Singularity Index

This is part of IEEE Spectrum’s SPECIAL REPORT: THE SINGULARITY

The singularity—that pivotal moment when machines attain superhuman intelligence—may never arrive, but don't tell Hollywood. Over the years, writers, directors, and set designers have envisioned worlds in which machines rule. Whether benign or evil or somewhere in between, these mechanized souls tend to mirror society's own attitudes toward technology. In the 1927 silent classic Metropolis, the robot doppelgänger Maria foments rebellion among the human workers—a reflection of that era's real-world struggles over labor and class. The trust-in-technology 1950s and early 1960s, by contrast, yielded a fleet of friendly helpers, from Robby the Robot in Forbidden Planet to Rosey, the automaton maid in "The Jetsons." Recent incarnations of humanlike machines have been more subtly drawn: though often physically superior, they remain conflicted about their existence and uneasy about their human creators. Here we offer a few depictions of the singularity, as seen through the lens of pop culture.

PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CAROLCO/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; WARNER BROS./THE KOBAL COLLECTION; UNIVERSAL/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; MGM/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; UFA/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; ACE HARDCOVER; SCI FI; CAT’S COLLECTION/CORBIS; AMBLIN/DREAMWORKS/WB/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; SPECTRA; TURNER BROADCASTING SYSTEM; UNIVERSAL TV/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; PARAMOUNT TELEVISION/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; G.P. PUTNAM’S SONS; MGM/THE KOBAL COLLECTION; COURTESY OF TEZUKA PRODUCTIONS CO.
THINKING MACHINES: [clockwise from top]: The Terminator (film, 1984); Agent Smith, from The Matrix (film, 1999); Colossus supercomputer, from Colossus: The Forbin Project (film, 1970); HAL 9000, from 2001: A Space Odyssey (film, 1968); Robot Maria, from Metropolis (film, 1927); William Gibson's Neuromancer (novel, 1984); Number Six, a Cylon from "Battlestar Galactica" (TV series, 2003–); Roy Batty, a replicant from Blade Runner (film, 1982); the boy-robot David, from Artificial Intelligence: A.I. (film, 2001); Isaac Asimov's I, Robot (short-story collection, 1950); Rosey the Robot, from "The Jetsons" (TV series, 1962–63); K.I.T.T., the talking car, from "Knight Rider" (TV series, 1982–86); android Lt. Commander Data, from "Star Trek: The Next Generation" (TV series, 1987–94); Robert Heinlein's The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress (novel, 1966); Robby, from Forbidden Planet (film, 1956); Astro Boy (Japanese manga series, original run 1952–68).

GOOD INTENTIONS [upper right]: HAL 9000 and Colossus mean well, but their single-mindedness in carrying out their programmed objectives turns out badly for the humans in their midst.

BOY WONDER [upper left]: The superpowered, ever benign Astro Boy touched the hearts of millions of fans in post–World War II Japan.

DEADLY BUT BEAUTIFUL [lower right]: Number Six, the robotic femme fatale of the sci-fi series "Battlestar Galactica," engineers the deaths of billions of people—yet longs for their approval.

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