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# Humanity as the Other: A Posthumanist Critique of the Surrealist Dystopias of René Laloux in *La Planète sauvage* and *Gandahar: Les Années-lumière*

K. Sripad Bhat & Nafisa Oliveira

## Abstract

The theories of posthumanism and transhumanism have gained a lot of traction in recent years. The crux of posthumanism is that scientific discoveries and evolution can change the very definition of what it is to be human. Various speculative scenarios in literature and media have acted as catalysts for the popularity of this field. Moreover, due to the development in information technology, social media, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, et cetera, the changing social reality makes it essential to comprehend the moral, normative, ethical, and legal issues arising from such alterations. In this regard, the current article seeks to revisit the former century and explore two animated films in particular. René Laloux's dystopias in his animations *La Planète sauvage* (1973) and *Gandahar* (1987) have become cult classics, occupying a niche for their ability to combine surrealist aesthetics with metaphysical inquiry. This paper examines the manner in which these works raise posthumanist concerns through allegory, particularly in their representation of otherness, power dynamics, ecological interdependence, and biopolitical control. The paper argues that by hypothesising worlds where identity is displaced and restructured through interactions with nonhuman life, technology and time travel, Laloux destabilises anthropocentric claims. By means of visual analysis the study indicates how Laloux's imagination foreshadowed contemporary issues surrounding ecology, bioethics, and the challenges of coexistence. *La Planète sauvage* and *Gandahar* invite viewers to reconsider agency, responsibility, and survival in an interconnected posthuman world.

**Key Terms:** Biopunk; Dystopia; Otherness; Posthumanism; Surrealism

## Introduction

Homo sapiens have considered themselves to be superior to other beings for centuries. The dominant species causing the others to be marginalised, exploited, and at times even made extinct. Humans have largely depended on an amalgamation of physical and intellectual strength to do so. However, time alone can test just how long this hierarchy will stand firm. Recent changes have challenged the very definition of what it means to be human. If defining human itself becomes a complex philosophical concern it remains to be seen if the status of homo sapiens at the apex will be retained. These changes have surfaced mainly through the advancement of technology in the 21st century. As the lines between man and machine, natural and artificial, real and virtual, are slowly blurred, addressing posthumanism becomes inevitable.

As the name suggests, the theory of posthumanism discusses what is 'beyond' or 'after' humans (Nayar, 2023). What may have been considered acceptable at a point of time may

today be taboo. Conversely what may have been abnormal at one time may today be normal. In the late 20th century there was a growing preoccupation with the idea of a cyborg: Is it man or machine? (Haraway, 2013). It is important to be able to navigate around the questions surrounding these radical alterations in life. In this regard, posthumanism attempts to guide one in their ever-changing reality by drawing from various disciplines viz. literature, science, philosophy, media, gender and animal studies among several others (Roy, 2025). It also includes aspects from various other theories such as feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. This interdisciplinarity makes it stand out from other recent theories.

In the visual medium, cinema has seen several examples of dystopian and utopian realities. The resurgence of speculative fiction has led to popular web adaptations like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2025), *Leila* (2019), or the remake *Utopia* (2020). While prominent anthologies such as *Black Mirror* (2011-) and *Electric Dreams* (2017) engage with the possibilities of technologically advanced futures, several film franchises such as *The Matrix* (1999-2021), James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984-2019) and *Avatar* (2009-) explore biopunk and cyberpunk themes. As with all science fiction, the debate surrounding posthumanism looms over them: Is it present in or peripheral to the human? Is it critical or compassionate toward the transhuman? Since posthumanism blurs the binaries of natural-artificial, human-alien, life-death, past-future, classification of things and beings becomes complex, which in turn challenges the very ethos of humanity, seeking to redefine it.

