Chapter 34

The Human–Robot Continuum of Self:
Where the Other Ends and Another Begins

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the cinematic representations of identity in Blade Runner, Bicentennial Man, and A.I. Artificial Intelligence. It looks at the way humans and robots in these films deal with the identity of a robotic Other in relation to the human self. Using posthuman, critical race, and philosophy of technology theories, the author builds a framework for how we, as humans can see ourselves within our technological creations as Another form of ourselves. The application of this framework is as an exercise in pragmatically understanding relationships that do not exist yet in our everyday lives. By raising questions framed by the cinematic playground, this chapter provides a place to begin further exploration into the robotic-human identity continuum.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of robotic technology as the oppositional other to our human selves has been around since Karel Čapek (1921/2010) coined the term in his play *R.U.R. Rossum's Universal Robots*. By examining recent cinematic representations

of robots in science fiction films in the United States, we can see the normative value of robots situated as the oppositional 'Other' in relationship to humans. Within these films, the representation of human identity remains superior to that of the robot. This superiority exists regardless of similarity or role reversal of humanity between the humans and the robots. The idea that 'they' are like 'us' is distanced and reinforced by rep-

resentations of dystopic fear. It is a trope that is similar to the one seen in films with problematic racial representations. For Western society to accept robots, or other advanced technologies, as, something I refer to as, Another form of human identity is to ideologically accept the death of what we understand human identity to be. This challenge is nothing new to critical studies and posthumanism, areas which delve into who defines the meaning of human and how that definition is constructed.

To understand this Othering and challenging of identity in relation to the robot, I analyze the science fiction film representations of humans and humanoids in *Blade Runner* (1982), *Bicentennial Man* (1999), and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). By using these films and theories of the posthuman, critical race studies and the philosophy of technology, I will address the robot as extension of self. Two methods of reading science fiction films that are particularly useful are (1) as a metaphor for who we are, and, (2) how these types of films are useful in exploring scientific fictions we have yet to make into reality. For example, science fiction media representations can be used to explore the fear society harbors toward scientific endeavors, such as those having to do with the bomb or the social realities of an industrialized world (Sobchack, 2004). These methods are also useful in exploring the representations of our socio-cultural relationships and identity with humanoid robots not as an oppositional "Other" out to destroy the human identity, but, rather, what I will describe as "Another" representational form of the human identity constructed by humans as an extension of ourselves. This is a useful way to look at our robotic creations because the lens of science fiction films provides a perspective for audiences and researchers to play with—a concept I refer to as a cinematic playground for examining socio-cultural issues. These films provide an opportunity to see and imagine a future before its realization in addition to being applicable to current technologies. This cinematic playground

makes it possible to learn about humanity through the technological endeavors that affect humans socially, such as robots.

Over the years, there have been multiple examples of robots interacting with humans in films. As Vivian Sobchack (1999) has said, "…[science fiction] has always taken as its distinctive generic task the cognitive mapping and poetic figuration of social relations as they are constituted and changed by new technological modes of 'being-in-the-world'" (p. 225). From Sobchack (1999, 2004), we can see the use of science fiction for exploration of our fears and anxieties about technology regarding the social interactions between our culture and technological innovations is both reflective of and informative to society. While she and other scholars have explored this, it is important to go to the next step in labeling the way film provides an inter-disciplinary cinematic playground to talk about our social realities. The idea of the cinematic playground is one in which many disciplines can come together to examine a text. This is important because there are many layers to a cinematic text. Such texts can be used to discover important ideas about society and to allow various disciplines to discuss the multiple meanings found. This dialogue could provide a broader understanding of what is seen within the text, but also the way the text is understood socially. Some important questions that science fiction asks are "What is it to be human? What are the conditions of personal identity? What are the roles played by reason/desire/memory in human existence?" (Knight & McKnight, 2008, loc. 381-82). The role of science fiction films serves an integral role in questioning our human identity and the relationship that we have with the technological Other. These films serve as a way to both tap into what society is thinking and why.

These films provide some insight into what robots may mean to our lives. I selected humanoid robotic representations as my focus for this chapter because of the physical and cognitive similarities to humans. These similarities provide an identifi-

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