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Article – Free Thematics

Posthumanism without vengeance

Poor things! and Catherine Malabou's destructive plasticity

Pós-humanismo sem vingança

Poor things! e a plasticidade destrutiva de Catherine Malabou

Poshumanismo sin venganza

Poor things! y la plasticidad destructiva de Catherine Malabou

Marco Grosoli [I]

Nova Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA), Universidade Nova, Lisboa, Portugal
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5251-0448

Abstract: Adapted from a novel by Alasdair Gray, Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor things!* (2023) is about a young female corpse awaken to life by a Frankenstein-like scientist (who transplanted in her the brain of the baby she was carrying when she died) in a Victorian-looking future London, and who eventually grows into an independent woman thanks to the experiences she makes in the real world outside his lab. It thus quite blatantly treads on posthuman territory – but on the other hand seems to share the ambivalence vis-à-vis the posthuman (implying that the posthuman still depends, to some extent, on a humanist framework) of scholars like Catherine Malabou. The latter's philosophy will be the main (albeit not exclusive) lens through which that ambivalence will be recognized and examined in *Poor things!,* by focussing on such conceptual axes (variously relating to posthumanism) as epistemology (the posthuman overcoming of Cartesian science), cyborg-feminism, animality, and postmodern historicity. In the analysis, a particularly important role will be played by Malabou's philosophy of death (*destructive plasticity*).

Keywords: Posthuman; Death; Animal; Cyborg.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.22475/rebeca.v15n1.1330, v. 15, n. 1, pp. 01-29, jan./dez., 2026. Publicação contínua.

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Resumo: Adaptado de um romance de Alasdair Gray, *Poor things!* (2023), de Yorgos Lanthimos, é sobre um cadáver feminino jovem que é trazido de volta à vida, numa Londres futurista com ares vitorianos, por um cientista que lembra Frankenstein (que transplantou nela o cérebro do bebê que ela carregava quando morreu) e que acaba por se tornar uma mulher independente graças às experiências que vive no mundo real fora do laboratório dele. Assim, o filme entra de forma bastante evidente no território pós-humano — mas, por outro lado, parece partilhar a ambivalência em relação ao pós-humano (implicando que o pós-humano ainda depende, em certa medida, de uma estrutura humanista) de estudiosos como Catherine Malabou. A filosofia desta última será a principal (embora não exclusiva) lente através da qual essa ambivalência será reconhecida e examinada em *Poor things!*, focando-se em eixos conceptuais (variadamente relacionados com o pós-humanismo) como a epistemologia (a superação pós-humana da ciência cartesiana), o feminismo ciborgue, a animalidade e a historicidade pós-moderna. Na análise, um papel particularmente importante será desempenhado pela filosofia da morte de Malabou (*plasticidade destrutiva*).

Palavras-chave: Pós-humano; Morte; Animal; Ciborgue.

Resumen: Adaptada de una novela de Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things!* (2023), de Yorgos Lanthimos, trata sobre el cadáver de una joven que vuelve a la vida gracias a un científico que recuerda a Frankenstein (que le trasplantó el cerebro del bebé que llevaba en su vientre cuando murió) en un Londres futurista de aspecto victoriano, y que finalmente se convierte en una mujer independiente gracias a las experiencias que vive en el mundo real fuera del laboratorio. Así, la película se adentra de forma bastante evidente en el territorio poshumano, pero, por otro lado, parece compartir la ambivalencia hacia lo poshumano (lo que implica que lo poshumano sigue dependiendo, en cierta medida, de un marco humanista) de estudiosos como Catherine Malabou. La filosofía de esta última será la lente principal (aunque no exclusiva) a través de la cual se reconocerá y examinará esa ambivalencia en *Poor Things!*, centrándose en ejes conceptuales (relacionados de diversas maneras con el poshumanismo) como la epistemología (la superación poshumana de la ciencia cartesiana), el feminismo *cyborg*, la animalidad y la historicidad posmoderna. En el análisis, desempeñará un papel especialmente importante la filosofía de la muerte de Malabou (*plasticidad destructiv*a).

Palabras clave: Poshumano; Muerte; Animal; Ciborg.

Introduction

To what extent posthumanism is still humanist? This article expounds the answer implicitly given by *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023), analysed especially through the lens of Catherine Malabou's philosophy. Particular consideration will be given to Malabou's philosophy of death, mostly encapsulated by her theorization of *destructive plasticity*, which may be for now cursorily and preliminarily defined as the formative property of the destruction of form. This identification of death with form explains why death, including Malabou's philosophy of death, will only be dealt with in the article's conclusion (which will thus have to be longer than usual). After the rest of the article will have broken down and analysed a number of key elements of the film, the conclusion will argue that death is what weaves all those elements together in a coherent form.

Film Studies have dealt with posthumanism mainly by showing how certain films illustrate specific traits of posthumanist theory, or by examining cinematic instances of representation of posthumanist issues in the broader media context (Graham, 2002). Recently, more systematic overviews have been attempted, either by welcomely enlarging the (geographical and otherwise) scope of the chosen examples (Molloy; Duncan; Henry,

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2023), or by revising the theoretical framework of posthumanism in light of what popular culture has made of it (Ayers, 2019), or by archaeologically reframing certain parts of film history as foreshadowing the posthuman (Tomas, 2013), or in the traditionally encyclopedic form of the companion (Hauskeller; Philbeck; Carbonell, 2015).

