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The Portrayal of Developments in Technology in Popular Media

Everything that people consider to be important, they portray in their art and literature. Early civilizations like that of the Greeks, attributed great importance to Gods and Goddesses which gave rise to countless myths and mythology. As time passed, people's priorities changed and so did the subjects of their literature. People today pay great attention to the development of technology because technology has made man less vulnerable to nature's moods. It has so frequently been the subject of literature that a separate genre, 'Sci-fi', has been dedicated to it. Sci-fi has not only served as a means of entertainment, but also a major source of inspiration for budding technologists of future generations. Sci-fi itself has been greatly influenced by the popular opinion about technological development of the time. This popular opinion in turn has been influenced by people's accessibility to new technology.

The Terminator (1984) by James Cameron is a typical example of Sci-fi movies from the 80s. It depicts how an infected artificially intelligent system becomes "self-aware" and launches a disastrous attack on the human race (Cameron). The movie paints a grim picture of the advances in technology and makes the viewer rethink about whether scientific development is really going to help us in the long term. Though it might seem that intelligent technology could

solve our problems, the movie suggests that technology itself could be a source of major problems in the future.

Kimberly Rosenfeld in her article 'Terminator To Avatar: A Postmodern Shift' claims that beyond their mass appeal and ability to entertain audiences, sci-fi movies also "capture aspects of the public's current experiences and ideological states" (par. 1). Rosenfeld uses this argument as a basis for showing that sci-fi movies are indeed a reflection of the political and social experiences of the people. She also points out that there have existed strong technophobic movements but recently as seen from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the human-technology merger has accelerated.

I would like to extend Rosenfeld's argument by saying that it is not only defense related human-technology merger that has changed the 'collective psyche' (para. 2). Consumer electronics and computers have played a major role in this process. Even today, *The Terminator* has not lost its appeal because of its realistic portrayal of fictional events, but it only remains as a source of entertainment. It doesn't influence people's opinions about technology anymore, primarily because our experience with technology has been very unlike what the movie predicted. The movie starts with a scene of absolute destruction of what was once the city of Los Angeles. The year is 2029 AD. Darkness adds to the negative tone of the scene. 'Self-aware' machines shaped like bulldozers are shown crawling over and crushing human skulls which are scattered all over. These machines are trying to hunt down the last humans alive using their laser guns. It is forbidding scene. But the scene is only a prediction made by the makers of the movie. The success of *The Terminator* testifies the acceptance of that prediction by the general public of the 1980s. Therefore, it can be said that popular opinion was not in favor of the development of

computing technology at that time. People were skeptical that one day computers might become more intelligent than humans and might take over the world.

It is important to note here that in the 1980s, computers were not as commonplace as today. It was a resource restricted for use by a small community of specialized individuals. Even in the movie *The Terminator*, computers have been portrayed as esoteric equipment. Most people had not even had a chance to see one, let alone use it for their daily life. Because of that, all predictions made by the general public about the future of technology were based on a vague idea of what computers could do and a lot of assumptions about the nature of their development. One of these assumptions was that computers would eventually become so 'smart' that they would become 'self-aware' and then they would attack the human race. Movies like *The Terminator* are a result of this line of thought.

Though popular opinion was against it, computing technology did not stop advancing. It was the people who actually had the opportunity to use computers for their work that saw their utility in helping solve problems. Macintyre writes in his Letter to the Editor of *Science*: "It is time to look to the science and technology that have caused the problem to provide ways of solving it" (16). Here, by the 'problem' he refers to the exponential increase in periodical literature and the difficulty libraries face maintaining it. The specific 'science and technology' that he refers to is computer technology, as is clearly suggested by the title of the letter. This letter was published in 1981, just three years before *The Terminator* was released. I would like to carefully analyze the sentence quoted above to show that it actually reinforces the conclusions drawn in the previous paragraph. The use of the word 'problem' to refer to the exponential increase in periodical literature is very ironical. Increase in periodical literature is a sign of increase of knowledge in various fields. And it is quite unlikely that any researcher would want

knowledge to not increase. So the use of a negative word like ‘problem’ to refer to a positive thing like the increase in know-how is ironical. Macintyre says that computer technology is the reason for this ‘problem’, and so indirectly he associates a negative tone with computer technology. The use of the phrase ‘it is time’ at the beginning of the sentence suggests that this association of negative characteristics with computer technology already existed while the writer wrote the letter in 1981. So in this sentence, the writer is saying that the negative attitude towards computers has lasted long enough and that ‘it is time’ to change that attitude. This proves the conclusions drawn in the earlier paragraphs that there was prominent skepticism about computing technology. Macintyre himself worked for the Scientific Computing Division of National Center for Atmospheric Research, and so had a good idea of a computer’s capabilities and utilities. In this letter he proposes that these capabilities should be extended to not only solve problems of the scientific community, but also for other applications, like in handling library databases.

