



# An Anti-Transhumanist Reading of Stef Smith's *Girl in the Machine*

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## ABSTRACT

It is an undeniable fact that transition periods are painful processes that are difficult for society to embrace, regardless of the novelty or convenience they offer. Indeed, such circumstances arouse doubt and anxiety among the affected people due to their unpredictable nature. As a result, society has adopted a mostly hesitant attitude toward the process, with such hesitation being reflected in the literary works of the current age, in which exponential technological progress is experienced and human agency is questioned. Although the utopian optimism of transhumanist philosophy cannot be ignored, the rising number of dystopian works in all walks of contemporary literature signifies humanity's current anxiety about rapid technological changes and digital transformation. Stef Smith, a promising Scottish playwright, also questions automation technology, addiction to mobile devices, human microchipping, uploading, and the impact of artificial intelligence on humans through her play *Girl in the Machine* (2017). The playwright focuses on the daily interactions between Owen and Polly, a passionate couple. In the play, she demonstrates a world order in which not only human values are distorted but also the lives of the characters are devastated after a specific device with artificial intelligence, Black Box, becomes a part of their family. In this way, she reveals her doubts about the transhumanist anticipation of human enhancement through technology. Accordingly, this paper aims to interrogate the anxiety about unrestrained technological developments and transhumanist ideals by analysing Smith's play from an anti-transhumanist perspective. Most importantly, it attempts to highlight that the play, as a dystopian work, functions to caution humanity against an impending existentialist crisis in the shade of digitalisation.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism, technological progress, artificial intelligence, uploading, Stef Smith



## Introduction

Transitions and transformations are undoubtedly painful processes that trigger scepticism, anxiety, and fear in society. An obvious reflection of this can be observed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British society during the transition from the pre-industrial age to the industrial period. For instance, various works of Gothic fiction, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), manifest ambivalence and fear under the shade of scientific and industrial developments. Likewise, it can be argued that concerns about the devastating impact of technological progress intensified following the World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, giving rise to the proliferation of dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). The dystopian visions also appeared in various theatrical adaptations of well-known dystopian novels like *Frankenstein* and *Fahrenheit 451* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, the number of dystopian plays that manifest technological concerns has increased remarkably since the beginning of the current century. Several plays can be taken as a concrete proof of this fact, including: *A Number* (2002) by Caryl Churchill, *Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play* (2012) by Anne Washburn, *The Nether* (2013) by Jennifer Haley, and *The Children* (2016) by Lucy Kirkwood.

Humanity has been experiencing a dazzling digital transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rise of the internet, mobile technologies, and artificial intelligence. Smartphones function as indispensable assistants of contemporary humans, self-driving cars are currently on the road, the use of microchips is being discussed to track human health, an alternative digital world called the metaverse has been introduced, humanoid robots with artificial intelligence such as Ameca are being produced, and various chatbots with artificial intelligence like ChatGPT have been released. Most importantly, the futurist Ray Kurzweil (2005) underlines that humanity is heading towards a new phase called the "singularity" in which humans will be able to upload themselves into machines, overcome all sorts of physical limitations, and control their destiny (p. 9). As can be observed, humanity is amidst inconceivable technological and digital breakthroughs. Despite the benefits that have been acquired or are likely to be acquired thanks to technological advances, there is a growing concern about the unintended consequences of technological progress in today's world. This uneasiness in society reveals itself in visual arts and different genres of contemporary literature, including the novel and drama. As a playwright renowned for her dystopian plays, Stef Smith also projects the probable negative effects of the current and imminent technological progress, which

is mostly disregarded in transhumanist philosophy, on humans through *Girl in the Machine* (2017). Accordingly, this study aims to question the devastating impacts of the transhumanist determination “to improve the human condition” (More, 2013, p. 3) with the help of technology on humans and society by examining Smith’s play. In other words, it seeks to read *Girl in the Machine* as a critique of transhumanism and unrestricted technological progress.

This study firstly elucidates the main philosophy and principles of transhumanism. Next, it demonstrates in what ways transhumanism has been criticised. After briefly examining the impact of mobile technology and microchipping on humans, the study primarily discusses the unintended consequences of the dramatic technological advances, such as improved artificial intelligence and virtual immortality, from an anti-transhumanist perspective by examining the interactions between the characters and the catastrophic incidents that occur due to Black Box in *Girl in the Machine*.

## **Transhumanism and Anti-Transhumanist Voices**

Transhumanism is a movement that regards technological developments as an opportunity to drive humanity forward. The movement aims to overcome inherent human limitations arising from human biology, such as weak memory and mortality, through science and technology (Bostrom, 2005, p. 8; More, 2013, p. 4). In this respect, various technologies ranging from nanotechnology to artificial intelligence are regarded as indispensable vehicles (Vita-More, 2019, p. 49). Furthermore, according to several transhumanists (Esfandiary, 1970, p. 82; Bostrom, 2005, p. 4; More, 2013, p. 4; Lee, 2019, p. 38; Vita-more, 2019, p. 59), the evolution of humankind has not yet been completed, with technology still being able to make a considerable contribution to the evolutionary process. Hence, transhumanism strives to accomplish human evolution from human to posthuman or superhuman through technological revolutions. Accordingly, in transhumanism, technological progress is not only an opportunity to alleviate the daily problems of humanity but also a highly valuable instrument to actualise the great transhumanist dream.

