Detailed Seminar Notes

Robotics, Race and Posthumanism

1. Aim of the presentation

Liam asks why robots must continually learn to be human. He argues that this process has racial, political and cultural dimensions as well as technological ones. In questioning what it means to be human, he suggests, posthumanism pays insufficient attention to race.

2. Historical background

Stories of artificial beings span ancient Greece and China, the Golem legend and Frankenstein. Modern science fiction draws on this inheritance to cast the robot as a figure of labour, service, obedience and otherness.

3. Modernity and race

One of the presentation's central claims is that racism is constitutive of modernity. Robot narratives carry this history with them.

4. Despina Kakoudaki

Artificial Bodies and the concept of "metal face" frame the robot's body as a blank surface onto which societies project their fears and ideas of otherness.

5. Gregory Hampton and Lewis Chude-Sokei

The presentation draws historical parallels between the robot and the enslaved Black body. It traces the connections between cybernetic discourse and anti-Black discourse.

6. Posthumanism

Drawing on Braidotti, Wolfe and Ferrando, the speaker identifies three features of posthumanism:

- A critique of humanism
- A critique of anthropocentrism
- The dismantling of binary oppositions

He argues that this scholarship does too little to interrogate whiteness.

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7. Sylvia Wynter

Wynter distinguishes “Man” from “human”. The subject presented as universally human has historically been the white European man.

8. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson

Jackson is the presentation’s central theorist. The speaker draws on “blackened humanity” and “ontological plasticity”. Blackness figures both as a position of exclusion and as a constitutive position that reveals how the category of the human is produced.

9. Judith Butler

Identity emerges through performance. In the discussion, Catherine suggests reading Butler alongside Jackson.

10. Reading Chappie

Chappie is the principal case study.

- Chappie learns to be human through imitation.
- At first, he is treated as an animal.
- He is then treated as a child.
- Finally, he imitates a stereotyped version of Black masculinity modelled by Ninja.

For the speaker, this sequence shows how humanness is produced through performance.

11. Zef culture

The speaker discusses the white Afrikaner identity of Die Antwoord and Ninja, debates about cultural appropriation, and the aesthetics of zef.

12. Motion capture

Sharlto Copley’s movements give Chappie his human physicality. Gesture matters more than appearance in the film’s account of how a robot learns to be human.

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13. WALL·E

EVE embodies a sterile, white technological aesthetic. WALL·E has the grimy, industrial body of a worker. The gestures he learns from Hello, Dolly! illustrate how cinema can teach its viewers to move.

14. Nope

Jordan Peele’s film turns the Muybridge myth on its head. The discussion considers the visibility of the Black body in the earliest images in cinema history.

15. A.I. Artificial Intelligence

David’s status as a second-class subject and the Flesh Fair scene bring discrimination against robots into view.

16. Other films

Metropolis, The Stepford Wives, I, Robot, The Creator, Star Wars and the character Data in Star Trek offer different ways to explore the relationship between robots, race and the human.

17. Key points from the discussion

- The distinction between an android and an industrial robot.
- Domestic labour, cleaning robots and gender.
- The circulation of anti-Black slurs directed at robots on social media.
- Cinema as a medium that teaches gesture.
- The proposal to read Butler and Jackson together.

18. Critical assessment

The presentation’s strength lies in bringing posthumanism into conversation with critical race theory. Its selection of films draws chiefly on Western science fiction, leaving other cinematic traditions unexplored.

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19. Names to remember

Rosi Braidotti · Cary Wolfe · Francesca Ferrando · Sylvia Wynter · Zakiyyah Iman Jackson · Judith Butler · Despina Kakoudaki · Gregory Hampton · Lewis Chude-Sokei · Béla Balázs

20. Films to remember

Chappie · WALL·E · Nope · A.I. Artificial Intelligence · Metropolis · The Stepford Wives · I, Robot · The Creator · Star Wars · Star Trek · Hello, Dolly!

21. Exam preparation

Possible questions:
1. Why has posthumanism been criticised for its treatment of race?
2. What is ontological plasticity?
3. Why is Chappie read through the lens of Black masculinity?
4. What does “metal face” mean?
5. How might Butler and Jackson be read together?

22. At a glance

Central thesis: Representations of robots are sites where the human, race and technology are constituted together.
Principal film: Chappie.
Central theorist: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson.
Key concept: Ontological plasticity.
Key question: Is the category of the human truly universal?