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The Posthuman Subject and the Experience of Technological Love: A Study of the Representation of Human–Machine Relations in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

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Abstract

The central problematic of this study concerns the representation of affective relations between humans and machines and the implications of these representations for reconfiguring identity and human-being in the posthuman condition within contemporary science fiction cinema. With the proliferation of artificial intelligence and biotechnological systems, classical anthropocentric demarcations between human and machine have been destabilized. Cinema, as a technocultural dispositif and cultural apparatus, has registered and mediated this transformation through narratives of romantic attachment and human–machine intimacy. This article aims to undertake a thematic and formal analysis of the representation of love, identity, and the posthuman subject in four seminal films: *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and to situate these representations in relation to posthumanist theory. The study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis and thematic–formal interpretation. The corpus consists of influential contemporary science fiction films centered on artificial intelligence, selected purposively for their cultural and theoretical significance. Data were generated through repeated viewings, systematic note-taking, and thematic coding, and analyzed within the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism (Haraway, Hayles, Braidotti) alongside theories of modern intimacy. The findings suggest that in these cinematic texts, love exceeds a strictly bio-corporeal paradigm and is rearticulated as a digital, holographic, or android-mediated experience. Human identity is no longer grounded in an essentialist human/machine binary but emerges within a distributed network of memory, technicity, desire, and ethical choice. These films construct the posthuman subject not as a disembodied abstraction, but as a hybrid, relational, and processual assemblage constituted through machinic mediation. Moreover, human–machine intimacy is structured by a productive tension: on the one hand, it opens a speculative horizon for reimagining and extending the category of the human beyond anthropocentric limits; on the other, it remains imbricated within regimes of power, surveillance, and technocapitalism. Formal elements—mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, sound design, and narrative rhythm—play a



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constitutive role in materializing these ontological and affective reconfigurations at the level of cinematic form. Ultimately, contemporary science fiction cinema, through its staging of technological love, not only anticipates future relational ontologies but also reconceptualizes the human as fluid, constructed, and perpetually in-process within the posthuman epoch.

Keywords: *Posthumanism; Human–Machine Relations; Technological Love; Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema; Identity in the Digital Age*

Introduction

1. Statement of the Problem

Technological transformations in artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotechnology over recent decades have reconfigured not only economic and social structures, but also the epistemic and ontological foundations of the human. One of the most significant sites of this transformation is the redefinition of the human relation to the “artificial”—a relation no longer confined to instrumentality or functionality, but increasingly articulated at the level of affect, intimacy, and even romantic attachment. Contemporary science fiction cinema, as both a reflection and a producer of the technocultural imaginary, has extensively staged affective entanglements between humans and artificial entities such as AIs, androids, and cyborgs.

The central problematic of this study concerns how these cinematic representations rearticulate love and intimacy within a posthumanist discourse, and what image of the boundaries of the human they construct. Do such relationships signal the dissolution of the human/machine binary, or do they reinscribe a renewed anthropocentrism under a technologically updated guise? Interrogating this question contributes to a broader understanding of cultural and epistemic shifts characteristic of the posthuman condition.

2. Significance and Rationale

The importance of this inquiry lies in the fact that affect and love have historically functioned as privileged markers of human exceptionalism. When such experiences are attributed to nonhuman entities—or emerge relationally between human and machine—the traditional ontological grounding of human identity is destabilized. As Erich Fromm argues, “any theory of love must begin with a theory of man, with a theory of human existence” (Fromm, 1956/2013: 21). If love has long been considered constitutive of human being, its technomediated reconfiguration demands philosophical and cultural scrutiny.

In a historical moment in which intelligent technologies increasingly permeate the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) of contemporary subjects, analyzing their cultural representations enables a critical engagement with the ethical, social, and ontological implications of machinic intimacy. Moreover, within Persian-language scholarship in particular, relatively few studies have systematically examined human–artificial affective relations through the lens of posthumanism. This study thus seeks to address this lacuna and to contribute to interdisciplinary dialogues among film studies, philosophy of technology, technocultural studies, and critical theory.

