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ZOFIA KOLBUSZEWSKA

THE ULTIMATE POST-HUMANIST NOSTALGIA  
IN THE TV SHOW BEING HUMAN US:  
MONSTROUS HOME AS AN ALLEGORY OF THE HUMAN

**Abstract.** This article interrogates a tension between post-humanist and humanist modalities of home created by hybrid monsters featured in the TV show *Being Human US*: a ghost, vampire and a werewolf (pair). The uncanny home emerges as a palimpsest of architectural and allegorical space, while the monstrous cohabitation gives rise to an allegorical model of the human; a model that wistfully gestures at the utopian vision of the future post-humanist world, and is simultaneously pulled back by the nostalgically traditional humanist conception of the person. By living together, the ghost, the vampire, and the werewolf function as an ensemble that dramatizes the humanist notion of what it means to be human. However, the humanity invoked in the TV show is interrogated from the point of view of critical post-humanism, which is based on the notion of the “post-human” that indicates a perspective where the abiding question of what it means to be human is not only addressed and re-articulated, but also critically assessed and transcended towards an as-yet-unrealizable utopia, promoting altogether new, post-speciesist, post-animist, or even post-global (in the sense of cosmic) ways of inhabiting the world. The momentary utopia of the monstrous cohabitation provides evidence that post-humanist utopian model of a human person is feasible; yet, only if “the impurity” of post-human creatures also becomes a part of the definition of the post-humanist human—a human who is a monster.

**Key words:** Critical post-humanism; monster; hybrid; gothic; nostalgia; human; post-human; TV series.

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Prof. ZOFIA KOLBUSZEWSKA—University of Wrocław, Faculty of Letters, Institute of English Studies, Department of American Literature and Culture; address for correspondence: ul. Kuźnica 22, 50–138 Wrocław; [zofia.kolbuszewska@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:zofia.kolbuszewska@uwr.edu.pl)

*The ghost is a powerful, versatile metaphor. It can signify the ways in which memory and history, whether traumatic, nostalgic, or both, linger on within the “living present.” It can be a potent representation of and figure of resistance for those who are unseen and unacknowledged, reduced to a spectral half-presence by dominant culture and official history. [...] It can also be a figure for the alienating disjunction between body and spirit wrought by modern communications technologies.*

Murray Leeder

*What determines the limits of the overarching nominal kind (the borders demarcating Undead and not Undead) is largely fixed by what conceptual truths there are about the Undead, and any constraints imposed by the universe on the reality of the Undead. In other words, there are lots of ways to be Undead, and some of those ways may be more and less a product of our way of thinking about things.*

Richard Greene

*If we glance back at the main intellectual signposts concerning human linguistic capacity in the Western metaphysical tradition, we find that Aristotle's founding ontological claim that animals possess only *phonē* and lack *logos* has been repeated in various forms throughout that tradition. René Descartes, for example, argues that animals lack ratio and the ability to respond in novel and creative ways to stimuli, while Martin Heidegger explains that a supposed lack of animal *logos* indicates a more fundamental lack of relational *ek-sistence* that is unique to human *Dasein*.*

Matthew Calarco

This article interrogates the motif of home created by monsters of various extraction living together in a house in Boston, featured in the television show *Being Human US* (2011–2014), as an allegory of the human; a notion whose new definition needs to accommodate the tension between its pre-modern, Gothic modalities (monstrosity) and the critical post-humanist drive to erase epistemological boundaries between species, states of sentience, and the division fundamental for western philosophy—into the cognizing subject and the passive object of perception. This vision of horrific creatures striving to create harmonious home presented in *Being Human US* inscribes itself in the global cultural trend of normalizing the gothic cultural unconscious and integrating monstrosity into the mainstream popular culture. Discussing the domestication of the figure of the zombie in contemporary global popular culture, Jessica Wind observes that:

Themes of control give way to domination and domestication, making the zombie commonplace in the household. Breaks from horror convention create new ways to tell the zombie story eventually leading to a family-friendly zombie, self-aware and

open for parody. The zombie is then read as a legitimate and important cultural product, shedding its low-brow cinematic reputation. The contemporary, normalized zombie is granted space in society, and with it comes a new set of challenges pertaining to the zombie body and its presentation of self in society. (54–55)

Just as normalized zombies, the three monstrous tenants of the house, who are later joined by another shapeshifter, the werewolf Nora, carve a space out for themselves in the mainstream society by renting a house and attempting to create a middle class home. Sally, the ghost, turns over time into a zombie and back into the spectral condition again. Aidan, a hospital nurse, is a vampire, and Josh, also a nurse, is a werewolf. Yet, paradoxically, the creatures inhabiting the house in Boston are gothic hybrids who wistfully dream of having traditional unitary human nature. However, each monstrous creature featured in *Being Human US* evinces only one attribute of a human person. Thus, by living together, the ghost, the vampire, and the werewolf function as an allegoric ensemble that brings together the aspects of being human. The human modalities of the ensemble inhabiting the house may, when considered together, represent properties of the human in accordance with the humanist vision. Yet, each feature that defines the human in classical humanism is, in the television show, inseparably connected with its opposite; an opposite that by definition invests a creature that possesses it with monstrosity.

The employment of the gothic world denizens in the *Being Human US* show encourages harking back to the pre-modern epistemology of curiosity and its devices of figuring cognition, such as, among others, allegory. On the other hand, the monstrous protagonists of the show also bring out contemporary fascination with hybridity that testifies to a crisis of modern desire to separate, purify, and sort. In *We Have Never Been Modern* Bruno Latour explicates how the modern worldview operates by apparent exclusion of hybrids, and why it is undergoing a transformation at present: “the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes—such is the paradox of the modern, which the exceptional situation in which we find ourselves today allows us finally to grasp” (12). Latour observes that:

The word ‘modern’ designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by ‘translation’, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by ‘purification’, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. (10–11)

Conversely, the protagonists of *Being Human US* exemplify a contemporary appetite for wonder, enthrallment with uncanniness, and fascination with monstrosity that manifests itself in countless representations of zombies, vampires, werewolves, and ghosts in literature and visual media. Prompted by recent advancement of bio-techno-scientific transformations, this invasion of the liminal and hybrid horrific figures in the global popular culture is a response to contemporary interrogation of the boundaries of what it means to be human. The exponential growth of bio-medical and digital research and practices as well as their tremendous innovativeness call for new narratives that conceptualize ways of being in the world that would express potential directions of transformation of humans and educate the participants of contemporary culture in how these changes might lead to an entirely new epistemology; an epistemology that would erase the insofar familiar distinctions between the human and non-human, cognizing subject and object of perception, animate and inanimate, material and immaterial, virtual and actual, ideal and real.

Popular culture responds to such a call with anxiety that finds expression in a recourse to traditions that thrive on ambivalence. Popular narratives liberally draw on folklore, gothic convention and science fiction; the cultural unconscious transpires in monstrous images shot through with gothic anxiety. They fashion anew our sensibilities, problematize in new ways the issues tackled by the neuroscience and philosophical considerations about the relationships between mind and body, imaginatively question the boundaries of human bodies and human subjectivity by transcending the division introduced by western philosophical thought, and offer a promise of both enhancing bodily performance as well as blurring differences construed in terms of gender, species, animation, and sentience.

In this way popular culture registers and responds to the redrawing of ontological boundaries and epistemological frames constitutive of a paradigm which has recently emerged. Definitions of this paradigm, designated as post-humanist, vary. Some of them overlap with the description of the concept of “transhumanism,” which refers to the tendency to enhance the human technologically and represent such creation as most empowered species, what paradoxically amounts to reinforcing the classical, teleological humanist view of man as the ultimate goal of biological and cultural evolution (see Herbrechter viii). Conversely, in this article the term “post-humanism” is understood as “critical post-humanism” and is based on the notion of the “post-human” that indicates a perspective in which the abiding question

of what it means to be human is not only addressed and re-articulated, but also critically assessed and transcended towards an as-yet-unrealizable utopia, promoting altogether new, post-speciesist, post-animist, or even post-global (in the sense of cosmic) ways of inhabiting the world.