The discipline has engaged with posthumanism perhaps more consistently when dealing with it through the lens of those fields most directly related to and affected by posthumanism, like feminism (Smelick; Lykke, 2008), animal studies (Pick, 2011), ecocriticism (Pick; Narraway, 2013), postnaturalism (Denson, 2014) – and, most crucially for the present essay, the redefinition of the animate/inanimate divide (Ezra, 2017). In this regard, a scholar like William Brown is emblematic, as he approached cinematic posthumanism from the distinct angles of gender (Brown, 2022), race (Brown; Fleming, 2025), the connections between human extinction and (digital) technology (Brown, 2009), and the like.

Similarly, the present essay explores the intersections between *Poor things!* and posthumanism by successively broaching posthumanism-related conceptual frameworks like epistemology (i.e. the overcoming of Cartesian science), cyborg feminism, animality and steampunk historical temporality. Nevertheless, because its main argument is about the ambivalence at the core of posthumanism (i.e. its residual yet ineradicable humanist side), the essay's methodology will be more philosophical than reliant on other film-related approaches.

Malabou and posthumanism

Following Jacques Derrida, in *From the overman to the posthuman: how many ends?* Malabou (2015) identifies the human with the longing for absolute knowledge; thus, it can only "accomplish itself as nonhuman, that is as infinite, nonmortal" (Malabou, 2015, p. 64). Human finitude can only find its completion, its end, its *telos*, in the infinite beyond itself. "The human's disappearance […] is in a way inscribed within the concept of the human or humanity itself" (p. 63), to which the human is reverted as soon as it reaches beyond (or deconstructs) itself. It follows that the human is "what repeats itself beyond all deconstruction of its being. The human is what repeats itself even when its essence is dissolved" (p. 62). In her *Repetition, revenge, plasticity* (2018), Malabou stigmatizes that part of posthumanism aiming to dispense with finitude and temporality (she makes no specific mentions, only a generic one, to transhumanism).

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In both essays, she categorizes this aversion to finitude and temporality as reactive in Nietzsche's sense, i.e. as an "incapacity to put an end to the past" (Malabou, 2015, p. 67), a "human, all too human" vengeance against the human because it overlooks that self-overcoming is what defines the human in the first place. The more posthumanism denies this deadlock, the more it repeats the human despite itself. The only viable posthumanism is, according to Malabou, one that repeats the human differently, *without revenge*.

Claire Colebrook (2014, p. 159) brings up Nietzsche in the same way. "Posthumanism is an ultrahumanism and partakes of the same metaleptic logic of reactive nihilism" (p. 163). Posthumanism

> […] renounces human privilege or species-ism but then fetishizes the posthuman world as man-less; 'we' are no longer elevated, separated, enclosed, detached from a man-less world, for there is a direct interface and interconnection—a mesh or network, a living system—that allows for one world of computers, digital media, animals, things and systems. (p. 164)

The world as "self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 3) would thus be but the flipside of the human subject: no less centric than anthropocentrism, just with a different centre.

From ever since *The future of Hegel* (1996 [1994]), Malabou has investigated this reciprocity between *substance* and *subject*, linking it to the reciprocity between difference and sameness (that is, essence). A philosophical reconstruction thereof falls outside the scope of this article, but it is important to stress that, for her, the *feminine* is where difference and sameness overlap. Contra the widespread tendency of feminist thinking to overemphasize (and indeed avenge, in the aforementioned sense) difference against essentialism, Malabou advocates a feminism in which difference and essence converge – not least because, by denying all essence to women, one ends up denying the systematic violence they are victim of. In contrast with claims by posthuman theorists like (among others) Donna Haraway that "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female" (Haraway, 2016 [1985], p. 16), Malabou's *Changing difference* does acknowledge an essence of women, and even a deep-rooted link between "Being" and "feminine", by placing a practical, empirical definition (the essence of women is that they are denied their essence, and thus their rights) in the context

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of the philosophical one she derives from Hegel: essence is such only insofar as it denies itself into its accidents (that is, into its predicates). Building upon her equally Hegel-derived theorization of subjectivity's plasticity (receiving form along with giving form; Malabou, 1996 [1994], p. 8), she argues that essence does not subordinate difference, but plastically accommodates difference as much as the other way around, and identifies the feminine therewith.

Anarchy is her name for this non-hierarchical overlap of difference and essence. Against the phallic subordination of the former by the latter, the scattered yet eccentrically centralized pleasure-geography of the clitoris embodies the anarchic, power-disarticulating relation-without-domination between difference and essence. Just like essence is not in itself but in the predicates whereby it is qualified and into which essence self-denies, the feminine is not in the feminine, but in the excess of the feminine over itself (Malabou, 2020). This excess can be accounted for less by Derrida's and Luce Irigaray's theorization of women's lips as the opening of hetero-affection ("'the self-touch you' of the subject affected by difference", suspending "the opposition of me and other, activity and passivity"; Malabou, 2011 [2009], p. 17), as it might ultimately be another phallic anatomical metaphor in disguise, than by a relationship between the vaginal and the clitoridean conceived in the wake of Irigaray yet beyond Irigaray – who, according to Malabou, falls short of grasping the anarchism of the clitoris in that she is not essentialist enough (Malabou, 2020, p. 74), i.e. she "presents a knowledge of woman that is negatively defined as exclusion" (Malabou, 2011 [2009], p. 129). The plasticity of the clitoris is, in this sense, a positive supplement of the elusive, negative fluidity of lips making the feminine eschew all definition.

Malabou's posthumanism qua repetition without vengeance (i.e. a plastic reformulation of human finitude and temporality which does not destroy humanism without receiving form from it and giving form to it) goes thus hand in hand with her feminism qua affirmation of difference that does not dispense with essence.

Poor things!

