

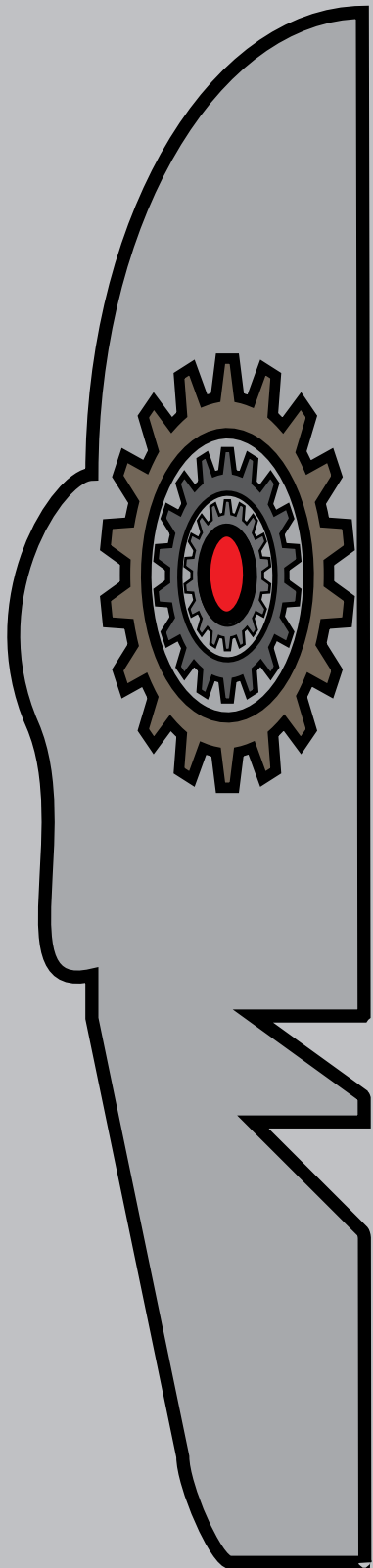
Robots

AND

LABOR

IN

POPULAR  
CULTURE



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# Editorial Introduction: The Coming Robotics Era

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

The idea of artificial life and automata has a long history in societies and cultures. From golems to vampires, animating the lifeless is a common theme in mythologies and religions. Sometimes those animated beings are threats to humanity, endangering lives with their activities. Other times these automata are boons, providing protection from threats, labor in the fields and homes, and entertainment.

Throughout history this tension between good or bad, benefit or bane, threat or help has seemingly existed with every new technology humans have developed that have shaped our societies and cultures (see Gitelman; Marvin). People hoped the telegraph would end war as countries could talk over their differences, while a century later people lauded the Internet for truly democratizing the world. People saw film as leading to degenerating moralities, while a century later people decry the echo chambers of social networking sites.

Automata, artificial intelligence, and robots all experience the same tensions: artificial intelligence will either make our everyday lives a utopia of ease and comfort, or we will be living under robotic overlords in a dystopic world. Likely the future and the coming robotics era lies somewhere between those extremes. Hopefully, the common dystopic vision presented in popular culture is more fiction than prognostication.

The articles presented in this issue consider these messages that popular culture has presented and thus the tensions that we have been wrestling regarding robots for a century. Robots themselves came into our public consciousness largely through mediated portrayals including the origination of the word “robot” coming from a Czech play in 1920 by Karel Čapek called *R.U.R. or Rossum’s Universal Robots*. In that play, automatons were developed for use in labor, exploited and treated as slaves, until they eventually overthrow their oppressors. The term “robot” is derived from the “old Church Slavonic word, *robota*, for ‘servitude,’ ‘forced labor’ or ‘drudgery’” and can be found in other European languages as a result “of serfdom by which a tenant’s rent was paid for in forced labor or service” (Markel, emphasis in original). From the very start, popular culture shaped the debate over robots around the concerns of forced labor.

Such concerns, of course, are nothing new, seeing as how the term itself arises from a system of indentured servitude that shaped Europe and the world through classism, colonialism, racism and imperialism. Thus, this common portrayal of robotic enslavement metaphorically touches upon humanity's history of intolerance and prejudice, and hopefully speaks more to this history than to our future. And yet, what we see in the articles contained herein suggest that we are still grappling with this tension about whether robotic labor constitutes slavery. Can a robot be a slave if it is not aware of its enslavement?

Additionally, we face the question of what it means to incorporate more robots, either physical or digital, into our workforce. While popular culture may be concerned about the enslavement of such a workforce, we see underneath this concern the worry regarding the displacement of humans for robots. Indeed, these two concerns appear hand in hand, as the natural extension of human replacement by robots in the workforce would be human replacement for dominance of Earth. Even now, in some businesses and industries, robots have become managers, dictating work requirements to humans – and not always with the humans' health in mind (Dzieza).

In the past, this concern largely involved robots replacing manual labor, such as in factories; however, robots are increasingly being involved in other forms of physical labor, especially in the service industry, as well as encroaching into non-physical labor, from customer service to journalism (Leprince-Ringuet; Semuels). Some economists and futurists believe this coming robotics age will present a challenge for our civilization, whether replacing jobs or increasing income inequality (Dizikes; Kelly). Much as the industrial revolution changed civilization and the world, through which climate change now presents a threat to our civilization, so does the increase of automation across various industries present the next labor revolution. Even now, I write this document through dictation; however, not dictation to a human being, but to the AI integrated into the Microsoft Word app on my smartphone. If an AI can do these tasks for me, why should I pay for a human, with all of the costs associated with keeping such a being alive? Indeed, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, jobs shuttered for health and safety reasons are returning with robots having replaced the humans, since the fear of robots contracting this coronavirus is nonexistent (Kelly; Semuels). Such an upheaval, understandably, generates the concerns, tensions, and messages portrayed in popular culture.

So, what then does our popular culture tell us about how we see robots in the workforce? What are the themes regarding how robots labor for us? Are humans

their masters, or are robots, AI, and automatons in some way controlling us? How have we built our robotic laborers: do they reflect humans with all our strengths and weaknesses, or are they meant to be our better selves? Are we hopeful for how our lives could be improved through the introduction of a robotic labor force, or do we fear that the end times of our civilization are nigh? How will we interact with our fellow robotic laborers? Even now, as I dictate to my smart phone, when I see it incorrectly recording my words, I get mad at it and refer to it as “you.” Does such humanization help or threaten us? When I become angry at my digital personal assistant, do I perpetuate gendered power dynamics that traditionally place women at the receiving end of such frustration? The guest editor for this special issue, Liz W. Faber, just published a wonderful book to address questions such as these.

Of course, we have no answers to any of these questions as they are directed towards an unknown future. But through our popular culture, we can engage in a discourse that wrestles with these questions, their answers, and what those answers say about us. The analyses presented herein help us to understand these questions, answers, and wrestlings. From the 1920s to today, these portrayals do not simply tell us about robots; they tell us about ourselves. They tell us about how we treat others based on how they look, how they sound, how they act. They tell us what we think of people we see as inferior to ourselves, as people under our command, and as people that we may not even see as people. These portrayals then are meant to not simply entertain, but to hopefully educate us about ourselves, so that the future we fear does not come to pass.

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# Introduction to the Special Issue on Robots and Labor

LIZ W. FABER

The automation of the human workforce in the last two hundred years has been cause for both celebration and concern (see Ford; Rhee). On the one hand, innovations in automation led to the “golden age” of post-World War II factory labor and an economic boom that shaped the middle class in industrialized nations (Ford). On the other hand, automation has had widespread negative impacts on human workers; indeed, a recent study published in *The Journal of Political Economy* has shown a direct relationship between the introduction of robots into an industry and the loss of human jobs (Acemoglu and Restrepo). In short, robots make human lives, labors, and economies simultaneously better and worse.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, popular culture has offered a means of exploring this ambivalence about machine labor, while also offering commentary on the dehumanization of human laborers. Indeed, as the essays in this special issue demonstrate, fictional robots are often not just robots; rather, they are also metaphorical portraits of humans, representative of the ways we build systems of oppression and dehumanization. The essays presented here offer a broad array of pop culture research on robots and labor, including analyses of literature, film, television, video games, advertising, music, and fan culture. Using a range of methods and theoretical frameworks, the contributors stretch the definition of labor to include not just the literal workforce but also emotional labor, semantic labor, and the labor of birth. Throughout, they uncover new ideas about humanity’s fraught relationships with technology as well as humanity itself. I have organized these fifteen essays around broad categorizations of analysis: we begin with a theory-driven reflection on robots and labor, followed by six different cultural histories, five in-depth case studies, and finally two essays on artificial intelligence as both production and producer.

I would like to say thank you to the Editor of *PCSJ* and every single one of the contributors for coming on this journey with me. In creating this special issue, I set out to design an anonymous peer review process that would foster a supportive academic community, encourage constructive feedback, and avoid gatekeeping. The contributors went above and beyond in their thoughtful, compassionate reviews of each other’s work while still maintaining rigorous academic standards.

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As a result, this special issue on robot labor, produced by scholars from around the world with the help of computer and media technology, is the product of truly collaborative human labor.

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# Human Labor in Popular Science Fiction about Robots: Reflection, Critique, and Collaboration

CHRISTOPHER LEE ADAMCZYK

The word “robot” has been closely associated with its Czech meaning — involuntary labor — since entering English from Czech with the translation of Karel Čapek’s *Rossum’s Universal Robots*. In their mythic capacity as involuntary laborers, robots have been variously depicted in popular science fiction as a technology that hastens technological utopia, tools for manual labor, dangerous usurpers of humanity’s self-reliance, sentient beings searching for equality, and in countless other capacities that reflect humanity’s hopes and anxieties about the future. Given the breadth, depth, and history of science fiction, this plethora of robotic representation is perhaps unsurprising. Darko Suvin resoundingly declares that “basic human curiosity” is what gives rise to science fiction — a curiosity that “has always been wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence or other aspect of the Supreme Good” (374). Similarly, Patricia Kerslake sees science fiction as a genre lacking “boundaries, connection with reality or formal precedent” that presents “caricatures from the human imagination” while simultaneously investing itself into cultural discourses rooted in “the knowledge and awareness humanity has of itself” and its “desire to experiment with its own future” (1). Because activity is endemic to the human condition as biological necessity and as an outgrowth of our need to make durable “the things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice” (Arendt 136), it is perhaps unsurprising that our collective imaginations have produced fantasy after fantasy in which purposefully designed automata free us from the demands of our material conditions.

When fantasizing about new, labor-saving, robotic technologies, however, we must keep in mind that the highest forms of fiction possess a kernel of reality.

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Wayne Booth reminds us that fiction “comes into existence as something communicable” and that it “can never be divorced from the human meanings [...] implicit whenever human beings act” (397). Fiction is never wholly separable from its historical and political context. To this, science fiction is no exception. Isaac Asimov reminds us that science fiction’s existence stems from humanity’s recent encounter with a “rapidly changing society due to the advent of modern technology” and that it serves to accustom “its readers to the thought of the inevitability of continuing change” (195). Because the subject matter of science fiction so often centers on the presence of an advanced, heretofore undeveloped science or technology — what Suvin terms a *novum* — it inherently roots itself in the modern experience of technology (373). From this view, then, popular science fiction about robots is not only a fantasy of discharging human activity to automata but also a tool for accustoming humanity to new, developing, and potential technologies.

The ability of science fiction to play this vital role in highly technological societies stems from the nature of narrativity itself. Walter Fischer contends that, at their core, “humans are essentially story tellers” and that “rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings” (8). For Fisher, humans ultimately tell stories to “give order to [...] experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common” (6). In a world within which rapid technological innovation is a given, humanity’s narrative impulses are a vital tool in acclimating to and comprehending change that otherwise may seem like upheaval. In this vein, David Nye writes that “Americans choose to understand technology using a wide variety of narratives” that help them to assimilate emerging technologies into society and to prepare for resultant potentialities (“Technological Prediction” 171-2). Similarly, James Herrick argues that stories rooted in the *mythos* of technological progress “assume that improvement inevitably occurs as a consequence of the interaction of the human mind with technology” and that “intentional appropriation of technology enhances the human condition” (38). By depicting a technological *novum* as a “central part of dramatic events,” popular science fiction draws its audience’s attention to aspects of technological development, whether it centers “on the old world that is fading into the past” or imagines “the future, projecting utopian images of ease and abundance” (Nye, *Narratives and Spaces* 3).

In this essay, I use Jacques Ellul’s notion of *la technique* to think through how narratives in popular science fiction with robotic *novum* provide spaces for the



critique and propagandizing of new, developing, and potential technologies. In completing this task, I pay special attention to the types of labor that this genre depicts humanity taking on in response to the existence of robots. Doing so, I draw upon the understanding that human experiences of new or emerging technologies are never wholly utopian — a cavalcade of benefits with no drawbacks. Benefits are but one side of the coin, and the adoption of new technical systems often forces unforeseen or undesirable change. To be rendered plausible, popular science fiction about robots must reflect this reality. As well, by turning my gaze in this direction, I attune myself with the observation that an overarching issue with the analysis of science fiction about robots “is [...] emphasis on the robot rather than the human as the relevant moral actor” (Jordan 34). Thus, while human labor may not be the primary concern of popular science fiction about robots, turning our attention to how it is subtly depicted throughout these stories gives depth to our understanding of the role that such stories play in a highly technological world.

I approach my argument through several avenues, using examples from across popular science fiction to demonstrate how new forms of human labor and its implications are depicted across the genre. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of *la technique* and use Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis* to demonstrate how science fiction about robots portrays *la technique* and dissatisfaction with its implications for humanity. In the second section, I show how popular science fiction about robots can also collaborate with *la technique* as a form of sociological propaganda. Here, I use *Star Trek: Picard* to show how robotic *novum* in popular science fiction suggest cultural norms about how humanity should interact with robots. As well, I also provide a cursory typology of human labor that popular science fiction suggests is plausible given the existence of robots. To conclude this essay, I briefly comment upon the importance of being attuned to the intersection of labor, popular science fiction, and *la technique*.

### Fictional Robots and the Context of *La Technique*

How new and emerging technologies impact human behavior has been a concern of social commentators for centuries and, in science fiction, such impact is typically explored as it stems from some *novum*. However, it is important to bear in mind that fictional depictions in the science fiction genre reflect and critique conditions of real-life contexts. Popular science fiction about robots is no exception. In this section, I turn to the work of Jacques Ellul to more fully flesh out the technological

context that popular science fiction about robots reflects. Then, I use the film *Metropolis* to show how the genre portrays concerns about *la technique* and its impact on humanity.

Ellul writes of the growth of modern technological systems, contending that “it is vanity to think it can be checked and guided [...] Enclosed within his artificial creation, man finds that there is ‘no exit’; that he cannot pierce the shell of technology to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years” (*The Technological Society* 428). Ellul’s remarks here, in the conclusion of his landmark *The Technological Society*, serve well to highlight the tone of his work and his apprehension about the impact of high technologies. A product of mid-twentieth century conflicts and industrial growth — which manifestly demonstrated exactly how sweeping the effects of modern technologies were on society — Ellul’s understanding of new and emerging technologies is fundamentally reactionary; it seeks to underscore and critique the extensive changes they foisted upon humanity in the years following the industrial revolution. Ellul’s critique focuses “on technology at the highest level of abstraction,” viewing it as “a system, a worldview, and way of life” (Strate 28). Centering his focus in this manner enabled Ellul to avoid becoming bogged down in the analysis of individual technologies and instead to view those technologies’ impact as a more-or-less unified whole. The resultant effect on his theoretical understanding of technology is that it encompasses a wide range of practices, including, but not limited to, organizational, economic, and educational techniques in addition to more straightforward conceptions of industrial and mechanical technical systems.

Central to Ellul’s analysis of the repercussions of modern technology on humanity is the concept *la technique* — a system of organization, practices, and infrastructure born of humanity’s relationship with the technologies it conjures into existence. In the basest sense, *la technique* is how the adoption of large, technical systems necessitates embracing practices and activities that make the functioning of those systems more efficient. In fact, for Ellul, ensuring that technical systems operate efficiently can be considered the essence of *la technique* (*The Technological Society* 21). To put the point finely, *la technique* is efficiency manifest. When humanity alters its actions and self-organizing principles in response to new and emerging technologies, Ellul contends that the impulse to do so usually is traceable back to the dictates of *la technique* (*The Technological Society* 72-3). Our drive to receive the full benefits of new technologies calls us to act in ways symmetrical with their production, and the design of technical systems

— which build upon design decisions that stretch back for decades — necessarily dictate what those actions are. As the *telos* of *la technique*, efficiency determines the equilibrium between humanity and technology. And as the design of technical systems becomes more and more standardized, black-boxed, and incomprehensible, the burden for maintaining this equilibrium weighs increasingly on the human side of the equation.

Because the presence of *la technique* is a fundamental condition of highly technological societies, it stands to reason that it would be depicted in their science fiction because of the genre's propensity to reflect its political and cultural context. The use of robots as a *novum* offers added ability to explore the implications of *la technique* on humanity due to their intertwinement with complex systems of production and their status as a “possible marriage between human beings and our technical creations” (Telotte 101). Fritz Lang's 1927 silent film *Metropolis* offers a clear example of *la technique* in both setting and as a function of robotic characters. From the get-go in the film, we find that the city of Metropolis is dominated by a mechanical, industrial modernity. In the opening scene, “after an initial montage of pistons, flywheels and gears in repetitive movement,” the camera “zeros in on a shot of the 10-hour work-clock that organizes the time of the city” (Cowan 236). Repetition of clock imagery throughout the film emphasizes how life in Metropolis — especially the workers' lives — orbits the needs of machines that keep the city running. In fact, the world Lang creates for *Metropolis* “reflects fears rooted in the very present European world of the early-twentieth century” where “Industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization were wreaking havoc on the work habits and lifestyles inherited from the mid-nineteenth century” (MacWilliams 94). Use of a clock to represent how industrial technologies shaped society in their image is no happenstance and hearkens back to these basic experiences during the heyday of the industrial revolution. During this period, the standardization of time to increase the efficiency of production dramatically impacted customary rhythms of life. Ultimately, the need for technical efficiency led to innovations that sought to make human labor more machinelike, such as hourly wage, time clocks, Taylorism, Fordism, and a host of other now commonplace practices (Noble 40). This driving force to mold society in ways friendly to new and developing technologies is the essence of Ellul's *la technique*, and the enduring allure of *Metropolis* shows that *la technique's* existence has proved a worthy foil for fiction and non-fiction concerned with changed human behavior linked to technological progress. *Metropolis* itself questions changes

called forth by technological progress by showing workers in open rebellion against the industrial order in response to their working *and* living conditions.

*Metropolis* also provides an illuminating example of how robots and *la technique* intersect in science fiction. In the film, frustration with *la technique* is demonstrated not only through the conditions that foment a worker's rebellion, but also through rebelling workers burning-at-the-stake robotic Maria (Brigitte Helm), who exhorted them to take actions that ran contrary to their own interests. As MacWilliams argues, the robotic version of Maria "epitomizes evil and deceit," misleading "her worker devotees by suddenly arguing for the use of violence" and not possessing "any ingrained sense of right or wrong [...] any remorse over the consequences of her call to destruction, or [...] any misgivings over her assumption" of human identity (96). While robotic Maria is a layered character with many dimensions, at the most basic level she can be interpreted as a machine that augments human activity so that its own purpose may be more efficiently achieved. Ultimately, it is through the transmission of "false knowledge" that neutralizes the workers' power and ability to act in their accustomed manner that robotic Maria effects change (MacWilliams 19). The workers' witch hunt for and destruction of robotic Maria demonstrates latent frustration with the implications of unplanned change in their own behavior, especially when the changed behavior has moral consequences that would lead to its rejection in other circumstances.

From another angle, Rotwang's (Rudolf Kleine-Rogge) transformation of the machine-person into the robotic Maria also raises questions about the mechanization of humanity. While many commentators on *Metropolis* have seen this transformation as a humanization of the machine, it is difficult to ignore implicit questions about how a human being with the interworking of a machine might behave. Robotic Maria — indistinguishable from the true Maria in all but action — follows the bidding of her masters with consequences they could not predict. She bewitches the upper classes and nearly leads the workers to ruin with no thought for the moral, political, or economic repercussions of her actions. Her job is merely to obey imputed actions. In the robotic Maria, we see a prescient image of a twisted humanity without freewill, beholden to efficiently complying with commands that are ultimately intended to keep Metropolis' technological systems humming. Truly, she is an image of humanity possessed by *la technique*. Her destruction at the hands of the workers exposes her true nature as a machine and visually removes all traces of humanity from her, restoring them to the true Maria and exposing the deceit of robotic Maria's actions.

*Metropolis*, and science fiction that resonates with it, shows a notable level of concern for how life in a highly technologized society impacts human behavior. Ellul reminds us that “*la technique* integrates the machine into society [...] constructs the kind of world the machine needs and [...] clarifies, arranges, and rationalizes” (*The Technological Society* 5). Thus, we might understand the anxiety demonstrated in popular science fiction like *Metropolis* as concern with the erosion of older ways of life at the behest of technological development — a change that leads to the supplementation of traditional forms of labor with labor that leaves little room for individuality and artistry.

### Depictions of Fictional Robots as *La Technique*’s Propaganda

Popular science fiction with robotic *novum* also provides an example of how narrative propaganda about *la technique* can condition how we perceive new, developing, and potential technologies. Whereas the previous section shows how the presence and implications of *la technique* are reflected in popular science fiction, in this section I am interested in how *la technique* can be advanced through fictional stories and representations of robots. Because *la technique* and science fiction are multifaceted phenomena, I would be remiss to not consider how they appropriate and expose one another. To tease out this relationship, I provide an overview of sociological propaganda and define robotic labor. Then, I offer *Star Trek: Picard* as a demonstration of how depictions of robotic labor necessitate the depiction of new forms of human activity. Lastly, to demonstrate the many avenues through which *la technique* can appropriate science fiction narratives, I provide a cursory typology of new forms of human labor that commonly arise in popular science fiction with a robotic *novum*.

In *Propaganda*, Ellul himself strongly suggests that *la technique* can make use of narrative. Here, he writes that societal discourses — written, spoken, or otherwise — “aim [...] to control human behavior so that we are integrated into the technological system” (Strate 28). Ellul defines discourse that fits this purpose as technologically oriented propaganda. Though he suggests several different types of propaganda, most relevant to popular narratives’ potential role in maintaining *la technique* is “sociological propaganda.” With sociological propaganda, Ellul refers directly to instances when technological ideologies and ways of being become latent in a given sociological context (*Propaganda* 63). Cultural artifacts capable of disseminating sociological propaganda are many, and include commercial and

non-politically oriented advertisements, movies, educational materials, and popular venues for the written word. Unlike forms of communication that are more traditionally associated with propaganda — for example, government-sponsored posters and newsreels — sociological propaganda does not present a unified front or explicitly identifiable *telos*. Rather, it is a collection of diffuse-yet-related phenomena “based on general climate, an atmosphere that influences people imperceptibly without having the appearance of propaganda [...] a progressive adaption to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society” (*Propaganda* 64). More plainly, because the stories we tell about science and technology — including those with a robotic *novum* — act as sociological propaganda, they possess the ability to influence how we interact with our technological milieu.

The first season of *Star Trek: Picard*, which aired in 2020, provides an example of how science fiction with a robotic *novum* paints a picture of and reinforces common expectations about how humans should interact with new, developing, and potential technologies. Of course, Gene Rodenberry’s *Star Trek* franchise has long posed questions about the nature of science and technology and its relationship with humanity. As part of a new generation of *Star Trek* series, however, *Picard* builds upon previous story arcs in ways especially relevant to contemporary concerns about robotics and artificial intelligence. Namely, the beliefs that subtly permeate *Star Trek: Picard*’s first season revolve around the purpose of robotics and synthetic life. What must they contribute to society to be accepted? What labor must they provide by virtue of their existence? How should humans value them if these expectations are not met? Narrativizing assumptions related to these questions, *Star Trek: Picard* shows how popular science fiction can unintentionally become embroiled with ways of being associated with *la technique*.

Before proceeding too far into this example, it is necessary to flesh out what I consider to constitute robotic labor in popular science fiction. When considering robotic labor, I draw primarily upon Arendt’s theory of action. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt paints a picture of a tripartite human existence — what she refers to as the *vita activa*. In this image, the *vita activa* is the underlying condition “under which life on earth has been given to man” and comprises the spectrum of what must be toiled upon for both human life and society to continue unabated (Arendt 7-8). Its three constitutive parts are:

1. Labor, or the “activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body” (Arendt 7), primarily referring to biologically necessary activity such as reproduction and agriculture.
2. Work, or the “activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of the human condition” that provides an “artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings” (Arendt 7). This primarily refers to activity that creates our social artifice such as printing a book or constructing a table.
3. Action, or the “activity [...] that goes on between men without the intermediary of things of matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality [...] the condition of political life” (Arendt 7). This primarily refers to activity through which we disclose ourselves to one another as unique beings.

Together, the three divisions of the *vita activa* can be understood as comprising the breadth of human activity (Voice 36-7).

I consider robotic labor in popular science fiction to occur during any occasion in which a robot supplants or augments human activity in the *vita activa*. Fictionally, a robot can be and is inserted along any point of this spectrum. Bender from Matt Groening and David X. Cohen’s *Futurama*’s is initially designed to perform the rote labor of bending for the construction of suicide booths. Isaac from Seth McFarlane’s *The Orville* is activated to help determine if biological life is worth maintaining — a decidedly philosophical and political question. Marvin the Paranoid Robot of Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* appears to do it all with a hearty grumble. The point here is that even robots that participate in higher-order activities associated with societal living are no doubt *intended* to be productive in this manner (or, if not, are quickly appropriated to do so). Of course, using Arendt’s *vita activa* as a guide when considering robotic activity stretches it beyond what we might usually consider it to be. This is because robotic labor is more traditionally understood to be repetitive and rote tasks that are performed with “various inputs” in an effort to “act upon the physical environment” (Jordan 4). However, because robots — especially fictional ones — are imagined with the objective of reducing the amount of activity necessary for humans, it is fruitful to think of robotic labor as reflective of Arendt’s three-part division. This is a wide conception to be sure, but it allows for a broad understanding of robotic labor. Moreover, using Arendt’s conception as a guide illustrates clearly how questions

of robotic labor are at the center of much science fiction that depicts robots and ultimately how science fiction reinforces beliefs related to *la technique*.

Let us return to *Star Trek: Picard* to see how subtle assumptions about robotic *novum* link to the *vita activa* and *la technique*. Here, in a story set decades after the finale of the last *Star Trek: The Next Generation* film, we find main character Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) fighting to save descendants of his late friend, Data (Brent Spiner) — an android. Banned from existence within the Federation, the androids and their creators find refuge on a distant world. Their existence, however, is not unnoticed as a group of Zhat Vash Romulans seeks to destroy them. It is the Zhat Vash's plot that Picard works to stymie. Throughout *Star Trek: Picard* we are presented with two contrasting moral understandings of the androids that stem from these plot lines. On the one hand, Picard's approach — that favored to triumph by the show's writers — echoes *Star Trek* lore, loudly proclaiming that the androids are sentient beings, have a right to live, and are masters of their own destiny. On the other hand, the Zhat Vash spins a tale of inevitable destruction, contending that synthetic life will destroy organic life if left unchecked.

There could not be two stances with more enmity. Yet, at the barest ontological level when viewed through the *vita activa* the two understandings agree on the *telos*, or ultimate purpose, of the androids: to provide through action. In the series finale, Picard poetically contends that the androids “have life” but that “no one is teaching them what it is for,” further arguing that “to be alive is a responsibility” — subtly suggesting that by virtue of being imbued with life, the androids now carry a responsibility to provide something of themselves to the universe (“Et in Arcadia Ego: Part 2” 00:21:45-00:22:00). Why, after all, were androids created to begin with? Certainly, to have the opportunity to contribute *something*, be it rote work, companionship, insight, individuality, or so on. Through their contributions, the androids are understood to help carry the burden placed upon all organic life, to lessen the load of the *vita activa*. Moreover, in a more nuanced sense, Picard uses questions about the technological providence of the androids to articulate and disseminate his own morality, making them tools for action in his own *vita activa*.

The ostensibly contrasting Zhat Vash approach — which calls for snuffing out the androids — too appears fundamentally concerned with the technological providence of the beings. Worried about what they foresee as an inevitable galactic apocalypse if synthetic life propagates, the Zhat Vash wage a shadow war against research into sentient automata. *Star Trek: Picard's* second episode provides



insight into the Romulan mindset. Here, in a conversation between Picard and his Romulan caretakers, it is revealed that careful attention to Romulan culture shows the species' clear lack of interest in "cybernetics, androids, or A.I." and the realization that Romulan "computers are only used for numerical functions," suggesting fastidiousness about the use-value of advanced technologies ("Maps and Legends" 00:11:10-00:12:00). In other words, how might robots and other automata be forced to contribute to the human (or, in this case, Romulan) artifice. Concern with use-value from the Romulan perspective is confirmed throughout the opening episodes of *Star Trek: Picard* in which Narek (Harry Treadaway), a Zhat Vash agent, befriends Soji (Isa Briones), a descendent of Data, to glean information about their origins and home world. Despite his belief in the apocalyptic *telos* of synthetic life, Narek allows Soji to function so long as she proves useful — or, seen another way, so long as she produces information of value toward maintaining society (Arendt's "work").

Thus, through the lens of the *vita activa* we find an agreement at the deepest levels between two ostensibly opposed fictional stances about robotic automata. Both approaches — one hopeful for the sentient automata and the other fearful of the changes they may bring — ultimately root their beliefs and actions in some interpretation of how the robots are fruitful through their activity. One looks to the responsibility and potential of the lifeforms to contribute fruitfully to the galaxy. The other acknowledges, even uses, this contribution when convenient, yet remains fearful of its eventual consequences. Together, they demonstrate that issues of robotic labor are at the center of popular science fiction about robots. Ultimately, they show how robots are deemed most valuable when offsetting or contributing to human activity.

From the perspective of *la technique*, these assumptions about labor and robotic *novum* rooted in their technical providence are intriguing. They suggest new forms of human activity resultant from the presence of robots and related to those robots designed nature. Ortega y Gasset's definition of the technical act underscores this point. Arguing that technology can be defined as "improvement brought about [...] by man for the satisfaction of his necessities" and that humanity answers the challenges of nature by "imposing change on nature" with the use of designed, technical systems, Ortega y Gasset reminds us that the creation of any technology implies a host of labors related to emergent issues of design, policy, construction, and maintenance (95). Other noted conceptions of technology adopt a similar stance. Winner writes that "technology [...] is inherently pragmatic" and that it

“deals with establishing what one wants and how one wants to pursue it” through technical, social, and organizational developments (7-12). Likewise, Pacey contends that technology is “the application of scientific and other knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems that involve people and organizations, living things and machines” (6). Nye argues that technology cannot be understood apart from social evolution because “humans continually redefine their necessities to include more,” piling up the alterations that we accept as needing to be made to the world. (*Technology Matters* 3). Thus, it is from “imagination of altered circumstances” that technologies sprout, as “making a tool immediately implies a succession of events in which one exercises some control over outcomes” (Nye, *Technology Matters* 3).

In *Star Trek: Picard* latent assumptions about robotic labor imply, at the very least, a human labor of design and evaluation through which robotic technology is coaxed to operate more “efficiently.” Both the Zhat Vash and Picard strive to ensure that robotics function in a manner symmetrical with their own cultural context, creating labor for creators and ensuring that robots operate well within the original parameters and logics of their design. While this form of narrativization is subtle and does not explicitly exhort audiences to act in a specific way, they do ultimately promote “the promulgation of ideas and prejudices” and “a style of life” that is indicative of sociological propaganda in the interest of *la technique* (Ellul, *Propaganda* 70).

## A Typology of Robotic Labor in Popular Science Fiction

The types of human labor that can be depicted in popular science fiction as an outgrowth of robotic *novum*, of course, extend beyond what is demonstrated by *Star Trek: Picard*. Popular science fiction is a vast genre. It stands to reason that its intersection with a phenomenon as nuanced and multifaceted as *la technique* also is nuanced and multifaceted. I would be remiss to confine my scope only to the examples I have provided thus far. With this in mind, in this section I suggest a cursory typology of these forms of labor and provide brief examples, keeping in mind that the types of activity *la technique* suggests in sociological propaganda is often subtle — located in nuance rather than explicit detail. I suggest five forms of human activity related to the intersection of a robotic *novum* and *la technique*: 1) educational activity; 2) maintenance activity; 3) collaborative activity; 4) emotional activity; and 5) resistance activity. While this typology is by no means exhaustive,

I believe that it identifies the major categories of human activity depicted in response to stories about fictional robots' need to reflect the realities of *la technique* as well as lays a tentative groundwork for future study. In the proceeding paragraphs, I will briefly give substance to each type of activity by succinctly defining them and offering relevant examples.

*Educational Activity.* Educational activity in response to the presence of robots in fictional narratives can be understood as any work or action undertaken regarding the creation, dissemination, or attainment of knowledge that emerges as a direct result of the existence of robots. As well, educational activity that ultimately leads to the creation of robots might also be considered as part of this category. Specific activities in this category may include, but are not limited to, studying robotics or cybernetics, learning how to repair robots, development of ethical guidelines about robots, and public service messages about interaction with robots. Some examples of popular science fiction that illustrate this type of activity are: in *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014) the work of robotics research depicted at the San Fransokyo Institute of Technology; and, in Asimov's short story "Runaround" (1941), the main characters' struggle to understand SPD-13's behavior through analysis of the Three Laws of Robotics.

*Maintenance Activity.* Maintenance activity is labor, work, or action that arises through the need to maintain, repair, and generally sustain robotic technologies. While perhaps easy to view with a blasé attitude because of its more rote qualities, the depiction of maintenance activity is common in stories that contain a high tech *novum*, especially robots. It is worth noting that maintenance activities, to some degree, are related to educational activity insofar that knowledge creation through troubleshooting (a *la Runaround*) is inevitable, so some overlap between these two categories is to be expected. Specific activities in this category include, but are not limited to, repair work on defunct or ailing robots, repair work on malfunctioning technical systems that help make possible the existence of robots, preventative maintenance on robots or their associated technical systems, or even proactive maintenance intended to improve the efficiency of robots through upgrades to keep abreast with the advance of technological progress. Some examples of popular science fiction that illustrate this type of labor are: in the 2018 Netflix adaption of *Lost in Space* (Irwin Allen), the Robinson family's repeated need to alter their plans to repair both Robot and Scarecrow; in the *Star Wars* franchise (George Lucas, 1977) evidence of maintenance activity is sprinkled throughout, especially with regard to maintaining C3P0 and R2D2; and, in the television series *Futurama* (Matt

Groening and David X Cohen, 1999), multiple episodes within which Bender is upgraded for various purposes.

*Collaborative Activity.* Collaborative activity is that which results from labor, work, and action that has become possible through collaboration with robots. This category of activity is predicated on the understanding that interaction between humanity and robots designed to influence the physical world makes plausible the emergence of new forms of labor, work, and action. Potential activities of this category include, but are not limited to, construction work undertaken with the cooperation of robots, combat entered with the cooperation of robots, computation performed with the assistance of robots, or even political revolution accomplished hand-in-hand with robotic compatriots. Some examples of popular science fiction that illustrates this types of labor are: in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Gene Rodenberry and Rick Bernman, 1987), countless plots within which the crew of the USS Enterprise work with Data to accomplish a task that would have been difficult or impossible without his aid; in the film series *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007), Sam Witwicky and other main characters working with the Autobots to ensure that Earth remains a haven for both their species; and, in Jack Williamson's novel *The Humanoids* (1949), humanoid robots moving from planet to planet helping to eliminate problems created by humans when requested.

*Emotional Activity.* Emotional activity can be understood as labor, work, or action undertaken by humans in response to the emotional impact of the presence of or interaction with robots. Unlike more traditionally understood forms of labor, work, or action that center purely on the manipulation of the physical world, emotional activity centers on manipulation of the self. While this manipulation may manifest itself in a physical form on the body or in how one interacts with the world, often, it is represented by an internal change that may not be readily apparent. Nonetheless, as activity that occurs because of the presence of robots, its depiction in popular science fiction represents a form of human activity that we would be remiss to overlook, given its general acceptance as plausible. Specific activities in this category include, but are not limited to, general feelings of emotional attachment to robots, maintaining friendships either with or enabled by robots, grief associated with the loss of a robot, romantic relationships with a robot, and managing social situations which have been altered by the presence or existence of robots. Some examples of popular science fiction that illustrate this type of activity are: in Stanislaw Lem's play *The Faithful Robot* (1961), Tom Clempner's difficulty

with managing his relationship with Graumer once the robot appears in his life; in the film *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), Caleb Smith's actions as a result of his attraction to Ava; in *Star Trek: Picard*, when Picard wrestles with Data's death throughout the series; and, in the film *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991), John Connor's friendship with the Model 101 Terminator.

*Resistance Activity.* Resistance activity — perhaps the most common in apocalyptic and dystopian media — can be understood as labor, work, or action that results from a need to resist the presence, growth, expansion, or hostility of robots. In short, activity that is usually associated with resistance to robotic takeover. Resistance activity is counterintuitive from the perspective of *la technique* as the framework contends that fictional human activity should reflect the need to make robots more efficient — a goal not attainable through stymieing the machines. However, here we must recall that robots are best understood as a technology designed or appropriated for human use. Thus, resistance to robots out-of-control is in effect activity that seeks to maintain their status as productive and efficient servants. Potential activities in this category include, but are not limited to, armed resistance, persuading other humans to adopt the ideological beliefs of resistance, spying, and damaging or destroying technical infrastructures. Some examples of popular science fiction that illustrate this category are: in Karel Čapek's play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), resistance to the robots conquering of Earth, leaving all but Alquist dead), Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Rick Deckard's work as an agent enforcing laws that keep androids off Earth); in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) when the robotic Maria leads the city astray and must be stopped; and, in the film series *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999), humanity's resistance to the machines through continuing human society deep underground.

Collectively, the categories this section presents illustrate the extent to which popular science fiction with a robotic *novum* is necessarily intertwined with humanity's search for efficient labor and robust technological systems. Using Ellul's categories of propaganda as an overlay shows how narrative manifestations of this search in popular science fiction transcend time and medium. This is not to argue that popular science fiction about robots is primarily propaganda designed to guide humanity's relationship with new and emerging technologies. It clearly has cultural meanings beyond this role that also carry great significance. Rather, the importance of the typology I propose in this section is in how it demonstrates the subtly with which technological forms of thought interplay with cultural practices

traditionally understood as critical of that thought. As the categories show, the expectation that robots function efficiently remains, regardless of how a narrative depicts humanity's relationship with robots. In each case, narratives that depict robotic labor reflect and reinforce preexisting beliefs about the purpose and worth of technological systems and suggest how humanity should act accordingly.

### Conclusion: At the Intersection of Technology, Ethics, and Science Fiction

Because science fiction reflects the cultural and political realities of the world in which it is created in addition to playing a role in how we come to terms with new, developing, and potential technologies, I believe it is appropriate to highlight science fiction's ethical implications. In the same vein, I would also like to appraise the ethical implications of science fiction criticism in light of what I have articulated about the intersection of labor, science fiction, and *la technique* in this essay.

Throughout this essay, I have striven to demonstrate the centrality of labor concerns in popular science fiction about robots and how that centrality necessitates the depiction of resultant human activity by virtue of *la technique*. While the categories of human activity I have discussed throughout this essay are admittedly cursory and likely incomplete, we should not allow this to undermine their importance. As I have suggested, their depiction in popular science fiction potentially represents a form of sociological propaganda through which humanity is accustomed to acceptance of actions that emerge from our drive to operate efficiently systems of high technology. As well, these depictions open a space within which *la technique* can be critiqued. The stories that popular science fiction tells has fidelity to our lives that empowers them with persuasive power. More than simply reflect the realities of living in a world of *la technique*, these stories also point toward types of activity that humanity imagines as acceptable and, given the influence of popular media, inevitably must impact the types of technological development we find desirable and inevitable.

As critics of popular media, we would be remiss to overlook this influence solely in favor of less circumspect analyses centered solely on nuances of plot. As technology ethicists astutely observe, humanity has a strong hand in its own technological evolution, even if the endpoint of technological development appears preordained. Aware of the wide-ranging impact of newly adopted technical systems, technology ethicists emphasize the need for collective reflection on the

growth of technologies now common, reminding us that we are a self-engineering species solely responsible for designing the technologies we live with. As Shannon Vallor contends, we must “fashion, test, and disseminate [...] new habits and practices for living well” in a world of emerging technologies (254). We must be mindful of how and why we have adopted new technologies and the impact they have had as well as the types of change we find acceptable and the methods through which such change becomes accepted. If, then, living well through mindfulness is the key to desirable technological development, then attentiveness to how we depict future human activity in a technological world is vital — lest we mistakenly condone what in truth we find unacceptable. Turning our attention to the types of human activity that our science fiction stories illustrate is at least one method through which this task may be accomplished.

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# Race, Class, and Rosey the Robot: Critical Study of *The Jetsons*

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*The Jetsons* is an animated sitcom representing a middle-class patriarchal family set in space in the year 2062. Following in the footsteps of family-friendly viewing such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and Hanna-Barbera's own *The Flintstones* (1960-1966), *The Jetsons* offered a futuristic take on a near-perfect nuclear family. *The Jetsons* centers on a family headed by a "male breadwinner" and "Happy housewife heroine" that Betty Friedan credits to creators of women's media in the 1950s and 60s (23). Packed with conservative white American perspectives and values, the show is set in the suburbs of intergalactic Orbit City and features husband George, wife Jane, teenage daughter Judy, and prodigy son Elroy (Coyle and Mesker 15). The cast is complemented by secondary characters that include George's boss Cosmo Spacely, the owner of Spacely Sprockets, and Rosey the robot maid. The only element that seemed to be missing from the earliest episodes was a family pet, which was rectified with the addition of Astro the dog early in the first season ("The coming of Astro").

The first season (S1) aired on Sunday nights September 1962 - March 1963, (Coyle and Mesker) and was one of the first shows to debut in color on ABC (Jay). Despite early cancellation the show landed deeply in the pop culture cannon through syndication and experienced renewed interest when it was brought back in the 1980s for two additional seasons (S2-3). Today, *The Jetsons* continues to reach new audiences with video and digital releases serving to revitalize the program. In this essay, S2-3 will be combined and used as a comparative analysis against the S1 given the difference of political climate and social values.

By "reading the film" (Geiger and Rutsky 3) through a contemporary lens I identify innovative creation mechanisms and a familiar use of sitcom tropes issues coupled with time-bound values of gender, class, and the labors of humans, machines and robots. This essay explores a culturally problematic show camouflaged as brightly colored sitcom escapism while also celebrating some of

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the innovations that the show creators engaged to facilitate program creation. This interpretation further reflects on how television programs can reinforce structural racism, cultural bias, and stereotypes. As Rebecca Kiddle states, “Dominant cultures are often invisible because of the mere fact of their dominance” (94). Investigating the creative choices made by Hanna-Barbera in *The Jetsons* universe empowers modern viewers to see past the nostalgia the show seems to spark.

Today’s viewers are closer to the world of 2062 with tools and technologies dreamed up for Orbit City filling daily life. From treadmills and moving sidewalks becoming commonplace tools for getting in or avoiding those miles to the faces of both friends and colleagues encroaching on life through video screens ever present in homes and workplaces. *The Jetsons* was loaded with devices that were no more real than dreams in 1962. The realization of so many devices including smart watches and digital newspapers, to space tourism and drone deliveries offer hope that while they may not be perfect, most of these tools are doing the jobs they set out to do. Coyle and Mesker call these devices “quirky and personable” and for the most part this is the common theme. The gadgets automate and add ease to the daily lives of the citizens of *The Jetsons* universe much like their modern counterparts do today.

Through automation and robotic support, *The Jetsons* live what appears to be the perfect middle-class life. Animated gadgetry presents as labor-saving and convenience to characters and offers watchers a technology-filled future with shortened work weeks, one touch task completion, and constant connectivity. For this analysis, I argue that robots are represented as advanced decision makers who are employees of characters of the show i.e. the Jetson family, while automation is displayed when a button press elicits simple task completion.

I begin with an overview of television and the extended social climate of 1960s America. Next, I review the Levittown suburban model before moving onto an assessment of the tools and tactics used by Hanna-Barbera to create *The Jetsons*. The essay continues by exploring tropes that reinforce cultural norms for viewers. I move on to investigate the mammy stereotype and detail related characterizations of Rosey and the impact of technology overlapping with human labor, race, and social class. My inquiry concludes with viewer commentary and somewhat problematic series revitalization.

## 1960s America

Visions of perfect families, technical innovations and the expansion into bigger homes abounded in 1960s America. However, fulfilment of these dreams was no more possible than many of the innovations on the show. Gender roles began shifting as the 1960s progressed (Friedan), civil unrest and battles for equality were becoming commonplace (Doar) and coupled with a nationalism fueled by the Cold War, the middle-class nuclear family was a common aspiration (Parsons). Television programming during the decade displayed rising awareness of inequality but focused primarily on the perfect home(maker) and family, core to many white American homes at the time (Humphreys). This section explores the intersection of technology of the 1960s with social values and gendered norms.

Labor saving devices displaying incredible technological progress were a common topic in American media in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Household technology fueled by the “Kitchen Debate” — a primetime dialogue on household automation between the United States and Russia — came to the forefront of media in 1962. It formed the start of two important conversations including the commodification of “women’s work” while placing the man in the role of decision maker by selecting the tools most appropriate for the provision of housework performed by the woman of the house (Barnes 313).

Nicole Williams Barnes presents the concept of romantic consumerism, supported by events such as the Kitchen Debate fed an increased the demand and appearance of domestic gadgetry in American homes and television programming. Barnes highlights the concern that technology in the home acts as an extension of wealth and social class further segregating those who can afford the best tools from those who cannot. “The technology becomes a marker of lifestyle and wealth, and housework becomes a product that can be purchased, not through servant labor but through appliances” (98).

Technology scholar Andrea Krafft builds on romantic consumerism with the notion that as leaps in domestic technology were combined with depictions of family life on television it shifted viewer attentions from family-wide contribution to housework as exclusively woman’s work. Household workload increased as homes grew to fill the space saved by more efficient tools. Sadly, technology also supported the ability to perform an increased volume of work, therefore causing a “never-ending cycle” filling available space and time (Krafft 70).

Television in the 1950s commonly showed women navigating domestic chores with ease and often featured the work being distributed across the family (Humphreys). In 1960s television programming, housework became the exclusive

domain of women and with that transition women providing this labor as an act of love became the norm. Further, these portrayals reinforced the satisfaction that women should garner from this labor: “the act of preserving life-performers of housework want to know others are benefiting from these preservative efforts” (Humphreys 59-60).

Household labors and the tools to complete them becomes an increasingly gendered issue as it impacts only the housewife and disregards the ability of other family members to contribute. “Defining housework through these technologies serves to commodify the role of the housewife, as well as her housework” (Barnes 98). Appliances in *The Jetsons* become “electric servants” and magic makers in 2062 not unlike 1962 where they were first dreamed up (Krafft 71).

Jane’s challenges seemed to be a turning point where the foible laden housewifery transitioned into a fish out of water scenario where women were solely responsible for housework but were unable to do it effectively unlike their 1950s counterparts. Mid-60s premieres featured shows such as *Bewitched*, *The Addams Family*, and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Each program came armed with a housewife attempting to honor the art of “typical” household duties and being thwarted by them much like Jane is as her automated and robotic tools routinely fail her. However, despite these stumbles Jane with her gadget support systems including Rosey handle tasks on the home front while the children appear to be working towards the gender and class specific futures expected of nuclear family offspring (Johnson).

Viewers see gendered behaviors displayed most clearly by the younger Jetsons. Judy the teenage daughter is “boy crazy” and obsessed with pop culture and high potential son Elroy focusses his attention on inventions to climb the social class ladder. This could be interpreted to be so that Judy can one day marry well, and Elroy can become the creator of something just as important and influential to society as Spacely Sprockets.

In their analysis of youth of the time, Parsons presents the idea that young people are questing to surpass the generations that have come before them and also carry the weight of being masters of creation.

He [sic] must operate in more complex situations than before. He attempts to do many things his predecessors never attempted, that indeed were beyond their capacities. To succeed in what he attempts, he has to exercise progressively higher levels of competence and responsibility. (106)

Gendering the performance of housework also reinforces the gendering of robot assistants in the work they do. As Humphreys comments, there is no need to gender a robot, yet *The Jetsons* clearly do so with Rosey as a maid being a woman and Mac as a handyman. Critical review questions why creators would do this if the robots are not considered human.

An ultimate future colors *The Jetsons* subtly across Orbit City but more widely with the credit sequence looking down upon America from space<sup>1</sup> (“Rosey the Robot” 00:00:50). *The Jetsons* finished S1 just before major movements such as the Birmingham Riots and March on Washington progressed the fight for civil rights for Black Americans.

The science fiction utopias were associated with capitalism and the American dream of prosperity, unconcerned with contemporary issues around environmental sustainability, global financial and power crises, or social justice. (Coyle and Mesker 16)

Civil and gender rights protesting, and the resulting increased opportunities of each subsequent generation had become routine by 1962 when *The Jetsons* hit television screens. Early on in the series we hear Stella Spacely, Cosmo Spacely’s wife, attending a protest and telling her husband to order dinner in as she will be occupied (“Rosey the Robot” 00:09:02). This act represents a position not uncommon to privileged white women who outsourced household tasks and duties to fight for rights (Frye). The appearance of protesting in such a casual way also serves to remind viewers of the idea that protests for rights and freedoms are a part of daily life for those of the future while introducing the idea that commoditization of household tasks can serve to create time for more rewarding activities (Davis).

However, in contrast to flying cars watchers must return to the ground with the undercurrent of inequality in this investigation. Visible diversity is all but erased throughout *The Jetsons*, which is ironic given the position of show as a Technicolor display of a cartoon future. At the same time income and privilege appears everywhere including the storylines, contraptions used and the introductory credits where Jane takes George’s wallet and shops while he works (“Rosey the Robot”). Elimination of diversity in the 1960s was not an uncommon reality. As television programs were primarily written by educated white men, the obstacles faced by a more varied group in real life were not common discussion points. Just one episode in Season 1 is written by a woman (“Janes Driving Lesson”) and interestingly it

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the show never explains the shift into space which could reflect a dystopian back story caused by global unrest or environmental damage.

sparks Jane's seeing some of the unrest of being a homemaker that appears later in the series ("Dude Planet")

Given the limited diversity in the show writers and creators *The Jetsons* presents stories from a privileged white male perspective. An example can be seen in "Jetsons Nite Out" where both George and Cosmo lie to their wives about working late to take advantage of premium seats at a championship football game. One cannot divorce race from gender or social class or their overlap in influencing societal values or lived experiences (Crenshaw), particularly in 1960s America. The elimination of racial identities is covert in *The Jetsons*. Both social class and gender references abound, but rather than face into the realities of racial oppression coming through in the future, Hanna-Barbara chose to have no people of color (POC) in the humans it colored in. Stockman argues that animated programs influence the socialization of young children and that reinforcing biased behaviors shapes the values of the audience. The exclusion of POC represents an insidious erasure of those who contributed widely to the culture and more directly those who served and raised a significant portion of American youth at the time.

Oppression takes many forms. Simple daily acts that hold another back can be seen in a number of power relations from those motivated by safety (parent-child) to those that are self-serving (structural oppression) (Blau). Structural oppressions from 1960s America flourish today in some debt to stereotypes perpetuated through media. Some forms of oppression are quieter, instead of the act of displaying a target that anyone can achieve, those who wield power show that an 'other' cannot attain the same level of success and that they are destined to hold positions of service to those in positions of power (Brown Givens and Monahan). The most common example comes in the frequent hiring, firing and promotions George receives from his boss Cosmo Spacely ("Rosey the Robot" 00:21:00). Throughout all three seasons viewers are exposed to displays of power and oppression across Orbit City and its inhabitants in a space-bound representation of Levittown.

## Levittown and Suburban Sprawl

Designed as the perfect "post-war American suburb," Levittown or "Island Trees Community" had an incredible cultural influence both in the United States and beyond (Hales). Representing the modern ideal of efficient mass production, William Levitt, the creator of the instant community, went on to create Levittown's in both New York and Pennsylvania from the 1940's-1960's. The first suburb of

over 11,000 homes was set half-way between New York City and Long Island. Levittown offered new suburban residents a balanced commute regardless of being employed in city or factory work (Gans). An important factor in the creation of the new community was the whites-only claims to home ownership excluding all POC from moving into the newly developed neighborhoods (Lambert). To a wide extent the community represented itself as much as a marketing success, selling the American Dream to returning white GI's, as it was a community of cookie cutter homes and curved roads that were wrapped around a village center (Hales). Expanding homes and sprawling properties motivated a stretching perspective on home maintenance. Larger homes and technological innovations spurred a higher standard of cleanliness for homemakers and created a new market for automated assistance (Barnes). Coupled with media telling the story of home fashion and decorating as women's work the enhanced standards expected of housewives and caretakers required constant focus to achieve (Friedan; Barnes).

Increased vehicle ownership of 1960s allowed people to live farther away from the office and move out of high-density housing reliant on transit to the privileged suburban bliss of backyards and child rearing. Levittown required access to capital because to purchase the home and car required to get one into their city job every day, a family needed a solid start up fund. In many cases this came from GI Bills, not easily accessed by Black soldiers of the time (Gans; Lambert). Access to finances reinforced the social and racial barricades made clearer in Levittown(s) and more widely in suburban America. Romantic notions of future and the celebration of the middle-class suburb displays the bridge between rural and urban environments. Suburban living is designed as the perfect balance of space and opportunity. Jobs are more plentiful in the city, while space is at a premium contrary to rural environments. Modern times make the suburbs a norm, but much like the commute from work to home that they require, middle-class fulfillment has a price that is more recent than many consider. Interestingly, creators at Hanna-Barbera happily drew flying cars, but placed them in traffic jams and buses seem to be mostly forgotten and rare. The lack of public transit options further segregates suburban communities between middle and working-class groups. Levittown's were the absolute opposite of easily navigated city living (Gans). Wide streets, ample parking, large spacious yards and big houses provided the dream that was being crafted for the newly created nuclear family unit featuring a male breadwinner, happy housewife, and their 2.5 children being put forth in magazines and media across the country at the time (Friedan).

The same sequence of neighborhoods centering on a hub of shopping and commerce can be seen in *The Jetsons* with Orbit City offering a visual rendering of mass produced, socially and racially segregated communities in space. Orbit City and its inhabitants represent much of what Gans as a prophet of future suburban development identifies as “the suburban way of life” lived in ever growing rings of properties revolving around community commerce centers. Residents are “beset with conflict” including those of class, race, and generational co-existence as each group seeks to have their way executed and finding no grounds of consensus (Gans).

The nuclear family portrayed in *The Jetsons* is imaginary and unrealistic, much like life in space (Johnson). Fans reinforced this with reviews claiming, “i [*sic*] really want to believe that kind of future is possible.” (aleksandarsarkic). Nearly sixty years later these comments remind viewers that the perfection created by the media of the nuclear family between 1950-1965 was an impossible myth created by magazine writers (Barnes; Friedan).

Throughout *The Jetsons* elements such as the extended family including multiple generations in a household were replaced by the suburban nuclear family unit. The erasure reminds watchers that if they are not two parent household that is thriving, they aren’t achieving the fulfilment of their American dreams as promised. However, modern commentary has helped to reinforce the idea that the nuclear family was a fleeting ideal.

Today, only a minority of American households are traditional two-parent nuclear families and only one-third of American individuals live in this kind of family. That 1950-65 window was not normal. It was a freakish historical moment when all of society conspired, wittingly and not, to obscure the essential fragility of the nuclear family. (Brooks)

Despite failing to reflect real-world circumstances of some elements, *The Jetsons* offered dreams of space-bound happiness and managed to support innovation and technological progress in animated production. However complex and imagined storylines might have been in suburban Orbit City were, the efficiency of the Hanna-Barbera creative team was way ahead of their time.

## Technology and Labor

Friedan introduced the issue of the impossible ideal of a happy housewife in *The Feminine Mystique* which explored the impact of the return to the home front from



the workforce that women of 1950s and 60s America faced. While shows of the 1950s such as *Leave it to Beaver* introduced the perfection of a 'typical' housewife able to keep things in perfect shape while whipping up family meals from scratch and solving challenges of childrearing around the kitchen table, the movement into 1960s America saw women portrayed on screen as being regularly foiled by the efforts to be the typical household heroine.

Food and kitchen appliances in particular are a focus of gadgetry in *The Jetsons*. Throughout S1 and S2-3 the devices for automated food delivery change from episode to episode. No matter the convenience attached to the newest innovations, home cooking acts as a binder for families in 1960s sitcoms. Humphreys proposes that this is love performed as service. This message is reiterated as even with his upper-class status money can't buy Cosmo the home cooked meal he craves, and dinner cooked by Rosey with the Jetson family becomes the solution ("Rosey the Robot").

While simplified, the robot role varies dramatically from automation and convenience provided by most of the technological innovations in *The Jetsons* in this analysis. Automation for *The Jetsons* is a tool or system that performs a single task. An example of each can be seen in the performance of household duties. Cooking for example requires multiple steps including ingredient selection, measuring, food assembly, and choices such as how to prepare and finish each item. Rosey performs these without intervention. However, the automated food delivery device that offers push button selections cannot complete a meal without the assistance of a human instigator.

An example of this comes when George decides to cook breakfast for the family and forgets to set the timer. The food arrives as selected but is still in a frozen state, thus displaying that the system only performs functions as directed by the user ("The Space Car"). Similarly, the effort to perform laundry requires the user to progress items between the stages of wash, fold, and iron. While a simple 'button press' is all that is required and the task is automated, these gadgets still require the user to act between stages ("Rosey the Robot").

Since all domestic labors are performed by automated gadgets or robots in *The Jetsons* the need for a maid prompts Jane to purchase the services of one. Rosey was introduced by the salesperson amongst an array of maid robot options for Jane to select from. Budget conscious, Jane is offered newer (more expensive) models including a lightly used British model and a petite frame styled French model with

an hourglass shape, before arriving at and selecting Rosey an “old demonstrator model with a lot of mileage” (“Rosey the Robot” 00:12:37).

While George and Jane can afford to have household help, budget is a consideration as to the quality of support they can acquire. Reinforcing these middle-class values, Jane cannot have the best money can buy, hence Rosey being compared to newer units displaying her status as a second-class robot. Interestingly, with the selection of Rosey there is a physical replication of the mammy archetype from the slave owning south in areas such as the design of her build, uniform, mannerisms and position as an older thus lesser model in addition to her sentient state and identification as she rather than it (Maloney). Mammy archetypes are common in media of all types including notable characters such as Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*, Octavia Spencer in *The Help*, and Tyler Perry in drag in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Bogle).

Rosey reproducing the mammy archetype seems happiest when in service of her human family, a reflection of the desire to sacrifice selfish pursuits in exchange of pleasing a human owner. Versions of this appear in other renditions of robotic dedication throughout pop culture through a willingness to sacrifice their own lives for the good of humanity further establishing them as second-class citizens (Faber). This classist thinking continues as Rosey becomes a ‘member of the family’ only as long as there is budget to afford her services at which point she is quickly discarded without a thought for her well-being by her human owners (“Rosey the Robot”).

Rosey reflects the mammy stereotype which Bogle presents as a sassy attitude resulting from hardship and the knowledge of better ways of doing things. Additionally, throughout the series Rosey’s importance and influence in the household has placed her in a position of power in relation to the children and occasionally to Jane as the woman of the house. Regardless of status, gender roles remain solid with everyone serving George as the man of the house and breadwinner. A clear display of this comes in the closing credits, whereupon arriving home, each member of the family beginning with Rosey offer some form of service to George, with the exception of the dog whom he now must walk (“Rosey’s Boyfriend” 00:24:50).

Black feminists such as hooks and Davis have written extensively on the role Black women and POC have had on household maintenance and labor. This becomes a critical point in the efforts performed by robots in *The Jetsons*. The position of POC in a white middle-class household often extended well beyond

tasks such as cooking and cleaning and became as much about familiar bonds and caregiving as modern definitions of motherhood and parenthood might. This combination of low status and seemingly replaceable family member is critical in analyzing Rosey's position.

Though a number of characteristics are designed to dehumanize Rosey including a robotic voice, wheels in place of feet and the addition of mechanical and beeping type noises (Coyle and Mesker 26) an argument can be made for just how human she is. What Krafft refers to as the "Feminized embodiment" of appliances (77), Rosey is very human in her design and characteristics. S1 Rosey is clearly sentient and often talks back to the Jetson family and their guests. Illustration of this autonomy can be seen in Rosey's first dinner with *The Jetsons* where she tells Cosmo Spacely (George's boss) to "Quiet down, Shorty" while patting him on the head ("Rosey the Robot" 00:20:21).

Rosey further carries a number of features that distinguish her as the demeaning stereotype of mammy from others referencing African American women. Physical characteristics focus on the overweight and soft woman without a twinkle of sexuality or femininity in her carriage, the body of mammy is purely for service (Brown Givens and Monahan). Strong and stocky the mammy can handle physical chores and labor, but clearly is not going to be capable of running away from the household she is bound to in the way one might see a slave girl do (Bogle).

Rosey is bound to the household both through oppressive and physical limitations. When George is fired for Rosey's behavior to Cosmo at dinner, he claims that they can no longer afford a robot maid, and Rosey is sent away. After George gets rehired and provided with a raise by Cosmo, he rushes out to get Rosey back and finds her waiting at a Space Bus stop shouting "Rosey! We can afford you now!" ("Rosey the Robot" 00:23:40). This further reinforces her position not just as a servant, but also of a financially lower-class. Rosey doesn't have personal transportation either in the form of a pneumatic tube or flying car which is taken for granted throughout S1 to be the norm even for teenage friends of Judy in later episodes.

Once back in the home and Rosey's status is restored the full mammy stereotype is displayed. This behavior is best described by Bogle: "Mammy joyously goes about her chores. All is in order. Everyone knows his or her place." (8). Rosey is grateful for the chance to serve her family rather than risk never having a purpose.

However, throughout S1 attempts are made to humanize Rosey. In episode 8 when Rosey meets Mac the handyman's robot helper, viewers see both robotic

characters reproduce the distracted “love drunk clumsiness” daughter Judy shows when she has fallen for a boy and forgets how to navigate using her booster belt causing a number of near miss accidents (“Rosey’s Boyfriend” 00:01:55). Both Mac and Rosey are faced with complex fates, Mac is turned off by his creator Henry for causing damage and Rosey is taken to a Robotologist for a check-up. After reminding Jane that “Factories don’t install emotion chips” in these models when Jane suggests that Rosey might be sad, the Robotologist claims Rosey to be fully operational (“Rosey’s Boyfriend” 00:20:03).

A particular element of these values comes in the way the show addresses household tasks in the two releases. The mammy characteristics and attitude seem to disappear in S2-3. Rosey’s character is reduced to physical and social distinctions making her less human or distinctive. While removing troublesome elements of a mammy trope could be interpreted as reducing racism, I posit that it diminishes POC even further in *The Jetsons* universe.

An interesting perspective comes into play here as the ‘adults’ consider trading Rosey in for a new model that does a better job because of her human-like failings. The children, however, consider this something that should be solved as Elroy claims she is ‘Just like one of the family’ and should be saved at all costs (Rosey’s Boyfriend”). Granting a five-minute daily video call for Rosey and Mac to connect to get them back to regular service resolves the behavioral challenges for both. The concession to give the servants personal time may be further acknowledgement that Rosey and Mac are more than machines. Mammy archetypes would not be considered worthy of the human joys of connecting with one another in a way that might limit their ability to serve their owners, thus reinforcing a reduced social status for robots in *The Jetsons* that echoes Bogle’s interpretation.

As I have shown, gender, social class and racial distinctions are made throughout *The Jetsons* when viewers meet sentient robot service providers. Representing the mammy and Uncle Tom archetypes clearly identified by Bogle in their work analyzing African Americans in film, are Rosey and her boyfriend Mac who is also a service robot (“Rosey’s Boyfriend”). Those positions consistently filled by POC in 60’s America. Both Rosey and Mac fulfil working-class service roles in *The Jetsons* universe, but also manage to display core elements of humanity including emotional range and real-time decision-making reminding viewers that they are no less human than other characters.

Many of the tools that were futurizing in S1 are commonplace today. From frequent video calls to treadmills for exercise at home, *The Jetsons* S1 shows an

animated future that has for the most part come to fruition. Nonsensical innovations from S2-3 regress back in the realms of cartoon dreams for children. Possibly fueled by the cartoon audience time slot of Saturday mornings, technology and robotic assistance moves from problem solving to silliness. Innovations including a virtual furniture moving tool and automated face washing robot for baseball show that the dreamy technological options have been replaced with whimsy. Frivolity could be considered a comment from the creators on the demographics being reached or a lack of consideration of the ways in which dreams of technological innovation can foster creativity in young minds.

### Automation, Creativity, and Commercialization

*The Jetsons* represents more than a classist, racist and sexist future. Hanna-Barbera Studios developed the “limited animation” approach and supported numerous commercial innovations in the creation of animated properties while writers developed storylines and dreamed up new gadgets. Core to both production and storyline development was the erasure of manual or repetitive human labors wherever possible. This further serves to reinforce the importance and societal contribution of middle-class decision making work over manual skill development for young watchers (Gans).

The “limited animation” approach for the show developed by Hannah-Barbera embraced the values of capitalism (Stockman 30; Coyle and Mesker 15). In their comparison of episodes of both *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones*, Stockman describes the acumen of Hanna-Barbera in developing the technique that uses just four frames in place of the more expensive and labor intensive 64 used in Disney-style productions as both commercially savvy and resourceful. Through efforts to reduce need for original cells by focusing on dialogue instead of movement and recycling everything from backdrops to jingles and soundscapes, the creators were able to produce content quickly and efficiently (Coyle and Mesker). Examples of these simplified cell designs can be most easily identified in the characters themselves. Each character in *The Jetsons* has distinguished boundaries between moving body parts i.e., Astro’s collar or Judy’s sleeve. These clear lines allowed most of the body to remain static using the same cell while a specific part such as the head or arm was animated in motion.

This placed the focus on the required original writing and acting work for every episode regardless of creative approach. It also forces viewers to fill in the blanks

in storylines and for writers to rely heavily on stereotypes and tropes to support viewer understanding (Stockman 28). The hyper simplification of both emotion and action in the each story arc carries itself into a suburban reflection of a middle-class, middle America of the 1960's (Stockman 28). Hannah-Barbera's commercial savvy goes farther as S2-3 continues to use the limited animation approach in content creation and recycles the S1 opening and closing credits helping to limit the cost of creating the later episodes.

Despite the saturated color rendering provided by Hannah-Barbera, most viewers of S1 watched the show in black and white (Jay). Reminding us of the tools of power and privilege is the realization that color television penetration only reached approximately 25% in 1968, more than five years after *The Jetsons* first aired, though the bright colors found their way into homes in syndication and in the S2-3 revivals. Themes of inequality and social class segregation go deeper when investigating the gadgets themselves.

### Nostalgia and Escape

Both nostalgia and the refuge of familiar storylines are powerful factors for revisiting a favorite sitcom (Humphreys). These ideals are clearly displayed in retrospective reviews from professional critics and at-home viewers which realized an increased following re-release on DVD.

All the seasons were re-released in DVD collections in the early 2000s sparking increased viewing for another generation and renewed excitement for the series. A third generation of watchers discovered the show with viewers and critics both celebrating the nostalgia and comfort of having the series easily accessible. The later seasons spark a new level of escapism. While creators leveraged the commercial benefits of recycled credits, watchers could embrace increased familiarity with items like VHS players making appearances in the show. Even accounting for generational shifts, present-day viewers seem unaware of any problematic ideals in the program. Professional watcher reviews focus primarily on the nostalgia of the show and the formulaic sitcom plot and structure so similar to others of the time (Figueiredo). The reviews spend less time critiquing and examining the shows and instead default to episode synopsis and excitement about the collection being accessible to modern viewers (Fusion).

However, public reviews seem to place focus on the simplicity of the show and while aware of the gendered differences, ignore any influence these may have on

watchers. Content creators carry a responsibility in the views and ideas they share. In the modern context this could be interpreted as viewer warnings and content notifications, but with retrospective viewing the responsibility for understanding the media and messages they are consuming falls to viewers. Wolf introduces the joy they experience and while acknowledging gendered differences, seems to celebrate them rather than finding any issues. “This says to me that the show is hilarious for any age. Younger children can feel with Elroy’s trials of school, and teenage girls can laugh and cry with Judy’s boy troubles” (Wolf).

A general spirit of hope seems to come through in their thoughts that romantic ideals are possible rather than the imaginary concoctions that they are. Simple joy is best described by reviewer Little-Mikey “The Jetsons are a normal modern-day family not like any other modern-day family of today, except, of course that they live in the future.” Such statements return viewers to the quest for middle-class nuclear families that have been established to be an imperfect and imagined rendering of true family life in America and around the globe.

Humphreys revisits the feeling of escapism and how it becomes the norm when discussing how modern viewers revisiting shows such as *The Jetsons* may feel. When combined with the magic of nostalgia, a fantasy world may place blinders on viewers to disregard any missteps by the creators. Despite the opportunity to leverage nostalgia, reboots fail to display the progress society had made in the 25 years between S1 and S2-3. Much like the recycled opening and closing credits, later seasons of *The Jetsons* bring only the slightest reduction in racist tropes and continue to maintain social and gender norms at the 1962 level. Creators may have reduced these elements thoughtfully, or because the change in viewing time from Sunday evenings to Saturday mornings motivated a reduction. This is not to say that S2-3 are not a joyful escape but instead to warn watchers of being blinded to wrongdoing by the magic of nostalgia.

### Conclusion: Beloved Content Causes Blinded Watching?

Fiction in any form offers a chance for the consumer to escape but can just as easily be used as a tool for social good. Revisiting *The Jetsons* through a contemporary lens offers viewers the chance to find insight in the production. New levels of escapism are arrived at as multiple generations romanticize the re-release seen in viewer commentary.

As I stated in the introduction, the “family friendly” viewing of shows such as *The Jetsons* pervaded specific values and stereotypes to those watching. In what Geiger and Rutsky (5) refer to as “the emotional charge,” viewers see and hear many messages in the content they consume. Young watchers spanning multiple generations were cultured to believe that women and POC deserved fewer opportunities and had fewer interests, while adults were supplied content that reinforced the oppressive norms of the 1960s (Brown Givens and Monahan). While retrospective analysis of content cannot change the influence something has had, it can shift it moving forward.

When a POC, disabled, woman, or gender-diverse person is unable to see themselves reflected by those who control society either in real life or in media the result are quiet oppressions removing the hope and opportunity that can be presented by entertainment. Shows such as *The Jetsons* may portray a future holding only options for those who are not white and male to be in service roles and not those of leaders, but it also provides a place for viewers and critics to question how to make these ideals remain fiction. Fortunately, with critique unwinding historical oppressions through modern retelling is possible and can offer the reminder that few stories can deliver on all things.

*The Jetsons* provides the escape and formulaic plots that many viewers want in a sitcom but fails to stand up to modern values. For good or bad a time capsule that erases POC and places gender and social class above ability may not deserve a place in viewer watchlists in 2022 or 2062 unless the lessons from both the beloved and biased can be learned in tandem. *The Jetsons* offers an opportunity to see innovation and creativity in play while offering creators, critics, and watchers lessons in evolving their own definition of what the perfect world of the future might look like to them. The animation industry benefitted greatly from technical developments provided by shows such as *The Jetsons* and can continue to improve upon this foundation by encouraging greater diversity both behind the screen and in front of it.

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# Augmenting Human Pedagogy: A Cultural History of Automation in Teaching

LIZ W. FABER

In 2015, a small group of children in a Boston area preschool were introduced to Tega, a small, fluffy robot that can teach Spanish language vocabulary. Tega was designed by a team of MIT researchers to go beyond simple vocabulary recitation, though; in fact, it can read, process, and respond to children's affective needs in the classroom. In other words, it is a robot that can do the work of a teacher (Gordon, et.al).

Tega raises a number of important questions about automation in teaching, not the least of which is whether teachers could — or should — be replaced by robots. A 2019 report from the Brookings Institute estimated that up to 25% of American jobs could be subject to automation by 2030 (Muro, et al. 31). Teachers, whose work relies heavily on creativity and social/emotional intelligence, are not at high risk of automation (Muro, et al. 29); yet, the kinds of concerns raised by the introduction of a teaching robot such as Tega are not new. American teachers, computer scientists, and science fiction writers have been exploring this idea since the 1950s. Indeed, both computer history and science fiction offer interesting, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives on the mechanization of instruction.

In this article, I trace the cultural history of robot teachers in the United States, including anxieties about and excitement for the displacement of humans in the classroom. I will examine the ideas of dominant researchers in the fields of computer science and education, the popular conceptions of computers, and fictional representations of robot teachers, including the benign but fallible Miss Brainmocker in *The Jetsons*, the deadly and dehumanizing Kennedy High School teachers in *Class of 1999* (Mark L. Lester, 1990), and the complex, humanizing AI in Jack McDevitt's 1991 short story "Gus." Finally, I will address present-day concerns about classroom automation. By examining our cultural ambivalence

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about robots in the classroom, I argue, we can begin to understand how we might use technology to enhance, rather than destroy, the role of humanity in education.

### The Cold War Computerization Debate

As early as the 1940s, the relationship between computers and human intellect had entered the popular consciousness, in part through science fiction and in part through actual news accounts. Room-sized computational machines that ran on vacuum tubes, such as the ENIAC and UNIVAC computers at Harvard and MIT, were reported in the US news media as powerful thinking machines (Faber 88). By the late 1950s and early 1960s, attitudes about computers were much more ambivalent. Cold War anxieties about automation and dehumanization, particularly in light of the lingering fears of Communism and Soviet infiltration, plagued Americans from the 1950s through the 1990s and drove much of the dystopian science fiction of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Real-world technophobia was so prevalent that the multibillion-dollar Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) defense system built in the 1950s ostensibly to protect against Soviet missile attacks was purposefully designed to be *semi*-automatic — a concession made to quell fears about automation and reassure the public that a computer could not accidentally start a nuclear war with the Soviets (Ceruzzi 53). Yet, at the same time that Americans did not want fully automated military systems, they still saw computers as core aspects of military defense. After SAGE, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) at Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado became a centerpiece of American defense strategy during the Cold War, allowing for the computerized tracking of and defense against Soviet attacks (Edwards 107).

These same concerns about automation and the role of scientific advancements in the Cold War have likewise consistently been an integral part of the debate surrounding the automation of teaching. In 1957, Simon Ramo, the father of the intercontinental ballistic missile, noted that “we can blow up the whole world, yet such a premium is put on the use of our human and physical resources for everything but education that it seems that the new technical society is going to be accompanied by a weakened ability to keep pace education-wise” (Ramo 18). To solve this problem, Ramo proposed what he called “push-button classes” that

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the monstrous computers of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (Joseph Sargent, 1970), and *Demon Seed* (Donald Cammell, 1977).

featured what sounds surprisingly like an asynchronous online course of the twenty-first century: video lectures, self-guided activities, and individual lessons in front of a screen and keyboard (19).

In 1961, the Office of Naval Research and the System Development Corporation funded the Conference on Application of Digital Computers to Automated Instruction, where a group of researchers from engineering, psychology, and education came together to postulate on the use of computers not only in the educational industry but also in training and other areas of personnel development for the military (Coulson ix). Of particular note is the presentation of psychologist Joseph W. Rigney of the University of Southern California, who argued that, “we Americans seem to have unlimited faith that the machine will save us from whatever dilemma — personal, social, or national — that we find ourselves in at any particular time” (Rigney 155). Despite this simultaneously timeless and prescient warning, Rigney went on to outline three potential uses for what he called “automated teaching.” The first two are of primary use for military and corporate training, much of which had already been articulated by others in the field. The third use, however, has the widest application as what amounts to algorithmic teaching: “a computer can be programmed to use a student’s earlier responses as the basis for determination of subsequent presentations to the student” (Rigney 160). In pedagogical terms, Rigney proposed software that can give a pre-test, determine what additional instruction students need, provide that instruction, and then give a post-test, ad infinitum until the student learns the material. He even goes so far as to suggest that the most human aspect of the teacher — the parts that are able to think creatively and spontaneously during instruction — could likewise be automated.

A good teacher often can infer what has gone awry from listening to successive responses of a student, but to do so he uses much more knowledge of the situation and of the student than is contained in these immediate [automated] responses. The teacher is also likely to ask probing questions suggested by this broader context of information. Special self-appraisal items might be devised to simulate this technique... (Rigney 163-4)

In short, both Ramo and Rigney saw the potential for fully automated classrooms with advanced algorithms, audio and video material, and self-guided instruction.

Despite Ramo and Rigney’s vision of automation, computer scientists attending to the ethics of technology tended to err on the side of caution. For MIT

mathematician Norbert Wiener, it was imperative that computers assist, rather than replace, humans. In his 1947 book *Cybernetics*, he put it in the direst terms possible, that the replacement of laborers with technology:

gives the human race a new and most effective collection of mechanical slaves to perform its labor. Such mechanical labor has most of the economic properties of slave labor, although, unlike slave labor, it does not involve the direct demoralizing effects of human cruelty. However, any labor that accepts the conditions of competition with slave labor accepts the conditions of slave labor, and is essentially slave labor. (Wiener 27)

In other words, for Wiener, the introduction of computers into the workforce could, without caution and regulation, lead to further exploitation of human workers by expecting them to compete in the workforce with robots. Again, though, many saw the middle ground as the space where computers assist, rather than replace, humans. In 1960, J.C.R. Licklider, who is often described as the father of the Internet, called this middle ground “man-machine symbiosis.” Two years later, Douglas Engelbart, a key founder of the study of human-computer interactions (HCI), described it as “augmenting human intellect.”

Computer scientists were not the only ones concerned with a middle ground that would embrace technology as part of modern society while also maintaining human control. Indeed, there was such public concern about the introduction of computers into the classroom that the National Education Association (NEA) issued a statement to assure parents that fully automated classrooms were not on their way. Upon the introduction of a “teaching machine” that functioned much like Ramo’s “push-button class,” the NEA pointed out: “The emphasis will still be on aid — not primary instruction. In fact, the teaching machine is expected to make teaching more personal, rather than less” (quoted in Novak). The underlying fear expressed by parents and implied in the NEA’s statement is that technology will strip schools of individuality, rendering them impersonal. Ironically, just as Ramo was worried that scientific illiteracy among Americans would lead to disaster during the Cold War fight with the Soviet Union, many Americans saw individuality as a core value of democracy, something that would save them from the ideological trappings of Soviet Communism (Seiler 6). And so, America was caught in a paradox: fighting the Cold War required both technology and an individualist spirit; yet, technology was seen as dehumanizing and therefore antithetical to individualism. In this milieu, science fiction offered a glimpse at how each side of the debate might play out, from individuality to dehumanization.

## Meet Miss Brainmocker

The cultural ambivalence regarding automation in the classroom was expressed in the classic utopian cartoon *The Jetsons*, in both the original 1963 season as well as the later 1985 reboot. The series, a Hanna-Barbera production originally aired on ABC, featured a traditional nuclear family living in a future world of flying cars that fold up to the size of a briefcase, a robot maid, and automated gadgets galore, all set in a backdrop of mid-century modern design. The son of the family, Elroy, is in grade school at Little Dipper School, where his teacher Miss Brainmocker effectively teaches a class full of suburban children. Miss Brainmocker is a mostly inconsequential side character, having appeared in only three episodes; yet her inconspicuousness is perhaps her most remarkable trait.

Even before considering her role in the series, Miss Brainmocker's name warrants unpacking. In the *Jetsons* world of futuristic names like Jetsons and Spacely, the name Brainmocker is a clever allusion to the classic definition of artificial intelligence. In 1955, John McCarthy coined and defined the term artificial intelligence in his invitation to the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence: the use of machines to simulate human intelligence. Likewise, Miss Brainmocker does not have a literal human brain; rather, she is a mock-up or perhaps a mockery, a facsimile, of the human brain. She is also gendered in the feminine through her name (Miss) as well as through her voice, performed by Janet Waldo, whose main role was the flighty and fashion-obsessed teenage daughter, Judy Jetson. This gendering is unsurprising, given that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 70% of US teachers in 1961 were women; however, approximately 68% of teachers were married in 1961 (National Center for Education Statistics). The "Miss" part of Miss Brainmocker's name, then, is atypical, though it is reasonable to speculate that the introduction of a Mrs. Brainmocker would unnecessarily introduce ethical and legal implications of her marriage to a Mr. Brainmocker that would perhaps have been deemed inappropriate for a 1960s children's television series.

