The Indigestibility of the World: Birthing the Posthuman in Spielberg’s A.I.

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Recent scholarship on the “posthuman” emphasizes embodiment, finitude, the humanizing work of representation, and ontological relation; it also tends toward a critique of dualism, transcendence, and the centering of the Human. These motifs are all emphasized to some extent because of an increasing awareness of the ethical limitations of Humanism, which seems in most formulations dualistic and, hence, violent: N. Katherine Hayles refers to the “liberal humanist subject,” a notion of identity which indicates a subject’s “freedom” from society (3). Neil Badmington discusses how a Cartesian humanism posits a notion of identity in which every human shares an “essence,” the human essence, to rationally differentiate “the true from the false” (Descartes’ phrase), displacing God and centering Humanity (Posthumanism 3-4). And Derrida writes of “man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology--in other words, throughout his entire history--has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play” (292).

There have been numerous recent texts on posthumanism, including fine texts by Elaine L. Graham and Badmington. With her emphasis on an ethics of birth, Graham’s argument in Representations of the Post/Human provides a particularly good counterpoint for what follows. Graham opposes “necrophilia” to “natality,” desiring to replace the West’s focus on death with birth, and thereby emphasize our “shared origin in birth which necessarily embeds us in common experiences, both biological and social, and commits all living beings to sociability,
interdependence and embodiment” (81). Graham, following Bruno Latour, posits that there are two “epistemological strategies” in modernity that ensure its “ontological stability” (33-34): The first strategy is “purification,” the categorizing of “species, classes and states of being.” The second strategy is “translation,” a process by which hybrids are made of nature and culture. It is purification, of hybridity and of modernity’s others, that naturalizes modernity’s “privileged categories” (i.e., the Human). The “post/human,” which is not a “condition” but an “intervention” that allows us to recognize the constructed nature of humanism (37), occurs at the moment that this purification process falters due to a “greater profligacy” of hybrids (35). She writes:

At the boundaries of humanity, machines and nature, the impossibility of fixed definitions is shown forth in the proliferation of contemporary signs and wonders. In their capacity to show up the “leakiness” of bodily boundaries . . . this emergent array of hybrid creatures are arguably “monstrous” not so much in the horror they evoke but in their exposure of the redundancy and instability of the ontological hygiene of the humanist subject. (12)

Graham’s book lacks a close focus on space and ontology, making it difficult to see how this “instability” precisely operates. Against what I see as her basic argument that the confrontation with hybrids causes a post/human “intervention,” I will argue for a sublime confrontation with birth.

Badmington’s Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within, by contrast, describes in much greater detail the ontological nature of the “posthuman.” His Derrida-inflected argument does not attempt to show that we are now in a period of “posthumanity” (145), so much as show how the binary of human/alien deconstructs itself as it oscillates between presence and absence,
and in this “wandering” is the “possibility of posthumanism.” He writes of *Roswell*, a television series:

The human is never quite at home with itself, and never without the alien . . .

Within its stories, the signifiers “human” and “alien” are rearticulated until the relationship between them is no longer one of absolute difference. Neither the human nor the alien is ever entirely revealed in the plenitude of opposition; there is a repeated deferral, an endless retreat from humanism. (134)

The problem, often, is love, he argues in relation to 1956’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (141-143), for “desire escapes its vows,” leading humans to desire aliens in a decidedly non-human fashion, undermining the binary, and giving rise to the posthuman (138). Desire, he continues, “never falls under the control of the subject of humanism” (140). (In what follows, desire will play, in large part, the opposite role: Desire sustains the human until a certain absolute representation is engineered.)

While the human subject generally conforms to what others, including Graham and Badmington, have said about its foundation in “absolute difference” or its strategy of “purification,” I argue that the embodied activities that create humanism are localized within the family. Specifically, families teach us how to eat in the literal embodied sense and, more importantly, in the following ontological sense: Family is the space within which we learn how to digest (or, in a Latourian sense, purify) the world--the essential mark of humanism. Subjectivity is created by ingesting a world of difference. Such poor (i.e., violent) table manners are fueled by an incessant, if illusory, traumatic lack which creates the desire that orients and, concomitantly, creates hungry subjects. This digestive (and representational) cycle is the essence of humanism, fueling the engineering of the world into more and more human dimensions. But
what happens at the apex of this trajectory when humans engineer their ultimate mirror, that is, an artificial entity which perfectly mirrors back to them their humanity?

