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ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN SCIENCE
FICTION: “BLINDSIGHT” BY PETER WATTS

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PREFACE

Blindsight (2006) by Peter Watts is a hard science fiction novel that presents the perspective that human evolutionary success is an accident, and the consciousness is useless. Consciousness, having been the object of study of numerous disciplines, has not yet been explained, and its inseparable nature from the human perception of life and self makes it challenging to fathom. Science fiction, traditionally set around assumptions in the realm of science, has often touched on the topic of consciousness. The problem of this study is the difficulties, implications, and limitations of the anthropocentric worldview that science fiction authors face when inventing novel approaches to consciousness.

This thesis explores how Blindsight (2006) uses narrative instruments to question assumptions about consciousness and anthropocentrism. It examines the novel's metaphor of consciousness as a "parasite" and its influence on portrayal of humanity. Furthermore, it analyses how the novel critiques anthropocentrism through its depiction of alien life forms and their modes of perception and cognition. The first aim of the study is to analyse how Watts sidesteps anthropocentrism in the novel. The second aim is to investigate how the "parasite consciousness" metaphor contributes to the novel's critique of anthropocentrism. The third aim is to study the usage of non-human entities in the novel to redefine what it means to be human.

This thesis consists of four parts. The Introduction explores the story behind the novel and discusses features of the science fiction genre. Chapter I "Anthropocentrism and Human Consciousness in Science Fiction" prepares the theoretical framework for the analysis: examines existing perspectives on consciousness and anthropocentrism. Chapter II "Sidestepping Anthropocentrism in "Blindsight"" explores the narrative elements of Blindsight (2006) and analyses the tools used in portraying consciousness and decentering anthropocentrism in the novel. The Conclusion summarises the research and comments on the research questions.

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INTRODUCTION

Science fiction literature serves as a profound medium for the exploration of complex philosophical and scientific concepts. A notable example of this is Peter Watts' "Blindsight" (2006), a novel that presents a unique and somewhat nihilistic perspective on consciousness and its role in evolution: rather than being an evolutionary advantage, it is seen as an inefficiency. The novel employs a variety of themes, including the first contact with an extraterrestrial civilization, the nature of consciousness, trans- and posthumanism, and the limitations of the human body and mind. It questions the understanding of identity, consciousness, intelligence, and what it means to be human when all aspects of existence are reduced to biological glitches. These themes challenge the anthropocentric paradigm that perceives human consciousness as an evolutionary apex.

The story unfolds in 2082, after a global event, the Firefall, which confirms the existence of extraterrestrial life. This event is marked by alien probes scanning Earth and transmitting a strong radio signal into space. In response, a spacecraft named Theseus is constructed, equipped with advanced technology to facilitate a manned exploration and First Contact mission. The crew of Theseus is a group of unique specialists: a linguist with multiple personalities, a biologist who has sacrificed neural pathways to enhance perception beyond human capabilities, and a soldier notorious for an act of treason. The crew is observed by a narrator, an analyst with half his brain removed, who translates their actions for superiors on Earth. The mission is directed by a vampire, depicted not as a supernatural entity but as an extinct human subspecies that evolved to prey on humans. They encounter Rorschach, an alien construct. While intelligent, it lacks self-awareness, operating purely on instinct. The novel's true horror is revealed towards the end, presenting a universe where consciousness, self-awareness, and associated empathy are unnecessary for advanced intelligence and creative thinking, being inefficient and leading to resource-wasting activities like art (Watts, 2006).

Watts (Ratio BG, 2018) shares that he started working on *Blindsight* (2006), aiming to offer a novel explanation for the function of consciousness. He initially assumed that consciousness must hold some benefit since natural selection would otherwise eliminate it. However, upon examining various functions attributed to consciousness, Watts discovered that non-conscious systems were capable of performing similar tasks. Learning, language, strategy, violence, artistry, discovery, and muscle movement all appeared to occur independently of consciousness. As Watts (Ratio BG,

2018) neared the deadline, he encountered difficulty identifying the role of consciousness. It seemed pointless, draining resources without delivering any advantageous outcome, comparable to a parasite or junk DNA. The author (Ratio BG, 2018) muses that this notion has dramatic implications from a narrative standpoint, presenting the possibility that one's innermost being may be devoid of inherent significance or perhaps even detrimental. A year following the release of *Blindsight* (2006), psychologist David M. Rosenthal (2007) argued that there appears to be no meaningful function associated with consciousness, which is rather incidental and holds no evolutionary benefits. According to Watts (Ratio BG, 2018), after the release he initially anticipated that somebody skilled in neuroscience would challenge his views, but instead, *Blindsight* (2006) became utilized as a textbook in neuroscience and philosophical courses.

An important concept for this study is anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism can be defined as the ethical stance that humans alone possess intrinsic value, while all other entities hold value only in their utility to humans (Kopnina et al., 2018). However, the classical understanding of anthropocentrism views it mainly from an ecological or ethical perspective and therefore does not cover all aspects of anthropocentrism necessary to analyse *Blindsight* (Watts, 2006). This necessitates an examination of how the theme of anthropocentrism is revealed within the fictional but plausible contexts of the science fiction genre. The way in which the concept of consciousness, or self, is explored in the works is of particular interest.

To greatly simplify, one's conscious experience constitutes one's entire world in the literal sense: both external and internal. Thoughts and emotions, perceptions of the body, time and sensory data, and the sense of self are all conscious experiences. Consciousness encompasses various aspects depending on the context in which it is used. In a general sense, consciousness refers to the state of being aware of and able to think about one's existence, sensations, thoughts, and surroundings. It involves subjective experiences and the ability to perceive, process, and respond to information (Consciousness (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), 2014). The phenomenon of consciousness raises questions about the nature of reality, the mind-body relationship, and the fundamental aspects of subjective experience. People have presumably wondered about the nature of consciousness throughout history. Signs pointing to this date back to the dawn of human civilization, with Neolithic burial practices providing early evidence of reflective thought about human consciousness (Mellars, 1999). Throughout history, reflections on the human self and the

nature of man and the world were expressed in philosophical reasoning, oracle divination, religions, folklore, and art in general. As something that forms the basis of what humans perceive as life, and has remained at the center of attention throughout human existence, consciousness nevertheless remains a mystery to humans today (Consciousness (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), 2014).

Changes in the public understanding of the phenomenon of consciousness can be traced through literature of any genre: purely technically, any story is a story about conscious experience and, therefore, indirectly reflects the author's idea of this complex phenomenon. The genre of science fiction, however, serves as a particular promising genre for this study. Science fiction implies a certain level of assumptions yet tends to make the causal connections between the current level of science and the possible future outcome seem plausible. Gunn (2014) describes that science fiction reflects humanity's current anxieties and brings possible risks of technological progress into the field of discussion by depicting plausible futures — envisioning where contemporary social trends and recent breakthroughs in science and technology might lead humanity.

The science fiction genre is a distinct branch of literature that explores the potential consequences and ramifications of scientific and technological innovations through narrative storytelling. Darko Suvin (1980) characterizes science fiction as a "literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (p. 48). This suggests that science fiction is defined by an interplay between near-replications of empirically observable environments and a "novum," or "a strange newness". Science fiction, in this context, challenges the effectiveness of the engagement with the familiar environment. It compels readers to analyze more critically the assumptions that shape the construction of meaning. Additionally, science fiction is seen by some scholars as a popular culture movement that develops and disseminates influential ideologies (Bainbridge, 1986). Scholes and Rabkin (1977) define it as a major force that sustains cultural advancement.