Adapted from the eponymous novel by Alasdair Gray, *Poor things!* centers around Bella Baxter (Emma Stone), a girl in her twenties with a baby brain. Godwin Baxter, a Frankenstein-looking scientist in a retro-futuristic Victorian London, extracted from the corpse of a pregnant, drowned woman the brain of her unborn child, and transplanted it into the woman's cranium before reanimating her. Wishing to break out of her confinement in

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Godwin's mansion, Bella embarks on a cruise trip with lawyer Duncan Wedderburn touching Lisbon, Alexandria, and Paris. The cruise marks Bella's sexual initiation as well as her personal growth by exploring the world for the first time. After having discovered its miseries (in Egypt), fallen out with Duncan and prostituted herself (in France) for self-support, she finds out that Godwin is dying of cancer. Now a self-conscious adult, she goes back to London and lovingly takes care of him in his last days. She also discovers her troubling origins. On her wedding day (with Godwin's assistant Max), General Alfie Blessington reclaims Bella as his legitimate wife: the dead woman to whom Bella owes her life turns out to be Victoria Blessington, married to him. Bella relocates to his house but shoots him in a foot and runs back to dying Godwin's upon overhearing Alfie's plans of inflicting genital mutilation on her. The film ends with her studying to become a doctor and keeping the General in the garden behaving like a goat after a goat's brain was transplanted in his cranium.

That *Poor things!* treads upon posthuman territory is unequivocal. A female human-techno hybrid affirming herself by vanquishing some prototypical Western males, thanks to a greater and greater embodiment supplementing her machinic origins (her personal growth occurs mainly thanks to an exploration of her material environment: through sex, food, etc.), Bella cannot but bring to mind several aspects of posthumanism reviewed in canonical accounts, such as Katherine Hayles's (1999).

Lanthimos is not new to posthuman undertones. "There is no essence of humanness" in his films, whose eccentric depictions of human beings often "suggest that we perform human before every other identity while, simultaneously, they denaturalise humanness" (Fessas, 2025, p. 174). In *The lobster*'s (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) "highly regulated societal setting [,] those who end up single are expelled to a hotel where they are given forty-five days to find their perfect match, or else they will be converted into an animal of their choice" (Psaras, 2022, p. 260). The potential union between the male protagonist and a female fugitive from that hotel ends with suspended indeterminacy as to the couple's actual formation; this, more generally, implies a suspension of that liminal space distinguishing (as do language, reason and affect) the human from the animal that is normative, regulated sexuality. "The power of *The lobster*'s posthumanist discourse is precisely located in the film's thematic and formal dramatization of humanism's perpetual deferral of this liminal space, which constitutes the boundary between the human and the animal" (Psaras, 2022, p. 266).

An overtly sexual tale of female emancipation, *Poor things!*'s relationship with posthumanism is nonetheless complex. Pursuing self-focused pleasure with no emotional

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connection with partners, like many Lanthimos characters (Haylett Bryan, 2022, p. 246-247), Bella begins her journey of self-discovery by masturbating; eventually, she becomes as vocal regarding her self-conscious pursuit of clitoridean pleasure as Alfie is that the organ stands in the way of his extremely abusive patriarchal power ("Do you want just clitoral hood or glans as well", asks the doctor in charge of the removal; "The whole infernal packet", answers the General). Still, there is something Oedipal in her taking on her beloved (surrogate) dead father's job and house, Bella's interracial lesbian love affair notwithstanding. Moreover, this affectionate father-daughter relationship is not in Gray's book.

Lanthimos's debut, *Kinetta* (2005), was produced by Athina Rachel Tsangari, whose *Attenberg* (2010) showcases (like other internationally renowned Greek films of those years, e.g. *Strella*, Panos Koutras, 2009) a peculiar ambivalence vis-à-vis the Oedipal. Marina, a young woman who spends the first half of *Attenberg* imitating animals or performing weird ballets with a female friend, becomes increasingly "normal" in the second (where she also engages sexually with a character played by Lanthimos) as she assists Spyros, her dying, beloved, engineer father. One of the pioneering planners of Aspra Spitia, an industrial ghost town now in ruins designed in the 1960s as an urbanist utopia, Spyros ("a much more sympathetic patriarch than his counterparts in [Lanthimos's] *Dogtooth* [2009] and *Alps* [2011]"; Lykidis, 2021, p. 94) tells Marina "I leave you in the hands of a new century without having taught you anything". At the end of her transformative arc (which Rosalind Galt [2017, p. 15-20], analysing the film's animality, overlooks to focus only on the first half's animalized Marina), the protagonist is humanized, no longer acting animally or mechanically, while that posthuman city is decaying away. Still, she faces nothing but an unsettling void.

Likewise, *Poor things!*'s posthumanism does not deny the human, but repeats it by hollowing it out, thereby reconnecting with the destruction of the human which, according to Derrida and Malabou, the human is. More precisely, it critiques the disembodied subjectivity of Cartesian science but does not do so without repeating it; against that subjectivity, it holds that it is not empty enough, and replaces it with an even emptier subject, i.e. a materialist subjectivity located nowhere else than in its material conditions.

Godwin's error

What Antonio Damasio called Descartes' error (mind-body dualism, a separated consciousness observing its objects from without) is introduced in the first scene: after a shot

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showing Godwin watching Bella at the piano, a fish-eye shot (Lanthimos's trademark visual signifier) shows Bella not from Godwin's POV, but from a different, unspecified spot (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Bella returns his gaze, but is fish-eye-framed from a POV that is not Godwin's.
Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023)

By coming across as a "nobody's shot" looking at the same object Godwin is also looking at, the fisheye stands for a disembodied, Cartesian subjectivity that is as associated with scientist Godwin as distinct from him. Godwin makes this contradiction sound like a curse passed down from father to son (mirroring Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*'s, from creator to creature):

> Once when I was very small, my father pinned my thumbs into a small iron case, to see whether he could retard the growth cycle of bones. Now, the pain was so great that to stop myself from weeping I would stare deeply into my other fingers, and simply by observation begin to parse out the epidemiological elements. When he came back, to his surprise, I was smiling (*Poor things!*, 2023, between 17min42s and 18min14s).

