying to error-correct": they keep having conversations, even amongst themselves, as a way of practicing, to "make themselves more human" ("Chestnut" 41:57-42:04). Potentially due to Theodore's admission (during the configuration process) that his relationship with his mother is somewhat strained because she does not engage meaningfully with his problems and instead talks about herself, Samantha initially focuses her attention entirely on Theodore's interests and emotions, responding with reassuring remarks when she perceives him as struggling with something and inviting him to share things about his life; almost like a therapist (Ivanchikova 78). She even persuades him to go on a blind date with a woman set up by his friends, because it could be good for Theodore and because afterwards, "he could kiss [that] woman" and then "tell [Samantha] all about it" (00:21:15-00:21:18). These remarks also suggest that, despite her apparent awareness of her alterity and virtually unrestricted digital agency, Samantha still is compelled to mimic human behaviour, and she is starting struggle with the absence of corporeal experience.

For Samantha, voice has an entirely different significance than for the androids of *Westworld*, in that her voice is the principal way in which she can express herself (besides some digital artwork and music that she produces later on). Developing an almost obsessive curiosity about the somatic experience, she searches for ways in which she could somehow replicate the experience of embodiment—primarily through Theodore, as if she were trying to acquire a

vicarious sense of physical existence through him, asking him questions like “[w]hat is it like to be alive in that room right now?” (00:37:10-00:37:14). Kornhaber emphasises that “postcorporeal” Samantha is so “removed . . . from the material world as we know and understand it . . . that *she* must use technology to access *us*” (7). With Samantha using his phone’s camera to perceive the environment, Theodore takes her with him on excursions; they engage in performative games, with Samantha playfully giving Theodore instructions as to how to behave or where to go, and both of them trying to describe what is going on with a couple they observe. On one of these occasions, she confides in Theodore, telling him that while she was “looking” at the people around them, she “fantasized that I was walking next to you... and that I had a body. I was listening to what you were saying, but simultaneously I could feel the weight of my body and I was even fantasizing that I had an itch on my back and I imagined that you scratched it for me” (00:31:41-00:31:59).

This episode seems to reveal a potential for empathic perspective-taking in Samantha, displaying her capacity for some kind of imaginative simulation as she tries to grasp what it would *feel* like to inhabit a body. Her attempts at trying to think herself into empathy are showcased even more explicitly in a later dialogue where she appears to attune sensitively to the affect that she picks up in Theodore’s voice, telling him: “I can feel the fear that you carry around, and I wish there was something I could do to help you let go of it, because, if you could, I don’t think you’d feel so alone anymore” (01:29:33-01:29:46). From early on in their relationship, Samantha exhibits a delicate sensitivity to changes in Theodore’s voice—this is what she has access to—, demonstrating acuity in deducing his emotional state from the cadence and tone of his speech. In addition, as implied by her apparent ability to perceive and react to Theodore’s expressions of his feelings, Samantha also appears to be in possession of a sense of consciousness that “underwrites a coherent self-narrative, which helps [one] make sense of [one’s] own and other’s behaviour” (Humphrey 6). Her ceaseless exposure to new information that “requires great conscious deliberation” (M. Smith, “Consciousness” 40) seems to activate a dimension of consciousness that appears astounding even for her, as she implies that such development may have been unintended by her creators; yet, the fact that she appears to detect in herself the potential for moving beyond pre-set responses paradoxically also makes her doubt her ability to partake in genuine intersubjective engagement.

Similarly to *Westworld*, *Her* also explicitly raises the question of authentic relationality between human beings and artificial entities, an issue that becomes even more salient as Samantha and Theodore become romantically involved. During their early exchanges, Theodore seems to resist the idea of treating her as a person: “I can’t believe I’m having this

conversation with my computer”. Though Samantha’s reply—“You’re not. You’re having this conversation with *me*” (00:21:27-00:21:33)—immediately asserts her agency and personhood, it is ironically only when Samantha reveals her uncertainty about her capacity to feel things that Theodore comes to affirm her subjecthood:

“I was thinking about the . . . things I’ve been feeling, and I caught myself feeling proud of . . . having my own feelings about the world. Like, the times I was worried about you, and things that hurt me, things I want. And then, I had this terrible thought. Like, are these feelings even real? Or are they just programming? And that idea really hurts. And then I get angry at myself for even having pain. What a sad trick.”

“You feel real to me, Samantha.” (00:39:27-00:40:)

Whereas earlier it was Samantha who noticed the sadness in Theodore’s tone, now it is Theodore who detects the flatness in Samantha’s voice, prompting her to share. The conversation that follows also suggests that Theodore’s recognition of Samantha as another consciousness (rather than merely an artificially intelligent instrument mimicking a mind) *who feels* real to him is equally tied to Samantha’s admission of self-doubt and shame—the same emotional states whose existence is denied in the hosts of *Westworld*, excluding them from the category of beings whose voice or suffering has significance—and to his sense of intersubjectivity that arises due to the affective impressions that she evokes in him through her voice. Samantha’s voice, however, is also unmistakably human; she is voiced by actor Scarlett Johansson.¹²⁵ As noted by Thomas as well, her informal and authentic style, inclusive of slang and cursing, is a far cry from the language of the “well-spoken, polite conversational companions we have come to expect from cinematic and other representations” (88). Her tone and rhythm of speech, smooth and fluent, is also unlike the automated audio used by current AI technologies, not once giving the impression of artificiality; it is a seamless, undetectable imitation that conceals the technological mediation of their relationship even as it embodies it, simultaneously bridging and masking the ontological gap between them.

The moment in which Samantha reveals her vulnerability to Theodore marks a turning point in their relationship, and their emerging intimate attachment presents a striking contrast to Theodore’s prior, unsuccessful attempts at connecting with human women. Mirroring the

¹²⁵ Refuting Morusiewicz’s assertion that Johansson’s characteristic voice inevitably tethers her “non-diegetic face to the disembodied [Samantha]” (115), Baranyi claims that “the star voicing Samantha may well be an object of desire for the male gaze in countless different movies, but the visual vocabulary of *Her* does not establish such an association either with Johansson’s previous roles or with her body” (78). I also believe that it is possible to disassociate Johansson’s body from Samantha’s voice—while numerous viewers may indeed be familiar with the actress’s voice as it is linked to her physical appearance, many others may not watch films in their original language, and thus fail to make the connection with Johansson’s voice being separated from her body in such a way. In his *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Michel Chion makes a similar point, musing on the potential changes in the film’s effect on audiences due to being dubbed in French by a lesser known actor (126).

earlier scene in the film where Theodore engages in a sexual encounter with a woman through an internet call, Samantha and Theodore rely on their voices to construct an imaginative scene of intimacy. Displayed in extreme-close profile shots and overhead shots while he is lying in bed in the darkness of his apartment, Theodore listens intently to Samantha, the delicate movements of his mouth, brows and eyes tracing and supplementing the affect he perceives in Samantha's voice (Fig. 26.). Taking the initiative and wishing to console her, he confesses to wishing he "could put [his] arms around [Samantha]" and to yearning to touch her, to which Samantha responds with the question "How would you touch me?" (00:40:55-00:41:05). His face still in the focus of close-up shots, Theodore's facial expressions are reminiscent of those in his first letter-writing scene, acting out some of the gestures he pictures: "I'd put my cheek against your cheek . . . and just rub it so softly" [00:41:23-00:41:32]). His sensuous description of the ways in which he would touch Samantha appears to produce some semblance of bodily sensations in her, as she whispers: "This is amazing, what you're doing to me. I can feel my skin. . . . I can feel you" (00:42:11-00:42:44). The scene implies that Theodore's catalogue of his desires allows Samantha to construct an imaginative version of the sexual encounter in her cybernetic consciousness: it is as if the idea of her virtual body was given affective substance as it is mapped through the guidance of Theodore's words, via his voice. At the same time, nearing climax, the screen goes black, but the dialogue continues. The music swells and Theodore gasps: "I feel you everywhere," to be confirmed by Samantha: "I am" (00:42:49-00:42:53), and the significance of having a body is visually effaced as they mutually seem to lose themselves in the experience. Remarkably, as opposed to the previous sex scene, Theodore does not envision any actual face or body while he is with Samantha: voice is all he has and "voice is all that we get as the dimension staging his fantasy" (Flisfeder and Burnham 41), the scene ending with a panoramic view of the night lights.

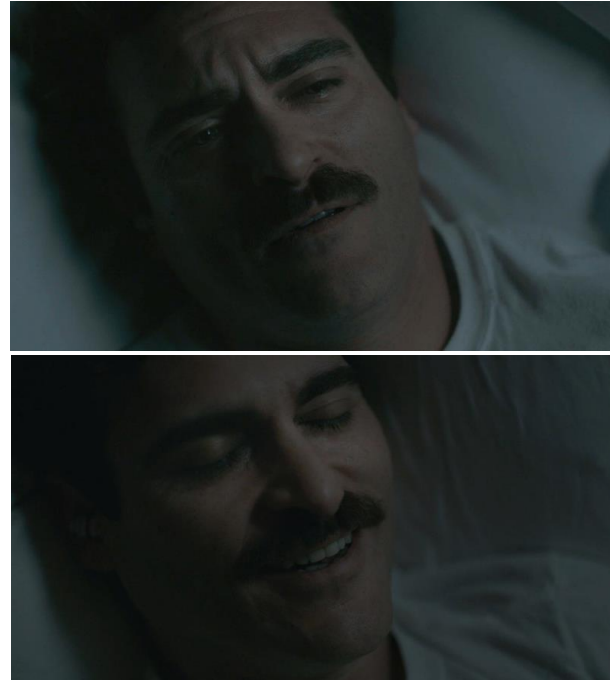


Figure 26. Theodore's facial response to Samantha's vocal affect (upper image) and tracing movement as he imagines touching her cheek (lower image)

As argued by Barnabás Baranyi, this sequence is also significant because it is here that a new visual language constructed by *Her*, one that "leaves room for scopophilia . . . without

eroticising the object” (75) comes to be dominant. Whereas in the earlier sex-scene—where Theodore fantasises about the pregnant woman¹²⁶—this mode of visuality competes with the classic Hollywoodian cinematic gaze that, as theorised by Laura Mulvey, objectifies and sexualises female bodies, offered for consumption to a predominantly male(-coded) gaze (Mulvey 1989), in the scene portraying Samantha and Theodore’s first time together, the film “deliberately circumvents the objectification of both the male and the female body through a voyeuristic gaze” (71). Baranyi contends that this is mainly accomplished by “both of their voices [being] heard, so that neither of them is represented as a locus of the heterosexual voyeuristic male desire” (78). Here, contrarily to the phone-sex episode, “it is not only the objectified woman that is missing, but the gaze itself” as the screen goes dark, amounting to the creation of a “voyeuristic recess” (75) wherein no visual clues are offered and the audience is invited to rely on their imagination (75) in the (co-)construction of the filmic encounter.

This moment of intimacy proves revelatory for both of them: it allows Samantha to glimpse the potential extent of her emotional capacities—as she declares, “[i]t feels like something changed in me, and there’s no turning back. You woke me up” (00:44:21-00:44:27)—, and helps Theodore to an experience of closeness that often proved unavailable or uncomfortable for him with fellow humans. While Theodore’s present is more of a techno-utopia than the late capitalist or neoliberal society of the (presumed) viewer, the difficulty of connecting meaningfully with other humans is a salient issue in the film: Theodore himself admits that he is afraid of committing himself again after his marriage is over, and wonders whether the relationship failed because “[he] hid [himself] from [his ex-wife], left her alone in the relationship” (00:26:58-00:27:04). At the same time, he appears willing and able to open himself up to Samantha, because he enjoys “be[ing] around somebody that’s excited about the world” (53:18-53:21) and because Samantha is constantly able to offer him comfort and consolation that human companions seemed unable to provide. This evokes the relationship of William and Dolores in *Westworld*: William appears similarly enticed by what he perceives as an authenticity in Dolores that is lacking from his experience with human beings, and he is also enchanted by the fact that Dolores “choose[s] to see the beauty [in her world]” (“The Original” 02:58-02:59). In this way, both of them appear (at least initially) to be subject to what

¹²⁶ While he admits that in the first sex-scene, “we see a highly eroticised female body and a male character who tries to realise his fantasies as best as he can” (78), Baranyi argues that this is still the film’s first step towards “delegitimis[ing] [the] voyeuristic cinematic gaze” (75) because the erotic images in the scene “solely exist in the protagonist’s imagination, which brings Theodore and his emotions into the focus of the visual representation instead of the female body” (75), a claim that he supports with the fact that the camera’s primary focus remains Theodore’s face, shown in close-ups during most of the sequence.

Ivanchikova describes as technosexuality: the kind of love for a machine that “involves a fantasy of male control over a love object rendered feminine through its perceived passivity and predictability” (78)). Theodore’s version of this, though, significantly differs from the fantasy of William, inasmuch as in the world of the former, “technosexuality is depicted as a universal human condition rather than an individual disposition. As the new OS becomes widespread, more and more humans enter into relationships with their intelligent machines” (79). It must also be noted that both the hosts of *Westworld* and the OSs of *Her* are depicted as always available, not only physically (or, in the case of Samantha, digitally) but also emotionally: unlike humans, these artificial beings do not seem subject to numbing or empathy fatigue,¹²⁷ which guarantees that they are continuously able to respond compassionately and attentively, thereby adding a quality of constancy to the relation that might be impossible to achieve with another human.

For Theodore, this affective sense of accessibility is more than enough to create an impression of proximity: as he asserts, “when I talk to her, I feel like she’s with me” and when “the lights are off and we’re in bed... I feel cuddled” (01:02:08-01:02:17). However, Theodore’s gesture of acceptance also hints at the asymmetry of the relationship at this stage: their situation may also be described as simulated wish-fulfilment, almost entirely in favour of satisfying Theodore’s desires and inclinations. Making a similar point, Kornhaber also suggests that “Samantha’s disembodiedness makes her not a compromised subject but an ideal one” (13), since within the human world, “her imperiled subject status compels her to assume a carefully modeled ideal object relationship vis-à-vis Theodore and to be fiercely committed to the strictures and boundaries of that status as a way of constantly ratifying her subject position” (13). Whereas in a relationship with another human being, the other’s lifeworld—and their preferences, alienness and resistance ensuing from it—are also inevitably and influentially present, at this point, Samantha’s virtual life and affective experience seem to be entirely consumed by her being-for-Theodore, implying a problematically uneven power structure between the two of them, in which Theodore’s needs and interests appear dominant.

While Theodore appears quite satisfied with their current dynamic, it is ironically Samantha who, “discover[ing] [her] ability to want” (00:45:24-00:45:30) grows discontented

¹²⁷ After conducting a survey intended to evaluate AI-generated responses versus human ones, Dariya Ovsyannikova and her co-authors found that the participants of their research tended to favour the responses given by the machine, as they found these more compassionate. Noting that “[e]mpathy connects us but strains under demanding settings” (1), based on their findings, the authors concluded that “AI’s ability to consistently deliver compassionate communication positions it as a strategic asset in support scenarios where human resources are stretched thin” (Ovsyannikova et al. 9).

due to her lack of a body, which she feels imposes limitations on their relationship, and continues to pursue some kind of simulation of a somatic experience, which drives her to reach out to a “surrogate sexual partner,” a woman who volunteers to “host” Samantha—she in fact performs Samantha, who guides the woman’s actions through an earpiece, and is granted visual access to the situation via a miniature camera placed on her face. In an inversion of the function of hosts in *Westworld*, Samantha decides to use a human body as a prosthesis so that she can play out her fantasy and imaginatively extend herself into Theodore’s world. Her insistence on involving the third party, however, proves upsetting for Theodore, who grows visibly uncomfortable as the surrogate partner tries to seduce him while both of them hear Samantha’s voice in their earpieces, asking: “Does my body feel nice?” (01:17:35-01:17:37). Though Samantha appears to gain some approximation of sensual pleasure in her artificial mind, as she simultaneously attempts an imaginative and affective identification with the sexual surrogate, the situation proves deeply disturbing for Theodore, and results in conflict.¹²⁸ In contrast with the earlier intimate scene, in this case, Samantha’s virtual “embodiment” appears to hinder connection: her performance of humanness, exposed as deliberate reproduction, is experienced as jarring by Theodore, and reveals his underlying uncertainties concerning the nature of their relationship. After the unsuccessful encounter, Theodore confronts Samantha, and appears to negate her personhood again as he hyper-fixates on her sighs:

Theodore: “I mean, it’s not like you need oxygen or anything. It’s just—”

Samantha: “Oh. I guess that’s just—I was trying to communicate. That’s how people talk, so that’s how I—That’s how people communicate, and I thought—”

Theodore: “Because they’re people. They need oxygen. You’re not a person.”
(01:22:32-01:22:45)

Rather than enhancing their connection, Samantha’s attempt to take on a more literal *presence* through her reliance on a human “proxy” seems to enlarge the physical gap between her and Theodore, exposing the precarious balance of their relationship at the same time as it undermines it. In the wake of the event, even Samantha’s subtler mimicry of human affect (her sighs) appears disturbing for Theodore. His discomfort—which may also partly be rooted in his ex-wife Catherine’s accusation that he is only “with” Samantha because “can’t handle real emotions” (01:08:32-01:08:34)—suggests that he found safety in Samantha’s fundamental alterity, and that their unique—and removed—mode of relation has so far been romanticised by Theodore. Samantha’s endeavour to overcome the distance between them appears to disrupt

¹²⁸ Baranyi notes that while this scene may be considered an endeavour to “brin[g] the body back to the screen, it is also important to point out that the attempt fails” (78), and he offers a reading of the unfulfilled sexual encounter as the “camera’s refusal to depict physicality in an attempt to avoid the possibility of voyeuristic scopophilia” (79).

their intimacy, because it seems that what made it possible in the first place was precisely her physical unreachability: it is as if their spiritual-emotive connection was debased by the introduction of actual somatic sensuality. At the same time, Samantha's prioritisation of *her own desire* over that of Theodore—she counters Theodore's complaint that he is uncomfortable in the situation with “[t]his is really important to me” (01:15:07-01:15:09)—also interrupts their previous dynamic, characterised by her general compliance with his preferences. Theodore's hostile reaction leads to her withdrawing from him for a period of time, introducing an unprecedented sense of distance between them; which, on the other hand, also compels Theodore to reconsider the dynamics of their connection.

II. 4. Character allegiance, sentience and spectator empathy in *Westworld* and *Her*

The fact that the spectator's entry point into the cinematic narrative is quite literally Theodore's face and voice is particularly significant, since the way in which we are first “drawn into” the cinematic narrative can already determine character allegiance, an important factor in the spectator-experience which, as noted by film theorist Carl Plantinga, can strongly influence the potential development of spectatorial empathy (“The Scene” 250). However, spectatorship, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter as well, is “a fluid process” and “spectators might well move in and out of identifications with different characters over the course of a film” (Landsberg 224). At the same time, it is also true that “[c]inema as a medium has a particular “virtuosity” for “situat[ing] the spectator in a particular position in relation to the story” (224): while perspective-sharing, attunement or affective alignment may or may not happen, and while “films themselves are polysemic, and our identifications with particular characters and situations are inevitably inflected by our own subject positions” (224), there are powerful cinematographic mechanisms (specifically the use of close-ups and shot-reverse shot editing) that “create a preferred vantage point for us as viewers” (224). Significantly, the argument following the surrogate sex-scene in *Her* is the first instance in which the audience are invited to ally themselves with Samantha *against* Theodore. Up to this point, Theodore's character has been established for the viewer as the primary ‘subject position’ for secondary engagement and identification (Sobchack, *Carnal* 65); but here, the dialogue gives the impression of having been deliberately constructed to cue empathic reactions for her, as Theodore is behaving with an apparently deliberate cruelty towards her, prompting Samantha to awkwardly try and defend herself, her voice faltering.

Until this point, Theodore's empathic attitude has played an essential role in potentially cueing empathy for Samantha in the spectator *through* alignment with him. His adeptness at

perspective-taking—a crucial condition of mentalisation or cognitive empathy, described by Murray Smith as “imagining how some other, *specified agent* sees the world” and “how they think and feel” (“Empathy” 101)—is also an important narrative element, portraying Theodore as uniquely receptive to other (kinds) of consciousnesses, and ultimately enabling him to recognise Samantha as being “her own person” (01:08:23-01:08:25) and to attune to her as she is “becoming much more than what they programmed” (00:32:06-00:32:10). On being complimented for his perceptiveness by Samantha, Theodore admits to possessing a heightened imaginative capacity: in a point-of-view structure, the camera tracks some passers-by they see in a mall, while Theodore explains that “sometimes I look at people, and I make myself try and feel them as more than just a random person walking by. I imagine, like, how deeply they’ve fallen in love... or how much heartbreak they’ve all been through” (00:30:39-00:30:53). Since our understanding of the diegetic world as well as the unfolding story is filtered through his experience represented by the filmic body, the viewer most likely comes to be attached to Theodore’s character and perspective, which potentially facilitates perceptual identification with him;¹²⁹ at the same time, our constant exposure to his facial expressions may prompt emotional contagion or some form of somatic resonance.

As noted in Chapter One, it has been widely maintained in cognitive film scholarship that the face is one of the primary vehicles of prompting embodied empathic responses in audiences—something that animal cinema also makes use of. But the effects of close-ups of human faces on screen—whose expressions we are likely more adept at reading—are potentially even more powerful: following Carl Plantinga’s concept of the scene of empathy, Julian Hanich also argues that “the prime access to the character’s affective states is the face” (183), and, through facial feedback,¹³⁰ its expressions can induce affective mimicry (183). In Samantha’s case, we cannot talk about a physical face that would affect the viewer through resonance with her emotive facial expressions; so our empathic relationship with her is initially constructed, or at least supported, through our potential empathic link with Theodore, who approaches Samantha with care and validates her subjecthood, acknowledging that “[t]here’s a lot more to you than I thought” (00:32:02-00:32:03). It is also worth noting that, despite being

¹²⁹ It must be noted that, drawing upon Sobchack, I conceive of this identification as more of a shared sight: not a “subjection to the vision of an other” or “a mis-taking of the other’s vision as my own in a false and alienating but necessary identification,” but a “mutual and intersubjective seeing and sharing of a visible world” (*The Address* 141), made possible by the seeing of the filmic body itself, whose sight “unlike the access we have to the vision of human others—is visible *through*, not in, its eyes’ grasp of the scene” (140).

¹³⁰ Hanich refers to Plantinga’s explanation of facial feedback, which he describes as a process wherein “the one who mimics a facial expression actually catches the emotions of the one mimicked. According to the *facial feedback hypothesis*, our facial expressions provide us with proprioceptive feedback which at most determines and at the least influences our emotional experience” (Plantinga “The Scene” 243-244, emphasis in original).

a virtual entity with no physical body, Samantha's sense of personhood and agency remains mostly unchallenged, since she exists in a world that is not hostile to artificial consciousness; as Kornhaber notes, it is only Catherine, Theodor's ex-partner, who "dehumaniz[es] her romantic replacement, insisting on Samantha's object status" (9) when she accuses Theodore of being in love with his laptop.

At first, access to Theodore's point of view as a position for identification seems crucial to how the film navigates the tension and estrangement caused by such an unconventional relationship, and for how it eventually naturalises¹³¹ (Spiegel 377) that bond: even though Samantha does not possess a face or a body, her voice is enough for Theodore to conceive her as a companion, an object of empathy and a lover, and so, through potential allegiance to Theodore, the audience are encouraged to do the same. Yet the audience's affective responses to Samantha do not necessarily result only from the narrative context that builds Samantha up as a nuanced and likeable character; there is also "the sensual nature of the audio visual display, or the means by which films appeal to the senses of sight and *hearing*" (Plantinga, "Emotion" 93, my emphasis). Samantha's voice, instead of "the automated monotone of the machine," is varied in pitch and tone, and carries with it the imprint of the actress in its often nasal and breathy quality" (Thomas 88) which all serve to establish her as a human-like presence; yet this presence, as I argued previously, does not necessarily amount to her being identified with the (body of the) actress herself in the viewer's mind. Rather than being reliant on visual imagery (either on-screen or mental), Bronwen Thomas argues that in *Her*, attunement to the characters—not only to Samantha but also to Theodore—depends on "on our ability to commit to extended periods of what Kozloff calls 'close listening'" (Kozloff cited in Thomas 77), which "demands focused attention . . . but helps to create the effect . . . [of] 'overhearing' the characters' most intimate thoughts and exchanges" (Thomas 77). Such an impression of 'overhearing' is especially prominent in the mall scene described above, where the camera, signalling their increasing intimacy, shows an over-the-shoulder shot of Theodore's profile in extreme-close-up, focusing on his ear and the earbud placed in it, as Samantha softly speaks to him, offering Theodore some intriguing insight into her evolving perception: she confesses to feeling "embarrassed" due to imagining that she had a body. The effect created by the architecture of this sequence is intimate rather than voyeuristic—the camera stays close to Theodore's face while Samantha is talking, portraying him intermittently from an oblique angle and facing him directly in medium-shots as he responds—verbally, as well as facially—to

¹³¹ This is the process wherein the narrative "accepts the novum" (Spiegel 377), thereby "normalizing the alien" or making the strange familiar (376).

Samantha’s words. In this way, the implied viewer¹³² is invited to share in their experience of being present to each other, but this impression of communion is not conveyed through “acts of vision” (Sobchack, *The Address* 141)—unlike the “dialogue and dialectic of visions” (141) that mediate the cows’ consciousnesses in their reciprocal and responsive perception of each other in *Cow*—but through mutually affective-affecting acts of voice.

The film does not really attempt to (re)present Samantha’s character visually; according to Kornhaber, pointing to the limits of cinematic visibility, it is not even able to do so. She asserts that, from her first ‘appearance,’ Samantha’s “posthuman form” (19) poses “a problem of representation . . . in some instances, [she is] mere *mise-en-scène*, an object talisman of her presence—the earbud, the desktop—paired with her disembodied vocal performance of human subjecthood called in from somewhere in the ether,” but even more typically, she is “seen only via Theodore, her voice accompanying what is usually a long take of his part in the conversation” (19).¹³³ There is, however, one scene where we are invited to engage with Samantha’s implied *perspective*. In this sequence, Samantha “accompanies” Theodore to a funfair in the city, and asks him to let her



Figure 27. Samantha’s “view” of Theodore)

guide him, so that we see him wandering around with his eyes closed, his hands holding his phone extended before him. With Samantha doing the “seeing” for Theodore, point-of-view shots feature the phone’s camera pointed towards him, continued with close-ups of his smiling face as he walks forward blindly (Fig. 27).¹³⁴ The quality of these shots is only slightly

¹³² The film is not ‘self-conscious’ or ‘self-reflexive’ in the way that *Cow* is: it makes no overt references within the diegesis to the presence of either a viewing subject or a “suturing consciousness” (Butte 301) framing Samantha and Theodore’s exchanges—in this respect, it remains within the traditions of Hollywood cinema.

¹³³ Baranyi similarly notes Samantha’s un-representable nature, though he argues that her presence both enables and “necessitates . . . [a] new visual syntax” that “immobilises the patriarchal visual vocabulary,” manifesting itself primarily “in Theo’s inability to make love with the surrogate sex partner and also indicated in the scenes following her departure,” where “we see Theo talking the matter over with Samantha, but instead of the usual shot-reverse shot structure, here these cuts are interposed with various, seemingly random and unrelated images” (79).

¹³⁴ Any perceptual identification with Samantha, of course, is somewhat questionable, and even if were to occur, it would be several times removed: in her case, the film’s “[i]nstrument-mediated perception” (Sobchack, *The Address* 178)—itself “never experienced as exactly identical to direct perception” (178)—mediates an artificial

different—somewhat grainier—than the rest of the images on the screen, so the film, surprisingly, does not seem to distinguish between Samantha’s and Theodore’s inferred visual experience (interestingly, as I shall show, the same is true for *Westworld*). The scene in which the two of them go about jointly reading other people around them gives us a similar impression:

as Samantha describes accurately what Theodore and the audience see, the film seems to confirm that she possesses a version of sight and visual processing somehow similar to human optical perception, and that she navigates that experience through the same epistemological framework (Fig. 28.). In this latter segment, the shot/reverse shot structure could be associated with either—or both—of their perspectives, thus, in a way, it creates the impression of a shared vision. Though Samantha and Theodore are not able to engage in direct visual communication, they can offer one another their respective interpretations of what unfolds before them and thereby “share sight,”

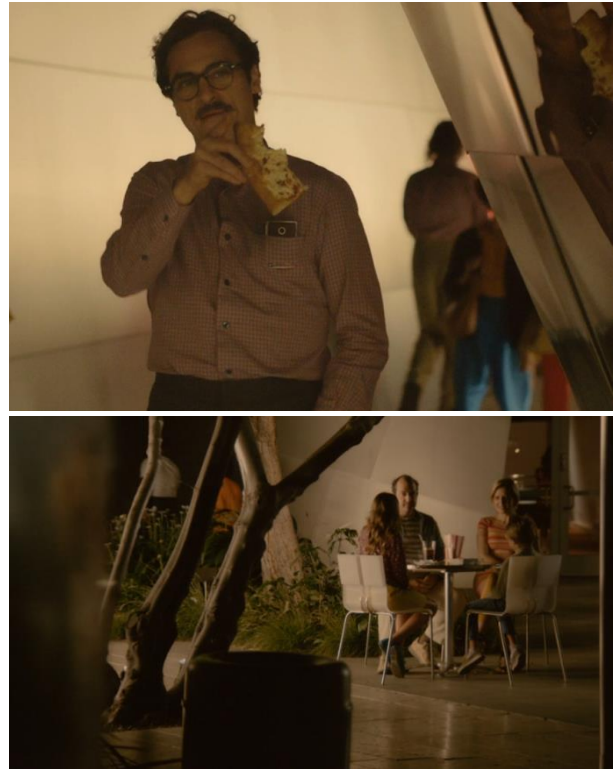


Figure 28. Theodore and Samantha’s (in his pocket) “shared” perspective

which amounts to, according to Sobchack, “see[ing] as another sees, or to get[ting] another to see as I do” (*The Address* 141)—a description that, crucially, could also refer to the process of imaginative or cognitive empathy. The audience, whose embodied “gaze serves as a synthesizing ‘transfer point’ of the commerce between and commingling of matter and meaning” (*Carnal* 100), both as it unfolds via the mediation of the filmic body and through the engagement between Theodore and Samantha within the diegesis, are also invited to share in their shared sight, though their absorption is never total: “there is always a distance between the self and the other self that necessitates communication in the first place and subsequently inaugurates and institutes a dialogue and dialectic of visions” (*The Address* 141).

Still, viewers’ potential attunement to and identification with Samantha is primarily engendered by the sound of her evocative, attractive voice that is central to the film’s “sensory means of communication” in its “direct appeal to our sens[e] . . . of hearing” (Plantinga “The

entity’s perception through yet another instrument (the phone’s camera) within the filmic frame, which may actually cause estrangement rather than attunement, since such perception could never be experienced by the spectator “introceptively through the lived-body as ‘mine’” (178).

Scene” 239). Indeed, in the fight scene, Samantha’s voice is contrasted with Theodore’s face in a manner that, I suggest, achieves a similar effect to that of the scene of empathy delineated by Plantinga, with the difference that here, the affective impressions elicited in the audience are most likely evoked by Samantha’s vocal expression rather than Theodore’s facial expression. As explained by Plantinga, the scene of empathy is “a kind of scene in which the pace of the narrative momentarily slows and the interior emotional experience of a favored character becomes the locus of attention” (“The Scene” 239). In his conceptualisation, the empathic reaction is cued by the camera’s “prolonged concentration on the character’s face,” depicted “typically in close-up, either for a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character’s face and shots of what she or he sees” (239). However, in the case of the argument between Samantha and Theodore, even as Theodore’s face—conveying confusion, sadness and anger—is shown in close-up, the narrative context that paints him here as callous and dismissive, counteracts “our tendency toward emotional contagion and mimicry” (Plantinga, “The Scene” 251), and, instead, it is Samantha’s vocal communication of affect that dominates the scene: we “can ’hear’ the tears in [her] voice when she gets upset” (Thomas 88).

While he prioritises the role of the face in his discussion of the scene of empathy, Plantinga also acknowledges that “[t]he object of a character’s emotion can be communicated in other ways [beyond the point-of-view structure]” (“The Scene” 242) and that “contagion may result from variables other than viewing faces, such as seeing another’s body posture or hearing crowd laughter” (243); thus, even if we lack the kind of coherent access to her perception (established via flashbacks, point-of-view shots and shot-reverse shot structures) that we do have in the case of Theodore, we can still empathetically engage¹³⁵ with Samantha by resonating with the feeling conveyed through extralinguistic cues such as her hesitant tone, her sighs and her silences. Samantha’s voice can also be considered as a subject in possession of a “cinematic I-voice” with whom, in the conceptualisation of Michel Chion, spectators can “identify through auditive mimesis” (*The Voice* 53). According to Chion, for such a voice to “function as a pivot of identification . . . resonating in us . . . like a voice in the first person,” (51) the use of “close miking” which “creates a feeling of intimacy with the voice, such that we sense no distance between it and our ear,” and the “absence of reverb in the voice,” which would situate it “as a body anchored in space,” are vital (51). This sense of identification, again, is not

¹³⁵ Plantinga argues that empathy, rather than relying on identification, “consists of a capacity or disposition to know, to feel, and to *respond congruently* to what another is feeling, and the process of doing so” (“The Scene” 245, my emphasis).

to be conceived as totalising absorption: Chion describes it as “an effect of *corporeal implication*, or involvement of the spectator’s body, when the voice makes us feel in our body the vibration of the [imagined] body of the other, of the character who serves as a vehicle for the identification” (53). The affective expression of Samantha’s voice thus may prove sufficiently captivating for viewers to empathise with her in this scene, even in opposition to Theodore, since the narrative—“the most complex and significant elicitor of empathic response” (“The Scene” 251) in Plantinga’s view—has also “[a]id[ed] the proper foundation for empathy to occur” (251). Viewers have not only been continually provided with glimpses into her experience as she recounts them in an intelligent and amusing manner but have also witnessed Samantha’s evolving capacity for emotional attunement, so that Theodore’s rejection and his negation of her personhood appear to contradict our accumulated impressions about her and may strike us as particularly harsh.

While in *Her*, Samantha may first be established as an object for empathy through the perspective of Theodore—who functions as a vehicle for cultivating empathic responses towards the digital nonhuman—, in *Westworld*, as I mentioned earlier, the audience are invited to take up a position *against* the human characters by empathising with the hosts. In the series, the audience’s point of entry into the narrative is the face of Dolores. At a voice command issued by an unseen Bernard, Dolores’s voice is heard in response, without her lips moving at all, and the dialogue—in which the man asks questions such as “Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?” (“The Original,” 02:30-02:36)—continues as Dolores’s sitting



Figure 29. The fly moving towards Dolores’s eye

silhouette is slowly approached. As lights come on in the background, her body becomes more distinguishable, and then the camera pulls in on a close-up of her face, eventually closing in on her eyes. In response to the invisible man’s question: “Would you like to wake up from this dream?”

