



## **AI, AI, AI!**

The When, How and Why of Robots

By Jerry James

*Artificial intelligence is the most consequential technology of our time, perhaps of all time.*

— President Joseph R. Biden’s Farewell Address, January 15, 2025



*The Three Types of Robots*

*Mechanical (“Forbidden Planet”); Cyborg (“The Terminator”); and Android (“Blade Runner”)*

In the year since the Rogue announced *Marjorie Prime*, the term Artificial Intelligence—AI—has pervaded our consciousness as if it were Pumpkin Spice in October. Right now, AI exists mainly on our computers, like HAL from *2001*. (HAL is one letter ahead of IBM.) But *Marjorie Prime* deals with AI in a humanoid representation—which we call a robot. While the playwright may say of the Primes, “They are artificial intelligence programs that use sophisticated holographic projections,” they’re played by actors. We see them as robots.

Robots come in three different types: Mechanical, an obvious machine; Cyborg, living tissue over a mechanical skeleton; and Android, all but indistinguishable from a human. AI faces the dilemma that it can only utilize the information that’s been fed into it. The maxim is GIGO, “Garbage In, Garbage Out.” But much robot-centered fiction asks these questions: What would happen if robots really learned to think? What if robots learned to deal with both love and death?

The term “robot” is only a little over a century old. Still, we can’t include everything in this overview. So, sorry, fans of Reject (“Johnny Jupiter”); Bernadette Peters (*Heartbeeps*); Haley Joel Osment (*AI*); the Agents (*The Matrix*); or the Bots (“MST3K”). Instead, we’ll begin our retrospective in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, with that golden oldie of robotics, the Golem of Prague.

## The Golem of Prague



The late 1500s were a bad time for the Jews of Prague, as mobs of Christians made regular forays into the Jewish Quarter. To defend his people, Rabbi Judah Lowe, inspired by a dream, went to the banks of the Vltava River and created a creature made of clay, a golem, through Kabbalistic ritual.

So successful is the Golem in its defense that Rabbi Lowe is summoned to a meeting with Emperor Rudolf II. An agreement is reached. The Jews are saved. The Golem is said to be locked in the attic of the New Old Synagogue in Prague, waiting, just in case.

Unfortunately, this story seems to have been invented by Jewish writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, striving to create a Jewish folklore.

## Rossum's Universal Robots



*R.U.R. on the BBC, 1938*

Karel Čapek, the author of the 1920 play *R.U.R.*, gave credit to his brother Josef for the creation of the word “robot,” derived

from the Czech word for “worker,” with more than an overtone of “serf.”

In 1932, Dr. Rossum (*rozum* is Czech for “reason”) invents something very like organic matter, and eventually figures out how to make robots from it. These robots are Androids, male and female. (Because it’s a play, with actors, as mentioned earlier.)

No one ever thought that after so many robots had been made, they would revolt and take over the world! Only one human is left alive. But because the original formula has been lost, no more robots can be made, either. Dissection may find the secret.

In the last scene, two robots, male and female, face dissection. Each says, dissect me, and set the other free. Why? Because they love each other. They have become, it would seem, human. The new Adam and Eve are sent out to repopulate the world.

## Metropolis



*The Robot Maria in Transition*

Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent film has an incredibly complicated plot. For now, let it suffice that the evil rulers of Metropolis, a city of the far future, fear a rebellion of the proles led by Maria. To combat this, they create a False Maria from a robot.

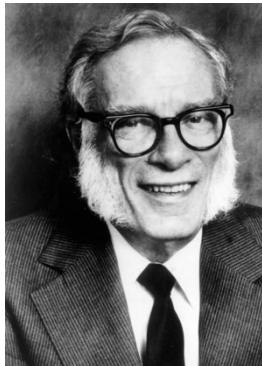
As seen above, the Mechanical Maria is about to be transformed into an Android Maria. After that happens, the False Maria gives the audience a lascivious wink.



Generations of cineastes have freaked out over this moment.

### Asimov's Laws

The science fiction writer Isaac Asimov is the James Madison of robotics. He didn't care for *R.U.R.*, but as long as robots existed (in fiction), he thought they should operate under some rules, like the Constitution.