Biopolitical horrors (e.g. the sisters forbidden from leaving *Dogtooth*'s household) ensue from sealing off environments so that their perimeter coincides with the reach of a disembodied, Cartesian eye. The anecdote's small Godwin "inscribes in himself the power

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relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 202-203); his father's experiments physically disfigure Godwin and make him replicate the same attitude, locking Bella in an environment delimited by the area he can surveil.

What enables Bella to escape and break the two men's generational curse is a convergence between auto-affection and hetero-affection as opposed to the disembodied, Cartesian subject of science neatly separating auto-affection (a privilege of the separated consciousness) and hetero-affection (the interaction between that consciousness and its outside). Godwin is both father and son because he bears on his body the scars of being the test subject of the father he mimics, but he is not *his own* father the way Bella is her own mother and daughter simultaneously. In her, hetero-affection and auto-affection meet: Bella's brain is hers but also not hers. Godwin develops feelings for her (thanks to which she is allowed to leave the house) because she incarnates his own condition minus its crippling deadlocks.

Initially, her child brain lets her experience the world only childishly; Bella starts wanting to see the world only after discovering masturbation (by-passing the oral phase altogether; Spivack, 2023) through genital organs that are fully developed, not a child's. Whereas Godwin and his father experiment on others, by experimenting on herself Bella is pushed toward the outer environment – and eventually, to becoming a doctor (that is, somebody whose practice is turned outward) as opposed to a researcher. Shown stabbing with relish a corpse's eyes, Bella's way of replacing (masculine) sight with (female) touch echoes Malabou's materialism: her blurring the distinction between hetero-affection and auto-affection is less "labial" in Irigaray's and Derrida's sense than strictly neurological: the more the brain is reduced to mere body, the more the mind and the brain turn out to be simultaneously the same *and* different. Mind and brain are non-identical because our consciousness of the brain is always distinct from the brain as material substance. The mind has access to itself only by representing it as something else, because of a non-coincidence ("hetero-affection") that is materially inscribed in the brain.

"The subject is fundamentally, immediately, biologically a stranger to itself, which never encounters itself, which never touches itself. This type of hetero-affection, unlike that brought out by Derrida, proceeds from a resolutely materialist inquiry. Hetero-affection originally is nothing other than the unconscious character of auto-affection, which places the subject straightaway in the position of being unable to accede to the origin of the feeling of self. This situation is determined by the structure of the brain, and not by that of consciousness, which is derived from the brain" (Malabou, 2013, p. 34).

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There is no “soul” for materialist Bella, who believes only in what she can experience. She does have feelings though, because feelings can be learnt and developed through experience without presupposing any exception to materialism. They are a matter of the mind, and the mind develops materialistically *but not deterministically* by having the environment interfere (in a way that cannot be predicted in advance) with the gap between the brain-represented-in-the-mind and the brain-qua-material-substance. Epigenesis (“the differentiated development that takes the middle ground between genetic determinism and the ‘environmental selective imprint’ on the individual”; Malabou, 2016 [2014]) underlies the gist of Gray’s novel, as summarized by Fiorato (2011, p. 295): “Personal identity is not exclusively genetic, but also and mainly biographic; the individual acquires his/her specific originality through his/her life, thanks to the numerous relational dynamics which characterize it”.

Bella’s gift of her feelings to Godwin is thus also the gift of materialism. The disembodied subject of Cartesian science makes way for an even emptier subjectivity: one that is nothing but its material conditions. “The formation and deformation of neuronal connections” (Malabou, 2012 [2007], p. 212) is all that there is. There is nothing spiritual or ineffable in personality, and yet it can be neither determined one-sidedly by the brain, nor by the environment: what gets lost in this neither-nor, what the materialist subject is actually devoid of, is a teleological, metaphysical origin. The film contrasts two kinds of autopoiesis, one invalidated by a metaphysics of origins (Godwin’s Frankensteinian dream of creating life and keeping it *in vitro*), and the other not so, i.e. Bella’s reformulation of the Marxist lessons she takes in Paris, where she works as a prostitute: her “we are our means of production”, in sync with Maturana and Varela’s “no separation between producer and product” (1987, p. 49), means that consciousness and objectification are one and neither of them is the origin of the other.

Reading Emerson on the improvement of men, Bella wonders “why he does not give advice to women”. Perhaps Emerson’s transparent Eyeball (“I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God”; Emerson, 1982, p. 19) is too reminiscent of a Cartesian, disembodied fish-eye. Bella redeems the subject of science from Descartes’ error and takes it on from Godwin after differentiating it from the humanist, patriarchal, male subjects which she leaves behind: Duncan, vainly deceiving himself into believing he is special, endowed with a soul, non-reducible to its material determinants, and Alfie, the military bent on conquering territories and subjecting women.

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Animals and cyborgs

Poor things!'s subtly self-deconstructing essentialism is key to understanding its idiosyncratic posthumanism. Malabou reads Hegel's notion of "essence" as detached from that of "teleological circularity" (i.e. of an origin that is also an end to return to). In *Poor things!* as well as for Malabou, origins lie on the side of contingency, not of necessity. Bella's arc is Oedipal, hence essentialist, as she goes back to Godwin's place to take on (with significant differences) his position after he dies, but Godwin is not her real father. A similar ambivalence between identity and difference characterizes the way *Poor things!* deals with two cornerstones of posthumanism: cyborgs and animals.