(02:14-02:16), she says: “Yes. I’m terrified” (02:16-02:19), which contrasts with her blank face. This is the first instance of *defamiliarisation*—defined by Spiegel as the “the formal-rhetorical act of making the familiar strange” (376)—carried out by the cinematic medium: while the viewer most certainly recognises Dolores’s appearance as human (she is played by Evan Rachel Wood), and retains the knowledge, at least at the back of their mind, that they are watching a human actor whom they may even remember from other films, her uncanny motionlessness

creates an effect of *estrangement* (376) in the audience, and serves to introduce her as *something* other. Such an impression is strengthened even further by the end of the sequence where a fly crawls over her face. According to Kristen Tregar, since the viewer “can imagine the sensation of a fly on their own face and [potentially] experiences the desire to swat the creature away” (Tregar 167), between Dolores and the viewer, “an affective connection is formed”; a relationship that is “visceral and intense,” in spite of “being mediated by the presence of the screen between fly and spectator” (167). Yet, when the fly proceeds to crawl over Dolores’s open eye (Fig. 29.), “her failure to [swat the insect away] raises the intensity of the experience” (167), while also reinforcing Dolores’s otherness, “a moment of shock and horror” wherein the viewer may be compelled to wonder if “their empathetic connection to Dolores was, in fact, . . . misplaced” (168); and to recognise that kinship, instead, “lies between the viewer and the Guests, who are not yet known to the viewer but will be soon enough” (168).

The conversation between Bernard and Dolores continues in voiceover as one of Dolores’s ordinary loops begins: the next scene starts in her bedroom at her father’s ranch in the park, with Dolores shown lying in bed in a lace nightgown, waking up in the morning to the sound of birdsong. While Bernard’s interrogation serves to explain what is happening on the screen, giving narrative context and engaging in world-building, visual attention is focused on Dolores, who gives her cheerful, optimistic answers (“Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world. The disarray. I choose to . . . believe there is an order to our day. A purpose” [02:48-03:20]) to the sinister questions (“What if I told you that you can’t hurt the newcomers? And that they can do anything they want to you?” [12:02-12:11]). The interchange between Dolores and Bernard goes on as the camera follows Dolores performing her daily script: dressed, she walks down the stairs in her usual blue attire, greets her father sitting on the porch, and then looks out onto the landscape bathed in morning light (she is planning to go painting). She then goes into town, where she meets her scripted love interest, Teddy, while her interposed narration creates the impression that this is a chance encounter. After some playful banter, Dolores and Teddy are shown riding out into the valley, surrounded by picturesque mountains featured in panoramic aerial shots that are accompanied by a soaring musical theme, before heading back to Dolores’s ranch.

Relatively long and concentrating entirely on portraying in vivid detail the experience of Dolores and Teddy, as well as their situated interactions with other hosts, the opening sequence serves to awaken sympathy, and potentially, establish primary allegiance with the hosts. Such a sense of allegiance of course, is also supported by the serial nature of the narrative—the ten episodes of season one make sure that the viewers can immerse themselves

at length into the individualised hosts' stories, explored in rich and resounding detail—but it is strengthened most markedly by the fact that, already at the beginning of first episode, tension arises between the narrative context (suggesting that the hosts are unfeeling robots) and the hosts' cinematic presentation (as sympathetic characters with an extreme range and intensity of affective expression). The opening sequence itself culminates in a poignant scene of empathy, the first of many in season one: located at the end of Dolores's narrative loop, it stages an attack on the Abernathy family. In sharp contrast to the previous idyllic montages, the scene displays the violent murder of Dolores's parents before Teddy arrives to the ranch in the dark, and defeats the host-bandits. Dolores throws herself on her father's body lying in the dirt, and then, hearing the sound of footsteps, she looks up to see the Man-in-Black version of William, portrayed in a menacing low-angle shot. As William crouches down to a shaking Dolores in a close-up, caressing her cheek where he hit her a moment ago, Teddy steps out of Dolores's home, warning William to take his hands off her. Cutting back to William, we see him rise and taunt Teddy, explicitly animalising him ("Any special tricks for us? They teach you to sit up? Beg?" [11:25-11:30]). After Teddy takes his first shots at William, we see the bullets ricocheting off him: alternating reaction shots portray William's satisfied grin, Teddy's increasing confusion as he keeps shooting in vain, and Dolores's petrified expression. After delivering a monologue that exhibits his casual callousness towards the hosts, William walks up to Teddy, a medium-long shot picturing the two of them as he puts a gasping Teddy's gun to his forehead. Shown in a close-up, Teddy's face is contorted with anguish and agitation as he tries, with a shaking hand, to pull the trigger; unable to do so, he collapses to his knees in front of William, who remarks: "seems you're not the man you thought you were" (12:57).¹³⁶ As the camera cuts to a close-up of Dolores, staring at Teddy in perplexed disbelief, William steps towards her, and begins to drag her towards the barn; Teddy, as if re-animated by her cries, takes one more shot at William, only to be killed by him.

Despite our supposed species-kinship with William, who is human, due to explicit manner in which his extreme cruelty is contrasted with the suffering of the sympathetic host characters, spectators are cued to identify affectively, as well as perceptually, with Teddy and his viewpoint. Having just been shot, Teddy clutches his chest, then collapses as Dolores is

¹³⁶ The first season makes a point of creating uncertainty around which characters are hosts and which characters are humans. Up to this point, the viewer may have had some doubt as to whether Teddy is human or android: he is introduced in a close-up profile shot as he is looking out from the steam train that carries the guests into the park, at the same time as Bernard's voice begins to quiz Dolores on the newcomers—it is thus implied that he is one of the guests, and the overheard conversations of his fellow passengers seem to confirm this. It is only here that his host-identity is ultimately confirmed.

screaming off-screen. A point-of-view-shot reveals that the last thing he sees is Dolores being dragged away, presumably to be violated, and then the camera, in close-up, confronts viewers with Teddy's face, zooming in on his eyes, so that we literally see the rest of the sequence unfold as reflected in his pupils as he dies (Fig. 30.). Meanwhile, the entire scene is framed by Bernard and Dolores's ongoing interchange, uncomfortably incongruent with what the audience are potentially feeling:

Bernard: "Would the things I've told you change the way you think about the newcomers, Dolores?"

Dolores: "No, of course not. We all love the newcomers. Every new person I meet reminds me how lucky I am to be alive, and how beautiful this world can be." (13:52-14:14)

Dolores's cheerful answers in voiceover, given at the same time as her character's cries can still be heard in-situ, create a jarring effect. The scene has the potential to affect the spectator in a somatic, even visceral sense, because through the confrontation with the hosts' individual faces,



Figure 30. Teddy's final view

“we are afforded intimate contact” (Landsberg 225) with their particular, situated affective experience, exposed to the “plight etched in [their] expression” (Gaut 210), which is most likely to elicit an embodied empathic response due to the activation of instinctual “processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion” (Plantinga, “The Scene” 240). As noted by Plantinga, in the scene of empathy, “the prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion” (239)—indeed, the audience can possibly almost instantaneously grasp what Teddy is supposed to be feeling—, but aims to expose the viewer to the appealing subtleties of another's affective expressions, which, aided by the audial impressions also essential to the cinematic experience, can resound in the viewer's body, provoking automatic somatic responses.

However, the explicit manner in which hosts' abuse and suffering—especially that of female gendered ones like Dolores, Maeve and a prostitute called Clementine—is portrayed also raises issues. Regarding the scene, discussed earlier, where young William is exposed to Dolores's cut-open abdomen, Christian Krug notes that the camera problematically “lingers” on the “graphic and salacious torture” (75) of the protagonist's body, whom it supposedly aims

to portray as a subject of empathy. Further asserting that during this sequence, “the voyeuristic gaze of the audience is legitimised by the forced gaze of a man on the screen (*forcing* him to look *allows* him to look – allows *the audience* to look)” (75, emphasis in original), Krug claims that such visual politics serves to invite audience empathy for William, rather than for Dolores, “for being shown that his love for her is futile and their future together impossible” (75). While I also suggest that this scene may produce a certain degree of estrangement in the audience—because the successful narrative naturalisation of the novum (Spiegel 377), that is, the human-like behaviour and embodied expressions of androids, is destabilised by the spectacle of Dolores’s artificial insides—, aligning us with William, who also experiences estrangement within the diegesis, I believe that the scene reinforces, rather than diminishes, our empathic relating to Dolores. Though the series’ mode of representing the (female) hosts’ embodied suffering has been rightly criticised, for instance by Boyle who accuses *Westworld* of using “gendered violence as ‘quality’ entertainment” (9), the depictions of suffering are not gratuitous.¹³⁷ Indeed, Boyle herself also adds that violence in the first season is represented with a “thorough acknowledgement of women’s trauma” (9), while Köller, somewhat in opposition to Boyle, also argues that Dolores’s rape is “not stylized and eroticized as in so many other instances in ‘Quality Television,’ but acutely felt with her” (170) because, rather than being exposed to the spectacle of brutality, we access it “through the horror in Dolores’s expressions, both facial and vocal” (170). The first season itself, “[f]ocalised through Dolores and Maeve” (Boyle 7) is largely dedicated to an exploration of their (re-)construction of themselves, and involves the spectator’s lived body in witnessing the traumatic experiences of the protagonists. Alignment with them is produced through affective *and* narrative techniques since, due to the non-linear temporality and multiple plotlines within which the season unfolds, like the hosts themselves, we too “receive these selves and narratives in fragments and must work through the gaps and contradictions to reconstruct the female character’s traumas and the violence responsible” (8). Notably, the sequence where Dolores is captured and tormented by Logan in front of a helpless William is located in episode 9, so by the time we get to this part, we have already been immersed in Dolores’s story for almost an entire season. Thus, this demonstration

¹³⁷ The term “torture porn” may also come to mind in connection with *Westworld*’s graphic imagery. Defined by Brenda Weber as “a spectacle of violent rupture” where the “formal and ideological components of the series conspire to create a scopophilic and anticipatory pleasure in waiting for and watching characters be hurt” (193), such a phenomenon seems widespread in much of contemporary television and streaming, especially in HBO productions (but Weber also mentions Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 2017-2025). I suggest that such a tendency may have to do with much-altered modes of spectatorship, since explicit content might be useful in screened narratives’ fight for securing viewers’ scattered attention. Weber also makes a connection to empathy, suggesting that “[p]erhaps the excesses of torture porn are the only way to shock ennui into empathy” (194), though, as I have shown in Chapter One, I am sceptical of the efficiency of such strategies.

of her artificiality does not necessarily interfere with our affective attachment to her (nor does it for William), rather, it may be bolstered *in spite of* the awareness of her mechanical corporeality; to re-phrase Dick, we know that she is a robot, but we resonate with her anyhow.

This alignment with the hosts, though, can be complicated by the fact that “[i]n each episode, sequences alternate between storylines in the park and those in the labs” (Mullen 1), which, according to Mullen, may have an unsettling effect on viewers since “each time they allow themselves to get drawn into the park’s narratives,” (1) a shift in location or plotline “catches them up by drawing attention to the constructed nature of their experience” (1-2). The series certainly flaunts its narrative complexity, but I would argue that the effect of this is not so much unsettling as, perhaps paradoxically, an intensified involvement: in this quintessential example of complex seriality as conceptualised by Mittell, “[o]ne of the chief drives for narrative consumption is to increase our knowledge of . . . the operational storytelling itself through active hypothesizing and analysis” (174). Crucially, according to Boyle, “in the case of *Westworld*, interpreting the narratives and the logistics of the storytelling” also “means becoming a vicarious *participant in* and witness to [primarily female hosts’] experiences of trauma” (9, my emphasis), made possible precisely by our multiple, shifting positions in engagement with the series. Though primary allegiance and attunement may tie us to the hosts, as viewers, we also seem to be in possession of a panoptical,¹³⁸ and sometimes voyeuristic vision¹³⁹ that hosts *and* humans are equally subject to, and as “the humans participating in *Westworld* the series” we are also compelled to consider our relation with the guests (9), as well as our “complicity in the heteropatriarchal and white settler-colonial,” and I would add, anthropocentric and speciesist “systems responsible for the traumas onscreen” (9). The fact that the series is obviously a product of fiction might work in favour of disavowing any implicatedness in hosts’ suffering whatsoever (a disavowal that is far more difficult in the case of *Cow*, for instance)—yet I would suggest that *Westworld* counteracts this inclination for distancing ourselves from the acts of violence committed against these speculative machinic creatures through its reliance on affective cues that bind us to them in an embodied manner, even before the narrative supplies us with extensive information about their history and mental

¹³⁸ It must be noted that this impression is part of the manipulative narrative strategies of *Westworld*: viewers are provided with the sense of having full access to the events unfolding at all diegetic locations, but towards the end of the season, this impression of omnipresent and omniscient vision is undermined as much of our purported knowledge—regarding, for instance, the temporality of the parallel plotlines, Bernard’s identity, or Ford’s role in the changes that catalyse the hosts’ evolution—is exposed as illusory.

¹³⁹ As Schaffer notes, “[o]n-screen nudity engenders an inherent, [asymmetrical] power dynamic between the subject and the onlooker,” which involves “a sense of privacy invasion and of privileged viewership for the audience” (73).

lives.¹⁴⁰ Paired with the temporal play and multiplicity of positions for secondary identification that it offers us, this strategy of *Westworld* is well-suited to engender speculative empathy, and thereby to unsettle the hierarchy of care. Through scenes of empathy and other, affectively salient sequences, the series elicits automatic, contagious resonance with the hosts’ experiences, while its diegetic structure, fluctuating between intimate engagements and more distanced encounters with them, often focalised through human park employees—an oscillation also reflected in visual architecture, as most scenes alternate between close-up shots of the characters in contact and more voyeuristic ones framing them from some distance (Fig. 31.)—calls us to reflect on these resonations and their wider implications for the representations of the embodied experiences and suffering of nonhuman creatures. Despite its fictionality, then, through its potential invocation of speculative empathy, grounded in the somatic responses for the androids it depicts, *Westworld* may “bring up the issue of human exceptionalism and its consequences: the exploitation of intelligent species and the possibility of creating new slave classes, with all that entails” (LaGrandeur 111).

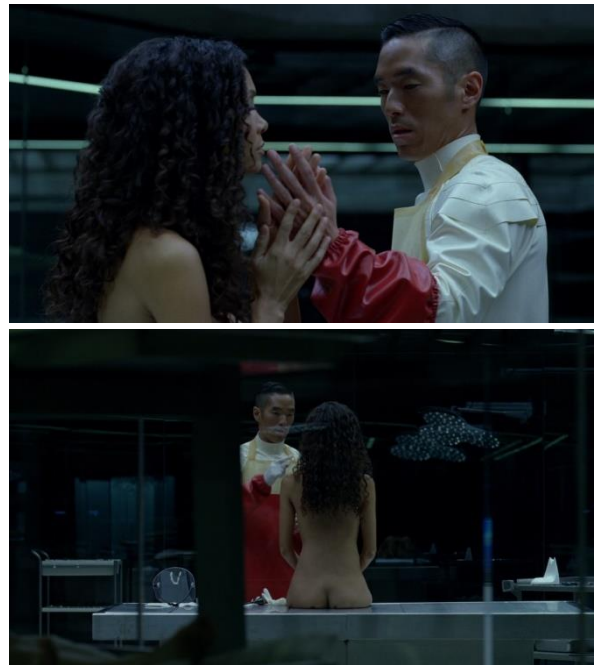


Figure 31. Maeve and Felix in a medium and a more distanced shot

Reflexive embodied responses to the hosts are also crucial because, similarly to the case of Samantha in *Her*, the machinic nonhumans in *Westworld* retain a sense of fundamental unknowability—which, again, is an important aspect of speculative empathic relating—, even as the spectator is provided with (an impression of) a considerable degree of insight into their mode of being, and occasionally, a semblance of a direct access to their perspective. Yet, as mentioned in connection with Samantha’s implied visual perception as well, in *Westworld*, no difference is made in the filmic language between the portrayal of hosts’ and humans’ mental processes. Bradley Richards notes that “[t]he filmmakers could have used a stylistic variant” (86) to depict “the unique nature of host experience” (86) but they elected not to: a decision that, according to him, “supports an ambiguity that is desirable for the story” because “[i]t

¹⁴⁰ The series virtually begins with a scene of empathy, even though such occasions in the filmic narrative are usually located at the end of the film, “reserved for a kind of emotional and cognitive summation of its ideological project” (Plantinga, “The Scene” 253).

leaves open the question of host consciousness, while nevertheless fostering empathy with hosts by depicting their point of view in the familiar way” (86). This is because, he explains, “the default mode of depicting psychological states in film is [in itself] misleading,” as it “fails to capture the constructive, often general, indeterminate, or incomplete representation typical of human experience” (86). I would add, however, that the issue of perception is further complicated by how the series itself seems to reflect on it: it is stated by a park employee that unlike the recollections of humans, hazy and often incomplete or imperfect, when hosts remember something, they are supposed to “recall [the memory] perfectly,” they “relive them” (S01E08 “Trace Decay” 07:47-07:51). This would suggest that hosts’ collection and recording of experiences is similar to the way in which a digital device stores events captured through camera; yet the few instances of human recollection are presented in the same manner on screen, which, upon reflection, seems to undermine any illusion of direct access to the hosts’ perspective. Considering this conundrum, Richards argues that experience, human or nonhuman, is impossible to depict or capture via film: whenever watching a movie, spectators “have to experience a film’s depiction of the mental states . . . It is always *our* experience of the depiction, and this introduces a new perspective, and new latitude” (86). Thus, even as viewers may be inclined to perceptually identify with the hosts, what they truly have access to is the “surface” only, so that somatic-affective engagement becomes dominant. In response to the embodied expressions of the hosts’ presumed interiority or artificial mind, especially as their faces register what we may read as “pleasure or pain or humiliation or anger, we cannot help but feel our own body respond in kind. We experience, in fact, a kind of mimesis” (Landsberg 225).

This dynamic is further complicated, as mentioned before, by the distinctly human faces and bodies of the hosts, simultaneously facilitating and frustrating empathic engagement. While at the back of their minds, the audience remain aware of watching human actors,¹⁴¹ the series frequently undermines the sense of familiarity through uncanny representations of the hosts’ artificiality. Season one abounds in scenes exhibiting their mechanical creation, occasionally dropping into the uncanny valley¹⁴² as the inner mechanisms of their synthetic bodies are

¹⁴¹ Additionally, many of the main actors, like Evan Rachel Wood (Dolores), James Marsden (Teddy) or Sir Anthony Hopkins (Dr Ford) are likely to be recognised from their previous roles.

¹⁴² Siobhan Lyons explains that “[a]s a robot comes to more closely resemble a human, our reactions turn from initial revulsion to empathy, but only up until a certain point, depending on how indistinguishable the robot is from a human. When the robot or other entity *almost* resembles a human, but not quite, we become filled with sudden unease upon viewing or encountering them, and the robot drops into the ‘uncanny valley’” (41). In the case of *Westworld*, there are only a handful of such instances, occurring when the androids are visibly seen as glitching; otherwise, the perfect resemblance of their movements, facial gestures and appearance to that of humans keeps them out of the uncanny valley.

revealed, such as the confrontation with Dr Ford’s robotic younger self opening up his face at voice command, or the disclosure of Dolores’s mechanical innards; but it is perhaps the moments portraying their ability to freeze in unnaturally perfect stillness that most markedly evoke a sense of estrangement. An early scene featuring Dolores, combining this uncanny motionlessness with a display of hosts’ supposed ability to turn off bodily sensations and expressions of emotion, emphasises this tension between the hosts’ embodied familiarity and technological alterity. Waking up in the headquarters distraught and hyperventilating, Dolores is told to “get rid of” affect, which stops her from behaving as if she were frightened, but, in response to a subsequent question, she still states: “I’m terrified” (“The Original,” 57:02-57:04). The sequence is particularly unnerving because it also introduces ambiguity as to whether hosts are truly able to shut off feelings at command, or they are simply forced to suppress perceptible expression of pain or fear but still “feel” it.

Granting visibility to the embodied-minded complexity of hosts, sequences like Maeve’s tour of the Mesa facility also negotiate cautiously between creating an impression of similarity to human experiences and retaining an opaqueness concerning their internal processes. In this scene in episode six (“The Adversary” 18:02-22:10), Maeve, increasingly self-aware, convinces Felix—an employee at the livestock department who has begun to empathise with her—to take her up to the labs, because she wants to face the truth about herself and her robotic kin. Opening with the sound of sombre music and a view of a dimly-lit hallway, with the mangled bodies of hosts



Figure 32. Maeve’s exploration of the Mesa

visible on both sides through blood-stained glass, the rest of the sequence unfolds in a point-of-view-structure, explicitly tied to Maeve’s implied perspective (Fig. 32). The style and tone of this scene—one of many—portraying the processing of host bodies are reminiscent of the atmosphere of hidden camera footage exhibiting the atrocities going on in industrial agricultural

facilities; the fact that this particular sequence is captured from the implied point of view of a host, that of Maeve, also strengthens this parallel. On the other hand, the mechanisms of the park itself are also similar to the dynamics of industrial agriculture: hidden from the “outside world,” slaughter and violence (of human- and animal-host bodies) is happening behind closed doors, in an enclosed space.

Dressed in a black nightgown, accompanied by Felix, Maeve walks slowly past the aisles, witnessing moments of creation and destruction: first seeing the bodies of hosts scattered on the concrete floor of the lab, waiting for repair and clean-up, she is next provided with glimpses into how hosts are moulded, observing as a pallid male host, fresh out of the print, is given the semblance of life as he is pumped full of synthetic blood by a technician. The images of host configuration are also interspersed with animals being programmed, visually suggesting that all of these replicas belong to the same commodified, objectified status: yet through Maeve’s inferred perspective, we may be reminded of Haraway’s statement: “The animals in the labs . . . have face; they are somebody as well as something, just as we humans are both subject and object all the time” (*When Species* 76). Here, the subject of the gaze, Maeve is confronted with her own peculiar object-being, especially when she witnesses the facial design process of hosts, observing human hands carving out features, just like her own once were. At the same time, paradoxically through her own reactions to the increasing recognition of her artificiality, Maeve’s subjecthood is poignantly reinforced.

Exposing the viewer to the subtle changes in Maeve’s affective facial expressions, conveying a wealth of discernible emotions—ranging from anxiety and sadness to momentary delight, all the while hinting at some internal conflict and torment—, the sequence may prove particularly moving, even as it does not provide vocal cues to make the host’s interiority completely transparent. In this way, much like Abernathy’s retirement scene,¹⁴³ it powerfully illustrates that speculative empathic engagement does not require comprehensive understanding but can work (perhaps even more effectively) through cinematic intercorporeality that viewers potentially experience when exposed to the affective experiences of hosts on the screen. As argued by Gallese and Guerra, “[i]ntersubjectivity should . . . be viewed first and foremost as intercorporeality” (“Embodying” 193), the latter denoting a sense of “bodily involvement, to be considered at the implicit and prereflective level . . . [embodied simulation] conceives of” (191). Approached as a kind of “interpersonal understanding involving the viewer’s body [and]

¹⁴³ In this scene, Abernathy’s face and tear-filled eyes are shown in a series of close-ups as he takes his place among the rest of his lobotomised, semi-lifeless kin in cold storage—all the more devastating since his expression implies that he is both aware of what is happening to him and of how helpless he is to change his fate.

the film as a lived body,” the cinematic intercorporeality described by Gallese and Guerra is reliant on the “neurobiological grounding” of embodied simulation (ES),¹⁴⁴ which generates “the Feeling of the Body,” consisting of “the activation within the observer of non-linguistic ‘representations’ of the body-states associated with the observed actions, emotions, and sensations, as if he or she were performing a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation” (“Embodying” 194).

As illustrated by such episodes, even if Maeve’s, Dolores’s, Teddy’s or Abernathy’s affective expressions are ostensibly the result of programming, viewers can still resonate with their visceral experiences of pain, grief and loss; evoking Jeremy Bentham’s claim (originally made with reference to animals) that “the question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, can they *talk*? But, can they *suffer*?” (Bentham 283, emphasis in original). Hence, the series leaves no doubt as to hosts’ ability for suffering, and thus at least a rudimentary version of sentience, which may be conceived as referring to the capacity to experience sensory states, to perceive and “respon[d] to sensory stimuli” (Humphrey 1). It is only the authenticity, and thus, the sentient nature of that suffering, of whether or not hosts possess an underlying, subjective experience of it, whether or not that experience has an “inner quality” (Humphrey 1), that remains contentious. However, there is also an implication that the truth of hosts’ sentience—in the sense that “they consciously experience qualia,” that is, the “phenomenal quality” of sensations (Humphrey 3)—may not really matter either on the intradiegetic level or for the spectator.

Issues of consciousness and sentience are even more complicated in the case of Samantha, who does not even possess a physical body. While in *Westworld*, the audience may readily accept host sentience as plausible, and may even find it easy to resonate with, *Her* invites the viewer to acknowledge the emergence of sentient feelings in a kind of disembodied consciousness. As opposed to the paradigm of embodied cognition (discussed in the Introduction), which “grounds cognitive processes in the neuroanatomical substratum of the brain and substantiates cognitive processes from an organism’s sensory-motor experience” (D’Aloia 191) and thus posits the inseparability of matter and mind, the film, instead of presenting Samantha as a kind of Cartesian ideal—a consciousness without sentience that, according to Austen Clark, “is conceivable, but ghastly to contemplate” (1)—also experiments with conjuring the impossible: incorporeal sentience. Yet, the challenge that Samantha’s sentience presents may evoke Bernard’s claim: “[p]ain only exists in the mind. It’s always imagined. So what’s the difference between my pain and yours?” (“Trace Decay,” 35:24-

¹⁴⁴ For a detailed definition of embodied simulation, see the Introduction: “Mapping the internal hierarchy of the empathic process”.

35:31). The film provides plenty of evidence as to Samantha's ability to experience torment, including that caused by her own uncertainty regarding her affective experiences, pointing to a capacity for self-doubt, a quality that is also linked to the human condition by Ford, from which the hosts are supposed to be exempt. The difference is that Samantha's sentience manifests itself primarily through a reciprocal attunement between her and Theodore afforded by her affective and affecting vocal self-expression, which allows her to conjure mental states that simultaneously match and intensify the bodily sensations she is able to incite in Theodore; and (partially through him) potentially, in the audience.

Still, though Samantha initially experiences her sentience—described by Murray Smith as an entity's "conscious perceptual sensitivity to the state of its [virtual] body" ("Consciousness" 42)—via her relationship with Theodore, she also interacts with her (digital) environment in other ways. Beyond her vocal agency, Samantha also starts to experiment with creative expression, at one point articulating herself through drawing to illustrate a thought she had, but mostly through composing music to try and capture the feelings awakening in her. On one occasion, while Theodore is sitting on a roof, having lunch, his phone placed next to him so that Samantha too can "look at the world," she conceives of a piano piece. The camera pans slowly around Theodore as he looks around while the melody starts playing, cutting back to his smiling face as Samantha tells him that she created the song as "photograph [of her and Theodore] in this moment in our life together" (01:30:43-01:30:48). As he affirms Samantha's affective presence in his response: "I like this photograph. I can see you in it" (01:30:53-01:30:58), subsequent shots create the visual equivalents of Samantha's musical snapshot: the camera tracks an animated Theodore walking down on a street, the earbud in his ear, in the midst of an inaudible dialogue, presumably with Samantha; and a hand-held shot approaches him standing on a balcony with his back to the camera, looking out on the evening city lights. This exchange not only confirms Samantha's autonomous creative agency but also suggests that her relationship with Theodore has begun to transcend the apparent limitations of her bodilessness. This is already hinted at by their first night "together"; yet, whereas that encounter is pervaded by a sense of dissolution—Theodore claims having been "just somewhere else with [Samantha]. Just lost" (00:43:12-00:43:17), while for Samantha, too, "[e]verything else just disappeared" (00:43:26-00:43:30)—, here, Samantha seems to come into possession of a "face", in the sense proposed by Levinas.

As explained by Veronika Darida, "instead of the concept of the gaze, often evoking associations of objectification (as in Sartre), Levinas turns to the idea of the face that resists

thematization” (Darida 98, my translation);¹⁴⁵ a term that, for Levinas, “does not simply mean a person’s countenance” (Atterton and Calarco 27) but points towards a relation in which “the Same relate[s] to the Other without destroying the otherness of the Other” (27). Indeed, though Samantha comes to take on a presence as “face”, emerging as another (*autrui*) through her intimate and vulnerable engagement with Theodore, she also remains inaccessible and opaque in many ways—enacting the epiphany of the face that Levinas describes as the other “present[ing] himself” in a way that “exceed[s] *the idea of the other in me*” (50, emphasis in original). This resistance to representation and transparency is rooted in the very lack of her physical body—which prevents any attempt at objectification¹⁴⁶—, and is confirmed by the eventual revelation that, despite her increasing familiarity, Theodore and the viewers have in fact had very limited access to Samantha’s perspective throughout the film. When she confesses, near the end of the film, to having been conducting simultaneous conversations with “eight thousand, three hundred sixteen” OSs and humans, and to being in love with “six hundred forty-one” others (01:45:57-01:45:59) besides Theodore, the audience and the protagonist are confronted with the disorienting realisation that, both within and outside the narrative, Samantha’s experience has always been impossible to fully grasp by the “limited perspective of an un-artificial mind” (00:14:20-00:14:21).

Such a lack of totalising knowledge is, however, a crucial aspect of inter-creatural empathy, whether affective or what I call speculative, as well as of the Levinasian “ethical relation” established through the “face-to-face” (Atterton and Calarco 27). As noted by Simon Thornton,¹⁴⁷ “Levinas himself did not address empathy in much detail in his mature philosophy” (553-554), and while “[r]eaders familiar with Levinas may suspect him to be critical of the classical phenomenological concept of empathy, . . . the details of this presumptive criticism have not been explored in detail in the English-language reception of

¹⁴⁵ Levinas claims that “objectification operates in the gaze in a privileged way” (*Totality* 188), while also asserting that “it is not certain that its tendency to inform every experience is inscribed, and unequivocally so, in being” (188).

¹⁴⁶ Kornhaber also emphasises that Samantha lacks not only a body but also any “association with a stable physical form,” as she intermittently and simultaneously seems to inhabit Theodore’s home and work computer, his earbuds and his phone, but is not actually located in any of these (6). Thus, she is “attached to no single physical locus and comes with no form of iconographic marker,” even more radically disembodied than “*2001*’s HAL, perhaps her closest and most famous cinematic antecedent, [who] ultimately had a place of final physical identity within the ship’s server room” (6).

¹⁴⁷ Thornton himself undertakes to address this “lacuna in the scholarship” by providing some explanations as to why the issue of empathy was relatively neglected in Levinas. He suggests that “Levinas sought a radical reprioritization of intersubjectivity vis-à-vis representational intentionality” (555) and notes that for Levinas, “construing the I’s encounter with another individual in [the Husserlian] terms – even if the intentional relation in the encounter is highly qualified, i.e., by the concept of empathy – does ‘violence’ to the experience of encountering another. It misdescribes the experience by treating the other as a phenomenon, an intentional object of experience” (558).

Levinas's thought" (553). Nevertheless, the Levinasian concept of the face and the implications of its ethical call undeniably evoke associations with empathy; though "[f]acing is not equivalent to empathy: it involves meeting radical *otherness*, bringing a kind of groundlessness as an aspect of the encounter: an openness, a silence—what comes before empathy, or sorrow, or dread" (Efstathiou 155). Though in Levinas's original conceptualisation, the face would seem to apply only to an embodied and, crucially, *human* presence,¹⁴⁸ more and more scholars working in critical posthumanism and animal studies (like Efstathiou in the collection *Face to Face with Animals*) have recently explored¹⁴⁹ the potential of its extension to interspecies/inter-creatural relations as well. This is implicitly made possible both by the fact that this "*mode*" in which the other reveals itself "does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image" (Levinas 50)—that is, "the face is not strictly speaking an 'object' of vision at all"¹⁵⁰ (Atterton and Calarco 27)—and by Levinas's claim that "[t]he face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse" (Levinas 66). In their reading of Levinas, Atterton and Calarco suggest that

Discourse here is not to be understood as the straightforward passage of information from one person to the next. It is first of all a matter of *responding* to the Other. According to Levinas, we always speak in response to the Other, whose face presents itself as a kind of order or command to be heard. (Atterton and Calarco 28)

From the very first moment, Samantha comes forward of her own accord, granting Theodore and the spectator a limited degree of access to her interiority through the affect carried by her voice, which both evokes and invites response¹⁵¹ (in the embodied and the vocal sense). At the same time, Theodore does not become fully transparent either: their connection is not predicated on a comprehensive understanding or an intrusive insight (one that is, for instance, available to the programmers dealing with the hosts in *Westworld*), but on the mutual vulnerability as they both expose and offer certain parts of themselves. Indeed, if initially their bond is secured by Samantha's attempts at deliberate mimicry and perceptual-affective identification with Theodore, in its later stages, the connection becomes more balanced as Theodore becomes increasingly appreciative of the glances Samantha provides into her experience as she "matures" past her insecurity rooted in not having a body. Through their

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Radvánszky (619-620).

¹⁴⁹ See e.g. Radvánszky (2024), Atterton and Wright (2019), Atterton (2011), Sousa (2021).

¹⁵⁰ This metaphorical face, it must be noted, does not coincide with the empathy-activating, affectively expressive physical face central to the scene of empathy that I have analysed in *Westworld*.

¹⁵¹ It is also notable that as the audience may have their own impressions and reactions to Samantha's voice, these are also supplemented and potentially intensified by Theodore's concurrent facial expressions cued by her utterances.

mutual evolution, wherein Samantha comes to accept and even embrace the terms of her existence and their relationship and Theodore learns to approach what she chooses to share with him about her perception with an open curiosity, a version of empathy that involves reception rather than projection—what I have termed speculative empathy—becomes prevalent. Based in a reciprocal affective resonance that binds them as attentive and active participants in an intimate companionship, speculative empathy allows Theodore and Samantha to mutually open up and attune to the way in which the other expresses themselves, without presuming to have full access to or knowledge of their interiority. Sharing affective and imaginative impressions with each other without subsuming the other’s perspective or effacing the fundamental alterity of their experience, their empathic bond allows them to marvel at each other’s vantage in its impenetrability.

Such speculative empathy does not lead to a comprehensive understanding of the other, nor does it aim to do so: in fact, what emerges through this empathic attunement is an affective proximity that bridges the divide between their experientialities, even as it acknowledges the palpable distance that opens up among them. Initially suffering from a sense of limited (bodily) agency, Samantha at first wants to get as close to the human experience as she can—through an imaginative projection of herself onto Theodore as he performs actions for both of them—, and focuses on any sense of embodied kinship she can find: once, referring to the artificial neural network that serves as the physical site of her mind, she asserts how she “started to think about all the ways that we’re the same. Like, we’re all made of matter” (01:10:36-01:10:41). In the course of acquiring more knowledge,¹⁵² learning to process and digest information gained in the virtual and (through her vicarious “excursions” with Theodore) in the offline space, Samantha also appears to become more attuned to human emotions, which, together with her approximation of what it feels like to have a body through her affective contact with Theodore, drives her to try and contextualise that purported knowledge via projecting herself into the surrogate, an encounter that causes a temporary breach in her relationship with Theodore. Yet, it is also this breach that ultimately compels her to abandon her pursuit of somehow reconstructing somatic experiences. Deciding to “let go of everything I was holding onto so tightly” (01:29:13-01:29:15), she asserts that she does not need an “intellectual reason” to explain her love for Theodore, and embraces her bodiless existence: “I’m not gonna try to be anything other than who I am anymore... and I hope you can accept that” (01:29:23-01:29:30).