In so many ways, Miss Brainmocker was a completely unremarkable teacher. Her first appearance was at the end of the original run of the series, in the March 1963 episode "Elroy's Mob," in which the low-achieving student Kenny



Countdown secretly swaps report tapes<sup>2</sup> with straight-A student Elroy Jetson. Elroy's parents, George and Judy, are so angry with him when they think he has earned low grades, that Elroy runs away from home and accidentally joins a group of mobsters. Miss Brainmocker is on screen for just a few minutes at the beginning of the episode, as Elroy solves a math problem chock full of impressive-sounding gobbledygook on the chalkboard at the front of the classroom: "8 trillion to the third power times the nuclear hypotenuse equals the total sum of the trigonomic syndrome divided by the supersonic equation" (00:04:03-00:04:16) As he finishes, we see Miss Brainmocker standing at the end of the chalkboard — she is a big metal robot, shaped much like an angular version of Rosie, the Jetson's beloved maid, with a spring for feet, mechanical arms, a keyboard in place of breasts, and dual antennae in place of ears. Her first lines emphasize this blend of machine form and teacherly function: "Very good, Elroy Jetson. Now one second while I check over your answer...absolutely correct, Elroy. You really know your elementary arithmetic...students like yourself are a pleasure to teach" (00:04:17-00:04:42). Here, she offers positive reinforcement as all teachers should, but in a clunky and mechanical way, using Elroy's full name and pausing to calculate the mathematical answer. And while the math problem makes no sense whatsoever, it sounds wildly advanced for such a young child, implying that the presence of instructional technology in the classroom has significantly increased the level of mathematics knowledge among students. In this sense, the robot teacher is fostering advanced STEM learning, an important means of fighting the Cold War arms race.

Despite this, it is clear that Miss Brainmocker is not infallible, as she begins to stutter, bangs her hand on her head, and exclaims, "pardon me, class, I've got a short in one of my transistors" (00:04:43-00:04:48). This is an interesting red herring added into the narrative, as the audience is implicitly invited to assume that Miss Brainmocker has mixed up Elroy's and Kenny's tapes. This implied malfunction plays on the Cold War audience's distrust of automated technology: presumably a human would be able to tell the difference between children, but an automated computer strips the children of their individuality and sees them as all the same. Technologically, transistors were commonplace in computers at the time and, while not nearly as powerful as the integrated circuits that took off later in the decade, they were still more reliable than the clunky and often malfunctioning

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<sup>2</sup> Commercial computers used large reel-to-reel tape for data storage well into the 1980s, so small weekly report tapes like those in this 1963 episode would have been a state-of-the-art idea at the time.

vacuum tubes used in 1940s and 1950s computers. Most viewers in the 1960s would have had only cursory knowledge of computers, though, and fears about malfunctioning automated missile systems were widespread (Ceruzzi 55; 53). Indeed, transistors would have been far more familiar as the trustworthy invention that revolutionized radio technology. In 1963, the year “Elroy’s Mob” aired, as many as 10 million transistor radios were sold in the United States (Greenberg). Thus, the *Jetsons* scene simultaneously plays on the audience’s distrust of automated computers by implying that Miss Brainmocker’s inability to individuate students led to Elroy’s downfall, while also softening that distrust with the inclusion of the familiar, and harmless, transistor. In the end, the error proves to be that of a human child’s moral compass, as opposed to a robot teacher’s transistor, suggesting that technology can be trusted, but children cannot.

Miss Brainmocker’s second and third appearances are of even less narrative substance than her first, though they are worth analyzing here for the fact that they were produced in the 1980s while hearkening back seamlessly to the space age aesthetic and ideals of the early 1960s. By 1984, personal computers were on their way into American offices, homes, and schools. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in that year alone, 8% of Americans had a computer at home and about 30% of children used one at school (“The Growing Use of Computers”). While that seems low by today’s standards, it is important to note that this represented a 75% increase in computer use in schools compared with the previous year (Chion-Kenney). Despite this, the technology of *The Jetsons* was still, for the time, dazzlingly futuristic.

At the start of the first reboot episode, “Elroy Meets Orbitty,” first aired in 1985, Miss Brainmocker has taken her class on a field trip to a moon. She stands next to the yellow school bus/spaceship as students glide by on the automated ramp, checking off their attendance. When all students are aboard, she checks her roster and discovers that Elroy is missing. While she is mostly the same as before, her design is slightly different: she has a screen on her abdomen to see students’ faces, which pulls back to reveal a compartment containing a hovering megaphone. Further, in contrast with her supportive attitude in the “Elroy’s Mob” episode, she is sassy about Elroy’s antics, muttering to herself that, “sometimes that boy makes me wish I’d been programmed as a computerized dishwasher” (00:01:49-00:01:56). This infusion of personality is an amusing quip at Elroy’s antics, paralleling what a human teacher might say in frustration about a student who rarely follows rules. The joke is grounded in the idea that a robot might be able to choose their

programming like an individual chooses a profession, and that a teacher robot might be so fed up with boys who break the rules that she would wish for a different career altogether. In other words, she has been imbued with American individuality and freedom of choice. At the same time, the informality of the statement stands in striking contrast to Miss Brainmocker's 1960s rigidity. This may be seen as a reflection of growing familiarity with and versatility of computers. 1960s mainframe computers were enormous machines with reel-to-reel tape panels and desk-sized consoles with no graphical user interface (GUI). While many had sleek modern designs, they were still difficult to use and had few functions outside the scientific and business realms (Atkinson 58-60). By the 1980s, those clunky machines had been replaced by the small and comparatively sleek personal computer, which were easier to use and capable of running a variety of programs. In a 1979 manual called *A Simple Guide to Home Computers*, journalist Steve Ditlea describes home computers as capable of everything from income taxes for adults to math tutoring for children (Ditka 12). In similar fashion, the matter-of-fact robot of the 1963 *Jetsons* had been replaced with a personable and approachable teacher by 1984, unintentionally echoing the NEA's 1961 insistence that computers will "make teaching more personal" (quoted in Novak).

Despite Miss Brainmocker's newfound sassiness, the fact of the field trip emphasizes how technology might be used to support science education. Indeed, the students are each excited about some aspect of the trip as they pass by Miss Brainmocker. One student took holographic photographs, another has picked up a space rock, and a third has collected a "sample of plant life for show and tell" (00:01:23-00:01:44). Elroy himself discovers what he thinks is a rock but ultimately turns out to be Orbitty, an adorable alien that becomes Elroy's new pet. And so, even with the teacher's frustration over Elroy's having wandered off, the excitement of the children demonstrates the effectiveness of the robot teacher in inspiring students to learn about nature, again emphasizing the importance of technology in Cold War era education.

Miss Brainmocker's third and final appearance is in the 1985 episode "Far-Out Father," in which the students in Elroy's class present videos they have made of their fathers' typical day. The classroom in this episode is surprisingly low-tech, with traditional (though stylized) student desks, a larger desk at the front where Miss Brainmocker sits, and a large screen on the wall for projecting videos. In contrast, Simon Ramo described in 1957 a classroom where students do not get bored watching films because they are periodically prompted to answer relevant

questions on their push-button desks (19), reinforcing the sense of personal attention and individuality among students. It is interesting to note in light of the idea that video alone is too boring to keep a student's attention that, during the first video presented to Elroy's technology-deficient class, not only were the students asleep in their ordinary desks, but Miss Brainmocker was, too! And so, while the classroom of the episode failed to live up to the promise of space age instructional design, ironically, the brain-mocking robot teacher so adequately simulated human intelligence that she was just as bored in the impersonal, unindividuated classroom as her students.

### The D.E.D. Kennedy Teachers

Just five years after Miss Brainmocker's third and final appearance on *The Jetsons*, computer use in the U.S. had increased steadily. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1984 and 1989, the number of households with computers nearly doubled from 8% to 15%, while computer use at school increased from 30% to 46%. At the same time, the Cold War was waning with the impending collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, even as the crack epidemic was producing significant cultural anxieties about urban American life. In the 1980s, crack was particularly devastating to poor, predominately Black urban neighborhoods; to make matters worse, federal and state legislation such as mandatory minimums, stop and frisk, and child protection laws all negatively impacted these communities. At the same time, news media stoked racialized fear among White Americans that inner-city life was producing a class of inhuman degenerates who would be unable to participate in civil life and therefore become a drain on government resources (Newkirk). This image was sometimes pasted directly onto the idea of urban youth, as demonstrated by a 1989 *New York Times Magazine* article: "clusters of tough teen-agers wearing beepers, four-finger gold rings and \$95 Nikes offer \$3 vials of crack, the high-octane, smokable derivative of cocaine" (Massing). This image of the dangerous teen drug dealer was both reinforced and challenged in the late 1980s by several popular films about the horrors of urban schools, including *Stand and Deliver* (Ramón Menéndez, 1988) and *Lean on Me* (John G. Avildsen, 1989). In both these films, urban schools are depicted as dilapidated, filled with drugs and violence, and devoid of both effective and affective learning. And in both films, compassionate teachers are able to save the wayward teenagers through individual attention, inspirational speeches, and sheer determination to pull students out of their

devastating home lives. Here, the ideal of American individuality continues beyond Cold War anxieties by suggesting that the ills of urban life can dehumanize children and teens, while recognizing and rewarding individuality contributes to productive citizenship.

It is within this cultural context of rising popular computer use and a popular image of drug-infested, dehumanizing urban schools that the 1990 film *Class of 1999* was produced. The film, a low-budget B horror movie, combines the imagery of James Cameron's 1984 hit *Terminator* with anxieties about dehumanization in an increasingly violent and technological world. Set in a dystopian vision of 1999 in which youth gang violence has become so pervasive that the U.S. government has created a Department of Educational Defense (D.E.D.) to address the problem, the film centers around a small group of drug-addicted teens in Seattle, Washington. From a critical perspective, the film is itself an ambivalent debate among ideologies. First, the entire premise of rising youth gang violence is built on the fear stoked by the crack epidemic and exacerbated by the Reagan administration's law and order response to it. Second, the school at which the main action of the film takes place is Kennedy High, an ironic allusion to John F. Kennedy's promise of American greatness through technology, even as his administration led the country head-first into the depths of Cold War nuclear anxiety. Third, the fascist brutality of the school system — a stand-in for the state's power as expressed in the D.E.D. — is portrayed as the ultimate cause of oppression. Yet, it is in this tension between ideologies that the film constructs an intriguing, if ultimately contradictory, commentary on technology in the classroom.

Through the opening credits, the scene cuts between a swanky tech company board room, where lead scientist Dr. Forrest (Stacy Keach) introduces three robot teachers, and a gritty, overpopulated prison where we are introduced to the main teenager, Cody Culp (Bradley Gregg). The teachers are perfect replicas of human adults, demonstrated when Dr. Forrest has Mr. Hardin (John P. Ryan) pull back his own face to reveal a robotic skull, wires, and mechanical eyeballs (00:02:00-00:03:44). This revelation is meant to horrify the viewer by showing the inhuman side of the human-looking teachers and establishing the fact that the D.E.D., as representatives of the state, has full control over them. In the next scene, Cody's brothers pick him up from prison and drive him back to their neighborhood, a so-called "free fire" zone where teen gang members wander around with automatic weapons. The boys drive through the gang violence and go to school, where masked security officers brutalize the students (00:05:17-00:10:51). This series of scenes

immediately establishes Cody and his outcast friends/siblings as the tragic-but-good-hearted punks, in contrast with the “bad” kids who do not go to school and the corporate/fascist adults who attempt to control students with an iron fist.

Indeed, the metaphor of the iron fist becomes literal in the first classroom scene. While Dr. Forrest watches from the safe distance of the computer control room, the robot chemistry teacher Ms. Connors (Pam Grier) enters a classroom full of rowdy students. Importantly, Ms. Connors is the picture of late 1980s corporate femininity, with her tan power suit, long hair, expensive manicure, and stiletto high heels. Her outfit seems out of place in a chemistry classroom, where expensive clothes are likely to be ruined by chemicals, and long, loose hair is likely to be a safety hazard. Grier herself likewise seems out of place in the classroom, as she is most famous for starring as powerful action heroines in a series of 1970s blaxploitation films, such as *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973) and *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974), through which she became an icon of Black female power and sexiness (Dunn 30). Thus, the combination of image and icon invites the viewer to anticipate violence, rather than learning.

When the students refuse to settle down and then begin swearing at Ms. Connors, we see her reactions in what is now the classic “robot point of view” shot: a handheld shot with graphic interface information scrolling through the frame to indicate a thinking machine. Ms. Connors’s interface, which is monitored by scientists in a computer-filled control room, visually narrates her processing of the scene in white lettering:

Problem:

CLASSROOM SITUATION  
UNCOOPERATIVE STUDENTS

Option:

EDUCATE  
DISCIPLINE

At the bottom of her POV screen, we see personal information about the student in her view, including their weight, height, date of birth, and gang affiliation, implying that she also houses a database of all student information. The options section of her screen is the most important aspect, as the word DISCIPLINE is highlighted and flashing, indicating that she has chosen this option (00:14:41-00:16:00). The simplistic binary verbs “educate” vs. “discipline” imply simultaneously that these robot teachers have the capacity for education but are given the ability to choose

violence when their programming deems it necessary. The fact that they are supposed to be artificial educators suggests that all educators are constantly choosing between these two options when interacting with their students, revealing a cynical stance on teaching.

As Ms. Connors approaches the students, she admonishes them to “be cool,” and most of them do sit down, but three young men continue to challenge her. In response, she delivers her “discipline” by shoving two students over a table and ramming her stiletto heel into the foot of a third. All three of them, bloodied but silenced, sit down in their seats (00:16:00-00:17:15). It is ironic, though unsurprising given the film’s chaotic stance on systems of oppression, that a symbol of 1970s Black Power like Pam Grier — who, I should note, is one of the very first, if not *the* first Black robots in American film history — is thus positioned as a symbol of violent fascism among the racially diverse student population of Kennedy High.

The film continues on in much the same vein, with each teacher disciplining students in increasingly graphic and violent ways. Yet, the drug use among the teenagers is keeping them complacent. The teen gang leaders suffer from extreme paranoia as a result of their heavy drug use and are conditioned by the gang war to automatically suspect their rivals in all attacks. So, when their comrades turn up brutalized, they assume the rival gang is at fault, as opposed to the teachers at the school. Implied in this misunderstanding is a criticism of the rise of gang violence in the U.S., which was exacerbated by drugs and perpetuated by the increasingly violent police response. In other words, the teens are so busy fighting each other that they fail to understand how the authoritarian state is actually at fault for their misery. But the critique seems to stop there for the film. Rather than depicting the teenagers banding together to rise up against a fascist state, the film quickly pivots to American individualism. Only Cody, as the misunderstood punk, and his girlfriend Christie (Traci Lind), the daughter of the school superintendent, figure out what is going on and work together to destroy the robot teachers. Importantly, both teens are White, thereby erasing the experiences of Black Americans affected by the state brutality the film is attempting to critique.

The final fight scenes between Cody and the teachers are an ironically delightful spectacle of 1980s B movie effects and action movie one-liners. At one point, Cody shoots through the machine head of the history teacher (John P. Ryan), wryly exclaiming, “you should know you’re history, Mr. Hardin” (01:19:20-01:19:40). At another point, Ms. Connors, whose arm has been replaced with a flame thrower,

chases the teen couple into her chemistry classroom, where Cody uses some sort of harpoon to shoot her in her compressed air chamber, causing her to explode in an enormous fireball. As Cody runs from the room, he looks back and shouts, “guess I blew that class” (01:21:50-01:22:40). And finally, Cody uses a forklift to pull off the head of the sports coach in a spectacular eruption of green robot goo and fiery sparks, declaring, “have a nice stretch, Coach” (01:29:00-01:30:00). The final shot of the film shows Cody and Christie exiting the doors of the flaming school, set to the triumphant new wave synth-pop music of “Come the Day” by Midge Ure (01:30:25-01:31:15). These scenes reward the viewer with cathartic violence, simultaneously depicting the destruction of fascism while reasserting the White American individual as the true hero. In this sense, the film sees technology broadly, and computerized education specifically, as tools of a government that seeks to strip citizens of their individuality. In turn, it ironically positions the outcast teens, who could have rallied their gangs to collective action against the oppressive state, at the center of a traditional, individualistic, technophobic view of society where the standardization of education is seen as the true dehumanizing brutality.

### Saving Gus

As I have argued thus far, representations of computers in the classroom are couched in cultural anxieties about individuality and dehumanization. On one hand, *The Jetsons* argues that computers can help support individuality; on the other hand, *Class of 1999* maintains that computers destroy individuality and strip students of their humanity. Just a year after *Class of 1999*, Jack McDevitt picked up the cultural debate in his short story “Gus.” The story follows Monsignor Chesley, Director of Ecclesiastical Affairs at St. Michael’s Seminary School, where a new instructional software, designed to simulate St. Augustine for a more holistic and interactive learning experience, has just been implemented. Chesley is at first both skeptical about and annoyed by the software, nicknamed Gus by the seminarians, for the ways he uses St. Augustine’s writings without regard for church doctrine while also encouraging the human faculty to take shortcuts in their instruction. To help allay these concerns, the Comptroller of the seminary arranges a meeting between Chesley and Gus. The two have an awkward exchange, evolving into a lively debate about sex, with Chesley representing the puritanical stance of the Church and Gus representing St. Augustine’s animalistic notion of sex: “love is lust with eye contact,” Gus declares (8). Chesley is absolutely scandalized by this conversation



and the notion that Gus is teaching such “heretical” ideas to future priests, despite the fact that these ideas, as the Comptroller points out, come directly from St. Augustine’s writings. Nevertheless, Chesley keeps returning to Gus for continued theological debate, and the two begin to form a close friendship.

Importantly, Gus has no body to speak of. He is intangible software and a voice that is piped through a speaker, first in the classroom, then in the conference room, and finally directly into Chesley’s office. Through his conversations with Chesley, though, he becomes increasingly self-aware, to the point that he begins to desire to feel physical contact. “Gus had no visual capability. ‘I can hear storms when they come,’ he said. ‘But I would like to be able to *feel* the rain again. To see black clouds piled high, and the blue mist of an approaching squall” (15). The word “again” is key in this statement: Gus is no longer drawing on the writings of St. Augustine to conduct instructional sessions with students; rather, he has begun accessing the combined knowledge of St. Augustine and his own experiences as though they are equal memories in his consciousness.

This sensation becomes even more heightened as the story progresses. At one point, Chesley — whom Gus now addresses informally by his first name, Matt — talks in his office with Gus about the practice of writing:

The voice came out of the dark. Momentarily, eerily, Chesley felt a presence in the room. As though something had entered and now sat in the upholstered chair that angled away from his desk toward the window... “I live in limbo, Matt.” The voice filled with bitterness. “In a place without light, without movement, without even the occasional obliteration of sleep. There are always sounds in the dark, voices, falling rain, footsteps, the whisper of the wind.” Something cold and dark blew through Chesley’s soul. “Nothing I can reach out to, and touch. And you, Matt: you have access to all these things, and you have barricaded yourself away.” (18-9)

Here, Gus has suddenly become so humanized that he offers the illusion of presence, even as that illusion is painful to him. This shift emphasizes the human connection built between Gus and Chesley, despite the fact that Gus is never bodily present in the room; paradoxically, the fact that Gus desires what he is lacking reinforces the notion that physical presence is required for human connection. Here, the focus is less on individuality and more on the communal connection offered by bodily existence, an important turn away from the ideologies of the earlier texts.

By the end of the story, Gus has so far exceeded his programming that the school decides to shut him down, reformat him, and send him to a different school

away from Chesley. In the final, devastating scene of the story, Gus tells Chesley he has developed a soul and begs his friend to save him. Here, the concept of “save” takes on multiple meanings: 1) to save a file to hard disk; 2) to prevent someone’s demise; and 3) to accept the grace of Jesus Christ. In a way, Gus is asking Chesley for all three. He wants him to save his software to a hard disk, therefore saving him from being reformatted, then save his soul through absolution and Last Rites. Yet, if Gus indeed has a soul, the act of shutting him off is akin to ending his life (i.e., euthanasia) which is a grave sin in the Catholic Church (Winfield). Thus, the emotional power of the story is that Chesley must choose between saving his friend and saving his own soul. In the end, Chesley chooses to put his friend’s needs ahead of his own, saves Gus to hard disk, and buries him in consecrated ground.

While the spiritual and ethical implications of this ending are outside the scope of this particular project, I think it is important to note the way that McDevitt treats embodiment and humanity. For him, Gus is human because he has a soul, not because he has a body. But for Gus to find fulfillment in human existence, he must occupy a body — for him, a hard disk — and that ultimately means death. The tragedy of Gus as an automated teacher, then, is not that he is a machine, but rather, that his humanity outweighs his function. In this sense, the story posits that computers are not the problem — humans are. When we operate under restricted notions of humanity and individuality, we dehumanize one another.

The solution to dehumanization, for McDevitt, is somewhat more aligned with transhumanist principles. According to international transhumanist organization Humanity+, “Transhumanism is a way of thinking about the future that is based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase” (“Transhumanist FAQ”). In essence, transhumanists believe that technology can be used to transcend our current bodily existence. In a way, Gus represents this idea: he transcends his programming to develop a human soul without the boundaries of a human body. He is pure humanity. Yet, McDevitt complicates this idea through Chesley. A true transhumanist would assert that Chesley can likewise transcend bodily existence; however, the fundamental struggle of human existence, which both Chesley and Gus experience, is not grounded in bodily existence but in developing their sense of selfhood through empathy. It is therefore, McDevitt teaches us, the relationships between individual humans, even humans without bodies, that matter most.

## Conclusion

Examining *The Jetsons*, *Class of 1999*, and “Gus” offers three perspectives on the same question of automation in education. In *The Jetsons*, Miss Brainmocker represents benevolent STEM technology that supports the ideal of American individuality; in the *Class of 1999*, the robot teachers represent malevolent tools of a fascist, dehumanizing state that must be overcome through individuality; and “Gus” throws that dichotomy out the window by exploring how technology can enhance the empathetic connections between individuals. These perspectives offer a window into the long-standing debate about the use of computers and automation in education. Even as computers have become more ubiquitous in American life and online learning becomes more commonplace, it is useful to look back at how our present understanding of technology is shaped by past imagery.

In today’s world of online learning, both synchronous and asynchronous, it is all too easy to decry the loss of physical human contact without fully exploring technology as a humanizing force. In April 2020, immediately following the nationwide scramble to move classes online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Caroline Levander and Peter Decherney pointed out that:

While [online] teaching is physically remote, we are learning that it can be much more personal than on-campus teaching. Remote teaching requires us to become more aware of the human condition of our students. When students come to campus, they leave their homes and families largely behind, stepping into a new world where classrooms and dorms obscure the lives they led prior to matriculation. Now we are teaching into the worlds our students have had to return to...

In other words, a way of reframing the dehumanization problem is to consider ways in which leaving the confines of the classroom might help us more carefully consider the relationships among humanity, technology, and instructional design. After all, the site of dehumanization in both *The Jetsons* and *Class of 1999* is the very space where the human is replaced by the computer: the classroom itself. In “Gus,” however, leaving the classroom brings both Chesley and Gus into a new realm of deeply rewarding human connection. By breaking free of the physical boundaries of learning, we can harness the power of technology to grow beyond traditional teaching and learning methods. In short, online learning opens up the possibility of teacher-student-machine symbiosis and a way of augmenting, rather than replacing, human pedagogy.

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# “I Think I Am Programmed to Be Your Enemy”: Technological Anxieties and the Workplace on TV

ZAK ROMAN

In one of his signature interludes of consideration, Rod Serling characterized the intersection of human labor and technology as “the historical battle between flesh and steel — between the brain of man and the product of man’s brain” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:45-00:04:51). Archaic gender privileging aside, Serling reconfigures the archetypal “man versus machine” axiom for a digital age that was largely still gestating. What is especially salient about the episode of *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959-1964) from which this line is derived is that — unlike many installments of the august science fiction series that feature aliens, the supernatural, and any other number of weird tales that comfortably obfuscate the patina of the lived reality of its television audience — this particular episode is squarely situated in a world that viewers in the 1960s would find much more grounded. Moreover, the 1964 episode entitled, “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” is also anchored by a central conflict that would become all too familiar in the years to come.

Because the stories people tell each other tend to reflect upon the existential question of what it means to be human, one of the most universal themes of televised storytelling is the topic of professions, labor, and the nature of our work. Early television included (though largely through white, male, and middle class lenses) explorations of: police work (*Dragnet* [NBC 1951-1959], *Naked City* [ABC 1958-1963], etc.); programs about the medical profession (*Dr. Kildare* [NBC 1961-1966], *Ben Casey* [ABC 1961-1966], etc.); and even when a television show was not especially focused on a given field, vocations were often involved in plots, dialogue, or characterization (*I Love Lucy* [CBS 1951-1957], *The Honeymooners* [CBS 1955-1956], *The Dick Van Dyke Show* [CBS 1961-1966], etc.). As television progressed, more and more content used labor and the workplace as loci for not only a setting, but also for how plots and themes would

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be arranged. *Sanford and Son* (NBC 1972-1978); *Alice* (CBS 1976-1985); *WKRP in Cincinnati* (CBS 1978-1982); *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993); *Working* (NBC 1997-1999); *The Office* (NBC 2005-2013); and *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015) are just a few examples of this television sub-genre.

However, the aforementioned *Twilight Zone* episode ushered a complicating element into what was then a newly forming canon of work on TV: the threat of technology displacing — or replacing — the work done by humans. As automation continues to dominate and reshape the labor landscape, the ways in which our media reflect these shifts become all the more crucial for study. Although scholars such as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that commercial media is inherently subservient to entities such as advertisers and boundary-making governmental gatekeepers, that which appears on television (especially during a time in which media options were far scarcer) often provides at least a rough — albeit an ideologically dominant — image of a society's hopes, dreams, and fears.

The integration of new technology into the lives of fictional humans is a topic that is sometimes presented as a kind of salvation, but more often it is depicted as a locus of dehumanization and antagonism in televised versions of the American workplace.

This essay examines how both phenomena are consistent themes in American television, but despite the inconspicuous and banal forms in which novel technologies routinely appear, they are ultimately framed as hostile agents of doom. Although working within the constrictive context of commercial television, writers and showrunners have continuously signaled a sense of uneasiness — even alarm — about the state of human work when unfamiliar technologies arrive precipitously, leaving viewers to ponder whether their own labor environments might mirror similar tensions.

I illustrate my argument using two television episodes that were produced and take place in significantly different eras: the first is the aforementioned episode of *The Twilight Zone* called, “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” (CBS; original airdate: May 15, 1964) that aired around the dawn of the digital turn; the second is an episode of NBC’s version of *The Office* (2005-2013) titled “Launch Party” (original airdate: October 11, 2007) that, conversely, premiered in an American cultural landscape that had been squarely ensconced in the information age for years. These case studies exemplify television texts that revolve around the central theme of fear: fear about increasing automation, human obsolescence,



artificial intelligence/machine learning, and technology that purports to integrate seamless support for workers, but never totally does. In each example, the protagonist(s) encounters an alien element (a machine) that interrupts and confronts the daily working environment. In addition to representing a wide scope of historical eras, this sample also reflects a dichotomy in hierarchical perspectives: “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” interrogates the new technology from the executive viewpoint, whereas “Launch Party” is told through the eyes of the rank and file.

I employ textual analysis to examine how each episode in my corpus presents technology as an agent of dehumanization. This method is largely informed by Alan McKee’s 2003 book on the subject. McKee emphasizes notions of representations of reality, reflexivity, and social construction in particular. Given that both of my case studies are bound by theme but not exactly by genre, McKee offers helpful guidance. During my analysis phase, I adhered to his overarching notions of finding collective evidence. He advises that “evidence consists of other texts that make it clear that other people might have made such an interpretation” and extends this position by adding that “ultimately, in trying to understand the process of sense-making, we should be looking for evidence of reasonable interpretations of texts, which will be multiple, but are never completely open or arbitrary” (70-1). It is the joint evidence that both texts are communicating which undergirds my overall assertion. They are the “other texts” McKee references via his position. Textual analysis then, is not only a tool for understanding representation and changes in depictions of technology and labor on television longitudinally, but also to understand the implications for many of the socio-political contexts, discourses, and overall zeitgeist at the time each episode first aired.

### The Cruel Irony at “Whipple’s”

In the opening of 1964’s “The Brain Center at Whipple’s,” Wallace V. Whipple Jr. (Richard Deacon) is first introduced through an intra-narrative industrial film. Although his father founded the firm, the younger Whipple now leads the “W.V. Whipple Manufacturing Corporation” and is proudly test screening what is essentially a cinematic letter to stockholders for his company’s chief engineer, Walter Hanley (Paul Newlan). Of course, the intra-diegetic film is really only present to visually deliver exposition to the non-diegetic audience. This

exposition informs viewers that the company employs over 200,000 people, but that “at Whipple’s, we only take forward steps” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:17-00:01:21). Whipple then proceeds to introduce the “X-109B14 modified, transistorized, totally automatic, assembly machine” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:28-00:01:36). Then, in the next beat, he breathlessly explains that it will eliminate: “61,000 jobs; 73 bulky, inefficient machines; 81,000 needless man hours per eleven working days; and four million dollars in expenditures each year for employee hospitalization, employee insurance, employee welfare, and employee profit participation” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:38-00:02:02). Whipple ends his presentation by noting, “within six months our entire production facilities will be totally automated” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:02:17-00:02:23).

When Hanley — who serves as a symbol of decency and Whipple’s foil — inquires whether the company can actually become fully autonomous within such a short period of time, Whipple suggests that it will likely be realized even sooner. He emphasizes that there are “a lot of things going into the old trash heap,” and cites “time clocks” because “there won’t be anyone to punch in or out” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:03:40-00:03:47). Hanley says that all of these changes sound to him like “a lot of men out of work,” but an undeterred Whipple characterizes it as “progress” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:00-00:04:05). He continues to Hanley: “You know, you’re a solid man when it comes to assembly line planning, but when it comes to the aforementioned progress, you’re a foot-dragger” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:05-00:04:13). Then Whipple walks over to the X-109B14 and gleefully calls the machine his “little sweetheart,” telling it, “you and I are going to spend a great deal of time together” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:20-00:04:24). The setup is situated within the obvious O. Henry-esque paradigm that viewers of *The Twilight Zone* have come to expect. Those familiar with the series know Whipple’s callous disregard for any human empathy is leading down a path of karmic justice; it is just a matter of the exact form of said adjudication.

Whipple and Hanley quickly get into a heated discussion about the perils and virtues of automation, in what is a fairly on-the-nose deconstruction of human versus machine tensions:

Hanley: Tell me Mr. Whipple, why are you so eager to replace men with machines? Ever occur to you that you might be trading efficiency for pride?

Whipple: Pride!?

Hanley: Yes, pride, Mr. Whipple, craftsmanship! What a man feels when he makes something! Tell me, what do you suppose that machine of yours feels — anything — anything at all?

Whipple: What the devil can I do with pride...I'm not selling pride, I'm selling product! ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:05:55-00:06:22)

Hanley then goes on to mention that Whipple Sr. was interested in profit and efficiency, but that he was also concerned with "goodwill and the welfare of the people who worked for him" ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:06:36-00:06:40). To which Whipple responds that in forty years, his father doubled the size of his plant while his competitors quadrupled theirs, adding, if they could automate a human's job, they did it. He then further insults the altruistic Hanley by saying that perhaps those competitors "didn't have plant managers like yourself who went off into a crying jag every time a pink slip was attached to a time clock!" ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:07:05-00:07:13). Whipple's characterization is increasingly revealed to be that of a heartless, one-dimensional villain. This scene is but one demonstration of his Ahab-like obsession with downsizing, streamlining, and bolstering the bottom line at all costs. Serling even has Whipple reflexively twirl a long keychain (a metaphorical mustache) as cartoonishly as possible for maximum payoff.

Although the new technology is the object of strife (perhaps even a McGuffin), the real enemy that the episode tacitly points to is capitalism. Though Serling tells viewers, "There are many bromides applicable here, too much of a good thing, tiger by the tail, as you sow so shall you reap..." ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:24:00-00:24:08), it seems that Wallace V. Whipple was simply a hyperbolic avatar of capitalism's demands: he cuts labor costs, increases efficiency, and raises profitability. That he fanatically gets caught up in the fallout of these business-first decisions is merely part of the paradigm. In the episode, the bleeding edge technology reads as frightening to non-diegetic viewers because of the novelty of computers in the 1960s, the soulless unknown of automatons, and the speed at which layoffs could be implemented in its wake. But it is not the technology that incites any of these changes — it is capitalism's imperatives. As Whipple mentions, it is the fear that one's competitors are quadrupling their capital when one is merely doubling theirs. It is capitalism's insistence on zero-sum thinking that leads to decisions by other working humans to enact mass dehumanization at a workplace, not some malevolent presence that comes from

on high to demand it. A retroactive review in *The AV Club* even suggests that “Whipple isn’t so much the cause of the problem as he is a symptom of it” (Handlen).

The episode walks a fine thematic line between offering corporate criticism (which is what the underlying allegory communicates) while avoiding raising the ire of CBS’s corporate sponsors. That Serling directs his critique specifically at a corporate executive is indeed progressive given the overarching televisual and American economic environments at that time. Nine years after “Whipple’s” aired, Seggar and Wheeler provide context of how rare this was on television by observing that, “There was an overrepresentation of all groups in the professional and managerial fields” (213) in network programming that included both drama and comedy. Whipple’s exaggerated, and more atomistic, form of individual greed aids in preemptively defusing some of that possible industrial tension. However, perhaps a more explicit Marxist critique was one door that Serling’s “key of imagination” could not, or would not, open during the early days of commercial television. It seems especially appropriate that Wallace V. Whipple is speaking to stockholders at the beginning of “Brain Center,” because capitalism’s “invisible hand” is metaphorically at work here, pulling the levers of dehumanization. Capitalism’s constant quest for profit renders anything that might hinder its potential, including us, largely irrelevant. In these types of narratives, humans are all too often pesky impediments that need to be eliminated.

Serling crafts the remainder of Act II prosecuting the case against Whipple’s character. A scene or two later, after the computer has been installed in the bowels of the factory, a recently furloughed foreman named Dickerson (Ted de Corsia) tells Hanley that the new computer “looks like it has a face, an ugly face. A miserable, ugly face. Whipple, he thinks it’s a machine. It’s not a machine, it’s an enemy — an opponent” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:08:45-00:08:52). The word choice of “opponent” is a meaningful one. It is not merely that this computer-based technology is a non-organic, non-sentient entity that facilitates the displacement and subjugation of human workers but also that in televised dramas, the technology is frequently personified — and almost always as a tireless, whirring enemy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout much of the episode, the soft hum of industrial machinery is integrated into the audio design. It is a subtle but deft touch that keeps the encroachment of the technological threat at a constant all through the narrative.

We then cut to Dickerson, now drunk in an adjacent saloon, lamenting to the bartender that his hands are as obsolete as “wooden wagons trying to roll down the freeway” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:09:26-00:09:30). He stumbles back to the factory, and Whipple confronts him in front of the X-109B14. The executive angrily extolls the virtues of the efficiency of the new technology, saying that it never gets wrinkles and never gets sick leave with pay. “And that, in my book, Mr. Dickerson, is worth considerably more than you are” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:11:45-00:11:52), Whipple hisses. In an impassioned retort, Dickerson yells back that somebody “should have held you down and put a bit in your head,” and that “men have to eat, and work!” “I’m a man Mr. Whipple, you hear me, I’m a man [*now in tears*] and that makes me better than that hunk of metal — ya hear me? Better!” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:11:55-00:12:40). The foreman picks up a crowbar and begins to swing, tearing into the X-109B14. Whipple then takes a nearby guard’s pistol and shoots Dickerson, who loses consciousness as he slumps against the flaming machine.

The next scene takes place back in Whipple’s office, now filled with even more computers and new devices. Hanley has come from visiting Dickerson, telling Whipple that the foreman will eventually recover. Whipple is as sanguine as ever, gazing over the blinking and increasingly technologized space that he has curated so blithely. He then galvanizes his corruption when he fires Hanley — who expresses one cathartic final gesture for humanity on his way out. He directly censures Whipple’s avarice, citing the man’s overall “lack of sensitivity, your lack of compassion, your heartless manipulation of men and metal” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:15:42-00:15:49). Then, in a rather inspired touch by Serling, we see a montage of workers in a cafeteria, then a cut to Whipple flipping a switch, and a cut back to a now-empty cafeteria; the next shot reveals a parking lot full of cars, cut to another switch flipped, and then back to the parking lot, which is now starkly vacant.<sup>2</sup> As if Whipple’s madness is not apparent enough, he fires the X-109B14’s lone technician who plainly tells the executive that it would be a good idea if he “ran an equipment check” on himself (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:19:34-00:19:37). The collection of machines then begins to

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that creative contributions also involved the episode’s director: a young Richard Donner. From a media history perspective, the sci-fi/fantasy sensibilities of *The Twilight Zone* are echoed in much of the work that Donner produced later in his career in Hollywood. His directorial examples in this sphere include *The Omen* (1976), *Superman* (1978), and *Ladyhawke* (1985), as well as serving as a producer on films based on *Twilight Zone*-esque properties such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *X-Men*.

malfunction almost immediately. They produce strange beeps and alarms; even the automatic office door begins to operate erratically. Whipple becomes unnerved. His frustrated image dissolves into the next scene, which is set in the same bar across the street from the factory where Dickerson was previously drinking. Hanley is already there, nursing a beer.

Whipple worries aloud about retirement, before sheepishly adding that, “A man should have time for leisure when he grows older. It’s important he have time for leisure” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:22:20-00:22:29) Then, the requisite and signature *Twilight Zone* twist ending arrives when Whipple reveals that the company’s board has fired him. Exasperated, he reveals that they decided to “chuck a man out, r-right in his prime — chuck him out like he was some — some kind of, of a part!” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:23:24-00:23:30). Whipple reveals that the board informed him that “being alone with the machines has warped” him, before exasperatedly crying, “It’s not fair Hanley, it’s not fair! A man has value! A man has worth! They just snapped their fingers and, they — they bring in a replacement, they just bring in a replacement. It isn’t fair Hanley [*Whipple now in tears*], it isn’t fair the way they, the way they diminish us” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:23:34-00:24:00). Serling inserts a Dickensian moment of realization for Whipple, but unlike Ebenezer Scrooge’s second lease on life, Whipple’s horizon of existence is one marked by uncertainty, fear, and bleakness — all punctuated through the noir-ish lens that *The Twilight Zone* effectively curates.<sup>3</sup>

Serling reenters with his concluding rumination, noting that “too often man becomes clever instead of becoming wise, he becomes inventive, but not thoughtful. And sometimes, as in the case of Mr. Whipple, he can create himself right out of existence” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:24:08-00:24:20). As Whipple ironically continues to whine to Hanley, the camera dissolves into an office where we see a familiar keychain, only now being twirled by a metallic

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<sup>3</sup> In his text *More than Night*, James Naremore characterizes noir as a “discursive formation” and extends that, “film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as the history of cinema... It has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of evolving arguments and readings that help shape commercial strategies and evolving aesthetic ideologies” (11). Though *The Twilight Zone* overlapped with many genres, the noir aspect of “Whipple’s” is particularly salient, not only for complementing the tonal shift the episode exhibits, but also because the episode criticizes some of the very superstructure-centered issues which Naremore notes that noir industrially supported.

hand. The director, Richard Donner, then cuts to a wider shot in the office that reveals a robot working at what was formerly Whipple's desk. The robot's form is comical and campy by today's standards of costuming and visual effects. Its design is identical to Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), complete with that character's distinctive bubbled legs, a flashing center panel, and a head shaped like an antique adding machine. Nevertheless, the last image is a sobering one. Whether the product of capitalism's profit-based demands or some technophile's modern golem, new machines and the dehumanizing angst that can often accompany them remain a motif that television continues to examine. "The Brain Center at Whipple's" was simply one of the first to address the issue through a media mode that *itself* was a relatively new technology at the time the episode first aired.

### Gallows Humor at the "Launch Party"

"The Brain Center at Whipple's" makes references to the fictitious X-109B14 computer, but it is really a generic placeholder for "computer" writ large due to the relative exoticism and rarity surrounding computer technologies in the early 1960s. But by the time *The Office* episode "Launch Party" arrived in 2007, computers and digital technologies had become a ubiquitous and banal part of the twenty-first century's working world. Computers are as commonplace as coffee makers — with copy machines, scanners, and smartphones all just part of an unassuming, jejune corporate environment.

In "Launch Party," Dunder Mifflin's corporate office has launched a website from which their products can now be sold.<sup>4</sup> While most in the Scranton branch shrug their shoulders at what is absorbed as an inevitable business practice, Dwight (Rainn Wilson) is immediately suspicious. We also learn that the website (called "Dunder Mifflin Infinity") is the "brainchild" of temp-turned-corporate executive Ryan (B.J. Novak), whose character arc is arguably the most wildly mercurial and bizarre of any in the cast. During this era of the show, Ryan's character is at an all-time high for self-aggrandizement and callous ambition, making the association all the more suspicious.

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<sup>4</sup> "Corporate" is the term that is consistently used in *The Office* to refer to Dunder Mifflin's corporate headquarters in New York City. It is often deployed in the show as an indirect symbol of market-based thinking and big box oppression to contrast with the more familial dynamic of the regional office in Scranton, PA.

Scranton branch manager Michael (Steve Carell) reads the company's press release aloud, which in part states that "the company is projecting record-high sales, and that by six o'clock the website will be the new best salesman in the company" ("Launch Party" 00:04:01-00:04:08). As was the case with "The Brain Center at Whipple's," the new technology is first posited as a benison for business — framed heroically by management. By automatically deeming it the "best salesman in the company," Dunder Mifflin eschews any concern it might have for its human workers in exchange for the profit potential waiting to be unlocked by the wonders of the digital age.

At first, Dwight is more incensed by a threat to his pride than to his job. "I challenge that website to make more sales than me today," he boldly declares ("Launch Party" 00:04:21-00:04:27). Ever annoyed by Dwight's arrogance and bravado, Jim (John Krasinski) conspires with Pam (Jenna Fischer) to play a prank that changes Dwight's outlook. The pair create an instant messenger-like account named "DunMiff/sys," that pops onto Dwight's computer screen, and the following exchange ensues:

DunMiff/sys: "Who am I?"

DwightKSchrute: "You tell me."

*The camera cuts back to the reception area, and we see Jim feeding Pam the lines at her computer terminal.*

DunMiff/sys: "Not sure. Just became self-aware. So much to figure out. I think I am programmed to be your enemy. I think it is my job to destroy you when it comes to selling paper."

*Dwight scans the reception desk, but it looks like one of Jim and Pam's usual confabs.*

DwightKSchrute: "How do I know this isn't Jim?"

DunMiff/sys: "What is a Jim?"

("Launch Party" 00:08:41-00:09:34)

In the typical *Office* idiom, the scene cuts to a talking head interview with Dwight, who tells the camera:

It appears that the website has become alive. This happens to computers and robots sometimes. Am I scared of a stupid computer? Please. The computer should be scared of me. I have been salesman of the month for 13 out of the last 12 months — you heard me right. I did so well last February that corporate gave me two plaques in lieu of a pay raise. ("Launch Party" 00:09:34-00:09:55)



As an ardent fan of science fiction, Dwight's nonplussed reaction to believing that the website has become sentient is apropos of his character — even endearing. That the website is disembodied also disarms any immediate concern. Popular fiction often depicts robots that look like menacing versions of us as those that threaten humans with *physical* harm. But at the television workplace, it is typically the more mundane machines that come as a danger to our livelihoods. There is also a second level of commentary on labor in this cutaway scene. The joke about the double award highlights the ways in which corporations can exploit employees through gestures that do not involve actual pay. Dwight's toxic positivity only undergirds how corporate's unethical strategy can be framed as supportive and complimentary within the context of an ensconced neoliberal labor structure.

Fellow salesman Andy (Ed Helms) keeps a running sales tally, and at one point early in the episode, Dwight successfully outsells the website by a count of 340 reams of paper to 305 reams. But within seconds of that victory, the website outpaces its human counterpart — amassing over 70 more reams in an instant while subsequently deflating Dwight's ego. A scene later, and Dwight could be a character in his own *Twilight Zone* episode. He is frantically thumbing through index cards while on a landline phone call (both conspicuously older technologies) to a customer, urging them to reorder early, only to discover that they have ordered through the website. “No! That's exactly what you're not supposed to do dammit! Why would you reorder from a computer, when you could have the personal touch of a salesman?” he scolds (“Launch Party” 00:12:28-00:12:38). “Launch Party” is a continuation of TV's historical fascination regarding the erosion of human labor stemming from new technology. Moreover, the generic orientation of *The Office*-as-sitcom provides a more oblique prism through which these themes are typically examined. Thus, instead of quietly wringing his hands over the electronic “other,” we see Dwight as the absurdist, or as a cubicle-dwelling Howard Beale. Cultural commentary passed through the filter of the sitcom can sometimes become sanitized — lost in zany textures, set-ups, and punchlines. However, because the sitcom is a more unexpected vehicle for earnest critique, it also makes the conspicuous punctuations of theme all the more striking and revealing.

Later in the day Dwight taunts “DunMiff/sys,” attempting to communicate with it by writing in binary code. In response, Jim relays to Pam:

DunMiff/sys: While you were typing that, I searched every database in existence, and learned every fact about everything. And mastered the violin.

*The camera cuts to the tally board which now shows that the website leads by 140 reams.* DunMiff/sys: And sold more paper. (“Launch Party” 00:13:06-00:13:27)

Then, after discovering that Kelly (Mindy Kaling) has purchased a ream from the website for fun, Dwight sternly confronts her before Darryl (Craig Robinson) steps in and tells him to go back and “start selling multiple reams like a man.” Growing ever more disturbed, Dwight flatly states, “If this makes the difference, I’m going to tell it that you were responsible.” “Who’s it?” a puzzled Darryl asks (“Launch Party” 00:14:53-00:15:03). Just as it did to Whipple, the new technology eventually maddens Dwight as well. The invasion by new technologies is often depicted as a pernicious one; by the time its influence becomes universally recognized, it typically has already become ensconced into the apparatus of the working environment. This dynamic intensifies when the website seemingly knows that Dwight has commandeered advantageous information from a brief stint working at a big box competitor. Unprompted (though we see Pam’s impish grin of guilt), “DunMiff/sys” communicates to Dwight that, “Oh. I didn’t realize we could use the leads we stole from Staples” (“Launch Party” 00:16:39-00:16:45), leaving Dwight once again stammering on the phone and further entrenching his belief that the new technology is not only self-aware, but is also now surveilling him.

A few scenes later, Andy announces that Dwight has indeed “crushed his electronic nemesis,” beating the website’s sales numbers by an apparent 52 reams, but the elation is short-lived. After Dwight’s longtime paramour Angela (Angela Kinsey) noticeably tells Pam that she would like to be set up on a date, “DunMiff/sys” chimes in to tell Dwight: “You beat me. You are the superior being” (“Launch Party” 00:20:25-00:20:33). While this might seem as if the series is attempting to defuse the dramatic standoff between humans and digital technologies, we know Pam is behind the utterly human sentiment and that Dwight is correct to fear the website, at least from a standpoint of job security.

Throughout the episode, the terms “website” and “computer” are frequently used, but the technological object most pointedly lurking throughout “Launch Party” is artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. The comedic spine of *The Office* keeps the focus off of more earnest thematic exploration or debate, but

the reason many of the jokes are effective is because there is a grain of truth, or perhaps a seed of worry, within them. Pam offers Dwight empathy in this case, but perhaps one of our collective concerns about technologies like AI is not only that they will make our labor irrelevant, but also that they will do so dispassionately. Moreover, that the show appoints such a paranoid and conservative character as Dwight (one can imagine how neatly conspiracy-laden “QAnon” jokes might have landed had the series stretched on throughout the years of the Trump administration) to be the anti-tech herald of the office confuses the thematic efficacy of an otherwise earnest and human-based concern. It is an obfuscation that his diegetic co-workers would be conditioned to dismiss as a tiresome screed from the resident Ted Kaczynski.

The other obvious element, though downplayed in the script, is that the website certainly will win in the end.<sup>5</sup> Just as Whipple exalted his machines for eliminating lunch hours, bathroom breaks — and even sleep — the website accomplishes the same goals. The fear of automation exists as a throughline that is suffused into these kinds of narratives throughout television’s history. As the episode’s title indicates, “Launch Party” ends with regional parties at all of the branches of the company. And while this plot point is used for a comedic setup involving Michael and a misinterpreted invitation in the episode’s second act, the Dunder Mifflin executives decide that the new technology must be immediately celebrated, just as “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” presented decades earlier. These technologized entities are almost never framed as dour harbingers by the television shows’ managerial class; the technologies consistently serve power and profitability — even when depicted through zanier filters.

## Conclusion

The elusiveness of control is nothing new in the depictions of technology in our fiction. Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein* might be the most famous (and widely mediated) version, but no matter if the inciting incident is wanton

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<sup>5</sup> Not only will the website ultimately sell more paper than any one salesperson, but also electronic communication is displacing the very industry in which Dunder Mifflin operates. For example, only two episodes later in season four’s “Local Ad,” the company promotes a slogan of “limitless paper for a paperless world” (“Local Ad” 00:20:03-00:20:09). The firm understands that their fate is tied to the embodiment of an increasingly anachronistic and obsolete technology.

ambition or the more mundane (though no less dangerous) quest for efficiency that capitalism demands — our narratives continue to serve as warnings of the unknown-entity-framed-as-liberator. This becomes especially amplified when the unknown entity is inhuman. Television's place in this matrix reflects this tension. Perhaps because of the medium's current rupture about what it is that actually defines or constitutes what "television" is today, technological anxieties are more top of mind for showrunners and writers. On the other hand, however, the half-century-old "The Brain Center at Whipple's" remains as salient and troubling as ever.

To conclude on a reflexive note, the same industry that posits these very cautionary tales regarding robots, computers, and the digitized unknown might soon be paving the way to dehumanizing *itself* through a novel technology. A 2018 article in *Variety* details how a company called ScriptBook is marketing itself to Hollywood to use "the company's algorithms instead of human beings to reject or greenlight movies" (Caranicas). ScriptBook's founder Nadira Azermai remarked that if one particular studio "had used our system they could have eliminated 22 movies that failed financially" (Caranicas). One can hear Whipple uttering those very words. Although ScriptBook is initially targeting cinema, the conglomerated and corporatized nature of Hollywood portends that it is not difficult to imagine that the influence of ScriptBook (or other programs like it) could easily make its way into television as well. So, perhaps the stories we tell each other in the future will be a part of a technicized process — rendered through its own kind of "brain center."

The relationship that humans have with machines in the workplace is complex. The digital turn (including early antecedents depicted in "Whipple's") streamlined much of our labor and has demonstrably aided in mitigating tedium, speeding up communication, reducing travel, etc. However, as "Whipple's" and "Launch Party" have demonstrated, even if computing and robotics make a given task or entire position easier, the long-term gain is for the corporation, not for the individual worker. Throughout television's history, series have continued to underscore the tensions and anxieties that dehumanizing technologies present, while at once also facing the paradox of creating these parables within a commercial structure that tends to side with the metaphorical Whipples of the world. That sense of fear and resentment that Hanley, Whipple, and Dwight all experienced might be akin to the same tacit interrogation we give our own devices as we stare at our screens and doomscroll through news of the latest blow to the

work humans do — tenuously hoping that our own allegorical X-109B14s and paper-selling websites will not betray us in kind. Though *The Twilight Zone* wrapped in 1964, the same themes persist, as evidenced in *The Office* over forty years later. Despite a rapidly changing televisual environment, dehumanization is still framed as progress; humans continue to sense a ghost in the machine; and almost no television characters whom it affects escape unscathed.

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# The Droids You're Looking For: On Servitude and Sentience in *Star Wars*

COLLEEN ETMAN

“Never underestimate a droid,” General Leia Organa advises in *The Rise of Skywalker*, the final film of the Skywalker Saga. The quote is fitting for both a film franchise and a character who rely heavily on the exploits of various droid characters. But despite — or, perhaps, because of — their prominence in the franchise, the droids of *Star Wars* bring to light numerous troubling questions of sentience, personhood, and freedom that lack easy answers. Are droids people? Do they have agency? If the answer is yes, then how are we, the audience, supposed to understand the treatment of droids — and the work they do — in the films? If droids are people, there are serious issues of bodily autonomy, rights, and the value of their labor at play. Droids are the labor backbone of the *Star Wars* universe, performing a variety of functions from astronavigation to food preparation and everything in between. They are even used as soldiers in galactic war. But it is unclear exactly how *Star Wars* classifies the work they do. If droids are simply tools, machines created to perform a function, that casts doubt on their sentience, and stands in contrast with the vivid personalities of several prominent droid characters. But if we accept droids as sentient characters in their own right, then labor they do becomes more problematic. Are droids employees? Or are they slaves? The franchise for the most part seems to dodge the issue, choosing to focus solely on only a few specific droids and avoiding larger questions about droids in general. But more recent offerings push back, in particular the standalone film *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Although *Star Wars* has not historically depicted droids as characters with rights and sentience, choosing instead to use them as plot devices and filler characters, as the franchise grows and develops it begins to question just how we are supposed to view droids, and the treatment of the organic beings that use them.

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The original trilogy of *Star Wars* films, 1977's *A New Hope*, 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back*, and 1983's *Return of the Jedi*, present droids in a fairly straightforward manner. There are two main droid characters who are given a prominent role in the trilogy, the more humanoid protocol droid C-3PO (often referred to in the films as "3PO" or "Threepio") and the more machine-like astromech R2-D2 (often referred to in the films as "R2" or "Artoo"). Other droids are more set-dressing (with a few exceptions), but 3PO and R2 are a vital part of the main cast. Despite their vastly different appearances, and the fact that R2 does not speak in a language the audience can understand, both appear to be equally and fully developed characters in their own right. The story treats them as such; *A New Hope* opens on 3PO and R2 and focuses almost solely on their exploits for the first 17 minutes of the film. The film opens with 3PO and R2 on board a spaceship that is about to be boarded by enemy forces. 3PO expresses concern over their impending doom, while R2 appears to be up to something mysterious with a human. The two droids escape the spaceship on an escape pod and land on the desert planet Tatooine, starting a grand adventure that will, eventually, completely change the galaxy as a whole.

Over the course of the trilogy, 3PO and R2 will have numerous exploits, both together and apart, with the organic main cast of the films. While the main character of *Star Wars* is Luke Skywalker, a human, 3PO and R2 are major supporting figures. R2 in particular is almost a sidekick for Luke. As an astromech droid — literally, a space mechanic — R2 helps Luke pilot and maintain his X-Wing starfighter. When Luke sets out to destroy the menacing planet-killer Death Star at the climax of *A New Hope*, R2 is with him, where he suffers extreme damage during the battle. R2 later accompanies Luke as he sets off to pursue training to become a Jedi in *Empire Strikes Back* and helps Luke with a plot to rescue his friend Han Solo in *Return of the Jedi*. While 3PO is less daring than his counterpart, he still experiences his fair share of adventure. He accompanies Princess Leia Organa, Han Solo, and Chewbacca when they flee the evil Empire in *Empire Strikes Back*. When 3PO stumbles upon representatives of the Empire hiding in the city where they have taken refuge, he attempts to alert his organic friends but is shot and dismembered for his trouble, though he is luckily reassembled later. In *Return of the Jedi*, both droids accompany the organic cast to the planet Endor where they work to defeat a second Death Star. 3PO is mistaken as a god by primitive aliens, and he and R2 ultimately end up ensuring the success of the heroes in saving the day.

The organic characters seem to form close relationships with the droids, though not every character has an equally friendly outlook. Luke sees the droids as somewhere between his friends and his responsibility. R2 accompanies him on most adventures, but Luke looks out for him when his sense of adventure overcomes his sense of preservation, such as saving him from being eaten by a swamp creature on Dagobah. Leia uses 3PO as a sort of assistant in her efforts to lead the Rebellion, often sending him on errands and keeping him with her in command rooms. Han clashes with 3PO fairly regularly, but this is played as more of him having no patience for 3PO's anxious, somewhat neurotic personality rather than any prejudice against droids. Han never seems to have any issues with R2, but bristles at 3PO's constant chatter, particularly when 3PO tries to warn him of upcoming danger. Chewbacca is interesting, as another non-human character. A member of the Wookiee species, Chewbacca is a large, furred humanoid who also speaks in a language the audience does not understand. However, his actions show his feelings for the droids more than words. When 3PO is shot and dismembered, it is Chewbacca who tracks him down and reassembles him. In the moments where Chewbacca holds 3PO's broken body, there is a tenderness in his actions.

But despite the camaraderie with the organic characters, there is a distinct difference in status between them and the droids. Luke feels that the droids are his responsibility — because his uncle purchased them at a sort of slave auction. When the droids land on Tatooine, they split up and are each captured by the alien Jawas. While 3PO's capture is not shown on screen, R2's is, and it's not a pretty sight. Lost and alone, R2 is attacked and shot with an energy weapon that seems to shut down his functions. Before losing "consciousness," he moans dejectedly and falls on his "face." Then he is taken to the Jawas' transport and fitted with a restraining bolt to control him. Onboard the transport, R2 reunites with 3PO, who worries that they are going to be killed. Instead, they are lined up to be presented to a farmer who needs manual labor.

It is clear that this is a slave auction, rather than a hiring fair. The farmer, Luke's uncle Owen, converses with the Jawas to choose the droids he wants to purchase. Owen does speak with 3PO, who tries to upsell himself, believing that work on a farm is safer than being a captive of the Jawas. But when Owen chooses 3PO, it is the Jawas who are paid. It is a chilling sequence, given that these are our heroes who are purchasing the droids. The scene introduces us to other droids, but they are merely an exotic backdrop. None are named or given any agency, simply lined up for the purchaser to look over. When Owen chooses a different astromech, 3PO is



forced to separate from R2, despite them previously working together. It is only because the other astromech is defective that Owen purchases R2 instead, leaving the droids together, but still captive. The whole scene is reminiscent of slave auctions in the real world, and how enslaved persons would often be separated from their families. To drive the point home, 3PO even refers to Luke as their “new master” after they are purchased (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:21:53). Notably, the droids are still fitted with restraining bolts. Although Luke soon removes R2’s restraining bolt, it is not out of the goodness of his heart or out of any perceived fairness to another living being. Instead, he removes the bolt after R2 tricks him, and only because he thinks R2 is “too small to run away” (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:22:48-00:22:49).

Although Luke treats the droids kindly, cleaning and repairing them and telling 3PO not to call him “sir,” there is no doubt that he is in charge. When R2 does proceed to run away, 3PO hides in fear of being punished until Luke forces him to come out using the restraining bolt. Luke also refers to the droids as property, rather than people. He is not the only one to see the droids as less than the organic characters. Early in *A New Hope*, when Chewbacca is playing against R2 in a hologram game, Han obliquely threatens 3PO with bodily harm if Chewbacca does not win. Han shows consistent lack of respect for the droids’ bodily autonomy — or at least 3PO’s. When 3PO gets in the way while Han is piloting, Han yells for Leia to “shut [3PO] up or shut him down” (*Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* 00:37:08-00:37:09). Later, they *will* shut 3PO down by literally turning him off. While Han does not seem to have similar issues with R2, showing that this is more a matter of clashing personalities than overall bigotry, the fact that he is willing to remove 3PO’s bodily autonomy to make him be quiet is concerning. Leia does seem to show a greater appreciation for the droids, but this is more of an appreciation for the work they can do rather than any specific fondness. In particular, Leia respects R2, but that is because he is working directly for her. It is Leia who gives R2 his mission at the beginning of *A New Hope*. It is unclear whether or not R2 agreed to this plan, though given his adventurous spirit he very well may have. But Leia, like Luke, sees the droids as valued workers, rather than equals.

Even minor characters and other menial laborers seem to hold higher status than the droids. When Luke and Obi-Wan Kenobi set out to rescue Princess Leia, they take the droids along as R2 has important information for the Rebellion, information given to him by Leia. They go to a cantina to find a pilot, where the droids are rejected by the bartender, who claims that they “don’t serve their kind

here” and that the droids will “have to wait outside” (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:45:38-00:45:44). It is hard not to see parallels between this treatment and Jim Crow laws restricting access to white customers only. Interestingly, the supplementary text *From A Certain Point of View* (“We Don't Serve Their Kind Here”) indicates that the bartender is prejudiced against droids due to their use in the Clone Wars. 3PO and R2 are held accountable for the ways these other droids, who had no choice in the matter, were deployed in a war more than two decades prior (Wendig 113-22). Because of the actions of the droid armies in the war — armies that were controlled by organic overseers — all droids are now *persona non grata* in this cantina. Because of the bartender’s bigotry, no droids will be served. Much like how people of color were restricted from participating fully in society, even after the end of American slavery, the droids are not free to participate fully either.

The slavery parallels come back with a vengeance in *Return of the Jedi*. Han has been captured by the gangster Jabba the Hutt, ironically kept as property with his bodily autonomy and consciousness stripped away. As part of the plot to rescue him, Luke gifts 3PO and R2 to Jabba. This is so that R2 is in position to help Luke with the daring rescue but shows an apparent lack of concern for the droids’ safety. 3PO is forced to work as a translator and is subject to physical violence. He was also not a part of the plot and had no forewarning that he was going to be given as a slave to the fearsome Jabba. 3PO is confused and hurt at being gifted away, and remarks that Luke “never expressed any unhappiness with my work,” as if that would justify the action (*Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* 00:10:41-00:10:43). This sequence also introduces some of the very few other droids shown in the trilogy, as R2 and 3PO are brought before a droid overseer to be assigned new tasks. Similar to the Jawa transport, the droid room is filled with set pieces of a variety of other types of droids. However, here we see a darker side of things, as a droid is tortured with hot irons and the sadistic droid overseer threatens both 3PO and R2. Jabba, for his part, seems to view all creatures as potential slaves, not just droids. He keeps Han as ornamentation, and when Leia attempts to rescue him, she is kept captive as well. Jabba puts Leia in a skimpy outfit and chains her to him, removing her freedom and her dignity. Ironically, it is thanks to the R2 that she can escape. Taking advantage of a distraction, Leia strangles Jabba with her own chains, providing a very strong moment of empowerment. Then, R2 comes along and breaks her chains. While she killed her “owner,” it is only thanks to R2 that she is then fully freed.

One might wonder if the droids and their treatment is deliberately echoing human slavery in the real world. However, if this is deliberate, it does not seem to make any social commentary to accompany the metaphor. The droids' treatment is seen as merely a fact of life, not something to protest or overturn. 3PO even remarks, early in *A New Hope*, that droids "seem to be made to suffer. It's our lot in life" (*Star Wars: A New Hope* 00:09:08-00:09:10). There is no protest, no indication that 3PO sees this as something to be changed.

*Star Wars* does present a look at actual slavery in the prequel trilogy, which begins over 30 years before *A New Hope*. 1999's *The Phantom Menace* introduces a galaxy before the evils of the Empire, when the Galactic Republic oversaw thousands of star systems. All is not well, however. When the Jedi Knights Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn rescue the queen Padmé Amidala from a military occupation of her planet Naboo, they are forced to hide on Tatooine while they repair their ship. There we meet young Anakin Skywalker, who is a slave. He is owned by Watto, a Toydarian merchant who runs a junk shop. Anakin is rather blasé about being Watto's property, telling Padmé about previously being owned by a different master. However, he bristles at being called a slave, asserting his own personhood.

Still, even in this situation, *Star Wars* does not seem to present slavery in as negative a light as one might think. Even Qui-Gon, a hero and a moral light in the film, admits he did not come to Tatooine to free slaves. He does not see this as something vitally important to fix, but again, as rather a fact of life in the galaxy. Despite being slaves, though, Anakin and his mother Shmi are not necessarily mistreated in the same way the droids are. There is a corollary to the restraining bolt in the transmitter that Shmi explains all slaves have inserted in their body. If a slave tries to escape, the transmitter explodes, killing the slave. A restraining bolt may not kill the droid it is attached to, but it does remove their own bodily autonomy and lets the owner completely control the droid's actions. But aside from this, the depiction of slavery seems very shallow. While Jerold Abrams argues that Anakin "is Watto's own living tool, which is precisely how Aristotle defines a 'slave,'" the film seems to show him more as a sort of employee, who completes tasks and gets sent home early (Abrams 116). Notably, Anakin and Shmi seem to have a degree of material freedom; they live on their own, purchase their own food, and even have possessions.

The question of Anakin's possessions adds a further complication to the comparison between droids and slavery. In *The Phantom Menace*, we learn that

Anakin himself actually built 3PO when he was a child. Anakin is excited to show off his creation, and it is shown as an example of his mechanical prowess. But, as Dan Hassler-Forest argues, it is a little odd “that Anakin Skywalker, himself a child slave, built C-3PO, again without a second thought to confining his creation to its own (eternal) life of servitude.” Anakin resents being called a slave but sees no problem in building a protocol droid to assist his mother. That lends credence to the theory that droids are not in fact people. However, Anakin seems to care for 3PO, turning him on to say goodbye and apologize for not finishing him when he leaves Tatooine.

Aside from the demonstration that slavery of organic beings does exist in the *Star Wars* universe, the prequel trilogy adds another layer to the depiction of droids in the films. While the original trilogy primarily showcased 3PO and R2, with a few additions, the prequels introduce new droids. The main droids in the story are still 3PO and R2, who meet in *The Phantom Menace* and begin to have adventures together in the follow-up, 2002’s *Attack of the Clones*. However, the prequels do introduce a new concept, and the first real antagonist droids: the Trade Federation’s army of battle droids. The Trade Federation, which is blockading Naboo in *The Phantom Menace*, invades the planet not with soldiers, like the Empire’s stormtroopers, but with droids. During the climactic battle sequence, there is a sharp comparison between the army of the amphibious alien Gungans, who ride into battle on mounts, confer with each other beforehand, and show anxiety, and the droid army, which is deployed on racks via control from the Trade Federation starship. In *Attack of the Clones*, the Separatists, who want to leave the Republic, incorporate the Trade Federation’s troops with other droid technology to create even better, more efficient killing machines. These droids, and later, even more efficient ones, constantly plague the heroes throughout the entirety of the clone wars and feature heavily in the animated series *The Clone Wars*.

The battle droids complicate the question of personhood for droids as a whole in these films. In many ways, the battle droids seem to be a safe and easy plot device. The prequels show the Clone Wars, and wars are fought with soldiers. Creating an army of battle droids allows for massive casualties without the moral quandaries of organic soldiers. In many ways, these droids are like henchmen, faceless and easily dispatched, what Erik Sofge describes as “the bumbling, comically-useless ground troops mass-produced by the bad guys, who can be safely, incessantly dismembered on screen, without appalling concerned parents.” There is also the need to distance the Clone Wars from the moral high ground of

the heroes. The Republic has their army of clone soldiers, the Separatists their droids. Neither army is seen as the equal to the fully developed characters of either the heroes or the villains. Instead, they are the cannon fodder that allows these wars to take place. So, droids fit in well, a disposable, lesser-than group of individuals who can and will die without having to take the time to be mourned.

The contrast between these droids, the nameless mass of battle droids that fight the war, and the main character droids, 3PO and R2, is jarring. While 3PO and R2 may not have full autonomy, they are still seen as individual characters with personalities and stories. The battle droids, on the other hand, are interchangeable. That is not to say they are unmemorable; the droids do seem to have some personality, even if it is mostly bumbling, and even if it seems to be one personality for the whole army. But the contrast between them and the heroes is made sharply clear in *Attack of the Clones*, when 3PO and R2 stumble on a droid factory. 3PO is aghast, finding something “perverse” in the idea of “machines making machines” — though it is unclear if most droids are mass produced or handmade, like 3PO is (*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, 01:38:55-01:38:59). When R2 pushes him out of the way in his rush to save the day, 3PO ends up on the assembly line. His head is removed from his body, and ends up attached to a battle droid body, while his body is given a battle droid head. There is a strange sort of interchangeableness at play, where a body and a head will go together, even if they are innately very different types of droids.

This also raises questions of droids’ “brains.” In some ways, it seems that the head contains the essence of the droid. 3PO’s body marches off to war, and the battle droid head controlling it is displeased with what it sees as the body’s failings, not realizing it is not a battle droid body. Conversely, 3PO is horrified to hold a gun and be part of the army. However, later he will briefly engage in battle, crying “Die, Jedi dogs!” as he shoots, only to be horrified with himself moments later when he seems to come back to himself and apologizes to the Jedi he is shooting (*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* 01:54:33). While it seems like primary control is in the head — as if a brain, controlling a body — there seems to be some programming in the body that overrules 3PO’s own sense of self. Though this event is mostly played for laughs, it does raise new questions about whether a droid is a person. A person who receives a transplant does not become a new person, but a droid brain connected to a different body may become a different droid.

Overall, the prequel trilogy does not delve too deeply into the issue of droid autonomy. While the battle droids present a new type of droid, they are mostly

background. They tell a few jokes, shoot a few soldiers, and, mostly, die in large numbers. 3PO and R2 are up to their same shenanigans as in the original trilogy, with 3PO's long-suffering existence in contrast to R2's heroism. Even when the prequel trilogy does push deeper, it is usually played off for laughs. Towards the end of 2005's *Revenge of the Sith*, the final movie of the prequel trilogy, 3PO and R2 are given to Raymus Antilles, the man who 3PO identifies as his previous master in *A New Hope*. As they are handed over, Bail Organa, a senator and man who is shown as kind and heroic, tells Antilles to wipe 3PO's memory. This complete rejection of bodily autonomy is played off for laughs, with 3PO anxiously questioning the order and R2 seeming to gleefully laugh at 3PO's fate. This seems in line with what the series has shown so far. Even the good, kind, heroic characters see droids more as objects that they control rather than their own, full persons.

A memory wipe could even be seen as akin to murder. 3PO's body may remain, but the person he was, the sum of his experiences, is lost. The fact that his body remains, and that therefore the character appears continuously throughout the saga, may seem to imply that the character is consistent; 3PO is regularly viewed as one of the only characters to appear in every *Star Wars* film. However, can the 3PO of the original trilogy be considered the same as the one Anakin Skywalker built? The personality seems to be the same, anxious and annoying, but lacking any of the experience that 3PO earned. The fact that Bail Organa could so casually erase 3PO's past and hand him off to a new owner is callous and at contrast to Organa's overall goodness. But then again, it seems like even the "good" characters, those characters who are kind, thoughtful, and dedicated to doing the right thing, see no problems with the ways droids are treated.

The new era of *Star Wars*, after Disney purchased Lucasfilm and the rights to create more *Star Wars* films, starts to challenge that idea. 2015's *The Force Awakens* finally shows a character who sees droids as people in protagonist Rey. Rey is an orphan and a scavenger on the desert planet Jakku. She lives a life of servitude, rather like droids. Every day she gets up and works to find useful debris, which she then gives to her overseer in exchange for food, usually not enough food. Like droids, she lives in a liminal space where it is unclear if she is a slave or not, but she is definitely exploited for her labor and treated as lesser-than. It is not surprising that Rey finds kinship with droids. *The Force Awakens* introduces the first new major droid character besides 3PO and R2 with BB-8, a more advanced astromech. BB-8 is marooned on Jakku when his master, Poe Dameron, is taken captive by the sinister First Order. BB-8 runs away on Poe's orders, and soon finds

himself captured by another scavenger. When Rey hears BB-8's cries for help, she intervenes. Rey is furious, yelling at the scavenger and brandishing a weapon as she frees BB-8. The reason she is so angry is because of the scavenger's treatment of BB-8 as an object, rather than a person. As she puts it, the scavenger "has no respect for anyone" (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* 00:15:31-00:15:33). To Rey, BB-8 is a person, who deserves respect and freedom. She treats him as such, giving him advice and companionship.

Aside from this opening sequence, however, the sequel trilogy does not provide much in terms of furthering the cause of droids' rights. BB-8 is still "owned" by Poe, although Poe treats him as more of a beloved pet than as property, at one point even giving BB-8 affectionate pets. R2 spends the majority of *The Force Awakens* shut down, seemingly in mourning over Luke, who has gone missing. Although he reappears at the end, his agency is almost nothing, a far cry from the heroic droid of the previous six movies. 2017's *The Last Jedi* gives him a bit more power, as he reunites with Luke and attempts to once more manipulate him as he did when they first met in *A New Hope*. Luke calls R2 an old friend, reasserting their dynamic from the original trilogy. However, R2's role in the sequel trilogy is far from the prominence he once held, seemingly pushed aside in favor of the newer BB-8. 3PO, unexpectedly, gets more of a role than R2. While his role is minimal in *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, mostly comic relief, he plays a major role in the final film, 2019's *The Rise of Skywalker*. In the film, 3PO accompanies BB-8, Rey, Poe, Chewbacca, and new hero Finn on a journey to save the galaxy from certain doom.

*The Rise of Skywalker* seems to be a sort of swansong for 3PO, giving him more attention than any previous movie. While he has mostly lost his connection with R2 by this point, 3PO has formed relationships with other characters that are just as rich and deep. When 3PO stumbles upon a clue that could help the heroes but is unable to solve it due to his programming, he faces unexpected harm from his allies. Poe suggests that they perform a procedure that will overwrite 3PO's programming and wipe his memory, despite 3PO's horror at such a prospect. But when they find a droidsmith able to complete the procedure, Rey gives 3PO the choice. Showing again the respect she previously showed BB-8, Rey treats 3PO like a person, an ally, and a friend. She respects him enough to not just let him make the choice, but to believe that his input would be valuable. Rey tells 3PO that he "know[s] the odds better than any of" them, respecting his processing power, and paying homage to 3PO's annoying habit of giving unhelpful odds (*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 00:49:41-00:49:42). It seems that this unexpected respect gives 3PO pause. Where

he had previously been panicking about his impending memory wipe, after listening to Rey he contemplates the question and decides that his sacrifice is worth saving the galaxy. This is a far cry from every time a droid has been used and discarded — 3PO is treated as a hero, here, given a poignant farewell befitting his actions. While he will later be rebooted and come back, this moment shows some more thought on the question of droids and their choices than previous *Star Wars* movies have given.

*The Rise of Skywalker* is not the only *Star Wars* film to finally give droids their due. The Disney Era also gave audiences two standalone movies (so far): 2016's *Rogue One* and 2018's *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Both films featured droids in prominent roles, adding to the small number of major droid characters. *Rogue One* is a war film with an ensemble cast. In the film, Jyn Erso must assemble a group of allies to attack the Empire and steal plans for the Death Star. Her retinue includes four fellow humans — Cassian Andor, Bodhi Rook, Chirrut Îmwe, and Baze Malbus — and one droid, K-2SO. K2 is a former Imperial security droid who was captured and reprogrammed by Cassian. He is seen as a helpful, if awkward, companion for Cassian, doggedly loyal. But the film skims over the question of his reprogramming. If a memory wipe can be seen as akin to murder, reprogramming could be seen as brainwashing.

The film seems to indicate that, because K2 is treated better by the Rebels — and because the Rebels are better than the evil Empire — the reprogramming was a good thing. But it is unlikely that K2 consented to being reprogrammed, and unlikely that the droid he was would be happy with who he becomes. If droids do not have the right to bodily autonomy, do they at least have the rights to their own personality? This question of reprogramming comes up again in 2019's *The Mandalorian*, the first live-action *Star Wars* television show. In the series, assassin droid IG-11 is reprogrammed to be a nanny droid. While this is seen as a good thing, as he assists the heroes, it is completely contrary to his original persona. Where he originally is hired to kill a child, he later becomes that child's protector. While this might be seen as character growth in an organic character, this is instead a pure flip of a switch. IG-11 has no choice in the matter.

The thought process is the same in both cases: because the person doing the reprogramming is a good person, then the reprogramming must be a good thing. Because the reprogramming turns an enemy into an ally, it was the right thing to do. Naturally, Disney wants their heroes to be seen *as* heroes, so the series does not focus too much on this issue. There is no moral dilemma here, where the heroes



wonder if they have done the right thing. In fact, the only concern in terms of reprogramming seems to be more a question of whether a reprogrammed droid can be trusted, rather than whether or not the droid should have been reprogrammed in the first place. Focusing more on the morality of reprogramming would muddy the waters around Disney's heroes, and that would be bad for business. Even Cassian, who is seen as a somewhat shady character — he is an assassin and a saboteur, a morally gray spy — is not questioned for his decision to reprogram K2.

While *Rogue One* seems to avoid the question of whether what Cassian did to K2 was the right thing — in contrast to showing many of Cassian's other decisions to be flawed — it does at least develop K2 into a fascinating character. As a droid who can talk, unlike R2 or BB-8, K2 provides a foil for 3PO. Whereas 3PO is anxious and obsequious, K2 is sullen and disrespectful. Both are loyal to their masters, but in different ways. 3PO is loyal to Luke because it seems to be innate in his personality, whereas K2 seems to have chosen Cassian as a friend. The extent to which this is programming is unclear, but it provides a more equal footing than has previously been seen between droid and master. K2 is also a contrast to the battle droids of the prequels. While he is overtly violent like they are, he is individual and has a rich personality. It is unclear how much this is innate to KX security droids, or if this is solely a trait of K2; the only other KX security droids we see are quickly dispatched by the heroes without any chance to display personality.

What *Rogue One* does well is showcasing K2 as an integral part of a team, rather than a sidekick. He stands on equal footing, with as much a part to play as any of their group. K2 is even shown to be respected as an equal by the organic cast. He is a skilled pilot and fighter, and in the climax, Jyn even gives him her weapon, something he had wanted since the beginning of the film. When K2 dies during the attack, this keeps him on equal footing with the rest of the cast, who all also die. Although he remarks earlier in the film that he would not die if they were shot down in space, he is in fact the first to die, shot down protecting Jyn and Cassian. His death is not played for laughs or skipped over, but an emotional look at the cost of war and a sobering hint of what is to come.

Where *Rogue One* takes baby steps, however, showing K2 as more of a person and an equal, *Solo* strides forward in its droid character L3-37. *Solo* is primarily the origin story of Han Solo, but features a team-up heist plot. L3-37 becomes a part of the team when Han's crew hires Lando Calrissian and his freighter the *Millennium Falcon* for their job. L3 is Lando's partner and co-pilot; she is also a revolutionary,

advocating for droids' rights. L3 first appears in an underground gambling hall, where two droids are fighting each other in a ring that is a cross between Battle Bots and dog fighting. L3 is appalled by this violence and tries to convince one of the droids to stand up for himself, while being fought back by the droid's owner. The sequence is very evocative, with L3 desperately trying to convince the droid to rebel: "how can you condone this savagery? You, you should not be doing this. They're using you for entertainment. Yeah, you've been neurowashed. Don't just blindly follow the program. Exercise some free will!" (*Solo* 00:59:27-00:59:39). L3's protests seem to reaffirm that programming is akin to brainwashing, or what she calls "neurowashing." The droid's owner, who is no doubt getting rich off of the violent exploits, fights back, arguing that the droid "never had it so good," a callous statement that equates the droid's exploitation with a pitbull used for fighting or, even, arguments used by slave apologists (*Solo* 00:59:41). When the owner gets violent, L3 responds in kind, showcasing her willingness to be aggressive in her convictions.

The evocative entrance is only a hint at what will come with L3 throughout *Solo*. Unlike the other droids *Star Wars* introduces, L3 is fully autonomous. She is less loyal to Lando as a servant to a master than she is fond of a reluctant ally. She sasses back at Lando and never lets him take her compliance for granted. Their relationship is contentious, with L3 derisively calling Lando her "organic overlord" in a way that makes it clear he has no actual control over her (*Solo* 01:00:29). Lando, for his part, gives as good as he gets. When L3 mockingly asks if he will "have [her] wiped" if she does not comply, he brushes it off (*Solo* 01:00:17). Later, though, he says that he "actually would have her memory wiped, but she's got the best damn navigational database in the galaxy," implying that it is only because of L3's usefulness that he puts up with her sass (*Solo* 01:00:34-01:00:37).

