

Robot Culture

ARHM 3342 & ATCM 3395

Fall 2023

Thomas Riccio, Professor



Office #972.883.2016 (Office/voice)

Thomas.riccio@utdallas.edu

www.thomariccio.com

Monday 10-12:45 room CB 1.106

Office Location JO 5.614

972-883-0216

Hrs: M 2-4 pm & by Arrangement

The course will examine the cultural and historical phenomenon and the emergence of robots and AI. Once the domain of fantasy and science fiction, robots have emerged as an everyday reality. This course will examine the evolution of robots from their mythical,

fetish, and ritual origins to present-day reality. Explored will be the cultural and historical precursors of robots and mechanical humans, focusing on how and why, over the last 100 years, a Robot Culture has evolved through popular culture, literature, film, television, industry, and daily life.

Before Capek coined the term “robot” in his 1920 play RUR, people dreamed of producing simulated human machines now known as “androids.” Including the “Talos” from Greek mythology, “Golem” from Judaism, Frankenstein, and other examples, images beyond human appearance frequently appeared in myths, folklore, and other sources long before the emergence of the modern-day robot. The robot today belongs as much to politics as it does to AI and science fiction, though it is associated more with the latter in the contemporary period. In novels and cinema, the form and content of the robot changed. A global-wide robot boom emerged with the 1927 Fritz Lang film Metropolis and other examples. The robot image was used as a publicity tool for the advent of home electrical appliances and became a presence that people were increasingly comfortable with. As this came to pass, Asimov’s “Three Laws of Robotics” appeared to define the relationship more closely between robots and human beings, with the robot forging a solid position within human society. In the 1950s and 1960s, robots were portrayed as either proxies for cold war invasion, as was “Gort” in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or labor-saving devices that would free humans from drudgery. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the robot in cinema, television, and Science Fiction literature was often portrayed as either disembodied objects, such as “Hal” by Arthur C. Clarke in *2001: Space Odyssey*, or as friendly helpers as in “Data” *Star Trek*, and “R2D2” in *Star Wars*. With the impact of computers, particularly personal computers, there was a switch in emphasis from mechanical human-like beings to computational objects in many science fiction renderings of the robot. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the robot returned to embodied humanoid forms. Still, this time, it was often associated with killing machines, as in the *Terminator*, *Matrix*, *Westworld*, and *Ex Machina*, rather than labor-saving devices or human helpers. Into the 21st century, the concept of robots as human-like and either dissembler or endearing was portrayed in the films *I, Robot*, *RoboCop*, *AI-Artificial Intelligence*, *Bicentennial Man*, and *Wall-E*, for example.

Objectives

The course will enable the student to identify and interrogate the cultural context, history, and development of robots and robotic culture to understand the advent and expression of robots and robotics as an emergent culture. A culture begot by human technology evolving into autonomous existence. By the conclusion of the course, the student will be able to understand the robot in its popular culture context, but just as importantly, be able to articulate the origins, place, and function of the robot from the perspective of broader cultural and anthropological perspectives. The course will consider robots a significant cultural phenomenon, beginning with the anthropomorphic figure as an avatar of human concerns, fears, and hopes and ending with the projection of autonomous intelligence.

Required Texts

[Robots in Popular Culture: Android and Cyborgs in the American Imagination](#). By Richard Hall, Bloomsbury (Available via UTD library as eBook)

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?: The inspiration for the films Blade Runner and Blade Runner 2049, Philip K. Dick, Random House
I Robot, Isaac Asimov, Del Rey Reprints
Mind Children: The Future of Human Intelligence. By Hans Moravec, Harvard

Additional Readings, articles, and films available via UTDBox

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Two 3 to 5-page papers
- Completion of reading assignments before class discussion
- One 20-page (minimum) research project on an approved subject
- One 10-Minute semester end research project presentation
- Class participation & Attendance

EVALUATION

1000pt scale

Participation and attendance	10%
Short Papers x 2 (3-5 pages)	30%
Final paper/project (20 pages)	50%
Final presentation (15 min)	10%

Only complete work will be accepted.
Incompletes will not be given in this class.
Plagiarism and cheating are unacceptable.
All dates and assignments are subject to change.
Assignments will be made with ample time for completion given. Please be alert to alterations or corrections in the schedule.

Attendance Policy: It is a once-a-week class, so: Two (2) unexcused absences are permitted; however, each subsequent lack will lower one entire letter grade per absence. Two late arrivals (30 minutes + after the hour unless lateness is pre-arranged) will count as one absence. Note: No Gum Chewing or Eating in Class. Soft Drinks, Coffee, and water are permitted.

Assignments & Academic Calendar

Each week will focus on the general topics noted below.

Readings subject to change

Assignments and reading for the following week are found in the right column.

August 21

Course overview // Gods and Robots // Myths, Metaphors // Performing in our image.

Read: Robot Fetish + Robotic Art and Cultural Imagination(UTD Box)

August 28

Robot and Android // The Robot in Early Fiction

Read: Robots in Popular Culture, Pt 1, Section 1, 2, 3

September 4

NO CLASS LABOR DAY

Read: Robots in Popular Culture, Pt. 1 Section 4, 5, 6

September 11

Anthropomorphism // the fetish and its function // slavery and control of other

Golem in-class viewing

Read: Dr. Frankenstein and the Industrial Body (UTD Box)

September 18

Modern origins //What exactly is a robot? // RUR// mechanical marvels that fascinate and frighten // telerobotics // superheroes of the 1930s, 40s and 50s—the cold war and triumph of technology

Frankenstein in-class viewing

Read: RUR (UTD Box)

September 25

Metropolis // industrial meets the technological in the imagination // future vision of the world // the jetsons and lost in space.

Metropolis in-class viewing

Read: Robots in Popular Culture, Pt 1, Section 7, 8, 9, 10,

Paper #1 Due

October 2

Asimov and the laws of robotics // the friendly drone helper robot // forbidden planet and Robbie // the 1950s and technology

Forbidden Planet in-class viewing

Read: Representing Robots in Cinema (UTD Box)

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October 9

Politics and practicality // the day the earth stood still and gort // future visions and fear.

The Day the Earth Stood Still in-class viewing

Read: I, Robot

Paper #2 Due

October 16

Industrial robotics // the popular imagination // fueling progress // extending human ability // space exploration.

I, Robot in-class viewing

Read: Robots in Popular Culture, Pt.2 Section 11,12,13

Read: Villainous Robots and Their Impact

October 23

Our technological fears // terminator // matrix

Terminator in-class viewing

Read: Termination of Transformation? (UTD Box)

Read: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?
In-Class Final Project/Paper Discussions

October 30

technological salvation mythology // techno-optimism

Blade Runner in-class viewing

Read: Sophia: An Emergent Ethnography (UTD Box)

November 6

the technological mixed blessing // star wars // star trek // the state of robotics overview // fact-fiction

Bicentennial Man in-class viewing

Read: Robots in Popular Culture, Pt. 2, Sections 14, 15, 16

November 13

the bionic human // the android // the cyberpunk

AI (Artificial Intelligence) in class viewing

Read Age of spiritual machines [selection] (UTD Box)

November 20

NO CLASS FALL BREAK

Read: Mind Children

November 27

Final presentations part 2 // the age of robots // trans humanism // the singularity // humans become robot-like

Ex Machina in-class viewing

Read: continue and finish Mind Children.

December 4

summing up

Alita: Battle Angel in-class viewing

December 11

Final paper due // Paper/Project Presentations