

Science Fiction Then and Now: A Comparative Reading between *The War of the Worlds* and *Zero K*

La science-fiction hier et aujourd'hui : une lecture comparative entre *La Guerre des Mondes* et *Zero K*

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Abstract

This article traces the evolution of the science fiction genre from the mechanical imagination of the late Victorian Age to the biotechnological complexities of contemporary times. To achieve this, a comparative analytical study is conducted between H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016), with the aim of addressing existential questions regarding war, technology, and human survival within unconventional settings. The analysis is grounded in a posthumanist theoretical framework, drawing on the works of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Reflecting on these perspectives, the paper demonstrates that the science fiction trajectory often aligns with the doctrines of posthumanism that reject the humanist anthropocentrism, yet the latter still occasionally surfaces. While Wells and DeLillo envision a world where technology is the leading character, each one contemplates the specific sensations related to its role in driving the variations of their fictional worlds, which can be said to be a mirror of the public opinions of those different

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times. Ultimately, the comparison reveals that the genre's development corresponds with the growth of human self-understanding in a rapidly technologically advanced world.

Keywords:

Posthumanism; Science Fiction; Survival; Technology; War

Resumé

Cet article retrace l'évolution du genre de la science-fiction, depuis l'imaginaire mécanique de la fin de l'ère victorienne jusqu'aux complexités biotechnologiques de l'époque contemporaine. Pour ce faire, une étude analytique comparative est menée entre *La Guerre des Mondes* (1898) de H. G. Wells et *Zero K* (2016) de Don DeLillo, dans le but d'aborder des questions existentielles liées à la guerre, à la technologie et à la survie humaine dans des contextes non conventionnels. L'analyse s'appuie sur un cadre théorique posthumaniste, s'inspirant des travaux de Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari. En réfléchissant à ces perspectives, l'article démontre que la trajectoire de la science-fiction s'aligne souvent avec les doctrines du posthumanisme, qui rejettent l'anthropocentrisme humaniste, bien que ce dernier réapparaisse parfois. Alors que Wells et DeLillo envisagent un monde où la technologie joue le rôle de personnage central, chacun explore les sensations spécifiques liées à sa fonction dans la dynamique de ses univers fictifs, lesquels peuvent être considérés comme un miroir de l'opinion publique de ses époques respectives. En fin de compte, cette comparaison révèle que le développement du genre correspond à l'évolution de la compréhension de soi de l'être humain dans un monde en rapide avancée technologique.

Mots clés :

Posthumanisme ; Science-fiction ; Survie ; Technologie ; Guerre

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, science fiction has acted as a literary testing ground for examining the conflicts between humanity and technology. Pioneering authors like H. G. Wells depicted technological progress as both marvelous and disastrous, pondering the fears surrounding industrialization and imperialistic growth. In his novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Wells imagines a Martian invasion that reveals the vulnerability of human civilization in the face of superior technology and intelligence. This story transcends mere extraterrestrial takeover, serving as an allegory for imperial aggression and challenging the notion of human supremacy. More than a century later, Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) shifts the focus from battling alien forces to confronting mortality itself. Within a context of cryogenic advances and aspirations for transhumanism, DeLillo's narrative changes the landscape from external strife to internal struggles concerning identity, death, and the quest for transcendence. Comparing Wells and DeLillo highlights the significant evolution of science fiction from confrontations with machines to reflections on biotechnology.

Scholarly discussions of *The War of the Worlds* often emphasize its exploration of themes like imperialism and the centrality of humans. John Huntington (1982, p. 57) notes that Wells's narrative "exposes the fragility of the human race's evolutionary position," hinting at an early awareness of species vulnerability in a posthuman context. In contrast, critiques of *Zero K* primarily examine the ethical implications of technological immortality. This is found in the works of Joseph Tabbi (1995), Mark Osteen (2000), Ross Maffey and Yugin Teo

(2018), and others. Moreover, the contributions of the posthumanist theorists serve as a valuable link between these two viewpoints. Donna Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg' questions the integrity of human identity, positing that "the boundary between human and animal, organism and machine, has become thoroughly blurred" (1999, p.152). Meanwhile, N. Katherine Hayles (1999, p.2) argues that "to be posthuman is to conceive of the human as an informational pattern rather than a fixed essence." Together, these two views show the progressive views regarding the transformation of the human/technology binary into one self. Cary Wolfe (2010, p. xv) further suggests that posthumanism "does not reject the human but interrogates the assumptions that ground it." These theorists collectively facilitate a comparative analysis of Wells and DeLillo, highlighting how both authors depict humanity's evolving relationship with technology over time.

