

Crossing Boundaries:

Post- and Transhumanist Hybridity in the *Guardians of the Galaxy*- Films



Iris de Visser, 8375909

Thesis Supervisor: Dan Hassler-Forest

Second Reader: André van der Velden

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Abstract

This thesis analyses posthumanism and transhumanism in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films. Most Marvel superhero films have underlying transhumanist or liberal humanist messages, yet I will argue that *Guardians of the Galaxy* and its sequels are progressively more posthumanist. Through the character analysis of Peter Quill and Rocket Raccoon, I will prove that even though there is a transhumanist basis in the films (especially in Quill's character), there is also a move towards a posthumanist worldview.

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Introduction

Marvel films have always been about superheroes. Starting with *Iron Man* (2008, Jon Favreau), the films have starred humans and aliens that have amazing abilities such as super strength, super weapons, and the ability to fly. They all fight, sometimes together, against forces that want to harm humans and the earth. Given their supernatural inclinations, it is fair to say that they have the ability to stretch our perception of what it means to be human. After all, the heroes struggling with their new-found power is a trope that returns in almost every film. These superhero films thus have the ability to stretch our perception of humanity. It is not hard to see their different physique or powers as metaphors for representations of real issues in the world. But in reality, most (Marvel) films are not too concerned with this.¹ They usually strengthen liberal humanist values, which is a way of thinking that has clear limitations, and compulsively defines everything into binary categories and/or hierarchies. These categories are those such as male/female, black/white, and so on. Like Leonardo DaVinci's 'Vitruvian Man', liberal humanism has a clear ideal way of being. This ideal has mostly been male, white, and straight. It has the downside that most humans do not fit in this perception of a perfect or even 'normal' human, which results in their exclusion and objectification.

Although the subject of superhero films seems perfect to change the standard image of liberal humanism, since there is a lot of variety in superheroes, most Marvel films do not do anything to change this image of the 'ideal human.' Superheroes like Thor, Captain America, and Iron Man are all based on this ideal liberal humanist image. They are all ideal men, in strength, physique, and behaviour. Their supernatural abilities do not change this, but only strengthen their humanity: their strength makes them even more human and compassionate.

¹ Although many new Marvel series and films such as *Ms. Marvel* and *Black Panther* feature marginalized groups as main characters, unfortunately the underlying liberal humanist values are still mostly the same as in the earlier MCU films.

Their powers thus allow them to overcome any physical limitations, without compromising their humanity. Instead, they become a human that is better. Best of all, they also seem to have clear boundaries between their human and superhuman parts, as Dan Hassler-Forest writes about in his article “Of Iron Men and Green Monsters.” Their supernatural powers do not split their identity, does not make them different, but makes them better. These superhuman parts are often exaggerated masculine ideals, like super strength (Captain America) or a suit with build-in armour (Iron Man). By continuing to embrace these values, though, they also do not change this underlying anthropocentric worldview.

But, as I will argue in this thesis, this is not always the case. With their subjects being superpowers and alien heroes, Marvel superhero films do have the ability to change these liberal humanist ideals and make posthumanist theory recognizable to a broader public. Using *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (James Gunn, 2017) as case studies,² I will analyse the hybridization of two particular characters in these films: Peter Quill and Rocket Raccoon. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is the first Marvel film that is set in space, with a cast of characters that is unlike other Marvel films.³ This space setting, in combination with the use of music, makes the film stand out. Because the story and characters are literally removed from earth, the potential for changing the humanist viewpoints that I have described earlier is strengthened. Peter Quill and Rocket Raccoon in particular stretch the ideas of (trans)humanism that are usually seen in Marvel films, in order for posthumanist ideas to grow. These characters, though very different from each other, both have a hybrid connection with technology, which will be the main subject of this thesis. This hybridity and integration of nonhuman elements helps to change an arguably outdated way of

² I will also refer to the recently released *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, but since this is not released on DVD or streaming services yet, unfortunately I cannot give specific quotations.

³ Aside from the *Avengers* films, there is often an emphasis on the titular hero and their sidekicks. Although Peter Quill is the main character in *Guardians*, I think the title suggests a less hierarchical difference between the characters.

viewing the world. My research question will therefore be: “In what ways do the hybrid characters from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) depart from the usual transhumanist values, and become increasingly posthumanist?”

Theoretical Framework

Before I discuss the main theory about post- and transhumanism, I will briefly look at that which they both react to: liberal humanism. This philosophical stance is centred around individuality and agency, having roots that go as far back as the Roman antiquity, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes in his chapter “Humanism” (14). These early Greek and Roman philosophers were concerned with “what being human was and should be like” (15). This focus has slightly shifted over the years, and today we are most familiar with a form of humanism that was formed in the enlightenment, called liberal humanism. There is no easy definition for the position, but the common denominator is a strong focus on humanity, which positions the human individual at the centre of everything (*The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, 1). Since we are humans, this seems positive: what is wrong with a focus on ourselves, after all? In reality, though, it has many downsides. The most obvious of these is a hierarchical power model that places the Eurocentric, straight, male at the centre of power. Here, similarities can be made to monotheistic religions, especially Christianity, “in which God appeared as the superhuman male who appropriately created ‘man’ in his own image” (1). This is problematic because it essentially excludes everyone who does not resemble this human ideal, which is most of the planet’s population.

The critiques that many posthumanist scholars have regarding humanism are nicely summarized by Rosi Braidotti:

Humanism upholds an implicit and partial definition of the human, while claiming to provide a universal and neutral representation of all humans. This dominant idea of

the human is based on an assumption of superiority by a subject that is male, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, speaking a standard language. (*Posthuman Feminism*, 10)

Robert Pepperell similarly calls humanism “That long-held belief in the infallibility of human power and the arrogant belief in our superiority and uniqueness” (*The Posthuman Condition*, 20).