This essay uses Steven Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence (A.I.)* to argue that something has changed: “Posthumanity” has appeared because this digestion has paused. To be Human is to lack, to always drive forward while repressing the past, the artifice of our *birth*, as we mold the world in our image. However, in a strange way, with cloning and other technologies, this digestion is interrupted; “we” humans have succeeded too well in our masterful creation of an absolute representation of humanity, and have lost our impetus. This mastery, secondly, leads us to experience *birth* in a new way. No longer can we easily digest *birth* (and its others) and move on. No, *birth* now surrounds us like an immense, sublime ocean, undermining us as desiring subjects.

*Family Identity, Narrative, and the Limits of Digestion*

*A.I.* begins in mourning. Martin, the son of Monica and Henry, is cryogenically frozen due to a medical condition for which science has yet to find a cure. He exists as both present and absent, alive and dead, and this is a reality that is excruciating for Monica. Their doctor says to Henry, “She is in the most difficult position of feeling she should mourn the death of your son. After five years your instincts tell you to mourn him, too. But medicine assures us that mourning is inappropriate, that Martin is merely pending, so all her grief goes undigested.” Death, an ontological wound in presence, is difficult to *digest*, but what we have here--through the advancement of medicine--is a cryogenic state with which humans have no previous coping experience (indeed, in a much more material sense than in the case of death, Martin *is* still present and absent). Even so, Monica reads to her son. She reads *The Adventures of Robin Hood,*
specifically the pages dealing with the birth of Maid Marian’s son, also named Martin. *Robin Hood*, as a birth narrative in this case, operates as a therapeutic narrative, assimilating the experience of “mourning” (or cryogenic freezing). The issues that I wish to elaborate on are nicely introduced here. Either subjectivity is gathered together into a well-bordered absolute with the assistance of narrative, or it is torn, “exposed” (Jean-Luc Nancy *Inoperative* 39) to a world of relation (both of presence and absence) that it cannot fully digest.

We only begin to see how some of these issues are coupled in a different manner after David enters the frame. In a situation which approximately duplicates that of Monica and Martin, Professor Hobby designs David after the likeness of his deceased son, also named David. David, as an artificial creation of Humanity, here operates similarly to narrative in that he also assuages mourning. David is intended as a child substitute for couples, like Monica and Henry, who cannot have children or whose children are terminally ill and resigned to a cryogenic state. As an artificial creation he serves to heal the familial world and preserve its sense.

David is the result of an attempt to create a “mecha” that will precisely model human emotional responses. As Sheila, a mecha, informs us, “love is first widening my eyes a little bit and quickening my breathing a little” and so on. Like a human, David will also love and not just artificially *simulate* its physiological manifestations. Hobby’s implicit assumption, of course, is that human, or *real*, identity is not in any way a matter of simulation. On the side of the real is immanent identity, a subjectival being which does not ostentatiously rehearse how to act (based on an exterior movement, or imitation), but (seemingly) reacts immediately, wholly out of itself, and with ease to the call for emotion. This is what it means to be Human; anything else is artificial and the lesser half of the binary.
Trauma has exposed the family to the outside, to a non-recognition (Nancy *Inoperative* 43). This family unit, or representation, is dispersed in the aftermath of Martin’s illness. Directly following a scene in which David is glancing over a series of family pictures which include Martin (but not David), Henry is shown explaining the rules according to which David can be imprinted. As he explains, a bathroom mirror reflects them not once, but in perhaps a dozen perspectives, as if they have their existence, somehow, outside of themselves. Both of these scenes underline the fragility of the family representation; the former in particular, in light of the absence of David from the pictures, foregrounds the painful disjunction of the idea and reality of the family--such representations can simply not keep up with a reality full of sickness and death.

