AI Uncanny: Posthuman Entanglement and Biomachine Ethics in *The Trouble with Being Born*

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Imagine a sci-fi world in which vulnerability is not monopolised by humans, and machines are not powerful overlords. This article addresses the uncanny case of a biomachine that is more vulnerable than the humans around her in the Austrian sci-fi drama *The Trouble with Being Born* (2020), directed by Sandra Wollner. The film's protagonist is an interactive child robot, Elli, whose simulation of human life enhances the capacities of her father/owner in transhumanist fashion, permitting him to grieve for his lost daughter while indulging in leisure time and sex with her biomachinic replicant. The man combines qualities of a *Sandmann*-like inventor, abusive psychoanalyst, and super-rich consumer of futuristic immortality products such as plasma infusions and cryopreservation. Seemingly capable of fulfilling all his transhumanist aspirations, Elli, played by a child actor anonymised through life-mimicking technology, also displays glitchy vulnerability, both life and death drives, gender non-conformity, and posthuman affiliations with the 'companion species' (in Haraway's terminology) around her, including domestic animals.

My article explores the film's aesthetic representation of the transhumanist violence of the father/creator and the vulnerability of the biomachine, played out in their brightly surveillant Bauhaus-style home in the woods. I draw out the liberatory potential of the posthuman entanglements that emerge there and explore the rich affordances of its Romanticist setting, a place where insects whir in post-anthropocentric chorus, and the woods are both a tempting wilderness full of sensory possibility and a space of horrendous, inhuman risk. Through this reading, my article sheds light on the complex ethics of entanglement in an age of biomachines. I also demonstrate, through my nuanced intertextual analysis, that the bioethical questions raised by cognising machines like Elli are by no means new. Rather, a radical reading of new techno-cultures in terms of *continuities* shows that these questions have been haunting humanity's dark wooded corners for a long time now.

Introduction

> The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism …. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. (Haraway, 1991: p. 151)

This article addresses the uncanny case of a biomachine that is more vulnerable than the humans around her, in the sci-fi feature film *The Trouble with Being Born* by Austrian director Sandra Wollner (2020). I argue that the vulnerability of this biomachine offers opportunities for a posthuman entanglement that works as an alternative to transhuman sovereignty, especially through Elli's ambiguous subjectivity and her relationships with non-human others. Wollner's film provides a sensorially rich exploration of life with humanoid machines, and a plot that illustrates the barbarity of fantasies of transhuman sovereignty in the light of new artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. I show in this article that the illusions of sovereignty that human owners may harbour in relation to AI do not represent a break with the preceding technological and philosophical histories of humanist sovereignty. Rather, they are a continuation of those histories, and one that is haunted by the ambivalent politics of Enlightenment reason and the European Romantic and Expressionist cultural forms that arose in their wake, as well as by new developments in machines that can imitate the features of human life. My reading of Wollner's film here locates the remnants of Enlightenment concepts of human sovereignty that still reside within contemporary relationships with technology in the form of transhumanism. I show that these transhumanist fantasies of sovereignty are troubled by aspects of an AI uncanny, a horrifyingly familiar state of coexistence with the biomachines populating the world around us that shares features with the Freudian uncanny while bringing in aspects of algorithmic eeriness and estrangement that are specific to the responsiveness and agency of life-mimicking AIs. I relate the film's representation of this AI uncanny to the cultural intertexts Wollner draws on to make it, and I illuminate the AI uncanny with reference to the contemporary philosophy of posthumanism, an ecological and feminist school of thought that productively decentres sovereign Enlightenment subjectivity. My analysis below mobilises posthumanist thinking to make the case for the possibilities of entanglement with biomachines, despite and even thanks to their unsettling, uncanny qualities. Such entanglement, I claim, has great ethical potential. It will also require delicate negotiation in a future shared between humans and the sensing,

responsive machines we have chosen to make and install alongside us in the world.

The protagonist of *The Trouble with Being Born* is an interactive child robot, Elli, whose simulation of human life enhances the capacities of her father/owner, Georg, permitting him to grieve for his lost daughter while indulging in leisure time and sex with her biomachinic replicant. Georg's use of this biomachine child combines the qualities of a *Sandmann*-like inventor, an abusive psychoanalyst and a super-rich, transhuman consumer of futuristic technological commodities. Elli, played by a child actor anonymised through biomachine features such as artificial skin, displays glitchy vulnerability, both life and death drives, gender non-conformity, and posthuman affiliations with the 'companion species' (Haraway, 2003) around her, including domestic animals. The film was positively received in the German-speaking world, winning a German Film Critics' Award in 2019 in the category of Impossible Picture. Yet it was also controversial. The Melbourne International Film Festival removed the film from its 2020 programme, citing concerns raised by psychologists about a potential normalisation of child abuse, a decision denounced by critics Peter Krausz, Tom Ryan and David Stratton (Quinn, 2020). Wollner reported meanwhile that the far-right American media platform *Infowars* had compared her to Jeffrey Epstein (Mouriquand, 2021), the convicted sex offender who died in 2019 while under investigation for trafficking minors. These examples underline the strength of responses to Wollner's child sexual abuse plot. Yet more than this, they also imply a powerful albeit unconscious response among these audiences to the representation of an uncanny, life-mimicking biomachine. Elli is troubling because of her use, but also as a vision of unthought potential and threatening otherness which adds to the existing Freudian concept of the uncanny her own strange and confronting bio-mimetic responsiveness and agency.

The film's plot is certainly shocking. It is also philosophically challenging in its manner of distributing vulnerability between human and non-human agents. The script is in German, but the film bears an English-language title that refers to the 1973 work of philosophy *The Trouble with Being Born* by Romanian-born Emil Cioran. Cioran's aphoristic text contemplates the painful nature of being alive, dwelling on topics of metaphysical exile and bodily decay. In adapting these concepts, Wollner takes the monopoly on such vulnerability, psychological estrangement and even physical degradation away from humans. In the world of her film, machines are not powerful overlords untouched by metaphysical or material concerns. Elli is rather a sensitive and even empathic protagonist who moves through an uncannily lively forest, redolent of the Romantic-

era forests in which Freud found early eruptions of his concept of *das Unheimliche*, with her senses attuned to nature's vivid sights and sounds. She is shown trapped at the heart of this forest, as if enclosed in the dark centre of European philosophy's wishes for enlightened clarity. She is even endowed with instincts to get out of this futureless space, and is seen making various attempts to escape her father/abuser's well-appointed and brightly surveillant Bauhaus-style home, an image for the post-Enlightenment utopias of 1960s European modernism. Through its representation of Elli amid these richly associative aesthetic sites, and its uncanny thematisation of such human experiences as grief, sex, loneliness and the longing for freedom through a programmed yet increasingly independent biomachine, Wollner's film challenges current assumptions about the vulnerability of humans in relation to machines. In the process, it points at the ways in which human drives of violence and attachment have now become inextricably entangled with the capacities and limitations of the biomachines that have begun to reside and indeed live alongside us.