From a posthumanist angle, this paper seeks to explore how science fiction has matured in its portrayal of humanity, technology, and survival. The research problematic revolves around how the depictions of war, technology, and human endurance in Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and DeLillo's *Zero K* reflect the shift in science fiction from a focus on humanist concerns to themes of posthuman transformation.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section analyzes the symbolism of war, illustrating how Wells's mechanized Martian invasion evolves into DeLillo's existential battle against the concept of death itself. The second section tackles the theme of technology, contrasting the mechanical determinism presented in Wells's machines with the biotechnological transcendence found in DeLillo's cryonic vision of the future. The third section focuses on human survival, interpreting both novels as meditations on extinction, adaptation, and the potential

for posthuman continuity. In its conclusion, the article infers that the progression from *The War of the Worlds* to *Zero K* highlights the development of science fiction from an anthropocentric perspective to posthuman speculation.

2. War: From Imperial Conquest to Existential Conflict

Among the constant actions committed in every human civilization across centuries is the act of war. The latter has been the subject of anthropologist and posthumanist studies due to its centrality in defining the human endeavor and desire. In this context, posthumanism challenges anthropocentrism by questioning the very elements that construct the hierarchical idea of the human subject (Herbrechter, 2025, p. 1). The first section of this article demonstrates this philosophical debate by reading the representation of war in the two novels from a posthumanist perspective to determine the orientation of each novel.

One of the core thematic aspects of *The War of the Worlds*, as the title indicates, is the direct and external military conflict to which the human race is exposed. It has been debated for decades that the entire novel can be read as an allegory for the (in)famous imperial mindset of the white man. Literary critics agree that Wells uses the Martian invasion to criticize British colonialism and create an inverted colonial narrative where the colonizer becomes the colonized of inexplicable powers (Pitman, 2018, p. 50). Wells ironically mocks the Eurocentric perspective by setting the plot of this work in the land of white imperialists. He does so by highlighting that claimed centrality necessarily calls for responsibility. Being the world's so-claimed leaders and the orchestrators of political agendas across the globe somehow leads to being the latter's first line of defense against any external threat. The conflict portrayed in this novel reflects the direct military conflicts of the

time between colonial powers and indigenous peoples, allowing the mass audience of the science fiction genre to rethink colonialism's consequences and damage. From a posthumanist perspective, this parable of imperial retribution may be read as a translation of the innate human desire to expand at the expense of the Other. Since posthumanism is a call against such primitive hierarchical beliefs, the novel can be seen as an avant-garde posthumanist literary work reflecting philosophical beliefs that were termed almost a century later.

From a war against aliens in *The War of the Worlds* to a fight against death itself, *Zero K* reflects the modern ontological conflicts that twenty-first-century inhabitants struggle against, regardless of being a colonizer or a colonized. In this context, the conception of technological advancement shifts from being an instrument of destruction, conquest, and forceful inclusion to that of rescue. In a war where death is the opponent, any form of survival and prolonging one's life becomes the trophy, and the main goal of weaponized technology shifts from overpowering inter-racial targets to transcending physical human flaws. However, this endeavor generates its own struggle among humanity, which appears in the novels' constant reference to a bomb without clearly elaborating on this sub-plot. Given its postmodern styles, this can be seen as an intentional loophole created in the narration to emphasize that traditional military conflict becomes marginalized in the presence of the modern human's ontological struggles. The characters' main concern is to pursue control over life and death through cryonic freezing, which limits the purpose of life to overcome death (Nel, 2021, Sec. 1). This reading reveals that *Zero K* retains the more humanist trajectory of anthropocentrism. Human disembodiment from the rest of the world reinforces the individualist stance, which forms the core of the hierarchy.

The two novels are a suitable example to trace the development of the science fiction genre in representing one of the most essential human actions. The transition from mechanical war to cognitive dissonance reflects humanity's shift toward self-enclosure. While the rise of expedition and globalization created a convenient platform for the posthumanist thought to thrive, the post-globalized world appears, through its reflection in science fiction, to be going back to a state of humanist attachment and a self-centered, inward-looking mindset. In the past, this mindset created global waves of discrimination and exploitation due to the keen belief in Western superiority. Even though the reassurance of those practices might be improbable, science fiction, with its speculative tendencies, still warms from an unpredictable, unjust future that could result from the ontological conflict humans are immersing into.

