

Ecological Consciousness in Contemporary American Science Fiction: Posthuman Subjectivity and the Paradox of the Hyperreal

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Abstract

This article examines representations of human and nonhuman subjectivity in Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt* (1950) and Philip K. Dick's *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) through the lens of environmental criticism. Specifically, it traces how the texts' representations of the hyperreal—a condition where simulated reality replaces the real one—lead to an expansion of human subjectivity to include the nonhuman other, whether organic or mechanical. The article argues that these stories highlight the dangers of the human self as separate from the nonhuman world. Such detached subjectivity results in a misconception of human control over nature and technology. My analysis of the texts suggests that the overwhelming impacts of the hyperreal, closely tied to images of nature, challenge and eventually debunk the notion of human superiority. Ultimately, these literary texts promote the construction of posthuman subjectivity, prompting the characters to realize that their human autonomy cannot exist in isolation. This article also suggests that the underlying trope of posthuman representations reflects an ecological consciousness in contemporary American science fiction.

Keywords: ecocriticism, posthumanism, subjectivity, science fiction, contemporary American literature

Background and Significance of the Study

The question of, and idea behind, “subjectivity” have intrigued scholars of humanities and literary critics alike; indeed, it is one of the most prevalent contemporary discourses in both fields. Hall (2004) postulates that “subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises... and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (pp. 3-4). To phrase it alternately, Hall emphasizes the external “influence” upon one’s identity as being beyond one’s ability to control or resist—thereby questioning the idea of human autonomy. The narrative genre that best captures such a complication in subjectivity is science fiction (SF), given its mediation between the real and the fantastic through humans’ use of highly advanced technology. SF has seeped into the contemporary world through a variety of cultural representations, including literary narratives. The term SF can be broadly defined as “a genre or division of literature” that “distinguishes its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world in which we actually live” (Roberts, 2006, p. 1). In other words, the genre relies heavily upon the interplay between the coexistent state of the real and the fantastic, high is foundational for this article’s examination of human’s diverse subjectivity.

Emerging themes and topics concerning SF have revolved around the idea of technology, dystopia, religion, reality, gender, and science studies, to name but a few examples¹. The area this research focuses on lies in posthumanism in relation to SF. Davis (2023), among others, probes into the posthuman aspect in Dick’s selected novels and short stories to “explore what it means to be human in a technologically dominated world” (p. 6). The author emphasizes a machine-like state

¹Adam Roberts *Science Fiction* (2006) introduces a variety of approaches to the genre, namely gender, race, and technology. In a collection of articles entitled *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science* (2018), the collection presents eclectic ideas in the field, ranging from science studies (Stengers, 2018), digital humanities (Saussy & Lenior, 2018), cultural studies (Bono, 2018), to mention a few examples.

of human nature, arguing that, “humanity lives in a machine-like state, unable to detach from the culturally induced directives of society” (p. 6). This representation of the posthuman imagery thus serves as my departure point as the subject is perfectly aligned with the notion of subjectivity I mentioned at the beginning of the article.

Further exploring the posthuman agenda and SF, I analyze ways in which the posthuman subjectivity in SF is intertwined with ecocriticism—a green or environmentally-oriented approach to literary studies and culture (Glotfelty, 1996). One research that interconnects the two angles is Huffman’s (2002), which postulates that SF as a genre can best capture the present’s deteriorating environment through SF’s use of the fantastic world (p. 65). He also coins “ecoscience fiction” that interweaves SF and ecocriticism together: “[ecoscience fictions] are explicitly activist in their orientation and intent and are thus pedagogic warnings about the coming realities of the planet’s ecological demise and ways in which humans will have to deal with it” (p. 65). In essence, Huffman has established a firm link between SF and ecocriticism since his analysis emphasizes the environmental representation in SF and how it sheds light on human attitude and hence treatment of the nonhuman world as a whole. Key literary texts that resonate with such a proposal are Ray Bradbury’s *The Veldt* (1950), Philip K. Dick’s *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011). Indeed, the narratives illustrate a detached human subjectivity from the nonhuman being as well as the underlying *anthropocentrism* under one’s excessive reliance upon technology.

Literature Review

Criticisms of Ray Bradbury’s *The Veldt* (1950), Philip K. Dick’s *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011) from posthuman ecocritical perspective are still regarded as an uncharted area, compared to other themes. Apart from Davis’ thesis (2023), Barlow (1988) argues for three categories in Dick’s works: metaphysics, religion, and politics. This research offers common themes in Dick’s

fictions—what he calls the model of “the mask” (p. 2), focusing on the relationship between the deceived and deceiver and how it relates to an alternate reality. Hamming (2003), on the other hand, examines contemporary American literature, including *The Veldt*, in terms of masculinity, technology, and nature. He argues that “technology cuts humanity off from nature, revealing the extent to which we are already, and always have been, technological subjects” (p. 96). The other research that takes an ecocritical approach to Bradbury’s work is Nandrajog (2021). This article does not analyze *The Veldt*, but it interestingly opens up an ecocritical perspective on Bradbury’s works. The author investigates the intricate connection between “social, political, and environmental (ill) effects of technology on the natural and social world” (p. 34). As for criticisms of *Ready Player One* (2011), scholars focus on the gender aspect and representation of the highly advanced technology. Among others, Condis (2016) postulates that the novel perpetuates the image of “certain kinds of bodies and identities over others” (p. 1). She also adds the novel promotes “white maleness” as synonymous with being a gamer as portrayed by the protagonist (p. 1).

