

Posthumanism and Identity in *Titane*: Gender, Technology and the Cyborg Body

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Review Article

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Abstract

Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) is one of the most unsettling cinematic expressions of what it means to be human in a world where flesh and metal are no longer fixed binaries. This essay analyses the film through Donna Haraway's essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991), N. Katherine Hayles's monograph *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), and later posthumanist interventions by Rosi Braidotti and Claire Colebrook. Moving towards a rich theoretical engagement, this essay argues that *Titane* constructs a world in which identity, gender and intimacy are continually recomposed through trauma and technology. The essay explores three axes, namely, cyborg embodiment, posthuman intimacy and non-biological kinship to reveal how the film dramatises the collapse of fixed human boundaries and the emergence of a hybrid, fluid ontology.

The Posthuman Mirror of *Titane*

From its opening crash to the metallic birth that closes it, *Titane* refuses to let the human body remain intact. Julia Ducournau's film is not just about the transformation of one individual but about the dissolution of the idea of 'the human' as a whole, in a fixed category. The camera dwells on metal, oil and skin with equal intimacy, turning each surface into an interface rather than a boundary. The violence itself is not as disturbing as the slow recognition that technology has entered the body's grammar.

This is where Donna Haraway's cyborg returns as a crucial figure. Haraway defines the cyborg as 'a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway 1991, 149). Her essay rejects the nostalgia for wholeness, insisting that in late-twentieth-century technoculture the human is already a fabrication of interfaces. *Titane* visualises this insight through Alexia, whose titanium skull plate and erotic bond with a car embody the end of the boundary between organism and mechanism. The film makes visible what Haraway calls 'the breakdown of clean distinctions between human and machine, organic and inorganic' (150). Haraway herself trained as a biologist, earning her PhD in biology at Yale, and this grounding in life sciences shapes her insistence that the boundaries between the organic and the technological are never absolute but materially entangled.

Yet Ducournau's posthuman vision is not triumphalist. The film's horror lies in the loss of familiar coordinates: gender and kinship, where even empathy, a core human emotion, appear unstable. The posthuman is not liberation alone, but also one of exposure in its rawest form. Haraway writes that the cyborg's condition is 'a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion' (149). *Titane* inhabits precisely this optical space, where an unstable mirror is held at the point at which technological reality and mythic fantasy are indistinguishable.

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Cyborg Embodiment: The Body as Field of Mutation

After the childhood accident, Alexia's head becomes the site of an industrial graft. The titanium plate is both repair and redesign. From that moment, her body is neither restored nor natural but perpetually hybrid. The scar glistens under light like a warning that biology has been rewritten. Haraway's cyborg 'does not dream of returning to dust' (1991, 151); she dreams of new couplings. The film understands this: Alexia's relation to machines is not fetishistic attachment but ontological continuity.

When she caresses the car's metal surface, the gesture carries the same affect as a lover's touch. The body recognises alloy as kin. The erotic scene inside the car literalises Haraway's challenge to dualisms such as mind/body, nature/culture, male/female, showing them to be obsolete categories. The car here is both an object of desire and a partner whose mechanical rhythm is shaping the impulse of the human body.

In this sense, *Titane* also shows what Hayles calls the 'posthuman view of the body as an information-processing system' (Hayles 1999, 2). The body is not just a thing but a set of exchanges. Alexia's sexuality and identity become iterative circuits, borrowing from computer science, each redefined through contact with machines. The famous scene in the film in which she leaks motor oil instead of milk redefines reproduction in machinic terms. Braidotti would call this a manifestation of 'zoe', the vital force that traverses organic and inorganic matter (Braidotti 2013, 60), continuing from the way Haraway had the set the scene. The leak, grotesque and comic, embodies a vitality no longer limited to biology as we perceive it.

The titanium skull plate, the oil, the car are all part of an emergent ontology that, however inorganic in nature, becomes communicative. The cyborg body here is not treated as a metaphor but a process of composition, continually joining what the mainstream culture has kept apart. *Titane* stages this process as both horror and necessity: to survive, Alexia must keep adapting, sealing the joins repetitively.

Trauma, Technology and Gender: Haraway's Cyborg Revisited

If Haraway's manifesto exposed the false innocence of 'woman' as a universal category, *Titane* pushes that exposure to an extreme. Alexia's gender cannot be read through biological or social codes; it mutates according to the demands of survival. Her violence towards men who desire her is not a form of sadistic pleasure but a method of control over a body constantly threatened with definition from outside. The murders mark each

failed attempt of the world to assign her a stable identity, in which she is desired, and which desire she turns into violence.