Both posthumanism and transhumanism are strongly influenced by liberal humanism. Where posthumanism critiques it, transhumanism embraces it. Though they have opposing ideas, they do have multiple things in common. Both movements developed in the late 20th century and react to the developing and upcoming technologies. In light of these technologies, they generally find the “traditional boundaries between the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, the organic and the machinic, as well as the spiritual and the material [to] become increasingly brittle and unconvincing” (*Palgrave Handbook*, 1-2). This includes the examination of the convergence of biological and technological parts to the point where they become increasingly indistinguishable (*The Posthuman Condition*, iv). Both stances believe that technology plays a vital role in the new way we understand humanity. Hauskeller et al. even go as far as to state that “...the key factor in the appearance and development of posthumanism as an interdisciplinary discourse is the underlying claim that technology is the missing ingredient in Enlightenment humanism’s recipe for what constitutes being human” (*Palgrave Handbook*, 3).

‘Posthumanism’ here refers to both transhumanism and posthumanism. It is often used as an overarching term that includes a multitude of different philosophical branches that are concerned with (changing) anthropocentrism in the 21st century. To make things less confusing, I have chosen to refer the branch of ‘the posthuman condition’ as ‘posthumanism’. This emphasizes not only the opposition between posthumanism and transhumanism, but also

affirms that posthumanism wants to move past the limiting and dangerous liberal humanist ideas (the posthuman literally signifies “the surpassing of the human condition” (*The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, 1)), which transhumanism does not.

But what exactly is posthumanism? According to posthumanist scholars, which include influential thinkers like Robert Pepperell and Rosi Braidotti, the humanist idea of human superiority or a human-centred universe has ended. It is therefore not just a post-humanism, but also a post-dualism and a post-anthropocentrism.⁴ Central to the movement, is the realization that “human beings do not exist in the sense in which we ordinarily think of them, that is as separate entities in perpetual antagonism with a nature that is external to them” (*The Posthuman Condition*, 22). It is thus centred around changing a humanist, human-centred worldview, as is evident in the critique on liberal humanism that I have written about earlier. Their main critique towards this worldview is that some humans have been considered less or more than human. Posthumanism refuses this hierarchy, and views human experience as fluid and changing, as the combined experience of all human beings. This is related to their critique of the liberal humanist ideas of binaries between nature and humanity. It is this idea of humanity existing separate from everything else, which is tied to the idea that humanity is better or superior to other species, that is known as the nature – culture divide.⁵ Posthumanism’s critique on the nature-culture divide is one of the most important features of the movement.

The influential posthumanist and ecofeminist scholar Rosi Braidotti has written about the damaging quality of this divide and argued about its superficial nature. In her book

⁴ “Transhumanism/Posthumanism,” *Posthuman Glossary*, p. 439.

⁵ To be clear, this idea is completely artificial. Darwin’s evolutionary theory proved that humanity is just a product of evolution, which was a “dramatic blow [...] to human exceptionalism, and its basis in patriarchal hierarchies” (*Bloomsbury Handbook*, 1). Yet people continue to believe liberal humanist ideas of human superiority, transhumanists like Steve Fuller included (*The Proactionary Imperative*, 6).

Posthuman Feminism, she states that the ‘nature’ category in this division has become “a corrupt and mistrusted category” (70). She adds to this that

appeals to nature and to a naturalized world order are a tactic that the patriarchal, capitalist, neo-colonial system uses to lend legitimacy to the social structures it has created. It allows for an uneven distribution of power, for the benefit of those who most approximate the dominant ideal of ‘Man’. (70-71)

In other words, the nature-culture divide is not just about humanity versus nature. The latter extends to humans who fall outside the Eurocentric, male-oriented ideals of humanity. As Braidotti states, “the nature-culture divide translates into real-life discriminations, the concrete loss of social, legal, economic, and symbolic rights by people who differ from the dominant norm of ‘Man’” (71).

This discrimination also extends to exploitation, which can especially be seen in colonialist practices.⁶ This does not just include the exploitation of humans, but also that of the natural world. Non-humans – animals, plants, landscapes – have been viewed as nothing more than resources in the European capitalist system. In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, Karkulehto et al. write, similar to Braidotti, that “the cultural meanings given to nonhuman animals often reflect and coincide with the attitudes and assumptions held toward repressed or marginalized groups” (3). This is connected to how they are treated and viewed, which is as “lesser, weaker, subordinate, or substandard” (3).

The posthuman condition condemns this binary chasm between humanity and the natural world. This is why Braidotti argues for a ‘posthuman convergence’:

⁶ Colonialism is such a broad and different (academic) subject that this would take too much time to analyse more in depth.

a zigzagging pattern of conjunctions and crossovers (and/and) rather than a geometric grid of drastic selections (either/or). My code word to describe this approach is transversality; it is about making affective connections across the ecological, the social, the technological and other domains (103).

Braidotti thus wants humans in the posthuman age to have hybrid identities: to be both part of humanity, but also have technological and non-human qualities. This differs from the hybridity in transhumanism because it is less concerned with using these qualities to strengthen human ideals, and more with proving that humanity is a part of the natural world.⁷ This approach diminishes the nature-culture divide, as well as prejudices and discriminations against marginalized groups. Through interconnection and recognition of other perspectives, in the form of hybrid identities, she hopes that it is acknowledged “that ‘we’ (humans and non-humans) are in *this* environment together” (103).⁸

Humanity’s relation to other species, but also the impact that humanity has (had) on them and the planet is thus contemplated. Instead of believing in strict binaries, posthumanism believes that the human body is a “site of constant negotiation”, where the traditional humanist binaries are no longer existent and fixed, but the human body is instead seen as constantly changing (Hassler-Forest, 68). Humans are thus seen as inherently hybrid creatures. Donna Haraway, whose works have laid the foundation for posthumanist theory, argues in her famous essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” that humanity’s integration with technology can be used to break free of the limitations of hierarchical and binary boundaries. This is very different from transhumanism’s way of defining cyborgs, as I will explain now.

