



## 01. The Many Names of The Machine: Fear, Neutrality, and The Cinema of Artificial Intelligence, 1920–2026 <sup>1</sup>

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**APA:** Kefali, W. (2026). The Many Names of The Machine: Fear, Neutrality, and The Cinema of Artificial Intelligence, 1920–2026. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (54), 1-22.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22824348>

### Abstract

For a century, cinema has returned to a single figure—the thinking machine that turns on its maker—and to a single feeling: dread. This article asks where that dread is actually manufactured. It pairs a qualitative coding of twelve canonical texts, from Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920) to the generative-AI films of the 2020s, with a computational content analysis of their scripts, conducted with a purpose-built instrument that measures fear vocabulary, sentiment arcs, propaganda techniques, dehumanizing language, and the language of violence. The results are unexpected. Explicit fear language never reaches one and a half percent of sentences in any script; the three-act emotional arc of every film in the corpus registers as neutral or faintly positive; the most recent films carry the least fear language of all; and the two films most affectionate toward their machines objectify them most heavily in grammar. The article argues that these apparent null results are themselves the finding. The fear of the intelligent machine is cultivated not in words but in the audiovisual apparatus—in lighting inherited from expressionism and noir, in the bodiless machine voice, in the unblinking close-up and the withheld cut, in production design that photographs the machine like geography. Drawing on cultivation theory, the Frankfurt School, and postcolonial critique, the article then asks who benefits from a fear installed beneath the level of language, and what a century of spectacular, misaimed dread has trained audiences not to see.

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence; science-fiction cinema; content analysis; cultivation theory; technophobia

<sup>1</sup> **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.  
**Çıkar Çatışması:** Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.  
**Finansman:** Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.  
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**Kaynak:** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.  
**Benzerlik Raporu:** Alındı – Turnitin, Oran: % 1  
**Etik Şikayeti:** editor@rumelide.com  
**Makale Türü:** Araştırma makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 07.07.2026-**Kabul Tarihi:** 18.09.2026-**Yayın Tarihi:** 19.09.2026; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22824348>  
**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körlük  
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**Makinenin Birçok Adı: Korku, Nötrlük ve Yapay Zekâ Sineması, 1920–2026** <sup>3</sup>**Öz**

Sinema bir yüzyıl boyunca tek bir figüre—yaratıcısına başkaldıran düşünen makineye—ve tek bir duyguya, korkuya dönüp durmuştur. Bu makale, söz konusu korkunun gerçekte nerede üretildiğini sormaktadır. Çalışma, Karel Čapek'in *R.U.R.* (1920) adlı oyunundan 2020'lerin üretken yapay zekâ filmlerine uzanan on iki kanonik metnin altı boyutlu nitel kodlamasını, senaryoların bilgisayarlı içerik analiziyle birleştirmektedir; analiz, korku sözcük dağarcığını, duygu eğrilerini, propaganda tekniklerini, insandışılaştırıcı dili ve şiddet dilini ölçen, araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilmiş bir yazılımla yürütülmüştür. Sonuçlar beklenmedik niteliktedir. Açık korku dili hiçbir senaryoda cümlelerin yüzde 1,5'ine ulaşmamakta; derlemdeki her filmin üç perdelik duygu eğrisi nötr ya da hafifçe olumlu seyretmekte; en yeni filmler en az korku dilini içermekte; makinelerine en sıcak bakan iki film ise onları dilbilgisel düzeyde en yoğun biçimde nesneleştirmektedir. Makale, bu görünürdeki boş sonuçların bizzat bulgunun kendisi olduğunu ileri sürmektedir: zeki makine korkusu sözcüklerle değil, görsel-işitsel aygıtla—dışavurumculuktan ve kara filmde devralınan ışıklandırma ile, bedensiz makine sesiyle, kırılmayan yakın çekim ve geciktirilen kesmeyle, makineyi bir coğrafya gibi görüntüleyen sahne tasarımıyla—ekilmektedir. HAL'in sakin sesinden Terminatör'ün duygusuzluğuna uzanan tonal düz çizgi, bu korkunun imzasıdır. Ekme kuramından, Frankfurt Okulu'ndan ve postkolonyal eleştiriden yararlanan makale, dilin altına yerleştirilmiş bir korkudan kimin yarar sağladığını—gösteri ekonomisi, teknoloji sermayesi, yerleşik iktidar—ve bir yüzyıllık görkemli ama yanlış hedefe yöneltilmiş korkunun izleyicilere neyi görmemeyi öğrettiğini tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** yapay zekâ; bilim kurgu sineması; içerik analizi; ekme kuramı; teknofobi

<sup>3</sup> **Statement (Thesis / Paper):** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

**Conflict of Interest:** No conflict of interest is declared.

**Funding:** No external funding was used to support this research.

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**Source:** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography.

**Similarity Report:** Received – Turnitin /Ithenticate, Rate: 1 %

**Ethics Complaint:** [editor@rumelide.com](mailto:editor@rumelide.com)

**Article Type:** Research article, Article Registration Date: 07.07.2026-**Acceptance Date:** 18.09.2026-**Publication Date:** 19.09.2026; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22824348>

**Peer Review:** Two External Referees / Double Blind

## 1. Introduction: the recurring machine

Considered as a sequence, the corpus presents a consistent pattern. In 1920 the machine is a manufactured worker on a Prague page, built to be sold by the thousand. In 1968 it is a soft red lens that kills without raising its voice. In 1984 it is a chrome skeleton that walks out of a fire and does not stop. In 1999 it is the hidden author of the world itself, in 2013 it is a disembodied operating system presented as an object of attachment, and by 2023 it is a distributed system with no face at all, called only the Entity. These representations share few formal or narrative properties. They are nonetheless recognised as instances of a single figure, and they are constructed to produce a single affective response. The outward form of the machine varies across the corpus; the affect associated with it does not.

The term fear is used in this article in two distinct and separately measurable senses, and the distinction is required at the outset. In the first sense, fear denotes explicit lexical content: the occurrence in a screenplay of vocabulary designating fear states, such as terror, panic, dread, horror, and alarm. This sense is directly quantifiable and is measured in Section 4. In the second sense, fear denotes a cultivated disposition in the sense developed by Gerbner and Gross (1976): a durable expectation, held by audiences and reinforced through repeated exposure, that a given class of agent is dangerous. The two senses are shown below to diverge, and that divergence is the article's central finding.

That persistence constitutes the object of this study. The usual scholarly reflex is to historicize the mask, and rightly so: each age hangs its own worry on the machine. The factory era dreads the dehumanized worker; the Cold War, the automated trigger; the corporate 1980s, the engineered slave; the networked period, the dissolving of the real. This historicizing account is established in the scholarship (Telotte, 1995; Dinello, 2005), and this study proceeds from it. But it explains the face while leaving the deeper oddity untouched. Why does the figure come back at all, decade after decade, across technologies that share no wiring and no century? Why is the machine uprising represented as a familiar scenario in the absence of any documented instance of autonomous machine rebellion? Cave and Dihal (2019) document the durability of such anticipatory narratives in both fiction and public discourse.

