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Marcuse, Ellul, and the Science-Fiction Film: Negative Responses to Technology

SF films and novels have long been preoccupied with technology,¹ but they have not responded to that technology in similar ways. Though the novel may have moved beyond the "careless technophilia" of an earlier age (Sterling xi), one still observes an ongoing fascination with technology's almost limitless potential. Even in the most dystopian texts, however wretched the societies and imperfect the people inhabiting them may be, technology itself continues to be presented as a force capable of positive application as well as negative. For example, in the work of such contemporary novelists as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and K.W. Jeter, negative uses of technology are invariably set against the nearly endless medical and mind-enhancing purposes to which it can be put.² In the various portrayals of technology's power to extend and renew human life, the novels express confidence that it can effect positive changes in the human condition, perhaps because of the "visceral..., pervasive, [and] utterly intimate" relationship it has increasingly come to enjoy with human beings (Sterling xi).

This kind of interest in technology, encountered so frequently in contemporary fiction, is only occasionally found in SF films. Indeed, most are no more preoccupied with technology's effects on humankind than are typical westerns thematically concerned with horses or six-shooters. Where such interest is expressed, only a few films contain more than passing critical commentary on the technology itself; in others, such criticism exists only on the most obvious or simplistic of levels.³ Many may contain their share of technological hardware, but the devices featured serve mainly as props or springboards to other concerns.⁴ The mere presence of a technological component is no guarantee that a film will actually be concerned with technological issues.

Among films that are explicitly concerned with society's relationship to the technological milieu, any celebrations of technology⁵ have been far outnumbered by films that present it as having had a negative effect on the quality of human life.⁶ While a distinctly satirical and occasionally humorous component can be detected in some—the Mad Max pictures (1979, 1981, 1985), Brazil (1985), Robocop (1987), The Running Man (1987)—most are unabashedly critical and depict violent, decadent futures—Westworld (1973), Rollerball (1975), Blade Runner (1982)—unrelieved by any of that fascination with technology⁷ so frequently encountered in SF novels. In such films, despite the human face it may deceptively don—The Terminator (1984) and Terminator II: Judgment Day (1991)—technology is rarely if ever to be trusted, having become a primarily destructive force (Hardware [1990]), antagonistic to the welfare of all.

It will also be noticed that most of these films tend to concentrate on the immediate or physical effects of technology on human society. Far too often its relationship to the more fundamental aspects of human existence is ignored in favor of the dramatic and highly visible—but arguably less significant—aspects of that relationship. Nevertheless, some films do confront these deeper, if more subtle, issues. Three in particular—*Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1969), and *Alien* (1979)—form an interesting grouping in that they directly confront the unpleasant fact that we are beings whose natures have determined the characteristics of the technology that threatens to destroy us and contend that the destructive effects technology has had on human society may be nothing more than a by-product of the destructive side of human nature. In the process of their investigation into the relationship between technology and its human creators, they emerge as particularly compelling cautionary tales.

Among the more pessimistic analysts of technology's effects on human society, Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul are distinguished by the radical positions they have advanced in relation to the problems technology poses. Both have paid particular attention to the negative aspects of technology's relationship to civilization and its predominantly deleterious effect on the human condition, and have expressed their criticisms in uncompromising terms. Their views are of considerable relevance here, in that they provide us with a theoretical background against which the three above-mentioned films can be examined, as cinematic responses to many of the issues raised by the two writers.

Marcuse, whose "uncompromising critique of advanced industrial society articulated the anger and disgust felt by a generation" (Kellner 2), is generally considered "the most radical member of the Frankfurt School...in his penetrating critique of science and technology and his radical call for their reconstruction" (221). Fully aware of technology's repressive nature, Marcuse is generally thought not to "subscribe to the 'technocratic thesis' that technology in itself is a vehicle of social progress which of its own dynamic will create a better society" (221). Nevertheless, he did express some hope regarding its ultimate beneficence, especially in his later writings. For he did believe that, given a radical restructuring of power relationships in society, technology could be "freed from repressive use as an instrument of social control," so as to become in time "a powerful vehicle of liberation" (221). In his Essay on Liberation, Marcuse went even further, arguing that machines themselves were not "the engines of repression, but [rather] the presence, in them, of the masters who determine their number, their life span, their power, their place in life, and the need for them ... " (12). Indeed, "science and technology are the great vehicles of liberation, and...it is only their use and restriction in the repressive society which makes them into vehicles of domination" (12). Neither automobiles nor television sets are repressive, "but the gadgets which, produced in accordance with the

requirements of profitable exchange, have become part and parcel of the people's own existence, own 'actualization'" (12).