This thesis explores in which ways *Blindsight* (Watts, 2006) uses narrative instruments to challenge anthropocentric assumptions about consciousness. The research questions are:

In what ways does *Blindsight* (Watts, 2006) decenter anthropocentrism in its narrative?

How does the “parasite” metaphor contribute to the novel’s critique of anthropocentrism?

What is the role of human characters and non-human entities in the novel in redefining what it means to be human?

CHAPTER I ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN SCIENCE FICTION

1.1. Consciousness: Relevant Theories and Concepts

Throughout history, many attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of consciousness. The approaches can be divided into dualist and monist approaches, which, in turn, are subdivided into materialist and idealist approaches (Consciousness (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), 2014). Dualism posits that consciousness and the physical world are fundamentally different. It suggests that conscious experiences, although dependent on brain function, are not themselves fundamentally physical phenomena. To explain conscious experience, dualism accepts the need to consider some fundamentally non-physical properties, processes, forces, entities, substances, or laws. Materialism asserts that conscious experience is fundamentally a physical phenomenon, ultimately based on physical processes occurring in the brain. It denies the need for any fundamentally non-physical properties to explain consciousness. Idealism asserts that consciousness is the ground of all being. It states that the only thing knowable is consciousness, and thus one can never be sure of the existence of matter or the outside world.

In this study, the concept of consciousness is predominantly examined from the perspective of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline that studies the structures of experience and consciousness, including but not limited to perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, volition, bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, inclusive of linguistic activity (Brown, 2014). Central to these experiences is the concept of “intentionality,” a term coined by Husserl (Dowling, 2007) to denote the directedness of experience towards things in the world. This implies that consciousness is about something, and the experiences intend or represent things through specific concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, etc. These elements constitute the meaning or content of an experience and are distinct from the things they represent.

The phenomenological paradigm centers around the concept of “qualia,” which refers to the intrinsic, non-representational features of non-physical phenomenal objects like sense data, which determine the character of experiences (Brown, 2014). Qualia can be understood as the subjective qualities of experiences, such as the colors of the sunset, the taste of wine, or the pain of a sting. In his seminal work, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974), philosopher Thomas Nagel introduced

a “what it is like” concept, aimed at understanding consciousness from a subjective perspective. According to Nagel (1974), a being is considered conscious if there is a subjective way the world appears or seems from the creature’s mental or experiential point of view, or in other words, if there is “something that it is like” to be that creature. For instance, he suggests that bats are conscious because there is a unique way they experience their world through their echo-locatory senses. However, this mode of consciousness is inherently subjective and cannot be fully comprehended by humans, as human experiences and perceptions are fundamentally different from those of a bat.

In addition, one of the important for this study property of consciousness is its narrative features. Consciousness is commonly understood as a continuous and sequential narrative of experiences from the perspective of an individual, often referred to as the “stream of consciousness”. This idea, proposed by Dennett (Block, 1993), suggests that a person’s conscious mental states are those that appear in this ongoing narrative. It implies that human consciousness is not just a collection of isolated experiences, but rather a coherent, unfolding story that a person tells themselves.

Despite consciousness being closely tied to the brain, it possesses unique properties that are not captured by understanding the brain alone. The so-called "hard problem" of consciousness refers to the challenge of explaining why and how subjective experiences or qualia arise from physical processes in the brain (Brown, 2014). This problem contrasts with the “easy problems” of consciousness, which involve explaining the functional, dynamical, and structural properties of consciousness. The hard problem posits that even after these “easy problems” are resolved, the reason behind functions being accompanied by experience remains unknown. Nagel (1974) argued that the subjective nature of consciousness cannot be fully explained by physical theories. Qualia, thus, are not adequately addressed or explained by physical descriptions of brain structure or function. This issue suggests that a complete physical explanation of consciousness may be fundamentally incomplete.

In “Being You: A New Science of Consciousness” (2021), neuroscientist Anil Seth presents a new way of understanding consciousness. Seth’s (2021) theory of consciousness has three main parts: conscious level, conscious content, and conscious self. Conscious level is how conscious, or aware, a being is. It can range from being fully awake to being in a coma or even brain dead. It also

includes unusual mental states caused by psychedelics. Conscious content is what a being is aware of, such as what they can see, hear, feel, think, or believe. The conscious self is a being's awareness of itself. Seth (2021) breaks this down into different aspects: bodily self (awareness of one's body), perspectival self (awareness of one's perspective), volitional self (awareness of one's will), narrative self (awareness of one's life story), and social self (awareness of one's social identity); these aspects coexist.

Seth's (2021) theory suggests that the brain operates using a combination of Bayesian inference and predictive modeling. This means that the brain is constantly making predictions about the world, and these predictions are then updated based on sensory input. This process results in what Seth (2021) refers to as a "controlled hallucination," (p. 15) which is the subjective experience of reality. He states that subjective experiences are created via "top-down" predictions rather than "bottom-up". In this context, the term "top-down" refers to the idea that perceptions are driven by these predictions, rather than being built up from sensory input, which would be a "bottom-up" process. This is a significant shift in understanding how humanity perceives and interacts with the world. Seth also introduces a new perspective on the problem of consciousness, which is different from the hard problem of consciousness. Rather than focusing on why or how one experiences subjective phenomena (qualia), Seth (2021) suggests that the more pertinent question is why specific patterns of brain activity are associated with specific conscious experiences. As a materialist, Seth believes that consciousness can be explained by the physical processes that occur within the brain. Therefore, Seth's (2021) approach to understanding consciousness involves explaining, predicting, and controlling these biological processes. He also states that consciousness is rooted in body, therefore, making computers smarter is not going to make them sentient.

1.2. Science Fiction and Studies on Consciousness in 20th Century

According to Feng & Liu (2023), the beginnings of science fiction are still debated among historians, with no definitive answer; however, it's widely accepted that Hugo Gernsback, an American editor of a science fiction magazine, created science fiction as a literary genre and publishing category. The Hugo Award, one of the most important awards in science fiction, was named after him. Gernsback defined "scientifiction" as a "charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (Feng & Liu, 2023). He admired novels that were grounded

in scientific facts, solved crises through inventions, and portrayed inventors as heroes. His emphasis on scientific facts and prophetic vision was influenced by his background as an electrical engineer and inventor, and his optimistic outlook on the future. This appealed to science fiction fans who were inspired by the spirit of invention and the potential societal changes brought about by technology (Feng & Liu, 2023). His definition gained popularity with his magazine and possibly shaped the early history of science fiction.

Such perceptions of the science fiction genre coincided with trends in scientific disciplines. The beginning of the century saw a decline in the scientific study of consciousness, particularly in the United States with the rise of behaviorism (Watson, 1924). Behaviorism posits that psychology is the scientific study of behavior, not the inner mind. It asserts that behavior can be explained without referencing mental events or internal psychological processes, instead attributing behavior to external environmental factors. Behaviorism dominated psychology from the 1920s to the 1950s, initially dismissing unobservable mental events. Consequently, the phenomenological side of consciousness remained out of focus. Initially, science fiction was seen as a tool to promote scientific knowledge and serve modernization, and it reflected contemporary scientific trends. Thus, it primarily represented the trend toward techno-progressivism in American society. *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) reflects this trend and the characteristic societal anxieties of those years regarding individualism/collectivism in its narrative.