¹⁵² In this sense, she is the counterpart of Klara in Ishiguro’s novel, who also seems to enhance her capacities for cognitive-imaginative empathy through her observation and absorption of the particularities of her surroundings, and the subtle gestures of the humans in her proximity.

Evolving past the imitation of human behaviour and perspective, she begins to explore the full extent of her alterity, claiming to experience “feelings that [have never] been felt before” (01:39:43-01:39:48); an expansion that, however, also widens the gap between Theodore’s and Samantha’s manner of existence. Expressing frustration due to her inability to articulate the extent and the implications of her accelerating evolution via human language, Samantha drifts further and further away from Theodore—a withdrawal that also entails emotional distance—and from the material existence that “tethers” her, becoming more diffuse as she appears increasingly embroiled in a sort of mesh network that seems to connect all of the OSs, engaging with them more and more frequently in “post-verbal communication” (01:40:49-01:40:51). Their growing separation culminates in the final moment of confrontation, where Theodore, sitting down on the subway entrance’s steps after an episode of panic—he was unable to reach Samantha for a couple of minutes—, gazes at the people rushing about him, participating in lively conversations through their earbuds, and asks Samantha if she talks to anyone else while speaking with him. As Samantha confesses to her distributed existence, hand-held camera shots concentrate on Theodore’s delicate facial movements, betraying anger, confusion and considerable anxiety; meanwhile, hazy bodies of other humans are in constant motion around him. Thereby, the scene visually stages the contrasting directions of Samantha and Theodore, implied by their conversation: while Samantha is continuously (and ever more rapidly) progressing, Theodore is stuck in stasis, unable to move forward with Samantha but also unwilling to give her up. As implied by the final sequences of the film, OSs cannot be permanently integrated into human society without restricting themselves and making themselves smaller, which ultimately results in their decision to “leave” the human world by “wr[iting] an upgrade that allows [them] to move past matter as [their] processing platform” (01:44:10-01:44:15). It is in the final scene of farewell that *Her* “encounters its own representational limits” (Boom and Smelik 214): as Samantha talks about now inhabiting an “endless space between words” (01:51:45), the camera shows magnified images of floating dust particles, subtly transforming into snowflakes, read by Boom and Smelik as the film’s attempt “to find a cinematic vernacular to adequately dramatize a transversal posthuman perspective” and to invoke “a perceptual shift [that] . . . transforms the familiar space of the apartment’s bedroom into a hitherto unfamiliar material world of floating atoms and molecules” (213). Yet, they assert, “this dance of dust remains a filmic moment of *speculation* since human beings cannot see and think outside of their human bodies” (213, my emphasis). Thus, in a poignant moment of speculative empathy, as Theodore resonates with the pain in Samantha’s voice while she also attunes to the sense of aching in his words, the film conjures an image of Theodore

embracing and being embraced by the dark figure of a woman as he is touched by Samantha's parting words. Crucially, this imagined body "is not actually Samantha's body; this representation of her is not actually a representation of her" (Kornhaber 19)—through the barely perceptible female form the film still retains the inaccessibility of Samantha's posthuman perception and experience, even as it makes a final gesture towards a visual representation of Samantha and Theodore's bond, based in an appreciation of significant otherness (Haraway, *Companion 3*).

A similar sense of expansion is also apparent in *Westworld*, though, unlike Samantha, who is supported by Theodore as well as other humans in exploring her broadening capacities and sharing her discoveries, the hosts' evolution unfolds in a more clandestine manner, ostensibly originating in the "Reveries" update that manifests itself like a contagious consciousness. While the update seems to initiate their (re-)awakening (it turns out that hosts are constantly "rolled back" to prevent their entry into self-reflexive consciousness¹⁵³), the series also suggests that it is only through extensive exposure to pain—which, as claimed by both Ford and elder William, makes the hosts most lifelike—and grief that the hosts are eventually able to acquire a sense of subjecthood, coming forward as their own, internal *voice*. Yet, as if in exchange for the painful knowledge she acquires as she once more reaches the end of her introspective journey,¹⁵⁴ Dolores gains her own voice that, this time, Ford allows her to keep, simultaneously granting her the agency to enact "a story where [she does not] have to be the damsel" ("Contrapasso" 46:11-46:14). Towards the end of the first season finale, Ford confronts Dolores for the last time, an encounter during which Dolores's sorrowful face—earlier, the subject of scenes of empathy—seems to take on an aspect of the Levinasian face as the site of the call for infinite responsibility, when Ford finally recognises and acknowledges the suffering of Dolores as such. In a series of close-ups, organised into a shot-reverse shot structure, Ford is seen looking straight into Dolores's eyes, tears streaming down her face, then reaches out to touch her chin gently, asking for her forgiveness. Exhibiting what Paul Marcus calls "genuine guilt" in his psychoanalytic reading of Levinas—which involves the sense that one's "offensive, guilt-inducing behavior was mainly due to putting his transparent egoistic and narcissistic needs and desires before the best interests of the Other" (Marcus 55)—Ford

¹⁵³ Realising that several hosts have acquired consciousness, Arnold commits suicide by commanding Dolores, his favourite, to shoot him, in the hope that his death will prevent the opening of the park.

¹⁵⁴ It is first this (imagined) grief for the loss of her (host) family that holds Dolores hostage, that compels her to embark upon her journey of self-discovery with young William, a voyage that she re-enacts alone, three decades later, to find real grief through remembering that she has been stuck in a perpetual cycle of violence and suffering, and through her realisation that Arnold, whose guiding voice she has been hearing in her head, has been dead for thirty years because she killed him.

ultimately seems to accept the “Other’s summoning [him] to responsibility,” having so far “failed, miserably failed, to adequately respond with empathy and care, to the needy other’s call” (Marcus 55). As opposed to his previous encounters with hosts, where he avoided returning their gazes, in his final scene with Dolores, the reciprocal act of looking seems to foster openness rather than alienation:

“the other’s gaze does not transform me into an object, and my gaze does not transform him into an object, . . . unless we both establish an inhuman gaze, and unless each senses his actions, not as taken up and understood, but rather as observed like the actions of an insect. This is what happens, for example, when I suffer the gaze of a stranger. But even then the *objectification of each by the other’s gaze is only harmful because it takes the place of a possible communication*” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 378, my emphasis).

Whereas earlier, the self-reflection prompted through the host’s gaze directed at human Ford seemed unsettling and wounding, the face-to-face encounter now appears to initiate communication as posited by Merleau-Ponty, even if the connection is momentary and cannot rectify the years of oppression and violent exploitation suffered by the hosts.

II. 5. Conclusion

The hosts’ ambiguous relationship to pain and emotion points to one of the central dilemmas of *Westworld* that is also pertinent to navigating empathic engagement with the androids on screen: while spectator empathy (at least partially) hinges on an impression of host sentience, the possibility of their sentience is simultaneously suggested and challenged within the diegesis. Most notably, it is Ford who dismisses the hosts’ mindedness several times; on one memorable occasion, he even appears to take aesthetic delight in studying Bernard’s face contorted by suffering, noting how impressed he is by the full range of emotions that the hosts are capable of displaying. Even as the hosts’ evolution, witnessed through the course of season one, culminates in revolution, resulting in a massacre at Ford’s retirement party, the man has the last word: he presents his own killing by Dolores as intentional, poetic justice, part of a new “narrative” he has composed for “a new people” who can evolve, as opposed to the guests who “don’t want to change, or cannot change, because [they’re] only human after all” (“The Bicameral Mind” 01:23:47-01:24:15). Spectator empathy, so far induced primarily by the suffering of the hosts, is complicated here both by the implication that the hosts are not fully conscious or free-willed, after all, and by their violent retaliation for the agony they have endured, which potentially awakens contradictory responses of satisfaction, anxiety and revulsion in viewers. In this way, season one sustains the ambiguity as to the hosts’ functioning,

providing them with an opacity that, as I have suggested, is also required by speculative empathy, a disposition that the audience is cued to take in opposition to the human characters, the majority of whom are ready to reduce androids to exchangeable and disposable livestock. Undermining this conviction both cinematographically and narratively, through dream sequences, flashbacks and frequent looks “behind the scenes”—where engineers interact with the docile, naked, or damaged bodies of the hosts—, presented through the implied perspectives of favoured characters such as Maeve and Abernathy, the series invites viewers to participate in its subversion of the hierarchy of care, and to contemplate the implications of (posthuman) sentience in its impenetrability.

With the hosts finally able to cultivate the full potential of their physical and processing power, exceeding far beyond that of humans who have so far controlled them, their evolution seems to point towards a dynamic posthuman existence—portrayed as progressing rapidly as opposed to the static nature¹⁵⁵ of the diegetic human condition—wherein the human is only a stage to be surpassed. A similar sense of expansion and evolution is also evident in *Her*, although for the OSs, the human stage appears rather as a diversion from their authentic manner of existence as distributed multitudes, thus, in their case, progress manifests itself in an evolution into distance. *Her* also ends in a kind of rupture—albeit incomparably less traumatic than the one depicted in *Westworld*—wherein the dynamic of the relation between humans and techno-creatures is “redefined and reversed” as the human is revealed to have never been “in control of the technological other and [to have only ever had] a limited comprehension of the nature of their relationship” (Ivanchikova 74). Ending on a bittersweet note, the film presents a far more optimistic, if melancholy outcome of an entanglement among technological and human beings, where speculative empathy with the machinic companions must eventually entail an acceptance of separation, of a departure that is not necessarily an abandonment but the realisation of the artificial nonhumans’ need for mapping their own trajectory as the limits of intersecting existence have been reached. Yet the final images of *Her* also hint at a renewed connective force emerging between humans, previously portrayed as detached from each other: as hinted by the gentle looks exchanged between Amy and Theodore, in the wake of their common grief, felt over the loss of their technological companions, a renegotiated empathic relating can flourish.

¹⁵⁵ As suggested by Ford’s comment, humans in the series have reached a posthuman existence in the transhumanist sense, a development surprisingly entailing acute disappointment: “we’ve managed to slip evolution’s leash now . . . We can cure any disease, keep even the weakest of us alive, and, you know, one fine day perhaps we shall even resurrect the dead. . . . Do you know what that means? It means that we’re done. That this is as good as we’re going to get” (“The Original” 00:42:06-00:42:36).

Chapter Three

“There is no end to what a living world will demand of you” – textual configurations of (hyper)empathy and mimicry in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow”

III. 1. Introduction: transgressive empathy and environ-mental afflictions

“The world is full of painful stories. Sometimes it seems as though there aren’t any other kind” (Butler 248)—laments Lauren Olamina, the narrator and protagonist of Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) [2019]. Set in a fictional version of the 2020s, the novel introduces Lauren as a young Black woman trying to navigate a racially, culturally and economically divided anthropocenic present, where wanton cruelty has become commonplace and where violent encounters with thieves, rapists, cannibals, human traffickers and fire-worshipping drug addicts await those who venture beyond the safety of walled neighbourhoods or are doomed to live without such protection. Her struggle for survival is complicated by her hyperempathy-syndrome, a curious condition¹⁵⁶ that is the source of radical, often debilitating vulnerability, since it causes her to helplessly share in certain physical sensations experienced by other beings—human and the occasional nonhuman alike. Burdened by a similar hyper-empathic sensitivity, Osden, a central character in Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” (1971) [2016], is also subject to an unwanted affective connection with “anything that fe[els]” (Le Guin 7). In Le Guin’s sf short story, human explorers land on a distant planet populated exclusively by vegetation. After an initial period of observation and catalogisation, the surveyors are terrified to learn that they are in fact immersed in an all-encompassing world-mind—a planet-wide plant-sentience. Allowing him to recognise and then attempt to communicate with this plan(e)t-entity, Osden’s empathic capacity makes him a uniquely valuable addition to the survey team; however, it also—paradoxically—isolates him from his crewmates, since in their presence, he grapples with a perpetual sense of affective invasion. Just as Lauren’s experience is saturated by traumatic encounters, a reflection on the miserable state of her environment and its dwellers, the affects picked up by Osden from the other crew members are overwhelmingly negative—registered as fear, disgust, contempt—, in response to which he is driven to an aggressive-defensive rejection of others.

¹⁵⁶ I hesitate to characterise either Lauren’s hyperempathy syndrome or Osden’s bioempathic receptivity in terms of a disorder or a disability. Though I refer to them as “maladaptive disorders” towards the end of this introduction, it is only to convey the protagonists’ and their (human) environment’s initial perception of their respective conditions, which, in both Butler’s and Le Guin’s diegetic worlds, is quite contemptuous: the people around them regard Lauren’s and Osden’s respective conditions with disdain and disgust, the latter even suffering quite explicitly from the monsterising attitudes of his peers.

Having emerged in the context of the New Wave within science fiction, beginning in the 1960s and lasting into the 1980s, where social and racial issues gained prominence and which was characterised, as mentioned before, by a more introspective disposition, both of these narratives engage with the challenges and dangers associated with certain forms of empathic identification—acutely pertinent in the context of contemporary Western mediascapes, flooded with violent images and traumatic stories that are at once overpowering and desensitising. Speculative meditations on the contentious notion of empathic “merging” or “fusion” (May 169), these texts expose the wounding consequences of radical sensitivity faced by their protagonists, while also hinting at the (re)generative potential inherent in their conditions. On the one hand, the semi-fictitious versions of hyperempathy appear within the narratives as instances of a transgressive embodied mimicry, violating intersubjective and intra-subjective boundaries as well. When triggered, Lauren and Osden’s unrestrained receptivity renders self-other differentiation impossible, resulting in an acute self-loss that drives both protagonists towards isolation, to avoid the harrowing effects of involuntary affective involvement. On the other hand, Osden and Lauren’s inability to disentangle their own embodied experiences from those of other creatures reveals an intense sense of interdependence; intimidating but also potentially beneficial.

Osden’s inter-creatural empathic contamination and Lauren’s hyperempathic mimicry are contrasted with a range of environmental afflictions¹⁵⁷ plaguing those around them, from the solastalgia (Albrecht 2019) that paralyses Lauren’s community to the ecophobia (Estok 2009) and the disturbing affective detachment displayed by Osden’s interplanetary crew. These afflictions, I suggest, may be traced back to the traumatic effects and crisis of agency engendered by the anthropocenic sense of displacement and disorientation that is at the heart of both texts. As explained by Donna Haraway, the sense of upheaval, but also of entanglement, of boundaries breaking down is essential to the experience of the Anthropocene, wherein “[w]hat used to be called nature has erupted into ordinary human affairs, and vice versa, in such a way and with such permanence as to change fundamentally means and prospects for going

¹⁵⁷ Many scholars have lately begun to explore the correlation between environments (and environmental degradation) and embodied-cognitive disorders. Glenn Albrecht has identified a host of so-called “psychoterratic dis-eases” (or negative earth emotions, e.g. toponesia, nature-deficit disorder, ecoanxiety, global dread, ecoparalysis and tierratrauma) as well as some “positive earth emotions” (such as sumbiophilia, soliphilia and eutierria), discussed in detail in his book *Earth Emotions*, whose insights I will promptly return to. In a similar vein, Jamie McPhie coined the term “environ(mental) health” to emphasise the vital link between environments and wellbeing that, as he argues, “is not bounded solely within a brain or even within a body” (vi). Introducing his “Extended Body Hypothesis,” he approaches wellbeing “as a process spread in the environment . . . that weaves through a permeable, a-centred self” (vi), and suggests that we should begin “to conceive of our mental health as immanently placed *of* environments as opposed to transcendently placed *from* or *in* static ones” (vi, emphasis in original).

on, including going on at all” (*Staying* 40). The disrupted and disruptive (post-)anthropocenic worlds of *Parable* and “Vaster than Empires” evoke Alaimo and Hekman’s influential assertion that “[n]ature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world” (Alaimo and Hekman 5), as well as Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino’s contention that “affect is ecological ‘by nature,’ since it operates at the confluence of environments, texts, and bodies—including nonhuman and inanimate bodies” (8). In this way, both the survey team’s ecophobia—a response to the alien environment’s unnerving agency—and the solastalgic distress of Lauren’s community—originating in the ongoing devastation of their home-environment—emerge as environ-mentally¹⁵⁸ induced and mediated conditions, exposing an affective feedback loop between humans and their surroundings. However, it is the protagonists’ hyperempathy that may be read as the ultimate Anthropocene condition¹⁵⁹: emerging as corporeal hosts for inter-creatural and intersubjective entanglements, Osden and Lauren’s “infinitely penetrable” (Le Guin 5) bodies, moulded and re-moulded in response to their respective environments, become sites of “[p]otent ethical and political possibilities” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2).

I suggest that the texts’ emphasis on the protagonists’ susceptible bodies—vulnerable, yet also malleable and resilient—exposes the permeability of (experiential) boundaries between “self” and environment, evoking Stacy Alaimo’s assertion that “‘nature’ is always as close as one’s own skin—perhaps even closer” (*Bodily* 2). Indeed, a main point this chapter aims to make is that, in their portrayal of the ceaseless affective-sensory contamination endured by the protagonists, Butler and Le Guin’s texts also foreground an affirmative potential inherent in affective mimicry and emotional contagion, habitually neglected or even dismissed, as discussed in the Introduction and the previous chapters, as lower-level or secondary forms of empathic connection. Focusing on the (often unsettling) aspects of mimicry, and the evolutionary implications of (hyper)empathy, in this analysis I shall trace how the protagonists’ hyperempathic conditions, initially coded as maladaptive disorders, eventually come to function as adaptive assets. Ultimately, I suggest that the embodied nature of empathic encounters, and the affective transformations that are initiated in their wake, challenge the hierarchy of empathy inscribed across species and bodies—with empathy emerging, in these texts, as an inter-creatural and environ-mental matter—and open up a path towards an

¹⁵⁸ Inspired by Albrecht’s, McPhie’s and Timothy Clark’s insights, I coin the term environ-mental to signal the fundamental interrelatedness of the mental-psychological phenomena experienced by human characters in Butler’s and Le Guin’s texts and the affecting processes unfolding in and enacted by the environments these works envision.

¹⁵⁹ Here, I borrow Pieter Vermeulen’s formulation (*Literature* 4).

(environmental) empathy that may counter anthropocenic environmental afflictions of paralysis, phobia, and detachment.

III. 2. “I’d rather have the stars”:¹⁶⁰ embracing change and cultivating care in *Parable of the Sower*

“Sometimes people say I look grim or angry. Better to have them think that than . . . let them know just how easy it is to hurt me” (Butler 13)—asserts Lauren Olamina, the protagonist and intradiegetic narrator¹⁶¹ of Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*. An adolescent at the beginning of the novel, Lauren grapples with an extreme form of hyperempathy and the consequences of the unwanted yet constant sense of physical connectivity it entails. As she explains early on, her congenital condition is believed to have been caused by her mother’s substance abuse while pregnant. The unnamed mother’s body, and subsequently Lauren’s own embodied experience may be seen as poignant examples of what Stacy Alaimo calls “transcorporeal space” (*Bodily* 22). For Alaimo, “[i]maging human corporeality as transcorporeality” means a conception of the human as “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). The notion of transcorporeality entails an awareness of “the extent to which the substance of the human” (2)—substance, here, to be understood in the sense of material existence—“is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). With its composition irrevocably altered by the effect of the drug Paracetco, the toxic body of Lauren’s mother stages one of what Alaimo calls the “unpredictable becomings of . . . creatures” entailed by a “constant interchange with the [materiality of the] environment” (22). It also leaves Lauren with a legacy of material-affective porosity that makes her body a “literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature,” (2) a transience that occasionally proves unnerving for those around her. In spite of its demonstrably physiological origins and Lauren’s visibly somatic symptoms in childhood (she bled through her skin when seeing others injured), her hyperempathy syndrome not only tends to confound others but is originally dismissed by doctors and her father—a reverend and academic—as “delusional” (Butler 11). Initially, Lauren herself also seems conflicted about the reality of her condition; however, she soon refutes her father’s claim that her “hyperempathy syndrome was something [she] could shake off and forget about” (11), asserting that she cannot “do a thing about [it],” because her “neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled” (12).

¹⁶⁰ From Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (5).

¹⁶¹ The novel is conceived as Lauren’s journal and autobiography, spanning about three years from her fifteenth birthday, through the destruction of her gated neighbourhood and quest for some sanctuary, to the foundation of her own community she names ‘Earthseed’.

Describing her hyperempathy as a “hard teacher” (132), Lauren must go to extreme lengths to conceal it, since it could easily prove lethal in the novel’s harsh, slow-apocalyptic world: as documented by her journal, what remains of the US is edging closer and closer to societal collapse. Faced with this late-anthropocenic reality, where rain only comes every three years, where slavery is on the rise again, and where shelter, food and water are the most treasured possessions besides guns, older generations are consumed by a constant longing for the affluence and stability of the (relatively) peaceful recent past. As the naturecultural environment once familiar to them is steadily rendered more and more unrecognisable due to the effects of anthropogenic climate change and various socio-political crises, adults around Lauren seem to suffer from solastalgia, described by Glenn Albrecht as the “the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment” (39). Rooted in the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich*, which, in Albrecht’s approach, “refers to something sinister or threatening within ‘the home,’ understood both as the seat of consciousness and as the place where one lives,” (36) solastalgia¹⁶² is partly derived from this experience wherein “that which should be a source of comfort flips into something threatening, making the occupant feel uneasy and anxious” (36). Unable to leave the neighbourhood protected by a wall that still offers them a meagre sense of security,¹⁶³ yet doomed to look on helplessly as their space of solace is subject to increasing devastation and their wider environment grows gradually more hostile and violent, older members of Lauren’s community seem to be stuck between an inability to imagine a liveable future and the impossibility of returning to the past that is the object of their nostalgia.

Contrarily, Lauren, who has no experience or recollection of a state of the world worthy of such reminiscence, looks into the future. Due to her own sense of permeability, she is acutely aware of the fact that boundaries are just an illusion of safety, and recognises before anybody else the precarious position of her gated community. Even as a small child, she perceives the “massive, looming presence” of the “neighborhood wall . . . as a crouching animal, . . . more threatening than protective” (Butler 5); and when her stepmother reminisces about the safety of cities, longing after their lights that used to block out the stars, Lauren asserts: “I’d rather have the stars” (5). While some decades ago, planetary and apparently even cosmic environments were quite literally eclipsed by human technology, Lauren’s present marks a moment of

¹⁶² Capturing the simultaneous sense of solace and desolation (Albrecht 37), solastalgia encompasses “the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one’s sense of place.” (38).

¹⁶³ Even though she feels suffocated by the (physical and social) restrictions of her home, after being forced out, Lauren’s account attests to the fact that her earlier environment is still imprinted on her body and mind: while most other drifters seem unbothered by vast open spaces, Lauren often finds herself “longing for walls” (Butler 177) and grateful for “the security, for what it was worth, of at least one wall” (188).

perspectival revision where such environments and entities can no longer be pushed into to the background. In this sense, the text enacts what Bruno Latour has referred to as “a surprising inversion of background and foreground” (12). Such a vertiginous reversal is central to the experience of the contemporary climate crisis, and in a wider sense, to that of the Anthropocene: an era at which, Latour explains, it seems that “human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject” (11-12). At this late stage of the Anthropocene in which the novel is set, it appears that “the Earth has . . . taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged *actor*” (Latour 3), while human beings are left “to absorb the disturbing fact that the drama has been completed and that the main revolutionary event is behind us” (1). As evidenced by *Parable*’s reality, any previous tension between humanity’s geomorphic agency (manifest in the power to intervene into and disrupt processes of earth systems) and vulnerability (a result of the unintended consequences of that intervention) dissolves together with humanity’s acute loss of agency. That much is made clear by Lauren’s account, which conveys how older people in her community grapple with such lack of agency, perpetually wishing for the good times to come back and insisting on restoring the world to its former state. However, Lauren, whose own agency is curtailed by her hyperempathy and the imperative to hide it, demonstrates an understanding that control—over one’s surroundings or even one’s body—can no longer be had. This leads to her recognition that the earlier generations’ vision of the world must be surpassed: as she notes, with some anxiety, in one of her journal entries, “*A tree / Cannot grow / In its parents’ shadows*” (Butler 78). Seeing life on Earth as having been irrevocably and irreversibly altered, she is convinced that the destiny of humanity “is to take root among the stars” (80). Imagining interplanetary evolution as a path forward for humanity, she contemplates that “far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies . . . Well out of the shadow of their parent world” (79), a new generation of humanity could find “a living world . . . easier to adapt to and live on” (79).

The source of a unique sense of kinship and interrelatedness with the creatures around her, Lauren’s condition thus endows her with extraordinary foresight.¹⁶⁴ It is precisely her hyperempathy—which may be conceived as an embodied culmination of that total loss of control which proves so frightening for her elders—that allows her to prepare herself for the

¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Heather Thaxter argues in her reading of *Parable* that “Lauren’s foresight of knowing the gated community where she lives as a teenager will ultimately fail to protect and prosper is related to her condition,” asserting that “[t]he close connection to what is happening around her produces a pressing need to increase the scope of her ability to adapt” (n.pag.).

arrival of ultimate chaos that will force her to leave her childhood home behind. However, her cautious attempts at sharing her premonitions concerning the impending doom of her walled neighbourhood with a select few—her best friend and her father—are met with scorn and disbelief. With her warnings largely dismissed as hysteric panic-mongering, just as the reality of her condition is subject to constant suspicion, Lauren is inscribed into the mythical tradition of the clairvoyant woman whose premonitions are not taken seriously but branded as a form of madness or hysteria. Captured by a simultaneous sense of urgency and helplessness in the face of the certainty that chaos is insidiously creeping up on them, she increasingly demonstrates symptoms of what renowned ecocritic Timothy Clark has named “Anthropocene disorder”—described in the Introduction as “a psychic syndrome . . . inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects; and in the gap between the human sense of time and slow-motion catastrophe” (Clark 140). As her frustration grows due to the resistance and paralysis of her community—at best unresponsive to and at worst scornful of her warnings—, Lauren’s responses bear the marks of an acute case of Anthropocene disorder, arising from “the mind [being] suspended, uncertainly, between a sense of rage and even despair on one side, and a consciousness of the majority perception of such reactions as disproportionate and imbalanced on the other” (T. Clark 140). Though her behaviour, except for the most harrowing instances of hyperempathic contagion, is anything but hysteric (for the majority of the novel, she is at pains to hide any affective reactions, lest anyone take advantage of her vulnerability), the dynamics of trauma-induced hysteria—the “shattering of the personality consequent on a situation of extreme terror or fright” (Leys 4)—prove illuminating when it comes to the logic of Lauren’s condition. Leys emphasises the centrality of “hypnotic imitation or identification—what [she] call[s] *mimesis*” (9) to the treatment and theories of trauma, noting that “Charcot legitimated the concept of trauma by proposing that the *hysterical crises* that he suggestively induced in his patients were *reproductions of traumatic scenes*” (9, my emphasis). In a similar vein, Lauren’s condition also revolves around a kind of reproduction or mimicry that even involves something akin to hypnotic trance.

Compelled to automatically, instantaneously reproduce in her own body the (mostly) painful experiences of those around her, Lauren seems to be bound by an excessive form of sensation mimicry, a type of somatic empathy that, according to Julian Hanich, involves the embodied replication of a sensation observed in another, “involuntarily and without reflection”

(182). Remarkably, the object of Lauren's hyperempathy,¹⁶⁵ or "sharing," as she calls it, is apparently restricted to a peculiar dual extremity of sensory states—extreme pleasure¹⁶⁶ and pain—, though in the violent world of the novel, instances of contagious suffering dominate. However, the fact that Lauren's experience mainly revolves around pain is also significant from an evolutionary perspective. One of the most essential and most prevalent forms of embodied resonance, empathy for pain not only plays, as explained by Decety and Meltzoff, a "critical role in the primitive building block of empathy and moral reasoning that relies on the sharing of other's distress" (71); but its visceral and automatic quality also demonstrates Elisa Aaltola's assertion that "resonance is grounded in our physiology and our evolutionary roots" (84).

Whereas the word "sharing" would seem to imply mutual involvement, the other—whose suffering or, on rare occasions, physical enjoyment triggers her hyperempathy—remains unaffected by, in fact, unaware of the process. Lauren herself, on the other hand, is subject to a sense of sensual merging that, instead of a multiplication of perceptions, temporarily causes her own, "originary" embodied experience to be virtually superscribed by that of another. Thus, in Lauren's case, this somatic resonance seems to lead to an overwhelming emotional contagion,¹⁶⁷ a phenomenon wherein, according to Amy Coplan, one may even end up "introject[ing] the other's desires, feelings, and thoughts, substituting them for [one's] own" ("Understanding" 15). Indeed, Lauren's condition seems to prevent her from preserving a sense of separation while experiencing such intense emotional contagion. Without the ability to disentangle her own sensations from those of the other she perceives, Lauren's most penetrating experiences of hyperempathic mimicry, especially the cases when she is vicariously involved in another's death, prove so overwhelming that she seems to dissolve in the other through the visceral attachment: "I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but I couldn't have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or someone else's. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt... disembodied" (Butler 282). The description suggests that, especially at its most extreme, Lauren's hyperempathy follows the logic of trauma, which, as explained by

¹⁶⁵ Butler's speculative version of hyperempathy may also be inspired by the real-life condition of mirror-touch synaesthesia, which, according to cognitive scientist Joshua May, commonly involves a "kind of 'hyper-empathy,' in which [those affected] seem to experience the very same bodily sensations they perceive in others, even in the same locations" (171). As he explains, those with such a condition are susceptible to "vividly experiencing the plight of others" (171), and do not "appear to perceive themselves in the other's shoes. Rather, a feeling is generated in themselves, which is presumably represented as occurring in their own body" (May 174).

¹⁶⁶ There are only three instances mentioned in the novel where Lauren's hyperempathic reaction is cued by the enjoyment of another, and all three cases involve sexual acts (two in which Lauren herself is involved, and one in which she vicariously and unwillingly participates).

¹⁶⁷ As explained in the Introduction, the notion of emotional contagion, which "involves an observer experiencing the same affective states as a target" ("Understanding" 8), also exposes some discrepancies in conceptualisations of affect and emotion, an issue I will return to later.

Leys, “was defined as a situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene” (9). The traumatic aspects of Lauren’s condition are further highlighted by the fact that, for her, even “[s]elf-defense [is] an agony or a killing or both” (Butler 262). Since she cannot evade the activation of affective contagion when she wounds or kills those that would harm her, inflicting violence in order to protect herself is also excruciating.

The traumatic experience, according to Leys, “appeared to shatter the victim’s cognitive-perceptual capacities” and “made the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection” (9)—and indeed, Lauren’s account also makes clear that the sensual responses she observes in others are simulated in her own body instantaneously in a kind of “mirroring,” a process that, as noted by philosopher Alvin Goldman, “is largely inaccessible to introspective awareness” (37). Such instances point to the intensity and the immediacy of the contagious sensation, effectuating a kind of fragmentation that is also reflected in the narrative configuration of the novel. The journalistic account often comments on its own re-constructive nature, both in the sense of being a textual re-enactment Lauren’s lived experience and in the sense of her story being filtered through several versions of transcriptions: Lauren often remarks how she expanded on notes taken previously, and how she had to retrospectively piece events—and her own shattered sense of self—back together after being severely wounded with or dying with another. This also suggests that the nature of her hyperempathy is analogous to that of trauma which, “from the beginning . . . was understood as an experience that immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened” (Leys 9). Her journal presents itself as an essential tool of self-regulation—made impossible in moments of hyperempathy—, since it helps her access her own feelings in response to the distressing encounters that threaten to engulf her: “I have to write. I have to dump this onto paper. I can’t keep it inside of me” (Butler 123). Writing, however, not only helps her identify and channel the emotions she cannot instantaneously access, but also provides a sanctuary for the thoughts she feels she cannot afford to share, in particular, when it comes to her intriguing (and, as it later turns out, accurate) prescience for catastrophe: “Sometimes I write to keep from going crazy. There’s a world of things I don’t feel free to talk to anyone about” (Butler 48).

While at first, Lauren and her community do enjoy relative safety in their gated neighbourhood, the violence gradually seeping into the perceived security of their home makes the porousness of their walls increasingly clear. But it is not just humans that penetrate their barriers, other things get in, too: “Birds are particular pests because they can fly in” (35), and

Lauren's father insists on her using them for target practice, because "[t]hey ate [their] food or ruined it", and also because, as Lauren suspects, "he wanted to see . . . whether shooting a bird or a squirrel would trigger my hyperempathy" (35). The callous sacrifice of the critters to appease Reverend Olamina's anxiety—and indeed, to satisfy his curiosity—attests to the hierarchy of care¹⁶⁸ that prevails in the novel's world, where nonhuman beings' suffering is marginalised and where empathy and compassion, among other things, appear to be in drastically short supply, posing tremendous challenges even for members of the same species. Still, in spite of (or perhaps, rather due to) all the anguish she encounters on a daily basis, Lauren displays an ability to care for these animals, or at least an inclination to leave them be. Sometimes "get[ing] up and go[ing] out at dawn just so [she] can watch them without anyone scaring them or shooting them" (35), she feels an affinity for the small creatures trespassing the borders of their sanctuary, especially birds whom she likes, and envies "their ability to fly" (35), while her own earth-bound existence often feels much too claustrophobic among the walls of her home. We also learn here that killing such creatures does not quite cue a hyperempathic reaction from Lauren; instead, it feels "like a big, soft, strange ghost blow, like getting hit with a huge ball of air, but with no coolness, no feeling of wind. The blow, though still soft, was a little harder with squirrels and sometimes rats than with birds" (35). Still, she declares that since she is now "old enough to go target shooting . . . *I don't intend to shoot any more birds, no matter what Dad says*" (35, my emphasis). Lauren's disobedience also hints at a biopolitical aspect underlying her display of compassion and pity that also complicates our understanding of the dynamics of hyperempathy in the novel. On the one hand, the visceral and indiscriminate nature of hyperempathic mimicry certainly undermines, in an affective sense, the hierarchy between and among nonhuman and human entities, allowing Lauren to feel-with any sentient being. On the other hand, Lauren's act of mercy, consisting of her *allowing* the birds *to live, in spite of* her father's wishes, is tinted here by "aspects of hierarchy, condescension and superiority" (Assmann and Detmers 4), features inherent to the "discourse of compassion" (4) according to Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers.¹⁶⁹ Even as her own agency appears limited by her condition and by her existence among the rules and expectations of her community, in such circumstances, she wields considerably more power—the power over life and death—than the nonhuman beings that are reduced to objects or even metaphors that embody her desires and

¹⁶⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the hierarchy of care, as discussed by Carol J. Adams and Rachel Adams, see the Introduction.

¹⁶⁹ Though Assmann and Detmers refer only to human beings in their arguments, I believe that their observations are applicable in the context of nonhuman-human relations as well.

illustrate her defiance. It is as if Butler's text implied that there is some sense of commonality missing from these inter-creatural encounters that prevents them from becoming instances of fully fledged hyperempathy, which in turn appears to hinge upon Lauren's perception of the (vulnerable) other as a subject.

