

VA0525 Technology, Culture and Design

Semester 2 Assignment: Technological Change

Student ID: 08001873

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How has the figure of the artificial human (robot, cyborg etc.) been used within Science Fiction?

This essay intends to explore the notion of the artificial human: a constant within science fiction through modern history. The term is polysemic in that the artificial human can be depicted in a number of different guises such as robots, androids, cyborgs and replicants. This is often dependant on the cultural anxieties of the given era, such as conformity, slavery and racial differences.

The term robot, meaning to drudge or to slave, was first used to denote the artificial human in a play called Rossum's Universal Robots (1920). It was a common conception that humanity began to be destroyed by technology during the following decade. For example, Henry Ford rationalised human assembly lines by implementing strict routines for the efficient mass-production of his automobiles. This machined outlook troubled many people but inspired modernists.

Arguably a result of these new attitudes, Metropolis (1927) further illustrates this concern by presenting a production line of robots intended to replace the human worker; the machines are "*depicted as ultimately working against mankind to create a dystopic environment*", O'Mahony (2002, p.43).

One of the first depictions of the artificial man, that was not mechanical, can be seen in the film Frankenstein, (1931). This was based on Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein, which was published in 1819; this text was one of the first to address the concept of the artificial man. The film also deals with the blasphemous and condemnatory attitudes regarding the Religion versus Science discussions, that is the creation of life through science, which continues to be a prime concern with the artificial human in the 21st Century.

With a techno-gothic atmosphere, the film was inspired by modernism and also responds to the social anxieties of the period in succession to the First World War; the advances of technology and medical science meant that seriously disfigured soldiers survived causing civilians to be exposed to horrifying injuries. This led to the development of futuristic ideologies such as that presented within Frankenstein. The film also contributed to society as escapism from reality.

Furthermore, the 'monster' is portrayed as having a lower status than the scientist, who is controlling him, as dominance in social roles was simultaneously perceived in the real world.

During the 1980's, the most common representation of the artificial human was a cybernetic organism: a hybrid of man and machine. This depiction was most frequently used during this era because the fusion of live tissue and technology was a central preoccupation at that time.

The cyborg is often seen to characterize the general consensus that technology was changing us and invading our humanity. This was a particular concern of the 1980's. As such, science fiction addresses popular themes such as interspecies rape and gene splicing.

As with the cyborg, culture also fused: in her essay, Claudia Springer explores the global hybridisation of different races, resisting the "*break-down of post-modernism*". This was again a key factor of the time with the growth of the media and communication. These social concerns were embodied by hybridisation within science fiction and the consideration of the human body as the last source of stability and refuge of the un-fragmented state.

With a heavy focus on the human body, bodybuilding and the bulked up hyper-masculine body became a preoccupation of the time. This is further exemplified through the key figures of the time, such as the actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger and the former fashion and fitness guru, Jane Fonder. Celebrating the human body, films such as *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing* were released, and pornography became more prevalent within society, further scrutinising the human body.

Further personifying these obsessions, *The Terminator* (1984) adopts a metallic endoskeleton presenting a strong and macho image. This is reflective of the aesthetic trends of the period. Examples of the hi-tech architecture built at that time include controversial buildings such as the Lloyds bank in London, which was built using steel and glass establishing a very aggressive appearance, and also the Pompidou Centre: a French art gallery. Utilising the space available effectively the functional elements such as pipes and escalators were fixed onto the outside of the building allowing for repairs to be done externally. The interior was essentially an empty box as this allowed for minimal structural constraints within the building further enhancing the functionality of the architecture as an art gallery.

Another film that deals with the concept of the artificial human is *Robocop*. Released in 1987, the film presents a man who is being kept alive by machine. This is symbolic of the invasion of technology in our lives, and as a prototype alludes the redundancy of the police force by

machinery. Being based in a futuristic representation of Detroit, the film also explored the current social anxieties of conformity and slavery to the US policies.

Concurrent with the post-modern themes of hybridisation, *The Fly*, 1986, graphically visualises the effects of the fusion of a man and a fly via technology. This film addresses the fears of how quickly technology is advancing and that we should “*be afraid, be very afraid*” of the consequences of the accidental gene splicing and is, perhaps, a morality tale of the progression of technology that we should not tamper with. Additionally, this is symbolic of the preconceptions of the era and the anxieties surrounding the human body, which contributed to the sub-genre of body horror.

Though exploring futuristic ideologies and settings, the films are often expressive of a modern-day outlook towards technology and responds, sometimes celebrating, technological advances in present day.

Artificial Intelligence: AI (2001) is representative of how our attitudes towards technology have changed through the decades. This progression is also shown within the film with older models that have been used as slaves. Further personifying the artificial human is an example of how this is done: the director provides the androids with emotions, more specifically the ability to love and be loved, whereas in prior films artificial intelligence are often shown to have no emotion and apathy. Another example of this is in *Blade Runner* whereby the lack of emotion is the only way that the humans are able to differentiate the humans from the replicants; which are “*human-like to the point of believing that it is a human...becoming upset when it discovers it is not*”, O'Mahony (2002, p.43). This allows for the viewer to empathise with the androids and replicants much more.

Artificial Intelligence (2001) presents the acceptance and a 'love' of technology, though again relates to the issues raised earlier in this essay with regard to the blasphemous creation of life, and now emotion, through science. The characters each have their own reservations towards the androids; for instance, the mother figure treats the main android, David, like her own child, whilst the father figure treats it like a machine.

O'Mahony (2002, p.44) states that, “*While some roboticists are looking at the possibility of mimicking human thought processes through artificial intelligence, others are developing the technology to allow robots to move in a humanoid manner.*” As science and technology progresses in reality, directors are simultaneously becoming more ambitious within science fiction, “*...science fiction is becoming science fact...it seems within our reach*”, O'Mahony (2002, p.1).

In reality, “*Just as the bible tells us that God created man in his own image, scientists have looked to create an human-like artificial life*” O’Mahony (2002, p.43), and thus the androids that can be seen in the 2001 film, *Artificial Intelligence*, are highly advanced in their similarities to the human form as opposed to many of the earlier preconceptions of artificial intelligence. That is the progression of the hi-tech aesthetics and imagery of robots and cyborgs through to the human-like androids. Though a representation of the future, earlier examples were idealised concurrent to the less related works of engineering such as the “*tea-serving automata, known as the Karakuri*”, O’Mahony (2002, p.43).

Furthermore, “*The Honda P3’s chief engineer has plans to develop a more advanced prototype that could take on not just human, but ninja characteristics*”, O’Mahony (2002, p.43). As such it might be anticipated that we will see much faster and stronger forms of artificial intelligence being explored within science fiction in the near future.

To conclude, throughout modern history, artificial humans have been a central concern but appeared in different guises, which were reflective of the central concerns of the era. Many of these representations emanate a fear of artificial intelligence invading humanity though through the ages, directors’ responses to this issue have shifted alongside both our knowledge and attitudes towards technology.

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