Literariness Journal
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Special Issue 1 (June 2026)

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A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147/literariness.v1si1.003

# Reconfiguring the Self with Deafness: Disability, Technology, and Posthuman Subjectivity in *Sound of Metal*

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**Abstract**: There has been an inseparable connection between disability and technology since ancient times. People with disabilities often approach the latest technologies for the betterment of their lives. However, there are scenarios in which technology fails to meet the expectations and satisfaction of human beings in their pursuit of becoming equal to "normal" people. This paper discusses the shortcomings of technology even in the twenty-first century by analyzing the American film *Sound of Metal* through the lens of affirmative ethics theory.

Ruben Stone, the protagonist of the film and a heavy metal drummer, experiences a sudden hearing loss and is unwilling to accept the reality of his condition. He becomes willing to sell all his belongings, even his drum set, in order to obtain a permanent cure for his deafness. Finally, when he undergoes cochlear implant surgery, he is not satisfied with the result and decides to abandon the pursuit of restored hearing and live in peace for the rest of his life. His willingness to accept his deafness is made possible by the futility of technology. Even though many people with disabilities depend on technology for their survival, there are still limitations to technology, since the human mind craves ultimate perfection in life.

**Keywords:** *Disability, Posthumanism, Technology, Deafness, Disability Acceptance, Affirmative Ethics*

## Introduction

Posthumanism emerged as a theoretical framework in the late twentieth century and flourished particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. The key theorists who developed this idea include Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Ihab Hassan, and Cary Wolfe. The term *posthumanism* was coined by Ihab Hassan in 1977 in his essay "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" The central idea of posthumanism is to challenge anthropocentric thinking. It suggests that human beings are interconnected with other systems such as plants, animals, ecosystems, and technology. It also challenges the boundaries between humans and nonhumans.

Technology has proven its impact on all aspects of life. In the medical field, it has become an integral factor that cannot be avoided or replaced. One of the groups that benefits most from technological advancements is people with disabilities, whose lives can be made easier through assistive technologies and implants. Such innovations help mitigate disability to a great extent and offer a sense of satisfaction and belonging by enabling individuals to participate more fully in society. Consequently, technology plays a significant role in the well-being and self-acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

With the emergence of technology and posthumanist thought, the representation of disability in literature and film has undergone significant changes. Contemporary films increasingly portray disability as a different mode of existence rather than as a condition that must necessarily be treated or cured. Such representations encourage people with disabilities to accept their conditions and understand them as diverse ways of living.

This paper analyzes the Oscar-nominated film *Sound of Metal* (2019), directed by Darius Marder, through a posthumanist lens. The protagonist of the film, Ruben, is a passionate heavy metal drummer who experiences sudden hearing loss. Unable to accept this reality, he becomes willing to sell all his belongings in order to obtain a permanent cure for his deafness. Besides Ruben, one of the major characters in the film is Joe, who manages a sober-living community for deaf people. Joe constantly tries to help Ruben become comfortable with a world without sound. However, Ruben, as a passionate drummer, desperately wants to hear music and play the drums according to rhythm, making him reluctant to embrace deafness. He is unwilling to learn American Sign Language (ASL). Recognizing this, Joe eventually asks him to leave the community, arguing that it is meant for people who accept their deafness rather than those who are constantly seeking to cure it.

Ultimately, Ruben chooses to address his hearing loss through cochlear implant surgery, but the outcome leaves him dissatisfied. He can hear sounds only in a distorted, robotic manner. At this point,

the conflict between technology and human experience becomes evident. Accepting disability is difficult, but it becomes even more challenging for someone who acquires it suddenly after having lived without it. After considerable contemplation, Ruben decides to stop relying on the cochlear implant and embrace silence as a permanent part of his life. Through this decision, the film reveals the limitations of technology even in the twenty-first century. *Sound of Metal* functions as a critique of certain posthumanist assumptions regarding disability by suggesting that not every disability must be cured; some disabilities may instead be accepted as part of one's identity.

This film is analyzed through a posthumanist framework using the theory of affirmative ethics introduced by the Italian-Australian philosopher Rosi Braidotti. Affirmative ethics advocates a positive and productive engagement with life despite challenges and adversity. In the film, Ruben is initially unable to accept the reality of his sudden hearing loss, but he eventually develops the courage to embrace his deafness. This transformation is significant for anyone who struggles with self-acceptance. Self-acceptance plays a crucial role in the emotional and mental well-being of every individual. By accepting his deafness, Ruben ultimately finds a sense of peace and fulfillment, demonstrating that his true success lies not in restoring his hearing but in learning to live meaningfully with silence.

