

REDISCOVERING OUR HUMANITY:
HOW THE *POSTHUMAN NOIR* ANIME, *DARKER THAN
BLACK*, SUBVERTS THE TROPES OF FILM NOIR TO
REAFFIRM A HUMANIST AGENDA

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I intended to reason. This passion is detrimental to me....

— Mary Shelly¹

There is an inherent contradiction at the heart of *posthuman noir*; this sub-genre focuses on science fictional futures where certain characters have moved beyond the traditional boundaries of what is considered human; these posthumans are modified for perfection, often presented as more logical and rational than their human counterparts. However, the emphasis, in all of the Anglo-American films and Japanese anime included in the *posthuman noir* corpus, is on more typically human traits of emotion and irrationality and their awakening/re-awakening in these posthuman characters. This hints that the sub-genre is not in fact positing a truly posthumanist standpoint but reaffirming an older humanist one, assuaging fears that what is traditionally considered human has no place in these technologically advanced worlds.

This article will explore this theory through its application to one *posthuman noir* Japanese anime, Tensai Okamura's *Darker Than Black* (2007), a series which is indicative of the other Anglo-American films and Japanese anime included in the *posthuman noir* corpus between 1982 and 2012. *Darker Than Black*, which aired for 26 episodes between April and September 2007, was produced by animation studios Bones and Aniplex. It was followed by a shorter second series of 13 episodes in 2009 and an OVA (original video animation) of four episodes in 2010. The analysis in this article will concentrate on the first series of *Darker Than Black*.

Focusing on two specific areas where the anthropocentric agenda of *posthuman noir* is particularly evident—narrative structure and characterisation—this article develops an overview of the sub-genre's distinct features. However, before *Darker Than Black* can be

explored in any great detail there are three areas of critical debate which must be raised. Firstly the sub-genre of *posthuman noir* must be introduced and defined; secondly the pertinent philosophical and ontological questions of what it means to be posthuman and posthumanist will be identified; and finally, relevant issues relating to the contested genre of film noir will be examined. The critical concerns drawn from these three areas will then inform and illuminate the ways in which *Darker Than Black*, as a *posthuman noir* anime, validates the continuing status of the human at the centre of focus in technologically advanced, science fictional posthuman futures.

WHAT IS POSTHUMAN NOIR?

Posthuman noir is located at the intersection of science fiction cinema and film noir; it draws on the aesthetic, thematic and structural elements of the latter to explore questions of humanity's place in posthuman futures. The Anglo-American films and Japanese anime included in this sub-genre have a cohesive set of concerns related to the fears and possibilities afforded by the modification of humanity through actions of "extension"² [cybernetics and robotics], "enhancement"³ [genetic modification], and "extrusion"⁴ [virtual realities, connected consciousnesses] and how essential human nature is preserved or perpetuated through these changes. These concerns are presented by this sub-genre by adopting elements found in the body of films labelled as film noir—traditionally considered to span the from *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) to *A Touch of Evil* (Orson Wells, 1958)⁵—and adapting or subverting them.

Each of the Anglo-American films and Japanese anime included in the *posthuman noir* corpus take on atmospheric and aesthetic devices that are associated with film noir; their settings emphasise the "constant opposition of light and shadow...[use] oblique camera angles...[with a] disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes."⁶ This use of aesthetic is evident from the neon and rain soaked streets of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)⁷ to the minimalist art deco inspired locations of *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccols, 1997)⁸ to *Dark City's* (Alex Proyas, 1998) nightmarish warren⁹ which establishes a distinct visual link to Fritz Lang's expressionist science fiction film, *Metropolis* (1927).¹⁰ Concurrently these visual signifiers of film noir are present in Japanese anime from the constantly shifting and disorientating angles of *Ergo Proxy* (Shukō Murase, 2006)¹¹ to the glorious art

deco cityscapes of Rintaro's *Metropolis* (2001)¹² to the moody purples and acid greens which dominate, and generate contrast, in *Darker Than Black*; this colour contrast, established in the first scenes,¹³ develops as a visual signifier of the rotting, corrupt nature of the world the characters populate.

The worlds of *posthuman noir* are populated with character types drawn from film noir: protagonists tend to be detectives—Rick Deckard,¹⁴ Motoko Kusanagi¹⁵— criminals and conmen—Vincent Freeman,¹⁶ Hei¹⁷—or everymen—Neo,¹⁸ Vincent Law¹⁹— manipulated by their desires for what the femme, or homme,²⁰ fatale is offering them. Moral ambiguity pervades *posthuman noir* narratives, building a rhizomatic maze of deceit²¹ which mirrors the urban maze of the science fictional metropolises in which these stories are based. Finally the sense of fatality that pervades film noir is also an inherent aspect of *posthuman noir*, as J.P. Telotte notes, “in the creation of something better than ourselves we [fear we] may become obsolete.”²²

However, despite the commonality between film noir and this sub-genre of science fiction, there is a surprising trend in *posthuman noir* stories which subverts one of the fundamental elements of film noir, namely, nearly all *posthuman noirs* end positively for the protagonists. Structurally, traditional film noir stories set out a downward spiral of destruction and tragedy for protagonists who transgress societal norms; for these protagonists, “death always comes at the end of a tortured journey.”²³ However, the very emotions that condemn the protagonists of traditional film noir are viewed as a saving grace for posthuman characters because they affirm the position of human nature in these science fictional futures. Therefore, the subversion of the film noir structure in *posthuman noir* is an active choice which explores and validates the continuation of a humanist standpoint. It is this subversion that the analysis of *Darker Than Black* in this article will highlight.

