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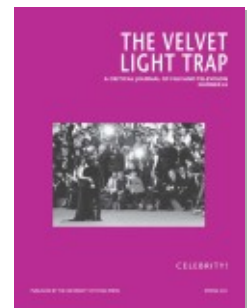
*Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman
Technology* (review)

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Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology

by Daniel Dinello

It seems that Daniel Dinello has a bone to pick with technophiles—or, at least, the extreme version of technophilia represented by posthumanism. His particular quarrel seems to be with men such as Raymond Kurzweil, Hans Moravec, and Gregory Stock, experts in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotechnology, respectively, men who predict a future state of human evolution in which humans will interface so completely with technology that we will essentially become a new, supposedly superior species. No longer fully biological entities, perhaps cyborgs at some stage or ultimately existing virtually in an engineered cyber reality, we will (they claim) transcend the limitations of our flesh and enter into a technological utopia, freed from disease and death.

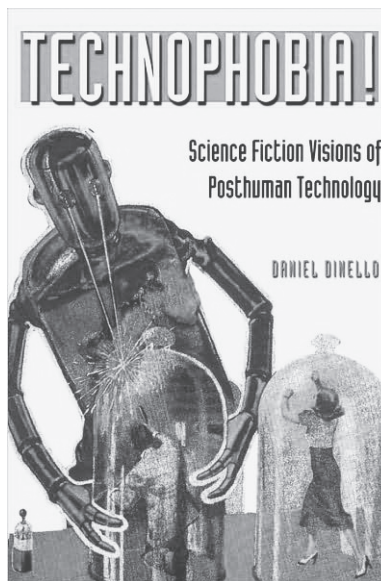
Understandably, a few of us might feel a little anxious about this strange but wonderful future, which is where science fiction comes in. Dinello's thesis is that science fiction counters these predictions of techno-utopia with visions of dystopia. He is particularly attentive throughout his book to the interface between technological development and the military-industrial complex, although he shies away from any political economy or Marxist theory. He suggests that, at their best, science fiction texts can do more than simply reflect anxieties, actually "arguing for a progressive political agenda" (275). Dinello examines science fiction's technological dystopias, and this book is certainly to be valued as an exploration of this trope within the genre.

Indeed, this will not be the first time that an academic work has addressed the dystopic themes of science fiction, but Dinello's book is unique in its orga-

nization around the ideas of posthuman technologism. Chapter 1, "Technology Is God," sketches the tenets of this theology, while chapter 2, "Haunted Utopias," gives a history of the idea. Subsequent chapters deal with progressive advances in technology that are presumably taking humans closer to their posthuman evolution: robotics ("Cybernetic Slaves"), artificial intelligence and androids ("Machines out of Control"), bionics ("Rampaging Cyborgs"), the Internet and virtual reality ("Infinite Cyberspace Cages"), biotechnology ("Engineered Flesh"), and nanotechnology ("Malevolent Molecular Machines"). As he proceeds he presents relevant texts from the corpus of science fiction; for example, in the chapter on cyborgs Dinello offers analyses of Martin Caidin's original novel *Cyborg* and its television offshoot, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (not to mention *The Bionic Woman*), *The Terminator*, the *Robocop* series, the *Star Trek* franchise's Borg, and *The Colossus of New York*. Arriving in his chapter on nanotechnology, he observes that both biological and technological

anxieties circulate around the idea of the virus, "a force that can destroy both humans and non-humans" (16). In real life we are overcome and overrun with viruses: AIDS, mad cow disease, germ warfare, biological terrorism, West Nile, H1N1 (although this crisis was not on the scene at the time of Dinello's writing), and in our genre texts viruses are also everywhere, representing a threat to both machines and humans. In Dinello's view the virus symbolizes technophobia itself, although he is not entirely clear as to how this is so.

Commendably, Dinello treats genre here as cultural phenomena that cut across various forms of media; his dis-



cussions range from film to television, print literature to video games. Moreover, it is laudable to see an academic work on science fiction that goes so far beyond the familiar (albeit worthy) filmic examples of *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, and *Terminator*, which have been so frequently revisited. On numerous occasions I was presented with material that was new to me, and I appreciated it. For instance, it may not be well known that even before *Metropolis*, 1984, and *Brave New World*, before *Neuromancer*, and, of course, before *The Matrix* there was the “The Machine Stops,” a short story by, of all people, E. M. Forster, about a future in which humans live underground in tiny cells, linked into a single machine that creates a virtual existence for their entertainment and their very survival. Passive, fleshy blobs who are utterly dependent on the machine, when they are unplugged by a single rebellious young man, they are unable to cope and die in huge numbers; only a few manage to make their way outside and survive. E. M. Forster was the father of cyberpunk—who knew?