Bella is no cyborg: her body appears ordinarily womanly. Apart from a couple of scars, technology left no trace inside or outside her body. "Cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing" (Haraway, 2016 [1985], p. 67), but Bella, while owing her life to advanced medical technology, was animated only thanks to the brain of the foetus she was carrying. Nor is her motherhood associated with "the metamorphic power of monstruous Others" (Braidotti, 2003, p. 156) manifested in posthuman, feminist cyberteratologies. There is nothing monstrous in Bella; at best something weird, gradually undergoing normalization like *Attenberg*'s Marina.

Like Braidotti's monstruous feminine/maternal (2003, p. 156), Bella's motherhood-with-daughterhood does blur the borders between self and other, but also those between unity and multiplicity, identity and difference. For all her insistence on questioning dichotomies (Haraway, 2016 [1985], p. 32), Haraway leaves the dichotomy between unity and assemblage intact. In the cyborg, she sees the model for a feminist self as "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (p. 33), and maintains that "Cyborg feminists have to argue that 'we' do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole" (p. 21). Assemblages stand on one side along with difference, unity on the other along with identity.

Poor things! intertwines unity and assemblage, identity and difference, mainly through the relationship between Bella's body and her costumes. Her body is no assemblage, but there is no shortage of assemblages in *Poor things!*'s rich costume design. Bella's clothes blend different epochs together (Freestone, 2024; Caulfield, 2024), but this juxtaposition of Bella's body as unitary and her clothing as wildly assembled is further complicated by a reversal of this polarity: clothes often tend to replicate body parts (something not unusual in Victorian fashion, but pushed here to quasi-grotesque extremes: Whitlock, 2023). Alongside unity and multiplicity, inner and outer are constantly swapped.

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Fabrics evoke “surface textures of living creatures, the body, particularly the inside of the body, the organs, intestines—materials that almost feel like they're breathing” (Freestone, 2024). A “bustle cage which would have been worn underneath the dress to give it volume” (Ryzik, 2024) is worn as a blouse in its own terms. The brothel was designed “with a color palette that was taken from the body” (Cadenas, 2023). Bella’s enormous sleeves “were like lungs full of breath and air that ignited and reanimated” her (Whitlock, 2023) (Figure 2). Clothes’ textures were inspired by “tripe, skin tissue, or the delicate textures you might see in meat” (Tangcay, 2023). “There are also lots of references to female genitalia—there’s a blouse we called the vagina blouse, then the clitoris blouse” (Seth, 2023) (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Textures. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023).



Figure 3: The vagina blouse. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023).

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Sets were designed similarly. “Bella’s private chambers, with their tufted floors, upholstered walls, and undulating plaster ceilings, mimic the softness of the womb” (Whitlock, 2024); light switches are “shaped like clitorises” (Keegan, 2024); a moulded ceiling like an ear (Figure 4); packing foam was stapled “to the atrium ceiling to resemble the wiggly bits on the roof of [the] mouth” and “wormhole-like structures to the walls” were added “that looked like a brain cross section” (Richardson, 2024). In Paris, the brothel features penis-shaped windows (Figure 5), and trees looked red “like the vein system in lungs” (Georgiades, 2024).



Figure 4: Ear-like moulded ceiling. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023).



Figure 5: Penis-shaped windows. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023).

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Again, taking Victorian patterns to the extreme, costume designer Holly Waddington “wanted to capture something of the animal in the clothes” (Coyle, 2023). The design of the ship evokes a caged animal (Davies, 2023), and “other notable details throughout include the oyster shell backsplash of a Lisbon bar (Figure 6), a fish tank built into a Lisbon building's wall, a pearlescent floor featuring an almost tiger-like pattern on the boat” (Allen, 2024).



Figure 6: Oyster shell backsplash. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023)

Animality is one of Lanthimos’s key themes (Petkova, 2022). Godwin’s mansion is populated by hybrid animals he created, like one half chicken and half pig, or another half goose and half dog - whose way of walking is compared to infant Bella’s. But while those hybrids are not troubled by their being assemblages, Bella is restless and wants to go out. In contrast with her gradual humanization and de-animalization, Alfie becomes yet another of those assemblages (and is seemingly untroubled by that), as a goat’s brain is transplanted in him. Godwin’s carriage (an engine mounted at the back, a horse’s head at the front) seemingly adumbrates an even more traditional conception: the human sits in between animal and machine. This is clearly a very different stance on animality from Derrida’s, after which many posthuman ideas are modelled (e.g. Wolfe, 2008). Rather, Giorgio Agamben comes to mind, who “insists neither on a simple continuity or sameness between animals and humans, nor on an exceptionalism or distinction” (Colebrook; Maxwell, 2016, p. 168). For Agamben, “Animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language” (Agamben, 1993 [1979], p. 52) because they always immediately

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coincide with their expressiveness. Man is “the animal deprived of language and obliged, therefore, to receive it from outside himself” (p. 57). Likewise, animals are fully defined by the relationships established with their environment and through their responses to it: they are opened toward a closeness insofar as those relationships as a whole delimit their environment. In addition to this, the human animal is defined by its relation not only (like the animal) to an environment-bound, actualized set of relationships, but also to the non-actualized potentialities that are the flipside of that same set of actualized relationships (Agamben, 2004 [2002], p. 49-62). “What makes humans human is that their defining and humanizing capacities may not emerge. This is also to say that the very essence of humanity lies in a potentiality that is expressed when it does not unfold into actuality” (Colebrook; Maxwell, 2016, p. 189). Drawing on Agamben, Comanducci (2024, p. 85) has noted that “*Dogtooth* shows how the human relation to language itself is captured in a behaviourist *Umwelt* and treated as a matter of triggers and reactions”. The actual possession of language, i.e. its reduction to instrumentality, subordinates the speaking subjects to a functional unity with their environment without the opening corresponding to this closeness: this, according to Agamben and Comanducci, is tantamount to animalization.