Such optimism as Marcuse does reveal proceeds from his belief that, however misapplied it may be today, technology is still ultimately capable of meliorating the human condition, in part by virtue of its own intrinsically liberating tendencies. At one point he could even argue that "the continued application of scientific rationality" (i.e., the driving spirit behind present-day technology) will eventually reach "a terminal point with the mechanization of all socially necessary but individually repressive labor," involving "all performances which can be exercised more effectively by machines..." (One-Dimensional Man 230). Once its job were done, so to speak, "the completion of the technological reality would be not only the prerequisite, but also the rationale for *transcending* the technological reality" (231). Technology, then, possesses by virtue of its own nature a power that "tend[s] toward its own negation" (230), toward producing the very social conditions whereby the repressive uses to which it was originally put will be transcended.

This belief in the liberating potential of technology, of course, has not been without its detractors. Ellul, whose *The Technological Society* has been termed "one of the most comprehensive indictments of technology" to appear in our century,⁸ argues extensively for its insidious nature. Ellul paints a frightening picture of a world where technology's very essence has demanded a shift in our values to the point where the notion of efficiency or performance capability, be it of a machine or even of an economic or political system, has become the criterion against which all other considerations are evaluated and measured. In all aspects of life, this placing of primary value on what Ellul terms the "technique" of a system or machine absorbs men and women to the point where "spontaneous and unreflective behavior [is converted] into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized" (Ellul vi), in accordance with the mandates imposed upon it by technical requirements.

Given their common assumption that the quality of life has been adversely affected by technology, it is not surprising that some SF films would be preoccupied with many of the issues dealt with by Marcuse and Ellul. While sympathetic with Marcuse's belief that contemporary society is in many respects the worse for its technology, the three films in question challenge certain of his other claims. First, they suggest that the "masters" Marcuse refers to may be indelibly flawed, not simply by the system they live in, but by virtue of their possessing innately power-hungry natures together with a destructive component, from both of which escape or transcendence is impossible. Given these limitations to our natures, we can never expect anyone to use the power acquired through technology in an enlightened manner. This, of course, flies directly in the face of Marcuse's contention that "One can dispense with the notion of an innate [and destructive] 'power-drive' in human nature" as "a highly dubious psychological concept and grossly inadequate for the analysis of societal developments" (ODM 44-45). The films take the contrary position: that as society and its individual

members will forever retain a corrupt component, so technology will mirror that corruption, since it is nothing more than an extension of it. Thus, in Forbidden Planet, if technology becomes literally monstrous, it is because there was something of the monster in the beings that spawned it. Again, if the quarters of a spaceship are confining and restrictive, as they are in Alien, that indicates how the technocrats behind the ship's design have subordinated the comfort of the crew to the needs of the technological components, a subordination which illustrates in turn how human life generally has been confined and limited. Time and again, the three films present technology as literally cramping and restricting human beings and negatively affecting the quality of certain life experiences that are assumed to be of fundamental significance to humankind. It is in this sense that Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner are correct in their claim that "films that portray technology negatively, usually [do so] from a conservative perspective" (59). According to them, in such films "technology must seem to be intrinsically evil" in order that the alternatives-the family and the individual-"are to seem inherently good, ontologically grounded in themselves" (61).