Stefan Herbrechter emphasizes that “the current and intensified attack on the idea of a ‘human nature’ is only the latest phase of a crisis which, in fact, has always existed at the centre of the humanist idea of the human” (vii). Herbrechter attempts to articulate critical approach to post-humanism that would “relativize the apparent radical novelty of the ‘posthumanist’ phenomenon” (viii), and at the same time do justice to post-humanism as “a ‘discourse’, or as a combination of material, symbolic and political changes” (viii). The critic further observes that “whoever cares about humans and their past, present and future might want to critically engage with humanism’s anthropocentric ideology” (3). He postulates a critical post-humanism “which understands the human species as a historical ‘effect’, with humanism as its ideological ‘affect’, while distancing itself from both” (7). This entails another observation on what the concepts of post-human and post-humanism mean — “to acknowledge all those ghosts, all those human others that have been repressed during the process of humanization: animals, gods, demons, monsters of all kinds” (9).

Appositely, Bruce Clarke, a post-humanist scholar who started his intellectual career with reflection on fantastic hybrid characters in early-modern literature, observes that:

When the real and the daemonic are observed emerging and merging in both technological and narrative constructions, classical human persons—the extraenvironmental essences of selves, souls maintained by ideal body stabilities—become at once nonmodern (folklore) and posthumanist, relativised actors performing operational functions and metamorphic transformations within natural/social networks and systems. This is not a demotion of the human but an elevation of the nonhuman into proper discursive representation. [...] daemonic metamorphosis always was a self-referential projection of the nonessentiality of the human. (53–54)

Latour articulates this attitude as follows: “Human nature is the set of its delegates and its representatives, its figures and its messengers” (Latour 138).

Indeed, each of the monstrous inhabitants of a house in Boston in the television series *Being Human US*: a ghost, vampire and werewolf (later a werewolf couple), can be considered such a “delegate.” The adventures, anxieties and failures of each member of the domestic arrangement featured

in the television show dramatize different aspects of being human in terms of the essentialist understanding of classical humanism, which, in keeping with the dualistic conception of Rene Descartes, sees these aspects as separate. There is a fundamental split between the mind and the body in Cartesian perspective.

The werewolf couple represent the body understood in the Cartesian way as *res extensa*, an automaton lacking feelings and intelligence; the vampire represents intelligence and the blind life-force, the libido; while the ghost is emblematic of the mind and of the spectrality of identity. Paradoxically, even though all these distinctions clarify no ambivalence or ambiguity concerning the relationship of the human and the environment, they contribute to the strict boundary-drawing between species and the determination of the difference between the animate and the inanimate.

However, as Herbrechter points out, post-humanism demonstrates that:

a traditional humanist world view and understanding of the human have become untenable if not irrelevant, either because of external, mostly technological, economic or ecological influences, or because of internal metaphysical and ethical reasons. The external forces can be seen as either enabling or threatening, or as both at the same time. The internal forces might best be understood as benevolent or 'strategic' misanthropy [...] which for the love of the human species opposes human *hybris* and instead demands a self-critical but not necessarily self-pitying *humilitas*. (9–10)