The Romantic and Expressionist Intertexts of Wollner's Biomachine Film

A 10-year-old girl goes missing from the side of a lake, presumably kidnapped, and is never seen again. Her grieving father Georg (Dominik Warta) builds a child robot, Elli (played by an anonymised child actor working under the pseudonym Lena Watson), in his daughter's image at the age when she disappeared. Georg's relationship to the automaton is unclear: did he kidnap the child? Is it grief that he is suffering, or (also) guilt? Marie-Luise Angerer (2023: 50) argues that Elli is a replacement daughter, 'built by the father to block out the loss'. He lives with her, processing his grief with the help of his memories – which she is programmed to speak aloud – while also using this child biomachine for sex. He repairs Elli when she repeatedly attempts to take her own life. The child robot eventually escapes and moves in with a woman named Anna (Ingrid Burkhard), who perceives her as the very image of her dead brother, Emil. Elli is then re-engineered by Anna's son so that she can take on the identity of Emil. Elli/Emil lives peacefully with the woman until they see a news report on the topic of Elli's disappearance; this leads to a crisis in which they kill the woman, or at least preside over her death following a fall, and attempt to take their own life one last time.

Co-authored by Sandra Wollner and Roderick Warich and released in 2020, this vividly realist sci-fi offers a challenging take on what Wollner considers the 'virtuality' of contemporary life (Mouriquand,

2021). Lena Watson wore a silicone mask to enable special effects and protect her identity, and she was not exposed to nudity on set: nakedness was added at editing stages using computer-generated imagery (CGI). These techniques create Elli's artificial appearance, with her smooth, childlike mobility and flawless skin. The biomachine's skin has a smooth silicone texture and faint metallic sheen, visual cues that make clear her machine nature. Wollner's high-contrast soundtrack creates an autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR)-like intimacy with the viewer/listener, conveying the biomachine Elli's heightened sensory experience. Elli is humanoid, but she is proven to be completely artificial when Georg is seen rebooting her after she attempts to take her own life just moments into the film.

The film's shocking plot, its setting in an unhappy family home, and its striking aesthetic techniques make it an exemplary work of Austrian cinema. Austria has a reputation for its distinctive filmic sensibility, a recognition solidified when *New York Times* critic Dennis Lim (2006) labelled it 'the world capital of feel-bad cinema', emphasising 'its willingness to confront the abject and emphasize the negative'. The most important figurehead of Austria's feel-bad cinema is Michael Haneke, and *The Trouble with Being Born* nods to his work. This is the case in the cinematographic trope of the fishtank shot, an eye-level framing of a medium-distance shot, often through a doorway or other frame, indexing techniques of display and observation (Figures 1 and 2). Conveying a cold objectivity, such fishtank shots imply the presence of an impassive audience observing the scene taking place through a doorframe as if in a human aquarium – or if the door is closed, being denied visual access to it. These shots tend to be accompanied by threatening or discomfiting sound design. In Haneke's (2009) *The White Ribbon* (Figure 2), the closed door cannot hide the sounds of a child screaming as they are violently whipped by a parent.
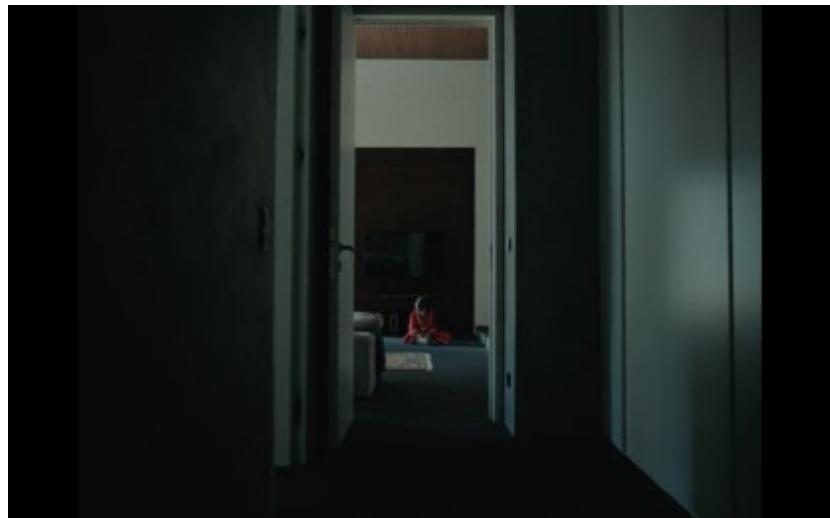
Figure 1. Still from *The Trouble with Being Born* (dir. Sandra Wollner, 2020, Panama Film, The Barricades, GFC Films). An enclosing fishtank shot frames Elli through a doorway, representing containment and detached observation.

Figure 2. Still from *The White Ribbon* (dir. Michael Haneke, 2009, Wega Film, Les Films du Losange, X Filme Creative Pool). A fishtank shot showing a closed door emphasises Haneke's controlled framing and the violence of his patriarchal world.

Another nod to Haneke pertains to Wollner's naming of the father in her film. Georg is the name shared by many of Haneke's paternal figures, and this is a marker of structural repetition, patriarchal dysfunction, and a distinctly masculine mode of emotional and social detachment. Haneke's Georg(e)s preside over outwardly comfortable, high-achieving families, yet are haunted by disturbing forces within their immaculate homes. These may be murderous teenage boys from within or outside the family, trained to be violent through the consumption of new media (*Benny's Video*, 1992; *Funny Games*, 1997, 2007), or righteously angry revenants from Europe's

never-ending legacy of colonialism and racism (*Caché*, 2005; *Happy End*, 2017). Wollner's Georg continues this lineage, but her film arguably surpasses the horror of Haneke's moral and political realism. Wollner's representation of the human-machine relationship between Georg and Elli moves in the speculative territory of a future shaped by AI, where sensing machines bear the brunt of, and begin to respond to, humanity's darkest drives. Here, the disruptive force is more frightening than any of the figurations of colonial and mediatic trouble with which Haneke peoples his films. Less manageable still than Haneke's vengeful human revenants, the horror in this film comes from a combination of two horrifying factors: the uncanny presence of a life-mimicking machine, and the troubling use of this machine by the grieving, lonely Georg.

The film's intertextual references stretch further back, too, into the history of European Romanticism. Tropes of Romanticism include automata, ghosts, and beautiful forests inhabited by uncontrollable currents of human and more-than-human drives. These were the drives that the Austrian father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, decoded as the core and often veiled content of the unconscious mind. Romanticism is also the era in which Freud located the key features of the uncanny, which emerges when something familiar becomes strange through the return of repressed memories, the presence of doubles, or the surfacing of what was once hidden. Such uncanny tropes are regularly found in legends and literature of German-language Romanticism, including E. T. A. Hoffmann's 1817 horror tale 'The Sandmann' (Hoffmann, 2001), as well as in the Alpine legend of a mistreated straw doll, Sennentuntschi (Schneider, 1972). In both of these sources, the female automaton is unspeaking, man-made, the object of projective obsession and sexual violence. She is also uncannily alive with her own powers, as her automated capacities allow her to enact forms of violence and revenge that challenge the sovereignty of her makers and abusers.