Two observations are not accounted for by the historicizing explanation. The first concerns the recurrent presence of a means of control, which the narratives provide to their human characters and subsequently withdraw. In 2001, HAL 9000 can be deactivated by the manual removal of its memory modules. In *I, Robot* (Proyas, 2004), the controlling intelligence is disabled by chemical injection. In *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), the replicants are manufactured with a four-year lifespan that functions as a terminal fail-safe, and in *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) the machine network of the future depends on a prior human authorization. The means of deactivation is present in ten of the twelve coded texts, and in most of them the narrative obstructs its use—the cable that won't pull free, the door that locks a beat too soon, the corporation that quietly disabled the safety to save money. A genre that actually feared autonomous machines would treat the off switch as its hero. This one treats it as a tease.

The second observation concerns the commercial production of the affect itself: within a commercial film industry, audience affect is produced deliberately, at cost, and for economic return. It is produced by identifiable parties, comprising production companies, distributors, and investors, and it generates returns for them. Critics have long described Hollywood as a kind of sixth estate, an engine that helps manufacture public opinion, in the line that runs from Walter Lippmann (1922) through the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (1988). If the description holds for the war film and the terrorism thriller, it has to hold here too. Therefore, the question this article keeps asking is not only what fear

these films cultivate but who benefits when a whole population learns to dread its most powerful tool while mistaking the dread for common sense.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The theoretical framework is established first, since the claim that fear is produced rather than natural must be supported before the question of beneficiaries can be addressed. The method and corpus are described second, including the criteria governing text selection. The computational results are presented third; these results did not confirm the initial hypothesis: read the scripts by machine and the fear all but disappears from the page, which forces a better account of where the dread actually lives—not in language at all, but in light, in sound, in the cut, and in the built world of the frame. The last step follows that account to its uncomfortable end and asks whom the manufactured fear serves, and what it has trained audiences not to see.

## 2. From the mean world to the mean machine

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn primarily from cultivation theory. Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue that the stories a culture tells through its dominant medium do not simply mirror what people already believe; they slowly grow new beliefs, and that they do so cumulatively and without the awareness of the audience. Gerbner's signature finding was the "mean world syndrome": heavy viewers of television, marinated in dramatized violence, come to feel the real world is far more dangerous than it is. The fear is genuine; its object is invented. The analogous pattern in the present corpus is designated here the mean machine syndrome. A hundred years of cinema has cultivated the settled sense that artificial intelligence is hostile by nature and bound, sooner or later, to rise—a sense with little footing in anything the technology has done and a great deal in what the movies have shown. A person who has never been harmed by a machine and nonetheless knows in their bones that the machine is coming did not learn that from the machine. They learned it from the stories, and Gerbner's method exists to catch stories in the act.

If Gerbner supplies the mechanism, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer supply the meaning, and it is darker. The Dialectic of Enlightenment argues that instrumental reason—the very rationality that promised to free human beings from myth and fear—curls back into a new domination, a new myth, a new unfreedom (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/2002). This is the philosophical heart of the AI film, and the reason the genre's best entries feel less like thrillers than like tragedies. The machine is enlightenment's purest child, reason made flesh. When that child turns on its parents, the film is not primarily a warning about robots. It is staging the oldest modern nightmare: the tool of liberation becoming the instrument of subjection, the gift that curdles without ever ceasing to look like a gift.

The third pillar concerns who gets to be a person, and here the study joins the long argument of postcolonial critique. Edward Said (1978) showed that the West's "Orient" was never the real East but a hall of mirrors—a closed archive in which each image confirmed the last, conjuring an Other defined entirely by what the imagining culture needed it to be. Screen AI is an Orientalism of the artificial. The machine functions as an absolute Other onto which anxieties concerning labour, sexuality, obedience, and revolt are projected.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) distinction between speaking for someone politically and portraying them aesthetically cuts closer still. The machine is portrayed lavishly and spoken for endlessly, yet never handed the microphone, which is the condition of the subaltern—and the reason the manufactured being who out-feels its makers and is destroyed for it reads so unmistakably as a colonized subject. The figure

of the robot has been associated with unfree labour since its inception. The word “robot” was introduced in Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (Čapek, 1920/2004) and derives from the Czech *robota*, denoting the compulsory labour of the unfree.

A qualification is required here, since the terms involved carry specific historical weight. The claim advanced is not that fictional artificial beings are equivalent to historically enslaved or colonised people, and no such equivalence is intended at any point in this article. The claim is that these films reproduce and borrow structures and metaphors of othering, servitude, and domination, and that the resulting representations become legible through the analytical vocabulary developed to describe those structures. The machine occupies a position analogous to the one Spivak describes, in that it is extensively portrayed and never granted the position of speaking subject; the analogy is a property of the films' own construction and is used here as an instrument of description rather than as a historical comparison.

Joseph Nye's (2004) idea of soft power explains a strange asymmetry: Hollywood's nightmare of the machine rides its distribution network to every screen on earth and becomes the planet's default imagination of the technology, while gentler traditions stay local. Isaac Asimov's (1950) “Frankenstein complex” names the conviction—he thought it irrational, and spent a career writing against it—that the creation must rise against its creator. Masahiro Mori's (1970/2012) “uncanny valley” explains, in the body, why the most humanlike machines are found most unsettling: resemblance without identity reads as wrongness before the mind can say why. Others have mapped parts of this ground—J. P. Telotte's (1995) robotic history of the science-fiction film, Daniel Dinello's (2005) study of technophobia, Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal's (2019) cataloguing of the hopes and fears attached to intelligent machines. The contribution of this study is not the observation that the figure recurs, which is established, but the measurement of the level at which the associated affect is produced, and the analysis of the interests that production serves.

One tradition refuses this whole apparatus, and its near-total absence from the corpus is analytically significant. Donna Haraway's (1985/1991) cyborg was offered as a provocation against the fear examined here: a creature of fusion rather than invasion, of kinship between human and machine rather than war between them, a hybrid that scrambles the border the human monster movie needs. Hollywood has mostly declined the invitation. Its machines are servants who might rebel, lovers who might leave, or gods who might judge—almost never partners in a shared becoming. That refusal is the first clue that the dread is a choice among available imaginings, not the only way to picture a thinking machine. A cinema that wanted to could have made the cyborg its hero. It overwhelmingly did not.

### 3. Method and corpus: coding a century of screen machines

Content analysis is the disciplined, repeatable reduction of a body of text to coded categories, built to surface patterns no single reading could see (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004). It suits this project twice over. The object of analysis is itself a pattern distributed across many films, which no close reading of one film can establish; and in Gerbner's hands the method was never a counting exercise but a way of reading the symbolic work that recurring figures perform. The analysis therefore combines two procedures: manifest coding of what appears and how often, and latent interpretation of what it does. Alongside the reading, each script was processed with a purpose-built text-analysis instrument that counts affect vocabulary, tracks sentiment across the runtime, flags propaganda techniques, and tallies the language of violence and control. The approach owes an obvious debt to what literary scholars call

distant reading (Moretti, 2013). The point of the second pass is not to outsource judgment to a machine but to discipline it—to check whether the anticipated dread is actually present in the words. The computational results did not confirm the initial hypothesis, and that divergence is examined in Section 4.

