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## Transhumanist Temptations

When the policeman Alex wakes up from his artificial coma and finds himself in his new body, a kind of black steel Batman suit, he—understandably—panics.

“What the hell have you done with me?” he asks, horrified.

Alex, who fell victim to a car bomb and lost most parts of his body apart from his torso, was operated into a robotic suit by Dr Norton, an expert in cybernetic prosthetics. While this suit gives Alex mobility and strength, it also turns him into a kind of robot on a psychological level. For the technical parts, such as artificial arms and hands, to function well, the electrical impulses from the brain must be perfectly implemented, i.e., Alex must be emotionally stabilized.

Alex is unaware that the mega-corporation OmniCorp, which sponsored his expensive operation, has an ulterior motive: Since the idea of armed robots has been so far met with resistance from the population as well as from the government due to a common law enacted by Senator Dreyfus,<sup>1</sup> OmniCorp CEO Raymond Sellars hopes to present the public with Alex a cyborg so likeable and efficient that people will want more of these RoboCops in the future. Of course, in order to then be able to distribute them with the greatest possible profit.

When Alex sees himself in his robot suit for the first time, he breaks down. He doesn't want to live like this. Only when Dr Norton tells him that his wife

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<sup>1</sup> Named after the real-life philosopher Hubert L. Dreyfus, who was one of the most prominent critics of AI in the USA. See Dreyfus (1972, 1992).

has consented to his transformation he calms down and decides to get used to his new existence.

There is another problem, however: Alex is far less capable of combat than real robots. Robots shoot straight away; Alex however considers beforehand whether it is morally okay to do so. In doing so, however, he loses time. To overcome this—from OmniCorp’s perspective—disadvantage, Dr Norton equips Alex virtual vizer. In combat situations, this vizer automatically comes down, making the robotic part of him take control of his body and his actions. The perfidious thing about this is that a chip implanted in Alex’s brain by Dr Norton causes him to believe that these are still his own decisions. Alex becomes increasingly cold and emotionless as the film progresses. Neither his wife nor his son recognize him. Where the robot begins—*RoboCop* (José Padilha. USA, 2014) tells us—the human ends. Another problem raised by the film is the question of responsibility. In *RoboCop*, the power over the robots does not lie with the state but is in the hands of a company. And this company has only one goal, namely to increase its profits. Alex is defenseless against the machinations of OmniCorp, which decides how he or to be precise his robotic parts are to be programmed.

Cyborgs—hybrid beings between man and machine—have existed in a certain sense for a long time. Aren’t glasses also an artificial aid that humans have been using for centuries to improve their abilities? Prosthetic legs or hearing aids also belong to this category. But what about implanted microchips that allow you to start a car, open your front door, or pass on your contact details? Or augmented reality lenses which allow one to see more of one’s surroundings or to superimpose information from the internet directly into one’s field of vision? Or implanted chips that allow one to sense the movements of others or to hear colors as sounds? Will we become as accustomed to these aids as we are to glasses for long-sightedness? On a website called *I am Robot*,<sup>2</sup> the company of the same name (under the slogan “Upgrade your body with new features”) is already offering to send these chips by post.

The US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, an agency of the US Department of Defense, has been researching for years the extent to which electric shocks to certain brain regions can increase attention, suppress fatigue, and influence moral behavior. Neuroenhancement is the name of this technology, which is designed to improve the brain, partly with the help of digital chips, or to equip it with better combat capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Online at: <https://chip-implants.com/>. Accessed 26 February 2022.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the well-known entrepreneur and Tesla CEO Elon Musk is currently developing chips with his start-up Neuralink, which are supposed to improve the brain’s performance and enable thought transmission.

The fantasies are particularly inflamed by what is referred to as *brain-computer interface*, i.e., technical connections between brain processes and software systems. For example, the European Union is also funding the VERE project (Virtual Embodiment and Robotic Re-Embodiment), whose explicit research goal is to permanently link the human sense of self to avatars or robots. There have already been successful trials in which a subject's ideas about movement are read via magnetic resonance imaging and passed on to robots, which then execute this movement.<sup>4</sup> The positive sides of such technology, including the accompanying Proteus effect, i.e., the successful identification of the ego with another artificial body, are undeniable: physically paralyzed people could walk and move in the world again thanks to a new body or new body parts. But what about the negative sides? What if, thanks to clever neurological manipulations, this technique is misused to make people do certain things? What if impulse control works less well with such a technique? And what if, within a military deployment, the identification with a strong robotic soldier body acting together with others in a group leads to what is known as the "Lucifer effect,"<sup>5</sup> i.e., to the user being tempted to act excessively aggressively and sadistically because he finds himself in a new role?

Advocates of these new technologies made to expand human capabilities call themselves transhumanists. They endorse using the most modern technological possibilities to arrive at a completely new dimension of human cognition (especially regarding the ability to grasp complex processes) and practice. Transhumanism is a global movement. There are several global transhumanist think tanks as well as transhumanist "parties" in the USA, Australia, Korea, India, Great Britain, Austria, and Germany.

As euphoric as transhumanists are about the expansion of human capabilities through new technologies, there are also counter-movements that fear a new division of society between those who, with the help of new technologies (not only digital but also medical and pharmaceutical or nanotechnological), place themselves on a higher level of human development and those who are denied this due to a lack of economic or technical means.

