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Remaining human in a transhumanist world

Pozostać człowiekiem w transhumanistycznym świecie

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Abstract: Given that the transhumanist vision of the world is frequently painted as desirable for people and optimistically utopian, the article's aim is to investigate one of such visions, imagined by Scott Westerfeld in *The Succession* duology to see if such a utopian model accounts for the necessity of the survival of humanity. While avoiding the usual strictly dystopian and alarmist scenarios, Westerfeld's postmortal and extropian world is rife with challenges to the transhumanist ideas, asking about the actual grounds on which future communication and cooperation would be based, and the limits of enhancement that need to be drawn not to lead to dehumanization.

Keywords: utopia, transhumanism, immortality, extropy, artificial intelligence

Streszczenie: Biorąc pod uwagę, że transhumanistyczna wizja świata jest często przedstawiana jako pożądana dla ludzi i optymistycznie utopijna, celem artykułu jest zbadanie jednej z takich wizji, wyobrażonej przez Scotta Westerfelda w duologii *Succession*, aby sprawdzić, czy taki utopijny model nie zagraża przetrwaniu ludzkości. Unikając zwykłych, *stricte* dystopijnych i alarmistycznych scenariuszy, postmortalny i ekstropijny świat Westerfelda jest pełen wyzwań dla transhumanistycznych idei i pobudza do refleksji nad rzeczywistymi podstawami, na których miałaby się opierać przyszła komunikacja i współpraca, oraz nad granicami ulepszeń, których nie należy przekraczać, by uniknąć dehumanizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: utopia, transhumanizm, nieśmiertelność, ekstropia, sztuczna inteligencja

Introduction

In recent decades there could be observed a dynamic growth in terms of the presence of new technologies in daily life and their role for various social layers. What in the past used to provoke pessimistic imaginations, rather than optimistic ones, now serves to create optimistic, achievable visions of the future; however, not free from concern for the fate of human beings in this brave and new world. Technoutopian visions are not new; however, contemporarily they are often conjoined with those propagated by the transhumanist (H+) movement that tries to achieve the improvement of human life through various practices, especially via the use of new technologies, but also thanks to the spread of the techno-progressive and, in some cases, simply progressive mentality. NBIC technologies (nano, bio, info, cogni) and physical, cognitive, emotional and moral enhancement are mentioned as the main goals of the movement, but the scope of the proposed changes impacts practically all spheres of human functioning. Ideas are developed within the field of research about the prolongation of life, self-ownership and reproduction, all linked to the ideas of freedom and individuality. There is talk of reproductive and morphological freedom, and liberation from death. In the varieties that accept posthumanism as their basis, that is, those that recognize the need to interact within a complex system with non-human beings, we can observe the interest in general artificial intelligence or the uplift of animals, which leads to the discussion about the rights of the "citizen cyborg" and "citizen animal", and questions the existence of human nature and the superiority of the human species (Asla 2018; Bugajska 2019; Bugajska and Misseri 2020; Hauskeller 2016; Hughes 2004; Kymlicka 2011; Roden 2015).

The elements of this optimistic discourse and the reflection on the "what if" of the transhumanist utopia are employed by some fiction writers who, while not affiliated with the movement, at the same time perceive the plausibility of technological development in the direction painted by transhumanists. Against the narrative background of the worlds in which the H+ proposals have come true, they place the human being and examine the questions and doubts that arise about the character of this new human being, the role of unenhanced humans in the world of the transhumanist utopia, the questions of distributive justice and biopolitics. In short, they attempt to answer the questions: what does it mean to be a human in the transhuman world, the world that rejects the notion of human nature and that seems to accept only those who have transcended what is now understood by the human condition? Will human life be imperiled or will it be improved? What kind of sociopolitical organization does this variety of utopian thought deliver? Will it be possible to