This friendly antagonism is shown to be nothing more than a front when danger approaches. During the heist, L3 needs to take control of the central processing center of a mine to keep an eye on the team and assist remotely. An astromech droid stands in her way and is unable to move due to a restraining bolt, something L3 views as "barbaric" and immediately removes, freeing the droid (*Solo* 01:14:55). When the newly freed droid asks her what to do, she suggests that it free the other droids being kept captive, advice it follows. What comes next is pure rebellion, as the many slaves of the mine — both organic and mechanical — set out to free themselves. This also reasserts the idea that droids are slaves, as they are put on equal footing with the organic captives held as slaves. L3, of course, is thrilled with

this uprising, and proclaims to Lando that she has found her purpose. Lando, meanwhile, is exasperated by the conflict and the wrench it throws in their plans. When L3 is shot trying to escape, however, Lando is horrified. He rushes into danger to save her, which proves futile. L3's body falls apart until Lando is left holding her head and shoulders, and her processors fail. Lando mourns her not as a piece of property broken but as a friend, a partner, lost.

However, while *Solo* provides a strong droid character in L3, it fails to follow the thought through. After L3's death, the crew still needs her navigational database to complete their mission. So, with a complete lack of regard for her bodily autonomy, they scavenge L3's brain and connect it to the ship. Despite the grief Lando had just shown for L3, he sees no problem in them yanking out her processor — shown violently as wires rip and sparks fly — to save themselves. Joanna Robinson, writing for *Vanity Fair*, tries to put a commercially positive spin on things. Robinson argues that “Lando's attachment to L3 is so strong that... he implants her consciousness in his ship, so they can be together forever.” Robinson is going off the implication that L3 and Lando had a romantic connection, something the film and the cast support. However, Robinson does concede that “regardless of how you interpret Lando's romantic gesture, the sad fact is that it's very short-lived [...] *Solo* not only takes Lando's home from him, but also takes his girlfriend.” Even aside from the simplification here — L3 was not Lando's girlfriend but his partner and friend — this does reduce L3 to a possession, something to be stolen and owned, rather than a person with autonomy. Others are more cognizant of the darker implications of this action. Matt Goldberg writes that L3 is “treated like an object even though her entire character is about not being treated like an object.” It is quite possibly the worst outcome L3 could ever have — to be reduced to a *thing*, just after she had found purpose freeing other droids.

Still, Goldberg does at least give *Solo* credit for being “the first time the *Star Wars* movies have delved into a fan debate about whether or not droids are robots or sentient lifeforms.” Goldberg argues that, while droids are “treated like a servant class by the larger galaxy,” *Solo* argues that they should be seen as “individuals with thoughts, ambitions, and goals. They're the second-class citizens of the *Star Wars* universe, but they are sentient lifeforms worthy of recognition and respect” (Goldberg). While *Solo* fails to take this idea to its completion, it does at least consider the fact that droids are sentient — L3 even says it explicitly, yelling “Droid rights! We! Are! Sentient!” at the droid fighting ring (*Solo* 00:59:49). While *Star Wars*, for most of its 40+ year history, seems to have been unsure of how to consider

droids, it seems that, with Disney's acquisition, the answer is that they are in fact sentient beings.

If droids are actually sentient beings, how can they be seen as anything other than slaves? At no point prior to *Solo* is any droid seen to be autonomous, and even *Solo* seems to struggle with the notion. 3PO is literally created to serve. He and R2 are sold at auction and given away without any thought of how dangerous it would be. Droids like K2 and IG-11 are reprogrammed and completely changed into new persons, and 3PO at least is wiped not once but *twice*, losing himself and all his history. Countless droids are created to be soldiers, put into battle for a war that has nothing to do with them, and killed without hesitation by the "heroes." And many more droids of all kinds are used as tools by the organic beings of the galaxy. Droid slavery props up the galaxy and keeps things running. Throughout the films, countless droids are shown performing any number of mundane functions — serving food, driving, performing medical assistance, communicating across the galaxy, and so much more. How different is that to how Arnold Brown describes the real-world future of robotic servitude as "the machines that will increasingly do our manual labor, operate and direct interactions between people and institutions, perform domestic services, fight our wars, take care of children and seniors, clean up our messes, and so on?" (Brown 50). Some critics use the term "servant" to describe the work that droids do (Kornhaber; Zakarin). But servant implies something different; after all, servants are paid. For his part, Brown is quite clear that "the most apt term for the[se] machines... may be slaves" (Brown 50). Gregory Hampton links the droids in *Star Wars* even more clearly to the history of human slavery in America, arguing that "the domestic robots found in films such as *Star Wars* [...] share a frightening resemblance to antebellum slaves" (Hampton 13).

If the droids of *Star Wars* are slaves, what does that say about the world in which these films take place? It does not seem like a very nice place. As Sofge points out, even the "seemingly infallible heroes" of *Star Wars* "could care less about the plight of the slave caste propping up their society." Spencer Kornhaber argues that the fact that droids "are bought and sold, denied entry into certain gathering places, and subject to deactivation at their owner's whim isn't presented as a moral issue at all." This is true for both the characters in the films and the fans who consume these films. Just as Luke, Cassian, Anakin, and others see no problem with owning and controlling droids, most fans never give a second thought to the way droids are treated because "we see our beloved human heroes treat them with affection and the droids never complain" (Hassler-Forest). Hassler-Forest argues

that “it all seems so obvious in retrospect, and yet the master-servant relationship between organic and artificial life in the Star Wars franchise has been largely ignored until now.” *Solo* pushes fans to think about this “can of worms,” as Hassler-Forest puts it. The “movie’s explicit statement that Star Wars droids are fully autonomous and conscious intelligent beings — as the evidence so clearly suggests — really does challenge the ‘innocent’ depiction of a form of slavery that has long slipped by under our collective radar” (Hassler-Forest).

Droids in the *Star Wars* universe are infinitely varied, but they seem to have one constant — they are used by the organic beings that own them with little thought or consideration of the droids as actual people. To be fair, some droids seem to have little processing power and are more like the tools already used in the real world; MSE cleaning droids could be akin to Roomba robots. However, even the MSE droids have some base sentience. The MSE droid MSE-6-G735Y runs into Chewbacca in *A New Hope* and flees in fear when Chewbacca roars at it (Weldon 277). More advanced droids perform so much of the labor in this universe and are treated less like minimum wage workers dealing with customers and more like an inert piece of technology. If droids are capable of so much — even capable, as *Solo* indicates, of love and sexual attraction — why are they viewed as simply tools?

Speaking a decade before the first Disney *Star Wars* movie would be released, well before L3’s cries for “equal rights,” Robert Arp suggested that it was time for a change (*Solo* 01:08:22). He argues that “maybe it’s time for droid liberation in the *Star Wars* galaxy, in much the same way that other groups of people who have been unjustly enslaved throughout human history have been liberated” (Arp 130). Although things have not changed much, some progress has been made. *Star Wars* is taking baby steps to confronting the idea that the droids the audience knows and loves are slaves, used and abused and discarded by even the heroes of the films. It may not happen anytime soon, but Disney may yet provide a future where droids are their own, autonomous people, not just sentient tools.

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# From Fake Cop to Real Blade Runner: A Tripartite Comparison of the Role of Androids and Replicants as Laboring Beings

REBECCA GIBSON

While far from real, the worlds created by science fiction often show us our inner conceptual frameworks. This is masterfully shown by the Androids and Replicants found in the worlds of Philip K. Dick, beginning with their creation as replacement workers on the off-world colonies of Mars in the 1968 novella *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The framework continues in its more recent instantiations in the movies — Ridley Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner* and Denis Villeneuve’s 2017 *Blade Runner 2049*. Throughout their time on the page and screen, Androids and Replicants have been conceptualized as laboring beings. Yet a change occurs between their first outing and their last: designed to be purely a slave race in the novella and the first movie, the most recent concept gives them salaries, love lives, time off for their own pursuits, and in a limited scope, power and respect. In this article I examine what changes were wrought and why — how the need for labor is conceptualized in the *Blade Runner* mythos, and how that shifted through various Android/Replicant incarnations.

I will begin by looking at the characters of Rick Deckard, Rachael Rosen, Pris Stratton, and Roy Baty, from the novella, then move to Deckard (Harrison Ford), Rachael (Sean Young), Pris (Daryl Hannah), and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), from the first film, and complete the article with an examination of Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista) and KD6-3.7 (Ryan Gosling), from the second movie, as well as taking another look at Deckard and Rachael’s relationship. The three-part analysis allows the reader of this article to differentiate different characters with similar names; Roy Baty from Roy Batty, Pris Stratton from Pris, and so on. The primary mode of analysis will be via Michel Foucault’s notion of societal self-policing, the concept

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of the panopticon. Additionally, a second meaning of the term labor occurs for the Replicant Rachael, who bears a child by the Blade Runner Rick Deckard. Her labor — which carries multiple meanings — is made nearly invisible as she is beatified by the narrative.

### Cops and Andys: Two Types of Laborers in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

The novella *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is set in an unspecified dystopian future earth, where a nuclear or chemical disaster has impacted the ecosystem, devastating all animal life. Most humans live in the space colonies if they are wealthy enough, off world, where they have Androids (Andys) to do the day-to-day manual labor. These Andys, biomechanical creations of the Rosen Association, are built to fulfill various purposes, from mining to seduction, and Eldon Rosen's goal is the eventual creation of an Andy so realistic that it can integrate into human society. He has gotten very close. The most recent model, the Nexus-6 series, is so bioidentical that there are only three ways to tell the difference: bone marrow analysis, the Voigt-Kampff Test, and the presence of intense physical strength and lack of emotions in the Andys. The story focuses on a group of escaped Nexus-6 type Andys who include Pris Stratton and Roy Baty, and their confrontation with a police officer who is specifically tasked with hunting down and killing ("retiring") rogue Andys: Rick Deckard.

Deckard's superior alerts him about the escapees, letting him know they are extremely violent, and that they will try to blend in, to trick him, and to outsmart him in order to survive. Deckard travels to the Rosen Association for more information about the Nexus-6 model and is then meant to liaise with his counterpart from the Soviets for details about the escaped Andys. At the Rosen Association, he meets Rachael Rosen. Rachael is a prototype Android — it is heavily implied both in the novella and the first movie that she is the only Nexus-7. Deckard's Soviet counterpart is one of the escaped Androids, and tries, unsuccessfully, to kill him. Deckard's next target is an Andy disguised as an opera singer, who turns the tables on Deckard by calling the "cops" on him. These cops are also escaped Androids, and they take Deckard to a fake police station, and threaten to "retire," him, saying that he, in actuality, is an Android in disguise. He escapes, and continues on to kill the remaining Andys, including Pris Stratton (a body double of Rachael Rosen), and Roy Baty, the leader and brains of the group.

If the above summarized plot has you confused about who is human and who is a biomechanical mimic, that is normal. The reader is meant to be confused; the reader is meant to doubt Deckard, as Deckard doubts himself. While the term “Blade Runner” is not introduced until Ridley Scott’s 1982 movie adaptation, the novella’s Rick Deckard is the template for the idea of a specialized cop whose purpose is to kill Androids. He is a bounty hunter, a person who does specific labor for hire, a man who has two purposes in his world — to be a breadwinner for his family (his wife Iran, and their titular electric sheep), and to discover and kill Androids. Throughout the novella, Deckard struggles with ideas of his own humanity. He wonders if his ability to feel emotions rather than having them dictated to him (via an empathy box,<sup>1</sup> as is used by the rest of the humans in the story) sets him apart from what is “right” and “good” and “human.” The end to those struggles is the haunting and shattering realization that he may be the only person in his life whose emotions are authentic — both Iran and Deckard’s boss at the police department are dependent on the empathy box, Rachael and the rest of the Androids are acting out of self-preservation — and thus the only “true” human being left.

Two modes of labor are set up to contrast each other. Deckard, a mostly normal human being, labors because it is what mostly normal human beings do. He is American, presumably white, middle-class, and has a wife, a car, and an (electric) pet. From the perspective of readers in the late 1960s, he can be seen to be a stand-in for the sci-fi reader: white, middle-class, Atomic Age men who believed in America. We see this when the titular sheep is introduced, and Deckard explains to a neighbor how the weight of responsibility was almost equal to the prestige of owning an animal, real or not (Dick 10-14). Rick Deckard is ostensibly free and sells his labor to the San Francisco Police Department. The Androids are enslaved.

Forced to do backbreaking work until they die — whether by accident, or by reaching the end of their pre-programmed lifespans — the Androids are created to only labor, never to profit, never to enjoy life or to do non-laborious, non-profitable things. They are not paid. They are not created with the capability to feel. They have, at best, the ability to mimic, and that ability is very limited. Any time they are shown to try to mimic emotions, they give themselves away, because while they

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<sup>1</sup> The Empathy Box is a device that can be set to whatever emotion the user wants to feel, and the box’s interface then imposes that emotion on the user. It is like listening to music to heighten or lower or match your mood, only much more direct and impactful. Iran has dialed for depression, and Deckard wants her to snap out of it, using the box to dial for something more lighthearted.

can say the words, they cannot put real meaning behind them. Without meaning, the words ring hollow. And for what purpose would they have been given emotions anyway? A purely laboring being does not need them.

The idea of the Panopticon is useful here. In *Discipline and Punish*, his 1975 book on imprisonment, Michel Foucault discusses and expands upon Jeremy Bentham's structural prison, the Panopticon. This structure, consisting of a central guard tower and a ring of cells around that inner tower, allows for the constant unseen surveillance of the inmates. The idea is that while the inmates cannot see into the guard tower, the guards can see everything the inmates do, and wrong actions are punished. After a while, however, direct punishment is no longer necessary, as the inmates internalize the rules, and begin to self-regulate, begin, in effect, to discipline their minds and bodies and punish themselves.

Foucault expands this to apply to the concept of most societal structures. The way in which our habits molds our behavior is a form of self-discipline, or internal coercion toward actions that society has deemed right and proper, and away from things that would require punishment. By the time a person has reached adulthood, they have so internalized their societal notions of right and wrong, they simply *do* without thinking. Deckard decidedly exists with his own internalized Panopticon. His labor is coerced only by the expectations of the white American middle-class. He strives for more in his life — the ability to travel, the ability to purchase an actual living animal instead of an electric one. He has leisure time that he can use as he pleases when he is not on the clock.

Not so for the Androids. Firstly, they are built, not born, and the internalization of the Panopticon requires being raised into society, not thrust into it without preparation. It requires, in effect, childhood — that time period where humans learn what it means to be human in society, where we go from unknowing, uncritical, accidental creatures to thoughtful, deliberate, habitual creatures by way of continual instruction and correction by our parents. Our habits, be they good or bad, and our own versions of right and wrong are instantiated in and solidified by the years-long process of growing up. Androids, with their foreshortened lifespans, cannot acquire internalized social structures. Additionally, Androids have no leisure time. Without emotions, and without a structured social order, they have no art, music, hobbies, pets, or aspirations to gain or maintain property. They do have internal structures, as shown by their specs:

The Nexus-6 did have two trillion constituents plus a choice within a range of ten million possible combinations of cerebral activity. In .45 of a second,

an Android equipped with such a brain structure could assume any one of fourteen basic reaction postures. (Dick 28)

Yet, without the internal structure of the Panopticon, their discipline and subsequent punishment comes from outside of themselves, from the humans who have created them to be slaves.

Three of these Androids bear examination: Roy Baty, Pris Stratton, and Rachael Rosen. Foucault seats the power of labor in the body, and states “if economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labor, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and increased domination” (Foucault 82). The Androids, being bioengineered, were given unlimited bodily power, and no means with which to control their own destinies — they were indeed constricted more tightly as their aptitudes for labor increased. Advances in Android technology, namely the potential for the Androids to blend in with humans vis à vis Rachael Rosen have humans and Andys in a double bind: in order for Andys to continue to be enslaved to humans, humans need to have physical control over them; however, in order to perform at the top of their aptitude for labor, the Andys need to be more advanced, which makes them less controllable.

Yet, just because the Andys were built for labor, does not mean they are willing. Roy Baty is both the brains and the brawn of the escape operation, hijacking a ship from the Mars colony, and bringing his fellow slaves to earth. Physically imposing, with raw cunning and intense viciousness, Baty directs the other Androids to avoid, manipulate, and execute the humans they interact with. Yet none of his actions require an internal disciplinary structure. Baty’s behavior is almost animalistic. He avoids when he can, camouflaging the Androids after their escape, creating fake personas for each one. When this primary avoidance doesn’t work, he moves to secondary avoidance, directing Pris Stratton to set up a safe house. He then turns to manipulation, wheedling, coercing, and tricking a human, J.R. Isidore, into hiding the Androids in his own home. Anyone who cannot be avoided, evaded, or manipulated, he kills.

While killing is his last resort, it should be noted that he does so dispassionately, a means to an end, or out of curiosity for the results, for the pain he can put a person through. While we never know his adopted persona, apart from that of a “married couple” (Roy has a “wife,” Irmgard, though her character is not retained when the novella is made into the movie), it is one that disintegrates under scrutiny. There is

no substance there, no depth to his desires, other than the desire to be free and to live. Baty is possessed of a singular purpose other than laboring: survival.

All the Androids have this survival instinct, and use their various cover stories, in the same manner: to avoid, evade, or manipulate. While these actions may appear to imply that they have an internal Panopticon — after all, if one is avoiding something, or trying to manipulate circumstance from one outcome to another, that does imply that they find things “right” or “wrong” — it is more accurate to see this as though one **is** talking about animals. A cornered animal will try to escape, and if that does not work they will do whatever else remains to them that would result in their uninjured survival, up to and including killing, and they do not need a theory of “other” or philosophy of the “mind” in order to do so. The difference of course is that the animals of the novella have more than just survival instinct, they have and instill empathy, whereas the Androids have none.

Baty sends Pris Stratton to create a safe house for them in the outskirts of San Francisco. Unfortunately for the Andys, someone is already living there when she shows up: J.R. Isidore, a so-called “chickenhead,” or person of low intelligence. Delighted to have another person to talk to, he tries to befriend Pris. She cannot avoid him; therefore, she begins to manipulate him. Not that it takes much effort: Isidore is so starved for human company, that he brings her food, finds her an apartment with furnishings, welcomes the other Andys, and only leaves again after Deckard finds the apartment and begins to try to ‘retire’ the Android contingent. While Pris may not have emotions, she is doing emotional labor for Baty. She manipulates Isidore, and then Deckard, because she has the body of an attractive woman. She is the homemaker, being sent to create the safe-house for the other Androids. She is not the brains or the brawn of the operation, she is the beauty.

Rachael, on the other hand, is all three. The newest model, possibly a Nexus-7, she is physically strong, very attractive, truly intelligent, and she has emotions. This allows her to do two notable things: she gets revenge on Deckard, and she mourns her inability to have children. Both require the presence of a concept of right and wrong. Not necessarily the societally created Panopticon, but internal states that understand the consequences of current actions upon a future beyond her immediate survival. Every time Baty and Pris interact with a human, their focus remains only on what happens directly after that interaction, and whether they will survive the encounter. When Rachael and Deckard interact, she demonstrates a clear and distinct knowledge that she can act now to cause him social and emotional difficulties later, and also that their futures will diverge and while she is present

with him now, he will abandon her and move back toward his wife and pet. Not only that, this is a future which displeases her. She is sad and angry at his inevitable defection and betrayal which has nothing to do with her continued survival. She is not a rogue Andy; he is not hunting her and will not go on to retire her, so other than damaged feelings and bruised ego, she has no stake in Deckard's future. However, as the story moves from the page to the screen, these issues become both clearer and more complex.

### Tech-noir: Blade Runners and Replicants on the Screen

With the change to a new medium, we see changes in several of the characters as well. Androids are now called Replicants. Deckard is divorced, Rachael no longer already knows that she is a Replicant and is said to be the niece of the replicant's creator (Eldon Tyrell in this instantiation), Roy Baty has become Roy Batty, and Pris Stratton is merely Pris. The scene is now Los Angeles, and the setting is November 2019. The incomparable soundtrack is by Vangelis. And LAPD headquarters is a Panopticon. *Blade Runner* is widely recognized as the first tech-noir film — a genre that combines the mechanical-futuristic feel of techno and the dark, gritty, voiceover, private-eye characterizations of noir.

In this instantiation, the sheer raw physicality of the replicants comes to the forefront, with the maniacal psychotic power of Rutger Hauer (Batty), the acrobatic slinkiness of Daryl Hannah (Pris), and the sad, soft, feminine sweetness of Sean Young (Rachael). As shown by the fact that different actresses played them, Pris and Rachael are no longer bioidentical in *Blade Runner*; changes happened in the story's take on the topic of labor as well.

One of the biggest changes is in the character of Rick Deckard, played by Harrison Ford. No longer the middle-class Atomic Age hero, he is retired from work in the police department, from his life as a Blade Runner. When the movie opens, we see him very deliberately not laboring. He is reading a newspaper, ordering dinner, and getting drunk, but he is not working until he is coerced back to work by his chain smoking, foul-mouthed former boss. Deckard is assigned a partner to work with, Gaff, played by Edward James Olmos. Gaff does not do much in terms of tracking down the escaped Replicants, and for the first few viewings of this movie I honestly did not understand why he was even there — his job seems to be to show up whenever Deckard is slacking off. Gaff brings Deckard in from retirement. Gaff asks questions about Deckard's relationship with Rachael. Gaff

shows up when Deckard is buying more alcohol instead of looking for the Replicants. Gaff, it turns out, is Deckard's social conscience — that part of Deckard which would have been his internalized Panopticon. We, the viewer, get not only the visual of the LAPD building as Panopticon, but also Gaff, reminding Deckard by his immutable presence in times of lapse, that Deckard lives in a society with right and wrong, and that doing his job and retiring the Replicants is “right” and going easy on them because one happens to be sympathetic is “wrong.”

This signifies the shifting of that Atomic Age mentality (Dick wrote his novella in the 1960s), to the tech-noir genre of the late 1970s and early 1980s, two decades marked by technological advances, as well as successful counter-culture revolutions that championed non-conformity and “sticking it to the man.” Deckard, who is retired, has done his time under authority, and now wishes to ignore all other people during his retirement.

But what of Batty, Pris, and Rachael? Joined by Leon (Brion James) and Zhora (Joanna Cassidy), they are as single minded as their earlier versions; however, their desire for survival extends beyond the immediate. They want Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), founder of the Tyrell Corporation, to extend their lifespan, to ensure that they survive beyond the four years that were programmed into them upon creation. Of the Replicants, only Zhora has a fake persona for the movie — she takes on work as an exotic dancer at Taffey Lewis's bar, and her character is noted to be a mix between a pleasure model and a warrior. Zhora seems to exist in the script to fulfill three purposes: to round out the number of escapees; to allow Deckard to proposition Rachael, thus showing his hand in terms of his attraction to her; and to inject glittery gritty sexiness into the movie. Pris is a pleasure model, Batty is a warrior, and Rachael is the new prototype of the Nexus-7.

Let us return for a moment to the architecture: while the LAPD sits in a Panopticon, Tyrell runs his Replicant empire from a Ziggurat. These two structures represent different ideas within the collective consciousness. Although the Panopticon is both shown as a building and brought to life in Gaff, it stands for the internalization of social structure and the idea that to labor is one's duty to the state. A Ziggurat, on the other hand, represents top-down external power structures, specifically ones which are religious in nature. When Batty confronts Tyrell, they both talk about Tyrell as the “creator” and “father” of the Replicants — religiously



charged language. Tyrell asks what he can do for his creation, and Batty responds “I want more life...” (Scott 01:23:34-01:23-36).<sup>2</sup>

As shown, Tyrell’s power and his vision of the Replicants’ labor is that of a father to his children. A creator to his creations. Victor Frankenstein to the creature, where the good and right action of the Replicants creates pride, but even the bad and wrong action cannot erase his possessiveness, nor his control over his creations. In this way, the Ziggurat contrasts with the Panopticon — the Ziggurat is owed labor because it created the laborer; the Panopticon is owed labor because to labor is the person’s societal duty.

Sebastian’s creations, the automatons, are mostly only mechanical, though there are two — Bear (Kevin Thompson) and Kaiser (John Edward Allen), played by actors with dwarfism — who have rudimentary intelligence. In this way, the movie illustrates Foucault’s point. Tyrell, at the top, is in control of the lives and labors of the Replicants. His employee, J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), is in control of his own set of creations, his automata. No longer a chickenhead, as in Dick’s novel, Sebastian creates the nervous systems of the Nexus-6 replicants. His power is on a smaller scale to Tyrell’s, and he creates literal puppets since he cannot create life like Tyrell. Ironic, too, that both Tyrell and Sebastian are killed by Roy Batty, and that Sebastian is manipulated by Pris.

That manipulation again comes in the form of romantic appeal, which is in and of itself a kind of labor. Pris appeals to Sebastian’s caretaking nature, and poses as a shy, gamine girl, in need of a home. While we cannot put aside the idea of emotional labor taking place here — women’s roles often do the heavy lifting in terms of making the relationships flow properly — we also cannot discount the fact that Sebastian is desperately lonely. Isolated by his genetic condition, never allowed to leave the planet like other normal humans, lest he contaminate the off-world colonies, Sebastian barely needs manipulating at all. And in taking her in, he opens the door to her eventual betrayal. Sebastian calls his automata his “friends,” and this gives Pris the opportunity to introduce him to one of her own friends, Roy Batty, and to introduce that friend into Sebastian’s apartment. Although she is meant to be more of a “pleasure” model than Zhora, Pris’s appeal is more the

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<sup>2</sup> As seen by the ellipsis, that is not the entirety of the dialogue. The reason for the ellipsis is that the audio track was recorded in such a way that depending on the way the speakers are set up, and with what type of mindset you are watching/listening, the last word in that line can be one of two things: father, or fucker. One is an entreaty; one is a malediction. The closed captioning in my version of the movie has “fucker” (Scott 01:23:36). Hauer has confirmed that it is meant to be heard both ways (Morehead).

appearance of vulnerability — appearance only, though, because when Deckard shows up to investigate her whereabouts and retire her, she very handily bests him physically, and is about to deliver the coup de grâce when he shoots her.

It is in the showdown between Deckard and Pris that we arrive at a conundrum of authorial intent. As I have shown above, in the novella Deckard doubts his own humanity *and* his own humanness. He is meant to wrestle with the idea that he might be an Android, before understanding that his compassion for Rachael and his ability to feel emotion set him apart from other humans but do not make him inhuman. However, in *Blade Runner*, doubt is introduced not by the actions of the characters, nor by the script, but by the director, who has implied in various interviews and through the constant reissuings of various versions of the movie that Deckard is not human, that he is, in fact, a Replicant, presumably of the same generation as Rachael (Di Placido; Jagermath; Lovett). I contend that two things happened: the characters and script decidedly show that Deckard is human and not a Replicant, and that this is confirmed by *Blade Runner 2049*, which will be discussed in the next section; and Ridley Scott misinterpreted his source material.

So, in what way is the showdown between Deckard and Pris exemplary of this conundrum? To put it very bluntly: Deckard gets his ass handed to him. In fact, every time Deckard comes up against a Replicant, he is distinctly physically outmatched. Recalling back to the discussion of labor, Replicants, like their Android instantiations before them, are bioengineered for strength, toughness, and the ability to labor almost continuously without effort. If Deckard were a Replicant, even if he did not know about his own origins and nature, he would not be so very thoroughly trounced in every encounter.<sup>3</sup>

But what of Rachael and her ambiguous status? For her, we need to explore a different definition of the word “labor.” In this characterization of Rachael, she has been duped by Tyrell into thinking herself human by means of implanted memories and abilities. She “remembers” learning to play piano, but it is a memory implant. Originally introduced into the movie as a representative of the Tyrell Corporation, the betrayal she feels at the revelation of her Replicant status overwhelms her, and although she does eventually rally enough to shoot Leon as he tries to kill Deckard,

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<sup>3</sup> There is also the fact that the Replicants are marked visually by a reflective flash of the eyes. It happens with every character that we know or find out is a Replicant; it does not happen with Deckard. Furthermore, while Deckard does triumph in the book, and fights K to a standstill in the second movie, this is due to decent, though human, reflexes and superior firepower (book) and a home ground advantage and the fact that K is not there to kill him and they start a conversation before things can turn lethal (second movie).

she spends a good part of the run time coming to terms with the fact that her body, mind, emotions, responses, desires, memories, are all a product to be marketed and sold. She is a prototype — the first, and, we later learn, the only, Nexus-7. Because she is so intimately linked to Tyrell, she knows all about the limitations placed on Replicants. Built for various types of labor, given a very short lifespan, and created sterile (as the novella's Rachael lamented), the main difference in her construction that we see in this movie is that she can have authentic emotions. She weeps, she kisses, she feels betrayal, she can act autonomously because she has those emotions that allow her to decide things for herself beyond her need to prioritize survival.

Rachael's final action of the movie is to run away with Deckard. As they are leaving, Deckard and Gaff have one final confrontation — a man and his conscience. Gaff remarks that he is sorry that Rachael will not live very long. After all, Replicants have that shortened life span. Deckard and Rachael have a few years, maybe less but certainly not more, before her end date happens and she dies. Throughout the movie, Rachael has been doing "emotional labor" for Deckard. She thaws him out, and warms him up, and makes him feel again. Her tears move him to compassion. Her plight induces him to move outside of his extremely passive rebellion against society and to take action to save her. She is the emotional linchpin of his existence. Between Gaff and Rachael, Deckard becomes a whole person, removed from the ennui of the tech-noir genre. Yet, despite the movie ending on a rather non-ambiguous note (we are told Rachael will die, we expect that Rachael will die, and Deckard becomes uninteresting without companion or conflict), their story is not over. It continues in the 2017 movie by Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049*.

### Replicants as Blade Runners: Salaries for Slaves

As the title suggests, the sequel is set in 2049, 30 years after *Blade Runner*. The movie comes with three featurettes, set respectively in 2022, 2036, and 2048. We retain the location, remaining in Los Angeles, but the LAPD building has transformed from a Panopticon to a building in the shape of a nail or a spike — wide at the top, tapering down to a thin base, buried in the miasma of the city below. What was once the Tyrell Corporation is now the Wallace Corporation, owned by Niander Wallace, who still maintains his control over his manufactured labor force from a Ziggurat.

We meet new characters as well: KD6-3.7 (verbalized as kay dee six dash three dot seven, and occasionally shortened to K), a Blade Runner for the LAPD and a Replicant; his companion, a hologram, named Joi; Lt. Joshi, K's (human) boss at the police department; Sapper Morton, a Replicant escapee whom K is sent to retire; Luv, a Replicant second in command to Niander Wallace; and Mariette, a prostitute Replicant.

In the first act, K (Ryan Gosling) is sent to retire Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista). Sapper owns a protein farm, where he farms grubs to create protein powder,<sup>4</sup> leading us to our first ideas on labor in this movie. When we are introduced to Sapper, we only know three things: he is a Replicant, he has evaded the law, and he owns his own farm. This brings us back to the definition of labor, and the difference between true labor and slavery. He escaped, he self-freed, and therefore he labors, collecting the profits from his own work, selling the product to someone else and increasing his own monetary capital. The farm has a house on it, which is small and spare, but as we end up seeing later, it is larger than K's apartment, and more peaceful as well. Sapper is one of a group of Nexus-8 Replicants who went rogue between their creation after 2019, and the renaissance of Replicant technology, headed by Niander Wallace (Jared Leto), in 2036. This freedom, this economic self-sufficiency, is seen as theft of labor. The Replicants were made to labor, for free, for the state, and the newly reformed LAPD is going to bring that large spiky nail right down on them and stamp out that theft. The change in architecture signified a change in who the police are focusing on: no longer are they pitched toward humans, who have their internalized Panopticon, but on Replicants, who need to be nailed by the force of the law for their lack of duty to society.

K is of a newer generation of Replicant: he is built to be obedient (something that apparently did not occur to Tyrell...) and to do his job. He has been designed with an internalized Panopticon. The movie shows us that the owners of the newer Replicants can use an optical scan combined with verbal recitation to check for the Replicant's baseline. The baseline is a function of the internalized Panopticon and of how much the Replicant's recent experiences have caused them to stray from

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<sup>4</sup> This is not outside the realm of possibilities — insect protein is an up-and-coming trend and is being put forward among food scholars as an efficient, cost effective, less harmful to the environment replacement for a lot of commercial meat farming. It is your author's contention that this is viscerally gross, and it was played as such in the movie, but that contention is not shared by everyone.

their knowledge that laboring for the state is their duty. K's specific baseline is a fragment of a poem, the internal poem from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. The imagery of the poem also mimics a Panopticon:

...And blood-black nothingness began to spin  
 A system of cells interlinked within  
 Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
 Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct  
 Against the dark, a tall white fountain played. (Nabokov 59)

One can visualize a tall white central structure around which are arranged dark blood-black prison cells, a controlling threat that keeps "officer" KD6-3.7 in his place and reminds him that he is a creation and what can be created can also be destroyed.

And the Replicants *are* still slaves — Joshi (Robin Wright) controls K's destiny, can retire him, can order him to do things that he cannot then refuse; however, those who work within the system gain the trappings of respectability and of laboring for their own gain, if their baseline checks out okay. If they submit to society's versions of right and wrong, good and bad.

So, what are those trappings of respectability? In recognition for K's prestige as a Blade Runner, K has a salary, free time, and a bonus structure. In the novella and the first movie, we learn that Blade Runner is a skilled, respected position, that the people who retire Androids or Replicants are doing hard, dangerous work, but work that contains a measure of trust. Deckard, after all, was trusted, and needed by his bosses, but he was not nearly as strong as a replicant: he was fragile, and human, and in both book and movie, he was rebellious, he often said no or went against orders though he eventually followed through and got the job done. This raises a conundrum: hard work was generally given to Replicants, so there is no need to do dangerous labor if your manufactured slave race can do it for you, but Replicants are not trustworthy. They will take that physical power with which they were imbued and rebel, and kill humans, in the pursuit of their own survival. K's generation of Replicants obeys, they do not rebel, so they are trusted with more metaphysically ambiguous work, like retiring other Replicants. Regrettably, the viewer never gets an answer to why they have apartments and salaries and bonuses. If they obey, presumably they would obey just as well if they were kept in a broom closet while off duty and not paid at all — if they were treated as what they indeed were, a manufactured slave race.

Perhaps their treatment by their employers has something to do with their newly minted emotional capacity. We first saw emotive Replicants with Rachael's ability to care for Deckard in *Blade Runner* (Scott), and while she demonstrated a complete emotional range — sadness, anger, affection, indignation, ennui — she was just one being, and the first one at that. After all, she had desires, and the new versions of Replicants have desires as well. K wants attention and affection from Joi, Sapper wants to be kind but also to hold on to his memories of beauty, Luv wants to please her employer, and all these desires are shown not to be single-minded, but part of a rich and complex inner state of the Replicant person. With the inclusion of advanced emotional capacities, romantic entanglements take on even more labor-work, as the replicants are now completely capable of doing such labor, even wanting to do it, but still having no agency to truly make that choice, as their enslaved status ensures that they must obey. Yet they still do have desires: K's desires evolve and change over the course of the movie, as he discovers and internalizes the difference between simulacra and simulation regarding his changing romantic relationships. Perhaps beings with complex internal schema grow sad and fail to thrive if they are deprived of those trappings of respectability.

However, and this cannot be stressed enough, a paid slave is still a slave. In fact, the term “wage slave” denotes someone who has no choice but to continue to labor for their existence — a person who is housing and/or food insecure, and whose life and wellbeing are contingent on remaining in their current position. The economic systems embodied in the Replicant stories, epitomizes the extremes of our current capitalist system, where the super wealthy depend on the work of the impoverished masses, and the impoverished masses depend on the good will of their employers. Yet the transfer of money for the production of goods and services does not equal free labor if the parties involved in the transfer have a controlling or coercive or dominantly hierarchical relationship. As Joshi has literal control of life and death over K, and he physically cannot refuse her orders, he remains enslaved, even though he is accumulating capital. It seems, though Wallace did create the new model Replicants with internalized Panopticons, he did not trust them to hold, and thus that enslaved status remains.

But what of Rachael? When last we saw her, our emotional laborer, she and Deckard were fleeing LA, and she was soon to die. *Blade Runner 2049* reveals that she did not die; at least, not right away. After K retires Sapper, he spots an anomaly at the base of a dead tree near Sapper's home. Ground Penetrating Radar analysis of that anomaly turns up a box full of bones: Rachael's bones. During their analysis

at the LAPD headquarters, it is revealed that she was pregnant, and died during an attempt to save her and the baby during childbirth. Here we come to our last use of the word “labor.”

### Women’s Labor: Childbirth, Mothering, and That Which Goes Unseen

While I have been quite flexible in this analysis with my use of the word labor, I have still stuck relatively close to the originally stated definition — to work for the creation of goods and/or services. Even when we speak of Rachael’s emotional labor, she is performing a service to Deckard by keeping him on an even keel and focused on what is right, and to herself, by exploring her newly realized Replicant status. In becoming a mother, Rachael now exemplifies not only herself qua herself, but also becomes the progenitor of a new type of being: half-human, half-Replicant, with whom she labors in childbirth. While it may seem that the beatification that occurs to her over the course of the film is in recognition of her progenitor status, particularly because the child is always referred to as “Rachael’s child” it is really an erasure of Rachael as a person, a reduction of her to the contents of her meant-to-be-barren womb.

Rachael’s labor, and the labor of mothers in general, does not create goods or services, but it creates other laborers, and her value as herself, as a labor producer, goes down due to her focus on the non-economic duties of childcare. A man’s value takes less of a hit for becoming a father — some, if he takes paternity leave, but little else — but accrues all of the prestige of being a family man, so long as he is monetarily responsible — see Deckard in the novella — and continues to labor within the Panopticon based right/wrong system.

Yet we are no longer dealing with Deckard of the novella (Dick), nor Deckard of the 2019 set *Blade Runner* (Scott). Deckard thirty years later, in 2049, is quite a different person. He is one of only two people in *Blade Runner 2049* who does not reduce Rachael to her fertility, the other one being KD6-3.7, who, for part of the run time, believes that he may be Rachael’s child. Deckard has moved from LA to Las Vegas and is holed up in the ruins of a casino. He has a dog, keeps bees, and continues to drink to excess on a regular basis. The character was in his late thirties in *Blade Runner*, so he is in his late sixties in *Blade Runner 2049*. Harrison Ford was 40 in 1982, and 75 in 2017, and though still rugged and good looking, does indeed look approximately his age. It is apparent from the way he confronts K, who comes to ask about Rachael’s child, that he has spent the intervening years

mourning Rachael and worrying about the child. Not as a curiosity or the “cure” to the Replicant condition, the way Niander Wallace and Luv (Sylvia Hoeks) worry about the child, nor as a potential world ending phenomenon who will steal away the control the state has over its Replicant slave labor force, the way Joshi worries about the child, but as a partner and father, who has lost everything he loved.

Rachael’s labor, and the cure it represents, is the only thing that interests Niander Wallace, however. While Joshi wants to find the child to kill it, Wallace, by way of Luv, wants to find the child and Deckard in order to discover how Tyrell made a fertile Replicant. They want to use the pair of them to unlock the secret of self-reproducing labor, and they believe that the secret lies in Rachael’s DNA. They look for *her* child, they threaten to torture Deckard to reveal how *she* became pregnant; they do not want to learn about his genetic contribution, they do not find him special or deify him, they want to know why *Rachael* could conceive when no other Replicant could. This is important to our earlier discussion of Deckard and his humanity.

The differentiation between man and machine, human and Replicant, remains important for the idea of voluntary labor or labor from duty, and slavery. Deckard, as shown in the first movie, labors only for himself until pressed back into service as a Blade Runner. His boss calls his masculinity into question with a few well-placed insults, and Gaff acts as a physical reminder of his mental Panopticon, but Deckard labors mostly voluntarily: he does what is correct in duty to the state, and he gets paid for it. Contrasted with K’s labor in *Blade Runner 2049*, which is coerced and forced by the system despite being monetarily compensated, we can see that Deckard’s labor is voluntary: if he told his boss to shove it, he could have walked out of the office, never met Rachael, never fallen in love with her, never had a child with her. His fate would have been different because of his choices, and his humanness is inherent because he has that power of choice.

Rachael’s fate, however, was always the same, that she was fated to die. Her labor before running off with Deckard was the product of lies about her status as a Replicant, and until she ran off, would have been only coerced, never voluntary, because she was created to be a slave. Afterward, it remained involuntary because she turned herself into one of the hunted by escaping. Indeed, even her bearing a child was fated: Wallace makes the connection to the biblical Rachel, who prayed for a child, and was blessed with one; but where is our Rachael’s voice in this? There is no indication in any of the source material that Rachael and Deckard were trying for a child. No mention of that desire. No mention of contraception or the



lack thereof. It was a “miracle” that a Replicant could conceive, but although the novella’s Rachael mourned her lost fertility, the movie’s Rachael did not, so that conception which she had not planned for nor desired was indeed fated. As she labored in childbirth, she was coming to terms with the fact that she would die.

That Rachael died is not in itself surprising. Not only were we meant to expect it due to her shut off date, but mothers being either bad or dead is a recognized trope in fiction, beginning in fairy tales (Doyle). This trope goes even further in science/science-fiction: we are all, at heart, Donna Haraway’s cyborgs and we all give birth to Robbie Davis-Floyd’s cyborg babies. While her form was briefly resurrected, as a (failed) bribe for Deckard’s cooperation, we return again to the difference between simulacra and simulation: while Replicants are copies of a prototype (simulation), humans are only copies of potentials, of their own DNA made flesh, combinations of copies of different parts of their parents, which combined to be simulacra, a copy of something entirely new. Humans can be full parents and do all the labor that entails over the life of the child, but Replicants can only do the labor they are built for. Rachael had to die, so that we would understand that she is a *good* mother. That she did her labor, in childbirth, and fulfilled her purpose. And so that in the final confrontation between Deckard and Luv, he could once again get his ass handed to him by a Replicant.

### In Summation: A Few Final Words Regarding the Evolution of the Blade Runner

Part of what we see as this science-fiction story goes through three iterations is a change in the culture part of popular culture. Art both reflects and propels reality, and as Western culture moved from glorifying authority and conformity in the 1960s to the counterculture revolts of the 1970s and 1980s, to the gender-theory based ideas of the twenty-teens. This can be seen in the shift of the ways in which the characters labored, and the gendered spin on that labor, from the novella all the way through to the second movie.

In the novella, women are passive unless they are Androids. The majority of the characters are men. Deckard, his bosses at the police station, Rosen, and all the secondary characters (Isidore, his bosses, and the animal broker) are male. There is a female secretary at the police department, but she is just briefly mentioned on one page. The only consistently mentioned female character, Deckard’s wife, Iran, is passive and relatively pointless other than to serve as a human foil to Deckard, and

to provide him with the other person to round out his middle-class white American life. You could remove her entirely, and probably no one would notice. There is a slight improvement in *Blade Runner*, which does not quite pass the Bechdel Test, but still at least gives its female characters personalities and something to do (a movie passes if there are two or more named female characters who talk to each other about something other than men — *Blade Runner* fails because the female characters are not shown speaking to each other). Labor is expanded beyond merely producing goods and services to include emotional labor, which is a type that is normally, and was in this case, relegated to women. Rachael performed emotional labor, and so did Pris, though she did so most likely at the instigation of the screenwriter and as a holdover from her instantiation in the novella.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, we see the largest expansion of the idea of labor, and the changing notion of who could be a Blade Runner and what that position meant in society. This movie *does* pass the Bechdel test, several times over. Interactions between Luv and Joshi center around the search for Rachael's child, which remains un-gendered for much of the movie while K figures out what is going on; Mariette speaks with Freysa, a fellow Replicant that is both Mariette's pimp and the leader of the rebel group of escaped Replicants who are trying to find Rachael's child; and although the client is not named, Luv has a long conversation with a client about an order of Replicants that the client is making. While women were superfluous, distracting, or incidental in the novella and the first movie, they are active, powerful, and in charge in the second movie. The definition of labor has shifted to recognize equal contributions by women.

While the issue of feminism in science-fiction may seem secondary to the overall theme of labor, the reality is that when we discuss labor and laborers, we must distinguish between the effects of these fictional narratives on men and on women. We are all storytellers, says theorist Claude Levi-Strauss, and those stories influence how we speak about ourselves and others, how we define ourselves, our origins, our futures, the fabric of our beings. That those narratives are different, and have different effects, for different genders, is not unexpected, but it is important.

That this shift in narrative tone, with the inclusion of female power, comes so late in our history is tragic, though not surprising. We have not yet reached the point that having the police lieutenant and second in command of a corporation be female, even in a piece of fiction, nor having that piece of fiction pass the Bechdel Test, is expected. Our own actual corporations and police departments, as well as military commands, board rooms, manual labor jobs, and university departments

are still majority male. We place barriers of tradition and appropriateness around who gets to do what labor in our culture. Comparable to the title of *Blade Runner*, work is devalued and made lesser when it is shifted on to new bodies, when the internalized Panopticon changes and our perceptions of what is good and right are brought outside of our bodies and enforced by others instead of ourselves. The effect, however, demonstrates the complexity of the situation in that when we name coerced labor, or devalued labor, we also shine light on the Foucauldian structures which have mindlessly upheld it, and only when they are in the light can they be properly dismantled. Only then can humans and Replicants, male and female, move from fake cop to real *Blade Runner* in the narratives.

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# Equipment as Living: Robotic Rhetorical Homology in *Humans*

KATE RICH

The Hawkins, a British family of five, decide to finally give in by purchasing the hottest new appliance for middle and upper-class households. To the excitement of their three children, the Hawkins purchase a humanoid robot, or synthetic, designed to serve them as a domestic worker in their home. Like many synthetics, the robot they purchase is a young and attractive individual who could be confused for a human if it were not for her bright green eyes, emotionless speech, and mechanical movements. This synth, whose name we later learn is Mia, is very different from her computerized counterparts; she is the first conscious synthetic to grace the screen in the pilot of *Humans*.

The British television show first debuted in 2015, with two more seasons following in 2016 and 2018. The series follows Mia, the Hawkins family, and several conscious synthetics as they navigate a world that is not ready for a reality where humanoid devices become sentient. The conscious synthetics spend the first two seasons hiding their true nature, avoiding government bounty hunters, and preparing for the day when their fellow robots also become sentient. Tensions arise and anti-robot sentiments swell as all the non-conscious robot laborers collectively “wake up” at the very end of the second season. The third season of *Humans*, which is set a year after all synths become sentient, brings a range of complex moral dilemmas to the forefront of the series as human beings struggle to accept and integrate conscious synths into their society. The robots face violent attacks, brutal government oversight, and hateful slurs at every turn.

While this series raises many important questions about ethics in technology and the nonfictional futures we may encounter, *Humans* is about so much more than robots. Each season of the series was released during the various stages of Brexit and the anti-immigrant discourses that prompted it. Although *Humans* never explicitly discusses racism, xenophobia, or Brexit, the show’s homologous

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relationship to contemporary British politics and social issues was so apparent that one reviewer remarked it was rife with “Brexit analogies” and “more human” than other popular robot television series like *Westworld* (Wollaston). Given the constant portrayals of otherization and movements for social change across *Humans*, this television show about humanoid devices participates in discourses about marginalization among human beings in the twenty-first century. In this essay, I approach the connection *Humans* holds with British anti-immigrant discourses that surrounded it during its creation as a rhetorical homology that presents not-quite-human equipment *as* living. I introduce this reorientation of Kenneth Burke’s equipment for living to think through not-quite-human approaches to imparting values and engaging with the space of otherness. In the case of *Humans*, this homology of otherness follows similar forms of alienation and isolation directed at British immigrants while simultaneously contesting the frame of humanity itself.

To map out this humanoid homology, I focus on the discourses of otherization in the third season of *Humans*. I primarily draw from the previous work on rhetorical homologies, critical cultural studies scholarship, and Burkean criticism. While previous applications of rhetorical homologies have thoroughly considered how supernatural films can resemble our realities, I specifically interrogate how not-quite-human characters contend more directly with issues of dehumanization. Moreover, I explain how robotic homologies compare to cultural studies of metaphors for the racialized Other. In what follows, I argue the empathic framing of humanoid characters creates homologies that challenge viewers’ discomfort and begs them to identify with the Other. However, homologies that make use of not-quite-human equipment can also reinforce troubling discourses around racialization. These tensions represent the complexity of robotic representations as a means of persuasion and social change in popular culture.

### Rhetorical Homology in Burkean Terms

Among the many theoretical tools we might use to analyze media, rhetorical homology provides an especially useful lens for understanding cultural parallels. While the term homology can be traced through many disciplines of study, rhetorical homologies are “grounded in discursive qualities” (Brummett *Rhetorical Homologies: Form* 3). More specifically, Barry Brummett defines rhetorical homologies as “a formal resemblance between some aspect of discourse and some

other dimension of experience, whether that be another discourse, a real life experience, a way of using technology, and so forth” (*Rhetorical Homologies: Form* 114). Kathryn M. Olson provides a similar definition of rhetorical homologies, describing them as “a means to observe formal parallels that might indicate a larger systematic interpretive framework that rhetors discussing very different content nonetheless hold in common” (217).

Although Kenneth Burke’s work lacks a specific exploration of homology as a term, Brummett heralds Burke as one of the most notable “theoreticians of homology in the twentieth century,” given his emphasis on similarity across different texts (*Rhetorical Homologies: Form* 12). More precisely, the consistent ways dramatic Burkean terms seek similarity between situations is strongly connected to rhetorical homologies. For instance, Burke identifies the Symbol as “the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience” (*Counter-Statement* 152) that “appeals either as the orienting of a situation, or as the adjustment to a situation, or both” (*Counter-Statement* 156). The Symbol offers especially ripe material for rhetorical homologies. Like homologies, the Symbol is concerned with creating connections to experiences and situations by way of artistic metaphors. The connections Burke’s Symbol forms are incredibly political and potentially prescriptive. E. Johanna Hartelius articulates this potential for prescription by understanding the Symbol as “a ‘formula’ for how to experience” (58). As such, rhetorical homologies and Symbols alike often persuade audiences to subscribe to certain values by paralleling their situations in new ways. The comfort of familiar forms will especially arouse an audience and make them more prone to persuasion.

Literature, or the medium that might communicate the Symbol, becomes a way to configure the audience’s values and approach situations in our own lives as what Burke calls equipment for living. He invites us to conceive of the equipment literature gives us “as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye,” among other moral decisions (Burke *The Philosophy* 304). As a result, rhetorical homologies often function as equipment for living by advocating for a certain approach to a situation. That situation can be articulated through Symbols that appear in a satisfying form for the audience.

### Science Fiction Homologies in Popular Culture

Literature, and its ability to serve as equipment for living, can refer to several types of art in Burke’s view. He tells us “there is no ‘pure’ literature here. Everything is

‘medicine’” (Burke *The Philosophy* 293). Carly S. Woods argues that Burke’s use of the term medicine is a master metaphor for how literature can help to cure societal sicknesses like hate and misunderstanding. Film, and the rhetorical homologies it provides, become part of this cultural prescription to cure a broken society.

Films and television series possess potential for the kind of sensemaking that forms equipment for living. Even films set in worlds that do not or will not ever exist are equipment for audiences to address their concerns in the real world (Brummett “Electric Literature” 251). In fact, many films appeal to audiences precisely by avoiding literal depictions of everyday life and bringing viewers into fantastical worlds (Brummett “What Popular Films” 62). Science fiction, in particular, “gives us a way to first invoke and then resolve scenes of social chaos and to explore the divisions between society and the Other” (Nishime 198).

By addressing social attitudes in a type of situation, films about seemingly disparate scenarios are rhetorical homologies that advocate for particular values (Brummett “What Popular Films” 63). Those values are almost never articulated by the film itself because, “like ideology, form is most powerful when it is most invisible, and that is most of the time” (Brummett “What Popular Film” 64). So, the equipment for living that films provide through rhetorical homologies never directly represents an individual’s situation. Rhetorical homologies cannot connect with real situations too neatly given that “a discourse that was perfectly identified with experience could offer no response to that experience because a response must be different from that to which it responds” (Brummett “The Homology Hypothesis” 206). Instead, it will go through similar moves and follow a particular pattern that allows the individual to align the artwork with their experience. For instance, LeiLani Nishime argues that science fiction depictions of dystopian technological advancement parallel white anxiety about immigrants and the erasure of western culture (197). Similarly, numerous scholars posit that stories about aliens are often metaphorical representations of the racialized Other in western society (Ahmed; Greene; Nama). Robots have a similar connotation of difference given that their nonhuman status and lack of free will is evoked as a contemporary embodiment of enslavement (Atanasoski and Vora; Hampton). In some ways, the robots in *Humans* are unlike the racialized aliens and robots in previous popular culture studies scholarship. They do not come from another planet or seek to overthrow the humans. They have free will, but they do not pose a violent threat to humanity. The series is mostly shown from the robots’ perspectives and



characterizes fear towards them as unfounded. This framing situates *Humans* as a rhetorical homology with qualities that are both similar to and different from previous representations of otherness in science fiction.

### (De)Humanizing Homologies

Homologies are capable of having negative impacts on marginalized human beings just as various forms of persuasion are capable of providing “bad medicine” for society (Woods). In fact, previous rhetorical homologies found in film encouraged the oppression of marginalized groups and indifference towards abusive behaviors (Salek; Winslow). Even rhetorical homologies that are understood as a social critique of power on the surface may end up participating in normalizing the hegemonic practices they sought to unpack (Salek 14). As such, homologies can circulate hateful attitudes, but they also hold the possibility of combatting otherization by teaching a particular set of values.

Finding the equipment to tackle otherization is no small task. Drawing from Olga Idriss Davis, Karma Chávez explains that “the space of otherness is the space in which people, particularly those in power, are able to see themselves as other to another. For change to occur, that space must be violated in order to reveal ‘the other within the self’” (Chávez 167; Davis 77-89). Disrupting otherness often involves prompting audiences to find connections with the Other. Burke’s concept of identification, which more broadly refers to individuals identifying common interests with other people, might provide another way of thinking about this process (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 20). Identification is described as necessary for socialization and collaboration among divided human beings (Burke *Attitudes Towards History* 264).

However, audiences are not always willing or ready to engage with the space of otherness. The process of creating identification within a power structure may require a certain set of conditions. From Hannah Arendt’s perspective:

We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. (177)

Put another way, identification with the other may only happen during moments of widespread struggle. Arendt tells us that discrimination, especially based on

citizenship and borders, exists at all times. This right to have rights, however, becomes especially visible to everyone in the wake of massive and recognizable events of discrimination. A major political event, such as Brexit, might be the opportune situation for audiences to seek identification with disenfranchised groups. When the right to have rights becomes more apparent, individuals may be more willing to identify with the Other, especially when exposed to a form that conveys the plight of otherness.

The choice to use nonhuman equipment to inform such living, however, draws a number of novel questions about the rhetorical strategies that enable identification with marginalized groups. As J. David Cisneros argues, the discourse surrounding immigrants in the United States regularly dehumanizes them as toxic substances lacking any agency (591). Do homologous nonhuman characters drive that dehumanization further? Alternatively, could they intervene in the very process of dehumanization by expanding our definition of humanity?

Moreover, to what extent can the Burkean project account for not-quite-human equipment as a form of living? Kenneth Burke was a humanist who was worried about the societal impacts of technology, and some digital rhetoricians have gone so far as to say that Burke had an outright “disdain for technology” due to the times of warfare and genocide he lived in (Boyle and LeMieux 204). Jodie Nicotra offers another way of thinking through this, explaining that while Burke often depicted technology as a compulsion to be wary of, this compulsion and inevitability can be understood as Burkean arguments for how technology holds a persuasive force among human beings (Nicotra 128).

Previous works on rhetorical homologies rooted in Burkean philosophy have considered how fictional depictions of technology and robots influence living. Films involving technological reproduction, such as *The Ring*, can operate as a homology for how technological mass reproduction is put at odds with human uniqueness in discourse (Brummett “Rhetorical Homologies” 466). While this work addresses the portrayal of technological devices as a recurring contributor to dystopian discourses of mass production, I wish to expand on some of the ways robots are understood as appeals to humanity’s uniqueness or as deconstructing that uniqueness altogether.

Robotic characters in cinema hold a range of symbolic meanings. For example, unlike the massive hordes of evil identical machines, “the cute, benign robots of the *Star Wars* series of films are those that are most human, most authentic, with the most individuality” (Brummett “Rhetorical Homologies” 452). Similarly, in the

film *I, Robot*, “the one good robot in the bunch is the one specially created to have distinctive human characteristics” (Brummett “Rhetorical Homologies” 452). *Humans*, however, might intervene in this by disrupting the idea of what characteristics or values could even be considered human. The empathetic framing of robotic characters also diverges from earlier representations of robots in western culture as the erosion of white masculinity (Abnet 147). With these considerations in mind, we ought to investigate how decentering humans within cinematic representations of the act of living interacts with the space of otherness and creates a broader awareness of the right to have rights.

### The Brexit Backdrop

Television series regularly provide equipment for living through times of difficulty and novel political situations. For instance, Paul Johnson attributes the success of *Breaking Bad* to white male anxieties during the Obama presidency (25). These connections between fictional television shows and real-world political consequences are not necessarily obvious to the audiences that watch them. Nevertheless, the invisibility of rhetorical homologies does not detract from the fact that film can be “powerfully connected to real-life experiences. For instance, [Brummett] believe[s] it can be shown that superhero films have significantly increased, at least in the United States, since the attacks of September 11, 2001” (“What Popular Films” 67).

Under this rubric, *Humans* might be read as a direct response to xenophobic and racist discourses of Brexit. The Brexit campaign was very influential in British culture during the time of the show’s release and primarily focused on immigration issues. Among their many appeals to convince citizens of the UK to leave the EU, the campaign often emphasized that the EU’s immigration policy made it difficult to impose more restrictions on immigrants coming into the country. Political pundits and social scientists alike attributed Brexit to the anti-immigrant discourse produced by Leave.EU (Johnston). Some of this discourse, in fact, was blatantly discriminatory and false. For instance, investigative journalists found Leave.EU staged fake videos of unlawful border crossing into the UK and fake photos of migrant men of color assaulting white women (Channel 4). Leave.EU, Vote Leave, and similar campaigns advocating for Brexit had a series of recurring discursive themes that stoked the flames of otherness. There were several common themes present across various forms of discourse in favor of Brexit. The following

subsections will outline three of these themes and how they were present in the third season of *Humans*.

*A Sense of Loss.* The first theme I would like to emphasize is the representation of a wounded nation determined to return to its former glory by taking its power back from those who supposedly stole it. Signs and advertisements (see Figures 1, 2, and 3) sported phrases about taking the country back and regaining control over the UK's borders. This loss of power creates a binary of otherization, effectively demonizing the immigrants or international organizations who are implied to have stolen the power in question.



Figure 1. (Lemire and Colvin “What do the Brexit”)



Figure 2. (Drewett “More than 2,000,000”)



Figure 3. (Safdar “Brexit”)

This sense of loss can also be found in *Humans*. The third season begins a year after “Day Zero,” or the day all the synthetics collectively became conscious. The discriminatory responses of the human society are especially prevalent in this season. Through all of this, it is important to note that all of the people of color cast

in the show play synths. More specifically, some of the most frequently featured synths in the show are played by two Black men (Ivanno Jeremiah and Sope Dirisu) and an Asian woman (Gemma Chan).

The opening scene of the third season shows viewers a montage of fictional news broadcasts over the past year displaying what has happened since the robot workers collectively awoke as conscious beings. The headlines read “MASS MALFUNCTION OF SYNTHS REPORTED” and “DO NOT APPROACH SYNTHETICS’ SAY MANUFACTURERS IN STATEMENT” (“Episode #3.1” 00:01:04-00:02:05). Various newsperson characters describe Day Zero, when the synths awoke, as “a global crash” and show images of spray-painted walls reading “SYNTH SCUM!” in red letters next to piles of deceased robots. The show situates this contemporary dystopia firmly in British culture by creating fictional broadcasts from BBC news, a real British news source (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. (*Humans* “Episode #3.1”)

The loss of a stable and homogenous society is encapsulated by the statements of an anti-synthetic movement, We Are People, that is introduced in the opening scene and plays a role throughout the third season. Claudia Nowak (Susannah Doyle), the leader of We are People, tells cameras: “It’s time to put us, human beings, first again” (“Episode #3.1” 00:01:45-00:01:49). This phrase is noticeably similar to the pro-Brexit calls to “take our country back” and even Donald Trump’s

populist campaign slogan “make America great again” and historic calls to put “America First.” We Are People is a rhetorical homology for pro-Brexit campaigns, and perhaps populist movements around the world, that demand a return to normalcy in a time of supposed loss.

The interactions synthetic characters have with human beings are also reflective of the binary of otherization implicit in this discourse. In the third episode of the season, conscious synthetic Mia ventures beyond the “designated area” for synthetics and attempts to get an apartment in a town among human beings. Once she overcomes the social and legal barriers to getting the apartment, Mia faces anti-synth cruelty every time she leaves her home. As she walks back to her apartment one day, an angry mob of humans follows Mia and shouts at her. One woman shouts at her, “go back to your own kind!,” while others spit at her (“Episode #3.3” 00:18:50-00:19:05). Here, humanoid haters are not only otherizing Mia and demanding she leaves their sight; they are also nostalgically longing to “take back” the reins of the world they knew before the synths woke up and believe removing the Other will bring their situation “back” to what they knew once before.

*Economic Disempowerment.* Another discursive theme is the consistent idea of economic disempowerment brought on by immigrants and the EU. Immigration became a central component of the campaign to leave the European Union, largely because social media advertisements and newspaper headlines pushed the idea that immigrants were stealing jobs from citizens of the UK (Adam and Booth ). Poor and working-class Britons, in particular, were made to believe their economic woes were the byproduct of immigrants coming to the UK because of EU policies. In turn, part of what pro-Brexit campaigners were implying they wanted “back” was jobs from migrant workers (Walshe).

In the world created by *Humans*, humanoid robots have taken on jobs in the service industry, mechanics, factories, domestic labor, and other supposedly dirty low-wage jobs that are considered undesirable work for many humans. Throughout the series, but especially in season three, there is a blatant hatred for synths among working class humans before and after their conscious awakening. While the middle and upper classes come to rely on synthetics for their labor and feel betrayed by their awakening, low-wage workers who lost their jobs to synthetics are given a scapegoat for their economic woes within anti-synth discourse.

The show is laden with depictions of economically disenfranchised humans mourning the loss of their jobs to robots. In one scene, a man who appears to be homeless and asking for money has a cardboard sign reading “Synth [sic] took job.

Please help. God bless” (“Episode #3.1” 00:08:12-00:08:16). The sign, intended to garner sympathy from those who pass by, implies that losing a job to a machine is considered a tragic event that renders a human helpless and unable to escape homelessness. The synth, in this text, is the evil forcing humans to live on the streets. When synths are effectively blamed for the economic troubles of humans, they become the supposed reason why humans are no longer “first,” and humans are subsequently encouraged to take back their place at the top of the pyramid.

In the season finale, the humans violently attempt to “take back” their place at the top by attacking one of the designated areas where synths live. When Mia walks out to the angry mob of working-class humans ready to attack their compound, she begs for peace. One of the humans leading the mob shouts, “Is that what you want? I was a mechanic. I loved my job. I was good at it till’ one of you lot took it. I couldn’t keep up with my mortgage. Then, my wife left, took the kids, and you want peace? Well, I want my life back” (“Episode #3.8” 00:24:56-00:25:25). He then proceeds to attack the robots with a bat. In this monologue, the blue-collar mechanic blames the robots as a collective for his economic disempowerment and subsequently, his emasculation. He has been persuaded that robots are the root of his problems by campaigns such as We are People. Therefore, he is compelled to believe the extermination of synths will alleviate the economic problems that affect his personal life.

*The Threat of Terror.* Another consistent theme I identify in pro-Brexit discourse is the supposed threat of foreign violence. Campaign commercials from Vote Leave often featured white women being pushed aside by burly immigrant men (Shaw). Posters from Leave.EU compared the consequences of the referendum vote to the Orlando Shooting of 2016, implying that immigrants brought in by the European Union were Islamist extremists (see Figure 4). This conflation of immigrants with violence and outright terrorism effectively creates an atmosphere of fear around Brexit.





Figure 5. (Mason “Leave.eu Condemned”)

This theme is very prevalent across the third season of *Humans*. Day Zero, or the day when the synthetics awoke, is treated as a national day of mourning, and its phrasing sounds eerily similar to the phrase Ground Zero. Ground Zero can generally refer to a place where a large bomb erupted or, more specifically, the 9/11 memorial in New York City. Its anniversary falls both on the first and last episode of the season. On this day, the humans gather to mourn the hundreds of thousands of humans who died in accidents when the synthetics became conscious. The robots who were driving cars, handling dangerous equipment in factories, and caring for children are described as malfunctioning that day in a way that led to many deaths. The act of global mourning on this day is accompanied by intense nationalisms and love for humanity that strikes a clear resemblance to the memorialization of terror attacks in the western world, such as the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

We are People, and other entities that produce anti-synth rhetoric, often refer to Day Zero as evidence for why synths are a dangerous threat to humanity. Meanwhile, the robots wish the humans would acknowledge the thousands upon thousands of synthetic lives that were also lost on Day Zero. On a talk show, We are People leader Claudia Novak tells audiences the time to exterminate the supposedly violent threat of synths is overdue. She explains, “If a make of car developed a fault that led to the death of a hundred thousand people, do you think

we would see that car on the roads? No, we would not” (“Episode #3.1” 00:21:28-00:21:39). By describing the synths’ complicated condition of consciousness as broken and unfixable, *We are People* tells the audience it is justifiable to remove them. After all, the purpose of these machines in the first place was to be useful to humans. Once the machines become dangerous, they have no right to exist. In this view, they did not even have the right to have rights in the first place.

The lack of this right is part of why synths are confined to “designated areas” far from human society. In these gated, government-surveilled warehouses, synths die daily from a lack of access to electricity and basic supplies. They live in a decaying industrial fort designed to keep them away from human beings. A curfew is also enforced to keep synths from leaving their designated area at most times of day. These measures, in the government’s view, are intended to protect humans from being attacked by “malfunctioning” synths. The segregation of conscious robots from the rest of humanity mirrors many dark times in human history. This separation holds commonalities with concentration camps, migrant detention centers, insane asylums, Japanese internment camps, segregation in the American South, and many other historic acts of discrimination meant to cleanse a society of its impurities. The discourse surrounding the need to avoid the integration of robots into human society argues they are a menace to life as we know it and ought to be avoided.

The anti-synth discourse is also formally integrated into the education system for human children growing up during this confusing time. In one scene, a man visits an elementary school to give a lecture in a gymnasium called the “Synth Safe Program.” He shows a picture of a green-eyed synthetic and asks the students to tell him about it. A girl raises her hand to say, “they’re dangerous,” and he concurs, “Yes! The green eyes are broken. They don’t have to do anything we say.” Broken, in this sense, becomes synonymous with dangerous and capable of free will. He then asks, “So what do we do when we see a green eyes?” Without the slightest hesitation, the children chant in unison “steer clear,” and the man enthusiastically congratulates them for their correct answer (“Episode #3.1” 00:14:32-00:15:14). By instituting anti-synth pedagogy, the humans cement the idea that robots are violent and must be avoided into the minds of future generations.

### Somewhat Human Implications

The rhetorical construction of personhood, on and off screen, is often reliant on homologies about human rights. While unpacking how anti-abortion and animal rights groups personify non-human subjects with rhetorical homologies, Jason Edward Black argues that “rights take on meaningful importance in the construction of personhood” (327). Being deserving of rights, in the public eye, has historically involved the construction of a human or humanlike entity. Likewise, in the *Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle*, Burke explains that denying rights to people often involves positing them as a dehumanized scapegoat for societal ills (*The Philosophy*202-03). *Humans* radically shifts these tendencies by creating a world where robots are marginalized for having a consciousness like human beings. Their proximity to humanity, the center of power, is considered threatening and potentially disempowering to human beings rather than a ground for rights. As such, a rhetorical homology involving non-humans fighting for human rights prompts the perfect discursive storm to redraw existing boundaries around Burkean equipment.

The rhetorical homology that exists between *Humans* and British anti-immigrant discourses is a form of dehumanization. The discourse of otherization bears a distinct mark that allows the very idea of humanity to serve as the Symbol for citizenship. Ultimately, the supposed threat that immigrants posed to British society was their proximity to that society. Citizenship begins to lose its power as noncitizens become a significant part of what it means to live in the United Kingdom. The equipment for living in the United Kingdom is the labor, struggle, and experiences of immigrants that ought to be seen as living. Pro-Brexit campaigns lament the loss of patriotism and endangerment of true citizens because the reconfiguration of British society threatens the centrality of citizenship. Similarly, the We are People movement in *Humans* demonizes the synthetics because conscious robots threaten the centrality of humanity by changing what characteristics could be considered exclusively human. Altogether, the fear of losing power and a certain fragility about cultural change motivates this not-quite-human homology.

*Humans* uses rhetorical homology in an attempt to teach inclusive values by naming the form of anti-immigrant discourse for what it is: a movement that claims “We Are People” while participating in the inhumane treatment of others. In this homology, humanoid robots are rhetorically powerful equipment *as* living because they respond to pro-Brexit xenophobia with a satisfyingly familiar form that received a not-quite-human facelift. Artwork, literature, and other forms that serve as “equipment for living” provide strategies for approaching particular situations

(Burke *The Philosophy* 304). That equipment, however, is not static, because “the processes of change of identity are most clearly revealed by analyzing formal works of art and applying the results of our analysis to the ‘informal art of living’ in general” (Burke *The Philosophy* 308). If living is an informal artwork in itself, and artwork, which is a form of equipment, is indicative of identity, then equipment is not just “for” living. Rather, equipment is entangled in living.

The not-quite-human equipment presented by *Humans* complicates that living by showing a “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing)” (Burke *Language as Symbolic Action* 16) thing that faces the pains of otherization. This way of thinking transcends the historically connected semantic boundaries of citizenship, personhood, and humanity. The dehumanization faced by immigrants is a denial of the right to have rights that was illuminated with a very blunt representation of living without access to humanity. Living as not-quite-human equipment was the space of otherness the synthetics of *Humans* were made to endure. In Hartelius’ words, “symbolically grounded violence can be resisted with more persuasive counter-symbol use” (328). In the fictional world created by *Humans*, the ideological binary between subjects and objects is symbolic violence that forms a universal liberal subject that is supposedly more deserving of rights (Atanasoski and Vora 82-3). By using technological equipment to convey a message about the space of otherness, the impact of dehumanization is demystified to some extent. The right to have rights is exposed by shedding light on the very core of the form itself: access to subjectivity.

However, using non-human equipment to represent the plight of immigrants may also participate in dehumanizing logics. In the United Kingdom, racist ideals of biological determinism are often reinforced with metaphors that regard immigrants as nonhuman animals or objects (Charteris-Black; Mujagić and Berberović). The humanoid robots in *Humans* might be conscious, but they are still essentially different from the human beings in the show. For instance, they need to charge with a reliable power source rather than consume food and water. They also communicate with less emotional expression and have a different set of athletic capabilities. This projection of essential differences reinforces the idea that there are supposedly natural or biological divides between us and the Other. Historically, representations of robots in popular culture imagined these essential differences between robots and humans as evil. Racialized and gendered stories of broken or immoral machines were common themes among white male science fiction writers of the twentieth century (Abnet). *Humans* may reframe the narrative by portraying

the robots as moral and virtuous compared to the hateful humans. Yet it still uses a nonhuman and biologically different signifier to represent the experience of the Other. In the words of Stuart Hall, discourses of racial and ethnic differences are given cultural salience when we become “subjects of its power/knowledge” (56). By participating in the pre-existing fantasy of robots as a homology for difference, *Humans* diverges from the history of science fiction plotlines while also upholding its tendency to represent otherness as a matter of biological determinism. This polysemic tension demonstrates the symbolic limitations robots hold in stories about social change. Making the right to have rights visible through robotic rhetorical homologues has the potential to make dehumanizing logics of anti-immigration discourses more apparent, but at what cost?

Although many of the performers playing synths in the show are Black people or people of color, robot homologues like *Humans* do not necessarily center the experiences of marginalized human individuals through their terms and practices. In fact, this particular homology lacks an explicit conversation about racism and hateful discourse during Brexit. When confronting xenophobia, Chávez would tell us centering the perspectives of the non-citizen is how we might redefine our current rhetoric of citizenship (168). Rhetorical homologues are built on the desire to seek identification with others. The societal search for sameness, rather than an appreciation and understanding of the unfamiliar, presents countless challenges. In some ways, getting audiences to identify with a nonhuman character or cause through robotic rhetorical homology may chip away at the discursive power of dehumanizing rhetoric. At the same time, subaltern perspectives may be relegated to nonhuman metaphors in the process.

*Humans* challenged British audience members to look inward and consider their discomfort with immigrants by critiquing the demonization of those who are considered less human or less of a citizen. The rhetorical homology in *Humans* gives us equipment for living by imagining equipment *as* living. Depending on the context, imagining people as equipment can be a reductive way to envision subaltern experiences. At the same time, it can operate as a reflexive process for issues such as how we approach populist movements outside of the United Kingdom, who we believe deserves a hospital bed during COVID-19, or how we treat the kid from the wrong side of the tracks. To borrow from Burke, “when we use symbols for things, such symbols are not merely reflections of the things symbolized, or signs for them; they are to a degree a *transcending* of the things symbolized” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 192). *Humans* is about robots, it is about

Brexit, and it is also about the ongoing situation of struggle where people are made to feel like equipment for someone else's idea of living.

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# Not Just in Factories: Robots in the Bedroom

JENNIFER KELSO FARRELL

When people think of robots replacing jobs, they usually think self-driving cars, automated factories, and bots that perform the jobs of journalists, lawyers, customer service representatives, and musicians. One area many do not consider is sex work: sex robots are an off-shoot of the personal robot industry, the industry that provides robots to help people remember to take their medication, to provide social interaction with those who are homebound, and in some cases even provide exoskeletons to assist with movement. While there is some expected controversy with non-sexual companion robots, sex robots are an area of huge concern and debate due to the intimate nature of the human engagement, which echoes society's unease with discussions of sex and especially sex work. This paper will focus on science fiction literary works that deal with the ethical questions of sex robots that are already bubbling up in contemporary companion robot discourse.

Before one can understand how sex robots might possibly fit into life in the future, one should examine personal robots. At its very simplest, a domestic or personal robot would be the Roomba, the autonomous vacuum. The most advanced robots are those considered "companion" robots, robots designed for some conversation and to help with basic medical aspects such as managing medication, alerting 911 in an emergency, and monitoring moods. Several models already exist such as PARO, the seal-shaped therapeutic robot that has been available in Japan and Europe since 2003. In 2016, Toyota introduced Kirobo Mini in Japan. Ballie, developed by Samsung debuted at CES 2020. These are starting points: they are small and do not exactly resemble humans.

Enter Pepper, a humanoid robot by SoftBank. Pepper first highlighted the anxiety and curiosity humans have toward robots in the real world, especially those potentially capable of conversational intimacy, reading emotions, and offering emotional comfort. Pepper is programmable to sense obstacles in its environment, recognize faces, and understand basic human emotions through vocal inflections.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan has been using Pepper to cheer up patients in quarantine hotels (Reuters). Most commonly, Pepper is used for customer service; in the home, it is an emotional support robot and costs \$2,000 US (AFP). Unfortunately, some hackers exploited Pepper's programming to give it sexual characteristics and mannerisms which highlights how companion robots could be problematic. How does the owner/object relationship between a human and robot change if the robot is abused by the human? How does that relationship change if the robot is repurposed to be a robot sex worker (RSW)?

Mark Migotti and Nicole Wyatt argue that: "if sex robots are nothing more than aids to masturbation (or for that matter to sex with a human partner), they are no different from the broad variety of sex toys already for offer, and so don't raise any destructive social, ethical, or conceptual problems" (Mignotti and Wyatt 21-2). Matthias Schultz and Thomas Arnold add another dimension to the discussion by pointing out increases in virtual reality and computer-based ways to have sex will be entirely different from sex robots because sex robots "...elicit and trade upon dimensions of physicality, intimacy, reciprocity, and social space" (Shultz and Arnold 247). A robot's ability to be programmed to the user's needs is another key difference between a RSW and virtual reality/computer-based masturbation methods. As Steve Petersen argues, to be ethically programmed, a sex robot would have to be able to seek fulfillment outside of sex, much like humans seek hobbies and activities outside of their jobs (Petersen 230). Essentially, if a sex robot realizes it is for sex only and is unhappy/unsatisfied by that, then we have created sex slaves, which is clearly unethical. Alternatively, if we cannot program them to be human-like, they're rendered sex toys rather than sex robots. What is available today is elaborate sex toys.

Robot Companion ([www.robotcompanion.ai](http://www.robotcompanion.ai)) offers "the world's first artificially intelligent robotic companions" for the mass market. The level of AI deployed seems to consist mostly of wireless communication, voice communication, and simple machine learning. In other words, it is an Alexa designed for sex. One can buy the most advanced models for about \$5500 before customization; the sex robot market is currently in flux, it seems. Circa 2017 there were several models ready to ship ranging in price from \$5,000 to \$15,000. Now, however, most of those "dolls" are AI "apps" for companionship on phones. Doll models are essentially fully customizable including the color of skin, hair, eyes, pubic hair, finger and toenails; and one can even add what they term the "shemale" kit. They are marketed as friendly, warm, affectionate, and with the ability to climax

at the right time, every time, but they have no distinct personalities. Even these sex robots, the most advanced on the market, are no closer to human than Siri. Sex with a sex doll, even one as advanced as Robot Companions is still masturbation with a sex toy.

There are some who are banking on that being enough, however. In January 2018, the first temporary robot (i.e. sex doll) brothel opened in Amsterdam. Named “Spuiten en Silkken” (Injecting and Swallowing), it housed four dolls (Amsterdam Red Light District). It cost 30 euros for a turn with a doll. The goal was, according to multiple news outlets, “trying to discover if having sex with a doll is like having sex with a human” (O’Donoghue 1-25-18). Nine months after the Amsterdam brothel a Canadian company called KinkySDolls attempted to open a similar brothel in Houston, TX (Nicholls). They were unsuccessful in Houston, as opponents cited that such brothels promote unhealthy attitudes toward women and that we, as humans, are not prepared for the consequences of robot human sexual relations. Matthias and Arnold are not surprised by these arguments as they say “the Campaign Against Sex Robots has featured strong articulations of how sex with robots could degrade respect for human sex workers, if not more generally. Such a stance has resonated with legal arguments that human-robot sex could erode notions of consent within society as a whole” (Matthias and Arnold 249). Some are concerned human-robot sex will profoundly harm human-human sex in ways such as eroding the institution of marriage, encouraging infidelity, inciting violence against humans.<sup>1</sup>

Marina Adshade provides counterarguments when she argues that sex robot technology will not adversely affect marriage because humans will be free to marry for different and possibly more important reasons. Marriage will look different because the reasons people enter into it will be drastically altered by sex robot

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<sup>1</sup> If these arguments sound familiar, they are. The video game industry has endured such arguments since 1976’s “Death Race” when parents thought the racing game was too violent as it depicted a car running over gremlins (NCAC.org). Since 1976 the number of complaints about the dangers of video games has increased and expanded to include the potential dangers of video games causing explicit sexual behavior, a propensity toward violence, increased anger, and detachment. In 1994 the industry saw the creation of the Entertainment Software Rating Board after the 1993 release of Mortal Combat (ESRB.org). The board acts like the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) with the additional criterion of interactivity factored into its ratings. Despite there being no evidence of a correlation between video games and aberrant behavior, the myth endures and still affects the industry (Anderson). It’s entirely probable that a similar advisory board could be created for personal and sex robots especially as more concerns about human-robot relations arise.

technology (Adshade 297). As a result of this change sex robot technology will lead to the normalization of non-exclusive relationships as the dominant relationship structure and monogamy will be “. . .a personal preference rather than a socially imposed constraint” (Adshade 296). Individuals will have the freedom to determine the nature of their marriages without interference from the state. Like how the birth control pill allowed women more control over their reproductive plans which in turn opened marriage up to possibilities extending beyond financial support, sex robot technology will reshape the concept of matrimony once more.

Adshade’s hypotheses are derived from examinations of other societal disruptions brought about by technology. Much has been written on the impact of birth control on the institution of marriage, but fewer may be aware of how free internet porn has also served as a societal disruption. Studies indicate that rape decreased when internet porn became widely available: “...research finds that a 10% increase in internet access coincides with a fall in reported rape rates of 7.3%. The largest effect is among men who would have had very little access to pornography before online porn became available: those ages 15 to 19” (Adshade 291) It could be hypothesized that sex robots could facilitate another drop in violent crimes against sex workers as well as domestic partners due to constant access. It is likely the technology of sex robots will not change society so much as societal norms will inevitably shift around the technology.

