THESCOTSMAN.CO.UK

State of the art affairs

From the destructive mechanical witch of the silent era Metropolis to the parasitic life-sucking machines of The Matrix, robots - the technologised humanoids of science fiction - have sought to destroy or enslave humanity over the history of film. Most science-fiction cinema, obsessed with enraged robots, demonic supercomputers, killer cyborgs and human-hating androids, taps into our anxieties about losing our evolutionary status, human identity and moral values to artificially intelligent machines.

The obscure 1962 B-movie, Creation of the Humanoids, is one of the few films to deal sympathetically with intelligent machines. It?s the story of empathetic robots who carry out a plan to save humanity. In its sympathetic treatment of robots, it may be the key cinematic predecessor to Steven Spielberg?s upcoming AI.

Inspired by a Brian Aldiss short story, Super-Toys Last All Summer Long, AI: Artificial Intelligence represents the collaboration of two master film-makers: Stanley Kubrick, who spent several years developing the project, and Spielberg, whom Kubrick asked to direct it.

After Kubrick?s death, Spielberg wrote the screenplay himself and modelled the visual design on storyboards Kubrick had supervised. Creation of the Humanoids seems to contain several of AI?s themes: This slow-paced, funny, intellectually complex film shows robots capable of love and sex, robots oppressed by human hate groups and robots who are morally superior to humans.

The earliest cinematic robot is Maria, from Metropolis (1926), Fritz Lang?s classic dystopian vision of the future. Lustful mad scientist Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) creates Maria (Brigitte Helm) to reflect his vision of the perfect submissive woman. But Maria rebels and provokes a worker revolt that threatens to destroy the entire city. Sexually aggressive and a threat to humanity, Maria embodies the male fear of uncontrollable women and machines. At the end, she is burned at the stake as a kind of witch.

The anti-technological themes continued in James Whale?s 1931 Frankenstein, which combines Gothic horror and science fiction with a monstrous artificial human that goes violently berserk. A few years later, evil mechanical men appeared in the Flash Gordon science fiction serials that pit the hero against the hi-tech Ming the Merciless.

Although a killer alien robot, Gort, incinerates dozens of soldiers in The Day the Earth Stood Still, Robert Wise?s 1951 classic is actually a harbinger of the new docile robot of the 1950s. Reflecting writer Isaac Asimov?s laws of robotic obedience, Forbidden Planet stars Robby the Robot - superior to humans, but their benevolent and tireless servant. Prototype of the cute, loveable robot and the first robot celebrity, Robby inspired decades of meek, servile machines like Huey, Dewey and Louie in Silent Running, C-3PO and R2D2 in the Star Wars movies, Johnny No5 in the Short Circuit films and, most recently, Andrew (played by Robin Williams) in Bicentennial Man adapted from an Asimov story.

With the dawning of the computer age, artificial intelligence temporarily replaces robotics as an object of technological terror. Forbidden Planet imagines an evil supercomputer as big as a house, with the power to materialise murderous monsters from the human id.

The Invisible Boy, which also stars Robby the Robot, envisions a colossal supercomputer that plans to exterminate all organic life in the universe. Cruel, emotionless, world-controlling computers also show up in The Colossus of New York and Colossus: The Forbin Project.

Kubrick?s vision of artificial intelligence gone awry, in 2001: A Space Odyssey conceives a more human, highly emotional computer. HAL suffers a nervous breakdown and murders several humans before being unplugged; humanity survives its technology in the symbolic spiritualism of the Star Child.

Fears of out-of-control artificial intelligence achieve hysterical expression in Demon Seed, a movie that combines 2001 with Rosemary?s Baby. Mad scientist Dr Harris creates Proteus IV, the greatest artificial brain ever. Wanting to be fruitful and multiply, the typically male supercomputer electronically rapes Harris?s estranged wife, Susan, who gives birth to a supersmart, metallic cherub - the robotic evil counterpart to 2001?s Star Child.