Before imprinting, David appears detached, with the family yet not recognizing Monica as mother (he is both *in* and *outside* of the family representation). When David is finally imprinted by Monica, he is her only child and, hence, “special,” insofar as he is *immediately* with Monica. Imprinting becomes an act of mythmaking in which it is less the words than their enunciation that is essential to drawing David into the presence of the family. After David listens to the series of random words that constitutes imprinting, he responds immediately by referring to Monica as “Mommy”. The work of narrative is precisely to give back identity and heal the family representation by making it once again immanent, erasing that deferral to the outside. In this case, Monica’s narrative gathers the family and gives them back a sense of themselves as a family. This state lasts until Martin’s recovery forces David to *mediate* around him before he can reach Monica. Such prolonged “mediation” foregrounds the work, the construction and artifice, that goes into that supposedly intimate relationship which we term real or natural. What had stabilized into a traditional family unit, is strained, though not broken. Neither David nor Martin feel fully in the presence of their mother, prompting Martin to emphasize the real/artificial binary
as a way of excluding David from the family proper and assimilating him to the outside. The ultimate object of this violence is the return of a world of immanence without the mediating presence of an other (boy). Ultimately, David is digested through his exclusion to the outside, “fully” within the mecha side of the binary.

Of course, such an immanent position is never anything but an illusion. In light of the film’s many photographs, it becomes a question, we could say, of who will be included in the family portrait—the mythic representation of the family. In this struggle between David and Martin the problem is that the family does not yet constitute a clear picture for itself now that the former has returned. The struggle is completely over the question of how this family representation will be delineated and bordered and, ultimately, who will be included, and who will be excluded to the “outside.” The very work of identity then amounts to the creation of a (“real”) monad, a subject or essence, which perpetually elides (or digests) its (“artificial”) birth outside itself.

*Embodied, and Performing Humans*

Thus far I have shown how representation operates as a means of creating that which is really human and, consequently, the violent digestion of that which suggests our existence outside of ourselves. In what follows I will undermine this opposition between “real” and “artificial” and show how identity is created through a hermeneutic movement that places us inextricably with others. Much of A.I.’s muted horror can be traced to this displacement of the above binary. For instance, the horror of the early scenes is bound up in David’s strange manner prior to his imprinting. Consider his first appearance at the dinner table. He silently stares at Monica and Henry as they eat until he finally picks up an empty glass and “drinks.” Then he
stares squarely at Monica and, having no stomach, mimics her eating, once again with no food. When some pasta fails to make it into Monica’s mouth, a few threads hanging, undigested, out the right corner, he laughs loudly, and hysterically. Why is the viewer spooked by this scene? We are horrified because the scene confronts us with identity’s groundlessness. Identity’s essence is existence if we understand existence as the constant self-interpretation that occurs prior to rational consciousness and inserts us in the world in a profound referential manner (Dreyfus 12-17). Each of us “embodies an understanding of what it means to be” in our reliance on shared social practices. Heidegger writes that the “closest kind of association is not mere perceptual cognition, but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care of things which has its own kind of ‘knowledge’” (German page numbers 67). In this case, it is both Monica’s failure to digest, and David’s improper laughter that foregrounds this groundless identity construction.

