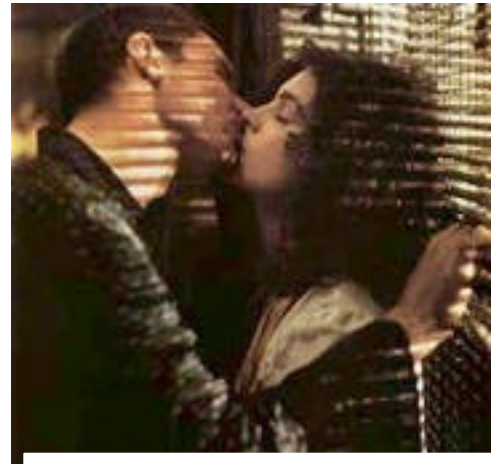


Technology in Sci-Fi: The Future We Love To Hate

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Science fiction is the most common vehicle in literature and film to explore our love and fear of technology. Cloning may seem new, but the first bioengineer was Dr. Frankenstein. The good doctor was a villain for committing the sin of playing God, creating life and breaking the laws of nature. In fact, it's for those very same reasons that many people today mistrust and condemn bioengineering. It's not Dolly the Sheep we fear, but those mad scientists in the backroom lab splitting genes and God knows what else.



Harrison Ford & Clone in Blade Runner

People have always feared being slaves to technology--that some day machines will control our lives, takeover our humanity, and define our reality. Marx situated technology within the context of social relations. For him the key question was who controlled the machine. Capitalists would naturally use technology for their own benefit and as a means to control workers. But if workers had control, technology could help liberate humans from want and misery. Just think of Charlie Chaplin in his classic film *Modern Times*, attached to the assembly line as if a human robot and swallowed into the very gears of the machine. On the other hand communist artist Diego Rivera painted Henry Ford's River Rouge with religious fervor, turning the halls of the Detroit Museum into a virtual chapel to technological worship and working class power. Images of master or slave seem to permeate our views of technology.

Clones And The Sin Of Creation

After Frankenstein, his bride, and their unfortunate fates, *Blade Runner* is our next great bioengineering film. This one gets more real as time goes by. Update the mad scientist to the Tyrell Corporation and it's slimy CEO, the villain now has turned into an unethical businessman with a Phd in science. The clones are manufactured to do particular jobs in outer space and designed with a five-year expiration date. They escape back to earth in search of their maker and with a question we all hold, "How long do I have?" As in Frankenstein, our new monsters, the rampaging misunderstood clones looking for their humanity actually gain our sympathy. For that matter, they win over Harrison Ford even as he hunts them down. Decker, (Ford's character) falls in love with one of the clones and flees into an unknown future with her at the end of the film. How better to express our attraction to technology than to sleep with it! On the other hand Decker goes around killing the other clones, the ones we fear, the ones out of control and questioning the very division between technology and humanity.

What is it to be human was one of Philip K. Dick's favorite themes, he wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the book *Blade Runner* was based on. His questions are becoming ever more relevant as technology puts electrodes into hearts to make them pump, silicon chips into eyes to make them see, and pig's livers into our bodies so we can continue to live. The inter-facing of science in our bodies and our genes is only just beginning. Designing humans (at the very minimum for health reasons) is on our doorstep.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's new film, *Sixth Day*, presents us with a world just around the corner, perhaps no more than five or six years. But rather than *Blade Runner's* dark distopia where police hunt down clones through neon lit rainy streets, *Sixth Day* presents a familiar world of bright clean suburbs where clones hunt humans and each other. This is the world we live in today, just slightly altered by a wonderfully layered use of technologies currently on the cusp of development. Smart refrigerators that remind us we're out of milk, self-driven cars with push button map locators and virtual sex for lonely guys at home. Chase scenes speed past suburban streets where all the houses look the same, reflecting a cloned culture where people already look, think and act alike.

The movie has a lot to say about the moral, legal and economic problems that cloning could create. Cloning in the *Sixth Day*, as in *Blade Runner*, creates memories and personal histories. In *Blade Runner* false memories made the clones more human, while in *Sixth Day* the real memories of the original person are reproduced creating a second or third you. In both movies out-of-control clones are the danger, technology gone wrong. Both movies also give us a dose of religious caution, *Sixth Day* even beginning with a quote from Genesis. And both movies wrap science and technology in its distorted relationship with market and commodity production. In fact, our *Sixth Day* bad guy is an info-tech capitalist dressed in New York black with a Regan era attitude.