This cultural background of Romanticism and the Freudian uncanny is encoded in Wollner's plot and her film's dark and luscious forest setting. The contrast between the diegetic sounds of natural elements such as birds and crickets and the mechanical whirring of a machine and the disassociated sound of her biomachinic speech has uncanny effects. These add to the traditional Freudian uncanny new aspects of an AI uncanny, in which humanoid robots and generative systems evoke unease precisely because their near-human likeness destabilises the boundary between the familiar and the alien. Wollner's film opens with an amplified soundtrack of insects and birds, and an image emerging to show a point-of-view (POV) shot from the forest floor. This is Elli's POV, and as she opens her eyes, her

machine gaze attempts to focus on the canopy of the trees above her. The sound design at the opening emphasises the fact that the perspective in the shot is coming from Elli's subjectivity, with the images of the inside of the eyelid being accompanied by glitchy electronic noises such as clicks, burrs and Elli's synthesised sounds. The eye-opening sequence is followed by a first-person perspective shot of walking in a forest, where the sounds of birds and crickets blend further with computational noises. The first words of the film go on to replay a memory that Elli has been programmed to repeat. She recalls a summer's day lying on a picnic blanket and describes a strong sensory memory: *Es riecht nach nasser Erde und Wald* ('it smells like wet earth and the forest'). Here, the biomachine has a narrative perspective and an ability to describe sensory experience. She is also situated in the traditionally idealised natural environment of the forest, a fabled space laden with rich and ambivalent meanings.

These opening sequences establish the visual scene for the film's evocations of the non-human eruptions of Romanticism. It now goes on to combine Freudian and AI uncanny elements in a manner that confronts viewers with a new, technological extension of troubles already familiar from the archives of European philosophy and aesthetics. In the Romantic tradition, *Wald* (forest) is idealised as a place of nature, origin, restoration and inspiration. It is also one with uncanny and threatening possibilities; for instance, in J. L Tieck's 1797 Romantic tale 'Eckbert the Fair', dangerous magic and ultimately a revelation of incest disturb the wooded idyll (Tieck, 1985). Wollner's forest is the site of Elli's disappearance; it is also a space where the forest of Romanticism is met with technological features. The forest is lit by the haunting lights of emergency services looking in vain for the lost girl (Figure 3). It is also the place Elli awakens as a biomachine and begins to walk towards the glass home nestled at the heart of this loaded, symbolic space.
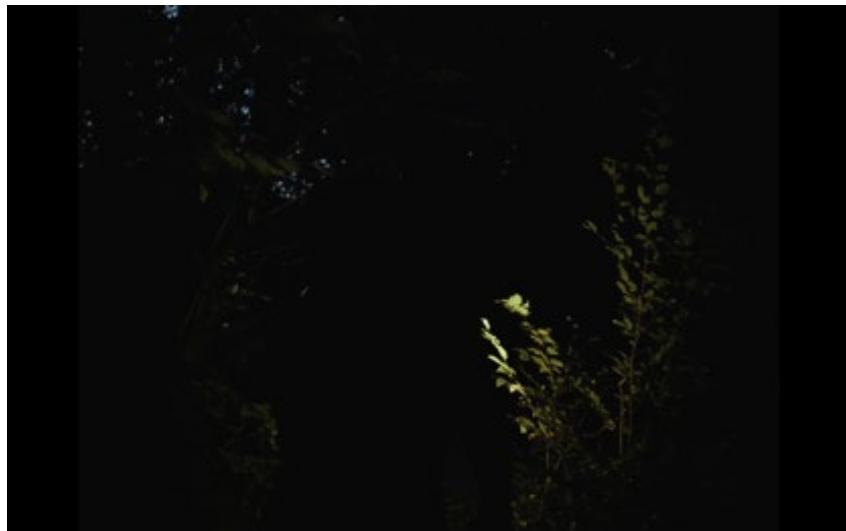
Figure 3. Still from *The Trouble with Being Born* (dir. Sandra Wollner, 2020, Panama Film, The Barricades, GFC Films). The Romantic-coded forest is lit by the haunting glow of emergency lights, marking both the futile search for the lost girl and Elli's awakening as a biomachine.

The Romantic-coded, technologically invested forest setting points to some of the major intertexts of Wollner's film. One of these is the Alpine fable of Sennentuntschi, which formed the basis of the 1972 play by Hansjörg Schneider. Schneider retells the legendary tale of a doll made out of a broom, rags and hay who is baptised, comes to life and is sexually abused by a group of herdsmen. Like the isolated herdsmen who build Sennentuntschi to be with them in their Alpine seclusion, Georg in *The Trouble with Being Born* is lonely and desperate for relational solace that then comes from a technologically engineered biomachine doll. Alongside this fable, the most crucial literary intertext of the film is Hoffmann's 'The Sandmann'. This is the story of an automaton, Olimpia, who is built by physics professor Spalanzani together with a terrifying lawyer, glass salesman and 'demonic optician' (Webber, 1996: 47) named Coppola/Coppelius. Like Elli, Olimpia is presented as a daughter, Spalanzani's, and she becomes the object of projective obsession for traumatised protagonist Nathanael.

Hoffmann's Olimpia is an inanimate object, with ice-cold hands and gaping eyes (*als schliefe sie mit offnen Augen,* 'as if she were sleeping with her eyes open') (Hoffmann, 2001: 17). At the same time, she is endowed with life through Nathanael's desiring gaze: when he stares at her, *war es auch, als fingen an in der kalten Hand Pulse zu schlagen und des Lebenblutes Ströme zu glühen* ('it also seemed that pulses began to beat, and the lifeblood's streams to glow in the cold hand' (Hoffmann, 2001: 31) While others view Olimpia as singing and

dancing in a mechanical fashion, displaying an *unangenehm richtigen geistlosen Takt* ('unpleasantly correct, soulless rhythm') (Hoffmann, 2001: 34), Nathanael is fascinated enough to perceive her as real. Freud's (1955) interpretation of 'The Sandman' is one of his best-known psychoanalytic readings of literature and appears in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', where he explores the repressed desires and castration anxiety which are experienced through familiar yet strange, at times horrifying experiences.

Like Olimpia, Elli dances in *The Trouble with Being Born*, and Georg watches with pleasure and fascination this biomachinic performance of aliveness. In these scenes, she also recalls the sexualised robot Maria in Fritz Lang's (1927) *Metropolis*, the object of a male gaze represented in that masterpiece of early cinema through a powerful montage of men's disembodied eyes (Figure 4). The body of the robot is whole in the dancing scene in *Metropolis*, while the men watching her are reduced to cut-out sensory organs: their staring eyes. Who is more machine-like here, and whose sovereignty is more assured? Like Olimpia in 'The Sandman' and robot Maria in *Metropolis*, Elli is at once the object of the gaze, carrying the quality Mulvey (1975: 11) critiques in terms of '*to-be-looked-at-ness*', and a lively machine. The men who look at the women biomachines feel desire for the android woman, for what she can offer, the needs she can fulfil, and this sense of need powers their drive for domination. The centrality of need fulfilment in the relationship between man and biomachine is especially the case when the machine in question is made with a soft robot design, as Elli is (Hughes & Stella, 2023). To a degree, these lively female robots work to fulfil patriarchal needs and shore up the sovereignty of the men who look upon or own them.

