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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND POSTHUMAN IDENTITY IN AMERICAN APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE (JUSTIN CRONIN'S *THE PASSAGE* TRILOGY)

This article analyzes Justin Cronin's The Passage trilogy through the lens of artificial intelligence and posthuman theory, exploring how technological progress reshapes human identity and ethics. In an era of rapidly advancing AI and biotechnology, apocalyptic literature reflects fears of uncontrolled innovation. Cronin's trilogy depicts a military experiment "Project Noah" that attempts to perfect humanity but instead triggers a global catastrophe, transforming humans into adaptive, networked beings resembling collective machine intelligence. This symbolizes technological determinism, where free will is overridden by algorithmic control.

The study examines posthuman identity through characters such as Amy and Fanning, whose transformations echo Katherine Hayles' concept of information-based posthumanism. Zombies are not merely mindless but rational entities forming a cybernetic superorganism, akin to distributed AI. Time and space in Cronin's post-apocalyptic world are destabilized: chronology fragments into memory-driven flows, and geography becomes a techno-symbolic remnant of collapse, resonating with Fredric Jameson's theory of temporalized culture. Donna Haraway's cyborg model illuminates the trilogy's hybrid beings, particularly Amy and Lila Kyle, who retain emotional traces despite technological alteration, suggesting a "human-in-the-loop" ethical framework for AI development.

Philosophically, the trilogy critiques technology's elevation to divine status, echoing Nietzsche's "death of God" and transhumanist ambitions for transcendence through superintelligence. Rather than salvation, technological omnipotence produces authoritarian control and existential chaos, aligning with Nick Bostrom's warnings about misaligned superintelligence.

Ultimately, The Passage trilogy dramatizes the erosion of metaphysical and ethical foundations in a technologically dominated future. It challenges readers to rethink human agency, collective intelligence, and the urgent need for ethical oversight in posthuman evolution, questioning whether humanity's pursuit of godlike power risks becoming its own destroyer.

Key words: *apocalypse, posthuman, artificial intelligence, Justin Cronin, "The Passage".*

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ШТУЧНИЙ ІНТЕЛЕКТ ТА ПОСТГУМАНІСТИЧНА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ В АМЕРИКАНСЬКІЙ АПОКАЛІПТИЧНІЙ ЛІТЕРАТУРІ (ТРИЛОГІЯ ДЖАСТІНА КРОНІНА *THE PASSAGE*)

У цій статті аналізується трилогія Джастіна Кроніна The Passage крізь призму штучного інтелекту та постгуманістичної теорії, досліджується, як технологічний прогрес трансформує людську ідентичність та етику. В епоху стрімкого розвитку ШІ та біотехнологій апокаліптична література відображає страхи перед неконтрольованими інноваціями. Трилогія Кроніна описує військовий експеримент «Проект Ной», який мав на меті вдосконалити людину, але натомість призводить до глобальної катастрофи, перетворюючи людей на адаптивних, мережеских істот, схожих на колективний машинний інтелект. Це символізує технологічний детермінізм, де вільна воля підмінюється алгоритмічним контролем.

Дослідження розглядає постгуманістичну ідентичність через персонажів, таких як Емі та Феннінг, чії трансформації відображають концепцію постгуманізму, заснованого на інформації, Кетрін Гейлс. Зомбі тут не просто бездумні істоти, а раціональні суб'єкти, що утворюють кібернетичний суперорганізм, подібний до розподіленого ШІ. У постапокаліптичному світі Кроніна час і простір стають нестабільними: хронологія розпадається на потоки пам'яті, а географія перетворюється на техно-символічні залишки колапсу, що перегукується з теорією темпоралізованої культури Фредріка Джеймсона. Модель кіборга Донни Харавей

висвітлює гібридних істот трилогії, зокрема Емі та Лілу Кайл, які зберігають емоційні риси попри технологічні зміни, що натякає на етичну концепцію «людина в циклі» для розвитку III.

З філософської точки зору, трилогія критикує піднесення технології до рівня божественної сили, перегукуючись із ніцшеанським «Бог помер» та трансгуманістичними прагненнями до надрозуму. Замість спасіння технологічна всемогутність призводить до авторитарного контролю та екзистенційного хаосу, що узгоджується з попередженнями Ніка Бострома про небезпеку неузгодженого надінтелекту.

У підсумку, трилогія *The Passage* художньо зображує ерозію метафізичних та етичних засад у майбутньому, домінованому технологіями. Вона спонукає читачів переосмислити людську дієздатність, колективний інтелект та нагальну потребу етичного контролю у постгуманістичній еволюції, ставлячи питання: чи не ризикує людство, прагнучи стати богоподібним, знищити саме себе?