POSTHUMAN, TRANSHUMAN, POSTHUMANISM

To analyse the agenda present in *posthuman noir* and how it is applied in *Darker Than Black* it is important to establish the conflicting ideas which colour the scholarly stage of the posthuman and posthumanism—the former being characters who go through a process which places them beyond what is currently defined as human, but which might not

challenge an anthropocentric view of reality; the latter being a philosophical position which aims to shake up pre-existing notions of the human as one isolated and superior to all of creation.²⁴

Posthumanism is a difficult concept to define, as Cary Wolfe points out in the introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* “it generates different and even irreconcilable definitions.”²⁵ Opinions on its aims, agendas and even categorisation vary wildly. The divide in ideas can be addressed through the use of two different terms: transhumanism and posthumanism. It is important to understand the difference between these two terms as both apply to the posthuman characters in the *posthuman noir* corpus. This distinction has been influential in the selection of the word *posthuman* over posthumanist in the titling of this sub-genre because the all films and anime in this study include posthuman characters but they do not all adhere to a posthumanist philosophical standpoint. Nearly all of the Anglo-American films and Japanese anime in the corpus include both characters who are fully posthuman and those who are in the transitional phase—often referred to as transhuman. In *Darker Than Black* this pattern is displayed through the fully posthuman characters, called contractors and dolls, and through the transhuman characters called moratoriums.

Transhumanism is the branch of posthumanism often described as the true child of humanism.²⁶ Transhumanism focuses on the rational, logical human who remains at the centre of the universe working to perfect himself through technological means of evolution.²⁷ Transhumanists view the human body and the individualist identity as markers to be preserved through evolution to posthuman futures. There is little desire to network and blur with non-human elements, be they artificial intelligence or non-human animals. When the boundaries between man and machine break down techno-terror is unleashed to generate fear and reaffirm the need for the human to remain an isolated being.²⁸ In the *posthuman noir* corpus this position is shown by the favouring of the emotional over the rational. This conforms to a stand on transhumanism, posited by P.J. Manney, which focuses on not only improving the physical human body via techno science but also the need to also enhance humanity’s empathetic capacity.²⁹

A purer philosophical posthumanism, on the other hand, aims to escape the bounds of the anthropocentric.³⁰ Posthumanism aims to situate the human within a network of other non-human animals and life forms and look to find way to express humanity through these networks. As such, posthumanism wishes to break down the binaries which currently

define human identity and throw out the pre-existing power structures that seek to limit what is considered 'human.' In this vein, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* calls for the breaking of traditional power structures and binary definitions of the human, and in its place Haraway would like to posit unity of races, genders, man and machine towards a destruction of boundaries.³¹

In *Darker Than Black* contractor, Hei (Hidenobu Kiuchi), and doll, Yin (Misato Fukuen), offer the tantalising prospect of posthumanism through the idea of the networked posthuman. It is Hei and Yin's identities which are formed by encompassing others, embracing the team of both humans and posthumans, as well as their self as human/posthuman hybrids, that ultimately saves them, in contrast to the characters who remain isolated, locked into their identification with their single species. There is also a hint at a further blurring of the anthropocentric boundaries through the character of Mao (Ikyua Sawaki), a contractor stuck in the body of a cat who can possess other animal forms. However, the idea is brought up but not followed, it is always Mao's human identity which dominates and when in the penultimate episode of the show Mao is cut off from the Syndicate—the shadowy organisation he works for—the feline identity overwhelms him and Mao is lost, considered dead.³² The cat runs away, abandoning Hei and Yin to their fate, which undermines the notion of Mao as a fully posthuman, integrated human/non-human animal, character who retains his purpose and loyalty to the team.