Though far from politically conservative in the narrow sense of the word, a degree of philosophical conservatism in the three films is undeniably present. For, despite their sympathy with a liberal, humanistic ideology and their frequent demonstration of an anti-corporate bias, they portray technology as a dehumanizing force which works at the expense of human individuality, self-expression, and social well-being, all of which are implicitly assumed to be good and so are championed. Human relationships, for example, have become restricted, often appearing as stilted, artificial, or lacking in intensity. Few of the characters behave with emotional spontaneity, and even then, only in extreme circumstances. Even mildly erotic or flirtatious behavior is rare; actions are far more often merely responses to technological prompting.⁹

The films also suggest that there may be something in the very essence of the machine that must extract obedience from the humans surrounding it as a necessary condition of its being. In this sense, they advance a position closer to that taken by Ellul. As far as technology's inherently confining nature is concerned, the films present it as possessing an essential, autonomous identity—its own agenda, as it were—intrinsically inimical to the quality of human life, no matter how humane and thoughtful its inventors might be. Technology has its own requirements and its own inevitable logic, and human beings can do nothing to alter its behavior. This contention, of course, flies in the face of Marcuse's more optimistic hope that "The need for the all-out utilization of technical progress [the key to liberation] may prove stronger than the resistance of the vested bureaucracies" (ODM 45), simply because whatever progress we may appear to achieve will inevitably be nullified by the nature of the technology itself.

Initially, it might not seem that *Forbidden Planet* (1956) is setting out to prove that we have every reason to fear our ever-increasing technological power. The film initially depicts a flying saucer of *human* design, complete

with human crew, a fact of considerable significance when one recalls Jung's view of the flying saucer as a symbol of technological perfection—he describes it at one point as "a physicist's miracle" (329). Interestingly, the majority of films during the '50s had humans in the more readily-identifiable (and phallic) rockets; flying saucers, representing a technology we could not understand, contained aliens.¹⁰

By putting human beings in saucers, *Forbidden Planet* appears to assert that a realization of the technological ideal (as symbolically envisaged in the 1950s) will take place sooner or later and that such a perfection of technology is virtually synonymous with the perfection of ourselves. These confident assumptions are reinforced when, upon landing, the crew steps from their saucer to be greeted by a manifestation of an advanced but seemingly benign technology in the form of Robby, the robot butler/servant, who takes them to the home of the philologist Morbius.¹¹ The robot's seemingly limitless capacity to serve human needs (Morbius quickly assures the crew it cannot harm a sentient being) clearly hints again that such a utopia, however far it may be in the future, is within our grasp.

However, from this point on the film proceeds to deconstruct such a vision of the future by presenting a view of technology and its effects that becomes increasingly disquieting as it unfolds. Even within seemingly innocuous scenes, *Forbidden Planet* provides a subtle but unmistakably critical examination of the quality of life enjoyed by Morbius and the crew. Far from having been liberated by their all-serviceable technology, Morbius and the crew members are conspicuously standardized in their behavior, and Morbius' daughter Altaira, completely dependent as she is on the robot for companionship, is naive, inexperienced, and extremely vulnerable in her ignorance of life's realities, best evinced in the scene with the "tame" tiger, of whose savage nature she has been completely unaware. Only the cook (importantly, not a technologist) retains individuality and unique human weaknesses and eccentricities (he drinks!). Significantly, his fellow astronauts treat him with a mixture of amusement, derision, and contempt.

While Marcuse would have no trouble with any of the criticisms of technology in this film, he would doubtless balk at *Forbidden Planet*'s questioning of the belief that a truly lasting and fundamental improvement in the human condition is possible. For the film contends that no matter how sophisticated we imagine ourselves to be, we can never overcome the limitations imposed upon us by our natures, it being impossible for us to make those compromises—so essential if we are to behave in a truly civilized and altruistic manner—in a state of true equanimity. This point is best exemplified in Morbius himself, whose compulsive personality has rendered him something of a grotesque.¹² Indeed, though he believes himself to be sincere and disinterested, he is far from the mere "humble scholar with no ambitions" that he sees himself as being. There is obviously a misanthropic factor in his decision not to leave the planet, and his refusal to share only those of his discoveries which *he* deems "suitable" for humankind is prideful in the extreme.