Ключові слова: апокаліпсис, постгуманізм, штучний інтелект, Джастін Кронін, *The Passage*.

Introduction. In the contemporary era of rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, the cultural impact of these domains has increasingly become a subject of scholarly inquiry. The influence of technological progress extends far beyond technical fields, leaving profound imprints on the humanities as well. In particular, apocalyptic literature – a branch of the science fiction genre – reflects on how technology and artificial intelligence, once freed from ethical control, may transform humanity. In this context, Justin Cronin's trilogy *The Passage* is examined as a literary and philosophical exploration of how artificial intelligence contributes to the formation of posthuman identity, replacing the concept of God with technology and engendering a new yet destructive civilization.

Technology and the Transformation of Human Will. The trilogy depicts a global catastrophe brought about by genetic experimentation and technological manipulation. The experiment, known as “Project Noah,” carried out by the U.S. military elite, was initiated under the claim of perfecting humanity. However, once the project escaped control, it confronted humankind with a plague of the undead. This narrative symbolically illustrates how the loss of ethical regulation over technology can culminate in a disaster of planetary scale. At the same time, the project embodies not only the risks of biotechnology but also the potential of artificial intelligence to assume control over human will. The state of zombification becomes an allegory for the algorithmic direction of human agency and the existential dangers posed by autonomous consciousness. This aligns with the concept of determinism, wherein individual freedom of choice is supplanted by technologically and genetically preconditioned circumstances. Justin Cronin portrays the gradual collapse of a technological civilization that humanity itself has created: “Mankind had built a world that would take a hundred years to die. A century for the last light to go out” (Cronin, 2010: 317).

As Sherryl Vint, a scholar of technological culture's impact on humanity, observes, “works writ-

ten from a posthuman perspective interrogate what it means to be human in contexts where technological intervention destabilizes the very category of the human” (Vint, 2007: 45). Cronin's trilogy *The Passage* can be read precisely as an artistic attempt to address this question. The statement, “It happened fast. Thirty two minutes for one world to die, another to be born” (Cronin, 2010: 204), signifies not only the physical passage of time but also the abrupt and irreversible transformation of human identity. The protagonist, Amy, embodies this transformation. Subjected to technological and genetic intervention, she experiences amnesia, fragmentation of selfhood, and existential solitude. Her existence is no longer anchored in relationality, history, or memory, but rather in a radical interior individuality. This illustrates how, in the posthuman era, the human subject loses its biological and social stability and reconstitutes itself as a being engaged in the ongoing project of self-recreation.

In this regard, the zombie figures created by Cronin can be understood not merely as elements of horror but as metaphors for technological systems that, once freed from human control, possess the capacity to learn and adapt. Within the trilogy, zombies are not portrayed as passive beings driven solely by instinct; rather, they emerge as information-based entities endowed with strategic behavioral abilities. This is most clearly embodied in the character of Fanning, their leader. Fanning is no longer simply an infected body but a technological being endowed with logic, memory, and will. His actions and motivations demonstrate that self-consciousness and purposive decision-making are conceivable not only within biological frameworks but also within information-based systems. In this sense, Cronin's zombies resonate with Katherine Hayles's influential theorization in posthuman studies, wherein new forms of existence arise through the convergence of the human body with technology and are constituted upon the flow of information.

Katherine Hayles describes the posthuman condition as one in which “the body is no longer the locus of subjectivity; instead, informational flows and the

priorities of technology take precedence” (Hayles, 1999: 2). In the world created by Cronin, these informational flows manifest both in genetic codes and in technologically mediated structures of consciousness. The human body ceases to exist as a natural whole and is instead transformed into a technological object subject to manipulation. Human will, in turn, is shaped by algorithmic structures. In this sense, Cronin’s post-apocalyptic world concretizes, within a literary framework, the posthuman model theorized by Hayles.

“The restraints were nothing, like paper. The rivets popped... because the darkness was part of him now... inside him... a great devouring hunger uncoiled itself. To eat the very world... To make the world eternal, as he was” (Cronin, 2010: 193). Through these lines, the author depicts a technologically hybridized being that transcends human limitations, yet does so not in the name of ethical values but in pursuit of boundless power and control. The metaphor of “darkness” emerges as a literary symbol of unregulated informational power and destructive technological instinct. As Katherine Hayles argues, corporeal embodiment is traditionally shaped by localized and contextual human experience; yet, in the posthuman condition, informational flows dislocate the body from its material stability. This resonates with *The Passage* trilogy, where technology algorithmically restructures both human body and consciousness. Fanning and the other infected entities are not merely biologically altered; their identity and memory are reconstituted into information-based, network-oriented structures. Fanning’s aim is not mere survival but rather the eternalization of his technological being and the transformation of the world according to this new principle.