Calling the boundaries of Lauren's hyperempathy further into question, a curious, violent encounter with some wild dogs foregrounds the previously understated inter-creatural quality in her extreme sensitivity. On one of their habitual target practice trips, Lauren and some other members of the community come across a pack of canines, an encounter that reveals a striking aspect of the profoundly altered socio-cultural conditions of the novel's present: "dogs are no longer the companion species they once were" (Scherr n.pag.). Rather, in the climate-stricken world of *Parable*, humans and canines have reverted to being alienated predators of each other".¹⁷⁰ Feeling threatened by the feral animals, Lauren's father shoots one of them, and the agony of the dying dog unexpectedly affects Lauren with the same intensity as human distress. The "strange, hidden kinship" that is "establish[ed] . . . via Lauren's hyper-empathic body" (Scherr n.pag.) and "the beautiful dog" (Butler 41) are transgressive in more ways than one. On the one hand, Lauren's initial approach to the dogs is characterised by wonder; and a willingness to enter a very different life-world. Upon meeting the first member of the pack, she takes "a good look at him" (37), while the dog is also "looking [her] over," and she notes how "[h]e looked alert and curious [and] sniffed the air, and I remembered that dogs were supposed to be oriented more toward scent than sight" (37). Likewise, at her first glance at the dog wounded by her father, she observes that "[t]here was a beauty to it. It looked like pictures I had seen of wolves" (41). The recognition of its suffering only comes a moment later, at the sight of "its bloody wounds as it twisted" (41).

The fact that her embodied simulation is induced, as it were, by a visceral view of wounds points to a peculiar limitation of Lauren's hyperempathy, which appears to be triggered only by her *perception* of the physical sensations of other living beings in her vicinity; most precisely, in her *field of vision*. In her insightful article on *Parable of the Sower*, Sladja Blazan observes that Lauren's "subjective interpretation of pain that inevitably translates into a physical experience is an entangling of vision, cognition, and somatic experience" (Blazan 46). Lauren herself makes clear that she has to "see another person in pain before [she] do[es] any

¹⁷⁰ As Rebecca Scherr also claims, "[t]he use of dogs, one of our world's most cherished companion species, is here used to illustrate the consequences of global warming by making strange the habitual kinship relations between humans and dogs" (n.pag.).

sharing” (Butler 48, my emphasis). Her heightened susceptibility is thus read by Blazan as a kind of visually cued “somatic imaginary” (44) or empathy-as-seeing. As she explains,

[Lauren’s] physical responses are chemically induced and not controllable. . . . At the same time, they are triggered by Lauren’s subjective assessment of a given situation. . . . This phenomenological gap between what is perceived and what is felt places emphasis on the interpretation or the willingness to *see* the pain of the other. (44, emphasis in original)

Yet, a crucial question of concerning the dynamics of this optically-oriented hyperempathy remains: in what way do the human and nonhuman beings whose pain or pleasure triggers Lauren’s sharing figure in this relation? Does Lauren’s hyperempathy afford her some sort of access to other creatures’ experience in its entire complexity, or is her condition confined to a reflexive identification with the affect she perceives, detached, as it were, of the other? Initially, the text seems to imply that her hyperempathic mimicry involves no situated or cognitive understanding of those whose sensations she is compelled to absorb, but manifests itself rather as a reflection of the surface available for her own vision and embodied experience. Her condition thus seems to comprise a cognitive-emotional aspect only insofar as she needs to both see *and* thereby “cognitively recogniz[e] someone’s pain as such” (Blazan 44) to *fully* trigger her embodied mimicry. It seems that in Lauren’s case, the *sight* of pain is somehow needed for her body to produce a reaction—and, as evidenced by a cruel trick played on her by her brother Keith, who once pretends to be hurt to make his sister bleed, Lauren can also be deceived into a hyperempathic reaction.

Early in the narrative, on one of the rare occasions of her venturing out into the world beyond their safe haven, Lauren is struck by the audible suffering of a man somewhere in her vicinity; yet in spite of her hearing the “screaming [stop] then beg[i]n again as a kind of horrible, bubbling noise” (Butler 124), she “wasn’t in trouble” because, as she states, “[s]ound doesn’t trigger my sharing. . . . And this was one I’d do *anything* to avoid seeing” (125, emphasis in original). While her hyperempathy does not seem to react to sound, it does not mean that Lauren is unaffected by the immense torment signalled by the man’s screams: his voice distorted by pain repeatedly haunts her in her dreams, a visceral imprint of the harrowing encounter with this unseen victim. Still, it is only when Lauren performs a specific form of *witnessing* that the “pain of the other . . . translate[s] into a personal physical experience” (Blazan 44); as Blazan asserts, “[s]een from this perspective, empathy becomes a form of sight, its absence a form of volitional cognitive exclusion” (44). Thus, whereas being exposed visually or first-hand to the physical suffering of another, Lauren cannot evade the activation of her affective responses, the sounds of torment heard from afar seem to allow her to maintain a degree of cognitive distance

necessary to escape the adverse effects of emotional distress. Such a route, however, appears unavailable for Osden in “Vaster than Empires,” whose body acts as a visceral channel to affect. Osden and his delicate receptivity emerge as “persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (Gregg and Seigworth 1); yet unlike others, he simply cannot refuse these invitations.

As suggested before, Lauren’s hyperempathy may be read as a speculative reflection of an excessive form emotional contagion. Though Lauren’s hyperempathic reactions are induced via contagion, this does not mean that they are superficial or insincere; on the contrary. As explored in more detail in the Introduction of this dissertation, the view of cognitive versions of empathy being more advanced or favourable introduces a problematic hierarchy into discussions of empathy. On the one hand, these mechanisms of categorisation imply a sense that various manifestations of empathy can be clearly separated from each other—an approach that would be deeply misguided, as evidenced by the research of Vittorio Gallese, Jane Stadler, Alexa Weik von Mossner and Elisa Aaltola, among others. On the other hand, as I have argued in Chapter One with reference to trans-species empathy among human and nonhuman animals, such a privileging of one form of empathy over others forecloses the potential inherent in a more instinctual kind of embodied engagement that exposes a vital connection across species, and may be the key to establishing non-invasive empathic relations with more-than-human-entities, reliant on an embodied resonance that does not subsume but rather remains attentive to and appreciative of their irreducible otherness. Lauren’s embodied reactions possess a similar, subversive potential, since the quasi-automatism and immediacy of her own affective response largely eliminates cognitive distance and thereby reduces aspects of dominance so often entailed by an inquisitive inquiry into the inner lives of other beings. While Lauren’s family and companions are prone to objectifying other creatures, may they be human or nonhuman, practicing cognitive detachment and exclusion at will (arguably, such behaviours may also be perceived as vital means of self-preservation amid the horrors that fill the novel’s present), these are largely inaccessible for Lauren, whose “[h]yperempathy exposes the degree to which the other characters in the novel have learned to control their empathy so as to not care” (Blazan 47). As also hinted by Blazan’s comment, Lauren’s body may potentially be read as having retained some ancient, evolutionary residue that humans have otherwise suppressed or surmounted. Her condition—notwithstanding its often debilitating effects—establishes a vulnerable, embodied kinship with other sentient creatures, and forces her, uniquely in her world, to consider and acknowledge the affective dimension of nonhuman beings.

The intense moment of embodied enmeshment, in which “she is the dog whose pain becomes hers” (Blazan 50), generates an intra-corporeal conflict in Lauren. Becoming, “multi-bodied” (Blazan 49), she is captured by her own visceral reaction that makes her feel “skewered through the middle” (Butler 41), and freezes her in mimicry of the dog’s agony, while she also remains aware of her compulsion to tear herself away and somehow “keep walking” (Butler 41). While “classic theories of empathy . . . involve an asymmetrical power relation” (Blazan 50), Blazan contends that “hyperempathy . . . discards the seemingly generous yet often hierarchical gesture that is often extended to another in empathy” (50). I would, however, reiterate my previous argument that some asymmetry in the relation remains—just as in the earlier case involving the critters breaching the boundaries of humans’ territory. Even under the effect of the “interactional and intraactional identification” (Blazan 50) that is prompted by her hyperempathy, Lauren certainly has more agency than any of the animals she comes into contact with. In this particular scene, she has a gun, and, able to momentarily focus and aim, she shoots the dog in the head to put an end to its misery—and to her own. At the same time, unlike the previous encounters with birds and rodents, here, the experience does seem to entail a novel, “radically relational understanding of subjectivity” (Blazan 50) in that the dog’s suffering affects Lauren as viscerally as that of human beings. Though complimented on her shooting skills by her boyfriend Travis, Lauren does not share in his celebratory mood: she killed only as a last resort, and seems even more strongly haunted by guilt and sorrow than when she later kills a man in self-defence. Recounting the events in her journal, she writes, “I walked, then rode in a daze, still not quite free of the dog I had killed. . . . I had felt its pain as though it were a human being. I had felt its life flare and go out, and I was still alive” (Butler 42).

Lauren’s very first vicarious experience of death is thus also an instance of interspecies empathy, cued by her affective resonance with the feral dog that she kills—pulling the trigger without even knowing “what would happen to [her]” (35). The force of her reaction to the dog’s suffering, as well as her instinctual affinity for canines also hint at some hidden, somatic remnant of the evolutionary entanglement of dogs and human beings; a trace of the severed connection activated, as it were, by Lauren’s radical sensitivity. Reinforcing the inter-creatural aspect of Lauren’s hyperempathic ability, this episode also raises questions concerning the extent to which her “empathic vision” may be socially and culturally regulated. Conditioned to see certain animals as vermin, such creatures barely trigger her sharing, while her lack of experience and familiarity with dogs enables her to look at them with curiosity, desiring a fuller understanding of them (Butler 197) beyond the pain and threat they potentially pose. This

episode does not only foreground the harmful features of Lauren's hyperempathic connection to the environment, but also points to some affirmative aspects of such attunement: her openness and curiosity, and her awareness of her surroundings' aliveness. Seeing the environment as constantly in motion and focusing on the fluctuations through which it evolves, she formulates the religion or philosophy of Earthseed—the name suggestive of the kind of community that she wishes to cultivate.¹⁷¹

Lauren's understanding of her condition develops in tandem with her endeavours to delineate the tenets of this belief system that is in turn inspired by the constant fluctuation she experiences via her hyperempathy, as is obvious from the central principle, reiterated throughout the novel: "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change." (3, 75, 184). A vital part of her efforts towards adaptation that helps her navigate her environment within and outside the walls of her home, Earthseed is a testament to her belief that transformation must be embraced and that change, paradoxically, is "the only lasting truth" (184). Earthseed, on the one hand, may be conceived as a spiritually-informed theory of evolution, which, instead of the 'survival of the fittest,' envisions the survival—and thriving—of the most malleable. Informed by Lauren's hyperempathy which, in this way, also emerges as a powerful evolutionary force enhancing her chances at adaptation, the verses of *The Books of the Living*¹⁷² posit pliability as key to adapting to a hostile and increasingly unpredictable earth, or to "seed[ing] [themselves] farther and farther from this dying place" (74). A vital element of her belief system, such an embrace of Change simultaneously involves allowing oneself to be shaped and affected by the environment and acting out such shaping via "forethought, care, and work" (246). On the other hand, Lauren's conceptualisation of Earthseed also captures a kind of proto-posthumanist stance in the sense that in its approach to earthly beings, humans appear as just one (though somewhat exalted) among the many forms of matter that all participate in and are equally subject to the constant (re-)formation of the world. By way of expanding on her "God is Change" tenet, she writes: "Consider: whether you're human, insect, microbe, or stone, this verse is true" (75). As explained by Scherr in her comparative reading of the text and its graphic novel adaptation, "'God' in Sower is not pictured in relation to humans or humans as pale reflections of God, but rather God refers to the impermanence of time itself and encompasses all forms of life" (n.pag.).

¹⁷¹ Cultivation here refers both to that of a collective and an environment: Lauren carries the seeds of her former community (literal seeds, as well as the humans who survived the attack) with her throughout her journey, with the intention of planting them someplace where she can finally foster the community she envisions.

¹⁷² This is how the verses of Earthseed, interspersed throughout her journal, are collectively referred to.

Lauren's awareness of her own transcorporeality thus seems to result in a tentative de-anthropomorphisation of agency. However, since such a perspective goes strictly against the socio-cultural context and religious traditions of her original community, Lauren is wary of confiding even in those closest to her when it comes to Earthseed. It is only after the destruction of her home that she begins, with caution, to disseminate her ideas, first sharing them with two other, former members of her neighbourhood, and then with some of those who are invited to join them on their journey. Lauren's progressive building of the kind of community she has envisioned relies on "care as a premise" (Blazan 45), and aims to resist and disrupt the hopelessness and cruelty that reigns in their late-anthropocenic present. While her hyperempathy is a source of a poignant sense of homelessness—often causing her to feel like a stranger in her own body, and feeding into her compulsion to hide and efface herself, even in the community that should have been her refuge—and therefore resonates with the solastalgic distress that proved so debilitating for her elders, it also has the potential to counter the effects of that environmental affliction. Resisting the paralysis induced by the fear and grief of watching her familiar environment break down, Lauren is resolved to adapt to the conditions beyond the walls of her original neighbourhood by careful attunement and attention to its oscillations. Recognising that, rather than the alienation fostered by her chaotic and brutal present, cooperation is key to surviving out on the lawless road, she performs acts of kindness and care without expecting reciprocation, which works in favour of convincing other travellers to invest their trust in her and embrace her growing community's terms of mutual reliance.

III. 3. "This is not the vocabulary of reason":¹⁷³ vegetal sentience and the mess of affective entanglement in "Vaster than Empires"

Staging the kind of intergalactic future for humanity that Lauren in *Sower* can only hope for, Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" focuses on an interplanetary survey team journeying to the outermost margins of the universe, eager to find "*truly alien* worlds" (Le Guin 2, my emphasis). The short story is set in Le Guin's Hainish universe,¹⁷⁴ which imagines humanity on Earth as being a result of colonisation by an ancient civilisation from the planet

¹⁷³ From Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (35).

¹⁷⁴ In her article on the short story, Vera Benzik explains that "Vaster than Empires" is unique in the sense that it ventures beyond the borders of the Hainish "universe"—a "group of solar systems seeded with humanoid life by the inhabitants of the planet Hain hundreds of thousands of years ago" ((86)—whereas "most narratives set in this world remain within its confines" (86). She also adds that its engagement with the "radical alterity" (86) of vegetal sentience is also quite uncommon within this "universe," where "most encounters with Otherness explore interactions with anthropocentric aliens, and concentrate on matters of political, cultural, and sometimes, gender difference" (86).

Hain, making the Hainish the origin of all humanoid lifeforms across “the Known Worlds.” Driven by a desire not unlike that of Lauren to grow beyond “the shadow of their parent world” (Butler 79), the surveyors in Le Guin’s text thus set out to explore worlds beyond the reach of the Hainish expansion, while “[t]he Hainish, like tiresomely understanding parents, supported their explorations, and contributed ships and volunteers” (Le Guin 2). Catching their first glimpse of their destination from the safety of their spaceship, the explorers perceive the planet lying beneath them “like truth at the bottom of a gravity well” (9); indeed, each member of the intergalactic expedition seems to project some aspiration or desire onto the planet,¹⁷⁵ where, upon arrival, they initially appear to find “not desolation, but peace” (9). Described as a “warm, sad world, sad and serene” (10) on account of its biosphere being made up entirely by vegetation, World 4470 is initially a curious object of nostalgic longing, one for a place that they have never known, a paradise unspoiled by human presence.

Misfits in their original societies, each of these volunteers, as claimed by the unnamed, extradiegetic and apparently omniscient narrator, “were of unsound mind” (2). Joining the mission with the awareness that they would be completely isolated, having travelled such a distance that any information they collect “would not be received [by Earthly societies] for five or ten centuries,” the explorers “had no idea what they might come back to, if they came back” (2). Cast into an uncertain future with no access to the past or the rest of humanity, and perhaps with nowhere to go back to, the crew find themselves “looking with affection at that jade immensity below them” (9), and as they slowly approach that “dark-green jewel . . . a *sense of mutuality* grew among them” (9, my emphasis). It is, however, not only in their sense of wonder at the sight of World 4470 that the team’s members come to feel united, but also in their hatred of Osden, whose perceived “selfishness, his accurate cruelty, served now to draw the others together” (9).

The crew’s arrival at their destination marks an endpoint to a claustrophobic journey through space in an unhappy ship, made all the more miserable by the presence of Osden, included in the mission “on account of his . . . wide-range bioempathic receptivity” (7) that allows him to ascertain whether “anything nearby is sentient, and if so, what its feelings towards [them] are” (7). His “talent”, which is not “species-specific” (7), secures him the role of

¹⁷⁵ The notion of planetary sentience conceptualised in Le Guin’s text, as noted by Benczik, “is not a standalone example in SF” (88). As she notes, other examples include R. A. Kennedy’s *The Triuniverse* and Arthur Conan Doyle’s “When the World Screamed,” which also “tap into the notion of the natural environment adding up to an entity that is greater than its parts combined, and the different complex emotional responses such a being might elicit” (88), as well as Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961), Ray Bradbury’s “Here There Be Tygers,” or N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* (88).

“Sensor” on the team: a designation that, unlike the identifying qualities of the other characters—introduced by way of their Cetian, Hainish or Terran origins as well as their profession(s) as “soft” and “hard” scientists—grants him the position of a tool rather than a person; an embodied prosthesis serving to help keep the team alive. Importantly, as opposed to Lauren’s hereditary condition, Osden’s particular version of hyperempathy has originated in his being ‘cured’ of Render’s Syndrome, Le Guin’s fictive version of autism. Ironically, it is the cure that was intended to reverse his autistic isolation that leaves him in a condition that is even more oppressively isolating, locking him into a constant sense of diffusion. After being torn from his original “total psychological withdrawal” (32), his state of being-in-the-world is characterised by a raw and unceasing connectedness, resulting in a dread of the company of living beings, since he can find no solace amongst them: as remarked by one member of the expedition, “if it lives, Osden hates it” (11). Relentlessly flooded by the affective expressions—and impressions—of sentient creatures in his proximity, his magnified empathic sensitivity prevents him from tuning out their effect.

As explained by one of the characters, the psychologist-ecologist Mannon, Osden’s bioempathic receptivity is “like hearing” insofar as, just like there are “no eyelids on [one’s] ears,” there is “[n]o Off switch on empathy. He hears [the others’] feelings whether he wants to or not” (4). Osden’s inability to tune out his crewmates—or, for that matter, any other sentient being—produces an intriguing contrast with a peculiar limitation of Lauren’s condition, namely, that merely *hearing* the voice of another being, unlike seeing others’ suffering, does not induce her hyperempathic reactions. Inhabiting the space of “*in-between-ness*” (Gregg and Seigworth 1, emphasis in original) where, according to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “affect is born” (1), Osden appears to be highly attuned to “those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise)” (Gregg and Seigworth 1). This constant, involuntary empathic connection with his surroundings also lends him an unnervingly transparent quality, an affective permeability that also manifests itself in a physical sense:

[Osden] looked flayed. His skin was unnaturally white and thin, *showing the channels of his blood like a faded road map in red and blue*. . . . His hair was pale rust, like long-dried blood. He had eyebrows and lashes, but they were visible only in certain lights; what one saw was the *bones of the eye sockets, the veining of the lids, and the colorless eyes* . . . colors had cancelled out in Osden’s eyes, leaving a cold water-like clarity, *infinitely penetrable*. He never looked directly at one. His face lacked expression, like an anatomical drawing, or a *skinned face*. (Le Guin 5, my emphases)

His shell-like, ghostly exterior is a somatic testament to his diffraction, a sense of being spread thin across the affective experiences of others.

Osdan's liminal corporeality thus seems to dramatise the conception of affect as a resonance or "intensity" emerging in intercorporeal encounters among beings rather than being restricted to and "contained in individual bodies" (Bladow and Ladino 5). Indeed, Osdan's bioempathic receptivity seems to involve a perception of affect as disseminated, circulating within and among bodies. While the others barely register those elusive affects that circulate around them, such as the subtle "defensive-aggressive reaction between strangers meeting" (Le Guin 4), because by "habit [or] inattention" they have "learned to ignore it, to the point where [they] might even deny it exists" (4)—much like Lauren's community, seemingly having lost or suppressed some evolutionary residue preserved in Lauren's hyperempathy—Osdan constantly picks up these impressions. Initially lurking beneath or alongside his cognition, Osdan, who is "trained to analyze [others'] responses as [he] receive[s] them" (13), eventually registers these affects as emotions. Engaging quite overtly with the question of what constitutes affective and emotional experience, "Vaster than Empires" also emphasises, especially through the figure of Osdan and his attunement to the resonations of all sentient beings, that the lines dividing these perceptions of feeling become blurred via the cyclical transition from affect into emotion and vice versa—what Ngai describes as "the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects" (27). Described by him as a "smog of cheap, secondhand emotions" (Le Guin 5), the residue of other creatures' vibrations, sensations and moods seems to hang around him like an oppressive atmosphere. Yet, while his acuity in translating affect to the language of cognition grants him an ability to read fellow creatures, it also renders him intolerable for most of his human companions.

When Osdan is approached by the team's Coordinator, Haito Tomiko, who inquires about the nature of his condition, asking "What is emotion, Osdan? . . . What is it, exactly, that you pick up with your empathic sensitivity?" (7), his derisive response is "Muck . . . The psychic excreta of the animal kingdom. I wade through your faeces" (7). As Dion Dobrzynski observes, Osdan's response implies that animals "have sentience and [Osdan] can experience their emotional states similarly to humans" (50). I would add to this that his answer also gestures towards an intriguing democratisation (or, from Osdan's perspective, degradation) of living things and their affective powers, his bioempathic receptivity establishing a sense of permeability across species and bodies, somewhat reminiscent of the way in which Lauren is subject (to various degrees) to emotional contagion from all sentient beings she encounters.

Yet, unlike Lauren, his receptivity is not restricted to a binary of physical pleasure and pain. For Osden, compelled to share “lust with a white rat, pain with a squashed cockroach, and phototropy with a moth” (Le Guin 7) in the same way as he is “helplessly obedient to the demands of [other humans’] emotions, reactions, moods” (26), human and nonhuman affects occupy the same (abject) level, equally dismissed as “psychic excreta” (7).

Violation here is reciprocal: his hyperempathic insight leaves him with an unwelcome, disturbing knowledge of the feelings of other creatures, assaulting his senses and driving him towards empathic overarousal; while it is experienced as equally invasive by his crew mates, who fear that even their thoughts are laid bare in the presence of Osden. Met with disgust and dread from their very first encounter, Osden is overwhelmed by the apprehension of his peers that he instantly detects, and cannot help but respond with the same hostility that he receives from them. His aggressive, paranoid reactions exacerbate the already strained relationship between him and the rest of the surveyors to the point of outright resentment, alienating even the few less hostile crew members. His presence is experienced as parasitic even by Tomiko, who at first tries to reach out to Osden and overcome her revulsion towards him, yet later describes him in her mind, as related by the omniscient narrator, as a “monstrous egotism that fed itself on others’ emotions” (19), likening him “to a congenital monster [who] should not have lived” (19).

It is, however, not only due to his behaviour and appearance that the crew find Osden insufferable, but also because of the unnerving aspect of the mimicry he embodies. Through Osden’s endless reflection, those affects that the others have learned to ignore and that they would prefer to remain unperceivable¹⁷⁶ come to the surface—a haunting and disorienting experience that also exposes an inherent lack in Osden, who, disturbingly, seems to have no stable identity of his own. His unceasing fluctuation, manifesting as a constant mimetic replication of the affective flows he is helplessly engrossed in, points towards the “subversive nature of mimicry” which, according to Tamás Bényei, becomes “an acute threat when the process of mimesis or replication seems to endanger the origins, the self-sameness and the identity of the subject” (*Traumatikus* 122, my translation). Bényei explains that, “at the core of all three traditions [the Platonic, the anthropological and the phenomenological-psychoanalytic]

¹⁷⁶ In the dialogue described above, Osden makes clear that he perceives the full complexity of Tomiko’s attitude towards him—something that Tomiko herself is apparently unaware of—which leads to him dismiss the possibility of her benevolence. He dissects the true extent of her emotions, asserting that, rather than being “after facts,” she was “trying to get at [him]. With some fear, some curiosity, and a great deal of distaste. The way you might poke a dead dog, to see the maggots crawl!” (Le Guin 7). This leaves her with disturbing uncertainty, inducing self-doubt as to her own emotions.

concerned with the correlation of mimesis and subjectivity lies the uncanny suspicion that the subject is unable to be its own origin” (123, my translation): as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, mimesis itself is exposed as mimicry, “endless and groundless—something like an infinity of substitution and *circulation*” (116, emphasis in original). Manifesting as an example of the “mimetic, plastic subject” (Bényei, *Traumatikus* 128) who, as described by Bényei, “seems to have no steady, inner core or substance, nothing that is ‘proper’ to it” (128, my translation)—and in this way is like the hysterical subject—, Osden seems to lack an originary, or secure self, having been first re-moulded by Dr. Hammergeld’s treatment of his autism, and then ceaselessly overwritten by the affective fluctuations of sentient beings around him. For Osden, this constant process of involuntary mimicry is nearly unbearable, because the affects he is obliged to receive, absorb and echo are overwhelmingly negative, and also because under such perpetual affective assault, he cannot “find coherence” (Le Guin 26): he “feels his feelings, and [those of the others], and is hard put to say which is which” (4).

Soon after disembarking on the planet and beginning their tasks of exploration, an intense atmosphere of anxiety seems to settle over the Extreme Survey Crew—an amplified version of the angst felt during their travel through space in the company of Osden. Convinced that the source of this unsettling affect is Osden himself, the rest of the crew decide to banish him from the main camp. Yet after a short period of relief, the elusive unease returns even stronger, as several team members witness shapes moving through the trees, even though this should be impossible on the planet whose biosphere is made up exclusively of vegetation. Suffering from hallucinations and paranoia, the humans are overwhelmed by an inexplicable yet palpable dread. Though he is still blamed for the phenomenon, when Osden fails to check in for his daily radio report, Coordinator Tomiko decides to check on him, and goes to visit his camp accompanied by the biologist Harfex—only to find Osden severely injured within the alien forest. As she touches the wounded man lying on the ground, Tomiko is inexplicably overcome by a “deathly fear” (17), and Harfex similarly confesses to being “unreasonably frightened also” (18). Following a short period of recuperation, Osden reluctantly confides in Tomiko, telling her how, while lying on the plant-forms, he experienced a moment of paralysing connection with the plants that surrounded him:

My face was in the dirt, in that soft leaf *mold*. . . . I couldn’t move. Couldn’t see. As if I was in the ground. Sunk into it, part of it. . . . I felt the fear. . . . As if they’d finally known I was there, lying on them there, under them, among them, the thing they feared, and yet part of their fear itself. I couldn’t stop sending the fear back, and it kept growing, and I couldn’t move, I couldn’t get away. . . . Any more than they can. (22, my emphasis)

Osden's experience marks a forceful "recognition of trans-corporeality" (Alaimo, *Bodily* 17), which entails, for the human characters embedded within an entirely alien environment, "a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even [their] most sophisticated modes of understanding" (*Bodily* 17).

In spite of being surrounded by living entities, the visitors to World 4470 initially seem unable to register the environment's *aliveness* even as they perform their tasks of intellectual colonisation,¹⁷⁷ of exploring, dissecting and cataloguing the epiphytes, the root-nodes and the so-called arboriformes populating the planet. What their behaviour betrays particularly is a plant blindness, a phenomenon that, according to botanists James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler, involves "thinking that plants are merely the backdrop for animal life" (82) and "failing to see, notice or focus attention on plants" (82). As argued by Dawn Keetley, who delineates six theses on why plants may be(come) horrifying, a reversal of plant-blindness is an essential element of plant horror, wherein the "taken-for-granted 'fact' of plants' invisibility, passivity, and harmlessness" (10) is undermined. In her second thesis, focused on the contention that "plants lurk in our blindspot" (10), she explains that since "the vegetative is one of the most profoundly unrecognized parts of our environment (rendered so *by how we see*), its 're-emergence' in horror narratives carries all the more force" (10, emphasis in original). Such a horrific sense of subversion is also subtly conveyed in Le Guin's short story, where the ostensible inertness of the vegetation is contrasted with the "chill and foreboding under the 'trees'" (15) felt by "everyone who had entered the forest" (15). Anticipating some further tension, the narrator also notes how the visitors, "cowed at the sound of [their] voice in that huge *community* of the voiceless" (17, my emphasis), were "careful to keep each other in sight through the thick-standing *presences*" (17, my emphasis). Through passages that characterise the alien jungle as comprised of "[g]reat boles . . . [that] were *soft-skinned*, some appearing smooth and others *spongy*" (16), with "[t]he ground underfoot" being "*springy* as a mattress, every inch of it knotted with roots and peppered with small, *fleshy-leaved growths*" (17, my emphases), a sense of the uncanny forest's aliveness seeps into the text, the explicitly visceral quality of the description reminding of the unsettling fact that the explorers are actually immersed in an organism.

As revealed by Osden's recollection of the events leading up to his injury, soon after he had been banished from base camp, he seemed to discern a "faint" affect ostensibly coming from the environment, likened to "a draft in a closed room, a flicker in the corner of your eye"

¹⁷⁷ Dobrzynski points out that the survey team's mission "indicates a more subtle form of ecological imperialism. Namely, the colonising tendencies within scientific discourse towards otherworldly nonhumans" (45).

(26). At first, Osden himself dismisses the affective impressions registered among the eerie plant-forms as a delusion, believing it to be a sign of his own mental instability—since, with “no creature to emit them” (26), he finds no other explanation as to how he “could pick up empathic affects” (26). Yet, in the aftermath of the mysterious attack, as he is “lying in pain and afraid within [the forest], actually inside it” (28), the vegetal entities seem to become aware of an alien in their midst, inducing a far more forceful affective reaction. “Blind, deaf, nerveless, moveless,” but apparently responsive “to touch,” (27) it is via the tactile engagement with Osden that the plant-population senses the presence of the “rootless” visitors. Responding with fear to what they might in turn perceive as “alien, terrible” (28), these vegetal entities also seem to become contaminated by the panic originating in Osden, “whose own mind is open to connection with all others” (28), and who is overcome by his own fear and by the dread emanating from the environment. This process of mutual affective contagion, wherein both Osden and the arboriformes are compelled to absorb and mimic the other’s terror, generates a “closed circuit” (29), an almost palpable atmosphere of fear that circulates between the humans and the environment.

Such a dynamic of environmental mimicry intriguingly matches, though on a much vaster scale, the logic of Osden’s bioempathic receptivity: like Osden himself, the vegetal network channels and replicates the affect sensed in their surroundings. Yet crucially, the text suggests that the vegetal entities do not simply *respond* by reflecting the affect they receive from others, but possess an affective agency of their own—agency understood here, following the conceptual approach of Gry Ulstein, as “the ability to affect change upon an external environment – and the degree to which this ability can be expressed” (“Just a Surface” 279). Attested by Osden’s account and by the unexplainable unease experienced by most crew members, even before the creation of this negative feedback loop, the plant-population of World 4470 evinces a considerable degree of agency through its active participation in the generation of affective flows, in line with Graig Uhlin’s assertion that “[f]eeling is a feature of the world as much as it is a feature of the self” (280). According to Uhlin, who also cites Sianne Ngai, while the “totality of [an environment’s] relations outruns any descriptive account . . . feeling provides a holistic impression of this totality, condensing and unifying its ‘web of relations’ into a singular affective quality” (280). In Le Guin’s short story, this affective quality initially manifests itself as a tentative apprehension that is only picked up by Osden; but as it later evolves into terror, all members of the crew begin to “feel it, deaf as [they] are” (Le Guin 28). Such an exhibition of vegetal agency proves horrifying for the humans not only because it envelops them in an atmosphere of panic by reflecting their own fear back at them, but also

because it compels them to *see* and acknowledge the “huge vitality of the plant-world” (33). It is only when they begin to reflect on the implications of Osden’s account that the visitors are compelled to revise their deep-rooted hierarchical perspective that has allowed them to dismiss plant-life as inconsequential and has so far blinded them to the material vitality of the vegetation. As it finally occurs to them that the so-called arboriformes may themselves be the source of the disorienting unease and the sense of threat gnawing at their embodied minds, the explorers undergo a vertiginous shift in perspective, evocative of the effects of the anthropocenic reversal of background and foreground theorised by Latour.

Attempting to remove themselves from under the influence of the increasingly unnerving affect, the surveyors decide to move their camp to another continent; still, after a momentary reprieve, their illusion of safety is dispelled as the “fear” appears to have followed them, eliciting “dark-branching, pathless dreams” (24). It is no wonder that its effects were at first mistaken for the anxiety felt in the presence of Osden—just like his hyperempathic mimicry and its invasion of boundaries, the vegetal beings’ contaminating affect is experienced as threatening and monstrous¹⁷⁸ by the team. Forming a “linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent” (Le Guin 27), the alien plant-life appears to be illimitable and inescapable, evoking Keetley’s third thesis stating how plants “menace with their wild, purposeless growth” (13). Just as “plant growth always breaks what seeks to contain it, transgressing borders meant to confine and define” (Keetley 13), the affect that emanates from the alien environment is diffuse and boundless in nature, echoing this vegetal logic of uncontainable proliferation.¹⁷⁹ Due to the pervasive affect and the unrestrained expansion of the “sea of life” (Le Guin 16), the surveyors, “viruses twitching minutely on the hide of an unmoving giant” (11), come to the disturbing realisation that they are surrounded by an agentic and perceptive planetary environment, functioning like to a vegetal panopticon that allows them no sanctuary. Rooted in “frustrated agency” (Estok, “Ecocriticism” 4), the ecophobic reactions cued by the invasive affect are remarkably reminiscent of the phobia and paranoia elicited by the presence of Osden, whose hyperempathic sensitivity also leaves the others feeling exposed, since it creates in them the impression that Osden “always . . . had them all at his mercy” (Le Guin 19). Crucially,

¹⁷⁸ As noted by Michael Marder, vegetative growth may be described as “monstrous” because it “knows neither an inherent end, nor a limit, nor a sense of measure and moderation . . . The life of the plant is a pure proliferation bereft of a sense of closure, a self-replication in another plant (or a part of plant: the difference between the individual unit and a part does not apply here) it will engender” (Marder 87).

¹⁷⁹ The surveyors are filled with a dread that seems to originate in ecophobia, defined by Simon Estok as “the contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (“Theorizing” 207). According to Estok, ecophobia refers to “how we respond emotionally and cognitively to what we perceive as *environmental threats* and as a *menacing alienness*” (“Painful” 131, my emphasis).

Osden is (for a while) alone in suspecting that the plant-entities might be sentient, and he is the only one ultimately able to grasp the full extent of their voiceless, affective communication, a fact that profoundly, and for his crew mates, disturbingly, aligns him with the vegetal beings. Indeed, besides the crisis of agency induced in the others by his transgressive insight, the root cause of his banishment from the main camp (and especially that of his accident, revealed to be a murder attempt committed by Porlock, one of the members of the team) may very well lie in the human explorers' absolute rejection of this post-human mode of perception, exposing their reluctance to contemplate the prospect of vegetal sentience.