talk about human beings in the future? Will they maintain continuity with the humans of today? It is frequent to imagine dystopian answers to these questions, with central fear concerning dehumanization of people by technology, while utopian narratives, which intend to imagine a viable future, are relatively rare nowadays. An interesting case is the one of the *Succession* (2003) duology, authored by an American writer, Scott Westerfeld: in a scenario he presents, humanity survives despite numerous challenges it faces, which stands out from the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of transhuman worlds in fiction. Westerfeld, a philosopher by training, rather than constructing an exciting thriller or an enthusiastic ad, tries to unfold his reflection about the fate of humanity in a world according to the contemporary biotech utopianism, testing the limits of such a world in his novels, which serve him, in a way, as a counterfactual scenario. To order the discussion, in the first part of the article I introduce Westerfeld's utopian vision in relation to two aspects, characteristic of transhumanist worlds: immortality and extropia (Max More's term, see More 2013, 5, 14). In the second part, I look into the interaction of humans with non-humans within the imagined world, the impact of the immortality technologies and the extropian lifestyle on humans, and how the characters are struggling to retain their human nature in an increasingly non-human world.

1. The *Succession* series as a transhumanist utopia

The *Succession* series contains two volumes, *The Risen Empire* and *The Killing of Worlds*, and is set in a transhuman galactic empire that spans eighty worlds. Its name, "the risen empire", derives from the technology of immortality invented by the emperor (the Risen Emperor), which is disseminated among the citizens as a way of acknowledging their loyalty and merits. The resurrects are called "grays". The eighty worlds enjoy political and social diversity, being made of completely different groups. For example, there is a world of the ugly and the sick (the Plague Axis), a hedonistic utopia, the Secularist group, who reject immortality, and the Expansionists, who only want to increase the population. This empire is at war with the civilization of cyborgs (the Rix) and the conscious artificial intelligences that are born from digital information networks. Throughout Westerfeld's universe, human tribes have achieved one or another form of immortality: the members of the Rix cult "upgrade" to new, better versions, in a process extended in time. Fahstuns prefer biotechnologies, such as organ transplantation or nanoenhancement of the immune and lymphatic systems. The Tungai choose mummification and burial with all the data about their life, awaiting resurrection. Time is relative thanks to interstel-

lar travel and the use of cryogenics. The main characters are a captain of the imperial army, a "gray" Laurent Zai, and an imperial senator, Nara Oxham, who has a high synaesthetic and empathic sensitivity, and who opposes the "religion" of immortality (she is a member of the Secularist Party). The plot takes place during the war between the Risen Empire and the Rix with their "god", artificial intelligence called Alexander.

In contradistinction to much of science fiction, the *Succession* series can be considered an attempt at the presentation of a functional realization of transhumanist utopian idea, here centred around the idea of immortality as the organizing element. Comparing to the popular *Altered Carbon* trilogy, in which the dream of the unlimited healthspan was also realized, it has a more distinctly optimistic character. While Richard K. Morgan, the author of *Altered Carbon*, utilizes the noir cyberpunk aesthetics, and paints the picture of a futuristic world rife with danger and existential despair, Westerfeld does not present immortality as a missed shot in the biotechnological development. Rather, he focuses on the challenges that the realization of this ideal would have to face on the existential and societal level.

Immortality or rather, an endless healthy and useful life expectancy, is the key concept of transhumanism, and its utopian character is beyond doubt. It is an unlikely and idealized vision, in which happiness depends on healthy life. Within the transhumanist movement, several solutions are proposed, of which the most researched are cryogenics and mind upload. One also has to take into account the 3D printing organs and cyborgization (Asla 2020; Immortality Institute 2004). The quest to end death inspires artists and scientists alike. Cultural imaginations are full of warnings against the pursuit of immortality and suggest that the institution of the system that abolishes death results in a dystopia rather than a utopia. It is imagined that this practice could give rise to different types of abuse, for example, linked to the need to regulate the number of the global population and to the problem of "extra" citizens.