Indeed, it is possible to look at the monster vs. human relationship from the perspective of what might be gained from its exploration. Neil Badmington is interested "in what aliens might reveal about how human beings see themselves and their others at the beginning of the twenty-first century", and asks "[w]hat if to read the extraterrestrial were also to read 'us'?" (10). The human can learn the idea of humanity from monsters. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in *Being Human US*, the monstrous characters are presented as endeavouring to create a home—a community of human cohabitation. The life of the ghost, the vampire, and the werewolf (later werewolf couple) under the same roof both confirms and defamiliarizes a behaviour considered human. On the one hand this unlikely cohabitation shows in a sharp light how close humanity is to monstrosity in moral and practical terms, on the other hand, however, the home created by the monsters reveals a longing for single and complete human nature, a notion we have inherited from Descartes (Badmington 7). Such "humanism of common sense" (Herbrechter 11) is based on:

an *empiricist-idealist* interpretation of the world. In other words, common sense urges that “man” is the origin and source of meaning, of action, and of history (*humanism*). Our concepts and our knowledge are held to be the product of experience (*empiricism*), and this experience is preceded and interpreted by the mind, reason or thought, the property of a transcendent human nature whose essence is the attribute of each individual (*idealism*). (Belsey 7)

However, the intensification of the development of technology and bio-science as conditions which have given rise to the emergence of post-humanism “cannot itself escape humanist metaphysics or anthropocentrism. This remains the case at least as long as our understanding of technology forces us to ask the question ‘What is man?’ at a metaphysical-ontological level—a level that even the negation or the apparent surpassing of the question is unable to achieve” (Herbrechter 15). Consequently, post-humanism in its critical version ‘has to question humanism even in the form of its own critique’ (Herbrechter 15). Yet, such critique is compelled to lead to an ambiguity because “[a]fter the end of man [...] is also before man, but in between finality and renewal there might be a possibility to think ‘man’ or rather, the human, otherwise” (Herbrechter 16).

Aptly, *Being Human US* interrogates the ways in which our culture is situated in-between humanism and post-humanism, and presents an allegorical conception of the human as a compound of roles, attributes and modalities—a shattered version of a humanist vision, nostalgically longing and striving for an impossible, never-to-be-achieved self-identity with the body serving as a vehicle for the soul. The device of allegory is in particular pertinent to the discussion of the reconstruction of a post-humanist conception of the human arising from the presentation of the monstrous home in *Being Human US* because, as Theresa M. Kelly emphasizes, allegory as “other speech” makes “unexpected alliances with historical and realist particulars to insure its status as a resident alien in modern culture” (3). Its status as the other helps allegory to capture the condition of the excluded and alienated aspects of contemporary culture and articulate a conception of the human that would integrate repulsive otherness created through exclusion—a monstrosity.

The ensemble of hybrid monsters that create a model human home in a Boston house help “think [...] the human otherwise” by simultaneously embodying a wistful longing for classical humanity and demonstrating the futility of such dream through evincing the state “after the end of man” in the world taken over by vampires, zombies and werewolves. Yet, paradoxically, on the allegorical level the ensemble provides an insight into what

transpires from the tension between the nostalgia for the utopian vision of the human and the post-humanist destabilized, fractured condition of a monstrous hybrid's mundane life. It is a vision of a condition that Herbrechter places chronologically "before man," from which monstrosity, as one of its modalities, is not excluded. *Being Human US* shows that we are on the way to fully accepting such a new and "impure" conception of human, but have not got there yet. After all, humanism, as Badmington observes, "has not entirely disappeared, and the present moment, it follows, is one of contradiction: 'alien love' exists alongside 'alien hatred'" (11).

Therefore, contemporary culture's simultaneous fascination with the post-humanist celebration of dismantling the humanist attributes of man matches its inability to override the nostalgia for essentialist human nature. Indeed, *Being Human US* presents the rise of a community initially based on its monstrous members reminiscing about the past as humans, acknowledging suffering caused by the alienation from human communities as a result of a transformation into monsters, while experiencing an estrangement from other monsters that move in packs and do not crave integration into human society. The "normalized" protagonists of the television show even nostalgically adhere to the rituals of a middle class family. The manifold alienation of the characters inhabiting the house follows from their repudiation of the horrific post-humanist dystopia in favour of an ambiguous utopian vision in which the future model what it means to be the human is in part, at least, based on the nostalgic reconstruction of the model of the human put forward by the classical humanism. Sally, Aidan, and Josh (and later Nora) reject, resist, or make effort not to engage completely their appetites, desires, and enhanced abilities inherently connected with their monstrous forms.