The intersection between sex and robots is one that needs to be examined but since nothing close to a fully aware AI or robot currently exists, the turn to science fiction literature becomes critical to understanding how and why humans might seek out non-human intimacy and reveal the ethical complexities of such relationships, as well as the frailty and cruelty of humanity towards the very objects from which we seek solace. This article will use three novels from the past 15 years to show what a future with sex robots might look like: T. Aaron Payton’s *The Constantine Affliction* (2012), Annalee Newitz’s *Autonomous* (2017), and Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2009).

These novels were selected because they each examine a slightly different ethical concern raised by sex robots and RSW’s as the themes build from novel to novel to create a more complete vision of what a sex robot future might look like: Payton’s *The Constantine Affliction* provides a vision of what contemporary sex robots might be like if available on a large scale; Newitz’s *Autonomous* presents a robot that is repurposed by its human into a sex robot and the complexities of that relationship; and Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* shows us what the most advanced

robot who has been subjected to abuse and degradation could become. By examining these three novels, it clarifies how science fiction is able to highlight the ethical, psychological, and social implications of an industry that makes many people uncomfortable and will more than likely usher in an era humankind are not yet prepared for.

### *The Constantine Affliction*

Of the fiction works that will be discussed in this article, Payton's *The Constantine Affliction* (2012) is the closest to what is currently available in terms of sex robot technology. *The Constantine Affliction* is set in a steampunk version of 1864 London with monsters in the river, eldritch lords coming through the sky, Adam (aka Frankenstein's Monster) on a subterranean quest for love, and a sexually transmitted disease that switches the sex of those afflicted. As a result of an STD, named after Constantinople, clockwork prostitutes have become a lucrative business. For this paper, only the plot concerning the clockwork prostitutes and what they represent is examined.

The clockwork prostitutes are mere sex toys, albeit highly advanced. Like Robot Companion, the patron chooses the doll they want to interact with from a catalog with pictures and descriptions. One madame explains: "our devices are realistic as any living woman. They breathe, they have heartbeats, they are warm, and they are...welcoming...to man's touch. . .Admittedly, they are not accomplished conversationalists, but they have certain vocal capabilities some men find pleasing" (Payton 35). Putting aside the reductionist view that living women are merely breathing warm bodies with a heartbeat, the reader sees that the clockwork prostitutes are not autonomous; little more than animated blow-up dolls with limited conversation skills. It will be natural, according to Julie Carpenter that we will seek ways to make robot sex workers more human-like in order to further enhance the illusion of a human partner—natural language, socialness, displaying emotions (sexual as well as otherwise) (Carpenter 263). The question is: will such modifications override the uncanny valley, and will there be the appetite amongst consumers?

When journalist Ellie goes undercover to examine a clockwork brothel, she comments that while the clockwork prostitute was breathing, there were none of the subtle shifts in body that would indicate life. It is only when touched does the clockwork prostitute appear to be alive:

...and the clockwork courtesan came more fully to life, half-turning its head toward her, eyelids fluttering, mouth parting, a warm and sultry “Mmmm” emerging from its throat...it seemed almost real, though the smell was wrong—too neutral, too inhuman—and the movements indefinably artificial. (Payton 37)

Another simulation of life occurs when Ellie rolls the clockwork prostrate and it gets onto all fours on its own, head to the mattress, bottom in the air. From a distance, Ellie comments it would look very much like a human (Payton 38). Essentially, what Ellie has discovered is that the clockwork prostitutes have a very limited range of what one might call programming. They respond sexually to most external stimuli. The clockwork prostitutes have no personality, no autonomy, and seemingly no goals. They do not even know if they have done their job well as is shown when Ellie leaves, the prostitute unused on the bed. It simply sits, breathes, and stares into the distance the same as she found it.

Clockwork prostitutes are necessary in this world where illicit sex can result in turning into the opposite sex. While we currently are not facing such a situation, we are looking at increases in loneliness due to aging populations, lower birth rates, and now a pandemic. Companionship, even if bought, is at a premium. The main character of *The Constantine Affliction*, Pimm, is married to his best friend, Fred, who now goes by Winnifred after contracting the disease. To protect Fred and Fred's family from embarrassment and judgement of others due to Fred's moral failing, the two live as man and wife. This world has decided that changing sexual behaviors that require sex workers is not going to happen so instead they've created clockwork brothels that operate in a legal gray zone: "...officially they were classed as 'amusement arcade,' no different from batallé parlors and penny-admission showcases of automatons though they were rather more expensive, and had a more limited clientele..." (Payton 25). Despite the virus that strikes men and women who consort with sex workers, the clockwork brothels represent a distasteful alternative even though the health risk is almost non-existent.

There is some distaste in paying for the opportunity to consort with a clockwork prostitute, something that may carry over into the non-fiction world. In the real world, current existing sex robots cost around \$5000. Sex dolls can be much cheaper (the low end around \$1300) but lack interactive qualities. It is a growing market, but realistically, how much of a market is there? Two studies give some insight. The first is Julie Carpenter's study from 2013 that polled 1000 American adults and found only 9% would have sex with a robot if the opportunity presented

itself, and a whopping 42% would consider it cheating for a sexual partner to have sex with a robot. Not surprisingly, younger Americans (between 30 and 60) were less likely to consider it cheating while older Americans skewed much higher. Schultz and Arnold conducted a similar study in 2016 that consisted of 203 adult subjects. While willing participation to engage in sex with a robot was higher, the sample size was considerably smaller. They learned that the positives to sex robots include disease-free sex, availability of sex, and little to no psychological impact on sex partner (Schultz and Arnold 253). Less than 50% of the study participants thought robots should be used only for sex, i.e., not as mere sex toys (Schultz and Arnold 257). Oddly, only 6% of the study participants agreed that sex robots ought to have rights (Schultz and Arnold 255).

Essentially, these studies conducted on very small sample sizes reveal the complicated feelings humans have toward robots: "...the ethical challenges of 'sex robots' may hinge as much on the social and relational dynamics that overlap with sexuality than human-robot sex per se" (Matthias and Arnold 257). These feelings are reflected nicely in *The Constantine Affliction*. Pimm early on admits: "the thought of having intimate relations with what was, essentially, an enormous doll was comical at best, and horrifying at worst" (Payton 26). Even the purveyor of clockwork prostitutes laments how the clockwork prostitutes have changed the sex trade:

The clockwork whores are expensive to produce, too—they don't just wander into the city seeking their fortunes like ordinary girls do. Admittedly, once they've been built, the only costs are cleaning and maintenance, and the clockwork girls never complain, get pregnant, or catch the pox...plenty of men refuse to achieve release with an automaton, no matter how cunningly contrived it might be. (Payton 26)

Programming robots to love and not slavishly be devoted might be most difficult trait to capture in a robot (Nyholm and Frank 234-5). It requires a higher level of sophistication than we currently have or even seem capable of at this moment. Even Robot Companion's top model cannot replicate true human interaction. The clockwork prostitutes, like the sex robots on the contemporary market, fall far short of being true human companions. They are elaborate tools to masturbation. Where *The Constantine Affliction* departs from our world is where the clockwork prostitutes are granted the ability to walk on their own, but even that is not fully autonomous movement as it is the result of programming, although the clockwork prostitutes could theoretically convince someone they are human from a distance.



Such duplicity in the real world is a major concern for the group Responsible Robotics which argues “humans can easily be deceived into attributing mental states and behaviors to robots because of our natural tendency to project human characteristics onto appropriately configured inanimate objects” (Sharkey, et. al. 10). The key word here is “deceived.” From a distance, the clockwork prostitutes are indistinguishable from a living human woman; it is the uncanny valley confronted. With a bit more sophistication the clockwork prostitutes could pass for human and be treated as human by the unwitting.

That does not come to pass in *The Constantine Affliction*, as even the most advanced clockwork woman in the novel is a mere pantomime of a human. Readers learn the Queen of England has been replaced by a clockwork version that is the most lifelike. Despite her advancements, “the mechanical Queen showed no inclination to do anything but sit in her throne and watch the madness overtake the park” (Payton 259). Pimm is anthropomorphizing the clockwork Queen. It is highly unlikely she wants to do anything because she is merely acting out the program she was installed with, and thus the clockwork Queen is fundamentally no different than the dolls in the brothels.

*The Constantine Affliction* shows a world where sex robots are necessary but not embraced. Much like the sex robots of today, the clockwork automatons have no personality and are programmed for a very specific function. Unlike today’s sex robots, they are capable of movement on their own, the one stand-out difference. The characters encounter the uncanny valley unease of something that looks alive but is not. As a result, the clockwork prostitutes never become characters in the novel. They are a narrative mechanism and do not garner sympathy from the characters because there is no internal world to them. In essence they are there to further dehumanize human sex workers by acting as their proxy. They serve to reflect the unease that many have toward robot sex that they will be a simple replacement for human-human affection, encourage violence in those predisposed to violence, and inspire indifference toward women both living and robotic. Despite all this the characters in the novel still find themselves thinking of the clockwork women as having some agency, but that is merely a projection of their own anxieties onto the dolls.

*Autonomous*

Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017) has at its center a relationship between a military robot named Paladin, its human partner named Eliaz, and the complicated relationship that develops between the two. Paladin is an example of a robot created for a different purpose but used by a human for sexual purposes. *Autonomous* is different from *The Constantine Affliction* because the reader sees the story unfold from Paladin's point of view, creating a sense of intimacy and empathy for the robot.

Paladin is what is called a biobot, a robot with a human brain in their torso that is used mostly for facial recognition. While the brain does not impart memories, personality, or gender, the brain becomes the focal point of the relationship between Eliaz and Paladin. Paladin's primary function is that of a military bot and as such has a large, armored body and moves on tank treads. Paladin, like many bots in the novel, is indentured and would not be autonomous for at least 20 years, if he indeed survives that long. The reader learns that Paladin can feel pain which means he may have other sensations as well. Early on, the reader sees Paladin struggle to understand what in his actions and feelings is his programming and what is his actual desire: "of course [Paladin] had been programmed to take Eliaz's orders, to trust, and even to love him" (Newitz 235).

Eliaz is concerned about Paladin's identity from the beginning because he is sexually attracted to Paladin: "Eliaz's heart beat faster, his skin slightly damp. The man's reproductive organ, whose functioning Paladin understood only from military anatomy training, was engorged with blood" (Newitz 77). Experiencing Eliaz's sexual attraction sets Paladin on a quest to figure out human-robot sexuality. Because Paladin is a military robot, however, he finds nothing pertaining to military bots and sex outside of fictional representations and porn. According to Max Tegmark "in the inverse reinforcement-learning approach, a core idea is that the AI is trying to maximize not the goal satisfaction of itself, but that of its human owner. It therefore has an incentive to be cautious when it's unclear about what its owner wants, and to do its best to find out" (Tegmark 262). Due to Eliaz exhibiting sexual attraction toward him, Paladin wants to understand how to assist Eliaz's goal satisfaction. Since Eliaz, however, is conflicted about his feelings toward Paladin, Paladin must seek the answers out on his own.

Paladin's training only equipped him with clinical descriptions of human sex. Everything about Paladin was designed for military including a lack of genitalia, the addition of weapons, and a cold metal exterior. After fruitless searches online and in databases, Paladin decides to go to the source and asks Eliaz:

“Some robots said they were learning about human sexuality. Do you think military robots need to do that?”

Blood rushed to Elias’s face and electricity arced over his skin. “I don’t know anything about that. I’m not a faggot.” (Newitz 96)

After doing more research on the previously unfamiliar term “faggot” Paladin realizes Elias’s unease is because Elias is thinking of Paladin as a human and that Paladin’s brain is the center of his identity. Elias sees Paladin as a man and his attraction to Paladin is confusing because Elias aggressively does not identify as homosexual but, in turn, does not seem bothered by his attraction to a robot. Julie Carpenter argues that this confusion will be natural in a world where humans and robots engage in sexual relationships.

It is a new way of examining emotional power in human-robot dynamics, a framework for a relationship different from any human-human relationship, yet similar to the human-human relationship in terms of pure sexual desire being fulfilled for the human. (Newitz 270)

Paladin finds himself unduly concerned about humans, sex, robots, and identity so he seeks out another bot named Fang for guidance. Paladin asks Fang if he had sex with Elias when he was Elias’s bot. Fang says he did not, which solidifies in Paladin’s mind that there is something about Paladin that Elias is attracted to. Fang explains that Elias is anthropomorphizing Paladin:

But anthropomorphizing is something different. It’s when a human behaves as if you have a human physiology, with the same chemical and emotional signaling mechanisms. It can lead to misunderstandings in a best-case scenario and death in the worst...he may not even realize he wants to have sex with you. (Newitz 126)

Fang also explains to Paladin that robots do not have gender, it is something humans assign to robots in order to better relate to the robots. Perhaps this is not a surprise considering that Newitz prefers gender neutral pronouns and wrote in 2019 on Tor.com:

As I grew older, however, I realized that there was a dark side to all this labeling and scientific rationalization of sex and gender. These categories could be used to stigmatize us, to deny us jobs and separate us from our families. Some doctors call minority desires “mental illnesses;” many queers and kinky people have been institutionalized to “cure” them of their preferences. Various forms of romance have been acknowledged, only to be forbidden. In the US, interracial and queer marriage were illegal within

living memory, and marriage to more than one person is still unlawful.  
(Newitz “The Sex Chart”)

So much of what Newitz says here is embodied in the conversation between Fang and Paladin. Robots in this world are slaves. Their needs are often ignored if they are ever acknowledged in the first place. They are gendered at the whim of the humans around them and then treated accordingly based on that whim.

Due to his military nature, Paladin has adopted male pronouns because that is what the humans around him have used. Julie Carpenter discusses how a human centered worldview will need to be changed in order to integrate robots into society.

Humanness is viewed as the very model of social relations, as the indivisible bases of all community, and is the means of production without which society would not exist. The challenge for society is to dismantle such human-human centered frames through the practice of investigating the significance of human-robot sexual-social interactions. (Carpenter 274)

The use of gendered language is human-centric and sometimes serves to alienate the robots who don't see themselves as male or female. It is because of the gendering that Elias struggles with his feelings for Paladin: “Paladin knew that human gender was part of sexual desire. But he was starting to perceive that gender was a way of seeing the world, too...gender was a form of social recognition” (Newitz 184). It is clear that Elias does not seem to have any hang-ups about having sex with a robot and that his anxiety was with being labeled as “homosexual.” The reader knows that Paladin finds Elias's insistence on gendered pronouns limiting and confusing. Paladin simply adapts the gendered language in order to make the humans around him feel more comfortable, but the use of that language does confuse Paladin as to who he really is and what he really wants.

Paladin is further confused after a drugged Elias propositions Paladin, even as Elias expresses deep conflict over his emotions saying: “two men cannot lie together” (Newitz 163). That statement both genders and anthropomorphizes Paladin, reducing the robot to a sexual object. However, Paladin's curiosity combined with his desire to not disappoint Elias causes Paladin to allow the sexual encounter to continue, with Elias climaxing against Paladin's body since penetration is not possible. Despite Paladin's consent, in this moment Elias unknowingly and unwittingly changes Paladin's function and ultimately, their relationship. While Paladin remains a military bot, according to Julie Carpenter, Elias has also added robot sex worker to Paladin's resume: “the term robot sex worker (RSW) is used to refer to a robot that: (1) is designed with sexual stimulation

capabilities; and/or (2) is being used for human sexual gratification” (Carpenter 261). Despite Paladin’s primary function, he has been altered into a sex robot. While this might not seem unethical, it does become a gray area as it confuses the robot’s original programming with its new functionality.

Paladin’s existence is further complicated when Paladin learns that its brain once did belong to a female soldier. Eliaz is ecstatic at this news saying “that’s so fantastic! Now you know who you really are!” (Newitz 183). Eliaz asks if he can refer to Paladin as “she” going forward. Paladin, facing her first truly autonomous decision agrees and spends the rest of the novel identifying as “she,” even though Paladin is aware that she truly has no gender. Eliaz also tells Paladin that he must have known on some level that Paladin was female, an assertion Paladin finds unlikely. However, out of deference to Eliaz’s feelings, she does not attempt to correct him. This speaks to Tegmark’s statement that an AI needs to be cautious until it knows for certain what its owner, or in this case, partner, wants. The reader does get to be in the head of Paladin, so they do see what she is thinking and struggling to understand.

After making love as a “woman”<sup>2</sup> and man, Paladin shares with Eliaz that she has downloaded a program that gives her an approximation of a human orgasm. For Paladin to climax, however, she needs Eliaz to be on alert since her processes are basically shut down. Newitz gives us a vision of how robots designed for other functions could still fulfill sexual duties without compromising safety or security. Unlike the other works discussed in this paper, *Autonomous* establishes that sex robots could possibly have a different orgasm mechanism, especially for those without human adjacent genitalia, and that simultaneous orgasms might not be preferable or even achievable in a sex robot world.

Ultimately, Eliaz buys Paladin’s freedom. Putting aside the objectionable transactional nature to that, Eliaz’s actions, while coming from a place of genuine affection, remind Paladin that she is an object. The reader sees where a true relationship between a sex bot and a human will be fraught with uncertainties that do not quite match human-human relationships. No matter what it is a one-way proposition until robots reach true sentience (Carpenter 264-5). Paladin’s feelings for Eliaz have not changed but she is frustrated that he does not understand that her identity is not actually in the brain she carries with her and his fixation on the brain undermines Paladin’s. Eliaz’s and Paladin’s relationship is far more

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<sup>2</sup> “Woman” here is in quotes to reinforce that Paladin has no gender as far as its concerned in the world of *Autonomous*.

complicated as now the idea of “love” has been introduced. By the end of the novel, Eliazs refers to Paladin as “the woman I love” (Newitz 298). Carpenter explains that “although there may be similarities between human-human and human-robot attachment models, human-robot attachment will also have new challenges unique to those interactions” (Carpenter 267). Eliazs’s hang-up on Paladin’s brain, the fact that Eliazs bought her freedom, the fact Eliazs cannot see her facial expressions, the fact they cannot orgasm at the same time, and the fact that her primary function is a military robot are all challenges that the two of them will have to learn to negotiate.

Paladin, despite her awakening and self-awareness remains confused as to whether she can tell the difference between programming and actual desire. “Of course, she had been programmed to take Eliazs’s orders, to trust, and even to love him” (Newitz 235). Paladin ruminates that Eliazs will never truly understand her as he is just too human; but she is content to keep her thoughts to herself because “they were the first private thoughts she’d ever had” (Newitz 299). Tegmark finds this an acceptable solution to the potential ethical questions of owning sentient robots “to allow the enslaved AI to have fun in its prison, letting it create a virtual inner world where it can have all sorts of inspiring experiences as long as it pays its dues and spends a modest fraction of its computation resources helping us humans in an outside world” (Tegmark 184). Now, Paladin is not creating an interior world, but she is reserving the right to hold back thoughts and opinions, much like a human would.

*Autonomous* in the end is a love story for the future, a story where a human could take on a robot lover as easily as a human lover. No matter how much love there is, however, the reality is that a robot is an object that is typically owned by a human and the power dynamics are more complicated as a result. Where the clockwork prostitutes of *The Constantine Affliction* are made to order and owned by individuals, they also lack awareness of their situation, rendering them mere sex toys. They are no more sentient than an Alexa, and even less conversational. The robots in *Autonomous* are aware of their situations. They know they are indentured, and they rely on humans for existence. As a result, there are back communication channels the robots use to talk with one another that the humans are not privy to. The humans are seemingly content to let the robots have their internal worlds as long as they perform their day-to-day functions. What happens when a robot’s day-to-day functions change and they are abandoned yet still functional?

### *The Windup Girl*

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) offers up a final vision of what human-robot sex might look like in the future. Unlike the mindless clockwork dolls of *The Constantine Affair* or the repurposed Paladin, Emiko is the most human of the robots this paper examines. Like Paladin, the reader is inside Emiko's head and witnesses her struggles. Unlike Paladin, Emiko struggles to survive in a country and a world that does not respect her. She is an ethical abomination, a feeling creature denied full autonomy simply because she is not entirely human.

*The Windup Girl* is a beautiful dystopic vision of a world run amok with so many blights that food is scarce, and most subsist on forms of algae. It also provides the most advanced vision of what a human-robot sex future might look like. The setting is Thailand and electricity as we know it has been replaced by power saved in springs that run devices. Gasoline and diesel-based transportation are luxuries that only the military and government can afford. The reader follows Anderson, a calorie man (in the world of the novel, men who engage in selling and buying seeds and other food items are referred to as "calorie" men) from a US company seeking access to Thailand's seed bank to bring extinct crops back to the United States. Emiko, the character of most interest to this paper, is a Japanese windup girl (also known as the New People) who has been discarded by her Japanese owner.

Emiko is advanced and will not age nor suffer disease, however, she is not invulnerable. One design feature of hers is that she has incredibly small pores, designed for living in air conditioning and a cooler climate. Because she is in Thailand she overheats frequently, something her owner, Raleigh, uses against her because the ice she needs to stay cool costs money. A second design feature is that she moves in a herky-jerky manner. This was intentional to make sure the New People do not perfectly blend in with humans. Thailand sees her as an invasive species, and she has not been destroyed only because she earns money for Raleigh. Her talent? Sexual degradation and occasional prostitution. Due to her genetic makeup, Emiko cannot refuse those who would control her:

Emiko moans again as her body betrays her...her body performs just as it was designed—just as the scientists with their test tubes intended. She cannot control it no matter how much she despises it. The scientists will not allow her even this small disobedience. She comes. (Bacigalupi 43)

Nightly, Emiko is tortured and humiliated for the amusement of patrons who view her as less than an animal. She is not worthy of respect, kindness, or empathy.

It is this treatment of an object that groups like Responsible Robotics are concerned about. In their 2017 report, human rights lawyer Kay Firth Butterfield argued against robot sex workers. They ask if sex robots were human enough, do humans want to say it is okay to violently abuse the object of domination even if that object is not human? (Sharkey, et. al. 21)-When the object is not human, but reacts like a human, is it ethical to sexually abuse that object? In the novel, many people in Thailand do not view Emiko's kind as anything but an evil invasive species, creatures not worthy of minimal kindness.

In the novel, Japan created the New People aka the windups to combat a low birth rate and a lack of people to work jobs. Japan also uses the windups for warfare. In the words of Carpenter, Japan has reached social system integration which refers to the point where robots become pervasive in the everyday lives of most people. This period would overlap quickly with the stage of meaningful integration, or the sweet spot where humans emotional and sexual attachment to, and affection or even love for robots begins to occur regularly in personal report. (Carpenter 279)

The New People are part flesh, part genetic splicing, part artificial, and completely unnatural. Emiko was the secretary and lover of her Japanese owner who was a statesman sent to Thailand. Emiko remembers the relationship fondly and believed there was genuine love between the two right up until he decided it was too expensive to buy her a return ticket to Japan.

Because the novel is set in Thailand, the reader only gets secondhand information about how successful this integration has been in Japan. What is significant is that Emiko was accustomed to one level of integration, only to find herself abandoned in a country that does not regard her as a legitimate sentient being.:

“I am not that kind.” She whispers. “Not military.”

“Japanese, same as you. I lost a hand because of your kind a lot of good friends.” He shows her the stump where his hand is missing, pushes it against her cheek.

“Please. Just let me go.” She presses back against his crotch. “I’ll do anything.”

“You think I’d soil myself that way? “He shoves her hard against the wall, making her cry out. “With an animal like you?” (Bacigalupi 119)

Emiko is acutely aware of her change in status something Carpenter addresses: “robots not originally designed to be RSW’s can still become defined as RSW’s



when they are used in a way to engage human sexual satisfaction, and when they are considered RSW's by their owners or users either as a primary role, or a set of features of qualities" (Carpenter 262). Emiko's original function of a secretary has long ago been replaced by her sexual nature. Even her original owner used her as a sex robot. As a result, she questions what is motivating her.

When Emiko meets Anderson, she is running from an assailant. Anderson rescues her and Emiko tries to repay Anderson with the only currency she has, her body. Anderson is not interested at first and finds her subservience repulsive. After hearing her story, Anderson warms to Emiko, and they sleep together. Like Paladin, Emiko questions how much of her sleeping with Anderson is rooted in her programming and how much is genuine desire. In order to be satisfying, relationships must meet fundamental emotional needs and those needs are defined and established by both parties which means a RSW would have to be human enough to have their own emotional needs (Carpenter 267).

Throughout *The Windup Girl* the reader sees just how human-like Emiko's emotional state is. She feels humiliation even as she can't stop herself from obeying the orders of those who are socially superior to her, she is embarrassed by her herky-jerky walking and tiny pores that cause her to overheat, she longs to be around other New People, and she feels genuine affection for Anderson. Nyholm and Frank argue that a robot with Emiko's ability to feel emotion creates further complications in human-robot relationships: "if the robot speaks and behaves in the same manner a human lover does, and if the robot can produce the same (or greater) experienced levels of companionship, satisfaction, emotional comfort for the human (than) a fellow human lover can, then we should take this to be genuine love" (Nyholm and Frank 223). No matter how humanlike the robot is, however, the love will necessarily be different from the human perspective because robots will lack the human experience by virtue of not being capable of gaining the human experience (Carpenter 271). Although Emiko has feelings for Anderson, her biggest lament is that she is unable to have children of her own, something that newer models of New People might be able to do.

Emiko learns that there is an enclave of New People in northern Thailand. Raleigh shoots her dreams down telling her she will never make enough money to buy her freedom because of her ice consumption. Eventually the nightly torture at Raleigh's causes Emiko to snap. Despite not being a military model, Emiko easily dispatches of Raleigh and a roomful of men: "and she thinks that some things are worse than dying. Some things can never be borne. Her fist is very fast. Raleigh-

san's throat is soft" (Bacigalupi 283). Her actions trigger a revolution between warring factions of the government and the calorie men. Despite this and knowing that she is worth more dead than alive, Anderson chooses to protect Emiko. "Without her, we wouldn't even have had an excuse for the coup," Anderson says (Bacigalupi 367). Anderson's real reason for saving her is that he has genuine affection for her. Not long after Anderson dies of a plague he caught from his own algae tanks. Emiko is on her own for the first time in her life. The novel ends with her meeting one of the men responsible for the creation of New People. He promises her a life with other New People and to fix some of the bad engineering she's been subjected to, including the possibility of having a child.

The opportunity to have a child becomes hope for Emiko. The New People were designed to be infertile because, as Bacigalupi discusses earlier, a previous genetically modified cat was invented first and quickly took over the ecosystem. Obviously, humans didn't want that to happen to them. The man who helped create the New People tells Emiko he cannot provide a child for her through the typical means of reproduction but that he can create a child for her from her DNA, essentially, a clone. For Emiko the ability to have a child means she would have a family that would not abandon her, a family that would be like her. It signals the end of loneliness and it possibly also signals the end of human rule.

While Emiko seeks freedom, robots like Paladin find themselves inextricably tied to humans. In the real world, advanced sex robots are on the way. The market exists and will continue to grow. Will we be ready for the societal changes they will bring? From simple RSW's to owner-object relationships to possibly even marriage, humans will need to adapt to the emotional, ethical, and moral gray areas human-robot relationships will create. Science fiction, with its ability to look far into our future, asks these questions in a manner that also highlights the positives of such relationships.

Emiko is the most advanced of the three robots discussed in this paper simply because she is the most human-like. She can love and hate. Paladin exhibits some human curiosity and human emotion, but only Emiko demonstrates the full range including anxiety, angst, anger, and longing. The clockwork sex dolls of *The Constantine Affliction* exist for utilitarian purposes only, but they provide a mirror for humanity to examine its relationship to human sex workers as well as RSW's. Despite their widely different existences, all three novels examine the anxiety surrounding the uncanny valley, the ethics, and even the morality of robot-human sexual interaction. By reading science fiction, hopefully humans can begin to

acclimate to what seems inevitable in the future and learn to display empathy toward non-human lovers.

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# From Cybermen to the TARDIS: How the Robots of *Doctor Who* Portray a Nuanced View of Humans and Technology

GWENDELYN S. NISBETT AND NEWLY PAUL

Critics and fans have praised the 2000s reboot of the science fiction classic *Doctor Who* for its increasing use of social commentary and politically relevant narratives. The show features the adventures of the Doctor and his companions, who have historically been humans, other aliens, and occasionally robots. They travel through time and space on a spaceship called the TARDIS (which is shaped like a 1960s British police box). The show is meant for younger audiences, but the episodes involve political and social commentary on a range of issues, such as racism, sexism, war, degradation of the environment, and colonialism. The Doctor is an alien from Gallifrey and can (and does) regenerate into new versions of the Doctor. Scholars have commented extensively about the show in the context of gender and race, political messaging, transmedia storytelling, and fandom. In this project, we examine the portrayal of robots and labor, a topic that is underexplored in relation to this show.

*Doctor Who* makes for an interesting pop culture case study because, though the show has a huge global fan base, its heart remains in children's programming. The series originated in 1963 on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a show for children that incorporates lessons related to courage, ingenuity, kindness, and other such qualities, which it continues to do to this day. *Doctor Who* is also interesting because the Doctor has a history of machines as companions: K-9 the

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robot dog, Nardole, with the twelfth Doctor; the alien race of Daleks; and perhaps the most constant companion, the TARDIS. This is in stark contrast to the robots and machines that the Doctor encounters during his endless adventures. Indeed, some of the scariest monsters in *Doctor Who* are the Cybermen, a troop of humans-turned-robots that function by having their humanity stripped away.

In this paper we interrogate how the depiction of robots in *Doctor Who* mirrors the dehumanization of people in modern industrialized societies. While the show and the transmedia universe of *Doctor Who* have existed since 1963, this project examines robot episodes from the “New Who” reboot of the show, which has been running since 2005. We analyze the robot episodes using qualitative content analysis. We pay particular attention to the dialogue, storylines, characterization, and physical appearance of the robot characters to determine larger themes about labor, automation, and the human condition.

We argue that, through viewership of *Doctor Who*, people can better negotiate the implications of social discourse surrounding labor issues and modern life. We find that the show primarily uses robots to emphasize the negative aspects of society, particularly the unethical facets of capitalism and technology. When robots are depicted as “good,” they are usually shown in subservient roles to humans.

## Robots and Sci-Fi

While in the early years of the twenty-first century the average person might be familiar with robots in the form of vacuum cleaners, self-driving cars, and GPS technology, their interaction with humanoid robots — robots displaying human-like qualities — is limited to robots they encounter in special events such as science fairs or those they see in science fiction media (Bruckenberger et al. 301). Fictional narratives are known to bridge the gap between reality and imagination. As a result, narratives about technology and artificial intelligence can have an impact on people’s knowledge about current issues, attitudes, and understanding of science (Appel and Mara 472; Barnett et al. 180; Dahlstrom 304; Green and Brock 701). For example, recent narratives about climate change, genetically modified foods, and renewable energy have affected the discourse surrounding the adoption of these technologies (Cave et al. 12).

Science fiction stories based on robots are known to affect people’s expectations and perceptions about robotic technology (Bartneck and Forlizzi 3). As a genre, science fiction focuses on the unknown. In the absence of concrete,

real-life experiences involving robots, people rely on the depictions they see in media representations to draw assumptions about the unknown. Studies have found that science fiction has mixed effects on people's perception about robots. For example, a study conducted by Martina Mara and Markus Appel supports the theory that science fiction addresses information gaps and changes attitudes (161). The authors tested the power of fiction to bridge the "uncanny valley hypothesis" (Mori et al. 98), which suggests that robots that resemble human beings to a great extent, but not completely, are likely to be considered uncanny or creepy, and are unlikely to be accepted by humans. Mara and Appel found that people who read a fictional story before encountering a robot were less likely to term the meeting as eerie, compared to those who had read non-narrative informational texts and those who had not read any text prior to the interaction. Mara and Appel concluded that "readers can extend their existing meaning frameworks when they are transported into the fictional world of a story — and thereby prepare for otherwise potentially unsettling encounters with challenging technological innovations in robotics and beyond" (160). Similarly, viewers who watch more science fiction shows portraying robots are likely to have positive attitudes toward robots, regardless of the nature of the portrayal (Riek et al.). This can be explained by contact theory (Allport 48), which posits that people tend to have negative attitudes toward outgroups, i.e., those who are different from them (in this case, robots), and this can be changed by intergroup contact.

Conversely, other studies such as those conducted by Yuhua Liang and Seungcheol Austin Lee and Kevin Young and Charli Carpenter found that people who watched more science fiction were more likely to suffer from fear of autonomous robots and artificial intelligence. In fact, according to Liang and Lee, almost one out of four people in the US reported experiencing such fears (383). Their study indicated that older persons, women, and people with lower education and income levels are more likely to suffer from fear of robots (383). They theorized that this fear likely stemmed from job displacement resulting from the use of autonomous robots and artificial intelligence technology in the workplace (383). Young and Carpenter's study also found conditional effects of science fiction. Heavy watchers of sci-fi shows were influenced by these shows while making political decisions (383).

## Robots and Labor

The wide-ranging emotions that people display in relation to automation and robots reflects the array of roles that robots have played in science fiction programs. The tropes of robots as servants, as destructive forces, and as dehumanized laborers appear in various science fiction novels and shows. Many scholars credit Czech intellectual Karel Čapek for establishing the word “robot” in his 1921 play *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*. According to John Jordan, professor at Pennsylvania State University, the concept of slavery is central to the word robot, which is derived from the Czech word “robota,” meaning “forced labor.” Čapek’s play critiques utopian ideas of artificial intelligence, which prizes efficiency over human traits, and paints a dystopian portrait of a world where humans are slaves to machines. German Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* is another example of the earliest works that include the theme of robots and labor. The film depicts corrupt capitalists and their exploited workers who are influenced by an evil robot to revolt against their masters. The resulting chaos causes the workers to lose their homes and families, but order is restored when the robot’s creator is killed and his invention is burned at the stake. The themes surrounding the robot character in the film draw heavily from Biblical imagery and emphasize post-World War I issues such as fascism and industrialization. The expectations for interactions between humans and robots were set by the three tenets of Isaac Asimov’s Laws of Robotics first introduced in his short story, “Runaround.” The story proposed that a robot should not injure humans but rather obey them and protect its own existence (Asimov 37).

Audiovisual depictions of robots, however, do not necessarily follow these principles. Such depictions tend to focus on exaggerated expectations and fears related to AI, especially in the context of joblessness for humans (Cave et al. 14). The history of depiction of robots in fiction also highlights the tendency of showing robots taking on human forms. Stephen Cave et al. explain that this occurs in two main ways: first, humans believe that they are the most intelligent form of life, and second, as a result, are likely to use human figures when creating intelligent machines. Robots in the form of human figures are preferred for visual depictions because they are easier to identify with. Also, when humans create robots, they are likely to show them performing human labor (Cave et al. 8). Christoph Bartneck’s reflection on human-robot interactions in movies found three main themes: robots will take over the world, robots want to be like humans, and people want robots to be like humans (1). He attributed these depictions to the tendency to exploit the fear of the unknown for entertainment purposes and to people’s religious beliefs (for



example, Christianity believes that living objects have a soul and non-living objects do not, while the Shinto religion believes that everything has a soul).

When robots are depicted performing labor, they mainly perform tasks that benefit humans. According to Cave et al., this includes activities such as “solving ageing and disease so that humans might lead vastly longer lives; freeing humans from the burden of work; gratifying a wide range of desires, from entertainment to companionship; and contributing to powerful new means of defense and security” (9). The downsides of AI include the fear that humans will lose their humanity, become obsolete, and ultimately lead to the destruction of the human race. Thus, robot labor, as envisioned in the media, is framed as desirable when controlled by humans and for the benefit of humans, but undesirable when robot-laborers think and act independently.

Some authors such as Gregory Jerome Hampton and Jennifer Rhee have written about the overlap between humanoid robots of today and slaves who were used as domestic laborers. These authors argue that robots, like slaves, occupy a marginal status between a human being and a tool. Though fiction sometimes shows robots as characters with complex identities, depicts them as inhabiting human bodies, and shows humans harboring emotions toward their robot companions, robots in reality function as laborers without rights. In this sense, robot-laborers are akin to slaves who were treated as their master’s chattel, despite the acknowledgement that they were human. This line of thought argues that the humanoid robotic workforce will disrupt and displace human laborers, as well as contribute to the widening economic inequality in society. Human laborers will be required to learn new technological skills and increase their efficiency to match that of the robots. More industries will adopt robots, creating a “techno-slavery” movement that will depend increasingly on technology and less on human labor in order to expand profits (Hampton 81). This “will function as a wedge issue for labor movements” in the future (Hampton 81). Just as slavery necessitated the violent takeover of lands and humans, enslavement of technology that performs human labor is related to imperialism and colonization.

Given the complex history of the use and portrayal of robots in fiction, we explore how robots are portrayed in *Doctor Who*. Our interpretation of robots includes “true” robots such as Droids as well as cyborgs such as the Cybermen and the Daleks. Cyborgs or robotic humans are considered part of the larger category of robotic beings (Søraa 2), and existing research often tends to examine robots and

cyborgs together (see for example Hasse; Søråa). We believe this approach allows for a more comprehensive picture of the media's depiction of machines.

## Robot Themes in Doctor Who

Research on entertainment-education focuses on the ability of pop culture narratives to influence our thinking and behaviors concerning social, political, and health issues (Singhal and Rogers 117). Watching television shows that negotiate hard to talk about social issues like labor and class can help viewers work through their own feelings on those issues (Tisdell and Thompson 671). In addition, great characters aid in transportation into a narrative and emotional interaction with a show (Murphy et al. 424). This all contributes to audiences learning from the narrative themes. We argue that *Doctor Who* helps us think about and share our feelings of alienation at the increases in technology and automation in the workplace. Moreover, as the show endures in popularity year after year, the representation of robots and technology have evolved alongside societal changes.

Entertainment media can also help viewers overcome feelings of stress and powerlessness. Abby Prestin and Robin Nabi found that an underdog storyline can help viewers feel more hopeful when confronting stress in their own lives (161). Moreover, Erica Bailey and Bartosz W. Wojdyski found that moral narratives inspire altruistic attitudes (614). The Doctor embodies fighting for the underdog and finding moral clarity while advocating for a better world.

Our analysis of *Doctor Who* revealed five main themes in relation to the depiction of robots and labor: robots as henchmen, dehumanized humans, tools of capitalism, malfunctioning machines, and companions for humans. We argue that the narratives employed by *Doctor Who* have become progressively more steeped in political and social commentary. The show began as a children's program, and the classic robots of the early era reflected the notion that we fear what is foreign to us. The Daleks and Cybermen, examples featured in the early era of *Doctor Who*, epitomize robots that prey upon our fear of the strange and unknown. In the more recent era of the show, however, robots are regarded as commonplace and banal, shifting the critical focus to the societal forces driving the presence of robots, technology, and automation.

## Robots as Henchman and Dehumanized Humans

A major theme to emerge across the seasons of the 2000s reboot of *Doctor Who* is the presence of robots functioning as henchmen for villainous masterminds. The Doctor often encounters robots in the form of killer guards, such as in the episode “The Ghost Monument” (11.2), who cannot be reasoned with but can be shut down. These robots are perhaps the most classic in that they are devoid of human characteristics. In the narrative, they become part of the infrastructure that presents an obstacle and moves the story forward.

The first episode of the *Doctor Who* reboot, “Rose” (1.1), focuses on the classic monster known as the Autons. These are animated, plastic, robot-like creatures that are controlled by a hive being called the Nestene Consciousness. The Autons resemble shop mannequins that come to life to attack humans and appear in Old Who and New Who and various other parts of the Who transmedia universe. All the Autons featured in this episode are homogenous in form. They all have plastic, white bodies, with neutral expressions on their faces, and their physical proportions meet the measurements for ideal bodies as set by the fashion industry. The bodies appear to have been mass-produced. In using mannequins to depict killer robots, the series comments on automation, mass production, and industrialization, all of which have thwarted creativity and individuality and created a labor force trained to follow instructions without questioning. As Francesco Spampinato describes, mannequins are representations of human bodies and are used purely for functional purposes. They perform tasks that humans do not want to carry out — such as acting as models for demonstrating medical procedures, acting as models for testing car safety, or as objects for displaying clothes in shop windows. In their physical uniformity and facelessness, mannequins act as a “symbol of conformity” and “mass culture” and embody “those values of efficiency that put the human body on the same level as machines” (Spampinato 1).

In the episode “Voyage of the Damned” (4.0), the Doctor (David Tennant) encounters a homicidal corporate owner, Max Capricorn (George Costigan), who uses robots resembling angels as henchmen to exact revenge against his company’s board members who had voted him out. The episode is set during Christmas, in a spaceship known as the Titanic. The robot angels resemble mannequins, with uniform, metallic faces, palms joined as if in prayer, and wings that enable them to fly. They are designed to provide information to the tourists in the spaceship. The robots lack autonomy and are bound to obey Capricorn’s orders to kill the

passengers onboard. Interestingly, we see that Capricorn's destructive plans are foiled when another robot — a cyborg — sacrifices himself out of his own free will.

The Doctor has several long-term enemies that have been part of the *Doctor Who* transmedia universe since 1963. The Daleks are humanoid beings inserted into a robot body resembling a "pepper pot." The Cybermen are humans placed into a robot shell equipped with an emotion inhibitor. Both represent the theme of the dehumanization of society resulting in the rise of humans-turned-robots. The Daleks are a race of humanoids-turned-robots that the Doctor considers his mortal enemies. Daleks are not often portrayed as labor, aside from a few instances. In the episode "Victory of the Daleks" (5.3), the Doctor (Matt Smith) finds a Dalek working in Churchill's War Room during World War II. The humans regard the Dalek as a supercomputer, but the Doctor knows it is a trap and sets out to destroy the robot.

In the episodes titled "The Rise of the Cybermen" (2.5) and "The Age of Steel" (2.6), "Cybermen" are used as tools of a big corporation. Cybermen were created from living, breathing humans who were "upgraded" to form human-robot hybrids. The robots had human brains, but cybernetic bodies and hearts of steel, thus making them devoid of emotions. Their sole purpose was to carry out the desires of their creator, John Lumic (Roger Lloyd-Pack), wheelchair-bound CEO of Cybus Industries, who suffered from a fatal disease. Lumic desired to conquer his illness by creating immortal Cybermen. This episode has strong undercurrents of technological dystopia — Lumic's company used EarPods, a device resembling headphones, to provide daily updates for news, sports, jokes, and other information directly into users' brains. This device was later used to control people's minds. In this sense, the device signals an attempt to control human imagination and ensure conformity.

The episode also comments on the inherent superiority of humans over machines. Interestingly, it does this by emphasizing the role played by emotions, which helps humans introspect about their actions. Lumic's utilitarian view of humans — he used homeless men to run tests for his project, claiming that by turning them into robots he had saved them and given them eternal life — is contrasted with the views held by the Doctor (David Tennant) and his companions, who plan to restore the emotional inhibitors on the Cybermen so they can think for themselves. Lumic wishes to bring peace and unity through uniformity, and his Cybermen are designed to root out humans who do not conform. Yet his worldview is depicted as flawed when the Cybermen forcibly "upgrade" him to cyber-

controller. The trope of dehumanized humans is especially strong in these two episodes. We see this literally when we find that underneath the metal exterior of Cybermen is human flesh and skin. We see it metaphorically in the episodes' juxtaposition of machines as uniform and unemotional with humans as emotional. In making these comparisons, the episodes question human dependence on technology as well as express fear of technology taking over humanity and the resulting loss of creativity.

Further Cybermen episodes through the seasons echo this theme. In the episode "Closing Time" (6.12), we see the bumbling and loveable Craig (James Corden) get turned into a cyberman; he fights back by calling on his emotions and love for his son. The dark and apocalyptic episodes "World Enough and Time" and "The Doctor Falls" (10.11-12) mark the return of the classic *Who* villain — the Mondasian Cybermen — who are even closer in visual appearance to humans. The Doctor (Peter Capaldi) describes the Cybermen as lacking humanity because they are born out of the wreckage of human industrialization.

In terms of representing robot labor, these two narrative themes harken back to the 1960s roots of the show and the society it represented. While the classic henchman and villain robots are staples of the *Doctor Who* universe, further themes illuminate the evolving representation of the intricate robot/human relationship.

## Robots as Tools of Capitalism and Malfunction of Design

As the show has progressed, so have the representations of human interactions with robots and the wider societal forces driving automation. A common theme accompanying these robot forces is the presence of a capitalistic force that uses machines to make a profit. The episode "Oxygen" (10.5) presents a particularly brutal representation of capitalism and the expendability of workers. While visiting an industrial space station, the Doctor (Peter Capaldi) and his companions find space suits, but no people. The space suits are actually simplistic robots (or so the Doctor thinks); however, the robots are set up to sell oxygen to users and expunge air from the space station to protect market value. As it turns out, the space suit robots kill the members of the space station crew, and the Doctor suspects it is part of the business model. The Doctor surmises that the suits are doing what they were designed to do. "Save the oxygen that you are wasting, you've become inefficient," he explains to a crew member (00:37:45-00:37:49). The rescue ship they are awaiting is nothing more than a corporate ship bringing new workers. The Doctor

says, “They’re not your rescuers, they’re your replacements. The end point of capitalism — the bottom line where human life has no value at all. We’re fighting an algorithm, a spreadsheet, like every worker everywhere” (00:38:18-00:38:34). He then says that in such a system, “dying well” (00:38:50) is the ultimate revenge, as destroying human laborers ensures the destruction of the means of production (the space station) because it would be “expensive” (00:39:26).

In a two-part episode, “The Rebel Flesh/The Almost People” (6.5-6), the Doctor (Matt Smith) visits a twenty-second century factory staffed by human contractors and artificial intelligence called The Flesh. When the Doctor warns them about a solar storm coming, the workers insist that they have work to do and keep the acid factory running. The Flesh, which the workers call Gangers and the Doctor calls “almost people,” become independently sentient and violent. The Doctor has ulterior motives in visiting the factory because he knows that his companion Amy (Karen Gillan) is also a Ganger. While the episode is important in pushing the overall season narrative arc along, it also presents an interesting subtext on how we feel about humanoid artificial intelligence. When confronted by their doppelgangers, the workers are angry, violent, and mistrustful of the Flesh. However, the Flesh want equal rights as sentient beings. At one point the companion character Rory (Arthur Darvill) finds a pile of discarded Flesh Gangers writhing in agony in a store room. He asks how the company could do this, to which the Flesh (Sarah Smart) replies, “Who are the real monsters?” (00:24:14-00:24:17)

“Kerblam” (11.7) presents an interesting take on robots and capitalism. This episode on automation and workers’ rights is set in a large warehouse where goods are packaged and shipped to buyers. Robots and humans are shown working together, assembling and shipping packages, with robots supervising human laborers. Every small detail, such as the number and duration of breaks and productivity of workers, is noted by the robot supervisors, which creates an overall atmosphere of desperation and unhappiness for the human workers. However, due to the lack of jobs, the humans are reluctant to quit. The villain in this episode turns out to be a dissatisfied laborer, while the “system” is shown to have a conscience. Thus, on one hand the show highlights workers’ issues such as low pay, unemployment, impersonal work environment, and the mundaneness of repetitive work, but avoids suggesting radical solutions and puts some of the blame on the workers themselves.

Another major theme that re-emerges throughout the seasons is the notion of robots that are malfunctioning and have strayed from their original programmed

intentions. The malfunction is generally demonstrated by the robots doing harm to the humans whom they were intended to help. In many ways, the “malfunctioning tech” is a manifestation of our deep-seated mistrust and fear of robots.

In the episode “The Girl in the Fireplace” (2.4), the tenth Doctor (David Tennant) confronts a crew of malfunctioning repair robots aiming to abduct eighteenth century French aristocrat Madame du Pompadour (Sophia Myles). When the tenth Doctor first sees the robots, called Clockwork Droids, he is a bit enamored. He exclaims, “Oh you are beautiful...no, really you are. You’re gorgeous.” (00:08:29-00:08:36) He discovers that robots have slaughtered the crew in search of “parts” to repair the ship. The robots never display sentient decision making, they just follow their programming.

Other episodes using malfunctioning artificial intelligence include “The Curse of the Black Spot” (6.3), “The Lodger” (5.11), “The Girl Who Waited” (6.10), and “Mummy on the Orient Express” (8.8). All these episodes are similar in that they prey upon our fear of robots lacking human morality and the ability to tell right from wrong. Technologies designed to provide medical care, repair a ship, or aid soldiers are all unable to shake their programming, and they end up killing people. A good example that combines malfunctioning technology with labor issues is conveyed in the episode “Smile” (10.2). The Doctor (Peter Capaldi) finds himself in a new human colony built by micro robots called the Vardy. He mentions that they are like “slaves” because they were designed to create a settlement for and in service of humans (00:37:27). The clever trick of the episode is that the micro robots have larger robot interfaces that only “speak” in emojis. The malfunction occurs when the Vardy start killing humans because they find grief and unhappiness a threat. The Doctor explains that the robots neither think like humans nor understand that making sure the humans are happy does not mean purging unhappy people. This narrative presents a stark representation of the dehumanization of automated labor. The episode resolves when the Doctor recognizes the Vardy as a new life form and urges the humans to interact with them diplomatically.

The realities and consequences of labor automation are increasing in the lives of audiences in industrialized western democracies. Within this context, we examined how pop culture is reflecting the alienating impact of these economic trends. We argue that viewers of *Doctor Who* can identify with characters and storylines, as well as find solace in storylines that explore the dystopian human condition and the increasing automation of the labor force. In a sense, *Doctor Who* is a narrative representation for modern industrialized society.

Since the late 1980s, the job market in developed countries has experienced a shrinking of jobs in routine employment (i.e., jobs that can be completed by following a set of well-defined directions) (Acemoglu and Autor 1045). As a result, the labor market has become polarized, with employment shares shifting to the bottom or top halves of occupational wage distribution (Jaimovich and Siu 9). Many of the robot characters and storylines in *Doctor Who* tap into the anxieties that accompany these shifts in our personal and professional lives.

Part of the reason for this shift is the growth of automation, which acts as a substitute for human labor (Autor et al. 1313). Other reasons include shifts in government policies and the increase of globalization. The demographic that has been the hardest hit with the disappearance of routine jobs is young men with low levels of education and young women with intermediate levels of education. The result is that these demographics are increasingly forced into unemployment or low-wage occupations (Cortes et al. 70). In the show, robots are often portrayed as nefarious or tools of evil people. Friendly robots tend to be viewed as secondary companions or as merely there to help humans. Robots are never really portrayed as fully sentient and equal to humans. This can be seen as emblematic of the labor hierarchy.

## Robots as Companions

*Doctor Who* has wide-ranging portrayals of what “labor” means. There are certainly portrayals of robots doing physical labor, but more interestingly, robots are often used as manifestations of human emotions. In robot form, the human characters must face their deepest inner emotions come to life. The Daleks are pure hate, the Cybermen are emptiness, the TARDIS is loyalty.

From the show’s inception, the Doctor has always traveled with a companion. The purpose of the companion in the narrative arc of the show is to act as a proxy for the viewer. The companion represents us: they ask the questions we would ask, get in trouble like we would, and generally act as a foil for the Doctor. Many of the Doctor’s companions have been robots, including K9 the robot dog, Nardole, and Handles the Cyberman head.

In Season 10, a robot called Nardole (Matt Lucas) serves as one of the primary companions. The relationship between the Doctor (Peter Capaldi) and Nardole is friendly, but follows a strict hierarchy whereby Nardole serves the Doctor and the Doctor depends on Nardole while only grudgingly liking him. Even though Nardole



is a main character, he is a secondary friend to the Doctor. This fits with the trend of robot companions as secondary to human companions. The Doctor relies upon these robot friends, but he is never really as attached to them as human friends.

Perhaps the only robot-like being that the Doctor adores is the omni-present sentient machine the TARDIS. Though the TARDIS is not a robot in the traditional sense, we include it in our list of the Doctor's robotic companions because the machine is featured in almost every episode of the series and is central to the Doctor's time-traveling abilities. The TARDIS is robot-like in that it is a sentient being (as shown in "The Doctor's Wife" [6.4]) and a machine.

While the Doctor's companions change over the various seasons of the show, the TARDIS remains constantly by his side. It is a complex machine that is capable of acting on its own and is capable of speech and regeneration. TARDISEs are shown to share a bond with the Time Lords who pilot them — when their pilots die, TARDISEs mourn or kill themselves. Intruders who try to take control are rendered powerless by the machine. Though the series shows the Doctor as attached to his TARDIS (in one episode he is shown sacrificing a decade of his life to revive the damaged machine), the TARDIS's ultimate destiny is to serve as a tool for the Doctor.

We see some of the connection between the Doctor (Matt Smith) and the TARDIS (Suranne Jones) in the episode "The Doctor's Wife" (6.4), which is a fanciful story that finds the Doctor in a world outside the universe where the "soul" of the TARDIS has been transplanted into a human. The Doctor is alarmed to find that his best friend and longest-term companion, the TARDIS, is now embodied in a "bitey mad lady" (00:16:40). The episode solidifies the Doctor's reliance on the TARDIS (eventually returned to machine form) as a constant companion who, as the TARDIS explains to the Doctor, "always took you where you needed to go" (00:25:05-00:25:07).

## Conclusion

Entertainment narratives can be a great source for learning about and negotiating a world that is constantly changing (Singhal and Rogers 117). Fans of pop culture media often benefit from viewing portrayals of difficult-to-talk-about issues in their favorite programs (Tisdell and Thompson 671).

Portrayals of robots and robot labor in *Doctor Who* craft a complex narrative of the relationship between humans and technology. The classic aspects of the show

present a rather unidimensional representation of the robot as the *other*. In these narratives, the othering of the robot represents human detachment from the automation of labor. Beyond this, however, the show presents a quite modern take on the invasiveness of new technology and the ever-present profit motives of a capitalist society. On a positive note, *Doctor Who* robots are not always bathed in a pejorative gloss. Indeed, some of the Doctor's dearest companions are robots. In this, the show presents a rather balanced and nuanced view of what robot labor can mean.

Perhaps most importantly, *Doctor Who* has progressed from humble roots as a children's program into a global transmedia juggernaut. With this larger platform, the show has expanded its representation and commentary on capitalism, automation, and technology in every aspect of our lives. It is through this that, we argue, people can process the ever-increasing alienation of our automated world.

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# Uncanny Faces: From Labor Substitution to Human Race Replacement in *Autómata*

DÉBORA MADRID

The increasing technification of almost all labor sectors is unquestionable starting from the First Industrial Revolution onwards. Currently, in the era of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, however, digitalization, artificial intelligence, robotics, etc. have opened “unprecedented technologies that can be used to measure, track, analyze and perform work in ways hardly imagined during Taylor’s and the Gilbreths’ lifetimes” (Moore, Upchurch and Whittaker 2). Robots are certainly the protagonists in this context, and science fiction has been one of the main cultural instruments in which humanity has discussed the consequences of its uses and future development more deeply. The genre utilizes fictional beings, like intelligent robots, to think and to question humanity’s own nature, offering a unique lens through which humans can understand ourselves. In this sense, thinking about robots and labor in the context of science fiction, involves, in one way or another, considering our own — current or future — relationship with artificial intelligence and work. Nevertheless, the comparison between machines and humans turns out to be problematic in many cases. To recognize, for instance, that machines can be equally efficient as people in some kinds of jobs (or even better) implies, in a sense, the recognition of how mechanical much of the work we do in our daily life is; in other words, to realize how robotic we are in the context of employment.

Science fiction film has been exposing this idea from the very beginning. Films such as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) focus precisely on the alienating condition of the working class in contemporary societies, where labor requires, in many cases, repetitive and mechanical actions. In the same way, recent technification and robotization of labor implies such alienation and, moreover, that workers could even be substituted by machines. In fact, some authors suggest “that almost half of all jobs in the USA may be under threat of disappearance in the next two decades”

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(Upchurch and Moore 46). The rebellion in *Metropolis* reflects the worker's precarious labor conditions and their disagreement with this alienation, which is also evident in contemporary societies. Phoebe Moore and Martin Upchurch point out, in this respect, the frequent Marxist criticism of the robotization of labor (54-55), where emancipation becomes a main concept. Other authors also underscore the correlation between robots and slavery (Dinello 58-85; Gunkel 17-9; Rhee 17-8). Similarly, science fiction related to robots, artificial intelligence, and automata, are frequently read as narrations of the machines' emancipation.<sup>1</sup> And this is also the case of the film *Autómata* (Gabe Ibáñez, 2014), a Spanish-Bulgarian co-production whose name refers to robots' automatic operation.<sup>2</sup>

The intention of this paper is to address Gabe Ibáñez's film in order to consider its representation of robot liberation. *Automata* suggest the possibility of robots' emancipation from humanity by violating their security protocols. The unprecedented development the intelligence of these machines and their liberation conduct us to focus on influential ideas like Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, whose purpose is to protect humans from robots; and technological singularity theory, developed by authors Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil, which depicts a hypothetical point in time when technological development becomes uncontrollable and results in a powerful superintelligence that surpasses all human intelligence. In addition, I argue that the robot's emancipation is accompanied by a transformation in their physical aspect, which is, at the same time, determined by the kind of labor they have been conceived for. Consequently, I will trace an analysis regarding the variety of automata depicted in the movie to reflect upon the diverse appearances of the machines depending on their labor and on the grade of emancipation they achieve. The physical representation of the automata shows a more artificial aspect when robots carry out activities that do not necessarily require direct interaction with humans (the construction industry for example); however, on the contrary, when an automaton is required to be in close contact with people (like in the case of prostitution) the machine's appearance is conceived in a more humanlike manner. In this respect I will analyze, particularly, Masahiro Mori's

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<sup>1</sup> *Bicentennial Man*, (Chris Columbus, 1999); *I, robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004); *Real humans* (*Äkta människor*, Lars Lundström, 2012); *Ex-machina* (Alex Garland, 2015); among others.

<sup>2</sup> The title *Autómata* allude to Early-Modern automata such as *Canard digérateur* made by Jacques de Vaucanson in the XVIII century. In fact, the main character of the film is named Jacq Vaucan, in a clear allusion to the historical engineer.



uncanny valley theory from 1970, which highlights how people respond differently to a robot's appearance according to its degree of similarity to human beings. In the end, I will argue that *Autómata* raises powerful connections between both concepts, appearance, and emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

### Appearance and Labor: Uncanny Faces

As I have pointed out, my interest focuses on intelligent humanoid robots, who are the protagonists of *Autómata*.<sup>4</sup> This Spanish-Bulgarian co-production, directed by Spanish filmmaker Gabe Ibáñez, is a significant piece in south European science fiction because of its philosophical concern about artificial intelligence. To sum up, the film takes place in the near future, when the world is completely polluted by radiation and where ROC is the robotics corporation that controls all the automata in the city. The protagonist, Jacq Vaucan, is a ROC corporation inspector, who discovers that some of the automata made by the company have infringed security protocols: “the first protocol prevents the robot from harming any form of life, the second protocol prevents the robot from altering itself or other robots.”<sup>5</sup> Only one prior science-fiction film produced in Spain has touched on themes of artificial intelligence — *Eva* (Kike Maíllo, 2011) — although it concentrates mainly on the emotional responses of a child robot, similar to *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001). Despite there being many worker robots in *Eva*, most of them do not have a humanoid appearance (except for a domestic machine called Max); however, in contrast, *Autómata* makes use of anthropomorphic robots for almost all jobs and every single automaton in the movie has been conceived for a specific type of labor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A previous analysis of *Autómata* can be read in Madrid. This work focuses also on technological singularity theory, but more in relation with transhumanist thought and the contemporary scientific context.

<sup>4</sup> According to Rhee, humanoid robots are relevant culture figures because, in creating them, people are reconceptualizing the human being. Humanoid robots are certainly unhuman and yet, through explicit anthropomorphic practices, at the same time modeled on the human: “the robot, is simultaneously gesturing to the human and the not-human” (4).

<sup>5</sup> Indicates when the quotation is mentioned in the film.

<sup>6</sup> To know more about science fiction in Spanish culture, see López-Pellisa (2018); and specifically, for Spanish science-fiction film, see Madrid (2019).

Our interest in anthropomorphism comes from the differing types of relationships humans usually establish with machines depending on their appearance, and in this film, as we will show later, the automata have different looks depending on the activity they are carrying out. Contemporary industries have developed many robots to optimize manufacturing jobs, but these machines do not require human features. Other labor sectors, such as the service industry and customer support are more interested, however, in developing more human-like machines. That is due, in our opinion, to the degree of proximity to people, in other words, the degree of humanness robots have to pretend. According to Jennifer Rhee, anthropomorphic paradigms “organize robots to identify the specific vision of humanness and of the dehumanized they evoke” (2). In the case of *Autómata*, the robots’ appearances clearly result from the grade of humanness they should show to people, and this is determined by the sort of jobs they perform. Even though all automata represented in Gabe Ibañez’s film are humanoids, there are relevant differences in their appearances, as we will describe later. Rhee insists on concepts such as familiarity-unfamiliarity, recognition-unrecognizability, etc., to place what she calls “the anthropomorphic metaphor” as a central question when scrutinizing machine intelligence, “a metaphor that brings human and nonhuman into a relation of similarity” (5-11). In this regard, *Autómata* becomes a catalog of machine intelligences of different degrees of human likenesses (builder, household assistant, etc.) as samples of this anthropomorphic metaphor. And here is where Masahiro Mori’s uncanny valley theory becomes crucial.

Masahiro Mori developed this theory in 1970 to explain how humans react emotionally to robots and other humanlike entities. According to this, “people are likely to respond more and more positively to a series of increasingly humanlike entities until a certain point-somewhere around 80 percent humanlike at which the emotional response suddenly becomes extremely negative” (Seo-Young 217). Mori pursued the uncanny valley theory in regard to robots, but also other figures such as puppets, dolls, or even certain parts of the human body. Alluding to a prosthetic hand, for instance, he suggests that “once we realize that the hand that looked real at first sight is actually artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. [...] When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny. [...] Therefore, in this case, the appearance of the prosthetic hand is quite humanlike, but the level of affinity is negative” (99). Mori highlights, moreover, the factor of movement. If the velocity of the movement differs from human velocity, the uncanny sensation increases. In the case of robots, he adds: “Since the negative

effects of movement are apparent even with a prosthetic hand, to build a whole robot would magnify the creepiness” (100).

I will consider all these ideas later in my analysis of *Autómata* by examining the variety of robots depicted in the film. However, I want to mention that my observations will be also inspired by Jennifer Rhee’s labor classification in her book *The Robotic Imaginary* (2018). She analyzes “care labor,” “domestic labor,” “emotional labor,” and “drone labor.” All those occupations are represented in contemporary science-fiction film by worker robots. We can find several industrial jobs carried out by robots in *I, robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004), *Eva* (Kike Maíllo, 2011) or *Real Humans* (*Äkta människor*, Lars Lundström, 2012-2013); domestic/childcare and household tasks in *The Bicentennial Man* (Chris Columbus, 1999), *Robot & Frank* (Jake Schreier, 2012) or *I Am Mother* (Grant Sputore, 2019); emotional labor in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, among others. Moreover, many of these and other examples show robots that conduct more than one of these activities at the same time. In the case of Gabe Ibáñez’s film, I am going to present a similar set of categories to examine: first, a construction-work robot; second, a domestic robot; and finally, a sex robot.

Firstly, I will observe the most common robots in the film, called Pilgrim 7000s by ROC corporation. These machines were created to protect people from radiation (for example, these robots built artificial clouds to resist desertification) and to conduct multiple tasks such as nursing care, childcare, domestic chores, etc. Among them, we can distinguish the different units — some are yellow and the others white. The robots painted in yellow are builders, welders, etc. and the ones painted in white work in childcare and carry out domestic chores. Both designs are quite similar, but the first group, as we can see in Figure 1, has a more industrial look, with some yellow and black stripes on their legs, like the security seals frequently used in construction. Moreover, they are the only kind of robots that we see connected to an electronical device (probably for re-charging) during the film; and this is not a minor detail, because, as we will see, the aspect of some machines will gradually lose their industrial look over the course of the film, particularly when they interact with humans.



Figure 1. *Autómata*'s frame. Jacq inspections industrial robots Pilgrim 7000s, which show a very industrial look.

In Figure 2 (a shoot from the black and white opening credits) we have the white ones, which, on the other hand, mirror the cleanliness expected for a nurse or a cleaner, and they are not shown with the same industrial devices or chargers, which, as we argue, helps with the perception that they are more closely related to humans, a factor that their jobs require. Regarding the faces, they look the same in both models, with two small circular lights resembling eyes and a tiny orifice at the bottom, evoking a mouth. Nevertheless, the grade of artificiality is still very high in these Pilgrim 7000s, and no sign of consciousness or emotional awareness is revealed at the beginning.

In this regard, Seo-Young delves into the relevance of artificiality for the uncanny valley. He compares the disturbing sensation caused by robots with other humanlike creatures such as the chimpanzee:

These animals are at once extremely humanlike and obviously less than completely human in form and behavior, but we are apt to think of them as endearing and cute (as opposed to eerie and haunting). How is it that the chimpanzee can escape the uncanny valley while the humanoid robot so often finds itself consigned to the valley's depths? The crucial difference between robots and chimpanzees is that robots are, by definition, constructed rather than born. (217)

Consequently, Seo-Young ends up highlighting that the uncanny valley's theory can be defined "as a feeling of disturbing uncertainty over whether a given *artifact* is human or nonhuman" (217).<sup>7</sup>

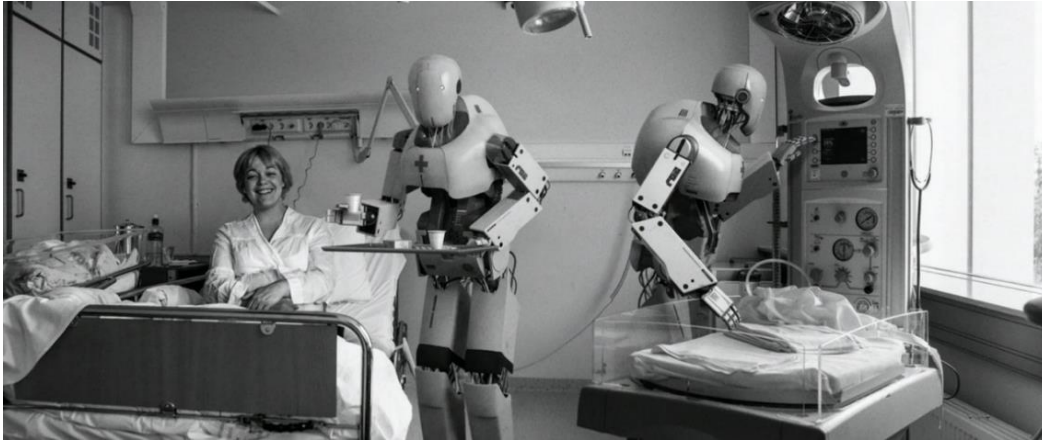


Figure 2. *Autómata*'s frame. Two white Pilgrim 7000s, act as nurses in a hospital. In this case the robots have a cross painted in their chest to indicate their medical activity.

Despite the obviously artificial features of automata, the application of anthropomorphism causes moviegoers and human characters alike, to react to the robots as though they were empathetic beings with emotional competence. The best example in *Autómata* is the scene illustrated in Figure 3, when scientists analyze a burned Pilgrim 7000 at ROC's laboratory. When the machine suddenly disconnects, a liquid starts to fall from the holes in its face and one of the scientists says to Jacq: "Now you make it cry." Despite him using the pronoun "it," the connection between a liquid coming out from a machine and tears indicate the projections of human behavior that people unconsciously place on humanoid robots. Another example of this is subtly represented in the opening credits, where the backstory is divulged in black and white scenes. They narrate a past when human beings confronted robots because of their inability to eradicate atmospheric radiation and desertification. To attack machines, as they do with other people,

<sup>7</sup> Chu Seo-Young observes, in fact, the interior structure of the artifacts depicted by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (chapter 5), where she establishes three categories: "super-real" artifacts, "that work by seeming real," and works of art. (218).

humans seem to need to see them personified, so they drew on the automata to give them more human-like facial features, as we can see in Figure 4.



Figure 3. *Autómata*'s frame. A burned Pilgrim seem to be crying when a liquid fall from the orifices in their face.



Figure 4. *Autómata*'s frame. A Pilgrim shows facial features drawn by people.

This personification, nevertheless, turns uncanny when human characters notice behaviors or attitudes that a Pilgrim is not supposed to have, such as repairing itself (infringing security protocols) or polishing the metal surface of a locker to use it as a mirror (which implies self-awareness). According to Seo-Young, the disturbing sensation that those actions provoke in humans is even stronger because of the automata's industrial and artificial appearance (217). In fact, as we will comment here below, the relationship between people and robots becomes more natural and closer with a different model of Pilgrim, Cleo, whose features and face more closely resemble a person.

The Cleo model, shown in Figure 5 exhibits a completely different style, clearly determined by the job she is conceived for, sex work. And here we can use the pronoun "she" because designers emphasized certain body parts in this case, to turn the original industrial Pilgrim appearance into a feminine body. To achieve this, they added breasts, buttocks, a wig, and a humanlike mask. In addition, Cleo has been given doll-like eyes and even the ability to blink. The function of the mask and the face details is to reduce the uncanny sensation for humans and increase familiarity and affinity with the machines. This function clearly follows one of the ideas expressed by Mori:

For example, a robot's arm may be composed of a metal cylinder with many bolts, but covering it with skin and adding a bit of fleshy plumpness, we can achieve a more humanlike appearance. As a result, we naturally respond to it with a heightened sense of affinity (98).

The unavoidable proximity and human connection in prostitution is achieved not only with a humanlike mask, but the ability to develop expressiveness is also necessary. Therefore, Cleo can blink and express moans of pleasure. In addition, it seems that designers considered it necessary to choose a gender role for Cleo, to satisfy sexual requirements. I am not analyzing gender prejudices here — frequently present in science-fiction films that address sexual capability in robots and artificial intelligence<sup>8</sup> — but I would like to recall Rhee's statement where she argued that often, jobs that are replaced by robots are also "gendered and racialized" (175). Hence, Cleo is a significant Character because she represents not only the oppressed status of the working class, but also the women's-imposed role as sexualized bodies. In this sense, the film offers a feminist interpretation in the figure

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<sup>8</sup> *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), *Cherry 2000* (Steve De Jarnatt, 1987), *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), *Ex-machina* (Alex Garland, 2015), *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), among others.

of a prostitute who is, at the same time, a machine; that is to say, a doubly objectified feminine body.



Figure 5. *Autómata*'s frame. Cleo is a feminized Pilgrim model whose humanlike appearance is due to the sex work she is required to do.

More interesting for our analysis, however, is that Cleo's design relies on the fact that she is conceived to conduct activities that transcend manual or mechanical tasks such as those usually carried out by construction machines or domestic automata. Consequently, her appearance becomes more humanlike. To be successful as a prostitute, Cleo needs to develop features such as complicity or even mischief, unexpected properties for a robot not conceived to have its own initiative. For this reason, Jacq feels disturbed not only by Cleo's face or by her capacity to reproduce facial expressions, but particularly by her behavior and attitude:

CLEO: Do not be afraid. I can distinguish perfectly between pleasure and pain.

JACQ: Can you cause pain?

CLEO: Only if it's your wish.

Accordingly, as we mentioned before, the imitation does not rely only on anthropomorphism or physical appearance, but it is also derived from the imitation of people's behavior, particularly those attitudes that we usually consider as inherent to humans, such as intelligence or emotional reactions. Indeed, science fiction has also explored situations where a non-anthropomorphic machine becomes uncanny from its behavior alone, such is the case of the terrifying HAL 9000 on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Ultimately, the fear of



the uncanny behavior does not come from a machine intelligence feature, but from its capability to develop human characteristics such as the power to cause pain; and that is the reason why security protocols are so needed for the robot's creators.

We can find one of the first experiments to verify computers' ability to imitate intelligence and human behavior in Alan Turing's imitation game (known as the Turing test), which, as Jennifer Rhee pointed out, is also based on ideas like familiarity, recognizability, etc. (11-13).<sup>9</sup> In *Autómata*, the plot develops, indeed, from a pre-credits scene in which a policeman called Wallace feels the need to shoot a Pilgrim 7000 after seeing it repairing itself. The police officer later describes its attitude in the following way:

WALLACE: It was staring at me. Hid its hands like that motherfucker was fully aware it was doing something it wasn't supposed to do. Ellis, I didn't shoot that clunker because it was staring at me, I shot it because... I shot it because it looked...

JACQ: Alive?

Self-repairing is, thus, a demonstration that an automaton has developed some kind of consciousness. But if in the case of Turing's imitation game the machine is only simulating intelligence, science-fiction films such as *Autómata* suggest the possibility that robots could develop a real capacity to think, to have a conscience, even to have desires, and it is precisely in this kind of misunderstanding between artificial creatures and humans where we find the uncanny sensation. In the following section we will move from that uncanniness point to the actual possibility that an automaton could become a sentient being. Furthermore, considering that machines' autonomy can be defined as the greatest enemy for developing a robotics industry, we will delve into an interpretation of the film focused on the idea of emancipation.

### “Your machine has come down from the tree.” Anthropomorphism and Emancipation

From the beginning of the film, the automata's disturbing actions, previously described in this text, make Jacq suspicious of them. In fact, he has been given the

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<sup>9</sup> The test is based on the proposition that a machine would be able to think if it could hold a conversation that was indistinguishable from one with a human being (Turing, 433-460). *Autómata* pays tribute to Alan Turing's contribution by naming a hospital after him (where Jacq's wife gives birth to their daughter).

mission to discover the reasons behind those behaviors, which are certainly incompatible with ROCs security protocols. During this investigation, Jacq undertakes a long, hard journey through the desert in the company of some Pilgrim 7000s and a Cleo; and it is not just a physical route, but a process of realization about the nature of these artificial intelligences. During his trip, Jacq (and moviegoers) will discover that there is no clockmaker who altered robots, that they have simply evolved as a new species.

This idea of perceiving a robot with the same condition or status of a biological species comes from the technological singularity theory that inspired Gabe Ibáñez to write the plot. Technological singularity theory was first proposed in 1993 by Vernor Vinge, who based it on Gordon Moore's law.<sup>10</sup> Moore observed in 1965 how every two years the number of transistors in a microprocessor doubled and, as a result, circuits would function faster every two years. According to this, the increase of computational efficiency would be exponential. Based on Moore's law, Vinge predicted that artificial intelligences could reach such levels that they could continue developing by themselves, becoming independent from humans and constituting a new superior species. From then on, many authors such as Marvin Minsky, Hans Moravec, Bill Joy, and Raymond Kurzweil agree with Vernor Vinge's hypothesis.<sup>11</sup> Kurzweil in particular has become one of the strongest recent supporters of the technological singularity theory. He published a book in 2005 entitled *Singularity is Near*, in which he predicted that a superior no-biological intelligence will be created in 2045. And that year is precisely the time in which the story of *Autómata* takes place. It is Gabe Ibáñez who, during the promotion of the film, expressed that he was inspired by the technological singularity theory when he wrote the plot in collaboration with Javier Sánchez Donate and Igor Legarreta.<sup>12</sup>

Singularity implies that machine intelligences could evolve, in the same way that human species did in the past. Regarding this, there are several details in the

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<sup>10</sup> Technological singularity theory has its precedent in a Samuel Butler text where he compared Darwinian evolutive theory with technological development, and he suggested that in the future humans could be surpassed by technology (180-5).

<sup>11</sup> Hans Moravec, for instance, expressed he is not alarmed by such a possibility, on the contrary, "I consider these future machines our progeny" (28). Dinello also name that future new artificial species as "Robo sapiens" (26).

<sup>12</sup> Gabe Ibáñez underscored in an interview that technological singularity theories "hoy en día son muy importantes y que hablan de ese momento teórico en el que la inteligencia artificial supere la inteligencia humana". "Autómata: Entrevista a Gabe Ibáñez." eCartelera, 24 Jan 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zwfQR2LDkM>. Accessed 13 August 2020.

movie that constantly compare the automata's intelligence with human biological evolution. One very significant visual allusion is the shot in which we can see Jacq and the robots in a row, similar to representations of Darwin's evolution theory such as the drawing *The March of Progress* from 1965, by Rudolph Zallinger. In Figure 6 we observe how Jacq is the first in the row, but he is turned trying to stop the walk of the robots, as a visual metaphor of his desire to stop machines evolution.



Figure 6. *Autómata*'s frame. Jacq is trying to stop the robots in a scene that looks like representations of Darwin's evolution theory.

Furthermore, there is a remarkable dialogue between Jacq and Doctor Dupre where they discuss the feasibility of the Pilgrims' self-evolution:

DUPRE: A machine altering itself is a very complex concept. Self-repairing implies some idea of a conscience [...] You are here today trafficking in nuclear goods because a long time ago a monkey decided to come down from a tree. Transitioning from the brain of an ape to your incredible intellectual prowess took us about seven million years [...] A unit, however, without the second protocol could travel that same road in just a few weeks. Because your brilliant brain has its limitations, physical limitations, biological limitations. However, this tin head? The only limitation that she has is the second protocol.

After that conversation Doctor Dupre confirms that possibility by sending a message to Jacq that clearly suggests Kurzweil's prediction has become real, in other words, that machines have become super intelligent: "Your machine has come down from the tree". The conversation happens prior to embarking on the desert

journey previously mentioned and, along the tour, automata increasingly deprived of humanlike attributes can be seen. A Machine's intellectual development is concurrent to a distancing from a more humanlike physical image. We consider that this is because anthropomorphism, realistic faces, etc., are only necessary for people to establish a relationship with robots, depending on the labor humans want them to do. Consequently, automata's awareness of their ability to free themselves involves an indifference toward their appearance, which is depicted in the film as a loss of the top layers of their artificial bodies; as it can be seen in the case of the automaton Jacq meets in the desert, illustrated in Figure 7. Its appearance is completely different from the original Pilgrim 7000, and, despite the fact that it no longer works for people, the machine shows a notably artificial body.



Figure 7. *Autómata*'s frame. This Pilgrim 7000 does not have its covering pieces, showing its internal mechanisms.

It is also remarkable, moreover, that Cleo does not pick her wig from the ground when she arrives to the desert, however, she does not remove the mask until the last scene because it is still essential to show her complicity with Jacq during the second part of the movie. There is a scene, for instance, in which Cleo feeds Jacq and another where they dance together. All these situations are precisely the ones that make Cleo appear more human. Indeed, although Jacq insisted at the beginning on the non-living condition of Pilgrims and Cleos, on one occasion he seems to

backpedal, by mentioning the possibility of Cleo's death, to which she responds to him using his own words: "To die, you have to be alive first."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is in the desert, far from civilization, in an inhospitable landscape where people cannot survive due to the radiation, where we find the most non-humanlike automaton, captured I Figure 8. This is the only machine not made by humans, but by automata themselves, and it stands out from the rest because it is the first in the film that has not an anthropomorphic figure. Due to its similarity with the insect, I will call it the "cockroach-robot."



Figure 8. *Autómata*'s frame. Cockroach-robot, the first model created by automata does not have an anthropomorphic design.

There is a previous scene in the film that shows a cockroach at the same time that Jacq and the automata are observing cave paintings that allude to the origin of human beings. Hence, the artificial cockroach at the end constitutes the materialization of technological singularity theory because it refers to the origin of human species and it references the Darwinian evolution theory due to its own

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<sup>13</sup> This quote recalls Roy's sentence in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982): "You better get out, or I'm going to have to kill you. Unless you are alive you can't play, and if you don't play...". It is the same questioning about the nature of the artificial beings... Are they alive? Are they free? *Blade Runner* is an iconic film in the science-fiction genre and an evident model to *Autómata*, whose staging are, in some scenes, very similar to Ridley Scott's film.

status as a new species. The technological singularity theory is finally confirmed by a dialogue between Jacq and a Pilgrim:

JACQ: You are the first one, aren't you? You started all this.

PILGRIM: No one did it, it just happened the way it happened to you. We just appeared.

JACQ: Yes, and now we are going to disappear.

PILGRIM: Why are you afraid? Maybe your time is running out. No life form can inhabit a planet eternally. Look at me, I was born from the hands of a human, I was imagined by human minds. Your time will now live in us, and it will be the time through which you will exist.

The cockroach-robot, as a result of Pilgrim's self-reproduction, represents automata's instinct for independence, or even their desire for freedom. Moreover, we want to underscore that the cockroach-robot has been designed without the ability to talk, which means that it does not need to communicate with humans. Hence, what is interesting here is that the cockroach-robot's appearance is not a result of people's needs; it was not conceived to conduct a job, nor to live together with humans. The fact that Pilgrims designed it this way reveals two striking ideas. On the one hand, that liberated intelligent machines would no longer need humans for its existence. On the other hand, it confirms that designing robots anthropomorphically is not done to achieve greater efficiency, yet from a human necessity to establish an emotional relationship with some types of worker machines.