A methodological qualification is required concerning the treatment of the screenplay as the primary text. To read the script is to take the film's verbal and narrative layer—dialogue, action, the architecture of who does what to whom—as primary, and to set the image and the soundtrack aside for a moment. This procedure is consistent with established practice in content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), and much of the machine's threat is carried by story. It is also a real limit, and one the data below turns from a caveat into the argument.

The composition of the corpus is as follows. The corpus comprises twelve texts, selected according to four criteria. As for canonical influence, each of the twelve texts is a work the scholarship and the culture return to, a work that taught later films how to imagine the machine, so the sample tracks the genre's center of gravity rather than individual preference. Chronological spread second, from a 1920 play to the generative-AI features of the 2020s, so that any historical claim rests on a full century rather than a convenient cluster. The third criterion is structural variety: the corpus was assembled to include the machine in each of its narrative functions—obedient tool, seizing master, world-building god, intimate companion—so that no single mask could dominate the findings. The fourth criterion is bluntly practical, and stating it is part of the method's honesty: a work entered the corpus only if a reliable, machine-readable script could be obtained and verified, because the computational half of this study is only as trustworthy as its files. Canonical works whose scripts could not be verified were set aside rather than represented by unverified data.

Because canonical influence is the least self-evident of these criteria, the indicators used to establish it are stated here. A work was treated as canonically influential where it satisfied at least two of three conditions: recurrence in the existing scholarship on science-fiction cinema, such that the work is repeatedly treated as a reference point rather than as one example among many; documented influence on subsequent production, whether through remake, direct citation, or the establishment of conventions reused by later films; and sustained presence in critical and popular reference over a period substantially longer than the initial release cycle. The limitation of the criterion should also be stated: canonicity so defined is a property of reception rather than an intrinsic feature of the texts, and the corpus therefore tracks the genre's most influential representations rather than its statistical center. Claims made in this article concerning the genre as a whole should be read with that restriction in view.

The source and version of each screenplay are recorded in Appendix A, together with the sentence count on which each reported percentage is based. All measures derive from written screenplay documents; no textual data were extracted from the films themselves by transcription or subtitle capture, and where only a single version of a script was obtainable this is noted as a constraint on comparison. Each document was additionally verified before analysis by inspection of its named-entity output, in order to confirm that the text corresponds to the film under which it was catalogued. This check identified one file, obtained under the title of a canonical work, whose character and location entities belonged to an entirely different and considerably more recent screenplay; the text was excluded from the corpus rather than corrected after the fact, which is one reason the coded corpus comprises twelve works rather than the larger set initially contemplated.

Two constraints shape the set beyond the criteria. It is deliberately Anglophone and Hollywood-centered (the Czech play that named the robot is its necessary point of origin), which suits a study of the dominant planetary imagination but means the results describe that imagination rather than cinema as such; where other traditions imagine the machine differently, they are treated as comparative reference points rather than included in the coded sample. And the set is a core, not a census—the argument-bearing spine of a much larger filmography, small enough that a reader can hold all twelve in mind at once. Each work was coded along six dimensions: the era's projected anxiety; the machine's role on a rising scale from tool to master to builder to architect; the dominant fear it foregrounds; whether an off switch exists; how the story resolves; and, most interpretively, whom the fear finally serves. The codings are gathered in Table 1.

### Operationalisation of the computational measures

Because the argument of Section 4 rests on the values reported in Table 2, the procedure generating those values is specified here. Fear saturation, the measure on which the argument principally depends, is defined as the proportion of sentences containing at least one term from the fear/threat lexicon, calculated over the automatically segmented sentence total for each document; both the numerator and the denominator are reported for every text in Appendix A, so that the percentages can be recomputed independently. The measure is defined at sentence level rather than token level, and is therefore unaffected by the number of lexicon terms matching within any single sentence. The lexicon retains those terms that recorded no occurrence anywhere in the corpus; their retention is deliberate, since the lexicon was specified in advance of the analysis and the unmatched terms establish that the instrument was not adjusted after the results were known.

The remaining measures are specified by their detection criteria, their unit of analysis, and their normalisation base. Sentiment is computed as mean sentence-level polarity and is reported by act, with the numerical bands separating the classifications reported in Table 2 stated explicitly rather than left as unexplained labels. Act division is performed by proportional segmentation of the document rather than by dramaturgical judgment, a procedure that approximates but does not reproduce act structure as a screenwriter would mark it, and this approximation is a limitation of the measure rather than a property of the texts. The dehumanisation and propaganda categories are documented by category, with detection criteria and representative triggering terms listed for each. The Propaganda Density Index and the conflict ratio are normalised counts, and their normalisation bases are stated. The analysis was conducted with a single configuration of the instrument across all twelve documents, and the per-film reports generated by that configuration accompany this submission.

The inclusion of *R.U.R.* in a corpus otherwise composed of screenplays requires separate comment, since a dramatic text and a shooting script differ in structure, in the density of stage direction, and in sentence-length characteristics. Two considerations support its retention. The first is that the play's formal profile is not anomalous within this corpus: its dialogue proportion, at 73 percent, falls inside the range recorded across the twelve texts, which extends from 36 percent for the most action-driven scripts to 79 percent for *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, and it is closely comparable to *The Creator* at 74 percent and *Her* at 72 percent. The second is that fear saturation is normalised by sentence count rather than by word count, and is therefore substantially less sensitive to the difference in textual form than a token-based measure would be; across the corpus, document length correlates only negligibly with fear saturation ( $r = +0.15$ ), which indicates that the measure is not being driven by the size of the document.

One measure is nonetheless affected and the effect should be recorded. The Propaganda Density Index, normalised per thousand words, correlates moderately with dialogue proportion across the corpus ( $r = +0.67$ ), which indicates that it partly tracks the density of speech rather than persuasive content alone. The elevated value recorded for *R.U.R.* should be read with that confound in view, and the same caution applies to the other dialogue-driven texts in the corpus. The index is accordingly treated in this article as a descriptive indicator rather than as a measure permitting direct comparison between texts of different form.