Transhumanism has been referred to as “humanism on steroids” (*Bloomsbury*

⁷ Discussing the definition of ‘nature’ or ‘the natural world’ is quite paradoxical, since it implies that “we – humanity – are somehow objective and distinct from the natural world” (Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, 7-8). Yet for this purpose it is unavoidable and necessary.

⁸ This is notably very different from the individual and binary-based perspective that liberal humanism and transhumanism have.

Handbook of Posthumanism, 4). It can be defined as “the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations and to arrive at fuller fruition; it is the realization that both individual and social developments are processes of self-transformation” (“Knowledge, Morality, and Destiny,” Julian Huxley, 139). To overcome our human limitations, transhumanists want to use technology, and argue that we already are using this in certain ways. This is not just about beauty or strength, but “about having the right to use the great range of technologies for increasing the likelihood of living a good life, that is, the human right of morphological freedom” (‘Transhumanism’, Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, 41). This goal can be promoted by “overcoming or maybe even better twisting who we are and by turning into a posthuman” (41). This ‘posthuman’ is thus an ultimate goal of transhumanism.⁹ Steve Fuller also calls it ‘humanity 2.0’ and writes that transhumanism is “the realization of a potential that will enable it [humanity] to break decisively with its natural history” (‘The Unity of Humanity’, 178). So, whereas posthumanism is more concerned with “turn[ing] ‘humanity’ into a chapter in the history of the Earth that is about to conclude”, transhumanism wants to turn humanity “into the pretext for a journey of cosmic import that has barely begun” (‘The Unity of Humanity’, 178).¹⁰ This is why Fuller calls the former ‘downwingers’ and the latter ‘upwingers.’

Posthumanist scholars (obviously) critique transhumanism. This lies mostly in the fact that it does not change any of the liberal humanist values that they are against, such as male domination and anthropocentrism. By creating a posthuman, those humanist values are even strengthened. Besides this, there is also the critique that “as long as an improved human is achieved, the rest hardly matters” (*Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, 2).

Transhumanists believe that humanity can be fully integrated with technology, and that

⁹ This can be confusing, terminology-wise. The goals and ideas of posthumanism differ so much from those of transhumanism that the confusion hopefully is not too big, though.

¹⁰ Because this is written by a transhumanist scholar, the reflection on what posthumanism specifically entails is different than how posthumanist scholars view it.

technology can be used as a tool and weapon. Posthumanism is extremely sceptical about this, arguing that a seamless hybridization where humanist values are unchanged is not possible. The opposition between posthumanism and transhumanism is thus quite big. But, like Rosendahl et al. wrote in the introduction to *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism*, “both sides matter, and indeed become more relevant by challenging each other” (2).

In superhero films specifically, transhumanism is more often seen than posthumanism. It can be seen in characters such as Iron Man, who embody transhumanist values: he is a glorification of technological prosthetics, which has the consequence that his human vulnerability is forgotten (Hassler-Forest, 74). His iron suit thus functions to protect his more vulnerable human self, and makes him an upgraded, better human. Transhumanist values like these can be seen in most Marvel films, since most Marvel heroes are ideal images whose superpowers function to aid them to become better humans. But because superhero films feature human hybridity, with technology and superhuman powers, they do have the potential to contain more posthumanist values. As I will argue, in the case of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, this is especially true.

Method

I have chosen to analyse *Guardians of the Galaxy* and its spinoffs because the films open opportunities within the Marvel superhero genre through their setting in space. By being removed from earth, the need to comply with the ‘normal’ humanist framework that exists there is considerably less. Therefore, there are more opportunities for different ideas and forms of hybridization that go beyond the liberal humanist framework. To prove this, I will analyse the characters of Peter Quill and Rocket Raccoon. These characters both have a complicated and hybrid relation to technology, in different ways. I have chosen to do a character analysis of these two characters specifically because they both have a different, but

obvious, relation to posthumanism and transhumanism.

Quill resembles for the most part a traditional Marvel superhero, and is therefore connected to transhumanism. He is seamlessly integrated with the technology he uses, which supports his character greatly. Yet I will argue that there is a move towards posthumanism, which can be seen in his character development in the later *Guardians* films, but most especially in the character of Rocket. This hybrid animal embodies elements from both sides of the nature-culture divide, and thus critiques it, and the anthropocentric worldview that is connected to it, in a way that is related to posthumanism.

Since most Marvel films can be categorized as transhumanist, and the main goal for this thesis is to prove that there is a move towards posthumanism that can positively influence these films, I will begin by analysing transhumanism as it is present in Peter Quill's character and then move to posthumanist elements in Rocket Raccoon's character. The analysis will mostly focus on the way the characters act and the way that other characters behave towards them. This encompasses dialogue, but I will also pay special attention to the way the characters develop during the course of the films. I generally begin with analysing the characters as they appear in the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* film, and then analyse how they change during the course of the (other) film(s) and connect it to the academic theory of the topic.

For this analysis, I have made many choices of what I wanted to analyse and what not. This is a textual analysis, which means that I did not consider the intention of the filmmakers or the opinions of viewers, but looked solely at the films. Even though transhumanist and posthumanist characteristics are present in the films, this has nothing to do with the purposes of the filmmakers. Furthermore, I also did not pay special attention to visual aspects, nor did I include every important character in the *Guardians* trilogy or involve other Marvel films in the analysis. The involvement of these things would have contributed to the analysis in

different ways, but I deliberately chose to focus on these two characters, their actions, dialogue and their relation to other characters in the films in particular, because I think these characteristics hold the most obvious relation to posthumanism and transhumanism. This can for example be seen in Quill's relation with his father, and Rocket's reaction to others looking down on him. In comparison to this, the soundtrack of the film and mise-en-scène elements such as costumes, lighting, or camera placement – which are equally important elements in the film – are not connected to post- and transhumanist to the same degree.

This research is important because the liberal humanist, and by extension transhumanist, worldview is damaging and restrictive for many people. A change is thus necessary, and posthumanism offers this. Popular films like Marvel reach a broad audience, but mostly support the existing worldview. It would thus be extra valuable if they change the normal, damaging worldview into one that is less restrictive. In this research I want to examine characteristics that point to this change. While I am aware that Marvel films predominantly are not revolutionary in the ideas they communicate to their audience, it could prove that things are changing for the better.