The knowledge that David is not “real” does not balance out the fact that he appears human. The Flesh Fair provides a telling instance of how David is interpreted as real because he conforms to social practice. This “celebration of life” is defined by its opposition to all that is artificial. An announcer shouts, “What about us? We are alive and this is a celebration of life. And this is a commitment to a truly human future!” About to have David killed, Johnson-Johnson argues that while David is a product of “artistry” and craftsmanship, he only “perform[s],” or simulates, and is only the most recent of “insults to human dignity.” The crowd saves David, but less because he looks human than because he acts like one. When David pleads for his life a member of the crowd shouts that he “looks like a boy” but only after commenting that mecha “do not plead for their lives.” In conforming to normative social practices, David finds empathy.
I am reminded of Heidegger’s example of the “handy” tool which is taken for granted until it is broken (73-74). Once broken its relation (“reference”) to its wielder and the world around it is made conspicuous. The state of being broken forces us to recognize our relation and dependence on the world around us, which is to say, that we are in the world and not monadic subjects. David’s eventual ill-advised and literal ingestion does land him in a mecha[nic] shop, but I want to emphasize conspicuousness on the level of social etiquette: David and Monica’s faulty “eating” can be read in at least two ways. To return to the motif of digestion, it can be understood as a metaphor for the impossibility of immanence. While our ingestion scoops up the exterior world and tidily assimilates it to our insides, it always misses something, the pasta lolls out of the corner of the mouth, we fumble the fork and it clatters across a plate. The digestion of difference (or artifice, in terms of the Flesh Fair) is doomed to failure.

Secondly, David’s “eating” foregrounds the socialization process which might be better described as a hermeneutic process. It highlights the fact that we are not essence but existence, creating, interpreting, and practicing our being, constantly searching for a resolution of reality with the idea we have of that reality, whether our idea is of the family, or the Humanist subject which are, indeed, the same in this context. Jean-Luc Nancy makes a distinction between the architecture of “meaning” and the metaphysical signification that results from the open architecture of the hermeneutic circle. Meaning is essentially “open” in that the “subject” constantly anticipates meaning; meaning therefore cannot be a prior origin or telos, but is rather formed because of this lack and through anticipation: “understanding is possible only by an anticipation of meaning which is or constitutes meaning itself” (Raffoul xii). Essentially, David’s mimicking of “eating” then is a hermeneutic attempt to inscribe himself in such a way that he closes the gap between his inept social skills (reality) and a particular idea of table etiquette.
Whether this is read as the actual act of ingestion or, more generally, as an issue of the assimilation of difference in which success would amount to being part of the family and/or fully human, the end result would be metaphysical. His actions should be thought of as a matter of signification, an attempt to resolve the distance between the sensible and the intelligible which would then amount to the presentation of “meaning” in, for instance, a family portrait (Nancy, Gravity 22-23).

David’s letters are perhaps the best way to see how the hermeneutic and representational work together. While one of these letters might indicate the presence of a fully present myth, the entire series with differing configurations—“DEAR MOMMY/I’M REALLY OUR SON/AND I HATE TEDDY/HE IS NOT REAL,” or “DEAR MOMMY/I’M YOUR LITTLE/BOY AND SO IS/MARTIN BUT NOT/TEDDY”—demonstrates David’s anguished hermeneutic attempt to resolve this tension between reality and the human family. He writes several letters because he is attempting to correctly signify an idea of family that remains distant. The stakes of this resolution are high, “Before the terrifying or maddening abyss that is opened between the possibility that thought is empty and the correlative possibility that reality is chaos . . . signification is the assurance that closes the gaping void by rendering its two sides homogeneous. Reality has an order to it, and reason orders the real” (Nancy, Gravity 23). And it is upon the human subject that all of this hinges. This closing of the hermeneutic circle is simultaneously the work of the subject and what makes the subject be in the first place.

All of this also dramatizes how the subject and narrative are not immediate and immanent, but the product of a prior hermeneutic exteriority, or mediation, which is continually erased as the subject becomes present: Shortly after the mecha woman (mentioned above) describes love, she begins applying cosmetics to her face. There is an immediate cut to Monica
who is engaged in the same act. The act of putting cosmetics on is associated with the simulation of love and then, crucially, identified with the human Monica. The ostentatious binary between humans and mecha would place immediate action on the side of humanity. Here that binary is strained, or founders, perhaps, from the viewers’ standpoint: Both “organic” and “mechanical” life forms require a resolution of the sensible and intelligible before a “real” emotion (identity) can be presented. Both mecha and orga have to engage in an unconscious hermeneutic work before they can be seen as real. Immanence and identity, once again, only exist as such when this prior practice or birthing is repressed. Such a moment of signification is what creates “commonsense” metaphysical distinctions such as that between “real” and “artificial.”