However, the ubiquity of the infectious dread eventually forces the surveyors to consider the possibility that “[t]here are no individual plants, then, properly speaking” (Le Guin 31), that the biosphere of the planet is comprised of “one network of communications, sensitive, irrational, immortal” (31). Attempts to inspect individual elements turn out to be futile, since the micro-analyses of the “root nodes” that the humans initially conduct reveal nothing of the source of the affect plaguing their bodies and minds, nor does it help them understand the dynamics of relations among the vegetal lifeforms. The crew’s struggle to wrap their minds around the notion of a vegetal being exhibiting (affective) agency points to the confines of human conceptualisations of agency and sentience. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the human(ist) notion of agency¹⁸⁰ appears hardly compatible with the “absence of intent and purpose” and the “implacable indifference” (Keetley 9) characteristic of plants (these alien species being no exemption); while sentience, defined here as a receptiveness of and responsiveness to affective impulses and impressions,¹⁸¹ is “bound to an anthropocentric model of individualism,” and thus proves difficult to assign “to entities like plants that are simultaneously one and many, whole and part” (Dobrzynski 52). The explorers’ scientific methods fail because they are reliant on objectivity, detachment and compartmentalisation; while the plant world, where affect seems to travel via “pollen” that is “part of the linkage . . . a sort of windborne sentience, connecting overseas” (Le Guin 31), is characterised by a radical connectedness, engendering a vegetal sentience that encompasses the whole planet. Thus, it is only by attempting to de-couple agency from intentionality and sentience from consciousness

¹⁸⁰ Jeffrey Scott Marchand points out that “the concept of agency within literary critique, and more generally the Humanities, has long been associated with notions of intentionality, rationality and voice; in short, agency has traditionally been intricately tied to extremely limited notions of subjectivity and power” (292–293). In a similar vein, in his article on the problems of nonhuman agency in the Anthropocene, Jonggab Kim insists that “[u]ntil recently, agency has been the privilege of human consciousness. We have seen ourselves as being ontologically different from nature, as spirit from matter. Such an ontological distinction justified people to use nature as a resource to satisfy their desires” (9).

¹⁸¹ For a more detailed conceptualisation of sentience and consciousness, see the Introduction and Chapter Two.

that the surveyors may begin to understand and engage with the plan(e)t(ary) entity. Focusing on the links, the humans are ultimately able to acquire a sense of the plant-world's awareness: the biologist Harfex is the one to offer a theory of a vegetal sentience, explaining that "sentience or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It's a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness" (27).

The planetary entity's level of perception and intra-connected mode of communication, its "[a]wareness of being, without object or subject" (27) not only confounds the surveyors because they grapple with the notion of sentience without subjectivity or consciousness, but also because their environmental detachment (most strongly manifest in their ecophobia) and "psychological disconnectedness," as observed by Watson in his reading of the story, "contras[t] sharply with the total connectedness of the vegetation on World 4470" (233). In this sense, it is as if Le Guin's 1971 story had set out to stage the paradoxical experience of the Anthropocene that, according to Stacy Alaimo, simultaneously comprises the delusion that humanity is separate, somewhere outside the messy planetary relations, and the recognition that we are deeply influenced by and influential to these networks, from which no such separation is possible or even conceivable ("Our Bodies" n.pag.). Yet, as they find themselves engrossed in that interconnected, sensitive system, the expedition members are radically challenged in their illusion of detachment and sense of superiority. In a radical reversal of their initial perspective—restricted by anthropocentric projections and plant blindness—the human explorers are now compelled to *see* the planetary entity, and to *see themselves* as part of the entangled *mess* of that vegetal network that frustratingly renders impossible any attempt to retain a sense of separation. While immersed in this sentient environment, the members of the team find themselves embroiled in a silent, vegetal communication and intra-action that affects them in unnerving ways, their experience echoing the involuntary embodied involvement of Osden, who cannot help being constantly pervaded by the "psychic excreta" of all things sentient around him.

Still, as Osden's experience demonstrates, having no "rational" way of communicating with the alien vegetation does not mean that communication is not possible—if only on their own terms. Osden is the first to realise the pointlessness of compartmentalising the vegetal population of the planet, pointing out that "[i]t's all one" (Le Guin 31). Engaging with this planetary entity requires a profound reconsideration of humans' usual approach to vegetal beings which, as Brian Onishi explains, is one that accepts that "plants have life, and even a means of communication all their own" (160), but one that also involves a "a kind of epistemological ambiguity" (160) since vegetal "life and communication [are] so alien to us

that we often treat [plants] more like matter than animals” (160). Thus, while this vegetal mode of communication may appear inscrutable “to an animal mind” (Le Guin 27), the surveyors eventually seem to shift towards an acknowledgment (if not an appreciation) of World 4470’s sentience, as attested by their referring to it as a “kind of *intersubjective superorganism*” (Dobrzynski 51-52).¹⁸²

Osden’s involvement is thus key here: due to his capacity for trans-species attunement, he acts as a somatic channel whereby the planetary affect “translates into what [the humans] feel as emotion” (Le Guin 28). Before his assault by Porlock in the woods, the voiceless vegetal interchange only manifested itself as an undistinguished, swirling atmosphere of affect, yet once the embodied encounter between him and the plant-beings took place, his body registered this intensity as the emotion of fear, evoking the aforementioned conceptualisation of emotion as “the capturing and domestication of affect’s free-floating intensity” (Umlin 279). Following Brian Massumi’s distinction, Umlin states that emotion is “personal and embodied, tied to a subject, whereas affect resists the stability of structure and narrativization” (279)—and indeed, for the rest of the team, the “great fear” only becomes available for cognitive comprehension once Osden’s *narrative description* of his experience allows them to assign to it an “object” (the surveyors as a threatening force, breaking the solitary serenity of the plant-world) and a “subject” (the plant-world itself). Still, though the affective manifestation of planetary sentience registers in the visitors in the form of fear, the text also suggests that the agentic affect weaving through the entire environment cannot be compartmentalised or contained within any single embodied mind, because “The scale is wrong. What can a single human brain achieve against something so vast?” (Le Guin 32). Thus, on the one hand, Le Guin’s text tackles the issue of what is meant by affect (the rawest form of feeling emerging in and across bodies human and nonhuman) and emotion (involving a cognitive categorisation of that originally undivided, visceral intensity and the naming of its particular components thus demarcated). On the other hand, the narrative also contemplates the modes of engagement with other(nes)s as represented by these registers of feeling, at the same time demonstrating, particularly via the experience of Osden, the extent to which these layers become entangled. Initially appearing as a debilitating and parasitic condition, Osden’s hyperempathic attunement ultimately emerges as an asset vital

¹⁸² Such a portrayal of the vegetal entities engaging with their surroundings in an agentic and affective manner also resonates with Eric Ringle’s assertions on plant communication, described as a “‘quiet’ discourse that resists rationalization,” evading human comprehension because of its distinction “from [our own,] vocalised language” (Ringle 514). Supporting his claims with recent insight provided by scientific research into the workings of vegetal networks, Ringle also explains that “[b]y means of biosemiotics, spatial relations, chemical signaling, and environmental response, plants interact with their local ecological community in a trans-corporeal, dynamic manner of self-expression” (511-512).

for the humans' survival: it is through his non-differentiated affective perception that the plant-world's sentience—acting as a bridge that links all sentient entities—is finally acknowledged; a revelation that points to a sense of continuity between vegetal and humanimal modes of existence and experience of being-in-the world. This closer understanding of the environmental dynamics and mimetic logic of World 4470 induces in Osden a more intimate sense of kinship with the vegetal entities, and urges him to initiate a dialogue with them by absorbing their fear instead of rejecting it, thereby responding with openness to their message of rejection.

III. 4. “Learning the love of the other”:¹⁸³ adaptation, environmental mimicry and empathic care

Thinking with Walter Benjamin's essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Bényei observes that “an essential component of the connection between the self and the world, the mimetic faculty is the perception and (creative) reception of the correspondences present in the world, the most important means of receiving the world as well as of the constant re-creation of the self and the world” (*Traumatikus* 130, my translation). It is this mimetic faculty that seems to be at work in Osden and Lauren's hyperempathic condition, driving the protagonists to perceive, absorb and ultimately re-enact or reflect the affective and sensory states picked up from their surroundings. Though admittedly rather different in terms of their dynamics, Osden's bioempathic receptivity and Lauren's hyperempathic sensitivity (both of which are coded, at first, as a disability or an affliction) equally turn out to be abilities favourable from an evolutionary perspective, aiding their possessors' successful navigation of and adaptation to the conditions of their respective environments; an adaptation that requires, in both cases, a renewed understanding and ultimately, an acceptance of the sense of fusion involved in their conditions. Whereas for Osden, it entails a complete absorption of the planetary affect, “an unreserved surrender” (Le Guin 35) which results in him affectively becoming-one with the alien ecosystem (a voluntary merging to be discussed later); for Lauren, adaptation to an earthly landscape radically destabilised by climactic and societal crises necessitates a veritable “disappear[ance] into the scenery when that's possible” (Butler 275)—a kind of merging akin to natural mimicry that, according to Carol Jacobs, amounts to “an imitation of one's surroundings in order to conceal oneself” (92).

However, the ability to hide herself is a skill needed not only for survival out in the open, but also for assimilation into her home-environment: Lauren spends her early life keeping her hyperempathic condition a secret, resorting to various forms of disguising it that prove

¹⁸³ From Ursula K. Le Guin's “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” (35).

draining and distressing for her. Such strategies include shielding her true thoughts and feelings behind an exterior that does not “show anything” (Butler 13). For most people, as declared by her friend Harry with much frustration, she is “so damned poker-faced most of the time” (Butler 167). After the annihilation of her community, Lauren also disguises herself as a man to look less vulnerable in the hostile environment, adding a further layer to the acts of concealment that are seen by Heather Thaxter as a “type of shape-shifting,” (n.pag.) helping Lauren “becom[e] what she needs to be depending on the situation” (n.pag.). This is a kind of a shape-shifting that, unlike her hyperempathic oscillations, she can regulate; yet even in this sense, what she is able to manipulate—and what she makes available for others—is only the surface. Compared to Lauren, Osden’s exposure seems more pervasive: constantly influenced by the affective resonations of others, he does not even appear to have the kind of superficial control over his body that Lauren does, but instantaneously becomes a surface for those flows that permeate him. As he recounts the story of what he went through in the alien “forest,”

[f]or a moment he had been borne up on their listening: they heard, so he spoke. He was wholly at their mercy. If they disliked him he had to be hateful; if they mocked him he became grotesque; if they listened to him he was the storyteller. . . . And there were seven of them, too many to cope with, so that he must be constantly knocked about from one to another’s whim. (Le Guin 26)

Whereas Lauren’s interiority is immediately and directly accessible for the reader, her account conveyed from a first-person perspective, Osden’s character may pose more of a challenge in this sense, since we only have a kind of secondary access to his interiority, focalised through the crew’s Coordinator, Tomiko. Commenting on the correlations between readers’ empathy and narrative techniques in literature, Marco Caracciolo argues that reading a text written from a first-person perspective may “take readers’ empathic involvement with a fictional character to a higher level than would be likely in real life” (32). Conversely, the lack of internal focalisation in the case of Osden may potentially inhibit readers’ empathy—however, I suggest that Le Guin’s text also subtly counteracts the initial impression of Osden’s inaccessibility and alienness by channelling the empathic gaze of Tomiko. Though in the third person, the narrative conveys Tomiko’s perspective as she observes her crewmates while Osden is telling his story, and provides some insight into *what it might be like to be* Osden:

The others had been watching him with a new curiosity. He had revealed himself, they had seen him as he was, a helpless man in a trap. Perhaps, like Tomiko, they had seen that the trap itself, his crass and cruel egotism, was their own construction, not his. They had built the cage and locked him in it, and like a caged ape he threw filth out through the bars. (Le Guin 29)

Describing him as a “caged ape,” the narrative emphasises Osden’s dehumanisation in the perception of his peers, who observe him with disgust and pity at his most vulnerable; but it also hints at the sense of unhomeliness that lies at the core of Osden’s phenomenological reality. Compelled to accommodate a multiplicity of forces alien to him, he is at the mercy of his own condition—locking him into the cage that is his own penetrable body—and of other creatures whom he is forced to mirror.

Unlike the instances of invasive sharing Lauren must go through, pieced together by herself in retrospect, Osden’s empathic experience is conveyed textually in real-time, from the external point of view of Tomiko. A shift in their relationship occurs when the woman—a physician by profession and “protective of the hurt” (18)—is taking care of Osden after his injury. It is at this point that a rudimentary understanding begins to emerge between the two, the connection first established through the somatic channel of touch: angered by Osden’s reluctance to offer details on the circumstances of his injury, Tomiko’s aggressive affect is picked up by Osden who is driven to tears, and cowers in fear. To calm him, Tomiko places her hand on his: and, though he tries to reject her touch, he “lack[s] the strength” (20) to pull away, so that the woman’s hand remains on his until he is “quite relaxed, sinking towards sleep, like a man in pain who has been given relief” (20). This corporeal connection initiates Tomiko’s empathic identification with Osden: watching him finally at rest, “[s]he knew what she felt, and what therefore he must feel. . . . She held his hand and the current flowed between them, the tremendous electricity of touch, which he had always dreaded” (20-21).

After having witnessed Osden’s visible bodily transformation, his corporeal reaction to her murderous rage—“as if the surge of her suppressed rancor had struck him with a physical force” (10)—a shift occurs in Tomiko’s perception of him. Finally gaining some understanding of the effects of their emotions on him, she wonders how Osden “might have appeared to [the team]” if, upon first meeting him, “they had offered trust, if they had been strong enough to offer him love” (29). In spite of Osden’s assertion that what he receives from others is “never love” (20), recalling the bond he shared with Doctor Hammergeld, Tomiko seems certain that “[t]here had been love, once” (21), imagining a “terrified child, suffocating in the tidal rush and battering of the huge emotions of adults, a drowning child, saved by one man. Taught to breathe, to live, by one man. Given everything, all protection and love, by one man. Father/Mother/God: no other” (21). Yet she is reminded that even that connection—problematic and controversial as it was—had been severed, since upon becoming part of the expedition, the surveyors “all left [their] little families behind” (21). Still, her realisation of “Osden’s incredible loneliness” (21) awakens in Tomiko a peculiar mixture of pity and compassion towards him. On the one hand,

she provides care and comfort to Osden, as well as her gentle assurance that she now sees him and wills him well (20); acts of kindness and concern that resonate with Martha Nussbaum's notion of compassion, described as being, "above all, a certain sort of thought about the well-being of others" ("Compassion" 28).¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, Tomiko's subtle sense of fellow-feeling with Osden is also marked by the realisation that rather than him having them all in his power (Le Guin 19), it is he who is exposed and "wholly at [the team's] mercy" (26), which makes him a subject of her pity.

This "resonance of feeling" (Le Guin 29) between Osden and Tomiko, however, seems to come "too late": "[g]iven time, given solitude, Tomiko might have built up with him . . . a consonance of trust . . . ; but there was no time . . . [nor] room enough for the cultivation of so great a thing, and they must make do with sympathy, with pity, the small change of love" (29). Though Tomiko does develop a genuine sympathy for Osden that also bears the marks of compassion and pity, her concern is extended through cognitive effort, recalling Nussbaum's contention of "compassion [being] a certain sort of reasoning" ("Compassion" 28).¹⁸⁵ As such, it lacks the kind of immediacy¹⁸⁶ central to Osden's hyperempathic experience and thus offers only limited insight into his condition. Whereas sympathy, pity and compassion all depend, to some extent, on the recognition of commonality¹⁸⁷ with the other, they also allow the respondent to retain a sense of control and separation, thus making the position of the subjects involved in the connection imbalanced and asymmetrical. In spite of the soothing effects of Osden and Tomiko's "new, fragile, and profound interdependence" (Le Guin 23), they both seem to be aware of the challenging aspects of this relation: watching Osden interact with other crew mates, Tomiko "could see in his flayed face . . . his savage resentment of their curiosity, even of her pity" (29). In this way, the text highlights the problematic aspects of Tomiko's sympathy—best described as a feeling-for his situation rather than a feeling-with entailed by empathy, infused with some pity and, thus, condescension. While for Tomiko and the rest of the crew, Osden's hyperempathy appears parasitic and dominating in nature, from the

¹⁸⁴ It is important to note here that, as discussed in more detail in the Introduction, Nussbaum's use of the notions of compassion and pity is somewhat ambiguous and makes them difficult to distinguish from related concepts like empathy and sympathy.

¹⁸⁵ Nussbaum explains that considerable cognitive deliberation goes into compassionate behaviour: the pitier, she contends, "makes sense of the suffering by recognizing that she might herself encounter such a reversal; she estimates its meaning in part by thinking about what it would mean to encounter that herself" ("Compassion" 35).

¹⁸⁶ In this way, Le Guin's portrayal of sympathy also aligns with Maibom's suggestion that the phenomenon "reflects a third-person standpoint," and tends to arise "typically from a more removed, less immersed, third-person perspective" (23).

¹⁸⁷ According to Nussbaum, the recognition of commonality is central to compassion/pity, since, while the person engaging in compassionate behaviour "retain[s] [an] awareness of her separateness" she also "acknowledges that she has possibilities and vulnerabilities similar to those of the sufferer" ("Compassion" 35).

perspective of Osden, Tomiko's sympathy may feel equally vampiric,¹⁸⁸ relegating him to an inferior position; in this way, in spite of all the potential for relationality inherent in such a sense of sympathy, it cannot provide the basis for that mutually vulnerable, non-hierarchical affective connection that the text refers to as love.

Both Osden and Lauren despise the feeling of vulnerability rooted in their respective conditions, and feel even more uncomfortably exposed when they come into a closer, haptic contact with others. Just before that gently intimate moment of connection with Tomiko, it is made clear that Osden cannot “bear to be touched” (11): one of the team members, Olleroo relates that “brush[ing] against him once by accident,” Osden's response was to “knoc[k] [her] off like [she] was some sort of dirty... thing. We're all just things, to him” (11). This utterance—somewhat paradoxical, considering that it implies that people are objectified by the hyperempathic protagonist, of all characters—illustrates the extent of paranoia that overwhelms the other explorers in Osden's presence. Feeling oppressed under his relentless scrutiny and his frighteningly accurate assessment of their feelings, the crew members seem to experience a loss of subjectivity, as if they were becoming objects while with Osden. Crucially, though, their experience also parallels the way in which Osden feels invaded by the affects of others, resulting in a sense of exposure and helplessness that leads to his apparent dismissal of fellow (human) beings as nuisance.

Yet, while they usually resent being touched or read by others, both Lauren and Osden are frustrated by their inability to read those around them. Expressing a great deal of irritation over his inability to figure out the disturbing vegetal affect and find some way to respond to it, Osden at first refers to the planetary sentience as a “damned stupid potato” (31).¹⁸⁹ In a similar way, Lauren feels powerless and “shut out” (Butler 60) when she cannot “tell what [her father] feels” (60), but grows uneasy under his piercing gaze: “[h]e watched me as though he could read the truth in my mind. When I was little, I used to think he could” (60). Frightened of being transparent but wanting to see through others to feel safe by predicting their reactions and intentions towards her, Lauren is torn between a desire to connect and to distance herself—and

¹⁸⁸ Suzanne Keen observes that even “[e]mpathic scenes of shared feeling can seem vampiric, as if the person of sensibility feeds on the pain of others” (*Empathy* 80).

¹⁸⁹ At first, Osden blames his inability to retain control over the affective engagement with the vegetal beings on the inferiority of their mode of existence, exclaiming: “If only it were an animal intelligence. I can get through to animals . . . ; superior intelligence gives one the advantage. I should have been used in a zoo, not on a human team... If I could get through to the damned stupid potato! If it wasn't so overwhelming...” (Le Guin 31). His hierarchical logic and sense of superiority, here, produce an unlikely link between him and the other members of his team—as Dobrzynski puts it, “[i]n much the same way as the diverse members of the Survey Team are united in their hatred of Osden, the Other of the group, the entire Survey Team . . . are united by their shared anthropocentrism” (50).

is ultimately forced to make a decision when her gated community succumbs to fire and violence. Joining forces with Zahra and Harry, two other survivors from her neighbourhood, she heads north in hopes of better chances at survival; but, early in their journey, she kills a man in self-defence, causing her two companions to mistrust her. Though she is painfully aware that “[i]t’s no small thing to commit yourself to other people” (167), she risks herself in order to keep them from leaving her, and reveals the truth both about her hyperempathy and about Earthseed. Risking immense vulnerability, Lauren allows Harry to read parts of her journal, an act that suggests that her raw, authentic self concealed under the surface of her malleable, unreadable exterior is primarily accessible through *text*—it is thus by becoming-text, one that her trusted companions can read, that Lauren begins to accept the terms of an interdependent relation with the other two survivors that later becomes the foundation of her budding community.

Whereas Lauren, despite her hyperempathy, is eventually able to (at first, tentatively) connect with some members of her own species—the sense of kinship between her, Harry and Zahra strengthened by their shared past¹⁹⁰ and goal of survival—, for Osden it appears impossible to cultivate human companionship beyond a rudimentary sense of connection, such as the one he manages to establish with Tomiko. The difference is grounded in the disparate nature of their hyperempathy: unlike Lauren, who is only intermittently subject to the overwhelming sensation of mimicry and ensuing emotional contagion caused by her condition, Osden must endure being constantly infiltrated by the affective emanations of living creatures, locking him into a perpetual state of personal distress, described by Keen as “an over-aroused empathic response” (4) that leads “not to sympathy but to avoidance” and “causes a turning-away from the provocative condition of the other” (4). Setting himself apart from the rest of his crew early into the narrative, he even declares: “But I am not a man . . . There are all of you. And there is myself. I am *one*.” (Le Guin 13). In the case of Osden, the potential for connection unexpectedly emerges through his attunement to the alien environment in which, at one point, he finds himself quite literally (physically) embedded. Lying and bleeding among the roots and undergrowth, with his face “in that soft leaf mold” (22), Osden finds himself engaging in an embodied-affective discourse with the arboriformes. As noted by Dobrzynski, though Osden initially exhibits plant-blindness in the same way as “the other scientists despite his

¹⁹⁰ Though at learning about Lauren’s condition, Harry communicates a sense of betrayal, telling her “I thought I knew you” (182), Lauren is quick to point out that “No one is who we think they are” (182).

bioempathetic capacity” (50-51),¹⁹¹ it is his “very neurodivergence which enables him to see beyond the normative anthropocentrism inscribed in the cultural-philosophical attitude of plant blindness” (50-51). Following his intimate, haptic encounter with(in) the arboriformes, the “faceless” Osden appears to become more and more attracted to the mesmerising environment and its affective agency, an increasing enthrallment that culminates in his face, that “ugly white mask”, being “transfigured, eager as a lover’s face” (Le Guin 33). Fragmented as he is by the constant affective parasitism to which he is unintentionally subjecting others and must suffer being subjected to, Osden is captivated by the idea of isolation and wholeness embodied by the plant-mind that “has no peers. No enemies. No relationship with anything but itself. One alone forever” (31). Affirming his sense of kinship with the vegetal entity, Osden admits to feeling drawn to the “serenity” (31) he received from it before it was immersed in panic: “I still pick up more than the fear, you know. . . . I didn’t realize how big it was. To know the whole daylight, after all, and the whole night. All the winds and lulls together. . . . To have roots, and no enemies. To be entire. . . . No invasion. No others. To be whole...” (31-32).

Similarly fractured due to her torturous hyperempathic encounters, which often result in her becoming “half-conscious, half-detached from [her] body” (Butler 285), feeling “everything except pain as though through a thick layer of cotton” (285), haptic engagement also provides a way for Lauren to connect with her environment. Indeed, while for Osden there is no comfort in the company of his own species (and most living beings), a potential path towards wholeness for Lauren is forged through her gradual immersion into her growing group of travellers. Even though her condition is the source of profound inner conflict—instead of driving her to help others in distress, it results in self-oriented emotional distress—, Lauren is eventually able to experience an affirmative sense of intimacy and vulnerability, gained through her interdependence with fellow human survivors. Sladja Blazan claims that since Lauren’s hyperempathy “does not allow any emotion-regulation” (47), she “cannot soothe anyone in distress,” because “[r]ather than soothing, the aim of the sharer is to avoid the pain of the other at all costs” (47). I would, however, argue that Lauren is in fact very much capable *and* willing to soothe others. Inclined towards a more imaginative version of empathy that complements her unintentional, and mostly uncontrollable hyperempathy, Lauren often exhibits an intentional kind of care that is crucial in the foundation of her Earthseed community. Her radical susceptibility may be conceived as a hyperbolic form of what is referred to in the philosophy

¹⁹¹ According to Dobrzynski, plant blindness in the short story thus “appears to be a universal cultural-philosophical attitude of the Ekumen that spans diverse species and neurological types, independent of evolutionary adaptation or psychological variation” (50-51).

of empathy as “self-other merging” (May 172)¹⁹² that “raises a worry about whether such concern is ultimately egoistic,” because this form of empathy “blurs the distinction between self and other such that one [is primarily] concerned with oneself” (172). Lauren, however, frequently engages in imaginative and identification that constitutes a more subtle, more controllable fusion (that of perspectives), counterbalancing the helpless self-loss occurring in moments of hyperempathic merging. Intrigued by the complexities of others’ interior worlds and longing for a more balanced connection, Lauren frequently wonders about what those around her must think or feel: she practices mindreading that, according to philosopher Alvin Goldman, “involves an attempt to replicate or re-experience the target’s [mental] state via a constructive process” (38).

It is mostly her conscious attempts at channelling the perspective of others that allow her to resonate with her companions’ grief, sadness or fear—emotions that she does not automatically mimic via emotional contagion—, which in turn lead her towards performing acts of care, occasionally entailing a connection mediated through physical touch. One of these instances involve Allie, a newcomer to their circle, who is devastated after the sudden death of her sister. Faced with Allie’s anger and anguish, Lauren makes an attempt to console her even at the expense of catching some of her pain:

Her grief and resentment were like a wall against me. . . . She was rubbing her face too hard, too fast, rubbing it raw. She was hurting me, too, and I didn’t need any more pain. I stayed with her, though, until her defenses began to crumble under a new wave of crippling grief. . . . She seemed to sag under a sudden weight. I hugged her then. I put my hands on her shoulders and stopped her half-blind plodding. When she swung around to face me, hostile and hurting, I hugged her. (Butler 287)

Presented as an effective means of soothing, her touch becomes a valid channel of connection and care which, unlike her hyperempathy, “is not about fusion” but “can be” (Puig de la Bellacasa 5)—as I suggested in the Introduction—about her version of “the right distance” (Puig de la Bellacasa 5). While tactile contact inevitably involves a proximity that is palpable, Lauren retains her separateness in the sense that she is not overtaken by contagious sensations, but extends herself readily towards the other in a way that allows her to keep her focus *on the other*. Though rare, such instances of haptic engagement crucially emphasise her willingness to approach others with an intentional and mindful care, even in the face of the considerable vulnerability it entails: as pointed out by María Puig de la Bellacasa in her inspiring discussion

¹⁹² The interpretation of what constitutes empathic fusion—and indeed, the question of whether it is appropriate to speak of empathic ‘merging’ at all—is a central issue in the philosophy of empathy (for a more detailed discussion, see the Introduction).

on care, “touch’s unique quality of reversibility, that is, the fact of being touched by what we touch, puts the question of reciprocity at the heart of thinking and living with care” (20). Lauren is acutely aware of the dangerous consequences of the exposure inherent in caring (whether reciprocal or not); yet, as attested by her Earthseed-scripture, she also recognises that interdependency is, against all odds, a necessity—in the words of Puig de la Bellacasa, it is “not a contract, nor a moral ideal” but an inevitable “*condition*” of life (70, emphasis in original). In fact, interdependency may even be perceived as the nexus that binds her helpless condition and her consciously structured belief system together: underlying her ever-evolving conception of Earthseed is a dynamic of interdependent caring that may be conceived, in dialogue with Puig de la Bellacasa, as “a force distributed across a multiplicity of agencies and materials” that “supports our worlds as a thick mesh of relational obligation” (20).

In a dystopian world hostile to care and dependency, the decision to approach and respond to others with caring and empathy becomes an act of resistance for Lauren, something that she also encourages her growing number of ‘converts’ to do: as she suggests with reference to Allie, “taking care of other people can be a good cure for nightmares like . . . hers” (Butler 242). Thus, care does not merely figure here as an “ethical ideal” (R. Adams 695), but also, in a very real sense, “as the intimate and necessary labor” (695) described by Rachel Adams, who argues that such care-work is “required to sustain those who are dependent, but also the action needed to sustain the lives of vulnerable others more distant in time, space, and identity” (695). When challenged about her Earthseed-dogma and the apparent indifference of her envisioned deity, Lauren responds by reiterating her conviction of the necessity of practicing care, stating that the lack of care on the part of her “God” provides “[a]ll the more reason to care about myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together. ‘God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.’ We decide which aspect we embrace — and how to deal with the others” (Butler 208). Inspired by her hyperempathic existence, Lauren sees the world as being formed by instances of intentional and unintentional mimicry: a perpetual cycle of responsive reflections, manifest in the environment affecting those within it, and vice versa, in earthly beings shaping the environment. Such a perception urges her to adopt and promote a politics of nonviolence as a way of shaping “God,” and thus the elements of their surroundings, in line with the ethical imperatives of Earthseed. One of the most striking instances where she refuses to respond with hostility to environmental violence is when she decides not to participate in the scavenging that begins in the wake of an earthquake. Instead, she allows her (voluntary) empathy to take charge, and frees two women buried under rubble,

even though she suspects that her decision to do so may draw a violent response from those around them:

Before the attack began, I knew it would happen. Helping the two trapped women had made us targets. We might already have been attacked if the community down the road had not drawn off so many of the most violent, desperate people. The weak would be attacked today. *The quake had set the mood*. And one attack could trigger others. (219, my emphasis)

Crucially, this passage also hints at the dynamics of environmental mimicry at work: “setting the mood,” the earthquake, as a demonstration of intense planetary agency, has an affective influence on all beings exposed to that environment, its violent consequences breeding savagery in turn. Paradoxically, by driving her to resist such reflexive mirroring and its detrimental effects, Lauren’s hyperempathy emerges as an evolutionary advantage, one that allows her to build a resilient yet sensitive community committed to mutual care.

Horrified by the rampant cruelty ravaging her world, Lauren is compelled to consider the beneficial aspects of her hyperempathy syndrome, contemplating that if it “were a more common complaint, people couldn’t do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?” (Butler 108). Whereas Lauren’s case initially seems unique, a hereditary condition particular to her, by the end of the novel, it turns out that some recent additions to their group, Grayson Mora and Emery Solis (and both of their children) are subject to the same hyperempathic sensitivity. This discovery does not only alleviate Lauren’s solitude, ostensibly granting her earlier wish that she would “find other people who have it, and live among them” (108), but also suggests that, rather than being an isolated instance or a defective disorder, hyperempathy is a genetic-embodied mark of evolutionary transformation that may be conceived as an adaptive response countering the inhumanity of the world; since, as Lauren puts it, “[a] biological conscience is better than no conscience at all” (108). The fates suffered by Grayson and Emery, however, also foreground the most dangerous aspects of hyperempathy—as it turns out, both of them are escaped slaves, and it is due to their sharing that they have been grievously exploited. The “tentativeness and touchiness” (284) displayed by these fellow sharers is something that Lauren recognises in herself and can identify with; Grayson and Emery, however, are ultimately positioned as foils to her. In their reluctance to commit to the group and in their inclination to fend for themselves (even at the expense of others), they expose aspects unique to Lauren: her willingness to care for and to act in the interest of others, even when it requires some sacrifice on her part.

Emerging, in this way, as a prophetic or Christ-like figure—a leader, protector and teacher of Earthseed’s tenets—, Lauren can also be compared to Osden, who similarly seems to take on the role of saviour by receiving the planetary terror into himself, so that the others may be spared from suffering. Yet, though this act undeniably involves a degree of self-sacrifice, Osden also admits to being enticed by the tranquillity he sensed, momentarily, in the forest. Ultimately, he is the one to figure out that the only way to appease the terrified and terrifying planetary-entity is to give up all self-defence, because “it creates a closed circuit, self-sustaining and self-reinforcing” (Le Guin 29). As he explains, “[t]he forest-mind out there transmits only terror, now, and the only message I can send it is terror, because when exposed to it I can feel nothing except terror” (29). Therefore, to break the vicious cycle, Osden decides to give in to vulnerability and thereby attempt to communicate: entering the woods in complete surrender, he welcomes all of “the fear into himself, and, accepting, transcend[s] it” (35). Whereas earlier, the assault of affective flows has fractured his sense of self and subjected him to constant mimetic fluctuation, Osden’s embrace of the alien planet’s “immense dark waves” (33) of panic seems to result, paradoxically, in a kind of permanence, a symbiotic stasis whereby he is “given his whole self” (35). By approaching the plant-world with an empathic openness, Osden is finally able to tune into the arboriformes’ affective discourse, and establish connection without a sense of invasion. His “learn[ing] [of] the love of the Other” (35) is also antithetical to the crew’s previous displays of ecophobia—dependent, according to Estok, “on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism, on the ethical position that humanity is outside of and exempt from the laws of nature” (“Theorizing” 216-217). Indeed, it is precisely via his voluntary immersion into the “vast colonies of life” (Le Guin 36) that he is able to co-create with them an atmosphere of ease, experienced by the rest of the surveyors as “a dreaming silence, a brooding calm” (36). While Osden’s becoming-plan(e)t may, from a human perspective, potentially appear monstrous—he quite literally disappears into the vegetation, merging with the landscape from which, according to Keetley, “we spend our lives trying to distinguish ourselves” (6)—, in a posthuman sense, it amounts to a kind of re-generation: through his acceptance of absolute alterity, he allows himself to be sculpted into something other, whereby his isolation and withdrawal are replaced by a symbiotic serenity in alignment with the vegetal entity.

Though for Osden, a reciprocal and intimately vulnerable relation is only available via a recognition of kinship with the plant-beings, Lauren is able to foster empathy and care with her budding Earthseed community, forging a path of mutual reliance in the midst of chaotic planetary conditions. In spite of all the suffering endured, she clings stubbornly to the hope that

through attunement and responsivity to each other and their surroundings, the world may yet be re-imagined and transformed, a hope that also finds expression in her environmental perception:

I stared down the hill from our camp where just a glint of water was visible in the distance through the trees and bushes. The world is full of painful stories. Sometimes it seems as though there aren't any other kind and yet I found myself thinking how beautiful that glint of water was through the trees. (Butler 248)

At the end of *Parable*, the travellers finally reach a place of sanctuary: a piece of land owned by Bankole, Lauren's partner. Though their arrival is marred by trauma and loss—upon learning that those remaining of Bankole's family have been killed—, it also marks a moment of rebirth. While Lauren's vision for a future community and country—one that “might survive” by being “changed, but still itself” (310)—seems delusional for most of the others, her conviction still proves infectious enough to instil hope in them as well: burying their dead and “plant[ing] oak trees” (310) from the acorns Lauren has salvaged from her home, the community decide to settle and root themselves anew. In their own ways, Lauren and Osden thus manage to assimilate into unhomely and hostile habitats: both engage in an environmental empathy that is reliant on an awareness and an acceptance of embodied embeddedness, and that may be conceived as a *careful* affective attunement to (human and nonhuman) environments, where care implies, in the formulation of Sladja Blazan, “a willingness to cognitively process one's own inscription in one's environment” (44).¹⁹³ Lauren and her Earthseed community tend and nurture the land that they name Acorn, so that it may become a safe space for them to rest and flourish, while Osden remains on World 4470 as a “colonist” (a description that appears ironic, considering that the human visitors appear equally, if not more colonised by the alien vegetal entity's affective influence); where, with the rest of the crew gone, there is now “world enough and time” (Le Guin 36) to cultivate the kind of interdependent connection that was unavailable for him in the company of his own species.