The current paper however does not intend to delve into the more popular and contemporary series and shows in Hollywood but is rather interested in the prevalence of posthumanist themes in two animated French films of the last century. René Laloux's *La Planète sauvage* (*Fantastic Planet*, 1973) and *Gandahar: Les Années-lumière* (*Light Years*, 1987) resist conventional classification within what would be typically defined as science-fiction cinema. In her article "Posthumanism and its reflection on Visual Media", Ashitha S Shabu claims, "The audience can become accustomed to live-action films more quickly than animated ones" (Shabu 2). Yet Laloux's animations are philosophical, political, and construct worlds that function as allegorical critiques of domination, identity, and progress (TheAnimationReel, 2025). While often discussed within frameworks of dystopia or surrealism, Laloux's work lends itself particularly well to posthumanist analysis, as both films challenge human dominion and foreground the entanglement of biological, technological, and ecological systems (Hart, 2022).

René Laloux (1929-2004) was a French filmmaker who was known for his animated films with philosophical undertones aimed at an adult audience. His work differed from mainstream cinema in an animated form in that it employed serious content in a surreal manner to pose introspective and at times rhetorical questions. Long before posthumanism gained academic prominence his films questioned the superiority of humans. Science and technology in his films are exposed to have far reaching consequences, which are often irreversible.

## La Planète sauvage

Laloux's work was significantly inspired by his experiences at *La Borde* psychiatric clinic in Cour-Cheverny (Brooke, 2016). It is only after the creation of *Les Dents du Singe* (1960), a work created in collaboration with patients, did he encounter the co-author of *Fantastic Planet*, Roland Topor (Johnson 2023). *La Planète sauvage* (*Fantastic Planet*, 1973) employs

surrealism as a tool of philosophical and political critique. Adapted from Stefan Wul's novel *Oms en série* (1957), the film constructs a dystopian world where humans, referred to as Oms, are reduced to either pets or pests by the dominant species, the Draags. The latter are a towering blue species, gigantic in form vis-à-vis the Oms who appear like lilliputs beside them (much like the Humans and the Na'vi in Cameron's *Avatar*). Through this inversion of anthropocentric hierarchies, Laloux questions the mechanisms of othering, biopolitical control, racial and gender-based violence, rendering humanity itself as the marginalized Other.

The film's narrative is straightforward: Tiwa a Draag child takes Terr a baby Om into her care after his mother is inadvertently killed but he appears to be used for entertainment and pleasure, stripping him of his freedom and forcing him to wear a collar that binds him to his new owner: "*Sa mère est morte. Je vais le garder... C'est amusant. Laisse-moi essayer... pas si fort, cet animal est fragile*" (1973). Terr eventually escapes captivity, acquires knowledge through stolen Draag educational devices (infos), and joins a community of wild Oms who resist annihilation.

The film implicates the viewer in its critique. By urging the viewer to identify with the oppressed Oms, it indirectly reflects on humanity's own treatment of animals, marginalized populations, and ecosystems.

## **Gandahar: Les Années-lumière**

*Gandahar* (1987) continues with Laloux's sustained interrogation of power, identity, and ethical responsibility. Adapted from Jean-Pierre Andrevon's *Les Hommes-Machines contre Gandahar* (1969), the film begins with a scene of Gandaharians and other species co-existing peacefully, with signs of new life, against a soothing backdrop until this peace is abruptly disrupted by an outside source. The society of Gandahar is depicted as harmonious and sensuous with close ties to nature. The Council of Women express their preference for birds over machines as natural solutions over technology despite their inability to resist the enemy. Queen Ambisextra stresses on how they take pride in embracing the "organic". Yet this apparent utopia is breakable. These mirror birds are another element of nature whose fate is doomed as a result of the attack in Jasper, the Capital of Gandahar. The Men of Metal - a type of distorted automata - infiltrate Gandahar and transform living organisms into stone.

Unlike conventional villains, the Men of Metal lack features as well as feelings, embodying systemic rather than individual violence. Prince Sylvain is sent on an expedition to uncover the truth behind these attacks. Along his journey he is assisted by The Deformed, a group of beings exiled due to their physical deformities which were ironically caused by genetic engineering gone wrong. Sylvain goes on to discover that the main antagonist is also a result of an experiment gone wrong: a gigantic brain referred to as the Metamorphis.

What follows is a juxtaposition of the past and future as the leader of the Deformed constantly foreshadows through his use of were/will be in the same conversation. Time travel in the film does not offer redemption, on the contrary it creates moral ambiguity. Sylvain's journey to the future reveals a world devastated by attempts to dominate nature and transcend biological limits.

