



## Art Cinema's Suicidal Posthuman Women

**Pansy Duncan**, Senior Lecturer, Media Studies, Massey University, Aotearoa, New Zealand, [P.Duncan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:P.Duncan@massey.ac.nz)

**Claire Henry**, Senior Lecturer in Screen, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia, [claire.henry@flinders.edu.au](mailto:claire.henry@flinders.edu.au)

**Caitlin Lynch**, Film Scholar and Archivist, Collection Moves Officer, V&A museum, UK, [caitlin.lynych2@gmail.com](mailto:caitlin.lynych2@gmail.com)

**Missy Molloy**, Film Programme, Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa, New Zealand, [missy.molloy@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:missy.molloy@vuw.ac.nz)

---

*Air Doll* (Kûki ningyô, dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2009) introduces a posthuman perspective through its protagonist Nozomi, an inflatable sex doll who miraculously comes to consciousness. Meanwhile, *On Body and Soul* (Testről és lélekről, dir. Ildikó Enyedi, 2017) centers on a surreal romance between Mária and Endre that thrives, in part, on their posthuman connections to animals and objects. Strong narrative, erotic, and traumatic elements bind these films—in particular, their treatments of their posthuman women protagonists—which video editing offered the ideal method for unpacking. *Air Doll* and *On Body and Soul* explore the posthuman possibilities inherent in their protagonists' nonhuman and neurodivergent subjectivities, yet the films' handling of Nozomi and Mária's leaky bodies reveals their confinement within humanist norms. Left bleeding and deflated, what do Nozomi and Mária foretell for posthuman cinema?

---





### Creators' Statement

The four of us collaborated on a book-length study of twenty-first century cinema's engagement with the evolving dynamic between the human and nonhuman world. Exploring this dynamic through the figure of the "posthuman," *Screening the Posthuman* (Oxford University Press, 2023) resists efforts to mortgage the posthuman to Hollywood sci-fi. Instead, we trace its outline across a diverse array of films, from *Border* (Ali Abbasi, 2018) to *Mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017). While diverging nationally, industrially, and generically, these films are united by their shared thematic burden: a preoccupation with forms of being that test the limits of conventional humanist understandings of the human. In grappling with this preoccupation, we turned to critical posthumanism, a body of critical work advanced by scholars such as Neil Badmington, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe. At the heart of critical posthumanist practice is a pair of insights that guided our attention to the films throughout. On the one hand, this body of work acknowledges the role of contemporary social, ecological, and techno-scientific coordinates—from climate change to human cloning—in unsettling humanist accounts of the human by drawing attention to our entanglement in broader biological, technological, or social worlds. On the other, it reminds us, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, that *we have never been human*, and that, as Rosi Braidotti reminds us, "some of us are not even considered fully human now" (Braidotti, 2013: 1).

In the final phase of our book's gestation, we decided to create a video essay that would unpack some of the book's recurring themes. While *Screening the Posthuman* seeks to differentiate the various sub-types of posthuman cinema, the video essay draws new connections between them in an accessible form. Perhaps the most notable shared feature of the films discussed in the book is a strand of ambivalence about the posthuman. This is exemplified not only by their tendency to fall into transhumanist fantasy and/or humanist nostalgia, but also their oscillation between anxiety and excitement in approaching the posthuman. Thus, when brainstorming a video essay

that would pull together arguments spread across the book, we zeroed in on this ambivalence as it manifested in two films that served as our case studies: *Air Doll* (*Kúki ningyô*, dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2009), which produces a posthuman perspective through its protagonist Nozomi, an inflatable sex doll who miraculously comes to consciousness; and *On Body and Soul* (*Testről és lélekról*, dir. Ildikó Enyedi, 2017), which portrays the surreal romance between Mária and Endre that thrives, in part, on their posthuman connections to animals and objects. Strong narrative, erotic, and traumatic elements bind these films, and video editing offered us a promising method for unpacking them.

The production process began with the exploration of a motif that the two films share: women characters who leak bodily fluids. In *On Body and Soul*, Mária (Alexandra Borbély), who is overwhelmed by the challenges of human intimacy, cuts her wrists. The spectacle of Mária's blood gushing into the bathwater recalls earlier scenes of cattle being butchered at the slaughterhouse where she works, meaning her suicide attempt evokes Mária's animality rather than her humanity. Meanwhile, *Air Doll* features a similar sequence in which Nozomi (Bae Doona) accidentally pierces her plastic body and air rushes out of her limping form until her lover re-inflates her. The scene not only calls sharp attention to Nozomi's non-human identity, but implicates her human lover, Junichi, in a posthuman exchange in which he is called to breathe live back into her. Both films, then, use leaking fluids—blood and air—to animate posthuman embodiment, which is to say, the “leaky” boundaries between human and non-human life. By setting them side by side, the video essay draws attention to these human/non-human proximities.

