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Humanities

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20th Century Science Fiction: Taking Control of the World

In recent years, technological advancements have taken over the world, or at least they did in American 20th century science fiction. Science fiction, a reflection of fear brought about by scientific advancements, described exaggerated futures given the dark present of the early-mid 1900s. Filled with violence and disinformation perpetuated by new technology, people began to grow fearful that all humanity would be lost. People saw and grew worried about a future of technology going against humanity by encouraging extreme human traits or going against what is natural for people. In science fiction stories, Americans read about dehumanizing emotions and thoughts, invoking fear of an event occurring in real life. The sci-fi literature of the period exaggerated the terrifying events that occurred, warning people against a similar future.

Science fiction produced fear amongst readers of loss of humanity through technological advancements. For example, Alfred Bester's "Adam and No Eve" written during the Second World War warned readers that scientific expansion could destroy the world. After the main character sacrificed nature to travel into outer space, his dog had "no love or companionship" for him because they had "vanished from the land along with life," leaving "nothing left but hunger" (Bester 913). His dog's hostility was the opposite of what was expected from a man's best friend. The dog was no longer able to feel the natural compassion towards his owner and became driven by fear of the monster his owner had become. Thus, the relationship between the main character and his dog became destroyed as technology destroyed the world, causing readers to feel anxious

about losing a precious relationship of their own due to carelessness with science. This mentality carried over with another short story, “Second Variety” by Philip K. Dick. The story written after the Second World War described a dystopian society infiltrated by robots and cautioned people about excessive power through scientific expansion. When the main character realized that each Variety “were already beginning to design weapons to use against each other” (Dick 331), he discovered the uncanniness of the robots. The human trait of greed for power was so excessive in the robots that it brought an eerie feeling to readers in the time period. Through the creation of the machines, humans were ultimately destroying themselves. Therefore, the text instigated fear amongst its audience by provoking the idea that technology powerful enough to display human-like traits could end up destroying humans themselves. However, not all science fiction of the time involved violence. Orson Welles performed a podcast after the First World War in which he read aloud a fictional news story of H.G. Wells’s “The War of the Worlds.” Through radios across the United States, people panicked about a faux alien invasion as they listened to the evening show thinking it was a new report. Through a first-hand experience of misinformation, Americans grew aware of technology’s ability to communicate fake news rapidly. The radio and other new forms of communication allowed gossip — humanity’s vice — to thrive. Those who experienced the mass anxiety learned that new ways of spreading information could potentially bring out the worst side of people. Through putting humanity’s values on the line, the three authors effectively brought fear of rapidly evolving technology. Early-mid 20th century science fiction made people more afraid of technological advancements.

Through fear, sci-fi brought attention to current events and warned people of a perpetuating future. “Adam and No Eve” and “Second Variety” introduced societies in which technology had completely overstepped its boundaries. Read by many Americans who had

experienced two World Wars filled with violence, the stories helped to bring light to the ethical issues of rapid technological development. With a very fast rate of violent machines and weapons being produced for war, including machine guns, poison gas, tanks, and atomic bombs, people saw plenty of technology being created to destroy lives. Questions of whether the usage of such machines were morally correct were brought up. Through the technology in science fiction, a prediction of the world in which humans continued using science for violence, authors induced fear in readers. In this way, Americans became more aware of how inhumane technology could be if used improperly, the consequences being a dystopian society or more war. However, the fear of expansion of technology was not only about brute force. Welles's radio broadcast and the resulting mass panic made people fearful of the facilitated misinformation of communication technology. Americans became increasingly aware that radios and telephones could facilitate the spread of news, which could cause a disaster if the information was false. Although not its original intent, Welles' adaptation made people aware that technology could spread disinformation easily and that disinformation could bring out the worst side of humanity. The radio broadcast ultimately warned people of similar events occurring in the future if they were not careful with technological expansion. The three sci-fi stories cautioned the population effectively of a future that matched the present. In this way, science fiction spread awareness of 20th century events possibly repeating.

Inducing fear through 20th century science fiction cautioned Americans against a perpetuation of current events. The significance of sci-fi related to technological expansion lies in its ability to make readers aware of the consequences of allowing technology to overcome humanity. The production of new machines that began a couple hundred years ago has affected the way humans work, communicate, and fight wars. With this massive lifestyle change, people

had no choice but to adapt, jeopardizing their humanity. From the 1900s to the present day, humans have used science fiction to understand the consequences of utilizing too much technology or being careless with it. Thus, along with technology spreading to all corners of the globe, its corresponding science fiction went along as well to remind people that their precious humanity should never be jeopardized.