To add more ecocritical perspectives into this scholarship of Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, and Ernest Cline, I scrutinize ways in which Ray Bradbury’s *The Veldt* (1950), Philip K. Dick’s *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011)—as the narratives of the contemporary SF American literature—unveil the anthropocentric attitude, attached to an isolated human subjectivity that is induced by human alienation from the natural world. Such a misconception is constructed by one’s understanding of technology and the nonhuman being—whether it is an organic or mechanical being—as a tool humans can use or take control of.

Drawing upon Darko Suvin’s notion of *cognitive estrangement* (1988), Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the *hyperreal* (1983), and Serpil Oppermann’s notion of *posthuman ecocriticism* (2016), I argue that the literary texts illustrate how the isolated human subjectivity from the nonhuman world can pave the way for an illusion of one’s absolute control over the nonhuman world. The three texts also challenge such

an obsolete view of humans through their protagonists' inability to overcome the lingering impact of the hyperreal, which is inextricably intertwined with the physical surroundings. Ultimately, the selected literary texts capture the paradoxical nature of the hyperreal now that the digitized environment galvanizes human subjectivity to become posthuman instead. Such an awakening to the impact of nonhuman subjectivity points to the diminished, isolated human self that cannot exist with nonhuman other, rendering it posthuman.

All in all, my analysis of the texts thus offers an alternate conception of a more inclusive "reality" under "estrangement", in Suvin's sense, embracing nonhuman agency. Therefore, this research contributes to an ecocritical dimension of SF narratives as it highlights the materialization of the nonhuman imagery—generated by the highly advanced technology to challenge the human former notion of subjectivity.

Theoretical Frameworks

The first term I would like to clarify the use and scope of is *subjectivity*. This specific term is best captured when compared to identity. In his book *Subjectivity*, Hall (2004) differentiates the nuances of the two terms through their different foci. Hall explains:

One's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that [...] gives one consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. (p. 3)

To put it another way, while the term "identity" gravitates toward a human's free will to become what one chooses, "subjectivity" on the contrary diminishes such autonomy as it accentuates how one is *subject* to something—thereby positioning one's identity under external influences. My deliberate use of the term *subjectivity* instead of *identity* thus points to the lessened human autonomy under the

technoculture of machines as human identity is now inevitably subject to advanced technology and its materiality.

Moreover, Jean Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal (1983) is also essential to the examination of nonhuman representations in SF narratives. This seemingly abstract state of reality paradoxically affects and thus alters human subjectivity to the point one cannot avoid the subtle impact (immanence) of the simulated environment. Lane (2009) succinctly explains the notion of the hyperreal as "the third-order simulation" (p. 84). To elucidate, the first-order simulation is "an artificial representation" (p. 84). The second-order simulation, with more complexity, "blurs the boundary between the reality and representation" (p. 84), as represented in the Empire's map drawn by a cartographer who cannot precisely pinpoint the boundary of a certain territory (p. 84). The third-order simulation, or the hyperreal, is that the copy becomes the real (p. 84), suggesting that the copy now replaces reality itself (p. 84). Lane explains, "Baudrillard's worry with third-order simulation is that the model now generates what he calls 'hyperreality'—that is, a world without a real origin... we no longer even have the real as part of the equation" (p. 84). The crux of this notion lies in the fact that this "new reality" of the third-order simulation is able to paradoxically generate a sense of concreteness/agency despite being a mere digitized simulation. In other words, not only can the hyperreal blur what is real and unreal, but it can also substantially affect human subjectivity—thereby pointing to a sense of nonhuman agency that comes alongside the hyperreal. Therefore, such simulated reality becomes concretized to the point that it affects one's former notion of human subjectivity to be more inclusive and ecologically oriented, as I will argue through my analysis of the texts. In this sense, this article highlights the concrete nature of the digitized environment which adds more layers to Baudrillard's postulation of the hyperreal as a mere abstraction.