On the other hand, the struggle of the monsters to keep behaving like humans can be interpreted as their rejection of the possibilities presented by their monstrous empowerment by the subtlety and strength of perception and possibilities of adaptation to unlikely environments—that is, enhancements that trans-humanists wish to equip humans with in the foreseeable future. The conception of the human that emerges from the allegory of the monstrous domesticity is thus based on redrawing epistemological boundaries and supporting instabilities of the notion of the human that admits hybridity rather than enhancing technologically the human body. Although this allegorical model harks back in nostalgia to an essential human nature as it is understood in traditional humanism, where a human person is regarded as the extra-environmental essence of a self, a soul maintained by the ideal



body stability (Clark 53), by revealing its composite character of an ensemble in the vein of Walter Benjamin, the allegorical model of the human arising from the cohabitation of monsters transcends the humanist vision. In Benjamin's theoretical reflection allegory is a domain of ruin and fragments that have the power to explode the continuity of universalizing conceptions (Hanssen 66, Kelley 251). Yet, contrary to the radicality of Benjamin's vision, the conception of being human evinced in the television show is both radical and conservative; it arises at the cusp of humanism and post-humanism. It both harks back to the nostalgic humanist utopia and reaches into the uncertain future utopia of the world transformed on the lines of critical post-humanism.

The post-humanist relational and non-essentialist conception of the human corresponds to the dynamic view of utopia, which was put forward by Wells as early as 1905 in *A Modern Utopia*: "the Modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage leading to a long ascent of stages." In late modernity, utopia is likewise regarded as kinetic. Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity

leaves utopia with no topos, no place. Loss of territoriality and finality make impossible utopia as an imagined future state of the world. The pursuit of a better tomorrow or an alternative physical or social space has been nullified. Transgressive imagination takes a different form: an 'unending sequence of new beginnings [...] and the desire for a different today,' and a quest for happiness not as a steady state but a series of fleeting moments. (Levitas 107).

New utopianism is characterized by "[t]he openness, the radical indeterminacy of consciousness and of the future" (Bammer 47), while utopia is construed not as an antithesis [to the possible], but rather "a series of utopian moments within the shifting configurations of the possible" (Levitas 109). Conservative nostalgia of the beginning of the first season of *Being Human US* soon gives way to such utopian perspective. In the television show, the cohabitation of a ghost, vampire and a werewolf is presented as an unlikely-yet-realized utopia, whose participants adapt to the conditions of the cohabitation, which resembles a dance-like choreography of "the shifting configurations of the possible" (Levitas 109). Still, the show adopts a position that both encourages and curtails the radical indeterminacy of momentariness, especially in the initial episodes of the series. Attempts to maintain permanence of utopian moments are manifest in the ways that monstrous creatures inhabiting the house go to great pains to furnish it, and make it look like an average white middle class home. The house-mates also perform rituals that

meaningfully punctuate the rhythm of human life, such as having dinners together, even if they all actually feed in completely different ways. Therefore, even as presenting contemporary reality as “always already” post-human, the show foregrounds an essentialist nostalgic conception of man that emerges from the Boston house inhabitants attempts to reconstruct a utopian human home.

Nostalgia is a pseudo-Greek word coined “from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing” by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 (Boym xiii). It designates “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym xiii). Nostalgia, the longing for home thus compels the monsters to create in *Being Human US* a mainstream middle-class domestic arrangement which is a manifestation of a never-fully-realized and not-completely-realizable longing for a core place that is defined by humans and defines them as human. Affection is expected to reside at the core of the liberal western middle-class domesticity. In keeping with this vision, alterity-induced sense of alienation of the monstrous creatures is to be obliterated by the domestic affection. The ghost, vampire and the werewolf (couple) form a foster family that see the human home they have created as a utopian island, a site governed by tolerance and an acceptance of otherness, attitudes that in the domestic conditions are transformed from rational injunctions to affective responses to alterity. Thus, paradoxically, the utopian, desired future condition of accepted monstrous otherness is predicated on the nostalgic vision of human home. Indeed, the conservative vision is indispensable in *Being Human US* for launching the process of becoming, a process of transcending the crisis of modernity diagnosed by Latour towards a utopian possibilities projected by critical post-humanism.

