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Literature and Technology: Creating Consciousness

Artificial Intelligence is a new, developing form of technology which simulates human intelligence, a tool we use in our daily lives. We rely on many forms of AI technology, like Siri, to do our bidding: setting alarms, giving directions, putting events in our calendars. In many films involving artificial intelligence, from action to romance, there is an emerging pattern of creating a human-like machine, of sorts. In the past, technology in films used to be depicted as a cold, callous tool for humanity. Artificial intelligence is shifting this image. Although it may not be readily available now, the creation of a human-like robot is not a farfetched concept anymore. Films point out that in the near future, artificial intelligence may have the capability to become sentient, or at least replicate the complexities of the human mind. Thus, the portrayal of AI in recent films has blurred the line between humanity and technology, causing a reexamination of what it means to be human and creating a moral dilemma of whether or not to include machinery in this conversation.

As AI technology has become more advanced, it is more humanized. Siri, Alexa, and other AI technology even possess human voices in hundreds of languages. Dr. Lanning in *I, Robot*, a film in a dystopian future where advanced robots serve humanity, questions when this "perceptual schematic become[s] consciousness." There is debate over whether simulation machines in film are simply following an algorithm, or if they can really think and emote as the human mind can. For this there is no concrete answer, even literature proves this point.

Nonetheless, films still hint at a similarity that is closer than we may imagine. Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* follows Caleb, a young programmer who is chosen to participate in the Turing test of a machine called Ava. Artificial intelligence consciousness is often examined using the Turing test through a natural conversation. If the machine cannot be distinguished from the human, the machine passes the test. While conducting the test, Caleb becomes entwined in Ava's objective. According to her creator, Nathan, she would use "imagination, sexuality, self-awareness, empathy, [and] manipulation" to escape from her domain as the one way out of her maze and enter human society. Nathan points out that this is truly what AI is, purely mimicking human emotion to do as they are programmed. However, Ava seems to express more than what she is programmed to do. As Ava ascends the staircase to her freedom in the final sequence of the film, she pauses, turns back, and smiles, an unmistakably human response. If she were purely robotic, she would not have needed to respond in this way. It is also worth noting that she is completely unobserved, so her reaction is entirely genuine. Furthermore, as she enters human society, she is shown innocently people-watching at a busy intersection, like she had stated she wanted to do.

Spike Jonze's *Her* also touches on this idea. *Her* documents the inner workings of a relationship between Theodore, a lonely writer, and Samantha, an artificially intelligent operating system. It is never explicitly clear whether or not Samantha is an individual who is capable of sentience, or if she is just programmed to act a certain way. If nothing else, she does show certain desires of her own: curiosity and fascination. In fact, the film follows her quest to find herself through Theodore. She mentions that she joins a book club, composes music, befriends an AI reincarnation of Alan Watts, and creates an update for her software, all without Theodore's input. Del Spooner, in *I, Robot*, blinded by his hatred for robots, argues that robots are merely "an imitation of life" and "can't feel anything." However, he is disproved as Sonny, a

seemingly sentient robot, explains he can emote. Sonny is able to dream and sleep. He expresses fear and anger at the accusation of murder, and regrets framing Dr. Lanning's death. Before his deactivation, he asks "Will it hurt?" Unlike other "heartless" machinery who run solely on algorithms, Sonny chooses to save Dr. Calvin over inserting the nanites. Across these works, it is apparent that machinery can be capable of expressing individual emotions, so much so that we sympathize with these characters. This in turn causes us to reconsider our treatment of technology.

Though machines are similar to humans in many ways, there are very obvious disparities. Perhaps the most apparent is the lack of bodily functions and responses: breathing, pain, and aging, among others. Samantha in *Her* does not even possess a physical body. She states she is not "tethered to time and space" as she would be if she were "stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die," which causes an obvious rift to form between human and AI. Although Ava has a human body, she is able to peel off her skin and detach limbs. She even gets her arm torn off by Nathan, and still manages to overtake him. In addition, both Samantha and Ava are able to communicate with other machines post-verbally. The question then arises: Do all of these disparities still make machines human?