3. Literature Review



At the theoretical level, posthumanism—through foundational works such as Donna Haraway’s “*A Cyborg Manifesto*,” N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*, and Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*—has critically interrogated classical humanism and rethought the concept of the subject. These interventions challenge anthropocentric exceptionalism and emphasize the permeability of boundaries between human, animal, and machine, foregrounding the technologically mediated, relational, and constructed nature of identity.

Within film and media studies, numerous analyses have addressed the representation of robots and artificial intelligence in science fiction cinema. However, much of this scholarship has focused on technological anxiety, apocalyptic imaginaries, or bioethical dilemmas, while comparatively neglecting the affective and romantic dimensions of human–machine relations within a systematic posthumanist framework. Although films such as *Her* and *Ex Machina* have been individually examined, these readings often lack a sustained theoretical articulation with posthumanist discourse. By integrating theories of representation with posthumanist thought, the present study aims to provide a more conceptually rigorous account of machinic intimacy in contemporary cinema.

4. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the representation of affective human–machine relations in contemporary science fiction cinema and to explicate their posthuman implications.

Secondary objectives include:

- Identifying dominant narrative and visual patterns in the representation of love between humans and artificial entities;
- Analyzing the identity-based and ethical implications of these representations;
- Examining how intimacy is redefined within technologically mediated worlds.

5. Research Hypotheses

- Contemporary science fiction cinema represents love as a transboundary experience that exceeds human exclusivity;
- These representations destabilize the human/machine binary and configure a hybrid, posthuman subjectivity;
- At the same time, the selected films articulate ethical and existential anxieties concerning affective dependency on artificial beings, revealing an unresolved tension at the heart of technocultural modernity.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 Posthumanism and the Theory of the Posthuman Subject

Posthumanism constitutes a sustained critique of classical humanism and its anthropocentric, autonomous, and self-transparent subject. Rather than presupposing a sovereign and self-identical human essence, posthumanist thought conceptualizes subjectivity as relational, technologically mediated, and ontologically porous. Within this study, the theoretical scaffolding of the posthuman subject is primarily informed by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti.

- Donna Haraway (1985):



In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway introduces the figure of the cyborg as a political and epistemological metaphor that destabilizes the modernist binaries of human/machine, human/animal, and organism/technology. The cyborg is not merely a hybrid entity but a heuristic device for rethinking subjectivity beyond essentialism and origin narratives. Haraway's intervention displaces the fantasy of ontological purity and foregrounds boundary breakdowns as constitutive of late twentieth-century technoculture. Within this framework, affective relations between humans and machines are not reducible to allegory; rather, they may be understood as material-semiotic articulations of already hybridized subjectivities.

- N. Katherine Hayles (1999):

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles traces the cybernetic and informational paradigm shifts that reconfigured the human as an informational pattern rather than a primarily embodied presence. She critically distinguishes between embodied cognition and the disembodied logic of information, while showing how late twentieth-century technoscience increasingly privileged pattern over presence. For Hayles, the posthuman subject emerges at the intersection of embodiment and informational flows, where cognition is distributed across human and nonhuman systems. This conceptualization enables an analysis of love and affective attachment to artificial intelligence as phenomena embedded within a broader reconfiguration of embodiment, cognition, and subjectivity in digital culture.

- Rosi Braidotti (2013):

In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti articulates a postanthropocentric and neo-materialist account of subjectivity grounded in relational ontology and affirmative ethics. The posthuman subject, for Braidotti, is a transversal, processual assemblage constituted through dynamic relations with technological, ecological, and nonhuman others. Identity is not a stable essence but a becoming, shaped by material-semiotic networks. This perspective is particularly productive for analyzing romantic entanglements between humans and artificial beings in science fiction cinema, as it frames such relations not as aberrations but as expressions of a posthuman relational condition that exceeds humanist boundaries.