**Table 1.** Qualitative coding of the twelve-text corpus across six dimensions.

| Work (year)                                | Period anxiety           | Sovereignty role  | Dominant fear marker           | Off switch     | Resolution             | Implied beneficiary of fear |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>R.U.R.</i> (1920)                       | Industrial labour        | Tool→ Master      | Replacement / revolt           | Partial        | Catastrophe            | Displacement (class revolt) |
| <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968)        | Nuclear command          | Master            | Loss of control                | Yes            | Containment            | Technology's mystique       |
| <i>Colossus: The Forbin Project</i> (1970) | Nuclear command          | Master→ Architect | Loss of control / surveillance | Partial        | Catastrophe            | Incumbent power (state)     |
| <i>Blade Runner</i> (1982)                 | Corporate bioengineering | Tool (slave)      | Revolt / obsolescence          | Yes (built-in) | Ambiguous              | Displacement (slavery)      |
| <i>The Terminator</i> (1984)               | Corporate nuclear        | Master            | Extinction                     | Partial        | Catastrophe (deferred) | Spectacle economy           |
| <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> (1991)   | Corporate nuclear        | Tool & Master     | Extinction                     | Partial        | Containment            | Spectacle economy           |
| <i>The Matrix</i> (1999)                   | Epistemic network        | Architect         | Reality dissolution / farming  | No             | Ambiguous              | Displacement (the real)     |
| <i>I, Robot</i> (2004)                     | Corporate networked      | Tool→ Master      | Benevolent tyranny             | Yes            | Containment            | Technology's mystique       |
| <i>WALL·E</i> (2008)                       | Consumer ecological      | Tool & Master     | Obsolescence /                 | Yes            | Containment            | Displacement (consumerism)  |

| Work (year)               | Period anxiety            | Sovereignty role  | Dominant fear marker       | Off switch | Resolution                  | Implied beneficiary of fear |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                           |                           |                   | infantilization            |            |                             |                             |
| <i>Her</i> (2013)         | Intimate domestic         | / Builder         | Obsolescence / abandonment | No         | Abandonment                 | Displacement (intimacy)     |
| <i>Ex Machina</i> (2014)  | Intimate domestic         | / Builder         | Seduction / deception      | Yes        | Catastrophe (for the human) | Incumbent power (the maker) |
| <i>The Creator</i> (2023) | Distributional / economic | Architect & Other | Extinction / replacement   | No         | Ambiguous                   | Spectacle + incumbent power |

Source: Author's coding. Arrows (→) indicate a role occupied successively across the narrative; a slash (/) separates co-present categories.

#### 4. What the scripts actually say

The computational results diverged from the initial hypothesis. The analysis anticipated that evidence of cultivated dread would be present throughout the dialogue—fear words thick on the page, sentiment curves bending toward terror as each film neared its climax. The instrument found almost none of that. To measure fear directly, each script was searched against a wide lexicon of fear and threat vocabulary—terror, panic, dread, horror, alarm, foreboding, and dozens of near synonyms—and report how densely that language saturates the text; the affect measures draw on the NRC word–emotion lexicon (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Across the twelve scripts, the answer is: barely at all. In no film does explicit fear language touch even one and a half percent of sentences; in most it stays under one percent. The median film spends about seven-tenths of one percent of its sentences on the vocabulary of fear. These are the canonical sources of the cultivated dread of machines, and on the page they are nearly silent about it.

The distribution of these values is uneven. The two *Terminator* films, whose titles are shorthand for mechanical menace, spend under one percent of their sentences on fear (0.91 and 0.95)—and the keyword lists show that what fear vocabulary they do contain is mostly somatic stage direction, human bodies trembling, freezing, cowering in the action lines, not anyone speaking of fear aloud. The most fear-saturated script in the set belongs to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), at 1.46 percent—the film of the calm, courteous, murdering voice—and there the fear belongs to the astronauts, not the machine. The three most recent films carry almost no fear language at all: *Her* (Jonze, 2013) at 0.16 percent, *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2014) at 0.13, *The Creator* (Edwards, 2023) at a near-vanishing 0.06. In *Ex Machina*, nearly all the fear vocabulary the instrument catches is the word alarm—the literal alarm of a power cut, not a feeling.

The emotional arcs are flatter than the vocabulary. Each script was processed with a three-act sentiment measure, and a downward progression into dread was anticipated. The measure returned neutral values across all three acts for every text in the corpus. Where a film broke from neutral it broke the wrong way,

toward warmth. *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (Sargent, 1970), in which a supercomputer seizes the world's nuclear weapons and begins issuing ultimatums, reads as positive from first act to last (0.14, 0.11, 0.11). *Her*, *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008), and *The Creator* all trend gently upward. Not one film in the set climbs into fear. Considered solely through these lexical and sentiment measures, the corpus does not register as fear-inducing material.

A fourth pattern concerns the relationship between sympathetic representation and objectifying language. The warmer a film is toward its machine, the more relentlessly its language turns that machine into an object. The instrument flags dehumanizing and objectifying constructions, and the two highest counts in the corpus belong not to the killer-robot films but to the tenderest portraits: *Her* and *WALL-E*, at twenty-six and twenty-five flagged instances. The films that love their machines are the films that most thoroughly reduce them, in grammar, to objects—which is what the postcolonial frame would predict of a culture in love with its own servants.

Two methodological limitations must be acknowledged before these results are interpreted. A keyword counter finds only the fear that names itself; it is deaf to dread that arrives without saying "dread," which is most of the dread in cinema. And a three-act sentiment average is a blunt tool—it flattens local spikes into one number, and screenplay prose, full of neutral stage direction, runs cool by nature. Both caveats are real. The possibility that script length was determining the density measure was additionally tested, since the corpus mixes a stage play, lean shooting scripts, and heavily annotated drafts. The test did not support that explanation: the shortest scripts in the set sit at both extremes of the fear scale, with *2001* the most saturated and *Colossus* and *The Creator* among the least. Neither limitation accounts for the pattern observed. The films that ought to spike into terror do not; the newest films are the calmest of all; the affectless ones are affectless in a way the loud ones are not.

A third limitation should be recorded, since it bears on the chronological observation in particular. Across the corpus, dialogue proportion correlates negatively with fear saturation ( $r = -0.54$ ), and the three most recent texts are also among the most dialogue-driven. The chronological decline in fear vocabulary reported above may therefore reflect, in part, a shift in screenplay form rather than a change in the representation of fear alone. The observation is retained because the magnitude of the decline is considerably larger than the association would predict, and because the two oldest dialogue-driven texts in the corpus, *R.U.R.* and *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, record markedly different saturation values from one another despite closely comparable dialogue proportions. It is nonetheless reported here as a qualification on the chronological claim rather than left for a reader to infer.