Collective Intelligence and the Reconstruction of Social Structure. As noted, Katherine Hayles argues that in the posthuman condition, consciousness and memory are no longer bound to the body but are instead connected to systems. The zombies’ preservation of past human experiences suggests that memory is retained in a non-biological yet purposive and selective manner. In the narrative, this is reflected in Fanning’s persistence of his personal past, emotional traumas, and goals. Unlike the classical zombie figure, here we encounter a literary embodiment of digital consciousness. In the figure of Fanning, the zombies may be interpreted as an alternative form of intelligence – entities that should not merely be understood as monstrous beings to be destroyed, but as distinct life forms requiring ethical and philosophical recognition.

Furthermore, the zombies can be read as a metaphor for the emergence of a new form of social col-

lectivity, coinciding with the dissolution of individual consciousness. Their collective awareness overrides individual will and establishes a new cybernetic model of society. This recalls Émile Durkheim’s notion of collective consciousness, but transposed into a technological context. From this perspective, the infected beings function not as isolated monsters but as carriers of a new social order grounded in a different mode of intelligence. They engage in information exchange not within individual bodies but through networked processes, thereby operating as a unified superorganism. This dynamic parallels contemporary cloud-based artificial intelligence and processes of collective machine learning, in which individual agents interact through a centralized system. In this sense, zombies transcend classical individual subjectivity to constitute a novel, non-individual yet rational form of collective intelligence.

The Passage not only depicts the transformation of the human body and consciousness through technology but also artistically presents a reconfiguration of time and space. In the post-apocalyptic setting, chronological time dissolves, giving way to cyclical and, at times, chaotic structures. The boundaries between past and future blur, and for technologically transformed characters, time no longer manifests as a linear experience but rather as a flow of information.

In the consciousness of characters such as Fanning and Amy, temporal experience is regulated more by psychological and technological rhythms than by biological aging. For them, the passage of time is measured not in years but through memory loss and disruptions. In particular, Amy experiences a dissociation from temporal flow when she loses her memory, defining her sense of self in terms of light and solitude rather than chronological markers.

Moreover, the distortion of time engenders a corresponding deformation of space. The post-apocalyptic world has lost former political and geographical boundaries and has become a labyrinth subjected to technological devastation. Space no longer functions as a neutral backdrop; it acts as a living structure, concealing the consequences of technological experimentation and serving as a platform for the proliferation of networked posthuman entities.

This conceptualization resonates with Fredric Jameson’s theory of the “replacement of cultural space by time”. Jameson argues that in the postmodern era, space no longer serves as a reliable anchor for individual identity, having been supplanted by technological symbols. In *The Passage*, space is similarly transformed into an artificial environment encoded by technology’s memory, experiments, and manipulations of information.

Consequently, time and space within the trilogy are presented not in their classical sense but as part of a new existential framework generated by technological catastrophe. This illustrates how artificial intelligence alters not only human identity but also the very modes through which humans perceive and interpret the world.

Donna Haraway, who examines how the cyborg concept transforms human biological and psychological limitations, argues in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* that “the integration of technology with the body fundamentally reconfigures notions of control, gender, identity, and nature” (Haraway, 1991: 149). Her cyborg framework highlights the erosion of boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, and male and female. She emphasizes that “the cyborg transgresses boundaries; as a hybrid of nature and culture, it reshapes social relations” (Haraway, 1991: 151).

In the trilogy, the collective consciousness exhibited by the zombies functions as a literary manifestation of this theory. They form a superorganism coordinated through networks and leadership rather than individual will, thereby dissolving classical individual identity and establishing a posthuman social structure. This transformation extends beyond biological alteration to encompass ethical considerations and the reorganization of social relations. The integration of technology into human bodies and consciousness compels a reevaluation of individual identity and free will while demonstrating how human-technology relations are renegotiated within the social sphere.

The impact of this transformation is particularly evident in the character of Lila Kyle. Despite her zombification, she retains maternal instincts and emotional attachment. Lila’s portrayal as both a technological entity and an emotional subject aligns with Haraway’s cyborg concept, highlighting its hybrid and dual nature. The persistence of familial and protective traces in her memory indicates that ethical and gendered responses are not entirely erased.