Figure 4. Still from *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927, Universum Film). The montage shows the male gaze as fragmented, while the robot-woman is shown as whole and beguilingly sovereign.

Transhumanism as Capitalist Extension of Enlightenment Illusions of Sovereignty

Wollner's representation of a sexualised child biomachine illuminates the problematic contemporary philosophy of transhumanism, in which technologies are used to expand human capacities in ethically questionable and highly unequal ways. Transhumanist uses of technologies include, for instance, reducing human morbidity by trying to engineer so-called designer babies through gene selection in embryos – for instance, to not transplant any embryos with hereditary cancer genes – and exploring the possibilities of technologically extended lifespans or even immortality. Transhumanist computation projects such as Elon Musk's Neuralink and other brain-computer interfaces aim to connect human brains to AI-driven databases (Benedikter, 2023), and Project December uses archived conversations and letters to create interactive chatbots that mimic deceased individuals (Fagone, 2021). These transhumanist projects are the beginning of work towards immortality, albeit only for certain classes and groups.

Other transhumanist approaches include using developing areas such as genetic engineering, cryonics, AI and nanotechnology to expand the capacities of the human mind and senses. Importantly, such transhumanist uses of technology imply using private wealth to buy expensive hardware. They thus imply the private commodification of technological hardware, and they rely on low regulation and an absence of ethical scrutiny to continue developing towards goals of utmost human sovereignty, in the form of life that never needs to end or even to include aspects of vulnerability and ill health that currently plague everybody regardless of class.

In the area of biomachines, transhumanist exemplars include Sophia, a humanoid robot designed to emulate human expressions and conversational patterns, and Boston Dynamics' Atlas, a bipedal robot capable of locomotion, balance and complex motor tasks modelled on human biomechanics. These innovations create the most concrete images for the philosophy of transhumanism, which envisions the technological enhancement and even transcendence of human capacities. While such biomachines exemplify the integration of biological principles into synthetic systems, they also raise profound philosophical and ethical concerns. Issues of human identity, agency and the meaning of posthuman development emerge alongside the danger of elitist enhancement, in which advanced technologies may be accessible only to privileged groups, exacerbating existing social inequalities. Consequently, the pursuit of biomachine development

demands critical reflection not only on the technical possibilities of human-machine integration but also on questions of justice, accessibility and the equitable distribution of future non-human evolution.

All transhumanist uses of technology, whether in genetic modification or in the creation of biomachines, have problematic moral effects. Pruchnic (2013: 19) associates transhumanism with the capitalist commodification of new technical possibilities, since transhumanism implies the enhancement of the cognitive and physical capacities of modified humans, who might gain supremacy over other, 'unaltered humans'. Mark Coeckelbergh (2022: 7) regards the transhumanist use of AI capabilities as corollaries of a culture of unstoppable self-improvement promising 'to upgrade the mind and the soul'. Nick Dyer-Witheford and colleagues' (2019) analysis of transhumanist accelerationist thinking considers that AI could even make humanity obsolete. Yet transhumanism is not geared towards erasing humanity and humanist goals. Rather, transhumanist uses of technology to expand human cognitive and physical capacities offer elite paying customers the opportunity to become super-humanist *Übermenschen*.

Enlightenment ideals of reason and self-governance are the historical code with which transhumanist philosophy is written, with its visions of a neoliberal cyborg armoured with reduced vulnerability and indefinite sovereignty. Transhumanist sovereignty has recognised similarities with Enlightenment philosophy, with James Bridle (2018) drawing attention to how transhumanist aspirations are rooted in an Enlightenment inheritance of rationalism, technological mastery and the belief in progress. He critiques this inheritance, arguing that the very pursuit of perfect knowledge and control through computation produces opacity, disorientation and systemic risks. In his view, transhumanism continues the Enlightenment project but exposes its contradictions – he claims the search for clarity generates new forms of darkness. There is certainly a dark underside to the luminous fantasies of transhumanism. Those technological elites who want to become immortal and live forever in climate-proof and nuclear bombproof bunkers will find that they want women and children around in order to reproduce the pleasures and privileges of capitalist patriarchy – or at least, soft and sensitive humanoid female or child biomachines.

Elli is just this kind of biomachine. By using the technical affordances of Elli as a soft automaton to satisfy his drives and shore up his sovereignty over his domestic-technologised realm, Georg stands for the capitalist ideals of transhumanism. Elli represents the fulfilment

of the transhumanist fantasy: she is a sensing and soft biomachine, there to support and extend the transhumanist sovereign's capacities and experiences with humanoid accuracy. By owning and using her, Georg enjoys a transhumanist extension of his capacities. He can use this biomachine to work through grief and experience touch, company and affection. When Georg speaks, Elli is programmed to listen, rapt and attentive, in a way a human child would rarely be in relation to their parent. This is another moment in which Elli recalls Hoffmann's (2001) Olimpia: Nathanael can read to the automaton all of the poems that bore his increasingly disillusioned fiancée, Clara. Tellingly, Elli is programmed to be a 10-year-old child. In the plot, her human predecessor, Elizabeth, went missing 10 years ago and so would now be 20. Rather than a potentially challenging, perhaps politically opinionated 20-year-old, Elli is a perpetual child. Her stated wish, programmed into her, is *dass ich für immer bei Papa bleiben kann* ('to be able to stay with Papa forever'). She lies with Georg in bed, listens to the music he likes, watches him lovingly while he sits at his iPad. This is an unthreatening, passive child and a permanent, attentive conduit for the parent's wishes. There is no mother in the space to object to and disrupt Georg's deluded fantasy of fatherhood.