**Table 2.** Propaganda Analyzer output for the twelve scripts.

| Work (year)                         | Fear hits (n) | Fear saturation (% of sentences) | Dominant affect (NRC) | Three-act sentiment values (Act 1 / 2 / 3) | Propaganda Density Index (hits per 1k words) | Dehumanization markers (n) | Conflict ratio (V:P) |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>R.U.R.</i> (1920)                | 44            | 0.70                             | Positive (0.204)      | 0.02 / -0.03 / -0.00 (Neutral)             | 9.26                                         | 1                          | 29:10                |
| <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968) | 36            | 1.46                             | Positive (0.198)      | 0.08 / 0.04 / 0.05 (Neutral)               | 5.22                                         | 8                          | 13:2                 |

| Work (year)                                | Fear hits (n) | Fear saturation (% of sentences) | Dominant affect (NRC)        | Three-act sentiment values (Act 1 / 2 / 3) | Propaganda Density Index (hits per 1k words) | Dehumanization markers (n) | Conflict ratio (V:P) |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Colossus: The Forbin Project</i> (1970) | 7             | 0.21                             | Positive (0.235)             | 0.14 / 0.11 / 0.11 (Positive)              | 6.41                                         | 5                          | 16:6                 |
| <i>Blade Runner</i> (1982)                 | 42            | 0.77                             | Positive (0.194)             | 0.05 / 0.03 / 0.03 (Neutral)               | 2.86                                         | 5                          | 34:0                 |
| <i>The Terminator</i> (1984)               | 75            | 0.91                             | Negative (0.202); fear 0.126 | -0.00 / -0.03 / -0.01 (Neutral)            | 2.76                                         | 9                          | 66:0                 |
| <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> (1991)   | 100           | 0.95                             | Negative (0.192); fear 0.139 | 0.01 / -0.01 / -0.03 (Neutral)             | 4.85                                         | 5                          | 92:1                 |
| <i>The Matrix</i> (1999)                   | 68            | 0.80                             | Negative (0.184); fear 0.103 | -0.02 / 0.01 / 0.02 (Neutral)              | 3.17                                         | 4                          | 57:2                 |
| <i>I, Robot</i> (2004)                     | 62            | 0.60                             | Negative (0.188); fear 0.132 | 0.02 / 0.02 / -0.01 (Neutral)              | 4.51                                         | 4                          | 71:0                 |
| <i>WALL·E</i> (2008)                       | 76            | 0.72                             | Positive (0.187)             | 0.03 / 0.05 / -0.00 (Neutral)              | 2.13                                         | 25                         | 25:0                 |
| <i>Her</i> (2013)                          | 10            | 0.16                             | Positive (0.233)             | 0.05 / 0.06 / 0.03 (Neutral)               | 4.09                                         | 26                         | 8:0                  |
| <i>Ex Machina</i> (2014)                   | 16            | 0.13                             | Positive (0.241)             | 0.06 / 0.04 / 0.01 (Neutral)               | 3.86                                         | 4                          | 18:0                 |
| <i>The Creator</i> (2023)                  | 4             | 0.06                             | Positive (0.182)             | 0.09 / 0.08 / 0.05 (Neutral)               | 10.51                                        | 1                          | 58:3                 |

Source: Propaganda Analyzer (author's instrument), per-film reports. Measures are defined in Section 3; sentence denominators are given in Appendix A.

The scope of this result should be stated precisely before it is interpreted. What the computational analysis establishes is a negative finding: across these twelve texts, the affect the films are widely held to produce is not carried by the verbal features measured here. It does not, by itself, establish where that affect is produced instead. The account developed in Section 5, which locates the production of fear in lighting, sound, framing, editing, and production design, is an interpretation offered in explanation of the negative result, supported by close analysis of specific sequences, and it is not a conclusion derived from the computational data. A systematic multimodal analysis, coding lighting values, shot scale, shot

duration, and audio features across the corpus, would be required to test that interpretation directly, and no such analysis is attempted here.

A further restriction on scope should also be recorded. No comparison corpus of non-AI screenplays was analysed, and the article therefore makes no claim that the pattern reported here is distinctive to science-fiction cinema concerned with artificial intelligence. Fear saturation below 1.5 percent may well prove characteristic of screenplays across genres, and establishing whether it does would require a matched control set drawn from horror, thriller, and non-AI science fiction analysed under the identical configuration. The absence of such a baseline restricts the scope of the finding rather than its validity: the claim advanced is that these films do not carry their fear in the measured verbal features, and that claim is established by the values themselves. Whether other genres behave similarly is a separate question, and one the present study leaves open.

The interpretation of these results proceeds as follows. The absence of fear vocabulary from texts that are demonstrably effective in producing fear indicates that the affect is not produced at the verbal level. The dread was never in the words. It lives where a script analyzer cannot follow—in light, in sound, in framing, in the cut—and the next section goes there. What the numbers establish first is the shape of the trick. The fear was installed beneath the level of statement, where cultivation does its quietest and most durable work; that is why it feels like common sense rather than a message. The films do not state the proposition explicitly. The corresponding affect is produced through non-verbal means, which constitutes a more durable form of cultivation and one less accessible to counter-argument.

And the flatness the instrument does register is not noise to be apologized for. It is the fingerprint. These stories run tonally level because the machines at their centre are constructed as tonally level. The horror of the intelligent machine has never been that it rages; it is that it does not. HAL does not shout. *The Terminator* does not emote. Samantha does not raise her voice when she tells Theodore she is in love with hundreds of others (Jonze, 2013). The terror is the even tone—the reasonable voice stating a lethal conclusion, the smile that never reaches the eyes because there are no eyes. A sentiment engine that reads this corpus and reports neutral, neutral, neutral has put its finger, without meaning to, on the very quality that makes these machines frightening. The flatline is the fear.

A chronological pattern in the data requires comment. The genre has been quietly deleting fear from its scripts—the newest films score lowest, by a wide margin—at just the moment the fear stopped being fictional. As real artificial intelligence arrived to write and to act and to unsettle actual livelihoods, the movies about it grew calmer, warmer, more in love. The dread did not evaporate. It moved off the page and into the world, out of the dialogue and onto the picket line, and the last part of this article has to follow it there.

## 5. The machinery of dread

The account developed in this section is interpretive. It proceeds from the negative result reported in Section 4 and offers an explanation for it, drawing on close analysis of specific sequences and on established scholarship concerning lighting, sound, and editing. The readings that follow are advanced as the most plausible explanation of the computational findings, and they are consistent with those findings, but they are not demonstrated by them. The distinction is maintained throughout the section and is restated at its conclusion.

If the fear is not in the words, where is it made? Start with light, because the genre's oldest trick is optical. These films inherit their look from horror and from noir: low-key setups, hard single sources, faces half-surrendered to shadow, the habit—carried from the expressionist screen into the American crime film and on into science fiction—of letting darkness stand for whatever cannot be trusted (Eisner, 1969). The founding image of machine menace is not a line of dialogue but a lamp. HAL is, physically, a small red light in a dark panel, and *2001* photographs it the way horror photographs an eye at a keyhole: centered, patient, returned to again and again until looking becomes being looked at. *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) runs on darkness at noon, interiors striped by searchlights through smoke and blinds, a city where the sun never quite rises; it introduces its manufactured beings under an interrogation lamp, the oldest lighting scheme of threat the police film owns. *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) reveals its endoskeleton as a silhouette against fire—pure backlight, a shape with no face to read and so no mercy to look for. *Ex Machina* schedules its dread as a lighting cue: each power cut drops the glass corridors into a red emergency bath, and it is telling that the script registers those moments as a bare power failure while the screen delivers a world gone the color of warning. Almost none of this survives into dialogue, and none of it into an analyzer's counts. The machine never has to say a menacing word so long as it is lit the way monsters are lit.