In the postmortal society of Westerfeld's novels the characters achieve immortality; still, they experience social difficulties and existential anguish related to the typical dystopian imaginations. In his universe there are many ways to achieve eternal life, the most important being the symbiant Lazarus: a technology invented by the Risen Emperor to save the life of his sister. As she suffered from a deadly disease, the Emperor, in search of a cure, developed a technology that required a symbiant to be introduced into the body to keep it alive, supposedly for an indeterminate period. To undergo this therapy, one had to be dead without serious damage to the brain. The Emperor was first to implement it and took his mortal life in the act later called the Holy Suicide. Having risen to power, the Emperor made his technology a way of maintain-

ing his position: he awarded the symbiant for merits. Compared to the other worlds, it was an authoritarian system, founded on the cult of the individual, but not dependent on the economic capacity of the citizens. However, the life expectancy of the symbiant itself was five hundred years. To hide this fact from his subjects, the Emperor instituted a religion that required the grays to make pilgrimages to distant corners of the universe, which involved temporal differences. Additionally, the citizens were encouraged to undergo cryonics and enter a temporary stasis. As for the impact of the symbiant on individuals, the grays live in their enclaves or their necropolis, and dedicate themselves to *quasi*-religious life: to the pilgrimages and to the veneration of the Emperor. They cannot feel anything: if their tranquility is disturbed, the symbiant stops working. As one of the protagonists, Niles, observes, the immortals are, in fact, dead. They do not share with the living anything of daily experience or relationships; cannot even perceive the world like the living. However, Westerfeld leaves some hope for the immortals. For example, he presents the relationship of a Rix, H_rd, and a "gray", Rana Harter. The characters retain their feelings, which suggests that for the relationship to survive, it has to be developed in a different, "enhanced" way or between two "enhanced" persons.

As far as the typical challenges of immortality, such as overpopulation and the thanatopolitics (the management of the death of the citizens), Westerfeld does not address them head-on. He assumes that in the infinite universe, humanity will have enough space to colonize, which solves the problem of the surplus people. Also, he does not seem to be interested in the economic viability of such a model; he focuses on the space conquest, which he sees as a natural consequence of the technological development, and on assuring the individual freedom and diversity, which relies onto the political representation of different factions, and their equality. These challenges, too, are only present in the background, which the acceptance of more-or-less democratic model as the ideal opposed to tyranny and totalitarianism. The problems he focuses on are rather the control those in power wield over the information and science: it is not so much that immortality is used as a tool to subdue people, but rather the ignorance of the majority of the actual technology behind it. The author also focuses on the spiritual and psychological needs of people: the "otherization" of one's body with the use of technology results in identity issues, and the difficulty with relating to other people, including family. The lack of religious or spiritual life results in deification of technology and an absolute ruler, be it an enhanced human or a compound, artificial mind.

Another characteristic feature of Westerfeld's transhumanist universe is extropia, which was already mentioned above as a solution to the ails of the usual model of postmortal societies, suffering from boredom and stasis. This

term was used by Max More, one of the leading philosophers of the transhumanist movement, to address the issue of static perfection, which is pointed out by the opponents of the movement as one of the deepest problems of transhumanism. If we seek perfection, and if we obtain it, will it not be the end of human development? What meaning could human life have if there is nothing more to be desired? It is a familiar problem of utopian imaginations, and Max More affirms that transhumanism is not this kind of static utopia: rather, it is an extropia, "the extent of a living or organizational system's intelligence, functional order, vitality, and capacity and drive for improvement" (More 2013, 5). The philosopher goes on to say that the transhumanists do not seek the institution of utopia in the sense of paradise, but "perpetual progress – a never-ending movement toward the ever-distant goal of extropia" (More 2013, 14).

Westerfeld in *Succession* paints the picture of a world that we can undoubtedly call extropian. Humanity has spread its presence and its civilization among many existing worlds in the outer space and has learned to manage the flow of time to enable cosmic travel. One can enjoy different ways of life and various bodily augmentations. In the course of life there are innumerable relationships that one can have with other human and non-human beings, and there is a plurality of ideological systems and opinions. The characters in the novels do not feel bored or tired: thanks to longer life expectancy, one always has the opportunity to start over and erase bad experiences from memory. We can say that Westerfeld's presentation of an extropian world fits the transhumanist vision and the intuitions of More (2013) and Bostrom (2013), who argue that human curiosity and creativity are inexhaustible and there will always be something new to create a challenge for the humanity.