Now that the usage and scope of subjectivity and the hyperreal have been laid out, the distinctive feature of SF as an established narrative genre can be discussed, so as to lay a clear foundation for my

analysis of the literary texts. Apart from Robert's (2003) definition of SF as a mediation between the real and the fantastic, Darko Suvin's approach to SF is one of the most prominent frameworks, specifically his notion of *cognitive estrangement*. In his book, Suvin (1998) argues how narratives in SF are grounded in the tension between what he calls estrangement and cognition. He defines SF as, "a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are *the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*" (p. 37, emphasis in original). In other words, Suvin posits the interplay between estrangement—the fantastic or what does not exist in the real world—and cognition—the reality in which we live. Such tension, according to Suvin, is foundational for SF narratives to represent the fantastic elements while subtly referencing real-world phenomena as a subtext. With estrangement that "estranges" the reader from the real world, there is room for creativity in narratives to represent the posthuman subjectivity rather than that of a mere "human" one.

One prominent feature that estranges the human characters in the SF narrative is that of the posthuman elements—be it the physical or digitized environment. Posthumanism is a school of thought that aims to debunk the legacy of humanism, accentuating the limitless capability of humans. Such a notion underlies a thought of how humans as a species are the apex beings, hence perpetuating anthropocentrism. To rectify this, the posthumanist agenda is to redefine the definition of human to be more inclusive of the nonhuman being, thus diminishing anthropocentrism attached to the former definition of what humans are. In one of the most influential works in the field, Haraway (1991) introduces the notion of humans as cyborgs to replace the former human ontology. She argues, "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (p. 66). Here Haraway focuses on the hybridized nature of beings, including humans, to rethink its construction and see a body as

being composed of other organic beings such as cells and tissues, like that of “machine and organism” or cyborg.

It is worth noting that the notion of posthumanism is ecologically oriented by its very nature. Such an interrelationship is proposed in posthuman ecocriticism. Oppermann (2016) places an emphasis on the environmental aspect of posthumanism, arguing that “posthuman ecocriticism seeks to maintain a sustainable ecological critique of the material interactions of bodies and nature in a highly technologized world and their conceptualizations in literary and cultural texts” (p. 30). Diverging from posthumanism which focuses on social and cultural aspects contributing to a shift in one’s autonomy, posthuman ecocriticism exclusively pays attention to the inevitable influence of the environment and nonhuman entity—allowing more room to explore nonhuman agency through various representations. This also includes nonhuman agency generated by the hyperreal/simulated environment. The scrutiny of the nonhuman agency thus coincides with the aforementioned ecoscience fiction that serves as “a pedagogic warning” (Huffman, 2002, p. 65) of the looming environmental catastrophe.

The Significance of the Three Literary Texts

The time and period in which each literary text was produced significantly influenced their plots. It also encouraged SF as a narrative genre to subtly engage with ecological problems. Ayres (2021) discusses the birth of human technology pertinent to its historical context. The 1950s to 1980s are the periods where *The Veldt* and *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* first came into existence. One impactful environmental concern is that of global warming. Ayres states that 1968 was the year the UN created the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). However, the concern over climate change initially emerged in 1950 with the increasing emissions of carbon dioxide. Such an environmental crisis then permeated into the global consciousness as people became more aware of this radical change in climate.

Apart from the ecological crisis, the birth of cinema as a technology, one that attempts to replicate reality, also coincided with the literary texts' representations of the hyperreal. To elaborate, cinema started to gain popularity during the 1930s and has continued to increase in popularity ever since (Ayres, 2021). This ground-breaking technology can be seen as human's attempt to capture reality through film and screen using light in the same sense that photography can capture a moment. Ayres also points out that the "movie industry became a giant moneymaker" during the 1930s (p. 397). The idea of complicating the real and unreal through filming technology underlies representations of a simulation machine through cognitive estrangement pertinent to SF narratives.

Taking the historical context of both the environmental crisis and the popularity of picture technology, it can be seen that these two factors influenced SF authors' minds and thus SF narratives to engage with both themes. In *The Veldt*, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, and *Ready Player One*, the literary texts all tackle themes concerning anxiety toward advanced technology and simultaneously the environment—particularly problems with isolated human subjectivity. Although the theme of global warming might not be explicitly represented in *The Veldt*, humans' superior attitude toward the nonhuman can be seen as what instigates climate change. As for *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, the relocation of humans to a new planet already implicates the environmental decay of Earth to the point they need to resettle on a new planet. Finally, *Ready Player One* explicitly describes Earth as being in a dire condition of climate change. In short, the corpus of texts portrays anthropocentrism through human's use of technology—in particular ones that construct the hyperreal.

Here, I provide a synopsis of each literary text and explain how each engages with themes of technology and human subjectivity. Bradbury's *The Veldt* revolves around the Hadleys, who use their simulation machine to babysit their children. The parents soon take this technology for granted and they think their children will not be affected by it. Originally published in 1985, Dick's *I Hope I Shall*

Arrive Soon represents the complexity of an artificial intelligence (AI) system through a spaceship where humans are put under deep hibernation while departing to a new planet. However, Victor—the protagonist—suddenly wakes up due to a technological glitch. Therefore, the Spaceship’s AI needs to feed Victor’s childhood memory into him once again to put him into the deep hibernating state. This simulated memory of Victor’s mistreatment of the nonhuman being then gradually replaces his former “memory” to the point where he cannot differentiate the unreal from the real. Lastly, in Cline’s *Ready Player One*, the plot is set on a future Earth, where climate change ultimately results in a global power shortage. People then seek refuge in the simulation called the OASIS, where they can participate in a campaign to become the next successor to this virtual world. Although the simulated world and the physical one seem detached, the novel illustrates the blurred boundary between the two since the digitized environment is directly replicated from the physical one—thereby having impact on one’s sense of self. In essence, the three literary texts point to human *subjectivity* that needs to be more inclusive, hence becoming posthuman instead.