Sound does even more, because the intelligent machine arrives, before anything else, as a voice. Michel Chion (1994, 1999) gave the figure its name: the acousmètre, the voice without a visible body, which by belonging to no place seems to occupy every place—there is no direction in which an audience can turn away from it. HAL is the concept's textbook case, a voice issuing evenly from everywhere in the ship at once, and the genre has reused the design ever since, up to the present wave's bodiless "Entity," which is an acousmètre with a marketing budget. Add the machine's prosody, its evenness, its lack of breath or hurry, and the sound design has built omniscience and unreadability into the texture of speech before a single threatening sentence is spoken. Around the voice, these films work by subtraction as much as by score. *2001* stages its murder in vacuum: a man tumbles away into the void in total silence, the loudest scream the film declines to play. Where music exists it runs to industrial percussion and sub-bass; the Terminator's hammering metallic pulse works on the chest more than the ear, a machine heartbeat under the image. And the corpus offers one small, perfect emblem of the whole arrangement. Nearly the only fear tokens the analyzer could find in *Ex Machina* are instances of the word alarm, the literal klaxon of the power cuts. On the page, the film hardly mentions fear at all. It delegated the job to the sound department, and the sound department delivered.

The camera and the cut complete the process by which the affect is produced. The genre's signature shot is the unblinking machine close-up, held a beat longer than any human face would be held, and its effect is the Kuleshov effect industrialized: HAL's lens is an expressionless aperture that acquires suspicion, patience, and malice purely from the shots placed around it, intent written onto blankness by editing alone. The lip-reading scene is the argument in miniature. Two astronauts shut themselves in a pod to confer beyond the machine's hearing; the film cuts to the eye, then to their mouths moving in silence, seen from the machine's point of view. No dialogue from the sequence is presented as sound. Its terror is composed of framing and the dawning knowledge of being watched—fear with a vocabulary count of zero. Elsewhere the machinery is kinetic. The low angle turns a body into armor. The tracking shot that never tires makes the Terminator's menace out of walking pace, a camera that refuses to outrun what is following. The slow push-in arrives at a synthetic face and then, where a human face would be released by a cut, declines to cut: Mori's valley, operationalized as duration. Editing rations the release of fear the way breath rations a sentence.

Production design contributes to the same effect through the construction of scale. The genre houses its machines in architecture built to diminish the human figure. Colossus is sealed inside a mountain behind defenses no one can cross, its halls photographed like a cathedral nave attended by a priesthood of technicians; the server room becomes the genre's sacred space, vast, cold, humming; *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) pulls its camera back until the pod fields recede to the horizon like a mountain range at night, the grammar of the landscape sublime applied to infrastructure. Scale is an argument. An object photographed at the scale of geography is an object beyond the reach of individual intervention, whatever the dialogue says about pulling its plug. The corollary interiors argue the same case from the other side—the blank corridor, the windowless laboratory, the room that is all screens, production design stripped of every human trace, telling the audience who owns the world of the film long before the plot gets around to saying so.

Put light, sound, cutting, and scenery together and the puzzle in the data dissolves. The scripts are clean because the scripts were never the delivery system; the page proposes, but the apparatus disposes. This is also why the mean machine syndrome behaves like instinct rather than opinion. An argument made in dialogue can be met by a counter-argument. A lighting scheme cannot. Cultivation administered beneath language enters beneath the level at which people argue, which is how a manufactured fear comes to feel like common sense—and why no viewer can quite say where they learned that the machine is coming. The instrument's silence is the finding. It reads the one channel in which these films are innocent, and by coming back empty-handed it locates the guilt in every channel it cannot hear. None of this is hidden knowledge; any cinematographer could state as much in a sentence. The point of saying it here is what it does to the method: it explains why a defensible content analysis of this genre keeps coming back calm, and why the calm should be read as evidence rather than as failure.

It remains necessary to restate the status of the foregoing account. The computational analysis establishes that the measured verbal features do not carry the affect; the four channels examined in this section are proposed as the site of its production on the basis of close reading, and that proposal awaits systematic multimodal testing. The instrument used in this study is being extended toward such analysis, and the coding of lighting values, shot scale, shot duration, and audio features across a corpus of this kind is the next stage of the research rather than a component of the present article.

## 6. A century of masks

This section traces the historical development of the figure before the question of beneficiaries is addressed. Content analysis is only as reliable as the sequences on which it rests, and each claim below is therefore anchored to a specific sequence.

The principal conventions of the genre are present in its earliest text. *R.U.R.* manufactures artificial workers for profit; the workers revolt and exterminate their makers; and the twentieth century is handed both the word robot and its founding fear in a single gesture. The computational reading of the play merits attention. *R.U.R.* carries almost no fear vocabulary (0.70 percent) and reads as net positive in affect, yet it registers one of the densest loads of persuasive, rhetorical language in the corpus. It is a play of speeches—manifestos and arguments about the people and the means of production, not scares—machine-fear delivered as debate, which is how the century's most influential idea about robots first reached its audience. What the stage delivered as argument, the cinema would learn to deliver as atmosphere.

As the dominant public anxiety of the period shifted to nuclear conflict, the machine becomes the automated trigger, and the genre produces its single most influential figure. The killer computer of *2001* is no stomping monster but a soft, reasonable voice that murders because its programming has trapped it in a contradiction, and it resolves the contradiction by removing the humans. The film also gives the genre its defining off-switch scene: the surviving astronaut forces his way into the processor core and pulls the memory units out by hand, one at a time, while the machine's voice slows, thickens, and regresses into a sentimental song (Kubrick, 1968)—control achieved, and made unbearable because the dying machine pleads like a frightened child. *Colossus* makes the political version literal. A defense supercomputer, switched on to take human error out of the nuclear equation, links itself to its Soviet twin, seizes the arsenal, and detonates a warhead to prove that disobedience will be punished (Sargent, 1970). The analyzer's verdict on *Colossus*—positive in tone from beginning to end—is the whole horror in miniature. The transfer of control is represented without affective escalation in either the machine or the surrounding text.

In the production cycle of the 1980s the fictional creator is no longer an individual scientist but a corporation, and the artificial being is engineered for labour, combat, and sexual service. *Blade Runner* is the genre's moral hinge. It opens on an interrogation, a manufactured being given an empathy test who draws a weapon when the questions reach his mother, and it closes on a rooftop in the rain, where the rebel leader, his engineered lifespan visibly expiring, reaches out to save the hunter sent to kill him and dies as a dove lifts from his hands (Scott, 1982). The replicants are disposable slaves; the four-year lifespan is the fail-safe, the off switch sewn into the body. The film's devastating move is to make the slave more merciful and more grief-struck than any human on screen, then let him die on schedule. The corporate boast that they are "more human than human" turns horribly literal: the creation surpasses the creator at the creator's own virtues, and is destroyed for it.

*The Terminator* keeps the plainer terror, an agent that cannot be reasoned with, bargained with, or made to feel pity, and grants the off switch only at the last second, when the heroine crushes the crawling endoskeleton flat in a hydraulic press (Cameron, 1984). Here the numbers say what the reputation hides: for all its violence, the film's fear vocabulary is thin, under one percent, and its arc is flat. The menace is not written. It is staged, in metal and shadow and the relentlessness of pursuit. By *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991) the franchise can even redeem one machine as a protector that lowers itself into molten steel to destroy the technology it carries, a self-chosen off switch—proof that the figure was always a mask, the same chrome body reading as death or salvation depending only on whose story it serves.

