



The Posthuman Skeuomorph in Ted Kosmatka's *Prophet of Bones*

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ABSTRACT

Posthuman narratives verge on the predominance of information over biological substrates. The biologically independent body has multiple identities to create different perspectives. Reality is considered ambiguous and human existence is possible only by being more than human. This is where cyberpunk fiction and the cyborg era begin. But Ted Kosmatka's *Prophet of Bones* offers a cross-dimensional vantage of the primeval emerging into the future as evolved beings. The human biological entity is manipulated through genetic engineering combined with anthropology and archaeology to produce a prehistoric yet futuristic race of mutants who stand as a doorway to immortality. They are skeuomorphs or thresholds to the future. However the human consciousness cannot be mutated as the mind remains a separate entity and the mutant body becomes a shell filled with violence and anarchy. The narrative questions the perspectives of researchers who vow to change the future or create a totally new one where man is not the dominant species. This paper researches the reasons behind the creation of posthuman skeuomorphs in Ted Kosmatka's 'Prophet of Bones'.

Keywords: *posthuman, skeuomorph, Ted Kosmatka, sci-fi, Prophet of Bones*

Informational patterns govern the existence of the posthuman in an era of bitcoin, metaverse and alternate realities. The existence of reality itself is questioned and its authenticity subjected to experiments and transformation. The posthuman considers information as vital and more important than biological substrates or the human body. Consciousness is merely a secondary effect, one that can be improvised by artificial intelligence. The posthuman biological body becomes a prosthesis that can be manipulated, augmented or replaced and even the unaltered homo sapiens is posthuman if subject to technological substitution or enhancement. The body is "data made flesh" [1] that has no gender or consciousness. There is no such thing as the posthuman 'I' but rather 'we', a collection of technological components and biological human substrates. The future rests on the decisions of the "other-will" [2] or the decisions of artificial intelligence, programmed conscience and enhanced hybrids. This is the reality of all posthuman beings.

Posthuman narratives suddenly flooded the realm of literature in the twentieth century owing to the birth of the internet and computer technology. Mostly considered speculation and fantasy then, these narratives have become reality today. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is a seminal work, considered to be the first cyberpunk fiction to deal with the dark side of artificial intelligence and the possibilities of merging AI with human consciousness. The noocytes in Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1983) have already become reality in nanotechnology. The metaverse and programmable hi-tech viruses in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) have evolved into virtual reality and global pandemics. Ted Kosmatka's *Prophet of Bones* (2013) is a hybrid anthropomorphic narrative based on an entirely new species of human that were destroyed by evolution but reengineered with technology to take over the world. Skeuomorph is a design feature that is no longer functional but a copy of something that existed in the past. The extinct species are recreated in the image of modern man as a skeuomorph. This paper researches the features of posthuman skeuomorphs and the socio-political implications of their existence based on the narrative *Prophet of Bones*.

Prophet of Bones is a metanarrative with underlying structures in paleo metagenomics, anthropology and archeology. The protagonist Paul Carlsson is a researcher in genetics and archeology working for Westing, a sister foundation of Axiom, the corporate and research headquarters of the notorious Martial Johannsen. Carlsson has had a rather traumatic childhood with a cataclysmic European father and an Asian mother. He had been interested in evolution and the survival of the fittest. He believed in the existence of "a finite number of unique creations [. . .] a finite number of species, which has over time, decreased dramatically through extinction." [3]. Evolution selects and breeds only the finest over time but cataclysm chooses certain species for extinction. Carlsson extracts DNA from five-thousand-year-old bones which Westing archeologists found in various digs all over the world. They are very careful to distribute labelling and testing in such a way that no one finds out the species or gets hold of any information on the dig site. This is when Carlsson gets a chance to see something different in Indonesia.

Apparently the new archeological site in Flores, Indonesia is under the control of Professor Gavin McMaster, a friend of Carlsson's. But Carlsson has no idea that the entire project is financed and operated by Johannsen for his own private research at Axiom. Carlsson is enthralled by the dimensions of the bones lying around in a cave that was once used as a school by a Dutch priest who had also attempted to research the bones. "Bone is a text" [3] that has the entire history of a species ready to be discovered. The Indonesians close the dig site because of theological conspiracies. Discovering a totally new species of human that is not mentioned by any major religious text is a conspiracy that the Indonesian government does not want to be responsible for. The new dwarf species of human that Carlsson finds remains hidden and the DNA that he extracted is destroyed. Researchers are shot to death and Carlsson loses an eye. But he is a Prophet who furiously believes in the truth. He hides away the DNA lozenges in his empty eye socket.

Kosmatka deconstructs racism and oppression hidden beneath the layers of science. Margaret, a colleague of Carlsson's, has aborigine blood in her. Carlsson himself has a mixture of Far West and East Asian nucleotides. His girlfriend Lillivati Gajjar is an Indian. The employees of Westing are mostly Asians. Carlsson's professors stereotyped skull types

for Asians and Africans. Even when the world is ready to recreate clones of different species of humans and breed them for hybrids, it still labels them. Gavin is horrified to see Axiom researchers experimenting on hybrids like the liger and the tigon. Martial Johanssen is a petty, paranoid yet fearless icon who saved many lives and killed people at the same time. He is obsessed with hybridity and enhancing future generations. While he shows off his proud creations, Paul secretly tests the DNA samples from Flores at Westing. The mysterious bones lead to more deaths and abductions - “the murder, the corporation, the conspiracy” [3].