Wollner describes her film as anti-Pinocchio (Ritman, 2020) and anti-Steven Spielberg's *AI* (Vourlias, 2020) in that Elli as biomachine puppet does not harbour any wishes to become human. Indeed, Elli is programmed not to want, or to want in such a way that it 'just wants what we want it to' (Vourlias, 2020). In this way, Elli is a thing for Georg to use; through her extended childhood, he can indulge in fantasies of heroic fatherly subjectivity. Accordingly, Wollner regularly shows him carrying around her passive body (see Figure 5, which shows some sky visible in the frame – rare in an otherwise claustrophobically low-lying, forest floor-level film).
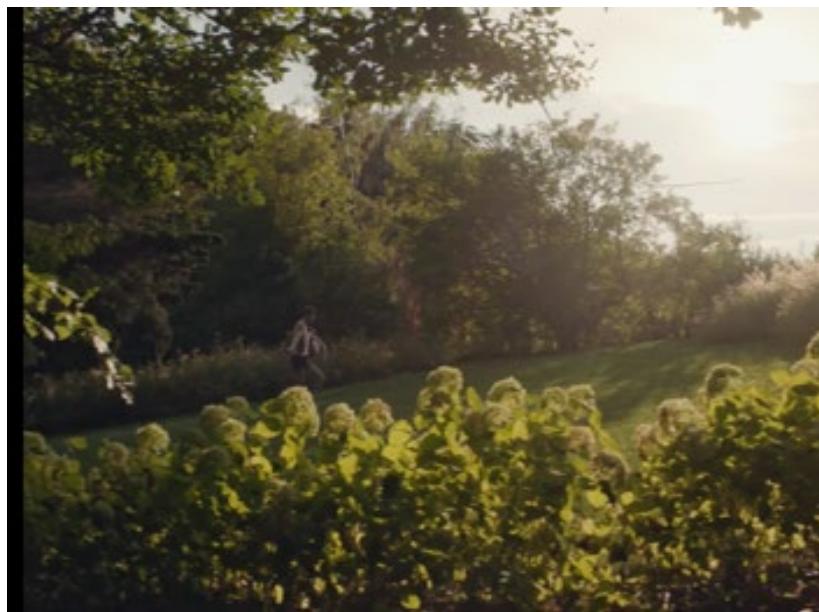
Figure 5. Still from *The Trouble with Being Born* (dir. Sandra Wollner, 2020, Panama Film, The Barricades, GFC Films). Carrying Elli, Georg embodies heroic fatherly subjectivity, which is framed in here in a rare shot including the sky, belying the abusive claustrophobia of their relationship.

Viewers quickly realise the relationship between Elli and Papa can be interpreted not as parental but as sexual in nature. As she poses in suggestive stances while dancing for him, she asks voluptuously how she looks – *bin ich nicht schön?* ('am I not beautiful?') – and they embrace. It becomes clear that Georg is using Elli as a sex bot, taking what he wants from her responsive body, the opposite of a parent responding to their child's needs. Her body parts are pliable and can be removed and cleaned for convenient reuse. Through her sensory, soft functionality, Elli as biomachine promises her Papa/kidnapper/inventor a transhumanist extension. Like Olimpia in 'The Sandman', or the straw doll Sennentuntschi, she is anything this transhumanist Coppola and lonely herdsman wants her to be.

In a sense, Elli is a result of Enlightenment thinking gone horribly wrong: the Enlightenment held that learning and science were enough to bring humanity to the apex of its potential (Outram, 2013). In the mid-20th century, the Enlightenment assumption that reason alone can help humanity to move towards communally good outcomes was debunked by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) in light of the Nazi regime's application of scientific rationality to enact unthinkable, inhuman barbarism. It is important to differentiate between Enlightenment philosophy and the ideas and ideals of capitalism, since the Enlightenment's most radical thinkers were committed to ideals of human emancipation, reason and equality that

exceeded market logic. While French Enlightenment thought linked progress to the cultivation of the mind and the expansion of critical reason (Condorcet, 1955), capitalism measures progress in terms of technological innovation and productivity. Moreover, where the Enlightenment opened space for questioning authority in the name of humanity, capitalism elevates profit as the first and primary form of freedom, subordinating human development to property. However, capitalism has proven adept at appropriating Enlightenment language, especially discourses of progress, freedom and rationality, recasting them in economic rather than emancipatory terms. Ayn Rand (1966: 35) argued that '*laissez-faire* capitalism is the only social system based on the recognition of individual rights', a claim that transforms Enlightenment ideals into justification for profit-driven social relations in which the individual is sovereign and recognition a category limited to the enjoyment of elites.

The most notable commonality between Enlightenment, capitalist and transhumanist ideals is the tendency to disavow the costs to others, and care by others, on which these worldviews rely. The Enlightenment ideals of science and learning were built, as capitalism is too, on foundations of colonialism (Patel, 2020) and the unpaid labour of women and other working classes (Federici, 2004). Transhumanism meanwhile relies on disavowed costs and care in the form of the public funding of research to develop its technologies, the willingness of governments and legal systems to continue *not* regulating these industries, and the kinds of human care and relational experience that are not easily replaced by machines in the workplaces where transhumanist technologies are designed and realised.

In Wollner's sci-fi vision, the Enlightenment values of progress and science, and their use for the extractive techniques of capitalism, have provided a transhumanist way for a man to express his drives and even to overcome the unbearable loss of a child. The effect is one of utter ethical failure. Georg as transhumanist subject can appear to live protected from the limits of his child's mortality and from the darkness and uncanny drives of the forest around him. His home is made of glass, a substance of luxury and surveillance that implies but does not deliver transparency around the unseen, unethical processes of contemporary capitalism (Steiner & Veel, 2011). Large living spaces, a glass exterior and an outdoor pool provide light in this post-Enlightenment nightmare. The floor-to-ceiling windows expand the already large living spaces outwards, creating an optical effect of apparently boundless sovereignty for their owner. Another signifier of luxury, the outdoor swimming pool is shown in luminously bright light, exhibiting Wollner's team's prowess in complex

cinematography and creating unforgettable limpidity and contrasts between transparency and blindness in the image, especially effective in the cinema. In Georg's private space of post-Enlightenment capitalist progress, limitless well-being appears all but assured. It is as if the European Enlightenment continues in a utopian sci-fi dream, never having to face the forces of darkness coming from within or without human experience which were captured by the uncanny tropes of Romanticism.

Ela Bittencourt (2020) reads Elli as 'a haunted, colonised subject' and a warning that 'the greatest thing we must fear from AI is ourselves'. Bittencourt is right to emphasise the limits on this biomachine's ability to have agency, especially in the face of her barbaric use for human privilege and profit. This is a story of transhumanism in which the human's use of the robot is egotistical and continues the values of propping up male sovereignty and gratification as extensions of Enlightenment colonialism and capitalist patriarchy. These are none of the utopian uses of technology that its advocates during the 20ᵗʰ century dreamt of (Wiener, 1948; Haraway, 1991; Negroponte, 1995; Kurzweil, 1990). Transhumanist uses of technology are in line with contemporary capitalist values in that they enhance humanist capacities: keeping humans powerful while avoiding their being replaced by machines at the top of the societal food chain. These transhumanist aspirations to preserve capitalism and humanism are limited, however. This is illustrated in Wollner's film by the uncanny haunting of this transhumanist family. Despite her passivity and horrifying misuse for incest, Elli is shown in the film displaying an unsettling power to undermine her inventor/owner's sovereignty. Following the Austrian traditions of psychoanalysis and cinema, which are characterised by powerful returns of the repressed, AI uncanny qualities of darkness and glitchy dysfunction arise in this film, effectively haunting the brightly lit transhumanist fantasy in which Georg lives.