Chapter 1 – Peter Quill and Transhumanism

This chapter analyses how transhumanist features can be seen in the main character of *Guardians of the Galaxy*: Peter Quill, also known as Star-Lord. Previously I have already given a brief introduction of transhumanism, yet I will elaborate on that theory here. I will answer the following question: “How can Peter Quill be seen as a transhumanist superhero?” To do this, I will especially analyse the ways in which Quill can be seen as an ‘enhanced human,’ according to transhumanist values. First, I will analyse the ways in which Quill’s relationship with technology corresponds with (liberal) humanist and transhumanist values. Then, I will focus on his relationship with his father, a Celestial named ‘Ego’, and the consequential complexity this has for his character’s relation with liberal humanism, transhumanism and posthumanism.

A Transhumanist Cyborg

Peter: “I found something inside of myself. Something incredibly ... heroic. I mean, not to brag, but objectively...” (Guardians of the Galaxy, 1:08:13-1:08:44).

Transhumanism is a movement that wants technology to be used to prolong the human health span. Yet most transhumanist scholars want to take this a step further. For example: technology can be used for prosthetics and glasses, but DNA can also be adjusted pre-birth to ensure good genetics and prevent things such as a loss of eyesight, making the need for glasses redundant. Ron Novy states that “These enhancement possibilities are generally seen as a continuation of the traditional function of medicine and technology: to improve physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being and to provide for the possibility of surpassing limits” (“Transhumanism”, 149). Continuing this development, transhumanism’s goal is for humans to be entirely integrated with technology, reaching a posthuman state. The change from technological interference to superpowers as they are seen in Marvel films thus seems

plausible.

There are a lot of problems with this, one of which, according to posthumanist scholars, is transhumanism's connection to traditional liberal humanist worldviews. This connection is not exactly well hidden, since the movement's acronym is the symbol 'H+', signifying 'Humanity Plus' (*Posthuman Glossary*, 439). Elsewhere it is also referred to as 'humanism on steroids' (*Bloomsbury Handbook*, 4) and 'humanity 2.0' ("The Unity of Humanity", 178). This shows that transhumanism is strongly rooted in (liberal) humanist values, which posthumanist scholars critique because "the transhumanist perspective [...] allows for the hybridization of human organisms and technology, without, at the same time, upsetting traditional binary distinctions, most notably gender difference" (Hassler-Forest, 71). This means that even though transhumanism claims to move towards a technologically improved humanity, I would argue that, even though it physically looks very different, it has the same underlying values of liberal humanism: seeing humanity as central in the world, specifically the white, straight, Eurocentric male.

The way which transhumanism's goal, becoming a posthuman, will eventually happen is not universally agreed upon. Yet they are all based on the need to move away from current human limitations with the use of technologies that are both currently already established and those that are just emerging (Sorgner, 42). One of these ways is based on a biological integration with technology: becoming a cyborg. Sorgner regards the "gene technologies as well as cyborg technologies as the most promising means for expanding human boundaries" (43). It is especially probable because we already have a lot of techniques related to this, that are already in use.

Novy for example argues that Spider-Man's aunt could be considered a cyborg, in his chapter "'Transhumanism', Or is it right to make a Spider-Man?": "Aunt May is a cyborg. Her visual acuity far exceeds that of any member of her bridge club. Her access to stored

information is incalculably greater than that of her ancestors. Her body's metabolism is alterable more or less at will" (145). This indeed seems like science-fiction technology, but really refers to her glasses, the newspaper she is reading and her coffee. This does not mean that everyone who uses these forms of technology is automatically a cyborg, but that this dependency and integration with technology is similar, albeit in a less technologically advanced way, than the cyborgs in superhero films.

Peter Quill can also be seen as a cyborg. His 'supernatural' abilities in the first film are almost exclusively connected to the technology he uses, in ways that are quite similar to Iron Man's suit. Like Iron Man, Quill also has the ability to fly and breathe in space, with weapons to defeat his enemy's. Quill's most notable cyborg qualities are his mask, rocket boosters and weapons. The mask makes him able to breathe in space. With its red glowing eyes, it also makes him appear more than human.



Figure 1: Peter Quill's mask.

The figure above is from a scene where Quill recovers his Walkman after they have escaped prison. As he makes his escape, he is able to fly through space with the help of rocket boosters on his feet. Combined with the mask, allowing him to breathe, this extends his human abilities to the point where he is able to do and withstand much more than the other

Guardians. Next to these items, Quill also has two guns and affinity with other weapons, which are just as essential in the space-setting. He uses these items so fast and naturally that they seem organically integrated with him.

A good example of this can be seen in the opening scene, where Quill escapes with the orb (00:09:10-00:09:30). He is able to escape because his equipment is integrated to the extent that he just needs to touch it to activate it. In less than two seconds, he activates both his mask and rocket boosters. These pieces are on him during most of the film, but not in an obvious way: they seem to simply appear when he wants them to. This is similar to the approach that Marvel has in other films, such as Spider-Man's mechanical suit (in the MCU films), and Iron Man's suit after *The Avengers* (2012). These notably have the same effortless integration, appearing quickly when they want them to. His pieces of gear are thus so entirely integrated in his personality that this essentially makes him a cyborg.

The problem that posthumanist scholars see with this hybridity between organic matter and technology is that, even though the technology is an important part of the superheroes' identity, there is a clear boundary between the character and the technology they use. This

successful incorporation of technological enhancements and modifications therefore points more directly towards the transhumanist perspective, which allows for new hybrid organic-technological identities to emerge without the simultaneous redefinition of traditional humanist categories. (Hassler-Forest, 71)

In other words, the 'hybrid organic-technological identities' – which are superheroes like Peter Quill, in this case – have the possibility to change the traditional humanist values on which they are based. But instead, the technology functions to support these humanist elements of their identities. Even though transhumanism thus claims to be about an "evolved humanity" because it is built on a humanist structure, this means that the human-centred,

male-dominant structures are not changed.