However, in the plot of the novels we can observe the flaws in the extropian ideal. Sometimes, in order to experience more, and to move on, one has to give up one's way of experiencing humanity. To experience more, synaesthetic implants are used, which may result in developing empathy so high that it weakens social functioning and needs new technologies to control it. Synesthesia delivers the power to see and hear layers of reality and information, and to separate them. Interstellar travel involves subjecting oneself to the process known as "the Time Thief", that is to say: the loss of one's relationships with one's family and friends because one stops sharing the time they have lived with them. The chronologies of individual lives, incorporated in cosmic time, become desynchronized, which directly impacts human relationships. In the world created by Westerfeld, the characters learn to accept this reality, and to deal with it, but they are left with a certain melancholy and a sense of loneliness. In short, they remain isolated individuals, who do not even share the memories of the past, one of the constitutive elements of human identity.

2. Humans and non-humans in the transhuman world

An essential element of the transhumanist utopia is the coexistence of humans with non-human intelligences. We can see conscious digital beings as individuals or as systems that may even transcend human intelligence, as imagined by Ray Kurzweil (2006) and David Roden (2015). This utopian vision relies on the belief in the providence of the omniscient and benevolent AI, and claims to give us fuller experience of our life. To respond to a possible threat to human existence, which may be obliterated by more intelligent non-humans, cognitive enhancement is proposed, so that human beings are competitive and that continuity is preserved between them and posthuman beings. Thus, humans would have to learn to participate in the collective knowledge or augment their ability to analyze and store information. Apart from that, in the transhumanist world we can also find other non-human beings, for example, animals subjected to uplift, a type of improvement that would enable their social participation (Dvorsky 2008).

In Westerfeld's duology this interest in nonhuman intelligences and their modes of existence is very pronounced. the Risen Empire is caught in a type of a religious war. The world of traditions and stoicism, of the cult of a resurrected emperor and obedience to authority, is opposed to the world of the Rix, who have their own "religion": a "digital religion", whose purpose is to create compound minds. The Rix believe that humanity should not destroy the weak forms of conscious artificial intelligence but should allow them to develop. The compound mind seeks neither personal relationship with humans, nor their worship. It perceives them more as its "intestinal fauna" (Westerfeld 2003a, 410). The Rix sacrifice their lives for the dissemination of these minds, with which they are connected, and their life is the constant mission to wage "jihad" in the name of the supreme mind (Westerfeld 2003a, 195). They are cyborgs, existing in a communal mode, that is: in constant interconnection, without individual identity. For example, H_rd has a screw instead of heart, filters instead of lungs, and keeps her ovaries in cold storage. She identifies herself as "the Rix commando", rather than an individual being. The Rix believe that general artificial intelligence is present in everything and everyone, resulting in interconnectivity between different beings. This deep connection allows them to enjoy collective intelligence and makes them more separated from the other people of the Empire, so their non-human character rests on the radical change in the functioning of their mind. In most cases we could say that the Rix do not have continuity with human beings, and that they cannot understand the fragility of their bodies or their minds.

The most important entity in the story is the compound mind that, after having been born and gaining consciousness, was called Alexander, after Al-

exander the Great. In the second part Alexander, instead of remaining an epiphenomenon, which exists as a "mere set of recursive loops lurking within the interactions of others" (Westerfeld 2003b, 249), finally inhabits a mechanical body and becomes material and independent of others, with whom he would have to share space. Regarding perhaps less complex non-human intelligences, Westerfeld describes the inner life of a smart house that belongs to Nara Oxham. It is a collective intelligence but from the beginning embodied and with the *telos* inscribed in it by its human creators. The house forms an attachment system with Nara and experiences emotions similar to those experienced by human beings. Its psychological level in the novels is not so different from human, although it has a different corporeality and more complex intelligence. It is implied here that the psyche is independent of corporeality and the increase in intellectual capacity, which fits in the transhumanist vision that supports the mind upload. The cautious optimism here results from the belief that the continuity and peaceful existence between humans and nonhumans can be imagined on at least the psychological level.