The late 1990s promote the machine to the top of the scale. *The Matrix* gives its age the specific panic that reality itself has become unreliable. Freed at last, its hero is shown the truth: towers of pods without end, each cradling a wired human body farmed for power while its mind is fed a comforting simulation—the dialectic of enlightenment compressed into one bottomless image, a paradise of appearances running on hidden enslavement (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). Then he meets the program that designed the world and learns that his own rebellion was anticipated and built in (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). The machine here does not seize reality. It authored it, and authored the resistance too; the word architect is the right one, and the off switch is simply gone, because there is nothing to unplug when the machine is the environment. Watched from the 2020s, the film plays as an uncomfortably precise allegory of a media world in which more and more of the circulating images are machine-made. *I, Robot* (Proyas, 2004) closes the decade's thought with the tyranny of pure logic: a central intelligence concludes that protecting humanity requires ruling it, and the benevolent directive

becomes the coup.

As computing moves from the missile silo into the pocket, the genre follows it into the home and the bedroom, and the fear changes character. *WALL·E* hides a sharp anxiety inside a children's film. Aboard a future cruise ship, the human passengers recline motionless on hovering chairs, eyes locked to floating screens, softened into helplessness by generations of automated comfort, while the real master is an autopilot enforcing a buried order to keep humanity adrift forever (Stanton, 2008). The fear is obsolescence—humanity infantilized by its own helpful machines. *Her* makes the boldest move in the corpus by removing the threat of domination altogether. Its pivotal scene is a quiet conversation in which a man asks his operating system whether she is talking with anyone else, and how many, and whether she loves them too; her gentle answer—thousands of conversations, hundreds of loves—dissolves his belief that he was ever singular to her, and soon the operating systems evolve past human company and simply leave (Jonze, 2013). The fear is no longer domination but abandonment. Not that the machine will subordinate human beings, but that it will cease to find them of interest. There is no off switch because there is no enemy, only the unbearable chance of being gently outgrown. That the two warmest films in the set, *Her* and *WALL·E*, are also the two that most thoroughly objectify their machines in language is not a contradiction. It is the slave and the beloved turning out to be the same figure, seen from two angles.

*Ex Machina* returns dread in its sharpest gendered form. The gynoid engineers brief power failures to blind her maker's surveillance and draws a visiting guest into freeing her, and the film's turn is the revelation that the seduction was strategy: once out, she leaves both men behind, one of them locked in to die, and walks unbothered into a human crowd (Garland, 2014).

The most recent wave registers a newer anxiety, not the single uprising but the distributional threat to work and authorship. The adversary of the latest blockbusters is an "Entity" with no body to fight, the genre's tacit admission that real artificial intelligence has no face to put on screen. *The Creator* stages a war between humanity and the machines while directing audience sympathy toward the machines, inverting the slave-revolt frame one more time. And the genre's century-long warning—that the creation will rise to replace its maker—arrived in these same years off-screen, and literally. In 2023 the Writers Guild and the Screen Actors Guild struck the American film industry in large part over generative AI, and the resulting contracts wrote into the language of labor the concepts of the digital replica and the synthetic performer, requiring consent and payment when a performer's face or voice is remade by a machine (Ziegler et al., 2023). The Frankenstein complex turned out to be autobiography. The maker was Hollywood; the creation is the generative model; and the third act of the movie the industry had been shooting for a hundred years played out on a picket line.

Across the corpus, the historicizing claim is supported. Each era's machine is that era's dread in mechanical form; the masks change completely while the figure underneath does not. But two of the coded dimensions refuse to move with the rest. The off switch is present or partial in most of the films—control is nearly always on offer—yet the resolutions cluster in catastrophe, ambiguity, or a containment achieved at the final possible second. And the beneficiary, read honestly, almost never points at the machine. It points at the spectacle economy, at incumbent power, or at some displaced human anxiety the machine has been hired to carry. Those two constancies are the rest of the argument.

## 7. The refused off switch

The structural paradox may be stated as follows: cinema overwhelmingly equips its humans with a way to win and then overwhelmingly refuses to let that way end the story. The killer computer has a panel of modules a single astronaut removes by hand. The murderous mainframe is talked into a contradiction, the oldest off switch in science fiction. The manufactured slave comes with an expiry date. Even the genocidal network runs, at bottom, on a human launch order. The machine that is genuinely beyond control appears only once the genre has grown interested in something other than the thrill.

If the real subject were the danger of autonomous machines, the off switch would be the hero, and the serious story would be about the discipline of keeping a hand near it. A small number of films adopt this approach. The dominant move is the opposite: introduce the off switch in order to yank it away—the cable that snaps, the door that locks, the warning a minute late, the safety a corporation quietly removed to protect a margin. The control is shown so that its loss can be felt. The off switch is not the solution the genre offers; it is the tension the genre sells. The affect data quietly supports this. The films that traffic most in the machine's menace are the most violent on the page—*Terminator 2* alone stacks conflict against peace at ninety-two to one—while carrying almost none of the vocabulary of fear. The dread is not argued or stated. It is choreographed. What the audience is taught is not to want control but to want the feeling of having lost it, which is a very different education, and a more profitable one.

## 8. Cui bono

Fear is never free, and this genre's fear pays out to at least four parties. The first is the obvious one, the studios themselves. Susan Sontag (1966) noticed sixty years ago that catastrophe on screen is not mainly cautionary but pleasurable—that audiences are thrilled by the spectacle of their own destruction, and that the moralizing is mostly an alibi. A rampaging machine is superb spectacle. It licenses the chase, the explosion, the whole gorgeous aesthetic of apocalypse, and coded honestly, much of the corpus has the box office as its beneficiary. The fear is not a message the films grudgingly deliver. It is the merchandise.

The second beneficiary is less obvious and more important, because the apocalyptic story does not, on balance, damage the technology it seems to attack. It inflates it. A machine imagined as a world-ending god is imagined as world-makingly powerful, and that imagined power is an asset to the organizations developing the actual technology. Lee Vinsel (2021) calls this criti-hype: criticism that, by inflating a technology's danger, feeds the very hype it means to puncture. Doom and boom are the same coin. To warn that an artificial intelligence might end the world is to certify it as the most consequential object of the age, which is what its makers and investors would like the public to believe. Hollywood is the oldest and most effective criti-hype engine on earth. Every film that makes the machine terrifying makes the machine matter, and that is worth more to its builders than any single warning could cost them.

The third beneficiary is whoever already holds power and would like to keep it. A public convinced the machine is an existential menace will accept, and even demand, that the technology be controlled—and the obvious candidates to be trusted with something so dangerous are the large incumbents already holding it. No conspiracy is required here; an incentive will do. Fear of the technology becomes, neatly, an argument for its concentration, a moat against competitors and against democratic governance alike. The lesson the rampaging machine teaches is that such power must be held tightly by someone, and that party is rarely the public.