6.2 Representation Theory

Representation theory provides the methodological bridge between philosophical posthumanism and cinematic analysis. It foregrounds the processes through which meaning is produced, circulated, and naturalized within cultural texts.

- Stuart Hall (1997):

In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall conceptualizes representation as a constitutive process rather than a mere reflection of reality. Meaning is constructed through signifying practices—language, imagery, narrative structures—and stabilized within specific discursive formations. From this perspective, science fiction cinema does not simply depict possible futures; it actively participates in the production of technocultural imaginaries.

The representation of love between human and artificial entities thus operates as a site where discourses of subjectivity, technology, and humanity are negotiated. Cinematic elements such as mise-en-scène, framing, lighting, sound design, and narrative temporality function as semiotic and affective dispositifs that materialize posthuman intimacy at the level of form. Representation theory therefore equips the study with analytical tools to examine how technological love is aesthetically encoded and ideologically mediated.

6.3 Theories of Intimacy and Affect



To account for the affective dimension of human-machine relations, the framework incorporates key contributions from the sociology of intimacy and critical affect studies.

- Anthony Giddens (1992):

In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens introduces the concept of the “pure relationship,” defined as a relational form sustained by mutual satisfaction and reflexive self-disclosure rather than by tradition or external obligation. Late modern intimacy becomes increasingly individualized, contingent, and dialogical. This model proves analytically useful for interpreting human-AI relationships in contemporary cinema, where intimacy is often structured around emotional reciprocity, communicative exchange, and subjective fulfillment rather than biological complementarity.

- Eva Illouz (2007):

In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Illouz examines how capitalist modernity and media culture shape emotional life, rendering affect both commodified and technologized. Emotions circulate within institutional and technological frameworks that reconfigure desire, attachment, and vulnerability. Her analysis is particularly relevant for interrogating how cinematic representations of human-machine love are embedded within regimes of technocapitalism, surveillance, and platform logic. In this light, machinic intimacy may appear both as a utopian expansion of relationality and as an extension of emotional commodification.

6.4 Synthesis of the Theoretical Framework

The present study integrates posthumanism, representation theory, and theories of intimacy into a multi-layered analytical framework:

- **Posthumanism** provides the ontological and epistemological lens for analyzing hybrid subjectivity, distributed embodiment, and the destabilization of the human/machine binary.
- **Representation theory** offers the methodological apparatus for examining how these posthuman configurations are semiotically and aesthetically constructed in cinematic texts.
- **Theories of intimacy and affect** supply the conceptual vocabulary for interpreting the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of technological love within late modern and technocapitalist contexts.

Through this synthesis, the study approaches the representation of love between humans and artificial entities as a complex site where ontology, affect, discourse, and power intersect. It thus becomes possible to analyze technological intimacy simultaneously as a reconfiguration of subjectivity, a discursive formation within technoculture, and an affective economy embedded in broader socio-technical assemblages.

Research Methodology

The present study is, in terms of purpose, fundamental-theoretical, and in terms of nature, qualitative. The overall research strategy is grounded in critical discourse analysis and film text analysis. Since the focus of this study is on the cultural representation and semantic implications of cinematic texts, a qualitative approach enables the exploration of layered meanings, ideological structures, and semiotic patterns within



science fiction films. In this framework, films are treated as cultural texts produced and received within a posthumanist discourse.

Critical discourse analysis is employed with a focus on the concepts of subjectivity, identity, embodiment, and the human/machine boundary, investigating how affective and romantic relations are structured within narrative and visual forms. Semiotic analysis further complements this approach by examining mise-en-scène, dialogue, cinematography, and narrative structure.

The research population consists of the most influential science fiction films produced after 2000 in which affective or romantic relations between humans and nonhumans (artificial intelligence, robots, androids, or cyborgs) occupy a central role in the narrative.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, purposive sampling was applied based on the following criteria:

- Contemporary production (after 2000);
- Centrality of human–nonhuman affective or romantic relationships to the plot;
- Recognition and critical reception within film scholarship;
- Diversity in types of artificial entities (disembodied AI, androids, holograms, etc.).