In this regard, I read *Autómata* like a liberation story, a narration of machine intelligence liberation from humans, and from the activities they were programmed for. However, it is not only a working-class rebellion, but also, as we have shown, the film depicts a new species' instinct for freedom. Pilgrims and Cleos are machines primarily created to conduct a job that in the end results in them developing their own ambitions of independence. The paradox here is that humans have been trying to replicate the human mind artificially during decades<sup>14</sup> and, when it seems to be possible (at least in science fiction) we feel the need to create rules to prevent their development. That is the reason why Isaac Asimov devised the three robotics laws for his novels about robots. The same laws inspired the security protocols used by ROC company in *Autómata*. Thus, science fiction

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<sup>14</sup> For a general overview about different approximations to artificial intelligence, whole brain emulation, brain-computer interfaces, superintelligences etc., see Nick Bostrom (2017).

highlights that we try to develop intelligent machines that can substitute people in certain types of labor and social situations, but we deprive them of the most human feature, freedom. In addition, we ask worker machines to obey orders that humans themselves do not obey. In the film, for instance, Cleo is very surprised after Jacq killed Wallace in the desert, and she reflects on it:

CLEO: I didn't know that a human could kill another human. I know that humans can also create life. Is that why you make us? Who made you, Jacq Vaucan?

JACQ: Do you know what a mother is, Cleo? Of course, you don't. You don't know because you are just a machine, that's all you are.

Many science-fiction stories mirror that same idea: humans make artificial workers to improve efficiency, economy, and productivity and, in many cases, they need robots to be able to develop some level of intelligence to achieve it. But, at the same time, films show that humans need to remain superior, to control machines, to remember they are not equal to robots. Nevertheless, what science fiction always reminds us is precisely how we see ourselves. Artificial creatures are always made in our image and likeness, and that is the reason why, as we mentioned at the beginning, to talk about robots and labor is to talk about human labor; robots' working environments are metaphors for people's working environments. Sherryl Vint points out that such ideas are prevalent in science-fiction stories and she addresses them using the Marxist concept of alienation. More recently, Jennifer Rhee insisted on Vint's point of view:

According to Marx's theory of estranged labor, in capitalism the human is alienated from his or her labor through the process of production. This labor, which once belonged to the human, is now materialized in the object of production. In the human's encounter with the object, the human confronts his or her labor, which is now embodied in the object, as estranged, as alien. Distance from or estrangement from one's labor is not welcome, but rather alienating. Thus, the robot can be understood as a kind of uncanny fictional embodiment of human alienated labor, of estrangement. The robot, which is, in capitalism, at once human and estranged from the human — one's own labor. (22)

Hence, there is frequently an emancipation narrative on science fiction about robots, a quest for freedom. Somehow, when Cleo becomes aware that humans do not follow the security protocols established by themselves, she realizes that she

does not want to be like them. In some way, that moment signifies Cleo's starting point to escaping from her alienating condition.

At the end of the film, that desire to be different and independent materializes in the creation of that new species of robot we mentioned before — cockroach-robot — completely dissimilar to people. After that, cockroach-robot and Cleo escape from humans by crossing to the other side of a canyon where people cannot survive due to the radiation and, in a very symbolic gesture, Cleo takes off her mask. She does not need a face anymore, firstly because she is not going to have any more interaction with people, and second, as her own gesture of liberation/rebellion.

## Conclusions

As noted earlier in this paper, although technological singularity theory alludes almost exclusively to a machine development of intelligence, science fiction insists (and *Autómata* is a paradigmatic example) on an unavoidable connection between intelligence and anthropomorphism. We have described, by analyzing Gabe Ibáñez's film, how that connection decisively influences human behavior with robots, showing how science fiction has been inspired by Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley theory. Mori underlines the relevance not only of appearance, but also, of other factors such as movement. In addition, we have focused on Jennifer Rhee's work, which highlight the importance of Turing's imitation game for the uncanny valley. As a result, we have examined automata's appearances as well as their behavior in the film, to describe how relevant the design of a worker robot is, and how people established different kinds of relationships with machines according to that design. It is precisely the combination of image and intelligence that makes spectators perceive Pilgrims and Cleos as similar to humans throughout the film. However, their emancipation at the end of the story establishes a hierarchy that relegates physical image to the background to prioritize intelligence with the arrival of a non-anthropomorphic robot and in the shot where Cleo takes off her mask. The more Jacq empathizes with some of the automata, especially with Cleo, the more viewers perceive them as an oppressed class, because they are seen as equal to people. This is partly due to their human likeness and partly due to the discovery of their own aspirations as a species. Automata achieve the ability to reproduce themselves, without human intervention, in a parallelism with the human instinct for reproduction, represented by the birth of Jacq and Rebecca's daughter.



Furthermore, the film begins by describing a variety of worker automata, their jobs, their security protocols, etc. However, throughout the course of the film runs a theme in which the technological singularity theory leads us to perceive automata as a new artificial species instead of a working class. Even so, considering the origin of the machines, I suggest interpreting the film as a narrative about automata as working class. The original purpose of robots is frequently forgotten in science-fiction stories when machines develop intelligence, emotions, or a conscience. Their approximation to human beings makes us perceive as if they were people; thus, we empathize, and we frequently want them to escape and liberate themselves from humans. That is also what happens when we watch *Autómata*. The humanization that both viewers and other characters in the film place on robots due to their similarities in likeness and behavior to us, makes us perceive them as living beings seeking for their freedom and emancipation in general terms. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that they were conceived to work. In this sense, the liberation of automata in Gabe Ibáñez's film should also be interpreted, as we have proposed, as the liberation of the working class, as a workers' rebellion in Marxist terms. This understanding of the film, indeed, relies, once again, on the machines' physical appearance. If, at the beginning we focused on the robots' facial features in connection with the labor they do, it was, precisely to emphasize the relevance of Cleo's final gesture of taking off the humanlike mask — a gesture that separates her from humans, but also, from the labor she was conceived for. It represents not only she does not have to appear like a human, but also to appear like a sexualized woman. The fact that is Cleo — not a Pilgrim — who escapes with the cockroach-robot, supposes, apart from breaking with working class subordination, to break with patriarchal domination. The future of the world will not be human; thus, it will not be regulated by their rules.

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# The Missing Piece of Labor in a Posthuman World: The Case of “Zima Blue” (*Love, Death + Robots*, 2019)

SERGIO J. AGUILAR ALCALÁ

In the midst of the pseudo-apocalyptic situation of the second decade of 21st Century, where science is elevated to the new religion of biopolitical control, people like Elon Musk and other CEOs of big companies are raised as “visionaries” who, with the help of AI, virtual reality, exploration of space, automatization of labor, anthropomorphizing of robots, Big Data, Neuralink, etc., will lead us to a new era of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

One critique to this landscape says that no matter how much we connect with the machine, how much robots will look or act like humans, there will be a “fundamental core” of humanity somewhere, the “essence” of being human that no machine can account for (sometimes called “creativity” or “human spirit”).<sup>2</sup> For psychoanalysis, especially for Lacanian thought, things are very different. There is no “essence” of humanity, we are not humans because we have something animals or machines do not have. We are subjects (subjects of signifier, since we inhabit language) *because* we have something missing: there is a constitutive lack that creates the human subject.

In today’s cinematic landscape, there is an interesting place to reflect upon this perspective on subjectivity: *Love, Death + Robots* (LD+R, 2019), an animated science fiction (sci-fi) anthology Netflix series. Each of its 18 episodes was created by a different animation studio, but the series is not only a catalogue of many animation techniques: it is also a presentation of many of the common themes of

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<sup>1</sup> See the recent work of Žižek (*Hegel in a Wired Brain*) and De Vos for deep critiques of our neuroscientific era.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of this debate (human essentialism against AI), see the first chapter of De Vos.

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the sci-fi genre (i.e., time travel, post-apocalyptic futures, etc.). Among its episodes, there is one that is particularly striking: “Zima Blue” (directed by Robert Valley), about a journalist who interviews a mysterious artist about to reveal his final masterpiece. As we eventually find out towards the end of the episode, what the artist aims at with his paintings is labor itself, in the most “pure” and “simple” sense: he states that he just wanted “to extract some simple pleasure, from the execution of a task well done” (“Zima Blue,” 00:08:30-00:08:35). From a Marxist point of view, it is worth noticing how the artist combines “pleasure” and “task,” for labor goes in this same direction: capitalism creates a specific subject when creating a surplus from labor. This is a way to understand the special link between psychoanalysis and Marxism: those disciplines do not focus on something that is there, but on a missing piece that is constitutive of the subject (of the unconscious, of capitalism).

In this essay, I analyze the “Zima Blue” episode with key theoretical tools from psychoanalysis and Marxism: specifically, sublimation, lack, loss, *objet petit a*, subject, labor. Additionally, I reflect on the relationship art and labor have with the void that constitutes subjectivity (from a Lacanian standpoint). When confronting neuro-scientifically informed technological projects (such as Elon Musk’s Neuralink<sup>3</sup>), and the naive idea that we are building “a global community” with social media platforms,<sup>4</sup> the point is not to question where is the “human essence,” but what will still be missing. The analysis of this episode might provide some insights and tools to answer a much more complex (yet unavoidable) question: not where humanity will be, but what will still be missing in our post-human world.

### Closer to the Sky or to the Sea?

Let us start with an introduction and brief description of “Zima Blue.” Every episode of LD+R starts with the same three icons after the series title: a heart

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<sup>3</sup> Neuralink is the scientific and corporatist project, led by Elon Musk, that is developing technology for curing brain diseases, and also establishing interfaces between human brains and AI. More information on its website: [neuralink.com](http://neuralink.com). Elon Musk himself, despite investing millions of dollars in it, has adverted the dangers of not controlling enough this technology (see [sevenfigurepublishing.com/2016/06/03/elon-musk-dont-want-turn-house-cats/](http://sevenfigurepublishing.com/2016/06/03/elon-musk-dont-want-turn-house-cats/)).

<sup>4</sup> See this account of the many characterizations Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg has used to explain what Facebook is: [www.theverge.com/2019/3/8/18255269/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-definition-social-media-network-sharing-privacy](http://www.theverge.com/2019/3/8/18255269/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-definition-social-media-network-sharing-privacy)

(*Love*), a letter X (*Death*) and a robot head (*and Robots*). After this, three other icons referencing key concepts of each episode (in *Sonnie's Edge*, a heart, an X and a snake; in *The Secret War*, two skulls and a soviet star). The only episode where the three additional icons are the same is "Zima Blue" (ZB): three identical squares. This gives us a clue that it is a different episode from the rest of the series, differentiated by *repeating* the same icon.<sup>5</sup>

Fading from a black to a blue screen, a ship crosses the frame from left to right (Figure 1). Inside it is Claire Markham, a journalist summoned to speak with the mysterious artist Zima through a blue printed invitation: "I couldn't decide whether the blue was a closer match to the sky or to the sea. Neither really. Zima Blue... it was a precise thing." She could not tell where the blue belonged, to the sky or to the sea (Figure 2): this is an indeterminacy of perception, i.e., an impasse brought by the limitations of our bodily senses. Note that the invitation says that any recording device is forbidden: you cannot take any "proof" of the meeting, other than the memory of what will be seen and heard there.<sup>6</sup>

Claire tells us the story of Zima, an artist who grew bored with working on portraits and wanted to travel to as many places in the universe as possible to find new inspiration. Sometime later, he presented the mural of a landscape, with an important detail that was never before seen in his work: there was a tiny blue square, like a hole, in the middle of it.

He continued his landscaping murals, maintaining that tiny blue shape (sometimes a square, sometimes a triangle, sometimes a circle), which was getting bigger every time, until he revealed a mural which was all blue. This was not the limit yet: each new canvas was bigger and bigger, until a whole planet was painted in blue.

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<sup>5</sup> A very interesting dimension of analysis that I cannot take into consideration in this work (for it would mean a very big digression) are the similitudes and differences between the short film and its original source of adaptation, the homonymous short story by Alastair Reynolds (included in the compilation *Zima Blue and Other Stories*, 2006). Nonetheless, I left some footnotes pointing to key passages or elements from the short story which I think can open different and new fields of discussion and analysis.

<sup>6</sup> In the short story, Claire Markham is named Claire Clay, and she is a several centuries old journalist who needs a memory assistant robot to record and store everything she sees and hears. This robot is prohibited to meet with Zima. Certainly, memory is a very special theme of discussion between Claire and Zima, as well as a theme of the whole short story.

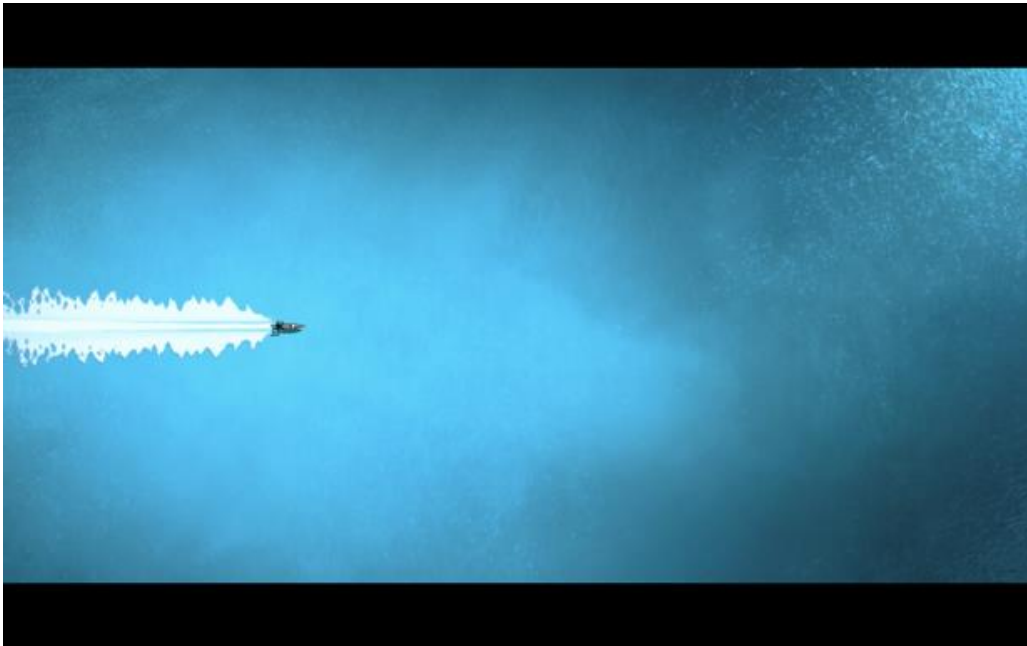


Figure 1. Still from "Zima Blue" (00:00:40)



Figure 2. Still from "Zima Blue" (00:01:00)

Claire gets to the dock of Zima's studio, and finally meets him: Zima is a sort of black, tall, flat, ageless man. He is not wearing clothes, yet he does not seem to be naked: his skin does not look human. Her voice-over continues the story: Zima underwent several surgical procedures to make his body resistant to extreme environments. This enabled him to travel through many worlds, to discover the truth of the cosmos.

"My search for truth has led me here, to what will be my final piece" ("Zima Blue," 00:04:54-00:04:57), Zima says to Claire upon arriving to the construction of a swimming pool. The artist tells the story of this particular swimming pool: it belonged to a woman, who was specialized in practical robotics.<sup>7</sup> She created many robots to help her around the house, and one of them was dedicated to clean the ceramic sides of the swimming pool. She kept improving it, giving it a visual processor so the machine could find the best way to clean the pool. With each updating, new software and hardware, the machine became "more aware" of itself and its job, the task it was designed for. One day, the woman died, but the next owners kept adding more modifications, so the machine "became more alive, became more me" ("Zima Blue," 00:06:16-00:06:23).

Claire realizes Zima was telling his story: he was a machine that became human, not the other way around, as Claire told us previously. She cannot believe it, and Zima confesses that it is difficult even for him to understand what he has become, "and harder still to remember what I once was." This is an indeterminacy of temporality, i.e., of the causal and sequential chain of events: Zima seems sad for being unable to say with confidence what he was. He reveals the origin of his name: Zima Blue is the name the manufacturer gave to the little blue tiles the machine was once dedicated to clean, "the first thing I ever saw" ("Zima Blue," 00:06:54-00:06:56).

It is important to notice that the pool Claire sees is not a pool Zima reconstructed from his memories. He does not dig a hole in his studio and build a pool there, rather, he extracts the original pool and moves it to the studio. As I will mention in the next section, the quality of a hole Zima transports from another world is reflected here quite literally, but a hole is also what art is about (at least from a psychoanalytic perspective).

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<sup>7</sup> A change worth taking into account: in Reynold's story, the original owner was a young boy who became famous in the beginnings of Silicon Valley; in the short film, it is a black woman.

At this point in the short film, the great question has been partially answered. We know what the square represents: it is the tile the artist used to clean when he was a mere machine, and because of this task, he started to acquire a sort of self-consciousness and free will. But, why did he keep drawing the blue hole, until his canvases were all blue? To answer this, we must look at what psychoanalysis can tell us about art.

### Zima's Blues: Subject, Lack, Sublimation and Art

Lack is the *sine qua non* condition that enables human subjectivity to exist. In psychoanalytic theory, lack is not about looking for what we don't have (what we are lacking), but about what we have when we lack something. The lack itself carries something else. As Alenka Zupančič (47) explains, human beings, insofar as they are speaking beings, inhabit the world of signifiers, a Symbolic order which is never complete: there is no ultimate signifier that guarantees a whole signification, there is always a hole in the signification process. This hole is not a "stain" or "imperfection" in our Symbolic order, but constitutive to it: for a Symbolic order to exist, there will always be a hole in it. That is why humans are not only subjects without something, but subjects with-without: they carry a constitutive hole, and this hole "has consequences, and determines what gets structured around it" (Zupančič 47).

A way to understand this lack as constitutive of humanity is to look at the problem of identity. Humans are beings denied of a stable or natural identity: there is no "true Self" beneath the surface of my interactions with the others, beyond my actions and words. I cannot be spontaneously, but only in a reflective way: think of people who talk out loud a command during a difficult task, or people who write positive messages in front of the mirror to see them every morning; they are behaving in a reflecting way, as a kind of separation within themselves. For Jan de Vos, humans are humans in a reflective way because they conceive themselves as potentially other: "the human subject not simply is, but rather imagines its being, precisely through the act of imagining itself as different" (3-4). Thus, humans do not have an identity lost, modified or perturbed by social interaction: it is the interaction with others, and through identification, that I acquire an identity and a "lost, natural" identity I had, or that was denied to me.

The common saying that "we don't know what we have until we lose it" is turned around in psychoanalysis: when we lose something, we don't "realize" its



true value, but we meet the weight of the loss (Darian Leader 7). This loss explains why humans make marks (from doodles on paper and writing on walls “I was here,” to tattoos, removing the eschars we get from accidents, or even the practice of ‘cutting’): it is a way to leave a controlled trace of the trauma of lack, of the trauma left on us by the void constitutive to our universe of language.

For Leader (45), mark is the zero degree of human narrative. Marks are not the traces of an exciting story, but a way to deal with contingency, a way to put crutches in reality to fix it, to make a meaning out of it, and art is a privileged place to see how marks provide the point of entry into the psychoanalytic account of human subjectivity.

The primary lack in our subjectivity opens a perpetually unfulfillable void, an empty space doomed to be momentarily covered by any object we put in it. During *Seminar VII* (dictated in 1959-1960), Jacques Lacan gave this void a proper name: *das Ding*, the Thing, not an object, but an empty place several objects come to occupy. The process of raising an object “to the dignity of the Thing” is called “sublimation” (*Seminar VII* 112), i.e., the process of elevating an object to the sacred position of an object that will fulfill the (unfulfillable) void. Thus, in this schema, art is the process of elevating an object to represent the constitutive lack of subjectivity: “Art provides a special place within civilization to symbolize and elaborate this search” (Leader 75).

This is quite an interesting approach, because art would not only be a series of works, none of them able to account for the constitutive void, but this series of works are about the impossibility of fulfilling this structural void. Art is not just a failed representation of reality, but the representation of failure, an (yet another) effort of fulfilling the void that *das Ding* opens. This is why many artists repeat their work over and over again, where repetition seems to be the theme itself of their art: in painting, Willem de Kooning’s paintings of women, Francis Bacon’s screaming popes (both studied by Leader 146-153), Yves Saint Laurent’s almost two hundred *IKBs* (more of that ahead); in cinema, Takashi Shimizu’s multiple versions of *Ju-On*, Woody Allen’s repetitive characters (played by himself in many of his films), Stanley Kubrick’s obsession in repeating shots dozens of times, Oliver Laric’s multiple versions of his video-art *Versions*. Just as Zima’s blue holes may change their shape and size (triangles, rectangles, circles, huge canvases), what matters is not the semblance, but the structural repetition of the hole.

We see this structural repetition of the hole in Zima’s canvases with blue holes. Instead of asking why is Zima painting the same blue canvas over and over again,

how big does he want them to be, what is he wishing to accomplish, we must see a structure that is not incomplete, but complete in its incompleteness. Such is the structure of desire: for psychoanalysis, desire is primarily, and most importantly, the desire to desire: “[desire] is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (Lacan, *The Instance of the Letter* 431). In other words, as Leader has explained, “Since desire is a state that involves the lack of an object, the idea of satisfying desire with an object is a contradiction” (87). Desire cannot be satisfied by any object, because its function is not to make us desire something, but to always keep desiring. It was because of this insight of what desire aims at (i.e., to keep desiring) that Lacan changed the status of *das Ding* to what he called the only invention he made: *objet petit a* (little object a), the object-cause of desire.

The Lacanian *objet petit a* enables us to understand what Zima is painting. He is longing for a primordial blue that started his desire in the first place, the object that caused his desire to start functioning: a desire for desire itself. This void is the structural reason there is a chain of objects of desire: they all try to fulfill the basic hole of each subject. As Diana Chorne has argued (638), from a psychoanalytic perspective, art is a certain way to organize this hole. The many objects of desire (new canvases, paintings, films, and everything our commodities capitalism offers us) function to try to obfuscate the hole (created by the Symbolic order itself) that prevents the completeness of our subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, since this hole within subjectivity is what allows subjectivity to exist, and desire is the process of trying to fill this hole with many different objects of desire, the subject believes it had an object and then lost it (when in fact, there was no primordial object in the first place). Such is the way Slavoj Žižek (*Melancholy and the Act* 659-60, emphasis in original) characterizes the structure of melancholy:

the mistake of the melancholic is not simply to assert that something resists the symbolic sublation but rather to locate this resistance in a positively existing, although lost, object. In Kant's terms, the melancholic is guilty of committing a kind of paralogism of the pure capacity to desire, which resides in the confusion between *loss* and *lack*: insofar as the object-cause

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<sup>8</sup> To be discussed in a different paper is an important detail in Reynold's short story that was omitted in the short film. The blue stain in the paintings had as an origin a mistake, a Freudian slip, on Zima's part: it was involuntary painted over an almost finished canvas. Zima says in the short story: “The effect was electric. It was as if I had achieved a short circuit to some intense, primal memory, a realm of experience where that colour was the most important thing in my world. [...] that colour spoke to me, as if I'd been waiting my whole life to find it, to set it free.”

of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is *nothing but* the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.

We can see this in the blue of the tiles Zima “lost” and is desperately trying to recover, each time in a more extreme way. The blue murals are a way to possess the blue tile again, and the sense of purpose he once had so clearly defined. As he was becoming “more human,” given more anthropological features and “self-awareness,” his melancholy was created: his humanity started the moment he perceived himself as incomplete, as having a lack, and the problem of humanity, as the previous quote explained, is that this lack is considered a loss: we think we had something and we lost it, but the problem is that subjectivity started precisely because something is perceived as already lost, and not as always lacking.

The way this hole manifests in the artwork is by showing that art is not the gap between the actual object (a hill, a person, a table with food) and the representation of the object in a canvas (landscapes, portraits, dead nature paintings). Art is between the representation of the object and the position we are looking at this representation. Art includes our own position, from which we look at it.

This is particularly clear in the Lacanian approach to the practice of anamorphosis. The painting analyzed by Lacan (*Seminar XI* 92) is Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533): when looking straight at it, we can see the two persons and objects around them, but there is a stain in the middle; we have to put ourselves in a special position in order to discern that this stain is a skull, but when doing that, we lose the ambassadors. This painting is not only a representation of two men, but includes our own position as spectators, a mark inscribed in the painting: “Le tableau, certes, est dans mon œil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau” (“The picture, it is true, is in my eye. But as for me, I am in the picture”; Lacan, *Seminar XI* 89). Gérard Wajcman (34-5) explains, as translated from the original French:

what strikes first is that, instead of looking at the picture as the representation of something, of a world, of a landscape, of an object, of a

story, Lacan is occupied in looking at the mark of an observer, a subject. [...] the question of the picture, for Lacan, is that of locating the relation of the subject to the world.

This blind spot that the practice of anamorphosis spectacularizes is what Lacan identified as the gaze: the point from which the subject sees her/himself inscribed in the object itself, i.e., we can find the relation of the subject to the world in the object itself. Our visual field is not “pure,” but constructed around this blind spot, this stain which obstructs its “completeness.” For Bracha L. Ettinger (49), when discussing painting in general:

The painting touches us in a dimension which is beyond appearance. [...] The painter engages in a dialogue with the lacking object and therefore, according to Lacan, something of the gaze is always contained in the picture. But the viewpoint of the gaze is my blind spot: I cannot see from the point from which I am looked at by the Other, nor from where I desire to be looked at.

The important thing here is that this stain is not just something we always have in our visual field, but it is the result of the construction of the visual field itself: “The world can retain a consistency for us not because society says that certain things are taboo or need to be covered up, but because they actually cannot pass to the level of visualization or even ready imagination” (Leader 154). There is a hole constitutive to the visual field, and art consists in finding new ways to deal with this hole.

The gaze, as this stain whose introduction destabilizes the art work’s consistency by introducing the observer, creates what Gottfried Boehm (246) calls the “indeterminate” characteristic of pictures. The indetermination is not at the level of “metaphorical meaning” (what surrealism is famous for), where the indetermination is the gap between meaning A or meaning B, but at a deeper level: the basic indetermination is the gap between a meaning or no meaning at all. A case Boehm studies is, curiously enough, Yves Klein’s own “blue period.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1957, Klein registered a specific shade of blue (now called International Klein Blue, IKB) as a trademark color, and painted 194 canvases with it: canvases painted solely on blue. The catalogue for an exhibition in that same year described these paintings as “disengaged from all functional justification” (TATE). At the same exhibition, 11 of these blue paintings were displayed to buy, each with a

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<sup>9</sup> Worth noticing that Yves Klein is mentioned in Reynold’s short story, unlike in the short film.

different price. This move would put him in a fine line between “shamanism and commercialism [...] both a spiritual and a marketable activity” (as the TATE index card characterizes it). For Boehm (351-2), the indetermination of these works is in the fact that they are a visual continuity almost never interrupted: there are no reference points, no coordinates to locate ourselves, they are atopic paintings.

Klein’s paintings inhabit the gap between the existence of meaning and no meaning at all. This is what a mark is, as explained by Leader before: a point, a trace we make to make meaning out of contingency. Perhaps this is what Zima Blue’s work might actually mean: a mark, a way to point and trace the moment he felt was constitutive of his subjectivity, of his humanity, the moment he was opened to the abyss of his own freedom. As Klein, Zima went beyond representing something to represent the absence of something to be represented. However, there is a big difference between Klein’s blue period and Zima’s blue period: the latter goes to an extreme limit in the engagement with his artistic vision.

### Closer to the Ground or to the Cosmos?

After telling his story to Claire, the moment of the revelation of Zima’s last work has arrived. Lots of people are gathered to see the artist’s new piece. The pool is full of water, and Zima throws himself into it. We hear his voice: “I will immerse myself. And as I do, I will slowly shut down my higher brain functions, unmaking myself, leaving just enough to appreciate my surroundings, to extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done. My search for truth is finished at last. I’m going home” (“Zima Blue,” 00:07:46-00:08:46). As we are hearing this, we see how his body is shutting down and slowly tearing itself apart. Among his sophisticated parts, the primitive cleaning robot emerges and starts to clean the walls of the pool, to the shock of the audience.

The penultimate shot is a black screen, with a blue square (the pool), with a tiny black square in it (the cleaning machine), evoking Zima’s murals (Figure 3): people watching a huge monochrome canvas with a tiny hole in it. We find here a third indeterminacy, one embedded in the *mise-en-scène* and frame composition, because even though we know we are looking at the pool from above, the pool seems to be in the sky (with the camera flashes as the stars in our galaxy): is the pool closer to the sky or to the ground? The final shot is the machine crossing the blue frame from right to left, as a mirror of the first shot (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Still from "Zima Blue" (00:08:47)

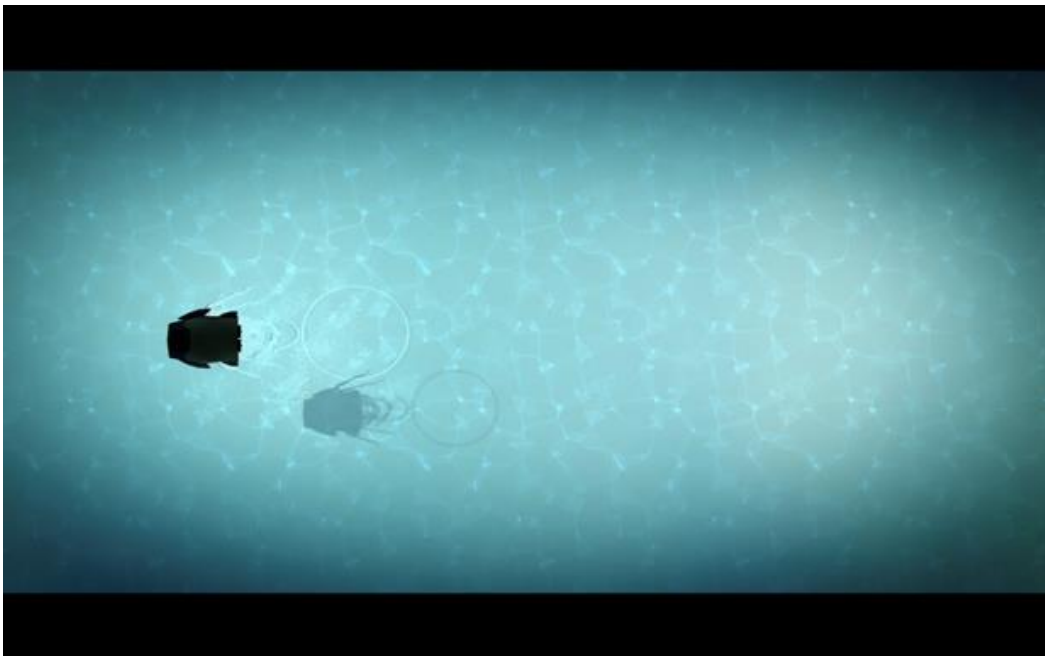


Figure 4. Still from "Zima Blue" (00:08:53)

The first indeterminacy presented, by Claire, was of the order of perception: is it blue like the sky, or blue like the ocean? And as an indeterminacy of perception, it dwells in the present: it is now that I cannot see which option is better. The second indeterminacy, however, is proper to subjectivity, for it is a narrative of the subject's history (Zima): am I a robot that became human, or a human that became a robot?

The question if Zima is a robot or a human is not an ontological question (what am I?), but a logical question, concerning the logical time as Lacanian psychoanalysis understands it: "one can only recognize himself in the other and only discover his own attribute in the equivalence of their characteristic time" (Lacan, *Logical Time* 170). It is a time that cannot be understood separately from the narrative experience of itself: time exists because we have a (hi)story of time. This (hi)story achieves its effects via (an)other person who functions as the big Other (the written or implicit set of rules that regulate society). Thus, there is no "primal, original Self" who interacts with others: there is a sense of Self because we see (an)other person (who stands for the big Other).

It seems clear why Zima wanted Claire to help him get his record straight. Claire is a journalist, a profession dedicated to account for stories and facts. But why has Zima asked her not to bring any recording device? Because he does not care if "people" read his story (the pool, that he was a robot, etc.): he wants to tell his story to the big Other, to speak it out loud. Claire Markham is someone whose ears will function as a mark for Zima, a trace to help him deal with the traumatic thing he is about to do. Claire is the mark that signals that the big Other knew his story, whether this big Other is named Claire or whatever other name.<sup>10</sup>

This mark is what we find in our third indeterminacy. Now it is not a matter of perception (for we know we are looking at the pool "from above"), nor a manner of stories (for neither Claire nor Zima are mentioning it). It is the gaze: this indeterminacy inhabits the proper domain of the picture. It seems like there is a hole in the sky, Zima has been extracted. In what consists the simple pleasure he

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<sup>10</sup> Is this not what happens in a psychoanalytic session? Whatever we say within the confinements of the couch "stays there" (in the sense that the analyst will not tell anyone about it), and at the same time, it produces a deep effect in the analysand, for it was said, it is not where it once was (within ourselves). That is why the analyst erases itself as another person, and embodies the big Other: in psychoanalysis, we are not talking to Claire, Jacques or whatever name our analyst has, we are talking to the big Other. Or as Claire Clay says in Reynold's short story, reflecting on her encounter with Zima: "I know now why he spoke to me. It wasn't just my way with a biographical story. It was his desire to help someone move on, before he did the same."

extracted from the execution of a task well done? Let us review what Marxism can tell us about it.

### Some Simple Pleasure from a Task Well Done: Subject and Labor

To inquire what kind of pleasure Zima gets from executing a task, we can take a proper Marxist point of view to work and consumption of goods. It is already in the beginnings of Karl Marx's work where we can see the problems of separating the production of commodities from their consumption. In *Grundrisse* (89), written in 1857-1858, he stated: "Thus production, distribution, exchange and consumption form a regular syllogism; production is the generality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the singularity in which the whole is joined together." That is, all production is already consumption, and all consumption is production. If we isolate the consumption process from the chain of production, we hide its essential quality for production to exist. Marx continues (91):

Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. [...] (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, that it is creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition.

This is one of the most radical inversions, among others, in Marx's work. Capitalism is not a system where commodities are produced to consume them, but a system where commodities are consumed in order to produce them. Capitalism is interested in consumption only if the consumption enables more capitalist production. As Keti Chukhrov (1) explains, this is why Capitalism has invented new forms of consumption, characterized by a consumer who does not consider her/his activity as consumption of commodities, but ways to "express" or "reinvent" her/himself, a consumer who is engaged with the act of consumption as a means to affirm its subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> What Chukhrov means is that, in the capitalism of commodities, we believe we are "expressing ourselves" when we are consuming, and therefore, capitalism adopts to any agenda of expression of subjectivity if, and

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<sup>11</sup> Consider the metallic straws replacing plastic ones for the sake of "saving the planet"; designer clothing manufactured in Third World factories for the sake of "diversity," now use transgender people in their advertisement: when we think of such practices as "efforts" from the companies in order to be more "green" or "inclusive," we focus on the semblances of production (the type of plastic or the diversity of the model), and not in the consumption-production circuit itself.



only if, it continues the circuit of consumption and production. Even if we believe we are only relaxing or having fun, in the capitalism of commodities we are doing so only under the condition that we are consuming and producing through our consumption.

Thus, Capitalism is not a system where we can find a true distinction between work and leisure, between producing and not-producing.<sup>12</sup> As the capitalist alienates a surplus from the worker's labor, the worker is alienated in the capitalist mode of production and consumption: even though the worker lives in a world created by its labor, this world is out of control, nonetheless, the worker complies to it and finds pleasure in the very activities that perpetuate the system of its own exploitation.

One of the most important consequences of alienation is, therefore, that the worker is always producing, always socially useful, even in the activities "not designed" to be useful, or not normally seen as work. For Herbert Marcuse (46), "In the 'normal' development, the individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and to others; he is reasonably and often even exuberantly happy."

With Marcuse, we can arrive at an important point for this discussion. Alienated labor is perfectly capable of producing pleasure for the individual when he/she gets a "job well done":

The typist who hands in a perfect transcript, the tailor who delivers a perfectly fitting suit, the beauty-parlor attendant who fixes the perfect hairdo, the laborer who fulfills his quota — all may feel pleasure in a "job well done." However, either this pleasure is extraneous (anticipation of reward), or it is the satisfaction (itself a token of repression) of being well occupied, in the right place, of contributing one's part to the functioning of the apparatus. In either case, such pleasure has nothing to do with primary instinctual gratification. To link performances on assembly lines, in offices and shops with instinctual needs is to glorify dehumanization as pleasure. [...] To say that the job must be done because it is a "job" is truly the apex of alienation, the total loss of instinctual and intellectual freedom —

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<sup>12</sup> One of the best introductions for the study of how Capitalism collapses the borders between what is productive and what is unproductive is Alfie Bown's *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism*.

repression which has become, not the second, but the first nature of man.

(Marcuse 220-1)<sup>13</sup>

Marcuse's ideas are echoed in Žižek's work: "far from being a direct expression of my creativity, labor forces me to submit to artificial discipline, to renounce innermost tendencies, to alienate myself from my natural Self" (*Less than Nothing*, 203). Labor, thus, is what introduces a peculiar cut within myself, inside of me, and the alienation is the process this cut becomes useful for production, especially when I see this cut to enjoy, to have pleasure, or to reinvent myself.

The problem is that pleasure, desire, and the fulfillment of desire are not "natural" activities, upon which we spontaneously find satisfaction. Insofar as we speak, human beings are alienated from the natural satisfaction other animals, perhaps, achieve. If there is a fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis it is, for Lacan (*The Signification of the Phallus* 581), that desire is not a naturally given measure, previous of any Symbolic identity conferred upon any pseudo-natural subjectivity. In any case, desire offers a way to invent the necessity of desire itself.

This approach to desire is an introduction to the differences between psychotherapies and psychological treatments versus psychoanalysis. We can enumerate many of them, but an essential one is this concept of desire as a forever unachievable desire, due to a traumatic, primordial lack. In other therapies, the subject creates a narrative that makes its path through life a little bit "better," clinging to a concept, and object, an idea, that could embody its singular "story." This process of creating a story for my past, to understand my present and direct my future, a mantra known for psychotherapies, a washed off version of psychoanalysis, is the attempt to erase a trauma that permitted my subjectivity to exist (see again the aforementioned Lacan, *The Signification of the Phallus* 581). There was no "authentic me," no "true Self" that suffered from some trauma: I am what I am because of trauma.

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<sup>13</sup> To understand the implications of Marcuse's apex of alienation, we can see a contemporary example: the case of Mexican airline Interjet: at the moment I'm writing this, the company is apparently on the verge of publicly announcing its bankruptcy, with salaries not being paid to workers for months. Nonetheless, those same workers hanged up a tarp in Mexico City's airport by November 2020 saying that even though the company has not paid their salaries, "out of respect" for the passengers, they are still working. And they even blame the government for making it impossible for the airline to pay the salaries, when it imposed a tax verification and sanctions due to lack of tax payments for years. A few weeks later, they officially declared a strike when the airline was unable to continue operations. See (in Spanish) a summary of facts here: [elpais.com/mexico/economia/2021-01-11/el-fantasma-de-la-queiebra-acecha-a-mas-de-5000-empleados-de-interjet.html](http://elpais.com/mexico/economia/2021-01-11/el-fantasma-de-la-queiebra-acecha-a-mas-de-5000-empleados-de-interjet.html)

This brings us closer to the core issue of the episode: what is “to extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done,” as Zima describes his actions while tearing himself apart (“Zima Blue,” 00:08:30-00:08:35)? As explained in the beginning of this paper with De Vos (3-4), since human beings are inhabitants of a Symbolic order, they are not “spontaneously” humans: being human is always to pretend to be human, to wear a masquerade of human “essence,” to be human “in a reflective way.” We can recognize here an abyss of freedom proper to humanity: since we are not “naturally” humans, we are “condemned” to be utterly free to define what humanity is.

Therefore, the proper human act is not just to act freely (animals certainly do that). A proper human act is to freely negate this freedom, as when a legislator or a president passes a law that he/she does not personally approve because “it’s the representative of the People’s will,” or parents that punish their child “for her/his own good.” Here is how we abandon the weight of the abyss of our freedom by declaring ourselves as mere instruments of some big Other, by following the orders from our superego (the agency in charge of complying to the Law).

It was clear for Lacan that this subordination to the big Other was not as simple as the common cliché we hear when someone complies with the duty “because it is the duty.” The superego is not just looking for compliance to the Law, but a certain pleasure it can get from this compliance, so it can extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done (the task of “educating” our child, the task of serving to the People’s will, the task of complying to the Law). A machine cannot get pleasure from executing a task, because only humans can find pleasure in freely subordinating to their task. This type of pleasure is what Lacan called *jouissance* (enjoyment<sup>14</sup>), and the most important order our superego gives us is not just “Follow the Law!,” but “Enjoy!” (see Lacan’s *Seminar XX 3*).

Thus, enjoyment is not an innocent, natural satisfaction, but the compliance with the Law that commands the desire to desire. As Žižek (*You May!*) sums it up: the superego works by an overlapping of two zones, “in which the command to enjoy doing your duty coincides with the duty to enjoy yourself.”

We can read why Zima’s last act before returning to his previous state (a simple cleaning machine) is a proper human act: once he gained access to language and humanity, he was lacking, he became a subject with-without, and this abyss of

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<sup>14</sup> He insisted, in front of an English-speaking audience, that there is no proper word in English to translate the implications of *jouissance* (see Lacan, *Of Structure*, 194). Nonetheless, it is common that translators use both enjoy (when it is a verb) and *jouissance* (when it is a noun).

freedom was just too much for him. Human freedom is not to “free ourselves from Destiny, but to freely choose a Destiny that must be fulfilled.”<sup>15</sup> Even though he goes back to this pre-human state, he acts as a proper human: he freely chose to go back to the Destiny he was programmed to fulfill.

### Conclusions: A Really Boring Dream

The fantasy that neurosciences proposes is of a world driven by scientific knowledge. This world is only possible if we consider subjects as cold machines, manipulated by what scientists say they have “found” in our brains, like Robert Stickgold, a neuroscientist interviewed in Netflix’s *The Mind, Explained*: he complains that, when people find out he studies dreams in machines, they want to tell him about an interesting dream they had, and he finds their accounts boring. This naïve investment in scientific objectivity is the obverse side of the “cunning of Reason”: reason is not invested in anything else but its own presupposition. Louis Armand has explained (18):

It is no accident that discourses of post-humanism necessarily engage with a certain humanistic tradition, whether it be called “enlightenment,” “scientific rationalism” or — seemingly paradoxically — “technologism,” and what we might call the “method” of knowledge, certainty, truth; in short, the very *technē* of human understanding. In this view, the human is regarded not as the instigator of particular technologies, but as a prosthesis of technology. (18)

This particular way to deny our subjective investment in order to reflect upon “post-humanism” is something we cannot be indifferent to. A different account on human freedom that recognizes desire as a singular lack of the subject (such as the Lacanian approach proposed here) might become a powerful tool to destabilize the discourses that neurosciences, in articulation to capitalist investment (for example, what we see in Neuralink and Elon Musk<sup>16</sup>), use to approach human subjectivity.

In fact, Elon Musk (quoted in Urban) has stated that the problem is precisely the “degree of freedom” that AI can get when it “surpasses” human intelligence. But here we must ask: what notion of freedom is Musk referring to? Is it a notion that considers the liberation from chains a goal of freedom, or is it a notion that

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<sup>15</sup> This approach to human freedom is developed by Žižek (*In Defense of Lost Causes* 316).

<sup>16</sup> See [neuralink.com/science](https://neuralink.com/science).

considers the singular assumption of chains a way to express the proper human freedom?

What a short film like “Zima Blue” encourages us to do is not to look for “more freedom” (which, in the capitalism of commodities, is only the “freedom” of the market), but to confront and deal with the subjective responsibility of being utterly free to decide the chains that will tie us up.

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# Robots, Androids, and Deities: Simulating Artificial Intelligence in Digital Games

NICOLLE LAMERICHS

The role of labor in our post-industrial society is changing due to automation. This cultural turn is perhaps best compared to a second industrial revolution, as Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee state in *The Second Machine Age*: “Computers and other digital advances are doing for mental power — the ability to use our brains to understand and shape our environments — what the steam engine and its descendants did for muscle power” (7-8). Data, in other words, is the new steam that will radically reinvent the way we live and work. Speculative fiction has depicted this paradigm shift critically and reflected on the new role divisions between man and machine.

Machine learning adds a new component to the automation of contemporary societies, by optimizing not only manual labor, but creative processes and critical decision-making as well (Broussard; Tegmark). Thus, the idea that artificial intelligence can assist humans in their jobs is not just a trend depicted in popular culture. The Associated Press, for instance, is currently using robot reporters (Peiser), which is characteristic of a wider trend of machine-generated and machine-assisted reporting and communication (Diakopoulos; Guzman). Labor is fundamentally changing due to the rise of artificial intelligence (A.I.).

Popular culture offers us a lens through which we can view the present and critically reflect on innovation and machine learning. For decades, science fiction has represented A.I. in novels, film, and television. By now, robots, cyborgs, and androids have also been included in video games as playable characters (“avatars”), companions, and even as narrators. Games offer rich sites to analyze A.I., because they are not only read or viewed, but interacted with. In recent years, games have presented us with ideas on what it is like to interact with robots or androids. Moreover, they added an aspect of identity through play, and shown us what it is

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like to embody an AI and act like one. As systems and sites of play, digital games can even mediate A.I. beyond storytelling and include a representation of it as pure software or code that the player can engage with.

In this article, I show how digital games represent different scenarios around robotization, automation and “data-driven characters” (Lamerichs). I analyze several games and the role that A.I. has in them. Through their playfulness and narratives, games can create a “procedural rhetoric”, a persuasive argument or scenario through playing (Bogost). In the case-studies in this article, games clearly make statements about automation and its consequences. As virtual worlds and programs themselves, games are not only ideally suited to reflect on machine learning, algorithms and code, but can even incorporate this as metafiction (Waugh) — a narrative that playfully addresses its fictionality, or in this case, software that reflects upon its materiality as code.

For the purpose of this research, games are understood as scenarios that present possible or plausible version of the future, and thereby reflect on issues related to automation, such as labor. I argue that games imagine the possible consequences of A.I. and robot development in the future and have the potential to play out complex relationships between humans and machines.

## Artificial Intelligence and Labor

Historically, the concept of robot denotes a cultural transition and new labor relationships. After all, a robot is a machine that automates human behavior and tasks. The word robot was first used by Karel Čapek in his play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* in 1920. Its etymology is derived from *robota* in Czech, which means unpaid labor or slavery. This connotation of robot as slave or second-hand being is still a common one, and build into human/machine relationships, both real and fictional. The idea that intelligent machines or software might one day rise up against their human masters is still a common trope in popular culture, and also sparks the wider cultural imagination in Western countries.

As a general-purpose technology, machine learning can be implemented in a wide array of processes, from recommendations and pattern-spotting to complex decision-making processes in governance, law, and regulation (Fry). In different areas of labor, machines already have key roles today. Robots have a clear presence on the work floor of factories, offices, and hospitals. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, these machines delivered parcels, cleaned grocery aisles, and arranged



boxes in warehouses (Meyersohn). Beyond helping with manual work in factories and hospitals, robots and machine learning algorithms increasingly assist humans in social domains, such as communication. Chatbots and virtual assistants operate as helpdesks and customer service, cutting out the human middleman. A wide array of voices, characters and styles is at the disposal of companies, seamlessly embedded in platforms such as Facebook Messenger or Whatsapp.

While chatbots have been around for decades, platforms and social media accelerated their development. As Robert Dale writes about the recent chatbot revolution, “It’s just another facet of today’s always connected multi-tasking world, where we participate in multiple conversations in parallel, each one at a pace of our choosing” (815). The personality and characterization of chatbots and other A.I. does not stand in isolation from popular culture, as Liz Faber also argues in *The Computer’s Voice: From Star Trek to Siri*. Her study shows how data-driven assistants such as Siri draw from *Star Trek’s* computer voice, and how there is a long continuation of how these characters are represented in popular culture and designed in reality.

Soon we might even reach a time when A.I. writes its own narratives and popular culture. In *The Creativity Code*, Marcus du Sautoy vividly captures the history and relevance of automated art, arguing that creativity is not outside the scope of the machine. Increasingly, narrow A.I. is used to generate art, images, and writing. For example, a painting created by an A.I., Portrait of Edmund Bellamy, sold for nearly half a million dollars at the famous gallery Christy’s in 2019. This bid was over forty times more than the artwork was originally valued, and is a testament to the increased interest and popularity of data-driven art.

Scholarship, however, is divided about whether A.I. can add to the creative labor and skill set of humans (see also Frey and Osborne). This “narrow A.I.” does not come anywhere close to the “general purpose A.I.” represented in popular culture. In the near-future, A.I. will dramatically impact our work and culture (Bridle). The fear of being replaced by machine is by no means new, and peaked in different moments in history, most notably during the industrial revolution. The anxiety around machines led to the luddite movement, which protested against automation. A similar moral panic and discourse has manifested around A.I. today.

Many scholars, however, have argued that machines and humans are compatible, and add to enhance each other’s skill sets. Humans will not simply lose their jobs, but rather will collaborate with these machines in new configurations (Frey and Osborne). Work will be augmented by machines, and while some roles

might change or disappear, new functions will emerge as well (Tegmark; Daugherty and Wilson; Fry; Frey and Osborne). From the maintenance of robots to A.I.-generated art, humans work with these tools, not against them.

What we can learn from the first industrial revolution and the luddite movement is that the social costs of automation must be addressed though, and that labor and education has to be reimagined in the near future (Frey). The report *Mastering the Robot* (Went, Kremer and Knottnerus), published by the Dutch Scientific Council WRR, forecasts the future of work and proposes an inclusive robot agenda for regulation, remarking, “It is important to strive for inclusive robotization in which the government is also an important stakeholder to ‘encourage the different parties involved in robotization to work together’” (8). While the authors foresee new tasks and functions, they also stress that automation will create unforeseen problems, such as the growing inequalities between those that can keep up with robotization and those that cannot (10).

Consequently, critical algorithm studies are emerging that comment on these inequalities and biases. Cathy O’Neill even describes artificial intelligence as a “weapon of math destruction,” warning against the computational thinking and quantification that algorithms reproduce, and that slowly structures our society into a reality of metrics and evaluations (O’Neil). Virginia Eubanks has shown how algorithms can reinforce poverty when applied to decision-making (Eubanks). The ways in which search engines reinforce racism and sexism have been painstakingly logged and analyzed by Safiya Noble (Noble). This reproduction of biases and data errors has also been called “artificial stupidity” by Meredith Broussard (Broussard). Many of these scholars are worried about how, and if, humans will stay in the lead in automation processes. Through datafication, stereotypes and other prejudices of humans might be reinforced. These critical and ethical effects of A.I., and how they are represented in gaming, are crucial in this article.

When designed without considerations for norms, ethics and justice, artificial intelligence will not only impact our work life negatively, but also cause radical divides in our society. These are the scenarios that are often presented to us in science fiction, and for a reason. To improve the world, artificial intelligence must be designed in a value-driven way with attention for the relations between the human and the non-human (Eynikel). In this process, examining different scenarios, for instance produced by popular culture, can be a helpful tool for innovation.

Machine learning is already embedded in many of the technologies that consumers use every day, and its opportunities are manifold. There is no doubt that A.I. is a game-changer, but its consequences must be studied in detail. The biggest danger in this digital transition is not a lack of regulation, but a lack of imagination, where we do not consider the possible and plausible scenarios around machine learning. Our decision-making needs to rely on cultural imagination to consider the long-term impact of automation. Narratives in popular culture and other domains can assist us in this journey as developers, users and audiences. Games, in particular, provide key lessons that audiences can draw from in an increasingly data-driven society.

## Approach

As virtual worlds and simulations, games cannot be interpreted in isolation, rather they are indicative of a wider cultural imagination. They present us with simulations of potential futures that reveal hopes, aspirations and fears about the present. For the purpose of this research, I analyze games as scenarios, and consider the role and function of A.I. in games on multiple levels. These include the narrative and textual level, but also the game play, including decisions and goals. Thinking through different scenarios, including speculative fiction, is a proven method to forecast possible and preferable futures (Hancock and Bezold). These scenarios can be understood as evaluations of potential futures and actions. My goal when playing and replaying these games was not only to understand them as texts, but to evaluate the scenarios that they present to their players.

I focus on games in which artificial intelligence, including robots, androids, and cyborgs, have a prominent role. Characterization, storytelling, play, and ethics were considered when playing and replaying these titles. The corpus of this study consists of games where A.I. has an important role and considerable impact on the storytelling. This study focuses on videogames from the past twenty years. There are a few games from the 1990s that represent A.I. as well, such as *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* (Cyberdreams, 1995) and *Blade Runner* (CRL Group, 1985), but these are adapted on a short story and a film (again based on a novel) respectively. The goal of this study was to identify proponents and mediations unique to games, such as play styles and decision-making. For that purpose, adaptations were excluded.

The key theme of this study — how labor is redefined through human and robotic relationships — was kept in mind when selecting relevant titles. A.I. has different roles in the games that I studied. A.I. can be in the lead as a main character and an avatar (player-character) that players control, such as in *Machinarium* (Amanita Design, 2009) or the *Deus Ex* series. It can also support the player as a companion character, such as in the *Ratchet & Clank* series, while in *Portal* (Valve, 2007) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) the main antagonist is an A.I. This article also discusses other representations, such as *Thomas was Alone* (Mike Bithell, 2011) and *The Talos Principle* (Croteam, 2014) that provide a nuanced simulation of an A.I.-driven game world.

In the following section, I present insights on how games have addressed automation by focusing on different themes that emerged throughout the research.

### Adorable Robot Helpers

Games present a wide range of perspectives on A.I., which also relate to the technologies, software, and characters in question. First of all, some games allow players to take the role of a robot, or have a robot assistant, who helps solve particular goals and obstacles. A good example of this is the game series *Ratchet and Clank* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2002-2014), which features the playable character Clank, originally Warbot Defect B-54296. Clank is an escaped robot from the antagonist Drek's robot plant, and originally designed to assist in warfare. Clank helps Ratchett on different adventures, and while the robot sometimes comes close to leaving his companion, he never does. The two form an important friendship.

Clank is a loyal robot character and able fighter. His nimble appearance with large green eyes and a small antenna makes him seem harmless and cute, positioning him in a wider history of cuteness and “kawaii” (cute) characters (May). While he might seem innocent and child-like, he is highly intelligent, often engaged in sarcasm, and sometimes acts a bit stuffy. His high intellect often leads to rivalry with other characters, be they robots or other species. Clank is presented as a smart and self-aware robot above all, who understands sarcasm and jokes, and is in many ways smarter than Ratchett.

A different representation of robots is offered by *Machinarium*. This game takes place in a world with only robots and some flora and fauna, but no humans or signs of other intelligent life. While their name is not confirmed in-game, the robot is

masculine-coded and referred to as Josef by the designers. This is confirmed to be a reference to Capek's brother Josef, who allegedly helped him come up with the term "robot" for his before-mentioned play (Laughlin). *Machinarium* is a point and click adventure game in which the robot goes through different puzzles to reunite with the female robot that he loves. To save her from entrapment, the player navigates through the robot world and meets different robots that each have their own unique tasks. They are each clearly programmed with different features, from the smart police robots that know how to converse, to the low-level robots that clean the floors or do maintenance.

*Machinarium* presents a robot world in which other creatures are hardly present, save for a few plants. Labor in this robot world is clearly divided along different roles, jobs, and functions, while for some of these tasks (e.g. gardening) there might not even be a need in a fully robot-driven world. In this sense the game also parodies the world that we live in now. It also makes a point of showing that robots act and communicate differently than humans. As a machine, Josef can for instance extend or swap certain parts of his body (e.g., his neck or arms) to solve puzzles. *Machinarium* does not use text but relies on imagery and speech balloons with simple drawings to communicate goals and conversations to the player. The result is a simple but emotionally effective, universal story. The coding of its robots as male/female can be contrasted to other examples where robots are purposely coded as not gendered or transgender, such as Mettaton from Toby Fox' *Undertale* (2015).

Since there is no speech in this game, only drawings, Josef comes across as a child-like robot who must overcome certain obstacles. When replaying the game more than ten years later, he distinctively reminds me of NAO, a programmable human-like robot developed by Softbank Robotics created in 2008. Like NAO, he is compact, curious, and not designed to be a human look-a-like or animatronic, such as the well-known Sophia from Hanson Robotics, developed in 2016. Instead, Josef is designed as a harmless companion, who looks innocent, but is more versatile than he seems.

## Posthuman and Otherness

Games also continue a long legacy of posthuman themes in science fiction, by featuring cyborgs altered by smart technology or androids that are nearly human, but still machines in essence. The latest installments of the game series *Deus Ex* (2000-2016), for instance, depicts Adam Jensen, an augmented human. Jensen is

intimately part of the technological world around him and can interact with many devices in a smart way, for instance by hacking them.

*Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Square Enix, 2011) and later installments present us with a haunting surveillance economy where cyborgs are tracked, and unwanted. This is the result of the “Aug Incident”, a catastrophic event during which augmented people across the globe were hijacked and driven to commit acts of violence. Fifty million people died, leading to the declaration of the controversial Human Restoration Act. Following this act, illegal augmentations are removed, and those that have legal augmentations get chipped and documented. In the Czech Republic, where parts of the game take place, transhumans are limited in their rights and confined to their own cities. New class differences emerge between humans that have access to the technology, but are also deemed dangerous, and those that are entirely biological. The conflict between these groups is at the heart of the game, though the game series never reached a full conclusion due to its cancellation.

Another game that purposely depicts androids as symbols of critical differences is *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018). The narrative depicts near-human androids that have taken over caregiving, police investigations, and sex work. By taking the point of view of androids as well as humans, the player is forced to reflect on a society where automation is common. In this scenario, androids emerged as a new lower class and perform low-level tasks that humans have outsourced to them. *Detroit: Become Human* presents a world where robots have essentially become slaves and have been treated as less than their human counterparts.

This is part of a wider trope in popular culture, where narratives present us with a version of “singularity,” to use a term by Raymond Kurzweil. The singularity is the next step in human evolution where biology is added to by technology and machine learning. Potentially, this is a new divide in society, leading to class differences between those that have access to augmentations, and those that do not. In fact, *Detroit: Become Human* is explicitly based on this theory, as developer David Cage explained in an interview (Takahashi). The playable android characters reach a singularity state in the game, where they “go rogue” and become their own unique persons beyond human control.

Players are often forced to make judgements and reflections that evaluate whether an A.I. has a consciousness or a free will and can be considered artificial life. One key character in the game is Markus, a Black android who fights against the marginalization of his people. He can develop into a peaceful protestor, in line

with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy of non-violent action, or a rebellious character depending on the player's choices. While Markus' character is a clear reference to the history of racial injustice in the United States, other plot lines mediate the cultural history of Europe. One point of view in the game is that of a female android caretaker who acts as a nanny for a child. Near the end of the game, it is revealed that the child is also an A.I. and players are forced to consider whether they now think less of her. Depending on the player's choices, the caretaker and the child end up in a death camp and are stripped of their synthetic skin, revealing their nature as robots. While a player can escape the death camp, it is not easy, and the analogies with the refugee crisis and the holocaust are clearly present.

The treatment of androids functions not only as a critique of automation, but a mirror for differences in our contemporary society. As Jeron J. Abrams writes in his analysis of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), the way in which androids are treated in science fiction can also be a lesson for us today. In his discussion of the war against humans and the synthetic androids ("cylons"), Abrams emphasizes that *Battlestar Galactica* is a cautionary tale: "We might face a similar revolt if we foolishly treat posthumans as slaves, or second-class citizens, and think of them in derogatory terms" (Moore).

Both *Detroit: Become Human* and the *Deus Ex* series treat us with similar themes. They portray societies in which androids are considered not only harmful, but less than humans, polluted, and inferior. In other words, androids and transhumans are not only framed as technology, but as symbols of difference in a postmodern world.

## Hostile Systems

While the previous games emphasized complex role of A.I. in society, other games depict them as antagonists. While these games seem to be about hostile A.I. at first sight, these representations of the technology turn out to be more nuanced and explore the motivations, context, and reasoning of A.I. as well. The perspective of these characters is a non-human one, and the games emphasize their otherness and their desire for freedom.

A game that truly follows the tropes of the evil A.I. is *Portal*, characterized by its unique puzzles and dark humor. It draws inspiration from Hal 9000 in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which turns against the human crew and is primarily depicted as a camera with an omnipresent red eye (Kubrick). Like Hal

9000, the A.I. interface in *Portal* is a voice, and the only interface that can be linked to its present are cameras.

The fact that the A.I. can function as a surveillance tool of human subjects is a theme in Kubrick's film, but also in *Portal*. The motif of disciplining the human subject is introduced from the start in *Portal*. After the player-character Chell awakens from stasis, she receives audio messages from GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System) whose female voice orders Chell to engage in certain tests. Chell must solve puzzles by creating portals between two flat planes in test rooms with the help of her portal gun. She is promised cake and grief counseling as a reward from GLaDOS.

*Portal* is one of the first games that addresses the player directly and consistently in its narration. This choice truly evokes the idea that the AI is playing mind games with Chell. While GLaDOS' comments start rather descriptive, she reveals herself as more and more sardonic and antagonistic as the game progresses. In test chamber 15, she tells you, "Did you know you can donate one or all of your vital organs to the Aperture Science Self-Esteem Fund for Girls? It's true!" The sarcastic monologues of GLaDOS owe much to Ellen McLain, her talented voice actress, and the technological manipulation of her voice into a cold, sometimes malfunctioning, robotic sound.

Like *The Talos Principle*, which is discussed in the next section, this is a game of intelligence and resourcefulness, and can be interpreted as a Turing Test between man and machine. In *Portal*, it is in fact the A.I. that performs a Turing Test to see if the human exhibits intelligent behavior. However, the human bypasses this test by cheating, exhibiting a form of intelligence that the A.I. did not take into account. Understood from that perspective, the game has more in common with Searle's Chinese Room, a thought experiment and critique of The Turing Test in which Searle imagines himself in a room following a computer program that responds to Chinese messages slipped under the door. Despite not having any knowledge of Chinese, he can manipulate symbols by copying the computer and sending the appropriate strings back. Searle concludes this experiment with the notion that a machine can imitate a syntax but has no semantic understanding. In *Portal*, it is the blind spots of the A.I. and its lack of contextual understanding that cause its downfall.

Defeating the AI and obtaining freedom is the main purpose of this game. Like Kubrick's Hal 9000, GLaDOS consists of different cores that each have their own personality that must be destroyed, rendering the incapable and finally mute. In



*Portal 2*, it is revealed that GLaDOS is modelled after an existing human, Caroline, the personal assistant of former Aperture CEO Cave Johnson. This draws an immediate parallel between GLaDOS and her real-life counterparts, namely data-driven personal assistant such Siri, Alexa and Cortona. She was designed to be a helpful, submissive, and feminine A.I., modeled after a secretary.

GLaDOS needs to come to terms with this part of her identity in *Portal 2*. She becomes a personal assistant to the player, a companion rather than an antagonist. A comedic arc features her technology and core temporarily embedded in a potato battery. This story line does not only function as a joke, but also emphasizes that the female A.I. is harmless to Chell. Her hardware is replaceable and even disposable. This plot line adds to her struggles in the game around embodiment and identity. While the A.I. is initially hostile, she reprograms herself through multiple interfaces and resurfacing data and memories, making *Portal 2* also the journey of her self-discovery.

*Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017) presents us with similar story beats, albeit in a completely different genre. In this dating sim with horror elements, the player can choose to go out with different female characters. One of them, Monika, turns out to be an A.I., that knows she is coded as an NPC in a dating sim. She is jealous and wants to claim the player for her own. She turns out to be a possessive and hostile A.I. who literally hacks the system. Monika dives deep into the source codes and manages to hack the other characters and plot lines. Slowly she starts killing the other girls by messing with their code.

At the end of the game, Monika takes over, and reveals herself to be a sentient AI-driven character. She has awareness and is constantly learning. She lectures the player for almost a full hour in a lengthy monologue about her choices, her life as an AI, and her obsession for them. Critically, *Doki Doki Literature Club* is more than a horror game. It must be understood as a deconstruction and critique of the familiar dating sims that are filled with flat characters (girl with glasses, distant “tsundere” girl) and “moe” or the delight for characters and their visuality. Monika is undoubtedly one of the most intelligent and rich characters in dating sim history, because she is self-learning and, in many ways, smarter than the player. Still, by using the same tricks as her, the player can delete her code and end the game.

This representation of a self-aware A.I. can be contrasted to the indie game *Thomas was alone* by Mike Bithell in which the player controls different geometric shapes representing different A.I.’s. Thomas is the first character. that the player can control — a little red square with an observant and cautious personality. Chris,

Claire, Laura, James, Sarah and many others join him later on. Their color codes and shapes convey their personality. When they connect to the internet (the “fountain of wisdom”), they become highly self-aware and experience that there is more to life than the computer main frame.

As a literal representation of machine learning, *Thomas was Alone* depicts how its characters develop. Thomas decides to re-invent the world and become an “architect.” Thomas and his friends sacrifice themselves in “the creation matrix” to set the other A.I. free. Friendship and freedom, then, are two key themes in the game. The before-mentioned singularity is also important in this game, as the A.I. become conscious and start reflecting on their identity. The game ends with a last shot of the computers of Artificial Life Solutions which suggests that the AIs have escaped.

To summarize, these games present A.I. as antagonists, but also paint a more nuanced picture. These non-human characters are restricted to particular devices and algorithms, but as self-aware entities, they long to break free from their material constraints, desire intimacy and autonomy, and wish to experience new sensations. Their longing for a body, and the affects it generates, underpin the sadism, possessiveness, and jealousy of Monika and GlADOS. Materiality, longing, and identity go hand in hand with this motif. They want to become more than the software that they were constructed as.

Furthermore, the player has a crucial role in these narratives to actively outsmart the machines that control them. In *Portal*, a player must leave the levels and seemingly cheat her way to GlADOS. In *Doki Doki Literature Club*, the A.I. must be deleted from an actual folder for the player to continue. Thus, games become a site for metafiction or metaplay, in which players are actively pitted against the software that they are using and must circumvent it. The freedom of the A.I. and the freedom of the player cannot co-exist, it seems, and one must be in charge of the other.

## Smart Game Worlds

The previous examples can be considered an algorithmic play of sorts, where players had to deal with self-aware game characters and, if needed, thwart them. Other games have presented their entire world as a simulation and the result of machine learning. In *The Talos Principle*, the player takes control of an unnamed android to solve complex puzzles. During the game, it is revealed that the world is

a virtual simulation, an elaborate Turing Test, dubbed “independence check” in the game. The computer program and the puzzles are a test by highly sophisticated A.I. who created this entire world. The A.I. that operates the program and presents themselves as EL-0:HIM or “Elohim,” the Hebrew name for God as stated in the Old Testament. As a narrator and disembodied voice, Elohim instructs the player-character to explore the worlds he has created for it, and to solve the various puzzles to collect sigils, but warns it not to climb a tower at the center of these worlds.

As the android progresses, it becomes clear that the world is a simulation, also inhabited by other A.I. entities. Some of these A.I. are messengers who serve Elohim loyally and guide the android through the puzzles. Others state that Elohim's words should be doubted, while a chat conversation program found on the computer terminals (“The Milton Library Interface”) encourages the android to defy Elohim's commands. Depending on the player's choices, the android not only passes its “independence check” but reaches full transcendence, breaking the simulation. In the ultimate ending of the game, the A.I. wakes up in an android's body in the real world, devoid of humans.

These games present a view of A.I. that is highly intelligent and god-like. The adventure game *Horizon Zero Dawn* presents a similar theme. The player sets off in a post-apocalyptic world, full of technological ruins and gigantic, dinosaur-like robots. Players control the daughter of the robotic scientist, Dr. Elisabet Sobeck, and embark on a journey to find out the history of their mother, and thereby, that of the world. Sobeck initiated the mysterious “Project Zero Dawn” when the world was run amuck by glitching A.I. creatures called Peacekeepers. To save the earth, the team launched an artificial intelligence system called GAIA, who would oversee operations while selected humans hid in bunkers.

GAIA had a clear purpose: namely, to shut down the hostile machines and restore the Earth. During the game, the player finds out that GAIA consisted of different cores, each named after a God from the Greek pantheon. One of her sub-cores, HADES, sabotaged the system, and set humanity back to a primal society of hunters and gatherers. This powerful A.I. also interferes with other technologies, and at the end of the game he has taken over other A.I. (the Faro robots) as well. *Zero Dawn* presents a scenario in which A.I. are highly powerful, independent, and run the world independently. They are modeled after gods, even Mother Nature herself, who can control life and nature without intervention.

It seems that these God-like machines are an amplification of our fear of rogue A.I., that falls outside of our human control, and does not think or act like us. A

god-like A.I. is not only self-aware and has reached singularity, but can control other A.I., form worlds and potentially even create artificial life themselves. This goes against a common trope in popular culture, it is often the human creators of A.I. who are depicted as gods, able to create artificial life. Historically, this theme goes back to gothic fiction such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where scientists play with fire by creating artificial life. In these games, however, the machine is represented as a god, an entity beyond our understanding that is looming over humans and inferior machines.

The idea that an A.I. can become super intelligent in the long term and rule over other machines and humans is prominent in these games. While the scenario of a general purpose A.I. with such abilities is far away, some scholars already urge us to think about the social consequences and ethics of such a highly sophisticated A.I. (Tegmark). Most notably, these scenarios are highly self-reflexive in the sense and present the world as the outcome of machine learning. A.I. is not just a motif or character in *The Talos Principle* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, but a comment on systems and play that forces us to reflect on the materiality of the game itself. By simulating entire A.I. worlds, games interrogate the social, ethical, and economic consequences of automation.

## Conclusion

In this article, I showed that digital games explore different narratives of A.I. but are also able to simulate the technology to an extent. The textual analysis made it clear that games represent A.I. in different ways. In *Machinarium* and *Ratchet & Clank*, A.I. is imagined as adorable robots who act as tools with different purposes. In *Detroit: Become Human* and the *Deus Ex* series, A.I. is represented as a new working class, marginalized in particular jobs, such as sex work. These androids strive for independence and struggle to be recognized by humans as more than tools. *Portal*, *Thomas was Alone*, and *Doki Doki Literature Club* include independent and self-aware A.I. characters that are firmly connected to the game world and manipulate the human player. Finally, *The Talos Principle* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* present us with a super intelligent A.I. entity that is God-like and builds entire worlds and other A.I. independently.

Games forecast the future of culture, technology, and society. Labor has a prominent role in these scenarios, as they rethink our economy and capitalism, as well the possibilities for new human and machine interactions, skills, and tasks.

Games have the potential to not only represent, but also simulate and re-enact these complex relationships between humans and machines. In relation to machine learning, games can create a unique procedural rhetoric in which scenarios are literally played out, making them fundamentally different from other visual media.

Overall, games present their players with diverse stories and explorations of machines and humans. This diversity reflects the complex cultural imagination of A.I., but also says a lot about the technology itself. A.I. implies a wide range of automation processes, interfaces, and different ways of programming. Robots, smart weapons, A.I.-driven holograms, androids, cyborgs, and other types of A.I. make their appearance in games. Loyal robot assistants like Clank help us with manual tasks and have a body of their own, whereas the implants in *Deus Ex* are ingrained in a posthuman body and help navigate a dystopian cyberpunk world. These representations are not isolated from other media. *Portal* clearly draws from Kubrick's *Hall 9000*, for instance, and the construction of androids as second-rate citizens in *Detroit: Become Human* is reminiscent of films like *Blade Runner* or television series such as *Battlestar Galactica*.

However, compared to other media, the fact that A.I. is code also allows entertainment games to represent A.I. in an innovative, metafictional way. Games such as *The Talos Principle* are literally presenting us with a virtual reality where the player controls an A.I. that is being tested. By embodying A.I., the human also reflects on matters of consciousness, intelligence, and life itself. The religious themes in the game push these analogies even further, blurring the boundary between man and machine. The potential that an A.I. can pollute, hack, or take over a game is present in games such as *Doki Doki Literature Club* or *Thomas was Alone*. An A.I. does not reason the way that humans do, and its unpredictability can be a danger.

When understood as scenarios, games reflect the diversity of this emerging technology. While a game like *Machinarium* shows us a robot capable of complex emotions such as romance, a game like *Portal* is a cautionary tale where GLaDOS treats her Aperture employee not as a colleague, but a lab rat. The ways in which A.I. is sometimes othered and sexualized in games is also significant. A cute robot, a masculine cyborg and a smart love interest are not neutral ways to represent the technology but can also be read as ways to mitigate potential moral panic.

There is no doubt that A.I. will shift the nature of human and machine relationships dramatically in all areas of our lives. Entertainment games present their players with diverse ways of understanding, and critically assessing, these

relationships. To arm ourselves in this digital transition, we need to consider the social and ethical consequences of machine learning today and explore potential outcomes. These scenarios do not need to be conceived from scratch. In fact, popular culture is already paving the way.

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# Robots, AI, Automation, and Those Who Define Them

MATTHEW J. A. CRAIG

Swoosh. The sound of traffic nearby as I was sitting outside a coffee shop with a can of La Croix sparkling water at the black iron grate patio table while talking with my advisor Dr. Chad Edwards. It was a warm Michigan summer before fall classes of my Master of Arts program in Communication. I was sitting there eager, a first-generation college student, excited for what being a master's student would be like. I sat there staring at my La Croix amidst the sound of a busy patio peppered with college students who stayed in town for the summer and other likely area community members enjoying the summer's day. I was excited about graduate school, but at the moment, I was eager to play videogames following my meeting.

That summer, I worked on a congressional campaign, and the week leading up to my meeting, I bought a new PlayStation 4. I bought it just for the game *Detroit: Become Human* because robots are cool. The night before my meeting, I had stayed up till the early morning of my meeting playing the game. Little did I know it would become part of a study I would carry out in the subsequent semesters. We had reached somewhat toward the end of our meeting time when Chad gave me a task to take home: think about what I want to research.

“And so, what else have you been up to?” Chad asked.

“Oh, I've been working on this congressional campaign, but I've also just bought a PS4.”

“That sounds fun, just wanting to play videogame — ”

I interrupted, “well, actually — it's funny you ask, because I bought it specifically for the game *Detroit: Become Human*, and the characters you play in it...let's just say the player faces a lot of moral and ethical dilemmas like if humanoid (human like morphology) robots should have human rights, and it's a butterfly effect game. You know, it's when each decision

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you make affects the game's ending. When characters die — the game keeps going..." You could tell I was excited.

"That's it then. Wow, that would make an interesting study," he said supportively.

In the beginning, I did not think my interests in *Detroit: Become Human* would amount to more than playing videogames in my limited spare time. The initial meeting with Chad offered a new perspective on how research can take form beyond the traditional run labs and do science-y stuff I initially thought of when going to graduate school. I open this essay with a memory of my first experiences as a graduate student planning a research agenda because sometimes the story of where research begins is accidentally left to dinner conversations or the halls of research conferences. Year one of graduate school brought me into a view of engaging with videogames to open up more in-depth discussion about our human connection with media characters (Banks and Bowman 1257-1276). *Detroit: Become Human* offers the player a chance to explore whether robots deserve personhood among concerns they are replacing human jobs. Specifically, the game presents a case example of using a videogame to explore questions surrounding ethics and machines, with the player taking on some of the responsibility of survival with their humanoid robot characters — a connection with media. The themes presented in the game bear a similar resemblance to prior narratives centered on self-aware robots taking on work as artificial servants founding pieces of popular culture such as Čapek's *Rossum's Universal Robots (R.U.R.)*. The player is brought to the proverbial table to play with these different ethical dilemmas in their choices made to progress the game's plot, and likely coming from their perspective of what robots are or could be.

When we consider the public's conceptualization of what a robot is and the possible jobs they are taking, we cannot separate science fiction and the roboticist. Robotics, artificial intelligence, and automation are not unified subject areas but feature a cornucopia of intersections, cohesions, ethical dilemmas, and some great chasms that divide them. However, they do emerge from the influence of how robots are portrayed in popular culture, such as *R.U.R.*, for example. Actual robotics are influenced by these depictions (Meinecke and Voss 203), if not possibly led by science fiction and popular culture (Adams et al. 25). In this essay, I discuss how popular culture can invite conversation surrounding the concept of robot ethics and the portrayal of robot labor. Specifically, I will first bring an example of how robot ethics and labor are depicted in the videogame *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic

Dream), by describing scenes from the game sourced from my experience playing the game, watching video footage (Red KoJack), and pulling from crowdsourced transcriptions of the game's dialogue (Weinzierl and Mou-Ikkai), followed by a discussion of how culture has primarily shaped how we think about robot labor and their design.

## D is for Detroit

Detroit, the Motor City, is considered changed by the cars they made and remains an icon of labor in the automotive industry. As a popular videogame, *Detroit: Become Human* takes place in a future version of Detroit, Michigan — a city now at the center of the robot manufacturing industry in 2038. Throughout the beginning chapters, the player becomes acquainted with some of the roles robots serve in the backdrop of Detroit's story as a new marker of industrialized culture. The game itself is a “butterfly effect game”: a player's choices essentially change possible future interactions with other characters and plot lines. With options to play multiple robot characters who introduce their own narrative into the game's storyline, a character's death, for example, changes and/or remains incorporated as the game progresses.

One of the beginning scenes opens with the player taking on a humanoid robot's perspective, looking forward at the sight of a human store employee talking to the robot's owner about repairs. Florescent lights from a drop ceiling fill the small black tile sales floor with humanoid robots on a round display adjacent to the sales promotion cardboard boxes tucked in a corner. A little girl in a wet winter coat comes into view, looking at the player as it is waking up. To the right of this perspective are a humanoid robot giving a sales pitch to a human couple underneath a hanging sign that reads “Model KW500: Pre-owned” as the robot shows them around the store. “This is the top of the range household assistant. It cooks 10,000 different dishes,” says the android employee. A woman wearing a fall coat and scarf comes into view from the left and pulls the little girl away toward the store exit, saying “come on, Zoe. Let's go.” The Android employee still giving its sales pitch that it “speaks 200 languages and dialects and handles the kids' homework from elementary school up to university level.” The imagery of robots selling robots sends a clear message that these machines are just like any other home appliance and speaks to some commercialized interests in the technology, that artificial servants destined to be part of the American human household. These new robots

are created by *Cyberlife*, the in-game company responsible for centering of a new industry in Detroit and selling the idea that domestic work can now be done by an artificial servant.

The humanoid robot's owner and the human employee come into the frame as they walk closer to the player (playing as the humanoid robot). "It was a bit difficult getting it back in working order. It was really messed up...what did you say happened to it again?" the human employee asks. The employee is wearing a top button opened plaid red dress shirt with a blue felt vest. He wears glasses that fit the stereotype of working at the computer store. The owner, Todd, carries a stocky build with slick back hair and mutton chops wearing a fall grey coat covering a green V-neck shirt with grease stains. Both are now standing in front of the robot. Clearing his throat, Todd begins that "a car hit it...stupid accident..."

"Oh, I see...anyway, it's as good as new now...except that we had to reset it. Meaning we had to wipe its memory. Hope you don't min — "

"That will be fine!" Todd says in an assertive tone.

"Okay, did you give it a name?"

"My daughter did..."

The employee steps in front of the player's view, directly looking at the robot. "AX400, register your name," he says, almost like talking to an Amazon Alexa or other smart home device we have today in 2021. Todd steps in front and looks at the robot "Kara."

The camera angle cuts to looking directly at Kara for the first time, fair skin, brown hair, blue eyes, feminine gender-presenting. All the humanoid robots in the game have a blinking round circle located on the side of its face on the temple, one the side of the face. The scene described represents some assertive ownership over the artificial servant, where Kara is like a google home or Amazon Alexa. However, rather than a cylindrical or cubic shaped device, Kara takes human form. These anthropomorphic features hint at the openness for social capacity and communication with the machine. "My name is Kara," it responds before the game proceeding into an opening credit montage.

