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Uncertainties and ambivalence surrounding AI: Popular filmic representations as real-world threat or saviour

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) has had a significant historical representation within popular culture over the decades, used in storytelling for films, television programmes, books and video games. Films like Blade Runner (1982), Blade Runner 2049 (2017), The Matrix (1999), The Terminator (1984), Ex Machina (2014) and Minority Report (2002), for example, can all be used to explore the impacts of AI on society. These stories exploring AI often centre around the environmental and social impact of advanced technology, including the perceived threat to humans, as well as the ethical considerations that this technology generates. Much of the same issues presented within films are also found in science fiction novels, by the likes of such authors as Isaac Asimov, William Gibson and, of course, Arthur C. Clarke who famously wrote in 1964 that 'the most intelligent inhabitants of the future world won't be men or monkeys, they will be machines'. This article examines popular films that represent AI as the focus of their content, to create the vision of both innovation and the fears around such advancement in the real world. In considering the historical background of AI development,

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together with the ever-present threat of science creating an all-powerful and uncontrollable artificial 'programme', that would have the ability to dominate and control humanity, these stories within popular culture may also serve as a warning about the implications of AI developments. This article then considers the representation of AI from a communication lens and whether the so-called science fiction is now here.

INTRODUCTION

The development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) has become a more urgent and pressing concern in contemporary life. According to the Future of Life Institute, AI technology can provide the potential for humankind to flourish like never before or to self-destruct. In other words, while AI offers the solutions to humanity's many crises; ranging from the threats of climate change to the ability to reduce poverty and disease, it also presents the potential for existential threat, by way of 'global, terminal risks' (Bostrom 2002: 1). Bostrom (2014) contends that there is research suggesting that AI could be the most critical issue that humanity has ever faced. The concept of AI has, until recently, been something appearing mostly within the realms of science fiction storytelling, largely an item of future imagination to be explored. With advancements in deep learning and growth in surveillance technologies, the threats visualized previously in science fiction texts are now appearing in our everyday lives. With these advancements becoming part of modern-day society, we are forced to grapple with both the ethical and logistical issues that arise from AI. An example can be seen when raising the question about who is responsible for regulating AI developments, as well as what should or should not be done with these AI capabilities. This article therefore explores the contemporary threat and possibilities of AI and how these have been represented in popular culture texts. A key consideration is how popular culture visualizes both the threats and possibilities of AI, and what these would look like in real-world terms.

Using theory from Cave and Dahl's (2019) survey of 300 fictional and non-fictional works, and their four dichotomies comprising hopes and parallel fears, their taxonomy is mediated by the notion of control, and useful as a method of examination. This chapter makes comparisons between key film texts and what these hopes and fears mean for popular culture representation of AI while addressing contemporary discussions around the present threats and possibilities of AI use. Cave and Dihal (2019) argue that the hopes and fears displayed in the texts they analysed, often diverge from the actual capabilities of AI, and shape how the technology is developed, implemented and regulated. This representation can lead to beneficial advancements and potential pitfalls as society attempts to navigate the further implementation and integration of AI.

The implications of AI in contemporary society are huge and cover many aspects of life, such as the notions of what is reality and truth. For example, we live in a time of rising examples of deepfakes and misinformation with everyday examples of the impact of job displacement and economic disruption. In this regard, Ford says that 'acquiring more education and skills will not necessarily offer effective protection against job automation in the future' (2015: 13). Furthermore, fears exist regarding the potential threat of the rise of AI machines with autonomous weapons that could start a war with

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humanity. Yoshua Bengio, known as a godfather of AI, expressed his concerns about current advancements when he signed an open letter warning about the dangers of AI, stating that AI ‘warrants immediate and serious attention’ (Norton 2023). Even at the most everyday level, however, AI can impact key areas of life, with implications for healthcare, education, transportation, finance, environmental considerations, manufacturing and industry, agriculture and national security (Heinlen and Kaplan 2019).