Haraway insists that 'liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness of oppression and so of possibility' (Haraway 1991, 149). Alexia's violent acts perform that consciousness without speech. Each death is a refusal to become readable under a patriarchal vision. Her body itself is a site of resistance, and the murders are the metaphoric extension of the same. In this sense, the film enacts Haraway's claim that 'the cyborg does not make history by reproduction but by the re-coding of communication and exchange' (163). Alexia communicates through rupture, where her acts break the code of femininity imposed upon her.

The film also visualises the exhaustion of what Haraway calls the 'organic family' (151). When Alexia disguises herself as the lost boy Adrien, she enters a space where kinship is redefined through fabrication. The masquerade can be seen as a transformation, in which an unknown family becomes a provisional technology of care. In the fire station, surrounded by male bodies choreographed by routine and hierarchy, Alexia's hybrid presence destabilises the very grammar of masculinity as known to society, collectively.

Claire Colebrook's critique of cinematic representation further helps to articulate this disturbance. She argues that images of gendered violence often 'circulate as repetitions of the very codes they claim to expose' (Colebrook 2016, 82). *Titane* walks that exact same line. Its brutal, disturbing violence risks becoming a spectacle of shock, but simultaneously makes visible the limits of representation itself. By pushing bodily mutation to grotesque extremes, Ducournau compels the viewer to confront their reliance on existing categories to contain embodiment within a fixed language.

Through Haraway and Colebrook, we can read *Titane* as a study in coded excess, in which the body overflows the signified systems meant to stabilise it. The film insists that gender is neither a body-suit nor destiny but a continuous reprogramming of form that is the self.

Posthuman Intimacy and Violence: Hayles and the Fractured Self

N. Katherine Hayles describes the posthuman subject as 'an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction' (Hayles 1999, 3). Alexia's body embodies this sentence literally. Her skin is an armour and her mind is fragmented across trauma and desire of fitting into a role even while resisting feminine categorisation.

Intimacy, in this layout, stops being about trust. It becomes a negotiation of edges, brutally. The murder

of the admirer in the parking lot redefines intimacy as defence. For Alexia, touch threatens dissolution. To her, the only way to preserve autonomy and survival is through aggression and the resort to violence. Violence is not pathology but a language of expression, where, in further extension, it becomes the syntax of posthuman survival instinct.

Hayles notes that in the posthuman condition 'consciousness is only one component of cognition' (Hayles 1999, 288). Alexia's behaviour reflects this decentring of the rational self. Her responses are embodied computations: she calibrates threat, proximity and desire at machine speed. The body thinks before the mind. This aligns with Hayles's argument that embodiment in information culture is 'distributed cognition, enacted through the interaction of body and environment' (290). In *Titane*, that environment is technological and violent, forcing cognition to migrate into muscle memory and metallic prosthesis.

When Alexia finally finds temporary refuge with Vincent, the relationship that develops is not intimacy in the humanist sense but a networked form of care. Two damaged systems interact, stabilising each other momentarily. Vincent's firehouse, with its drills and steroid injections, mirrors Alexia's self-disciplining rituals of binding and disguise. Both characters are maintained through rituals that blur the line between repair and obsession, in the pursuit of a stabilised body.

Hayles's insight that the posthuman blurs 'the distinction between bodily existence and computer simulation' (Hayles 1999, 48) resonates here. Alexia's gestures are like programmed responses, while Vincent's care mimics algorithmic repetition even while knowing Alexia is not his son. Their connection is not purely emotional but a shared protocol; a recognition, a quiet knowing that survival for both now depends on iterative recalibration and reformation rather than authenticity.

Kinship Beyond Biology: Vincent, Love and the Hybrid Child

Rosi Braidotti extends Haraway's cyborg politics into an affirmative ethics of relation. For her, posthuman subjectivity is 'an enfleshed materialism that opens up the subject to multiple relationalities' (Braidotti 2013, 81). This perspective illuminates Vincent's transformation across the film. Initially a figure of patriarchal authority, he becomes a practitioner of care that defies bloodline and, if seen carefully, biology as we know it.

When Vincent accepts Alexia as his son, his act performs Braidotti's concept of 'becoming-minoritarian', a movement away from identity towards relation (Braidotti 2013, 99). He recognises – or rather, acts to recognise – her as his son by need, not actual resemblance. In a world stripped of certainties, love,

which we know as intimately human, becomes the only sustainable technology. His insistence on rigorous physical training, even his denial of ageing with the help of technological effects of steroids, all reflect an attempt to keep the self functioning, which is a mechanical devotion mirrored in Alexia's bodily maintenance, as discussed in the previous section.