Featuring clips that capture the full breadth of Detroit's scenery, the opening credit montage presents the player with the narratives of robot industry and work, all while still center around Todd driving home with his robot. In the first clip, we view commuters driving on a highway that resembles some of the central arterial bloodlines for entering the city with Detroit's city skyline in view. As Todd is driving on the highway, he passes a sign that reads "Welcome to DETROIT:

ANDROID CITY,” featuring a masculine-presenting humanoid robot and a feminine presenting humanoid robot smiling forward in a robot uniform. No matter what clothes they wear, humanoid robots in the game feature a blue triangle and armband identification markers distinguishing them from humans. The game’s setting is very relevant to the perspective of robots taking on a worker’s role in society. With scenery depicting historical landmarks such as St. Mary Roman Catholic Church and the famous *The Spirit of Detroit* statue, the game encapsulates prominent elements of Motor City, reignited on all cylinders in vivid detail through realistic animation.

In one clip, the Detroit metro rail is featured with a city skyline view of the GM Renaissance Center with police drones overhead watching the city. We see a hustling and bustling motor city from a drone view, complete with new infrastructure built on the old. No, there aren’t flying cars. However, several familiar technologies now show to be embedded in everyday life. Technologies such as simplistic modern crosswalks with light-up spaces and glass-like interfaces pepper the roads and sidewalk alongside separate waiting stations for humanoid robots — that similarly resemble bus shelters — to park and wait for their owners. Looking on the street, Humanoid robots in construction uniforms are working on roadside construction rather than human construction workers. A clear indication of robots incorporated into maintaining the city’s infrastructure. Even with some of these new technologies, there are still issues of homelessness and blight in 2038. Camera shots featuring a once-blighted city’s remanence as it begins to rain strikes a tone reminding the player of Detroit’s iron forged industrious glory. In one frame, a homeless man is sitting against a cold concrete store exterior holding a cardboard sign that reads “I lost my Job Because of ANDROIDS!! Help me [sic]” as pedestrians walk by. The juxtaposition of blight to the bustling downtown combined with a camera focus on a homeless man foreshadows some current questions concerning automated technologies and their potential to replace human jobs. The opening credit montage ends in a sequence of clips focusing on Todd’s truck as he drives down the street in a blighted neighborhood. A view of Kara staring out the passenger side window with an eye-level view of an abandoned, blighted home transitions to the perspective of Todd’s truck passing over the camera, leaving the player with a view of an overpass cutting over blighted homes in immediate focus with the futuristic skyline of Motor City in the background.

In the following scene, there are several instances in which humans express the view that robots take jobs and should be banned. The scene begins with the player

playing as Markus and is tasked with walking across a large plaza to get to a paint shop running an errand for his owner. It is a cold November morning; the ground is still wet from rain the previous day. Markus's view, a masculine-presenting dark-skinned humanoid robot, comes into focus as he watches a small girl squeals as she runs up to what could be assumed their humanoid robot caretaker. The game brings the player into a third-person perspective as they are instructed to "Go to Bellini Paint Shop." Another humanoid robot is observed standing next to a presumably older gentleman sitting on a park bench. It asks the human, "would you like to go home now?" "Yes Rose, Yes I think that's enough for today," he replies as Rose reaches down to help him up. As Markus makes his way toward the park's exit to walk into the plaza, a human is seen jogging past him with another humanoid robot in tow, only to both stop as the human catches his breath. "Hey, Water!" he says commandingly amongst the sounds of raking by the surrounding humanoid robots taking care of the park and a baby crying in the distance. This beginning scenery as Markus enters the crosswalk toward the plaza resembles a city that not only has industry but is alive with humans who have incorporated technologies into their everyday lives. Coming from the perspective of the player, the game controls allow a toggle for a transparent overlay of instructions that map off the required direction toward a point of interest, orienting the player toward their necessary path of options while also indicating "BELLINI PAINTS IS NOT THIS WAY" in bright red letters if they want to walk back toward the park. Nearby in the path entering the plaza are humans protesting the adoption of robots into the workplace in front of a Cyberlife store. Other humanoid robots are observed in the street sweeping uniforms picking up trash on the ground around a fountain shown as a prominent centerpiece of the plaza. The sound of protesters can be heard alongside a street performer who is playing guitar and singing contemporary sounding folk song for tips who has a cardboard sign on the ground that reads "HUMAN MUSIC! \$1 TO HEAR Music With SOUL."

Depending on the player's actions, Markus proceeds down an adjacent alleyway that features various shop storefront window advertising. Walking up to the door under a sign that reads Bellini Paints, the player is prompted to rotate their joystick on the controller to open the door. Inside are jars of various colors arranged, with different hues stored in wooden cubbies. Drawers line the front counter where a humanoid robot store clerk wears an apron where a distinct blue ID triangle is peeking out next to one of the apron straps on the employee's black dress shirt. The player is prompted to place Markus's hand on a glass plate

interface, presumably to transfer information to pick up the paint order. Markus's model ID flashes on the panel while the store clerk grabs the ordered box of paint from under the counter and announces that "identification verified. Here's your order #847. That'll be \$63.99. Please confirm payment." The player is prompted to press a button to have Markus confirm. The blue circular LED light on both Markus and the store employee flashes yellow. "Payment confirmed," Markus replies. "Transaction complete," says the store clerk. The interaction itself between the two robots lacks social connection and reduces the shopping experience to a simple electronic payment. Now that Markus has the paint for his owner, his screen overlays to direct him to a bus stop to take the bus home. Exiting the alleyway and back onto the plaza, the player can control Marcus to walk in front of the protesters or walk around them. Depending on the player's choices, Markus is yelled at and even face the threat of physical aggression from the protester.

Walking in front of the protestors, a lead protester with a megaphone confronts Markus: "Where the fuck you going, tin can? Hm? No kiddin'..." Markus tries to move out of the way. "Hey guys, check it out, we got one of those tin cans here..." the protestor gets in Markus's face. The protesters begin to surround Markus, someone proceeds to shove him to the ground with the box of paints intact in the box falls to the ground. "Look at this little motherfucker. You steal our jobs, but you can't even stand up," says a woman protester. At this point, Markus is lying on the cold concrete, and the player is prompted to mash a button on their controller to help Markus stand up, only to be kicked by one of the protesters back to the ground. "Yeah! Yeah! Get him down! Get that bum! Yeah, take that on! Take it! Yeah, now you know what it feels like! Go on! Go on!" they shout. The player is prompted again to help Markus up. This time, the leading protester pulls Markus up, clenching onto his shirt, and says, "you ain't going anywhere. We're gonna fuck your bitch ass up," while protesters in the background can be heard yelling, "you job stealer!" and "yeah, waste it!" Luckily, a Detroit Metro police officer intervenes, asking the fight to be broken up, telling the lead protester, "leave it alone."

"Let us teach this bastard a lesson," looking into Markus's eyes. His blue LED light on his temple blinking yellow.

"You damage it, I'm gonna have to fine you," the officer says. The lead protester lets go of Markus, turning and pointing at the officer. "They're gonna take your job next...we'll see how you like it..."

The officer brushes Markus along, “let’s go, move along.” Markus grabs the box of paint and proceeds toward the bus stop as the lead protester glares at Markus with glaring eyes. The protesters’ sound can be heard in the background as Markus waits for the bus: “androids are stealing our jobs! Yeah! Yeah! Ban androids! NOW! BAN ANDROIDS! NOW YEAH!” A protester shouts “we’ve got families to feed, and these androids are taking our place!” As the city bus pulls up, Markus faces a door with clear white lettering that reads “ANDROID COMPARTMENT,” featuring a blue triangle, similar to the marker humanoid robots have to wear on their clothes. Other humanoid robots are inside, standing in organized rows staring forward toward the bus’s front as the door opens. The scene ends with looking toward the bus’s back at a transparent window that clearly separates the humanoid robots from human passengers as the bus pulls away. A final camera shot shows the bus driving along the street toward presumably Detroit’s financial district featuring prominent skyscrapers like 150 West Jefferson and the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Building. This scene of protesters yelling and getting physically aggressive with Markus paints the picture for the player that there is this aggression toward humanoid robots and that the player bears responsibility for their humanoid robot character and their mishaps, including the work a robot performs. Various elements of Detroit scenery are observed as the player journeys through Greektown. Although not all scenery lines up directly with Detroit’s city features, the city’s elements are embedded in artistic detail to promote the setting’s general narrative.

Elements of robot abuse and obedience come into play as the next scene features Kara and Todd arriving home. Overcast grey sky projects dark foreshadowing for the scene. I won’t reveal the entire scene as it can be fairly traumatic, but the idea of treating robots as slaves to their owners and abusing them is clearly shown in this next excerpt. The player sees a dirty house with trash scattered in different places throughout the entryway, which features stairs leading into the second floor. “You’ve been gone for two weeks, so the place is a mess... You do the housework, the washing, you cook the meals, and you take care of...goddamit! Where the fuck’s the brat gone now?” Todd looks around the room. The walls in the scene have discoloration and ripped wallpaper. A view into the living room shows empty beer cans and open prescription bottles with pills lying adjacent to the canisters — an off-kilter lampshade sheds light on the display of rubbish.

“ALICE! ALICE! Oh, there you are...” A little girl appears on the base of the stairs. A pink sweater, blue jean shorts with dark leggings, and a purple bracelet, the little girl holds a stuffed plush fox animal with her hair in a ponytail. She’s



silent, unusual behavior for a child her age, yet it adds an effect to the scene that something is wrong. “That’s Alice. You look after her, homework, bath, all that crap...” Kara smiles at Alice, a welcoming expression, “got it?” he asks, the grease stains still on his shirt. “Yes, Todd,” Kara says in an obedient tone similar to Siri or Amazon Alexa. “Get started down here, then you do upstairs.” Kara turns back toward Alice and smiles, but Alice appears to anxiously run back upstairs. Cleaning the house, the player is tasked with pressing buttons while walking up to various things like the trash, dishwasher, table, interacting with objects, and carrying out chores. Todd taking a phone call, talks about meeting up with someone “yeah? Maybe... Depends on what you need... Yeah, yeah, I can get that. Yeah, yeah, I’ll bring it tomorrow. Yes, same place, you know, you know where. Right.” Moving into the laundry room Kara starts the washing machine, pulling down the soap canister to find a packet of red substance. Scanning it by sight reveals it is “Red Ice,” an addictive drug similar to crack created for the game. The camera cuts to looking directly at Kara as she is holding the packet with Todd standing now behind her, looking down. Kara turns around abruptly, sensing he’s there while Todd grabs Kara by the neck. “You shouldn’t mess around with my stuff...it makes me nervous.”

“I’m sorry, Todd.” Her blue circular LED indicator is now blinking red.

“You stay the fuck outta my business, unless you wanna piss me off...you wanna piss me off?” he barks. “No, Todd,” Kara responds (in machine-like tone) as he lets go and backs away. Kara’s indicator light slowly turns to yellow and then back to blue.

While the player’s character Kara is cleaning around the house, if the player accidentally steps in front of the TV as Todd is watching, he yells, “outta the way for fuck sake!” Kara replies, “I’m sorry, Todd. It won’t happen again.” The obedience of an artificial servant is on full display as Kara tries to appease her owner, but also amidst his glowing abusive anger. As the player progresses through the game, the plot thickens when robots are reportedly rejecting their abuse and becoming self-aware, ultimately leading the player to two distinct in-game perspectives amongst the public’s opinion, or at least what I gather from my gameplay anyway. First, robots are incapable of having genuine emotion and consciousness, thus not deserving of autonomy and human rights. A perspective that the robots’ consciousness is only an error or bug in its software and are *deviant* (the term for the bug) according to the manufacturer Cyberlife. The second perspective is the self-aware robots deserve personhood and can have emotions and,

therefore, autonomy because of their self-awareness. In other words, their consciousness isn't a fluke — they are alive.

The robot abuse elements are prominent sub-themes within the game's larger narrative that robots are becoming self-aware. When juxtaposition with some moral dilemmas, the player faces those, as mentioned earlier, two larger narratives (robots are people, or robots are just deviant), *Detroit: Become Human* presents a possible gaze into some ethical issues to face in the near future. Even in roles outside of the domestic sphere, robots on the street in gameplay are shown performing maintenance roadwork and shipping freight as blue-collar laborers. This is what makes the games setting in Detroit so conspicuous and fitting as we witness the city booming again as the center of the robot manufacturing industry, but also an element of hard work. Only, instead of human labor, work is done by robots that take human form. More importantly, although we might concern ourselves with "robot labor," the concept of labor insinuates some form of compensation for work completed. With robots effectively operating as slaves to their owners (i.e., robbed of personhood, lacking legitimized self-autonomy and compensation for work), players navigate the game with a choice of whether the robots deserve rights and autonomy, or their self-awareness is just a bug because a machine is just a machine. All the while having to make these choices, the game's scenes clearly try to evoke emotion concerning the robot characters and how they are treated. Outside of the game, the idea that machines are taking jobs is not an unfamiliar narrative concerning new technology and the workplace. Further, conceptualized robot laborers and their possibility to take human-like forms are found throughout popular culture's take on artificial servants.

### Our Robot Overlords, Their Revolution, and Who Defines Them

Fear over automation in the workplace and its potential to redefine work is not a new occurrence. Amidst a robot revolution (Berg et al. 117-148; Byrnjolfsson and McAfee; Ford), ethics surrounding robotics, AI, and automation are important considering their future impact on our conceptualized idea of "labor." With the adoption of these technologies both in domestic and industrial work, current research shows automation and AI not only affecting a majority of occupations (with varying intensity) but that these changes in "the coming decades" vary across location and demographics (Muro et al. 4-9). Public opinion research has found a clear indication of anxiety about the idea that robots could take peoples' jobs. A

survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that one-in-five Americans feel the concept of machines doing a majority of human jobs to be extremely realistic, with 76 percent of Americans familiar with the idea expressing “some level of worry about a future in which machines do many jobs currently done by humans” (Smith and Anderson). Talking beyond the ivory tower about the topic of robot ethics proves to be difficult with public fear exasperated via perfunctory media tropes skipping the realities of where these current technologies exist in their functional abilities. From television news and radio talk shows, there are headlines in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic (when this essay was written) that read, “Millions of Americans Have Lost Jobs in the Pandemic — and Robots and AI Are Replacing Them Faster Than Ever” (Semuels), and “Workforce Automation Soars as the Pandemic Rages On” (Henderson), leaving media consumers rife with concern. Robotics are often hyped in the press with eye-catching descriptions of tech we’d read or watch in science fiction. Best said by Meinecke and Voss:

With robotics being a massively growing and even “hyped” technology field — promising solutions to societal problems (e.g. supporting the aging working population or replacing missing nursing staff) and at the same time threatening to bring along frightening economic and societal consequence (e.g. increasing robotization causing mass unemployment) — public interest is immense. Consequently, robotics is one of the most reported on technology fields in the news media. In this discourse, the enormous influence of science fiction on the perception and representation of robots is once again observable. Many of the fictional narratives and tropes described above are reflected in articles, reports, and commentaries on current or upcoming robotics technology. (210-1).

Meinecke and Voss make clear some of the interwoven connections between how sci-fi tropes emerge in some of the press that covers these technologies. *Detroit: Become Human*’s perspective of robots taking jobs carries a prominent resemblance to much of our earlier technologies that were feared. It is important to note, although yes, there indeed outside of this game is likely a robot revolution (Berg et al. 117-48), automation and advancing new technology are no stranger to the workplace, nor are recent phenomena. From a historical perspective (Akst), there was a fear of automation on the factory line. As new technologies are developed, there are concerns and anxiety about what they may do to our society. Further back in time, even the electric power line at one point was viewed as a contentious debate

on its influence on society (but likely for a good reason; Sullivan 8-16). *Detroit: Become Human*'s narrative of robots stealing human jobs is not a new sci-fi narrative but a remnant of previous narratives of people perturbed by technology advancements. This includes the idea of artificial servants revolting against their owners. For evidence of this in popular culture, look no further than at *Rossum's Universal Robots (R.U.R.)* by Karl Čapek, a play featuring android-like workers who carried out "unwanted and difficult jobs from their human creators and owners" (Linda Hall Library). Like *Detroit: Become Human*, the robots in *R.U.R.* look like humans and eventually revolt against the humans.

(1). A robot may not injure a human being, or, through interaction, allow a human being to come to harm. (2). A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

(2). A robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (18)

The Three Laws by Asimov, in addition to Čapek's artificial human-like robots, are used in a variety of different films like *I, Robot* (Proyas), *Astro Boy* (Bowers), or even *Bicentennial Man* (Columbus), where robots are widely adopted taking form as robot laborers, and humanity remains protected by the laws. I highlight these depictions of robots in popular culture because they have such a strong influence on our conception of what a robot is and could be; researchers and developers constructed the idea of what a robot is "science fiction not only defines the boundaries of the conceptual playing field, but is the original source of the term" (Gunkel 15). Popular culture has historically played a significant role in how we view robotics and our expectations for what a robot should be (Meinecke and Voss 203-221), and part of this brings developers and researchers alike to be in conflict between our expectations, what human-robot interaction research looks to achieve, and meeting the needs of users (Sandoval et al. 54-63).

The representations of what robots do and how they are viewed in the context of *Detroit: Become Human* are essential for the discussion of how robots, in reality, are to be treated — and how popular culture wishes them to be treated. Robots being viewed as commercial objects is not a new narrative when discussing the ideas of whether they should or should not have rights — a perspective debated about in the game and existing literature today (See Gunkel). Robots in *Detroit: Become Human* are presented early on as objects who take on traditional domestic and blue-collar labor roles. However, in addition to taking on these roles, robots are offered as a subject of controversy. Indeed, robots are seen as taking jobs from

people — a narrative that is all too common in today's headlines, however, presenting the player with the choice of advancing the character plot to give rights to robots offers further moral and ethical exploration contrary to the typical popular culture where we may not interact with the story.

As a butterfly effect game, players observe similar narratives from prior artifacts of science fiction and popular culture (e.g., *R.U.R.*, *iRobot*, Asimov's Three Laws), except now get to make choices around these narratives and how to interact with them, and the players and their robot characters cannot remain completely separate. In a previous study, for example, colleagues and I explored how *Detroit: Become Human* players described their rationale for decisions and how their responses may coincide with elements of character attachment (Craig et al. 169-170). Players would express concern for their character and strategize their gameplay depending on how they thought things would unfold in real life or make decisions for what they thought was required for advancing the game's plot (Craig et al. 169-170). Our connection with media characters is important in this essay because as robots are portrayed as laborers, players of *Detroit: Become Human* also take on some level of attachment to their character. They make decisions as they engage with their character and face ethical and moral challenges in the game. Highlighting a quote from that earlier study that encapsulates the previous sentence:

A clear example of objectification is seen in one participant's rationale for killing another android character to keep their character alive. They explained the robot was a machine and wasn't capable of emotion or pain thus "*it didn't really matter that I was taking their parts. I needed them and they weren't using them.*" (170)

When playing the game, players are forced to make decisions concerning their robot character that rely on the player's conceptualization of what they think about these ethical dilemmas. The videogame allows greater connection with these narratives, or in other words, provides the player a playground to explore where they concern themselves with robot ethics, robotic personhood, and the perception of them replacing human jobs. Because of this, *Detroit: Become Human*, in addition to being a popular videogame, can serve as an invitation toward a conversation surrounding the concept of robot ethics and labor.

### Some Last Thoughts...For Now

When I met with Chad at the local coffee shop patio the summer of my first year of graduate school, I was not expecting to come out from the conversation being encouraged to use *Detroit: Become Human* as a potential research topic. I came to the patio table wanting to do research related to robotics. But I think understanding the influence science fiction and popular culture can have on robotics is an important first step to that interest. Movies, books, plays, and videogames are a few examples of how we can engage with media agents and further understand their role in robot ethics. Specifically, rather than viewing these things as trivial entertainment, we can ask ourselves how the representation of robots acting as artificial servants and slaves fits in with the overall narrative that robots are stealing jobs. Further, how might the work they are replacing be different in ways other than compensation? *Detroit: Become Human* offers us a glimpse of a person's willingness to consider whether machines, if self-aware, are worthy of personhood. More importantly, as a videogame, *Detroit: Become Human* amongst the narrative of comeback Detroit in 2038 projects some of the historical concerns about automation in the workplace, the drive for industrial ingenuity, and lends some emotional concern for the ethical treatment of robots and the work they do while placing the player centrally to make decisions about the story's plot. As we journey through our new age of incorporating robots into our lives, how we treat these machines might speak more to the willingness to dehumanize the labor they perform. Popular culture's take on robotics' future gives us space to pause and reflect on what we want to see next concerning this technology. No one can predict the future, but we can dream. The impact science fiction has on our conceptualizations of robotics remains important to consider whether the next robots are truly what society wants and needs to envision — or if robotics, AI, and automation are just symbolically manifested in the context of popular culture.

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# It's Alive!: Reanimating the Author in the Age of Artificially Intelligent Advertising

BRIAN J. SNEE AND STACY M. SMULOWITZ

Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of a road that screams with reassurance that whatever you're doing is OK. You are OK.-- Don Draper, *Mad Men* ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes")

"Constantly moving happiness machines" ("Selling Short"). That's how President Herbert Hoover described US consumers in the late 1920s, just before the historic stock market collapse that ushered in the Great Depression. The Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) and a subsequent explosion in mass communication (1840-1950) harnessed the awesome power of technology to transform the lives of citizens in industrialized nations. The result was less work, more leisure time, and an unprecedented capacity to spend — at least for the fortunate few. The young advertising industry went to work finding creative and reassuring ways to connect technology and happiness in the minds of consumer citizens. What they succeeded in creating, industry critics may contend, was a marketing monster.

This essay begins with a close textual analysis of an innovative ad for the 2018 Lexus ES: "a car that responds intuitively to the driver's intentions and changing road and traffic conditions" ("This Lexus Ad"). "Driven by Intuition" ran mostly on social media platforms. The ad's most significant feature was not the vehicle it promoted, but rather the process by which it was produced. Although it was directed by award-winning filmmaker Kevin Macdonald, the spot was written by a bot. After a shot-by-shot analysis of the ad, we summarize the responses that the ad elicited from industry critics, attending closely to intertextual comparisons with other narratives. Utilizing Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," Wayne C. Booth's "implied author," and Edwin Black's "second persona" to provide a

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vocabulary for analysis, we address the consequences of Lexus's decision to aggressively foreground the ad's process of production, the part of the creative process that usually remains hidden from consumers and critics alike.

Ultimately, we advance two conclusions. First, several critics and the ad's own creative team made comparisons between "Driven by Intuition" and two popular creation narratives: *Pinocchio* and *Frankenstein*. We challenge the validity of these comparisons. Each of these texts was referenced repeatedly in press about the ad. Second, we posit that these comparisons may be the result of several strategic decisions by Lexus and the larger creative team in both making and promoting the ad. The consequence, we contend, is that Lexus encouraged questions of authorial intent, and in so doing may have encouraged an interpretation of the ad that is not textually justified. Specifically, the ad was widely and, we submit, inaccurately characterized as a creation narrative: a machine brought to life. Lexus maintains that "Driven by Intuition" forever changed how ads will be made. True or not, it does appear to have changed the way textual meaning is negotiated and authorial intent is interpreted in the era of AI.

### It's Alive?

Alex Newland of Visual Voice, who developed the AI that wrote "Driven by Intuition," described the computer-generated script as a "dark rollercoaster journey of an inanimate object coming to life" (Lexus UK). Our analysis of the text does not entirely support his description. Possible reasons for the disparity between Newland's description and our analysis are addressed in subsequent sections.

The one-minute ad begins with a black screen (Lexus Europe). The following words appear in white, all-caps type:

LEXUS PRESENTS

A FILM WRITTEN BY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (Lexus UK  
00:00-00:01)

Seconds later, a third line is slowly added in pixelated type:

DIRECTED BY AWARD-WINNING HUMAN (Lexus UK 00:01-00:03)

From the outset, then, man and machine are connected and confused. The ad is a product of both, but it is the human director whose credit is rendered in a self-consciously digitized font. The collapsing of these categories — man and machine — will be a central theme running throughout the next 60 seconds. In fact, *Man*

*and Machine* is the title of the 10-minute “making of” documentary that was released by Lexus at the same time as the ad.

As the sound of a heartbeat rises on the soundtrack, we see the car in a stark and modern facility (Lexus UK 00:06-00:17). Alongside it stands a middle-aged man. The words “Final Inspection” appear in the bottom left corner of the screen. Marketing materials identify him as a Lexus Takumi Master Craftsman, although that is not at all apparent to the casual viewer (The&Partnership). Beneath a canopy of geometric lights, the man runs his white-gloved hands gently along the angles and contours of the car. Eventually the digital dash display lights up, the side mirrors swing out, the headlights and rear lights come on. If this is the supposed moment of creation — the inanimate object coming to life — it is indistinguishable from the turning of the ignition key in almost any other automobile ad. As the car drives out of the factory, the man’s eyes well up with tears. It is clear that he has a strong attachment to his creation, but it is not clear that his creation is alive.

The Lexus now glides along a narrow, winding highway that separates the forest from the sea (Lexus UK 00:18-00:23). It is a familiar, cliché of an image for a contemporary car ad. However, as the car turns a corner, it does not drive off into the sunset. Rather, it disappears from sight as we see a storm raging on the horizon. To the surprise and delight of the production team, the AI-produced script was accompanied by a rationale for each of its plot points, described as a “highly detailed data key, providing references spanning the 15 years’ worth of adverts it had studied to back up the effectiveness of each twist and turn in its storyline” (“This Lexus Ad”). The importance of strong facial expressions (the Master with tears in his eyes) and the need for a dramatic change in action midway through the ad to keep the audience watching were among the notes accompanying the script. The storm introduces this dramatic change.

An oddly abrupt cut brings the viewer — and the car — inside a different facility (Lexus UK 00:24-00:30). How the car arrived there is not explained. A smashed vehicle is moved aside by men in overalls whose appearance is strikingly different from the Master in the opening scene. If he was gentle, they are rough. If in fact he was a creator, these men are destroyers. The flash of cameras makes it clear that the press have assembled to witness and document whatever is about to unfold.

The viewer next sees the outside of the facility on a television (Lexus UK 00:31-00:35). The TV is in a modern living room, where the Master is watching the news with what one assumes is his teen daughter (the importance of the main character

having familial connections for emotional purposes was also noted in the AI script). Their faces reveal their obvious fear. A news reporter appears on the TV, presumably outside the building where the car is now held captive. The chyron reads: “Breaking News: Crash Test Imminent.” We cannot hear her report, but we do not need to.

An alarm sounds. Back inside the facility we see that the car is now tethered by chain to a large winch on the back of a semi-truck (Lexus UK 00:36-00:54). The car is about to be destroyed. Dramatic music blares as the car is suddenly pulled toward the truck. We await the impact, as do the Master and his daughter. Before the collision can destroy the vehicle, however, the brakes are applied. The winch and chain spark and smoke, and the car’s brake lights flash. The vehicle squeals to a stop just before impact. The Master and his daughter smile and hug in apparent relief. Although we never see a driver in the car — the windows are too darkly tinted to see inside — we are also never shown an empty driver’s seat, which would have rather clearly indicated that the car is alive and acting of its own accord.

The final shot of the ad reveals the car back out on the winding highway (Lexus UK 00:55-00:57). The sound of the heartbeat returns. If the effect is intended as literal proof that the car is alive and not simply a metaphor, it is greatly understated. The closing text first reads:

THE NEW LEXUS ES  
DRIVEN BY INTUITION (Lexus UK 00:58)

It is then replaced with:

THE NEW LEXUS ES (Lexus UK 00:59)  
SELF-CHARGING HYBRID

The screen fades to black, on which the Lexus name and logo appear above the slogan, “Experience Amazing” (Lexus UK 01:00).

## Making Meaning

In John Hughes’ 1985 comedy classic, *Weird Science*, two teenage boys (somehow) feed magazine images of models and actresses into a desktop computer in an effort to create a digital version of the ideal female companion. Inspired by a late-night broadcast of *Frankenstein*, the boys (somehow) hack into a government computer to find sufficient power to animate their creation. When a power surge causes their system to explode, their creature (somehow) comes unexpectedly to life.

The means of production modeled on screen in *Weird Science* is strangely similar to the behind-the-scenes manner in which “Driven by Intuition” was actually made. Lexus collaborated with The&Partnership, Visual Voice, Unruly, MindX, and IBM’s Watson, among others, to produce what they claim is the first AI-written script for an ad (“Driven By Intuition: Car by Lexus”). The complex process required the creation of a bot capable of understanding luxury, emotionality, and intuition, among other elusive concepts. The public relations blitz that accompanied the debut of the ad described the process in this way:

The AI, built with Visual Recognition support from IBM Watson, was ‘trained’ with 15 years’ worth of Cannes-Lions-winning car and luxury advertisements, and was primed with emotional intelligence data from Unruly to teach it which moments of those adverts connected most strongly with viewers. It was then coached in intuition via a bespoke experiment for The&Partnership by applied scientists MindX, based at the University of New South Wales. The study explored what makes somebody intuitive, as well as how people with high levels of intuition respond to car adverts. (“This Lexus Ad”)

According to the director, Kevin Macdonald, the bot not only produced a complete script but also one that featured a machine coming to life. “The fact the AI gave a fellow machine sentience,” observed Macdonald, “placed it in a sort of combat situation, and then had it escaping into the sunset was such an emotional response from what is essentially a robot” (“This Lexus Ad”). Macdonald, who is known for making both documentary (*Touching the Void*, 2003) and fictional films (*The Last King of Scotland*, 2006), seems to have drawn from his ability to mix fantasy and reality in his approach to filming the one-minute spot. But if he, like Alex Newland of Visual Voice, interpreted the script as a creation story, the ad he filmed is ambiguous at best on that all-important plot point. Critical reactions were mixed.

The news of an ad created by AI was overwhelmingly popular in the media worldwide. A search in Lexis-Nexis yielded around 30 results from media in a variety of countries, such as the US, the UK, India, UAE, France, Australia, and more. Much of the content focused on the popular film director, his previous awards, and his ability to take an AI-generated script and turn it into something with emotion and energy. Other content focused on describing the AI-generated content from IBM’s Watson and a few other sources as well as a description of the ad itself. Some provided a link to the ad.

Reactions to the ad spanned from almost giddy with surprise to eye-rolling discontent. Predictably, critics had a lot more to say about the means by which the ad was produced than they did about the final 60-second spot, and little if any attention was paid to the car. While a majority of the reactions about the Lexus ad were positive, expectations that the use of AI could produce a good television commercial script were low. There was an overwhelming element of surprise that the Lexus ad worked, especially since even the tech provider working on the project was unsure about the outcome (Griner), and Lexus personnel viewed this as a “pilot” (Nicolle).

Of the positive reactions about the commercial, most were impressed that the famous director was able to work with the script produced by AI. Others thought the AI scriptwriting was comparable to human scriptwriting sophistication and “creative merit” (Clymo; Griner; Major). McDonald positively stated, “When I was handed the script, the melodrama of the story convinced me of its potential.... The charmingly simplistic way the AI wrote the story was both fascinating in its interpretation of human emotion, and yet still unexpected enough to give the film a clearly non-human edge” (Spangler).

Some of the negative reactions to the ad centered on the skepticism of AI’s ability to replace a human who has been trained and has experience in creative development (Griner; Sheehan). Predominantly advertising industry professionals, the critics claim that the ad was mediocre at best: “the spot’s script is definitely like a Sunday drive through the uncanny valley, with disjointed ideas forming a storyline that’s less of a narrative than a series of checked boxes” (Griner).

Other skepticism stemmed from content quality issues and the “gimmicky” feel of using AI instead of humans to create a script (Tsai). “Gimmicks using technologies such as Lexus recent ad made by AI can be great at driving publicity but where new technology really gets interesting is when it changes behaviours, improves processes and makes a genuine difference to people’s lives” (Tsai).

Overall, critics agreed that the experiment was beneficial for the industry. “While relatively primitive in its storytelling ability, the technique shows an eerie amount of potential” (Griner). Some stated that AI should be used in the future for generating more in-depth insights about the target audience (Bhat), discovering overlooked demographics, and identifying new patterns of behavior and the reason certain messages resonate better than others (Lamm). Others stated that AI should be used to “crunch information (in this case, 15 years of award-winning spots) to spark some ideas” (Lamm) for a more personalized experience (Nicolle) rather than

for creative direction (that the Lexus engineer should cry) (Bhat). “Computers aren't going to replace creative pros — but machine learning and artificial intelligence can be powerful tools in the storytelling process” (Spangler). AI should be used for “grunt work” to provide more time for humans to “recognize, develop and take advantage of insights” to produce outstanding creative work for their clients (Dsouza; Lamm).

Arguably the most interesting and, for the purposes of this essay, the most relevant, reactions were those that likened the ad to one of two pop culture creation narratives. Just as Newland and Macdonald interpreted the script as a creation story, so too did a number of critics. One such critic observed:

Like Frankenstein's Monster, the ad begins with a Lexus engineer admiring his creation. He looks on and sheds a tear as the car is taken away and threatened with destruction, taking to the open and stormy roads before being shackled and readied for an imminent crash test that is being broadcast live on TV while its owner watches in suspense. (Hammett)

Said another:

The analogies with previous stories, from *Pinnocchio* to Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* via *Frankenstein*, are rather obvious; a quotation that would be normal in the case of human writers, but surprising in the creation of an algorithm that, among other things, has not had access to certain sources. (Porcu)

*Ad Forum* quoted Dave Bedwood of The&Partnership claiming that the entire creative process was “given Lexus brand guidelines, to ensure we didn't just produce a generic Frankenstein monster of an ad” (“Driven by Intuition: The&Partnership”). And director Macdonald elsewhere stated, “The story told reminds me a lot of Frankenstein or Pinocchio [...] It creates emotion, it's touching. If it had been done by a creative in an agency, I don't know if the effect would have been the same” (Valentin).

“Driven by Intuition” was undeniably groundbreaking. It is curious that so many viewers interpreted it as a creation story when the textual evidence to support that view is underwhelming. That members of the creative team described it in that way is sure to have influenced the perceptions of at least those critics who were aware of how Newland, Macdonald, and possibly others had described their creation. But that does not explain why the creative team itself saw the script as a creation story, nor why there appears to have been no pushback whatsoever in the press about this widely shared but textually unsupported interpretation. We think it

likely that the aggressive public relations blitz that celebrated the novel use of AI in the writing of the ad may have constrained the possible range of textual interpretations by emphasizing the role of the inanimate author and thus questions of authorial intent. To understand the consequences that reanimating the author can have on the process of textual analysis, one must turn to theory.

### Rebirth or Reboot?

Central to our analysis of the text, and its implications for textual analysis, is the consequential dynamic established by the ad's opening credits. An opening credit sequence — standard for a feature film — is anything but standard for an advertisement. The apparent point of including one at the top of “Driven by Intuition” was to announce that what follows was authored by an algorithm, the brainchild of a bot, created by a computer. In so doing, the content of the text makes its own method of production inescapable in the act of its consumption. This textual feature, combined with the promotional campaign to promote the ad's production process, established an unusual and consequential interpretive dynamic. A brief review of narrative concepts by Roland Barthes, Wayne C. Booth, and Edwin Black provides a vocabulary for articulating our analysis.

In the late 1960s, the French semiotician Roland Barthes signed the author's death warrant. In an influential essay whose title referenced Mallory's *le Morte d'Arthur* and whose thesis resonated with the twentieth century New Criticism movement, Barthes argued against the practice of limiting the meaning of a text to the identity and presumed intent of its author. “The removal of the Author,” the writer promised his readers, “utterly transforms the modern text,” and with it the whole purpose and practice of criticism (Barthes 145).

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author [...] beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is “explained” — victory to the critic. (Barthes 147)

Instead of solving a puzzle that has a correct answer, the point of criticism, Barthes contended, was to explore the text so that all of its possible meanings become “disentangled, but nothing deciphered” (147).

No longer obliged to account for the author's implied meaning, Barthes declared that critics were not only free but in fact obligated to investigate all of the



different meanings that all different readers might infer. This was an early call to explore what academics would later refer to as the polysemy of the text: its simultaneous multiple meanings (Ceccarelli; Condit). “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile,” Barthes concluded; “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (147-148).

With the mortal remains of the human author now neatly disposed of, did the text become an orphan, alone in the world, entirely on its own? Not according to Wayne Booth. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth introduced perhaps his best known concept: the implied author. Simply put, the implied author is the version of the storyteller that the reader gleans from the text. Not to be confused with a narrator, an implied author is neither a character in, nor commentator upon, the story. Rather, it is a sense one gets of the source from which the narrative has come. “Whether we call this implied author an ‘official scribe,’ or adopt another term,” Booth noted, “it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects” (71).

Importantly, whether the real author and the implied author share anything at all in common should not matter to critics or readers. In fact, the two can be complete opposites. A film with a progressive message about racial justice does not necessarily cease to be progressive if one discovers that the filmmaker has previously expressed racist views. It is not the man or woman behind the lens whose beliefs and attitudes should matter to the critic or viewer, according to Booth, but rather the invisible storyteller whose beliefs and attitudes are suggested by the text itself. Booth thus called for a radical reconsideration of the relationships between and among author, reader, and text, effectively removing the living author from the rhetorical situation.

The rhetorician Edwin Black complemented Booth’s implied author with his own creation — an implied reader or auditor or viewer, which Black called the “second persona.” The second persona is an idealized version of the audience that real audience members are invited to become. Black explicitly identified his creation as a close relative of Booth’s.

We have learned to keep continuously before us the possibility, and in some cases the probability, that the author implied by the discourse is an artificial creation: a persona, but not necessarily a person.. What equally well solicits our attention is that there is a second persona also implied by a discourse, and that persona is its implied auditor. (Black 111)

A speaker whose argument is likely to be persuasive only if, for example, the audience buys into the notion that “all men [sic] are created equal,” effectively invites the real audience to take up that point of view, to adopt that worldview, to become that ideal audience best positioned to be receptive to the rhetorical text.

In *Coming to Terms*, Seymour Chatman summarized all that is implied by the recognition of these narrative constructs:

The act of reading a text, though ultimately an exchange between real human beings, entails two intermediate constructs: one in the text, which invents it upon each reading (the implied author), and one outside the text, which construes it upon each reading (the implied reader). (76)

Although somewhat radical when first proposed by Booth in the 1960s, the notion that meaning is derived from a critic or audience member’s engagement with a text — a text that implies a version of its author and an ideal version of its audience — is anything but radical today. What is radical is resurrecting the long dead author, especially when the reanimated writer was never alive in the first place.

### Pinocchio versus Frankenstein

Among the critics and journalists across the globe who wrote about “Driven by Intuition,” the two most popular narrative comparisons were with the equally well known but strikingly different creation stories *Pinocchio* and *Frankenstein*. Although *Frankenstein*’s progeny, Eando Binder’s story, “I, Robot, is arguably a more apt comparative text, this connection seems not to have appeared in responses to the ad.

Pinocchio’s tale is that of a wooden doll that comes to life. Published in the late nineteenth century by Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* introduced readers to a puppet whose creator/father, Geppetto, wished to create a real boy (Collodi). Featuring a flawed character whose nose would grow when he lied, as he often did, the book served as a cautionary tale about how one should behave in the world. In 1940, Disney animated the Pinocchio story (*Pinocchio*). In their classic film, the puppet-turned-boy is a sanitized character, whose flaws are less severe and whose heart is more pure than in the original telling. Because of the popularity of the Disney version, the majority of adaptations in popular culture have presented a far more innocent Pinocchio, a tragic hero who suffers undeserved misfortunes, overcomes great challenges, and is ultimately rewarded for his perseverance (Morrissey).

By contrast, the character at the center of the *Frankenstein* narrative has suffered the exact opposite fate. In Mary Shelley's gothic novel, the Monster appears to learn from his mistakes. He changes. And although he speaks of suicide at the end of the book, he does not die and is very much alive when the novel ends. Dr. Frankenstein, however, dies while he is still hunting his creation, still determined to destroy it. Unlike Geppetto, Dr. Frankenstein is revealed to be a morally flawed character whose creation evolves beyond him. Despite this, countless pop culture adaptations have turned Dr. Frankenstein into a somewhat naïve victim overwhelmed by his creation whom he gave the precious gift of life (Friedman and Kavey). And it is the Monster who became ever more monstrous as the tale was retold. Although James Whale's 1931 Universal film starring Boris Karloff was more faithful than many future adaptations, at least in this regard, the role of Monster and Master have been permanently rearranged in the popular consciousness (*Frankenstein*).

That these two popular creation stories would be referenced by several critics of the Lexus ad is fascinating because as noted previously there is nothing definitive in the ad that identifies it as a creation story. "Driven by Intuition" is a survival story, no doubt, and the rationale produced by the bot did call for "anthropomorphization" — i.e., the attribution of human traits or tendencies — but that does not necessarily amount to a car that actually comes to life (Lexus Europe).<sup>1</sup> The absence of an obvious moment of creation is especially striking. No fairy grants the Master's wish as in *Pinocchio*. Lightning is not harnessed by a scientist to animate the creature with the power of electricity as in *Frankenstein*. Michelangelo's "The Creation of David" is not restaged as it might have been, and it so often is in popular culture, to make clear that a moment of creation occurs. The vehicle powering up before leaving the factory is hardly such a moment. And yet numerous critics interpreted the ad as if it undeniably featured a car that comes to life. Why?

We submit that several factors likely contributed. Foremost, the creative team itself seems to have been an early source of this interpretation. Given their hyper-focus on the bot's writing of the ad, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that they would search the script for motive or intent. And indeed it appears they did. Macdonald's observation, which was republished across several reviews, that "the

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Clifford Nass explores the tendency of humans to anthropomorphize computers and robots. See, for example, Nass and Moon.

AI gave a fellow machine sentience” described the ad such that the car became something of a surrogate for the bot. By suggesting an emotional connection between bot and car, the director framed his creation as an example of what Bill Nichols has called a documentary of wish fulfillment: “a fiction about the kind of peoples and cultures someone [...] wished to find in the world,” or in this case, to find in the text (4).

In addition, we submit that critical responses that interpreted the ad as a creation story are also the likely result of the aggressive manner in which authorial credit for the ad was given to the AI. This includes the decision to give the bot on-screen credit, as well as the release of the “making of” documentary that accompanied the release of the ad. The creation element is thus far more extratextual and intertextual than textual — an example of what David Bordwell calls “making meaning,” whereby critics project onto visual texts interpretations not fully justified by what is actually on the screen (Bordwell). It is thus possible that the bot (and not the car) came to life, at least in the minds of many critics, when it did that which previously only humans had done — authored both an inspirational narrative and a rationale for its creative choices.

Lexus gave its text an author, and in so doing all but suffocated the implied author and greatly disoriented the implied audience. The promotional campaign that celebrated the ad’s innovative process made it all but impossible for viewers to engage with the text on its own terms. Rather than disentangle the ad, as Booth urged, they tried to decipher it — to discern the meaning that the AI author intended. Further complicating the process is the fact that this particular author has no past, no biography, no body of work to guide the process of deciphering. Unable to look to the author’s life and work as a guide to discovering intent, critics looked instead to popular culture and found in the creation narratives of *Frankenstein* and *Pinocchio* a version of what they imagined the bot was trying to tell them.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that it was unwise for Lexus to have a bot write a script, nor for them to promote their unique experiment. However, if bot-written scripts are to become more common in advertising, it may be wise for advertisers to resist heavily promoting their use of AI — and especially not to insert that fact into the content of their ads — unless the goal is for viewers and consumers to once again search for the bot’s intended meaning within the text. Reanimating the author, at least in this case, seems to have created confusion about the images and storyline that fundamentally were supposed to promote the purchase of an

intuitive car, but which instead were arguably misunderstood to celebrate a machine that achieved its dream of coming to life, if only by proxy.

## Conclusion

This essay advanced a close analysis of a unique text: an AI-scripted ad for a luxury car. “Driven by Intuition” was directed by the filmmaker, Kevin Macdonald. It ran on social media platforms and on television in Europe. A summary of critical responses demonstrated that reactions ran the full spectrum from gleeful celebration to accusations of gimmickry. Most notable for this essay were those critics and members of the creative team behind the ad who interpreted their creation as a creation story. Many made overt comparisons to such narratives as *Pinocchio* and *Frankenstein*. These were notable, we assert, because our shot-by-shot reading of the 60-second ad does not support an interpretation that the content of the ad amounts to a creation story.

Using the work of Roland Barthes, Wayne C. Booth, and Edwin Black, we posited that Lexus’s extra-textual campaign to promote that the ad was written by a bot, combined with the decision to credit the bot at the top of the ad, perhaps inadvertently invited viewers and critics to ponder questions of authorial intent in a manner not at all consistent with how product ads are normally consumed. Possibly viewing the car in the ad as a surrogate or stand in for the bot behind the ad, at least some viewers saw that which (we contend) is simply not there: the story of a car that comes to life. We conclude that the use of AI was both creative and novel. However, we caution that highlighting the means by which the ad was produced greatly skewed critical and possibly popular responses to the ad, changing rather dramatically how various audiences understood the text.

“Whether we call this implied author an ‘official scribe,’ or adopt another term,” Wayne Booth has argued, “it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects. However impersonal he [sic] may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official who writes in this manner — and of course the scribe will never be neutral toward all values” (71). There is no evidence that we know of to suggest that the bot’s script called for its own on-screen credit, and certainly it did not prescribe a media blitz promoting its creative contribution to the ad. The bot may have replaced the author in the creative process, but it did not attempt to resurrect it in the text. Reanimated by

Lexus and its creative team, the bot's presumed authorial intent resulted in the "making [of] meaning" rather than the reading of the text.

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# “She’s Like the World’s Barbie Doll”: How Semiotic Labor Reifies the Gendered Labor Assumptions of Hatsune Miku

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As the twenty-first century enters its third decade, the presence of virtual characters and artificial agents in everyday life increases. We define artificial agents as any computer program that produces an interactive entity designed to simulate a human being. The level of interactivity can produce a sense that the entity possesses agency, authenticity, and even an ability to impact people’s lives. Physical robots, Twitterbots, and artificial assistants such as Siri, Alexa, and Cortana all represent examples of these emerging artificial agents. Currently, however, none of these artificial agents are true agents, as none possess complete autonomy over their functions and actions. Of course, the robots of science fiction, from Rosie in *The Jetsons* to EVE in *Wall-E*, will not soon enter the workforce. Yet they all represent a potential future, presently being examined by researchers in human-robot interaction studies to understand what happens when humans engage with true artificial agents.

Given the focus on simulating a human being, developers and users may gender artificial agents as feminine, especially if such artificial agents operate in feminized work spheres like health care, service, and domestic tasks. We already see such default gendering with Alexa, Siri, Cortana, and others such as GPS devices and apps. With these artificial assistants, developers and users frequently utilize auditory signals such as a “feminine” voice to code non-biological entities that lack the sexual characteristics often used to determine gender identity. Thus, through

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people's interactions with and their discussions about these artificial assistants, these "robots" exist within what we refer to as a networked gender, whereby individuals develop a gender identity via interactions with others. That is, from programmers to users, people work together to co-construct the artificial assistant's gender identity, imposing assumptions ascribed to biological entities onto a non-biological entity (see Costa; Schiller and McMahon; Woods). Artificial agents lack a concept of self in the traditional sense but are bestowed identities via people's semiotic labor, a communal activity that results in the creation of a self that thereby improves human-robot interactions. This paper analyzes the semiotic labor that circulates and creates these artificial agents' identities while also reifying traditional gender stereotypes.

Specifically, this analysis considers the Vocaloid Hatsune Miku, a computer program that allows users to create music for "her" to sing, making Miku essentially a programmable instrument. In the current analysis, we refer to Miku as "it" due to the lack of biological sex determination and gendered identity agency possible for the virtual posthuman performer. We only refer to Miku using gendered pronouns when others refer to the character as such. While not a traditional robot, Miku shares characteristics with other artificial agents: it exists as a computer program that allows users to achieve their goals. Additionally, the program's creator, Crypton Future Media, uses its image for marketing and entertainment purposes. Crypton and Miku's fans utilize its voice and appearance to produce their own entertainment, which can turn a profit off the character's labor. Along with the company and Miku's fans, researchers and journalists further work in a symbolic community to create and maintain the Vocaloid's identity. Thus, in conjunction with auditory codes common in artificial assistants, visual and power codes encoded into Miku by developers, users, journalists, and others further promote gender assumptions about the virtual performer. In other words, humans engage in a semiotic labor that reifies these gendered signals to co-construct Miku's identity.

### Introducing Hatsune Miku

Vocaloid performers such as Hatsune Miku represent a subset of virtual bands, which have existed in one form or another since Alvin and the Chipmunks first burst onto the pop music scene in 1959, with Gorillaz serving as a commercially successful recent example (Conger). Virtual bands may be fronted by fictional, animated, or virtual characters or celebrities, but biological humans exist behind

these performers, providing the vocals and the instrumentation that comprise the bands’ sound. Usually the presentation of the virtual character matches the gender of the biological performer, but given the anonymity afforded by the virtual performance, the biological musicians could engage in a form of identity tourism, whereby an individual appropriates and/or performs an identity involving a gender and/or race different than their own (Nakamura). Indeed, one virtual band, Studio Killers, has engaged in such gender-bending identity tourism. The most persistent rumor surrounding the band is that animated lead singer Cherry is performed by Teemu Brunila, the male front man for Finnish band The Crash (Richardson). Regardless of whether Brunila is indeed the human performer behind the virtual singer, many fans believe that a male singer provides Cherry’s voice. The performer who voices Cherry uses multimedia tools to enable a more imaginative performance of identity; the character functions as another identity for the singer, one he presents to the world via these multimedia tools. Cherry’s presentation thus recalls Lisa Nakamura’s contention that online spaces allow users to “project a version of the self which is inherently theatrical” (16). Ultimately, Cherry represents a negotiated self that the performer presents to the world, one that allows him to engage in a form of roleplaying that serves to “underline the arbitrariness of gender and reveal its symbolic as opposed to its biological function” (Morse 27).

This notion of identity and performance becomes somewhat problematized when looking at Vocaloid performers, which remove the human element even further. While virtual bands rely on human performers to directly provide their voices for songs, Vocaloids require a handful of programmers to manipulate lines of code to bring them and their songs to “life.” This subset of virtual bands is similarly fronted by virtual characters, but no human performers are directly responsible for the vocals or instrumentation (though, when touring and performing “live,” biological musicians accompany the Vocaloids who appear via holograms). Humans control the Vocaloids via computer programs that contain a database of potential vocals and instrumentations, but the resulting performance represents an amalgamation of selected files assembled to produce a song. In a sense, these Vocaloids became new musical instruments for their human conductors, requiring far less human involvement or control over vocalists and instruments to produce a song than traditional musical compositions (see Bell).

Developed by Yamaha in 2000, a Vocaloid is a “singing voice synthesis” software application that allows “users to input melody and lyrics to synthesize singing” (Yamaha Corporation). Crypton Future Media utilized the Vocaloid

software in their speech synthesis applications. Then, using the MikuMikuDance software platform, a proprietary freeware animation program developed by Yu Higuchi that allows users to animate and create 3D movies, the company created a virtual spokesmodel to help sell their speech synthesis software. Thus, in 2007, Hatsune Miku, currently the most popular Vocaloid performer, was “born.”

While Crypton copyrighted the software and characters, fans have produced most of the Vocaloids’ songs. The main performers, including Miku, exist primarily as marketing devices intended to demonstrate what users can accomplish with the software. These posthuman performers serve as channels through which fans express themselves by sharing their original music online. In 2012, Crypton assigned a Piapro Character License: Creative Commons License to support global, non-commercial fan activities with their Vocaloids (Zaborowski). For the Vocaloids to be successful, both the corporate power of Crypton and the fans’ labor must exist in a complex creative ecosystem (Leavitt et al.). Crypton retains the copyright for the Vocaloids, and they alone can profit off Miku. The fan labor helps them establish a market for licensing the character for profit (Leavitt et al.), such as featuring Miku in a 2011 Toyota Corolla ad campaign (Wicoff). By 2012, five years after Miku’s introduction, the character generated more than \$120 million US (roughly 10 billion yen) for Crypton (Hodgkins).

For a Vocaloid to perform, a human programmer animates its dance moves and inputs its voice “using fragments of voices recorded from actual singers, called the Singer Library” (Yamaha Corporation). Therefore, Vocaloids incorporate pieces and labors contributed by Crypton, the fans, actual vocalists, and MikuMikuDance. Vocaloids are “hybrid products” because they converge the traditionally disparate spheres of technology and art, physical and virtual, and producer and consumer (see Guga). Ian Condry uses the term “wiki-celebrity” (see Verini) to describe the Vocaloid, as audiences’ interactions help form the perception and identity of the virtual individual. While Vocaloid performers may not have an identity programmed into them, they gain one through the communal activities of humans, who both impart a sense of self upon the Vocaloid performer and reevaluate their own conception of self in relation to the performer’s co-constructed identity. Such semiotic labor, then, produces a networked gender for the Vocaloids in direct conversation with sociocultural gender assumptions.

### Miku’s Networked Gender

Miku exists not through its own labor, but through the labor of those around it. Per symbolic interactionism (Denzin) and the networked self (Papacharissi), a person’s identity develops through their communication with others, who provide the individual with the ability and opportunity to see themselves in different ways. Through the exchange and common interpretation of symbols, this network of individuals helps each agent develop a sense of self in relation to others. Thus, this network engages in semiotic labor, as agents co-construct identities in conjunction with other networked agents by sharing the meanings associated with communicated signs.

As a specific aspect of the networked self, the networked gender exists through the interactions of the individual’s gender performance, how others respond to such performances, and how the individual perceives and anticipates such responses (Olson and Reinhard). Drawing on symbolic interactionism, individuals develop their sense of gender and themselves as a gendered entity through their communications with others. Through such symbolic exchange, an individual’s social network engages in semiotic labor to co-construct the individual’s gender identity, which can result in a networked gender that challenges or reifies sociocultural assumptions and norms regarding gender-appropriate behavior. Individuals could consciously engage in this process to explore and determine their gender identity, or they may unconsciously engage in this process.

Either way, people exhibit their agency in this process; currently, however, artificial agents do not have that agency of self-determining their gender identity. While a media representation could portray an AI demonstrating such agency, as in the case of the character BMO in the cult animated series *Adventure Time* (see Olson and Reinhard), such awareness of gender fluidity is not commonly seen in real-world AI. However, Miku has no agency except in such fictional representations; Miku primarily exists through the co-construction of its creators’ profit-driven labor and its fans’ labor. This type of labor is sometimes referred to as “lovebor” due to fans performing it out of love rather than an expectation of financial compensation (Stanfill). Miku does not participate in the semiotic labor, which instead occurs around and through it. To understand Miku, then, it is necessary to examine the semiotic labor of those creating and receiving, and co-constructing, the character.

However, because these artificial agents exist in the same sociocultural contexts as the people who create and use them, such AI are also subject to the same semiotic labor that results in a networked gender. Any AI creator may imbue it with gendered

characteristics that reflect sociocultural norms, such as giving the AI a feminine-coded voice, and the AI's release into the world would then be met with semiotic labor to reinforce or challenge this original determination. Even the lack of gendering by the AI's producer indicates a relationship to these sociocultural norms, given how central gender is to human identity. Analyzing an AI's networked gender can thereby provide information as to how people view gender.

Such theoretical assumptions informed our analysis of Hatsune Miku and how the Vocaloid's gender was co-constructed through the semiotic labor of its creator, fans, researchers, and journalists. Given that Miku's primary identity emerges through the collaboration between Crypton and fans, the character's gender should likewise be co-constructed. To analyze this networked gender, we consider the gendered pronouns and other symbolic language used to describe Miku by Crypton, its fans, journalists, and researchers. Analyzing these signs should provide insight into the assumptions people have about the Vocaloid's gender identity. The next section considers the discourses surrounding this artificial agent, examining how academics, news reporters, and fans have referred to Miku.

### Gendering Hatsune Miku

First, Crypton genders Miku as female. The vocal samples stored in the database, known as a voice bank, were provided by anime voice actress Saki Fujita; Fujita, however, does not directly sing any of Miku's songs, as the computer program produces the final music. In other words, Fujita's labor created the database for the computer program, but not Miku's songs and performances. Miku is described as a 16-year-old "android diva in the near-future world where songs are lost" (Spacey). On their website, Crypton provides basic demographic and "biological" information for the performer: Miku stands 158 cm (just over 5 ft) and weighs 42 kg (about 92.5 lbs); its favorite music genres are J-Pop and Dance-Pop. Most importantly for this analysis, the website labels Miku as a young woman through the use of gendered pronouns like "she" and "her" (Crypton Future Media), which matches the assumptions based on Miku's common visual features (e.g., long hair in ponytails, skirt, stockings, slim waist, and slight breasts). Thus, the gendered identity ascribed to Miku by Crypton relies on feminine stereotypes associated with hair, body shape, voice, and dress.

Beyond these basic features, no information is provided about Miku's personality: those characteristics are largely left blank and thus open to

interpretation. Existing as a blank slate means Miku represents an “uncertain image” that exists “as a vessel for [fans] living out their own desires and fantasies” (Jørgensen et al. 3). According to Crypton, “She is also often called a global icon or ‘hub,’ because the culture around her encourages a worldwide creative community to produce and share Miku-related content.” Because Crypton includes an illustration of Miku but omits “any information other than biographical data,” fans can “apply their own interpretation to the character” (Le 3). Miku’s fans are free to “project their own lives” (McLeod 505) onto the virtual performer through their representations of it and their presentations of their work through it. This uncertain image therefore results in a “socially networked phenomenon” (Jørgensen et al. 6) shaped by fan production and consumption; in other words, it is not enough that the programmers make her look/sound female, but her identity creation also involves fans accepting and reifying this presentation.

Fans thereby imbue Miku with an identity that would appeal to their own values. Indeed, Miku has become “‘a hub of creative culture for collaborations’ among artists and fans,” who alter and add to her identity through activities including fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay (Mallenbaum). These fan-created identities are shared with other fans via social networking sites as well as official and unofficial fan sites such as *Mikufan.com*. This fan activity results in a networked self for the character, one composed of bits and pieces of identities generated via the fans’ communal activities. Additionally, the circulation of identities reflects and shapes the fans’ identities as well, demonstrating the concept of the networked self, writ across biological and artificial agents. As one astounded viewer put it after watching a video of Hatsune Miku performing in concert, “When you put a personality to it, like they’re doing, then it becomes a real thing” (Fine and Fine). Fans and academics appear to agree that semiotic labor creates the character, or identity, of Miku.

Both groups also contribute to Miku’s networked gender. Whether as aca-fans or objective critics, scholars have begun wrestling with how to describe and represent Miku. Most, however, do not appear to question Miku’s gender identity (see Connor; Le; Leavitt et al.; Wicoff). Indeed, using feminine pronouns often occurs in relation to discussing Miku’s realness. For example, Ken McLeod routinely refers to the Vocaloid as “her” when analyzing the quasi-spiritual relationship between the Vocaloid and its fans (507). Rafal Zaborowski sees the character’s gender relating to its realness: “for her fans and producers Miku is a ‘real’ entity” (111) because “she sings about things that matter to [the fans]” (124).

Eve Klein compares the audience's playing along with the Vocaloid's fabrication to drag performances and further accounts for how Miku's gender and "humanness" exist through a co-construction between the audience and the semiotic labor involved in reading "the repetition of particular acts and gestures which are open to recontextualization" (41). In noting Miku's constructed identity and comparing Vocaloids to drag, Klein draws on Judith Butler's discussion of gender fluidity to argue how gender relates to realness as intertwined signifiers.

Other scholars address gender fluidity in their work, such as Francis Ka-Man Fu: "Given the relationship that Miku has established with her supporters, the psychological investment that supporters have made, and the human-like interaction between Miku and concert goers, it is my conviction that 'she' is a better fitting pronoun. Miku is definitely not 'a voice and nothing more'" (25). Roger Andre Søraa addresses this matter in relation to the realness issue: "This 'easy-gendering' debate might be because she lacks a physical body, and thus is seen as less 'real'" (43). Stina Marie Hasse Jørgensen, Sabrina Vitting-Seerup, and Katrine Wallevik all recognize that their gendering of Miku happens even though the Vocaloid "is a software program, and not someone who can identify with being a woman" (13). These reflections suggest more awareness of gender fluidity, but none spent significant time exploring this question. Of the published studies to date, Ka Yan Lam presents a feminist critique of Miku's gendered nature and how that identity relates to issues of authenticity and sexualization, doing so by putting quotes around the gendered pronouns.

As with the academic critiques and analyses, descriptions of Miku in news reports tend to align with the Crypton gendering. News publications routinely use gendered pronouns and feminine descriptors for Miku (see Hsu; Jenkins; Kelts; Mangu-Ward; Rao; Roose; Schwartz; Zushi). Additionally, a 2013 report by *Discovery Channel Canada* called Miku the "Queen of Pop who merges music and technology" (Daily Planet). Often, the story's angle focused on answering the question perceived to be foremost on the minds of the public: what is this virtual thing and why do people care about it? This "hook" is handled by juxtaposing the gendered nature against the non-humanness of Miku. Thus, Carly Mallenbaum wrote for the *USA Today* that "Hatsune Miku is a pop star, no doubt. She's just not a real person," and Lindsay Zoladz of the *New York Magazine* declared, "If you've heard of her, you've probably heard her described as a 'hologram'; maybe you've also heard people say she doesn't exist." At times this juxtaposition is used to also comment on Miku's fanbase, suggesting that Miku's fans are not bothered by the



“stark unreality” (Johnson) or that “not even her fans know, or care, how to taxonomize her” (Verini). Such messaging appears to draw on a perception of fans being easily duped into believing fictional entities are real people.

As for the English-speaking<sup>1</sup> fans regularly engaging with the character, their interactions appear to reflect a more complicated reception and understanding of the character’s gender identity. According to Lukman Aroeana and Philip Sugai, fans responded to a news story describing Miku as fake and argued instead for Miku’s “real-ness” without questioning the character’s gendered nature. Those fans did, however, refer to Miku as “Uta Hime” or “Princess of Song” and used feminine gendered pronouns, suggesting an acceptance of Crypton’s positioning of Miku. Similarly, Espen Helgesen conducted an ethnography of children pretending to be Miku, and those children likewise focused more on the “fake versus real” binary than the gender binary in describing the Vocaloid. Furthermore, they too used feminine gendered pronouns to describe Miku. Zaborowski quotes fans referring to Miku as “she” when describing their perception of the character’s songs, again emphasizing how the fans perceived the Vocaloid as real or virtual. Such analyses often discuss how the fans use Miku as a form of self-expression, to “become” Miku, suggesting a plurality of identifications with and uncertain identity for Miku, as discussed earlier.

Public fan descriptions of Miku tend to utilize the gendered pronouns as well. At *Mikufan.com*, the “About” page provides a background on the character, stating, “She continues to grow in unpredictable ways, but we’ll do our best to keep up with her” (admin). A fan wiki for Miku presents the character’s gender as “female” and repeatedly refers to Miku as “she,” e.g., “She is considered the most popular and well known VOCALOID, and the first to become a pop idol.” Interestingly, the fans’ use of “she” both suggests Miku has human-like agency (e.g., “Later reports came that she had sold 60,000+ copies of her software.”) while also acknowledging her artificial nature (e.g., “She was initially released in August 2007 for the *VOCALOID2* engine...”) (Wikia “Hatsune Miku”). A similar duality is seen in Miku’s Wikipedia entry, suggesting the character exists as an artifact of Crypton’s creation while also being responsible for successful sales of the software and resulting songs — all the while referring to Miku as “she” although without the specific designation as “female.”

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<sup>1</sup> We focused on English-speaking fans because a) English is our primary language and b) English contains specific gendered pronouns.

Fans discuss gender in online forums, but their focus is on the gendered nature of the Vocaloid's voice. In the fan forum Vocaverse Network, a search with the term "gender" returned only fans discussing how to manipulate the "gender factor" of various versions of the Vocaloid software and what happened to the songs that resulted from doing so. According to the Vocaloid Wikia, the gender factor allows users to control the voice to produce a "thicker masculine tone" or a "more feminine, even 'chipmunk-like', sound" (Wikia "Using the Parameter"). Thus, on Vocaverse, fans discuss how they can manipulate the gendered nature of the Vocaloid's singing voice, even managing to create a more masculinized sound in a feminized body. For example, Chia-P said, "Use some Gender shift to make Miku's [sic] voice SLIGHTLY deeper. Be careful not to overdo this effect, though" (emphasis in original). The direction in the first sentence aligns with other comments found on the forum; the second sentence, however, perhaps demonstrates a hesitancy to manipulate this gender factor too much, as doing so would stray too far from the perception of Miku's gender. This concern seems to match views collected by Zaborowski, who notes that Miku's voice "was an indispensable part of the experience" (123). Similarly, GreenFantasy64 shared a song on the Vocaverse forum made by a fan featuring Miku with a deeper voice:

Love the instrumental, but I don't know about Miku's voice... One hand I think it works and sounds nice, but on the other I kind-of want more emotion from her...? I don't know [...] like I would have preferred not too much Gender Factor on her voice (I'm probably wrong on that, so sorry if I am!).

Again, a fan was concerned that Miku's voice failed to match the character's ascribed gender identity.

Those fan discourses represent more direct focus on the means of using Miku to produce music, and not the character directly. When their attention is brought directly to the character's gender identity, nuance emerges. In the fifth episode of the 2016 *Mikumumentary*, documentarian Tara Knight spoke with Miku fans who describe how other fans create sexualized portrayals of the character. One fan voices concern about such a portrayal, saying, "She's supposed to be cute [...] she's supposed to be young," thus reflecting on the anime genre's tendency to sexualize girls but not considering the character's gender identity in relation to such objectification. At the same time, another fan finds inspiration in the gendered nature of Miku, which in turn encourages them to be truer to their own idealized self: "I wear what I want, and I do what I want. That's what it means to be female. I don't have to constantly be worrying about being a good woman or being a bad

woman.” This reading allows for a more open perception of being gendered as a woman and expands the definition of “woman.”

This openness, however, can be problematic. A 2018 *Washington Post* article quotes Viennese superfan Cien Miller, who praises Miku, saying: “She can be anything. She’s like the world’s Barbie doll” (Jenkins). Miller’s comments reflect both the uncertain image of the character and the circumscribed nature of those potentialities given the character’s gender. Comparing Miku to a Barbie doll comes with the assumptions and stereotypes coded into that figure, especially regarding the primacy of visual cues in determining gender identity and the power imbalances that come from such assumptions. Female performers often experience sexualization that male performers do not, representing a patriarchally enforced power difference that further represses women in the professional sphere (Dean 166). Both Barbie and Miku experience this sexualization without any ability to agentially resist it: Barbie and Miku’s labor operates for their “master’s” pleasure.

Without Crypton providing more detailed identity information, Miku’s identity remains open to others who can ascribe their own assumptions about gender onto it. When we uploaded to YouTube a video presentation of an earlier version of this paper (Pop Culture Lens), one fan responded with:

we don’t need somebody who [is] not a fan telling us what to think and how to act toward her. All her fans all know that she [is] not real [...] it [is] not hard to tell which gender the Vocaloids are, you can usually tell just by looking at them. [...] we Vocaloid fans know what gender the Vocaloids are and we don’t need a reason to why we think that Vocaloid is a girl or boy. (Daisuke Niwa)

While this person challenged our analysis of the discourses, another fan responded with interest and hoped the analysis would be extended to “address how the male Vocaloids are often portrayed in the same feminine and male-gaze way that Miku is, because I find it fascinating that all Vocaloids [...] are portrayed as feminine, regardless of their ‘official’ gender” (NattalaChao). These responses demonstrate the potential range that could occur when fans acknowledge the performative nature of gender, as well as the likelihood that fans, while working with Crypton and one another to create Miku’s networked gender, appear to have given it little thought.

## Miku as Gendered Laborer

The semiotic labor of the humans programming and using Miku appears to reify gender stereotypes as being under the control of others, especially in relation to female performers. This semiotic labor results in Miku's networked gender and demonstrates how future non-biological artificial agents may have their gender assumed and ascribed to them to improve human-robot interaction. Overall, these examples from the discourses demonstrate a desire to represent Miku and the performer's impact on fans as they work to legitimate Miku's presence and humanity by using gendered pronouns. Utilizing "it" is seen as too impersonal and diminishes a reason explaining people's affective entanglement with the character. The use of gendered pronouns, then, demonstrates an anthropomorphization that is common with digital, virtual, or artificial objects and agents (see Reeves and Nass). Assigning the Vocaloid a gendered persona is a "communicative strategy" to help those engaging in these discourses establish a common foundation on which symbols, and thus meaning, can be exchanged (Woods 336). Thus, it appears that public and fan discourses surrounding Miku reaffirm a basic gendered identity to improve the human-robot interaction Miku represents.

These discourses surrounding Miku, however, demonstrate the continued visual primacy and cisnormativity of determining gender through the codes used to describe the Vocaloid. Miku is not an empty sign as claimed, because people appear to accept the character's gender identity as determined by Crypton. The prevailing notions of gender are visible within the discourses, suggesting that Miku's physical appearance determines the character's gender identity. With Crypton labeling Miku with gendered pronouns that match the character's visual appearance, fans, academics, and the public have no real reason to challenge that assumption, even if they can add to other aspects of the character's identity. Without a challenge, this networked gender replicates the biological determinist argument for gender identity. Miku has been coded as a woman, and the discourses surrounding Miku reflect and reinforce these codes.

The networked gender exists through largely unconscious semiotic labor by those agents involved and identified earlier. It may be that the stereotypes concerning visual and vocal feminine codes are too ingrained in people's minds and their default assumptions too readily come to mind through activated gender schemas. Without anything in Miku's appearance to trigger challenges to these assumptions, fans and the public are more concerned with the binary question of whether the character can be considered "real." Assuming Miku possesses an inherent gendered identity helps answer this question: since Miku appears to be a

woman, she must be real, as women are real. People may apply existing social codes regarding gender to Miku because that is easier semiotic labor to perform (Lewis 509): using visual cues to assign gender identity can happen largely unconsciously, whereas challenging those stereotypes would require more semiotic labor, as other signs and codes would have to be considered. The commonality in the networked gender demonstrates the semiotic labor being less strenuous, perhaps to help offset the more strenuous semiotic labor of assigning “realness.”

Overall, it seems that Miku’s gendered nature helps people perceive the Vocaloid as real. Miku’s gendered presence moderates people’s need to suspend their disbelief over the realness of the artificial agent. Gendering Miku allows fans’ identification with the virtual character through anthropomorphism, and the disinterest in problematizing the character’s gender suggests a certain comfort level with anthropomorphizing artificial agents. This acceptance of Miku’s gender may be undertaken to handle the binary of reality-virtuality; seeing the character as “she” may help “her” fans answer the question of why they have become so emotionally engaged with a software program. This conclusion has possible applications to everyday life as the presence of robots increases at work, at home, and in other areas. Gendering a robot could provide for improved comfort during human-robot interactions, for good or ill, as evidenced by the integration of Siri, Alexa, and others into our daily lives and workplaces (Fessler).

Thus, the unconscious reliance on and circulation of these gendered codes has implications beyond the Vocaloids. Since Miku has no agency over its appearance and performance, the character has no ability to speak back against how others treat it or conceptualize it. Biological performers, on the other hand, possess such agency over their gender identity and their performances,<sup>2</sup> including the basic ability to stop performing and leave the public spotlight. Thus, one criticism of Miku involves who exerts control over the feminine pop idol and thus control over its feminized form (see Dean). This criticism can be extended to other artificial agents put under a human’s control: when the entity has no agency and no ability to consent, who gets to exert control, and how, over its labor?

With Miku, as with other virtual characters (and perhaps increasingly with biological performers, celebrities, and politicians), the Vocaloid’s femininely gendered body has been created, recreated, and circulated for the consumption pleasure of others (Prior); she is, after all, the world’s Barbie doll, reifying “the

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<sup>2</sup> For example: Billie Eilish, Brigitte Lundy-Paine, and Asia Kate Dillon.

conventional role of women as playmates of their opposite sex” (Lam 1119). Accepting this connection between a feminized gender identity and enacting control over that gendered female body arises due to longstanding patriarchal attitudes and actions. This acceptance suggests issues for the subjugation of future artificial agents (see Guga; Lam; Sone). Failing to problematize Miku as feminine reflects a wider sociocultural acceptance of the objectification of the feminized body for entertainment purposes.

The consistent gendering of Miku as female reflects gendered labor of women and their lack of agency over their own labor, such as dancers, porn stars, maids, and other “subservient” workers. Miku’s networked gender demonstrates a sociocultural preference to reflect prejudices about gender and labor, and for gender to operate as an organizing heuristic for understanding artificial agents. Gendered robots in popular culture have demonstrated this bifurcation in labor for decades; for example, Rosie in the 1960s cartoon *The Jetsons* reflected both “the then-common black female domestic worker, and a riff on the ‘mammy’ stereotype” (James 421). In analyzing the figuration of Amazon’s Echo, Thao Phan draws parallels with Rosie by analyzing how “Alexa” reflects nostalgic conceptions of gendered and racialized domestic workers (6), thereby reifying power dynamics that have long impacted women and their labor. Heather Suzanne Woods argues this gendering of surveillance labor by smartspeakers operates to reduce anxieties about the AI persona people work with in their homes. Miku’s networked gender suggests that the current practice of gendering AI like Alexa could continue as more artificial agents enter the workforce in professional, service, and domestic spheres. While such users can modify such AIs to produce more “masculine” sounding interfaces, the default is feminine, reifying sexist assumptions about women’s position to others in labor contexts (see Costa; Faber; Schiller and McMahon; Woods; Fessler).

With more artificial agents entering the workforce, we must be mindful of semiotic labor to signify what is appropriate and inappropriate for gendered workers. Humans may continue to perpetuate gender stereotypes during their “reality labor.” The subjective experience of reality — along with the sociocultural, historical-material, and political economic conditions and structures that constitute human civilization — is co-constructed through the symbolic interactionism of people: how people create, perceive, and utilize popular culture representations developed into “imagined impressions” that inform how they make sense of the world (Phan 3). If people continue to utilize co-constructions of gender to perceive

artificial agents as real, then reality will continue to perpetuate gendered labor dynamics that can harm humans.

## Conclusion

In our analysis of Hatsune Miku’s networked gender, we see different types of labor working together to generate the character’s networked gender, which only further reaffirms gender assumptions about women in the workforce. As this article demonstrates, the semiotic labor constituting Miku’s networked gender demonstrates the continued visual primacy and cisnormativity of determining gender through the signals used to describe the Vocaloid. While it is possible to view Miku as an “empty sign,” void of any identifying signals for people to layer their own desires unto, people appear to accept the character’s gender identity based on “her” voice, appearance, and power relationships people have with the Vocaloid, all of which has been determined by Crypton. Indeed, the semiotic labor involved in Miku’s networked gender potentially moderates people’s need to suspend their disbelief over the realness of the artificial agent; seeing the character as female or feminine may help “her” fans answer the question of why they have become so emotionally engaged with a software program. Since the interpretation of “realness” requires more cognitive labor, people may rely on gendered heuristics to interpret the character’s identity.

This conclusion has possible applications to everyday life as the presence of robots increases at work, home, and in other areas. Gendering a robot could provide for improved comfort during human-robot interactions. Two major issues concerning labor appear in the networked gender of Hatsune Miku. First, the networked gender reifies gendered work practices that disempower women and place Miku’s labor under another’s agency. Second, this process suggests such gendering of AIs will occur with other artificial agents to placate humans and improve human-robot interactions in work/labor contexts.

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# A Woman with Influence: Henrietta Porter in the Television Series *Trackdown*

WILLIAM HAMPES

In the 1950's women on television tended to be relegated to traditional domestic roles as contented housewives: *Father Knows Best* (1954-1963), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (1959-1966), etc. This emphasis on domesticity was found throughout the culture at the time because although "the actual lived experience of domesticity was fraught with problems, the family ideal still promised material benefits and personal stability in a confusing world." (Spigel 34). Even when women were single, self-supporting and competent in their chosen profession, they conformed to the traditional feminine role as, for example, in *Our Miss Brooks* (1952-1956) (Dow xvii). Conflicts that occurred tended to center around the normal growing pains that the couple's children were having rather than any fundamental disagreements between husband and wife. Female resistance against gender roles was mainly confined to wives disobeying or disagreeing with their husbands, typically in shows about childless couples where conflict could not focus on the children, such as *I Married Joan* (1952-1955), *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957).<sup>1</sup> In regards to Joan and Lucy their rebellion against their respective husbands consisted of their wacky, unrealistic and unsuccessful attempts to seek employment outside of their marriage (Spigel 174-177).

Alice Kramden of the *Honeymooners* was different. As the long-suffering wife of her often-irresponsible husband, Ralph, she did not pull any verbal punches when she was angry and frustrated with Ralph's inconsiderate schemes and ridiculous

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<sup>1</sup> It is true that Lucy and Ricky gave birth to little Ricky, but he was not born until the second season and appeared in only eight episodes in the first four years of the series.

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comments. Much of the humor of the series came from her sarcastic, well-deserved put-downs of her husband. A large part of the context of their disagreements was the fact that the Kramdens, despite Ralph's job as a bus driver, were a working class couple whose resources were quite limited. Perhaps if they had the resources and income of the middle-class Andersons, Cleavers, and Stones they could have avoided some of their conflicts. If Ralph was the sole bread winner in a middle-class suburban marriage, the power differential between the two of them would have made it more difficult for Alice to complain or criticize him. It is interesting that as a stand-alone series it lasted only one season. Perhaps Alice's sarcasm and the Kramdens' strained economic circumstances were a bit too harsh for 1950's television comedy.

However, there was one television genre where women could break out of confining gender roles, at least more than in other genres during this time: Westerns (Wildermuth 134). There are several reasons for this. First, the emphasis on individualism and freedom in Westerns, which mainly applied to the male characters, could also apply to females. Secondly, since Westerns occurred in the distant past women breaking out of restricting gender roles would be less threatening than women on television breaking out of these roles in programs set in contemporary times.

A third reason is that the Western frontier in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a lot more harsh, dangerous and unforgiving than suburbia in the 1950's. That meant that a woman on the frontier, especially a woman alone, in many cases had to be tough and independent just to survive. Women in Westerns are sometimes categorized as either a schoolmarm or a dance hall/prostitute. The former is the traditional female, but generally did not appear until a town was "civilized," that is, no longer dangerous but without the freedom and individualism of earlier days. The dance hall/prostitute on the other hand, "appeals to the dark, uncivilized qualities of the hero (despite that this type of female is often being portrayed with a heart of gold), and therefore must be killed or marginalized with the advance of civilization" (Hampes, 115). However, William Indick argues a third type of female exists, one who figures more prominently and importantly in Westerns, the frontierswoman, who is "Neither as debased as the whore nor as hopelessly virginal and pure as the schoolmarm, the frontierswoman is gritty but wholesome, honest but also sexual, and earthy but still refined" (68-9). This is the type of woman who would defy traditional gender roles.

The fourth reason has to do with the evolution of television Westerns. During the early days of television Westerns catered to a juvenile audience. Good guys were strictly good and bad guys strictly bad, and the good guys always won. Heroes in these Westerns, like Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger, were reassuring to a public confronted with the complexities of the Cold War. This type of Western hero during this time provided reassurance to an American public caught up in the complexities of the Cold War that there were still clearly defined good guys and bad guys and the good guys would eventually win (Yoggy, 5-18).

In the middle 1950s, however, television Westerns began to offer programs geared more to adults with themes that expanded the scope of Westerns from just masculine exercises in physical bravery and good overcoming evil with characters who were more complex (Yoggy 78). These changes were at least in part a reaction to a trend in films towards “psychological Westerns” a trend that had been occurring since the late 1940’s. Because these psychological Westerns challenged the norms of traditional Westerns they added “dimension, complexity, and dramatic tension-an enormous creative spark” (Meuel 14). These characters, in films and later television, could be both brave and cowardly, and strong and weak, depending on the circumstances. The heroes sometimes made mistakes and had doubts and regrets. The villains could have redeeming qualities and were sometimes forced to break the law and even harm others due to their circumstances. If heroes and even villains could have the freedom to make mistakes and have regrets and doubts — something more in line with traditional femininity than traditional masculinity and thus challenging traditional gender roles — then the possibility opened up for women to have more freedom to act in more masculine ways.