Research Questions and Main Argument

In this research article, I specifically scrutinize ways in which the corpus of literary texts represents the paradoxical aspect of the digitized environment which ultimately affects the human subjectivity in Ray Bradbury’s *The Veldt* (1950), Philip K. Dick’s *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Cline’s *Ready Player One* (2011). To this end, the research questions are as follows:

1) How do the texts show that detached human subjectivity leads to viewing the simulated environment as something passive and controllable?

2) How does the simulated environment, the *hyperreal*, challenge human superiority when the human characters interact with the digitized nonhuman beings?

3) How does the realization of nonhuman agency, induced by the *hyperreal*, contribute to the human characters' development of posthuman subjectivity?

Drawing upon the notion of cognitive estrangement, the hyperreal, and posthuman ecocriticism, this article argues that the corpus of texts portrays the detached human subjectivity through the character's perceptions of advanced technology as a passive tool. Such a conception also underscores a sense of anthropocentrism, which reinforces both the self/other and human/nonhuman demarcations. In other words, the human characters think they are in full control of both technology and nonhuman beings. Moreover, my analysis of the literary texts suggests that the corpus highlights human's inability to overcome the hyperreal state of reality. That is, the abstract yet concrete nature of the digitized environment challenges the characters' isolated subjectivity to be more inclusive. Lastly, I postulate that the human characters' development of posthuman subjectivity—originating from their realization of the nonhuman materiality in the digitized environment—debunks their former isolated autonomy to include nonhuman beings, thereby becoming posthuman instead. Overall, this article lays bare the nonhuman agency attached to the digitized environment in SF to promote ecological awareness in contemporary American SF narratives.

Textual Analysis

Human Alienated Subjectivity

The first discussion point of this research article is the representation of the obsolete detached human subjectivity from the nonhuman being and the problems it poses. Here, I investigate how the selected texts depict the protagonists' misconception of their control over technology—thereby leading to their isolated subjectivity from the nonhuman world. Such a misconception also insinuates an anthropocentric stance, which emerges from the isolated human subjectivity that tends to dominate the other instead of coexisting. In this section, I argue that, in *The Veldt*, the Hadleys exhibit a misconception of overseeing not only the simulation machine but also the animals and nature such a machine

generates. In a similar vein, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* illustrates detached human subjectivity through the protagonist's memory, reflecting his domination of nonhuman beings through his childhood memory. Lastly, *Ready Player One* captures the isolated human subjectivity through Halliday's childhood memory, which points to his alienation from both the human/nonhuman community alike. Essentially, human subjectivity coincides with humans' misconceptions of their superiority to nonhuman beings—be it mechanical or other organic beings.

In Bradbury's *The Veldt* (1950), the short story revolves around the Hadleys, who equip the highly advanced simulation machine in their own house to function as a babysitter for their children. In this short story, the human isolated subjectivity is first hinted at in the exposition of the short story, where the house automatically controls electronic devices: “[George and Lydia] walked down the hall of their soundproofed Happylife Home, which had cost them thirty thousand dollars installed, this house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them” (p. 1). The passage here highlights the commodified state of the technology, costing “thirty thousand dollars”. Therefore, this exposition implies the separated subjectivity through the couple's view of it as a mere commodity that facilitates their lives.

This dichotomic relationship between human and nonhuman other is further elaborated through the Husband and Wife's alienation from the simulated environment, which also materializes their digitized animals. Upon their encounter with the simulated room, the couple's discomfort is present: “Now the hidden odor phonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor at the two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. ... The shadow flickered on George Hadley's upturned, sweating face” (p. 2). The bodily response from the couples connotes the family's sense of alienation from the nonhuman world as the “odorphonics” of the “baked veldtland” leads to “sweating”. Moreover, the scene exhibits an anthropocentric view of the nonhuman being since the wife utters “filthy creatures” (p. 2) upon seeing the simulated

vulture. The implication here is that the discomfort suggests not only the detached human subjectivity from this techno-generated landscape but also an alienating view of nature as “filthy”, represented by the vultures. Furthermore, George’s perception of this technology as merely “walls” (p. 2) implies his notion of this nonhuman entity as a mere “passive” machine, a tool that he can take full control of. As George says to his wife, “Walls, Lydia, remember; crystal walls, that’s all they are” (p. 2). In essence, the protagonists reveal their alienation from the nonhuman world through bodily discomfort in the simulated environment. At the same time, this alienating view also foregrounds their anthropocentric conception since George thinks the machine and the simulated image are just a passive being consisting of “walls”, something that cannot affect the human’s sense of self.