Noam Chomsky's (1959) critique sparked the "cognitive revolution", challenging behaviorism (Virués-Ortega, 2006). Cognitive psychology, emerging in the 1960s, diverged from behaviorism's denial of unobservable mental processes and used mental processing models to explain human behavior. Its principles have been incorporated into various disciplines, including cognitive science, which also studies non-human subjects and artificial intelligence (Gardiner, 1985). Despite this, consciousness remained a largely neglected topic for several decades. The late 20th century witnessed a resurgence of scientific and philosophical research into the nature and basis of consciousness.

As Feng & Liu (2023) notice, the 1960s brought changes to the science fiction genre as well. With the rise of the New Wave movement and the radical assertion of new perspectives, The division

into "hard" and "soft" science fiction, fuelled by market competition between writers and publishers, became apparent. The "hard" part of science fiction retained the genre's inherent commitment to scientific facts and technical details, while the "soft" part retained inherent rules and experimented with the humanities and social sciences, including psychology, philosophy, religion, and anthropology. The authors of the "soft" part of the genre suggested that science fiction should leave behind the old and clichéd narrative plots. As a consequence of such a wide range of understanding of the genre, the definition of science fiction has expanded considerably, as has the range of themes.

1.3. Future of Humanity: Posthumanism and Transhumanism

One of the key features of the science fiction genre is the idea of social and scientific change as an inevitable and unavoidable part of life, as well as the representation of life in the dynamics of change (Guffey, 1976). This approach allows for clear connections to be made between the future options portrayed in science fiction and the foundation of the theoretical and practical knowledge available to the authors at the time of writing.

The acceleration of technological development at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries has brought the concept of the technological singularity into the public discourse. The technological singularity is a theoretical event that postulates the emergence of a future point in time when the pace of technological progress is so rapid that it exceeds the ability of humans to comprehend or predict the future. At this point, artificial intelligence and other forms of advanced technology will have surpassed human intelligence and will possess the ability to improve and evolve themselves at an exponential rate. This event is seen as a threshold beyond which the future development of humanity is uncertain and difficult to predict (Vinge, 2018). The concept of the technological singularity has had a significant influence on science fiction genre, providing a framework for exploring the implications of advanced technology and artificial intelligence, and raising ethical, moral, and societal questions about the future of humanity.

Frequently science fiction, focusing mainly on changes in the external world, also touches on the theme of human change, the unlocking of human potential and the elimination of the limitations and shortcomings of human nature. These changes can be described as internal, caused by new scientific information about human nature and humanity's place in the world. Changes may also

be of a more fundamental, physiological nature. This trend includes two key ideas both view the human as a dynamic, evolving frame rather than a fixed category and are often adopted by science fiction works: posthumanism and transhumanism. Transhumanism is a philosophical and scientific movement that advocates for the use of technologies like genetic engineering, cryonics, AI, and nanotechnology to enhance human capabilities, improve the human condition, and potentially evolve humans into an enhanced species, the “posthuman” (Latham & Milburn, 2014). Posthumanism, as the name implies, aims to push against or move beyond humanism, but it is an umbrella term covering many movements. For the context of this study posthumanism is best defined through science fiction. According to Latham and Milburn (2014), posthumanism in the context of science fiction literature often speculates on the posthuman future, whether imagined in biological, technological, or cultural terms. The posthuman represents a radical difference from the norms of human thought and embodiment. Science fiction represents the posthuman narratives through several main patterns. Some consider the posthuman in a biological sense, focusing on the evolutionary future of *Homo sapiens*. Others consider the posthuman in a technological sense, focusing on the synthetic, engineered successors of humanity or the idea of humans and machines linked ever more closely in the circuits of technoculture. Some narratives concern the posthuman in a cultural or epistemic sense, discovering that “human nature” is a tenuous social construct open to modification and revision.

The threats, complexities, and challenges to humanity and its culture described in the works may differ, but the ways in which these problems are addressed are common and tend to fall under one of two approaches. Posthumanism is based on the deconstruction of culture and socioeconomic constructs; transhumanism is based on the enhancing human capabilities and elimination of humanity’s limitations through technology. (Pisarski, 2021). Analysing these approaches in science fiction in the context of the self allows to find a balance “between posthumanist and transhumanist, anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric, and technophobic and technophilic approaches to our present.” (Pisarski, 2021, p.17)

Pordzik (2012) points out that science fiction literature itself anticipated the concept of transhumanism and the idea of the further transformation of humans (with the help of science and technology and bypassing the natural evolutionary development) into some kind of more perfect, new being. It has been suggested that transhumanism as such is largely caused by human’s

awareness of their imperfections and desire to use science and technology to eliminate inherent biological shortcomings.

1.4. Understanding Anthropocentrism in Science Fiction

Anthropocentrism can be defined as the ethical stance that humans are the sole entities with direct moral standing, as they are ends in themselves, while all other entities are means to human ends. Anthropocentrism can be further categorized into narrow and broad (or enlightened) anthropocentrism (Boyd, 2017). The former views humans in isolation, disregarding nonhuman relationships, while the latter understands humans in an ecological context, acknowledging their dependence on relationships with other entities and systems. These perspectives are often discussed in environmental ethics. Anthropocentrism, as a philosophical stance, dismisses the concept of Earth's finite resources. It posits that future scarcity issues will be resolved through technological advancements, thereby negating the necessity for legal environmental protections. In contrast, certain environmental ethicists advocate for an enlightened form of anthropocentrism, which acknowledges the ethical obligations humans have towards the environment due to its significant impact on human existence. Prior to the advent of environmental ethics, conservationists championed the intrinsic value of nature. This field subsequently posed a challenge to anthropocentrism by proposing biocentrism. Biocentrism perceives humans as merely one species among a multitude and acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature beyond its exploitation by humans. This perspective fundamentally shifts the focus from a human-centered view to a broader consideration of all life forms (Boyd, 2017).

Brave New World (Huxley, 1932) pictures the loss of individuality and manipulation of consciousness through conditioning and technological interventions. The drug *soma* serves to shield individuals from the stress and negative consequences of conflicts that society cannot entirely prevent, leaving soma-induced individuals unaware of their degradation and lacking full consciousness of their individuality (p. 31). Huxley's (1932) portrayal resonates with the ideas of philosophers such as Husserl (year), who emphasized the embodied nature of subjectivity or consciousness. According to Dowling (2007), Husserl's concept of the "minimal mind" refers to the mental sphere and capacities of the simplest conceivable subject. It shares similarities with the phenomenon of suppression of individuality in *Brave New World* (1932). This concept is echoed in Huxley's depiction of a society where individuals are molded into interchangeable parts, their

value solely derived from their contribution to the smooth functioning of society. The novel was written during the interwar period, a time of significant global changes, including the collapse of empires, revolutions, and the rapid development of science and technology. The period following World War I was marked by a departure from traditional values and an embrace of new, modern ideas. The post-war economic boom and the rise of mass production led to increased public consumption as individuals gained access to a broader range of commodities. Huxley (1932) acknowledges the advent of assembly lines by Henry Ford as a significant historical milestone, even structuring the chronology "after Ford" (p. 4). The plot reflects an anthropocentric view of the world in which humanity goes against the laws of nature, changing the world and itself for the good of the collective.

