To what extent can contemporary French cinematic representations of technology be said to be in any sense realistic? Discuss with reference to at least two films.

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The portrayal of technology in film is interesting in this day and age, and compared to previous decades, because of the modern day person's reliance on technology to perform their day-to-day tasks. In this essay I will attempt to examine the realism of any type of technology (with particular focus on computing technology) as portrayed in French films in particular, as France could be said to have been stuck in the dark ages with regard to its sometimes slow adoption of mainstream technology. I will pay particular attention to two French films: *Demonlover* (2002), directed by Olivier Assayas, and *The Fifth Element* (1997) which was directed by Luc Besson and stars Bruce Willis.

The grasp technology has on people's everyday lives varies, understandably, from person to person. We know from commercial success and following, or our own experience, that a film and in particular a story has to be able to be related to society by its viewers. If it is not, it neither fulfil its audience, nor sufficiently connect them with the topic and storyline and therefore does not seem to have any chance of becoming a positvely termed cult film. Therefore, it can be said in many cases to be more important that a film has so-called shock value, and a memorable storyline, than any attempt at realism. Obviously, it depends on the type, style and genre of film. Documentaries allegedly portray reality or a historical moment, but to do this while captivating the audience means that artistic license, inventing fiction to enhance the power of fact, is sometimes required. This could be said to be what film does in its portrayal of technology, particularly in hacker-style films such as *Hackers* (1995) with its fast-scrolling green on black text and characters hitting the keyboard too fast to make sense of, or *James Bond: Skyfall* (2012) which has the protagonist being tied up in a visually realistic yet aurally unrealistic, deathly quiet server room.

Films that include representations of technology often tend to overdo them or dumb them down, making them unrealistic and sensationalist. This can be disappointing to many technologically-minded people because the general public tend not to be massively literate when it comes to computers or digital products in general. A 2013 paper by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, present in thirty-four countries), entitled "Skills Outlook", stated that France ranked below the average for its adults' literacy skills, taking into account also digital literacy, far behind Japan who was the leader, below even the United Kingdom which ranked about average.

The basic premise of *The Fifth Element* is that of "a cab driver [who] unwittingly becomes the central figure in the search for a cosmic weapon to keep [evil] away" (IMDB synopsis, 2016). First, it seems a compelling science fiction film, due to the presence of

"cosmic weapons" which don't exist in real-life and add another sensationalist storyline or event to the viewer's consciousness. This is frequently the point of anything sci-fi or any kind of fiction, whether it be a book or a film: to take the reader or viewer to another land: one of escapism from the harsh realities of life. (Evans, 2001)

Trailers of films are a good way for viewers to see that they appeal to them before watching them in the cinema or buying a DVD. *The Fifth Element*'s trailer is short, punchy, includes shots of the main character Korben Dallas—Bruce Willis—in Bruce's default state (based on every film he stars in) of barely dressed and being asked to save the world. However, in terms of realism and technology, the plot thins. The central elements are fire, water, Earth and air, but these, especially Earth's survival, on which all except fire depend—the Sun was, after all, formed out of the same giant fireball of gases as the Earth (Redd, *Space.com*, 2013)—are threatened. Luckily for humans trapped in the clutches of an evil takeover, there is a fifth element, a mysterious machine that comes to earth every five thousand years to relay more of the central elements and keep it ticking over. In this film, the fifth element's travel to earth is sabotaged by so-called evils who are intent on Earth's destruction. That in itself is an inconsistency and plot hole, because if it happens every five thousand years, no-one could have lived long enough to see it happen before and at this point, no-one would know to sabotage something that has had no visibility in the past. How would the evils know they had got the right spaceship? Theoretically, there would have been many spaceships, or hovercars, moving around, as it was a big city. Also in the trailer, the almost Egyptian, tomb-like, structure surrounding the so-called fifth element—a triangular shaped, gold-plated ship-type object with flares as legs—is only opened with one key every five thousand years to reveal no erosion, no sticky locks, and no worn away hieroglyphs or missing pieces. This in itself is sensationalist, because research by Burke and Gunnell in 2008 has proven that erosion happens over the years even without human interference, meaning that even computer controlled environments would still see some erosion and loss of function, especially over five thousand years, especially with the lack of digital technicians or electronic engineers in these fictional worlds—everyone who has ever used a computer knows that they break down at the most inopportune moments.

The story of *Demonlover* seems on the surface quite a bit darker and more disturbing while still not technically being classed as a horror film: "[t]wo corporations compete for illicit 3D manga pornography, sending spies to infiltrate each other's operations." (IMDB synopsis, 2016) Thankfully for many viewers (I would imagine) it is more concerned with the rival corporations' tactics than the contents of the "treasure" they seek.