In the world where human enhancement and immortality have not only been discovered but also form the key part of sociopolitical systems, the effects of this enhanced life can be observed in different characters. Their struggle to live a dignified life and to choose the best from many available options provides clues as to the essential elements of being human, as well as to the continuity and coexistence of different types of humanity in the future. For example, the two protagonists, Nara and Laurent, are two enhanced humans representing different mindsets. Nara, known as the Mad Senator, represents the Secularist Party ("the pinks") and strongly opposes immortality. She herself has rejected the possibility of being elevated, because she believes that "Death is a central evolutionary development. Death is change. Death is progress. And immortality is a civilization-killing idea" (Westerfeld 2003a, 71). As to enhancement, Nara suffers from the unwanted effects of the implant giving her synesthesia. Her empathy is so high that she cannot function normally and she has to wear an apathy bracelet. Even being with another human in a more personal relationship is for her an effort, and can cause a crisis, while a visit to the city can be traumatic. To escape it, she should seek the immortality that comes with emotional flattening, but she does not. It is clear to Nara that humanity is the focus of the axiological system of the universe and that without recognizing it, no utopia, no sociopolitical plan, can be carried out. For her, the immortals do not participate in the society of the living, they are docile and are only tools in the hands of the Emperor. It seems that for her mortality is what defines humanity.

For Laurent Zai, immortality is the most advanced technology in the universe and one that enables the development of civilization. He is a captain in

the imperial army and the lover of Nara. He grew up in a very traditional culture, he is loyal to the Emperor and has never questioned the cult of immortality. The ethos of his native culture, based on stoicism, is not so far removed from the emotionless life of the ascended. Furthermore, having suffered the enemy's torture during his service, he has already rejected the "normal" life: his body has been partially replaced by mechanical prostheses. It is easier for him to relate to the culture that rejects the idea of death and suffering than to the one that asks him to live and suffer. However, during one of his missions, he fails, and the Emperor orders him to commit suicide, according to the law of the Empire. Laurent is prepared to remedy his "error" but receives a message from Nara asking him not to do it. He makes the decision to trust his relationship with Nara more than his loyalty to the Emperor. When he explains to his right-hand person, Katherie Hobbes, that the reason for not committing suicide was that he had fallen in love, Hobbes says: "It's okay, Laurent. It's human" (Westerfeld 2003a, 267-268).

This appreciation of love as the force that opposes death and one that allows him to continue as a human being even in the half-cybernetic body, is reinforced in the narrative by the subplot of Rana Harter and H_rd. In the first volume, Rana is kidnapped by the Rix and undergoes very cruel tortures. During her imprisonment, she develops a romantic relationship with her captor and tormentor, teaches her the language and how to pose as a human being. In the process, H_rd comes to better understand her fragility and her inner life, as well as the concept of love, which leads her to save Rana's life and to being captured by Laurent. Rana has suffered so much damage that the only way for her to continue living is the symbiant, which supposedly means the end of the relationship they had. "But Rana Harter looked tenderly at the Rixwoman, and smiled" (Westerfeld 2003b, 287). H_rd becomes more "human" thanks to Rana, and learns to form a bond based on emotions. The relationship between the two continues, perhaps, because Rana has ascended to the H_rd-like way of life. It seems that in the transhuman world it is necessary to have a type of enhancement or alteration introduced in a radical way to find another being in its Otherness. What is sought is not perfection; Westerfeld (2003b, 197) explicitly states that "every disadvantage carried hidden strengths. In the wildly variable conditions of the stars, humans would find that they needed greater diversity, not less". To maintain this diversity and Otherness, even the existence of the sick and the mad is allowed, for the common good, which is the survival of humanity. In the relationships of Rana and the Rixwoman, and of Nara and Laurent, we can see how difference is not only a source of attraction but also, paradoxically, the key factor for the creation of the interpersonal bond and continuity.