Yet if, formally speaking, these scenes of suicide provide rich resources for reflection on the posthuman, then, narratively speaking, these are scenes of containment. By earmarking both Mária and Nozomi for suicide, the films identify them—like many marked bodies before them—as “impossible” bodies that cannot be incorporated within a conventional life-world. In this sense, they reflect the extent to which these films are ultimately limited by humanist assumptions that curtail their capacity to imagine alternative posthuman narrative possibilities. Admittedly, Mária does not ultimately succeed in committing suicide. As the blood eddies and curls through the bath water, she receives a phone call in which Endre declares his love and instigates a reunion; the subsequent morning finds the two sharing breakfast in a state of post-coital bliss. Yet, in many respects, the terms of her deliverance are no less problematic than the terms of Nozomi's demise. While Endre's declaration marks an end to her anguish, it does so only by proscribing the queer possibilities of her distinctly posthuman forms of being and relating, and situating her, uneasily, within a

conventionally heterosexual frame. In this sense, the resolutions of both films speak to their ambivalence about the posthuman as a trope that they at once fetishize and seek to contain.

### **Biographies**

Caitlin Lynch is a film scholar and archivist, currently working as a Collection Moves Officer at the V&A museum. Pansy Duncan is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand. Claire Henry is Senior Lecturer in Screen at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. Missy Molloy is Senior Lecturer in Film at Victoria University of Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Screening the Posthuman* (Oxford University Press, 2023) is co-authored by Molloy, Duncan, and Henry, and Lynch served as a research assistant for the book project.

### **Review by Allison De Fren, Occidental College**

Smartly edited and structured and beautifully narrated, “Art Cinema’s Suicidal Posthuman Women” offers a compelling meditation on the ambivalence that has marked posthuman bodies ever since Donna Haraway first suggested their critical potential in her seminal feminist essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985). While Haraway heralded cyborgs and other posthuman figures as “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (181), many critics since have noted the difficulty—or perhaps the refusal—of imagining posthuman identity and embodiment within screen culture, where even a bodiless digital AI—as in Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013)—is framed in humanist, gendered, and heteronormative terms. Nevertheless, as the video essay makes manifest, gendered and sexualized bodies can still convey the “leaky distinction” between the human and nonhuman by revealing non- and/or posthuman subjectivities and ways of knowing and relating.

The video essay’s thematic comparison of the affectively relational blow-up doll, Nozomi, in *Air Doll* (2009) and the robotic-acting human protagonist, Mária, in *On Body and Soul* (2017) serves as an effective strategy for drawing out their equally complex experiences of self and other across the human/nonhuman divide. Especially provocative is the back-and-forth cutting between Nozomi’s accidental puncturing and Mária’s self-inflicted wounds, both of which, the video essay suggests, catalyze a form of posthuman relationality even as they encourage heteronormative coupling. In foregrounding the ways in which Mária and Nozomi are figured as posthuman, the video essay sidelines questions about their cultural work, that is, to what narrative end each character is troubling humanism and the extent to which it is reflective of

their respective film's unique socio-historical context. This is, however, an artfully rendered demonstration of the ways in which posthumanism is often invoked only to be contained and—as audiovisual supplement to the creators' book-length study of cinematic posthumanism, *Screening the Posthuman* (Oxford University Press, 2023)—a compelling invitation for further reading, viewing, and inquiry.

## References

“Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985) in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

## Review by Kathleen Loock, Leibniz Universität Hannover

This video essay—a collaborative project by Caitlin Lynch, Pansy Duncan, Claire Henry, and Missy Molloy—explores posthuman cinema. More precisely, it focuses on the nonhuman and neurodivergent female characters in the Japanese movie *Air Doll* (*Kūki ningyō*, dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2009) and the Hungarian movie *On Body and Soul* (*Testről és lélekről*, dir. Ildikó Enyedi, 2017). Created as a companion piece to their (also collaborative) book project *Screening the Posthuman*, the video essay is designed to illustrate some of the central ideas of the study. Even if that was the initial motivation for making this particular video essay, it certainly can stand on its own and succeeds in making a full-fledged argument about the female protagonists' posthuman subjectivities, bodily excesses, and over-bearingly conventional (read: humanist and heteronormative) narrative constraints.

The video essay compares both films by efficiently, yet also poetically, moving back and forth between them. The pace is initially relatively slow, allowing viewers to take in the images and follow the argument made in the voiceover. But the video essay also builds tension towards the graphically violent and sexualized scenes of attempted suicide and deflation (in the case of the sex doll), which are then rendered in quick parallel editing to draw out the similarities between the representations of the leaking female body in both films. As the video essay continues to use this cross-cutting technique to discuss the endings of *Air Doll* and *On Body and Soul*, it also voices its critique of posthuman cinema's failure to divest itself of humanist assumptions. The video essay is used in a creative and explorative manner to make that point, drawing on the affordances of the audiovisual to guide viewers through this thought process.

---