The idea of human clones used as technological commodities was more starkly presented in *Blade Runner*, because in *Sixth Day* they have achieved a level of success and power. Nevertheless the deep contradictions and daily compromises between science and capitalism are important elements that make *Sixth Day* work. Robert Duvall plays the scientist (we know because he always walks around in a white smock), and he is clearly manipulated by the corporation's CEO. Although motivated by his research and desire to extend his sick wife's life, his work is used in a political plot to change the laws prohibiting the cloning of humans. Particularly the law that makes it illegal for clones to inherit the wealth of their former self. Something only the really rich would find necessary to kill over. To carry out the scheme people are murdered and cloned, but engineered with diseases that are fatal within a few years. This arrangement helps to enforce contracts as well as company loyalty. Duvall's wife has already been cloned several times and pleads with her husband to let her die. It's a Kovorkian scene arguing for a dignified death over the technological extension of life.

The film also presents some other nicely framed observations about technology and market relations. A star quarterback is badly injured, murdered in the ambulance, and then cloned so he can rejoin the team and fulfill his multimillion-dollar contract. Clones are also employed as an in-house gang working for the corporation. No longer hunted down as violent runaways as in *Blade Runner*, these clones are the hunters and recreated every time they're killed. When they fail to do their job their boss barks out, "You cost \$1.2 million each, show me you're worth it!"

Sixth Day is also good at showing us the arguments and marketing that entices society to accept dangerous technology. The scientist just wants to keep his wife alive and the CEO talks eloquently about reproducing people like Albert Einstein and Dr. Martin Luther King, all high moral arguments that cloak the power and greed behind the reasoning. There is also an active legal business of cloning dead pets and here we are already facing reality. Recently the founder of Phoenix University paid Texas A&M \$2.3 million dollars to try and clone his pet dog Missy. Notice the price tag. That point is brought out during the climax of *Sixth Day*, when the hero "Adam" poses the question "who decides." That, after all, is the key: in a market driven society, who decides is the one with the most money. We may see a world divided between the gene rich and gene poor. Or as Marx would put it, class determines use.

Unfortunately *Sixth Day* betrays itself in the end, much like the studio cut of *Blade Runner*. In that film Decker literally flies off into the sunset with his clone lover as the voiceover tells us that she is special and has no expiration date. Director Ridley Scott's version has them on the run, an elevator slamming shut like a jail door and nothing about Rachel being "special." *Sixth Day* spends two hours telling us about the dangers of cloning, even giving it religious overtones by calling the clones "evil" and "abominations." But in the end Adam's cloned self has a fond farewell with his family, gets into a flyer and takes off over the Golden Gate Bridge into a future of adventure and self-discovery. Here the hero doesn't fall for a clone lover, he falls in love with himself. There is even a mention that his DNA has been checked out and cleared, he has no engineered disease. The film leaves us thinking the only danger with cloning is if we clone bad people. On the other hand, if we clone good people, (like ourselves) it's okay.

Technology As Terror

For a world that technology almost destroyed, we need to visit *Terminator I* and II. Arnold Schwarzenegger is the robotic killing machine and his square body fits the part perfectly. When *Terminator I* came out, robotics were replacing thousands of workers in auto and other industrial jobs. How better to express our fear than a robot that destroys our future. The machine is relentless as your boss on an efficiency drive; he just keeps coming after you no matter how hard you work to avoid your fate.;

Terminator II takes us to the next phase of technology, the digital threat. This *Terminator* is no longer a one-note robot, but a flexible, adaptable, ever-changing threat. The film's effects, produced by digital technology, presents the new killer as information based and computerized. He can mimic any voice, assume any identity, and reprogram himself to deal with changing situations. Robert Patrick (now on X files) as the new Terminator even looks like a well-groomed, thirty-something professional. But under that nice exterior a killer lurks. This Terminator represents the new third wave economy, not only attacking humans, but also replacing the old Terminator model. Finding himself in the technological garbage dump alongside humans, *Terminator I* now switches sides to help defend humanity.

In both films the climatic ending takes place in an old second wave industrial factory. *Terminator I* ends when he is crushed in a machine shop, our human heroine making use of the old familiar technology that we know, control, and feel comfortable with. This is repeated in *Terminator II* where the final battle takes place in a steel mill, the molten metal consuming both *Terminator I* and II. Our jobs are safe, the future technology has been destroyed, and we're left with our industrial base intact.

Total Recall, another Schwarzenegger film, is a virtual Marxist tale on the use of technology. There is a lot of excitement and fun around concepts of dual identity. The hero is torn between joining the revolution or working for a nasty corporation which is running Mars. This conflict of political consciousness is wrapped inside an advanced virtual reality technology game where Schwarzenegger plays out his moral dilemma. Eventually his virtual persona becomes his real self, just as we all wish to be better and braver in our virtual mental playgrounds. To defeat a rebellion of poor outcasts the corporate CEO on Mars (played by Ronny Cox) orders all air cut-off to the underground sections of the city where the rebels have taken over. Air is the prime commodity on Mars, and the corporation that produces and controls it runs the city. Marx couldn't have put it better. Capitalism turns everything into a commodity, even the air we breathe.

