

“How can we think *outside* the terms in which we *are*?”<sup>1</sup>:  
Counterhumanism and the Call Centre in the Age of Digital  
Science Fiction.



Figure 1 – The corporate call centre called “4<sup>th</sup> Dimension” in *John & Jane* (Ashim Ahluwalia, 2005).

Counterhumanism, as an intellectual project put forth by Sylvia Wynter, seeks to unsettle and reimagine the Western formation of what it means to be human.<sup>2</sup> This formation, this constructed image of “Man” as Wynter terms it, is the calcified and reified figure of human as a being whose essence is an economic drive to increasingly produce, consume and accumulate. Wynter argues that this invention on behalf of capitalist structures is precisely what “institutes, regulates, normalises and legitimates, what [...] controls us,” as its

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Wynter (emphasis in original), quoted in Sylvia Wynter and David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8 (September 2000): 207.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 11.

representation becomes the foundational dominant logic of Western bourgeois culture.<sup>3</sup> Wynter argues that overcoming this “overrepresentation” of Man is the struggle of the new millennium.<sup>4</sup>

But how can we overcome the representations through which we live, through “which we *are*”? Wynter argues that planetary humanism calls for the “making conscious” of the processes of overrepresentation that reify Man as both cause and effect of systematic oppression.<sup>5</sup>

Within the realms of representation, it is the genre of science fiction that appears as the most radical mode in which to analyse the overrepresentation of Man. Although a genre that appears fixated on the future, Samuel R. Delany argues that science fiction actually provides a “significant distortion of the present,” and as such, science fiction representation provides a distance through which we can acknowledge ourselves.<sup>6</sup> This distance is achieved because science fiction is inherently a site of rupture – temporally, through its interplay of future and present, and through its intermingling of possibility with impossibility. Contemporary manifestations of the genre compel us even further, as digital-age science fiction has the radical potential of what Sean Redmond terms “digital deterritorialisation”: it has the ability to “[reproduce] the virtually borderless, boundary-less nature of liquid modern life.”<sup>7</sup> Digital deterritorialisation is destabilising, as it uncouples time from space before us, but it also opens up boundless possibilities through its dematerialising of the human body through what Lev Manovich terms digital’s “deep remixability”: its ability to alter, simulate, and rework the possibilities of the physical world and human form.<sup>8</sup>

The work of this essay, therefore, is to read the filmic worlds of digital age science fiction – taking the examples *John & Jane* (Ashim Ahluwalia, 2005) and *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018) – for their representation of Man, and, to determine whether there is a potential for radical counterhumanism in their representations in the age of the neoliberal and neo-colonialist structures of the call centre.

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<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Wynter and David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter”: 159.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument” in *The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, No. 3, (Autumn 2003): 260

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Wynter and David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter”: 207.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012): 165.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Redmond, *Liquid Space: Science Fiction Film and Television in the Digital Age* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris 2017): 62.

<sup>8</sup> Lev Manovich, “Deep Remixability,” in *Artifact* Volume 1, Issue 2 (2007) (76-84): 76.

The call centre itself is a site of deterritorialisation representative of the networked global flows of neoliberal late capitalism. These global flows allow the call centre to function on a spatially and temporally separate plain than those it engages with, making it a site of rupture through its contradiction of networked presence and physical absence. It represents the transition from industry to post-industry, from products to services, and from manual labour to affective labour, that underlays present day capitalist economies. Michael Hardt has described affective labour as being at the “pinnacle” of the hierarchy of labouring forms in our post-industrial economy of “postmodernization.”<sup>9</sup> Affective labour is that which produces or manipulates affects: the feelings of satisfaction and wellbeing that we would typically associate with the service industries.<sup>10</sup> Hardt argues that a necessary tenant of this form of labour is that of human contact and proximity, be that actual or virtual. The immaterial labour of affect is precisely the labour at play within the call centre environment. Although now, in 2019, technology is far more advanced than at the time Hardt was writing (1999), the structuring of a call centre around the presence of another human being remains integral to the customer service experience. Yet the positioning of such labour upon subjective individual bodies is strongly at odds with call centre mandates to ‘stick to the script’ (S.T.T.S in *Sorry to Bother You*): the detached, impersonal objectivity more easily associated with algorithms and technology. This contradiction begs the question: what is it about the human that we cling to in a neoliberal environment?

