

“All the Components That Make Up Me as an Individual:” What Makes a Being Human? *The Ghost in The Shell* Posthumanism Analysis



Major Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell*

Technology has advanced dramatically currently to the point where people have started to question how this advancement will affect humans in general. With the creations of AI's, robotic prosthetics, self-driving cars, and so much more, humanity's fate seems to become even more and more entwined with technology with each passing day. It makes people ask the question of what makes a being a human. Is it the human body or the ability to have thoughts and feel emotions? Masamune Shirow asks this question throughout his series, *The Ghost in the Shell*. The series follows Major Motoko Kusanagi, an assault team leader for Public Security Section 9, who also happens to be a "cyborg." Every adaptation of the series shows what it is like for Motoko to live in this technology advanced future and makes the audience question what makes someone human. It's the first series that came to mind when I thought about the question, so I felt a deeper analysis of the series could help others come to their own conclusion about this question. Throughout this article we will explore what truly makes a human being comparative to its robotic cohort.



The creation of a cyborg from *The Ghost in the Shell* Manga



The dismantling of a robot in *Ghost in the Shell 2: Age of Innocence*

Before going off and giving everyone an existential crisis on what makes something considered a human, I'm going to give a bit of background on *The Ghost in the Shell* series. The series was created in 1989 by Masamune Shirow. It takes place in the twenty-first century, the year changing with each

adaptation, but most believe it takes place in 2029. The story is set in a made-up Japanese city of Niihama, called New Port City. One thing the series likes to point out at the beginning, is that even though the world has advanced technologically, and civilization is mostly cyborg, “nations and ethnic groups” have not been wiped out (Shirow). Which is one of the reasons why the public still needs countermeasures to protect themselves from attacks. The story follows Public Security Section 9, a taskforce of former military officers and detectives that work together to stop acts of terrorisms, corruption, and cyber-attacks. In this society, most of the public have a cyberbrain, which lets them connect their brain to various networks. Along with cyberbrains, there are a lot of cyborgs in this society. For those who are not a huge fan of sci-fi, “a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 3). The series follows Major Motoko Kusanagi, who has been a cyborg for most of her life since a tragic incident from when she was a child. Kusanagi has been a cyborg for so long, she starts to wonder if she was ever human from the start. Just like other sci-fi cyberpunk related stories, “*Ghost in the Shell* uses a cyborg protagonist to question the nature of subjectivity and the mind/body split. The English title of the series refers to this conundrum: the term ‘shell’ is used to describe the characters’ material body in the world, whereas the ‘ghost’ is the person, consisting of ‘memories, consciousness, and self-identity’” (Loreck 37). A ghost within this series is the equivalent to a human soul.



A panel from *The Ghost in the Shell* Manga of Mokoto talking about her Ghost

The world treats the shells without a ghost as if they are just simply tools and possessions, they show some sympathy for them, but not as much as a real person would get. They're basically robots at that point and they are treated as such. The second movie, [*Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*](#), goes into how robots in this world are treated to those that have ghosts. The movie begins with an [introduction](#) that shows how robots are created and it's a very intimate intro. It shows the slow process that goes into making a robot, comparable to the development as a child in the womb. Yet, robots are just treated like objects. "People throw robots away when they don't need them anymore. They keep buying new ones every time a new model comes out. Some of the discarded ones become vagrant and they deteriorate without maintenance. The only thing a robot desires is not to be disposed of" (Shirow). This shows that robots also have thoughts like the humans and cyborgs of this world, but they are treated less. Maybe it's because if society accepts that robots are just like humans then "the fear that humans might merely be the sum of simple clockwork tricks and components" will be proven true and that we're not better than non-human beings (Shirow).