This Martian scenario was virtually carried out by Lawrence Summers when he was chief economist at the World Bank. In a memo that could have been part of *Total Recall's* script Summers wrote: "I've

always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted: their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. Only the lamentable facts that so much pollution is generated by non-tradable industries...prevent world welfare enhancing trade in air pollution and waste." Now there is logic that they would have appreciated on Mars. Yes you read it correctly, clean air is inefficient and should provide a market in which poor countries sell their under-polluted oxygen as a sink for industrial waste. Meet your new boss, same as the old boss, and ready for his assignment on Mars.

This is uncomfortably close to the reality of globalization. Today everything seems to be for sale to transnational corporate ownership. There are no longer any socially owned resources, if its public it needs to be privatized. The latest buyouts have focused on national water resources. Recently in Bolivia, Bechtel "bought" major public water resources and increased prices by 300%. As on Mars, there was a massive rebellion of poor people and Bechtel was kicked out of Bolivia.

In *Total Recall* Schwarznegger remembers a hidden Martian technology that creates oxygen for the entire world. The plot revolves around his struggle to put this technology to use for the free consumption of air. Of course our hero is successful, undermining the corporation's monopoly and killing everyone on the executive board for good measure. Technology is both the oppressor and liberator, depending on its use and control. In this case the revolution wins out.

Consciousness, Real And Otherwise

In many of these films computers reach artificial intelligence and act in their own class interests, or at least against human interests. It was a self aware defense computer which sets off nuclear war in *Terminator I*, and who can forget Hal in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The computer that is built to serve us, suddenly turns in rebellion and with cold logical efficiency sets out on our destruction. No matter what we say, no matter what we input, it just won't obey our commands. How many times have we all complained about exactly that same problem as we sit in front of our PCs. In 1968 when I first saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* I was in a San Francisco theater filled with stoned hippies plastered to their seats as spaceships twirled to Strauss. Twenty years later as I sat stone sober at my desk facing my first PC; it seemed Hal was lurking somewhere deep in my subconscious warning me that if I hit the enter key this machine would destroy my life. Now whenever the computer seems to have a mind of its own and refuses all my commands I know Hal's ghost is somewhere in there just short of achieving full consciousness.

The movie that brings all this together is *The Matrix*. False consciousness, artificial intelligence and revolutionary consciousness fight for our hero's soul in a virtual world more real and appealing than reality. Once again computers gain self-consciousness and take control in a bitter battle that leaves the world in ruins and humans enslaved. To provide energy to run the machines humans are kept in cocoons and hooked-up as batteries while their minds are immersed in a virtual reality that looks like New York on its best day. It's hard not to give this a Marxist reading. Human batteries (wage slaves) mercilessly exploited to keep the machine (capitalism) running, all the while believing they are living in the best of all possible worlds. Virtual reality is nothing more than false consciousness. While you think everything is great in actuality the world is hungry, cold, and a prison of poverty.

The film carefully constructs sharply contrasting images of the real world and its computer stimulation. In virtual reality you eat and dress well, have a steady job, and the light shines like Los Angeles in the 1940s. But our small crew of revolutionary cadre who have escaped false consciousness live in small confined metal spaces. The food is prison slop, the clothes dirty and old, and the only job is to organize the overthrow of the machine. Those with revolutionary consciousness

must also be careful of people still trapped in virtual reality. Although the task is to liberate humanity, as long as people are fooled by false consciousness they can be inhabited by a computer program that turns them into agents of the system.

The computer's security programs look exactly like FBI agents. And these agents are nasty business. They use torture, implant bugs in your body to keep track of your whereabouts, express racial hatred of humanity, and carry themselves with a cold fascist attitude of superiority. In a nice turn the director uses a technologically influenced color palate to bathe the agents in a Qualcomm green light during night scenes to contrast with the surrealism of the day.

Matrix also makes use of myth to develop its characters. Laurence Fishburne is wonderful as teacher and prophet, there is an Oracle who lives in the projects as single Black women in an apartment filled with kids, and a Judas who craves to be part of the system again and so betrays his friends. Keanu Reeves as the hero, Neo spends most of the film in the act of becoming the hero and reaching awareness. A bit like his previous role as Siddhartha, but this hero doesn't transform into a peaceful Buddha, but a black clad revolutionary armed to the teeth. Neo breaks out of false consciousness when Fishburne offers him a red pill. You can almost hear Timothy Leary whispering, "turn on, tune in, and drop out." In the end two things save Neo: love wakes our hero to his full potential and saves him from death, and his liberated consciousness gives him the ability to think outside the rules of the system and so deconstructs the programmed security agents.

I suppose in the sequel Neo will go about reprogramming the machine to serve humanity once again. Or perhaps create a utopia without technological terror. Of one thing we can be certain: as long as new technology is created within the social confines of exploitation, science fiction will have plenty of stories to offer us. Our love and fear of technology is based on its potential for liberation or enslavement. Marx was right, it all depends on whose finger is on the button, whose hand holds the hammer, and the agenda in their mind.