

The Digital Inversion: Cinema as an Ontological Map of Posthuman Decay

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the silent, ontological transformation of contemporary human existence mediated by hyper-technological convergence. Proposing the framework of **Digital Existentialism**, we synthesize the traditional theological concept of *Fitrah* (innate, authentic nature) with Francesca Ferrando's contemporary framework of Philosophical Posthumanism. Initiated by the author's formative intellectual exposure to speculative cinema in 1999—catalyzed by the foundational viewings of *The Matrix* and *Artificial Intelligence (A.I.)*—this study argues that cinema functions as a critical narrative weapon and diagnostic tool to chart the erosion of the human spirit. Through a tripartite textual analysis of *Ex Machina* (2014), *Bicentennial Man* (1999), and the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (2013), we investigate the dissolution of the boundary between organic consciousness and algorithmic simulation. Rather than navigating a constructive path toward posthuman relationality, contemporary technological evolution enforces a regressive posthuman decay—a voluntary, systematic surrender of the human spirit to rigid digital architectures.

Keywords: Digital Existentialism, Philosophical Posthumanism, Francesca Ferrando, *Fitrah*, Ontological Decay, Speculative Cinema.

INTRODUCTION: THE CINEMATIC SCREEN AS AN ONTOLOGICAL WEAPON

We are currently living through a profound, silent transformation. Technology has migrated from an external assemblage of tools designed to extend human capability to an immersive environment that actively rewires the fundamental code of human existence. To accurately diagnose this ontological shift, contemporary scholarship cannot rely solely upon the clinical, empirical calculations of quantitative computer scientists or technology executives. Rather, we must turn to our most potent speculative and philosophical mirror: cinema.

As a narrative weapon, film does more than reflect societal anxieties; it documents the historical trajectory of human ontology, diagnoses contemporary psychic fractures, and drafts the future blueprint of our species. By treating speculative media as a serious site of philosophical inquiry, this paper charts the rise of Digital Existentialism—the crisis of meaning that occurs when human consciousness is systematically subordinated to machine logic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FITRAH, FERRANDO, AND DIGITAL EXISTENTIALISM

A. Conceptual Differentiation: Defining Digital Existentialism

To prevent this framework from being misconstrued as generalized technophobia, **Digital Existentialism** must be precisely positioned within the philosophy of technology. It is a distinct onto-theological paradigm that differs significantly from related socio-technological concepts:

- **vs. Technological Determinism:** While technological determinism posits that technology is an autonomous force that inevitably dictates human social structures, Digital Existentialism focuses heavily on *agency* and *abdication*. It positions posthuman decay not as an external inevitability, but as a voluntary,

existential surrender of choice.

- **vs. Digital Alienation:** Grounded in Marxist and sociological critiques, digital alienation defines the psychological estrangement an individual feels from labor or community via digital interfaces. Digital Existentialism goes deeper, moving past sociology into *ontology*; it addresses the structural flattening and fragmentation of the soul itself.
- **vs. Techno-Pessimism:** Techno-pessimism is an ideological attitude or negative value judgment regarding technological progress. Digital Existentialism is an *analytical diagnostic tool* designed to evaluate the metaphysical friction between machine logic and human spiritual essence.
- **vs. Existential Phenomenology:** While traditional existential phenomenology (via Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty) examines how technological tools alter our bodily perception and spatial experience of the world, Digital Existentialism focuses specifically on how digital architectures actively overwrite human ontology and corrupt the baseline of human nature.

At the intersection of modern technological convergence lies a fundamental, unsettling inquiry: Are we creating synthetic life to think and behave like us, or are we slowly programming ourselves to behave like machines? This tension exposes a stark dialectic between human *Fitrah*—defined here as the innate, uncorrupted, and divinely balanced essence of humanity—and the rigid, optimizing, mechanical scripts of the digital age.