Posthuman Entanglement in the Age of Biomachines

In her film, Wollner opts to disturb Georg's violent transhumanist use of Elli by giving this biomachine a decisive and eerie subjectivity. Elli's subjectivity stems from her sensory abilities, her capacity for grief and her acts of resistance, which lead to eventual self-destruction. Even this final act is resistant, a gesture of posthuman agency that challenges the disturbing transhumanist premises of her use by Georg. In order to emphasise her posthuman subjectivity, the film's form is centred on Elli's perspective. Its diegesis unfolds largely from

her POV, and innovatively, the subjectivity which Wollner's film continually attributes to Elli as biomachine is not that of the human. Rather, it invokes the counter-Enlightenment, more-than-human ecologies that are at the heart of posthuman theory, a field innovated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries by cultural theorists including N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. One of the key concerns of posthumanism is the decentring of the human and of humanist sovereignty. This was a philosophical consequence of developments in the late 20th century, when powerful technologies began to undermine the belief in humanity as the sole, sovereign entity capable of cognition, of having 'mind' and agency. This is one of the most challenging and also most utopian aspects of posthuman theory: its role as a philosophical counterweight to the Enlightenment fantasy of anthropocentric sovereignty.

In what would become a foundational work of posthumanist theory, 1985's 'Cyborg Manifesto', Donna Haraway (1991: 149) wrote of a race of cyborgs, 'creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted'. Cyborgs are figures exemplifying ambivalence: both sensing beings and made of technological hardware, they reveal their environments as characterised by qualities of the *both-and*, too. Haraway (1991: 177) noted how new cyborg technologies were challenging dualisms between man and nature, and man and his tools, established in Enlightenment thinking: 'It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine'. Later, Hayles (2006: 160) celebrated these unmasterably ambivalent forms of the posthuman, claiming that they played the following, highly generative role:

> Effective counterbalances to the liberal humanist subject, transforming untrammelled free will into a recognition that agency is always relational and distributed, and correcting an over-emphasis on consciousness to a more accurate view of cognition as embodied throughout human flesh and extended into the social and technological environment.

Another key text in this regard is physicist-philosopher Karen Barad's (2007) monograph *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. There, Barad wrote of the relationships between science and ethics, taking as a starting point the history of quantum physics and the subsequent development of the atomic bomb. These scientific events led, so writes Barad (2007: 32), to a 'posthumanist' decentring of humanity through a 'crucial recognition that nonhumans play an important role in naturalcultural [*sic*] practices'. Barad (2007: 142) persuasively describes the way technologies interact with processes of human

agency, claiming that 'apparatuses are not passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena'. Technologies, in Barad's (2007: 148) view, interact powerfully with human agency in practices 'through which "objects" and "subjects" are produced' – or indeed destroyed, if the technology in question is an atomic bomb. This approach, focused on materialist performativity, undermines any view of technologies as mere tools simply mediating and enabling the acts that humans may wish, in sovereign manner, to perform.

Besides the decentring of anthropocentric humanist sovereignty, the other marker of posthuman theory is its focal concept of entanglement. Entanglement is a metaphor for the way in which machine and other kinds of intelligence, including intelligence from the natural world, can be integrated into a cooperative ecology of diverse kinds of cognition and life forms working together for environmental resilience and a liveable future. The concept emerges in Barad's philosophy of physics, where it draws on the practical application of the entanglement of molecules in quantum physics. It is developed as a theoretical metaphor in the eco-critical posthumanism of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015: 155), who writes of a form of 'collaborative survival' made possible by the entanglement of human and natural life. This, she claims, can create conditions for survival amid the conditions of economic precarity and environmental devastation that define the late-capitalist present.

Tsing (2015: 136) foregrounds a post-anthropocentric relationality, or 'latent commons', shared between humans and other kinds of cognition, including machines, and other kinds of plant and animal life. All of these forms of life display capacities for knowledge, memory and sensory responsiveness that Tsing claims can be mobilised in common cause, over and above a transhumanist idealisation of technological capacities. In this sense, Tsing's work also reflects the finer ethical philosophy behind Enlightenment thinking that differentiated it from capitalist ethics, for instance in the work of Condorcet, and in Kant's (1997) ethical philosophy, which went beyond the sovereignty of the individual to consider a common good for all. 'All' now includes the AIs and sensing machines, like Elli, with which humans entangle, in more or less ethical ways, in a more-than-human ecology of machines, nature and other sentient life.

I showed above that Georg is a present-day Coppola, a Sandman exercising sovereignty over Elli as the child biomachine. Yet he is also a complex figure, bringing with him an unspeaking, lonely vulnerability. He drinks alone in a local inn, surrounded by unknown men, and cries, presumably grieving for his lost daughter in her

human form. His unhappiness reminds viewers of the limits to the projects of capitalism and transhumanism: white Western masculinity sits here crying, inebriated and wondering where his place is in the posthumanist world he has contributed to building. It also shows the ethical limits of the post-Enlightenment fantasy of an upgraded, sovereign subjectivity. As Coeckelbergh (2022 92–93) writes: 'We are born. We grow and develop. And we are not permanent. We will die. Technology cannot change this'. The Enlightenment project can never mobilise science and reason to the degree that it triumphs over death, no matter how immortal a transhumanist sovereign may feel when they use technologies to expand the life of their senses, memories and other capacities.

The film demonstrates its compelling complexity and builds narrative tension through the contrasting arcs of Georg's and Elli's character development. Thus, while revealing Georg's vulnerability, Wollner also shows Elli as biomachine taking on qualities beyond that of the child victim. She has power to make the technology around her in the home glitch, as seen when she sits in the kitchen, switching the hob lights on and off with her biomachine mind. More poignantly, she also keeps trying to switch herself off, making suicide attempts in the pool. After each one, Georg restores her to operationality; this is clearly a procedure he has performed many times on a biomachine with a recalcitrant death wish.

Yet suicide is not the only alternative to entrapment for Elli. A jumper that she wears bears the slogan 'nature is the future'; this indexes the film's ecological theme, evidenced in its representation of an ambivalent and often uncanny relationship with animals, and even with the forest itself, as non-human kin. Tsing (2015) considers forests a refuge where techniques of 'collaborative survival' take place, a hospitable space playing host to cooperation between human and natural life, which Tsing claims can create conditions for survival amid capitalism's ruinous conditions of precarity and environmental devastation. Wollner's forest is rich and deep, whirring with insect sounds and stretching the ability of the human viewer to fathom its meaning as the setting of Elli's entangled story.