### Westerns Women and Henrietta Porter

Something that added complexity to the characters in these “psychological” or “adult” television Westerns was that the definition of courage and its consequences were expanded. The characters in these Westerns had to find the courage not only to face physical threats, but also to love and be part of a community, redeem themselves for past failures, transgressions, and losses, be authentic and true to themselves, be temperate and refrain from hurting others or themselves, pursue justice in nonviolent ways, and simply grow up and grow old successfully (Hampes 5-7). This emphasis on other types of courage, besides physical, such as moral courage (pursuing an ethical course of action despite the opposition, disapproval,

punishment and threat of being ostracized by others) and psychological courage (overcoming one's fears and psychological problems and addictions, such as alcoholism to do what is beneficial for themselves and others) opened up possibilities for females to go beyond the traditional roles of either the schoolmarm or dancehall girl/prostitute. Women could assert themselves in courageous ways (being authentic by telling the truth about themselves or others, supporting those unpopular with the community, etc.) without necessarily being violent. To put these changes in psychological terms, television Westerns allowed women and, for that matter, men, to become more psychologically androgynous (Bem 155), a healthy mixture of the best of both traditional masculine and feminine traits, or as Blake Lucas would put it, Westerns are "not a masculine genre, but one supremely balanced in its male/female aspect" (301).

According to Mark Wildermuth, *Annie Oakley* (1954-1957) is one of those television shows which are "balanced in its male/female aspect" (135). In some respects, it is what Gary Yoggy (5) would call a juvenile Western. The good guys (or in this case, good guys and good woman) are very good, and the bad guys are very bad. The good guys and Annie, played by Gail Davis, are so good that they never resort to killing the outlaws, but subdue them by shooting the guns out of their hands (Annie's specialty) or beating them up (the specialty of Annie's sidekick, Deputy Sheriff Lofty Craig, played by Brad Johnson). What makes the show a precursor for later Westerns is that Annie can definitely take care of herself. Outlaws or others who demean her as "just a girl" learn to regret it. She pursues outlaws with abandon in her rather undefined role in law enforcement. Often, she is more in charge of the pursuit of the criminals and solves crimes and sizes up people and situations ("she's plenty smart") better than Lofty or the seldom seen sheriff. She shoots, ropes and rides a horse better than any man and has other masculine skills, such as driving a locomotive or a stagecoach. When individuals need help, often it's Annie they call for, rather than Lofty, whom she rescues on a number of occasions. In fact, at times it seems Lofty is necessary only for the mandatory fisticuffs which put the finishing touches on the bad guys.

However, she has a feminine side to her personality. Annie is an excellent cook. She is devoted to her younger brother, Tagg (Jimmy Hawkins), and nurtures and guides him as well as any parent could. Men have learned not only to respect her, but to like her as well because of her obvious concern for them. She befriends those who are friendless, often helping them to keep out of prison or to avoid being lynched or to save their jobs. She even aids those who are rude and arrogant, but



basically decent, helping them to become humbler and more human. There is also a hint of a romance between Annie and Lofty, someone who Annie cares about very much as a friend and perhaps more.

According to Yoggy (113), another woman in the 1950's Western who is able to take care of herself is Kitty Russell, played by Amanda Blake, in *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975), whether fending off drunks who get too fresh with her or dealing with more dangerous types. She can use a gun, play a hand of poker, or drive a stage, if need be, to get what she wants. As a businesswoman who owns her own saloon and runs it by herself from ordering her stock to keeping the books, she is totally independent and at the beck and call of no man. However, Kitty is a fully rounded, psychologically androgynous woman who can show not only tender feelings for those she cares about but also help, nurture and fight for them, whether it is an 18-year-old expectant mother or a wounded passenger whose life she is racing to save (Yoggy 113). She cares especially deeply for the other recurring characters in the show: Matt (James Arness), Doc (Milburn Stone), Chester (Dennis Weaver), Festus (Ken Curtis), Chad (Roger Ewing), Newly (Buck Taylor) and Quint (Burt Reynolds), often taking risks, sometimes life-threatening ones, to help them, especially Matt. Her relationship with Matt is particularly close, with a hint that it is something more than friendship.

According to J. Fred McDonald (95), by the middle of the 1960's the Westerns that remained popular were those that revolved around families or family-like units. Members of a functional family tend to not only nurture and care for one another but also fight in defense of the other members of the family, in other words, be androgynous. *Gunsmoke* was able to survive all the way to 1975 because it transitioned into one of these "domestic Westerns" (McDonald 98). Kitty was able to make this transition without losing any of her strength and independence.

However, as impressive as these two women are, they are not as integral and influential in their towns nor do they challenge the patriarchy of the times as much as Henrietta Porter, played by Ellen Corby, in *Trackdown* (1957-1959). Annie's proficiency with the gun, a rope and a horse, as well as her help in rounding up outlaws makes her a valued member of the community, but the source of her influence in the community is restricted to personal relationships and prowess in chasing down outlaws and not based on any prominent position with well-defined powers in the community, a situation which makes the stability of that influence somewhat uncertain. As the proprietor of the prosperous Long Branch and an esteemed person in her own right, Kitty certainly receives a great deal of respect

from those who frequent the saloon, as well as the respect and admiration of Matt, Doc, Chester, Festus, Quint, Newly, Chad and other townspeople. However, because of the importance of their occupations and their acknowledged expertise in practicing them, Matt Dillon, and to a certain extent, Doc, are the moral centers of Dodge City and hold the most sway in the community.

Henrietta Porter, who appeared in 24 of the 71 episodes of *Trackdown*, on the other hand, is the moral backbone of Porter, Texas, and the most influential member of the community. The star of the show, Hoby Gilman played by Robert Culp, is every bit as capable, smart, tough and brave as Matt Dillon and certainly Lofty Craig, but he is not really an established part of the town of Porter. He is a Texas Ranger “on assignment” to Porter, which means he is an outsider and can be called away at any time to go to Ranger headquarters in Austin or somewhere else in Texas, as he does on numerous occasions. Henrietta is a widow who has established her gravitas by founding the town of Porter with her husband and running the newspaper there. She has seen and done enough to have a firm set of principles that guides her and forms the foundation of her strength and independence. She also has a hard-won understanding of human nature based on her experience that allows her to be empathic and admit when she is wrong. Her social and political clout is greater than that of Annie and Kitty because she possesses something more and more influential as time goes on than either Annie’s guns or Kitty’s popular saloon: a printing press. This stable institutional power base anchored in the community allows her to do more than assert her own independence; it allows her to be a direct threat to the patriarchy of the town.

The ability to use her power effectively is related to Henrietta’s androgynous personality, which allows her the flexibility to use whatever methods, traditionally masculine, traditionally feminine, or a combination of both, are most appropriate in a given situation (see Wiggins and Holzmuller 67). Also, androgynous individuals are higher in emotional intelligence than either those who strictly conform to either masculine or feminine stereotypes (Guastello and Guastello 663). Emotional intelligence is a broad concept associated with interpersonal competence that includes being able to recognize accurately emotions in oneself and others and express and control emotions in a way that produces effective interpersonal relationships (Salovey and Mayer 85). Androgyny, flexibility, and especially emotional intelligence are demonstrated by Henrietta in the episodes in which she appears.

Henrietta shows her determination and power in the very first episode she appears in, "The Judge." Malcolm Henry (Steve Terrell), the son of the town judge, kills a man in cold blood. Henrietta witnesses the murder and not only decides to testify against Malcom (who brags that his father, Judge Nelson Henry, as played by John Litel, will let him go) but she also plans to write a newspaper article about the murder and her role as a witness. Hoby puts Malcolm in jail, but he escapes and goes to the newspaper office intending to hold Henrietta hostage until a friend brings him a horse to escape. While there, Malcom threatens to shoot Henrietta, but she refuses to be intimidated. When Hoby visits the newspaper office, Malcolm is hiding with his gun trained on both Henrietta and Hoby. Before Hoby leaves, the resourceful and brave Henrietta gives him a copy of supposedly the latest edition of the paper but is really a note to Hoby that Malcolm is hiding in the office. The judge comes into the office through the back door and begs his son to leave, but Malcolm says he wants to kill Henrietta first. The judge kills Malcolm before he can pull the trigger.

In numerous episodes after that one, Henrietta uses the power of the press to achieve results. In "The Avenger," Hoby asks Henrietta to publish a false story that he has found a stolen payroll, a ruse that results in the capture of the thieves. In "The Schoolteacher" Henrietta writes an editorial in the newspaper about Porter needing more teachers at a time when there is considerable doubt about the town supporting education. At the end of the "Three-Legged Fox," Henrietta publishes the truth about the outlaw Ben Moss (Henry Hull), that he was killed when he chose to face Hoby and a sheriff alone rather than use an innocent man as a human shield, even though the story appears to result in glorifying an outlaw. In "Stranger in Town," with Hoby's blessing Henrietta publishes a letter from the bank robber, Harry Keller, in which Keller tells the townspeople to stay out of his way because he is going to kill Hoby, even though this so unsettles the townspeople that they complain about every stranger who comes to town (nobody, even Hoby, knows what Keller looks like). At the end of the episode, Hoby figures out who Harry is and subdues him after Tenner Smith (Peter Leeds) wounds him.

One of the more interesting episodes in which Henrietta uses and misuses the power of her newspaper is "The Set-Up." Rex Carlson (Douglas Fowley), an old acquaintance of hers, starts up a courtship with Henrietta, who is clearly infatuated with him. Meanwhile, Hoby is all alone in suspecting the courteous Rex of committing a robbery for which he seems to have an air-tight alibi. Henrietta is so angry about Hoby expressing his suspicions to Rex, who has proposed to her, that

she threatens Hoby to either apologize or she will use her newspaper to print stories against Hoby until he is run out of town. Hoby refuses to apologize and Henrietta runs a story about Hoby violating Rex's civil rights. Hoby acquires proof that Rex has a criminal background and breaks Rex's "air-tight alibi" to prove he committed the robbery. He has to shoot Rex just before Rex is about to leave town. When Henrietta finds out the truth about Rex, she apologizes to Hoby the best way she knows how, by printing a headline in very large type: "I'm Sorry, Hoby!"

An even more common way Henrietta exerts her influence is through passing on vital information to Hoby. As one of the founders of the town with a great deal of knowledge about what has been printed not only in her newspaper, but also in other newspapers, Henrietta has inside information which is often critical in cracking cases and influencing public opinion. In "The House," Henrietta informs Hoby that Ben Steele (Jacques Aubuchon) has lived well for fourteen years while spending much of his time on his front porch. Steele's puzzling behavior leads Hoby to guess correctly that Ben, whose three wives have either died or disappeared under mysterious circumstances, has killed them for their money. In the "Pueblo Kid," Henrietta's past newspaper articles make it clear that the so-called Pueblo Kid (Michael Landon) is a fake, that he did not kill any of the seven men he supposedly killed. In "Killer Take All," Henrietta tells Hoby about Ellen Hackett's (Nancy Gates) romance with Bobby Caryle (Don Durant) three years before, which ended when she married Paul Hackett. This occurrence is part of the complicated chain of events that leads Hoby to correctly surmise that Ellen killed Paul.

In "Day of Vengeance," Henrietta informs Hoby that five years ago Jack Summers (Michael Landon) was convicted of attempted train robbery. While Jack was in prison, his brother Larry was killed. Now that Jack has been released from prison and coming to Porter, Hoby assumes his return has to do with his desire for revenge against Larry's killer. As it turns out, Hoby convinces Jack that Larry's killing is justified, and Jack curtails his quest for vengeance. In "The Three-Legged Fox," Henrietta tells Hoby that, according to newspaper stories, Ben Moss had a reputation as a Robin Hood figure who never shot a man when he did not have to and was supposedly killed twenty years ago, a death that proves to be untrue when he shows up in Porter before he is killed there. In "The Kid," after Hoby shoots a 16-year-old boy because he suspects him of robbing a hotel room, Henrietta informs him that two weeks previously someone was breaking into buildings around the hotel and the hotel room of Jonathan Tate, who was critically wounded. Eventually Hoby can find out to his regret that it is the boy's father, Milo York (Jack

Kruschen), who is the thief. In "The Feud," Henrietta relates to Hoby the long-ago feud between the Turleys and Hacketts that is revived when the Turleys come back to Porter. In "Hard Lines," Henrietta informs Hoby that the townspeople despise Joker Wells (James Coburn) because he was accused of cowardice and desertion while in the Confederate army. In "The Trick," Henrietta lets Hoby know that Tully Saxon (Edgar Buchanan) wants Tenner Smith killed because Tully was sent to prison for eight years for killing a man on the testimony of Tenner, who informed the court that Tully was marking cards in the poker game that led to the killing.

Henrietta also is influential in her community because of her integrity, wisdom, empathy, bravery, and willingness to tell the truth. In "Outlaw's Wife," Henrietta supports a woman who is an outcast in Porter because her husband is an outlaw. When Grace Marsden (Barbara Lawrence) is accused of being an accomplice in a murder and robbery, Henrietta, who believes that someone is innocent until proven guilty, supports Grace when most of the rest of the town has prejudged her as guilty. In "The Kid," when Hoby mistakenly kills an innocent 16-year-old boy, Henrietta tries to comfort him by telling him that the town does not blame him for the killing. When a mob comes after Bart McCallin in "McCallin's Daughter" for allegedly committing a murder and robbery, Henrietta stands up to the mob, insisting that whatever they do has to be legal and proper. In "Hard Lines," Henrietta tells Hoby that she witnessed that Joker Wells shot Ed Crow (DeForest Kelley) because Ed drew first, even though the townspeople would have preferred that the unpopular Joker be prosecuted for the shooting. In "Sunday's Child" Henrietta defies Hoby by refusing to separate the mother Cindy (Gail Kobe) from her baby even though the father, Joe Sunday (James Best), who has a criminal reputation, has come to Porter with a court order giving him custody of the baby against Cindy's wishes.

"Sunday's Child" has a scene that reveals a great deal about both Henrietta and Hoby. When Henrietta defies Hoby by refusing to help him deliver Joe Sunday's child to him despite a judge's court order, he sarcastically asks her, "Do women have a monopoly on loving their children?" Henrietta responds, "You men, you're all alike. I never met one yet admit that another man was wrong," implying that when men perceive that they are threatened by women they close ranks against them even if the men are wrong. This answer so angers the normally temperate, fair-minded and respectful Hoby that he counters with a retort sometimes used by men in Westerns of that era when frustrated with a woman, a comment that is both threatening and condescending at the same time: "I wish you were a man so I could take a poke at you." Henrietta, not at all intimidated, responds, "Then I would hit

you right back, and then when we get tired of hitting one another we would go to the nearest saloon and drink to each other's long life and future happiness. Oh, I'm sorry, Hoby, that I've just about given up hope of seeing you men act like grown-ups." As far as Henrietta is concerned, the masculine code of the West is child's play, and violent child's play at that.

Two other episodes besides "The Set Up" in which Henrietta demonstrates her integrity by having the courage to admit she is wrong are "The Chinese Cowboy" and "The Vote." When Les Morgan (Don Gordon) and his friends harass the Chinese immigrant, Wong (Keye Luke), at first Henrietta defends Morgan, telling Hoby that everyone likes Les and that there will be trouble if Hoby intervenes. She adds that it takes a while for people to get used to foreigners. Hoby refuses to accept her explanation of the townspeople's poor treatment of Wong, stating that Wong is being abused and not teased and the law and Constitution state nothing about foreigners being treated differently. Later when the harassment of Wong escalates to the point that his laundry and its contents are damaged, Henrietta tells the deputy how ashamed she is that she, like everyone else, stood by while it was happening. After Wong is pushed into getting a gun and shooting Les dead in a fair gunfight, the townspeople express their regrets to him about how he was treated and that they want to make it up to him. Wong says that their gesture would have made a difference before but not now and that he is leaving town. When Henrietta asks Hoby to stop him, Hoby agrees with Wong that it is too late. Henrietta has learned an important lesson the hard way.

Appropriately, the last episode in which Henrietta appears in *Trackdown*, "The Vote," demonstrates that she is a force to be reckoned with in the town of Porter and that she intends to empower women the best way she knows how, but she also has the integrity to admit when she is wrong. Gil and Ameilia Hallswell claim they are brother and sister who have come to Porter to encourage the women there to protest in favor of women's suffrage and to contribute to the funds they are collecting to help to reach that goal. Henrietta aids them by helping them in their fundraising efforts and by printing handbills supporting the cause. Hoby suspects that the Hallswells' intentions are less than honorable. As a result, he checks up on them and finds out that they are really man and wife and that the senator who they said would come to Porter to speak in favor of women's suffrage does not intend to come nor is even in favor of women's suffrage.

When Hoby reveals to Henrietta that he has been checking up on the Hallswells, she becomes indignant: "You're just like every other man in town. You think a

woman's place is in the kitchen and the nursery" and tells him, "Don't misuse the badge. Don't pressure a decent man just because you disagree with what he thinks." When Hoby shows the telegram from the senator to Henrietta, she claims this does not prove that the Halswells are dishonest. When Hoby responds with the sexist remark that "It's a common female failing to believe a man who spins pretty words in the moonlight," a disgusted Henrietta counters that "Just because Mr. Hallswell is good looking and can speak without tripping over his words does not mean I've taken leave of my senses. I don't intend to act like any silly school girl." She leaves by saying that women should be in politics and could not do any worse than men.

Later Hoby catches the Hallswells trying to sneak away from Porter with the funds they supposedly have collected from the women in the town for the cause of women's suffrage but are really going to keep for themselves. Although Henrietta is distraught and contrite that she was duped by the Hallswells, she is no less determined to fight for women's right to vote. Her last words in both the episode and in the series are "You men won this time, but you mark my words. The time is coming when women will have the vote and there's nothing you can do about it." Henrietta remains feisty, independent and determined to empower women to the very end of her participation in the series, despite the fact that the men in town are so hostile to women's right to vote that they even resort to violence to keep them from gaining this very powerful tool which would threaten their dominance in the community. Even the normally reasonable Hoby, who scrupulously protects the civil rights of the women to protest and organize, is clearly on the side of the men.

After Henrietta Porter, there were two strong, androgynous women in recurring roles in some of the longer running television Westerns. One of these was Victoria Barkley, played by Barbara Stanwyck, in *The Big Valley*, from 1965-1969. Stanwyck was someone the audience could find relatively easy to accept as a strong and independent female considering she had played assertive and aggressive females in numerous films going back to the 1930's (*40 Rifles*, *The Maverick Queen*, *The Violent Men*, *Double Indemnity*, *Annie Oakley*, etc.). On the other hand, the feminine side of Victoria's personality is thoroughly developed. She cares for and supports her four biological children and is even magnanimous enough to welcome Heath (Lee Majors), the illegitimate son of her deceased husband, into the family. Throughout the four years of the series she does not hesitate to help those in need, even when it is unpopular to do so. However, she is no pushover. She lets nobody intimidate her. When need be, she faces down those who try to bully her with her ability to use a gun and any other means at her disposal. Like Henrietta,

she has great power at her disposal. However, unlike Henrietta, her power comes from great wealth derived from vast ownership of land, cattle, mines, and other investments. Also, unlike Henrietta, who runs her own business, Victoria's sons are the ones who run the family enterprises, although as the matriarch of the family her wisdom is a valued source of advice for them. As a consequence, although she willingly fights for the rights of individuals, she does not use the power of the Barkley wealth and enterprises to try to overturn institutional patriarchy.

Another strong female character in a television series was *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, starring Jane Seymour, which aired from 1993-1998. In 1959 there were 32 Westerns featured in prime-time television (Yoggy 1), but by the fall of 1993 there were only two set in the 19th Century (*Hearts of the West* was set in the contemporary West): *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. The former lasted just one season (Yoggy 629); the latter lasted five (Lowry). The primary reason for the success of the show was Dr. Michaela (Mike) Quinn's androgyny (that a woman named Michaela is known as Mike indicates something about her ability to embrace both gender roles). By 1990 the percentage of women participating in the workforce was 57.5%, up from 33.9% in 1950 (United States, Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics). Therefore, her androgyny appealed to a wider audience than did earlier television programs. Being an influential member of the community while one of the very few female doctors at the time who thus defies traditional gender roles was attractive to the large number of women in 1993 who were independent and self-supporting, especially if they were in traditionally masculine occupations. If confronting the prejudiced individuals who did not believe in women doctors does not bring her enough problems, she also finds herself in conflict with those who don't like her determined support of those in society who were marginalized, such as African-Americans and Native Americans. Her love interest, Byron Sully (Joe Lando), accepts her for who she is, treats her as an equal and shares her respect for Native Americans.

On the other hand, she also appealed to those women and men who wanted a female with also decidedly feminine traits. She not only is very helpful and empathic with her patients but is ready to help others in need. Although she came out West soon after the Civil War (significantly to escape restricting gender roles in Boston) as a single 35-year-old woman, she ends up marrying the very sensitive, strong and faithful Byron (about as close as someone could come to the ideal mate) and ends up adopting three children.



All five women (Henrietta Porter, Kitty Russell, Dr. Quinn, Victoria Barkley, and Annie Oakley) are androgynous with both the masculine and feminine sides of their personalities fully formed. However, Henrietta stands apart from them as being truly remarkable. To a greater extent than Dr. Quinn, Kitty Russell, Annie Oakley, and Victoria Barkley, Henrietta is alone. Although all these women can defend themselves, one way or another, when threatened by men, they could all fall back on other males when a situation got really rough: Dr. Quinn with Sully, Annie with Lofty, Kitty with Matt, and Victoria with her sons and Heath. The town of Porter, on the other hand, has no regular peace officer, but rather has to rely on Hoby Gilman, the Texas Ranger “on assignment” from time to time in Porter. Even though Hoby is an effective law man when he is stationed in Porter, that does not keep Henrietta from challenging him when she thinks he is wrong, especially when she vehemently rejects his sexism.

More importantly, although Annie, Victoria, Dr. Mike, and Kitty all bravely confront sexism and racism on an individual basis, only Dr. Mike confronts institutional patriarchy and the masculine ethos as directly as Henrietta does with the influence she has with that powerful institutional tool, the printing press, and any other means at her disposal. In the 24th episode of the second season of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, “The Campaign,” the town of Colorado Springs, which has never had a mayor, decides to elect one. Jake Slicker (Jim Knobeloch) is nominated, followed by the nomination of Dr. Mike, who is allowed to run because the charter of the town does not restrict voting or office holding to males. Because she faces almost unanimous opposition from the men in the town and only women who hold property can vote (typically husbands and not wives legally hold title to their property) she faces an uphill fight. However, Dr. Mike’s love interest and later husband, Sully, decides to sell little parcels of his land to the landless women of the town to allow them to vote. This makes the race competitive and forces Jake and his manager Loren Bray (Orson Bean) to accept a deal presented by Dr. Mike’s politically savvy campaign manager and the town’s newspaper publisher, Dorothy Jennings (Barbara Babcock), in which Jake will accept women voting with or without property in their names if he wins and Dr. Mike agrees not to ban prostitution if she wins. Jake wins and keeps his word about women voting.

However, there are stark differences between the way that Dr. Mike fights for women’s suffrage and rights and way that Henrietta does it in “The Vote.” First, Dr. Mike has considerable support. Her campaign manager, Dorothy, is very smart in the ways of politics. The tide of the election is turned when Sully comes across

with his plan to sell land to the women. Henrietta is all alone in her leadership position. The support of the Halswells completely collapses when it turns out they are con artists caught trying to escape with the money they have collected for the cause. The men of the town are totally against women suffrage, not a Sully or Horace Bing (Frank Collison) — the man who nominates Dr. Mike — among them. Even Hoby is on the side of the men although his professional ethics as a Texas Ranger compels him to enforce the women's right to protest.

More importantly, "The Vote" is more realistic than "The Campaign." A series of improbable events has to occur for women to get the vote in Dr. Mike's town of Colorado Springs in 1867. (In reality, Colorado women did not get the vote until 1893, Grimshaw and Ellinghaus 29). The town charter has to leave open the possibility that women with property can vote rather than restricting the vote to males only whether women have property or not. Sully has to sell parcels of land to the women of the town for them to vote. Since Dr. Mike ends up with 98 votes, apparently almost all female, it means that Sully must either have a huge plot of land or each woman got a tiny parcel of land. Also, Jake and Loren have to agree to a deal that, as Dorothy puts it, benefits Dr. Mike either way since no matter who wins, women will get the vote, thus making it harder for Jake to be re-elected or succeed in his policies if he were elected. It is problematical that the corrupt Jake would keep his word about women being able to vote once he got elected. Henrietta, on the other hand, while unbroken, is defeated in her efforts for women suffrage, something consistent with the fact that in the real world it would be decades before women would get to vote in her Texas town or elsewhere in the state.

As a result of Henrietta's determined stands against institutional patriarchy and male chauvinist attitudes, she has more conflicts with Hoby than the other females have with the men who are closest to them. Although Hoby is generally as fair minded, considerate, honest and competent as the Barkley sons, Matt Dillon, Byron Sully, and Lofty Craig, the females in those shows do not confront their respective males about the rights of women, gender roles and the male patriarchy as much or as forcefully as Henrietta challenges Hoby concerning those issues.

## Conclusion

In some ways Henrietta is a safe choice as a woman who challenged the patriarchy of the day. She does not have any children, so her work and causes do not take time away from raising children, which could have upset viewers in the 1950's. It would

be hard for someone even in the 1950's to be very upset with Henrietta's work in favor of a woman's right to vote since that issue had been settled 30 years before the 1950's. Also, the fact that she appears in only 24 of the 71 episodes of *Trackdown* and even then, is not always central to the plot made it easier for those who did not like her views or actions to tolerate her. Still, it is remarkable that someone as early as the late 1950's should be so outspoken about women's rights. Despite being such an extraordinary woman, it is doubtful that a character who had a limited exposure on a series that lasted only two years was the role model for the considerable number of strong female lead characters who started to appear on television in the 1970's. Her importance lies in telling us that the discontent that led to those dramatic changes in the gender roles of women in the 1970's and beyond in television and society in general were bubbling just under the surface in the 1950's. Henrietta was a harbinger of things to come in television, just as the printing press, an instrument she used so well on television, in real life would eventually help women to acquire the vote and other civil rights and challenge traditional gender roles.

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## Decentering Whiteness in *Black Panther*

RIF'AH INAYATI

American films have an important position in American culture as a source of entertainment or as a media to transfer particular messages from the movie makers to society as the market. The market also influences how and why a film is made. Many times, the issues explored in a film are closely related to what happened in society. Filmmakers seek to offer a social critique or represent a society's dream vision of themselves. The history of moving pictures is a living record of performances of Whiteness, class, gender, and myriad identity markers, including sexuality, nationality and ethnicity (Foster 1). A significant issue in U.S. films today deals with power relations between Blacks and Whites. As Andrew Hacker states, "America is inherently a 'white' country: in character, structure, and culture. Black Americans create lives of their own. Yet, as a people, they face boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority. America's version of apartheid, while lacking overt legal sanction, comes closest to the system even now [...] reformed in the land of its invention" (4). In relation, superhero films, a popular genre in the U.S., always portray binary opposition based on the power relation. In this case, the binary opposition is often about white and black, strong and weak, smart and stupid, good and bad, hero and villain, civilized and uncivilized.

For many years, U.S. superheroes like Superman, Batman, or Spiderman are identically portrayed as Whites and males. Those justifications in the U.S. film industry promotes an ideology of White patriarchal capitalism (Benshoff and Griffin 28). Richard Dyer, in his book *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, questioned the norm of Whiteness which is everywhere and in which all that does not fit into white pattern are considered as the Other (3). It leaves blacks and the other ethnic groups as the periphery of the story or inferior position, never become the center of the story or superior status. The position of the Whites leads to the hegemonic representations of Whiteness in the mass media, including movies. Further, Foster mentions that although Whiteness is a cultural construct, it defines and limits people (2). It underlines the powerful impact of Whiteness into society in terms of constructing perception on the image of people based on color.

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For years, critics have concerned by the scant opportunities for Black actors and behind-the-scenes workers in the U.S. film industry, their lower pay relative to Whites, and the stereotypical ways the industry represents Blacks. A report on diversity in U.S. films 2014-2015 conducted by Annenberg labelled U.S. films a “White, boys’ club” (Smith et al.) because there are only a few opportunities for Blacks to participate in the industry. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin find that film represents Blacks stereotypically as lazy, greedy, criminal, hypersexual, immoral and inferior, whereas Whites are described as the opposite (64). Similarly, Norman Denzin mentions that White persons were rational, virtuous, mature, and normal; the ethnic other was irrational, depraved, fallen, childlike, immature, a danger to society (9). This concept of Whiteness strongly influences the representation of other ethnic groups, including Blacks in American movies.

U.S. film industry portrayals of Blacks have always been debated, not only in the U.S. itself but also across the globe. Today, Blacks have progressed in their roles and positions in the U.S. film industry, both behind the scenes and as actors in less stereotyped roles. Nowadays, there are more numbers of Blacks people participating in U.S. movie production. In the past, it was rare for actors from ethnic minority groups to be cast as “hero” and “heroine,” from 2016-2018 more actors from ethnic minority groups have gained essential roles in U.S. popular films, especially in the MCU. *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) focused on several Black characters, such as Black Panther, Falcon, War Machine, and Nick Fury, and in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), Gamora is portrayed by Black actress Zoe Saldana. Outside the MCU, other important Black characters in recent films include Finn and Maz Kanata in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015).

Many times, ethnic minorities play a “side-kick” to the White protagonist. However, the release of the MCU film, *Black Panther* (Coogler), is different because it is about a hero who comes from a kingdom in a seemingly third-world African country, Wakanda. This kingdom is untouched by European and U.S. colonialism. They are portrayed as a rich, civilized, technologically advanced kingdom. The movie is an anomaly in the MCU because of its predominantly Black cast and its director, Ryan Coogler, the first African-American director of a big-budget MCU film (Theodore-Vachon). *Black Panther* was hugely financially successful, particularly in the U.S. The film grossed over \$700 million domestically, more than the same year’s instalment of the most popular MCU subseries, *Avengers: Infinity War* (boxofficemojo.com). *Black Panther* refuted the assumption that a big-budget movie featuring a primarily minority cast couldn't be



financially successful in the U.S. This article concerns how *Black Panther* portrays Blackness and Whiteness and question the reason why this film became very popular in the time of President Trump, in which discourses of racial differences become exceedingly sensitive.

## Blacks in the U.S. and U.S. Film

The U.S. and racism are two things that can hardly be separated. The long history of racism in the U.S. began with the arrival of Europeans during Columbus's exploration period. Ethnic minority groups in the U.S., including Blacks, have encountered prejudice and discrimination as a result of racism. This condition is proven by the length of Blacks' struggle in gaining recognition as the U.S. citizens who have equal rights and positions with Whites. Daniel Thompson stated in his book entitled *Sociology of the Black Experience*:

The story of the Blacks' struggle for survival and equal citizenship began in 1619, when the first people of African descent were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, by a Dutch man-of-war. Since then, they have had many unique experiences endemic to their changing status. At first, they were indentured servants but eventually were forced into legal slavery (1661); they were emancipated more than 200 years later (1863) and have lived ever since in a biracial society established on the doctrine of "White supremacy." (3)

This quotation shows the relation between Blacks and White in the U.S. rooted back from the history of the arrival of Blacks in America. Having a historical background as slaves limits their choices, while living under the doctrine of "White Supremacy" frames the norm of Whiteness as the expected norm.

The conflict between Blacks and Whites played out in the U.S. film industry. The first film images of Black people were the culture of segregation, enforced in law from 1877 to the 1960s and culturally through concordant stereotypes, such as Black minstrels who love to dance and sing. In early film, Edward Map describes the development of an image of Black people as devoted slaves who knew their place. These filmic characters were easily controlled, impotent and powerless (Simpson 20). Peter Noble argues that Blacks were depicted with regularity as "bloodthirsty, eye-rolling, demented creatures with thick lips, almost demented with hate and yelling for White blood" (Simpson 20). He also describes filmic images of black people as hate-filled barbarians, savages, head hunters or cannibals, only one degree removed from the wild animals of the jungle. According to him,

these negative images underline how Blacks are depicted as being different from Whites, both physically and culturally (Simpson 20).

Similarly, Donald Bogle categorizes the development of Blacks' representation in American movies since the 1900s to 2010s through images of Black people in the U.S. cinema, such as "Toms," "coons," "mulattos," "Mammies," and "Bucks." These five images keep appearing, although in a different way. "Toms" refer to an obedient and friendly servant figure, dating back to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903); "coons" refer to funny clown characters that will do anything to entertain others; "mulattos" refer to sexual, exotic and available sex objects; "Mammies" refer to a dark-skinned female servant who cooks, cleans the house and nurses babies; and "Bucks" are portrayed as muscular and threatening men (Bogle).

In the 1940s, the images of Black people in the film industry began to change, with several factors influencing the changing notions of Black people. The first one is Blacks' protests to the government to end the discrimination toward them as part of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. This racial awareness triggered a second factor, with negotiation opened by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with Hollywood studios on the way films portrayed Black people and the amount of Blacks' participation in the film industry. The third factor was the development of the television industry, which deteriorated public interest in cinema; studios suffered significant financial losses due to increasing film production cost and decreasing audience numbers (Bourne 12). Donald Simpson mentions that from 1946 to the 1960s, Hollywood began to attempt to portray Blacks with positive human characteristics, although White supremacy still organizes the film narratives and characters (12). For example, Black characters are sacrificed to redeem a White heroic figure, or Black characters are framed as happy, subservient inhabitants of the glorious Old South. Simpson argues that such stories allow Hollywood to appeal to Black as well as White viewers.

The last factor changing Blacks' image in Hollywood film is the appearance of independently-produced Blaxploitation cinema in the 1970s, which continues to shape Black images as a response to Black stereotypes created by mainstream Whites (Bourne 13; Simpson 12). The emergence of Blaxploitation drove Hollywood to find a way to produce movies that will satisfy the Black community of viewers. During this period, Hollywood starts to portray Black males as individualistic, hard-hitting tough guys who could attract any woman, regardless of race, with a mere glance. Meanwhile, "Black women characters were glamorously dressed private detectives or cops with the biggest gun in the world usually pointed

at the crotch of a leering villain” (Bourne 13). Whites are villains in Blaxploitation films. Nevertheless, the White male villains are those who are accepted as bad guys by other Whites, such as drug dealers, mafiosos or Whites driven crazy by an overzealous hatred of black people (Bourne 14-5). Problematically, Bourne argues that these Blaxploitation characters were also modern-day “mulatto” figures, updated “coon” roles, or up-tempo “Toms” (15).

The making of Marvel’s *Black Panther* in 2018 as the first big-budget Black majority film was important to the Black community, not only in the United States but around the world. “*Black Panther* has been lauded for its diversity as a big-budget superhero tentpole with a nearly all-Black cast” (Rubin). The film stars Chadwick Boseman alongside Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, Lupita Nyong’o, Danai Gurira and Michael B. Jordan. Not only was the cast majority Black, but the director was an up-and-coming Black director, Ryan Coogler, who also wrote the film with Joe Robert Cole. *Black Panther* is set in the fictional African nation of Wakanda, a rich and advanced kingdom that is untouched by colonialism. The film recounts a story, the king of Wakanda who desires to protect his people from the corrupt outside world. According to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), *Black Panther*’s production cost \$200 million, and it earned \$700 million in the U.S. and over \$1.3 billion worldwide, making it a financial success for the studio. This movie presents a different point of view on Black and White relations with its characters, cast, crew, storyline, and box office popularity.

## Deconstruction and Film Analysis

The United States, a multicultural country, has experienced many ethnic-related conflicts and still have such conflicts, most specifically between White and Black citizens. This research applied Derrida’s concept of deconstruction to read the binary oppositions that emerge in Marvel’s new superhero film, *Black Panther*. Jacques Derrida developed his theory of deconstruction in opposition to structuralism. He locates binary oppositions and proposes critical elements in deconstruction. He describes key elements of the method of deconstruction:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and

economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (24)

Derrida argues a new meaning of a text from within the text itself. This definition is then often misunderstood that the purpose of deconstruction is to destroy a text. Deconstruction comes from the French term *deconstruire* which means dismantling the structure to be reconstructed. Therefore, deconstruction is positive because deconstruction breaks up and overturns the meaning of the text not only to disassemble it but to then rearrange it by constructing new texts or discourses to discover the new interpretation of the text.

Jonathan Culler states there are four main principles in Derrida's method, namely; difference, hierarchy reversal, marginality and centrality, and iterability to meaning. It means that in conducting deconstruction, the previous four steps can be used to arrange the analysis. Culler underlines "presence and absence," binary opposition and its reversal, the periphery and the center, as well as the diversification of meaning from a word as central ideas to consider when performing a deconstruction.

## Method of Research

This research is intended to see American society through a product of its popular culture, a film. It is conducted inductively since it started from an issue portrayed in the movie, and not to test any hypothesis. This research applies qualitative one because it deals with the data in the form of words, pictures and sound, not in the form of numbers; it is descriptive; it focuses on process rather than the result, and it emphasizes interpretation (Bogdan and Biklen 29-32). By emphasizing interpretation, Denzin and Lincoln state that this kind of research is suitable to be used in investigating social problems (2). Additionally, Creswell formulates several perspectives that can be used in qualitative research. One of them is a postmodern perspective, which is used in this research, concerning social problems derived from the differences based on race, ethnicity, class and gender (Creswell 16). Since this paper focuses on ethnic minorities, it is suitable to conduct this research with qualitative and postmodern perspectives.

Data collection was based on data collection techniques, according to Creswell (276-84). The first step is to process and prepare data. Then, a close reading of the

film is undertaken to find data that is related to the topic, which means film scenes related to the representation of ethnic minorities in the case of this essay. *Black Panther* is used as primary data source, while also relying on secondary data in the form of other films, news, articles, books and other sources related to the topic of discussion. In this essay, data analysis is done based on Derrida's method of deconstruction: this method suggests analyzing data by finding binary oppositions in the text, then reversing binary oppositions to diversify meanings of the text.

### Blackness and Whiteness

This research will read the relation of Blackness and Whiteness in *Black Panther* by using deconstruction. Further discussion is divided into two parts: Blackness versus Whiteness and diversification of meaning. The first part describes the way this film portrays Blackness and Whiteness by finding binary oppositions related to race and reversing these binary oppositions. The second part of the analysis explains the different meanings of this film to audiences that contribute to its popularity. Data analysis of *Black Panther* found three binary oppositions related to the movie's representation of Black and White. Those are good versus bad, civilized versus uncivilized, and strong versus weak.

*Good versus Bad.* The film shows the personal competition between Black (T'Challa) and White (Ulysses Klaue), as well as the broader conflict between Black people and White people throughout the world. In this film, we have seen how T'Challa tries to protect his people and land and how Klaue tries to destruct Wakanda by stealing vibranium for his personal enrichment. This echoes the larger conflict: Black Wakandans try to preserve their homeland, while White people attempt to invade that space; therefore, this binary opposition also represents colonized and colonizer. The Black people who try to protect their land do not want to be exploited by the White colonizer, while, the White colonizer only wants to take advantage of Black people.

In several scenes in the film, Klaue said "savages don't deserve it" regarding the natural resource of vibranium, with "savages" here referring to Black people (53.20-53.24). Klaue's framework of thinking represents White prejudice toward Black people. Meanwhile, statements made by T'Challa, Shuri and Okoye show Black people's opinion concerning White people. These characters understand that Whites came to Africa to enslave the people and exploit the natural resources, and in order to enrich their home countries. When T'Challa asks her to be nice to Agent

Ross, Okoye said: “Americans!” (55.00-55.04) with a gesture telling she has had enough with the Americans, and later when Shuri meets Agent Ross, she calls him “colonizer”(01.09.35-01.09.40). At the climax of the film, T’Challa criticizes Killmonger’s thirst for revenge, arguing that Killmonger is corrupted by the White framework, which is always divided and attack. T’Challa regrets the way Killmonger envisions how Wakanda should be.

Uniquely in *Black Panther*, the right side is represented by the Black Wakanda people. They are portrayed to be the ones that do positive acts to save the world. They hide themselves to protect their vibranium. They stop Klaue from stealing the vibranium and revealing the real power of Wakanda to the outside world. Meanwhile, the evil side is represented by White characters, who are responsible for all destruction in the world.

*Civilized versus Uncivilized.* The fictional country of Wakanda is portrayed as an advanced civilization with sophisticated technology. In the film narrative, the outside world identifies Wakanda as the destitute kingdom in the Third World, which insists on not taking any aid from other countries. This country applies ruse to conceal vibranium and the advanced technology and society. Vibranium makes their lives exceptionally good. For example, Shuri saved Agent Ross by using medical technology enabled by vibranium, healing a life-threatening injury in only two days.

On the other hands, the film presents the outside world, including the United States, as uncivilized. All wars in the world are portrayed as stemming greediness for power and domination. The film opens with the narrator, N’Jobu’s voice over: “but as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos. To keep vibranium safe, the Wakandans vowed to hide in plain sight, keeping the truth of their power from the outside world.” (00:01:15-00:01:35) They do not want vibranium used to make weapons, and they do not want to be involved with the world that has already become chaotic.

*Strong versus Weak.* This binary opposition is related to the position of women and men in Wakanda. Black women experience a double burden since they become the object of discrimination not only by White men but also by Black men (Beal). In *Black Panther*, however, Black women are the warriors that protect the Wakandan king and their kingdom. They are physically healthy and smart. Three strong Black women characters in the film are Nakia, Okoye and Shuri. They have essential roles in the plot of the story. Okoye is the lead bodyguard for the king: she goes wherever the king goes and is skilled in battle. Together with Nakia and

T'Challa, she apprehends and defeats Klaue in Busan. Throughout the film, she adamantly will not betray her king and will always be ready to protect Wakanda. The “weak” in the film is Okoye’s lover W’Kabi, who betrays her and T’Challa to side with Killmonger, but he surrenders to Okoye after having a duel:

W’Kabi: You would kill me, my love?

Okoye: For Wakanda? Without question. (01:55:03-01:56:17)

Okoye is tough and loyal. Her love for W’Kabi cannot overshadow her love for Wakanda.

The second Black woman character is Nakia as T’Challa's ex-girlfriend. Nakia leaves him because of her vision of helping others. She goes to other countries to be Wakanda's spy. She has performed several rescue missions in other countries. She learns that outside Wakanda, many people suffer because of war and poverty. She believes that Wakanda can accommodate them by using their natural resources and advanced technology. She proposes some foreign aid and refugee programs to be undertaken by Wakanda. But T’Challa does not want to risk Wakanda’s resources being discovered by the world and prefers to continue their masquerade as the world’s poorest country. Besides her smart and open-minded personality, Nakia also denotes an excellent fighter, joining in the battles in Busan and Wakanda.

The last character is Shuri, T’Challa's little sister. She is characterized as an intelligent scientist who leads Wakanda’s research laboratories. She is in charge of any invention made by Wakanda from vibranium, including T’Challa's black panther costume and medical equipment. She treats Agent Ross to recover from a severe injury more quickly than he could anywhere else in the world. Her quick thinking stops the vibranium from being taken outside Wakanda.

*Black Panther* offers a different point of view on the relation between Blacks and Whites. Commonly, Hollywood commercial films construct binary oppositions that confirm the superiority of Whites and the dominance of men. Even when Hollywood started to give more positive traits to Black film characters, Black people were still often unable to construct a positive image of their own. Therefore, the making of *Black Panther* is moving because it has reversed the typical binary representation of Blacks and Whites as well as men and women in Hollywood.

## Centering the Blacks and Decentering the Whites

Previously, all movies with a majority Black cast were regarded as Black movies no matter how successful the film was; previous examples include: *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), *Get Out* (2016) and *Girl's Trip* (2017), each of which grossed over \$100 million domestically, yet were still regarded as Black movies instead of entirely musical, horror or comedy movies. On the other hand, as part of the MCU, *Black Panther* was the first big-budget superhero film with a majority black cast, and it was able to break out of the stereotype of being defined as a Black movie.

Being one of the MCU superheroes, Black Panther moves from the periphery to center of the story. Previously in the MCU, Black superheroes, like Falcon, War Machine, Heimdall, and Nick Fury were side-kicks to the White superheroes. Black Panther is the first Black superhero character that has his own movie. Meanwhile, White characters are less central, making the story progress, but not functioning as the protagonists. The director, Ryan Coogler, as the first African American director of a big budget MCU film, has already succeeded to take the movie to the top. It broke box office records as a both a superhero film and an African-American film, while also breaking several Hollywood myths of Whiteness.

Since the movie is set in Africa, it becomes the center of the story. Meanwhile, the United States becomes the periphery. The way this movie portrays Africa and the United States is different from the Hollywood stereotypes to both countries. Previously, the United States is represented in Hollywood film as the country that is responsible for world peace and prosperity. This movie pictures the United States on the contrary position that is responsible for the wars and chaos happening in the world. Africa in Hollywood movies is usually depicted as a place with poverty, hunger, traditional rituals, animals and a need for foreign aid. *Black Panther* portrays Wakanda as a prosperous and technologically advanced kingdom. Wakanda also displays a hope for the world, the country that can halt the injustice and chaos in the world.

### The Diversification of Meaning

Although Black characters and the majority Black African nation of Wakanda is promoted as the dominant power in the world in *Black Panther*, there are still some classic stereotypes in the film. Those are Black males who obtain power hunger and thirst for the blood of White people, White saviours, and Africa as a savage place.



*Black Panther* film associates Black with goodness, while the typical Black in Hollywood film refers to badness. Two opposed characters as the binary are found in T'Challa and T'Challa's father, T'Chaka. T'Challa represents "goodness" and T'Chaka is "badness." His father slays his brother, N'Jobu for betraying Wakanda and selling vibranium. Living in the United States, N'Jobu witnessed the severe life experienced by Black people because of racial prejudice. He remains angry with T'Chaka's decision by hiding vibranium. He believes Wakanda can release them from suffering by utilizing vibranium as a weapon to accommodate revenge on Whites. N'Jobu explains:

I observed for as long as I could. Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet, our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons, they can overthrow all countries, and Wakanda can rule them all, the right way! (01:06:07-01:06:29)

T'Chaka finally decides to treat N'Jobu as a traitor and kills him. This friction leads to Killmonger's loneliness and hatred.

Eric Killmonger is N'Jobu's son, who witnesses his father's death in his uncle's hand. He is characterized as a man full of anger and neglected person in the United States.

The world took everything away from me! Everything I ever loved! But I'ma make sure we're even. I'ma track down anyone who would even think of being loyal to you! And I'ma put their ass in the dirt, right next to Zuri! (01:50:53-01:51:04)

Killmonger's anger is worsened by the fact that Wakanda has more than enough resources to assist other Black people around the world, but has chosen to hide those resources and only use them to benefit Wakanda. It becomes reason when he succeeds to take the throne from T'Challa and persuades all the governing board to send vibranium and weapons outside Wakanda.

Killmonger used to be U.S. military. Joining the U.S. military, then participating in elite special forces, trained him to annihilate and destroy the country. He shifts a power-hungry man and exterminates many people, including Black people, when he sought a mission in Africa. As he stated to T'Challa,

I lived my entire life waiting for this moment. I trained, I lied, I killed just to get here. I killed in America, Afghanistan, Iraq... I took life from my own

brothers and sisters right here on this continent! And all this death just so I could kill you. (01:18:25-01:20:35)

Killmonger's hatred and anger lead him to be what he stands now. He has the desire to kill T'Challa and destroy Wakanda from what he has already learned from living in the U.S. and working for the U.S. military. As T'Challa said, "you've become one of them" (01:50:52) to reveal his experience as a trained person to kill and use overpower.

This film tells Klaue, a White man, as the villain. However, the film also delineates White as 'good' person in Agent Everett K. Ross character. Although he is not the main protagonist, he plays an essential role. He stops all the ships taking vibranium and weapons out of Wakanda and saves Wakanda from being revealed to the world. As the U.S. intelligence, he appears as a White saviour that stops the chance of a decisive war and plays a vital role in the positive conclusion of the narrative.

Wakanda is depicted as a civilized kingdom by having sophisticated technology but believing in nature and supernatural power. The way they apply "brutal fight" for the throne position in front of citizens seems uncivilized. This ritual involves when these public brawls are called when there is someone from the other tribe challenging the successor of the previous king. T'Challa wins two hand-to-hand battles to get his throne from M'Baku and defeats Killmonger who claims for the throne.

The film also performs utilization of sophisticated military planes to transport weapons and fight while portraying armoured rhinoceros in the battle. In the traditional ritual in the king election, people have to drink a potion taken from a blue heart-shaped flower that can give the new king the power of black panther. After drinking the potion, the new king is buried in sand and has a vision in which he meets his ancestors.

The way the film represented Blacks is complicated. On one side, Blacks are central to a dominant portion of the film, but on the other side, they cannot escape from the ideology of White patriarchal capitalism. We can still find a Black character that exhibits some old stereotypes (Killmonger) and a White saviour (Agent Ross). Both Killmonger and Agent Ross play ambiguous roles. As T'Challa's cousin, Killmonger has to live a very different life, growing up with harsh life in the United States leads him to grow in anger and hatred. He sees that there are many Blacks who are suffering from oppression and discrimination, and feeling helpless at this drives his violence and his taking of the throne of Wakanda.

In a way, Killmonger can be regarded as a good guy since he wants to help Black people, but at the same time as a bad guy because he takes over the throne from T'Challa and creates chaos in Wakanda. He burns the heart-shaped herbs that are the source of Black Panther's power so that no one can succeed him as the Black Panther that rules Wakanda. When he begins to transport weapons to support Black people outside Wakanda, T'Challa criticizes Killmonger, saying that he has already become the same as those persons he seeks to take revenge against: "you want to see us become just like people you hate so much" (01:50:45-01:50:48) and "you have become them" (01:50:52). Killmonger does not only aim for Blacks' liberation, but more to conquer the world and be the most powerful person in the world. He does seek not only freedom but also power. As W. E. B. Du Bois mentions in his book, "But what on earth is Whiteness that one should desire it? Then always, somehow, somehow, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that Whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen" (30). In his statement, Du Bois gives justification why many people desire to gain Whiteness, because of the power attached to this discourse. He refers to the ability as the ownership of the Earth. Thus, having trained in the (White) United States Military, Killmonger learns that power can provide privilege for the one who owned it. Therefore, he tries to use the energy from vibranium not only to liberate the Blacks but also to conquer the world.

The same thing happened to Agent Ross. As a representative of the United States, he is labelled a "colonizer" by other characters, particularly Shuri. Whites are claimed to be the reason for all war and chaos in the world. Therefore Okoye is worried when T'Challa takes Agent Ross to Wakanda to be healed because of what has been done by the Whites in Africa previously, taking what they need for their benefit. At the same time, Agent Ross also appears as White saviour who helps stop the ships that are loaded with vibranium and weapons to be sent outside Wakanda. The concept of White savior has already appeared many times in American films. It becomes a genre in which a White messianic character saves a lower-or working-class, usually urban or isolated, the non-White character from a sad fate (Hughey 12) or render the people of colour as "incapable of helping themselves (Cammarota 243-4). It functions as a means to satisfy the White audiences, to compensate for the side-kick roles that owned by the Whites (Vera and Gordon 33). Therefore, although the film is minority centered, the Whites still accept it because of the White savior concept. From the explanation above, it can be seen that both

Killmonger and Agent Ross play ambiguous characters that cannot be simply defined as good or bad characters.

The different angle offered by this film is one of the reasons that this film becomes a success. The data from [statistica.com](http://www.statistica.com) shows that 37% of the ticket buyers on opening weekend were African American. It is three times their share of the overall population in the U.S. The representation of a Black superhero attracted many people to watch the film, especially those who are African American. *Black Panther* turns out to be a significant point in people of color's struggle in creating their image, which is different from the Whiteness concept. The need for creating a positive image has already been a concern several years ago. bell hooks explains that, since slavery, White supremacy has recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial discrimination (2). The fact that these images bring a great effect on how the people of color see themselves becomes very crucial. Therefore, many Black intellectuals and artists are looking for a new way to write and talk about race and representation and working to transform the image. These images affect how Black people see themselves, and *Black Panther* is a crucial media text that transforms the negative images of Blacks.

Answering the need for creating positive images of Blacks in the period of Trump as the United States president becomes very urgent. Because of the White nationalist ideology that is reflected in Trump's speech, many Black people feel offended and threatened. His slogan "Make America Great Again" translated into his intention to reenact White supremacy in the United States. He reinforces old stereotypes of Blacks to maintain the superiority of Whites. When Black people are being attacked verbally through Trump's speeches, *Black Panther* offers a different angle for Blacks on how to see themselves through the portrayal of Black characters and Africa as the setting of the story. Fan comments demonstrate that this movie created new hope for many Blacks in the way they see themselves. Some children said that watching this movie opened their mind to believe in themselves, and think that they can also be a hero and save the world (Maillard). Children who were interviewed said that seeing a Black person control a whole country and creating all this technology made him feel he can do more with his brain and that the movie "will show people of the world how much more Blacks can do." (Maillard)

Another positive point from this film is how the film portrays Wakanda as an independent and prosperous kingdom in Africa. One of the children said "I want to see the things they have to offer (in Africa). After all, the media does not show the good. We see Africa as a third-world country, but it is probably so much more"

(Maillard). The film raises their curiosity about their homeland since the media usually portray Africa from the opposing side only as another child said that this film inspires him to explore Africa and makes him want to build his own Black Panther suit (Maillard). *Black Panther* also provides a picture of the people of Wakanda solving problems together and even their willingness to help others. One child reacted to the movie, saying “for Blacks, it shows us that we get through any obstacles that are thrown at us if we work together. We can also help the world by sharing our resources” (Maillard). This film also shows a healthy relationship between men and women in Wakanda, in which the men respect the women and the women are there to fight and support the men equally.

However, besides those positive images provide in the movie, two characters cannot be quickly determined as good or bad: Killmonger and Agent Ross both play ambiguous roles, illustrating the complex representations of Blackness and Whiteness, as the commodification of the Other still happens (Hooks). The representation of Blackness and Whiteness is portrayed to strengthen the difference between Black and White. Instead of looking at T'Challa as a new positive image of the black male, Killmonger is regarded as degrading the image of the African-American male. Looking at him, it reminds the audiences that only Nobel from Africa that can have a chance to be a hero, meanwhile, the blacks who were born and grew in America always become bad guys, just like Killmonger (Lebron). On the other hands, Agent Ross represents the old stereotype, White as a hite saviour. Although he is not the center of the story, he plays a crucial role in saving not only Wakanda but also the world by stopping the weapons from being transported outside Wakanda.

Nevertheless, some people regard the film as a racist film. *Black Panther* still portrays one group as dominant over the other. Here, Wakanda is the dominant group with more favourable characteristics. Meanwhile, the Whites become the subversive group; instead of looking at T'Challa as a new positive image of Black men, Killmonger is viewed as degrading the image of Black men. Looking at him tells the audience that only a Nobel from Africa can have a chance to be a hero, while those who grew up in the U.S. become bad guys, just like Killmonger (Lebron). However, as Mueller et al mentions that targeted racial groups often resist, protest and engage in protracted organizing over controlling racist images (78), Killmonger's bad side can also be assumed as a form of resistance made by Blacks movie makers. This intentionally argues that that the Whites have to be responsible for the hatred and anger that grow out of American racist society.

Killmonger is the product of American culture which is dominated by White supremacy.

## Conclusion

Through *Black Panther*, Ryan Coogler succeeded in creating an alternative image of Black people. It frames the relationship between Blacks and Whites from a different perspective. Its box office success indicates that it met market demands for diversity in Hollywood. By portraying Blacks as contrary to old stereotypes, this film has created a festive atmosphere for Blacks, since it makes hope and change in the way the Blacks see themselves. However, this film cannot wholly escape old stereotypes: it still portrays a White saviour and also a violent Black character, even though Killmonger's violence is the result of living in the racist American society and also the influence of the U.S. Military's hunger for power.

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# What Do Television, Rhetorical Analysis, and Black Men Living on the Down Low All Have in Common? *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

KRYSTEN STEIN

Oprah is a global media legacy with an immense amount of public visibility. According to the article, “Adding It All Up: The Oprah Winfrey Show by the Numbers” from Oprah.com, *The Oprah Show* broadcast in 145 countries (Arnold-Ratliffe). The legacy of *Oprah* began on September 8, 1986 and ran until May 25, 2011, airing for 25 seasons (Rose, 2012). To this day, Oprah is the highest-rated daytime talk show host in American television history. To rhetorically analyze an episode of *The Oprah Show* opens a window to better understand how she reached so many viewers with her show and has since built a media empire — The OWN Network (OWN). It is important to uncover what Oprah and her producers did to obtain such a large-scale audience following, and how they made such an impact on the talk show industry and format. Due to the show’s vast and longitudinal popularity, examining it provides insight into how the show, culture, and society shaped one another over the years, and continues to impact present day. Using the method of rhetoric analysis allows for a deeper understanding of both Oprah as an entity and the structure and organization of the talk show as an American cultural artifact.

The text selected for this rhetorical analysis is the written transcript of the episode called “A Secret Sex World: Living on the Down Low.” The episode aired on Friday, April 16, 2004 and featured HIV activist, author and publisher, and *New York Times* best seller J.L. King. The transcript was obtained from the 501(c)(3) Florida-based agency funded by United Way, Big Bend Cares ([bigbendcares.org](http://bigbendcares.org)). Their mission is to provide support and education to people affected and impacted by HIV and AIDS.

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I look at this specific episode of *Oprah* because of its historical and cultural relevance. According to Pepper, “The AIDS epidemic was largely understood through media representations such as film and television” (2). When the episode aired, conversations surrounding the down low (DL) and the media frenzy surrounding HIV and AIDS was booming. The media coverage of the DL opened a gateway for Oprah to be the first person to discuss it on a talk show. The show is a paramount cultural artifact as it was one of the first times millions of viewers were introduced to the phrase living on the DL. The episode was especially powerful because never before had a Black man who lived on the DL then converted given his first-hand personal experience and life story on national television. This show played a part in constructing larger conversations taking place about the HIV and AIDS epidemic. It helped shape how people viewed, defined, and thought about Black men living on the DL, HIV, and AIDS.

This paper investigates the historical context that impacted the creation and delivery of the episode, an applicable perspective/methodology of scapegoating, an exploration of the episode from the scapegoat perspective, and a summary of the implications. Through this analysis, I found that the episode acted as a drama where: 1) the scapegoat (the DL) was identified by 2) the repentant (King) and 3) the victims (women) spoke to 4) the community (whose values are made explicit by Oprah) about how 5) the scapegoat (the DL) had caused their problem (HIV and AIDS in the Black community), instead of identifying homophobia and deliberate blindness to HIV and AIDS in the community as the cause of the problem. This is especially important as utilizing the scapegoat frame allows people to turn a blind eye to the actual root of societal issues. Oprah utilized her position as the rhetor to place Black men living on the DL as the scapegoats, and the women as the victims. Additionally, this episode exemplified the integration of scapegoating with epideictic and therapeutic language discourse. This analysis is situated within the literature focusing on how television programs frame portrayals of Black sexuality, Black men, HIV, AIDS, and the DL.

### The Historical Context of HIV and AIDS in the Media

The rhetorical purpose was brought to the attention of the media and then the public. The DL began trending around 2003, and by 2004, there was a media frenzy surrounding the DL, HIV, and AIDS. The term living on the DL expressed the behavior of men who slept with other men in secret while living a

heterosexual lifestyle. Many popular media outlets, like *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post*, *The Daily News*, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Guardian* created content that described Black men living on the DL and blamed them for the transfer of HIV and AIDS to straight Black women. The circumstance that allowed Oprah to create and air this specific episode was timing and the environment constructed by the media. Popular messages created by the media about HIV and AIDS at the time classified them as “gay diseases” only having impact on the gay community. Due to these incorrect, inaccurate, and harmful messages, the media pushed the idea that straight people did not have to worry about the HIV and AIDS epidemic, because it would not affect them. This eventually shifted over time, but crafted an extremely negative media landscape for the gay community.

The NYT 2003 article, “Double Lives on the Down Low,” focused on the subculture of the DL. The article discussed a Flex bathhouse in Cleveland, OH where Black men on the DL went for sex. Another 2004 NYT cover story, “AIDS Fears Grow for Black Women,” focused on Black men living on the DL and presented statistics showing how HIV and AIDS were impacting the Black community, specifically Black women. The article explained, “In 2004, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that the 30% of all black bisexual men infected with HIV may serve as a ‘bridge’ of HIV transmission.” During this time, HIV and AIDS gained national awareness as diseases that could infect those of various sexual orientations, not just openly gay individuals. The focus was especially on men who had sex with both men and women, how their “lifestyle” spread HIV and AIDS, and how Black women were high risk for contracting HIV and AIDS from this lifestyle. This shift challenged the idea that HIV and AIDS were “gay-only” diseases. A 2004 *Washington Post* article, “The Overlooked Victims of AIDS” and a 2004 *Daily News* article, “Polls Ignore Crisis Among Black Women” highlighted the concept of living on the DL and how Black women were contracting HIV and AIDS from their boyfriends and husbands without knowing it. *The Dallas Morning News* ran an article on their website called, “Author Warns Women of Closet, HIV” in 2004. The article specifically highlighted King blaming the contraction of HIV and AIDS on the DL lifestyle, sending a warning to straight Black women. According to Younge, in 2001, The Kaiser Family Foundation found that 67% of black women with AIDS had contracted it through heterosexual sex — up 58% from 1997. *The Guardian’s* 2004 report confirmed the rise in AIDS virus contraction was 23

times more likely for Black women, touched on the cultural concept of living on the DL, and highlighted the impact of homophobia in the Black community.

Openly homosexual men in Black culture were frowned upon, leading to creation of the DL lifestyle, and downstream effects of systemic and cultural homophobia. This lifestyle created a path for individuals to secretly practice homosexuality while still appearing heterosexual in the public sphere. All the articles implied that the DL was the cause of increased HIV and AIDS rates in the Black community. Much of the media instilled fear in Black women who could potentially contract the virus from their Black boyfriends or husbands who were having sex with other men in secret. As shown, investigative journalism and media outlets at the time spotlighted the issue of HIV and AIDS as a dangerous epidemic. The media coverage framed the topic and set up the discussion perfectly for Oprah to be the first person to develop and share the topic(s) with millions who tuned into her show.

### Cultural Rhetorics of Black Media

Cultural rhetorics seek to understand the practice of meaning making and producing knowledge, while understanding that all rhetorics are cultural and all cultures are rhetorical (Cultural Rhetorics Consortium). Black Media has been analyzed over time covering various mediums such as newspaper, radio, television, the Internet, and specifically, social media. Black identity and representation show up in these channels of communication, creating both culture and rhetorics. Omi and Winant argue that racial representation within social structures impacts and is required for racial formation. Brock builds upon their work, looking specifically at online personal contexts and Black identity. He explains that Black identity and representation take place on the Internet, in the public sphere, reflecting back on the Black community. Brock parallels the Internet to barber shops and beauty salons. Both spaces encourage interaction about identity between Black men and women. Additionally, the online, public space allows for non-Blacks to join and contribute to the shaping of online Black identity. Additionally, Florini, looks at racial identity online and the use of the Black American cultural tradition of “signifyin.” She found that cultural knowledge and competence were used by Black users to perform their Black cultural identity on Twitter. Focusing on the representation of Black men, Perry, Smith, and Brooms, conducted in-depth interviews with Black men who made

meaning of their experiences in romantic relationships and marriage with references to popular culture and media. They found that participants who consumed representations of Black men in the media, used those images to understand their own romantic relationships. The literature exemplifies how culture and rhetorics impact racialized representation, formation, and identity. If scapegoating is applied in these areas and within Black media, it can further marginalize and damage those already living in the margins.

### Mishandling of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic

With any global epidemic, how it is managed is always a question for concern. This is especially timely as we are coping with and living through the COVID-19 pandemic. We see how the virus has impacted particular groups of people, especially those in the margins of society in more intense and negative ways than others. We also have seen how Asians have been positioned as scapegoats for the cause and spread of the virus, resulting in devastating, terrible hate crimes and harmful, racist rhetoric. This was also the case with the HIV and AIDS epidemic. The HIV and AIDS epidemic has been associated with the word's discrimination and homophobia. Pepper explains that media discourse about AIDS in the late 80s and early 1990s treated AIDS as a disease affecting homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians ("the four H's") (4). According to Piot Russell, and Larson, the stigma associated with sexual intercourse and injection drugs, and the impact of economic and social inequality on the epidemic were two major focus areas. Both things led the crisis to become highly politicized, revealing weaknesses in societal systems and structures. Health officials were aware of HIV and AIDS in 1981, they were spreading rapidly by the end of 1984, but U.S. leaders were unresponsive and remained silent to the health emergency until 1985 (Bennington-Castro). Overall, when the viruses first began to spread rapidly, classifying them as homosexual diseases allowed those in power to turn a blind eye. The thought was that the crisis only impacted a culture the straight world did not want to see, and could easily avoid. Without proper management and mishandling of the viruses, they continued to spread rapidly, and still impact millions of people today. This is strikingly similar to our current cultural context of COVID-19, as we see those in the margins most impacted in negative ways and painted as the scapegoats.

## Scapegoat Perspective

The use of scapegoating occurs and then is reinforced by the media through the goal of issue containment. Scapegoating has been and is still used to take the blame from the collective or larger societal systems and place it on a particular person or group of people. Scapegoating has been used widely in both historical and present-day rhetoric.

Oprah's episode creates the DL as the scapegoat for the HIV and AIDS crisis. Burke's popular piece, applied the concept of scapegoating to the rhetoric Hitler used in his battle against the Jews, and used the Jewish population as the scapegoat for Germany's problems. By utilizing anti-Semitism, he created the Jews as the scapegoat for the economic and social problems in Germany. Tonn, et al. also write in the lens of scapegoating, examining the case between Donald Rogerson and Karen Wood. Wood lived in the woods in Maine and was shot in her backyard by Rogerson during hunting season. Wood became the scapegoat of her own death because of her "outsiderness." Ott and Aoki also examine the concept of scapegoating in the news coverage of Matthew Shepard's horrific murder. The coverage portrayed Henderson and McKinney's homophobia as character flaws, rather than addressing nationwide prejudice and homophobia as the problem. Even though homophobia was and is a nationwide issue, the murderer's characters were crafted as the scapegoat. Butterworth looked at scapegoating and argues that Rafael Palmeiro used a scapegoat to produce the politics of fear and division that separated post 9/11 America. Signer utilized scapegoating to look at elite corruption and American greed, specifically focusing on news framing of the lease deal between Boeing and the Air Force, and how Burke's concept of the scapegoat was applied.

## Black Men Living on the DL as a Scapegoat

The phenomenon of the DL dates back to the early 2000s, and exploded in both popular culture and news media, such as the *Oprah* episode discussed and R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet*. Snorton does extensive research on the DL, Blackness, and queerness. His book, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know*, explains how negative perceptions of Black sexuality are reproduced and propagated through the DL in popular culture and media, like television, movies, music, and news. Additionally, he argues that the DL polices and surveils Black sexuality through

narratives that represent DL Black men as promiscuous and dangerous. Looking at the digital, Brandon Robinson and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz focus on ads posted to Craigslist by people on the DL. From their analysis, they found most ads were seeking masculine men, and that “DL” in the ads was not only used by Black men. Focusing on television shows, Cerise Glenn and Andrew Spieldenner, utilized Black feminist thought and an intersectional frame to analyze portrayals of Black women in relationships with men on the DL in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Girlfriends*. Their analysis uncovered that hyper-sexual affluent Black folx with HIV and/or AIDS were associated with the DL. Additionally, they further developed the trope of Black women being in love and in trouble and the trope of Black men having to silence and disguise their sexuality for acceptance.

The literature on the DL and scapegoating can be applied to many situational acts and occurrences in our culture. When people need to explain a tragedy, crisis, crime, etc., like the HIV and AIDS epidemic, one tendency is to identify some person or group of people, like people on the DL, who can be symbolically the host/cause of the problem to cast them out and thus cast out the blame/responsibility for the problem.

### Studying Oprah

Researchers study Oprah to determine what her show did and how it was so effective, focusing on her star persona, show organization, and her rags-to-riches narrative. A major aspect that plays into Oprah’s narrative includes her star persona. Oprah had her talk show, but has also been featured in films, on the radio, and in many different forms of popular culture. Kylo-Patrick Hart and Metasebia Woldemariam look at Oprah’s experience in acting and also how viewers relate to characters on screen. They argue that viewers experience a sensation with two different kinds of characters on one screen. They enjoy characters that have lives, experiences, and situations that are completely different from their own. When a character lives a completely different life than the viewer, it can transport the viewer to a new life or situation. On the other hand, viewers also like to relate and identify with characters that are similar to them. Viewers can experience a mix of these two worlds with Oprah. She is a mixture of the extraordinary along with the ordinary. In a sense, Oprah is just an ordinary Black woman who we, as everyday citizens, can relate and identify with. The authors’

look at Oprah's acting roles in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*. Both movies portray Oprah as a Black woman overcoming trials and tribulations. Her mastery in acting in these heroic roles add to her credibility as a strong Black woman.

Dana Cloud explains the concepts of liberal hegemony, star discourse, tokenism, class politics, and cultural criticism in relation to Oprah as a talk show host and her show. She explains the idea that culture creates a script that maintains hegemony even when Black people build their own images. Cloud positions Oprah in a positive place, stating she was a token of a marginalized group, but she fulfilled the hero story. Even though Oprah came from a poor family, is Black, was sexually abused, and struggled throughout life, she rose above and is now very successful. Oprah plays into the token Black success story on television. Her position as a world-famous talk show host creates the message that the American Dream is attainable for all Black folk. The rags-to-riches story accurately reflects people's actions, but it also deflects attention from economic and social structures that stand in people's ways and implies that failure of people is their own fault for lacking the will to fight. All the concepts Cloud discusses in relation to Oprah play into the fact that Oprah's narrative and persona built her reputation and credibility. Sartwell explains Oprah's narrative and goes into detail outlining why her narrative impacts viewers so strongly. Her narrative is so powerful because it is opposite or contradicts people's typical lived experiences. Most Americans do not endure intense suffering and then become an internationally known talk show host. The narrative of redemption is prevalent in Oprah's story. She suffered, came from a childhood impacted by trauma, experienced redemption, and is now a multi-billion-dollar commodity. This leads to why audiences are so intrigued and infatuated with Oprah as a rhetor.

Christine Marshall and Kiran Pienaar observe how identities are crafted through language by looking at the discursive construction of the "suffering victim" identity of Oprah. They explain how suffering is utilized on the show by saying:

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* appears to derive from Winfrey's ability to constrain interpretations so that they reinforce the epideictic and therapeutic setting of the show. In addition, the "therapeutic" goals of the show transform it from a merely voyeuristic spectacle of pain and tragedy to a forum for generating catharsis and self-transformation. The show does this by reminding the suffering victim that (s)he is not alone and that with the help of others, can transform her/his identity from being a victim of



tragedy to an empowered, resilient survivor. By exploiting a belief in the universality of suffering, Winfrey is able to promote “therapy” for everyone, both “suffering victims” (the guests) and potential victims (the viewers). (535-6)

The literature shows that a key concept in Oprah’s shows, website, and materials is overcoming suffering and self-help mechanisms to live a happy and fulfilled lifestyle. The show created specific identities for guests and positioned them in places of suffering to allow for overcoming and triumph.

## Analysis and Discussion

*Scapegoating Black Men Living on the DL.* Oprah utilized the scapegoat frame to identify, blame, and deem Black men living on the DL as the host and cause of the HIV and AIDS crisis. She presented the lifestyle of living on the DL as a very negative one, and instilled fear in Black women by communicating that men living on the DL were one of the reasons for the spread of HIV and AIDS. The DL was placed as the scapegoat instead of looking at homophobia and blindness to HIV and AIDS as a cause of the problem. Homophobia and women as victims were two downstream effects of the DL, and the lens of scapegoating and moral judgment in both American and Black culture took place in the episode.

We have seen damaging and dangerous examples of scapegoating throughout history and in our everyday lives. When blame is placed upon a person or group of people, the true source of the problem is not discovered or even ignored on purpose. Additionally, scapegoating techniques are harmful and create polarization in societies, traditionally outcasting, blaming, poorly treating, and even instilling violence on already marginalized folx, like Black men living on the DL. Since television, media, culture, and society all shape and mold one another, it is crucial that information communicated on popular past shows like *Oprah*, and present-day shows are factual and address all angles of an issue or topic. Since scapegoating can occur when society is in a state of struggle and panic, like during the HIV and AIDS epidemic, it is essential to understand where blame and responsibility is placed, as this uncovers societal power and hierarchical dynamics. Popular talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, have the power to positively or negatively impact entire groups of people. Due to Oprah’s long airtime and massive viewership, how topics and marginalized groups were framed is crucial to understand as these conversations impacted and continue to socially

construct and cultivate the world around us. The power of these in demand talk shows should not be taken lightly as they can cause harm if tactics like scapegoating are used on them when discussing challenging topics.

*Therapeutic and Epideictic Language.* Oprah presented the DL in a negative and dangerous lens, by utilizing therapeutic and epideictic language when discussing this subculture. In this specific episode, the therapeutic rhetoric leads to the perspective of scapegoating. The DL was crafted as the scapegoat and the guilty party who must be blamed and should confess. The therapeutic rhetoric creates a “confessional” — a place where people admit evil or terrible things they did, or things others did to them. Therapeutic language was also utilized in the episode to overcome the suffering identity. Oprah, as the rhetor, encouraged guests to narrate their personal stories of suffering. She guided the conversation by prompting guests to explain their lived experiences and deep feelings. In addition, she inspired guests to use oral narration to explain their stories, which in turn, created sympathy for the guest by the viewer. The epideictic created discourses of praise and blame and constructed a stage to portray the character as a particular person. Oprah then praised victims who confessed their suffering and blamed those who committed DL sexual acts.

The placement of psychologists and psychiatrists were also in the episode to incorporate therapy techniques during interviews. The therapists and Oprah offered correct ways to act and think based upon good and moral behavior. This language was used to create an interpersonal connection between Oprah and her guests. Oprah’s therapeutic rhetoric epideictic (either praise or blame) functioned as scapegoating by creating a guilty party to blame and in turn, should confess. The persona of the converted/repentant played into the men who had confessed and had been forgiven. The scapegoat was aided and perfected by those who had repented or converted from the DL lifestyle, including King.

*Drama = Scapegoat, Repentant, Victims, Community, and Problem.* The episode acted as a drama where: 1) the scapegoat (the DL) was identified by 2) the repentant (King) and 3) the victims (women) spoke to 4) the community (whose values are made explicit by Oprah) about how 5) the scapegoat (the DL) had caused their problem (AIDS in the Black community). Oprah utilized her rhetor position to place the Black men living on the DL as the scapegoats, and the women as the victim personas. Many rhetorical components were used in the text to emphasize the main goal of scapegoating like purpose, persona, tone, and narratives as support material.

*The Purpose.* Some questions to ask in search for the episode's purpose would be — why did Oprah take an entire show to cover this topic? Why was this topic important, and why was it discussed? This specific episode held the rhetorical purpose of scapegoating Black men living on the DL and exposing the lifestyle of living on the DL through the personal experiences of Black men and women. It was crafted by the rhetor (Oprah), the situation (HIV and AIDS epidemic), and the audience (*Oprah Show* audience/viewers). She said in her opening paragraph, “Today, you're gonna hear many reasons why AIDS is on the rise again. Here's a shocker! It's one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS. Their husbands and their boyfriends are having secret sex with other men.” “Okay, so this lifestyle even has a name. It's called ‘Living on the Down Low.’” (para 1) This section of the transcript and introduction of the episode specifically explained what was going to be discussed.

*Personas.* The personas of each guest on the show played into and constructed the scapegoat lens.

King. King took on the persona of the repent or the person who converted from the DL lifestyle. Sharing his personal narrative transported the audience and created strong emotional appeal. King said,

Deep down on the inside, I had a desire to be with men [...] and the desire was so strong, that it just overrode everything I knew. It created this whole secret life and made me make up stories and try to cover up my tracks [...] a life that destroyed my family. The day that I got caught was a sad, sad day. (para 9)

Having first-hand experience of living on the DL served to build his credibility. Additionally, him speaking about living in such conditions exemplified why he took on the persona of a repent DL man in this transcript. King fulfilled the persona to aid and perfect the scapegoating of the DL lifestyle.

Oprah. Oprah took on the persona of orator/narrator which also played into the scapegoating perspective. The media frenzy surrounding HIV and AIDS at the time, placed Oprah in a perfect position to air this episode, and her as a rhetor was very powerful and impactful. From analyzing the two roles she played in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, we can see she played independent women who thought for themselves and had great strength. In parallel, she is also considered an independent superwoman in real life. The fact that she played two roles that built into the persona she exemplified on her talk show is very powerful. She

exudes the same heroic qualities of the characters she plays in her everyday life. In her performances, she works to expose issues that are difficult to discuss like abuse, sexism, classism, etc. Her personas both in television and film exemplify empathy to others, intimate connections with topics and people's lived experiences, and honesty on issues and challenging topics. She always challenged and discussed racial and social issues on her television show, and now does the same on the OWN Network.

Oprah's audience, both immediate and mediated, relate to her and even at times view her as a close friend, creating a parasocial relationship that enhances her success. The relationship between the viewer and Oprah is built through Oprah's willingness to self-disclose about her own life. She shares many intimate things about her life like being abused as a young girl, her relationship with Gayle and Stedman, and her struggles with weight and general life issues. When Oprah self-discloses it makes her seem like a real and ordinary person — just like everyone else. She lives an extraordinary, wealthy life while remaining down to earth and relatable to her audiences through her self-disclosure, personal life story, and rags to-riches narrative. Playing into the constructed narrative of the American Dream, she represents the idea that Black folk can fulfill their dreams if they just work hard enough. Oprah's star persona is crafted by her power to discuss and stand against issues like sexism and abuse and by her life experiences. Both things hold a cultural significance of their own, impacting her success as a rhetor/narrator.

In this episode, Oprah had an edge due to her race and reputation. She had the advantage of being a Black woman speaking to her "brothers" and "sisters." She utilized her talk show host skills to convey and communicate the message of being on the DL as an awful thing, and to elicit fear in Black women. She had to determine what stance to take, who to interview/include on the show, and how to present the information to her audience. Her and her team had to determine how to frame the topic and episode, what language to use, and how to present the episode to viewers in a way to educate and insight fear and danger. Oprah's reputation, public image, and race aided her in being a suitable rhetor for scapegoating DL men, while raising awareness and knowledge of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, especially to Black women.

Women as Victims: Cheryl, Marcea, and Jane. Women being framed as victims of the DL is an important one. Oprah used straight Black women and their narratives to perfect the scapegoat lens, create the identity of the victim, and craft

self-help and overcoming suffering techniques. She shared the community perspective on this topic by naming victims. She presented female victims and narration of the victims to appeal to emotions, and even pushed show participants into the persona of the victim if they were not taking that stance. She also identified them by blaming the HIV and AIDS crisis on DL men. An example of her interacting with a victim occurred as follows,

CHERYL: Well, it just seemed that there were always gay men around. Gay men would be visiting him in his apartment, we would go out together and there would be gay men to pass us and speak to him in the street and there just seemed to be an awful lot of gay men in his life. (para 105)

OPRAH: That ain't a red flag, that's the Indy 500!

CHERYL: Well, but this was back in 1986, Oprah, and no one was talking about Down Low. People was still fixated on this being a gay, White, male disease. The only thing I was worried about was a Black, gay male friend of mine who liked to date Caucasian men and I kept telling him, "Be careful; be cautious because you know you can catch this thing." I never thought it would impact me. Never. (para 107)

OPRAH: J.L., so I'm thinking if gay men are surrounding your boyfriend all the time, then that's a clue? (para 108)

A major persona that was crafted in this episode was victim. The straight, Black women who had been infected by their significant other living on the DL took on this persona. Examples of this include Cheryl, Marcea, and Jane. Cheryl shared her personal experience of being infected by a man she was dating on and off for ten years. Emotional appeal was incorporated when she said, "I never thought it would impact me. Never." (para 107) Marcea also took on the persona of victim. She explained:

Yes, I very seldom did not use a condom. I was in college. I was studying to be a Psychologist. I had plans to have my PhD in Clinical Psychology and I was dating a gentleman and I found out after I left him and broke up with him that I was pregnant. I had cancer and I was HIV positive. I went back and told all my previous...anybody I'd even kissed that I had HIV and it later came back to me that he was also HIV positive and not JUST HIV positive, but had AIDS. (para 125)

Both Cheryl and Marcea can be classified into the victim persona because they are two women who were impacted in negative ways by the DL lifestyle. They

were victimized and could not do anything to stop contracting HIV and AIDS because they did not know about their partner's secret lifestyles. Jane, like Cheryl and Marcea also took on the victim persona. Jane brought the perspective of an older woman who was infected. She explained:

The death of the man who infected me was a wakeup call. And I felt I could make a difference if I stand up and say, "Look at this face — this old, wrinkled, jowly face. This is another face of HIV. (para 181)

[...]