This can be seen in binaries where the white, human, heteronormative male is dominant, which is also present in *Guardians of the Galaxy* through Peter Quill's character. The technology that Quill uses does not complicate his character, but "effectively makes him *more human, more complete*" (Hassler-Forest, 73).¹¹ The technology seems an extension of his organic self. This is problematic in the film because it essentially re-establishes a human-centred, male-dominant worldview in space. It can be seen through multiple things in the film, most obviously in Quill's code-name: Star-Lord. It suggests a male and human-centred worldview with implicit superiority over others. Though this title and its implication are not taken seriously throughout the first film,¹² the ironic connotations change with the theme of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, about which I will write in the second subchapter.

Ego and Star-Lord

Ego: "Only we can remake the universe. Only we can take the bridle of the cosmos and lead it to where it needs to go" (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, 1:20:44 – 1:20:56).

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 revolves around Peter's relation with his Celestial father. This character, Ego, is related to religious themes, as is already evident when they visit his planet, and the song 'My Sweet Lord' by George Harrison plays on the background. After lyrics such as "My sweet Lord (Hallelujah)" (00:42:54), Ego reveals that he is a Celestial:

GAMORA. You own a planet and can destroy two dozen spaceships without a suit.

What are you exactly?

EGO. I'm what they call a Celestial, sweetheart.

¹¹ This citation was originally about Iron Man's mechanical heart, functioning as an "authentic extension of his organic humanist self" (73). It can also be applied to Peter Quill's character.

¹² See *Guardians of the Galaxy*, (00:08:55 – 00:09:07).

PETER. A Celestial. Like a ... god?

EGO. Small 'g', son. At least on the days I'm feeling humble as Drax.

(00:44:09 – 00:44:32)

The connection between religion (Christian or otherwise) and Ego is obvious in this interaction: he is the 'sweet Lord' of this planet.¹³

This relates to transhumanism, especially Steve Fuller's theory, who is an influential transhumanist scholar. In his book *The Proactionary Imperative*, he writes about the aspiration of transhumanism to become posthuman, and "overcome the body of one's birth" (129). He connects this to Christianity, arguing that this is why Jesus has historically been so significant: it "depicts his resurrection as having redeemed the idea of a humanity created 'in the image and likeness' of God, but also in the progressive secular world, where Jesus stands for the refusal to accept that one's starting position in life determines one's destiny" (129). This is not only connected to the Enlightenment's version of humanism, but also to the 'human enhancement' that is the centre of transhumanist theory.

Ego's explanation of how he evolved relates to how Fuller interprets Jesus, and the Christian idea of humanity created as being like God: "I created what I imagined biological life to be like, down to the most minute detail" (00:45:44 – 00:45:48). This dialogue is supported by images, showing that Ego's image of biological life to be exactly like a human being. Even when, later in the film, we learn that Ego can take on different forms, he is shown with a human nervous system and always returns to the likeness of a human.¹⁴ This is important, because it corresponds to the Christian idea that Fuller also wrote about, of God creating man in His likeness. In this case, though, it is a god creating himself to be the ideal

¹³ The religious connotations in the film are not related to a particular religion, but since Fuller's theory relates especially to Christianity, I will mostly refer to Ego in these terms.

¹⁴ After Ego reveals to have put a tumor in Peter's mother's head, Peter shoots him. Ego responds with "I tried so hard to find the form that best suited you," and temporarily changes into David Hasselhoff (1:29:56 – 1:30:09).

biological life: man.

This is a very extreme and dangerous form of liberal humanism, which Steve Fuller also addresses in his chapter “The Unity of Humanity,” writing that “Problems start once this phrase is taken to imply that certain human creations may enjoy the elevated status of their human creators because, in some sense, those works also bear humanity’s divine inspiration” (172). In other words, this is a form of human exceptionalism that has also been seen in the past and present with the privileging of certain humans who ‘look’ more similar to the image of God than others: being male, straight, and white. The rest of humanity, and in extension all other species (which, in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, are a lot), are thus automatically seen as less important and valuable.

It also has clear connections with Peter’s ideals, as is evident in his codename Star-Lord. Ego takes advantage of this desire for power, persuading him to join his cause. He does this by teaching him to control his powers and playing catch with him, acting like a father would (00:55:41 – 00:56:10). He makes Peter feel exceptional, which is evident in his interpretation of “Brandy (You’re a Fine Girl)” by Looking Glass:

Peter, you and I, we’re the sailor in that song. *He came on a summer’s day. Bringing gifts from far away.* Like the child I put in your mother or the freedom you brought Gamora. *Brandy, you’re a fine girl. What a good wife you would be. My life, my love, my lady is the sea.* The sea calls the sailor back. He loves the girl, but that’s not his place. The sea calls upon him as history calls upon great men. And sometimes we are deprived the pleasures of mortals. (1:19:20 – 1:20:01)

He then tells him that he is immortal, and that “it is a tremendous responsibility. Only we can remake the universe. Only we can take the bridle of the cosmos and lead it to where it needs to go” (1:20:44 – 1:20:56). Noticeably, the interpretation of the song is focused on how exceptional Ego and Peter are, how different from the other Guardians and from Gamora

specifically.