The birth scene radicalises this notion of care. The metallic child, born from the so-called biologically impossible union of woman and machine, symbolises what Haraway once called 'monstrous worldings' (Haraway 1991, 154): new ontologies generated by hybridisation rather than purity. Vincent's acceptance of the infant is the film's most subversive gesture. It dramatises Braidotti's claim that 'affirmation is not optimism but a recognition of life's uncontainable multiplicity' (Braidotti 2013, 190).

In this moment, the cyborg ceases to be metaphor. The baby's body, part metal and part flesh, is the literal manifestation of posthuman futurism, or rather, of continuity. Its existence collapses the binary between natural and artificial, demonstrating that identity will henceforth be built from contingency. Over the course of the film, this process is shown as one of continual recalibration; in the end, however, endurance emerges as the continuation of life through care, which is hybrid at its core.

Fluidity, Alienation and the Ethics of the Inhuman

The fluid body that *Titane* constructs is both liberating and alienating. Hayles warns that the posthuman condition can easily slip into 'disembodiment', where the body becomes a disposable shell for information (Hayles 1999, 5). Alexia's repeated erasure of her own image, as seen in her binding her chest, breaking her nose and cutting her hair, shows how survival may demand self-deletion. The price of fluidity is alienation.

Colebrook's critique becomes relevant here. She writes that 'the posthuman future may be one in which the human persists only as the trace of its own disappearance' (Colebrook 2016, 14). Alexia embodies that paradox. Her survival requires the continual destruction of her recognisability. Each transformation, be it woman, killer, son or mother, marks another subtraction of self but also an insertion. The posthuman is not simply multiplicity; it is also exhaustion.

Braidotti, on the other hand, instigates that such exhaustion can open an ethical horizon. 'We need to learn to think with pain, not against it,' she argues, because suffering 'marks our transversal connection with all living matter' (Braidotti 2013, 188). In this sense, *Titane's* relentless physicality becomes an ethics of endurance. Pain here should not be seen just as

punishment but also as a form of connection to the world, as it cathartically binds the cyborg to the world it remakes because of its fluidity to make the cyborg one of its own.

Vincent's acceptance of the hybrid child completes this ethical arc. His gesture is affirmative, yes, but can also be seen as a willingness to care for what cannot be classified. The film thus redefines love as an act of ontological hospitality. In accepting the machine-child, Vincent extends Haraway's call to 'make kin, not babies' (Haraway 2016, 103). The future is no longer lineage; it is collaboration.

Yet the film refuses sentimentality. The final image, where Vincent cradles the newborn beside Alexia's 'body', remains ambivalent. It is unclear whether the hybrid can live or whether it will corrode. This uncertainty is central to the posthuman condition: continuity without guarantee.

Conclusion: The Unstable Future of the Human

Titane is a study of transformation as ontology, not transformation in the moral sense. Its posthuman world dismantles the binaries through which identity has been governed: human and machine, male and female, parent and child, love and violence. What remains is motion and constant restructuration.

Haraway's cyborg, once a figure of feminist rebellion, here becomes the only condition of existence. Alexia's body is a metaphor for humanity, and it demonstrates that humanity itself is a temporary arrangement of materials and affective emotions. Hayles's notion that 'we have always been posthuman' (Hayles 1999, 291) finds its visual extension in the film's relentless and, at times, beautiful merging of flesh and metal. Braidotti's call for an affirmative ethics of hybridity offers a fragile hope, where this fusion form and new modes of care and responsibility might arise. Colebrook's caution reminds us that such hope must coexist with critique, since representation can easily reproduce the violence it seeks to expose.

The power of *Titane* lies in refusing to resolve these contradictions. It lets the viewer experience what posthumanism feels like, and what the simultaneous terror and wonder of a body no longer secure in its boundaries. The film shows that the future of identity is neither utopian nor apocalyptic, which is soothing in its own way. It is simply a composite, where a process of continual breakage and repair is manifested.

To watch *Titane* is to confront the truth that Haraway articulated more than three decades ago: 'We are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism' (Haraway 1991, 150). The film takes this

insight literally and invites us to accept and live with its consequences. And in doing so, it turns film reels into philosophy, metal into flesh, and the cyborg into a mirror that breaks all the boundaries we have been fed by society.

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