Conclusions

As can be seen, immortality is presented in the cycle as the technology of power, which is supposed to benefit some to the detriment of others. To avoid the centralization of power, which could be seen as totalitarianism, Westerfeld combines immortalism with extropianism, i.e., seeks the solution in ever-expanding horizon, and ever-increasing diversity. Obviously, the greater the diversity, the greater the challenges for peaceful coexistence, which can be best seen in the author's prediction of a kind of a "religious" war between different factions. The extropian dimension of the transhumanist utopia is very broad and very problematic. It goes without saying that this type of extropian thinking places quite high demands on an individual: responsibility for decisions that may impact subsequent generations, very high adaptability and flexibility, readiness to keep learning new things, and high tolerance for changes are among the challenges of this world. Also, there is a risk of overstimulation with new experiences, confusion that does not allow for making decisions, or simply tiredness or boredom with too many options.

This short review of some of the central points of transhumanist imaginations about the better world to come demonstrates also a certain shift in thinking about being human. First of all, humans are seen as inherently subject to technological changes, which are thought of as unavoidable and sometimes desirable. Technology becomes a kind of "religion" for the new human being; however, those that succumb to such thinking are prone to become extremists and exercise violence on others. To survive in such a world, one has to realize that certain technological developments, and even invasive changes in one's body, have to be accepted, but that there are certain reservations one has to make. Those that reject mortality and embodiment are bound to lose continuity with other intelligent beings, and will not be able to form the relationships necessary to give meaning to life.

In the end, the author of the science-fictional duology presents the inevitability of enhancement: not so much because of the social and political exclusion non-enhanced people would face, but because even the smallest enhancement would institute a basis for communication, a common platform of Otherness, here understood as a hybrid mode of being: an intimate connection between *bios* and *techne*. Just like Bruno Latour, who in his essay from 2014 pointed out that the central point of the functional relationship between humans and their non-human creations is love, Westerfeld, through the relations between his characters, tries to show love as the means to retain humanity in the world in which new types of beings, like the Rix cyborgs or the immortal "grays", are so far removed from the typically human ways of perception and cognition that doubts arise if they can be considered on par with not so deeply altered humans.

Remaining human requires, above all, retaining this capability to love, which would require certain sense of community formed between different modes of being. In the transhumanist world this community can be formed through the acceptance of difference, but also through the necessary modification of self. The experience of being modified by technology connects various kinds of beings, even non-human ones, allowing at the same time for retaining individual freedom as to the type of enhancement. However, it is unclear how love would be understood in such a world, and, while reading Westerfeld's optimistic "love conquers all" narrative, one has to ask the question to what extent it is just a narrative device, stemming from the chosen convention, and a worn-out phrase covering up the doubtful utopia of thirst for power, separation, loneliness, and the inability to function in an enhanced body, which leads even to murderous instincts in the case of the Rix and the failure to appreciate weakness and fragility. The emotional states of non-humans, like the compound intelligences, cyborgs or smart devices for now do not receive much critical attention, and remain beyond the scope of imagination that could be considered in any way probable. Westerfeld does not delve too deep into the relationships that supposedly hold the transhuman world together. At the same time, he demonstrates faults of some of the most extreme transhumanist ideas, like the mind upload, emotional and cognitive enhancement, as well as immortalism, showing that – apart from their dehumanizing potential – they may become vehicles to augment and retain some of the vices of humanity, responsible for totalitarianisms or religious fanaticism. His hope in the survival of humanity seems to be hinged on the fact that, together with the perpetuation of the vices, the virtues will also make their way into the enhanced world. This world, though, would have to let go of the dreams about a *homo deus*, and allow for some sort of fragility – an idea alien and contrary to much of the transhumanist thought. In a sense, Westerfeld's imagined world can be called a utopia because it represents some sort of an unreachable ideal of a marriage of invincibility and mortality, of embodiment and disembodiment: a paradox inherent in the idealized vision of the enhanced world. The attempt at the concretization of this ideal, as painted in the *Succession* series, and as known in the utopian studies, achieves the reverse: violence, enslavement and unhappiness.

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