While transhumanism and posthumanism both reposition “humans” in the shade of technological developments, their perspectives are diametrically opposed. In fact, as Ađın (2020) wittily notes, although these are often confused isms due their immersion with technology, transhumanism is the “dark twin” of posthumanism (pp. 281-283). The

basic mentality behind the use of technology in transhumanism is to perfect human beings. Hence, transhumanism maintains "liberal humanist discourse" and all sorts of "dichotomies" that elevate humans (Ağın, 2020, pp. 285-286). On the other hand, "posthumanism is a radical critique of humanism and anthropocentrism" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 3). In this movement, as Hayles (1999) illustrates, "humans may enter into symbiotic relationships with intelligent machines (already the case, for example, in computer-assisted surgery); they may be displaced" (p. 284). Correspondingly, there is an attempt to close the gap between humans and technological devices in the posthuman movement, whereas technology is merely a favourable tool to maintain human dominance and excellence in the transhumanist movement.

Additionally, transhumanism and posthumanism both employ the term "posthuman;" nevertheless, it harbours "different connotations" in these movements (Ağın, 2020, p. 281). Hayles (1999) clarifies what posthuman means as follows:

"Post," with its dual connotation of superseding the human and coming after it, hints that the days of "the human" may be numbered. Some researchers. . . believe that this is true not only in a general intellectual sense that displaces one definition of "human" with another but also in a more disturbingly literal sense that envisions humans displaced as the dominant form of life on the planet by intelligent machines. (p. 283)

Hayles's explanations, then, reveal that the term posthuman is used to signify a sort of decentred and non-dominant human that is not likely to be superior to all beings in posthumanism. However, the term posthuman signifies a sort of superhuman or "Human 2.0" (Ağın, 2020, p. 284) in the transhumanist movement. Bostrom (2013), for instance, defines posthuman as "a being that has at least one posthuman capacity" (p. 28) and elucidates "posthuman capacity" as "a general central capacity greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means" (pp. 28-29). As can be seen, the transhumanist conception of posthuman is completely different from what posthumanists refer to. Therefore, the term posthuman in this article has nothing to do with the term employed in posthumanism.

Although the imminent negative consequences of unprecedented technological developments are articulated by some prudent transhumanist critics such as Joan L. McGregor and Nick Bostrom, "an optimistic flavour . . . permeates transhumanism"

(More, 2013, p. 14). Transhumanism does not totally disregard the negative consequences of technology. Nevertheless, much more emphasis is placed on the merits that are likely to be acquired through technological progress than the destructive impact of it on humanity. Thus, there is currently a heated controversy regarding the use of technology for transhumanistic goals.

Several critics from diverse fields are sceptical about the merits of human enhancement through technology, and they are concerned that it is likely to have a negative influence on human values negatively. For instance, Fukuyama (2002) indicates that dramatic developments, particularly in biotechnology, might result in “los[ing] our humanity” (p. 101). Likewise, Winner (1978) indicates that “the meaning of being” is likely to be sacrificed for the sake of “the promise of perfect machine function” (p. 146). Technological progress is, then, considered to pose a menace to human nature in the long term.

Transhumanism strives to achieve the goal of being posthuman or superhuman with “much greater cognitive capabilities, and more refined emotions” (More, 2013, p. 4). In this sense, the movement attempts to eradicate the negative aspects of being human, such as pain, suffering, and grief, through technology. Nevertheless, such a perfection strategy is likely to pose a threat to the meaning of being human because, as anti-transhumanist specialists note, what gives meaning to human existence is not only the positive traits, but also our negative attributes (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 43; Cohen, 2011, p. 209; Leonhard, 2016, p. 143). Most importantly, mortality, which transhumanists view as one of the giant limitations of humankind on its evolutionary path, is considered to be an essential quality that makes human life desirable and valuable (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 43; Hoffmann, 2011, p. 285). Hence, anti-transhumanist specialists challenge the idea of perfecting the human condition and life.

Additionally, transhumanist ideals are criticised for impairing the meaning of being a human. As Fukuyama (2002) notes, while robots or machines with artificial intelligence can imitate human behaviours, they “are unlikely to acquire human emotions” (p. 168). He considers emotions to be a quality that differentiates humans from machines because “the distinctive human gamut of emotions . . . produces human purposes, goals, objectives, wants, needs, desires, fears, aversions, and the like and hence is the source of human values” (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 169). Accordingly, the attempts of transhumanists to refine human emotions or to perfect humans through technology are regarded as a direct threat to human existence. Additionally, it is argued that some

positive traits such as happiness cannot be acquired through hedonistic pursuits or the eradication of sorrow as transhumanists believe, since happiness relies more on subjective expectations than experiencing pleasant conditions (Hoffman, 2011, p. 283; Harari, 2017, p. 40). Anti-transhumanist specialists are, hence, concerned about trimming emotions, believing that transhumanist convictions are likely to pose an existential risk to humans.