Contemporary transhumanism is the concretization of an age-old human dream, namely, to be able to defy the human condition, to go beyond all limitations of human nature, and to develop superhuman powers and abilities.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Israeli-French pilot study by Cohen et al. (2012).

<sup>5</sup> The "Lucifer effect" comes from the "Stanford Prison Experiment" conducted by Philip Zimbardo and colleagues in 1971, in which students were asked to take on the roles of guards and prisoners. After a short time, students who had taken on the role of guards treated the prisoners sadistically and aggressively. The reason for this was both the fact that the students were allowed to slip into powerful roles and felt the social pressure of the group. Cf. Zimbardo (2007).

Some transhumanists also hope to be able to fulfill the childlike wish for immortality via digital technologies. For example, Alcor Life Extension Foundation, a US non-profit organization, offers to preserve the brain after death, so that the owner of this brain can be resurrected decades, perhaps even centuries later in a cloned, healthy, young, or even in an artificial machine body. The machine body that is to fuse with the brain thus becomes a kind of double or revenant that, unlike the previous human, is supposed to live forever.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, such a desire must be characterized as regressive and narcissistic, because it is one of the most elementary conditions of adulthood to accept one's limitation as a human being and also one's own mortality. Freud also described the idea of *doppelgänger*, i.e., the idea of a double, as pathological and narcissistic and mentions in this context the ancient Egyptian tradition of sarcophagi, which, as images of the dead, were supposed to guarantee their immortality. Robots that are to be implanted with our brains are, in this sense, nothing other than the modern manifestation of these regressive ideas.

What is not (yet) possible in reality is played out in science fiction films, probably most extremely in the film *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders. USA, 2017), based on a manga by Masamune Shirow. Major Mira Killian, the film's protagonist, is the result of a fusion of a human brain and a purely synthetic body that gives her incredible elasticity and strength. Tony Stark the hero of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau. USA, 2008) also has superhuman powers, he has become a cyborg with the help of a steel battle suit. Unlike Alex in *RoboCop* however, Tony, as a genius engineer, not only has the power over his own programming, but as the immensely wealthy owner of a gigantic company (Stark Industries), he can thus sponsor himself. The problem of a company exerting control over a person's identity does not arise here.

Freud would certainly have seen this film as a typical expression of regressive, unconscious fantasies of omnipotence and invulnerability.<sup>6</sup> And yet these fantasies have no doubt often fueled innovations, such as the desire to fly, for example, the realization of this age-old dream of humankind, in the end became a technical and economic reality. Automobile-based individual transport, the movement of dozens of horsepower with a light hand and gentle foot pressure, the movement of a vehicle weighing tons with minimal use of one's own physical strength, is also the realization of an old dream of unlimited

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<sup>6</sup>For the cultural scientist Klaus Theweleit, *Iron Man* would probably be an example of the fantasy of a hard, "soldierly body" of a man who is incapable of building relationships with other people because of his ego disorder. Theweleit (1987).

mobility. Natural science and technology have repeatedly received important impulses from radical ideas in our lifeworld. The development of nuclear-power technology and its peaceful use in the form of light-water reactors or the far more advanced technology of fast-breeder reactors were intended to realize the vision of an unlimited, clean, sustainable, and carefree use of energy. As we know today, things turned out quite differently in the end, and nuclear power as an energy source is still regarded in many countries at best as a transitional technology to a decentralized economy based on renewable energies, which, interestingly enough, falls back on quite old models of energy production (wind turbines, hydropower, manure, geothermal energy, etc.).

New technologies have almost always been accompanied by utopian visions, may it be the invention of aircraft, electricity, or the first automobile which was hailed by Henry Ford in his book *Machinery: A New Messiah* as a “new messiah” which would bring eternal peace and prosperity on earth. However, even if these utopian expectations have never been met, they have often improved the conditions for human life. This is why humanists welcome new technologies. Humanists are guided by the idea of responsible agency and self-determination. They aim at improving conditions of human authorship within the limits of the *conditio humana*.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in his small but very influential writing *De hominis dignitate*, praised almost hymn-like the special human abilities in the arts and sciences. For him, the special human dignity is shown above all in the fact that man—as the image of God, so to speak—harbors within himself divine abilities of creativity and freedom, which come to full development under favorable conditions. However, this humanist idea of human self-development remains limited by natural conditions. The common thread of humanist thought since antiquity, to keep moderation and to defend the middle against the extremes (the *mesotes* doctrine of Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*), gains new relevance through the new technological possibilities and the transhumanist movement.

Only in the modern age and in times of advanced information technologies, which in conjunction with contemporary neuroscience give rise to expectations of overcoming some of these natural barriers, can humanism turn into transhumanism. Transhumanism differs from humanism in that it questions the natural conditions, even if they belong to the traditional human self-image, in a sense extending the humanist idea of self-determination and self-design beyond all boundaries. This swift from humanism to transhumanism has a famous precursor in Friedrich Nietzsche and his transhumanist ideal of the *Übermensch*, who does not have to take anything or anyone into consideration and can disregard the herd of supposed mediocrity and the values of humanity.

In the course of the film *RoboCop*, the protagonist Alex loses more and more of his moderation and center. He becomes arrogant, aggressive, and increasingly loses his humanity. In the end, when the US government speaks out against the use of cyborg police officers, Dr Norton confesses in an interview that he regrets having worked on the creation of an armed cyborg: “I admit that we know less than we thought. I do believe my research program is sound but what I did with it was wrong.”

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