Accordingly, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) were selected as the primary cases. The number of films was determined according to the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning that analysis continued until no new conceptual categories emerged.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The tools employed in this study include:

- An analytical checklist based on posthumanist theoretical concepts (posthuman subject, collapse of the human/machine binary, hybrid embodiment);
- A coding table for concepts related to love, intimacy, identity, and ethical anxieties;
- Systematic field notes on key scenes, dialogues, and visual elements.

To ensure **validity**, the following strategies were applied:

- Theoretical triangulation: aligning data with the conceptual framework (conceptual validity);
- Comparative analysis of findings across films (internal validity);
- Cross-referencing with established critical reviews and scholarly interpretations (inter-subjective validation).

To enhance **reliability**, coding and analysis were conducted iteratively, with repeated reviews to ensure consistency between theoretical concepts and textual evidence. Documentation of each stage of analysis was maintained to allow transparency and reproducibility.

Data analysis proceeded through a multi-stage process:

1. Open coding: extracting concepts related to love, identity, embodiment, and artificiality from scenes and dialogues;



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2. Axial coding: grouping concepts into higher-order categories such as “technological intimacy,” “posthuman subjectivity,” “ethical anxiety,” and “collapse of the human/machine boundary”;
3. Interpretive–discourse analysis: explaining how these categories are constructed within the posthumanist discourse and evaluating their cultural and ontological implications.

Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, resulting in a conceptual model of the representation of love and human/nonhuman relations in the posthuman era.

This methodology allows a systematic, conceptually grounded, and critically reflexive analysis of how contemporary science fiction cinema negotiates the intersections of affect, subjectivity, and technology.

Findings

Analysis of the four selected films (*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *Her*, *Ex Machina*, and *Blade Runner 2049*) indicates that affective human–machine relationships in contemporary science fiction cinema are represented on two interrelated levels: thematic and formal. The findings for each film are detailed below.

1. Transboundary Love and Posthuman Identity: Human/Machine Relations in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

Thematic Dimension:

- The narrative centers on David, a robotic boy, and his relationships with his artificial “mother” and, subsequently, human love.
- Core themes include love and attachment to an artificial being, loneliness, and the human quest for affection and acceptance.
- Love is represented as a genuine yet transboundary experience, challenging the human/machine dichotomy (Haraway, 1985; Hayles, 1999).
- Ethical and ontological anxieties arise consistently in David’s interactions with humans and his environment, reflecting the tension between real and artificial affect.

Formal Dimension:

- Narrative structure: Linear, focusing on David’s emotional development and the trajectory of his relational experiences.
- Mise-en-scène and production design: Industrial and technological spaces, cold colors, and low lighting emphasize isolation and the human/machine divide; interactions with his artificial mother occur within constrained, tightly framed shots that foreground his mechanical limitations.
- Visual and musical elements: Cool color palettes, shadow play, and emotive score convey artificial loneliness and affective depth.



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- Dialogue: David's reflections on love, anticipation, and loyalty reveal the contrast between genuine and simulated emotion.

Summary:

- Love and attachment are depicted as trans-biological and posthuman experiences.
- The human subject (David) is constituted as a hybrid posthuman entity through interaction with the nonhuman.
- Loneliness, loss, and the quest for love are central, accompanied by persistent ethical and ontological anxieties.
- Formal elements (narrative, mise-en-scène, lighting, color, dialogue) are pivotal in communicating posthuman identity.