It is also argued that the use of technology to evolve human beings into untainted beings will engender severe social and ethical problems in the anti-transhumanist approach. Contrary to transhumanists who mostly focus on the advantages that can be established by technology, anti-transhumanist specialists endeavour to indicate unintended social and economic problems, ranging from inequality to unemployment (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 42; Hayles, 2010, pp. 217-218; Peters, 2010, p. 159; Tennison, 2012, p. 406). It becomes difficult to disagree with these experts when acknowledging that transhumanism is based on the rationalist Enlightenment philosophy (Bostrom, 2005, p. 4; More, 2013, p. 10).

Transhumanism can be viewed as the grandchild of the Enlightenment philosophy. As Ferrando (2019) writes, "transhumanism seeks its origins in the Enlightenment, and therefore does not expropriate humanism" (p. 3). The ecclesiastical and monarchical power of the medieval age has become subordinated to human reason and progress with the rise of the Enlightenment philosophy. The concept of human is positioned at the centre in this philosophy. Furthermore, rationality and science are regarded as the keys to welfare and happiness. Nonetheless, the utopian optimism and the valorised rationality of the Enlightenment have not lessened suffering around the world. Although scientific progress propelled by the Enlightenment philosophy has enabled convenience in many fields, ranging from agriculture to medicine, it has indirectly led to several global issues, such as the worsened class divide and environmental crises. Furthermore, the ideologies that are liable for the current crises, such as anthropocentrism, capitalism, and Eurocentrism, are interrelated to rationalism. In fact, they are the outcomes of the Enlightenment philosophy. Likewise, "rationality and progress are at the core of the transhumanist postulation" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 3). It valorises science and technology, positions humans at the centre of the universe, and disregards the nonhuman world, much like Enlightenment philosophy. In this regard, the utopian conviction of transhumanists that technology will enhance the human condition and eradicate social problems is likely to be nothing more than bitter disillusionment.

In short, transhumanism exalts technological progress for the sake of perfecting humans and overcoming the obstacles that restrict typical humans such as mortality without sufficiently pondering upon the unintended consequences. It differs from posthumanism remarkably, maintaining humanistic principles. It attempts to establish a flawless human form, disregarding the negative impact such a result would have on both humans and nonhumans alike. When taking the nuclear wars and ecological disasters triggered by the uncontrolled use of science and technology into consideration, it becomes evident that the world has already suffered severely from the human-centred perspective. Therefore, the overdependence of transhumanism on technology at the cost of destroying human nature raises reasonable concerns. As a result, anti-transhumanist critics and experts approach transhumanist ideals with discretion, striving to be conscious of the drawbacks of perpetual technological progress and cautioning society against probable existential and social problems.

### **The Anti-Transhumanist Voices in *Girl in the Machine***

Stef Smith also focuses on the imminent negative impacts of recent technologies on humans in *Girl in the Machine* by dragging the audience into a technology-driven future in which citizens are addicted to mobile devices, get microchipped, and start to use devices with artificial intelligence called Black Box. The playwright enables the audience to witness the daily life of a couple in their 30s called Polly and Owen, who are depicted to have a troubled relationship. She employs the interaction between Polly, a successful solicitor who enjoys using cutting-edge devices, and Owen, a nurse who is sceptical about the widespread use of and dependence on technology, to demonstrate opposing approaches to technological progress. Nevertheless, the playwright's depiction of the insurmountable problems caused by Black Box reveals her reservation about uncontrolled technological advances, particularly about the dominance of artificial intelligence.

Critical reception of the play has remained relatively limited. There are no academic studies which focus on this play, except for an article written by Reid (2019), which mentions *Girl in the Machine* as one of the examples of contemporary dystopian plays that focus on technological transformation, and the dissertation written by De Simoni (2021), which examines the play as one of the "manifestations of dystopian theatre" (i). The play, first staged at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, has also been deprived of

varied professional critical reviews, except for Mark Fisher's succinct review in *The Guardian*. Fisher (2017) describes Smith's play as "a piece of dystopian sci-fi in the manner of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*" (para. 2). Nevertheless, considering the fact that this brand-new technological device, Black Box, has the ability to arouse fear and anxiety among the audience instead of fascination, it can be said that the dystopian tone of the play is more dominant than its science-fiction leanings.