*Isaac Asimov (1920-1992)*

Asimov's Laws of Robotics (1942) are:

First Law: A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

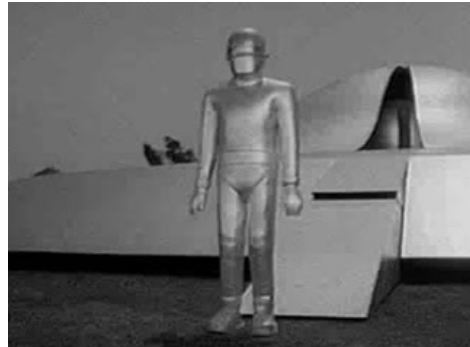
Second Law: A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with First Law.

Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with First or Second Law. With these laws in mind, Asimov created a quartet of novels featuring detective Elijah

Baley and his partner, R. Daneel Olivaw, an Android. R, of course, stands for Robot.

Films made from these novels usually chuck the Laws out the window, as they're more interested in returning to the basic *R.U.R.* plot of, "The robots are gonna kill us!!"

### Mechanicals



*"The Day the Earth Stood Still"*

The evil Tobor, the first TV robot, was a Mechanical, played by a 7'-6" actor in a metal suit. It was eventually defeated by Captain Video, who froze Tobor's joints with what appeared to be a Space Flit Gun. (Some of us took years to realize that "Tobor" was "Robot" spelled backwards.)

The robot from "Lost in Space" is another of TV's famous Mechanicals, forever calling out, "Danger, Will Robinson!"

Movie Mechanicals include the non-verbal Gort from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and the talkative (albeit monotone) Robby from *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Robby becomes even more interesting when one realizes that the movie is patterned on *The Tempest*. And that Robby is Ariel.

Still popular after almost 50 years are George Lucas' lovable *Star Wars* Mechanicals, R2D2 and C3PO.

## Cyborgs



*"The Twilight Zone"*

There are fewer Cyborgs. Mechanicals can be actors in metal suits and Androids can just be actors. But a Cyborg...

In "The Lonely," a 1959 episode of "The Twilight Zone," Corry has been exiled to a barren world. A sympathetic officer delivers Alicia, an artificial companion. During the next year, Alicia and Corry fall in love. When he is unexpectedly pardoned, he doesn't want to leave her behind. The officer reluctantly shoots Alicia in the face, revealing her Cyborg innards. "[A] fragment of a man's life... kept alive by love, but now... obsolete," intones Rod Serling.

Far happier, in an odd way, is *The Terminator* (1984). So popular was Arnold Schwarzenegger as the villain of the film (in which he spoke only 58 words—or was it 74?) that he was retooled into a good guy, returning for several sequels. The Cyborg's threat, "I'll be back," was prophetic.

## Androids

Androids have always been the easiest robots to portray, from *R.U.R.* to Replicants. Data, of "Star Trek: The Next Generation," may have golden skin and yellow eyes, but he's still an actor. And makeup is cheap.

The Replicants of *Blade Runner* are more disturbing. The 1982 film is set in a dystopian 2019 Los Angeles, reminiscent of the city in *Metropolis*.

Replicants—genetically manipulated humanoids—are manufactured to work on space colonies. But a group of advanced Replicants has escaped. They're on the loose in LA. Former *Blade Runner* Deckard, a burnt-out case, is persuaded to "retire" them. Terminally. It's what a *Blade Runner* does.

One of the interesting points raised by this film is the creation of Replicants with implanted memories, who believe they are human. One of these is Deckard's lover, Rachael. Many people believe that Deckard, who eventually kills all the escaped Replicants, yet finds love with Rachael, is a Replicant himself.



*"Maybe Happy Ending"*

The Broadway musical *Maybe Happy Ending* tells the story of two obsolete robots, now resident in the Old Robots Home. Although they know that sooner or later, they will no longer be able to recharge, they fall in love. Time is short. And precious.

We end as we did with *R.U.R.* Even among robots, love is stronger than death.

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