This gap that Ego tries to create between Peter and the others relates closely to Fuller's theory on 'upwingers' and 'downwingers', which is the subject of multiple of his books. He writes that there has always been two opposing ways of self-understanding within humanity. The first is promoted by the evolutionary theory and ecology, and sees humanity as embedded in the natural environment. The other way wants humanity to be ultimately embedded in technology and wants to enhance and even replace the biological bodies we were born in (*Preparing for Life in Humanity 2.0*, 2). As Fuller writes: "In the former case, we are animals with only a temporary edge over the rest of nature, in the latter we are beings with the capacity to surpass all other animals indefinitely, in which case 'nature' simply refers to the set of obstacles in the way of realising that mission" (2). Elsewhere, he refers to these ways as 'downwingers' and 'upwingers' or 'Infra-Foucault' and 'Ultra-Hegel' respectively. Relating it to posthumanist terms, they also stand for posthumanism and transhumanism.¹⁵

Ego's ideology can be seen as a very extreme form of posthumanism or downwingers, since his power comes from within himself and is not enhanced by any technology. The Expansion, Ego's purpose in life, is even about expanding his biological life form through the galaxy, which is similar to the behaviour of all biological life.¹⁶ His power is passed on biologically, and only with Peter's help can he improve his powers. Peter and most of the other Guardians, on the other hand, use technology to enhance themselves. Transhumanism is thus portrayed as 'good' in the film. When Peter rejects Ego's extreme goal, he essentially rejects posthumanism in favour of the benevolent transhumanism:

EGO. You are a god. If you kill me, you'll be just like everybody else.

¹⁵ Fuller, being a transhumanist scholar, sympathizes with the upwingers.

¹⁶ Likewise, it is similar to capitalism because of the endless drive for expansion and domination of others. This is related to themes of the first film, where the bad guy, Ronan, wanted to destroy an entire civilization.

PETER. What's so wrong with that?

(1:56:22 – 1:56:33)

Likewise, following Ego's purpose would force him to change his humanity. Since the transhumanist values in the film function to support this humanity, this would not be agreeable. This seems to make him the ultimate transhumanist hero.

But Ego does not just embody an extreme form of posthumanism. He also has strong liberal humanist and patriarchal values, as I have written before. His connection to Christianity, which inherently is strongly hierarchical and patriarchal, embodies this. It makes him represent a human-centred worldview in which men are dominant. This can also be seen in his interpretation of "Brandy (You're a Fine Girl)", where he argues that both he and Peter are better than the women they love. Quill's rejection of Ego is complicated by this, since these liberal humanist values, that privilege white, straight men, are also strongly present in transhumanism. In rejecting Ego, Peter thus does not just reject posthumanism, but also a part of transhumanism that corresponds with the patriarchal liberal humanist values that Ego embodies.

This is obviously contradictory because it both supports and rejects transhumanism in particular. Posthumanism, in an extreme form, is represented as bad, but at the same time these values correspond with the so-called 'good' transhumanist and humanist values. This means that posthumanism is not entirely renounced. Posthumanism's rejection of liberal humanist values is supported, which opens up possibilities for hybridization and other, more posthuman, values. Peter Quill is thus not a perfect transhumanist hero, as might be suspected from this cyborg relation with technology explained in the first subchapter. In his rejection of Ego, transhumanist values that were previously considered good are suddenly renounced. Quill's character becomes partially open to forms of hybridization as it is seen in

posthumanism. In the next chapter, I will analyse how these hybrid elements are even more explicit in Rocket Raccoon's character.

Chapter 2 – The Hybrid Identity of Rocket Raccoon

This chapter is concerned with posthumanist theory. Whereas Peter Quill is portrayed as a mostly transhumanist hero, Rocket Raccoon shows, as I will argue in this chapter, posthumanist characteristics. The question I will answer is the following: “How does Rocket Raccoon’s hybrid relation with technology and biology make him a posthumanist superhero, that modifies Marvel’s usual transhumanist films?” Since Rocket is a raccoon, given human-like intelligence through cybernetic experiments, he transgresses the important nature-culture divide. Critique on this liberal humanist and transhumanist divide is central to posthumanism.¹⁷ I will analyse how Rocket relates to theory of the nature-culture divide in the first part of this chapter. In the second part, I will examine how he comes to accept his hybrid identity.

The Nature-Culture Divide

“Subject 89P13. Calls itself ‘Rocket’. The result of illegal genetic and cybernetic experiments on a lower life form” (Guardians of the Galaxy, 00:21:58 – 00:22:03).

As I have written more extensively in the first chapter, liberal humanism revolves around the idea that humanity is central in the world. Transhumanism, by extension, believes in humanity’s centrality in the entire cosmos, as Fuller wrote in his book *The Proactionary Imperative* (8). Posthumanism breaks with this, often neglected, assumption: “that humanity is somehow separate from the rest of the universe and constitutes a centre for orientation – a basic set of measures, values, and points of views – from which no judgment can escape” (*The Bloomsbury Handbook*, 1). This decentring of the anthropocentric worldview is posthumanism’s main concern (*Posthuman Glossary*, 439).

In the introduction I have written extensively about the nature-culture divide. This

¹⁷ See Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*, 2.

constructed concept that separates humanity from the natural world has negative consequences for both nature and those that do not resemble liberal humanism's ideal human. This is why Rosi Braidotti argues for a 'posthuman convergence': for humans to become hybrid through integration with technology and the natural world will make the nature-culture divide lose its influence. This 'posthuman convergence', though meant for humans, can also be applied to Rocket Raccoon. He is a good example of a character crossing the nature-culture divide, since he has gained a (super)human intelligence through technological experiments. He is neither fully animal nor human, but possesses qualities of both. What is especially relevant about him is that he does not acknowledge this himself, especially in the first film.

The interactions he has with others make it clear that the more human-like characters in the film do not see him as an equal.¹⁸ The most obvious example of this is when, in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the Guardians are sent to jail, and Rocket is referred to as "subject 89P13" (00:21:58). The guard says that he "calls *itself* 'Rocket'" and refers to him as a "lower life form" (00:21:59 – 00:22:03). This makes it clear that – at least in Xandar, which is the society where the guard comes from – there is a strong divide between nature and culture. The word choice of "lower life form" suggests that there is a hierarchical difference between creatures. Since Rocket does not physically resemble a human, but a non-talking animal, his lesser value is probably based on this.¹⁹ Another way in which he is devaluated is through a running joke of other characters calling Rocket names like "vermin", "rodent" and "rat".²⁰ Especially in the beginning of the first film, the characters say this to insult him. This suggests that, because the characters come from different societies throughout the galaxy,

¹⁸ With 'human-like' I mean characters resembling humans in most physical aspects, except for small changes, such as bright green or pink skin.