This is because posthumanism is not the philosophical standpoint behind the *posthuman noir* corpus. These texts are not created from the perspective of posthumanism; they are not trying to break the power binaries apart. Instead, they use posthuman characters to promote emotional qualities over rational ones. In the technological age,³³ emotions, that are harder to program, are the sign of enlightened posthumans. In *Darker Than Black* it is the posthuman characters who overcome their rational programming, like Hei and Yin, who survive while those who cling to their rationality, like the contractor Wei (Takeshi Kusao), are ultimately defeated.³⁴

Very rarely, if ever, do posthuman characters in *posthuman noir* exhibit traits that shift from an anthropocentric viewpoint.³⁵ Instead, they embody humanist and transhumanist ideas of self improvement; they are Human 2.0, the next stage in the human operating system. Through scientific methods the human is perfected, which often includes increased rationality; posthuman characters make their decisions based on logic and reason, they are not emotionally motivated. Film critic Roger Ebert draws attention to the problem of these

rationalised posthumans asking: "Why are 'perfect' societies so often depicted by ranks of automatons?... Is it that human nature resides in our flaws?"³⁶

These flaws of human nature are the same impulses that are exploited by femme fatales to corrupt the male protagonists resulting the typically tragic endings of film noir. Yet it is these particular flaws that demonstrate our humanity and, once awoken in posthuman characters, result in the change of the *posthuman noir* ending from tragic to triumphant. It is through remaining firm to anthropocentric ideals, not posthumanist ones, that these films demonstrate their true agenda; this is not a posthuman desire to blur and break the boundaries of humanity, or remove humans from the centre of the debate; if anything, it is to place them firmly back into the limelight.

FILM NOIR

Now that an overview of philosophical position of *posthuman noir* has been established, its relation to traditional film noir must now be unpacked. The aesthetic, structural and thematic elements of traditional film noir form the method by which *posthuman noir* pursues its humanist agendas; thus these are the areas of focus for this brief overview of film noir. However, as will become apparent, these elements and the nature of film noir as a genre are highly contested. Still, as Robert Porfiro states, "we must ground the term in some sort of adequate working definition if it is to warrant serious consideration as an object of either film or culture."³⁷ Thus, this article, and *posthuman noir*, takes the standpoint that there is more than a shared set of stylistic devices that unites the oeuvre that is often referred to as film noir. In the words of Foster Hirsch: there is a unity of "narrative structure, characterisation and theme"³⁸ which binds these films together. It is the careful manipulation and subversion of these tropes that *posthuman noir* uses to validate its agenda towards consolidating a position for the 'human' in the technological, posthuman world.

The period of traditional film noir is generally agreed to run between *The Maltese Falcon* and *A Touch of Evil*.³⁹ Yet there is much divergence in critical writing about what constitutes film noir and whether or not film noir is a genre or a cycle of films which are merely united by similar aesthetic tropes.⁴⁰ The idea of a dark film, a film noir, stemmed from Nino Frank⁴¹ who noticed a new tone in the films from America in 1946; these crime

dramas were united by a darker and more violent atmosphere which distinguished them from general crime dramas. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumont, in their book *Panorama du Film Noir Américain*, noticed that defining film noir was not a simple task and perhaps, by its very nature, film noir defied coherence. These films could be linked by something more subtle; a common sense of tone and mood.⁴² Paul Schrader established a set of elements, or tropes, by which one can identify film noir and which were used as criteria for the *posthuman noir* corpus. Firstly, there are stylistic features which include: low lighting, a preference of oblique and vertical lines, a prevalence of water, voice over narration and complex chronological structures, i.e. flashbacks. Secondly, there are more tonal features which include: paranoia, claustrophobia, plumbing psychological depths, post war disillusionment, alienation.⁴³

It must be noted that film noir's distinctive style partially emerged from the German expressionist tradition, which was reinforced in Hollywood by German émigrés — for example Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger and Robert Siodmak⁴⁴—in the lead up to, and following, the Second World War. One of the most iconic expressionist films is *Metropolis*, which is also a science fiction narrative that deals with questions of what it means to be human, praising human emotional qualities over the calculating, or industrial, machine. There seems to be a link to science fiction hardwired into the DNA of noir; to that end, the return of directors from the 1980s onward, in a period of equal, if not more, rapid social and technological change than the post war era, to film noir elements to explore posthuman questions might not be so surprising.

As mentioned previously, the key thematic and structural element of film noir which is subverted to follow the humanist agenda in *posthuman noir* is the tragic downfall of the protagonist. Corrupted by his—it is nearly always his—darker emotions, manipulated and seduced by the femme fatale, the protagonist has nowhere to escape to; the only way out of the rhizomatic maze of lies and deceit is death. Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), Hank Quinlan in *a Touch of Evil* and other noir protagonists are punished for their transgression from the moral codes of law and order. This is where the noir genre reaffirms the idea that criminals cannot prosper⁴⁵, and that failure to repent or atone for sins committed will result in those sins returning to condemn the protagonists.

However, in *posthuman noir* this moral code can be replaced by the code of human nature, transgressions from this are punished, while discovery, or rediscovery, of human emotions and motivations are rewarded. Neo in *The Matrix* (Lana and Andy Wachowski,

1999) triumphs over the purely rational A.I. Agents, Deckard is allowed to leave with the girl, Rachel, in *Blade Runner*, Hei and Yin in *Darker Than Black* survive while the other emotionless contractors die. The sin, in the context of *posthuman noir*, is the rejection of humanity's emotional flaws in the pursuit of Human 2.0. Once again the human focused agenda, which is present in many science fiction films,⁴⁶ comes to the forefront; when a posthuman character stops being considered as 'other' through displays of irrationality, emotion and deceit, *posthuman noir* films tap into the things that make us inherently human and those re-humanised characters are allowed to survive the narrative. This structural subversion will be demonstrated in an analysis of *Darker Than Black* later in this article; both through the macro view of the series arc and through the micro view of individually paired episodes.