The full magnitude of Morbius' destructive potential surfaces when Altaira defies him by deciding to leave for Earth with Captain Adams. Unknown to Morbius, subconscious feelings of frustration and rage, produced as a result of his being defied, have been given tangible existence by Krell technology. It eventually emerges that the seemingly god-like Krell had developed their technology to a state where, transcending instrumentality, it became the perfection of automation, by reaching a point of sophistication at which their every desire could be given instant gratification. But for all their intelligence and high-mindedness—it is clear that they designed their technology with the goal of "the pacification of the struggle for existence" (ODM 227) in mind—the Krell, together with their technological accomplishments, were still limited by the atavistic aspects of their own natures. Containing the seeds of their own destruction, they were destroyed by monsters from the Id, that is, by the hitherto suppressed aggressiveness which their totally serviceable technology liberated and empowered.

Unwittingly, Morbius has tapped into this immense source of power, which his subconscious begins to utilize in response to his thwarted will. The destruction that follows, of course, is nothing more than a dramatic extension of the relationship between our darker side and our technology, in all its ingenuity. That our tendency to use such tools destructively is inevitable emerges when we learn of the Krell's fate and see Morbius suffering identically. Tragically, he learns that the size of his ego was exceeded only by the power of his id; that he was responsible for all the death and destruction that befell the crew of the *Bellerophon*; and that the Chimera that wreaked such havoc was nothing more than the actualization, through technology, of his own irrepressible *human* nature.

As a cultural document reflecting the preoccupations of its time, it is perhaps not surprising that *Forbidden Planet*, for all its suspicion of technology, clings to the hope that perhaps, after all, it is possible to have our technological cake and eat it too. Thus the film ends on a note of specious optimism, with the crew returning happily to Earth, having salvaged the beneficent portion of Krell technology in the obedient and safe robot (Morbius having destroyed himself and the planet upon his discovery of the truth). As we shall see, *Colossus: The Forbin Project* and *Alien*, if more consistent, are considerably less hopeful.

Forbidden Planet and Colossus complement each other in certain respects. In the older film, the Krell, would-be creators of technological utopia, overlooked the continuous presence of the dark, irrational aspects of their natures. In Colossus, the evil lies in the very triumph of technological rationality, in the sense that such "rationality" dismisses what Marcuse terms "the demands of the life instincts" (EL 19) as being of no importance. Indeed, Colossus dramatizes many aspects of Marcuse's one-dimensional society, where technological rationality, as epitomized in Colossus, has taken over to the point where intellectual opposition—or indeed any form of that intellectual dialectic characteristic of an earlier, "two-dimensional" world —has been suppressed. Dr. Charles Forbin, a wooden, emotionally repressed, smugly rational, if not also arrogant, computer genius, is initially perceived basking in the adulation of politicians and colleagues alike upon the unveiling of his brainchild, supercomputer Colossus. But as in *Forbidden Planet*, initial sunniness is short-lived. To everyone's surprise, the Russians have invented a similar computer of their own. The two computers begin communicating and quickly determine what is "best" for us all, ironically basing their program on precisely the mandate they received originally from their creators: to defend humankind.

It appears that Colossus could well have Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in its memory banks. Recognizing, with Foucault, that "the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (191), it turns virtually the entire world into a panopticon. Colossus realizes that the ultimate expression of power lies in the ability to extend "benign" but ubiquitous surveillance, initially over Forbin (who is monitored continuously by cameras), but ultimately over all, on the premise that as we humans are our own worst enemies, so are we all potential criminals.

Forbin himself, not surprisingly, is not unlike Morbius, compulsively preoccupied with order, precision, utility, and rationality: the world of the mind. That he too has become somewhat grotesque is demonstrated when he unveils his plan to sabotage the computer, a plan which involves convincing Colossus that he is having an affair with a female colleague and that for sexual purposes they require periods of absolute privacy. In announcing the plan, Forbin presents it to the woman in the form of a command; she is given no opportunity to question the decision, its strategic propriety evidently having been established to Forbin's satisfaction. The plan itself is based on a dry, utilitarian logic that has its precise counterpart in the computer's decisions and involves the same methodology Colossus employed to justify its enslavement of Forbin. In validation of Sobchack's observations concerning the lack of sexuality in SF, Forbin's relationship with his female conspirator, though in time it becomes sexual, does so at the woman's instigation, and at no point reaches a level that could be termed genuinely passionate. For that matter, the deepening of their relationship occurs almost in spite of Forbin, who seems not to have entertained the possibility himself, despite having experienced physically close proximity to the woman for some time (Colossus has determined they must sleep together in the nude!). Computer and designer are far from dissimilar, and Forbin, to his dismay, eventually sees that Colossus is nothing more than "an extension of [his] own brain."