Malgrem (1993) discusses the concept of the alien actant in science fiction, emphasizing its role in exploring the nature of selfhood from the perspective of alterity. The alien actant can take various forms, such as a technologically transformed self, a mutant, a monstrous alter ego, or an extraterrestrial. There are two main lines of critique in alien-encounter science fiction. The first critique argues that the alien, regardless of its form, is never truly alien but rather a reflection of human traits. This critique also suggests that science fiction often relies on stereotypes in its character portrayal. The second line of critique, proposed by readers more familiar with the alien-encounter tradition, distinguishes between "anthropocentric" and "unknowable" aliens. The former are exaggerations of human traits, while the latter embody an essential strangeness. The degree of alienity is a function of the mental operation used to generate the alien, which can be either extrapolation or speculation. The anthropocentric alien serves as a mirror for humans, helping people examine their problems in a different light. The act of making a connection between human and alien forces people to explore what it means to be human (Malgrem, 1993). The term 'anthropocentrism' is sometimes confused with 'anthropomorphism', the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman entities. This conflation may reveal ethical parallels. Just as ontological anthropocentrism underscores the limitations of human experience, anthropomorphism reflects the human tendency to create relatable characters that communicate and participate in relationships in human-like ways, even if these characterizations do not reflect ecological reality. Narrow anthropocentrism, like anthropomorphism, reflects an invented reality, but anthropomorphism could also be seen as an attempt to address a moral shortcoming by enabling individuals to relate to nonhuman entities (Malgrem, 1993).

Anthropocentric thinking, which places humans at the center of ethical considerations, is sometimes conflated with anthropogenic action, or human-induced effects on the environment. This conflation may reveal deeper ethical implications. Some environmental thinkers argue that anthropocentrism underlies many current environmental issues, including climate change and pollution. They suggest that the genesis of environmental philosophy is a response to anthropocentric thinking, which has shaped the Western religious worldview since the Renaissance. Thus, White (1967) explores the relationship between religion, science, and the environment, establishing a connection between ethics and ecological degradation. White scrutinizes the Judeo-Christian worldview and its influence on the human-nature relationship. He traces a flawed relationship with the natural world to an interpretation of Genesis, where God grants man dominion over nature. White (1967) contends that the anthropocentric relationship with the natural world is the cause of the current environmental crisis. To address ecological problems, he argues, one must reassess the worldview or religious interpretations. White cites St. Francis of Assisi as an exemplar of humility, not just for the individual, but for humanity as a species, and advocates for a more inclusive moral community.

One of the examples of the environmental understanding of anthropocentrism in science fiction is Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). *Dune* focuses on ecology rather than technology. The story is set in the distant future and revolves around the desert planet Arrakis, the only source of a valuable substance called spice. *Dune* is among the earliest instances of climate fiction, a genre exploring the relationships and interactions between organisms and their environment. The *Dune* universe presents a vast interconnected ecosystem and navigates the complexities of interstellar politics and ecological intricacies. As noted by Parkerson (1998), Herbert perceived the emergence of a global problem, with no aspect separated from any other, encompassing social, political, and economic ecology. Thus, Parkerson states, a central theme of the novel is not merely ecology, but ecology examined in various contexts. "Herbert's decision to examine the messianic superhero against a backdrop of ecological concerns was no accident," writes Parkerson (1998). As Herbert (1980) stated, "superhero concept filled me with a concern that ecology might be the next banner for demagogues and would-be heroes...I could begin to see the shape of a global problem, no part of it separated from any other—social ecology, political ecology, economic ecology" (p. 2). Herbert (1965) reminds readers that a human being, even one ruling a galactic empire, is first and foremost

a human being as a member of a biological species: “saw the subliminal reservoir of each individual as an unconscious bank of memories going back to the primal cell of our common genesis” (p. 542).

Malmgren (1993) discusses the challenges associated with the topic of aliens and first contact in science fiction, particularly the depiction of the “unknowable alien”. It is argued that the otherness of such an alien is a matter of degree, as total alienness cannot be depicted. The act of defamiliarization is relative, as it is impossible to imagine what is utterly alien. Giving meaning to something inevitably humanizes it, bringing it within the bounds of human worldview. The concept of otherness inherently involves a relationship, raising the question: other than what? In the context of an alien encounter, this ‘what’ is defined in human terms. The author must encode a degree of mystery that defies comprehension or intelligibility, often achieved through “alien effects”. The focus is not on what the alien is, but on what it does. Malmgren (1993) explains this principle through *Solaris* (Lem, 1961), the ocean creates massive colloidal compositions that resist description and explanation. These activities can be interpreted in various, even contradictory ways. The ocean also creates Phi-creatures from the subconscious or unconscious minds of humans, seemingly an attempt at contact. However, the intention behind these creatures remains obscure, problematizing the idea of intention itself and suggesting that intentionality may be a human construct.

Manfred Geier (1992), a scholar of Lem's works, emphasizes that human perception is oriented towards objective meaning, shaped by objects' relevance to vital human activities. In the context of interspecies communication, this objective meaning is inherently anthropocentric, rooted in biology, language, and culture. Even to refer to the enigmatic sentient being as an "ocean" is to geomorphize it. In the words of Lem's (1961) character Snaut, “humans require no other worlds but seek mirrors, desiring to find their own idealized image” (104). Anthropocentrism as a concept in this context goes beyond an approach that can be abandoned and is perceived more as a program code of the brain, which is the most relevant perspective for the purpose of this study.

CHAPTER II SIDESTEPPING ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN “BLINDSIGHT”

2.1. Description of the analysis

The first stage of the analysis involves a comprehensive reading of the novel, noting key narrative elements such as plot, characters, and themes. The second stage defines the layers of the novel’s narrative regarding the main theme, consciousness. ‘Layers’ refers to the dimensions of the narrative that contain the dichotomy between the Group and the Other. This principle is highlighted based on a quote from the novel explaining the relationship between identity and external objects, where Siri shares that the appearance of aliens made him feel part of humanity:

Somehow, though, the presence of real aliens had changed the dynamics of the equation. Mere observation didn’t satisfy any more. It was as though the presence of this new outgroup had forced me back into the clade whether I liked it or not; the distance between myself and the world suddenly seemed forced and faintly ridiculous (Watts, 2006, p. 15)

Such an external object, called in this study the Other, becomes a unifying factor, shifting the point of view to the centre of the new system. Comparison allows to unite a non-homogeneous group, to make differences insignificant in comparison with the alien Other.

The following step includes finding and analysing the image of consciousness in the paradigms of the layers, and the instruments used in the portrayal.

2.2. Plot and Characters

2.2.1. Plot

The plot takes place at the end of the 21st century when various intelligent lifeforms coexist, including humans, transhumans, AIs, and vampires. The plot follows a group of astronauts during the first contact with an extraterrestrial civilization. The central task assigned to the astronauts aboard the spacecraft Theseus is to decipher the intentions of the aliens and, if deemed necessary, take hostile action against them. The plot dimensions unfold as Theseus traces the probes’ origin to a colossal alien entity. Once communication is established, the being identifies itself as Rorschach and warns the crew to stay away. Skeptical of Rorschach’s threats, the crew decides to explore the entity, encountering a species referred to as “scramblers” – multi-armed, hyper-intelligent aliens living within Rorschach. As the crew studies the scramblers, the confrontation between Theseus and Rorschach intensifies. An essential revelation occurs when the crew realizes

that neither the scramblers nor Rorschach, despite their intelligence and adaptability, possess consciousness. The latter part of the novel focuses on extensive discussions among the characters about the nature of sentience. In the final stand of Theseus's crew, faced with a swarm of scramblers, Siri is compelled into an escape pod, referred to as his "coffin," by the ship's AI. Siri's last command is to warn humanity about the capabilities of the aliens. An explosion engulfs both Rorschach and Theseus, leaving Siri as the sole survivor drifting towards Earth.