Facing AI capabilities is difficult, and according to Suleyman ‘[w]e urgently need watertight answers for how the coming wave can be controlled and contained, how the safeguards and affordances of the democratic nation-state can be maintained, but right now no one has a plan’ (2023: 16). Similarly, the United Nations attests:

Though AI has been around for years, capabilities once hardly imaginable have been emerging at a rapid, unprecedented pace. AI offers extraordinary potential for good – from scientific discoveries that expand the bounds of human knowledge to tools that optimize finite resources and assist us in everyday tasks. It could be a game changer in the transition to a greener future, or help developing countries transform public health and leapfrog challenges of last-mile access in education. Developed countries with aging populations could use it to tackle labour shortages.

(2023: vii)

Though expressing optimism at the role that AI could play in the world, the United Nations report expresses concern and discusses the risks associated with the rise of AI, suggesting that AI ‘can reinforce biases or expand surveillance; automated decision-making can blur accountability of public officials even as AI-enhanced disinformation threatens the process of electing them’ (United Nations 2023: vii). Furthermore, Future of Life Institute says that

Artificial Intelligence is racing forward. Companies are increasingly creating general-purpose AI systems that can perform many different tasks. Large language models (LLMs) can compose poetry, create dinner recipes, and write computer code. Some of these models already pose major risks, such as the erosion of democratic processes, rampant bias and misinformation, and an arms race in autonomous weapons. But there is worse to come. AI systems will only get more capable. Corporations are actively pursuing ‘artificial general intelligence’ (AGI), which can perform as well as or better than humans at a wide range of tasks. These companies promise this will bring unprecedented benefits, from curing cancer to ending global poverty. On the flip side, more than half of AI experts believe there is a one in ten chance this technology will cause our extinction.

(2024: n.pag.)

At the centre of our capacity to deal with all these issues lies the rapid acceleration in technology where ‘[t]he speed, autonomy, and opacity of AI systems challenge traditional models of regulation, even as ever more powerful systems are developed, deployed and used’ (United Nations 2023: vii). Technology experts continue to suggest that AI could drive humans to extinction. Moreover, ‘a team of international scientists asked 2,778 AI experts

about the future of systems, with five percent reporting the tech will lead to collapse' (Main 2024: n.pag.). At the core of these arguments is that the only way to protect humans is through stringent regulation. The existential problem according to Kurzweil (1999) is that the development of AI could lead to humans questioning the very nature of what it is to be human. He contends that:

Before the next [twenty-first] century is over, human beings will no longer be the most intelligent or capable type of entity on the planet. Actually, let me take that back, the truth of that last statement depends on how we define human. [...] The primary political and philosophical issue of the next century will be the definition of who we are.

(Kurzweil 1999: 2)

In addition, this era will also be defined by 'a fundamental shift in the relationship between workers and machines [...] and the line between labour and capital is blurring as never before' (Ford 2015: 10). Moreover, while some of the problems with the development of AI are pragmatic others look to the philosophical tensions around machines gaining consciousness with the concept of reaching the singularity moment (Kurzweil 2005). Bostrom's examination of AI concludes that:

superintelligence is not just another technology, but another tool that will aid incrementally to human capabilities. Superintelligence is radically different. This point bears emphasizing, for anthropomorphizing superintelligence is a most fecund source of misconceptions.

(2003: n.pag.)

Bostrom highlights that where traditional technologies enhance specific aspects of human ability, this technology is a radical departure from previous technologies because it involves an intelligence that surpasses human intelligence in all aspects. The danger of anthropomorphizing superintelligence is that this could lead to significant misunderstandings about its potential nature and impacts. To anthropomorphize superintelligence then, is to potentially underestimate the unique and transformative potential of superintelligence itself.

WHAT IS AI?