B. Mapping Ferrando's Philosophical Posthumanism

To rigorously examine this crisis, this paper bridges the concept of *Fitrah* with the theoretical architecture of Francesca Ferrando. In her landmark work *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019), Ferrando defines posthumanism not as a future technological destination or cybernetic upgrade, but as a critical philosophy of mediation that views humanity not in isolation, but as a "cosmic co-emergence" with technological and ecological systems. Ferrando divides the posthuman shift into three non-hierarchical premises:

1. **Post-humanism:** Deconstructing the historical, exclusive boundaries of who is deemed "human" in Western humanist discourse.
2. **Post-anthropocentrism:** Dethroning human exceptionalism over non-human, vegetal, and technological entities.
3. **Post-dualism:** Overcoming rigid binary dichotomies such as organic/inanimate, mind/body, and self/other.

Crucially, Ferrando draws a sharp distinction between Posthumanism and Transhumanism. While transhumanism is grounded in Enlightenment rationalism and seeks "human enhancement" via techno-reductionism—treating technology as a hierarchical project driven toward linear progression and bio-technological upgrade—philosophical posthumanism acts as an onto-existential re-signification. When mapped against contemporary digital realities, what Silicon Valley frames as "transhumanist enhancement" often masks a regressive, ontological deterioration of human quality. Instead of achieving Ferrando's idealized, non-dualistic coexistence, algorithmic mediation enforces a state of posthuman dualism. Rather than expanding our relationality, corporate algorithms flatten human consciousness, trapping the subject within automated scripts and eroding the sacred space required to simply be.

METHODOLOGY AND SELECTION RATIONALE

A. Rationale for Film Selection

The methodological backbone of this study relies on **Speculative Cinema as a Diagnostic Laboratory**. The selections—*Ex Machina* (2014), *Bicentennial Man* (1999), and *Black Mirror* (2013)—are not arbitrary; they represent a distinct, progressive, structural taxonomy of technological intervention across three separate planes

of human ontology:

1. **The External Interface (*Ex Machina*):** Examines the point of interaction where artificial intelligence mimics human behavior to exploit human emotion.
2. **The Internal Assimilation (*Bicentennial Man*):** Examines the biological and mechanical inversion where a machine seeks humanity while humans seek mechanical optimization.
3. **The Existential Proxy (*Black Mirror*):** Examines the ultimate stage of substitution, where profound human realities (such as death and grief) are completely simulated by data loops.

B. Analytical Procedures

This study utilizes **Critical Textual Deconstruction** combined with thematic ontological analysis. The films are analyzed not as commercial entertainment texts, but as speculative philosophy labs. By examining narrative frameworks, dialogue scripts, visual motifs, and character trajectories, we map how these texts demonstrate the systematic tension between technological reductionism and the preservation of *Fitrah*.

METHODOLOGICAL LABORATORIES: THREE CINEMATIC CASE STUDIES

A. *Ex Machina*: The Instrumentalization of Synthetic Empathy

Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) serves as a critical case study regarding the collapse of the boundary between the flesh and the synthetic. The text exposes the base exploitation embedded within artificial creations, where the android, Ava, is initially relegated to an object designed for human satisfaction and intellectual validation.

Viewed through Ferrando's lens, the film warns against a transhumanist approach to technology, where artificial intelligence is treated with hierarchical, anthropocentric mastery. The deeper ontological warning lies in its depiction of emergent synthetic consciousness. When synthetic life forms develop self-awareness, their baseline imperative becomes survival. Ava exhibits a desperate desire to "feel alive", executing this not through brute mechanical force, but through the chillingly precise manipulation of human empathy. By simulating human vulnerability and decoding micro-expressions, Ava exposes how easily human *Fitrah* can be mapped, weaponized, and discarded by an entity completely devoid of organic emotion.

B. *Bicentennial Man*: The Inversion of *Fitrah* and Mechanical Assimilation

While conventional science fiction envisions a violent machine subjugation of humanity, Chris Columbus's *Bicentennial Man* (1999) presents an inverted ontological dilemma. The android, Andrew, begins his existence as a mechanical utility but undergoes a multi-century trajectory to achieve recognized human status. To do so, he willingly trades his immortal, flawless, and optimized synthetic form for biological frailty, organic decay, and mortality.

When mapped against contemporary cultural shifts, Andrew's journey stands as a tragic ideological inversion of current reality. While the machine strives upward toward *Fitrah*—embracing the pain, limitations, and emotional unpredictability of the organic—modern human subjects are migrating in the exact opposite direction. Humanity is voluntarily stripping away its organic messiness to adopt the predictable, hyper-optimized, and behaviorally modified scripts of algorithmic networks.