Badmington’s work is deeply interested in such moments in which the “absolute difference” between alien and human is undermined, as alien features are found in the human, or human features are found in the alien. With Badmington, I agree that at such moments “the boundaries marked out with such confidence and clarity by anthropocentrism have been breached” (Alien Chic 131), at least for the viewer. To a large extent, Spielberg’s film does, in fact, operate formally in such a way, though all such breaches need, additionally, to be framed by what Darko Suvin describes as the essential work of science fiction: “cognitive estrangement” (4). A.I. estranges us from humanity, and from our world, making the viewer see both in a new, denaturalized light. However, with my ultimate emphasis on a diegetic sublime, I am after something more radical than estrangement.

Interrupting Humanism: Birth and the Posthuman

In Rouge City, David asks Dr. Know how a mecha can be made real. He is told to travel to the “end of the world where the lions weep” and seek out Hobby. In this future world, global
warming has melted the ice caps. The oceans have become bloated and overrun countless cities. Most of Manhattan’s buildings are covered by water. Lady Liberty, perhaps the Humanist icon, barely lifts her enlightened torch above the waves. This is Manhattan, “a mecha restricted zone,” where Man (fails to) resist(s) that which would undermine his identity and reveal his artificial nature. In the first few moments of the film, a voiceover explains that millions have starved in this future world and that first world nations have “licensed pregnancy” and turned to mecha as a means of ensuring a stable way of life. The narrator refers to mecha as an “essential . . . economic link in the chain mail of society,” nicely summing up both the economic nature of identity as well as its obsessive construction of an inside and an outside.

As the voiceover commences, we see the ocean followed by a fade into a statue of a man with outstretched hands and a peacock base which conveys a sense of flight, power, and immortality. It is the business logo of Cybertronics, David’s manufacturer. As the camera draws back, we realize that we are behind a rain-swept window looking out at the statue. Perhaps the oldest trope for birth, water is also a metaphor for that which erodes immanence. It is that which all representations, statues, and mecha are created to shield humans from, like chain mail, or the pane of glass shutting out the rain in this scene. It is fitting then that while the Cybertronics statue, window, and rain are still in view, Hobby begins his speech about how inventing a mecha “has been the dream of man since the birth of science,” advocating the design of a mecha who will not simulate: David. Opposed to the rain of difference outside, Hobby is concerned with a mythic birth of immanent subjects that will fend off the horror of death--his son’s--and the indefatigable rain (of difference) on the outside.

This is, as another series of statues suggests, an impossibility. On the flight into Manhattan, several identical stone lions, iconic symbols of power, are found weeping, gushing
water out of both eyes and mouths. If subjectival identity is a matter of bringing the outside in, digesting difference, here is an inversion of that movement. The leonine, immanent interior has been exposed to the outside. Just as the melting icecaps suggest humanity’s inability to manage or assimilate nature, this vomited water points to the failure of the Humanist subject, and to the indigestibility of the world, and to the posthuman. David meets Hobby only after he has murdered another david, confirming his humanity through his efficacious elimination of difference. Hobby affirms that David is the only David, implying his individuality and his humanity, only to add that his son was “one-of-a-kind” and that David was at least “first-of-a-kind.” This tension between simultaneously recognizing humanity and undermining it continues when Hobby tells David that he is “a real boy, at least as real as I’ve ever made one.” For him, David is a “success” story, the first mecha to desire and dream. Shattered, David tells Hobby that his “brain is falling out.” When Hobby leaves to collect David’s “real mothers and fathers,” David wanders around a manufacturing center, his womb. A dozen boxed davids stand in a line while others hang from the ceiling on what resemble meat hooks. Two lines of life-size boxes are each marked “David” and “Marlene.” Ad copy on the outside says, “At Last--A Love of Your Own.” At a particularly crucial moment, David looks through the eyes of another david. This face, without a cranium, is exposed to the world around it, specifically to the rain and window discussed earlier. David’s murder and meeting with Hobby occurs in the room adjacent to the aforementioned window. It is through this window that David walks only to deliberately drop to the water below. If the window and the building amount to humanist enclosures, the digestive spatiality of the Humanist subject is reversed as David leaves the building. A suggestive shot at the surface of the ocean follows. The camera begins filming while still placed within what we
can only suppose to be the building that David fell from only to move forward through shattered glass to the outside and to the rain. The camera recapitulates David’s indigestion.