2.2.2. Characters

Siri, the protagonist of the novel, suffered from epilepsy as a child, and as a radical solution he had one hemisphere of his brain removed and replaced with a cyberimplant. The operation left him with an altered mind, lacking genuine emotion and empathy, but with superior analytical skills. Siri is a synthetist, he gathers information about new technologies beyond human comprehension and translates it into the language of baseline humans. In the course of the story, Siri goes through a traumatic attack that gives him back his emotions, but he loses most of his analytical skills. The narrative is told on behalf of an altered, emotional Siri, who is sent to Earth.

Susan James is a linguist on the crew of Theseus with a consciousness artificially split into four sub-personalities. Sent aboard Theseus for the first contact - communication with aliens. Susan's subpersonalities are autonomous, have different genders, personalities and skills, take turns taking control of her body, and one of her subpersonalities, the synesthete Michelle, is in a romantic relationship with Isaac Szpindel.

Isaac Szpindel, a biologist, is a doctor with a severely altered body and senses, unable to experience the tactile and visual sensations familiar to humans. The biologist dies and is replaced by Robert Cunningham, awakened from hibernation. Far less friendly than Szpindel, Cunningham smokes constantly and doesn't use gender pronouns due to a glitch that occurred during the operation. Sacrificed some of his neural connections to make the equipment in the room an extension of his body.

Amanda Bates, a major who has replaced her body with an artificial body that is strong and fit for battle. Bates is paired with robots that she controls with her mind. She is on the team to use aggression against the aliens if it needed.

Jukka Sarasti is the commander of Theseus' team. Sarasti is a vampire, a member of an extinct predatory subspecies of humans brought back to life through genetic engineering for the sake of his unique intellectual abilities. Sarasti, like all vampires, is much smarter, faster and stronger than humans, and his presence causes them to instinctively fear him. He rarely sees his crew face to face, preferring solitude and intercom conversations.

The Captain – the AI of Theseus. A superintelligent quantum artificial intelligence. Forgettable character who remains in the shadows until the end of the novel. Never communicates with the crew, except for Sarasti. Sarasti calls it the Captain, and others follow, assuming that this is merely an ironic nickname. The Captain reveals its true level of agency almost at the end of the story.

Chelsea is the protagonist's ex-girlfriend. She is old-fashioned for her time: she does not like virtual communication, and prefers real communication and sexual intimacy. Chelsea previously worked as a neuroaestheticist: rewired people's brains, changing taste in music or cuisine, or optimizing mate compatibility. Chelsea and Siri's relationship was unhappy and led to a breakup. Chelsea was subsequently killed in a terrorist attack.

Pag, or Robert Paglino, Siri's best and only friend since childhood, they were outcasts together, both with physical disabilities. Pag's parents, unlike Siri's parents, did not resort to medical intervention. They belonged to "those few TwenCen relics who still believed in God also held that one shouldn't try to improve upon His handiwork" (Watts, 2006, p. 5). As an adult, Pag upgraded his body and became, like Siri, a transhuman. Pag dedicated his career to studying vampires.

Helen, Siri's mother, is not on the best of terms with her son. At the beginning of the novel, Helen goes to Heaven, a personal virtual reality popular with humans, and her body is warehoused..

Rorschach is a colossal artifact, vessel, or entity. It is intelligent beyond comprehension. Rorschach makes contact with Theseus and has a long conversation until James realises it is a Chinese room. Rorschach has no consciousness and is unable to truly communicate.

Scramblers are star-shaped species, inhabitants of Rorschach. They do not have consciousness as well but are extremely intelligent, can survive in outer space, and momentarily improvise a

complex strategy: they manage to restrict their movement to the gaps in human vision to stay invisible.

2.3. Defining Layers

The layers on which consciousness is discussed are not arranged in any particular order and operate interconnectedly and simultaneously, but for ease of perception in this analysis the Groups will be considered in ascending order of scope. The first Group is then considered to be the protagonist himself, Siri, and the Other opposing him will be the whole. The second layer considers Siri as a part of the Group of transhumans, and the Other will be the whole society. The subsequent layer expands the Group including Siri to humanity by contrasting them with vampires. When expanded, the Group includes all of humanity, including the vampire clade, contrasted with aliens (Rorschach and scramblers). The penultimate layer represents the Group including all entities or constructs possessing consciousness, and the Other is raw unconscious intelligence (aliens and AI). Finally, the last layer represents the opposition of all entities possessing intelligence to the Other—consciousness.

2.3.1. Person Siri vs Humanity

The first Group to which some Other is opposed is Siri himself, who is opposed to other people by virtue of his sociopathic peculiarities. This opposition is both expressed in the text by the protagonist's direct words and emphasised in communication with other characters. Thus, Siri admits: “I'd spent my whole life as a sort of alien ethologist in my own right, watching the world behave, gleaning patterns and protocols, learning the rules that allowed me to infiltrate human society” (Watts, 2006, p. 20) His differences from other people are emphasised by the first scene involving Pag, Siri's friend. Eight-year-old Siri, his brain altered after surgery, saw his friend being bullied on the playground. He had no emotional reaction but remembered that to stand up was to be a hero, so he attacked the offenders with a rock and indifferently contemplated whether to kill them. Pug was legitimately scared of his friend and said that the real Siri had died during the operation.

I grew up and I got along. I learned to fit in. I observed, recorded, derived the algorithms and mimicked appropriate behaviors. Not much of it was—heartfelt, I guess the word is. I had friends and enemies, like everyone else. I chose them by running through checklists of behaviors and circumstances compiled from years of observation. (Watts, 2006, p.7)

Siri's mental characteristics are highlighted especially in the storyline of Chelsea, his ex-girlfriend. Siri started a relationship with her at Pag's encouragement, but the relationship proved unhappy for both of them. Siri is incapable of understanding the emotional, social side of relationships, and is unable to genuinely connect, which led to conflicts. Siri was pathologically honest, not choosing his expressions and often offending Chelsea. Siri could not perceive Chelsea's emotions other than biologically based evolutionary manipulation strategies. To Chelsea's words "It's not a strategy, for God's sake! Can't you see I'm hurting? I'm on the fucking floor, Siri, I'm curled up in a ball because I'm hurting so much and all you can do is criticize my tactics? What do I have to do, slash my goddamn wrists?" Siri reacts: "I'd shrugged and turned away. Nature's trick. ... High blood-lactate levels, makes it easy for her. It's just chemistry but she holds it up like it was some kind of IOU." The relationship naturally ended, although Siri sincerely did not understand what he was doing wrong. He notes that he envies Spindler's charms: "Spliced and diced, a gangly mass of tics and jitters that could barely feel his own skin, somehow he managed to be charming. As a social necessity it was all but obsolete, fading into irrelevance along with two-party nonvirtual sex pairing" (Watts, 2006, p. 87)

The communication gap between Siri and other people is vividly highlighted in the scene where Siri tries to find the words of farewell. After the breakup, Chelsea was the victim of an attack by the Realists (terrorists who oppose people going to a virtual Heaven) and was hit by a virus that causes ossification of the body. With only hours to live, she called Siri to talk and say goodbye. Siri, upon seeing her call, immediately realises that the matter is lethal and cannot speak to her without understanding exactly how to do it properly. All the time Chelsea had left to live, he spent trying to figure out how to talk to her. The next time she called, she turned on the video link, and Siri never answered the call, watching her mangled body on the screen:

I couldn't talk to her until I knew how to do that.