When defining AI, Bolden states that '[a]rtificial intelligence (AI) seeks to make computers do the sorts of things that minds can do' (2016: 1). She believes that AI has two main aims, the first is technological and the other is scientific. In the technological sense, AI is used to get computers to do useful things, while in the scientific sense, it uses AI concepts and models to ask big questions about humans and other living things. There have been many predictions about what the future holds for AI, but the most terrifying prospect seen in the popular cultural examples is the contemporary angst around Singularity, the proposed point where machines become more intelligent than humans. The Singularity point was originally proposed by Vernor Vinge who said that within 'thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended' (1993: 11). Some think that the future of AI lies in humans trying to become the 'Gods' of

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the earth, where '[t]he upgrading of humans into gods may follow any of three paths: biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings' (Harari 2017: 38). Harari argues that once 'technology enables us to re-engineer human minds, *Homo Sapiens* will disappear, human history will come to an end, and a completely new kind of process will begin, which people like you and me cannot understand' (2017: 40). To this end, this potential and meeting of the past with the future that has now become the present, raises issues and problems outside humans' capacity to understand and cope. This is what makes popular culture so vital in understanding contemporary issues around AI and how popular culture represents and acts as a conduit joining what was once imagined, to the present. In this way, AI has moved from the realm of being a terrifying product of the science fiction genre, into a real-world threat.

The appearance of AI within popular culture can be traced back to the early twentieth century with representation across many forms of media over time. It has been a theme in films, television programmes, books and video games, to name a few. Prominent examples that grappled with AI as a central concern were films such as *The Matrix* (Wachowskis and Wachowskis 1999), *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), *The Terminator* (James 1984), *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002), *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), all of which explore the impact of AI on society. Some of these concerns covered areas such as the impact of replicants, for example in the *Blade Runner* films, where bioengineered beings are virtually indistinguishable from humans and are created to serve off-world colonies. Here, the nature of consciousness is explored, and the film raises ethical concerns about whether the replicants should be considered sentient beings. *The Matrix* also suggests that AI is an existential threat to humanity and shows a dystopian future where the notions of reality and perception are tested. *The Terminator* raises questions about the use of AI for military purposes and is set in a dystopian landscape. It includes themes of time travel and the existential threat posed by AI surpassing human intelligence and control. Here, the AI Skynet system in this film, gains self-awareness, perceiving humans as a threat, which results in a terrifying takeover of humanity and war with a relentless attack and tracing of humans in the resistance. *Ex Machina* further explores questions around the connection between AI and consciousness, and in this film, the impact of a tech billionaire's desire to test limits and experiment with machines and other humans is explored. Other films such as *Minority Report* raise ethical dilemmas around predictive policing using algorithms and AI, exploring precrime interventions and the issues around free will, where faulty predictions are more than possible, and the limitations of AI are exposed. These films can act as cautionary tales of what happens when AI surpasses human intelligence, raising issues about artificial consciousness, morality and the ethical responsibilities of creators towards their creations. While the possibility of AI and its benefits are significant, the rapid and continued developments continue to raise these ethical, existential and political challenges and possibilities (Clapton and Shepherd 2019), as there is a growing realization of the potential for AI to create good or harm.

The history of AI representation in popular culture texts is extensive. Some of the earliest representations can be found in the work of Issac Asimov, who wrote about AI and robotics in his stories in the *I, Robot* (1950) series. These were a collection of short stories and novels exploring the interactions between humans and intelligent robots who were governed

by the ‘Three Laws of Robotics’, a set of ethical guidelines designed to ensure the safety and well-being of humans. These ethical guidelines also appeared in *I, Robot* (1950) which is a series of interconnected stories, and the implications of robot–human interactions were explored. He also wrote books such as *The Naked Sun* (1957), where investigators examine a murder on the planet Solaria, in a society where humans live with robot servants. One of the most significant aspects of Asimov’s writing was the discussions about the ethical, social and philosophical implications of AI. Like many similar writers, though this work fits into the category of science fiction, it is also part of speculative fiction, which asks the question – ‘[w]hat if?’ – and thus ‘allows authors to examine earthly themes of love, loss, family, and morality through a fresh and fantastical lens’ (Brown n.d.). Popular culture representations therefore are sights of contestation as well as representation and:

Popular culture does not simply affect a separate domain of ‘real world’ politics, it is itself contested and political. Second, popular culture has always had a dual functionality and purpose the (re)production of tropes and existing structures of meaning-in-use and the exploration and making of new meanings and new horizons of possibility.