Despite this laudable breadth, I am troubled by Dinello’s arguments in a number of ways. In general his book suffers from a lack of theoretical grounding. To be fair, it was not his stated purpose to write a book on the philosophy of technology; nevertheless, it is difficult to accept his arguments without some kind of theoretical framework because by their very nature they invoke theoretical claims. Dinello very nearly presents technology as an all-or-nothing proposition, as though the options are either to invest fully in the religion (or perhaps fantasy, but more on this below) of the posthumanists or to retreat to a pretechnological Garden of Eden. He claims that the book’s title is meant to suggest an “aversion,” “dislike,” or “suspicion” of technology “rather than an irrational, illogical or neurotic fear” (8). He suggests that this is his effort to “elevate” the term, but I find his statements here puzzling. He does not trouble to define technology. Which “reasonable” technologies are we to assume would not invoke the presumption of the posthuman? Which would automatically invoke his or the science fiction author’s anxieties? Without further qualification of his statements regarding technophobia Dinello leaves himself open to the suspicion that his “aversion” to technology is complete, which, on the one hand, is simply not rational or tenable and, on the other, is probably not the case. To be concerned about the impacts of genetic manipulation or the Internet is indeed warranted, but to imagine that humans could exist without technology is impossible.

Another problem with Dinello’s thesis is the suggestion that science fiction can “encourage questions” to promote a progressive political agenda (or a regressive one, as was once frequently argued with respect to genres). This type of argument has been more or less discredited by genre scholars. Again, Dinello’s book seems to lack adequate theorization, this time from the field of genre studies, where scholars have done significant work reflecting on the proposition that a text can be “progressive” or “regressive.” To vastly oversimplify, texts are complicated, and this is to say nothing of the complicated processes of reception. Certainly, I believe that art is transformative, and as an educator I must believe that it can encourage critical thinking, but it is another matter to make claims about the potential political effects of an entire genre, or part of a genre, assuming that one could somehow determine which texts belonged definitively in the “progressive dystopic” category.

There is one further beat in Dinello’s argument that I do not accept. Even as Dinello wishes to reject the utopian claims of the posthumanists, he appears to accept their predictions for the future of humanity, which is to say that he seems to believe that we are becoming posthuman. That is, there are those who fear (for it is not only him, I am sure) that even as he writes, the disembodied *Cyber sapiens* is becoming reality. Not to put too fine a point on it, I find this highly improbable. I would *like* to believe that I could evade death by uploading my consciousness to a hard drive for later retrieval or perhaps for unlimited existence in some spectacular cybercity. I simply do not believe it is possible yet, if it ever could be. Perhaps I am showing myself to be a lesser human specimen, but I have yet to be convinced that everything accomplished by a human brain can be taken up by a computer. This is not some vague, spiritual protest but a scientific one. Fundamentally, we are still rather ignorant. We do not yet entirely understand how the human brain works, but we are just beginning to consider how our cognitive functions are interpenetrated by our flesh, ultimately lived within our body; this is a line of inquiry just emerging within the wider field of cognitive studies. The figure of the digitally supported, disembodied consciousness, either artificially created or imprinted from a human brain (see *Neuromancer*), remains a piece of science fiction, regardless of how many Kurzweils write of its inevitability. Computer gurus like Bill Joy can present their fantasies as nonfiction (i.e., his *Wired* article “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us” warned of a dystopian future not

unlike the world of *The Matrix*, dominated by machines rather than biological life), but this does not render their predictions into gospel. In essence, the posthuman future that has inspired Dinello's anxiety and the anxieties of the science fiction authors referenced in *Technophobia* is itself a science fiction.

Dinello writes as though the posthuman transformation is literally unfolding, as though it is happening right now. It could be happening to me, apparently. However, the material reality I see is one where the most menacing technology currently is the combustion engine, not the nanite. The posthuman future is currently just one more technological fantasy, like the utopian side of the cyberpunk coin described in *Neuromancer*. This is not to say that there are no valid reasons within the material human situation for anxieties about technology. It is clear that human beings have a long history of both loving and

hating the technologies we create, which is why we need to be very careful in thinking about our technological future. As postphenomenologist Don Ihde pointed out in *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, no matter how much we may long to reenact the fantasy of standing naked in Eden, of completely shedding our technological selves, we are irrevocably technological, tool-making creatures. To acknowledge this is not to wallow in slavish worship of technology but to establish a place from which to begin a dialogue around the purposes and meanings of technology. I would question the usefulness of reclaiming, or "elevating," the term *technophobia* for such a purpose.

Daniel Dinello. *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. 329 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).