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Hey, Siri...

The twenty-first century has seen two monster crazes so far: first vampires and werewolves (often together), then zombies. The recent decline of zombies in media has led to the rise of technological monsters—in particular, artificial intelligence, or AI. According to John Fletcher in his article “Deepfakes, Artificial Intelligence, and Some Kind of Dystopia: The New Faces of Online Post-Fact Performance”, artificial intelligences are programs “capable of autonomous self-improvement and agency” (NP). These include the “weak” or “narrow” programs that play chess or suggest what to watch next on Netflix and “strong” AI like sentient robots, the latter of which Fletcher assures are “currently well beyond our capabilities” (NP).

Jeffrey Cohen argues in “Monster Culture: Seven Theses” that monsters are created in response to societal fears and illuminate aspects of humanity (4). By examining the portrayal of AI in entertainment media, it can be seen that humanity has deep fears about the potential monstrous future of technology.

Robots are Replacing Humans

A common theme in current discourse is that intelligent robots are going to take humans’ jobs. In fact, this particular concern has been around since at least 1887, when Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward*, a novel about a utopian society in which technology has “enabled people to be very productive while working part-time” according to Darrell M. West in his article “Will robots and AI take your job? The economic and political consequences of

automation” (NP). West argues that developed countries are approaching the future Bellamy imagined, but despite Bellamy’s positive portrayal of automation, West says there’s still a “widespread fear that robots and AI will take jobs and throw millions of people into poverty” (NP). West cites a Pew Research Center study in which half of experts expressed their concern that robots will eventually displace enough workers that income inequality will increase due to people being unemployable (NP). In their article called “Artificial Intelligence in Service”, Ming-Hui Huang and Roland T. Rust agree with West’s evaluations of trepidation concerning AI. People fear for the security of their jobs as AIs become more advanced. They theorize “there are four intelligences required for service tasks—mechanical, analytical, intuitive, and empathetic” (NP). Job replacement first occurs at the mechanical level, and as the technology advances, they predict it will eventually move through the four intelligences until AI is capable of completing tasks requiring intuition and empathy (NP). They argue this “results in a fundamental threat for human employment”, echoing the concerns discussed by West. Cohen’s third thesis says monsters are the “harbinger of category crisis” (6). He asserts that part of what makes monsters frightening is their inability to be categorized; they are “disturbing hybrids” that cannot be put into distinct structuration (6). West and Huang and Rust’s articles take on a deeper meaning when analyzed with this in mind; people are scared of AI not only because it could take their jobs, but because it fits the category of a monster—it’s an uncanny blend between computer code and humans’ emotional and empathic capacities.

Kenneth Coates, like West, Huang, and Rust, recognizes that people are scared of losing their jobs to alternate intelligence—he even cites the same Pew Research study as West. However, he argues these fears are unfounded, saying AI will actually create new jobs in a *Forbes* article called “Let the Robots Take Over: How the Future of AI Will Create More Jobs”

(NP). He uses the Industrial Revolution as an example; jobs were expected to be eliminated, but new professions grew to transform the labor force (NP). While Huang and Rust predict AI will eventually be able to empathize, Coates says robots will never learn skills like “creativity, abstract or critical thinking, [or] social or emotional intelligence”, so jobs that need those skills will always be safe (NP).

The fear of what will happen when human jobs are taken over by AI is portrayed in *WarGames*, a 1983 film about an AI programmed to simulate nuclear war in order to take human emotions and doubts out of making tough calls. A high school student unknowingly hacks into the system and thinks the simulation is a game. The simulation then tries to start World War III by launching missiles at the Soviet Union. The near-disaster in *WarGames* aligns with Coates’s assertion that computers will never be able to replace humans’ decision-making and emotional capabilities and shows that attempting to replace humans with AI could have very dire consequences.

Along with being replaced in their professional lives, people are worried they’ll be replaced in their personal relationships. One of the most prominent examples of this in recent media is the 2013 film *Her* in which a man falls in love with his Siri-like artificial assistant. While not a particularly horrifying portrayal of AI, it still fits Cohen’s definition of a monster under his third thesis. The AI in *Her* is capable of human emotions, even love, despite being nothing but a computer. This brings up important and unsettling concerns about the future of artificial intelligence and what exactly it means to be human. In David Edelstein’s review of the film, “A Man and His Machine, Finding Out What Love Is”, he identifies its theme: “Do we need our bodies, or is love all in our brains?” (NP). Are machines capable of love? (Edelstein,

NP). The lines between person and machine are blurred, bringing up questions of morality and humanity that relate to the category crisis described by Cohen.

