

# I, Robot: The Speculative Leap

Science fiction is a difficult genre to adapt, particularly since technology development often outstrips or invalidates the speculative literature written about it. This is particularly true in the case of Isaac Asimov's novel, *I, Robot*, and the film adaptation by the same name. The 53 year temporal and cultural divide between the source text and adaptation can be seen in the development choices of the adaptation; this essay will analyse these factors using the technique of medium specificity.

The source text *I, Robot*, was compiled in 1951. It contains a series of nine novellas which are set between 1998 and 2052 that depict “positronic” robots (Asimov 6) acting abnormally and the characters pursuit of the reason why. Isaac Asimov is highly regarded as part of the science fiction canon, and this is the book in which his famous Three Laws of Robotics are first introduced. The cultural context in which the book was written was post-WWII, which can be seen in Asimov's lack of violence, focus on human psychology, US dominance, atomic power, and the space race: “In an age of Atomic Power and a clearly coming Hyperatomic Drive” (Asimov 89).

The film adaptation, *I, Robot*, directed by Alex Proyas and released in 2004 with Will Smith, is set “In the year 2035 [where] a techno-phobic cop [Will Smith] investigates a crime that may have been perpetrated by a robot, which leads to a larger threat to humanity (Proyas 2004).” The crime being spoken about here is the framed suicide of Dr Alfred Lanning, the top scientist of US Robots, who makes an appearance in three of the nine novellas. The timeline of the adaptation incidentally takes place between Asimov's last two novellas. The cultural context of this 2004 film adaptation is similar to today's context: including economic globalisation, mobile telecommunications, and public scepticism of authoritative benevolence.

The “move from a telling to a showing mode” (Hutcheon 45), from novel to film, requires a number of form changes. For example, due to the limited length of a film, it would be

imprudent to directly translate the nine novellas of the source text into a multi-hour film. In this aspect, a “movie can fail more than a book” (CD1), as it must not only contract a much larger work, but also ensure it will draw a wide enough audience to make a profit: the production costs of a film being significantly higher than that of a novel.

The move from a serial novel media to a multi-media film can also be seen through the film's dual visual and audio mediums. The visual medium provides the template of a modern film: an underdog hero, a feminine, career-woman heroine, and a minor event turning into a world-risking, do-or-die fight. However, the film does not contain the same level of gravitas as the source text, for number of reasons—the hierarchy of mediums; the intellectual discourse of the novel; the canonicity of the works of Isaac Asimov; and the physical and emotional nature of the film. Perhaps because of this, the superimposition of orchestral soundtrack is used in an attempt to add a layer of solemnity to the film without extending the length of the scenes.

As mentioned previously, compared to the novel the film has a shorter time to engage the audience, and Hutcheon mentions, when adapting to film, the “novel, in order to be dramatised, has to be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity (36).” This can be seen in the change from the source text's internal action plot (with the novellas having intellectual, problem-solving structures), to the film adaptation's external action plot (with a literal, detective-murder plot, violence, and explosions). This simplification can be attributed to both the difficulty of displaying thoughts and emotions of a novel onscreen, and the cultural shift in film audience expectations.

It was acknowledged in the class discussion that a modern movie about technophobes would not make a successful Hollywood blockbuster (CD2). The source text depicts a world with an anti-robot movement, to the extent where robots can only be used in off-planet projects, while in the film robots are an everyday household item accepted and taken for granted and the main character Del Spooner is the only anti-robot symbol. The decision to change the film adaptation from a social mistrust of robots, to a single “paranoid” detective with a grudge against robots, demonstrates that, since the 1950's, time has dampened the fears of technological intrusion into society. It is interesting to note

that a previous transposed film script created in 1978, with collaboration from Asimov, never made it into production (Weil 125).

In modern culture, reading for entertainment has declined, especially compared to film-watching for entertainment (CD3). A successful Hollywood film production is often a family film and must interact with its audience on two-levels: on a child's level of understanding and an adult's level of understanding; in the case of this adaptation, with a physical antagonist and with the extrapolated consequences of robot evolution. As the novel was written for adults, it engages on a single, higher level than the film adaptation.

Speculative literature is difficult to adapt to film, particularly in the science fiction genre. In her fourth chapter, Hutcheon quotes the screenwriter of *I, Robot*, Michael Cassut; "things of the future in the earlier written narrative are now often things of the past, so setting, character, and action inevitably have to shift and change" (Hutcheon 127). The temporal and cultural divide between Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* and Alex Proyas's film adaptation clearly demonstrate the changes in audience values and expectations over time: from the fear of technical intrusion to robots in the household; from intellectual analysis to meeting violence with violence; from pro-authority to the underdog.

It can be argued that, in today's society, the source text *I, Robot* has lost its cultural relevance to the wider community, as time has dampened the technophobic fears the novel addressed. Or, that while the quality of the adaptation is subjective, it would not have been technologically possible nor culturally appropriate to create a film like this in 1951. It is clear, however, that both the cultural differences between their audiences and the change in medium have produced two distinctly separate, temporally popular texts.

# Bibliography

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