One last point that must be made about the development of film noir is the way it developed from the specific social and cultural conditions generated after the Second World War. "One who seeks the root of this 'style' must think in terms of an affected and possibly ephemeral reaction to a moment in history."⁴⁷ The era after the Second World War was defined by great change and upheaval in which the position of men, in particular, was unstable.⁴⁸ The cynical, morally ambiguous tone which is associated with film noir, a "melodramatic reaction for a word gone mad,"⁴⁹ emerged from the changes in attitude in America during and after the Second World War as a reaction, perhaps, to the way seemingly ordinary people, and those in positions of moral authority could commit such major acts of cruelty and violence as the Nazi concentration camps or the dropping of the atomic bomb.⁵⁰ The aftermath of this conflict had a profound effect on the Anglo-American and Japanese psyche. The attack on Pearl Harbour which brought America into the war showed that even America was vulnerable to assault,⁵¹ while the effect of the atomic bomb and the occupation of Japan by America in the 1940s had deep implications on the construction of Japanese identity, and especially Japanese masculinity.⁵²

It is important to briefly identify the influences behind Anglo-American and Japanese portrayals of the noir figure on the edge of society and the inherent differences as these are relevant to the way posthuman characters are portrayed in relation to society in *Darker Than Black*. Unlike American noir characters, those on the borders or margins in Japanese noir were almost always cast as tragic figures,⁵³ because they had been cut off from the nurturing environment of the community, the collective society.

In Britain and America neoliberal ideas, which grew from a reaction against the totalitarian, overbearing interfering state, privileged the power and importance of the individual and cast the concepts of a collective identity in a negative light.⁵⁴ Therefore the outsider, the individual on the periphery of society, or even alienated from society, who emerged in traditional film noir, remains a popular figure for the neoliberal age.

In contrast, neoliberal ideas did not take such a firm hold on the social and political structure of Japan. Instead, the traditional philosophical, cultural and religious contexts of Buddhism and Shinto continued to play an important role in Japanese society and those ideologies often privileged the collective over the individual.⁵⁵ This is also evident in the way the form of becoming posthuman via collective consciousness is cast in a far more positive light in Japanese anime, than in Anglo-American films.⁵⁶

This attitude toward the outsider as a tragic figure is prevalent in the characters of *posthuman noir* Japanese anime, bringing another layer to the analysis of many *posthuman noir* protagonists, who are not only outsiders due to their posthuman nature, yearning to become part of the collective society known as human; but also their false human personas are foreigners to their current environments. Hei and Yin in *Darker Than Black* are both characters who are foreigners in Japan, Chinese and Finnish respectively, their journey to regain their humanity takes on a different allegorical tone when they are also viewed as foreigners trying to find a way to become part of Japanese society. In *Ergo Proxy*, Vincent Law's cover identity as a human is one in which he is also an immigrant to the main location of Romdeau from Mosque. Vincent's greatest desire in the opening episodes is to become a model citizen.⁵⁷ In Japanese anime it seems that there is a secondary layer for the positive endings provided to posthuman characters who regain their humanity, because they are also rewarded by being brought back into the fold of society.

The impact of film noir style is evident in the science fiction films and anime which form the *posthuman noir* corpus but what this exploration of other aspects of traditional film noir demonstrates is that there is more than merely aesthetic links between these two genres, hence the use of noir in the titling of *posthuman noir*. This explanation of some narrative and character patterns inherent to film noir is also relevant to the examination of *Darker Than Black* which will now act as a case study through which to observe the theories established in the first part of this article.

DARKER THAN BLACK

Darker Than Black is a *posthuman noir* series which, through the span of twenty six episodes of twenty five minutes, explores questions of what it is to be human in a technologically advanced world. Set in Tokyo in the near future the series follows a team of contractors, dolls and humans who work for a shadow organisation. After an incident ten years previous to the series, two areas of the world have emerged, one in South America labelled Heaven's Gate, one in Tokyo labelled Hell's Gate, which are inhabitable to humans. In Tokyo a large wall has been built around the Hell's Gate, the area being left for scientific research, and the city's occupants have resumed their normal lives. There is a link to the damaged cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in this image,⁵⁸ harkening back to the Second World War and one of the influences on film noir. Since the development of these two areas some humans have evolved into posthumans called contractors and dolls.

Contractors are named for the contract, or price, they must obsessive-compulsively pay to use their posthuman abilities, such as breaking their fingers after using an anti-gravitational ability⁵⁹ or reverse-aging after using an ability to freeze or manipulate time. Throughout the series, a contractor's rational, logical thought process is constantly held up as a major symbol of their superiority and difference from humans. The other main type of posthuman character in *Darker Than Black*, called dolls, are blank slate characters who have lost all trace of their original human personalities. These dolls can have their minds networked, and act as living surveillance devices, sending their 'spectres' out along wires, through water and through glass to spy on whomever they are ordered to.