¹⁹ Christopher Manes' article "Nature and Silence" elaborates on the language aspect in the nature-culture divide.

²⁰ See *Guardians of the Galaxy* (00:53:39), (00:48:55) and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (00:40:25).

they all initially do not see him as an equal. It means that the nature-culture divide is deeply rooted throughout the film's universe.²¹

This makes Rocket's position as a combination of animal physique and superhuman intelligence through technological means very remarkable. In *Posthuman Feminism*, Braidotti states that "bodies are neither natural nor cultural but in constant process between them, as a heterogeneous assemblage of complex relational components" (12). This viewpoint from posthumanism differs from the transhumanist outlook that I have discussed in the first chapter. Posthumanist scholars see identity as hybrid and constantly changing, but in transhumanist superheroes like Iron Man, and, to a lesser extent, Peter Quill, this hybridity is viewed as stable and coherent. But where Peter Quill's hybrid body makes him "*more human, more complete*" (Hassler-Forest, 73), Rocket has a more complicated relationship with his hybrid identity. Like Quill, he is a cyborg being in the sense that technology constitutes an important part of his hybridity. It is such an important part of him, in fact, that he does not seem to have a connection to his biological identity at all, especially in the first film where he does not even know what a raccoon is:

PETER. I ain't about to be brought down by a tree and a talking raccoon.

ROCKET. What's a raccoon?

PETER. What's a raccoon? It's what you are, stupid.

ROCKET. Ain't no thing like me, except me.

(00:22:59 – 00:23:12)

Although he says this last statement in a proud way, this is a sensitive topic for him. He takes offense at being called a raccoon multiple times, such as in the second film, where he says:

²¹ Although the way the other Guardians treat him changes as they get to know him more, the way he is seen as a 'lower life form' is a subject that notably returns in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*.

“Don’t call me a raccoon!” (00:23:01 – 00:23:03). Even though this is technically what he is, he knows that others view him as inferior because of it. That he is offended and humiliated by this becomes especially clear halfway through *Guardians of the Galaxy*. When waiting to see a character called the Collector, they get drunk and Rocket gets in a fight with Drax, where Peter has to interfere:

ROCKET. Keep calling me vermin, tough guy! You just wanna laugh at me like everyone else!

PETER. Rocket, you’re drunk. All right? No one’s laughing at you.

ROCKET. He thinks I’m some stupid thing! He does! Well, I didn’t ask to get made! I didn’t ask to be torn apart, and put back together, over and over, and turned into some... Some little monster!

PETER. Rocket, no one’s calling you a monster.

ROCKET. He called me ‘vermin’! She called me ‘rodent’! Let’s see if you can laugh after five or six good shots to your frickin’ face!

(00:53:55 – 00:54:35)

That Rocket says that he “didn’t ask to get made” is an especially important moment. It becomes clear that he does not see his hybridity as a positive or empowering thing, but as something that scarred and traumatized him.²² His relationship with technology thus does not have an inherently positive impact in his life.

His self-image of being “some little monster” is directly related to this interference of technology, which becomes even more evident and understandable in the third *Guardians of*

²² This is related to Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*. The monster, according to the *Palgrave Handbook*, can be seen as an early ‘posthuman’ (4).

the Galaxy film, where there are many scenes of his origin story. There, it becomes clear that he sees himself as the result of technological interference, which has impacted him to such an extent that he has forgotten his biological identity. This is an either/or mindset, to use Braidotti's terms. His denial of being a raccoon is a dualistic way of viewing identity (*either technology or biology*) which can be categorized as transhumanist. This dualistic, transhumanist way of viewing himself is mirrored in the way others see and treat him, but the other way around: they only view his biological identity, especially in the first two films. In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, the way the villain of the film refers to him is painfully similar to these first interactions but filled with much more malice. The way he is referred to as something unworthy and unequal relates to his self-image in the first film, where he called himself a "little monster" (00:54:21). In this world, where there is a seemingly unbridgeable gap between human-like cultures and nature, he is something that should not exist. His very existence goes against this divide, which is why it is obvious that he has problems with accepting himself.

Becoming Rocket Raccoon

Rocket: "Ain't no thing like me, except me" (Guardians of the Galaxy, 00:23:10 – 00:23:12)

These problems of self-acceptance described above are expressed in Rocket's inability to deal well with being patronized: he resorts to violence and constantly offends people throughout the films. This already becomes clear in his first scene in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, where he gives commentary of the people of Xandar – a culture that is similar to an urban society on Earth (00:15:34 – 00:16:13). His very first sentence in the film is: "what a bunch of losers. All of them in a big hurry to get from something stupid, to nothing at all. Pathetic" (00:15:34 – 00:15:41). This not only implies that he sees himself as different, but also encompasses his attitude towards others for the most parts of the other *Guardians* films:

he is often rude and offensive. This results in diminishing the chances of being accepted. This acceptance is directly linked to his crossing of the nature-culture divide: if he remains unequal to the other characters because he is seen as being closer to nature than the others, the attitude towards the nature-culture divide remains unchanged. It also means a lack of his own self-acceptance.

This changes in the second *Guardians* film, which elaborates on this behaviour. Through his interactions with the criminal Yondu, he is confronted with himself. Yondu sees that the insulting and violent behaviour are a way to conceal his actual feelings, which are insecure and scared:

YONDU. I know everything about you. I know you play like you're the meanest and the hardest, but actually you're the most scared of all. [...] I know who you are, boy. Because you're me. (01:24:39 – 01:25:34)

This is a common theme throughout the *Guardians* films: using violence, insults, or humour to hide actual feelings. Acknowledging this, which Yondu initiates, is a character development that continues in the third *Guardians* film.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3 expands upon Rocket's character development.²³

Rocket plays a central part in the film, especially through the many flashbacks of his traumatic past. The villain, someone called "The High Evolutionary", wants to make biological "lower life forms" evolve into intelligent beings. He uses genetic and technological manipulation to create the perfect society, an experiment that has continually failed.²⁴ This assumes that human evolution is the perfect way for all life forms to evolve, which can clearly be connected to transhumanist ideals: both are concerned with evolving into

²³ Unfortunately, I am not able to directly refer to specific scenes of the film since it was just released in theaters.