## Methodology

The research employs a qualitative, hermeneutic approach through the application of posthumanism. Although various theorists such as Braidotti and Haraway have offered their own understanding of this term, in the case of the present article the researcher felt that the definition of posthumanism offered by Pramod K. Nayar is the most feasible to analyse the films under study.

Drawing on thinkers like Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe, Nayar defines the term critical posthumanism as “the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (p. 2). It insists that the ‘human’ is not a fixed, autonomous entity but an assemblage deeply entangled with technological infrastructures, animal lives, and environmental systems, all of which shape and disrupt our sense of identity, ethics, and agency. Likewise, even literary works in the last few decades have begun to depict how the human is constructed by their interactions with the non-human.

Posthumanism challenges humanism’s emphasis on rationality, autonomy, and species hierarchy, instead proposing a vision of existence shaped by interdependence and relationality (Haraway 150). Laloux’s cinema anticipates these ideas by portraying humans not as masters of their environments but as marginal, mutable, and vulnerable beings embedded within larger networks of power (TheAnimationReel 2025).

## Analysis

The work of Laloux is didactic and not merely entertaining. Instead of offering an escapist fantasy, his animation insists on ethical engagement. The strangeness of his worlds does not distance the viewer but instead reflects back the contradictions of human civilization – colonial violence, ecological exploitation, and technological hubris. This will be analysed as follows:

### **Otherness - the crux of the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis cycle**

The concept of the Other is significant in various disciplines and discourses. Identity is often a construct of the interaction of a person (Self) with another person (Other). This interplay leads to self-reflection and a better understanding of oneself. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes, “In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm...woman the other of man, stranger the other of native, enemy the other of friend, ‘them’ the other of ‘us’...” (Bauman 1991). Thus it is apparent there is a certain influence of structuralism in the concept of otherness.

In *La Planète sauvage*, Oms are the marginalized species, dominated by the Draags. The inversion of traditional power hierarchies instantly destabilizes anthropocentric ‘truths’. The Draags domination of Oms is not driven by malice but by an ideology that naturalizes

hierarchy. They perceive themselves as intellectually and spiritually superior beings, while Oms are dismissed as savages that multiply uncontrollably: “*Avoir un Om domestique ce n’est pas une mauvaise chose, ça distrait, mais tous ces Oms sauvages...ils sont sales, ils reproduisent à une vitesse folle*” (1973). In a 2022 article, Benjamin Hart states, “This method of exaggeration and attribution of animalistic qualities to humans both concealed the film’s intentions and called upon the sympathies of the audience in reaction to their humiliating subjugation.” Such language echoes actions and practices of the past which were used to justify slavery, wars, and genocide, situating the film within political allegory.

Oms are domesticated as pets, exterminated as pests, or studied as experimental subjects. Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower where life itself becomes an object of political control is particularly relevant here (Foucault 140). The Draags regulate Om existence through surveillance, extermination drives, and population control, rendering Om life disposable: “*Les Draags vont nous massacrer. Ils nous punissent d’avoir volé leur science*” (1987).

Yet Laloux complicates this dynamic by refusing to depict the Draags as purely villainous. Their society values meditation, knowledge, and cosmic harmony. Their violence emerges not solely from sadism but from a deeply ingrained belief in hierarchy. This is also established in the very beginning as the frame shows a mother with her infant being tortured and bullied. When the screen pans out the viewer realises the culprits are in fact Draag children who innocently considered it as ‘playing’, indifferent to the fact that their actions led to the death of the woman. Furthermore, there are moments that drive the audience to believe that the Draags are considerate. When Tiwa decides to keep Terr, her father expresses that it is a good idea since one cannot leave an animal to die: “*C’est bon Tiwa. On ne pourrait laisser cet animal mourir...Sa mère est morte. Je vais le garder*” (1987). Nonetheless, such positive perceptions are immediately crushed when Terr’s freedom is curbed and he is controlled by a collar fastened around his neck by Tiwa.