## Affirmative Ethics as a Way of Accepting the Disabled Being

The theory of affirmative ethics was first introduced by the Italian-Australian philosopher Rosi Braidotti in her book *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, published in 2006. It is a posthumanist theory that challenges notions of normalcy and advocates the fluidity and instability of life. Braidotti encourages individuals to accept reality and come to terms with it, irrespective of how difficult the situation may be. Through affirmative ethics, she exhorts individuals to learn from the negative experiences they encounter in life and transform them into opportunities for growth. Affirmative ethics can be seen as a ray of hope for those facing adversity, regardless of how challenging their circumstances may be. It critiques the ableist world, where everyone strives to be "normal," and instead advocates an understanding of life as fluid and diverse.

As Rosi Braidotti states, "Affirmation is finally a method through which negative aspects can be put to work in an ethical process of transformation."

When it comes to disability, Braidotti views it as a different mode of existence rather than as an abnormal condition. Individuals with disabilities do not have to seek a cure merely to fit into society. Instead, disability should be understood as a distinct identity. She considers society a fluid entity in which all identities deserve equal respect and dignity.

The theory encourages people to approach every situation with a positive perspective while also recognizing that life does not always unfold according to one's expectations. It emphasizes the importance of accepting reality in all its fluidity, whether it works in one's favor or not. In this sense, affirmative ethics advocates a transformation from negativity to positivity.

When affirmative ethics is applied to the film *Sound of Metal*, Ruben emerges as a character who initially remains optimistic about returning to a world of sound and music through cochlear implants. However, the outcome of the implant is entirely different from what he expects. Rather than restoring his former life, the implant produces a distorted auditory experience that leaves him dissatisfied. By relying on the cochlear implant, Ruben begins to feel that he is losing his authentic identity. After enduring several internal struggles, he eventually becomes willing to accept his deaf self. He realizes that the only way to move forward and continue the process of becoming is to embrace this new identity. Through this transformation, Ruben embodies the core principles of affirmative ethics by accepting his condition and finding meaning within it rather than seeking validation through a return to normalcy.

## Methodology

This study seeks to understand how the human self can transcend technological dependence despite the rapid evolution of technology in the twenty-first century. Using a qualitative research method, this paper analyzes the film *Sound of Metal* (2019), directed by Darius Marder, through a posthumanist lens. The paper focuses on how the director portrays deafness and identifies a significant shift from earlier conceptions of disability. The representation of deafness as a different mode of being rather than as a condition that must be treated and cured is particularly compelling for viewers. This study places greater emphasis on the characters engaged in discussions of disability than on other aspects of the film.

The theoretical framework employed in this analysis is affirmative ethics, introduced by Rosi Braidotti. Through this framework, the study examines the transformation of the protagonist from a negative outlook toward a positive acceptance of his condition. Ruben's journey ultimately demonstrates how embracing his deafness leads to self-acceptance and personal growth.

## Literature Review

Despite the significant body of scholarship in posthumanism and disability studies, the representation of these concepts in film remains comparatively underexplored. This paper examines the interconnectedness of posthumanism and disability, particularly in relation to identity formation and psychological transformation.

One of the seminal works in this field is Stuart Murray's *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology, and Cultural Futures* (2020). The book explores how posthumanism and disability are represented in literature, film, and other aspects of human existence. Another important contribution to posthumanist thought is Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), a collection of essays in which she presents the cyborg as a figure that challenges traditional understandings of identity, embodiment, and disability.

Another influential work is Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (2017). In this book, Clare critiques society's persistent desire to normalize disabled bodies and questions the cultural obsession with cure. Beyond these books, numerous scholarly articles have explored the intersection of disability and posthumanism. Dan Goodley, in his article "The Posthuman: Disability Studies and Queer Theory" (2014), argues for the interdependence of humans, technology, and ecosystems.

Another relevant article is "The Bionic Body: Disability, Technology and Posthumanism," which examines the relationship between technology and the disabled body and explores how technological interventions can produce hybrid forms of embodiment. Similarly, "Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability" argues that disability should be understood as a non-tragic condition, emphasizing impairment as a form of human variation rather than as a social deficiency.

These studies collectively contribute to an understanding of disability and posthumanism; however, the application of affirmative ethics to the representation of deafness in *Sound of Metal* remains relatively unexplored. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining Ruben's journey toward self-acceptance through the lens of affirmative ethics.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper analyzes the film *Sound of Metal* through a posthumanist perspective, demonstrating how technology ultimately leads the protagonist to accept his deafness rather than overcome it through cochlear implants. By employing a posthumanist theoretical framework alongside Rosi Braidotti's theory of affirmative ethics, the study traces Ruben's journey from the denial of his condition to the acceptance of a new deaf identity. His transformation from someone desperately seeking a permanent cure for deafness to a mature individual capable of fully embracing his transformed self offers an important model for understanding disability and self-acceptance. Ultimately, disability should be viewed as a distinct identity rather than a shortcoming. It deserves equal recognition within society, where diverse identities are acknowledged, respected, and celebrated.

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