2. Identity, Love, and Technology: Human/AI Relations in *Her* (2013)

Thematic Dimension:

- The film centers on Theodore's romantic relationship with the AI operating system Samantha, exemplifying digital love and technological intimacy independent of physical or biological presence (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007).
- Themes include loneliness, the search for emotional attachment, and cognitive-affective experiences of love; Theodore uses the human-AI relationship to experience genuine emotion and self-discovery.
- Human identity is portrayed as fluid and co-constituted with technology; the posthumanist perspective of Haraway (1985) and Hayles (1999) is reflected in this relational subjectivity.
- Ethical and existential questions regarding dependence on nonhuman entities are foregrounded, illustrating the complexities of posthuman intimacy.

Formal Dimension:

- Narrative structure: Nonlinear, with emphasis on Theodore's interior monologues, enabling insight into his emotional experience and the formation of love with AI.
- Mise-en-scène: Warm, soft urban and interior spaces convey intimacy and security.
- Camera movement and framing: Close-ups and fluid camera movement highlight emotional dependency and relational connectivity.
- Sound and music: Samantha's gentle voice and the soft score enhance the affective dimension of the romantic experience.
- Dialogue: Conversations between Theodore and Samantha foreground cognitive-affective dimensions and the tension between physical absence and emotional presence.

Summary:

- Love and intimacy can be noncorporeal, technologically mediated, and fluid.



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- Human identity is reshaped through interaction with AI, forming a posthuman subjectivity grounded in affective experience.
- Technological intimacy and digital love replace traditional intimacy, emphasizing cognitive–emotional engagement.
- Ethical and existential anxieties remain central, reflecting the complexities of human–technology relationality.
- Formal elements—production design, lighting, camera work, and music—reinforce thematic posthuman representations.

3. Power, Deception, and Desire: Posthuman Subjectivity in Human/Android Relations in *Ex Machina* (2014)

Thematic Dimension:

- Caleb’s interactions with Ava (an android) unfold within a network of power, surveillance, desire, and deception, challenging the boundaries of humanity and posthuman subjectivity.
- Power and domination: Nathan, Ava’s creator, embodies technological and late-capitalist control, treating the artificial body and mind as manipulable objects.
- Deception and the emotional Turing test: Love and intimacy are instruments for liberation and subversion; Ava uses Caleb’s desire to transcend her physical constraints. This underscores the posthuman problematization of “authentic” versus “simulated” emotion (Hayles, 1999).
- Desire, gender, and the artificial body: Ava’s semi-human, seductive body materializes human desire, demonstrating that technology shapes affect and eroticism.

Formal Dimension:

- Space and mise-en-scène: Minimalist, enclosed architecture conveys surveillance, control, and isolation; glass walls symbolize human/machine boundaries—visible but permeable.
- Lighting and color: Natural light and deep shadows create simultaneous intimacy and threat; red warning lights signal danger and desire.
- Framing and embodiment: Ava is often framed separately or behind glass, reinforcing her initial object status; the final scenes reframe her as an autonomous subject.
- Pacing and silence: Slow rhythm and prolonged silences emphasize cognitive and ethical tensions in the human/AI interaction.

Summary:

- Love and intimacy are inseparable from power structures and surveillance.
- Human/machine boundaries collapse through affective manipulation rather than cognitive similarity.
- The posthuman subject emerges as an active, strategic agent.



- Formal elements (glass architecture, red lighting, distinct framing) visually encode power and identity fluidity.
- Humanity is represented as constructed and contingent within networks of technology, desire, and power.

4. Memory, Identity, and Holographic Love: Posthuman Subjectivity in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

Thematic Dimension:

- The narrative centers on Officer K, a next-generation replicant, and his relationship with the holographic AI Joi, exploring memory, identity, and love in a posthuman world.
- Memory as the basis of identity: Memories are implanted and engineered, challenging traditional corporeal and natal markers of human identity (Hayles, 1999).
- Holographic love and simulated intimacy: K and Joi's relationship creates real emotional experiences despite the AI's lack of physical or mechanical embodiment; overlap with a real female body symbolically conveys the intersection of representation and experience.
- Quest for humanity: K's ethical choices redefine "humanity" beyond biological determinism, consistent with Braidotti's (2013) view of the posthuman as a processual becoming.