(Clapton and Shephard 2019: 533)

AI is now without a question one of the most pressing issues for the world, where as well as a threat there are possibilities to solve real-world twenty-first-century problems. Tegmark (2018) asks the question that if superhuman AI appears will it be a good thing? He contends that sceptics think that the matter of killer robots is exaggerated and that worrying about this could harm the development of AI. However, ‘[w]e might create societies that flourish like never before, on Earth and perhaps beyond, or a Kafkaesque global surveillance state so powerful that it could never be toppled’ (Tegmark 2017: 13). Both the possibilities and threats all include the significant issue of what happens when humans are no longer the most intelligent species on earth. Therefore, what was once an imagined science fiction future has now become a concern with implications for almost all areas of life.

While technology advancement has increased, especially in the areas of computing and the capacity to generate data, it has now leapt forward into a field that has the ability and potential to impact us all. The degree of sophistication that AI currently presents, and its future capacities are almost without end (O’Neill 2017). With the acceleration of this technology, there is a simultaneous increase in new narratives around the technology. Hermann argues that science fiction AI is ‘considered part of a larger corpus of “AI narratives” that are analysed as shaping the fears and hopes of technology’ (2021: 319). For those who think that AI offers existential threats, Ng argues that ‘while superintelligence is always a possibility, there is no need to be concerned about an imminent superintelligence “explosion” that may threaten humanity with extinction, and so worrying about superintelligence is like worrying about “overpopulation on Mars”’ (Ng cited in Baum 2020: 28). However, the persistence around the impact of AI continues, and in the daily occurrences in news feeds as well as in popular culture.

One of the earliest definitions of AI is one that is still widely used and accepted. John McCarthy at the 1956 Dartmouth conference outlined ‘that artificial intelligence is about letting a machine simulate the intelligent

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behavior of humans as precisely as it can be' (McCarthy cited in Huawei Technologies 2023: n.pag.).

However, AI is a new type of technological science that investigates and develops the theories, methods, technologies and application systems to simulate, improve and upgrade the human intelligence. The AI is created to enable machines to reason like human being and to endow them with intelligence.

(Huawei Technologies 2023: 3)

The concerns around AI therefore cover a vast degree of considerations from utopian and dystopian visions of the future, the arrival of the future now and ethical considerations that cover many areas of life.

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE WORLD

The integration of popular culture representation is therefore important. Forbes and Mahan contend that 'popular culture' draws our attention to the widespread, common, frequently commercial, and often entertaining aspects of our cultural context as worthy of attention, examination and reflection (2017: 5). They argue that popular culture both reflects and shapes us and that the representational issues that were once science fiction, popular cultural representations, are now things to be grappled with in contemporary real-world life. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause state that 'the popularity of a given cultural element (object, person or event) is directly proportional to the degree that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values' (1992: 16–17) and this definition fits the current focus and excitement around AI perfectly. At the intersection of popular culture and the representation of AI is a complex interplay of a sense of fascination and hope as well as anxiety about what could happen. Furthermore, Forbes and Mahan believe that '[b]ecause popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflect us' (2017: 5). Popular culture is therefore both a reflection and a shaping force which are important aspects to consider to the impact that AI is having in contemporary society. The other aspect is that an examination of popular culture texts offers a chance to look at cultural anxieties – as a place of examination of power and tensions of which AI has now become one of the largest global tensions.

One of the most critical issues to consider is how AI 'has moved from the realm of Science Fiction (Sci-Fi) to become an increasingly prominent issue in the "real world"' (Clapton and Shephard 2019). There are diverse interconnections between popular culture and world politics, and this has become an emerging sub-field of international relations. Shephard argues that 'popular culture contributes to changing perceptions of time, space, scale, identity, and participation while establishing the outer limits of what is understood as "political" or "cultural"' (2012: iv). Popular culture has always commented on societal concerns, and the representations of AI within popular culture have explored ethical dilemmas, depicted potential dystopian futures, and have also humanized AI. Cave and Dihal say that 'regardless of how accurate they are, these portrayals matter, as they create a backdrop of assumptions and expectations against which AI is interpreted and assessed' (2019: 74). What might be one of the most pressing examples of how popular culture works is that of acting as cautionary tales. Science fiction has warned about the potential