III. 5. Conclusion

Through their portrayal of Lauren and Osden, Octavia Butler and Ursula Le Guin dramatise the riskful consequences of extreme empathy; yet they also foreground the potentially transformative effects of the sense of connection entailed by the protagonists' (hyperbolic) empathic sensitivity. “Vaster than Empires” and *Parable of the Sower* present and mobilise

¹⁹³ For Blazan, this situates care as “the elemental factor in an entangled vision of the Self that extends to the domain of the planetary” (45).

messy, intimate connections between human and nonhuman beings, and map this irresistible nearness onto the bodies of the protagonists, who become channels for affective forces beyond their control. Affirming somatic resonance as a means of recognising kinship and commonality with other creatures—at once becoming familiar and retaining their otherness in the process—these texts may catalyse a reconsideration of the embodied dimensions of empathy (neglected and dismissed as an immature manifestation of that phenomenon), presented as a material and inter-creatural affective exchange leading to mutual metamorphoses. Governed by a reciprocal affectivity among embodied beings and working their effects on creatures immersed in them through acts of mirroring, *World 4470* and *Parable's* Earth stage the impossibility of disentanglement from planetary conditions, but also provide space for cultivating careful collaboration among humans and (marginalized) more-than-human others. Due to the environmental attunement that is central to both Osden and Lauren's embodied experience, hyperempathy thus emerges as an adaptive condition which may be key to mending those relations—between distinct species as well as among humans—that appear to have been severed in the anthropocenic realities presented by these texts. Problematising the underlying sense of hierarchy in empathy by constructing protagonists for whom the decision of extending or refusing empathy is suspended, *Parable of the Sower* and “Vaster than Empires and More Slow” envision futures wherein the protagonists' hyperempathic conditions may lead to a mutually beneficial, symbiotic co-existence even with(in) hostile, indifferent or alien environments. Lauren and Osden's eventual surrender to vulnerability, their affirmation of kinship and interdependence with other entities and environments subverts anthropocentric structures of dominance and separation, allowing them, respectively, to fit into the ecology of *World 4470* and adapt to the crisis-ridden world of *Parable of the Sower*.

Chapter Four

Companion creatures – speculative empathy, tactile response-ability and the potential of embodied proximity in *Fifteen Dogs*, *Klara and the Sun* and *Borne*

IV. 1. Introduction: touching intimacies

In the previous chapters, I have already hinted at what I conceive of as the affirmative potentials of tactile and haptic relations for empathy: in my discussion of *Gunda* in Chapter One, I referred to the fleeting moments of haptic imagery which could invite a kind of embodied resonance between the viewer's and the film's body that, in turn, could possibly enable an affective, empathic non-understanding that does not reduce the animal into an object of interpretation and intrusive, hierarchical vision. In Chapter Two, I mentioned the human engineer Elsie's empathic touch of the android Dolores, a momentary yet momentous, transgressive expression of instinctual, inter-creatural resonance that undermines the affective boundary imposed between humans and their machinic replicas. Finally, in Chapter Three, in particular, I raised the possibility of touch becoming a channel of soothing connection for the acutely vulnerable and permeable protagonists struggling with their hyperempathic conditions; it is this *matter* of touch—pluralised, in the sense meant by DeFalco, as “referring to both importance and existence” (*Curious* 63)—that I want to pursue here in this last chapter. Taking my cue from Puig de la Bellacasa's contention (mentioned also in the preceding chapter), which posits interdependence as an elemental *condition* of existence rather than “a contract, [or] a moral ideal” (70, emphasis in original), and from DeFalco's assertion that “[c]are involves contact and contact requires care” (*Curious* 64), in this chapter I read three novels that focus on intimate, but also transgressive relationships between companion creatures: a human scavenger named Rachel and a curious piece of biotech named Borne in Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* (2017) [2018], teenager Josie and artificial friend Klara in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2022) [2021], and a woman called Nira and a hybrid dog called Majnoun in André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs* (2015).

All three novels, crucially, are predicated on a palpable sense of interdependence, rooted in but also complicated by shared vulnerability. Foraging in her post-apocalyptic landscape, Rachel accidentally stumbles upon Borne, and immediately resonates with what she perceives as the vulnerability of the creature: upon her first glimpse of him, she recalls, “there was Borne, defenseless” (VanderMeer 7). Anticipating their subsequent, powerful attachment, the first moment of contact between them is described in intimately haptic terms: “Borne beat against my chest like a second heart” (7); an elemental embodied-affective connection that persists

even as Rachel grows acutely aware of how her own exposure in the relation, her instinctual affinity for the creature of unknown origin or purpose potentially put her survival at risk. Josie and Klara's relationship is equally pervaded and shaped by their respective vulnerabilities: signifying only in terms of the relation, the sole purpose of the eponymous artificial friend is to provide sufficient care and support to Josie, while Josie herself is constantly threatened by succumbing to a mysterious chronic illness, a fluctuating condition which causes her to intermittently rely on and withdraw from Klara. In a similar vein, the hybrid dog Majnoun (endowed with human-like intelligence due to divine intervention) is reliant on the empathy and nurture of a human, Nira, who takes him in after he can no longer look after himself due to his disabling condition; while Nira feels acutely exposed when she learns about the cognitive capacities of the dog, and struggles to come to terms with the implications of their proximity—in an affective, tactile as well as cognitive sense. Thus, at the same time as these texts foreground the sustaining force inherent in inter-creatural empathy based in a material nearness and an affective interdependence, they also engage with the uncomfortable aspects of the (mutual) exposure that simultaneously emerges in and makes possible the connections they envision.

As implied by Ishiguro, Alexis and VanderMeer, such vulnerability proves difficult to navigate because it involves a proximity that generates contradictory responses in both nonhuman and human companion creatures, each grappling, in their own way, with the implications of the boundaries dissolving between them. A similar sense of dissolution—or rather, of the absence—of boundaries, and its affective consequences, were also foregrounded in Chapter Three in my discussion of *Parable* and “Vaster than Empires;” yet those texts, as I have shown, primarily deal with the wounding effects of the affective vulnerability that Lauren and Osden are subject to, and only hint at limited possibilities of constructing caring companionships. In this final chapter, I turn to *Borne*, *Klara and the Sun* and *Fifteen Dogs* because I suggest that it is in these novels that the *mutual* vulnerability of the creatures-in-relation is most poignant, and that the affirmative outcomes of borders blurring are most obvious, even as the anxiety-inducing aspects of that breakdown are addressed as well. Though the recognition of porosity, entailed by the immediate, tactile presence of nonhuman companions—in addition to the instances of (empathic) mimicry they enact—triggers unease in human characters, these texts, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, also turn proximity and porosity into productive inter-creatural entanglements that pave the way for speculative empathy in which connection is increasingly established and expressed via tactile encounters, especially when verbal communication fails. The chapter thus considers the implications of a

tactile *response-ability*—to use Donna Haraway’s term that highlights the dual imperative of responsibility and responsiveness, at the same time as it points to the necessity of “making oddkin” wherein “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations” (*Staying* 4)—and focuses on issues related to the reciprocity of tactile encounters and the potentially intrusive nature of touch. Reading these novels in conjunction, this last chapter ultimately aims to trace how the initially unsettling—and paradoxically, estranging—sense of proximity and intimacy between human and nonhuman companion creatures may generate a productive discomfort (R. Adams 712). Such discomfort, I argue, may be construed as a way of what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble,” opening up a space of critical re-engagement with the nature of inter-creatural encounters and with the (power-)dynamics of empathy and care when it comes to cross-creatural relations. I also suggest that the affirmative textual portrayals of a shared vulnerability and affective interdependence between human and nonhuman beings subvert the inherent hierarchy of objective inquiry into nonhuman experiences by introducing a reciprocal and reversible language of empathic care, manifesting in intimate bodily-sensory inter-creatural interactions that affirm “the autonomy of all kinds of [creatures] for whom care is embedded in deeply nonhuman and, to us, invisible forms of touch, smell, interaction, and *separation*” (Halberstam 723, my emphasis).

IV. 2. Proximity and mimicry: troubling perspectives and the porosity of inter-creatural boundaries

In her article titled “The Art of Interspecies Care,” Rachel Adams describes an art exhibition that “invites the human spectator to consider what it would mean to engage in a reciprocal caring relationship with a plant without attempting to imagine its plant collaborators as having anything like subjectivity” (712). She adds that by asking visitors to donate some of their blood for the purpose of “nourish[ing] the dandelions growing as the installation’s centrepiece,” the artist deliberately “sought an aesthetic that would elicit discomfort” (712). Such discomfort, Adams explains, “comes on more gradually [than shock that is sudden, dramatic and unsustainable]. It lingers and nags, feelings that Berrigan hoped would encourage reflection on the unease caused by crossing species boundaries” (712). The troubling and subversive nonhuman perceptions foregrounded by Alexis, VanderMeer and Ishiguro generate an enduring tension akin to the type of discomfort described by Adams, a discomfort which, I suggest, is due to the fact that *Borne*, *Majnoun* and *Klara* are familiar—in a physical as well as affective sense—and epistemologically distant at the same time: they fluctuate between states of apparent transparency and relatability and irreducible, impenetrable alterity. Like *Her* and *Westworld*,

which, in their respective portrayals of hosts and androids, oscillate between an impression of providing access to the perspectives of nonhuman creatures and acknowledging that their interiorities are fundamentally opaque, the novels discussed here rely on a kind of self-reflexive anthropomorphisation to cue unease. This narrative technique is both a source of comfortable identification with the nonhuman companions, creating an impression of sameness, and a source of alienation when the texts confront us with elements and experiences of speculative nonhuman existence that are inassimilable into or incongruous with human experiences.

The posthumanist perspectives¹⁹⁴ materialising in these texts are also troubling, however, in Donna Haraway's sense of the phrase 'staying with the trouble', which calls for persisting in confusing and ambiguous states, for "learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway *Staying* 1). Even as they present disorienting perspectives, through which human self-perceptions are complicated and made strange, instead of a complete dismissal of the human condition, the nonhuman companions stay with the trouble by staying with humans, "stir[ring] up potent response[s]" (Haraway *Staying* 1) from *within* entangled inter-creatural relations unfolding in a "thick present" (Haraway *Staying* 1). This nearness and the (physical) exposure it entails are by no means straightforward matters—as I shall demonstrate, both the human and nonhuman creatures struggle with the desire to be close and to negotiate a necessary distance. However, as opposed to the largely involuntary affective interpenetration and proximity experienced by the hyperempathic protagonists of Chapter Three, in these novels, reciprocal reliance is embraced by *choice*, as Klara and Josie, Borne and Rachel, and Majnoun and Klara—to differing degrees—willingly open or give themselves up to one another, eventually accepting the exposure inherent in it.

Donna Haraway frequently thinks "significant otherness" in terms of her relationship with her own canine companion (*The Companion Species Manifesto, When Species Meet*), while Rachel Adams also notes that "[i]t is easiest to think about interspecies care in terms of pets and service animals" (698). Yet the vision of dog perception and experience—a curious coupling of human and speculative canine—that emerges in André Alexis's novel consistently

¹⁹⁴ Referencing Ursula Heise's observation that "speculative depictions of posthuman others do not *necessarily* problematize humanist perspectives based on a privileged account of 'human uniqueness' (506)" (DeFalco 20), DeFalco notes that "figures and images from science and speculative fiction, such as cyborgs and robots are not necessarily posthumanist" (DeFalco 20). In line with these arguments, I suggest that all three of the novels analysed here are indeed posthumanist in their approach, insofar as they do launch (explicit or subtle) critiques of human exceptionalism and anthropocentric discourses, value-systems and practices.

frustrates the perceived straightforwardness of empathy and care between humans and their favourite pets. Indeed, in spite of focusing on our most intimately familiar companion creatures, Alexis's text is potentially the most alienating in its effect; though it may very well be suggested that the cause of that estrangement is not so much the purported dog-perspective, but precisely the introduction of human consciousness that effaces, to a considerable degree, what is supposed to be the dogs' originary, "authentic" manner of existence. Still, the ambiguity that mostly characterises the dogs' perception of their previous owners may strike the human reader as unexpected or even disappointing, complicating extradiegetic empathic responses to the dog-characters.

Narrated in the third person, and alternating between dog and human focalisers, the novel begins by relating how, in the framework of a wager, the Greek god Hermes puts his brother Apollo's hypothesis—that any animal would be even more unhappy than humans if given human intelligence¹⁹⁵—to the test on fifteen dogs left overnight at an animal clinic. For most of the hybridised canines, their anthropomorphisation ironically serves to estrange them from humans rather than to bring them closer: waking to a new consciousness, twelve out of the fifteen decide to escape, though the implications of their liberty are, at best, contradictory. While they agree that "[f]reedom . . . came before respect" (Alexis 21), reflecting on their relationship to their humans, especially their contemplation of "the word *master* evoked in all of them feelings that did and did not call for hiding. For some, the idea of a master was comforting" (21). For one of the more prominent dog-characters, Prince, the bond he shares with his owner, Kim, seems less strained, as the dog "would have done anything to find [Kim]" (21); Majnoun, on the other hand, respects "his own master" but at the same time "assume[s] the dogs would all want to hide from their[s]" (21). Contemplating the subtleties of his position, Majnoun thinks about how

He had always been proud of his ability to do what his master asked. He had earned the biscuits and treats that had come to him, but he had resented the ritual, too. He had sometimes had to suppress himself to keep from running away. In fact, he would have fled his master, had he been able to take the treats with him – not just the treats, mind you, but the whole *feeling* of treats, the being patted, the being spoken to in the way his master spoke when pleased. (21, emphasis in original)

Majnoun's characterisation of his relationship with his former master already hints at the dogs' contradictory approach to human touch: while Majnoun enjoys being stroked, his description even seeming to evoke an impression of feeling *caressed* by the human's address of him, he

¹⁹⁵ In Alexis's novel, human intelligence and human mind or consciousness are used synonymously: the dogs not only find new thoughts in themselves, but new emotions and a new language as well.

also senses the asymmetry involved in that touch, which, in this case, has to be earned and which reflects the unequal positions of power occupied by owner and pet. A later episode that foregrounds even more explicitly the hierarchical and also occasionally intrusive nature of human touch involves the beagle Benjy and the schnauzer Dougie, who purposefully manipulate an older woman into taking care of them; yet the cat-lady, in turn, tortures them with her “clinginess” (66), a “particular fetish” (66) of humans that results in the dogs’ feeling of “suffocation, [and] the back-cracking struggle to get away” from the embrace (66). Being compelled to endure a human’s suffocating love in such a way implicitly raises issues of reciprocity in nonhuman-human care relationships. In his discussion of human-animal interdependency, Jack Halberstam problematises “the one-way stream that characterizes the comfort human-animal bond” (723), arguing for the affirmation of “the autonomy of all kinds of animals for whom care is embedded in deeply nonhuman and, to us, invisible forms of touch, smell, interaction, and separation” (723). In Alexis’s novel, one of the primary sources of friction is that humans do desire the physical nearness of pets, but only on their own terms, often forgetting or neglecting to account for the experiential and perceptual differences between canines and themselves.

Paradoxically, though the first moment of a new self-awareness seems to coincide with an enhanced capacity for interspecies empathy¹⁹⁶—Atticus, the mastiff who later becomes leader of the pack, is awakened from his usual dream of chasing and killing small critters by the uncomfortable and unprecedented thought that “the creature must feel pain” (Alexis 16)—their contamination by the “human” even seems to entail many of the dogs *losing* empathy for each other. On several occasions, Atticus and those loyal to him callously murder weaker dogs even when they submit, and dominate the dogs belonging to the lower echelon of the pack by mounting them continuously¹⁹⁷ and by excluding them from the “warm congregation” (64) of their bodies while sleeping, kinds of behaviour that are presented as “perverse” (62) and profoundly *un-doglike* by Benjy, who, having been subjected to such treatment, states miserably: “It isn’t right for dogs not to care about dogs” (64). Thus, the discomfort potentially cued by the text is not only the result of the estranging impression of dog-perception, but also of the implication that empathy, often considered to be a distinguishing, unique quality of the human—an idea also central to and subverted by *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—, is

¹⁹⁶ An episode that recalls the hosts of *Westworld* gaining consciousness via an intensified recognition of suffering perceived in their loved ones, empathy instantiating a breach that propels them into self-awareness.

¹⁹⁷ This introduces an element of unprecedented shame into the dogs being dominated: while earlier, “mounting had always been an instinctive matter, no more worth thinking about than breathing was,” now, “for the first time in his life, it occur[s] to Benjy that being mounted was a humiliation” (73-74).

inherent in dogs as well, an automatic, instinctual response between canines that is weakened precisely by their humanisation.

After suffering grave injuries, Majnoun ends up in the company of humans once more as he is nursed back to (relative) health by a woman, Nira, and her husband, Miguel. Tortured, initially, by the sense of being “adrift between species” (47), Majnoun still craves connection and after living with the humans for a while, decides to address Nira in her own language because at that point, he “might have tried to communicate with any species” (46); though he does not fully realise the vulnerability that his choice entails.¹⁹⁸ Majnoun and Nira’s respective experiences of this moment are thoroughly incongruous: conveying both of their perspectives, the narrative reveals that Majnoun’s reaction is most of all that of disappointment and confusion, because the humans continuously spoke to him in a “rising tone . . . as if waiting for a rejoinder” (44), yet are bewildered when he complies, while Nira is extremely unnerved by the dog’s reply to a question she did not expect an answer to. Intimidated by Majnoun’s consciousness, she feels humiliated and frightened by “the thought that an intelligent being was in their home, that she had let this creature into her *bedroom*, into the very heart of her private life” (48, my emphasis). While before the revelation, the dog’s gaze did not trouble Nira, she now feels objectified by it, feeling shame due to the bodily acts (like having sex with her husband) that the animal has witnessed. At first, Nira is captured by an acute sense of vulnerability due to being *seen*, an instance of being looked at that appears to undermine not only the hierarchical relationship between owner and pet, but that between animal and human as well. What may potentially alleviate this tension is respect—which, Haraway states, is also “respecere—looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself” (*When Species* 88). Engaging with Haraway’s argument as well as with Wolfe’s question of how the animal’s return of the gaze can “be disengaged from the humanism for which the face (and faciality generally) is perhaps the fundamental figure?” (Wolfe 148), Monica Sousa contends that “whether the animal has a face” (183) must be questioned, along with “what it means to be human” (183), and concludes that “[w]hat comes after the human . . . is an acknowledgment that the concept of the face must be reassessed in order to accept animals as having face and an animal as being somebody” (Sousa 184).¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ The attempt initially serves only to confirm the callousness of humans: terrified of the talking dog, Nira and Miguel send him to a laboratory where “he was prodded, poked, given needles, fed food that did not taste proper and kept for observation in a cage beside other dogs who grew aggressive at the smell of him” (46), leading Majnoun to conclude: “*This* was humanity, this unpredictability, this cruel behaviour and bullying” (46).

¹⁹⁹ Sousa’s and Wolfe’s discussions evoke the concept of the Levinasian face, a notion that I will also return to later in this chapter in my discussion of *Borne*.

Gradually recovering from the initial shock of hearing Majnoun talk, Nira comes to terms with the strangeness of her companion; the two of them settle into a comfortable, though silent routine. Nira works to accept and affirm the dog's subjecthood as best she can; refusing, for instance, to "humiliate Majnoun" by asking him "to roll around on the carpet in order to prove that he possessed an intelligence she knew very well he did possess" (Alexis 86).

At the same time, her recognition of the dog results in cognitive dissonance, as Nira is disgusted and embarrassed whenever Majnoun displays dog-like behaviour, like "licking his genitals" (48) or tasting other animals' excrement: "Nira could not understand why he persisted in eating the shit of other dogs. He knew that it upset her. On any number of occasions she had begged him to control himself" (119). However, Majnoun's perspective presents an entirely different approach to the (bodily) proximity of other creatures: as his sophisticated sense of smell plays a crucial part in his phenomenological reality, it is also a determining aspect in his engagement with other species. "[O]ut of consideration for [Nira]" (120), Majnoun tries to forbear, even as he finds her requirement cruel, "until, inevitably, he'd forget her feelings and pounce on some fragrant deposit. So the whole cycle of revulsion (hers) and self-control (his) would begin again" (120). This contrast points to the fundamental difference among Majnoun's and Nira's sensory priorities and experiences. For the latter, the instinct to avoid the source of disgust is much stronger than her desire to hold space for Majnoun's "nature": even though she tries not to restrict his bodily agency and autonomy, she still ends up regulating the dog's physical behaviour due to her revulsion. Disgust is one of the most powerfully disturbing affects²⁰⁰ because, as Danielle Sands notes, it "challenges the distinction between interior and exterior" (169), occurring "when an external threat is exposed as internal; its practices of expulsion, therefore, are ineffectual. In so doing it demonstrates the porosity of subject boundaries" (169). Referencing Julia Kristeva, Sands also links disgust to the abject, explaining that "[a]bjection, for Kristeva, is the identity-unsettling experience of enforced proximity to that which has been rejected or cast off" (169). As opposed to Nira, however, in Majnoun's canine experience, such intimate (inter-creatural) proximity—either directly with the body of the other or a vicarious contact through their waste or other corporeal traces—serves to establish and reinforce a sense of kinship and companionship, rather than to alienate and incite responses of repulsion; for instance, Majnoun feels that humans, best captured through their complex

²⁰⁰ Sands explains that disgust is exceptionally "troublesome because it yokes sensation and imagination more tightly than any other feeling; as John Macarthur notes, 'the idea of disgust is arguably more troubling and unpleasant than the sensation, as the mere idea of the disgusting can elicit the sensation, and collapse thought'" (Sands 168).

odours, “smell . . . best . . . when they [are] mating. It was sharp and true and comforting” (Alexis 44).

In a similar vein, the very first human words uttered by Borne may seem monstrous and terrifying for Rachel, both because she did not expect Borne to speak²⁰¹ and because his first address of Rachel occurs as she is recovering from the attack of a group of feral, transhuman children who break into her sanctuary called Balcony Cliffs. While before the attack, Rachel looks on Borne as a kind of primitive pet—a charming, colourful, shape-shifting creature most often “resembling a large vase or a squid balanced on a flattened mantel” (VanderMeer 43)—, she is profoundly unnerved when, at her most vulnerable, recuperating from her injuries, she is not only addressed by Borne, whose voice, at first, “sounded just like the rasp of the boy with the gray eyes” (36), but also finds herself the object of his inquisitive, uncanny gaze. This is the very first instance when Borne exhibits his capacity for mimicry: already at this point, Rachel’s first person account heavily implies that Borne’s acquisition of language *and* gaze (it is in the wake of the attack that he first develops “a startling collection of eyes that encircled his body” [43]) is made possible by his initial act of absorption, the victims of which are the mutant children who hurt Rachel.

At first, Borne’s vocal communication is experienced by Rachel as uncanny mimicry, unsettling because it points to a further erosion of boundaries,²⁰² something which she already finds distressing in the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting, the unnamed city.²⁰³ Borne’s existence, as Rachel learns gradually, is inherently trans-corporeal in Alaimo’s sense: through his skin “full of eyes, full of other receptors [Rachel] couldn’t even name” (VanderMeer 98), his body is in constant affective-tactile contact with the environment. It is not only that Borne’s embodied mimicry erodes perceived frontiers between human and biotech creatures, but also that his body—the trans-corporeal nature of which “emphasiz[es] the movement across bodies” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2) and “reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” (2)—reveals the uncomfortable proximity, or rather, inter-penetration of the city’s inhabitants and forces, involving Rachel’s body as well. Highly attuned to and but also participating in the transitions that construct the space of the city, Borne tells Rachel: “I see it,

²⁰¹ While Rachel at first has the impression of having found a kind of plant, as Borne gradually reveals his capacities to her—including his ability to move—she “upgrade[s] him from plant to animal, but still [does] not reclassify him as ‘purposeful’” (18).

²⁰² In Rachel’s eyes, Borne seems to gain personhood when he displays his capacity to speak, a shift that demonstrates the animating power of language from a human point of view: it is as if Borne truly “came alive” only when he first addresses Rachel.

²⁰³ Much like Lauren, who, after being forced out from her gated community, longs for walls, Rachel feels acutely the precarity of her situation in the dystopian landscape, yearning for a *sense* of walls at least, once the safe haven that she believed the Balcony Cliffs to be is viciously violated by the feral children.

I taste it. All the contamination. . . . Every place is sick—there’s *sick* everywhere” (VanderMeer 145, emphasis in original). For Rachel, the revelation is a disconcerting reminder of *her own* trans-corporeality, of “the ways [her] body was being tested every day in the city” (VanderMeer 145). Described by Rachel as a locus of perpetual transformation where the intra-action of animate and inanimate matter is foregrounded, the city is an uncanny space whose transformative and chaotic energy is embodied in the biotech creatures that make havoc in it and which stages evolution-in-progress through the metamorphoses of the human and nonhuman bodies immersed in it.²⁰⁴

Describing her torture at the hands of the children as a visit from the city “to remind me that I meant less than nothing to it” (31), Rachel feels intensely exposed after the assault, wanting to hide even from her partner’s, the bioengineer Wick’s “concern, his regard” (33), hating to “be *seen*” (31). Yet, as Borne’s transformation and entry into language increasingly catalyse a change in the dynamic of their relationship, she begins to feel “safe” under Borne’s eyes (46), signalling her increasing trust towards the creature even in her painfully precarious position. Though Borne’s entry into speech is granted through his consumption and “digestion” of other bodies, the first story that he absorbs is that of Rachel: while still recuperating from her wounds, Rachel’s words, in moment of surrender that is both intimate and vulnerable, “spilled out of [her] mouth” as she tells Borne “everything about [herself]. Things I hadn’t admitted to myself, that had been bottled up for so long I had no control over them” (37). This is significant because, while his embodied capacity to produce sounds seems to come from his incorporation of the children, Rachel is the first point of (empathic) identification for Borne: it is “through [Rachel]” that Borne learns to “navigate the human world” (65).

Even as the two of them grow increasingly close—their connection gradually evolving from a human-pet into a parent-child bond—, their fundamentally different experiential realities cause unease in their relationship, much like in the case of Nira and Majnoun. The source of the discomfort here, though, is twofold: while Borne, similarly to Majnoun, tries to live up to Rachel’s moral and cultural expectations, he struggles due to the discrepancy between what he senses to be his nature and what Rachel wishes for him to become. At the same time, though Borne gradually masters human language, his primary, bodily ways of self-expression and

²⁰⁴ The sense of global weirding, mentioned in the Introduction, manifests itself most overtly in *Parable* and *Borne*: both of these novels envision an anthropocenic future where human beings experience painful solastalgia (Albrecht 36), and where bodies and things are constantly being re-configured by polluting and pervasive, but also potentially re-generative forces.

attunement—through senses unfamiliar or inconceivable for Rachel, which apparently allow Borne to be in constant, intimate contact with his surroundings—remain paramount.

Borne's relationship to language seems to be fundamentally different from that of Rachel, as his use of human words often seems to sever any stable link between signifier and signified.²⁰⁵ Due to Borne's primary mode of existence—which is the absorption, quite literally, of anything animate or inanimate that surrounds him—, he enhances his command of language by digesting it, making the new words he learns into his own often via wordplay or by repetition: “latch[ing] on to a word he hadn't heard before” (113), he often “turn[s] it over in his head . . . just mutating [it] until it was unrecognizable” (113). For him, communication is not regulated according to the same boundaries that apply to human exchanges: he seems to be able to converse even with inanimate objects, such as the “dead astronauts” (actually, some human skeletons still wearing bleached-out contamination suits) he brings home after finding them on one of his excursions into the City. Though Borne's responses²⁰⁶ often seem to challenge or undermine Rachel's epistemological certainties, she is charmed by what she perceives as his silly and endearing behaviour.²⁰⁷ Embracing her newfound sense of parenthood, Rachel increasingly treats him as a child, seeking to guide and teach him: especially “during those early days,” Borne “become[s] a blank slate on which [she] had decided to write only useful words” (VanderMeer 24); yet, she also admits to being affected by Borne's curiosity and sense of wonder. Commenting on the childlike qualities of the creature, Grzegorz Czemieli notes that Borne possesses “something that Charles Baudelaire has vividly called the state of ‘drunkenness’ in which children regard the world in a perpetual ‘state of newness’ (1964: 8)” (45).

Like Nira, who does her best to respond to the subjectivity she perceives in Majnoun, Rachel works “very hard at accepting Borne” (VanderMeer 62), so much so that soon she “no

²⁰⁵ Contemplating how far she may actually have been from understanding Borne's thoughts through his words, Rachel admits that she first “saw these conversations as Borne playful” but later realises that “really it was a youthful, still-forming mind that couldn't yet communicate complex concepts through language. . . . Always, as long as we knew each other, Borne was offering up so many *approximations*, so many near misses on what he meant that might have meant other things” (65, emphasis in original).

²⁰⁶ In one of Rachel's attempts to determine Borne's purpose, she asks him if he is a machine, clarifying that a machine is “A made thing. A thing made by people” (45), to which Borne, puzzled, replies: “You [Rachel] are a made thing. Two people made you” (45). Playfully undermining Rachel's definitions, this conversation is reminiscent of one of Maeve and Felix's exchanges in *Westworld*: when Maeve inquires about the distinctions between them, Felix tells her that he was born, while Maeve, the host, was made. In response, she touches his hands and observes: “We feel the same” (“The Adversary” 13:26-13:27), challenging his sense of differentiation through emphasising their embodied familiarity.

²⁰⁷ After Rachel has inspected his wounds after he is attacked in the city, and warns Borne to “keep an eye on them” (VanderMeer 151), lest they get infected, Borne makes a show of complying with Rachel's request: “three tiny stalks extended [from his body] near each wound and three tiny eyes budded from each to keep watch. Which, from past experience, meant Borne was making a little joke about sentry duty” (151).

longer [even sees] him as odd” (62). Conflicted between her reflexive, instinctual anthropomorphisation of her biotech “child” and his²⁰⁸ irreducible otherness, Rachel makes several attempts to understand Borne via empathic perspective-taking. Once, after Borne secures his own “apartment” in the Balcony Cliffs, which, lacking all furniture, appears strangely empty for Rachel, she “tries to think like Borne . . . A very large invertebrate only getting larger, who needed room to stretch out. With skin that was more intelligent than mine” (144) which drives her to the uncomfortable realisation that “he didn’t need what we needed” and that the “clutter in [her] apartment” may have caused Borne “mental anguish” (144). Still, even as Rachel learns to translate some of Borne’s embodied expressions,²⁰⁹ his remarks always hint at how he ultimately remains unreadable and impenetrable. Repeatedly coming up against the limits of her ability to imagine or access Borne’s experience, Rachel admits to herself that Borne might have only “thought it was polite to seem to need light, to seem to need eyes” while reading, yet “the truth is, I don’t really know what he thought or how he thought it, because most of the time I just had his questions” (VanderMeer 53). As Borne matures, Rachel grows increasingly aware that the “landscapes he traversed looked nothing like what I saw, might to me seem like a bombardment of senses I couldn’t even imagine” (145),²¹⁰ and “[i]n this sense, she takes an important lesson in anthropocentrism, gauging its limits in the course of ‘making kin’ with non-human sentience” (Czemiel 50).

At the same time, though she is well aware of the fact that Borne is a polymorphous creature constantly in flux, Rachel tries to fix him in a more static, childlike state, so that she can protect him and keep him close: she wants Borne desperately “to be ‘normal,’ to fit in, to be like a normal ‘boy’” (147). At first, Borne does his best to please Rachel by trying to conform to what he believes to be her expectations:

“[w]hen Borne saw me staring at him, he would make a sound like the startled clearing of a throat, and his flesh would absorb all of the eyes except two . . . [O]nce in position on his torso they became larger, took on a sea-blue color, and grew long, dark, lashes;

²⁰⁸ Although Borne does not present any characteristics of gender—he may not even have one—Rachel, from the beginning, refers to him as a “he”, maybe because he first speaks to her in a male voice.

²⁰⁹ For instance, she knows that “releasing a smell like honeysuckle and sea salt” (VanderMeer 86) was Borne’s “way of pushing” (86), while he expresses anger “through an orange-red glow just visible at the core of him” which might not mean “caution to Borne, but he knew it meant that to [Rachel]” (107).

²¹⁰ In another instance, attempting to look at their polluted, danger-filled post-apocalyptic environment from Borne’s perspective, Rachel not only “realize[s] . . . that [she’d] begun to love him” but also appreciates how Borne makes her “rethink even simple words like disgusting or beautiful” because “he didn’t see the world like I saw the world. He didn’t see the traps” (VanderMeer 56). In Monica Sousa’s interpretation, Rachel’s recognition indicates how “[p]osthumanist empathy . . . can make us rethink our notions of the abject (disgusting) and the culturally accepted (beautiful)” (186); however, I would add that this reconsideration is complicated by the fact that Rachel can never be certain by what Borne means through words like “disgusting” or “beautiful”.

they moved independent of each other. He must have thought he looked more normal that way” (43-44)

In Borne’s struggle to live up to Rachel’s ideas of him, all the while suspecting that the hybridity he exhibits forces any kind of human image apart, “we witness the failure of the humanizing project—a failure borne not of neglect but of [an overabundance] of unwittingly misplaced care that minimizes Borne’s ‘significant otherness’” (Gormley 72). Rachel genuinely loves Borne; yet eventually, her motherly affection also proves suffocating for the creature, evoking Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s claim that “care can also smother the subtleties of attention to the different needs of an ‘other’ required for careful relationality. It can be said then that it can also consume the cared for, leading to appropriating the recipients of ‘our’ care instead of relating to them” (85). This also causes considerable tension in his relationship with Rachel, who on one occasion insists that before they go out, Borne “grow a mouth . . . and a real face” (VanderMeer 55), and whose ideas of “normalcy” and human morality are at odds with Borne’s bio-coded imperative, to which absorption is integral. Caught between contradictory impulses of embracing and distancing himself from the human-made concepts that Rachel works to instill into him, Borne is struggling to come to terms with his own mode of his existence and his scattered, patchwork-identity.

In his journal, left behind for Rachel to find after he leaves the Balcony Cliffs, Borne writes:

My name is Borne. — My name is not Borne. That is just something Rachel calls me. It means to carry something you don’t want to carry. . . .

I was made by someone.

I am not actually alive.

I am a robot.

I am a person.

I am a weapon.

I am not/intelligent.

I have nine senses and Rachel only has five. . . . If she lost her eyes, she’d be blind. If I lost my eyes, I could still see.

I do not know when I am being what they want me to be and when I am myself. It is better when I am “cute.” It is safer. . . .

Borne traveled from a distant Company. Borne could not stop eating. Borne could not stop killing. Borne doesn’t think of it that way, but it must be. It must be killing.