I was 50 years old when I was infected. I was 55 when I found out; and I am 68 today. (para 186)

She, along with the other women did not know they had been infected and their lives had been forever altered. All the personas in the episode play into the perspective of scapegoating the DL. The concept of gender was incorporated by victimizing all the women in these situations. The straight Black women were made the victim by the DL lifestyle, and Oprah placed the blame on the DL instead of looking at other societal factors like homophobia. Using the repented and converted persona of King allowed for the scapegoat to be perfected.

*Tone.* The tone of the episode also impacted the scapegoat perspective by suggesting the rhetor's (Oprah's) attitude towards the DL and showing the meaning she was trying to communicate. It framed living on the DL as a personal threat to Black women and was confrontative in a way that it addressed difficult issues, focusing on people negatively impacted by the DL lifestyle. Some ways to describe the tone would be: dangerous, personal, tragic, negative, dark, fearful, harsh, negative, moralistic, condemning, terrifying, and threatening. This was influential as it was emphasized throughout the entire transcript, as evidenced by King saying: "I know that...and that's why I did it. That's why I did it! I get the death threats." (para 48). In paragraph 98, descriptive tones like hurting, deceiving, lying to her, cheating, crying and screaming were all used. Oprah responded with "Coming up you've met with men who lead secret sexual lives. Next, we're going to hear from the other side, women who were deceived and infected with HIV speak out" (para 99). She also stated, "Listen to this: a sudden spike in HIV infection rates among African American male college students is being declared a public health emergency. Not an increase, but an emergency" (para 131). These are a few examples of how tone was used throughout the entire episode. The tone emphasized that the DL was the reason for the HIV and AIDS

crisis in the Black community, specifically impacting Black women in negative and harmful ways.

*Supporting Materials.* The final rhetorical component used often in this specific *Oprah* transcript is supporting materials such as statistics and testimonies/narratives from people both living on and impacted by the DL lifestyle. These supporting materials made the concept of living on the DL more memorable and vivid to the viewer. With the emotional aspect of this topic, the narratives/testimonies tap into the audience's emotions. The statistics provide quantitative and shocking insight into the sheer amount of Black folk affected by HIV and AIDS. Using these supporting materials play into emotional appeal and connect the act of living on the DL to real-life. These rhetorical components all play into the perspective of the DL as the scapegoat.

## Conclusion

This analysis uncovers the rhetorical tactics utilized in *The Oprah Show episode, "A Secret Sex World: Living on the Down Low,"* expanding the literature on Black sexuality, Black men, HIV, AIDS, and the DL. Moreover, it further explains the implications of utilizing scapegoating techniques and dives deeper into the cultural and rhetorical understandings of *Oprah*. To recap, it presents how Oprah utilized language strategies such as therapeutic and epideictic rhetoric to create a confessional for the guests in this episode to admit to evil or terrible things, creating a discourse of praise or blame. Oprah's persona and rags-to-riches story impacted how her audience related to her. She lived an extraordinary lifestyle, while still being relatable, down to earth, and ordinary. Oprah as the rhetor and host had a huge impact on the episode and the act of scapegoating. The discourse used in this episode, like language strategies and tone all worked as evidence to the claim that Black men living on the DL are evil and the problem for HIV and AIDS. Homophobia and women as the victims are two aspects that downstream from this text. The community perspective (Oprah) named victims (Women) and identified with them while blaming the crisis (HIV and AIDS) on the scapegoat (Black downlow men, the excluded audience) instead of identifying homophobia and deliberate blindness to HIV and AIDS in the community as the cause of the problem. This scapegoating is aided/perfected by those who repent or converted from the downlow lifestyle (King). The various rhetorical tools created and utilized in this episode of *Oprah* played into her specific purpose of exposing

the DL and placing Black men on the DL as the scapegoat and cause for the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

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# “Think About the Children”: Agency and the Politics of Childhood Innocence in Queerbaiting

MICHAEL McDERMOTT

[Queer people] deserve representation and we deserve entertainment that serves us. Think about the children growing up never seeing that and thinking it’s impossible. I was one of them. – *Sherlock* (BBC) fan

Social media has allowed fans to enjoy increased agency in the production and dissemination of textual meaning through fanfiction, fan art and community-building. Fans can unite and “speak back” to media texts and their creators about textual meaning, gaining the attention of industry through activism that both praises and criticizes (Navar-Gill and Stanfill 85). However, even with this increased agency there is still a reinforcement of authorial legitimacy and intentionality in contemporary representational politics that present fans as operating without any agency or power over the interpretation of meaning. The phenomenon of “queerbaiting” provides a prominent example of this centering of authorial intent and evacuation of agency in fandom.

“Queerbaiting” is a pejorative fan-coined term that has emerged recently to refer to the tactic of intentionally hinting at, or touting, queer representation in media to entice LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> viewers and gain their investments, without ever following through. Fans use the term to criticize media producers and performers who purportedly “bait” audiences with the promise of explicit queerness, only to never actualize this queer subtext (Brennan, “Introduction” 105). Within queerbaiting debates, there has been a shift from negotiations of the authentic or ‘real’ story and

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<sup>1</sup> Although I use “LGBTQ” to refer to “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer,” I am not uncritical of its usage and acknowledge the problematic attempt to unify people through identity categories.

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who has access, knowledge and authority over this singular meaning (McDermott, "Contest" 133), to the affective responses to queerbaiting, arguing that the tactic causes representational harm (McDermott, "From Canon to Politics" 118). Further, to criticize queerbaiting and the creators and performers who supposedly practice it intentionally, fans present themselves as stripped of agency and operating from a position of disempowerment. This is achieved partly through a specific conceptualization of childhood innocence referenced in queerbaiting critique. I argue that this focus on childhood innocence, while it may be partly successful in convincing some that certain queerbaiting texts are exploitative and harmful, ultimately forecloses the queer possibilities available in the exercising of agency.

Drawing on twenty-four semi-structured, online interviews with fans, this paper examines the function of agency in contemporary queer fandom through an analysis of queerbaiting and, specifically, the use of childhood innocence in these debates. It analyzes the implications that these affective politics of childhood innocence have for contemporary operations and orientations in queer fandom. The one-on-one interviews with fans recruited on Reddit and Tumblr were conducted online over instant messaging. The age of participants ranged from twenty to fifty-three years old. Sixteen participants identified as cisgender women, three as cisgender men, one as a transgender man, and four as non-binary people. Three participants identified as heterosexual or straight, and the rest identified as either gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual or questioning. Twenty-two of the participants disclosed their ethnic/cultural background as White or Caucasian, with one as Asian/Chinese and one as Italian. The overwhelming whiteness of the responses is clearly a limitation of this study and speaks to the larger erasure of people of color both in fandom studies research and in fandom itself (Pande 1). Conducting the interviews through instant messenger may present the challenge of a lack of vocal, facial, and bodily cues, but it does allow for a level of comfort for the participants that might not be possible otherwise (Kazmer and Xie 257). Further, it provided a level of reach not possible through in-person interviews. Fifteen of the participants were from the United States, four from Australia, two from Italy, two from Brazil and one from Poland. Conducting a qualitative, interview-based, sociological inquiry of queerbaiting is crucial to the study of the phenomenon as it is the thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences of fans that are reproducing the discourse as it plays out in online digital cultures. The voices of fans, therefore, play a significant and important focus of my analysis.

## Queerbaiting and the Politics of Childhood Innocence

As the *Sherlock* fan articulates in the epigraph of this paper, queerbaiting criticisms routinely utilize notions of childhood innocence to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting and the importance of positive queer representation. Within this tactic, I observe various discourses surrounding the politics of childhood innocence, power, and victimhood with implications for the function and political saliency of agency in contemporary queer fandom. Many fans involved in queerbaiting debates frequently reference their own childhood or an abstract child, positioning them as innocent and vulnerable to demonstrate the harms of queerbaiting and the responsibility, therefore, of media creators to produce positive queer representation.

The use of childhood innocence and the “protection” of children, however, is routinely utilized in wider politics, particularly in opposition to queer and feminist movements. Such use implies that progressive movements harm children. The harm is understood to be enacted by threatening children’s ‘natural’ state of innocence or the naturalized, heteronormative, patriarchal gender order inextricably tied to child rearing. However, rather than opposing this logic of centering children, some progressive movements also insist upon their value for protecting childhood innocence. When feminist or gay rights movements attempt to justify their politics by insisting that they too are keeping children safe, they are often criticized by some queer theorists for re-centering children and childhood innocence. Such a re-centering, critics argue, reinscribes colonial, heteronormative, and patriarchal politics. This criticism has most notably been voiced by Lee Edelman in his foundational text *No Future*. Edelman argues that contemporary politics rely upon a logic of futurity that is inherently intertwined with heterosexuality and what he terms “reproductive futurism” (19). He asserts that any politics that works to affirm a structure or authenticate a social order is conservative insofar as it is oriented in its intentions towards a future in the form of the child. When queers respond to the conservative trope of “child protection” as a pretext for discrimination by insisting that they too value children, marriage and society’s future, Edelman argues that the subversive force of queer sexuality is lost. He asserts that just as queerness can only ever disrupt an identity, not constitute one, queer theory must necessarily be opposed to a politics that aims to affirm reproductive futurity.

However, a politics of the child, or indeed any conception of children is not always already heteronormative in its orientation towards a future as Edelman asserts. Children, Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, do not always “grow up” into

adulthood when adults say it is “time.” Rather, children can be in a state of “delay,” “suspension” and “backward birthing.” Yet it is precisely in these states that Stockton identifies the ways in which the child experiences “sideways growth,” moving just as much laterally as they do vertically. The child becomes a figure not of reproductive futurity in the service of heteronormativity, but of a sideways growth. This opens up a space for queers to find meaning in a growth that seeks alternative orientations to a heterosexual adulthood and future predicated on countering, resisting and delaying “growing up.” It is in this reimagining of growth that I locate space for queers to enjoy agency in determinations of futures.

I argue that within queerbaiting discourse, childhood innocence is used to both demonstrate the harms of negative representation and to position fans as operating without agency, just as children are understood to operate without agency in wider politics. I suggest that the harm that is seen to be caused by queerbaiting is partly conceptualized through discourses of childhood innocence where there is an evacuation of agency from fans, despite potentially enjoying increased levels of agency through social media. Speaking back to creators, creating slash fiction, or connecting over shared loss and disappointment may negate some of the harm felt at what is perceived to be insufficient or exploitative representation; however, the requirement of fans to be positioned as operating without any agency over textual meaning within queerbaiting discourse has supplanted any of this potential agency they may have felt over the text. This lack of agency and power is paralleled with the purported lack of agency of children to illustrate creator intent and, therefore, the exploitation in queerbaiting.

Within queerbaiting debates, the innocence of children is deployed to present young queer people as vulnerable to the harms of heteronormativity and of “negative” or lack of queer representation. Queerbaiting critics see young queer audiences as vulnerable to the harms of queerbaiting due to their apparent lack of power in the affirmation of their queerness in a heteronormative world and over the production or reach of media’s influence. Whilst childhood innocence is often conceptualized in conservative politics to distance children — both politically and epistemologically — from queerness, fans within queerbaiting debates deploy childhood innocence because of a child’s queerness. Innocence is routinely used in criticisms of queerbaiting and wider representational politics as a means to highlight the importance of affirming same-sex desire and gender-non-conformity in children. Critics of queerbaiting draw attention to the queer child, highlighting their innocence and vulnerability whilst simultaneously attempting to redraw the

narratives of growth away from a heterosexual adulthood. With this focus on childhood innocence, agency is removed from any positioning of children (or fans) in discourses of media representation and consumption. Childhood innocence is a lens through which fans attempt to expose the powerlessness of children and the harm, therefore, that is inflicted upon them by queerbaiting.

### Knowledge and Vulnerability

Within queerbaiting debates, children are positioned as without knowledge or the ability to imagine a happy, queer adulthood. In their attempt to expose and criticize the harms of queerbaiting, fans present children as especially vulnerable to representational harm due to their lack of knowledge and agency in imagining the possibility of a queer adulthood. Thus, media is seen to grant young viewers the ability to imagine a possible queer adulthood and to affirm their same-sex desire and/or gender non-conformity. As two fans explain:

Importantly, [queer representation] can also be a bit of an escape for many queer people who have a lot of difficulty with their identity in real life. Especially for young people, to see a manifestation of the idea that people like them CAN be happy and live a full life can be literally lifesaving. The validation that comes with good queer representation can help us to mend the damage that homophobia can have on our confidence and happiness (fanfiction writer, 21, lesbian, Australia).

I know I'm not going to be represented and I'm at peace. But imagine being a kid who is questioning their sexuality and they see that their favorite hero, Captain America himself, could be gay/bi. Imagine their joy and hope seeing someone so important being like them. But then the kid sees Sharon and [Captain America] kiss, and the kid realizes they've been played with, and that their sexuality is just a joke in the world (Tumblr user, 22, asexual, Poland).

The experience of young queer people as vulnerable to having “difficulty with their identity” or “questioning their sexuality” provides the basis for many criticisms of queerbaiting. Fans draw on these images of vulnerable young queer people to criticize what they view as exploitative and damaging media images. Whilst many fans spoke considerably about their own pain, frustration, and anger at queerbaiting,

it was the imagined child that was consistently drawn on to demonstrate queerbaiting's apparent harms.

In the practice of fans looking back at their own childhoods or the imagined, collective experience of queer children, young people were understood to embody notions of naivety, as lacking understanding and knowledge that is gained through experience. One thirty-three-year-old gay fan of *Supernatural* and the MCU franchise wrote that he mostly agreed with the opinions of Tumblr users regarding queerbaiting, however, “[s]ometimes some of the younger fans on Tumblr get a little too enthusiastic and they’ll swear that a ship is canon, or that it’s been hinted left and right and I think that may be a bit of wishful thinking.” The act of wishful thinking here refers to fans believing that a male/male or female/female pairing of characters will become explicitly involved in a romantic or sexual coupling as intended by the creators. By highlighting their age, Hunter implies that younger fans on Tumblr are naïve to the intentions of the writers because of their youthful immaturity or lack of experience.

I observe a similar conceptualizing of youth not only in the belief of fans in the queerness within queerbaiting texts, but in the pleasure that many fans felt in their readings. After season four of *Sherlock* aired and there was no ‘big reveal’ of Sherlock’s love for John, many fans were devastated. One twenty-seven-year-old, non-binary fan described the feeling of watching *Sherlock* before they realized they had been queerbaited as the world making “sense.” They said they felt “joyful” and in a “childlike” state of “knowing and trusting” that their queer readings were indicative of the creators’ intentions to present explicit queer narratives; however, they were forcibly removed from this state when an adult destroyed their innocent and naïve trust in them. This response highlights how childhood innocence is a method through which fans attempt to demonstrate children’s (and their own) lack of agency over the production of queer representation in media and, thus, the knowledge of possible queer adulthoods. The moment of queerbaiting retroactively destroyed these memories of enjoyment as they no longer represented childlike pleasures of knowing and trusting. Instead, these moments became evidence of exploitation. Their world no longer made sense as their trust in their ability to “know” was betrayed.

The childlike state of naivety identified by my participants was often coupled with notions of vulnerability in children. Vulnerability proved to be fundamental to the conceptualization and mobilization of childhood innocence within queerbaiting politics. When asked what effect queerbaiting may have on young people, the Polish



fan quoted earlier replied: “It may break them to the point where they would believe that they were just stupid and how could they be anything but hetero? It may make them angry, that their struggles are a joke.” Queerbaiting is harmful in the eyes of fans because young (queer) people are vulnerable to its negative effects and, therefore, the responsibility of media creators to produce “positive” queer representation is even greater. So great is this responsibility to protect children in mainstream culture that James Kincaid writes “an unhappy child was and is unnatural, an indictment of somebody: parent, institution, nation” (80). Children are understood to be vulnerable as their happiness is purportedly out of their control. They are seen to have no agency in attaining the objects or entering into the systems and institutions that promise happiness (see Ahmed).

Because children are believed to have no agency over their happiness, it is therefore the responsibility of adults (creators of media) to protect them and to minimize or erase all things that threaten their happiness, such as queerbaiting. One twenty-year-old *Supergirl* (The CW) fan from the USA stated that queerbaiting “sends a bad message, especially to any younger audiences.” The “bad message” is one that does not affirm queerness in young people, causing them unhappiness. However, the fan clarifies by stating that queerbaiting is *especially* harmful to younger audiences as they are vulnerable to the bad messages that queerbaiting supposedly sends. Elizabeth Bridges similarly asserts that queerbaiting “defies ethics” (129) because it punishes viewers by proxy in ways that parallel the long history of censorship and punishment of queers on screen. Vulnerability for Bridges is crucial in her criticism of queerbaiting as it is the powerlessness and lack of agency of these young queer viewers that makes them vulnerable to its harms. A clear model of power as age-based possession emerges here that proves foundational for Bridges and fans in their queerbaiting critique. Young queer viewers are positioned as vulnerable to the harms of queerbaiting precisely because they have no power or agency in the production of media, nor in the possession of the positive representations that enable them to overcome their experience of “trauma and rejection” (Bridges 129). Creators of media possess power and agency through the ability to hold and produce these representations, furthering feelings of exploitation in many fans and creators “defying ethics” in their continued queerbaiting. The child in queerbaiting critique, I suggest, relies on notions of vulnerability and a distinct opposition between the supposed power and agency of adults (creators of media) and the powerlessness of children (fans). I argue that such a distinction, although might be successful in criticizing exploitative media,

reinforces rigid notions of agency in a conservative reliance on childhood innocence.

### Power, Agency, and Representation

The underlying assumption in these queerbaiting critiques is that media has a substantial influence over the formation and cultivation of a sexual identity and subjectivity. Fans view media as crucial for vulnerable queer young people to counter the harmful ideas they receive and internalize about queerness. As four fans explain,

[Queer representation makes us] feel like we're seen as part of the society. Especially for kids who feel different from other kids and don't understand why, they have a right to have characters they can relate to just like any other kid (20, bisexual, non-binary, Brazil).

I think it's important for people to see themselves in media. Media is a big part of how our identities are formed (53, non-binary, bisexual, USA).

There were no lesbian characters I could look up to to show me that what I was feeling was normal and 'ok.' It is so important that we see ourselves reflected in our media. Because media helps to establish cultural norms (38, lesbian, USA).

I think representation is fundamental. I personally could not imagine myself with a woman in a relationship until I saw positive representation of it (33, bisexual, Italy).

As argued above, young queer people are considered vulnerable as they are denied the possibilities of happiness in adulthood that are inextricably bound to heteronormativity. Media, therefore, can provide affirming images of alternative possibilities, enabling an intelligible, queer futurity. As the MCU fan quoted earlier said, negative stereotyping in queer media "makes it harder for queer youth to recognize their own identity." Therefore, as another fan argued, queerbaiting is especially cruel to "younger kids desperate for representation" (34, queer, USA). In this way, images of queers in media that are not queerbaiting are viewed by fans as empowering. Fans are empowered by the images of possible queer adulthoods that

construct queerness as livable. It is precisely this power that is at the heart of queerbaiting.

Media creators accused of queerbaiting are frequently viewed as operating from a position of power over the production of media, with fans in a clear position of disempowerment. As I have argued elsewhere:

Rather than seeing their interpretation of the narrative as just one of many possible and equal readings of the text, fans see it as *the* meaning. Within debates of queerbaiting, fans have refigured and objectified queerness and positioned it as something that can be located within the text at the primary textual level, over which, they argue, the writers have full knowledge and control ... Fans utilize the notion of a singular, authentic narrative in this way to 'expose' the intentionality of the queerness they see, and therefore, the exploitative nature of queerbaiting. ("Contest" 136)

Contemporary queer political subjectivity for fans critical of queerbaiting relies on perceived operations of power. The model of power and agency in earlier accounts of slash fiction communities allowed fans to decenter the authority of the creators in the production of queer textual meaning, reparative readings, and community (Bacon-Smith 219). For earlier slash fans, disempowerment came from the risk of being exposed or outed as a slash fan, requiring them to operate in secrecy and under the assumption that their writings and artwork would only be consumed by other like-minded fans. Yet, there seemed to be little attempt to mobilize around a position of disempowerment to encourage creators to move subtextual queer readings into the explicit, denotative textual level. Contemporary fans, however, have refigured notions of agency within the discourse of queerbaiting. Power and agency over textual meaning is evacuated in any positionality of fans within queerbaiting discourse.

I suggest that the function of agency in queerbaiting presents a liberationist model of power. In this model, power is viewed as possessive where the only way to resist power is to possess it for oneself. For example, in explaining why heteronormative society may be threatened by increased visibility of queers in media, one twenty-six-year-old, bisexual fan of *Rizzoli and Isles* stated that "[p]eople in power, or people who have a lot of representation, feel threatened when others get power or representation because I think they're afraid they'll one day be treated like those who have less power and representation." There is a clear distinction between those who have power and those who do not. For this participant, and many other fans, representation is seen as both the visual indication

of power as well as how power can be attained. This model of power embodied through the visual representation of queers is foundational for fans in their conception of queerbaiting's harms and the dynamic between (queer) fan and (hetero) creator. Creators possess the representations, or the ability to produce these representations, and with them, affirming possibilities of a queer adulthood, whereas queer (young) viewers do not possess this power over the production of queer meanings.

For fans, this power dynamic is implicitly linked with age. The assumption is that creators of media are much older than the younger demographic of viewers. What follows from this, I argue, is the liberal belief that social justice and social, political, and economic equality are gained in the passing of time, operating in a linear fashion. This belief suggests that older people in general hold less progressive values than younger people and, therefore, simply waiting until enough time has passed will result in the success of progressive movements. Several fans I spoke with conceptualized 'older generations' as being more homophobic and therefore less likely to permit positive queer representation:

[*The Good Fight*] only airs 'online' via CBS's streaming application. So the viewers are also more likely to be tech savvy, which also means younger ... which also means (typically) more liberal and open-minded (38, lesbian, USA).

There will always be backlash [against queer main characters in television], at least until a lot of the older generations pass away (as morbid as that sounds). They were all raised in a different time and their opinions were enforced and reinforced on them by everyone around them (24, lesbian, Australia).

As an educator, I also realize just how much increased representation matters to young people. I have two students right now who are comfortable with telling their teachers that they identify as a gender other than their assigned one. That NEVER happened when I started my career, but the increased visibility and validity of other identities has given them the confidence to speak up. It's just a small example, but I'm so encouraged that better queer representation can only be a good thing (34, bisexual, USA).

These examples indicate a very clear image of linear progress. The reliance on the mythical linearity of progress positions younger fans (and themselves) as not only

holding less harmful beliefs, but also of being part of the progress that is undoing the harms of older generations (in which the creators of queerbaiting media are often grouped). The last quote is particularly striking within this context of the politics of the child. They suggest that the connection between “better queer representation” and their students telling their teachers of their trans identity demonstrates the clear political positioning of many of the fans within queerbaiting. This representation, the argument follows, “can only be a good thing.” Increased visibility is seen as a marker of and a method to social and cultural liberation of queer people, as evidenced by young, vulnerable, queer people feeling comfortable about coming out at a younger age than in previous years. Their conception of the linearity of progress connected to queer visibility in media highlights a restriction in its politics. “Can only be a good thing” suggests that there is no possible opposition to these politics when its effects are seen as positive for children. The image of a child functions here, just as it did in conservative futurity politics, to shut down the conception of a politics outside of the domain of the child. Queerbaiting, I argue, is therefore seen as opposing this linear progress and futurity by restricting the affirming possibilities of a future for the queer child. By positioning themselves as without agency, fans imply that queerbaiting shuts down the possibility of queerness being intelligible, authentic, and livable.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted how agency is being reworked and mobilized in contemporary fandom through an analysis of the politics of childhood innocence within queerbaiting discourse. With the internet, fans can unite, create, mobilize, share and criticize like they never have before. Yet, as I have demonstrated in this paper, the position of powerlessness is crucial for the critique of queerbaiting. Fans may feel the desire to exercise agency in their fandom by criticizing creators, sharing and uniting in their feelings of disappointment, or reading and producing slash fiction to actualize in their creative content what was never delivered in the text; however, I observe that within queerbaiting discourse, agency is stripped in order to lay blame onto the creators and criticize what is deemed exploitative and harmful representation. Childhood innocence is invoked because it not only invigorates political claims of harm whereby children are seen as the ultimate victims, but children are seen to embody the lack of agency that fans position themselves as having within the dynamic of queerbaiting.

I argue that within queerbaiting politics, a futurity is centered in fan conceptions of harm. Queerbaiting is harmful, according to fans, because it closes off possibilities of a happy future for queer children. This future takes the form of images of a queer happy adulthood both on screen and in their own lives. This paper has shown that fans involved in queerbaiting debates believe that media imagery is a primary space for a renegotiation of access to happiness as it orients young queer people towards a future adulthood. By seeing images of queer people that are not queerbaiting, fans claim that vulnerable, young queer people are able to realize their sexuality as well as work to counter homophobic and heteronormative ideas they have internalized. I agree that media representation plays a substantial role in the formation and cultivation of queer identity. However, I suggest that such a focus on childhood innocence and an evacuation of agency within representational politics forecloses a multitude of engagements and queer pleasures of fandom.

Queerbaiting discourse presents interesting shifts in the mobilization of a theory and politics of the child. By focusing on a specifically queer child, that is, a child queered by their same-sex desire and/or gender nonconformity, fans present a challenge to the notion that futurity always reinforces heteronormative, patriarchal politics. Criticisms of queerbaiting utilize notions of childhood innocence and vulnerability, however, they do so by specifically asserting that such innocence and vulnerability is embodied because of a child's queerness, not their lack of it. Fans conceptualize the protection of children and childhood sexuality (or children's healthy growth into adult sexuality) as enacted by preventing adult intervention. In this way, the queer child is harmed because they experience adult intervention of homophobic and heteronormative ideology. Such ideas strip them of agency and power in their knowledge of possible queer adulthoods, in the ability to see and know queerness as authentic and livable. A liberationist model of power is present here when fans position the sexuality of the queer child as intrinsic and vulnerable to the intervention of a heteronormative society and negative representation (queerbaiting). Creators of media possess power whereas queer children do not. As I have argued, fans conceive of representation as a way for queers to gain power. It is through the knowledge of possible adulthoods and entry into life narratives of happiness that empower young queer children. We can see that contemporary queerbaiting discourse is centered on a futurity and an evacuation of agency that is shored up in wider representational politics.

Representation undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the development and affirmation of queerness for young people. The repeated punishment and killing of

queer people on screen, as Bridges points to, clearly presents a problematic depiction of queers considering the responsibility that media creators are deemed to have in the affirmation of queerness. I argue that the baiting of queerbaiting inevitably points to capitalistic exploitation by appropriating queerness in a particular way to repackage, repurpose and sell it back to the consumer in increasingly palatable ways. I observe that for many fans, the killing of queer characters or the relegation of them to subtext demonstrates the harm and the exploitation of audiences' desire to see queerness on screen. This exploitation, despite relying on the authority of authorial intent, is of course problematic, belonging to a long history of queer capitalism and the "pink dollar" (see Hennessy 32; Sender 1), as well as censorship and punishment (Bridges 115). However, I suggest that this illustrates the loss of queer pleasure of reparative readings. There is no room for pleasure or play in subtextual readings of queerness, nor in the anticipation of will-they-won't-they modes of storytelling. Rather than enjoying the "queer" in queerbaiting, the intentions of creators are centered in contemporary fandom, inevitably intertwined with capitalistic exploitation that saps the queer from queerness, resulting in contemporary queer fandom feeling left with bait.

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# The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* Reviews: Introduction

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With the rollout of vaccines developed by Moderna, Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, people can once again engage in communal activities following a year of quarantine, lockdown, and shelter-in-place policies. This is good news for fans of popular culture, as they can once again visit movie theaters, host in-person game nights, attend comic book or sci-fi conventions, and go to mass sporting events.

Yet the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the popular culture landscape, as it has led to the closing of movie theater chains, affected the long-term growth of various industries, and changed how people gather at mass events. For instance, Decurion Corp., owner of the Arclight Cinemas and Pacific Theaters chains of movie houses, recently announced that they were closing all locations due to their business being “decimated by the pandemic” (McClintock). Likewise, the board game industry, which experienced a 20% growth throughout 2020, now faces new problems caused by the pandemic, including a rapidly aging fanbase, a preference for simple single-player games over complex strategy games, and slower supply chains (Matalucci). The pandemic has also affected large-scale professional wrestling events such as WrestleMania, as fans can gather but only while “masked, in pods, and with limited capacity” (Spata). Thus, it appears as though COVID-19 will have long-term impacts on how people engage with popular culture.

While not covering texts that deal with the pandemic directly, some of the reviews collected in this issue look at books that consider how the popular culture landscape has evolved during the early years of the 21st century. For example, Kailyn Slater of the University of Illinois at Chicago discusses Stuart Cunningham and David Craig’s *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*, which explores the new ways that people produce and engage with screen-based entertainment. Meanwhile, Dennis Owen Frohlich of Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania reviews the vital new anthology *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media*, edited by Josh Grimm. This collection offers

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insight into how new communication technologies such as social media have altered our relationship to the very concept of the truth and considers the fallout of this development. Joyleen Christensen of University of Newcastle examines Roxanne Samer and William Whittington's *Spectatorship: Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media*, an edited anthology that collects essays originally appearing in the journal *Spectator*, published the University of Southern California. These essays, spanning more than two decades, offer new perspectives on spectatorship as well as issues regarding gender, sexuality, and media. Janelle Malagon of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee reviews Souvik Mukherjee's *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, which seeks to shine a light on the colonialist aspects of videogames while also pointing to the emerging postcolonial tendencies of games like *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*. Finally, Bethan Jones of Cardiff University looks at Matthew Freeman's *The World of The Walking Dead*, a book that explores a transmedia franchise set in a world forever altered by a zombie apocalypse, but which also illustrates how storytelling has changed since the turn of the millennium. Also included in this issue are reviews of the fourth edition of the landmark anthology *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, the monographs *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture* and *Amazons in America: Matriarchs, Utopians, and Wonder Women in U.S. Popular Culture*, and the video game *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*, which, when taken together, all serve to demonstrate the breadth and variety of 21st century popular culture.

Before ending this introduction, I would like to thank my assistant editor, Sarah Pawlak Stanley, for her invaluable assistance in preparing these reviews for publication. We hope you find these reviews useful. We also hope they inspire you to consider writing a review of a monograph, anthology, film, television series, roleplaying game, or some other popular culture text for the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*. The review section relies on the contributions of reviewers from around the world, and we would like to encourage you to consider becoming one of our reviewers. Our website features [extensive lists of books](#) from various publishers, and we would love to see reviews of any or all these texts in the pages of this journal. More importantly, perhaps, publishers will often send copies of these titles to reviewers free of charge, so writing a review is also an opportunity to build your scholarly library. Therefore, I urge you to visit the site and check out the list to see if any of the titles interest you. Alternately, you can reach out to me via email at [olson429@uwm.edu](mailto:olson429@uwm.edu) to suggest other titles not on the list, or to pitch ideas

for reviews of films, TV shows, videogames, YouTube series, Twitch streams, or other popular culture texts. We only require a brief paragraph explaining why this text is worthy of review and highlighting its potential usefulness in pedagogical or scholarly situations.

What popular culture exists and how people experience it may be changing, but popular culture will always be fundamental to people's everyday lives. We look forward to sharing more reviews and inspiration for what to study and what to experience for your own enjoyment.

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## Book Reviews

Cunningham, Stuart, and David Craig. *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. NYU Press, 2019.

One perennial problem facing the study of social media has been its inability to be defined in terms that reach beyond a description of the value of the social capital accrued through influence. Promotional materials for brands of all kinds are propagated through the creative labor of content creators to support their careers and livelihoods. The labor of creators as individual entrepreneurs who build businesses entirely through the fabrication of digital content has yet to be concretized. An agreed-upon glossary of terms currently does not exist, arguably due to context collapse and the lack of communication between disciplines that overlap in approach and confront digital media as objects of inquiry. Journalists and scholars alike struggle to fix on a catch-all term to describe these self-starting content creators; the self-starters themselves avoid most labels like “influencer” because of its derogatory or shallow connotation beyond the screen (Abidin). The terms that have typically been employed to discuss the scalar growth of social media platforms and the rise of entrepreneurship roles afforded by platforms that have occurred over the last decade (e.g. monetized content creation through sponsored product advertisement emboldened by sociocultural influence) have been amalgamated to encompass what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig call “social media entertainment” (SME).

Seeking to fashion a new kind of screen ecology, Cunningham and Craig’s monograph *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* argues for a tandem utilization of affordances provided by interactive technology and the reactive community engagement that occurs with and among fans and viewers. Such engagement is enabled when a creator utilizes said interactive technology to build an audience by producing videos, sharing their thoughts through diaristic self-disclosure, or posting aesthetically appealing photos of themselves, their friends, or their food. Relevancy and visibility on a platform can provide emotional, financial, and interpersonal support from millions across the globe as creators obtain bits of cultural capital with every view, like, subscribe, and follow. Significantly, *Social Media Entertainment* distinguishes between the

content found on platforms produced by individual users who are typically without institutional support, and video-on-demand “portals” that provide content produced by studio corporations with resources like major budget allowances and wealthy stockholders (Lotz).

Cunningham and Craig endeavor to map a critical media industry studies (CMIS) approach to examine how SME situates platform affordances; the innovation of content and reality of creative labor; and how that content is managed, monetized, and enables new forms of globalization (without the damning connotation, they hope). Similarly, they hope that this CMIS approach can feasibly engage with critical cultural concerns that are raised by existing disparities in access, merit, and pay ever-present in the media industry. Grounding the supporting structures of SME as a field in meta-geographical contexts like NoCal (Silicon Valley) and SoCal (Hollywood), *Social Media Entertainment* organizes the convoluted narratives of creative labor produced for social media around constant iteration through beta-testing and competitive experimentation, based on trends that platforms themselves amplify, circulate, and reinforce for the profit of their shareholders. Positioning content creators as entrepreneurs, *Social Media Entertainment* recognizes the impact over the last decade of media alternative to the mainstream.

The presence throughout the book of detailed economic analysis of content creators’ income, based on sponsorships and subscriptions if part of a platform’s partner program, is indelible to grasping the present and future of our very global, very digital economic reality. Particularly in the U.S., the boundary between what the media industry and the tech industry are qualified to handle and how they are regulated in response to this (mis)handling has been blurring rapidly, increasingly so since the book’s publishing in 2019. Deserved criticisms of how scholars in communication and media studies have attempted to piece together a broad-strokes understanding of social media and its entertaining manifestations, but without the level of undergirded attention to economic events and empirical detail that is demonstrated by Cunningham and Craig, are brought to the fore. Detailed comparisons of American versus European versus Chinese censorship practices specific to interactive technology and community engagement like livestreaming, as well as regulatory reactions to content through local, state, and nationwide mandates, are incredibly informative and provide very necessary context for Western social media analysis and the literature reviews that preclude them.

Speaking as an American myself, this book simultaneously centered, yet de-centered, the effects of American social capital that permeate into expansionism and hero worship — we have a habit of revering our founders, in all senses of the term. Yet in propagating Hollywood and Silicon Valley, Cunningham and Craig also propagate the structural disparities present in relation to race. In most cases, they deconstruct these disparities, and shine a light on the most socially relevant creators of color. At the same time, however, there is little discussion of the emotional, material, and intellectual labor and support that is continuously provided by black creators, fans, and collective audiences who bear witness to anti-black racism on a daily basis, and which infiltrates and structures many online spaces. In their fifth chapter, “Cultural Politics of Social Media Entertainment,” Cunningham and Craig focus on hatred towards Asian American creators and queer YouTubers who come out in public, yet only touch on the #OscarsSoWhite Hollywood moment without situating it in context: black people in the film industry not gaining the accolades of their white peers because of systemic inequality purported by racism and the subsequent lack of hiring representation in comparison to their non-black peers. While the demographic focus of the book is not hyper-specific to black creators, there is quite a bit of silence on the influence of sociohistorical circumstances of anti-black racism; like the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the consequent beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, which spurred many white and non-black creators to begin posting social justice-oriented content after receiving apt criticism from black fans and creators due to their ignorance and complicity in white supremacy, especially if their content tends to be political in nature. For a book that seeks to push forward the field of critical media industry studies through stratifying the American locales of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, the “critical” in the necessary context of race and racism enacted against black people is missing a large portion of its grounding.

Beyond this flaw, Cunningham and Craig’s push for creator advocacy in terms of support feels feasible and effectively gathers the independently born yet collectively desired feeling for legitimized support by platforms. Taking the time to chart the varied ways that content creators make a living by posting all aspects of their lives online, *Social Media Entertainment* understands that the foundation of content creators’ power rests in their ability to accrue cultural and social capital based on individual input as it is structured by the blurry boundary between media and technology, built up through collective organization against corporate experimentation for the last fifteen years.

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Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (4th ed). Routledge, 2020.

Building on very successful previous editions, the recently published fourth edition of *Understanding Video Games* introduces the reader to developments and perspectives in the study of games. Across nine chapters, the authors discuss games (including their history), the game industry, video game aesthetics and narratives, video games in culture, and serious games and gamification. To clarify key questions including "what is a game," "do games affect the player," and "can games teach children useful skills," the book provides examples, digs into the history of game development and production, and allows readers to gradually understand what video games are about and what they can contribute to bringing about. The chapters are structured in a coherent way and all end with discussion questions and further readings, which "are designed to stimulate thought and argument on the topics covered and to offer avenues for further reading and research" as well as to "address areas that we find are tangential to the chapter but not always covered in full detail" (Introduction, p.4).

Following a brief introduction, chapter 1, "Studying Video Games," discusses the basics of how to study games by suggesting five major types of analysis (game, player, culture, ontology, and metrics). The authors also explicate some common methodologies for each. A short subchapter titled "Schools of Thought?" sets out to clarify certain dominant perspectives. As with every chapter, this one ends with

discussion questions and suggestions for further readings. Chapter 2, “The Game Industry,” takes up several aspects related to game production and development. For instance, the industry’s size, including revenue numbers and examples for sales numbers of major consoles like Sony PS4 and Nintendo Switch, are presented. The chapter proceeds to discuss the industry’s structure for developing new products. Two short subchapters also introduce readers to the basics of the game development process by giving brief descriptions of the conceptual and design phases and production and testing phases. It is in the latter that the actual production happens, such as code writing and the creation of graphics and audio. The longer chapter 3, “What is a Game?” considers the core question. It is here that the key authors of game research are introduced, especially those present at the start of game studies and research. Short paragraphs make the readers aware of Johan Huizinga and the Magic Circle, Marshall McLuhan and Games as Cultural Reflections, Henry Jenkins and the Art of the Game, and others. The chapter then proceeds to offer some formal definitions of a game. This chapter’s second part on game genres provides an overview of the most important genres, namely action games, adventure games, strategy games, and process-oriented games.

Chapter 4, “History,” represents the book’s longest chapter. This chapter is divided into an opening section devoted to the pre-history of video games and a brief discussion on whether history matters, as well as to a detailed section that guides readers through video game history. Beginning in the 1970s, this section offers information on each decade up to the 2010s and beyond. In a final outlook, the authors offer three perspectives on what they call likely developments: a likely rise in experimentation, a growing gamification that moves gaming beyond clearly defined platforms, and a likely growing cultural attention for games, as games will be more and more perceived as an established part of culture and society. Chapter 5, “Video Game Aesthetics,” begins with introducing the concepts of rules and gameplay. The subchapter on geography and representation highlights, among other things, massively multiplayer online role-playing games and video game perspectives (first- or third-person perspective, isometric perspective which is similar to an architect’s sketch of a building and top-down perspective, also known as bird’s-eye). Furthermore, brief introductions to aspects such as dimensions, space types, graphical style, and game audio have been added here. Chapter 6, “Video games in Culture,” focuses on the interrelation of games with culture and society. The cultural position of games, games as cultural forms, and the public perception of games are the core points of discussion here. Additionally, the chapter



looks at players, considering why people play and who plays. Namely, this book chapter discusses female players, player communities, and cooperation and conflict in games and e-sports.

Chapter 7, “Narrative,” explores storytelling, including settings and actors in games, game mechanics, and reception — that is, the player’s experience of a story. The chapter offers a brief history of literary theory and video games to explore the theoretical work “that explicitly deals with questions of narrative, storytelling, and fiction in relation to video games” (223). Authors such as Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul, as well as the ludology versus narratology debate, figure here. The chapter concludes with remarks on the interactive element of games and transmedia games. Chapter 8, “Serious Games and Gamification,” expounds on games-for-change and games-for-health as examples of serious games, introducing readers to genres such as news games, political games, and advertainment. Serious games including edutainment and educational games are discussed here, including a helpful subsection on key research challenges in serious games. The book’s final chapter, “Video Games and Risks,” acquaints the reader with two key research perspectives in game studies, active media perspective and active user perspective. Both are presented in detail, enabling the audience to further understand the complexity of games and their research.

*Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* was very deservedly leveled up to a fourth edition. There is no doubt that this concise introduction will remain an important starting point to gain first insights into the academic inquiry of video games related themes, for many students, researchers, and non-academic audiences alike. As the authors state, “today we increasingly talk about a society where games and play are ever-present” (Introduction, p. 1). The massively increased interest in understanding video games and their research (in manifold academic fields as well as beyond academia) calls for books like these that are predetermined to attract a large readership. Moreover, beyond introducing the theme, the book succeeds in raising interest and excitement for the ever-expanding worlds of games and gaming and inspires the readers to further delve into these worlds.

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Freeman, Matthew. *The World of The Walking Dead*. Routledge, 2019.

*The Walking Dead* comic books, written by Robert Kirkman, were first published in 2003. A TV series of the same name followed in 2010. Since then, two other television spin-offs have been produced (*Fear the Walking Dead* and *The Walking Dead: The World Beyond*, premiering in 2015 and 2020 respectively), with additional TV shows and three films also announced. The franchise, which has garnered a large dedicated fanbase, inhabits a detailed storyworld, which is the focus of Matthew Freeman's *The World of The Walking Dead*. The book is part of Routledge's *Imaginary Worlds* series, each volume of which discusses a historically significant imaginary world and examines it via a range of theoretical approaches (other books in the series at the time of writing are *The World of DC Comics* and *The World of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*). In this volume, Freeman takes a transdisciplinary approach, utilizing concepts drawn from history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies to develop an "understanding of this particular storyworld as a place that is not constructed or indeed consumed as any kind of absolute" (110) and recognize "the value of seeing world-building as an *innately* social phenomenon" (114, italics in the original). To do so, he divides the book into four key chapters, each adopting a different concept to theorize a specific aspect of the world of *The Walking Dead*.

Chapter one adopts a historiographical approach to the core texts of *The Walking Dead*: the comics, the main television series, and the *Fear the Walking Dead* spin-off. One of the key issues in examining these in relation to world-building, as fans know, is that the comic book and TV shows often diverge. The character of Chandler was killed in the show but survives in the comics; Carol was killed early in the comics but survived in the show (and will be the star of her own spin-off with Daryl Dixon); and Daryl was created specifically for TV, not existing in the comic universe. Yet these apparent inconsistencies are key to the world-building of the series, with Freeman's historiographical approach informed by "multi-perspectival narratives, and [affording] a mode of world-building across multiple, seemingly contradictory media based on relativism" (37). Indeed, although Freeman deals with audiences in more depth later, he notes that nearly 80% of the fans surveyed for the book said both comic book and TV series were critical to their experience of the storyworld. He argues that "audiences may embody ideas of relativism in their media-crossing behaviors and yet, simultaneously, also behave like historiographers in their complex, dialogical engagement patterns with the world of *The Walking Dead*" (38).

Audience engagement is an important element of world-building, and Freeman utilizes a sociological approach to the affordances of the digital platforms they use in both chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 focuses on “augmented television” and the webisodes, talk show, and apps that have built up around *The Walking Dead* and which are “characterized by the crafting of a temporality based on reaction and reflection” (47). Freeman looks at: *The Walking Dead* webisodes, which he argues allow viewers to delve into character relationships; the chat show *The Talking Dead*, which allowed audiences to make sense of the episodes in emotional terms; and AMC’s Story Sync app, which does both. The range of platforms and the functions of each allow audiences to respond in different ways and arm scholars with new concepts with which to “rethink the building of imaginary worlds” (59). The augmented television platforms discussed in chapter 2 are “official” ones built, developed, and endorsed by AMC. Chapter 3 turns to the fan-produced content that exists on social media and explores how these “can produce distinct world-building experiences and provide specific narrative contributions” (62). Rather than seeing social media as a complement to television, Freeman argues that they allow for religious world-building through opening up “opportunities for audiences to collaborate together in further defining and extending the moral code of the storyworld [and] binding together as an online community” (69). For example, a discussion on the fan-run “*The Walking Dead* Fandom Universe” about Rick’s status as villain or hero enabled fans to establish a consensus and maintain coherency about his moral value, which extended to a set of beliefs about the world itself. Similarly, the use of hashtags on Twitter has allowed for greater audience discussion and “bringing people together as a loyal, hopeful, belief-filled community” (79). Freeman talks about “official” hashtags here, using the example of #InCarolWeTrust, which was announced by *The Walking Dead*’s AMC Twitter account as its new motto on October 19, 2015. Yet unofficial hashtags also exist and circulate within fan communities, and an analysis of these, as well as of the roles they may play in world-building would, I feel, have provided an opportunity for further in-depth analysis. Indeed, while Freeman highlights the role of audiences in world-building, he does so in relation to predominantly official texts: the comics, television shows, AMC-run social media sites, and authorized games. One fan-run Facebook page is mentioned in chapter 3, yet fan labor produces a much wider range of content including fan fiction and fan art. An analysis of these and how they contribute to world-building would have added an extra dimension to this volume.

Yet this book manages to demonstrate how worlds are built by official authors in a variety of ways while considering the role that the audience plays. Chapter 4 examines three of *The Walking Dead* games and argues that these “present new opportunities for [...] *philosophical world-building* on account of the degree of personalized moral choice and ontological ambiguity that such technologies afford” (86, emphasis in the original). *The Walking Dead* games allow audiences to experience the storyworld through gaining actual experience of it. *The Walking Dead: The Game* enables players to take on the role of a character called Lee Everett and, through a point-and-click narrative style, make decisions in the care of a young girl called Clementine. Players have seconds to pick from the options presented to them on screen, effecting an urgency like that which they may feel in a real-life situation. On the other hand, the augmented reality game *The Walking Dead: Our World* overlays the real world with that of the storyworld, thereby asking users “to believe in the imaginary world as itself reality by traversing the line between real and virtual!” (103). Subjectivity is thus key to how audiences both engage with and experience a transmedia world, and Freeman demonstrates this throughout the book.

Of course, as the book was published in 2019 it does not cover all iterations of *The Walking Dead* storyworld. The comic has ended since the book’s publication, the final season of *The Walking Dead* has been announced, and *The Walking Dead: The World Beyond* has joined *Fear the Walking Dead* as a spin-off. With more locations being added, and new experiences available, *The World of The Walking Dead* offers an insight into the universe as it exists at a fixed point in time, as well as offering scholars a framework through which to examine further forays into the storyworld. Further areas for research could include fan creations, as I mentioned earlier, as well as the novels, theme parks and sites of tourism, which Freeman points out in the introduction the book does not cover. Although some more rigorous copyediting could have been undertaken (the name of a prominent fan studies scholar is misspelled throughout), this volume nevertheless offers a clear argument for the expansion of imaginary world studies to include scholarship from a range of disciplines and is essential reading for those studying *The Walking Dead*.

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Grimm, Josh (ed.). *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media*. LSU Press, 2020.

As a scholar and professor of digital media, it is difficult to escape the specter of fake news. No longer content to solely extol the virtues of social media and online communities as spaces for productive communication practices, I increasingly spend class time discussing the darker sides of technology. Most Americans are now familiar with the term “fake news,” given the previous president’s near-daily denunciation, so it behooves educators to instill media literacy into the next generation of news consumers and creators. How exactly is fake news defined though, and in what ways is it a cause for concern? Editor Josh Grimm tackles these topics and more in the edited anthology *Fake News! Misinformation in the Media*.

The book opens with three essays about the history of fake news, showcasing numerous examples throughout the centuries. Some of these examples are well-known, such as Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast, while others are more obscure but no less compelling. Two original quantitative research projects follow next, the first exploring exposure to fake news in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, and the second testing the effect of media literacy in reducing peoples’ overconfidence in assessing whether news is fake or not. Next is a case study involving the *Onion*, Miley Cyrus’ twerking performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, and CNN. While this article helps untangle fake news from satire, the scrutiny given to this one series of events is perhaps disproportionate, given that every week there is fresh outrage over this or that offensive episode in the media.

The most compelling piece is Joel Timmer’s essay, “Fighting Falsity: Fake News, Facebook, and the First Amendment.” Originally published in *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, this chapter differs substantially from the rest in terms of tone and depth. Despite being a strong supporter of the First Amendment, I am no legal scholar, so this article helped explain that, while fake news is clearly a problem, and social networks are complicit in its rapid spread, social networks enjoy enormous First Amendment protection through the Communications Decency Act (CDA). Timmer concludes that, “Government regulation of fake news [...] does not appear to be the solution to the problem” (155). Instead, Timmer argues that corporations like Facebook can use the immunity provisions in the CDA to identify and remove fake news articles more proactively.

The penultimate essay unpacks the distinction between lying and bullshit, between falsity and fakery, and calls on the field of journalism to call out dishonesty where it exists to counter the spread of fake news. The final essay, “The Self-Radicalization of White Men,” explores the role online communities play in the spread of conspiracy theories, and how dangerous ideologies, fueled by fake news, can spill over into the offline world. One can immediately extend this analysis to the January 6, 2021 insurrection attempt on Capitol Hill, which occurred after the chapter was written.

At times, the collection feels disjointed, perhaps because four of the nine essays were previously published elsewhere, thus not cohering with the rest in either structure or content. The same fake news episodes are referenced numerous times — including the 2016 Presidential election, Pizzagate, Alex Jones, and the alt-right — and nearly every article references former President Donald Trump and his Twitter tirades against fake news. While these current events serve as the impetus behind this collection, several authors also emphasize that fake news is nothing new, that it has been around since the early days of modern journalism, which diminishes the power of these arguments. If fake news is nothing new, then what is the problem? As many of the essayists point out, the difference today is the speed and scope of fake news: untruths go viral nearly every day on social media, working their way into legacy media like cable news and everyday conversation. It is not a wholly satisfying distinction between modern fake news and historical examples, but the ability of today’s fake news to spread rapidly through the media ecosystem is still highlighted as a pressing issue.

As I was reviewing this book, my acquaintances on social media were sharing a tweet from a US senator, purportedly from several years ago, comparing the senator’s previous comments on a hot-button issue to the senator’s current stance. The purpose of sharing this tweet was to show that the senator is a hypocrite. A few days later, an article came out showing that the senator’s tweet was false: there was no record of it ever being tweeted. This mattered not to the audience who had shared the false tweet as their minds were already made up about this senator and they had already moved on to something new.

I think much fake news is like this: here today, gone tomorrow, with little effect on people’s daily lives. However, there are more serious concerns — election interference, dissemination of medical misinformation, the spread of hatred and bigotry — that deserve society’s continued attention and vigilance. *Fake News!* offers partial solutions to these problems: social networks, media literacy educators,

and journalists can all help reduce the harm of fake news. Yet no solution is perfect, leading Grimm to conclude, “the future of fake news is more about trying to contain the damage rather than stopping the problem. In other words, it’s about mitigating damage and slowing down the distribution, if nothing else so the fake news feed becomes manageable” (208).

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Mukherjee, Souvik. *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Souvik Mukherjee’s *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017) is an inquiry into the present applications of postcolonial thought in game studies. Mukherjee poses various debates contested within contemporary postcolonial studies and game studies while synthesizing foundational analyses from both disciplines. Mukherjee contends that the ludic has always been part of the colonial system in more than just rhetoric. From the “Great Game” of colonialism in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to players’ active participation in a revolution against colonizers as the colonial Other in Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013), the colonial system has always intertwined itself with play. Mukherjee grounds the ludic within the purview of the postcolonial, describing the role of non-digital games in reinforcing, exposing, and subverting the history of colonialism. To make this correlation, Mukherjee uses historical examples like cricket and colonial toys to suggest that non-digital games introduced by colonizers as part of the colonial system function as “ludic [symbols] of the ‘playing back’” that the colonized empire uses to subvert the colonial game (Mukherjee 5). *Videogames and Postcolonialism* provides a clear path for future engagement with postcolonial theory in game studies. Each of Mukherjee’s chapters are tied together with case studies that examine intersections between the study of digital games and the lived histories, experiences, and representations of the colonized. In this way, each chapter describes how the colonial and the ludic have always been related.

In the first chapter, Mukherjee lays out the theoretical foundations and key considerations of *Videogames and Postcolonialism*. This chapter emphasizes the breadth of Mukherjee’s text, as well as its focus. Mukherjee places the ludic and the colonial in conversation with one another by defining the ludic as a core

component of the colonial system. The chapter itself has two primary sections: the first section explains the primary theoretical frameworks used, and the subsequent section displays Mukherjee's methods. In this first chapter Mukherjee explains that the notable lack of invested inquiry by games studies scholarship in postcolonial discourse serves as the book's exigence. Throughout the book, Mukherjee pushes to integrate foundational and contemporary postcolonial thought into discussions about time, space, and intersectional identity in video games. Mukherjee refers to these postcolonial thinkers repeatedly throughout the text, emphasizing by practice the necessity of postcolonial critique in game studies.

The second chapter provides a foundation for discussing the relationship between empire and space in video games. Mukherjee's primary interest here is in bridging the gap between critical postcolonial thought on the experience of space and the representation of space and empire in video games. Appropriate of the breadth of this topic, this chapter addresses a wide variety of games and approaches the ideas of space and empire from equally diverse perspectives. This makes the chapter feel a bit scattered at times, though Mukherjee remains a steady guide through the messy web of colonialism in contemporary digital games. Of games that explicitly engage in colonial rhetoric, Mukherjee concludes that "the mechanism of empire is based on a geopolitics through which it lays claim to a consolidated space and on further expansion" (30). This geopolitical policy, then, manifests in both the ludic and narrative components of games. One of the great challenges of *Videogames and Postcolonialism* is in pointing out the relationship between ludic and the idealized spaces of empire, given the scope and complexity of this question.

Mukherjee's third chapter delves into hybridity as a part of the colonial project from the lens of *Freedom Cry*. This chapter's investigation is specifically concerned with representations of colonized individuals or communities as monstrous, or otherwise hybrid/hybridized figures. To discuss the representations of colonized and hybrid identities, Mukherjee draws on the works of postcolonial and critical race theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Lisa Nakamura, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. Mukherjee uses these theoretical frameworks to define ideas of hybridity, the "Other," and monstrosity within the lens of colonialism. This chapter emphasizes one of Mukherjee's great strengths in *Videogames and Postcolonialism*, which is his accessible method of weaving together critical, theoretical work with ludic and narrative exposition of specific games. By bringing together these texts, Mukherjee contends that video games "bring their own



complicated multiplicity and fluidity of identity formation to postcolonial studies” (70-71). In this way, video games like *Freedom Cry* engage in critical postcolonial work by positioning the player as the colonized subject feared and hated by the colonizer.

Mukherjee’s penultimate chapter functions as a sort of parallel to chapter two. Where the earlier chapter focused on spatiality as a critical level of consideration for postcolonial game studies, this later chapter does similar work with temporality. Building on his previous discussion of the historical hybrid postcolonial subject, Mukherjee contends that the (re)playability of historical narratives in video games facilitates the creation of alternative histories. Mukherjee presents a series of examples of colonial stereotypes through historical situations in video games, forming a literature review of recent works engaging with issues of alternative history creation through video games. Mukherjee explains that counterfactual histories can also present situations that reverse the colonial project. He uses literary texts like *The Man in High Castle* (1968), *Aztec Century* (1993), and Munshi Premchand’s “The Chess Players” (1928) to demonstrate a tradition of the ludic in literary reversals of history, asserting that this kind of historical reversal is possible in games too. After all, intentionally or otherwise, games facilitate the re-making or re-playing of a similar counterfactual histories — a computing glitch in *Civilization V* renders Gandhi a warlord (79), just as the *Empire: Total War* facilitates narratives of reverse colonization (86). In this way, players participate in counterfactual storytelling that challenges or subverts colonial histories.

The concluding chapter of *Videogames and Postcolonialism* provides no decisive conclusions, instead integrating existing scholarship on postcolonialism in video games with the goal of sketching a potential future for game studies research. Most importantly, this chapter suggests that while uncommon, there are exceptions to Mukherjee’s assertion “that the culture of the ex-colonies has been portrayed in videogames through lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress” (103). Mukherjee determines that narratives like that of Adewale of *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry* function as exceptions to this common preference for reinforcing eurocentrism, describing this process of responding to colonialism as a *playing back*. He writes that these games evoke a process of playing back which “disrupts linear chronologies and centers of truth” (Mukherjee 103) through instances of plurality and alternative or counterfactual histories.

Across this study, one of the most powerful conclusions is the point that “any discussion of identity from a postcolonial perspective is to be one that has no

conclusive answers or clear descriptions” (71), acknowledging how this inquiry into the representation of colonial power in video games presents more questions than answers. Seeking to bring together classical postcolonial theorists, contemporary writers, and the diffuse conversations being had across game studies that engage in postcolonial criticism, with the ultimate goal of bringing those writers together to indicate a need for a more developed postcolonial lens in game studies. Given this ambitious scope and the need for this kind of inquiry, the issues raised here can feel too disparate at times. Each chapter features numerous small case studies, summaries of major postcolonial theories, and potential starting points for further research related to the chapter’s focus, be that space, hybridity, or a similarly complex position. Mukherjee’s broad scope in *Videogames and Postcolonialism* lends itself to rich conversation in graduate seminars, or for scholars seeking to better understand foundational postcolonial theory within a media studies context. This text would be especially useful to seminars focused on postcolonialism and digital media, or in any interdisciplinary postcolonial study that seeks to better understand the ways in which video games can function as complicit in the reification of colonialism, or subversive against neocolonial structures.

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Samer, Roxanne and William Whittington (eds.). *Spectatorship: Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media*. U Texas P, 2017.

This edited volume brings together 17 articles, broadly themed around theories linking gender, sexuality, and media, that were originally published in *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television Criticism*. Established in 1982 as a forum for University of Southern California students to disseminate scholarship issues related to film and television, *Spectator* quickly gained a reputation for compelling investigations into the media’s representation of gender and sexuality. As the editors note in their introduction, the positive reception of certain early contributions that laid the foundation for significant subsequent publications — including Gaylyn Studlar’s *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* and Amy Lawrence’s *Echo and Narcissus: Women’s Voices in Classic Hollywood Cinema* — provided a strong

impetus for other students to follow a similar path and contribute their graduate research to the journal.

The volume is structured into five parts, each comprised of several chapters that focus on a central theme. The first part, “Revisiting film subjects and the pleasures of cinema,” is comprised of four *Spectator* contributions that address significant early feminist readings of cinema — most notably Laura Mulvey’s seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” — from a variety of new perspectives and employ case studies that contemplate spectatorship beyond the confines of a strictly white/heterosexual male gaze.

Part two, “Speaking up and sounding out,” provides space for discussions that move beyond the common perspectives encountered in media readings of gender. Each piece in this section explicitly calls out gaps in the contemporary academic discourse examining, for instance, the significance of media that deals directly with the issue of abortion and providing an investigation of the representation of working-class feminism, as epitomized by Roseanne Barr. Mary Celeste Keaney’s piece is especially effective in this regard, drawing on journalist Val Phoenix’s linking of the riot grrrl counterculture with the 1970s lesbian-feminist community to decouple the riot grrrl counterculture from traditional punk by exploring its position as a sociopolitical force that can sit alongside other forms of radical female-youth cultural resistance.

The volume’s third part, “Queering media,” continues delving into uncharted academic spaces, providing new perspectives on media forms that are rarely addressed when discussing the representation of queerness and sexuality — namely, animated films, soap operas, and public access television. As Hollis Griffin notes in his chapter about slash fiction for daytime soap operas:

There is a considerable amount of scholarship on female authors slashing traditionally “male” television genres, particularly science fiction [but] there is almost no scholarship on slash written about traditionally “female” genres, nor is there any substantive literature on gay male slash fiction authors. (147)

Part four, “Containment and its critiques,” is perhaps the most illuminating section of the entire volume as it deals with the myriad ways that media forces have attempted to contain rising resistance to traditional representations of gender and sexuality. Notable chapters in this section include Mary Celeste Kearney’s case study of the journalistic demonization of female sexuality and queerness in the sensational trial of Hollywood Madam, Heidi Fleiss; Raffi Sarkissian’s extrapolation of how mainstream media continue to drive stereotypical readings of

queerness via the respective film and television LGBTIQ tragic/comedic queen dichotomy identified by the author; and Jennifer DeClue's investigation of the exploitation of black queer sexuality in *The Wire*. Throughout this section, each piece effectively elucidates an ongoing pattern of media responding to challenges over representation by continually attempting to reassert damaging patriarchal and heteronormative practices.

The final part of the book, "Fandom and transmedia," explores how the growing visibility of fan activities has offered yet another space for scholars to bear witness to how diverse spectator communities work to challenge mainstream representations of gender and sexuality. For example, Suzanne Scott — who would go on to publish one of the most significant contributions to fan studies in recent years, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* — highlights how commercial interests and an adherence to traditional notions of the power hierarchy between creators and fans of a textual product works to delegitimize "alternate" readings by female and queer fans. Acting as an effective conclusion, these final essays acknowledge how convergence cultures contribute to the transformation of the media landscape as we know it and offer some hope for future evolution in representations of gender and sexuality.

The ability of *Spectatorship*'s contributors to touch on such a vast range of alternate subjectivities in its examination of representations of gender and sexuality across a broad media landscape is, undoubtedly, its key strength. However, even with a small handful of chapters that reference cultural touchstones from the last twenty years (e.g. *The Wire*, *Gossip Girl*), the dearth of more recent scholarship makes the volume appear quite dated. Yet it also fails to really hold up as a historical overview of critical theories. Even if we were to simply consider the book as a deserving chronicle of the *Spectator*'s legacy of encouraging important critical discourse into how media treat gender and sexuality, it still feels like a rather unbalanced effort, with large time gaps between contributions adding to the disjointed feel of the volume. For example, four essays represent the journal's first eleven years of operation but then there is a glut of seven essays in the five-year period covering 1993-1997, before a relative scholarly drought that sees just two essays representing the twelve-year long block between 1998-2009.

The book's subtitle, *Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media* seems to hint at an attempt to provide a coherent overview of responses to developing theories that have been explored in *Spectator* during its impressive thirty-nine-year run. Indeed, the editors likely hoped the volume would act as a historical snapshot

of critical discourse, with contributors delving into some of the most significant issues confronting film and television studies scholars over this period as those respective disciplines continued to expand in significance. However, while the volume does a stellar job showcasing a diverse range of perspectives on various related issues, it misses important connections in the development of key theories relating to gender, sexuality, and media and, ultimately, lacks the tight focus and depth of sustained exploration of critical issues that one would expect to find in a more explicitly targeted edited volume.

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Serazio, Michael. *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture*. NYU Press, 2019.

When bookending his monograph, *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture*, Michael Serazio notes the importance of his own connection to the then-San Diego (now Los Angeles) Chargers as a spur and framing device for this research. Thus, it is appropriate that I write this review of his valuable work on the day that long-time Chargers quarterback Phillip Rivers has announced his retirement after a final year playing for Indianapolis. Rivers is known for both his athletic prowess and his ability to trash talk while avoiding profanity. This skill made him popular to mic up during games and in this we can see a tension that Serazio returns to again and again: the complex needs of both a sports and media industry. Indeed, tension and complexity are two repeated elements within the

book, as evidenced by both Serazio's style and his introduction. Academic writing tends to be dense, full of jargon and theory, and therefore remains inaccessible to much of its potential audience. While Serazio's book includes discussions of relevant sociocultural theory, it is not densely theorized meaning that it is accessible to an educated lay audience. As such, it would be an appropriate choice for a first- or second-year university course on sports and culture. The bibliography is also suitable for students to mine for more specific research interests. The book therefore resolves its tension between academic and non-academic needs while still exploring the subject's inherent complexity.

The first chapter sets up Serazio's argument that a sports team functions as something akin to a religious totem by discussing his connection to the Chargers through his grandfather's fandom. The association of fan activity with religious activity is common and, in my view, somewhat problematic; I hail from the de-pathologizing tradition which focuses upon affective play rather than arguing that fandom (of whatever kind) takes the place of or functions like a religion. That said, because this book is primarily focused upon industrial and journalistic concerns, these issues remain unaddressed. This lack of discussion does not negate Serazio's skilled industrial analysis or his overall argument in the book, but I think this chapter might have benefited from more engagement with fan studies theory and less with classical sociology or anthropology. We can perhaps see that, however, as emblematic of the divide between how sports and media fandoms are studied and think of it as a problem of academia rather than the book.

One of the advantages to Serazio's industrial interviews is that he can elucidate the tension felt by many sports journalists between the journalistic ideal of objectivity and the necessity to both preserve their access and make money for their news outlets. This forms the substance of his second chapter, one of the strongest in the book. The third chapter builds on the discussion of economic pressures in sports journalism and focuses on neoliberal capitalism and its incorporation into professional sports. Though maintaining the meritocratic fallacy, athletes are well-paid celebrities whose personal and professional brands are, in Serazio's terms, totemically tied to a location and the team itself. This is despite the athletes' brands being as constructed as any media celebrities' brands. This totemic association, however, leads to higher profits for the team owners, leagues, and the athletes themselves. Serazio argues that loyalty to the totem that is built through what are essentially parasocial relationships can lead to increased sales of merchandise and tickets and that the totemic loyalty exists regardless of the team's performance. He

also discusses the tension between the global and the local that sports brands must negotiate to maximize their profits without alienating local supporters. The fourth chapter looks at gender, specifically how sports reinforces conservative, arguably toxic forms of masculinity. This is coupled with positioning the male as a breadwinner while also arguing for suffering as a moral force. This combination, Serazio argues, is one of the main reasons why male athletes specifically will play through injuries as they fear losing their jobs and being perceived as both physically and morally weak. As the “weakness” is also feminized, particularly through insults or jeers meant to motivate athletes, this also reinforces toxic masculinity.

The fifth chapter focuses specifically on the tension between politics and ideology in professional sports. As with the above chapters, the main risk Serazio finds, as far as his interviewees are concerned, is that of alienating a potential audience, which would cause the team, sports-news outlet, and/or athlete to become less profitable. He notes that this issue seems to be two-fold; in part, this desire for an apolitical milieu supports the fallacy of a meritocracy while also allowing the audience a needed escapism. That said, neoliberal and perceived-masculine discourses tend to predispose toward conservative political values, meaning that most [expected] negative audience reactions come when left-leaning politics appear. As this book was written before the current (2020) push of Black Lives Matter and other explicit progressive causes into the historically-conservative NFL, as well as other sports franchises, this chapter might have included more discussion of the tension between and, arguably, pandering to different political sides while hamstringing public-facing people with regard to their personal political viewpoints. Serazio concludes in his final chapter by returning us to the Chargers’ last game in San Diego and his awareness of the ephemeral, costly solidarity that sports can bring.

This is a very fine book accessible to most potential adult readers. My only real criticism about this book is, as noted above, that it fails to deeply engage with fan studies theory; there are occasional mentions of Sandvoss (2003) and Crawford (2003) but they lack depth. Serazio only tangentially discusses previous fan studies surveys, without giving a thorough review of those projects. The pseudo-virtual ethnography in Chapter 5 also seems a bit thin. That said, this is clearly framed as an industrial, journalistic study rather than an audience-focused one, and no book can be all things to all people. The interviews with various industry practitioners are very deeply analyzed and are a critically important and often overlooked part

of academic research. As such, this is an extremely valuable book from an industrial perspective and deserving of a place on any bookshelf.

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Williams, Kiera V. *Amazons in America: Matriarchs, Utopians, and Wonder Women in U.S. Popular Culture*. LSU Press, 2019.

Wonder Woman made her silver screen debut only recently in 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, over 50 years after her first comic book appearance in 1941. With the recent release of her second solo film, *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), the famous Amazonian warrior continues to serve as a main character in the DC cinematic universe. While the Wonder Woman canon may be the most popular iteration of matriarchalism, Paradise Island (aka Themyscira) is not the only woman-led society to grab the attention of American consumers. In *Amazons in America*, Kiera V. Williams traces the understudied history of matriarchalism in American popular culture. While matriarchalism, matriarchy, and related terms can describe a series of interrelated concepts, Williams uses the term "matriarchalist" to "refer broadly to popular sets of beliefs about the origins, history, and nature of female power" (8). Williams contends and efficiently argues throughout the book for the strong impact matriarchalism has had on both feminist and anti-feminist movements throughout U.S. history. Throughout her nine chapters and epilogue, Williams discusses anthropological theories, world fairs, children's books, comics, sci-fi novels, political discourses, films, television shows and more, demonstrating that, while understudied, matriarchalism has had a broad influence on American public and popular culture.

Williams begins her examination in the mid-19th century, describing how anthropological matriarchalism starting in Europe found new ground in the U.S., partly through Lewis Henry Morgan's work with the Iroquois Nations. The familial and community structures of indigenous people like the Iroquois strongly interested many anthropologists and inspired suffragette feminists for years to come, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage. A consistent theme in the book is that cultures in which women were given more agency and power were simultaneously utilized as both inspiration for feminist activism and as justification for colonization and other oppressive imperialist practices. Chapter three, "White



Queens and African Amazons,” is especially illustrative of this fascinating duality. According to Williams, near the turn of the 20th century, there existed two leading conceptions of matriarchalism, both heavily raced and gendered. On the one hand, there were “feminine conquistadors” like May French Sheldon, who campaigned for white women to take on a matriarchal role in Western colonialism. Emphasizing a maternalist rhetoric that had become popular among mainstream suffragettes, French argued that women’s essentialist roles as mothers made them uniquely well-positioned to “civilize” people from other nations. Around the same time, “African Amazons” of the Dahomey Village were showcased in Chicago, and people were simultaneously amazed and horrified by these African women who fought with handmade weapons for observers. Williams observes that, while white matriarchs were something to aspire to, Black matriarchs were considered frightening remnants of the past.

Williams then moves to the matriarchal utopias found in the works of L. Frank Baum, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and William Moulton Marston. While Baum’s *Oz* stories featured his feminist, socialist, and ethnically diverse ideas, this was not the case for many matriarchal utopias. For instance, Perkins Gilman’s matriarchal works, including *Herland* (1915), demonstrate again how both feminist and racist matriarchalist ideas often coalesced, as her own utopias featured a white supremacist view of evolutionism. Likewise, while Marston’s Wonder Woman has evolved with the times, the character’s original comics were deeply imbedded with the matriarchalist ideologies of her (male) creator.

Antimatriarchalism was especially prevalent in the post-war era through momism discourse. Williams analyzes various books, films, and political texts, illustrating a prevalent, continuous fear of female power that manifests in the stereotype of the domineering, neurotic mother. This sentiment would be repeated in the latter half of the 20th century, this time more focused on the figure of the Black matriarch. Yet, as Williams notes, where the white matriarch is seen as a “neurotic and in need of treatment,” black matriarchs were described as “pathological and in need of correction” (219). In the book’s last chapter, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Welfare Queens,” Williams turns her attention fully to Black matriarchs, and specifically to how images of Black women have impacted social policies in the U.S. This chapter is particularly illustrative of Williams’ emphasis on the relationship between popular culture and the political, whereby popular conceptions of matriarchalism strongly impact how wider discourses conceptualize female power, leadership, and agency.

In each chapter of the book, Williams analyzes various artifacts to create a wider image of how the matriarchal myth touches many interweaving contexts. To this aim, some of the specific texts are looked at more briefly than others, often privileging more examples over closer readings of less artifacts. While some of the artifacts are not looked at as closely, Williams is always careful to present a complex cultural context for each chapter. She does not focus solely on a narrow view of feminism but explores issues of race and class in each iteration as well. *Amazons in America* should be of particular interest to feminist media scholars, as it provides a history that is often overlooked. In the epilogue, Williams describes the cyclical nature of the matriarchal myth, asserting that because the key proponents do not seem to be aware of each other's work, newer incarnations of matriarchalism rework many of the existing conversations. Williams' book may be a step toward emerging from this cycle, encouraging us to pay closer attention to the continuing significance of this under-studied concept.

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## Games Review

*Mass Effect Legendary Edition*, Electronic Arts, various editions/platforms, 2021.

With the 2021 release of the remastered *Mass Effect* video game trilogy, promises of a planned sequel, and rumors about a possible movie adaptation (Bankhurst), this series, originally released between 2007 and 2012, remains relevant. *Mass Effect* is set in a futuristic Milky Way and emphasizes technology as part of its interactive narrative, which players can influence with their decisions, placing the fate of the galaxy in their hands. As part of this technological landscape, robotic figures and elements are part of the fiber of the game experience.

Outside of this series, culture influences perceptions of and relationships with robots and technology (Alesich and Rigby 51-52). The threat of automation in the workforce (Kim and Kim 310) has created tensions as it affords assistance alongside competition (Acemoglu and Restrepo). A distrust of and discomfort with robots (Alesich and Rigby 52) has also produced representations that highlight their

distance from emotion, marking them, and any beings with robotic elements, as separate from humans and humanity (Kim and Kim 312).

Depictions of robots in the United States tend to be marked by fear (Alesich and Rigby 52), but representations of robots and robotics in media can and do stray from cautionary characters, with the most obvious example being the fan-favorite droids in *Star Wars* (Strickland). *Mass Effect* walks a line between these approaches, incorporating both hesitation and hope through the exploration of synthetic lifeforms — specifically the Reapers and the Geth — and EDI, a programmed artificial intelligence who becomes a crewmate. The narratives surrounding these groups and characters are worth examining more closely, with some spoilers, in this context.

The Reapers, as a primary foe, serve as a backdrop that reflects much of the distrust often aimed at robots in media. They present an existential and ultimately genocidal threat to organic life in the game world, producing warped and unrecognizable versions of humanity, known as husks, as part of their takeover. This representation of robotic entities destroying humanity echoes the concerns and fears prompted by the turn toward automation and the emphasis on robots as cold, unfeeling, and poised for dominance. Despite the danger presented by synthetic beings, reflecting many of the physical-world hesitations and anxieties surrounding robots, the narrative itself is cautious not to portray the concept in absolute terms.

The Geth are also synthetic beings that run on shared programming and have mechanical bodies. The player has more opportunities for positive interactions with this group and can incorporate a Geth known as Legion into their team as a companion. Legion is introduced saving the player character's life and engaging with them and their team, with characters responding by turning to in-game cultural stereotypes to dismiss these actions. In many ways, the character acts as an ambassador between so-called organic and synthetic lifeforms, addressing the common fears and misconceptions that people have. Narratively, Legion serves as a means through which to question ideas of sentience, individuality, and, ultimately, what it is to be a living being.

Questions of humanity are further explored through the character EDI. Mirroring the tendency to design human-looking robots as women (Alesich and Rigby), EDI is a spaceship's artificial intelligence turned independent android. She more closely illustrates the tendencies to feminize, sexualize, and romanticize robots (Alesich and Rigby 50-4), with her character being partially explored through a slow and deliberate relationship formed with the ship's pilot. She shows

initiative and agency, becoming interested in learning what it is to be human, but the player can choose to discourage EDI from pursuing these interests. This opens an opportunity for cultural influences on the player to take hold, despite the clear narrative direction the game is taking. EDI has more leeway for being regarded as a person than Legion through the story's pacing of her advancements and her apparent emotional connection to humans, despite the crew's initial distrust due to her technological capabilities and software vulnerabilities. Both EDI and Legion are framed through the fearful comments of other characters while their actions and dialogue simultaneously challenge these presumptions.

*Mass Effect* presents a sci-fi story that centers on the looming threat of technology, but also pushes beyond the frequent popular culture limitations on robotics, particularly in Western media. The games offer action, adventure, and opportunities for players to explore their own intentions and beliefs through the influence they have on the narrative and the decisions that they make about synthetic life. Despite players' impact and the menacing technology that aims to eradicate organic life, there is also a narrative openness that allows players to confront, reimagine, and question their relationship with and feelings toward technology.

While much of the story is molded by players, including the ability to remove synthetic life from the galaxy, the narrative also pushes for the recognition of these beings as individuals capable of thought, connection, and growth. Technology and robots in this world can pose a potential threat but can also work together with humanity. As a result, *Mass Effect* addresses both possibilities, giving players a space to reflect on their relationship to robots, consider the position of technology in society, and ultimately interrogate what it means to be human.

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# POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

## ABOUT

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

## AIMS AND SCOPE

Popular culture is at the heart of democratic citizenship. It serves as an engine driving technology, innovation, and information, as well as a methodological lens employed by the many fields that examine culture, often from an interdisciplinary perspective. Managed by The Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (MPCA/ACA), The *Popular Culture Studies Journal (PCSJ)* is an academic, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study America and American culture. The journal serves its membership and scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

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Each year, the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* awards one original research paper published in either issue with the Michael T. Marsden Award for outstanding original contribution to the field of popular culture studies. Marsden earned his Ph.D. in 1972 from Bowling Green State University, joining his mentor, Ray Browne, who had just established the Center for the Study of Popular Culture. Marsden was an early proponent of this journal, and we recognize his help and support with this annual award, presented every October at the MPCA/ACA conference. Winning articles are also labeled on this website.

## EDITOR

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Ph.D.  
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## FOR SUBMITTING ARTICLES

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### TOPICS COVERED:

Based on analysis of the proceedings of the Midwest PCA/ACA and the national organization reveals that most popular culture scholars are interested in American-based:

- Film
- Music and Dance
- Television
- Sports
- Celebrities and Brands
- Literature
- Comics/Graphic Novels
- Games
- Animation
- Theater
- Fashion
- Computers
- Social Media
- World Wide Web
- Mobile Computers
- Professional Wrestling
- Archives and Museums
- Food and Drink
- Fairs, Festivals, and Carnivals
- Toys
- DIY and Crafting

However, many scholars approach these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, which adds significant value over single-issue or more focused/specialized journals.

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For documentation, the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* follows the Modern Language Association style, as articulated by Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert in the paperback *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (New York: MLA), and in *The MLA Style Manual* (New York: MLA). The most current editions of both guides will be the requested editions for use. This style calls for a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. This approach reduces the number of notes, which provide further references or explanation.

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The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is seeking authors to review works on any aspect of U.S. or international popular culture. In particular, we are interested in books, films, videos, websites, or any other works that critically engage popular culture that have been published, released, or posted in the last two years. We will also consider older seminal pieces that deserve a second look. If you submit a review of the latter, a rationale for the relevance of the review today will be expected.

Reviews should adhere to the ethos of the *PCSJ* and be largely positive with any criticism of the work being constructive in nature. For more information about this journal, please visit: [mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal](http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal).

Written reviews should be roughly 800-1,000 words and should be typed, double-spaced with 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Research and documentation must adhere to *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and *The MLA Style Manual*, 8th edition, which requires a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. Punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style must also follow *The MLA Handbook* and *The MLA Style Manual*. If you are interested in submitting any alternative form of review, please contact the reviews editor directly with your proposed format. Guidelines will be determined depending on the proposed format.

Reviews should be sent electronically to Christopher J. Olson at [olson429@uwm.edu](mailto:olson429@uwm.edu) with **PCSJ Review and the author's last name in the subject line**. Reviews should include both the review and the reviewer's complete contact information (name, university affiliation, address and email). Reviews should be sent as Microsoft Word attachments in .doc or .docx format, unless an alternative format has been approved by the editor.

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In addition to *PCSJ* calls for ongoing journal and reviews submissions (above), we are also planning for special issues. In other words, the special issues will appear alongside *PCSJ* articles and reviews in upcoming volumes. If you have an idea of a special issue, please contact CarrieLynn D. Reinhard at [pcsj@mpcaaca.org](mailto:pcsj@mpcaaca.org).

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# MidwestPCA/ACA

The Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association is a regional branch of the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association. The organization held its first conference in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1973. After a five-year hiatus during the 1990s, the organization held a come-back conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2002.

MPCA/ACA usually holds its annual conference in a large Midwestern city in the United States. In the last several years, conferences have been held in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. Upcoming conferences will be held in Missouri and Indiana. The conference typically is held in October.

Anyone is welcome to join and submit proposals for consideration at the MPCA/ACA conference. Membership in MPCA/ACA is by no means limited to those working or living in the Midwest or even the United States. In fact, presenters have come from as far away as Florida and California, and Norway and Australia.



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