In *Darker Than Black* traditional film noir narrative structure and character types are manipulated to follow the humanist, anthropocentric agenda of *posthuman noir*. As previously stated, *Darker Than Black* uses stylistic, aesthetic tropes of film noir; there is even a sense of hardboiled detective fiction and film noir in the title of the episodes: "A Love Song Sung from the Trash Heap,"⁶⁰ "Memories of Betrayal in an Amber Smile."⁶¹ "The Scent of Gardenias Lingers in the Summer Rain."⁶² *Darker Than Black* is a series which takes care to establish the fictional world of noir so that the subversion of the film noir elements can be viewed as a deliberate choice.

Traditional film noir structure revolves around establishing the male protagonist in his typical routine which is then disrupted by the entrance of the femme fatale. What follows is seduction, the transgression of moral and social boundaries by the protagonist in

pursuit of the femme fatale, and often riches, which inevitably leads to the protagonist's downfall.⁶³ This is a simplified version of the narrative structure in film noir; however, it is necessary to break the narrative down into these simple sections to demonstrate how *Darker Than Black* on the micro scale of each pair of episodes, and over the macro scale of the whole series, uses this same structure but with an entirely different outcome.

This pattern is established from the first pair of episodes titled "The Fallen Star of a Contract." In this pair of episodes the film noir pedigree of the series is quickly set up; the world is dark, threatening and filled with shadows. The locations feature staples of film noir, including urban spaces of dingy alleys, hostess clubs and the police precinct; while the characters featured are cops, conmen, femme fatales and the protagonist Hei/Li who is simultaneously the hardened conman and innocent everyman. The narrative revolves around a stolen piece of technology which the femme fatale, the traditionally white and red clad,⁶⁴ Chiaki Shinoda (Megumi Toyoguchi) has taken. Chiaki seemingly seduces Hei into helping her escape from, and kill, her co-conspirators, ultimately leading him into a trap which should result in his death. When Hei steps in front of Chiaki to defend her from the other contractors, an illogical and emotional move, he is shot in the back by Chiaki.⁶⁵ Thus far this is the typical film noir structure, however, this is *posthuman noir* not traditional film noir and Hei has exhibited emotional awakening through his seduction by the femme fatale. When this occurs in *posthuman noir*, the posthuman character is rewarded rather than punished for their transgression from their logical programming. Hei survives the attack while the other contractors and Chiaki, who is in fact a doll, are killed because they are incapable of exhibiting traditionally human traits of emotion and empathy. These characters cling to their pre-determined programming rather than Hei, who shows his own agency in his irrational actions which go against the defining factors, rationality and logic, of his race of posthumans.

All the episodes in the series follow this structure, building a pattern which, in the macrocosm of the series arc, fully reinforces the humanist standpoint. The two main protagonists, Hei and Yin, who to some extent are femme fatale and homme fatal for each other, form emotional bonds, reawakening their human desires and thus functioning more illogically and unpredictably than other posthuman characters. This is important in ensuring their survival and shared positive ending. Once Hei and Yin have regained enough of their humanity their bond is tested in Hell's Gate, the literal rhizomatic maze of the series, a liminal, fog bound dreamscape, in which every step forward towards the

centre leads the characters to become more lost. Hei and Yin are lured into the maze by series femme fatale Amber (Tomoko Kawakami), once again a figure dressed in ironic white,⁶⁶ who has managed to manipulate both characters into carrying out her plan. In traditional film noir this seduction would lead to the protagonist's downfall and they would be devoured by the maze. However, these posthuman characters have regained their humanity and thus Yin takes on the role of Ariadne,⁶⁷ her posthuman surveillance abilities strengthened by her emotional attachment to Hei, and leads them out of the twists and turns of the noir maze to achieve their combined goal of survival.

The subversion of the film noir structure to reaffirm the position of what is traditionally regarded as human in the centre of focus for the future could not also be achieved without the subversion of film noir character types. One of the noticeable subversions is that of the femme, or homme, fatale. In traditional film noir this character's role is to set in motion the moral and social transgressions, fuelled by the protagonist's sexual desire, which will lead to the protagonist's death. In *posthuman noir*, however, these characters' intervention in the protagonist's life, their seduction, is not fatal; it is exactly the opposite. Amber's emotional manipulation of Hei, and her kidnapping and friendly seduction of Yin, leads to both characters regaining the human qualities which were lost in their posthuman transformations, this enables them to navigate the *posthuman noir* narrative maze and survive. This is a complete reversal of the role occupied by the femme fatale in traditional noir.

Linked to this change in the role of the femme, or homme, fatale is the modification of the role of the protagonist. The main function of posthuman protagonists in *posthuman noir* is to re-engage with their emotional, irrational human side and, in Japanese anime, find a way to reintegrate with society. In *Darker Than Black* the ability to maintain more traditionally human emotional characteristics, as well as harnessing their posthuman natures, equips the protagonists with the skills needed to thrive.