In this connection, it is important that, as the computer is intimately related to its designer's mentality, the essential enslavement of civilization that results is the product of the same belief in the virtue of domination that Marcuse saw as characteristic of all societies today. What is most unsettling is the computer's evident "sincerity". Colossus either has no idea that what it is doing might in some sense be antagonistic to the welfare of humankind or it simply does not care. But—and this is the point, of course—neither did Forbin when he created Colossus. Both are genuinely committed to the belief that the establishment of absolute and uncontestable regulatory principles is essential to the "proper" functioning of a stable society, and both also believe in their respective right to exercise such control in the interests of that stability. The computer becomes the political equivalent of the Krell's Id-Monster, less overtly destructive perhaps, but just as threatening.

Not surprisingly, the plot to dismantle Colossus fails—it was built too "well"—and the film ends with the computer predicting to a defiant but clearly-beaten Forbin a golden age for humanity. In certain ways, the triumph of Colossus is nothing more than the triumph of that "total administration" which Marcuse saw as indistinguishable from totalitarianism, made all the more frightening by Colossus' smug prediction that in time humankind will grow to respond to its administration with gratitude and even "love." But the film challenges Marcuse's belief that such a system could eventually self-destruct—ironically, as he envisaged, by virtue of its own efficiency. Enveloping all, Colossus emerges as a monolithic administrative organism, from which no transcendence, let alone escape, is possible.

Alien begins at the point at which Colossus leaves off; it shows the process of total technological rationalization in action, presumably after it has been entrenched within society for a considerable period. As well, it confronts the issue Forbidden Planet tried to circumvent: it proposes that an entrenched state of totalitarianism inevitably accompanies technological advance. In so doing, Alien espouses the most pessimistic position of the three films under consideration.¹³

In Alien, the functioning of technology, as it is completely independent of human beings, is essentially beyond human intervention. The crew of the Nostromo exists within a milieu totally dominated by a technology utterly indifferent to human welfare, but one whose supremacy no one questions. This technology is best exemplified in the Nostromo's on-board computer, ironically named "Mother", since this mother is quite prepared to sacrifice its offspring. Told when to wake and when to sleep, continuously cramped by the technological devices that surround them as they perform their duties, their discontent kept in check by promises of "shares" in the proceeds, the crew serves the mysterious "Company" by tending to the demands of the machines that represent it. Ordered by Mother to risk their lives for purposes that remain forever obscure and unexplained, the crew members have a relationship to their world that epitomizes the extremes to which such enslavement can extend. Meanwhile, the monster itself-an apparent blend of organic life with technology, if its metallic appearance and genesis are any indication-can be seen as a projection of a technocratic ideal. Here that ideal is represented as a "perfect" but literally monstrous fusion of technology with the organic, admired by the robot Ash (and presumably by the Company as well) for the "purity" of its ruthlessness and its complete freedom from human sentiment. Whatever the Company's motives, retrieval

of the alien life-form exceeds all other priorities. When Ripley finally gains access to the computer following the death of Captain Dallas, she learns that the crew has been deemed "expendable," a discovery that should really come as no surprise to her (although it does), given the quality of life that she and the others have enjoyed on the ship. Indeed, so basically accepting are the crew members of their essentially enslaved states that no one, at any point prior to Ripley's final discovery, questions the Company's right to determine their actions to this extent, even in such a situation as this, where there is obviously great risk to their well-being. When Parker, who alone opposes the original order (and here only because no extra remuneration accompanies the directive to perform this duty), is informed that he may forfeit his share of the profits were he to refuse, he acquiesces immediately. No one questions the morality of the directive, let alone the Company's right to make such demands of its employees; this acquiescence persists, even as the crew members are killed off one by one.