In *John & Jane*, the call centre is also a site marked by globalisation, as the workplace it documents in Mumbai serves callers from the United States, pointing to the corporate offshoring that has become standardised to reduce labour costs within the global economy. Wynter’s *economic Man* is the perpetual and ever-present recalibration of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation – the accumulation by dispossession that founds and drives capitalism – and nowhere is this clearer than in the networks of our global economy: how it encounters, absorbs, and accumulates places and people into its flows.<sup>11</sup> The offshoring of services to historically colonised spaces under the marker of globalisation is in fact a stratum of neo-colonialism: previously Anglo-colonised nations are exploited for their English-language comprehension in the name of imperialist profit. Ursula Huws describes how the global call centre exacerbates the problems of national

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt, “Affective Labour,” in *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1999): 90.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt, “Affective Labour”: 96.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” in *Capital: Volume One*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm> (accessed 02/02/2019).

call centres, as agents here must communicate in different languages, observe foreign holidays, adapt their body clocks, adopt false names, and put up with racist abuse.<sup>12</sup> In this framework, affective labour acquires a new layer, that which Kiran Mirchandani terms “authenticity work.” This work is the “invisible activities” necessarily performed by transnational service workers: the work of being both yourself and someone else simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> The work of “passing” is therefore inherently tied to the structures of racial capitalism.

In her analysis of passing, Cheryl I. Harris describes it as a state of “anonymity” for those deemed to have ‘white’ features within the racial hierarchy of societies structured on white supremacy.<sup>14</sup> In the call centre context, these features start with the voice, overlooking the more immediate qualities of skin colour and appearance that usually determine racial identities and subjugation. Whiteness, however, is more than a racial identity: Harris argues that it has now become a form of *property* that is historically protected by US law, with the right to exclude those considered to be “not-white” as its central tenant above any sense of inherent unifying attribute.<sup>15</sup> As such, effective change is impossible while the property of whiteness protects and perpetuates itself from the top of the racial hierarchy that it instituted, in line with Wynter’s argument that destroying Western bourgeois standards of gender and race are impossible until we destroy the dominant *genre* of Man to which these notions are attached. Both Wynter’s and Harris’ influential understanding of racial hierarchies within white supremacy build upon W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of the colour line: the role of race as a mode of domination on a personal, national, and global level.<sup>16</sup> Here related to the capitalist structure of the call centre, it is clear that the colour line still influences, infiltrates, and dominates, through its appeal to whiteness as a method of increasing profitability in its “not-white” workforce.

“Let me give you a tip. You want to make money here? Then use your white voice.”

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<sup>12</sup> Ursula Huws, “Working at the interface: call-centre labour in a global economy” in *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* Volume 3, No. 1 (Summer, 2009): 6.

<sup>13</sup> Kiran Mirchandani, *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012): 1.

<sup>14</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” in *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1711.

<sup>15</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property”: 1736.

<sup>16</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind” (1900), in *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*, edited by Nahum Dimitri Chandler, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014): 111.

In *Sorry to Bother You*, an older Black co-worker gives the newly hired call-centre employee, Cassius “Cash” Green, the sage advice to use his “white voice” in order to improve his commission prospects, and through it, Cash becomes extremely successful in the world of telemarketing. A “white voice,” so this character, Langston, explains, is “about sounding like you don’t have a care... There ain’t no real white voice, but it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s what they think they’re supposed to sound like.”

Langston is describing the *property* of whiteness inherently connected to the conception of Man, revealing an awareness of the power and opportunity their context allows them to take advantage of. This notion of “passing” in a call centre context is a central theme within the fiction comedy *Sorry to Bother You* as well as the documentary *John & Jane*. In *John & Jane*, instead of a fictional account, it is real-life Mumbaikar workers who are instilled with the necessity of learning ‘Americanisms’ in order to make them more successful in their engagement with their United States-based customer network. These call centre employees go through a rigorous training process in order to learn the cultural differences between India and the USA, from values (“individualism...achievement and success...progress”) to pronunciation (“You have to, “Aa!” You have to open your mouth. Say “aa.””) from a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American instructor. To “pass” is made clear to be the path to success in such an environment. The call centre is shown in both films to be a place where recalibrating oneself is not only possible but encouraged, marking the call centre as an inherent rupture within the dominant framework of capitalism that otherwise seeks to impress rigid and inflexible boundaries on Man as the conception of human. As such, an opening appears within the system, the call centre deterritorialised from the global network, reinforcing Man and the property of whiteness but simultaneously undermining it, as a mask, or in these cases, a new voice, that can be learned and exploited.