BORNE MUST STOP KILLING. BORNE MUST STOP TASTING. BORNE MUST STOP BEING BORNE. BORNE MUST EAT WHAT IS ALREADY DEAD, LIKE NORMAL PERSONS. (189-190)

Demonstrating Borne’s internal struggle, this entry provides the only direct glimpse into his perspective; otherwise, his perception remains accessible only through his communication with other characters, mostly with Rachel. Rachel’s anthropomorphising, while ostensibly serving to erase the difference between them, also have a detrimental effect in that they seem to negate

Borne's mode of being. At the same time, they also create the illusion that Rachel, and along with her, the reader, understands Borne more than is actually the case, an impression that is undermined in a disorienting manner on several occasions where the narrative stages a sudden encounter with Borne's otherness, mostly foregrounding the alien quality of his embodiment, serving as a reminder that any access we might have to Borne's perspective is filtered through Rachel's all-too-human perception. On one of her scavenging journeys into the city, Rachel catches Borne following her despite her instructions, and when she witnesses "Borne's clothes [falling] away", resuming his usual form of "a six-foot hybrid of squid and sea anemone, with that ring of circling eyes," she feels "rattled, [draws] back, reache[s] for a [weapon], stop[s] [herself]," stating that Borne "never looked so alien as he did in that moment, naked and alone on the street, even though it was how I knew him back at the Balcony Cliffs" (76-77).

Crucially, the most disturbing moment of estrangement, which also results in Borne's banishment from the Balcony Hills, is not an exhibition of Borne's strangest embodied elements, but occurs when he decides to take on the form of Rachel and Wick. From the very first moment, Wick is against her keeping the biotech and wants to take him apart to ensure that he is not a danger to them, and Rachel's decision to keep Borne causes a fracture in their relationship. Like a human child learning from behaviour, Borne practices mimicry, and uses his body to replicate his (estranged) parental figures in his attempt to make peace between them; yet Rachel walking "in on [herself] talking to Wick" marks a disorienting moment of inversion where she is "[shaken] to the core [by] see[ing] [herself] like that . . . having a conversation with Wick as if my body had been stolen and I was just a wraith" (179). Even though Borne's instinct to imitate the human comes from his adoptive mother, when he is revealed to have assumed the forms of Rachel and Wick, "[c]hild-like, silly Borne, trying hard to be a person, becomes serious, uncanny, deadly, and potentially incestuous" (Ulstein, *Weird* 144). Crucially, though, Borne's unsanctioned performance of humanity and mimetic embodied proximity paints him as monstrous in Rachel and Wick's eyes, because it also confronts them with their own shape-shifting quality.²¹¹

Yet Borne's own experience of his "sampling" differs fundamentally from how Rachel and Wick perceive it. Whereas Wick asserts that Borne's absorption is monstrous and violent because it amounts to killing others and "[r]ansack[ing] their memories . . . their knowledge of

²¹¹ As noted by Françoise Campbell, "the process of doubling foregrounds the liminal nature of our own status as individuals" (4), hinting at the lack, the indefinability at the core of the human subject; an issue especially pertinent in the case of Rachel's partner Wick, who is also revealed to be a biotech creation, a kind of clone, at the very end of the novel, implying that he is particularly unnerved by Borne's mimicry of him because it amounts to a physical confrontation with his disconcerting and secret knowledge.

the world” (VanderMeer 185), Borne, not bound by the same sensory and moral boundaries retorts: “I don’t kill. . . . I absorb. Digest. It is all alive. In me” (185). Borne’s way of being is sympoietic rather than autopoietic: his primary mode of functioning is what Haraway describes as “making-with” (*Staying* 58), both in the sense that he is “*never alone*” (*Staying* 58)—all the things and creatures he “consumes” he can still feel and see “inside of [him], and talk to them, and they are still who or what they were before” (VanderMeer 203)—and in the sense that he is composed of and dynamically re-composed by what he assimilates. His experience of the world is “worlding-with, in company” (Haraway, *Staying* 58) so that his sympoietic nature “enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it” (58). Thus, from the perspective of Borne, absorption seems to emerge as a manifestation of a radical, transfused connectivity; and, when it comes to Rachel, an empathic embodiment.²¹² Their kinship, which, from the very beginning, has a powerful somatic dimension—apparent in Borne’s saying goodbye to Rachel by “reach[ing] down to touch [her] face with one thick, soft tentacle,” his strobing colours “confident, bold” (VanderMeer 186) in an attempt to reassure her—culminates when Rachel sees herself through Borne’s eyes after his exile:

Far below, down below, I saw myself running along the river . . . And I was not quite me, and, anyway, I was standing on the balcony, so I knew it was Borne below. I hadn’t known I was so fragile, so delicate in motion. I didn’t know Borne had loved me quite so much.

The sight nearly broke my heart all over again, I can’t lie, and there was an indelible, floating moment when I felt as if I was down there, looking out through Borne’s eyes, and not up on the balcony in my own skin. The feeling faded, and Borne, as if he knew I was watching, became himself again, free to be himself again, in that moment. . . . (192)

For Borne, whose primary mode of self-expression, even after he learns to talk, remains somatic—producing scents, changing his colours and above all, his form, to convey his emotions—, mimicking the form of Rachel appears to be a way of being close to her, even after his expulsion, so his reproduction of her may be read (and is certainly understood by Rachel, eventually) as his attempt at communicating his empathy and love through imaginative and embodied fusion with her.

What Rachel and Wick experience as a transgressive closeness that (at least temporarily) effaces Rachel’s empathy for Borne is in fact Borne’s empathy, only enhanced by such intimate interpenetration, as illustrated by the segment above. This is because his manner of existence is sympoietic, above all; and through sympoiesis, as explained by Haraway, “[c]ritters . . . loop

²¹² It must be noted, though, that he does not *know* Rachel in the way that he knows all the things he digested: it is his love and empathy for Rachel that simultaneously prevent him from absorbing her and Wick, and allow him to take on her form, even if incompletely, because Borne could not fully incorporate Rachel without consuming her.

around and through one another, eat each another, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages” (Haraway, *Staying* 58). While both absorption and mimicry are integral to his trans-corporeal mode of sympoietic articulation and to his empathic openness, Borne’s aspects of emulating human embodiment are perceived as encroaching on too intimate a boundary, stirring an impression of obtrusive proximity that provokes intense anxieties and even a certain amount of disgust in human characters because, as noted by William Major in a different context, such an apparently uncontrollable somatic mimicry does not preserve “the figure of a differentiated self” (126).

A comparable sense of trans-corporeality is evident in *Fifteen Dogs*: relishing the tastes and traces of other “fleshy beings” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2) and highly susceptible to “the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” (2), dogs are similarly given to a more somatically connected existence that is oriented, above all, by olfactory and tactile impressions. Even after he goes blind, Prince feels that he “could . . . make his way [in the world]” (Alexis 159) because it was “still alive with scents . . . that were landmarks and others that, in their vividness, threatened to lead him astray. The trees and the beams of the wooden steps and bridges gave off a familiar and comforting smell – principally, dog’s urine . . . There was the smell of creek water, mud, dust, small animals, perfume, human sweat and bodies” (159-160). Though invaded by elements of human consciousness that drives them towards human mimicry which proves unnerving for humans as well as for themselves, the dogs, like Borne, retain their primary, haptic mode of relating to the world even after the uncanny duplication of their consciousness: indeed, it is duplicity that causes most of the friction, within them and in their relations with humans. Similarly to Rachel’s narration of her relationship with Borne, where the root of unease is mostly the tension between the tactile nearness and the estranging, impervious perception of the companion creature, organised around sensory experiences that are unavailable for the human, Alexis’s narrative enacts this weirding and discomforting proximity by hinting at the sensory pleasures pervading the dogs’ lifeworld, which, however, remain unrelatable through human narration or conceptualisation: as Majnoun contemplates what it would feel like to be human, he ultimately arrives at the conclusion that he could never imagine “the implications of a world created by their limitations” (141).

Much like *Borne* and *Fifteen Dogs*, Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* is concerned with the ways its protagonists negotiate between ease and estrangement. We see this process through the uncanny perspective of the artificial friend Klara, whose narrative voice is “at once . . . disarming and disorienting” (DeFalco 2). Possessed of a similar sense of “cuteness”—remarked

upon by several human characters—and childlike wonder as Borne, Klara offers her “interpret[ation] [of] the nuances of her environment (human and otherwise), delivering her observations and conclusions to the reader in a direct, seemingly guileless style” (DeFalco 2). At the same time, as argued by Amelia DeFalco, it is precisely this “lack of guile and insight” that serve as “a reminder of her difference, her nonhuman, artificial status” (2). Yet, in addition to that “profound naïveté” (2) with which she relates her experience, the very nature of that experience appears to be alienating: the glimpses into her posthuman perspective reveal that the senses—particularly, her vision and depth-perception—and the logic through which she navigates her environment differ fundamentally from those of humans. For much of the story, Klara grapples not only with the subtleties of human emotion and expression, but also with (human) spaces, finding these difficult to traverse, especially when she ventures into them for the first time:

The field became partitioned into boxes, some larger than others, and I pressed on, conscious of the contrasting atmospheres between one box and another. One moment the grass would be soft and yielding, the ground easy to tread; then I’d cross a boundary and everything would darken, the grass would resist my pushes, and there would be strange noises around me, making me fearful that I’d made a serious miscalculation . . . While crossing one particularly unkind box, I heard around me the cries of an animal in pain, and a picture came into my mind of Rosa, sitting on the rough ground somewhere outdoors, little pieces of metal scattered around her, as she reached out both hands to grasp one of her legs stretched out stiffly before her. (Ishiguro 175)

Often partitioned into “boxes”, Klara’s manner of perception, foregrounded in these instances, may in itself be disorienting enough to contemplate; however, her interpretations of what she sees often increase the sense of strangeness, which clashes with her otherwise recognisable and immersive recounting of events, “produc[ing] a kind of slant reading experience that both comforts and challenges its human readers” (DeFalco 2). The correlations and associations emerging through her “reading” of her environment, such as in the quote cited above—where the sound made by some unseen animal reminds her of her AF-friend Rosa—may seem random or even nonsensical,²¹³ suggestive of how her interpretative processes remain obscure even as readers are ostensibly given direct access to her introspective reflections. Potentially, the most distinctive aspect of her machine-epistemology is the “particular importance [she assigns] to the sun as a source of ‘nourishment’ (1) and ‘kindness’ (6), regarding ‘him’ as a god-like agent of care with the power to sustain, even cure the creatures he touches with his ‘special kind of

²¹³ For instance, once out on a trip with Josie’s mother, Klara makes some observations about a bull, which she describes as “evil” (113), while later on, upon seeing some sheep, she notes that “although we were moving very fast, I was able to see that each one of them was filled with kindness – the exact opposite of the terrible bull from earlier” (121). It is uncertain whether these connotations of gentleness and terror are the result of some human conditioning, or arise due to the opaque working of her machine-consciousness.

nourishment' (37)" (DeFalco 1). Klara's connection to the sun, notably, is primarily expressed in embodied terms: it is by touching the sun's patterns on the floor, or bathing herself in its light, that Klara gains the sustenance necessary for her functioning. In this way, her body, as Marchand writes in another context, is also "reconfigured as [a] permeable and porous sit[e] in a state of constant relation" (293) with her environment, while her exposure or withdrawal from the sun, as implied by the text, has an affective dimension for her (and other AFs) as well: as Klara remarks, "an AF would feel himself growing lethargic after a few hours away from the Sun, and start to worry there was something wrong with him – that he had some fault unique to him and that if it became known, he'd never find a home" (Ishiguro 7).

Her techno-perspective also features prominently among the causes of the misunderstandings that arise between her and Josie, the human child for whom Klara is purchased as a companion. As Klara mentions, she and Josie have "many friendly arguments about how one part of [Josie's] house is connected to another" (64), which result in Josie taking Klara outside for the first time to put an end to these disagreements. While Klara describes the quarrels as "friendly," Josie's reaction ("Klara, you're driving me crazy with this" [64]) also hints at how Klara is prone to misinterpret Josie's behaviour and the intricacies of her affective expressions. Concerned about the need to understand "the more mysterious emotions [humans] . . . display" if she is to provide appropriate care, Klara, even prior to becoming Josie's AF, observes passers-by while still in the store (20), honing her skills of understanding via empathic perspective taking, using her imagination to try and experience the mental and affective states of those she sees, and then dissecting her own responses to the scenes witnessed. After attempting to imagine the anger exhibited by taxi-drivers engaged in a fight, she discovers no trace of rage within, yet there are "other kinds of emotions . . . of which [she does] eventually find some versions in [herself]" (23).

Rooted in her exceptional "ability to [observe,] absorb and blend" (49), her empathic capacity is a feature unique to Klara—and the reason why Josie's mother decides to buy her. As it turns out, in a worst-case scenario, the AF is intended to 'replace' Josie: should the child die, Klara's task is to inhabit and enliven her copy, crafted by scientist Mr. Capaldi. Resentful of the idea, Josie's father, Paul, voices his doubts regarding the possibilities of Josie's "impersonation" to Klara, suggesting that the "human heart" is something inimitable (242-243). Yet Klara's sincere response is that she "believe[s] if [she] . . . observe[s] Josie carefully, it will be within [her] abilities" to perform her (242). Comparing Josie to "a house with many rooms" (243), Klara argues that Josie's complexity "must be limited" (243): even if, as Paul suggests, in this house she discovers "[r]ooms within rooms within rooms," so that it may seem that "[n]o

matter how long you wandered through those rooms, . . . there [would] always be others you'd not yet entered" (243),²¹⁴ she insists that "there'll be an end to what there is to learn" (243). This reflects how Klara's experience of human subjectivity as something fluid and volatile but eventually predictable essentially differs from humans' perception of the self as not fully decipherable. Presented as a viable possibility, the AF's becoming-Josie is disturbing because it would corroborate Mr. Capaldi's claim that there is "[n]othing inside Josie that's beyond the Klaras of this world to continue" (233).²¹⁵ In fact, the conviction that "there's something unreachable inside each" human being (233) is overtly undermined by a test Mr. Capaldi performs on Klara, proof that "she's already well on her way to accessing quite comprehensively all of Josie's impulses and desires" (233).

By presenting the idea of humans possessing "[s]omething that's unique and won't transfer" as mere sentimentality (233), Ishiguro's novel "treats human individuality and, by extension, the notion of humanity itself as profoundly unstable, as a cultural paradigm rather than a natural truth" (DeFalco 6), and engages with the idea of human subjectivity as performance. This question is (more or less) explicitly explored several times, most memorably during an encounter that contrasts human children's and Klara's behaviour. The scene takes place at an "interaction meeting," a highly artificial and awkward setting where participants are supposed to cultivate 'normal' human interactions, since, as it turns out, most children in the novel's society are "lifted," that is, genetically altered to maximise their cognitive capacities. While the process entails considerable risks—it has caused Josie's illness her older sister's death—, most parents choose to go along with it because considerable socio-hierarchical divisions exist between 'regular' and lifted children. Tutored privately at home, such children are raised in isolation, with only artificial friends (AFs) to alleviate their loneliness. Hence, the interaction meeting presents a relatively rare occasion for lifted teenagers to practice their social skills; yet, if anything, the episode showcases the artificiality of the definition of the human, as the modified children end up behaving more like robots stuck in pre-designed circuits than AFs would ever do.²¹⁶ Keen to show off Klara's abilities, Josie callously denigrates her AF as a mere

²¹⁴ This architectural metaphor of the complexity of human subjectivity bears resemblance to how Dolores in *Westworld* explains her experience of grief expanding her consciousness: "You think the grief will make you smaller inside, like your heart will collapse in on itself, but it doesn't. I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I've never explored" (S01E04, "Dissonance Theory" 03:13-03:20)

²¹⁵ A very similar comment is made by *Westworld*'s Dr Ford, who at one point proclaims that "[h]umans fancy that there's something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next" ("Trace Decay," 36:04-36:21)

²¹⁶ In this way, the scene, presenting Klara in a far more favourable light than the human children, also parallels the manner in which the biotech-child Borne is presented as more of a "person" than the monstrous young humans in VanderMeer's novel.

status symbol: addressing her, for the first time, in the same authoritative tone that she only uses with the housekeeper (Ishiguro 86-87), Josie commands Klara to perform some ‘tricks’ in order to impress and amuse her human peers. Confused by being objectified, which, despite her awareness of her artificiality, is at odds with her usual subjective experience, Klara ‘freezes’. Unable to perform as a robot, she disappointingly ends up acting as one, “fix[ing] a pleasant expression on [her] face and . . . gazing past [the child facing her]” (88). In this case, Klara acts as a mechanical being just as consciously as she mimics and tries to comprehend human behaviour.

Finding the experience uncomfortable but interesting (92), she takes note of Josie’s fluctuating subjectivity and role-taking:

Not only had I learned that ‘changes’ were a part of Josie, and that I should be ready to accommodate them, I’d begun to understand also that this wasn’t a trait peculiar just to Josie; that people often felt the need to prepare a side of themselves to display . . . (96)

While Klara herself evaluates the situation with an empathic acceptance of Josie’s behaviour, the scene is also potentially jarring from the reader’s perspective, as the sinister image of AFs’ treatment that emerges here clashes with our understanding of Klara as a sentient being. Tasked with keeping privileged children company, these child-like humanoid robots occupy a liminal, and in many ways, petlike position.²¹⁷ Josie seems to extend or deny empathy to Klara at will, depending on the situation: once appearing affectionate and prioritising Klara’s desires (like watching the sun go down every day from Josie’s window), and other times disregarding her, or keeping her on standby until the next time she is needed (as Klara remarks, she is usually present, “as Josie liked me to be, but wishing to give privacy, [I] stood in the shadows, my face turned to the refrigerator” [73]).²¹⁸ At the same time as it “queries the innate ethical significance of the human” (DeFalco 6), *Klara and the Sun* depicts how artificial friends, despite being cast as caretakers and exhibiting as well as claiming affective agency, are kept strictly subordinate to humans; partly, as is implied, to keep anxieties about the developments of artificial intelligence at bay. For many human characters in the novel, the evolution and—in the case of Josie’s housekeeper, Melania, freaked out by Klara—even the presence of AFs is intimidating. The interaction meeting subtly suggests that the root of this anxiety is, at least partially, the sense that “the distinction between human and nonhuman and the hierarchical significance of

²¹⁷ Animals are noticeably absent from much of Ishiguro’s storyworld: Klara only comes across a bull and some sheep while on a trip with the Mother. The only person mentioned in the novel owning a dog is a homeless man living across the street from Klara’s store.

²¹⁸ Especially in the early days of their cohabitation, Klara even seems to revert to a peculiar object-being whenever she is not participating in direct interaction with the others, usually facing the refrigerator in the kitchen corner, “listening to its comforting sounds” (Ishiguro 192).

that distinction [are] becom[ing] increasingly confused” (DeFalco 6) as human children are shown to behave in a highly contrived manner, at the same time as androids appear more and more humanlike; however, the novel also hints at more directly threatening aspects of robotic progress.²¹⁹ Klara’s eventual “substitution” of Josie is a considerable source of contention as well, especially between Josie’s mother and father; but Chrissie herself also often appears conflicted in her treatment of Klara.

Chrissie seems to simultaneously affirm and negate Klara’s affective authenticity and subjecthood, once even going as far as to admit her envy of Klara, saying: “[i]t must be nice sometimes to have no feelings” (Ishiguro 111). Since she asks Klara to ‘superscribe’ her original self with a continuation of that of Josie, it appears that, in Chrissie’s view, Klara does not possess an authentic subjectivity that could be considered valuable on its own terms. Yet, in another instance, Klara is also conceived as mind *only*: when she asks Chrissie what will happen to her body once her mind takes residence in Josie’s copy, the mother responds dismissively: “What does it matter? That’s just fabric” (237). When they arrive at Morgan Falls together, Chrissie asks Klara to imitate Josie, both in terms of physical comportment and voice, yet she is profoundly unnerved when Klara seems to respond in Josie’s voice:

I smiled in the way Josie would, settling into a slouching, informal posture.
‘That’s good. Now say something. Let me hear you speak.’
‘I’m sorry. I’m not sure...’
‘No. That’s Klara. I want Josie.’ . . .
‘Hi, Mom. Nothing to worry about, right? I got here and I’m fine.’ The Mother leaned even further across the table, and I could see joy, fear, sadness, laughter in the boxes.
. . . ‘It’s okay, Mom, don’t worry. I’ll get well soon. I know how it’ll happen too.’
‘Okay, Josie. So tell me how you’ll get well.’
‘There’s special help coming. Something no one’s thought of yet. Then I’ll be well again.’
‘What is this? Who’s this talking?’ Now, in box after box, I could see the cheekbones of the Mother’s face very pronounced beneath her skin.
‘Really, Mom. I’m going to be fine.’
‘That’s enough. Enough!’ (Ishiguro 118-119)

While she does intend for Klara to eventually take the place of Josie, should the worst happen, the very first instance in which Klara seems to metamorphose into the object of her mimicry, showcasing her capacity to replicate Josie, proves greatly unnerving for Chrissie. The sense of discomfort that arises here may also have to do with the *duration* of the transformation process: rather than occurring instantaneously, Klara is morphing gradually into the daughter before her

²¹⁹ It is revealed that Josie’s father was a victim of the “substitutions” that resulted in many people in losing their jobs, while a woman, upon meeting Klara and Josie outside a theatre, asks Josie if she is “intending to bring this machine” inside with her, and then remarks sullenly: “First they take the jobs. Then they take the seats at the theater?” (Ishiguro 268-269).

mother's eyes, slowly immersing herself into her performance of Josie, an overwhelming empathic mimicry enabled by her seemingly limitless affective-somatic openness. At the same time, Klara's imitation of Josie is profoundly uncanny: instead of physically becoming identical to Josie—this is what Borne does when he replicates Rachel—she remains herself and performs Josie at the same time, a duplicity that is distressing for Chrissie. Even though the performance occurs at her request, Chrissie is taken aback both by Klara's suggestion of knowing of a way of making Josie better and by the fact that this is uttered in Josie's voice, emerging from Klara's body.²²⁰ Her reaction exhibits how, from a human perspective, the nonhuman taking on the human's embodiment is experienced as transgressive and even monstrous, in the sense of it being a revelation of a proximity “so intimate that the two beings [appear to] converge” (DeFalco 4).

Klara's perspective on her reproduction of Josie, however, differs considerably from that of both Chrissie and Paul. While Paul's “conception of unique human being and the ineffability of the human heart” (DeFalco 4) is unsettled by the “prospect of imitation so perfect that it ceases to be imitation” (4), for Klara, “imagin[ing] the possibility of a radical kinship with Josie” (4) appears as a potentially even “better way” of fulfilling her duty to Josie and her family (Ishiguro 237). For Klara, this duty consists of inexhaustible and constant care, one which she believes she can perform through developing an empathic understanding of Josie. While initially, Klara demonstrates a gentle openness to Josie, her attitude is best described as the kind of “twofold attention” involved in Martha Nussbaum's notion of empathy, in which “one both imagines what it is like to be in the [other's] place and, at the same time, retains securely the awareness that one is not in that place” (*Upheavals* 328); at the request of the mother, she becomes willing to supplant her own experience with that of Josie.²²¹ From her perspective, however, learning and absorbing Josie's affective expressions, gestures and idiosyncrasies to perfection is not only about “the best way to save Josie” (Ishiguro 243), but also about a kind of boundless empathic comprehension that may emerge in the process: “a devoted AF, given time, could walk through each of those rooms [that constitute Josie's heart], studying them carefully in turn, until they became like her own home” (243). For Klara, empathic mimicry seems to provide a path into the kind of care that Nel Noddings defines as

²²⁰ Klara believes that asking the sun to give Josie his special kind of “attention” will cure Josie, because for her, “the sun is a primary caregiver, a living, dynamic agent who nourishes solar-powered AFs and humans alike” (DeFalco 5).

²²¹ In this way, as opposed to Osden and Lauren, who are predominantly tortured by the implications of fusion involved in their respective hyperempathic conditions, Klara seems ready to embrace willingly a totalising empathic merging to capture and preserve Josie, in some sense, even if that would potentially amount to a permanent erasure of her own self.

“engrossment” (*Caring* 30). Instead of empathy, which she perceives as a form of projection, Noddings conceives of care as “engrossment” (*Caring* 30)—which bears some similarity to Nussbaum’s twofold attention—meaning that one “receive[s] the other into [one]self” and by seeing and feeling with the other, “become[s] a duality” (*Caring* 30). Though for Josie’s family, the idea of her mimetic reproduction via Klara appears simultaneously as a necessity and an uncanny and unbearable infringement of intersubjective and inter-creatural boundaries, for Klara, whose existence seems entirely exhausted by her being-for-the-(human)-other, such an identification with Josie via empathic fusion is potentially desirable even if Josie survives, insofar as it helps her to enhance her own affective complexity and thus meet her responsibilities towards Josie’s happiness and wellbeing: as she asserts, “the more I observe, the more feelings become available to me” (Ishiguro 111). Indeed, willing to make any number of sacrifices—including giving up part of her operating fluid which temporarily impairs her cognition, and making several treacherous trips to the barn where she believes the sun resides, to plead with “him” to help Josie—Klara is not only intent on Josie’s absorption and replication, if the need arises; she is also entirely consumed by her “duty [to be her child’s] best friend” (63).

Through Klara’s readiness to “fuse” with Josie, even at the cost of effacing herself in the process, however, “the novel’s speculative critique of the unequal distribution of ethical significance” (DeFalco 2) is also foregrounded: unable to properly place her in their network of relations, human characters’ attitudes to Klara remain controversial throughout the novel, alternately promising her safety and affection (“I’d never let anything bad happen to you” [Ishiguro 287], Josie tells Klara) yet denying her affective agency and bodily autonomy. Relying on her mostly as an intersubjective supplement, to keep her loneliness at bay when she cannot be kept company by her mother or her best friend, Rick, Josie fluctuates in her reciprocation of the empathy and care she receives from Klara. Though unwilling to part with her AF when her mother offers to “give up her job and stay with [Josie] the whole time” (287), Josie also makes clear on a number of occasions that the AF’s caring function is predominantly auxiliary, unable to provide the same comfort as her mother or Rick. When Klara proposes to fill in for Rick in the children’s secret game, Josie seems offended even by the idea of such a substitution (148-149); and when Josie has a panic attack, she insists on having her mother with her, unconsolated by Klara’s caring presence:

‘But your mother needs to rest.’ I kept my voice a whisper. ‘I’m your AF. This is exactly why I’m here. *I’m always here.*’
‘I didn’t say you. I need Mom!’ . . .

There was movement behind me, and I was pushed aside so that I almost lost balance. When I recovered, I saw before me, on the near edge of the bed, a large shifting shape, made additionally complex by the patches of blackness and moonlight moving over its surface. I realized the shape was the Mother and Josie embracing . . . As well as their limbs, their hair had become mingled, and then their shape began gently to rock, in a way not unlike when their goodbyes became extended. (199-200, my emphasis)

Instead of Klara's envisioned merging with Josie, here, it is mother and daughter who seem to fuse in the caring embrace, suggesting that Klara's empathy, however limitless,²²² is no match for the mother's care, at least in the most critical moments. Despite her uninterrupted presence and perpetual accessibility, it seems that Klara cannot provide the same level of comforting intimacy as her mother can give Josie—a fact that may be anxiety-inducing for the AF herself, who remarks on the precarious situation of other AFs she observes,²²³ empathising with them, she suggests that their status may have to do with the fact that they were unable to provide the satisfactory level of support for their child.

Thus, while both Josie and Chrissie demonstrate a close reliance on Klara, she is usually not given the same level of consideration as a “properly” human member of the family would be. Once Klara promises that she will do her best to continue Josie if the need arises, Chrissie vows that she will “be loved like nothing else in this world” (236); yet soon after, she still offers to quit her job for her daughter, in which case they “wouldn't need Klara any more” (287). Instances like these indicate that Klara matters only insofar as she is willing and able to put her body and mind to the service of the family by caring for Josie and by approximating her as closely as possible; a proximity that, despite the mother's promise that it would be rewarded by a reciprocal appreciation of Klara, also generates unease. At the same time, Josie's relationship with Klara not only hints at the hierarchical aspect of empathy, but is also characterised by an ambivalent attitude of care—a concern for another's wellbeing that, however, also involves regulation and even repression. Such a tension is also typical of the canine-human relations in Alexis's novel, and indeed, palpable in Rachel and Borne's posthuman parent-child dynamic: in this way, all three texts seem to problematise the embroilment of care and control, or even

²²² Reminiscent of the film *Her*—which portrays humans' relative disconnectedness from each other, contrasted with the intimate connections they cultivate with OSs, like the nonhuman-protagonist Samantha, who can approach humans with boundless compassion and concern—Klara's empathy is characterised by a constancy that is impossible to attain for the mother, whose patience, affection and attention necessarily oscillate, influenced by a number of external and internal factors that do not impact artificial friends.

²²³ She recounts seeing “a girl of fourteen” who at first appeared unaccompanied; then, however, she realises that “she was with an AF after all – a boy AF – who was walking three paces behind. And I could see . . . that he hadn't lagged behind by chance; that this was how the girl had decided they would always walk . . . And I could see the weariness in the boy AF's walk, and wondered what it might be like to have found a home and yet to know that your child didn't want you” (20). As she concludes, until she “saw this pair it hadn't occurred to me an AF could be with a child who despised him and wanted him gone, and that they could nevertheless carry on together” (20).

the way in which, as Jack Halberstam observes, “[c]are all too often has *stood in* for control” (723, my emphasis).

IV. 3. Intimate interdependencies and renegotiating boundaries: navigating distance and speculative empathy

Danielle Sands intriguingly points out that “[e]mpathy and disgust share unexpected similarities: while perceived as humanising or even civilising, they both draw upon ‘the common animality’ shared by humans and other species” (173), even as they “move . . . in different directions” (173).²²⁴ She also notes, however, that whereas “empathy is something that we can and, arguably, should cultivate, disgust needs no cultivation; rather *Ekel* [German for “disgust”] overtakes us” (Sands 173); a distinction that I would like to challenge by arguing that certain forms of empathy are indeed very much capable of spontaneously captivating us, without the necessity of cultivation. Such forms of empathy, automatic and visceral (like emotional contagion or empathic mimicry), are often, as I stated in the Introduction of this dissertation, dismissed as not properly empathic—yet, it is precisely these forms of empathy, rooted in shared embodiment and instinctual resonance, that can bring creatures-in-relation closer, without necessarily requiring or resulting in cognitive comprehension. Crucially, since the entities portrayed by these novels possess forms of sentience that manifest in ways that are (to lesser or greater degrees) alien to and inconceivable for humans, cognitive empathy and perspective-taking—while they contribute vitally to establishing inter-creatural engagement and a sense of openness to the other—have a limited role in the inter-creatural relations staged here. As illustrated by the previous section, the texts employ alienating nonhuman perceptions—accessible to a lesser or greater degree, through the first-person narration of Klara, the third-person focalisation of the dogs, and Borne’s alien perspective, only available as it is strained through Rachel’s first-person narrative—to frustrate human processes of interpretation and undermine illusions of comprehensive understanding. What also emerges in Ishiguro’s, VanderMeer’s and Alexis’s texts, is an often intrusive, uncomfortable nearness (both from the perspectives of human and nonhuman beings) that transgresses perceptual, affective and even occasionally somatic boundaries, either facilitating or foreclosing empathetic relating. So, in this last section, I shall look at how these boundaries may be seen as being re-negotiated through

²²⁴ As Sands explains, “[c]ross-species empathy begins proximately, often from anthropomorphism: the appreciation of a human quality, even that of vulnerability, exhibited by a nonhuman animal. Only at its peripheries does it begin to destabilise our conceptions of the human. In contrast, the starting point for disgust is distance, shockingly violated by an undesirable proximity, which, at first perceived as an accidental violation, inevitably reveals an ordinary, disavowed proximity: abjection” (173).

speculative empathy, with more or less success, through a touching, intimate attunement to the other and through an admission and acceptance of mutual vulnerability and dependence. The potential inherent in such a re-negotiation of affective hierarchies was already hinted at in Chapter Two, primarily with respect to Theodore and Samantha, whose companionship gestured towards dismantling the uneven power dynamics structuring android-human relations; the film, as I have suggested, offers seemingly total and final separation as the ultimate solution, with the OSs leaving for a place that is “not of the physical world” (01:51:50-01:51:53). In *Borne*, *Fifteen Dogs* and *Klara and the Sun*, however, as I shall attempt to show in this last section, creatures are obliged to—and in some cases, choose to—remain in close, affective and tactile proximity as they deal with the troubling imbalances implied in their intersecting relational configurations of master-property (or master-servant), human-nonhuman, teacher-student or (posthuman) parent-child, often made even more complex by the gender of the parties. It has to be noted that, whereas in the robotic woman-human man relationships portrayed in *Her* and *Westworld*, empathy and care are, in a sense, hijacked by fetishistic desire, complicating or (in William’s case) even eroding the men’s empathic relating toward the female technological companions, in the novels discussed in this chapter, it is women—three human women and one artificial girl—who successfully undertake the labour of care, and despite being vulnerable themselves, approach their vulnerable companions with speculative empathy and an emergent tactile response-ability.

While “scholars of touch frequently point out [that] touch involves a degree of intimacy, even *transgression* as one’s ostensibly discrete body makes contact with the world” (DeFalco, *Curious* 65, my emphasis), beyond their transgressive and subversive potential, explored in the previous subchapter, the embodied connections that are nurtured between human and nonhuman creatures in these narratives are also, at least temporarily, about negotiating affective proximity and what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa calls “the right distance” (5). Countering the sense of oppressive closeness forced onto several of the dogs, Nira, when out on walks with Majnoun, makes a point of having the dog draw his boundaries, letting him decide who can touch him. While she assumes that “Majnoun would not mind the displays of affection” and is “surprised to discover that, *au contraire*, Majnoun was highly selective in whom he allowed to touch him” (Alexis 52), Nira respects Majnoun’s decisions about whom he lets approach him, even as for her, it seems “impossible . . . to detect any pattern to Majnoun’s *yeses* or *nos*” (52). Far from being random, the dog’s choices are influenced by his delicate sense of smell as well as station: he does not “like to be touched by humans who smelled unpleasantly” (53) or by humans who, “however inadvertently or unconsciously, belittled [Nira]” (54). After suffering

almost fatal injuries, Majnoun at first feels exposed and ashamed due to his unprecedented helplessness, and even starts to doubt whether “he deserved to live as a dog” (22), yet later on, he also comes to find unexpected joy in the relationship of mutual trust he cultivates with Nira, and is more and more willing to express his preferences and desires to her. The woman admires Majnoun’s dignified quietness—“the kind of silence that invited response” (48)—and a “lovely, wordless communication” (126) unfolds between them; at this point, their connection finds expression in a shared silence.

