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Why Does Film and Television Sci-Fi Tend To Portray Machines As Being human?

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The way we communicate about machines informs how we interact with them. The mind-machine metaphor predominates in screen fiction, in part, because it is compatible with audience identification. However, stories using technological protagonists and antagonists displace other visions of AI. For example, the mundane but immediate dilemmas that AI presents, like surveillance and unemployment, are overlooked. Effective public discussion and debate require a greater diversity of ways of representing and imagining AI in popular culture. The affordances of film and television also encourage a type of species solipsism. Even if machines could become conscious, why should we assume that they would, essentially, be human.

Why does film & television sci-fi tend to portray machines as being human?

Narrative Drama Needs Audiences to Psychologically Identify with Characters

Identification depends on viewers’ ability to understand characters through the lens of their own experience. As such, it relies on recognisable social categories like gender, age, nationality, class and so on. This need to allow viewers to recognise themselves and their society applies equally to dramatic representations of machines.

Writers must construct the characters of technological protagonists, or antagonists, using recognisable human traits. This dependence on audience identification with central characters may limit the ways that AI and robotics are represented and imagined.

This commentary is based on a qualitative content analysis of four films (Ex Machina 2015, Her 2013, Chappie 2015, Interstellar 2014) and one television series (Humans 2015).

Why is TARS Different?

If TARS were a person it would be a slave. It exists to work. TARS is liked but expendable. TARS is not seen to be a ‘person’. Its personality is a user-configured simulation.

Most importantly, there is no pressure of identification on TARS as a central character. Thus there is more scope in the representation of technology.

Who Cares?

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