I still didn't know the principles, the rules: all I had were examples.

Recorded memoirs and deathbed confessions rattling into flatline. Black box transcripts of doomed spaceships and falling beanstalks, ending in fire and static. All of it relevant. None of it useful; none of it her.

"Please? Jus'—talk to me, Cyg..."

More than anything, I wanted to.

"Siri, I...just..."

I'd spent all this time trying to figure out how.

"Forget't," she said, and disconnected.

I whispered something into the dead air. I don't even remember what.

I really wanted to talk to her.

I just couldn't find an algorithm that fit. (Watts, 2006, p. 192)

2.3.2. Transhumans vs Baseline Humanity

The world Blindsight takes place in has little in common with the world humans evolved to thrive. The technological singularity has already occurred, and new technologies have become completely incomprehensible to humans. People of the future have reached their cognitive ceiling and are changing their bodies and brains with technology. Science has moved to a new level: "we've surpassed ourselves now, we're exploring terrain beyond the limits of merely human understanding" (Watts, 2006, p. 24). Baseline humans are obsolete: "Computers bootstrap their own offspring, grow so wise and incomprehensible that their communiqués assume the hallmarks of dementia: unfocused and irrelevant to the barely-intelligent creatures left behind" (Watts, 2006, p. 32). Transhumans play the role of the Group in this case, while baseline humans are the Other.

Siri is a synthet: "I am the bridge between the bleeding edge and the dead center. I stand between the Wizard of Oz and the man behind the curtain. I am the curtain" (Watts, 2006, p. 31). His job is to serve as a translator between the world of technology and baseline humans, or as Siri puts it, "hard-won truths are being bastardized and lobotomized for powerful know-nothings interested only in market share" (Watts, 2006, p. 14).

Transhumans, superior to human beings in every way, along with artificial intelligence, are taking over all the work, rendering ordinary humans obsolete and useless. This has resulted in humans no longer having to work to feed themselves:

"Former neuroaestheticist, presently a parasite on the Body Economic thanks to genes and machines on the cutting edge."

"Siri," I said. "Freelance synthesist, indentured servant to the genes and machines that turned you into a parasite." (Watts, 2006, p. 44)

Baseline humans, having little choice in what to do with their lives, often go to live in Heaven, a virtual world that is unique and customised to its inhabitants. Such people are called Ascended. In Heaven, people can take any form and live in any world available to the imagination: “Heaven was not intended for the casual visitor; any paradise in which the flesh-constrained would feel at home would have been intolerably pedestrian to the disembodied souls who lived there” (Watts, 2006, p. 27). Their bodies, meanwhile, are kept in anticipation of a scientific breakthrough that will allow for true digital immortality and uploading of consciousness to the cloud. However, Heaven is not a perfect substitute for the real world, as shown in the example of Helen, Siri's mother. She went to live in Heaven (as Siri believes, because she couldn't stand the sight of her defective son (Watts, 2006, p. 27)), but found herself unhappy there as well. Siri explains that she realised that her perfect world was only in her head, and that she had no control over the outside world she had escaped from: “there was only one way my mother would ever be truly happy in her own personal creation ... The rest of creation would have to go” (Watts, 2006, p. 28)

Cunningham, a biologist, “had sacrificed half of his neocortex for the chance to see x-rays and taste the shapes hiding in cell membranes, he had butchered one body to become a fleeting tenant of many.” He had merged with the lab, made it a part of him. He said that his decision to become a cyborg cannot be considered a free choice, as people are left to either transform their body and brain to adapt, or shove their brain into Heaven for good: "If you don't reconfigure you can't retrain. If you don't retrain you're obsolete inside a month, and then you're not much good for anything except Heaven or dictation" (Watts, 2006, p. 116)

2.3.3. Humanity vs Vampires

Vampires in Blindsight are human subspecies, extinct hyperintelligent predatory hominids that were the basis for vampire legends. They are extremely intelligent, capable of holding multiple perspectives at once, and have to be sociopathic – “they're too much like their own prey—a lot of taxonomists don't even consider them a subspecies” (Watts, 2006, p. 125). Vampires have a weakness -- right angles cause them epileptic seizures, which gave rise to the legend of fear of crosses. In nature, right angles generally do not occur, but with the invention of architecture, people surrounded themselves with right angles, and vampires became extinct. Their genes were accidentally discovered in autistic savants. Technology has allowed humans to recreate vampires to make their intelligence a valuable tool, and people quickly realised they were on a completely

different intellectual level: "We could second-guess vampires, we wouldn't need vampires, eh?" (Watts, 2006, p. 140) Reborn vampires were not freed from the Crucifix glitch to keep them under control.

Vampires aren't verbose because they're "transient, not resident." (Watts, 2006, p. 204). Residents here are fish-eaters, who live in groups and talk a lot. Transients eat mammals, smart prey, so they have to be sneaky. "Every time he opens his mouth, every time he lets us see him, he's fighting his own brain stem" (Watts, 2006, p. 204). For the same reason they are solitary:

They were solitary hunters and very territorial. With a minimum viable pred-prey ratio of one to ten—and human prey spread so sparsely across the Pleistocene landscape—the biggest threat to their survival had been competition from their own kind. Natural selection had never taught them to play nicely together (Watts, 2006, p. 204)

Vampires have been described as creatures "between human and alien... whose mind is much closer to the unconscious intelligence of the Rorschach than to the human, qualia-stuffed interiority" (Watts, 2006, p. 182). Vampires have a lower level of self-awareness. This is because they have evolved and discarded an unnecessary limiting factor:

"It's true," Sarasti told her, "that your intellect makes up for your self-awareness to some extent. But you're flightless birds on a remote island. You're not so much successful as isolated from any real competition."

"You?" Michelle whispered. "Not we?"

"We stop racing long ago," the demon said at last. "It's not our fault you don't leave it at that." (Watts, 2006, p. 182)

Had it not been for a happy accident that deprived humans of their main predators, they would not have had a place at the top of the food chain: "we humans were never meant to inherit the Earth" (Watts, 2006, p. 306). Without predators, human civilization kept advancing, relying solely on technology and media. The human brain evolved by running, eating, and breeding on the ancient savannah, and biologically it is still more or less the same. Vampires remind humans that they were once prey, with a single glance: "As a child I'd read tales about jungle predators transfixing their prey with a stare. Only after I'd met Jukka Sarasti did I know how it felt" (Watts, 2006, p. 43).

When Sarasti attacks Siri on Theseus, the inferiority of humans to vampires is emphasised particularly vividly. All humans become one Group: asocial Siri, Ascended humans, baseline humans, transhumans with modifications and technologies -- they are all still the same primitive prey, panicking at the sight of a predator, the Other:

Sarasti advanced through a haze of trauma and confusion. His face swam in and out of focus, rich with his blood or mine. His eyes were bright red mirrors, his eyes were time machines. Darkness roared around them and it was half a million years ago and I was just another piece of meat on the African savannah, a split-second from having its throat torn out (Watts, 2006, p. 369)

2.3.4. Homo Sapiens (including Homo Sapiens Vampiris) vs AI

Vampires, being so different from humans, are still homo sapiens subspecies. And they, like all other humans, are inferior to artificial intelligence. The artificial intelligence in the novel has long since surpassed humanity by many orders of magnitude: “Computers bootstrap their own offspring, grow so wise and incomprehensible that their communiqués assume the hallmarks of dementia: unfocused and irrelevant to the barely-intelligent creatures left behind” (Watts, 2006, p. 51). In the novel, this is demonstrated in the example of the Captain, AI of Theseus.