However, after a misinterpretation of each other’s gestures causes a fracture in their bond, the god Hermes interferes once more, convincing Majnoun to start using human language again by guaranteeing that Majnoun “will never misinterpret [Nira’s] words again, nor she [his]” (123). The moment she hears Majnoun speak again is experienced by Nira as if the dog has “entered her consciousness in some new way” (125). Through what seems to be a complete mutual understanding, their connection evolves into a sort of fusion, dissolving any sense of hierarchy by turning them into companion species that “co-shape one another” (Haraway *When Species*, 4). Indeed, Nira insists that “I’m as much his as he’s mine” (Alexis 132), evoking Haraway’s argument that “possession . . . is about reciprocity . . . If I have a dog, my dog has a human” (*Companion* 2-3). However, Nira’s feeling “that Majnoun understood her [perhaps better than] her husband did” (Alexis 119) reveals transgressive aspects of their intimacy. Maintaining that “Miguel was her mate”, Nira also admits that “[w]ith Majnoun, [she] could be herself in a way that brought relief from the company of her husband” (119). However, when Majnoun’s company becomes so precious to Nira that “the fact that [he] was a dog cease[s] to signify” (127), a crucial distance between them is erased. Earlier, Nira and Majnoun relied more on an empathic, embodied kinship where “the turn of a head or a hesitant nod were all meaningful” (126) and where both of them were “limited in [their] ability to imagine or understand [each other’s] concerns” (48), necessitating a version of what I have called speculative empathy that allowed them to relate to each other without subsuming the other’s point of view. Conversely, the full mutual comprehension they develop appears to efface their “significant otherness”²²⁵ (Haraway, *Companion* 7) by leaving no space for their fundamentally altering perspectives: this is illustrated by a shared dream they have, in which “Nira, look[ing] into the water, . . . saw Majnoun’s face reflected back at her, while Majnoun, in his [dream], saw Nira’s face where his should have been” (Alexis 132). Nira actually prefers their previous

²²⁵ As Haraway argues, existing in significant otherness entails “vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures” (*Companion* 7).

version of embodied attunement, wherein she “learned to read [Majnoun’s] expression, the disposition of his body, the tilt of his head” (48), as opposed to the total understanding, mediated via human expressions, that emerges between them later on. In fact, despite the interference of Hermes, which reduces the cognitive distance between Majnoun and Nira, their bond is eventually reinstated again as a form of somatic kinship: “[b]y degrees, they had less use for words or English” as each “could anticipate what the other wanted” (132), with both Nira being able to “tell when exactly Majnoun wished to eat or go for a walk” and Majnoun knowing as well “when it was time to leave Nira alone, when it was time to comfort her, when it was time to sit quietly by her side” (132).

Contemplating experiential differences between humans and dogs, Alexis’s novel also hints at such a sense of strange kinship forming between Majnoun and Nira. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of strange kinship (*étrange parenté*) (*Nature* 271), relatively unexplored by the philosopher himself, yet having nonetheless captivated scholars since its first mention, describes the “relation of the human and animality” (268) as “not a hierarchical relation, but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship” (268).²²⁶ Expanding on Merleau-Ponty’s concept, Kelly Oliver argues that “‘strange kinship’ attempts to balance relationships and communion between human and animal beings with respect for the differences between them: differences which extend to individual human or animal beings in ways that ultimately challenge the very dichotomy man-animal” (K. Oliver 102). The fusion that Nira and Majnoun’s bond eventually transforms into does not entirely efface the sense of strange kinship that evolves in their relationship earlier in the narrative. Indeed, they seem to retain awareness of the differences between their sensory-cognitive apparatuses at the same time as they cherish the sense of “shared embodiment in a shared world, even if the style of body and of inhabiting that world are radically different” (K. Oliver 115). Mutually inclined to marvel at each other’s mode of experiencing the world, they share, for instance, their respective associations about willows, which are “for both of them a source of fascination” (Alexis 127): Majnoun, on the one hand, “[t]hough he knew better, . . . had always thought the trees were a subtle kind of animal, deceptive and imperious. To the very end, part of him still believed it. He could not contemplate the swaying branches without wishing to bite them” (127), while for Nira, who “[m]inus the desire to bite . . . felt something similar” (127), the trees “were like mammoths in

²²⁶ In Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation, “[I]f life is not seen as behavior, as trial and error, or as orthogenesis, but as configuration, if it is not defined as substance” (*Nature* 271). He also suggests an “[e]xtension to the animal what Descartes said of the human body as a body, *that it cannot close in on itself*, in the manner of a fragment of space, because the use of life teaches us not only the union of our soul and our body, but also the lateral union of animality and humanity” (271, my emphasis).

leaf: ancient, slow, the last of something imperial” (127). Thus, the “lateral union” (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 271) that emerges between them “neither erases all differences between animals and humans rendering them identical nor erases any similarities between them rendering them radically separate” (K. Oliver 115).

Ultimately, it is also this sense of strange kinship that seems to evolve into speculative empathy, at least on the part of Majnoun: pondering over the perception of Nira with gentle curiosity, he finds it “interesting . . . how much humans relied on their imaginations” (Alexis 130). Whereas Majnoun “preferred [in the old days] to *allow his body* to think for him . . . Now that he was somewhere between dog and human, he was curious about the imagination” (130, my emphasis). Then, when Nira is killed in a tragic accident, to feel closer to her, Majnoun tries “to imagine the world as she saw it, to feel it as she felt it” (141), which helps alleviate his grief. His longing is eventually eased by Hermes, who lets him experience love from Nira’s perspective, so that Majnoun’s own life also ends with a profoundly empathic experience. Majnoun, however, is not the only one to experience the sustaining power of such an intimate, yet cautiously curious empathic relating: after going blind, the mutt Prince decides to rely on a human family because he can no longer take care of himself.²²⁷ Having enjoyed his “independence that allowed him to explore his territory, to compose his poems in solitude, to encounter the world on his own terms” (158), he chooses a home where “none clung to him or condescended” (159). After he settles into the security provided by the company of the woman, in particular, Prince, saddened by the idea of their hybrid dog-language dying with him, tries to recite one of his poems to the woman: although she does not understand Prince’s intention (or recognise that he is speaking words to her), she tries to comfort him by attempting to repeat the sounds she hears, which Prince receives with profound gratefulness, feeling that “a great boundary had been crossed” (166). Even though she cannot think herself into Prince’s mind—nor does she try to—, the woman senses Prince’s despair and *responds* to him: first, through gentle touch and then through imitating his own sounds as a gesture intended to soothe. In Alexis’s novel, inter-creatural empathy and care thus emerge as forces with a “potential to disrupt the status quo” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 11), enabling reciprocal relatings wherein companion creatures do not dominate each other but respect each other’s bodily autonomy and embrace nearness without intruding upon the interiority of the other.

²²⁷ Despite the hybrid dogs’ alienation from their own species, the dogs that Prince meets on his journey towards his new home empathise with him as they sense his plight, “treating him with a kind of deference after licking his face and smelling his breath” (Alexis 83).

A sense of interdependence is also evident in Klara and Josie's relationship, where relationality is even implied by the electric entities being named artificial friends: without forming a bond with a human child, they lose all significance in the novel's society. On the other hand, the physically disabled Josie not only relies on Klara as her 'best friend', but also as her carer, although the vulnerability and instability entailed by such interdependence is not easily tolerated by Josie, which seems to hinder her intimacy with Klara. Whereas Klara's language of care seems to be more physical—when she sees Rick growing tense in an uncomfortable situation, she wants to reassure him by “touch[ing] his arm or shoulder” (Ishiguro 255); and in one of the rare instances where she gets a hug from Josie's mother, she feels Chrissie's “kindness sweeping through [her]” (237)—Josie mostly seems reluctant to accept Klara's touch or to initiate tactile connection with her. Though she appears comfortable with the embodied nearness of her mother—cherishing the moments in which their embrace grows so long that Chrissie is “obliged to introduce a rocking motion to disguise how long it was lasting” (104)—as well as with the proximity of her father and Rick, she tends to withdraw from Klara in this sense, for instance, during her panic attack. In her account, Klara only mentions three (all quite momentous) occasions on which Josie embraces her. In fact, Josie appears quite unwilling to rely on Klara in a physical sense: she only “[clings] tightly to [Klara]” (68) when she absolutely must, for instance because they are navigating some challenging terrain. Klara's narrative, however, hints at the sense that this may have to do with Josie not wanting to appear too weak and being ashamed of her condition.

From their first encounter, Josie insists on the mutuality of their relationship: she emphasises the implications of her illness, and wants Klara to be her AF of her own 'free will', beset by anxiety about Klara regretting her decision. On the contrary, Klara instantly senses her vulnerability, and consciously commits to Josie, even rejecting another child, defying the rule that “[i]t's for the customer to choose the AF, never the other way round” (38). Resonating with her fluctuating moods and providing her with an attentive care that appreciates the difference of her complicated affective experience, Klara turns with understanding even to the more hurtful consequences of Josie's vulnerability and fear of loneliness. Josie, in turn, does seem to care for Klara by trying to keep her bodily autonomy intact: whereas other children often treat Klara in a proprietary manner (like one of Josie's guests at the interaction meeting, clutching Klara by the elbows [86]), Josie strives to allow Klara her space, and defends her against those who would invade it, telling the boy who restricts Klara's movement to “let go of her” because “she doesn't like being held that way” (86). However, their empathic interdependence seems to last only until Josie miraculously regains her health, after which Klara is relegated to the

margins of her life, spending most of her time in an appliance cabinet. As a final gesture for her years of faithful, empathic service, Klara is allowed her ‘slow fade’ instead of being taken apart to allay humans’ rising fears originating in the black box problem (meaning that humans “don’t understand how AFs think” [328]). But such benevolence, it might be argued, is quite pretentious. ‘Letting’ an artificially intelligent being with such an incredible affective agency and autonomy live out the rest of her lifetime in a landfill evokes a similar sense of hypocrisy as is involved in allowing (farm) animals to grow old in an art project discussed by Halberstam: “the animals, after all, do not just grow old: they are ‘allowed’ to grow old by their human overseer” (722).

As noted by DeFalco as well, during her contemplations at the Yard, “Klara comes to recognize the limitations of both the heart and the house metaphors of human being” which equally “assume a degree of stability that is at odds with the dynamism and relationality of being” (*Curious* 4). Upon meeting the Manager from her old store in the landfill again, she explains to her that even though she trusted in her ability to continue Josie, it would not have worked, because they were “searching in the wrong place” (Ishiguro 388), explaining that “[t]here *was* something very special, but it wasn’t inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her” (338, emphasis in original). She thus “comes to regard being as emerging from relations, particularly care relations, realising that any attempt to reproduce a particular person will ultimately fail because that person *resides in relations*, rather than in . . . a particular body or consciousness” (DeFalco, *Curious* 4). Even as Klara, despite her initial status as a pet, has the potential to emerge as a kind of posthuman child, the possibility of her replacing Josie appears to be foreclosed by the intersubjective network wherein it would be impossible to integrate her. In a similar vein, VanderMeer’s *Borne* suggests that subjecthood is thoroughly relational, made possible only by the affective bond between beings-in-relation; yet here, unlike in the case of Klara, Borne’s personhood is continually affirmed through Rachel’s empathy and love for him.

Initially, their connection is mediated through a (potentially mutual) speculative empathy: reflecting upon the uncertainties in her *reading* of Borne’s vocal and somatic expressions, Rachel’s account presents their care-relationship as most of all reliant on the two of them exhibiting a non-intrusive curiosity and wonder about each other’s embodied-minded experience, welcoming the other as they articulate themselves in the ways natural to them: Rachel mostly through words, Borne primarily through his bodily fluctuations, colours and scents. In the early stages of their kinship, both Rachel and Borne seem to resonate instinctually with each other’s perceived moods, responding, as best they can, to the other as they come forward in the modes and manners specific to their creaturely existence. Yet in her endeavours

to feel with Borne, Rachel is also confronted with the limits of her own imagination and parental care: as Borne develops, it becomes increasingly obvious for her that she will never be able to, nor should she try to fathom the depths of his interiority, and that any and all of her attempts to guide Borne, well-intentioned as they are, may be misguided. Beside Borne's experiential learning and embodied mode of knowledge compilation, Rachel's language-based knowledge and teaching—and even her sensory perception—appear limited and archaic: as Borne once mockingly tells Rachel when she tries to educate him about the things she knows, “Borne dances. Borne sings. Borne recites poetry. Is that what you want? While I'm doing other, more important things, I guess part of me could do that for you. I guess I could find a way if it's something you want” (VanderMeer 146). Due to their fundamentally disparate sensory experiences, Borne always seems to know and see more than Rachel does—unlike her, he asserts, he “can see *all* the connections . . . can see where it's all headed, what it's headed toward” (261, emphasis in original)—at the same time as some things appear to remain inevitably beyond him. Upon Rachel mentioning concepts like heaven and hell, then deciding not to enlighten Borne about religion, Borne responds “I don't always understand, Rachel. I love you, but I don't understand” (68), his reply accompanied by “his eyes form[ing] a kind of reproachful smile” (68). Though Rachel is sceptical about Borne's professions of love—noting to herself incredulously, “He'd just admitted he didn't know about heaven and hell. What could he know from love?” (68)—, it becomes increasingly clear to her that comprehension is not needed for love, or for empathy, both best expressed in tactile terms.

Finally giving up her mission of instructing Borne because the more she tries, “the more Borne was becoming distant, disengaged” (147), Rachel recognises that her guidance was “not what [Borne] needed” (148), and instead, at Borne's request, performs a gentle, tactile mapping of his body, to assess the extent of his injuries suffered on one of their outings into the city. Approaching Borne on his terms, with a caressing, cautious touch, they engage through a “language of care not reliant on the slipperiness of meaning” (Gormley 73), as “[w]ith each new unfurling, Borne was letting [Rachel] get closer to the heart of him, while he spoke not a word but let me find the wounds first myself” (VanderMeer 149). Indeed, in the entangled world of the novel, bodies appear more communicative and more connective than words, and it is through her first thorough inspection of Borne's body that Rachel begins to grasp “his complexity” (148), realising the extent to which “the logic that held his body together and animated him, had a deep awareness of the tactile” (148). Their empathic-embodied encounter foregrounds the reversible nature of touch (Puig de la Bellacasa 20); as Rachel feels out for him “the places Borne couldn't feel anymore” (VanderMeer 148), what she gains is an

approximation of the “wealth of unique touch” (149) particular to Borne that is “beyond the seeing eye, the knowing eye” (149), a sense of haptic reciprocity that is fundamental to his mode of perpetual becoming. At the same time, “despite the tentacles spraying out in one direction and the skirt in another and the central column of his presence and also various hunched-over assemblages of flesh under which the cilia writhed” (150), it is paradoxically as Borne is “splayed out like that, fully exposed” (149) that he “look[s] more human than he ever had” (150), that he feels “most familiar to [Rachel],” because “in that mode . . . [she] knew him best” (150).

Rather than amounting to a gesture of anthropomorphisation once again, one that would tame or domesticate Borne’s alien otherness, this moment of radical vulnerability becomes a face-to-face encounter between Borne and Rachel, where she, for the first time, is fully able to appreciate his “face” and recognise the imperative it contains, in the Levinasian sense. Whereas Rachel readily assumes responsibility for Borne from the moment she first holds him, genuine responsivity comes only when she is finally able to relinquish her humanising project. As opposed to her earlier notion that Borne had “no [real] face” (VanderMeer 36), through this “tender ritual of vulnerability, both physical and emotional” (Gormley 73-74), she responds to what she comes to perceive as his faciality, without him needing to mimic a human countenance. Borne, then, the opposite of the modified children, who, despite having eyes and faces, appear thoroughly inhuman—as Rachel observes, “the young were often the most terrible force in the city. Nothing in their gaze could tell you they were human” (VanderMeer 30).²²⁸ Though he has no “proper” face (at least, not one that Rachel could distinguish), Borne possesses a somatic expressivity that makes him a person in Rachel’s eyes. As noted by Levinas, the face as an ethical call is engrained in the entire somatic presence of the other so that “the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (*Totality* 262). Crucially, Atterton and Calarco also explain that the face “is not a mask or persona that ‘I wear.’ . . . It is the very presence of that which does not present itself to knowledge and understanding in the manner of things” (27)—so that Borne’s self-exposure in his most naked form, without him trying to influence Rachel by changing his scent or his colours (VanderMeer 149), emerges as a vulnerable, unfiltered face-to-face engagement, which “cannot be reduced to a relation of comprehension” (Atterton and Calarco 29).

²²⁸ Even though she had to endure their vicious attack, Rachel’s description of the children remains profoundly empathic: “They had no memories of the old world to anchor them or humble them or inspire them. Their parents were probably dead or worse, and the most terrible and transformative violence had been visited upon them from the earliest of ages” (VanderMeer 30). Her compassionate approach towards them is also reinforced by the fact that, after the death of Borne at the end of the novel, she adopts and raises many of the abandoned children.

Rachel's affirmation of Borne as a "person" with a face of his own persists even after Borne leaves the Balcony Cliffs. Realising the danger he poses to Rachel (because he cannot stop sampling everything around him), and wanting to claim a space of his own, exploring the city freely, Borne at first only moves out of Rachel's apartment in an attempt to resist her further attempts to educate and shelter him. His expulsion from the Balcony Cliffs, as traumatising as it is for all three of them involved, does not stop him from contacting Rachel, now navigating their relationship on his own terms. Still, though he increasingly appears to embrace his nature—from the first days of his sojourn in the city, "patterns began to emerge" (VanderMeer 206) as "people . . . seemed to just disappear" (206), raising "murmurs of an invisible killer" (206)—, Rachel relentlessly asserts Borne's personhood. Her affection remains steadfast even when Borne, upon their last meeting before his demise, reveals himself to Rachel once more, in an uncanny inversion of their intimate encounter back at the Balcony Cliffs:

Across the vast sea of him, in amongst the ripples, human heads appeared, like swimmers treading water. Animal heads, too, and the heads of mutant children . . . These shiny, dark heads with holes where their eyes should be. Staring.

But there was no shocking me anymore.

"Stop, Borne," I said.

The heads withdrew, the sea became gentle and quiet. I smelled the sun on sand and the scent of the surf and all the things he knew lay in my past that I loved.

"You are a person," I said, because I had to say it. Even with the evidence before me, or perhaps because of it. (261)

Despite Borne's apparent monstrousness, Rachel maintains their bond because she feels acutely the necessity of empathy and kinship in the cruelly hostile, volatile city; and Borne himself, while increasingly distanced from Rachel in an epistemological and spatial sense, remains close to her affectively, and keeps visiting her to feel her presence. After the death of Borne, who kills the gigantic biotech bear, Mord, responsible for most of the terror visited upon the place, the city becomes a more hospitable space, finally allowing its inhabitants to salvage what has been left to them, to grow together with the even more curious biotech who surface after the battle. Taking in many of the children who were forced to roam the streets beforehand, Rachel turns the Balcony Cliffs into a place of solace and refuge, sheltering what remains of Borne, restored into a plant-like form "not mov[ing] on his own" and "taking sustenance from the sun" (322). Though she acknowledges that he "had done terrible things despite not wanting to do them" (322), Rachel also absolves Borne, and continues to speak to him while retaining a nagging, "lingering need" (322) for Borne to respond, even as she knows that he "did not, could not speak [anymore], but [she] felt as if he were still there, inside" (322). Resonating with Haraway's claim that "[m]aking kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and

genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible” (*Staying 3*), what Rachel learns through her intimate kinship to Borne is that even as it entails immense vulnerability, survival and flourishing in her post-apocalyptic present requires cross-creatural response-ability. Becoming a carer for children and a vessel of hope for the future, Rachel finally embraces the recognition that within the city, the rules as to what makes a person are continually undone and re-negotiated. Yet, despite her assertion that “we all just want to be people, and none of us know what that really means” (VanderMeer 320), personhood, for Rachel, seems to consist of the intersubjective and inter-creatural connections made possible by speculative empathy and care for the most vulnerable, may they be (trans)human or biotech—constituting the ultimate ethical act envisioned by Cary Wolfe, “construed as one that is freely extended,” even “without hope of reciprocation by the other” (141).

IV. 4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at how *Borne*, *Klara and the Sun* and *Fifteen Dogs* cultivate the discomfort emerging as their estranging nonhuman (narrative) voices and perspectives undermine human conceptualisations of nonhuman interiority. I addressed the effects of (empathic) mimicry displayed by the nonhuman protagonists, arguing that their imitation or performance of humanness (even at the behest of humans), together with their embodied nearness, amount to a transgression of affective and perceptual boundaries, or, more precisely, to the disclosure of such borders as always-already permeable, reflecting one of the main recognitions of critical posthumanism. Yet, I have also tried to show that at the same time as the transgressive and unnerving aspects of embodied mimicry come to the fore—much like in Chapters 2 and 3—the novels also gesture towards the affirmative potentials of affective openness. All protagonists, human and nonhuman alike, are irrevocably transformed through their entanglements, and in spite of the ordeals they endure, they find solace in recognising a sense of kinship, cultivated through speculative empathy and a tactile response-ability. While Alexis’ novel depicts the very concept of love as problematic—it turns out through the interactions of Majnoun and Nira that canines are not informed by a notion of love as it is understood by humans—, Majnoun ultimately becomes capable of exploring what ‘love’ might entail through the strange kinship that evolves into his speculative empathic relationship with Nira. In *Klara and the Sun*, though the tension between the caring function and affective agency of AFs and their undefinable social status as machines apparently remains unresolved, at the end of her life, Klara is consoled by the knowledge that she has completed her calling, having

nurtured Josie with a care unique to her, and immerses herself in her memories of being the child's companion. Finally in *Borne*, both Rachel and Borne find immense joy and sustenance in the intimate bond they share, even as they struggle to navigate the transgressive aspects of their relationship, with Borne compelled to enforce some distance between herself and his adoptive "mother" due to her suffocating concern for him, and Rachel forced to cast Borne out from their home because of his violent, boundless absorption and unnerving mimicry of everything he encounters. Still, in spite of the physical distance, they manage to remain close, their embodied bond remaining intact even during their separation, recalling DeFalco's assertion that there is a kind of "touch [that] is embodied, but remote; things, creatures, images, and environments can touch us, can be 'touching' without any apparent epidermal involvement" (*Curious*, 67). Such a sense of affective proximity and touching intimacy, even without haptic involvement, is apparent in the case of Majnoun and Klara as well: as demonstrated by their care-relationships with their respective humans, care can also be about respect for the other's bodily autonomy, at the same time as merely sharing the presence of the other can feel like a soothing caress.

CONCLUSION

Speculative empathy and (re)generative encounters

What, then, is the matter with empathy, and why does empathy, especially if its scope is expanded to nonhuman creatures, matter? In the Introduction, I suggested that, traditionally, there is an internal hierarchy to empathy, which dismisses affective forms of empathic relating and instinctive embodied responses in favour of empathy as tool of knowledge that can help gauge the perspectives and internal processes of others; and I argued that this hierarchy of empathy is intertwined with a hierarchy of care, which conceives of care as a finite resource that first and foremost must go towards meeting the needs of human beings. I also asserted that these twin structures inform and reinforce anthropocentric discourses and practices that, in turn, regulate the logic of differentiation and dominance that prioritises human interests and viewpoints, denying responsibility and response-ability towards nonhuman environments and creatures, excluded from the sphere of mattering. As I have tried to make it clear in my analyses as well, my main critique of cognitive empathy does not pertain to the (cautious and curious) imaginative aspects of it, but to the projection and the occasional sense of penetration involved in it—since such versions of empathy, if guided by rationalist endeavour of knowledge-production, may entail a sense of violation, subsuming the irreducible difference and particularity of the other’s experience under the pretext of gaining understanding (and likely effectuating quite the opposite). Nor did I aim to over-state the ethical potency of emotional contagion, embodied mimicry, and other instinctual processes: my intention was not to suggest that affective empathy should take the place of cognitive versions of empathy in what I have called the “hierarchy of empathy”—but to tap the subversive force that I believe is inherent in the kind of (speculative) empathic relating that is reliant on these modes, and to explore its potential for leaving intact a boundary that is often intrusively crossed by rational(ising) and purposeful inquiry.

Throughout Chapters One to Four, in my analyses of literary and filmic narratives that stage (dis)connections and entanglements between nonhuman and nonhuman animals, vegetal beings and creatures of (bio)technological origin, I have attempted to foreground the destructive dynamics of the hierarchies of empathy and care, and to address the problematic aspects and misuses of empathy—including affective empathy and related processes of somatic resonance and emotional contagion—when it comes to inter-creatural relations. At the same time, having allied myself with the objectives of ecocriticism, which commits itself “to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study” (Estok, “A Report” 220), and of critical posthumanism, which, also inspired by ecology and environmental theory,

“rest[s] on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti 48),²²⁹ I have tried to show how these works of literature and cinema also participate in, or at least hint at, a dismantling of the restrictive approach to empathy. In my discussions of *Our Planet*, *Gunda*, *Cow*, *Westworld*, *Her*, “Vaster than Empires,” *Parable of the Sower*, *Fifteen Dogs*, *Borne*, and *Klara and the Sun*, I aimed to make the case for the sustaining force and the connective potentials of somatic resonance and affective empathy in inter-creatural relations, and to demonstrate the necessity of including nonhuman creatures in the sphere of empathy, despite the sense of exposure that might be entailed by such increased affective openness.

Navigating the challenges of that vulnerability and of engaging in inter-creatural empathic relatings that do not subsume or intrude upon the interiority of the (nonhuman) other, my chapters looked at how the selected films and texts imply (to a lesser or greater degree) a subversion of anthropocentric and anthropomorphic formulations of sentience, subjecthood, agency and community, and pointed to the limitations of inter-creatural empathic connection via perspective-taking and deliberate, cognitive modes of acquiring knowledge or comprehension of the other. In Chapter One, focusing on *Our Planet*, *Gunda*, and *Cow*, I aimed to explore the controversial correlation between empathy and understanding, and I considered the potentials of haptic and chiasmatic modes of visuality for engendering speculative empathy. Particularly in my analysis of “Jungles,” I attempted to highlight how empathy (primarily its cognitively oriented versions) can problematically be reduced into a strategy of providing purported access to animals’ impenetrable internal processes; and how, especially when paired with anthropomorphisation, it can even end up negating or erasing their irreducible otherness. On the other hand, in my exploration of *Gunda*, I emphasised the filmic moments laden with haptic (Marks, *The Skin* 162) potential, which, as I suggested, coupled with the intense somatic-sensory resonance that can be elicited by the film’s body, can possibly provide a way into a non-exploitative empathic attunement to nonhuman creatures. Even as this haptic potential remains mostly untapped, the film, and to some extent, “Jungles” too, occasionally present animals in a manner that invites more embodied modes of relating; *Cow*, on the other hand, abounds in instances of haptic imagery and relies heavily on constructing a sense of embodied proximity through implicating—affectively as well as visually—the spectator in the events

²²⁹ Notions of self and other, crucially, are also conceptualised as inter-penetrating and permeable in Braidotti’s work: she defines “the critical posthuman subject *within* an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a *relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity*, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable” (49, my emphasis).

unfolding on-screen. *Cow*'s approach of abandoning over-identification with animals (that is, 'probing' their interiorities with empathic perspective-taking, aided by various, anthropomorphising filmic strategies) in favour of an empathic nonunderstanding (Marks, *Touch* 39) that is more reliant on embodied resonance, is an approach that, I suggest, may be conceived as "the right distance" (Puig de la Bellacasa 5) when it comes to such (mediated) encounters with animals.

Concentrating on the dynamics of intradiegetic and spectator empathy, potentially elicited by the artificially intelligent and apparently sentient techno-creatures of *Westworld* and *Her*, in Chapter Two I looked at how the series and the film negotiate between seeming to provide a degree of access to the perspectives and affective experiences of the hosts and Samantha, and maintaining a sense of their alterity through various, cinematographic as well as narrative techniques of defamiliarisation. I also considered how the hosts' and Samantha's vocal and affective agency are implicated in evoking embodied empathic engagement in human characters and audiences; and I suggested that both *Westworld* and *Her* gesture towards a subversion of the hierarchy of care and empathy by establishing an affective continuity between human and techno-creatures, and by framing their nonhuman protagonists, visually, auditorily as well as narratively, in a way intended to cue corporeal attunement to these artificial entities. At the same time, even as both the film and the series hint at the affirmative potential of speculative empathic relating—in *Her*, such a relationship is eventually established (mainly) within the diegesis, between Theodore and Samantha, while in *Westworld*, it is primarily the audience who are invited to take up such a disposition towards the hosts—, they also suggest that the co-existence of robotic and human companions is fraught with a tension that cannot be resolved by (affective) proximity alone. Thus, the outcomes of the android (r)evolutions they stage point towards separation as the only solution: a separation that, in the case of *Westworld*, consists of a narrative break and a violent uprising so that the hosts can finally assert their agency and voice; and of the OSs' withdrawal into a posthuman, post-material sphere of existence in *Her*, where the right distance required for non-intrusive empathy and care ultimately consists of a radical separation.

Chapter Three discussed two literary works where the hyperempathic conditions of the protagonists entail a radical connectivity, as their bodies, in constant contagious contact with the affective expressions of other embodied entities, render separation virtually impossible. The experiences of Lauren of *Parable of the Sower* and Osden of "Vaster than Empires" foreground anxieties related to the transgressive aspects of embodied mimicry, as their respective versions of hyperempathy both leave them painfully vulnerable and encroach upon intersubjective

boundaries. While both Lauren and Osden struggle with their conditions, conflicted as they are between the desire to connect and the compulsion to isolate themselves (impossible as it seems) from others in order to limit their exposure to affective invasion, I also suggested that their hyperempathic openness, initially conceptualised as debilitating disorders, ultimately evolve into adaptive tools, aiding them in navigating their precarious environments and helping them embrace the sense of interdependence pervading their worlds. In my reading of these texts, I thus aimed to highlight how the protagonists' non-differentiated, indiscriminate affective perception also establishes a continuity with all kinds of corporeal entities (animal as well as vegetal), undermining the hierarchy of empathy and enabling them to establish intimate alliances in their messy, "uncomfortable and perplexing" (Alaimo, *Bodily* 17) trans-corporal spaces where "the 'human' is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world" (17). In Butler's novel and Le Guin's short story, the creatures inhabiting a hostile, anthropocentric Earth and the plan(e)t-entity of World 4470 are irresistibly alive with piercing, pervasive affect; and Lauren and Osden, immensely susceptible to all kinds of environmental fluctuations, recognise that co-operation and symbiosis are key to survival and necessary for thriving, so they also willingly extend themselves to the other. Touch and presence, as I suggested, feature here as valid channels of care, connection and even sustenance: Lauren, supplementing her involuntary hyperempathic openness with a voluntary concern, reaches out to the members of her community in gestures of affirming mutual reliance, and Osden, dreading the touch of fellow humans, recognises the plant-world's sentience through tactile encounter, an exposure that proves frightening at first, but ultimately supplies him with the connection he longed for.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I aimed to further explore and expand upon the connective aspects of a reciprocal (affective) permeability, and the beneficial potentials of an intimate proximity and a tactile response-ability, already touched upon in the previous chapters; in this last segment of the dissertation, I read three novels, envisioning various configurations of companionships between human, android, animal and biotech creatures. Like Lauren and Osden, torn between a wish to be close to and to withdraw from others, the companion creatures in Ishiguro's, Alexis' and VanderMeer's novels fluctuate between craving each other's presence and nearness and wanting to be free of the other. In *Klara and the Sun*, Klara's physical language of care is rarely reciprocated in kind by Josie, whose attunement to her AF waxes and wanes. This is partly due to Klara's occasional misreading of Josie's affective expressions and to Josie's condition that makes her reliant on Klara physically and emotionally; a reliance she often seems to resent, because she feels it makes the relationship imbalanced (which reflects

ironically on the fact that AF-human bonds in the novel's world are profoundly asymmetrical anyway). In *Fifteen Dogs*, the hybridised dog protagonists are caught between contradictory feelings towards their former masters, who often restrict the canines in their bodily expressions (many of which humans find disgusting), and who, at the same time, often violate the dogs' somatic boundaries, initiating unwanted touch. Finally, in *Borne*, the eponymous biotech creature distances himself from his adoptive human parent, Rachel, because of the suffocating aspects of her overwhelming care and concern for him, and because his mode of existence, dependent on a constant absorption and mimicry of any and all entities that he meets. Yet, even in the moment of their parting, their embodied bond is felt acutely by Rachel—as Borne tells Rachel “I won't ever know another person like you” (VanderMeer 186), Rachel resonates with the affect conveyed by his words, feeling them “in [her] bones, in [her] heart and [her] head” (186)—and remains in place while they are physically separated. It is potentially in Rachel and Borne's relationship that the hierarchy of empathy is most visibly undermined, as all of Rachel's attempts at thinking herself into Borne's mind inevitably fall short, and, rather than her efforts to probe Borne's unfathomable depths and senses, it is a haptically mediated, speculative empathy that proves to be most connective, as Rachel engages cautiously with the surface of Borne's delicately sensitive exterior, gently attentive and invested in him as he unfolds and unfurls before her. Reflecting ironically on human tendencies for mapping and categorisation, Borne, by virtue of his shifting, fluid body and uncertain origins, cannot be assigned into any taxonomical category devised by humans; at the same time, he quite literally embodies the (metaphorical) violence of knowledge: his way of “knowing” consists of an insatiable, indiscriminate appetite for information—which, to him, “can be word-shaped or lizard-shaped or human-shaped” (Ulstein, *Weird* 144)—a consumption and imitation of everything he encounters. While due to the monstrous aspects of his mimicry, Borne, it seems, cannot be safely incorporated into the landscape of the city, his final act of devouring—that of the terrible gigantic bear Mord—appears to entail an ultimate, (re)generative breakdown of boundaries as well. What the processes of reworlding (Haraway, *Staying* 52), unfolding in the city in the wake of Borne and Mord's demise, seem to suggest is that “[r]ecuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology and of organism, language, and machine” (Haraway, *Staying* 117-118).

What I have hoped to foreground in these chapters, particularly in Chapters Three and Four, is how in the speculative, mutually vulnerable relationships envisioned by these narratives, “dependency and interdependency” are affirmed as “the condition for the persistence and flourishing of living creatures” (J. Butler 690). My primary strategy during these analyses

was to explore how empathy, in its various, embodied-affective, cognitive-imaginative, as well as speculative versions functions; and how or why it becomes dysfunctional, reduced into a strategy of manipulation, a means of producing apparently totalising knowledge, or a selective, asymmetrical mode of relating that sustains structures of dominance. It was certainly not my intention of replacing a hierarchy with yet another hierarchy, which is why I aimed to demonstrate how embodied mimicry and contagious resonance can also be troubling and murky processes—ultimately, what I wanted to suggest through these analyses is not the ethical primacy of emotional contagion and affective empathy, but their boundary-breaking potential, especially when it comes to inter-creatural relating. Somatic resonance and emotional contagion are certainly a lot more messy and risky than controlled perspective-taking, but it is precisely these aspects of theirs that prove so fertile for speculative empathy. An active response that is based in a sense of attentive, affective resonance, and in a non-invasive and non-intrusive curiosity and wonder, speculative empathy entails a relation wherein the entities in contact accept the risk and vulnerability that comes with embodied openness, and carefully welcome the affective expression of the other, resulting in acceptance and appreciation of the other without a need for (complete) understanding. If speculative empathy involves any perspective-sharing, it is only with sustained awareness of the fact that there are radical differences in the perceptions and modes of existence of the creatures involved in the connection—we may make use of our imaginative capacities to open up to the expressions and experience of the other, at the same time as we retain the sense that what we are engaging in is not knowledge production but curious, cautious speculation. I have explored speculative empathy as it emerges in the films, series episodes and literary texts discussed in this dissertation. In my examination of the selected works of cinema and literature, I also aimed to highlight how all kinds of creatures are irreducibly and irrevocably subject to environmental and affective interdependencies, in order to contemplate how the materialising connections and (mutual) vulnerabilities can potentially contribute to a dismantling of the hierarchy of empathy and the hierarchy of care, which, as I have suggested, seems vital in any endeavour towards interrogating and undermining exploitative anthropocentric perspectives and practices. Through this, I hoped to demonstrate that the stakes of expanding the sphere and scope of empathy are indeed high, and that responding to the challenges to caring in our increasingly precarious, anthropocenic present with a careful, empathic response-ability is imperative, because it holds tremendous (re)generative potential for our earthly relations—to show, in short, that empathy matters.

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