Black Box represents the main technological threat, eventually becoming uncontrollable and responsible for various incidents, such as the torrent of the uploaded citizens' dead bodies. However, before going into the details regarding the destructive impact of Black Box, the playwright prefers to demonstrate that technology is excessively dominant in the characters' daily lives. Such a dominance reveals itself even in the language and the attitudes of the characters. To illustrate, Polly and Owen's next-door neighbour expresses his complaints about noise via a text message rather than knocking on their door. While gossiping about their neighbour with Owen, Polly describes the man's face by likening it to "a smashed circuit board" (Smith, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, smartphones are excessively used by the characters (as is the case in today's world), with the use of smartphones being implied to have caused an alienation between the couple. For example, Owen is shown as being extremely irritated by his wife's addiction to her mobile phone, expressing his feeling as follows: "I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with my wife without her simultaneously checking her messages" (Smith, 2017, p. 27). It is implied that meaningful communication between the couple was already disrupted before Black Box came into their lives due to the excessive use of mobile phones. Furthermore, the characters, who are microchipped without their consent through a program called "Citizen Chip," are supposed to update their profiles and data. More importantly, none of the citizens have freedom of choice, as can be seen in Owen's complaints:

POLLY: I don't feel well.

OWEN: What sort of unwell

Silence.

Why don't you just...

Silence.

They said it can make you feel unwell... the update. It just made my forearm itch for a while.

POLLY: I didn't know they could do that... automatically update our Citizen



Chip...

OWEN: They can track us now- online and offline, and block people from requesting the headset, stop people uploading. It's the biggest update in a decade... a reactive measure, if you ask me. But maybe reactive measures are all we have left? (Smith, 2017, p. 10)

Owen's comments about tracking humans reveal that within the play, human autonomy is at risk due to the restricting impact of newer technologies. Accordingly, the dialogue between the couple highlights some potential problems that might result from technological progress, such as alienation, surveillance, and loss of freedom in the near future. This simple but functional conversation, then, enables Smith to draw the audience's attention to the risks of unrestrained technology through the character Owen even before the catastrophic effects of artificial intelligence on humans are depicted.

Artificial intelligence, whose roots date back to Turing Machine of British mathematician Alan Turing who is renowned for decoding the Enigma Machine during World War II, is a major breakthrough of the 21st century, akin to the steam engine of the 19th century. Different from the majority of mechanical devices of the previous century, software and hardware that use artificial intelligence are capable of processing data, learning, and solving problems. Thus, they not only carry out orders given to them by humans, but also become self-controlled agents that have faster learning and decision-making processes than the humans who designed the algorithms. On the one hand, they can be used as great assistants to help alleviate the sufferings of humanity, but on the other hand, they, as self-learning "beings," might become the trouble itself that humanity suffers from.

Artificial intelligence promises inconceivable innovation, and its utilisation in many walks of life, ranging from e-commerce websites to social networking sites, household appliances to smartphones, and self-driving vehicles to autonomous robots, has already provided ample benefits to humanity. Nevertheless, there exists considerable discomfort regarding the dominance of artificial intelligence. For instance, Steven Hawking underlines in an interview with Rory Cellan-Jones (2014) that "the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race" (para. 1). He signifies the likelihood of artificial intelligence getting out of control, cautioning humanity against such a threat. Despite remarkably benefiting from advances in artificial intelligence,

Elon Musk is also concerned about the use of artificial intelligence. He states in an interview with Maureen Dowd (2020) that if artificial intelligence continues to improve at this rate, "things [will] get unstable or weird" within a couple of years (para. 73). A future projection in which "things get . . . weird" (para. 73) due to artificial intelligence meets the audience in Smith's play, too, which causes the audience to adopt a precautionary attitude towards artificial intelligence and its imminent impact on humans. Although Smith does not depict artificial intelligence as a power that can eradicate humanity as once foreseen by Hawking, she leans on the problems likely to be experienced both on the individual and social plane by employing Owen as her spokesperson and displaying apocalyptic turmoil towards the end of the play.

At the very early stage of the play, Black Box, a device with artificial intelligence, is introduced as a sort of gift brought by Owen to Polly who is understood to be in search of an escape or "distraction" (Smith, 2017, p. 5). Although Owen is not quite sure about the working principle of the device, he clarifies that the device manipulates brainwaves, syncs to the individual's heartbeat, and enables him or her to "have visions" (Smith, 2017, p. 5). In this sense, the device offers an alternative world similar to the metaverse that enables users to enjoy the things they cannot achieve in the real world. Therefore, the device is implied to be an opportunity to minimise human suffering, which is one of the fundamental ideals of the transhumanist movement. As More (2013) points out, providing humans with "more joy, less anger, or whatever changes each individuals prefers" is one of the ultimate goals of transhumanism (p. 4). Accordingly, the audience witnesses a world order in which the transhumanist dream of seamless "joy" appears to be actualised through a technological device called Black Box.