As a consequence of this repression, the only source of Oms’ resistance arises through access to Draag knowledge, particularly their educational headsets. Terr’s acquisition of language and science destabilizes the assumed hierarchy between species. Knowledge plays a crucial role in the film’s politics. The Draags exhibit control over the sharing of information and educating the masses. In turn, Oms access to education and advanced technology is limited in order to ensure a continued hold on the tamed pests. During a Council meeting, one of the members expresses their fear of the Oms ability to think and be organized: “*Nos savants avaient également remarqué que les animaux rapportés de la planète Terra...et intelligence assez élevés. Il est évident que cet animal possède certaines facultés d’adaptation*” (1973). Terr’s access to Draag learning devices allows the Oms to challenge their assigned status, suggesting that power operates through the control of information which is a conspicuous trope in most dystopian narratives.

Laloux avoids an ending in the form of a victory but instead aligns with posthuman ethics that emphasise harmony over subjugation. The Oms and the Draags come to an understanding wherein the Draags could use the Fantastic Planet to continue with their meditations and instead an artificial satellite was created for the habitation of the Oms. The film started with repression, moved on to a kind of revolution and then ended with a resolution thus completing the cycle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis due to the Draags and the Oms not only comprehending benefitting from the thinking of the Other.

In *Gandahar*, the revelation that the Men of Metal are future Gandaharians transformed by technological experimentation collapses the distinction between Self and Other. When the protagonist Sylvain realizes that “we are fighting what we will become”, the narrative shifts from external conflict to introspection. This reinforces the idea put forth by Issac Asimov (the translator for the release of the film in English) at the beginning of the movie in the form of an epigraph: “We speak of Time and Mind which do not easily yield to categories. We separate past and future and find that Time is an amalgam of both. We separate good and evil and find that Mind is an amalgam of both. To understand, we must grasp the whole” (1987). The enemy is not an alien invader but the logical outcome of Gandahar’s own pursuit of progress and control. This paradox positions Gandahar firmly within biopunk and posthuman discourse, where technological innovation destabilizes identity and ethics. Mohammad Farogh Alam explores the blend between utopia and dystopia. He states that in our quest to fashion society as per our perception of an ideal world, we often fail to understand how harmful it would be if it resulted in a dystopian setting, owing to corporate greed, power dynamics, and a deteriorating planet (2025).

Another more lucid example of otherness is through the discriminatory treatment of The Deformed who are considered an abomination by the ‘normal’ Gandaharians. The flipside to this is that they are in addition blessed with the gift of clairvoyance as well as a unique power to destroy the Men of Metal through a kind of meditation. The Gandaharians are almost rendered extinct and it is The Deformed who save the day. Once again the audience can see Laloux subverting the normal and empowering the underdog. Akin to the previous film, *Gandahar* too ends with hope where the protagonist Sylvain sets out to salvage the remains and rebuild Gandahar along with the Deformed. We see his emotions move from animosity, to curiosity, to fidelity, again completing the cycle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

### **Biopunk - interdependency and intervention in organisms and ecology**

Biopunk is a subgenre of Science Fiction that emerged in the late 20th century, characterised by a focus on biotechnology and its potential impact on society. The term “biopunk” is derived from the cyberpunk genre, with “punk” reflecting a rebellious and countercultural attitude. While cyberpunk explores the intersection of high-tech and low-life, biopunk delves into the realms of biotechnology, genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and biohacking, creation of genetically modified organisms.

In *La Planète sauvage*, the planet Ygam is not merely a setting but an active ecological system. Its unique flora and fauna underscore the interconnectedness of all life forms. The Draags’ attempt to dominate Oms disrupts this balance, producing instability.

While the theme may not be overt in *La Planète sauvage*, by hinting at biocontrol or situating humans as one species among many or treating life as administrable matter, *La Planète sauvage* dismantles the illusion of human exceptionalism. Its posthuman ecology resonates strongly today, as climate change exposes the consequences of hierarchical thinking.

In *Gandahar*, it is a single seed and the quick growth of a plant that helps Sylvain to crack open the enclosed giant egg in which he was imprisoned, thus proving how nature helped him to attain freedom once again. Further, it is a Saur (a large dinosaur-like creature) that ensures Sylvain and Airelle are safe. Gandaharians wage war against the products of Metamorphis

by flying genetically modified birds and dropping seeds onto the land that eventually turn into plants which swallow the Men of Metal. Nonetheless, this natural harmony is disrupted by the latter and their destruction of life or conversion of living beings into machines.