The connection that Hei, the contractor protagonist, has to his humanity allows him to succeed in his missions for the Syndicate. Hei is a character who is both a criminal and a detective—human and posthuman—and the solution to the mystery he is trying to solve throughout the series is ultimately hidden inside himself. Jerold J. Abrams highlights a shift in the nature of the protagonist when moving from traditional film noir to neo noir; that neo noir protagonists are at war with themselves.⁶⁸ Hei embodies this concept; his character is defined by the journey he takes to understand his dual human/posthuman

nature and his inability to come to terms with what he is. Ironically, before his posthuman transformation Hei was less human than he is as a contractor. This is noted by the contractor Havoc (Naomi Shindō): “In the old days you were more ruthless than anyone even though you weren’t changed like us... But now that you’ve become a contractor you’ve somehow stopped acting like one.”⁶⁹ It takes being considered ‘other,’ to allow Hei to explore his softer emotional side. He no longer has to act to keep up with the contractors around him; the act of physically becoming less human allows Hei to rediscover his humanity.

Hei’s divided nature is represented by two distinct personalities. While Hei’s professional persona is a masked, efficient assassin, his everyday persona is the exact opposite. Li Shenshun, is a sensitive, shy everyman. The Hei persona dresses in a black trench coat, his face masked;⁷⁰ while Li wears a white, partially untucked shirt with blue jeans.⁷¹ The prevalence of white in Li’s outfits symbolically casts Li as the moral half to Hei’s criminal immoral killer. The Hei persona fits into traditional hardboiled rational masculine tropes while the Li persona is characterised by the more stereotypically feminine attributes of empathy and intuition.

Hei’s human alter ego, Li Shenshun, is a Chinese exchange student; this places him as an outsider in Japan just as being a contractor marks Hei as an outsider to humanity. This outsider identity allows Li to make, and fake, mistakes; it excuses him from knowing Japanese customs which provides him with an alibi when his emotional responses differ to the humans around him. Once again it is important to mention the emphasis on being part of a community⁷² which many *posthuman noir* characters rejoin when they regain their humanity. This functions on two levels with characters like Hei or Yin, who are foreigners as well as posthumans. For them finding their community with each other, and within the team they are part of, forms the locus of their transformation back towards their emotions and their humanity.

Hei’s change toward humanity mirrored and amplified in the character of Yin who is a doll, the second type of posthuman in the world of *Darker Than Black*. Dolls are blank slates that have the ability to project their ‘spectres’ through glass, water and cables, to carry out surveillance. They are an example of a posthuman perfectly evolved for a single task, but who lack the capacity to be unreliable, or even function, outside of these roles. Used and abused, as demonstrated in episode arc titled “A Love Song Sung from a Trash

Heap,"⁷³ dolls are treated as little more than commodities to be traded, not people to be cared about.

At the start of the series, Yin is a typical doll; her facial expressions are constantly blank, her eyes fixed in the middle distance, her breath imperceptible, as if she were really a doll.⁷⁴ Yin is introduced through the stylised features of her 'spectre,' which is indistinguishable from any other doll's spectre. This emphasises that she is no longer a human being with an individual freewill or consciousness.⁷⁵

Due to her emotionless appearance, when Yin begins to manifest emotions their impact is far more visible. In episode 14, Huang (Masaru Ikeda) comments that "this is ridiculous, dolls can't cry"⁷⁶ as he watches the tears rolling down Yin's cheeks. This is the beginning of Yin's transformation, she rejects her past life for the place she has as Hei's partner, as part of the team. At the end of the episode Yin uses a finger to raise the side of her mouth into a smile.⁷⁷ This is the first moment Yin actively makes a decision and the first moment she is acknowledged as a person, rather than a doll.

Yin's spectre, which is visually and thematically tied to ideas of the spirit, is deliberately used to show her first moment of rebellion, externalising and visualising the changes that are occurring within. Once Yin's transformation begins it is unsurprising that she has been constructed with an affinity to water. This element is tied to the unconscious and ideas of introspection and interiority;⁷⁸ water acts as a mirror which can reflect and conceal. The clear, still surface hides currents and depth, just as Yin's blank exterior conceals an evolving emotional core.

This growing ability to lie to protect those she cares for generates stronger bonds with her friends, allowing Yin to track them more quickly when they are in need of help. Therefore, Yin's increasing human emotions improve her posthuman abilities; this is the same for the nameless doll in the arc "A Love Song Sung from a Trash Heap". Emotional awakenings, especially romantic, are shown to aid and enhance a doll's posthuman abilities, rather than hinder them. Once again the humanist agenda appears to demonstrate how the balance of emotions and rationalism are preferable in posthuman characters. Yin's evolution could be seen to conform to Buddhist ideals of unity through the bonds she shares with others.⁷⁹

Yin's final moment of change occurs in the Hell's Gate as she shouts, "Don't leave me alone,"⁸⁰ which saves Hei's life. The fear of being alone is one of the most basic of human fears which Yin, as a doll, should not feel let alone express. Through being treated as more

than a tool by Hei, Yin develops inconsistencies in her perfect posthuman reprogramming and begins to rediscover her humanity. Once again, it is through this rediscovery that Yin becomes another example of the way *posthuman noir* rewards characters who exhibit humanist values. While the protagonists of noir are “emasculated” by love,⁸¹ in *posthuman noir* they are redeemed by it.