In both films, however, we witness the grasps of capitalism as it successfully or unsuccessfully attempts to absorb and accumulate these call centre workers into its flows. In *Sorry to Bother You*, Cash, through the use of his “white voice,” becomes so successful he is promoted to “Power Caller”; a team of elite telemarketers who earn vast amounts of money, work on the top floor of the building as opposed to the basement, and take a golden elevator up to work in which a programmed woman’s voice gives fiery inspirational pep talks (“Welcome, Power Caller. Today is your day to dominate the world.”). Suddenly he goes from living in his uncle’s garage to a penthouse apartment. He leaves behind his friends who are conducting a strike downstairs, and chooses his new job over his relationship, fully embracing the role before him (“I’m finally

good at something...I'm important.”). In *John & Jane*, of the six lives that the film documents, Osmond and Nikki make special cases in the film's narrative. Both appear content with their working circumstances, Osmond a budding entrepreneur determined to become a billionaire, and Nikki, a Christian convert who sees her job as an opportunity to spread love. Osmond's boundless positivity is sourced from his constant immersion in motivational material (“Instead of hanging out with friends I build myself by listening to various tapes”), not unlike the lift in *Sorry to Bother You*. We hear the repeated words of one such tape while Osmond is framed sleeping (“I am now wealthy. I am now wealthy...”) and one in the background while he cooks (“You are special. Prosperity is your birth right.”). This strange externalised system of validation is one such way capitalism has absorbed and profited insecurity. In the context of these moments, Man is hereby revealed as an *external* ideal of humanity, one to be bought, one to be taught. *Sorry to Bother You* reveals this by enacting excessive hyperbole in the lift to the point of humour (“Mr. Green, I am a computer, but I wish I had hands to caress your muscular brain. Today is your day.”), whereas in *John & Jane*, the reveal is felt through the extreme investment Osmond has made in the empire of externalised validation; books, tapes, posters, life plans. Osmond and Cash are absorbed into the ever-increasing-accumulation-complex, and although by the end of the fictional narrative Cash escapes, in the documentary we are left with the heavy impression that Osmond's confidence is unlikely to pay off due to his investment in the American dream. Osmond pastes pictures of his dream motorcycle and dream house on the walls of his apartment with dates he'll acquire them by (“I'm going to be having it by October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005. No one will stop me.”) and is fully invested in the false notion that “anyone and everyone who goes to the States becomes rich.” An abyss is opened up beneath his positivity. What is notable here, too, is that alongside the capitalist impetus to accumulate is an isolation that is inherent to the individualism so strongly linked with neoliberal drive, as both Cash and Osmond disregard social relationships for economic dreams.

Whereas Osmond and Cash fit the active, *masculine* attributes of Man in their increasing pursuit of capitalist gain, Nikki's positivity for her call centre job is found within the system itself: “Everything that I've missed in life – a family. I got it here in this call centre.” Seeing the call centre as a source of family is completely at odds with her isolation within the frame of the film, and the nature of capitalism itself, and as such, Nikki's story works within the film to reveal the chasm at the heart of capitalism: its inability to account for the human relationships we need to sustain ourselves. To be human is to seek out other people, for

empathy, for comfort, for companionship: Nikki's call with a lonely 80-year-old man is an encapsulation of this. Roles that require affective labour futilely attempt to fulfil the deficit capitalism cannot account for, as here the lonely caller ("I don't do too much calling no more") meets the call centre worker with good intentions, yet human proximity is still fundamentally tied up with *transaction*, as Nikki is still determined to make a sale ("If you have agreed say yes, okay?" "Yes." "Very good.").

As these depictions within *John & Jane* show, there is something *weird* and *eerie* about the depiction of these real lives, something speculative, simulated, and dreamlike about the films approach.<sup>17</sup> The science fiction elements of both films are integral to their representations of Man. In a discussion of our postmodern era, Frederic Jameson writes that "the present...is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect. Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to "experience," for some first and real time, this "present."<sup>18</sup> This is what we are seeing through the use of excessive hyperbole, humour, and pathos: a view of our present. Delany argues that anything that makes us ask the question "what kind of world would have had to exist for [this] story to have taken place?" is the radical "dialectical freedom" of science fiction put to work.<sup>19</sup> In recognition of the fluid speculation that science fiction inherently requires of its audience, Delany champions the appropriation of *literature* by science fiction.<sup>20</sup> We can read into this project a new understanding of science fiction as a genre beyond tropes of technology and aliens: science fiction, by necessarily calling into question the conditions that lead to representation through "strategies of indirection," give us a path through which we can think outside the terms in which we *are*. The combination of documentary and science fiction within the case of *John & Jane* and dark comedy and science fiction in the case of *Sorry to Bother You*, are integral to their ability to represent the tireless yet exhausting conditions of Man back to us in a way that we see it from the *outside*. Science fiction has the capability to rupture the realism of the *mise-en-scène*, and as such,

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Fisher defines the weird and the eerie as affects or modes that are experienced "in the raw": the weird is a presence of "that which does not belong" and the eerie describes when something is "present where there should be nothing" or where there is "nothing present when there should be something." Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016): 61.