It follows that humans are both distinct and not distinct from animals: they are distinguished from animals only by exacerbating an opening toward a closeness which, however, is what defines the animal in the first place. The more it tries to “vengefully” (in Malabou’s Nietzschean sense) exclude animality, the more the humanist subject turns into an animal like Alfie, whose faultless, quasi-literary eloquence is far superior to that of any other character (except perhaps that other epitome of humanist subject: Duncan), and who neatly separates nature from culture even in his villa’s garden, whose trees have all been cut down. Conversely, Bella becomes human after breaking free from Godwin’s house by opening not toward a real environment, but toward another closed environment: the film’s aesthetics is decisively a *studio* aesthetics, due to the glaring artificiality of its set design (Figure 7).

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Figure 7: Old-school studio-aesthetics. Source: Still from the film *Poor things!* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023)

Moreover, like the quasi-happy ending of *The lobster*, where closure was similarly denied, *Poor things!* ends before she actually becomes a doctor. Fullness, actuality, is on the side of animals, which are both assembled and whole. Godwin's nickname "God" is repeatedly reversed pun-wise into "Dog". Even his gastric bubbles, perfect spheres that briefly float in the air before bursting, may suggest wholeness. Potentiality, incompleteness, are on the side of the human, which is one as much as split. Mind-body dualism is, as we have seen, solved by being redoubled into that between mind and brain, and repurposed against Descartes into something more heterogeneous than any cyborg-esque assemblage.

Typically, Lanthimos's characters do not possess language. Rather, they "employ a hyperbolically rationalist speaking style" (Lykidis, 2021, p. 100), often of a pseudoscientific (p. 102) or excessively taxonomic (p. 103) kind, "that reaches absurd levels of dehumanization" (p. 100). Their de-psychologization (p. 110) peaks with Bella's blank-slate (yet rapidly developing) brain. She calls sex "furious jumping"; when Duncan berates her for her awkward social interactions and instructs her to use sentences such as "how marvellous", she takes him literally, achieving the opposite effect (she replies "how marvellous" when a woman tells her about her father's terminal illness).

Scholarship on Lanthimos highlighted on the one hand this "lack of agency where the characters do not appear to be 'acting on behalf of the self'" (Karkani, 2022, p. 75), and on the other hand "an intentionally contrapuntal relationship between body, sound, and filmic space" (p. 71) through a mechanical, robot-like acting. This estranged performativity, according to Comanducci (2024), exemplifies Agamben's notion of gesture, i.e. the threshold

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uniting as well as separating normativity and/from its exception as the battlefield between biopolitical subjection and its subversion.

In Bella there is no self altogether, except that self which emerges less from generic experience (again, the "outer world" Bella explores is a studio-like non-environment), than from experience qua specifically enabled by the disconnection between mind and body. Because the reciprocal adjustment between mind and body is never smooth (as suggested in the film by various kinds of dissonances, e.g. deliberately jarring colours and disharmonic ballets), "embodiment" is not only the next frontier of cybernetics, but also what humans had always to go through to become full-fledged humans, without quite ever getting there.

"To the extent that the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information, it continues the liberal tradition rather than disrupts it" (Hayles, 1999, p. 5). *Poor things!*'s posthumanism lies in repeating a pre-human state which, however, coincides with the human as such.

Steampunk?

Set in a retro-futuristic Victorian London (Godwin's mansion is squarely late-20th century, late-modernist, and contains "electricity and plastics when those materials weren't yet invented" [Mitchell, 2023]), the film is in line with recent scholarship suggesting that "posthumanism might be traced back […] beyond the Turing test—perhaps to Babbage's Analytical Engine or Marx's Capital" (Esser, 2018). Victorians were fascinated by human-machine hybrids (Karpenko, 2022, 49) and anomalous bodies like the creature in *Frankenstein* (heavily referenced in *Poor things!*, e.g. by naming Godwin after Shelley's father), a novel showing "that the condition of being ordinarily human and wanting to exceed that condition are thoroughly intertwined" (Mousley, 2016, p. 161).

It is tempting to frame *Poor things!* as steampunk. This genre, summed up by John Coulthart as "Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man / baroque stylings) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot" (Vandermeer, 2011, p. 8), "looks to the present to illuminate the past, the past to illuminate the present, the future to illuminate the past, and the past to illuminate the future" (Bowser; Croxall, 2010, p. 29), and "deconstructs metanarratives of Western progress, enlightenment and humanitarian liberalism" (Kohlke; Gutleben, 2012, p. 22).

Set designer Shona Heath, however, rejects this hypothesis (Silver, 2023). Its aesthetic is markedly different: steampunk is "devoted to the perspicuity of the machine's interior" (Emmerson Reid, 2014, p. 139) and fetishises cogs, springs, sprockets, wheels,

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clouds of steam, and the like. *Poor things!* has none of that. Its London (the archetypical steampunk city, whereas the book was set in Scotland) looks as factory-less as Aspra Spitia ("a country that skipped the industrial age altogether", as per *Attenberg*'s Spyros).

What *Poor things!* borrows from steampunk is its visual tinkering. Steampunks are tinkerers (Barber; Hale, 2013, p. 166) in that they encourage "a culture of do-it-yourself amateur art and design" (Huxtable, 2103, p. 221). Like 19th century Arts and Crafts, and against our digital era's dematerialisation (Danahay, 2024, p. 495), steampunk rejects mass production (Huxtable, 2103, p. 217-218) and celebrates handcraft.