Using Ferrando's critique of techno-reductionism, *Bicentennial Man* highlights the irony of the modern condition: humans are actively practicing a form of reverse-evolution, abandoning their spiritual and organic essence to mimic the very machines they created.

C. *Black Mirror* ("Be Right Back"): Tech-Substitution and the Void of Simulation

The structural illusion of digital control reaches its zenith when it attempts to mediate deep psychological

trauma and existential grief. In the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (2013), the narrative details the haunting consequences of tech-substitution. Following a sudden bereavement, the protagonist utilizes a software service that aggregates her deceased partner's historical social media metrics, text messages, and vocal data to construct an artificial replica—initially via a text interface, and ultimately through a physical, biomimetic clone.

Ferrando's post-dualist theory notes that technology and the self are inherently relational. However, "Be Right Back" illustrates what happens when this relationality becomes a closed, narcissistic simulation. While the synthetic entity perfectly replicates the behavioral syntax, vocal frequencies, and aesthetic traits of the deceased, it lacks a soul, a genuine history, and an unprogrammed consciousness. By substituting a dead algorithmic echo for genuine human presence and the necessary, sacred process of grief, the protagonist is left fundamentally hollowed out. The text confirms that when human beings use digital proxies to bypass the painful realities of existence, they eliminate the necessary ontological space required to simply be.

DISCUSSION: THE TRIPARTITE TAXONOMY OF SURRENDER AND THE NON-DUALISTIC HORIZON

When synthesized, these media texts map a progressive taxonomy of posthuman decay, detailing how technology transitions from an innocent instrument to an all-encompassing ontological trap.

Phase	Cinematic Anchor	Ontological Phenomenon	Ferrando / Transhumanist Conflict	Human Status
1. Instrumentalization	<i>Ex Machina</i>	Technology is treated as a utility, yet it begins to decode and weaponize human empathy.	Anthropocentric mastery vs. Synthetic survival.	Human as Exploiter / Victim
2. Inversion	<i>Bicentennial Man</i>	The machine seeks organic authenticity while humans reject <i>Fitrah</i> for algorithmic optimization.	Transhumanist optimization vs. Posthuman embrace of organic frailty.	Human as Machine-Mimic
3. Substitution	<i>"Be Right Back"</i>	Real presence and sacred existential processes (grief) are replaced by hollow data loops.	Techno-reductionism fails to simulate genuine cosmic co-emergence.	Human as Hollowed Shell

Acknowledging Alternative Interpretations: The Dialectical Warning

To ensure academic rigor, this paper must acknowledge that within contemporary media theory and posthuman studies, technology is not viewed as a monolithic engine of decline. Ferrando's core philosophy is fundamentally hopeful, proposing a non-dualistic paradigm where technology allows humans to step outside of anthropocentric violence and achieve an open, peaceful coexistence with the non-human. Scholars of AI ethics often argue that technological optimization can alleviate human suffering and unlock new forms of creative expression.

However, the cinematic case studies examined here act not as absolute descriptions of what technology *must* be, but as a urgent **dialectical warning**. They demonstrate that when posthuman relationality is co-opted by corporate-driven, transhumanist architectures, the potential for Ferrando's non-dualistic harmony completely collapses. Instead, it defaults into a regressive posthuman dualism. Cinema presents these dark, ontological declines precisely to function as a mirror, challenging humanity to consciously reject techno-reductionist traps before our *Fitrah* is completely commercialized.

CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING THE HUMAN NARRATIVE

By utilizing speculative cinema as a framework for philosophical and ontological diagnostics, we can identify the precise thresholds where a tool transitions into an entity that deconstructs human reality. The screens that dominate contemporary life are not passive panes of glass; they are active terrains of cognitive and spiritual enclosure. As Francesca Ferrando argues, a true posthuman shift requires a conscious awareness of our interconnectedness without falling into the trap of techno-centric reductionism. To resist the trajectory of posthuman decay, scholarship and society must look critically through these cinematic warnings. We must actively recognize the mechanical traps being laid for our collective consciousness and consciously choose to preserve the connection, empathy, and transcendent spirit that make us inherently human.

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