dangers of AI and Harari (2017) notes that many science fiction stories depict dystopian futures where AI poses existential threats to humanity. Often at the core of these tales are the representations of ethical implications of AI development and how to take proactive measures to ensure its responsible use. The depictions of AI have often taken the form of:

depictions of catastrophic and/or dystopian futures (for example the Terminator and Blade Runner franchise) that capture the fears and anxieties of the time, or utopian futures that depict a better world and reflect the hope for a better tomorrow and the continued march of progress and advancement (*Star Trek*).

(Clapton and Shepard 2019: 533)

These narratives then deliver insights into the cultural anxieties and the growing philosophical implications of AI development. What is pressing, however, is that what was once in the future – is now, and these concerns are real.

WHAT THEMES EMERGE IN AI POPULAR CULTURE REPRESENTATION?

As popular culture representation has presented scenarios of utopian and dystopian futures of AI, this poses questions about what the narratives mean for society and the real-world impacts of the representation. Cave and Dihal (2019: 74) recognize that for the Anglophone West, the portrayal of AI is presented optimistically and pessimistically. They argue the importance of these portrayals is that they ‘create a backdrop of assumptions and expectations against which AI is interpreted and assessed’ (2019: 690). As overarching ideas, this means that AI developers can be influenced by the way that they ‘inform and develop research already underway and open up new directions of exploration’ and ‘narratives could influence public acceptance and uptake of AI systems’ (2019: 74). Their study examined over three hundred works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They evaluated whether the categories they found also applied to historical early imaginings of intelligent machines such as *Medieval Robots* (2015) and Kang’s *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automation in the Europeans Imagination* (2011). Their corpus then selected the top 35 best-grossing robot films, and a selection of older fiction works that were still in print and/or deemed classics. This included non-fiction work such as Bostrom’s *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (2014) or Kurzweil’s *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (1999).

This study found that there were four dichotomies present, which were categorized into four areas, four hopes and four parallel fears. The four hopes were labelled: immortality, ease, gratification and dominance. Each of the elements of the hope category is associated with narratives that present positive transformative impacts on humans, while the fears were inhumanity, obsolescence, alienation and uprising (Cave and Dihal 2019). Therefore, each of the hopes has attendant fears. AI, for example, has been projected to bring about radical changes in extending life for humans (Cave 2020). Sophisticated new medicines may make the body immune to ageing, but at its most extreme this could become cyborgization and dehumanization. If there is transcendence and removal of the consciousness from the body, an upload of the mind, this raises the question of what is human (Cave and Dihal 2019).

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Ease and obsolescence are both two sides of hope and fear where the hope is that AI will wrest humans from the burdens of work while the threats and fears remain around humans becoming obsolete. Gratification vs. alienation is another aspect with enormous possibilities for AI to bring humans pleasure where it 'promises to automate – and thus un-complicate – the fulfillment of every desire' (Cave and Dihal 2019: 76). While this potential to provide unparalleled levels of pleasure seems enticing, the flip side is that many would fear and recoil at the thought of human and personal aspects of humanity being altered to this extent. The final category they discuss is dominance vs. uprising, a category that focuses on concerns over power. The hope is that AI could protect utopian ways of life; however, the counter to this is the dystopian imaginings of where autonomous weapons turn on humans. This scenario has long been imagined in science fiction texts and one of the best-known examples is that of *The Terminator* (1984) where the humanoid robot is sent back to eliminate humanity.

Using their model I have explored key texts to assess themes that are in these films and tease out the implications of this. I also add ideas around ethics, the uncanny valley and an overarching commentary about whether AI forms the backdrop of dystopian and utopian scenarios.

The idea of the uncanny valley was conceived by Masahiro Mori in 1970 which is a concept of robotics, 3D animation and AI design where the robot, avatar or artificial being appears almost human. This then causes a sense of revulsion in humans (Mori 2012). Within this concept is the idea that as the machine enters a point where it enters the valley, it evokes a sense of discomfort or even fear, like the concept of the uncanny, where the likeness and yet difference to humans is both eerie and unsettling.