While *The Veldt* encapsulates human subjectivity through the protagonists’ misperception of the simulation machine as a passive nonhuman being, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013) portrays such an alienating human self through Victor’s memory of the nonhuman being. The plot of the short story revolves around the spaceship’s control of Victor’s memory, which arises after a malfunction in Victor’s hibernating capsule where his mind is bombarded with fragments of his memory—simulated by the Ship’s AI itself. In his childhood memory, Victor expresses his anthropocentric conception resulting in the mistreatment of the nonhuman being as he recalls how “he felt a hatred toward small living things, because they were dumb” (p. 449). This misconception suggests his detached view from the nonhuman being as well as his detached human subjectivity. Additionally, such an attitude further paves the way for his maltreatment of another nonhuman being, the bird. In the scene where Victor deliberately lets his cat attack a bird that lost its way getting into his garage, “He picked up the cat; the cat extended its body and its front legs, it extended its jaws and bit into the bird. ... he could hear the sound of breaking bones, small bones. He felt a strange feeling” (p. 449). This violence toward the bird, therefore, vividly delineates Victor’s isolated human subjectivity. That is, he firmly believes he can take control of the

nonhuman other without bearing a consequence through his act of controlling the cat and harming the bird. Noteworthy, this imagery will later serve as a crucial motif that renders the nonhuman being, formed by the AI, agential through its substantial impact on Victor's psyche and his memory.

Diverging from the two short stories, *Ready Player One* (2011) encapsulates human alienation from the natural world through a misanthrope: Halliday, the creator of the virtual world called the OASIS. For context, the novel narrates a post-apocalyptic world where the environment becomes harsh to live in, and most humans take refuge in the OASIS instead. The narrative focuses on Wade's journey to win Halliday's "egg hunt" campaign to seek his successor to the OASIS. My analysis of the novel suggests that Halliday's childhood experience gradually constructs his detached subjectivity from the human and nonhuman beings which foregrounds his obsession to later create the OASIS instead. Wade, the protagonist who participates in Halliday's campaign, discovers information regarding Halliday's upbringing through *Anorak's Almanac*—a record of Halliday's autobiography written by Halliday himself. According to the journal,

[Halliday] had an extremely difficult time communicating with the people around him. Despite his obvious intelligence, he did poorly in school, because most of his attention was focused on computers, comic books, sci-fi and fantasy novels, movies, and above all else, videogames. (p. 82)

The journal here emphasizes Halliday's inability to connect with people and at the same time his passion for technology. Furthermore, Halliday's misanthropic tendency is depicted in one of the lines in *Anorak's Almanac*: "Being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable" (p. 15). For Halliday, the virtual world or the digitized environment seems to be the only place he can take refuge.

Moreover, the emergence of OASIS substantiates Halliday's detachment as he intends this virtual space to be a refuge from the real world's physicality, as represented by the acronym for OASIS: "Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation" (p. 87). Despite being a purely simulated reality, the word "Anthropocentric" points to the goal of this virtual space as created solely for humans' refuge from the real world. In the latter part of the novel, Halliday himself admits how his estrangement leads to the creation of the OASIS. He states,

I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. (p. 567)

Halliday's comment underlies his perception of "the real world" as something unreal and passive, seeing that there is no personal connection between him and the environment. At the same time, a sense of regret is highlighted through his ultimate realization that his virtual world will also dissipate along with the physical Earth due to the ongoing environmental crisis².

The Materialization of Nonhuman Agency through the Hyperreal

In the previous section, I investigated detached human subjectivity from the nonhuman world through the characters' anthropocentric attitudes, whereby they take control of both technology and nonhuman beings, regardless of their dependence upon them. In this section, I examine how the selected texts challenge the isolation of human subjectivity by highlighting the characters' interactions with the materiality of the digitized environment, thereby diminishing their former sense of superiority. To this end, I argue that *The Veldt* diminishes human subjectivity through the concretized hyperreal state of the nonhuman beings which ultimately awakens him to the impact

² In the novel, Earth is now on the brink of ecological collapse that results from climate change. As Wade describes the real world's condition, "After all, the people of the Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease" (p. 2).

of the nonhuman agency, rendering the subject posthuman instead. On the other hand, the fact that Victor's childhood memory is gradually replaced by the digitized environment, generated by the Artificial Intelligence, reveals the fragile state of human subjectivity and its susceptibility to the nonhuman influence, particularly through the natural imagery that keeps haunting him. Lastly, *Ready Player One* portrays the hyperreal state of the digitized environment that substantially induces Halliday to construct his sense of place³—his bond with the physical environment in his cherished childhood.