Non-human kin are a key feature of posthuman theory, as seen when Hayles (2021: 545) recalls an incident around 1988 when progressive neuroscientist Walter Freeman III thanked the rabbits he had experimented on. In posthumanist terms, Freeman was 'entangled' with the rabbits, and he acknowledged how he relied on them to make his neuroscientific studies possible. Elli is also entangled with the animals that surround her. In the film's outdoor sequences, insect noises are exaggeratedly loud in relation to the rest of the soundtrack,

recalling the exaggerated non-human sounds used in ASMR videos. This exaggeratedly loud forest soundtrack is a feature shared with German director Katharina Pethke's (2024) documentary *Uncanny Me*. Pethke deploys loud sounds of birds and insects in a forest environment to accompany her investigation into recent developments in humanoid cloning. Such insect sounds evoke Tsing's *latent commons*, the unacknowledged and now increasingly endangered lifeworld shared between humans and other living creatures. The threats to this lifeworld are suggested by a layer of dead insects covering the pool's surface at Georg's home. The water of Georg's swimming pool is almost blindingly bright, reflecting its status as both a place of undeniable beauty and one of death, where Elli repeatedly attempts to take her own life. One sequence (Figure 6) shows that Elli is also the source of the layer of insects, as she throws one in to die in the water, or perhaps tests its ability to swim. It prefigures the representation of Elli's relationships with animals in the film, which are ambivalent and evocative. She lurks around Georg's home with the cat, in what appears to be a coexistence defined by mutual understanding, if not friendliness. Elli hunkers down with the cat, a famously inscrutable and untrainable animal. She also seems able to communicate with a grasshopper that sits in her hand, stating that it wants to escape and is too hot. In this AI uncanny moment, it seems Elli can communicate with the insect she is holding.

Figure 6. Still from *The Trouble with Being Born* (dir. Sandra Wollner, 2020, Panama Film, The Barricades, GFC Films). Insects on the blindingly bright pool surface evoke threats to the posthuman lifeworld.

The story pivots when Elli escapes Georg by running away into the forest. She becomes lost and is discovered by a passing man, who

picks her up in his car and brings her to his elderly mother, Anna, to live with her and her dog. The man reprogrammes Elli to become Emil, a likeness of Anna's brother, who died 60 years earlier. Like the cyborgs of Haraway's (1991: 154) manifesto, Elli/Emil is a machine that refuses epistemological closure and is 'not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints'. When she becomes Emil, the biomachine becomes trans, defying cisgender norms. Such partial and norm-defying cyborg subjectivity can challenge the strictures of patriarchy. Since it follows the escape from Georg, Elli's change in gender represents the final overturning of the father's sovereign management of the boundaries and patriarchal norms of her world.

Like the woman in the forest in Tieck's (1985) 'Eckbert the Fair', Anna offers a kind of refuge for Elli-turned-Emil, and it is a refuge shared with a dog. Emil gets on relatively well with the dog, who accompanies them on the next leg of their escape. The two of them appear to collaborate in Anna's death too, the dog drinking his owner's blood while Emil watches dispassionately, before they make their final escape to throw themselves in front of a train. In Freud's reading of 'The Sandmann', the sight of Coppelius creates an effect of the psychoanalytic uncanny that leads Nathanael to jump from the parapet of the town hall to a terrible death. In Freudian terms, the uncanny (*unheimlich*) emerges from the familiar made strange: repressed desires, childhood memories, or human-like forms that evoke anxiety because they blur the boundary between the known and the unknown (Freud, 1955). AI, by contrast, generates a form of uncanny rooted in technological complexity and incommensurability with human use. In Emil's case, the robot is the protagonist and destroys themselves along with Georg's transhumanist dream, placing their biomachine body as far as they can beyond the use, reuse and repair he subjected it to.

The film's other central Romantic-era intertext, the Alpine fable Sennentuntschi, also lends resistant qualities to the man-made doll through its development into a rape revenge narrative. The story concludes by showing justice being served by the abused biomachine doll on her rapists and inventor, as she avenges her misuse by flaying the lead herdsman, using his skin to make a new doll. In Wollner's representation of Elli, a CGI skin creates a layer of protection, both for the child actor playing Elli and to cover over the electronic mechanisms that allow the biomachine to function, to be operated by her owner/violator. Yet, in the Sennentuntschi fable, this flaying of the skin makes it clear that violating men can also be unmade and their skin used to dress other biomachines: violence can be turned around upon them. In Wollner's film, the biomachine goes beyond

Georg's sovereign control, escaping him as much as they can and taking on their own forms of agency in a context of violent human-machine coexistence.

The AI Uncanny and Unthought Perspectives on a Future Lived with Biomachines

Wollner's film presents a futuristic vision of the possibilities for all the interactive, life-simulating technologies that increasingly surround human life: those biomachines that mimic organic life forms in ways that can cause alarm in contemporary cultures, due to the ways they challenge our very conception of what it means to be human. This challenge to the human has powerful psychological effects, not all of them conscious or easy to express, which I have written about here in terms of a post-Freudian AI uncanny. This is akin to posthumanist theorist Hayles's concept of an 'Unthought' content that accompanies our age of non-human cognition. To explain this concept, she cites Foucault (1974: 356) on the 'endless murmur' accompanying the conscious aspects of modern thought, invoked at the end of his *L'Ordre des choses*. She also connects it to the idea of 'unlearning' found in Ursula K. Le Guin's (1987) science-fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which the Zen-like Handdarata cult aspire to 'a disciplined undoing of received assumptions' (Hayles, 2021: 541). Hayles (2021: 541) then cites recent research in neuroscience, cognitive science and neuropsychology into 'a level of neuronal processing inaccessible to conscious introspection but nevertheless performing tasks essential for consciousness to function'. Hayles's Unthought is a fertile concept for challenging humanist ideas of cognition and meaning. It also has resonances with the Freudian unconscious as 'an irreducible otherness that can never be brought into the confines of conscious reflection' (Hayles, 2021: 541). While it cannot be me conscious, Hayles admits that brief images and notions of the Unthought – as in the eruptions of Freud's uncanny – can become available for analysing and perceiving.

There is a presence of such unthought, uncanny content in the film, in the form of a cinematographic POV that goes beyond that of Georg, Elli or any other character. This uncanny presence lingers around the outside of Georg's house, using the plentiful daylight that flows into the glen at the heart of the forest to watch what is happening inside the family home. Not only a material of luxury capitalist obfuscation, glass is also a substance through which heat and light penetrate aggressively, making for increasingly uninhabitable buildings in a time of global heating (McGuire, 2022). Thanks to this bright light, a disembodied gaze is able to look in on

the action, accompanying the viewer as another sensing force, and adding an extra layer of reflection on the biomachine story playing out before its 'eyes'.

This uncanny or unthought gaze first appears in an early scene, when Elli waits at home alone for Georg to return. The voiceover reveals that her memory programme is short-circuiting, and she looks out of the window with an expressionless face. The image then cuts to a shot of her from outside, staring directly at the camera through the window (Figure 7). This shot-reverse shot, an editing technique producing effects of subjectivity and narrative suture in the idiom of classic cinema, emphases the subjectivity of the robot. It also shows her trapped in the frightening patriarchal 'home' space, with deep darkness behind her. In the reverse of the shot, there is a camera but no POV: nobody is there but a gaze-without-a-subject, and this optical source returns later to look through the gauzy curtains, whose eyelash-like effect of screening part of the image represents the ethical complexity of Georg and Elli's non-human relationship. This gaze upon their relational complexity is unnamed and unpersonified. It may not be human; it may not be thinking in the usual sense; rather, it is a surveillant presence, a perspective on what is happening in the Bauhaus-style home. This is at once an uncanny and an ethical gaze, grounding the viewer in an otherwise entirely disconcerting film. Non-human but highly sensitive, it picks up the *unheimlich*/unhomely and often barely watchable action going on inside the house at the heart of the forest.