Subjectivity, co-originary with representation, arises as we have seen through the digestion of difference. David’s tortuous and repetitive attempts to write the family/Humanist narrative are all concerned with exactly such a digestion of difference in which the subject recognizes his self in that which is other, becoming in this way human. However, in the experience of the birth of these other davids, David’s digestion is stalled, and spatially reversed. Such a confrontation with birth—by contrast to the myriad examples of digestion in the film—exceeds the rational, assimilative abilities of David, who, until this moment, was able to quite easily scoop up the exterior world of difference and interiorize it. David’s idea of the family (Human) founders before this sublime experience of birth which undermines representational closure. We do not need Lyotard or Nancy to tell us, though they do, of the sublime nature of birth (Nancy Birth 2; Lyotard “Unbeknownst” 47). The digestive logic (spatial, rational, representational, ontological) developed thus far in the essay has been turned inside-out in the face of this, the raw experience of birth. A Latourian reading of this moment would emphasize the row of davids as examples of the proliferation of nature-culture hybrids, undermining modernity. Such a reading is possible, but not quite as telling as what I have developed above. David, after all, has already murdered one other david, and the very fact that David could be digested by a human family indicates the incredible purifying power present in the film. Birth is the logical trigger for this posthuman exposure, ultimately, because of the spatial logic. If Humanism is defined by a rationalizing ingestion, the logical opposite, birth, is defined, literally, by an expulsion—the brain of the rational subject somewhere outside of itself, in the other.
This spatial exposure entails David’s “recognition”—one cannot in light of the experience described above neglect the scare quotes— that he will not become immanent, or real. While in the lab, David sees how all these other davids are not only constructed but also boxed; if boxes operates as a metaphor for subjectivity, he also sees how very insubstantial the lines we draw between the “inside” and “outside” are. He “recognizes” that he cannot be rid of the artificiality that plagues him and all humans for that matter. In this moment of representational indigestion, David confronts the impossibility of immediate presence, the fact that identity is born through an exteriority that cannot be erased. For the Humanist subject to be interrupted, digestion must stop, opening up the borders of the self so that the interior movement is reversed: The “self” opens to the outside, and to others; a posthuman ethics would begin with this spacing. With Badmington (Alien Chic 153) and Graham (228), I would also locate the posthuman in the spacing of Derridean differance. Against the rigid difference of, say, a binary between human and alien, what happens at this moment is that David’s representational faculties—which are on the side of difference—break down, confronting him with his existence in an endlessly deferred series of relations.

**Humanist Completion, Cloning, Hospitality**

Just as David gets his dream in *A.I.*’s final scene—immanence—and (apparently) dies, so, too, does humanity. Hobby informs us that it has been the dream of “man since the birth of science” to create a real being. David, as a tool of narrative, represents the completion of signification for both Hobby and the family. Monica has lost a son, prompting the desire for and creation of David to heal the family representation. Hobby, of course, is confronted with much the same circumstances as his own son’s death predates his Davidic simulacrum. This parallel
justifies telescoping the obsession with a familial representation onto the much larger stage of humanism.

Contemporary critics of postmodernism argue that philosophy, the world, is ill (in the absence of its “Martin”) and has lost its hold on absolutes like God, morality, and Man (Nancy, *Gravity* 21-35). Paradoxically, it is the very charge that meaning has been lost that provides meaning with its vitality--to return to the dynamic of anticipation and the hermeneutic circle. This illness stands in for a lack that is less absent than present “at a distance.” Such an illusory absence is crucial as it is what creates the desire which fuels the modern project whose ultimate object is the presentation of an absolute Subject. Meaning (David/Martin), once returned, then has to move away again to ensure that this crude dialectic of lack and desire continues.