Androids - human-looking robots endowed with artificial intelligence - emerge in 1973?s Westworld, which centres on an Old West theme park, populated with animal and humanoid robots. Purposefully mocking Asimov?s laws of obedience, the robots - led by gunslinger Yul Brynner - run amok in this bizarre extension of Disneyland. Westworld?s sequel, Futureworld goes further: The androids design and produce more sophisticated robots, who break out of the vacation resort to destroy and replace humans in the real world - the ultimate robot threat.

Fusing cybernetic machine with biological organism, cyborgs rampage through films such as Robocop, The Terminator and Terminator 2: Judgement Day. These macho machine-men embody the fear and awe of technology, visualised as massive mechanised bodies that overpower frail human characters. Like the robot Maria in Metropolis the female cyborg in Eve of Destruction associates fear of technology with unleashed female sexuality and Terminator-like hyperviolence.

This science-fiction technophobia continues in recent films such as The Matrix, in which artificially intelligent machines control and exploit humanity. Grown rather than born, millions of humans lie cocooned in gel-like pods, fed intravenously with nutrients while their bodies provide power to these all-powerful parasitic machines. Human rebels - led by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and his recruited saviour Neo (Keanu Reeves) - must fight the machine technocracy to free the human hosts.

While most science-fiction films show artificially intelligent machines as emotionless, power-mad, murderous and morally inferior to humans, a few fascinating exceptions buck this trend. Like AI, these movies portray robots as more capable of empathy, generosity and love than humans. In Android, kind and gentle robot Max floats in a laboratory spaceship with snarling Dr Daniels, a cruel mad scientist. On a quest to create the perfect robot slave, he builds sex-worker android Cassandra and terminates Max. But, recoiling from Dr

Daniels? lustful touch, Cassandra resists her programming, she recharges Max and together they escape to provoke an android revolution.

Classic cyberpunk movie Blade Runner imagines beautiful, life-loving android "replicants" - the workers, entertainers and soldiers of the future - revolting against their servile positions and their cold-hearted human creators. Bounty hunters or "blade runners" put aside their human compunction and unfeelingly kill these humanoids, whose chief crime is asserting their desire to live and love. Lead android Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) expresses humanity by sparing the life of blade runner Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). Inspired, Deckard rediscovers his human feelings, stops killing androids and even falls in love with one.

Blade Runner captures the ambiguity between man and machine that the best science-fiction movies aspire to. Here, too, Creation of the Humanoids, nearly 40 years old and created by film-makers now forgotten, anticipated Blade Runner, Android and AI. Creation of the Humanoids - promoted as Andy Warhol?s favourite movie - describes a post-apocalyptic world where the dividing line between human and robot no longer exists. As in AI, humans despise robots. "The more we become like men, the more they hate us," says one robot. Disparagingly calling robots "clickers", a group called the Order of Flesh and Blood - a kind of futuristic Ku Klux Klan - lobbies for anti-robot laws and harasses the robots at every opportunity. The most zealous anti-robot proselytiser, Cragis, condemns his human sister for living in sin ("rapport") with humanoid Pax, a charming robot love machine like Gigolo Joe in AI.

Declaring that "humanity doesn?t always know what?s in its best interest", the Robot Central Committee for the Preservation of Mankind carries out a secret plan to save dying, radiation-poisoned humans by transferring their minds into immortal, mechanical humanoid bodies. Robot-hating Cragis and his girlfriend turn out to be highly sophisticated robots, with artificial souls and recently designed reproductive technology. The revelation stuns them into accepting their roles as Adam and Eve to a new robot generation. The film has stilted, often hilarious, philosophical dialogue that eerily echoes the present-day theories of artificial intelligence experts Ray Kurzweil (The Age of Spiritual Machines) and Hans Moravec (Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind), but among its sci-fi cinematic brethren, Creation of the Humanoids is unusual in that it - like the upcoming AI - dares to suggest that robots may be the next stage in human evolution.

Dan Dinello
Thursday, 5th July 2001
The Scotsman