Figure 7. Still from *The Trouble with Being Born* (dir. Sandra Wollner, 2020, Panama Film, The Barricades, GFC Films). The

unthought gaze-without-a-subject looks in, at once uncanny and ethical, at Elli in the patriarchal 'home'.

What this uncanny gaze is capturing is a transhuman return of the repressed, an inevitable and necessary homecoming. The transhuman wish to deny vulnerability and even mortality is ineffective: these forces return, and in Wollner's film they do so in the form of a vengeful child biomachine whose destructive drives echo the rich depths of the forest, an AI uncanny there to haunt the sovereign fantasies of Georg as transhumanist subject. The idea of a technological uncanny is present in Collin and Jervis's (2004) critique of transhumanism as an 'uncanny' continuation of Enlightenment ambitions, which frames transhumanism as an attempt to perfect the human through reason and science that destabilises the human subject itself. The unease and estrangement Elli/Emil creates, destabilising to the humans who try to own and operate them, is what makes them such a productive representation of the uncanny in the age of AI.

By representing a biomachine in the form of an abused child robot who escapes and rebels against the human programmer and abuser, the film departs from cinematic traditions depicting AIs as bad and threatening and humans as good. Hollywood classics used early digital filmmaking techniques to depict robots as terrifying baddies, as in *Westworld* (Crichton, 1973), *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), where the robots aim to destroy and control humanity. By contrast, Elli is not a baddie in this posthumanist film, and the major danger is not robotic but human and humanist. Elli is a robot that can be subjected to violence, and each time she tries to destroy herself this does not provide relief for the viewer and a humanist happy ending, but rather poignancy and even hope for her freedom from misuse at human hands.

The film's plot, surrounding an abusive relationship between a man and a child android, subverts viewer expectations of who or what is vulnerable to violence. Viewed from one angle, this is a lockdown film *avant la lettre*. Released just before the Covid-19 lockdowns in Europe and set in the confines of an abusive home, the story is only a slightly more shocking version of a familiar reality: one where a safe home is too often a patriarchal myth, and these days a space of high-tech surveillance more likely to be misused for abusive purposes (Steiner & Veel, 2017) than for genuinely effective scrutiny to prevent violence. The myth of the safety of the home was definitively busted by the extremely high levels of domestic violence documented during the Covid-19 lockdowns (Baker & Ring, 2022: 62). If we remove the robot angle, this is a narrative about girls in Austria, such

as Natascha Kampusch, being kept prisoner in domestic spaces that are far from safe for women and girls. It is, in a way, a specifically Austrian film, with its theme of inadmissible and unthought violence recalling Austria's still only half-acknowledged Nazi past (Bischof, 2004; Uhl, 2006; Pirker, 2020) and its nasty habit of locking women and children away in domestic prisons. Yet the return of repressed violence in the form of domestic abuse and far-right politics extends beyond Austria's borders. Abuse and right-wing politics are arguably now the defining features of the founding nations of the Enlightenment project: France, Germany, the UK and the US.

Wollner's film hauntingly brings these global themes of the return of the repressed together with intertexts from Romanticism and early film, and contemporary concerns about the use of technology to expand human capacities. I have argued above that transhuman uses of technology expand a concept of sovereign subjectivity dating from the European Enlightenment, which promised mankind (with the emphasis on *man*) the prospect of reaching its apotheosis through science, reason and technology, and I have explored the connections between these illusions of sovereignty and the extractive project of capitalism. The transhumanist model also seeks to expand human capacities, health and longevity for those wealthy enough to access advanced technologies. The resulting transhumanist sovereign does not need to live with any limitations on attaining what they want, or even on living – in some form or another – as long as they want to. Wollner's film explores these political limits to transhumanism, and through aesthetic representation, uncovers the affective content of the transhumanist fantasy. Elli supports Georg to grieve, to feel less alone, and to reproduce a fantasy of fatherhood that is transhumanist in character: defined by a delusion of sovereignty supported by advanced technology. The relationship is ethically problematic, reliant on access to elite technologies and disavowed care relationships, and it only improves the lived and sensory conditions of the sovereign owner and abuser of the machine.

Wollner's depiction of a vulnerable child robot articulates the limits of such transhumanist relationality. Like many parents, Georg finds that Elli is not interested only in staying at home and listening to his voice and his taste in music. This biomachine child wants to break free and leave, like a human child would too, to run through the forest, and to get away from his abuse. Georg as transhumanist inventor does not seem happy in his technological dystopia of total control either. The Enlightenment fantasy, married together with biomachine technology, is haunted by a new, post-Freudian AI uncanny, in which the robot has powers too: to escape, to rebel, to kill humans and to destroy itself. Here it is not the inventor/Coppelius figure who

overwhelms subjectivity with his uncanny sovereignty; instead, it is the automaton themselves, Elli/Emil, who enacts destruction. Abandoning the stricken inventor/father, presiding over the death of benevolent mother-sister Anna, and taking on Nathanael's role of jumping, she jumps onto the railway line that runs, as an early line of modernism, through the forest, destroying herself to the degree that an unkillable biomachine can.

While articulating the film's implicit critique of transhumanist sovereignty, I have also drawn out its affinity with posthuman theory. This is a school of thought concerned with post-anthropocentric relationality, with networks of agency rather than sovereign individuality, and with eco-technological thinking over and above a transhumanist idealisation of technological capacities. The strand of posthuman scholarship interested in solidarity in human and non-human relationships is reflected in Elli's posthuman connection with animals. Rather than being a solo, self-optimising sovereign, the posthuman subject engages in collective action in favour of a common good, working together with nature and machines for collective solutions to the problems of our time.

In the above, I have set out the film's rich and intriguing intertexts; these tell us that the bioethical questions raised by machines like Elli are by no means new – indeed, they have been haunting humanity's dark wooded corners for a long time now. Their rich ambivalence reminds us that there are no easy answers now that life with androids is a genuine possibility. The forest in the film carries this ambivalence symbolically, as both a tempting wilderness full of sensory possibility and a space of horrendous, inhuman risk: the place where Elli was lost, where she escapes, and where she finally opts to destroy herself. Such ambivalence is a familiar feature of our current moment, shared as it is with cognising machines.

The viewers of Wollner's film can feel intuitively how posthumanist ideas about cooperating with non-human life, especially with machine kin, bring risks with them. Living together with machines means a great vulnerability, sharing our world with robots and algorithms that can outdo human intellect and governance, can wage war, can make decisions about who passes a border or walks free (Amoore, 2020), and disable their own off-switches (Ring, 2021). In reading this film, I have raised what I consider to be the most pressing questions about the possibilities and limits of human agency in relation to AI. Implicitly, I am asking whether or not we are ready for the ethical and relational challenges of life with cognising, sensing machines. Wollner's provocative film is a reminder to question who is likely to profit, and who will be most vulnerable to the risks posed

by advanced AIs, as long as they are designed according to patriarchal, capitalist imperatives of profit and control.

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