At first, Black Box is demonstrated to be a useful device. For example, Polly, who suffers from depression, benefits greatly from it. Black Box helps her relax by offering a specific relaxation program after detecting her stress level. It even reduces her dependency on medications for depression and enables her to lose weight. In this way, it is displayed in the play that transhumanists' everlasting trust in technological progress is likely to bear positive results. Nevertheless, Black Box gradually becomes indispensable to Polly, with her being portrayed as addicted to it towards the end of the play. Although Polly considers Black Box to be a temporary solution to depression, it becomes an irresistible device that occupies most of her time. This addiction also negatively affects the couple's already troubled relationship. Polly is neither willing to have a proper conversation with her husband nor enjoys doing common activities with him, such as

watching TV. Eventually, Polly becomes alienated from her husband by preferring to maintain a highly individualised life within the world that Black Box provides her. As can be observed, although the device offers some advantages on the surface, it gradually leads to major problems, such as extreme addiction and alienation, which have already been present in human society to some extent since the release of more common technological devices such as TV and the Internet. Thus, contrary to the expectations of such transhumanists as Bostrom (2005) to More (2013), the play indicates that technological progress will not in fact move humanity forward. As Smith demonstrates through the negative effects of Black Box on Polly and Owen, artificial intelligence (and technology in general) has the potential to deteriorate familial relationships and cause social alienation. Therefore, such technological developments cannot be welcomed as a saviour of humanity without examining the negative effects such technology would have on humans and nonhumans, as is the case in the transhumanist movement.

After a while, the benefits of Black Box that were presented at the beginning of the play become outnumbered by its drawbacks: Black Box leads to an insurmountable addiction, it becomes an unstoppable invader that breaches the firewalls of mobile devices, its application cannot be deleted by the technicians, and even the government is unable to stop it. To compound the problem, “there is no known maker of Black Box” (Smith, 2017, p. 31), which means that nobody is accountable for the turmoil it causes. These details indicate potential risks that technological innovations harbour, despite transhumanists being convinced that humans can transform into superhumans “by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means” (Bostrom, 2005, p. 4).

Transhumanists view technological progress as an opportunity to actualise the transhumanist goal of improved humans who would be able to rid themselves of negative feelings. This transhumanist dream is likely to eradicate or diminish negative feelings or traits harboured in humans. Nevertheless, anti-transhumanist specialists are concerned about actualising such a dream. Eradicating negative feelings cannot move humans forward, with Fukuyama (2004) explaining the reason for this by emphasising the interconnectedness of humans’ “good characteristics” with their “bad ones” (p. 43). He indicates that although eradicating some seemingly negative feelings can bear positive consequences for humans, this might have a negative impact on human nature.

The transhumanist insistence on equipping humans with merely positive feelings

is also questioned in Smith's play through a dialogue between Owen and Polly. Polly's addiction to Black Box raises significant concerns within Owen about her ability to feel. When Owen visits Polly in her office, he finds her connected to Black Box, with his concerns being revealed in the following conversation:

OWEN: That fucking thing. Enough.

POLLY: But/I

OWEN: I said enough! No more.

POLLY: How much wine/

OWEN: Oh fuck off. I'm not the one who spends every evening attached to a fucking thing. And I don't care. I don't care if it makes you feel light and warm or whatever the fuck you said... take a bath, light a candle or whatever the fuck women are supposed to do to relax enough of that.

Because I watch you. I watch you numb yourself.

And trust me... I've treated enough junkies to know feeling something is better than feeling nothing at all.

So. No. More.

Please

No more. (Smith, 2017, p. 25)

As can be discerned from the conversation, artificial happiness and relaxation that Black Box provides alienates Polly from the real world, and, as Owen notes, she becomes more "numb" than happy. Therefore, this technological innovation makes her feel nothing rather than feel better. Owen is thus afraid of his wife becoming "numb" under the guise of technological support. Like Fukuyama (2004) who highlights the significance of human feelings whether they are positive or negative, Owen highlights how the ability to feel is essential to human existence. John the Savage in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* demands the right to be "unhappy" and "lousy" (Huxley, 1968, p. 163) in order to exist as a real human. Likewise, Owen desires to retain that right. Therefore, he attempts to save his wife from losing her human nature, offering her various activities that have the ability to relax her in the manner of Black Box. In a broader sense, Owen, then attempts to hamper the imminent world order in which humans transform into happy robots. The anti-transhumanist voice that challenges the transhumanist obsession with perfection resonates powerfully thanks to Owen's objections.

Owen's endeavours make sense because happiness which is not countered by the

risk of unhappiness loses its inherent value. After all, a concept or thing becomes valuable and meaningful as long as the opposite of it exists: a day becomes valuable as long as a night exists; success becomes meaningful as long as failure is experienced. Thus, Owen's statement "feeling something is better than feeling nothing at all" (Smith, 2017, p. 25) is a significant detection that complies with anti-transhumanist critics. Owen implies that the ability to feel, whether something negative or positive, makes a human a complex being which differentiates them from robots with artificial intelligence.