The hyperreal state in *The Veldt*, depicted by the simulation machine and brought to life by estrangement in Suvin's sense, immensely affects George's and Lydia's former subjectivities. Indeed, they are gradually awakened to the nonhuman agency of the machine along with the simulated animals. To explain using Baudrillard's term, the simulated environment tends to be, at first, the *first-order simulation* when George and Lydia still recognize the simulated "veldt" as somewhat real, seeing that George recognizes the AI-generated lions as "so real" (p. 2). Both protagonists' sensory perceptions are also heightened by this simulated environment as they perceive the heat, the smell, and the sound of the place: "The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rusty smell of animals, the smell of dust" (p. 3). The heightened human sensitivity, specifically the olfactory, tactile, and auditory perceptions, challenges and thus blurs the boundary between the real and unreal.

At the same time, such environmental perceptions substantiate the materialized nonhuman agency, thereby inducing the posthuman subjectivity that affects the human sense of self. To phrase it alternately, this second-order simulation of hyperreality thus renders the nonhuman agency concrete. With such a state, the husband and the wife now realize how these natural images are not merely passive, in the sense that they do not affect human's sense of self. In fact, their human

³ I use the phrase "*sense of place*" in a humanistic geographer's view, emphasizing one's attachment to the physical environment/ landscape—particularly Yi-fu Tuan's notion of *topophilia* (1974) or one's bond with a cherished/ special place.

subjectivity is now subject to the influence of the nonhuman imagery as George now admits: “Perhaps Lydia was right. Perhaps they needed a little vacation from the fantasy which was growing a bit too real for ten-year-old children” (p. 4). The fact that George accepts the room as “a bit too real” hints at his threatened human subjectivity. At this point, he is not sure if the lions he saw in the simulated veldt are real now that he “closed the nursery door and locked it, tight” (p. 6). This changing behavior, therefore, captures the nonhuman agency of the simulated lions, made plausible by the hyperreal which challenges the isolated human autonomy.

On the other hand, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* lays bare the diminished human subjectivity through the hyperreal state of the memory transmitted by the AI of the Spaceship to Victor. In particular, Victor’s disorientation, caused by the disruption of the natural image in his memory, points to his exposure to the materialized nonhuman agency. As pointed out in the previous section, Victor is bombarded with the images of his own memory, imposed upon the AI—specifically, the memory pertaining to his deliberate attack on the bird. This memory unconsciously resurfaces in his mind from time to time. Attempting to feed Victor his happy memory, the Ship unintentionally imposes the image of the dead bird upon Victor’s mind during his hibernation in a capsule: “You are responsible for the death of the bird, the presence thought; he could understand its thoughts. . . . The bird wanted to fly and eat and live, the presence thought” (p. 454). Such a disruption of the bird imagery then substantiates the nonhuman agency that intrudes on Victor’s former subjectivity. To put it another way, the bird is now agential through the hyperreal state that concretizes and materializes its existence despite being a mere digitally simulated memory. In Baudrillard’s term, the bird now becomes the second-order simulation since Victor himself is not certain of his own memory.

In addition, this inability to overcome the simulated natural image is further represented in the Ship’s narrative of Victor’s mind. Indeed, the Ship describes such a long-lasting psychological imprint upon Victor’s conscience: “This is a very neurotic person, the ship

realized. I am having an awful lot of trouble finding happy memories. There is too much fear and too much guilt” (p. 455). The neurotic state here delineates the nonhuman agency of the natural image and, at the same time, points to the collapse of Victor’s isolated human subjectivity. That is, the impact of the bird imagery causes a long-lasting impact on Victor’s subjectivity, seeing that he is now subject to the bird’s psychological presence under the hyperreal state of the memory-simulating machine. The narrative after this sequence can also elucidate this point as the Ship reiterates the repercussion of the bird imagery on Victor’s very identity: “[Victor] has integrated his early fears and guilt into one interwoven grid” (p. 456).

Diverging from the other two short stories, *Ready Player One* delineates the paradox of the hyperreal through the digitized environment that constructs one’s sense of place through Halliday’s campaign. Specifically, the Hunt—Halliday’s game to seek his successor to the OASIS—is grounded in Halliday’s childhood memory that is inseparable from the environment he grew up in. In the OASIS, Halliday materializes his cherished environment, including his own hometown and childhood home. Wade, who thoroughly learns Halliday’s autobiography from the *Anorak’s Almanac*, describes the place,

I’d read that Halliday had done all the coding himself, drawing on his memories to re-create his hometown exactly as it was during his childhood. He’d used old street maps, phone books, photographs, and video footage for reference, to make everything as authentic and accurate as possible. (p. 160)

The similarity between the real and simulated (hyperreal) environment defamiliarizes one’s perception of the digitized place as likened to that of Halliday’s memory, hence blurring the real/unreal.