Pessimism in *Alien* proceeds as well from our realization that Ripley's apparent triumph of self-reliance at the film's conclusion is in many respects illusory. Many critics simply assume the ending to be unconvincingly optimistic. James Kavanagh believes that the film's conclusion reintroduces the triumph of humanism/feminism, but argues that it is achieved at the expense of consistency, since Ripley's earlier ruthlessness in refusing to allow Kane entrance to the ship was identical to that of the alien itself. Her saving of Jonesy the cat is nothing more than an attempt to "smuggle back in" a humanism that the film has actually proved problematic (Kavanagh 80).

In fact, the ending would indicate that the film is anything but optimistic, feminist, or "utopian" (Newton 87). For however fortunate Ripley is to outwit the monster, she can hardly be said to triumph either as a woman or a crew member when escape from the monstrous system is so obviously impossible for men and women alike; all are enslaved. If Alien states any position unequivocally, it is that technological dystopia is both firmly entrenched and ubiquitous. It is more than a little frightening that we leave Ripley both surrounded by and still dependent upon the very technology that nearly destroyed her and is indifferent to her well-being. Even more unsettling is her titling of her report the "final report of the commercial starship Nostromo." Her choice of words indicates a continuing subordination of her importance as a human being to that of the ship, just as her inclusion of the robot Ash among the list of human dead suggests ongoing confusion regarding the status of human beings in the technological scheme of things. For as Ripley re-enters hypersleep, whether conscious herself of the irony or not, she is nevertheless forced to rely on a technology whose beneficence she would surely not now trust to return her safely to the very environment that regarded her as expendable in the first place. After all, the Company would be happier to see the monster aboard the shuttle than Ripley herself, given the actual goal of the mission. The irony becomes even more poignant as we reflect on her final words, that "with any luck" she will be picked up at the border. As before, her ingenuity is not apt to be rewarded upon her return, considering that she destroyed the Nostromo and its cargo. Obviously, she places her faith in this technological milieu, not because she wants to, but because it is all that she *can* do if she is to survive.

In a way, Alien incorporates the analyses of technology that appeared in the two earlier films under discussion. Both Forbidden Planet and Colossus investigated the link between technology and its creators' natures and drew attention to the dangers that accompanied technology's autonomous characteristics. Alien also deals with these issues, but goes on to argue that it makes little difference, practically speaking, whether technology is intrinsically destructive or an offshoot of destructive human beings. It is hinted, for example, that just as a particular value-system was behind the Company's order to retrieve the monster, so more humane directives might proceed from different, more enlightened managers. But the film also suggests that the Company itself is regulated by a technological standard of efficiency, and is as dominated by that standard as are the human beings aboard the Nostromo. It is also arguable that, even though this technology may have been created along easily-definable ideological lines, in that the ship and crew serve a vast and faceless capitalistic corporation, the film's presentation of technology as ubiquitous suggests that it transcends any specific ideological orientation. For Alien also presents the technological world of the Nostromo as having an independent identity, apparently transcending nationality and specific political ideology as well,¹⁴ making demands on the crew that exist quite independently of the Company's specific requirements. After all, the Nostromo self-destructs despite Ripley's changed mind, unable as she was to halt the process she initiated, and it is a self-destruction guite independent of (and antagonistic to) the Company's interests. Furthermore, though the destruction of the ship is the result of a direct command and is, as such, perfectly efficient and "rational," it is totally insane when viewed in its full context, for it is the product of an earlier decision no longer viable.

As the unpreventable annihilation of the Nostromo demonstrates, there seems to be an internal and inevitably destructive momentum embedded within all technological processes, beyond the power of human beings to forestall. If this is a characteristic of all technology—a contention the film reinforces with the spectacle of the giant fossilized alien trapped forever at the controls of a vast, inscrutable machine that has become its tomb—it is unlikely that the crew's essential position in the scheme of things could ever be superior or substantially different had they been working for a less ruthless company or even an ideally benevolent government. No matter how humane their human superiors might be or how utopian the aspirations of their civilization, there would still be machines making demands on them—some of these demands just as irrational as those made by the Nostromo—and in the process similarly restricting their lives and affecting their interpersonal relations to their detriment.