A far less positive portrayal of AI replacing human relationships is found in an episode of *Black Mirror* entitled “Be Right Back”. The story follows a woman who replaces her dead boyfriend with an AI imitating his likeness. Daniel M. Swain’s review of the episode, “What Black Mirror Episode Be Right Back Says About Us and Technology”, says the woman is left “starved of intimacy, actual feeling or anything of any meaning” (NP). He argues “Be Right Back” shows “we now fear social stagnation as a result of the seemingly benevolent technology we have created” (NP). Although “Be Right Back” focuses on the potential negative consequences of replacing relationships with robot and the social consequences of doing so—more so than *Her*--both portrayals illustrate the category crisis of AI technology, showing Cohen’s third thesis at work.

Artificial Intelligences Could Become Hostile

Perhaps the biggest fear concerning artificial intelligences is that they could become hostile and out of control. Famed physicist Stephen Hawking expresses his worry about the future of AI in an article entitled “Stephen Hawking: 'Transcendence looks at the implications of artificial intelligence--but are we taking AI seriously enough?'” Hawking describes AIs outperforming humans in many fields, including economics, research, and weapons development; he believes “the long-term impact depends on whether it can be controlled at all.”

Hawking’s fears are echoed in countless movies, including the 2015 film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The film’s plot centers around the semi-accidental creation of Ultron, an incredibly complex AI that grows out of control and wreaks destruction on a Russian town, by two well-meaning scientists. “Ultron only sees his good intentions and fails to realize the possibly

monstrous means and consequences,” explains the article “Declassified: Avengers Age of Ultron—Analysis, Explanations, & Secrets Revealed” (NP). The article argues that the film explores what it means to be a monster—Ultron is a monster because he has no regard for human morals or ethics (NP). Cohen’s fifth thesis describes how monsters police the borders of the possible; they serve as a warning against pushing the boundaries of knowledge (12). Ultron’s creators pushed the limits of AI and suffered disastrous consequences when the AI pushed back. Ultron grew out of control, which is one of Hawking’s concerns about AI. By applying Cohen’s theses to Ultron, it can be inferred that people are scared of pushing science too far and AI’s perceived potential to grow beyond human control and act maliciously of its own volition.

Another example of a monstrous portrayal of AI that fits Hawking’s assessment of AI’s future is *Nerve*, a 2016 film about an online game which dares players to perform dangerous acts. The real danger, though, comes when the protagonist learns the game program spreads throughout people’s computers, stealing all their personal information and using it as blackmail to get them to commit treacherous and illegal acts—even killing each other. The monstrous AI effectively turns humans themselves into monsters using its influence. Cohen’s sixth thesis describes how the fear of monsters is actually a kind of desire (16-17). Besides portraying physical fears like heights and motorcycles, the *Nerve* AI preys on many deeper human desires: fitting in with one’s peers, looking good in front of other people, maintaining the status quo, keeping personal information secure, and staying safe from identity theft. With Cohen’s sixth thesis in mind, *Nerve*’s monstrous artificial intelligence takes on an even deeper meaning.

The End of Privacy

Michael Deane, in “AI and the Future of Privacy”, says the increasingly digital world brings with it many issues regarding privacy. He claims AI has “the ability to gather, analyze,

and combine vast quantities of data from different sources” (NP). He says this is because of AI’s speed, scale, and automation capabilities (NP). Specific concerns he discusses include data exploitation through smart home appliances, identification and tracking, voice and facial recognition, prediction of personal information, and profiling (NP). Geoffrey A. Fowler, in “Hey Alexa, come clean about how much you’re really recording us”, agrees with Deane; specifically, he writes about smart-home devices such as Google Home and Amazon Echo and the potential they have to record and store personal information. The AI inside these devices is programmed to listen for specific words and phrases in order to send messages, turn on music, and even make purchases. “These devices are always ‘awake,’ passively listening for the command to activate,” Fowler explains (NP). The information gathered by these devices could potentially be exploited in the ways Deane described.

These fears are portrayed in George Orwell’s classic novel *1984*. The society it portrays is one in which citizens are monitored at all times through cameras and microphones. “Big Brother is watching you”, citizens are constantly reminded (Orwell, 3). AI technology is used as a means to exert control over the population. Antony Funnell in “*1984* and our Modern Surveillance Society” compares *1984*’s all-seeing government through AI to the Snowden exposé. “1984 wasn’t far off the mark,” says Mark Pesce in Funnell’s article. He continues, “The NSA and its associated organizations were all colluding in massive wide-scale surveillance of populations” (NP).

Another example of a monstrous AI used for surveillance and control can be found in the 2011 film *The Adjustment Bureau*. The film portrays an intelligence network that is used to influence people’s actions and choices in order to achieve the Bureau’s desired outcome. The protagonist is repeatedly blocked from interacting with a love interest because the Bureau

predicts both of them will be more successful without each other. If the main character does not comply, he will be “reset” or lobotomized. With Cohen’s writing in mind, *The Adjustment Bureau* reveals what society is afraid of: the loss of free will and privacy.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence isn’t going away anytime soon, and the unknown risks of the technological age are frightening to many. The portrayal of AI in entertainment media in monstrous roles illuminates many fears humans have: being replaced, venturing into the unknown, losing control over their creations, and the invasion of privacy.

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