To elaborate on such a resemblance, Halliday’s sense of nostalgia for his childhood memory—embedded in the simulation— further complicates the real/unreal demarcation. Indeed, Halliday’s campaign of “the Hunt” is grounded on his sense of nostalgia, seeing that he wants people to adopt his bond with the environment through his

simulated childhood memory. Therefore, “the Hunt” is not about seeking the most skillful player but one who learns about the importance of one’s sense of place. That is, the most important clue (one of the “keys”) is hidden in Halliday’s simulated home itself. In other words, only those who grasp Halliday’s bond with the place can get the clue to the key. For instance, as Wade observes, “Looking around, I wondered why Halliday, who always claimed to have had a miserable childhood, had later become so nostalgic for it” (p. 162). The sense of “nostalgia” thus substantiates Halliday’s sense of place. As Wade puts it, “Halliday had preserved his childhood forever, here in the OASIS” (p. 161). In this light, it is worth noting that the whole “Hunt” campaign is to inculcate into the participants Halliday’s notion of a sense of place, which later foregrounds his ecological awareness.

Additionally, the materialization of Halliday’s simulated environment emphasizes the influence of the digitized environment on Halliday’s subjectivity. This aspect can be seen in Wade’s attempt to imagine Halliday’s childhood: “Looking at the replica Halliday had created of his old house, I tried to imagine what it had been like for him to grow up there” (p. 161). The fact that Halliday’s “old house” can capture its owner’s life suggests that this simulation also possesses a sense of nonhuman agency. Consequently, Wade’s ability to learn Halliday’s bond with the place also emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the digitized environment as being both abstract and concrete simultaneously.

Most importantly, my analysis of *Ready Player One* in this section suggests that Halliday’s subjectivity is under the influence of the hyperreal he creates. That is, this simulation now influences both Halliday and Wade to form a connection with the environment. Despite being a mere simulation, this physical attachment to the digitized reality, as I will illustrate in the next section, becomes a foundation for Halliday’s ecological awareness. In essence, human characters no longer gain control over their subjectivity. Rather, they are under the influence of the simulated environment, be it as a creator or player, thereby accentuating the impossibility of the isolated human subjectivity.

The Construction of the Posthuman Subjectivity

Now that I have discussed the susceptibility of human subjectivity that has been gradually challenged and ultimately debunked by the hyperreal environment, in this last section, I scrutinize the human characters' construction of the posthuman subjectivity—a subjectivity that is now subject to the nonhuman agency and hence its influence. At the same time, I explore the implication of human embedment in highly advanced technology and how it offers an alternate view of reality that endows nonhuman beings with a sense of agency. To this end, I postulate that the corpus of texts tackles the ecological theme under the SF genre by estrangement, in Suvin's sense, which accentuates the materialization of nonhuman agency.

In *The Veldt*, after the couple become cognizant of the nonhuman agency through the simulated environment's impact on their children, they begin to develop an epiphany and acceptance of the nonhuman existence that directly affects their subjectivity and that of their children. In the scene where George expresses his regret of having bought such technology, he states "I'm beginning to be sorry we bought that room for the children" (p. 7). Such a regret then lays bare the impact of the nonhuman agency that affects George's perception of the simulated images of nature as well as his human subjectivity. Additionally, the other scene that portrays such a realization is the scene where the couple realizes how the simulation room replaces their role as parents. This aspect can be extrapolated from the scene in which David McClean, a psychiatrist who pays a visit to check on the children, discusses the nonhuman agency of the machine: "You've let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children's affections. This room is their mother and father, far more important than their lives than their real parents" (p. 9). This scene vividly captures the children's posthuman subjectivity, seeing that the simulation machine becomes their foster parents. In short, their subjectivity is now subject to this nonhuman entity and thus becomes posthuman instead.

Ultimately, the parents' former sense of arrogance is undermined, which signifies their dismantled former human subjectivity. The scene

that illustrates this idea is when George and Lydia admit their grave mistake of initially refusing the machine's agency: "Lord, how did we ever get in this house? What prompted us to buy a nightmare? / "Pride, money, foolishness" (p. 11). The couple's pivotal realization here implies their development of posthuman subjectivity in the sense that both are now well aware of the machine's influence on them as well as on the children. Therefore, such admittance suggests that they can now discern the AI room as having a nonhuman agency, thereby pointing to their posthuman subjectivity. Noteworthy, this new subjectivity also undermines their sense of anthropocentrism, seeing that their arrogance of assuming humankind to be the superior species is now debunked through the acceptance of their own "pride" and "foolishness". This extended notion of human subjectivity thus coincides with their less anthropocentric attitude.

As for *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, I argue that Victor's admittance of his past mistreatment of nonhuman beings as "sin" delineates the repercussion of the hyperreal state which galvanizes his subjectivity and becomes posthuman. Previously, I discussed how Victor's memory is tarnished by the disruption of his memory of killing the bird. In this section, my analysis of the short story suggests that Victor's "sin" is inextricable from the simulated memory of his mistreatments of animals, namely the bee and the bird. For instance, in the scene where Victor reflects upon his red welt caused by a bee (a being which he at first expressed his hatred toward), he thinks "I got this as punishment for killing the bird" (p. 459). This repetitive resurface always harks back to his memory of "killing the bird". Such an immense psychological impact then points to the undermining of Victor's former human subjectivity because the dead bird is now integrated with his subjectivity under the hyperreal, disclosing the materialized nonhuman agency of the bird and bee.