AI POP CULTURE REPRESENTATIONS

While the selected films discussed here are not an exhaustive list of AI film texts, they are films that have been critical and commercial successes and are key examples that have generated much discussion about the role of AI in the future.

The Terminator (1984)

The Terminator (1984) is one of the most prominent and successful representations of AI. In this dystopian film AI becomes sentient, in the form of an advanced AI system called Skynet. As Skynet becomes self-aware, it initiates a nuclear attack that results in an apocalypse which sets up a battle between machines and humans. As part of Skynet's evolution, it designs and deploys an army of killer robots called Terminators whose task is to hunt down and eliminate humans, and one human in particular, Sarah Connor, who is the mother of the resistance of the future. In this film, and the other films that follow in the series, is the fear of uncontrolled AI, where humans lose control over systems that were supposed to make life easier. The battle of humans versus machines is shown as an exhausting and ongoing struggle, where the machines are relentless, and humans have the odds stacked against them. At the base of this film, is the clear question of the ethics of AI and technology. Clearly without adequate safeguards humanity is ultimately at risk of extinction. The film fits the themes of ease and obsolescence as well as uprising (Cave and Dihal 2019). These themes have of course been mirrored in concerns by some of the world's leading thinkers and commentators around

AI in recent years such as Elon Musk, Stephen Hawking, Bill Gates, Nick Bostrom and Yuval Noah Harari.

Blade Runner (1982)

Blade Runner (1982) directed by Ridley Scott was inspired by the Philip K. Dick's science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep* written in 1968. The novel was set in a post-apocalyptic world rather than a dystopian future with oppressive societal control and a deep sense of decay. Though set in a dystopian version of Los Angeles, the year is 2019. Noticeably, the city is depicted as multi-cultural, marked by skyscrapers, massive advertising billboards and neon lights. The future Los Angeles is full of elements of Japanese aesthetics in its visual style and was perhaps an indication of the growing influence of the Japanese economic influence, technology and culture. At the centre of the film is the Tyrell corporation which is a powerful and ever-present influence that is responsible for making the replicants. Replicants are engineered for dangerous off-world tasks and the role of the Blade Runner is to hunt down the rogue machines and stop their rebellion. This film then projects a future where advanced technology AI has had a major influence on life.

A central theme of *Blade Runner* is immortality, seen through the lens of AI. While the replicants have superior strength and agility to humans, they only have a limited life of four years. The lifespan limitation is imposed as a fail-safe to prevent replicants from becoming too human and potentially threatening human society. The film presents a mixed point of view of these developments where it questions whether it is ethical to extend life artificially and whether the invention of replicants diminishes human life. The film raises questions about whether Deckard is a replicant himself. In subsequent interviews with the Director Ridley Scott, he suggests that Deckard is intended to be a replicant. There is an intentional ambiguity in his presentation, however and whether Deckard is a replicant adds to the complexity of the interpretation of the film. In this way, the hope of ease, where machines carry out the workload that humans cannot is present. It is clear too that the replicants are used for human gratification, where the replicants are presented as constructed to fulfil human desires. The ethical issues associated with AI are presented throughout the film, raising existential questions about exploitation and the future of humanity. *Blade Runner* fits the category of dominance, where the main storyline is set to show humans attempting to regain control of the AI robots they made. *Blade Runner*, it can be argued, fits into the fear categories of Cave and Dihal (2019). Levels of inhumanity are explored throughout the film where it is often the replicants who show more emotion and empathy than the humans. The replicants for all their advanced technology and use to humans are seen as disposable. Alienation and a sense of unease is seen when the replicants are displayed with glowing eyes, but the film tends to avoid the impact of the uncanny valley where it is hard to tell humans and replicants apart. The fear of obsolescence is a primary theme of the film, with replicants that are faster, stronger and more intelligent than humans. The role of the replicants therefore raises enormous ethical questions and humans appear to have lost their moral superiority when faced with how they treat the machines. The fear of uprising is subtly presented, where rather than a world war, the battle is more on an individual level where machines seek to reverse their predetermined fate and defy their extinguishable lifespan.