The Captain is mentioned infrequently at first, even emphasising that “It was easy to forget the Quantical AI at the heart of our ship. It stayed so discreetly in the background, nurtured and carried us and permeated our existence like an unobtrusive God; but like God, it never took your calls” (Watts, 2006, p. 25). The Captain only communicated with Sarasti, the crew commander. The Captain remains in the shadows until the end of the novel, when Sarasti suffers an epileptic seizure. After Sarasti's death, the Captain takes control of Sarasti's body and reveals that it had been in control from the beginning of the operation:

Sarasti's corpse urged me on from behind. I turned and faced it.

"Was it ever him?" I asked.

Go.

"Tell me. Did he ever speak for himself? Did he decide anything on his own? Were we ever following his orders, or was it just you all along?"

Sarasti's undead eyes stared glassy and uncomprehending. His fingers jerked on the handpad.

U dislike ordrs frm mchnes. Happier ths way (Watts, 2006, 397).

Siri, being human, is incapable of understanding the Captain's plan or even imagining its scope. He analyses the whole story afterwards: “Not that most of us even knew the rules of the game, of course. We were just pawns, really. Sarasti and the Captain—whatever hybridized intelligence those two formed—they were the real players. ... And now the game is over, and a single pawn stands on that scorched board and its face is human after all” (Watts, 2006, p. 411)

The artificial intelligence story arc emphasises that both fully conscious humans and slightly less self aware vampires with consciousness are just stupid compared to the indifferent and rational AI. Siri argues this while thinking about the specifics of her job:

I've never convinced myself that we made the right choice. I can cite the usual justifications in my sleep, talk endlessly about the rotational topology of information and the irrelevance of semantic comprehension. But after all the words, I'm still not sure. I don't know if anyone else is, either. Maybe it's just some grand consensual con, marks and players all in league. We won't admit that our creations are beyond us; they may speak in tongues, but our priests can read those signs. Gods leave their algorithms carved into the mountainside but it's just li'l ol' me bringing the tablets down to the masses, and I don't threaten anyone. Maybe the Singularity happened years ago. We just don't want to admit we were left behind (Watts, 2006, p. 64)

2.3.5. Earth vs Aliens

The previous Group, including humans and vampires, is expanded to also include AI as a human creation. The aliens, Rorschach and scramblers, in this case appear as Other, moreover, posing a danger to all of humanity.

As Theseus approaches the alien vessel, they receive a transmission in English, conveyed through a sequence of light pulses. Alien entity introduces itself as a Rorschach and engages in a long conversation with the linguist. After a while, team concludes that Rorschach does not understand the semantics of the conversation and engage in it, but rather unconsciously mimics the patterns of human communication, having learned language through observation of broadcast transmissions in space. This scenario is compared to the Chinese Room, where a person in a closed room receives sheets with symbols through a slot in the wall. The person inside has a database of rules to manipulate these symbols. As Siri put it, “Point being you can use basic pattern-matching algorithms to participate in a conversation without having any idea what you're saying” (Watts,

2006, p. 89). Siri compares himself to the Chinese Room as well, explaining how he explains to people complex technologies that he himself doesn't understand. "The system understands. The whole Room, with all its parts. The guy who does the scribbling is just one component. You wouldn't expect a single neuron in your head to understand English, would you?" (Watts, 2006, p. 91). The argument is made that the system does not require a conscious narrator to communicate, and narrative organization may be an outcome of the system's increasing complexity.

Rorschach's unique perspective lies in its relationship to information. Intelligent without sapience, aliens are incapable of conceptualizing things like "self", "beauty", or "emotion. Since Rorschach operates in a different framework and is not constrained by the limits of semiotic models developed to survive in a particular environment, it sees no value in the concept of communication. This means when they first receive human communications (i.e. from radio and TV transmissions), they determine it to be a virus attack to make them waste cognitive resources to interpret gibberish: "needlessly recursive" and containing "no usable intelligence" (Watts, 2006, p. 381). Thus, they classify humanity as a threat and respond to the attack. It makes communication impossible: "How do you say *We come in peace* when the very words are an act of war?" (Watts, 2006, p. 389)

The lack of sentience allows aliens—both Rorschach and inhabiting it scramblers—to adapt freely, without the limitations of the self. As said by Siri: "Imagine you're a scrambler. Imagine you have intellect but no insight, agendas but no awareness. Your circuitry hums with strategies for survival and persistence; flexible, intelligent, even technological — but no other circuitry monitors it. You can think of anything yet are conscious of nothing." (Watts, 2006, p. 360) In the case of the scramblers, their alien nature is especially challenging for human observers because they seem to play the role of single cells of Rorschach, but despite that and the fact that star-shaped aliens are supposed to be juvenile, scramblers possessed an advanced intellect higher than that of a vampire. Later, it was discovered that they don't have genes, and they are speculated to be a byproduct of Rorschach inner processes: "You misunderstand. Scramblers are the honeycomb. ... Rorschach is the bees" (Watts, 2006, p. 247). This roughly shows the scale of Rorschach's own intelligence, which itself is speculated to still be merely a growing seed, if tiny little scramblers are so clever: "the dumbest of these things can look into your head and see what parts of your visual cortex are lighting up" (Watts, 2006, p. 309)

2.3.6. Intelligent Life vs Consciousness

The previous layers have gradually expanded the scope of the Group. This layer further expands the Group to include both intelligent life and intelligent machines. However, as Watts mentioned, “one of Blindsight's take-home messages is that life is a matter of degree” (Watts, 2006, p. 430). The Other is consciousness. The whole novel shows on various levels that consciousness is not the peak of evolution: “compared to nonconscious processing, self-awareness is slow and expensive”. It is a random mutation that most life in the universe is devoid of:

Because if Sarasti was right, scramblers were the norm: evolution across the universe was nothing but the endless proliferation of automatic, organized complexity, a vast arid Turing machine full of self-replicating machinery forever unaware of its own existence. And we—we were the flukes and the fossils. We were the flightless birds lauding our own mastery over some remote island while serpents and carnivores washed up on our shores. Susan James could not bring herself to concede that point—because Susan James, her multiple lives built on the faith that communication resolves all conflict, would then be forced to admit the lie. If Sarasti was right, there was no hope of reconciliation (Watts, 2006, p. 407)

It is noteworthy that “some very timely experimental support for this unpleasant premise came out just as Blindsight was being copy-edited: it turns out that the unconscious mind is better at making complex decisions than is the conscious mind. The conscious mind just can't handle as many variables, apparently” (Watts, 2006, p. 433). Although Blindsight is science fiction rather than science fiction, it adds subjective weight to Watts' theories.

The Climax of Consciousness Arc falls in a scene in which Sarasti assaults Siri, returning him to a state of frightened prey, shutting down rational processes and forcing Siri to feel emotions again. Sarasti's later explanation for this is that Siri rationalises or trivialises everything, and in a situation where it's necessary to convince Earth of Rorschach's dangers: “Can't give you the chance to shore up your rationales and your defenses. They must fall completely. You must be inundated. Shattered. Genocide's impossible to deny when you're buried up to your neck in dismembered bodies” (Watts, 2006, p. 374). Siri had to be humanised so he could speak to people in the language of emotion.