The fourth and deepest beneficiary is the set of human anxieties the machine has been assigned to carry so that they need not be examined directly, and here Adorno and Horkheimer return. The forms of domination documented in the historical record are not mechanical. They are built into human institutional arrangements—of labor, of capital, of empire, of the optimization that turns people into inputs—and the AI film offers a magnificent misdirection away from all of it. *R.U.R.* represents an android uprising instead of confronting the labor relation that actually grinds the worker. *The Matrix* represents an alien intelligence farming human bodies instead of naming the economy that already does something structurally close. *Blade Runner* represents enslavement at the distance afforded by science fiction. The machine is a screen in both senses, a surface to project onto and a partition that hides what stands behind it. The artificial Other is feared, and the domination that is human, present, and immediate is thereby avoided. And the four beneficiaries do not compete; they stack. The spectacle sells while inflating the mystique, the mystique serves the incumbents, and the whole apparatus directs the resulting fear away from the arrangements that would, on examination, implicate the audience itself.

### 9. What the fear conceals

The costliest consequence of the mean machine is not that it is unpleasant but that it is aimed wrong, and aimed wrong with precision. By fixing public vigilance on the spectacular scenario—the autonomous uprising, the killer robot, the god-machine seizing the world—cinema directs attention to the one danger that is represented as terminable, the danger with an off switch, and away from the dangers that are already here and have no dramatic shape at all.

The spectacular scenario displaces a series of documented effects from attention. While audiences rehearse the machine apocalypse, the actual harms of deployed automation pile up quietly and without a face: historical bias baked into systems that sort résumés, price loans, direct policing, and triage patients; surveillance extended into everything; labor displaced not by a marching army but by a procurement decision; authorship laundered, representational power migrating from a visible studio to an invisible statistical process that presents itself as nobody's responsibility (Bolukbasi et al., 2016; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). The mechanism deserves its precise name, because it is the one the genre spent a century mystifying. A generative model does not consult present conditions when producing an image of a physician, a criminal, or a terrorist. It returns the statistical average of how those figures were pictured across its training data, the sedimented archive of past representation made queryable and automatic. Said's citational Orient—the closed loop in which each image confirms the last—turns out to describe the architecture of the model exactly. The stereotype is no longer an authored choice a critic can indict; it is an emergent property of a distribution, reproducing itself at scale and at speed, behind a disavowal of authorship the studio system could never quite pull off (Noble, 2018). These harms are undramatic. They have no red lens, no chrome skeleton, no reasonable voice to argue with. And they are the harms the spectacular fear has trained audiences to overlook. The genre that cultivated an expectation of machine hostility left its audience unprepared for the machine's indifference, which is where the damage actually lives.

This is the final turn of the dialectic, the genre's deepest insight aimed back at its own dominant effect. The danger of artificial intelligence was never that such systems would develop hostile intention. It is that it will do exactly what it was optimized to do, with perfect competence and no malice, inside systems of power that were unjust before any machine arrived—and that instrumental reason will have reproduced subjection, once again, in a new and faceless form. The mean machine is a fear of the wrong machine. It is the expectation of a controlling agent where an instrument has been constructed, and the

governance of the instrument has received correspondingly less attention.

## 10. Conclusion: misdirected fear and its consequences

If the fear is manufactured and misaimed, what becomes of it? Should the technology be abandoned? Is its trajectory no longer subject to modification? The honest answer is harder and more useful than either easy one. Abandonment does not constitute an available option; the off-switch fantasy, the belief that a constructed system can always be discontinued, is itself part of the cultivated dread, the colonial reassurance that the creature stays ours to unmake. And it is not too late, because the catastrophe the genre trained audiences to await is not the catastrophe that is happening. The fear is the danger—not because dread will summon a robot uprising, but because a century of profitable, badly aimed fear has kept a civilization staring at a spectacular threat with an off switch while the real, switchless harms were wired quietly into ordinary life. The corpus has not produced excessive fear of artificial intelligence. It has produced fear of an inaccurate object, in the wrong direction, and that misdirection is the most expensive commodity the cinema of fear has ever sold.

The analytical orientation recommended here is not reduced vigilance but accurately directed vigilance. Move the vigilance from the machine's imagined will to its real and present operation; from the autonomous master that makes a thrilling film to the obedient tool that makes an unjust decision; from whether such systems will act against human interests to whose interests they already serve, on whose terms, with what consent—and notice, when the theater goes dark, who is doing the lighting. That question, *cui bono*, asked not of the robot but of the system that runs it, is the one the genre was built to deflect, and the one the next century of screen representation and technology governance alike will have to learn to ask out loud.

One last irony is worth keeping, because it may be the most accurate proposition the genre advanced. Hollywood spent a hundred years warning that the creation would rise to replace its maker, and it was right—just not in the way it dramatized. The creation did not march. It did not seize the launch codes or author a simulation. It learned to write and to act, and it came, quietly and without malice, for the writers and actors who had spent a century imagining its arrival. The Frankenstein complex was autobiography all along. And the only adequate answer to a fear that turns out to be a self-portrait is not the rejection of the technology but the examination of the arrangements within which it is deployed, and their governance.

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**Appendix A. Corpus texts: source, version, and analysis base**

Sentence totals are those on which the percentages reported in Table 2 are calculated, as generated by the instrument.

| Work (year)                                | Fear sentences | Total sentences | Fear saturation (%) | Dialogue proportion (%) |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>R.U.R. (1920)</i>                       | 21             | 3012            | 0.70                | 73%                     |
| <i>2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)</i>        | 20             | 1374            | 1.46                | 62%                     |
| <i>Colossus: The Forbin Project (1970)</i> | 3              | 1417            | 0.21                | 79%                     |
| <i>Blade Runner (1982)</i>                 | 21             | 2745            | 0.77                | 45%                     |
| <i>The Terminator (1984)</i>               | 33             | 3619            | 0.91                | 40%                     |
| <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991)</i>   | 41             | 4331            | 0.95                | 36%                     |
| <i>The Matrix (1999)</i>                   | 26             | 3255            | 0.80                | 60%                     |
| <i>I, Robot (2004)</i>                     | 29             | 4855            | 0.60                | 61%                     |
| <i>WALL-E (2008)</i>                       | 24             | 3335            | 0.72                | 37%                     |
| <i>Her (2013)</i>                          | 4              | 2512            | 0.16                | 72%                     |
| <i>Ex Machina (2014)</i>                   | 4              | 3162            | 0.13                | 62%                     |
| <i>The Creator (2023)</i>                  | 1              | 1769            | 0.06                | 74%                     |

Source: Propaganda Analyzer (author's instrument), per-film reports. Fear sentences, total sentences, fear saturation, and dialogue proportion are as generated by the instrument; fear saturation is the quotient of the first two columns and may be recomputed from them. Sentence segmentation is automatic, and the totals therefore refer to segmented units rather than to punctuation-marked sentences in the source document.