As we have seen, Hobby’s speech inscribes a teleological history whose fulfillment, whose “dream” and desire, is embodied in David. His objective is the resolution of the sensible (David as representation) and the intelligible (the idea of Man) in which “each presents the other” (22-23). Assuming the chasm between the sensible and intelligible, signification is the absolute “resolution” of the two which, at the furthest end, amounts to “the very model of a structure or system that is closed upon itself,” a definition of the seamless monad (original’s emphasis). It is also--to point out what may be obvious by now--the utter opposite of the sublimity, which is defined by the impossibility of representing an otherwise intelligible idea (Lyotard *Postmodern Condition* 78). In the same way that David’s letters were an attempt to align the sensible (words) with the intelligible (an idea of the family), David himself operates for the Humanist project. As a feat of engineering David amounts to an absolute representation of the Humanist subject. There can be no greater Humanist feat than to make an entity that mirrors the self, desiring, dreaming, and lacking. By making David (really) human, the world has been
fully represented and science can be at ease because this representation signals the end of that distant lack and the desire that it creates (49).

Yet it is a profoundly disturbing success in that it is only the dialectic of lack and desire that creates the orientation or project that gives identity to the subject. The closure of the hermeneutic circle is therefore also a non-subjectival opening. First, a bit more on this limit from Nancy’s *The Gravity of Thought*:

In its completed form, this circle is as follows: the subject of signification recognizes itself as the ultimate signified. This amounts to saying that the process or structure of signification recognizes and signifies itself as its own subject. Thus, the *meaning* of the *subject* . . . is situated at once in a constant and infinite presence-at-a-distance and in a perfect ontological identity with the subject whose meaning it constitutes; the uniformly evasive presence of meaning constitutes its substantiality. (original’s emphasis; 43-44)

At the point of total representation, lack and its corollary, desire, are gone and with them the subject. What remains as a “subject” “recognizes” that identity is less immanent than a play between absence (“presence-at-a-distance”) and presence (“perfect ontological identity”). The subject “recognizes” that its substance is grounded not in signification, but in the perpetual movement or architecture of meaning by which signification comes into being. Subjectivity requires an inexhaustible lack, so that, in a way, the subject is confronted with a structural paradox: to complete the Humanist project is to die. When Hobby tells David that he is “real” because he is the first mecha to desire and dream, he explains in the simplest terms that subjectivity is grounded in lack. We are who we are because we are constantly projecting ourselves toward that illusory lack. Subjectivity is revealed, in other words, as *in-significant*, as
lacking a ground as it moves perpetually from here to there (51). Having become a real boy, his subjectivity is endangered along with the essential inertia that is the project of subjectivity (and having completed its project in David, the same is true for humanism).

As I have demonstrated, there is no essential difference between orga and mecha. Both simulate and operate hermeneutically in the world, trying to resolve the tension between the sensible and intelligible in a representation. Whereas humans had been able to elide this exposition in seamless representations, at the end of humanism this cannot be ignored: The recognition of “insignificance” is the signature trait of our time. This is again, to say the least, considerably different than Graham’s argument: Rather than an overabundance of hybrids that may no longer be “purified,” what we see here is a mechanical boy who is really human (at least in terms of Hobby’s definition)--at which point the Humanist edifice collapses.

_A.I._ focuses and furthers this discussion by foregrounding the fact of bioengineering. With the film’s emphasis on androids this will seem strange until it is recalled that David is an identical twin of Hobby’s son--as are all the davids on the manufacturing line--and that the A.I. at the end of the film clone Monica for a brief rendezvous with David. While David is an android, my analysis takes Hobby (for whom David exhibits the essential qualities of humanity) at his word, and uses this android’s human experience to discuss the biotechnological world that we humans now inhabit. The dialectic of lack and desire stalls because reproductive science interrupts the rational subject in two ways, both as a completion, and as a confrontation with our birth. Biological science has been perfected to such an extent that it not only confronts us with our birth, but does so _incessantly_ due to its increasingly expansive place in society. We may be able, as David does, to digest one copy, but when we are confronted with the artificial manner in which we are born, our digestion fails and “we” are brought, finally, face to face with the
indigestibility of the world. The subjectival mastery over birth has made it impossible to move beyond a subjectival birth: Posthumanity experiences a state of constant birth.