Declaredly (Allen, 2024) drawing from Victorian ornamentation (Emmerson Reid, 2014, p. 140-142), Heath strove to create "a slightly handcrafted feeling [,] a bit otherworldly" (Silver, 2023): "We went a bit more sort of gnarly, a bit more organic, things that are maybe perceived as ugly or a bit rougher [and made them] beautiful and different" (Allen, 2024), with more easily detectable patterns and textures than in steampunk's cluttered, microscopic details. "Lanthimos wanted an Old Hollywood feel, and thus shot the movie at a studio, using painted backdrops" and miniatures (Silver, 2023). "He kept saying the textures needed to be bigger, deeper, stronger" (Mitchell, 2023), and the overall emphasis was on contrasts: "Art and very decorative surfaces suddenly had a very flat side to them, or a heavy, textured wall was contrasted with a very sleek staircase, that sort of approach" (Carlson, 2024).

This clashing aesthetics is meant to express the world "seen through *her* eyes" (Kermode, 2023), i.e. those of someone like Bella whose self literally consists in the scission between mind and body. The fact that things are shown the way they would be seen by a character who embodies that scission, relates to two important aspects of the film.

Firstly, Bella's way of becoming human strongly recalls artificial intelligence's acquisition of embodiment; reason and senses become more and more attuned through a European Grand Tour, like in British realist novels (e.g. Charles Dickens's *Little Dorritt*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch,* and many others), and contemporary scholarship has convincingly shown that precisely British realist novels have foreshadowed many ways, for cybernetics, to juggle together concrete materiality and abstract information. "Revealing the machinic modes of the most human-seeming characters illuminates the automatic feedback loops and networked structures that powered Victorian verisimilitude. To be like a human is not the antithesis of the machine but one form of its embodiment" (Ward, 2018, p. 10), argues Megan Ward in a book in which she (p. 7) takes pains to distinguish this analogy (between British realist novels and artificial intelligence) from steampunk: the latter typically skips the 20th century (which Lanthimos's film evokes through its "Old Hollywood feel") in bridging 19th and 21st, whereas Ward focuses on the origins of artificial intelligence in 20th century's

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cybernetics.

Secondly, the film is not underlain by a unitary narrative arc without also being split in three different films by adopting three different aesthetics. Waddington explained in detail how Bella's clothes change as she evolves (Cadenas, 2023; Piceni, 2024; Ryzik, 2024), and Heath that, in the first black-and-white part at Godwin's, graphic patterns are more geometric and serial than the freer ones in the second part in colours overseas, and in the third part, back at Godwin's, "those colors are milder [than in the second part], closer to the more moderate hues seen in 'our' world" (Weldon, 2024). *Poor things!* couples the traditional, Hollywood-like, linear narrative journey with a character-milieu system that mutates (changing its corresponding aesthetics) without transition into another when Bella leaves home and then mutates again as abruptly when she comes back. Even if the film's world is seen through Bella's eyes, that world changes as Bella changes by encountering the world. Neither character nor milieu come first; both of them taken together, however, change and transform into different worlds with different aesthetics. The Oedipal, anthropocentric hero's journey is not affirmed without its countermeasure.

Final Considerations

Steampunk (whose quintessential garment, the corset (Taddeo, 2013), only appears during the flashback when Victoria commits suicide, but never on Bella) is thus evoked only to be differed from. "Steampunk plots stage the disruptive return of Victorian culture's dark double, its seamy underside or secret truth" (Hantke, 1999, p. 251), but then normally "power merely rearranges itself before our eyes" (p. 251-2), metafictionally showing the reality lying beneath the conspiracies of Victorian(ish) power as yet another piece of fiction, albeit one whose ontology is internally consistent. Instead, *Poor things!* stages a positive, affirmative transformation involving an actual defeat of that establishment, with Bella breaking the patriarchal alliance between Godwin, Duncan, and Alfie by bringing the scientist to her side: Bella breaks Godwin's Oedipal, vengeful Frankensteinian curse he inherited from his father by not taking revenge against him. As M. Keith Booker and Isra Daraiseh (2025) put it drawing on Fredric Jameson, *Poor things!* can only belong to a kind of steampunk whose utopian, affirmative component overcomes the postmodernist one (both of which are normally part of the steampunk worldview, but mostly in such a way that the latter overwhelms the former).

In *Poor things!*, origins are summoned only to be discarded. Body, mind, brain,

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environment, animals, technology etc. all contribute to Bella's development only differentially. No supposed primacy for any of them that does not get dialectically flipped. That origins are contingent does not mean that there is no essentiality: the essential lies, precisely, in differing the origin – what Derrida ascribed to trace and Malabou to the plasticity of form.

Even Victoria, the woman Bella owes her body and brain to, appears in the film only so that Bella can deny all link with her: "It was just a story of someone else. Not Bella Baxter". As much as they can safely be expunged with no consequence on the film's narrative trajectory, the thirteen minutes when Bella plays Victoria, whose corpse gave her life, are the film's crucial core. Bella does not become herself without gaining awareness of her origins (Victoria, and by extension female condition both structural and historical) while disavowing them as origins. Bella's is exactly the kind of repetition envisaged as true posthumanism by Malabou, who ends her book on the clitoris with a plea not to amputate feminism from the feminine, because "without origin" does not mean "without memory" (of violence, injustice etc.) (Malabou, 2020, p. 122).