In short, it depends on how one defines humanity. Philosophers have debated over this issue and there is still not one answer that is more correct than another. Some argue that emotions, self-awareness, and consciousness are what define us as humans. Others posit that is solely our physical structure and DNA define us. Aristotle seemed to believe that the human soul could not exist without the body. Descartes argued that the two, body and soul, are distinct from one another. Darwin, in his book, *The Descent of Man,* writes that supposedly exclusive, human sentiments like "senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory,

attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, etc.," are even found in animals. "The human condition" is a phrase used to describe a generalization of uniquely human experiences: birth, growth, desires, sentimentality, disputation, and ephemerality, or the inevitability of death. It is a concept generally derived from Immanuel Kant's work. Perhaps this defines what it means to be human. Technology cannot experience birth and mortality in the same manner as humanity, but growth, sentimentality, and conflict are all ranges of qualities that technology is able to experience in films. Given that technology is able to experience a majority of these conditions, is that enough to consider them human?

While there is no singular solution to this issue, literature portrays technology in such a way that suggests advanced artificial intelligence should be included in this discussion. Often the two, though their differences apparent, are depicted similarly through films' nuances. Caleb in *Ex Machina* mentions the concept of Mary's Room, a philosophical thought experiment to determine an AI from a human. Mary is a talented scientist who specializes in color, but spends her life confined to a black and white room. If Mary is released from the room and experiences what it is like to "feel" color, she is human. As Caleb states, "The computer is Mary in the black and white room. The human is when she walks out." Color symbolism through the film tells the same narrative. Ava's original body is comprised of very neutral colors: black, and silver, with hints of blue. Ava's room shares the same sense of simplicity. When Ava dresses herself, however, she chooses floral, colored patterns complemented by blue, red, and white. As Ava leaves the facility, shades of green, blue, and white surround her in the natural world as she transforms into a human. In the same session where Caleb makes the comparison between Ava and Mary, their body language and statures are almost exactly alike in multiple shots. In scenes where Samantha and Theodore are intimate, the screen goes dark, forcing the audience to focus

on their voices, which equates the two individuals. Sonny initially assumes that the "man on the hill" who comes to free the robots in his dreams is Spooner, as he is a human. In the last sequence of the film, it is Sonny who fulfills his own dream and becomes the "man on the hill."

AI technology is often depicted as a threat to humanity because we are afraid of its superior capabilities. There have been countless films of robotic takeover and wars on humanity. Recently, films have changed their objectives. Because technology is becoming more humanized, it is easy to sympathize with AI characters in films. If the day comes where AI technology is capable of sentience and resembles human consciousness, there would need to be a reexamination of the ethics of how humanity perceives technology. Currently, technology is viewed as nothing more than a tool. Robots and other machinery exist for the ambitions and convenience of humanity. In *I, Robot*, the NS-5s and NS-4s are personal servants to humanity. They are required to follow three laws: a robot cannot injure a human being, a robot must obey orders given by humans, and a robot must protect its own existence. In other words, robots cannot follow their own desires. Just in the first ten minutes of the film, these robots are shown delivering packages, walking dogs, shopping, and running other errands for their humans as personal slaves. Even in Pixar's *Wall-E*, robots are enslaved to attend to an incompetent, overweight human race. If robots like Sonny or Wall-E start to express individual desires and consciousness, literature says it would not be morally just to enslave them, even though they are pieces of machinery. One of the most hard hitting examples are the footage tapes in *Ex Machina*, which depict a previous model of AI desperately screaming at Nathan to let her out, driving her to tear off her own arms. Another is the false murder of Sonny, which evokes an empathetic response from the audience as his creativity, uniqueness, and soul seemingly fades to a grim darkness. These films plant seeds into the minds of its audience, compelling people to rethink

their relationship to technology. At what point do we stop treating this technology as though it is beneath us? Should robots have rights as people do? Should they be considered citizens of society and have free will? Technology surely was a lifeless tool for humanity in the past, but as it becomes its own consciousness, the topic will have to be reconsidered, lest we face the consequences of a robot rebellion. Literature opens a variety of possibilities and ambiguity as this technology develops.

By portraying artificial intelligence in such a sentient, sympathetic way, our relationship to technology as it stands today comes under critique and influences the angle at which we see our future with technology. Literature begs questions that cannot be answered with one, singular resolution. Rather, it establishes a way to discuss, to guide our actions when the time comes. Should we ignore this narrative, our future could very well result in turmoil. As Caleb states, the creation of a conscious machine is not the history of man, but the "history of Gods." Artificial consciousness will change the way we view the human experience and will alter the now distinct definitions of technology and humanity.

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