Another significant example of this transformation is Amy. Despite technological and genetic intervention, she strives to preserve her human emotions, embodying a synthesis of posthuman and humanist values. “She remembered no one at all. She remembered one day thinking: I am alone. There is no I but I. ...She taught herself to walk in the light, though it was not easy” (Cronin, 2010: 360). This depiction reflects Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit* (“thrownness”) in existential philosophy, illustrating how technological intervention renders the human subject uprooted and estranged. Yet Amy does not remain passive; by “teaching herself to walk in

the light,” she attempts to reclaim her inner self and moral agency. This narrative suggests that artificial intelligence can be shaped not only functionally but also ethically.

Amy’s hybridized yet emotionally intact portrayal corresponds to the “human-in-the-loop” model in AI studies, which posits that technology should operate under human supervision and approval. Nick Bostrom, who examines the safety of AI and the long-term future of humanity, warns that “the decision-making capacity of artificial intelligence, if exercised without human ethical oversight, could jeopardize the security of existing civilization” (Bostrom, 2014: 208). At the conclusion of the trilogy, Amy and the surviving humans begin to form a new society in a world devastated by technology, serving as a literary affirmation of this ethical approach.

David Seed, who examines the cultural function of apocalyptic literature, characterizes the genre as “a project interpreting culture’s and ideology’s fears concerning the future” (Seed, 2000: 3). In *The Passage* trilogy, these anxieties are expressed against the backdrop of uncontrolled technological development and the dissolution of ethical and metaphysical stability. Technological hegemony – particularly exemplified by “Project Noah,” in which science and power attempt to supplant divine will – symbolizes humanity’s self-directed path to destruction.

According to Gabriel McKee, who studies apocalyptic and theological motifs, apocalyptic texts are characterized by deified power and the search for salvation. Cronin, however, subverts this idea by replacing God with technology. Yet this substitution does not establish order; it produces chaos instead. Fanning presents himself as a savior, yet he functions as a simulation of artificial divinity, accelerating the apocalypse while promising eternity and control. This figure not only represents the usurpation of God’s function by technology but also evokes the literary prototype of contemporary authoritarian AI models. He exerts total control over infected individuals, establishing a centralized algorithmic hegemony. Their individual will is suppressed, and collective agency is forcibly governed by Fanning, mirroring the totalizing governance envisioned in superintelligence theories. Thus, Fanning embodies the convergence of technology with divine power and the evolution of artificial intelligence into authoritarian forms.

This motif can be philosophically illuminated through Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous assertion that “God is dead”. Nietzsche argued that humanity would be compelled to create its own values. In the post-apocalyptic world, technology emerges as a new metaphysical power; however, this power func-

tions not as a salvific force but as a destructive one. It demonstrates how humanity's attempt to divine itself, when coupled with uncontrolled technological advancement, can lead to catastrophe.

Contemporary transhumanist movements represent a technological expression of this philosophical shift. Transhumanist theorists, such as Nick Bostrom, contend that through technology, the biological limitations of the human body and mind can be transcended, transforming humans into posthuman entities. This approach constitutes a form of human self-divinization: the aspiration to achieve immortality, total control, and an all-knowing consciousness transfers qualities traditionally attributed to God onto humanity.

In *The Passage* trilogy, Fanning artistically embodies this process. Although he presents himself as a savior and a being of divine power, his "salvific" actions lead humanity toward destruction. This serves as a literary depiction of the chaos predicted by Nietzsche, resulting from the loss of old values and the creation of new ones without ethical grounding.

These cultural and theological anxieties resonate with Fredric Jameson's reflections on the exhaustion of utopian imagination: "We can no longer think the future; instead, we can only imagine catastrophe"

(Jameson, 2005: 199). The future depicted by Cronin is no longer merely a potential threat but the consequence of a realized technological catastrophe. Technology developing outside ethical frameworks drives society into profound crisis.

As evidenced, *The Passage* trilogy illustrates the ethical and metaphysical crisis arising from technology's substitution of divine power. It raises the question: in the posthuman era, does humanity, by remaking itself as a god-like entity through technology, transform into a new destructive force rather than a savior when ethical oversight and moral responsibility are absent?

Conclusions. On this basis, it can be argued that Justin Cronin's *The Passage* trilogy generates philosophical and aesthetic questions about how technology reshapes human existence. Artificial intelligence in the narrative is presented not merely as a technological tool but as a metaphysical force that disrupts human identity and ethical centrality. The post-apocalyptic world imaginatively portrays the potential consequences of technological advancement, prompting reflection on human-technology relations, the feasibility of ethical oversight, and the necessity of developing new humanist approaches in the posthuman era.

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