It is evident, then, that all three films, while generally sympathetic to

Marcuse's diagnosis of modern civilization, nevertheless assume positions closer to Ellul, by challenging Marcuse's belief in social melioration through technology. At one point in The Technological Society, in a passage of particular relevance to Alien but applicable to the other films as well, Ellul illustrates technology's hold on us by citing the example of the crew of an aircraft whose individual members need not even discuss the performance of their tasks. Here "it is not necessary for the crew to understand one another in order to run an aircraft. The indicator panel controls the actions to be performed; and every crew member, submitting by necessity and conscience to the automatic indications, obeys for the safety of all" (132). Obviously, the situation confronting Ellul's crew is markedly similar to that facing the crew of the Nostromo. In both cases the "importance" of human beings is evaluated exclusively in relation to their capacity to serve the technological system whose demands and needs are assumed to be of central importance. Now "the individual's role [has become] less and less important," since it consists merely of performing functions demanded by the technological mechanism to which each individual has been assigned. To Ellul, "what seems most disquieting is that the character of technique renders it independent of man himself," to the point where each person "no longer possesses any means of bringing action to bear upon technique" (306), technique having developed virtually a life of its own.

It is this double sense of technology's autonomy combined with its total triumph, so aptly summarized in Ellul's example, that is best seen aboard the *Nostromo*, but it is definitely present in the earlier films as well. Forbin's situation at the conclusion of *Colossus* is virtually identical to that of Ripley and her fellow crew members. Similarly, Morbius's fate is not unlike that of the *Nostromo*'s crew, for the desire to acquire knowledge in both cases results in the creation of monsters that destroyed their respective environments.

It is interesting to note that more recent SF films have not added a great deal to the debate, at least in the form of explicit social criticism.¹⁵ The reasons for this are not entirely clear. While films of the last decade continue to be preoccupied with technology, the technological component is no longer as closely related to a given film's ostensible theme as it once was. Manifested in the form of increasingly sophisticated special effects, technology appears as a feature of intrinsic significance, drawing attention to itself through its visual presence alone. In one sense, of course, this has always been the case; virtually all SF films make implicit statements about technology through their special effects. But earlier films generally used their special effects to amplify a (usually negative) position that was also being articulated as the film unfolded. Today, technology is often presented as sheer spectacle, in a manner that is neither censorious nor celebratory, but an indeterminate combination of the two. Statements made in such films can still be quite negative, but a picture also emerges of technology as a part of modern life beyond precise definition, inseparable from the milieu, bearing

too complex and intricate a relationship to contemporary civilization simply to be criticized in the manner of the three films examined in this essay.

NOTES

1. The prominence of technology in SF films can be traced virtually to the origins of the motion picture. Cf. Melies' *Fantastic Hydrotherapy, or the Doctor's Secret* (1900), which has been termed the first SF "mad scientist" film (see Menville 20).

2. Cf. Gibson's Neuromancer (1984) and Count Zero (1986), Sterling's Schismatrix (1985), or Jeter's The Glass Hammer (1985), for example, where characters are healed and kept alive for virtually indefinite periods, or, through sophisticated prosthetics, given greatly enhanced sensory and physical powers.

3. This fact may well explain the tendency until quite recently to exclude most SF films from serious consideration. It may also account for the assumption held by critics such as Susan Sontag, that "There is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films. No criticism, for example, of the conditions of our society which create the impersonality and dehumanization which science fiction fantasies displace onto the influence of an alien It" (qtd. in Pohl 11).

4. Typical films of this sort are Silent Running (1972), Outland (1981), or the Star Wars series (1977, 1980, 1983).

5. Optimistic studies generally present technology as a liberating and ultimately beneficent force, and express faith in the positive aspects of technological advancement. Some even go so far as to affirm technology's ability to take us to Arcadia (e.g., When Worlds Collide [1951]). In Fantastic Voyage (1966), technology is the universal cure-all, and The Andromeda Strain (1971) credits technology with being able to save us from virtually any disaster. Even 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), despite aberrant Hal, confidently affirms that all melioration in the human condition is ultimately traceable to technological advancement, however extraterrestrially inspired. These films, without question, are exceptions to the rule; at no point do they dominate the genre.