Demonlover's trailer is loud, shocking and seems very fast-paced and glitchy. There are lots of split-second shots with disturbing sounds of screaming, interspersed with blank screens, which seek to make the viewer absorb what just happened without going at full speed into the next hard-hitting sequence, and maybe even split up the film into themes, leading to viewer intrigue. Unlike *The Fifth Element*, the trailer does allude to its French director and therefore French origins, having in the English version subtitles for the two sentences that the characters say in French when conversing about the rival company and their plans. It is also very colourful, as Japanese manga is as it is the pop culture symbol

of an entire country which is colourful in itself (Sugimoto, 2014), and this adds even more to the intrigue—the viewer is left wondering what the colours mean, if anything, and whether these represent computers connecting to illicit sites, as in obfuscating the workings of the internet, but this comparison could be seen as tenuous or far-fetched.

The plot of *Demonlover* is interesting because it centers around acquisition of and profiting from an online pornography site, the fictional "demonlover.com". Therefore, it covers explicit themes such as those of pornography, cultural norms, and addiction. This film was made in 2002, a little while before such strict controls and regulations about broadcasting torture came into force, and thus it also portrays the fights between rival corporations in the industries, where people will stop at nothing to push creative boundaries and profits. There are scenes of computer hacking a while into the film as Diane infiltrates the rival company representative's hotel room and attempts to download confidential files onto a USB stick to steal them for her company's advantage, but this is done at speed and in a way that many real computer hackers think of as too risky: in person. They prefer keyloggers downloaded as viruses that transfer data as and when it is captured whilst not relying on humans who, from various events both fictionally and in real life in the past, are known to be fallible pawns in the machinery of corporate espionage. Indeed, Diane ends up fighting when the woman she spies on returns, yet after this bloodshed she wakes up later without a mark on her. This has parallels able to be drawn with video games, which the film also tries to include in its screenplay: people die but it's not real, it's a blurring of reality and fiction, you can shoot people but they get back up again as good as new several seconds later, not tarred at all by their experiences because they are not real. These advances can make people desensitized to what they are reading, watching or doing in books, films or video games, leading to a loss of control, a loss of morality, and a loss of a grip on reality. *Demonlover* deals with these themes very convincingly, as as the rival companies' spies infiltrate, they become accustomed to what they are seeing and start to *enjoy* it rather than be repulsed by it, which puts thier operation at risk, especially when in order to pull the operation off they have to befriend each other, thus letting their guard down enough to initially seem—and remain—convincing.

The Fifth Element's most technologically advanced scene is that of the body reconstruction of Leeloo. This is likened in modern times to the rise of 3D printers, which are of particular interest given some—the RepRap, for example—can now self-replicate, which is seen as the pinnacle of the futuristic age and will be completely useful when, say, the world's natural resources run out and Earth, or any planet, becomes a kind of utopia. The graphics are CGI, due to the film's age, but still quite lifelike, and actual research (Wake Forest School of Medicine, 2016) has dubbed "bioprinting"—printing tissues and organs—a real thing, so the concept was not all that implausible to be starting to be researched in the years in which this film would still be in the world's consciousness. Another computing concept, but more commonly thought of as related to information security, that this film covers is that of two-factor authentication or, more accessibly termed, two-step verification. The principle of this is that you authenticate—login—to for example your emails with something you know—a password—and something you have—a code texted to your phone number, given that nowadays people in the Western,

modern worlds, tend to always have their phones with them. I liken this to the 5000 year deadline—something you know, as a settler on the planet prior to its 5000 year impending destruction—and the stones—something you have, which is brought down by a supreme being on a spacecraft as and when you require it—like codes being sent by text message when you log in, and to verify that you're the real person, you have to enter them into the login box. In the same vain, to save the planet, you need to *know* the date and *possess* the stones at the right time, in the right place. In a way, these film makers were ahead of the technology curve in 1997 as what we have now come to know as two-step verification did not come into common use in the modern, real world until the mid-2000s, yet even then it was hailed as "too little, too late" to protect us from the Internet's evils by world-renowned security researcher and cryptographer Bruce Schneier.

A big question throughout watching these films is that of why their respective French directors focused on the technological basis of them and making technology-related films even minimally. As I mentioned in the introduction, France is seen as very backwards when it comes to the use of technology, in particular computers, in most cases. The French pioneer of telecommunications, with its best feature being its "phonebook" of sorts, the Minitel, was in common use until 2012 when it was retired by France Télécom in favour of its more modern, faster, actual Internet connections. (Schofield, BBC News, 2012) There exists next to no computing education in France, with specialisms in computing only being available at *Bac Pro* level, so the inclusion of technology in these films seems to be catered to a science fiction loving international audience as they were both released internationally to great acclaim. This becomes especially apparent when one realises that their main screen language is English apart from, in *Demonlover*'s case, occasional subtitled French for grassroots and plot effect as both of the central characters—the rival company infiltrator women—are French.

In conclusion, yes, both films could be said to be both technologically progressive and backwards, but they rely on their audiences either not caring and watching it for comedic or sensationalist value, or, in the case of *Demonlover*, being ahead of their time with the principles of biometric data collection and bioprinting to create new beings ressembling humans, or enhanced real humans—androids or cyborgs—artificially, and that the world will catch up with them or, in the case of science fiction books like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, that their work will become a world-renowned cult classic that everyone interested will know and talk about forevermore.

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