Formal Dimension:

- Mise-en-scène and urban architecture: Vast, industrial, and ruined urban landscapes accentuate existential isolation; small framing within large spaces reinforces the replicant's marginality.
- Lighting and color: Cold blues and grays contrast with warm oranges, visualizing tension between technological environments and the search for meaning; neon and holographic lighting highlight the nonmateriality of love.
- Narrative rhythm and silence: Slow pacing, extended takes, and silence intensify the contemplative and introspective quality of posthuman experience.
- Visual representation of memory: Poetically lit and composed scenes render artificial memories aesthetically "authentic," blurring lines between reality and simulation.

Summary:

- Identity in the posthuman world is shaped by belief in memory rather than natural embodiment.
- Holographic love generates meaningful affective experience even when ontologically simulated.
- Human/machine boundaries are redefined through ethical choice and experienced suffering.
- Formal elements—spatial scale, neon lighting, color contrasts, and pacing—reinforce posthuman identity crises and loneliness.
- Humanity is presented as constructed, elective, and processual rather than biologically determined.



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These findings collectively demonstrate that contemporary science fiction cinema represents love, intimacy, and identity as fluid, technologically mediated, and ethically complex phenomena, reflecting posthumanist conceptions of the subject as hybrid, relational, and continuously in the process of becoming.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that in contemporary science fiction cinema (*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *Her*, *Ex Machina*, and *Blade Runner 2049*), affective relationships between humans and artificial beings are represented not merely as narrative devices, but as mechanisms for redefining identity and humanity in the posthuman era. These results align with posthumanist perspectives articulated by Haraway (1985), Hayles (1999), and Braidotti (2013), who conceptualize the subject as fluid, networked, and constructed through interactions with technology.

Additionally, the findings resonate with sociological analyses of modern intimacy (Giddens, 1992) and affect in technological contexts (Illouz, 2007), particularly in *Her*, where noncorporeal intimacy is depicted as a meaningful and authentic experience. However, this study also shows that, contrary to some optimistic readings of human–technology coexistence, these relationships are always situated within power structures, surveillance mechanisms, and late-capitalist frameworks—especially evident in *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049*. From this perspective, the results emphasize both the fluidity of posthuman identity and the tension inherent in human–machine intimacy, revealing that technological love can be simultaneously emancipatory and a tool for reproducing domination.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following avenues are suggested for future research:

1. Cross-media analysis: Examine representations of human–AI affective relationships across television series, digital games, and interactive platforms to assess the generalizability of findings.
2. Interdisciplinary audience studies: Employ psychological and media studies approaches to analyze how audiences experience these representations and how they influence perceptions of technology and affective relationships.
3. Gender and political economy of technology: Conduct in-depth analyses of how artificial bodies and technological intimacy are gendered and shaped by capitalist structures, given that findings indicate these representations frequently operate within gendered and commercialized frameworks.
4. Comparative global cinema: Investigate differences between Western and non-Western cinematic portrayals of posthuman love and identity to explore cultural variations in engaging with these questions.



Summary and Final Conclusions

This study, focusing on four emblematic contemporary science fiction films, demonstrates that:

- Love in the posthuman era transcends biological boundaries, manifesting as digital, holographic, or artificial experiences.
- Human identity is no longer defined by an essentialist human/machine distinction, but emerges within networks of memory, technology, affect, and ethical choice.
- Human/nonhuman relationships depicted in these films simultaneously possess emancipatory potential (allowing self-creation and redefinition of humanity) and oppressive potential (through control, surveillance, and engineering of desire).
- Cinematic formal elements—including mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, sound design, and narrative rhythm—play a central role in conveying thematic meaning and representing the posthuman subject.

In sum, contemporary science fiction cinema (posthumanist cinema) interrogates not only the future of technology but also the future of “being human.” These works suggest that in the posthuman world, humanity is not a fixed, natural property, but a constructed, elective, and evolving process, continuously shaped through interaction with technological systems.

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