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (July 1982): 151.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*: 81.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*: 81.

these moments are the most powerful through which to see the effect of science fiction on the overrepresentation of Man.

The representation of the physical structures of power as out of joint with time and space is one way in which science fiction infiltrates the documentary. The corporate building where the call centres are situated is called “4<sup>th</sup> Dimension” (figure 1), which inherently implies science fiction themes, with no prompting from the filmmaker necessary. This external architecture already appears as if lifted from a science fiction film, its imposing modern structure accentuated through the upward tilt of the camera, making the building take on imposing, dominating, and “overseeing” characteristics. Internally, we are shown vast panopticons of cubicles, implied through medium closeups of individual agents engaged in sales-calls while other agents at identical desks are mirrored in front and behind them out of focus, through establishing shots, and through security footage. The scale of the space allows us to read into the boundary-less accumulation of capital, while its uniformity, standardisation, consistency, alert us to the strict control and scripting it exerts over the individual. In notable contrast to the occupied interiors, when external environments are filmed, the frame lingers on moments emptied of people. This contrast belies a world literally depopulated: where have all the people gone? Humans appear to have been absorbed by the dystopic network, deterritorialised from the physical world, unless at desks or asleep. This can be seen as symbolic of what economic Man does in its accumulation of places and people.

The initial rupture of physical representation within *Sorry to Bother You* occurs when Cash makes his first telemarketing calls, and the phone connection transports him and his whole desk into the same room as those at the other end of the line (figure 2). His desk tremors and shakes as if an earthquake is only affecting him, and falls right down out of the frame of the film, undermining the architecture of the built environment, and of the filmic form itself, with the dual effect of deterritorialising filmic continuity and physically representing the “binding element” of affective labour: the human connection between caller and callee.<sup>21</sup> The *weird* – the presence of a desk and telemarketer which does not belong – is a site of disturbance that destabilises our understanding of the world as bordered and material. The effect here is to re-present the quotidian encounter on a new stage – a visible, absurdist stage – which therefore confronts us with the

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Hardt, “Affective Labour”: 95.



scripted inhumanity of the situation. The woman in figure 2 explains to Cash that her husband is ill and therefore she cannot afford to renew her magazine subscription, and yet he is compelled in his role to stick-to-the-script in order to make a sale anyway.



Figure 2 – Cash and Mrs. Costello

Representation is also ruptured through the use of sound. Diegetic sound is what powerfully conveys the sheer volume of individuals at work within *John & Jane*; the overlay of voices of other agents, the sound of dial tones and ringing tones, of keyboards being typed on, the voices of random callers and their conversations, the hum of lights, the sound of scanners, all come together to create a radiating texture that implies vast repetition and distraction. Sound is often a crucial layer in science fiction cinema in order to instil the strangeness of new worlds upon the spectator, and here in *John & Jane*, it has a similar effect.

Dehumanisation is another prevalent theme in both films. The six workers who are profiled within the film – Sydney, Glen, Osmond, Nikki, Nicholas, and Naomi – all wear name tags that, instead of displaying their name, only display their photo, employee number, and blood group (see figures 3 – 6). The eeriness of their name not being present, and the inhumanity associated with being reduced to a number and blood group, is starkly displayed to us without comment in extreme closeups of the tags on their individual bodies. The worker's identity is here reduced to the most practical terms which fit the prescribed mould of Man.