In *Poor things!*, self-determination consists in both embracing and disowning one's conditions of possibility: not only female condition, but also death as fundamental human condition. Willing to overcome death, Godwin fails, unlike Bella, to be his own parent. By having Bella repeat her original corpse, Victoria, *Poor things!* moves away from Braidotti's underplaying of death and finitude in the name of a posthuman, Spinozian monistic life (Braidotti, 2013, p. 121-137) and closer to what Ruben Borg, following Malabou, called *fantasies of self-mourning*: "the encounter with one's own reflection [setting] up a relation to self that is grounded in the impossible experience of one's own death" (Borg, 2019, p. 33), displacing the subject's narcissism by the awareness that self-determination depends on the impossibility to self-determine. For Borg, self-mourning specifically allegorises the posthuman's

> conjunction of reality ([Hegel's] *Wirklichkeit*) with its limit: but a conjunction without synthesis and without transcendence […] that preserves the absolute alterity of the terms it joins, that does not negate finitude or overcome boundaries […]. It would have to inhabit the in-between of [Hegel's] Spirit and Nature, to mark some kind of co-existence between them without privileging the self-preserving power of the former. (Borg, 2019, p. 62)

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Both body and mind, the brain is, for Malabou, where this materialist indeterminacy between Hegel's Spirit and Nature is most substantially located, as best epitomized by the strictly neurological phenomenon she calls *destructive plasticity*: through brain damage, someone turns into a completely different person. The identity of these "new wounded" is "without origin and without memory" (Malabou, 2012 [2007], p. 152), characterized by unemotional "coldness, neutrality, absence" (Malabou, 2012 [2009], p. 37). Destructive plasticity, "the power to form identity through destruction—thus making possible the emergence of a psyche that has vacated itself, its past, and its 'precedents'" (Malabou, 2012 [2007], p. 68), makes subjectivity face the fact that it is contingent through and through: "the possibility, inscribed within each human being, of becoming someone else at any moment" even by sheer accident (p. 200).

Malabou insists that the survival of the subject after such radical metamorphosis "does not appear as sublation or redemption. It has nothing to do with salvation or resurrection" (Malabou, 2012 [2009], p. 60). No link whatsoever between the personalities before and after the accident.

But how can Bella, a lively woman who could not seem farther from being detachedly uninterested in herself like the "new wounded", be a case of destructive plasticity? The latter "prohibits envisaging precisely the other possibility, even if it were an a posteriori possibility. It has nothing to do with the tenacious, incurable desire to transform what has taken place, to reengage in the history of the phantasm of an other history; it does not match any unconscious tactical strategy of opening, the refusal of what is, in the name of what could have been" (Malabou, 2012 [2009], p. 89). Bella's impersonation of Victoria results in no connection between the two: "it was just a story of someone else. Not Bella Baxter". She does not try to change it, redeem it, or "reengage in the history of her phantasm": all she tries to do is to save her genitals. The Victoria episode is just one more origin summoned only to be repelled (just like in the wider arc of the film, it is both crucial and safely expendable), and thus an actual case of destructive plasticity, a "type of metamorphosis that is a farewell to being itself" (Malabou, 2012 [2009], p. 37). This remains true even if the transformation from Victoria to Bella was due not to an accidental brain trauma but to Godwin's deliberate surgical treatment: as he did not know Victoria, Godwin could not have created Bella taking any link between previous and following personality into account, and so the act whereby he gave life to Bella must be regarded as contingent through and through.

Death, then, turns out to be quite in the foreground of *Poor things!*. Ultimately,

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destructive plasticity is a way for death (form's destruction) as subjectivity's condition of possibility to coexist non-transcendentally with the receiving and the giving of form (their plastic interplay being what subjectivity is, for Malabou, all about). There is no plasticity, hence no subject, without acknowledging death not as a transcendentally removed and untouchable origin of subjectivity, but as part and parcel of its formation at all times. In a film relying heavily on the tactility of the inorganic through its old-school studio aesthetics, Bella can only keep Victoria's spectre at bay by repeating her life, post-mortem, as an entirely different person, unrelated to her despite sharing the same body, in an episode which, consistently with these premises, is both essential and contingent in the overall narrative economy of the film.

Poor things! illustrates, with more than a nod to *destructive plasticity*, Malabou's caveat (borrowed from Nietzsche) on the plastic, non-vengeful power that true posthumanism should have (Malabou, 2018: "the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken molds") while also clarifying that death and finitude should be part and parcel of it. The posthuman must not repudiate death and finitude (and thus, by extension, temporality and history), otherwise it gets haunted by the spectre of older humanism as opposed to repeating it *differently*.

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[I] Marco Grosoli

PhD in Film Studies (University of Bologna, Italy, 2010), British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow (University of Kent, UK, 2015), Assistant Professor in Film Studies (Habib University, Karachi, Pakistan, 2016-2021) and Appointed Research Fellow (Nova Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA), Universidade Nova, Lisboa, Portugal, 2024-).

E-mail: mgrosoli@fcsh.unl.pt.

Informações sobre o artigo

Resultado de projeto de pesquisa:
"Film and Death: Film-Philosophy as a Meditation on Death" (https://filmdeath.fcsh.unl.pt/), Nova Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA), Universidade NOVA, Lisboa (Portugal).

Fontes de financiamento:
This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme (FILM AND DEATH, grant agreement No. 101088956).

Considerações éticas:
Não se aplica.

Declaração de conflitos de interesse:
Não se aplica.

Apresentação anterior:
Não se aplica

Artigo recebido em: 22/08/2025. Aprovado em 25/02/2026.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.22475/rebeca.v15n1.1330, v. 15, n. 1, pp. 01-29, jan./dez., 2026. Publicação contínua.