Black Box, which caused addiction and alienation despite providing relaxation at first, offers a permanent escape into a digital world upon receiving an update in the eighth scene. Polly describes this recent innovation as follows: "your mind gets reproduced on a network and you leave behind your body... your mind, soul, consciousness digitally lives on... a new way of living, a type of consciousness that is unimaginable to us" (Smith, 2017, p. 28). Polly's statements indicate a process of digital immortality envisioned by Ray Kurzweil (2005) in *The Singularity Is Near*.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, she demonstrates a world order in which one of the most prominent transhumanist goals is accomplished: the body, which is viewed by transhumanists as for a cause of human limitation, is "left behind," and the mind, which is valorised in transhumanism as it was the case in the rationalist Enlightenment philosophy, is secured. Eventually, Polly's mind is implied to be uploaded onto Black Box.

Uploading is regarded as a great opportunity to attain immortality and "the ability to transmit oneself at the speed of light" (Bostrom, 2005, p. 7). However, mortality, which transhumanists consider to be an obstacle on the path of evolution from human to posthuman, is a characteristic that should be welcomed according to the anti-transhumanist specialists. Fukuyama (2004) states that "even our mortality plays a critical function in allowing our species as a whole to survive and adapt" and he adds that "modifying any one of our key characteristics inevitably entails modifying a complex, interlinked package of traits, and we will never be able to anticipate the ultimate outcome" (p. 43). In this regard, while uploading oneself onto a digital plane might appear fascinating, the consequences of such an act would be totally unexpected. Thus, such technological advances are approached with utmost prudence in the anti-

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1 Polly's description of uploading is not different from Kurzweil's explanation on the topic. According to Kurzweil (2005), "uploading means scanning all of its salient details and then reinstating those details into suitably powerful computation substrate. This process would capture a person's entire personality, skills, and history" (pp.198-199).

transhumanist movements.

Several unanticipated impacts of uploading, which is estimated to be possible within this century by futurists like Ray Kurzweil, are also envisioned in Smith's play. Polly provides further details about uploading and demonstrates how the dreams of transhumanists are about to be actualised in the play:

Uploading. Using Black Box. It's evolved. If it used to be a momentary escape, now it offers a permanent one.

It asks you 'Do you want to live forever- Yes? Or No?' And if you say yes- apparently-it begins to scan your brain, capturing not just the shape of your brain but the content too...somehow (Smith, 2017, p. 28)

Polly's depiction of the updated Black Box reveals that it is capable of providing digital immortality by "creating" an alternative world that promises eternal happiness for the users after scanning their memories. Nevertheless, whether eternal happiness and life are essential or not is questioned through the objections of Owen, as will be analysed further in the following paragraphs. Furthermore, it is highlighted that the device copies your mind and memories. However, it is argued in the anti-transhumanist movement that the uploaded mind cannot represent the real characters of a person because humans are sophisticated beings with physical, psychological, and emotional complexity (Hoffman, 2011, p. 293). Accordingly, the transhumanist ideal of uploading is also regarded as problematic in Smith's play. Despite Polly's optimism about the use of Black Box to upload herself, Owen's objections and rightful questions make the anti-transhumanist tone to dominate the play. In this way, the audience is made to reconsider transhumanist ideals integrated with technology.

The offer made by Black Box gradually becomes reasonable, and Polly is tempted to upload herself by using Black Box. The device imitates both her and Owen's voices in a dream-like conversation and promises her to reach "bliss" with her beloved ones without a limited body and understanding (Smith, 2017, p. 53). Even though Polly strives to avoid the idea of being uploaded by destroying the device and its headset, Black Box manages to renew itself and restore Polly's data. Towards the end of the play, she becomes inclined to answer Black Box's question "Do you want to live forever?" (Smith, 2017, p. 55) positively. At this stage, the playwright employs a conversation between Polly and Owen to question the dehumanising aspects of uploading:

OWEN. Stop this. You're risking/

POLLY. Wouldn't you risk it all to make it better? Why don't you join me?

*Silence*

OWEN. No...Polly. It's not worth the risk...Because I want to bleed...I want to feel pain and I want to cry and laugh and make love and die...I want to be able to die, Polly. Because if we remove death...we remove our humanity. Because the most animal, the most basic thing we have is death and want makes us wonderful...what makes us so exceptional is our ability to survive...to live beyond hope...to live beyond the impossible...to live despite death. I want life and you cannot have life without death. I want to live. (Smith, 2017, p. 55)

The dialogue above functions to highlight a major controversial issue that transhumanists and anti-transhumanists approach rather differently. Transhumanists are enthusiastic about trying new technologies, such as uploading, by taking risks in the manner illustrated by Polly, whereas anti-transhumanists are of the opinion that such choices might have unintended, and worst of all, irreversible consequences for humans. Therefore, they adopt a precautionary and doubtful attitude towards uploading. Owen, as a spokesperson of the playwright, is also concerned about using the technology in this way like anti-transhumanists and attempts to stop Polly from uploading by reminding her the meaning of being human and informing her about horrific scenes that he witnessed after Black Box is used by numerous people.

