

**“Aren’t you gonna close
her up? And cover all that
beautiful machinery?”
Critical Transhumanism in
*The Book of Boba Fett***

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Transhumanism in the fictional world of the *Star-Wars*-universe is a well-known topic and has been widely studied both in fandom (Ajjviolin96, 2021) and academia (Wida, 2019). Darth Vader/Anakin Skywalker can certainly be considered the most famous cyborg of this vast science-fiction tale (Wida, 2019: 1828). His life-sustaining black armor with its iconic breathing sounds was deeply etched into cultural memory decades ago. His mechanically enhanced physical strength has also sent generations of fans into shuddering awe and continues to thrill, most recently in the season finale of the Disney series *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, which once again deepened the character development of Darth Vader into a bitterly merciless arch-villain (see “Part VI”, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*: 2022). In many interpretations, Darth Vader is considered the *caveat* and prime example of transhuman transformation gone

wrong. As Dong notes, “The story of Darth Vader, while powerful, is only a warning of a possible outcome of transhumanism on a single individual” (2014).

In its latest *Star Wars* franchise product, the series *The Book of Boba Fett*, Disney takes up the topic of transhumanism beyond the canonical character canon once again in greater detail and more critically. Thus, in the third episode (“Chapter 3: The Streets of Mos Espa”) of the series’ first season, viewers encounter cyborgs in the form of a gang of youths marauding through the streets of the town of Mos Espa on Tatooine, making the domain of Daimyo and of the titular hero Boba Fett unsafe. These so-called cyborg “mods,” short for modified, optimize their bodies with droid parts for the purpose of increasing performance and implementing new physical and technical abilities. To do this, they visit shady establishments (“mod sheds”),

most comparable to tattoo parlors,¹ where they obtain various cyborg implants and body hacking tools. These parts either replace body parts (arms, legs, etc.) altogether or modify existing ones (e.g., eyes, spine, abdomen) with new technical capabilities to enhance them.² The native population of Mos Espa is quite critical of these cyborg youths because of their scavenging and arrogance induced by their technical superiority. In the course of the plot, however, Boba Fett allies himself with the street gang and quickly knows how to use their technical advantages for his own consolidation of power. Furthermore, in a crossover (“Chapter 4: The Gathering Storm”), the viewer learns that Boba Fett’s companion and fellow fighter Fennec Shand has also been modified with droid parts after she was left critically injured in the desert of Tatooine in the fifth episode of the first season of the *Star Wars* franchise series *The Mandalorian* (“Chapter 5: The Gunslinger”), also from Disney. Boba Fett, finding her so close to death, saves Shand’s life by taking her to a so-called “mod shed” where her abdominal gunshot wound is treated and a kind of lower abdominal prosthesis is implanted.

What is remarkable about the way the subject of transhumanism is dealt with in *The Book of Boba Fett* is the fact that it is a critical and multi-layered examination of the personal and social consequences of transhuman modifications. While social prejudice against modified humans (in part disparagingly and pejoratively called “mods”) is overt, because transhumanism is perceived primarily as a kind of lifestyle phenomenon of a youthful anarchic subculture with negative consequences in terms

of character, Shand (like Anakin and later Luke Skywalker) personally experiences the benefits of the possibilities for optimizing the human body, because she probably would not have survived without the help of the mods.

Despite the initial experience of alienation and insecurity regarding her own body, Shand increasingly comes to terms with her “mechanical” parts, probably also encouraged by the encouragement of Boba Fett. In my opinion, Boba Fett appears in the series as a mediator between humans and non-human species and/or cyborgs. Thus he is accepted as (probably the first) human into the tribe of the (humanoid) Sand People, because he avenges an attack on them despite the enmity between Sand People and humans, and also shows himself tolerant, even integrative, towards the transhuman Mod gang by making them cooperative. Fett, nonetheless, must first come to terms with the Mods’ machine-like aesthetic. This becomes clear in a short exchange with the mod outfitter in his studio. In response to Boba Fett’s astonished question as to whether he wouldn’t like to cover up Shand’s lower abdomen after the “operation” so that the cyborg prosthesis is not visible, the latter replies, “and cover all that beautiful machinery?” (“Chapter 4: The Gathering Storm” 2022: 9:07) Here we see that Fett’s tolerance, however, does not extend as far as considering transhuman modifications to be attractive, such as the members of the youth mod gang. Moreover, in this and in the unconcealed wearing of the modifications, a certain pride of the mods for their “extensions” can also be seen.³