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Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

Blade Runner 2049 takes a different but complementary approach to the themes of AI. The replicants in this film Joi, an AI companion, and Luv, a replicant enforcer, are presented as machines that demonstrate emotional depth, and self-awareness on a similar level to humans. In this film, the idea of consciousness and the separation of machines and humans is tested further. Rather like the original *Blade Runner*, the film contends with issues of disposability of replicants and concepts of personhood. The ideas of love and relationships in *Blade Runner* blur between humans and machines. This blurring is evident in the character K, who is revealed to be a replicant. This film shows a machine grappling with notions of identity and confronting his humanity. While the film also contains all the hopes of AI to some extent, immortality, ease, gratification and dominance, this is more complex, as it is the AI replicant who must contend with his sense of identity. K sets out to find out if he is more than a replicant. The themes of the future of humanity and the role of AI are raised further with the exploration of the idea that a replicant has given birth and K finds there is a child of a replicant called Rachel, who is Deckard's daughter. The collapse between humans and machines is clear.

The Matrix (1999)

The Matrix (1999) a cyberpunk trilogy created a virtual-reality universe that introduced the idea of 'life as a simulation designed to keep humanity from rebelling, a sort of virtual opium of the masses for the 21st century' (Child 2019: n.pag.). Though *The Matrix* does not address immortality directly, it presents a world that instead questions the nature of reality and the human condition. Key to this is the idea of consciousness, or lack of consciousness on the part of humans who have lost control and remain docile and unaware of their true reality. Cave and Dihal's categories of inhumanity, obsolescence, alienation and uprising are displayed throughout the film. Humans are locked in a battle with the machines that have taken over the world, and humans are alienated from their true nature and deceived by the vision of the world that the machine has given them. The positive category of ease is the back story to the creation of the Matrix, as humanity creates AI and machines to serve them, but as the machines become self-aware, they rebel against their human creators in the Machine War. The fear portrayed fits perfectly with the idea of lost humanity, and obsolescence. In this way, *The Matrix* is a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of AI (AIFastCash 2023). Alienation is seen when the characters freed from the Matrix struggle with existential angst and a sense of alienation. As a cautionary tale, there is little that could be seen as positive about the impact of AI.

Minority Report (2002)

Minority Report (2002) is a science fiction film that explores the intersections of futuristic technology, surveillance and the ethics around a future that is dominated by these things. The core of the film is around precognition as a crime-solving tool and the role AI plays in shaping society and human behaviour. In this film, the predictive and algorithmic biases play out when the main character John Anderton becomes a fugitive after being accused of a future crime. AI in this sense, without limits and checks, becomes out of control and

dangerous. There are extensive representations in the film of a society that has lost control of privacy with biometrics controlling all aspects of life. Privacy is non-existent with surveillance cameras equipped with AI algorithms in the film's futuristic cityscape, and the citizens are constantly monitored. All the negative areas of Cave and Dihal's (2019) study are seen here with inhumanity, obsolescence, alienation and uprising displayed.

Ex Machina (2014)

At the centre of *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014) are ethical questions about AI and the creation of sentient beings. A young programmer Caleb Smith works for a tech company called Blue Book. He wins a lottery to spend a week at CEO's Nathan Bateman's company. The plot centres around Bateman's project, Ava, a humanoid robot with advanced capabilities. Caleb's task is to evaluate Ava with the Turing test to determine if she exhibits human-like intelligence and consciousness. As Caleb gets to know Ava more, he develops feelings for her though he suspects Ava is not as innocent as she originally appears. For example, Ava shows that she can manipulate and deceive Caleb, and use intelligence in a way to help her escape. A key theme in this film is that Ava can manipulate, and the dangers of AI with thinking capacities are clear. *Ex Machina* fits the themes of cautionary tales with the existential and ethical risks associated with development.