A POSTHUMAN NOIR?

As this exploration of the first series of *Darker Than Black* has demonstrated, there are specific features that define the sub-genre titled *posthuman noir* which draw inspiration from critical discourse around posthumanism and transhumanism, while also taking the stylistic, structural and character elements of traditional film noir. This is a sub-genre which, despite the prominence of posthuman characters, perpetuates older, more humanist, notions of what it means to be human and reaffirms the position of human values and inherent human traits in posthuman futures. Although there is potential in the use of characters who blur the clearly demarcated boundaries of what constitutes a human being, the emphasis is not placed on the ways these characters could represent a truly posthumanist standpoint. Instead *posthuman noir* is primarily concerned with using traditional film noir tropes to place posthuman characters into situations where their emotional human traits re-emerge. When these situations occur, the posthuman characters able to harness both their posthuman, and more traditionally human traits, are rewarded with endings which are positive, compared to their counterparts in traditional film noir who are damned by their desires. The second series and OVA of *Darker Than Black* corroborate and develop this concepts, as do the other anime in the *posthuman noir* corpus.

There is no posthumanist agenda at the heart of *posthuman noir* as it currently stands; however, this leaves the field open for new Anglo-American films and Japanese anime to fully explore the possibilities of a posthumanist noir. Can human creators truly think beyond their anthropocentric tendencies and generate posthumanist narratives? As notions of what it is to be human evolve in the current technological age perhaps a true *posthumanist noir* will emerge.

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- ¹ Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 1992), 141.
- ² Julie Clarke, *The Paradox of the Posthuman: Science Fiction/Techno-Horror Films and Visual Media* (Saarbrücken; VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG, 2004), 203.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 203.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.
- ⁵ Although the period between *The Maltese Falcon* and *A Touch of Evil* is generally considered the period of traditional film noir there are some who consider it starting earlier and finishing earlier. See Joan Copjec, ed. *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London: Verso, 1998) and James, Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts Updated and Expanded* (London: University of California Press, 2008).
- ⁶ Mark T. Conard, ed. *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (London: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 1.
- ⁷ *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, (1982; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.
- ⁸ *Gattaca*, directed by Andrew Niccol, (1997; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia, 2004), DVD.
- ⁹ *Dark City*, directed by Alex Proyas (1998; London: Entertainment in Video Ltd, 1999), DVD.
- ¹⁰ *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927; London: Eureka, 2005), DVD.
- ¹¹ "The Pulse of Awakening/Awakening," episode 1, *Ergo Proxy*, directed by Shukō Murase, (2006; Chepstow: MVM Entertainment, 2007), DVD.
- ¹² *Metropolis*, directed by Rintaro, (2001; Culver City, CA: Columbia Tri-star, 2002), DVD.
- ¹³ "The Fallen Star of a Contract... Part One," episode 1, *Darker Than Black*, directed by Tensai Okamura, (2007; Los Angeles, CA: Manga Entertainment Ltd, 2010), DVD.
- ¹⁴ *Blade Runner*, Scott.
- ¹⁵ *Ghost in the Shell*. directed by Mamoru Oshii, (1995; Los Angeles, CA: Manga Entertainment Ltd, 2010), DVD.
- ¹⁶ *Gattaca*, Niccol.
- ¹⁷ *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.
- ¹⁸ *The Matrix*, directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski (1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999), DVD.
- ¹⁹ *Ergo Proxy*, Murase.
- ²⁰ In Japanese anime there is a prevalence of the *homme fatal*. For more on notions of the feminised man see Yumiko Iida, "Beyond the 'feminization of masculinity': transforming patriarchy with the 'feminine' in contemporary Japanese youth culture" *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6:1 (2005) 56-74, accessed October 8, 2013, doi:10.1080/1462394042000326905
- ²¹ Jerold J. Abrams, "From Sherlock Holmes to the Hardboiled Detective in Film Noir" in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (London: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 72.
- ²² Susan J. Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle – Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11.
- ²³ Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumont, "Towards a Definition of Film Noir" (1955) in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. A. Silver and J. Ursini (New York: Limelight editions, 1996), 19.
- ²⁴ The boundaries of what can be considered 'human' has been debated since antiquity. For a detailed overview of humanist debates see Tony Davis, *Humanism* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Also see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 13-25.
- ²⁵ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010), xi. See the rest of the introduction xi –xxxiv for detailed examination of these debates. See also Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) for an overview of the complexity of defining posthumanism.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.
- ²⁷ Male gendered pronouns are more often used in humanist discourse, for more on this see Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 5.
- ²⁸ See Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, "Technophobia/Dystopia" in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 48-56 and Emily E. Auger, *Tech Noir Film* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011).
- ²⁹ See P.J. Manney, "Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is Key to Empathy," *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, Vol. 19 Issue 1 (2008), 51-61 accessed February 16, 2015 <http://jetpress.org/v19/manney.htm>
- ³⁰ See Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xiv-xx.
- ³¹ Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Manifesto* in *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 35.
- ³² "Meteor Shower," episode 24, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

³³ Notions of the technological age have developed throughout the twentieth century, and ideas of what it is to be human have also changed in relation to various technological breakthroughs. See David Bell "Cybercultures Reader: A User's Guide," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.