¹ The installation of the modifications in the “mod shed” accordingly does not appear to be particularly painful or intrusive for the “patients” or customers but is presented more like the application of tattoos or piercings as a kind of “beautification.” Fett is explicitly asked “Aren’t you little old to be here?” (Chapter 4: 7:29).

² There is a striking resemblance here to the cyborg extensions of the protagonist Max Da Costa in the film *Elysium* (2013).

³ In contrast, Anakin and Luke Skywalker, for example, still tried to cover up their cyborg prosthetic hands with gloves.

The portrayal of the Mods in *The Book of Boba Fett* also shows great similarities to the representatives of what Albert Cohen calls criminal subcultures (Cohen 1967: 24-32, 49-67, 121-137). Cohen's subculture theory, in my opinion, best captures sociologically what is presented in the series with the Mods.⁴ According to Cohen, delinquent youths usually belong to a subculture that is a result of their members' problems of adjustment and low status in the established society. Disappointed integration processes or sociocultural inequality between social classes thus lead to the formation of youthful anti-systems with heteronomous values and life plans. According to Cohen, the delinquency of the members is to be understood as a form of self-esteem that could not take place due to failed integration into the majority society homonomously. Subcultures are thus characterized by heteronomous values, partly "antisocial" behavior, and partly hedonistic or exaggerated status gratification (cf. Wickert, 2022).

As is characteristic of subcultures, the Mods are marginalized by Tatooine's majority society as a criminal gang. According to their own statements, however, they only rely on delinquent behavior (i.e. stealing water) because they are unemployed (Chapter 3: 7:23). The Mods' lifestyle and values also differ from the mainstream: they "indulge" in some kind of hedonistic transhumanism and ride garishly painted Speeder-bikes, and even in terms of their urban clothing they do not conform to the pragmatic, earthy environment on Tatooine. The exaggerated display of their transhuman modifications can thus be interpreted as alternative status gratification against the background of Cohen's subculture theory.

In *The Book of Boba Fett*, the viewer is thus presented with a differentiated picture

of transhuman modifications. This image includes both the question of the purpose of such modifications and their legitimacy, as well as the personal and social consequences of transhumanism for a society in which transhuman humans, humanoids and non-modified humans must live together. In the moral-philosophical debate and ethical considerations of transhuman modifications, the cinematic reappraisal of transhumanism as presented in the series *The Book of Boba Fett* can therefore serve as a low-threshold model of discourse. Complex and abstract ethical options are given a face, as in the series, that allows the viewer to empathize and tolerate, and thus to personally weigh rival options (approval or rejection of transhumanism) and possible trade-offs (transhumanism as an aid to life in danger).

Furthermore, the transhumanism of the Mods can be interpreted, as we have seen, with the help of Cohen's subculture theory as a social critique of the lack of tolerance of the society depicted in *The Book of Boba Fett*. Within this paradigm, it becomes clear that a social marginalization of transhuman modified humans does not solve the underlying problems. Only Boba Fett's integrative behavior strengthens the Mods' sense of responsibility for the city of Mos Espa and their fellow citizens and channels their previously delinquent behavior into courageous defense of the civilian population and thus into socially compatible action. *The Book of Boba Fett* thus shows us both a critical transhumanism as well as a nuanced and well-composed critique of transhumanism itself and is worth seeing for that reason alone.

⁴ Their name also recalls the British Mod subculture of the 1960s (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod_\(subculture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod_(subculture))).

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