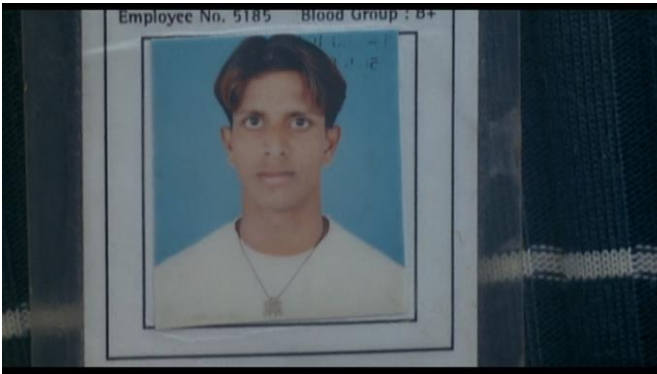


Figure 3 – Sydney

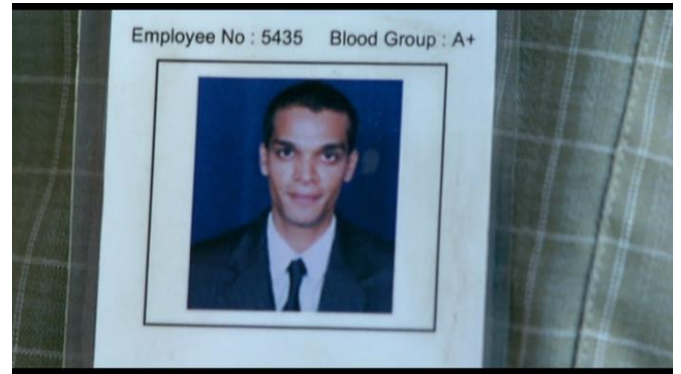


Figure 4 – Glen



Figure 5 – Nikki



Figure 6 – Naomi

In *Sorry to Bother You*, dehumanisation is embodied by the “equisapien” workforce assembled as “the future of labour.” Through advertisements within the film on TV, newspapers and billboards, we are introduced to WorryFree, a global corporation that offers “employment for life” through lifetime contracts in their production factories, with “no salary needed” as food and accommodation are provided “free of charge” on site to all “employees.” It is marketed towards the homeless and unemployed as a means to solving their economic and social problems. The company is investigated but ultimately cleared by a Senate committee of ‘slavery,’ and its power and influence grows throughout the film. Power Callers like Cash market the “slave-labour” of WorryFree over the phone. In a further development, as the demand rises and the labourer-as-slave earns the powers-that-be more and more money, WorryFree decide that in order to further their capital, they need to make their workforce “bigger, stronger.” Technology allows them to create a hybrid species – humans and horses – the “new calibre of worker.” An informational video (figures 7 and 8) tells Cash: “Our workforce of equisapiens will make WorryFree the most profitable company in human history.” Here history, progress, and capital are all tied together as one, a gesture familiar to economic Man. A worker that can overcome the physical fallouts of the human body – exhaustion, illness,

hunger – is the worker that increases production, consumption, and accumulation. The film shows that this worker does not and cannot exist, through the representation of horses and hybrids, and therefore reflects the threshold that late capitalism has reached.



Figure 7 – WorryFree promo – Man and equisapien



Figure 8 – WorryFree promo – the recalibration of Man

Identity is what is lost in the process of dehumanisation. In the classes offered by the call centre, the United States is brought into the room through objects: through magazines, through flags, and through photographs. The instructor passes around adverts from brochures and shows photos of iconic American imagery: bright lights in New York City and Las Vegas, flags and patriotic slogans on desert garages. The fact that workers are taught about American culture through ideals and representations couldn't be more in line with the perpetual reification of Man as Wynter posits. At one point Osmond declares: “[American] culture has gone into me. Now I would prefer being an American.” In another, Nikki reveals: “In the call centre I was introduced to a new person. You know, I mean, myself.” The call centre gets workers to change their names in line with their white passing personas, and Nikki describes this process as a chance for her to adopt a new identity: “And I was given the name Valerie, which I didn't like, so I asked the ma'am if I could choose...I said, “I like Nikki...Nikki Cooper.” This connection between idealised representations and the acceptance of the imposed new identities, speaks strongly of the fraudulent construction of the human that capitalism requires in order to function. The acceptance of the white-passing identity makes one easier to absorb into the throws of consumption and accumulation.

Interrogating someone's identity within the documentary form is historically tied to the classic talking head profile, and it is reutilised in *John & Jane* to provide intimate, prolonged connection with the six lives documented within the film. Each person is framed at different moments, eyes interlocked with the camera

lens, for 30 seconds or so of single take. The powerful effect of such moments is to *rehumanise* the people who have been absorbed into the dehumanising work of the call centre environment (figure 9). In the return of body to voice, the anonymity of the call centre worker is undone, and their agency is returned. This is achieved by placing Cassius in the same room as those he addresses, and by filming the frustrations and reactions of the call agents in Mumbai in real time against their interactions with American callers.

Through these ruptures evident within *John & Jane* and *Sorry to Bother You*, it is clear that there is a certain work that science fiction is able to conduct, in reframing ourselves back to us. By representing the “elaborate strategies of indirection” in the normalised ritual encounter of a call centre, we question what conditions made the worlds before us possible, which in turn leads us back to our very own concepts of Man and what it means to be human. The radical power of this gesture is to experience ourselves in the present, and to *counter* the dominant humanism that controls and propels us. Both films explicitly display the foundational logic of capitalism and operate science fiction as a destabilising point of rupture.



Figure 9

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