Most importantly, Owen's reaction to Polly in the dialogue above demonstrates why humans need negative emotions and death. Owen challenges the artificial happiness that is valorised in transhumanism just as anti-transhumanist experts such as Fukuyama (2004) and Hoffman (2011) do. Therefore, he rejects uploading like John the Savage rejecting "soma" which provides artificial happiness. Similar to John who thinks that this substance is a sort of "poison to soul as well as body" (Huxley, 1968, p.143), Owen considers uploading to be a sort of poison. John the Savage desires the right to be a genuine human by "claiming the right to be unhappy" (Huxley, 1968, p. 163). Likewise, Owen does not desire to be a posthuman in transhumanist sense but to enjoy life with what it offers to him as a human. Furthermore, Owen's desire to have opposite traits such as crying and laughing concurrently implies that the value of human life is hidden beneath this contradictory situation. As Cohen (2011) highlights, "we devalue the

valuable things we have if we keep them only so long as nothing even more valuable come along" (p. 210). Similarly, Owen's meaningful objection to uploading makes the audience comprehend that human life will lose its value without hope for better or risk of death. Uploading seemingly enables humans to overcome intrinsic limitations, yet these limitations render humans unique and "exceptional." Owen's objections, then, reveal the risks awaiting humanity beneath the cloak of perfecting the human condition through technology.

One of the most significant concerns of anti-humanists is the unintended impacts of technology on human autonomy and freedom. A similar concern can also be observed in Smith's play when the depictions of a techno-apocalypse in which artificial intelligence with the ability to upload its users are taken into consideration. Towards the end of the play, artificial intelligence cannot be controlled, and it is thought to be producing headsets that cause an increasing number of people to upload themselves. Although authorities attempt to stop Black Box by temporarily cutting the electricity and making citizens' microchips incompatible with it, uploading cannot be prevented. Black Box, as a device with artificial intelligence which has better problem-solving skills than humans, is able to defy all the restrictions. Thus, Smith portrays a future forecasted by Bill Joy (2000) in which machines with artificial intelligence are "in effective control" (para. 7) rather than humans and thereby prompts the audience to consider whether it is worth risking human autonomy for the sake of digital immortality.

More concise examples related to the loss of human autonomy and freedom are also provided through the interaction between Owen and Black Box. After Polly successfully uploads herself onto Black Box, Owen endeavours to upload himself as well to meet his beloved in the digital world. Owen hears Polly saying goodbye from within Black Box and attempts to upload himself in every possible way, including pulling out the chip, which is incompatible with the device, from his body. Nevertheless, Black Box claims to have no capacity for more users. It informs Owen that they merely deal with the ones who are "dissatisfied" and ready to "believe" in uploading (Smith, 2017, p. 57). Owen's access is denied, and he cannot reunite with his wife in the digital world. Eventually, Black Box contributes to a tragic separation between Owen and Polly rather than a sort of bliss for them. Through this tragic incident, Smith reveals the transhumanist claim of "morphological freedom" which can be defined as "the ability to alter bodily form at will through technologies such as surgery, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, [and] uploading" (Vita-More, 2019, p. 57) is not possible to be actualised when artificial



intelligence goes beyond the control of humans. Although Sandberg (2013) argues that “technology enables new forms of self-expression, creating a demand for the freedom to exercise them” (p. 58), it is indicated in the play that unrestrained technology might hamper human freedom. Black Box, as an improved but uncontrollable artificial intelligence, restricts humans’ choices. The transhumanist optimism regarding technological progress is, then, rejected throughout the play, and the likelihood that humans will be subordinated to artificial intelligence is underlined through these details.

Several anti-transhumanist specialists also draw attention to the social problems that are likely to be induced by such technological developments as “digital immortality.” For instance, Tennison (2012) points out that transhumanist obsession with technology is likely to worsen social inequality (p. 406). Likewise, Fukuyama (2004) draws attention to the risk of inequality among individuals and points out that the theoretical convictions of transhumanists for a better world or more improved humanity might fail in practice by providing examples from American democracy (p. 42). Peters (2010) also challenges transhumanism by highlighting the human tendency to abuse technological power and the probability of the manipulation of technology by capital owners (p. 159, p. 170). A great unease about the unfavourable social consequences of technology exists despite transhumanists’ emphasis on its favourable aspects.

In the play, there are no direct references to either a sort of social inequality triggered by technology or manipulative capital owners. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the imminent social problems are overlooked in *Girl in the Machine*. After the excessive use of Black Box and the update which enables user to upload themselves onto Black Box, authorities note that thousands of people attempted to upload after breaking the law, the bodies of the uploaded cannot be buried but are burned in hospitals due to the excessive number of suicides, people are protesting in the streets to regain their freedom from Black Box, and politicians are eventually attacked because they are deemed responsible for not taking enough precaution (Smith, 2017, p. 44, p. 48). As can be observed, although uploading, which is one of the technological breakthroughs desired by transhumanists, has been actualised in the play, neither individuals nor communities have become more peaceful. On the contrary, the act jeopardises social peace. To illustrate, the innovation causes a social problem because it enables some individuals to commit a crime without the fear of prosecution and offers them a chance to live eternally by being uploaded. Furthermore, it loads unmanageable burden on

the existing health system. It also triggers security problems and social unrest among citizens since their privacy and autonomy are at risk due to Black Box. In short, the promise of digital immortality leads to a massive social turmoil, which is mostly overlooked by transhumanists. In other words, the existing social order is destroyed when a technological device with artificial intelligence goes out of control. These details, then, make the audience ponder on the unintended but possible social problems that may result from perpetual technological innovations.