Transcendence (2014)

Transcendence (2014) takes the ideas around the growth of AI further again into the concept of singularity, the last step in the evolution of AI into consciousness. This step represents the step for humans, moving from a biological state to a technologically enhanced state. This follows Kurzweil's prediction that AI capabilities will not just enhance human physical capabilities but will change the fundamental nature of human movement and life. In this story Will and Evelyn Casters work on AI development creating technology that will conquer disease, and save the world from hunger and poverty, exactly as many now predict that AI could do. Will is however shot by a group called Revolutionary Independence from Technology (RIFT) which wants to stop the development of AI. Will dies from radiation poisoning and Evelyn sets out to upload Will's consciousness to AI. Evelyn then can communicate to Will through images on-screen and they create 'The Brightwood Data Centre' in the town of Brightwood that makes even more leaps in technological progress. The self-replicating system they create grows exponentially and needs to be destroyed to save humanity. *Transcendence* then demonstrates the Cave and Dihal (2019) categories of immortality, though seen dangerously, what happens when humanity is lost, and the threat of uprising.

THE FUTURE IS NOW AND LIVING BEYOND HUMAN SCALE

Of the filmic texts discussed there are interplays between what is potentially good, and bad with the development of AI. One theme that is not clear in these apocalyptic and dystopian texts is how the current shift will transition and what happens around the everyday tensions that humans are experiencing. This can be broadly described as living beyond human scale (Schaden 2024). It is clear that an examination of popular culture texts merges arguments around how technology is created with fictional depictions. These texts

comment on and provide a platform where cultural anxieties are shared and created. 'Fiction certainly plays a part in comment in the past and present, but it may also serve to set direction in the development of technology by putting forth speculations about the future' (Larson 2007: 293). These texts present many of the concerns that the United Nations has recently addressed around AI. They conclude that AI offers enormous opportunities to assist in all aspects of life, just as others have suggested. These areas include scientific areas and breakthroughs, and the capacity to expand human knowledge tools. They conclude there are risks, with the capacity for expanded surveillance, and that AI can reinforce biases. A key aspect in attempting to navigate the challenges and opportunities is around '[t]he speed, autonomy, and opacity of AI systems [to] challenge traditional models of regulation, even as more powerful systems are developed, deployed and used' (United Nations 2023: 1). The popular culture texts discussed in this article were largely made before much of the AI that is seen now was invented, or at least seen publicly. Perhaps the overt part that is missing from the texts is the issue that society now finds itself grappling with; how does society cope with these changes and how much if any regulation is needed to deal with this? The acceleration of AI and the opacity of the systems that could regulate this can be seen in the following:

AI safety has become a mainstream concern. Experts and the wider public are united in their alarm at emerging risks and the pressing need to manage them. But concern alone will not be enough. We need policies to help ensure that AI development improves lives everywhere – rather than merely boosts corporate profits. And we need proper governance, including robust regulation and capable institutions that can steer this transformative technology away from extreme risks and towards the benefit of humanity.

(Future of Life Institute 2024: n.pag.)

Tegmark (2023) argues that five areas need to be addressed in the future role of AI. These are that innovation does not require uncontrollable AI and that AI research should be 'refocused on making today's powerful, state-of-the-art systems more accurate, safe, interpretable, transparent, robust, aligned, trustworthy, and loyal' (Tegmark 2023: 42). AI innovation depends on regulation and oversight, and though often framed as an obstacle to innovation, failing to do this creates far more catastrophic risk than not regulating. He also calls for 'a liability for harms caused' to incentivize caution and responsibility (Tegmark 2023: 58).

When we consider the space that popular culture texts have played in the representation of AI it is clear that 'popular culture does more than reflect or mirror world politics. It actively shapes it: a realm of meaning-making and identity construction that informs what we understand world politics – including both its location and its agents to be and to represent' (Clapton and Shepherd 2019: 540). Possibly, and more importantly, popular culture texts provide 'the opportunity to investigate how politics might be configured in a world yet to be realized' (Clapton and Shepherd 2019: 540). For AI, popular culture texts are more than just entertainment and the issues and representations they present should be considered for how the real-world implementation and uptake of the new technology is managed, regulated and adapted.

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