²⁴ This can also be looked at from the perspective of disability studies. Especially the other animal/machine hybrids in the film with which Rocket is imprisoned have clear connections to this.

something better, and see themselves as superior to nonhuman beings, to name the two obvious examples.

Important is that the High Evolutionary refers to Rocket solely as “89P13”, thus completely appropriating his identity and seeing Rocket as his sole creation. This relates to how Rocket refers to himself in the earlier *Guardians* films: as exclusively connected to technology. His name being ‘Rocket’ supports the High Evolutionary’s disregard for his biological past. But this changes in one of the most important moments in the third *Guardians* film. It is when Rocket is confronted with a cage filled with baby raccoons and sees the name tag, stating origins and the name ‘raccoon’, that he finally realizes and accepts his biological heritage. After this, the High Evolutionary confronts him in a final fight and screams that he is an abomination, a freakish little monster, and that he cannot think that he is anything more than that. Rocket replies that his name is “Rocket Raccoon.” It is a key moment in not just this film, but the entire *Guardians* trilogy. This new name implies a connection to both technology and nature: ‘Rocket’ being technological and referring to his constructed identity, which was what he used to solely identify himself with, ‘Raccoon’ being the newfound acceptance of his biological origins. It is a posthumanist change in the films, where the human is no longer central and superior. This is supported by the ending of the film, where Quill hands over his leadership of the Guardians to Rocket. It signifies that this change is not just symbolic, but that the departure from the anthropocentric worldview has real consequences.

This development is very similar to posthumanism’s goal, which Braidotti describes in her book *The Posthuman* as introducing “a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our policy and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (1-2). In the *Guardians* films, this is reflected upon on an even larger, universal, scale. Especially with the addition of the last *Guardians* film, there

are increasing posthuman influences that indicate a change in attitude towards humanity's relation to the natural world, and, in extension, minority groups. Since Rocket Raccoon possesses qualities of both sides of this previously unbridgeable chasm between nature and culture, his development and acceptance of his hybrid identity is an important contributor to change. His hybrid identity therefore is a positive, posthumanist impact on the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films and the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have answered the following research question: “In what ways can the hybrid characters in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) be read in both post- and transhumanist ways?” To answer this question, I started with giving an overview of the theoretical framework regarding posthumanism. There, I explained the main concepts of this thesis, such as liberal humanism, posthumanism, and transhumanism. These last two concepts are the most important for my research: they can be seen as opposites, and “indeed become more relevant by challenging each other”, as was written in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism* (2). As such, the analysis part of the thesis mirrors this statement: one part consists of transhumanist characteristics as they can be found in the character of Peter Quill, the other of the posthumanist characteristics of Rocket Raccoon.

In the first chapter of the character analysis, I analysed the transhumanist characteristics in Peter Quill’s character. I started with analysing his relation to technology, of which his mask and rocket boosters are the most notable, and argued that they are integrated into his character to such an extent that it essentially makes him a cyborg. The connection to transhumanism here is present in the way the technology functions to support his character: through the integration of technology, he has become a more complete human. This corresponds to the way most Marvel superheroes are portrayed, and is problematic because it re-establishes liberal humanist characteristics in a space setting. The second part of this chapter concerned Quill’s relationship with his father, a Celestial named Ego. Where Quill was related to transhumanism, Ego displayed extremified characteristics of posthumanism and liberal humanism. The simplified version of this argument is that Peter’s refusal of Ego’s purpose makes him conform even more to transhumanist ideals, yet since Ego also displayed strong liberal humanist and patriarchal values, this becomes more complicated. In rejecting an extremified form of posthumanism, at the same time, he accepts other posthumanist

values. This hybrid form of both trans- and posthumanist values in his character makes him not the perfect transhumanist hero that I initially assumed him to be. From a posthumanist perspective, this is a positive sign that points to a change in Marvel's attitude towards their superheroes.

The second chapter focused on the character analysis of Rocket Raccoon. In the chapter I argued that Rocket can be seen as a posthumanist superhero because he crosses the nature-culture divide and is part of both the nature and the culture 'side', thereby embodying the posthuman argument that the divide is constructed and does not coincide with reality. Yet in the films, especially the first, this divide is still very present. This can be seen in the way others treat him as less, for example by calling him names like 'rodent' and 'rat'. This contributes to Rocket's denial of being a raccoon, implying that he sees himself belonging to the 'culture' category whereas others view him as part of nature. His acceptance of his hybrid self is therefore stilted, but character development in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* and *3* makes him develop to the point where he calls himself 'Rocket Raccoon': a name that signifies his relation to both culture and nature. This posthumanist change in Marvel characters, that is also very evident in the change of leadership at the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, signifies the increase in posthumanist characteristics throughout the *Guardians* films.

In this thesis I have analysed transhumanist and posthumanist characteristics in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, especially the posthumanist developments. I think I have succeeded in this, especially in the character developments throughout the three films. But there is still room for further research on this topic. Since I specifically focused on two characters and their relations, dialogue and actions, further research could expand on this and analyse visual elements, different characters or other Marvel films. Since I have shown that throughout the *Guardians of the Galaxy* trilogy, there has been a move towards

posthumanism, I think it would be especially interesting to analyse Marvel's newest films and series and how they connect to transhumanism and posthumanism, to see if this posthumanist change continues. Of course, since this research is specifically about three particular Marvel films, and there are still plenty of transhumanist characteristics besides the posthumanist ones, this posthumanist shift is not enough to immediately change everyone's worldview. Yet I think that these changes and developments in the characters that I have analysed in this thesis signify a notable change in attitude towards posthumanism.

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