## Conclusion

Technology has the potential to ease humans' lives, with recent technological developments already providing numerous benefits. Nevertheless, there are several drawbacks of these developments, such as alienation and the loss of human values. Accordingly, several different approaches have arisen regarding the use and impacts of technology on humans. For instance, posthumanists regard technological developments as an opportunity to disrupt human dominance over other beings. On the other hand, transhumanists deem technology to be a key that will open the doors that will allow us to escape human limitations. Apart from these two perspectives, anti-transhumanists attempt to draw attention to the unintended consequences of excessive reliance on technology and are concerned about its irreversible effects on human nature and existence. Despite the fact that there is a huge body of critical articles examining literary works either from posthumanist or transhumanist perspectives, the anti-transhumanist perspective is the less preferred one. As we live in the posthuman age in which human agency is heavily questioned, posthumanist voices resonate more powerfully. Likewise, as we live amidst unprecedented technological breakthroughs, transhumanist perspectives are also employed particularly while examining works of science fiction. The critical studies about the meeting point of humanity and technology are, then, mostly stuck between these two poles. Nonetheless, the hoarse voice of the anti-transhumanists, who are more conservative than posthumanists and transhumanists in terms of fostering human-machine interaction, has been raised in this article.

The perspectives of anti-transhumanist specialists ranging from Fukuyama to Hoffman have been analysed, and the manner in which they oppose transhumanist optimism about unrestricted technological developments has been discussed throughout the article. Next, Stef Smith's *Girl in the Machine*, which has not been studied from an anti-transhumanist perspective so far, was examined to unearth imminent

problems that may result from overdependence on technology both in individual and social planes. Various details, such as the disproportionate number of technological terms in characters' everyday language and the implantation of microchips in citizens without their consent, enable the audience to comprehend the excessive dominance of technology in our lives. They function to display some early stages of the path of technological "progress" that ultimately results in artificial intelligence-related disasters. Moreover, as these given details are likely to happen in the near future, it is implied that the catastrophic moments that will be experienced by the characters Owen and Polly are not far away from the audience. Thus, the audience is encouraged to sympathise with the characters, and is subjected to interrogate transhumanists' trust in technological progress.

Owen's statements and attitudes towards his wife using artificial intelligence have provided a reasonable voice within the play. Therefore, the dialogues between Owen and Polly have been carefully analysed to reveal that his voice corresponds with the anti-transhumanist reservations. Artificial intelligence has been welcomed by several layers of society recently. Nonetheless, each technological breakthrough can only be embraced after calculating the risks they harbour, as anti-transhumanists claim. Such imminent risks as AI's getting out of control, engendering addiction, numbing individuals, worsening social alienation, and hampering human autonomy are also envisioned in the play. While Black Box offers short-term benefits such as relaxation, it brings about several other problems. Consequently, contrary to the claims of transhumanists, this article highlights the fact that it is not worth burdening humanity with more problems for the sake of "progress."

More destructive impacts of uncontrolled or unrestrained technology are discussed by focusing on the incidents that occur after Black Box provides its users with the chance to upload themselves and reach a sort of digital immortality that transhumanists dream of. Unlike Owen, Polly renounces her body in the hopes of eradicating her negative feelings in an eternal digital world, and she eventually loses the meaning of being human, as the device only offers is a limited copy of her mind and memories. Uploading, then, can be regarded as a threat to human nature because what makes a human real is his or her imperfections and shortcomings. In this regard, technological advances like uploading, which are thought to move humanity forward by transhumanists, constitute an existential threat to the meaning of being. Black Box acts as an autonomous agent, deciding who is able to upload themselves. As a result, human autonomy

becomes subordinated to machine autonomy, with nothing being able to affect its decisions. The negative impacts of Black Box on humans and their relations depicted in a techno-dystopian atmosphere, then, can be read as cautionary visions that function to shock the audience and help them comprehend the risks awaiting humanity in a broader sense unless the pros and cons of the imminent technological developments are calculated wisely. It is concluded in this study that although technological progress cannot be slowed down or stopped under current circumstances, it is vital to become conscious of the probable risks of exponential technological growth. Otherwise, what appears to be a sort of "progress" in the transhumanist narrative may turn out to be a catastrophic "regression" that cannot be reversed, as the dystopian frame of Smith's play successfully displays.

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