Levitas invokes a statement by Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who emphasizes that “human identities need to be more strongly articulated in terms of what people individually and collectively might become, rather than in terms of where they come from: we should ‘call on prophecy more than upon memory’” (Unger 181, qtd. in Levitas 189–190). Yet, in the case of *Being Human US*, it is nostalgic memory that facilitates the prophesy. Thus, being human as a process and condition is in the television series presented as constructed retroactively from within the post-humanist perspective. With a wistful hindsight the utopian desire for a better future in the post-humanist world invokes and elevates a bygone essentialist ideal—the self-contained

human. Yet, the notion of the classical humanism constitutes an unattainable, retroactive boundary of an idealized condition the ghost, the vampire and the were-wolf (pair) aspire to go back to; an (illusory) purity which explains the conservative utopianism of the community created by the monsters. Thus, the middle-class home created by them embodies a nostalgic utopia—a utopian dream of purity, stability, unity—embedded in a post-humanist dystopia. However, the allegorical model of the human arising from the presentation of the monstrous cohabitation’s momentary utopia provides evidence that post-humanist conception of the human is feasible inasmuch as “the impurity” of hybrid also becomes a part of the definition of the post-humanist human. It then follows that in such perspective the human is tantamount to a monster.

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GRANICE POSTHUMANISTYCZNEJ NOSTALGII  
W SERIALU TELEWIZYJNYM PT. *BYĆ CZŁOWIEKIEM, WERSJA AMERYKAŃSKA*:  
POTWORY DOM JAKO ALEGORIA CZŁOWIEKA

Streszczenie

Artykuł dyskutuje napięcie występujące między humanistyczną a posthumanistyczną perspektywą przedstawienia domu stworzonego przez hybrydyczne potwory w serialu telewizyjnym pt. *Być człowiekiem, wersja amerykańska*: ducha, wampira oraz parę wilkołaków. Niesamowity dom postrzegany jest jako palimpsest przestrzeni architektonicznej i symbolicznej, a współistnienie monstrów daje asumpt do wyłonienia się alegorycznego modelu człowieka; modelu, który nie bez nostalgii za humanistyczną przeszłością, zapowiada utopijną wizję przyszłego posthumanistycznego świata. Żyjąc we wspólnocie, duch, wampir i para wilkołaków funkcjonują jako asemblaż dramatyzujący humanistyczną koncepcję tego, czym jest człowiek. Jednak człowieczeństwo, którego poszukują bohaterowie serialu badane jest z perspektywy krytycznego posthumanizmu, opierającego się na pojęciu post-człowieka przywołującym i transformującym pytanie o to, co to znaczy być człowiekiem i w jaki sposób człowieczeństwo może być krytycznie ocenione i przekroczone w kierunku jeszcze nie zrealizowanej utopii. Krytyczny posthumanizm propaguje całkowicie nowe, post-gatunkowe, post-animistyczne, oraz post-globalne (tzn. kosmiczne) sposoby zamieszkiwania świata. Chwilowo zrealizowana utopia współistnienia potworów stanowi dowód na to, że utopijny post-humanistyczny model człowieka może funkcjonować, ale po warunkiem, że „nieczystość” post-humanistycznych stworzeń zostanie użyta do zdefiniowania post-humanistycznego człowieka — człowieka, który jest potworem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** posthumanizm krytyczny; potwór; hybryda; gotyk; nostalgia; człowiek; post-człowiek; serial telewizyjny.