³⁴ "Meteor Shower," episode 24, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

³⁵ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 190.

³⁶ Clarke, *The Paradox of the Posthuman*, 126.

³⁷ Robert G. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" (1976) in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Silver and Ursini, 77.

³⁸ Conard, *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, 9.

³⁹ Alain Silver, "Introduction" in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Silver and Ursini, 11.

⁴⁰ Andrew Spicer in Mark T. Conard, *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, 10.

⁴¹ Borde and Chaumont, "Towards a Definition of Film Noir," 17.

⁴² Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir" (1972) in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Silver and Ursini, 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 57-58

⁴⁴ Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg "Noir Cinema" (1968) in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Silver and Ursini, 27.

⁴⁵ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006) 84.

⁴⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 107.

⁴⁷ Borde and Chaumont, "Towards a Definition of Film Noir," 19.

⁴⁸ Gates, *Detecting Men*, 84.

⁴⁹ Tom Flinn, 'Three Faces of Film Noir,' (1972) in Alain Silver and James Ursini *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight editions, 1999), 35.

⁵⁰ For more on levels of moral ambiguity and morality in general in film noir see Aeon J. Skoble 'Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir,' in Mark T. Conard, *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, 41-48.

⁵¹ Robert Porfirio 'Forward' in Conard, ed. *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, xii.

⁵² Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 27.

⁵³ David Desser "The Gunman and the Gun: Japanese film noir since the late 1950s" in *International Noir* ed. H. Petty and R. Palmer, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 121.

⁵⁴ See N. Marsh, P. Crosthwaite, and P. Knight, "Show me the Money: The Culture of Neoliberalism" *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, Vol. 80-81 (2013) 209-217 accessed February 6, 2015, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_formation/v080/80.marsh.html

⁵⁵ M. Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion: With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation*, (London: Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd. 1930) 66. See also Paul J. Bailey, *Postwar Japan 1945 to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996) 155.

⁵⁶ The issue of collective consciousness continues to form a distinct difference between the two cultures *Transcendence*, directed by Wally Pfister. (London: Summit Entertainment. 2014) DVD, once again casts a negative tone on the use of collective consciousness as a means of becoming posthuman.

⁵⁷ "The Pulse of Awakening/Awakening," episode 1, *Ergo Proxy*, Murase.

⁵⁸ Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle*, 29.

⁵⁹ As demonstrated by the character of Louis in *Darker Than Black*, Okamura, "The Fallen Star of a Contract... Part One," episode 1 and Amber in "Memories of Betrayal in an Amber Smile" episode 16.

⁶⁰ "A Love Song Sung from the Trash Heap," episodes 17 and 18, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁶¹ "Memories of Betrayal in and Amber Smile," episodes 15 and 16, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁶² "The Scent of Gardenias Lingers in the Summer Rain," episodes 7 and 8, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁶³ J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 217.

⁶⁴ Kathrina Giltre, "Under the Neon Rainbow: Colour and Neo Noir" in *Neo Noir*, ed. Mark Bould, Kathrina Giltre and Greg Tuck (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 20.

⁶⁵ "The Fallen Star of a Contract... Part Two," episode 2, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁶⁶ Giltre, "Under the Neon Rainbow," 20.

⁶⁷ For more on detective as Theseus in noir see Jerold J. Abrams *From Sherlock Holmes to the Hardboiled Detective in Film Noir* in Conard. ed. *The Philosophy of Film Noir*.

⁶⁸ Jerold J. Abrams, "Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema" in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir* ed. Mark T. Conard (USA: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 10.

⁶⁹ "Red Giant over Eastern Europe... Part Two," episode 6, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁷⁰ "The Fallen Star of a Contract... Part One," episode 1, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Desser, "The Gunman and the Gun," 133.

⁷³ "A Love Song Sung from the Trash Heap," episodes 17 and 18, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁷⁴ "The Fallen Star of a Contract... Part One," episode 1, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "A Heart Unswaying on the Water's Surface... Part Two," episode 14, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Routledge: Hove. 1959), 24.

⁷⁹ Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, 72.

⁸⁰ "Does the Reaper Dream of Darkness Darker Than Black?" episode 25, *Darker Than Black*, Okamura.

⁸¹ Jackie Stacey, *The Cinematic Life of the Gene* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 160.