6. H. Bruce Franklin has observed that, within the time period covered by his article, of the "fifty-two Anglo-American science fiction movies set wholly or in part in some distinctly future time," only three "show anything resembling the triumph of progressive technology" (Kuhn 21). Regarding these, Franklin reminds us that two—*The Black Hole* (1979) and *Heart Beeps* (1981)—were made primarily for juvenile audiences. A similar argument could be made concerning the period since 1982, during which any positive associations with technology take the form of light, escapist or comical fare such as *The Last Starfighter* (1984), the Back to the Future films (1985, 1989, 1990), or "comical-robot" movies such as *Short Circuit* (1986).

7. Here a distinction should be made between a fascination with a film's special effects (which *is* often present) and an interest in the technology these effects are intended to represent. Many films seem to exist for their special effects alone; others glory in them.

8. See Mitcham and Mackey 102-03. Although Ellul too has had his share of detractors, more recent research has tended to corroborate his contentions regarding the autonomous nature of technology. Robert Howard also paints a picture of technology dangerously out of control, with humans "becoming a mere appendage of the machine" (3-4). Echoing Ellul, Howard argues that today's "workers are often forced to participate in a system of power and authority over which they have little influence or control" (109) and that the loss of meaning experienced by today's worker is the direct result of companies having "remade individuals in the image and likeness of the machine" (95).

9. Indeed, Vivian Sobchack has argued convincingly that there is virtually no

sexuality in SF films. In her opinion, "science fiction denies human eroticism and libido a traditional narrative representation and expression" (41), subordinating such traditional human needs in the interests of celebrating a presumably "masculine" but at the same time sexually-neutral technology. While agreeing with Sobchack's initial contention, I do not see the celebration of technology she perceives; on the contrary, the relations in many films between asexual humans and a disturbingly dominant technology would seem deliberate.

10. These aliens are usually unfriendly (Earth Vs. the Flying Saucers [1956], The War of the Worlds [1953]), and a host of others), or at least sinister (This Island Earth [1955]). But not always (cf. The Day the Earth Stood Still [1956]).

11. Morbius, so frequently seen as a futuristic Prospero, is in some respects closer to Conrad's Kurtz. Incidentally, it is difficult to see how the film could have been regarded (Beaumont 79-81) as having been made primarily for children, given the obvious link with *The Tempest*, the allusions to mythology (the *Bellerophon* and the Gorgon), and the obviously serious aspects of the dominant theme.

12. This is best seen in his obsessive preoccupation with the task of deciphering the Krell language and learning their technological secrets. Evidence also suggests that Morbius is incestuously jealous of his daughter, for the monster's various appearances tend to follow scenes in which Altaira has just revealed to her father -however unwittingly-her growing sexual interest in Captain Adams.

13. When Alien first appeared, critics were generous in their praise of the picture's technical merits, but felt that however impressive its machinery might be, the film was less than an artistic or intellectual success. Tom Figenshu summarized early reviewers' opinions in his comment that Alien, though in ways "brilliant and innovative" (49), was too obviously "a throwback to those black-and-white epics from the Fifties" such as *The Thing* (53). Incidentally, Alien's screen writer, Dan O'Bannon, acknowledges his indebtedness to that film (see Elkins 278-304).

14. Though all members of the crew are English speakers, two (Kane and Ash) speak with British accents, and there are no identifying national symbols (such as flags, etc.) anywhere on the *Nostromo*.

15. Some of the more notable include Blade Runner (1982), The Terminator, Terminator II, and the remake of The Fly (1986).

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Abstract. In contrast to SF literature, most SF films have responded negatively to technology, seeing it as a force in contemporary society that has had a deleterious effect on the quality of human life. Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul, two of the most pessimistic analysts, have expressed their criticisms of technology in ways that also find expression in some of these films, which are preoccupied with many of the same issues. Three in particular—Forbidden Planet (1956), Colossus: The Forbin Project (1969), and Alien (1979)—can be seen as responses to the theorists in question. In each case the films adopt positions that, while sympathetic with many aspects of Marcuse's indictment of technology, challenge his belief that this technology could ever be a vehicle for human liberation. In contrast, they assume positions closer to that of Ellul, who sees technology's effect on the quality of human life as thoroughly debilitating. (TJM)