Moreover, Victor's conception of the unhappy memory as resulting from his "sin" unveils the undermining of his isolated human subjectivity. In the scene where he reflects upon his guilt, he sees such traumatic disruption as God's punishment: "God punished me. He took

away all that was precious to me because of my sin. It wasn't [the cat's] sin; it was my sin" (p. 460). His epiphany, again, is linked to the nonhuman imagery, namely the cat that killed the bird. Such a long-lasting psychological imprint evidences the nonhuman agency despite being merely simulated imagery conjured by a machine. The idea of "sin", therefore, epitomizes Victor's posthuman subjectivity, seeing that animal imagery is inseparable from his self-understanding—thereby debunking his former anthropocentric self. Ultimately, the simulated memory paradoxically becomes Victor's reality, as he cannot differentiate the simulated memory from his real one. In other words, the third-order simulation now replaces his former "reality" to construct Victor's posthuman subjectivity. This idea can be extrapolated from the scene where Victor states how he still sees the "red mark" from the bee on the back of his hand despite being in the real world. He asks his wife upon their reunion on the destined planet: "See where the bee stung me?" (p. 464). However, his wife "saw no mark on his hand; she took his hand and held it" (p. 465). Victor's hallucinated state then serves as a physical manifestation of his posthuman self since he is now fully subject to the nonhuman influence of the memory of nonhuman images.

In a similar vein, my analysis of the hyperreality in the OASIS from *Ready Player One* gravitates toward its impact in prompting the human character to foster his posthuman subjectivity. However, a nuance in this text lies in Halliday's formation of the ecological awareness that is constructed by his sense of place, as discussed in the previous section. In this section, I emphasize that Halliday's immersive experience in the digitized environment paradoxically forms his sense of place to the point where he becomes cognizant of his connectedness with the physical reality, thereby signifying the materialized nonhuman agency of the simulated environment. Indeed, this epiphanic moment is implicated in the scene in which Halliday reveals the ultimate goal behind "The Hunt" competition. To explain, the setting of this scene hints at Halliday's attachment to the physical world. Wade thinks, "I realized that I was standing in ... the room in his mansion where

he'd spent most of the last fifteen years of his life. The place where he'd coded his last and greatest game" (p. 560). Spending his last fifteen years in this setting, Halliday chooses this place as the final location before bequeathing his legacy to the successor. This location thus signifies Halliday's posthuman subjectivity as inseparable from the place.

In addition, Halliday's revelation of his hidden agenda behind the competition delineates his posthuman subjectivity and his ecological awareness, paradoxically constructed by the digitized environment. Halliday entrusts the OASIS to Wade, his successor, saying,

I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*. Do you understand? (p. 567)

Paradoxically, the sense of belonging Halliday lacks when he lives in the physical world is eventually realized upon his stay in the digitized world. In other words, the passage points to the concreteness of the digitized world as a materialized nonhuman agency. Its materiality is palpable enough to stir Halliday's mind and, hence induce his ecological awareness. As he states the physical world is "real" and a place of "true happiness". Although Halliday tends to prioritize the physical world, the simulated world of the OASIS is what makes him realize the significance of physicality. The novel thus suggests how the simulation or the hyperreal, despite being a mere abstraction, possesses some agential capacity as it influences human characters to construct their posthuman subjectivity.

Conclusion

Overall, my analysis of Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt* (1950), Philip K. Dick's *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (2013), and Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) suggests that detached human subjectivity underlies a sense of

anthropocentrism—resulting in one’s misconception and mistreatment of the nonhuman world. Such representation cannot be possible without the cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1988) in SF narratives: a mediation between the real and the fantastic.

Furthermore, the texts capture the paradoxical materialization of nonhuman beings through the third-order simulation or hyperreality that endows the nonhuman world with a sense of agency. Such nonhuman agency then affects one’s subjectivity to bring one’s identity under the influence of both advanced technology and simultaneously nonhuman beings. This radical impact of the nonhuman agency is then able to extend one’s subjectivity to be more inclusive by rendering it posthuman instead. Noteworthy, although the digitized images of nature seem abstract and de-materialized, the simulated environment and natural images paradoxically endow the nonhuman beings with a sense of agency. In this light, this research then suggests that the de-materialization—brought about by technology—can paradoxically pave the way for the re-materialization of the nonhuman being as well. Consequently, my scrutiny of the corpus of literary texts accentuates how the nonhuman agency—despite being digitized or simulated—can transform human subjectivity to become posthuman. This aspect can be deemed a “pedagogic warning” that subtly promotes ecological awareness in SF narratives.

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