In conclusion, it can be said that the evolution in the depiction of war in science fiction is undeniable. This comparison shows a massive shift in where human anxieties dwell. The classic literary canon expresses a fear of being smashed by weapons more powerful than the most advanced human forces. The contemporary literary landmark, however, reflects a wariness of individual annihilation. Due to the daily overexposure of nuclear threats and bioweaponry predictions, bombs do not catch the interest of the audience anymore. The contemporary audience of this commercial genre is inferred to be looking for answers to their existential questions in the pages of science fiction.

3.Technology: From Mechanical Realization to Biotechnological Hope

The war factor is famously responsible for driving technological advancements across the Ages, and the genre of science fiction has often provided far-reaching technological visions that sometimes become the inspiration for real inventions. In this context, posthumanist pioneers argue that technology is no longer a mere extension of humans but rather an indistinguishable, embedded part of what composes the posthuman (Haraway, 1991, p. 178; Hayles, 1999, P. 288; Braidotti, 2013, p. 89). This section analyzes the connotation of technology in *The War of the Worlds* and *Zero K* in an attempt to trace the reduction of fear and increase of reliability accompanying the representation of technology in science fiction.

Wells' novel is grounded in mechanical invention, as the entire plot revolves around the idea of survival for the higher technological military advancement. The narrator describes the Martians as "[...] monstrous beings of metal moving about in the distance over the hedge-tops" (Wells, 1898, p. 58). This indicates their technological superiority since metal is a component linked directly to industrial products. Put differently, the first and most noticeable point of imbalance between the two species appears to be technology, which again mirrors the colonial power's ability to invade the larger part of the known world due (exclusively, as it may be argued,) to the technological superiority of the European nations as opposed to primitive non-European weaponry. This analysis situates technology not as an instrument of survival and advancement but as a destructive tool of power and hegemony. While the representation of war in Wells' novel aligns with the posthumanist stance, the depiction of technology articulates a Victorian fear that posthumanist scholars later work to refute in their creation of a sense of acceptance rather than the negative anticipation that their predecessors held.

Over the course of a century, exceedingly rapid technological growth has created a significant difference in the very conception of what technology is. From the 'metallic' representation of Wells' times, DeLillo's technology is more implied in the overall effect of the setting and thoughts of the characters. This embodies the contemporary times where technology is not a new, impressive, visible machine on the market anymore. The familiarity of existing alongside technology as it is integrated within everyday life has reached an extent of making it invisible to the sight of the beholder. In *Zero K*, technology is internalized to the molecular and informational level. Everything, from the biological, coded, and fluid references, indicates the domination of technological presence over the setting and plot without a straightforward indication. This integration is a direct introspection of the posthumanist doctrine of melting the boundaries between the human and the machine. In essence, the novel challenges human exceptionalism by creating a continuity between humanity and technology, where one serves the other for purposes beyond hegemony. Even though references to a war and a bomb appear frequently in the background of *Zero K*'s plot, the focus remains on the biological experimentations of transcending mortality itself, making technology a medium through which humans' aspirations are boosted.

In both novels, technology represents another central thematic aspect that drives the plot. However, the difference in these representations manifests the tangible alteration in the perception of technology. Wells' novel demonstrates technology as a detached entity that preserves power. It shows that locating deterrence and offensive capabilities in outside instruments creates a constant fear of having to face more enhanced instruments. This condescending view towards the human mind labels humankind as physically vulnerable and technology as possibly

mischievous. In contrast, DeLillo expresses a more peaceful disembodiment of technology as a result of its integration within human biology. Technology is reduced to a mere instrument that adheres to human morality. To this end, it can be said that both narratives share one insight: that technology is no longer regarded as a servant to humanity, but either a threat of annihilation or an instrument of continuation, respectively.

The comparative analysis between Wells's late-Victorian technological envisioning and DeLillo's postmodern imagination of biotechnology and informational immortality indicates that fear of death remains the one common factor among humans. The representation of war and the technology that drives it, along with the doctrines of humanism, posthumanism, and other philosophical trajectories, remains a mere attempt to answer the one question of how to survive a bit longer. Hence, the last section of this paper tackles the development of representing human survival in science fiction.

4. Human Survival: From Biological Anxiety to Technological Immortality

It can be claimed that the shared factor among all philosophical trajectories and literary genres is the endeavor of finding an answer to the existential question of the human species. The existential dilemma consists of an abstract side related to the purpose of the human, which can only be reached after securing its tangible side, represented in survival. The posthumanists, particularly, attempt to redefine human survival in relation to the technological advancement of the age and constantly seek different ways to harness technology in favor of human continuity instead of against it (Hayles, 1999, Ch. 1, Braidotti, 2013, Ch. 2). The two novels at hand evoke the

speculative feature of science fiction in addressing humans' eternally lost battle against death. The final section of this article elaborates on the flexibility of the concept of survival across time, which the two literary works demonstrate.