Just like Macintyre, people found lots of different utilities for computers and eventually that lead to the development of personal computers. The decrease in costs and sizes and increase in availability has been instrumental in the penetration of computers into society. Its effects have been so great that it has been capable of sparking revolutions. The Arab Spring is a definitive example of such an event. Exposure to computer technology has been the key to people accepting it in their daily lives.

Zack Parsons in the article ‘Neither AI nor Nanotech Poses a Doomsday Threat’ clearly states that all the predictions that sci-fi made about computer technology taking over the world are nothing but hoax. He uses an extremely informal style of writing and uses a lot of real life examples to downplay the tension created by the predictions of sci-fi authors. I agree with his

argument that scientific development has not kept its promises, but it has not failed too miserably as well. Had it failed so, people would have totally lost faith in it, and that is not what we see in real life. People today do not feel any hesitation carrying a smartphone, which in essence is a small hand held computer. They are not afraid that the smartphone might assault them all of a sudden. But they also feel the constant necessity to carry that piece of technology along because of its utility. Therefore failure of predictions made in sci-fi movies is one of the reasons why the attitude towards technology has become favorable, but that is not the only one.

As seen in the article 'Scientists warn of 'Terminator' threat from robots' by John Arlidge, the predictions of sci-fi movies are not entirely baseless. Arlidge talks about the recent secret meetings of leading researchers in technology to discuss limiting their research so as to prevent endangering humans from catastrophic consequences. The threat of technology turning against humans still remains, but it's just that popular opinion does not pay much attention towards it anymore. As mentioned above, the failure of the predictions coming true in anyway has reduced enthusiasm in the subject. Also, the personal experiences of the people with computers and their utility has been a major force behind the change in opinion.

As resistance towards technology was portrayed through movies, its acceptance has been portrayed too. *Iron Man* (2008) by Jon Favreau is a prime example of such movies. It is the first movie of an award winning science fiction series about a billionaire, engineering genius weapons manufacturer, Tony Stark, who develops an intelligent suit of armor. The suit gives him some exceptional capabilities which he uses to confront and destroy his enemies, including his traitor partner himself. This movie attracted a lot of attention specifically because of its fascinating technology. Jarvis, the intelligent computer built by Stark is a good portrayal of technology used to the benefit of mankind. Jarvis runs Stark's suits; he does his housekeeping, and every other

operation that can be thought of, to an amazing level of accuracy. More than a machine, he is a friend to Stark.

There is a fundamental difference between the way *Iron Man* approaches technology and the way *The Terminator* looks at it. Although *Iron Man* also uses technology that has not been developed yet, unlike *The Terminator*, it is portrayed as a valid instrument in solving problems facing mankind. The movie would like to reinforce the fact that outcomes of technology are positive or negative based on how it is used. This use is not dependent on the machine; it is dependent on the ethical choices of the human user. For instance, in *Iron Man*, the suit used by the antagonist, the 'Iron Monger', is nothing but a larger adaptation of Stark's original suit. The 'ARC' reactor used to power the Iron Monger is also stolen from Stark rather than being developed individually. But despite being the same kind of suit in theory, it ends up on the negative side of the plot. This reinforces the fact that the suit itself is not bad, but rather is used for a bad purpose. The contrast in general beliefs between the 1980s and the 2000s can be clearly seen here. The people today do not look at technology as the cause of 'problems'. Instead they look at human ethical decisions as the cause and at technology as a possible means of solving them. Technology is no more portrayed in sci-fi as hostile autonomous humanoids trying to take over the world, but rather as machines that behave as directed by their human user. Technology is a way for human beings to overcome their physical limitations and achieve more.

In her article 'The Galvanic Twitch: Frankenstein Machines', Meeka Walsh expresses an interesting opinion about what effects science fiction has on society in the long term. She says, "Their content is retrospectively absorbed into mainstream consciousness, oftentimes carrying the shock of having been prescient" (para. 5). We can never be too sure about whether predictions of sci-fi movies will ever be true or false. A few predictions turn out to be true, while

others do not. It also cannot be judged when a prediction might come true. This fact emphasizes the importance of sci-fi as a genre itself. It is not merely a source of entertainment, and also not just an indirect expression of social experiences. It is an expression of our future aspirations as well.

The drastic change in attitude towards computing technology has not been without a valid cause. Development in technology has itself dispelled the initial fears of the public. The difference between logical-romantic contemplation and actual experience has made people feel at ease with computing technology.

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