

2B or Not to Be ... A Review of *2B: The Era of Flesh is Over* (2009)

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The famous fairytale line “Once Upon a Time,” opens *2B: Era of Flesh is Over* and sets the tone for the fantastical exploration of a “happily ever after” for human evolution. Set in New York, during a time described as “soon,” the audience is introduced to a transhumanist future envisioned by writer and executive producer, Martine Rothblatt who is also the cofounder of the transhumanist group Terasem.

The film revolves around the murder of scientist Tom Mortlake whose life ambition is to improve human life expectancy through perfecting the science of downloading human consciousness into new bodies. Mortlake’s engineered daughter, Mia, is the first artificially created human with downloaded consciousness. Mortlake engineers his own murder to draw attention to his work and to usher the human race into a new era where the very nature of life and death has changed. *2B* delves into the science and theoretical thought behind the Terasem Movement Foundation; namely Transbeman and Mindfile concepts.

Mia, as a genetically engineered, biological artificial intelligence, is a ‘Transbeman’ (Transitional Bioelectric Human Being). In her academic work, Rothblatt defines the Transbeman as a human in evolutionary conversion as assisted by technological development: ‘We can look at transbemens as people who self-identify as bio-electronic humans in transition’ (Rothblatt). Rothblatt’s belief that the definition of life in the future will be more flexible underpins the message of the film. The film also draws on the idea of reconstructing the mind as software through the creation of a Mindfile. Currently, *Lifenaut.com* (sponsored by the Terasem Foundation) offers the means to create a ‘Mindfile account’ to store the user’s life experiences for longevity after the user as died, or for uploading into digital technologies at a later stage. *2B* explores the revolutionary concept of combining the Transbeman and Mindfile in the future in a way that will “change life and death itself” through rebirth (*2B: The Era of Flesh is Over*).

2B builds on Rothblatt’s established work for Terasem which focuses on the education of the public:

Terasesem Movement, Inc. is a 501c3 not-for-profit charity endowed for the purpose of educating the public on the practicality and necessity of greatly extending human life, consistent with diversity and unity, via geoethical nanotechnology and personal cyberconsciousness, concentrating in particular on facilitating revivals from biostasis. The Movement focuses on preserving, evoking, reviving and downloading human consciousness (“Mission Statement”).

The educational nature of the film is evident through the frequent employment of extended metaphors to convey posthuman principles to a general audience. Comparing the Mindfile to a magical box, and the scientist to a magician, seems to be a rather deliberate attempt to make the film content and argument accessible. The frequent repetition of “fairy tales,” “happy ever after,” and “magic” is rather heavy handed and inadvertently condescending, but appears to be a soothing technique to reassure viewers that the posthuman vision of the future is not as dystopian as films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Surrogates* (2009), and even Disney’s *Wall-E* (2008) portray it to be. This idealism will work for existing supporters and believers in the Transbeman concept and the Posthuman/ Singularity movement – however, for general audiences the script prevents meaningful exploration of both sides of the complicated debate. That said, the film does flirt with the ramifications of the Transbeman movement but through the lens of human ignorance: “the magician knew this magic would be misunderstood” (*2B: The Era of Flesh is Over*). The problems the film highlights mainly revolve around unfair pressures on the Transbeman – such as legal, ethical, and social complications which are presented as the manifestation of paranoia, fear and unfounded prejudice. However, the more meaty debates surrounding the ramifications and ethics of life extension are not dealt with adequately.

A few minor conceptual issues problematize some of the film’s arguments. Mia is presented as the “world’s first posthuman”; however, many thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles argues that we are already posthuman (Hayles 277). Further, Donna Haraway argues: “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (150). Although Haraway is speaking of an imaginative cyborg, Andrew Murphie and John Potts argue that humans have become posthuman through the adoption of technology to assist their lives (155). For Andy Clark, the human does not need to be enhanced physically with technology (prosthetics) or a product of technology (biologically engineered) to be posthuman as the human is programmed and mechanized as part of a new human condition (3). Yet, *2B* presents the posthuman as a specific entity that will emerge at a future date and actually misses the many interesting ways the human is viewed as transitioning already. In addition, it would have been interesting to explore the undeveloped subplot of the artificial intelligence of ‘Dave.’ How Mia, as Transbeman, and Dave as software AI, are similar or different was not explored. Interestingly, the film does not challenge gender binaries despite the *trans* nature of the Transbeman. In fact, Mia is presented as a stereotypical female: she likes chocolate, she thinks differently to men, Mortlake created a woman because (he argues) “daughters love their fathers more” (*2B: The Era of Flesh is Over*). Despite Haraway’s famous argument in *A Cyborg Manifesto* that the posthuman will reconsider traditional binaries, the binaries for the *2B* Transbeman are most certainly in place.

The film walks a challenging line between philosophical debate, theoretical science, and entertainment. The film raises many complex questions for consideration such as: ‘How do we define life?’, ‘What is death?’, ‘What does future evolution look like?’ These pertinent questions have also been posed by *The Singularity Is Near* (2010) written by Ray Kurzweil, produced by Martine Rothblatt, and sponsored by Terasem. *The Singularity is Near* deals in more detail with many of the themes introduced in *2B* and includes interviews with key thinkers.

Although the film opens with a quote from the late American science fiction author, Robert *Heinlein*, “Everything is theoretically impossible until it is done,” these words do not limit the film to science fiction in the same trend as *Transcendence* (2014). *2B* clearly aims for scientific credibility and the theoretical content of the film is stimulating. Unfortunately, the film’s message at times is burdened by science fiction clichés, such as over exaggerated mood lighting (pulsing greens and reds), oppressive atmospheric music, and the use of Gothic devices such as constant darkness, tortured characters, and even a laboratory that is reminiscent of Frankenstein’s castle. However, focusing on the cinematography perhaps misses the point *2B* is trying to make. The exaggerated darkness and ruinous world acts as a metaphor for the death, pain, and futility of the present decaying human state. The Transbeman future, Terasem promises us, will be brighter – as subtly highlighted through the use of colored light often in conjunction with Mia’s appearances.

Despite the shortcomings, the film is fresh and original and introduces audiences to larger debate. *2B* provokes fascinating questions and certainly encourages awareness of the posthuman movement – which seems to be the goal of the film. As a serious depiction of a posthuman future by experts in the field, the ambition of the project is commendable. As such, many futurists and critics have received the film positively. Ray Kurzweil notes, “MindFile technology is the most dramatic I can remember in the cinema” (“2B”). *Woodstock Times* claims that the film provokes “discussion not only of filmmaking’s future, but mankind’s”; and Wendell Wallach calls the film an emerging “cult classic” (“2B”). Despite the positive reception, the film is a rather hidden project and can only be streamed on the 2B Movie website.

For anyone working on posthumanism, transhumanism or the Singularity – *2B* is essential viewing. Whether or not general audiences will embrace *2B* as a plausible and utopian depiction of the future is uncertain. However, the film does well to raise important considerations pertaining to future evolution. Ultimately, the film *informs* (rather than *forewarns*) that the future will render the human obsolete. The human, we are told, will be remembered as a mere fairy tale – remembered as the darkness before the “happily ever after” of the posthuman. “To be or not to be?” That is no longer the question, Terasem suggests. The answer, we are told, is simply: *2B*.

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