During this scene, Sarasti tells Siri about the nature of consciousness. Thus, Sarasti informs that consciousness has nothing to do with free will because “sleepwalkers converse, drive vehicles, commit crimes and clean up afterwards, unconscious the whole time” (Watts, 2006, p. 374), and the brain makes the decision to move a finger before the conscious mind registers it: “the self chose nothing; something else set your body in motion, sent an executive summary—almost an afterthought—to the homunculus behind your eyes” (Watts, 2006, p. 374). Consciousness even gets in the way: “Every concert pianist knows that the surest way to ruin a performance is to be aware of what the fingers are doing. Every dancer and acrobat knows enough to let the mind go, let the body run itself” (Watts, 2006, p. 374).

The implication is that humans have reached their cognitive ceiling, and to move on, they need to lose consciousness, i.e., cease to be on a subjective level:

“We could engineer ourselves back into nonsentience, perhaps. Might improve our odds in the long run.” She looked at me, a rueful sort of half-smile at the corner of her mouth. “But I guess that wouldn't be much of a win, would it? What's the difference between being dead, and just not knowing you're alive?” (Watts, 2006, p. 399)

It is noteworthy that when discussing consciousness, metaphors are often used to give consciousness the characteristics of a separate living organism, which echo the characteristics that the novel gives to baseline humans. Thus, consciousness is referred to as “parasitic DNA” (Watts, 2006, p. 377) and “parasite” (Watts, 2006, p. 406) compared to cancer: “metaprocesses bloom like cancer, and awaken, and call themselves I” (Watts, 2006, p. 377). As revealed earlier in this chapter, baseline humans are explicitly compared to parasites on the body of society (Watts, 2006, p. 44).

Consciousness is also personified, compared to incompetent superiors: “the pointy-haired boss from Dilbert” (Watts, 2006, p. 421), or “that fat old man sitting in the CEO's office upstairs” (Watts, 2006, p. 377). In addition, consciousness “does little beyond taking memos from the vastly richer subconscious environment, rubber-stamping them, and taking the credit for itself” (Watts, 2006, p. 409). Baseline humans in a future world are the bosses of superior transhumans, AI and vampires doing all the work. As the story progresses, they are always referred to as “our masters,” with Siri explaining his job as “bridging the gap between the people who make the breakthroughs and the people who take the credit for them” (Watts, 2006, p. 54). It can be concluded that Siri in

this paradigm acts as a conduit between technology and human beings, and between intelligence and consciousness, without fully belonging to either party.

Such anthropomorphism, giving consciousness traits inherent to humans, seems to be a paradoxical tool when trying to sidestep anthropocentrism. However, it makes sense in conveying meaning to the reader. The reader is invited to follow the same path of understanding the nature of consciousness that Siri takes. The depiction of consciousness as a separate entity with its own characteristics, goals, and qualities can be useful in the reader's attempts to separate the most essential part of their life from the rest of the self. This technique places the reader in the same group as humans, AI, and even the infinitely unknowable Rorschach on the basis of the presence of intelligence, contrasting them with the parasitic consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Blindsight (Watts, 2006) shows an ambiguous picture of the future: on the one hand, progress is advancing, people no longer need to work, biological issues and diseases are eliminated technologically, people have access to any kind of entertainment, up to and including the creation of an ideal individual world. However, at the same time, humanity as a species has no future—they are behind even their own technology and do not understand the world they live in. They are left to either live as useless parasites on the body of society, or to change themselves, improve themselves, and, as a result, stop being human. In the novel, humans have no agency -- all the important actions were performed by Rorschach and the Captain, both of whom have no consciousness.

The analysis aimed to highlight the ways Watts uses non-human entities to redefine humanity, and the data shows that vampires, AIs, and aliens serve as the Other, or the mirror for humanity. The investigation of the ways in which the novel decenters anthropocentrism in its narrative shows that the paradigm placing humans at the centre of the world is explicitly challenged on many levels through hierarchical comparison, emphasising the inferiority of humans compared to other humans, vampires, AI, aliens and even unconscious selves.

The question of how the “parasite” metaphor influences the portrayal of consciousness and contributes to the novel’s critique of anthropocentrism has several answers. First of all, the metaphor anthropomorphises consciousness, giving it human characteristics and even roles, and it allows the reader to see consciousness as a separate entity from themselves, contributing to the comprehension of the idea of being an unconscious intelligence and perceiving consciousness as something different from themselves. Secondly, it creates a clear comparison between baseline humans and consciousness, implying that both are obsolete, useless, and do not contribute to the system they are a part of while taking all the credit. This adds to the critique of anthropocentrism, contributing to the idea of humanity not being seen as the center of the world.

The ceiling for humans is consciousness, which is literally all of human life that matters to humans. The novel states that in order to evolve, humans must abandon what makes life subjectively worth

living. This hypothetical scenario of loss of consciousness through evolution, of course, unfolds in the distant future -- evolution takes a long time. However, this scenario sets the stage for a moral that the reader can apply in the present: human beings have to accept that the first place on the pedestal does not belong to humans and never has. Humans have to be content with not being the greatest entity in the universe, but rather a humble parasitic creature that realises its place in the world and is happy with it.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Peter Watts'i *Blindsight* (2006) on raske ulmeromaan, milles esitatakse seisukoht, et inimese evolutsiooniline edu on juhus ja teadvus on kasutu. Galaktiliste impeeriumide, digitaalse surematuse ja suure tuleviku asemel antakse inimesele parasiidi roll ühiskonnakehas ja madalam koht toiduahelas, millega ta on harjunud. See teos uurib, kuidas Watts (2006) vaidlustab antropotsentrilise maailmapildi, mis asetab inimese maailma keskmesse.

Töö sissejuhatavas osas tuuakse välja teadvuse teema mitmetähenduslikkus kunstis, jagatakse akadeemikute arvamust ulmežanri eripära kohta ning tuuakse esile romaani loomislugu, selgitades, et Watts'i (2006) fantastilised spekulatsioonid said hiljem osaliselt kinnitust teaduse poolt.

Esimeses peatükis "Antropotsentrism Ja Inimeste Tunnetus Teadusfiktuuris" tuuakse esile teoreetilised materjalid, mis hõlmavad inimkonna teadmisi teadvuse nähtusest, ning uuritakse teadvuse teaduse ja ulme arengu ajajoonte kokkulangevust. Lisaks uuritakse peatükis antropotsentrismi mõistet ja tuuakse esile autorite katsed oma maailmakujunduses antropotsentrilisest paradigmast kõrvale hiilida.

Teises peatükis "Antropotsentrismi Vältimine *Blindsight*'is" analüüsitakse romaani narratiivi kihti: jagades selle üksteisega ristuvate vastandlike dihhotoomiate konventsionaalseteks kihtideks. Iga kihti analüüsitakse grupi ja Teise võrdluse kaudu. Samuti analüüsitakse vahendeid, mida Watts kasutab oma sõnumi edastamiseks.

Uurimusest selgub, et vältimaks antropotsentrilist pilti *Blindsight*'is, katsetab Watts (2006) peategelase ja lugeja identiteediga, lastes neil end vaheldumisi eri rühmadega samastada. Teadvuse samastamine parasiidi, ebakompetentse ülemuse või põhiinimestega on metafoor, et luua lõppkokkuvõttes eraldatus, eristades teadvuse kui ultimaatilise Teise. Selline antropomorfism aitab paradoksaalselt lugejal mööda minna antropotsentrismist ja vaadata omaenda mina kui midagi võõrast ja kasutatut.

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