*Gandahar* presents a more overtly technological dystopia. The Men of Metal, once human, now grotesquely altered embody biopunk anxieties surrounding uncontrolled technological evolution. Their ability to petrify living beings symbolizes the freezing of life into rigid forms, a metaphor for technological systems that erase difference and agency. The Metamorphosis. Although he is not seen by most, his power continues to be strong and his voice is enough to terrify the people of Gandahar: “...*Mais nous l’entendons par les orifices de ces galeries. Les oreilles de la Terre*” (1987). When the protagonist Sylvain learns that the Men of Metal are future Gandaharians, he realises the enemy is not external but produced by Gandahar’s own pursuit of technological mastery.

Biopunk narratives often critique the commodification and manipulation of life (Luckhurst 112). Laloux’s vision aligns with this tradition, portraying technological progress as ethically ambiguous rather than inherently liberating. One such example is that of the Deformed. Sylvain who initially holds prejudices against their community, is astonished to know that they are simply an outcome of their errors: “*Capable de vous vaincre? Non...avec ces corps, ces têtes...assemblés n’importe comment. Ceux que Jasper nomme les Transformés...des malformés, des erreurs monstrueuses...des mutants*” (1987).

Time travel in *Gandahar* is not a heroic solution but a source of ethical crisis. One of the members of The Deformed community explains to Sylvain why they have a tendency to resort to old practices and are afraid of the present since they keep degrading over time. He further emphasises the double prophecy that is split between a future of uncertainty which can be saved by correcting the flaws of the past: “*Dans mille ans, Gandahar était détruite et ses habitants massacrés. Il y a mille ans, Gandahar serra sauvé et une évitable évité*” (1987). However, attempts to alter the future generate new forms of violence, reinforcing the film’s pessimistic view of interventionist logic. When Sylvain confronts Metamorphosis of his sadistic actions, the latter informs him that the invasion and destruction he intends to put an end to, comes from a future driven by technology through the Door of Time. The narrative rejects the fantasy of technology, emphasizing instead accountability and restraint.

The various juxtapositions employed by Laloux mirror contemporary concerns about irreversible technological decisions viz. genetic modification, AI development, environmental exploitation, whose consequences extend beyond present comprehension.

## Visual Surrealism as Posthuman Aesthetics

*La Planète sauvage* rejects realism in favour of a deliberately alien aesthetic inspired by Roland Topor’s illustrations. Organic landscapes, plants and animals which appear to be a modified illustration of existing flora and fauna, and vulnerable bodies reinforce the film’s posthuman sensibility by challenging familiar categories. The planet Ygam is not a passive backdrop but a living system, foregrounding ecological interdependence and underscoring the violence inherent in attempts at domination. This association with nature is further reinforced through details like the name of the protagonist. In his article, *Fantastic Planet’at 50: Revisiting Rene Laloux’s Cult Classic*, Rich Johnson opines: “...the Oms’ Earth origins

revealed via the Draag’s telepathic documentation of “Terre” (the French word for Earth; “Oms” is similarly a cognate of *hommes...*)” – 2023.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming: where identity is fluid and relational, offers a useful lens here (Deleuze and Guattari 238). Laloux’s characters are always in states of becoming: human-animal, human-machine, present-future. In *Gandahar*, human beings transform into Men of Metal as they cross the portal. Sylvain transforms into stone after being struck by Men of Metal but his body soon regains its original state while inside the giant egg. Animation enables these transformations without the constraints of physical realism, making posthuman theory visually legible.

## Conclusion

*La Planète sauvage* and *Gandahar* can be regarded as significant works of posthuman cinema till date. They deconstruct anthropocentric hierarchies and expose the ethical consequences of domination, whether biological, technological, or temporal. Laloux’s animated worlds challenge viewers to confront the fragility of human identity and the necessity of ecological and ethical interdependence. Laloux offers a vision of the future that is unsettling yet profoundly relevant. His films remind us that the posthuman condition is not a distant possibility but an ongoing reality wherein the only onward approach may be of coexistence.

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