Paul Carlsson and Lillivati are on the run but captured by Johanssen and trapped in his futuristic skeuomorphing of humans. Johanssen’s ideology is to create a better race of humans - stronger, more powerful and resilient. He has already cloned the *homo erectus*, *homo heidelbergensis*, *Australopithecus* and *Ramapithecus*. In fact, Carlsson had helped him all along at Westing without the slightest knowledge of contributing to this illegal research. Every bone sample that he had labelled and tested went into Axiom for cloning. Flores is supposed to be the crown jewel of all. Johanssen’s fearless assassin is actually a prehistoric clone named Trieste. The shock comes later as Carlsson’s father was part of the project and even provided his sperm for artificial insemination. Trieste, the beast with “inhuman rage controlled by the barest of margins” [3] is actually Carlsson’s half-brother. Johanssen justifies his research by going back to the Bible. He asks, “Who did Cain marry?” [3] and believes it was one of these species never recognized by any religion.

According to N. Katherine Hayles, author of *How We Became Posthuman*, skeuomorphism and other conceptual information frameworks “evolve similarly to material culture, in part because concept and artifact engage each other in continuous feedback loops” [2]. There are certain information patterns in cyberliterature where a series of data, including biological substrates and consciousness, are serialised, labelled and cloned. Skeuomorphs have a low rate of usability in a data-mad world but remain essential to remind us of the past. Hayles compares the skeuomorph to the Roman god Janus looking back into the past and looking ahead to the future at the same time. These skeuomorphs are threshold devices that allow changes in our world. They make change easier to accept as they look into different dimensions of past and future. Skeuomorphs are often created with the physical world in mind but they soon take on social, political and psychological meanings as they evolve in the real world. When Johanssen cloned species of ancient beings, he did it to introduce the world to these extinct creatures. But they become a threat to extant religious beliefs and he turns them into assassins.

Skeuomorphs are created simply because people are accustomed to certain sentimental and psychological symbols and cannot upgrade directly to something new:

Why does the skeuomorph exist in the first place and more importantly, why does the skeuomorph persist as an integral part of design communication? The short answer is that the skeuomorph touches on a massive number of values that are intrinsic to the consumer culture of modern society. [4]

Martial Johanssen's creations would destroy the religious beliefs of centuries if revealed to the public. Genetic experimentation is illegal and researchers who do too much of research simply vanish. The mysterious bones are found in Indonesia and the government arranges for the destruction of all evidence because the bones are "other", as Margaret puts it ominously [3], and not that of any creature mentioned in any Scripture. Trieste, the first posthuman skeuomorph is built and designed just for the purpose of exhibiting Johanssen's prowess to play god. Cultural politics begin when Paul Carlsson realizes the disgusting truth that Trieste is his half-brother. A primeval yet daunting force unhinges the doors of civilization and reaches back into the past to bring his nightmares alive in the name of progress.

The skeuomorph from the past makes the modern human the subaltern. Perfected by evolution over the centuries, *homo sapiens* cannot stand before the clones species of Johanssen in physical strength and rigour. Johanssen's obsession with hybridity proves his hatred for human socio-cultural discourses. This is his way of becoming immortal - the ultimate posthuman ambition. Merging with technology or enhancing the body is one way of achieving immortality but he is satisfied with bringing back copies of humans who are better. The skeuomorph is a design feature that allows for a gradual transition to something innovative. Johanssen has plans of creating a better species of human and mixing them with the modern *homo sapiens* to bring forth hybrids who are stronger, faster, adaptable and resilient to disease. The cages at Axiom hold specimens of first trials and Johanssen's terminal illness moves him to further his dangerous yet necessary research. Capitalism views all bodies as machines fit for labour or aesthetics and Johanssen views his creations as prized objects. As Rosi Braidotti asserts:

Firstly, I have argued that contemporary capitalism is 'bio-political' in that it aims at controlling all that lives. . . because it exploits the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells. Secondly, this means that human and anthropomorphic others are relocated in a continuum with non-anthropomorphic, animal or 'earth' others [5].

The eventual hypothesis of bio-politics is that the extinction of humans is inevitable and hence all resources can be exploited to prevent this. Carlsson and his colleagues work with the past to prevent cataclysms from destroying the species in future. They code evolution to favour man over the others. Though Carlsson's father is a religious fanatic, he still goes against his own principles in designing Trieste. Modern technology is a tool to create reality itself. The control of individual devices, beings and ultimately consciousness leads to the inevitable end of these controlling the creators. Johanssen understands that he will not be able to keep Trieste and the others under control for long. He wants everyone he can get on the team, including major corporations and governments. He also argues for bodily autonomy and freedom to change the original prosthesis or the human body as one likes.

The uncertain future is certain about one thing - change revolutionized by technology. The posthuman is just a threshold skeuomorph to transition the old *homo sapiens* to hybrids and cyborgs. Kosmatka's narrative is just a drop in an ocean of genetic research looking back into the past to better the future. The fiction ends in adverse consequences for Carlsson and Johanssen but the plot clearly moves toward uncharted territory in multidisciplinary genetic research. Survival of the fittest still holds true but only for hybrids or transhuman cyborgs.

Works Cited

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