Cloning is not a simple extension of subjectival power. It is also an interruption of subjectivity and thereby a confrontation with our insubstantiality, our existence outside of ourselves with others. This is an endless birth because cloning is endless; innumerable davids can be made of one David and, more importantly, it is endless because the “subject,” in the face of this birth, is incapable of creating the mental representations that would reduce this reality to the well-bordered stability of a Human, Family, National being.

When, for instance, Hobby informs David that he will return momentarily with David’s real mothers and fathers, the immanent notion of the family self is replaced with a notion of the self constructed via an impersonal web of communal activity. David cannot interiorize this “family” or “birth” in a representation when his presence is endlessly deferred. The rational mind cannot truly digest its relation to all humans, let alone its construction in a womb that looks more like a factory floor than an intimate domicile. Humanism is a sentimental myth which is exposed at the moment we are forced--as we are more and more--to confront our birth in the world.

Ethically, this entails an understanding of identity as less immanent than deferred, a spacing in which what once was a subject--absolute, monadic, solipsistic--is now exposed to others. “Posthumanity” would be defined by spacing, a non-subjectival awareness of each singularity’s existence outside of his or her self. Opposed to the digestion of presence and absence seen in David’s personal path toward total signification, this exposure would interrupt simple immanent representations. Instead of seamless borders of self, the subject’s “interior” would be radically exposed. (While in the mecha shop for ingesting real food, David attempts to touch his chest cavity. The mechanic slaps his hand away. In this new space, hands will not be
swatted.) While *Artificial Intelligence* signals the interruption of the subject, it concomitantly signals the birth of a singularity whose existence is defined by “artificiality,” once this word has been drained of all metaphysical vestiges. Nor, lest I be misunderstood, is this a new individual, shorn of the past, and now somewhere *simply* beyond humanism, as if that were possible.

Spielberg’s film ends with a representation of such a singularity. The A.I. at the film’s end, descendants of David and others of his time, while curious, do not recapitulate the obsession with subjectivity that is seen in humans and David. Our first telling image of this other order is glimpsed in their choice of transportation. Their transport, for lack of another name, is not a seamless representation of tin and rivets, but a rough-cut rectangle in which the seams are ostentatious. Nothing appears to hold the sides of this vehicle together but transparent spacing. Its interior is totally exposed to the outside. Having served its purpose, the ship explodes in dozens of pieces to be, assumedly, stacked to the side. It is a (strategically essential) representation to be used for a short time and abandoned. The A.I. who leave the transport discover David, frozen, immobile and trapped in a seamless helicopter-like bubble by contrast. He is foreign to them. He is an intruder, demanding and increasingly rude. Yet they remain hospitable. David’s alterity is not digested and put to work in the manner so well modeled by Martin, David, or Hobby’s humanism. When the statue of the Blue Fairy collapses at David’s touch, the A.I. recreate and animate her. Monica is even brought back for 24 hours of illusory communion with David. This is not the world of abandonment and exposure of the A.I., yet they acquiesce to the fantasies of this young boy. Exposed to the end of humanism, it is such a hospitality that beckons to us.

**Notes**
1. This essay began as a chapter in my 2005 dissertation (At the Limit of Subjectivity: Ethics, Community, Birth, and the Posthuman in the Narratives of Thomas Pynchon, Samuel R. Delany, Steven Spielberg, and Joel and Ethan Coen). In light of space considerations, I have eliminated much of the theoretical armature. The film sustains the above argument, though I willingly acknowledge my theoretical debt to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy whose language I emulate. Numerous people have read this essay along the way, including David Sheridan, Dawn Comer, Scott Michaelsen, Eyal Amiran, Patrick O’Donnell, and A.C. Goodson. Thank you all for your assistance.
Works Cited