The thematic statement surrounding survival in *The War of the Worlds* advocates physical endurance and adaptation. The narrator's entire journey across the ruins that his country turns into due to the Alien invasion is one of pursuing the hope of survival. The protagonist repeatedly internalizes the vulnerability of humans despite their constant pretense of superiority. This, again, stands for an avant-gardist posthumanist doctrine inasmuch as it offers a direct criticism of anthropocentrism. Interestingly, the initially presented struggle for survival, which is inaugurated as a survival-for-the-more-technologically-advanced, is later challenged in the novel. The defeat of the Martians because of their bodies' inadaptability to a bacterium shifts the narrative again to an old-fashioned survival-of-the-fittest plotline, labeling humans as the top of the species due to their ability to adapt. Moreover, the sudden and unexpected death of the Martians represents an absurd plot twist since the bacterium is not intentionally harnessed. Humans do not fight back, and their survival is not rightfully earned. It just so happens that planet Earth functions in favor of the human survivor, placing the latter at a fragile state. Therefore, *The War of the Worlds* shrinks the entire idea of survival to the biological struggle.

In contrast, *Zero K* outstrips the traditional conception of biological survival and introduces the theme of informational continuity. Through the cryogenic project known as the Convergence, the novel redefines survival as preserving consciousness beyond death. It can be inferred that after surviving countless wars and pandemics throughout history, humans have come to the conclusion that the

ultimate threat remains the very idea of mortality. This shifts the desire for survival from a collective preservation of the species to an individualistic pursuit of prolonging existence. *Zero K* manifests this alteration through the idea of “making the future. A new idea of the future. Different from the others” (DeLillo, 2016, p. 25). Characters like Ross and Artis rely on technology not only to escape physical decay but also to reach a form of existence where the human self is contained outside the limitations of the body. Hence, it can be said that the novel aligns with the posthumanist appreciation of a Body without Organs (BwO). The latter is a postmodern theorization advocating that the contemporary human body does not have to obey the customary circle of life since technology can preserve consciousness even when the flesh decays (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, pp. 8-9). The novel, then, can be read as a fictional endorsement for the posthumanist doctrine of disembodiment.

The two novels at hand share the common anxiety about human survival. A comparative prism indicates that the fear of extinction persists at times of war and peace, and that the idea of death remains the only challenge that humans cannot overcome through technological means. In *The War of the Worlds*, survival is depicted as an accidental event that took place as a result of the Earth restoring the order of humans' superiority. In contrast, *Zero K* shows an active endeavor towards technological survival but does not offer concrete conclusions to this endeavor, leaving the question of survival to be an open-ended dilemma. This open-endedness can also be noticed in Wells's novel insofar as survival was an act of nature and not of human wit. The transition from biological survival to a digital one reflects the only shared notion between humanism and posthumanism, which is the constant wish for continuity.

To conclude, the depiction of human survival by Wells and DeLillo traces the movement from natural selection to technological resurrection. The first novel shows that survival laws adhere to the mutable and biologically fit regardless of the possession of advanced technology or military power. In juxtaposition, the second one indicates that technology is the only path towards a disembodied form of survival. It shows that science fiction went from a literal fight for existence to a metaphysical quest for immortality.

5. Conclusion

This article outlined the progress of the representation of war, technology, and survival in two works of science fiction from two different eras. It offered a comparative reading between H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) to highlight humanity's changing behavior towards the three aforementioned themes. The paper contrasted Wells' illustration of external technological threats through alien invaders with DeLillo's portrayal of the internalized fear of mortality and the hopes viewed in technology as a means of continuity. The theoretical framework was selected due to the posthumanist tendencies of the genre of science fiction, which stems from its speculative feature and anthropocentric attitude. Therefore, examined from a posthumanist prism, both works reveal that anthropocentrism often surfaces when a threat to human existence is presented. This shows that the linkage between the genre and the theory at hand cannot be fulfilled without references to humanism and its doctrines. Overall, the narrative of science fiction can be viewed as a reflection of humanity's evolving self-understanding. Thinkers attempt to advocate that the human is not

necessarily the measure of all things until the existence of the human is jeopardized. At that point, ancient and novice philosophies align against permanent perishing .

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