Ghost in the Shell's Movie
Poster

Even though cyborgs are considered above robots, some cyborgs like Motoko are more cyborg than human. Yet, she is still treated like a person, even if she doesn't feel like a person most of the time. In the [*Ghost in the Shell*](#) movie, besides the focus being on Motoko's mission, the movie focuses on Motoko's struggle with identity. Since Motoko was in an accident at a young age, she grew up in a [cyborg body](#), and it made her contemplate her humanity from the beginning. She starts to think that her memories might be a "simulated experience," basically all of them are made up and she

was never a real human from the start (Shirow). “Memory plays a vital role in forging and encapsulating an identity and meaning of self and life. In a pivotal sequence of the film, Kusanagi reveals part of her anxiety to her partner, the cyborg Batou, following a deep ocean dive” (Curti 96). When talking to Batou, Mokoto tells him her deepest fear as a “complete” cyborg: “maybe I died a long time ago. And I’m just an artificial product of a cyber brain and synthetic body. Or maybe there was never a real me in the first place” (Shirow). She goes on to say that the only thing that made her feel human was how she was treated in society.

True. We can quit... but we’d have to give back our cyborg parts and augmented brains to the government. All components that make up me as an individual. There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind. A face and voice to distinguish oneself from others... the hand you see when you wake up, your childhood memories and feelings about your future. And that’s not all. There’s also the ability to access vast amounts of information from an infinite network... All of that blends to create a mixture that forms me, and gives rise to my conscience. At the same time though, I feel continually confined within boundaries...

Major Motoko Kusanagi to Batou (Shirow)

With these restrictions on her body and how she sees herself, Motoko wonders if she even belongs in the “human” world since she feels so trapped there. However, even though she has those beliefs, the feeling of being trapped and stuck is a very human feeling. As the movie goes on, Mokoto questions more about herself, but does not let it get in the way of her mission. Mokoto, with her team, are on a mission to stop the cyber terrorist, The Puppet Master. Eventually, she and Batou can catch The Puppet Master and learn more about their origin. It becomes clear that The Puppet Master was originally an artificial intelligence which was created by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hack foreign networks and find out political

information. Over time, The Puppet Master gained sentience and became” a living, thinking entity who was created in the sea of information” (Shirow). Just like Mokoto, The Puppet Master has thoughts and beliefs. Originally, Public Security Section 9 believed that The Puppet Master was a human because of how they planned their attacks and their hacking skills. They never comprehended the thought that The Puppet Master was an AI that became their own being. After observing Mokoto for a while, they felt that Mokoto was just like them, since Mokoto was questioning her own humanity. The Puppet Master was a being that wanted to be human, while Mokoto is a being that doesn’t know if she ever was human. Which is why they believe she is perfect in passing on [their dream](#). The Puppet Master wishes to merge with Mokoto where she would take their essence and reproduce something else that would essentially be their child.



Some may argue that reproduction is solely a humanoid quality. However, at the end of the series, Shirow tries to challenge the idea of it being solely human.

A page from *The Ghost in the Shell* Manga, showing Mokoto’s interaction with the Puppet Master

To enhance one's existence.. Life continues to diversify, and at times, sacrifices this diversity. Cells go through a cycle of regeneration and degeneration. When they die, they erase the entire memory...leaving only the genes behind. This is a survival mechanism against total annihilation.

The Puppet Master to Mokoto Kusanagi

Mokoto and The Puppet Master merge together into one being, becoming a combination of the two, creating something new entirely. The new being goes off on their own and goes to explore the whole depth of the digital net. This allows Mokoto to finally be free of her confines and allows The Puppet Master to die as they always wanted – a human. Even though they both occupied shells throughout the series, they still struggled with the idea if they were human. They were both treated as humans which created the ability to think and feel. Yet, they still struggled with their identity because of the robotic essence that was still present in their physical body.

No one knows the exact way to define humans, but we can put a definition to cyborgs and

By becoming a body without organs, then, Kusanagi thus opens herself up to the possibility of re-creating her own organs—she frees herself from mechanistic, hierarchical assemblages of desire and becomes capable of experiencing existence as a multiplicity.

Gerald Miller

artificial intelligence. When we come across something that appears human, yet isn't human, we must put a name to it to differentiate it from us. Every human has their own identity, the ability to think and feel, yet we feel like we have a hierarchy when it comes to other beings who have the same emotional intellect. How have we as humans come to a point where we have the power to decide what is true or not? What gave us the right to decide that if a being is not human, they are considered less than? "We are responsible for boundaries" with beings that are not exactly us but have the potential to be us (Haraway 65).

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