CORPSES, FETUSES AND ZOMBIES: THE DEHUMANIZATION OF MEDIA USERS IN SCIENCE FICTION AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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The relationship between humans and media is a central trope of classic science fiction, and one where media is frequently portrayed as a threat. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is focalised through Mildred's husband, who sees her as distant from him, imprisoned by the media she loves and surrounded by her soap opera heroes: "His wife stretched on the bed, uncovered and cold, like a body displayed on the lid of a tomb, her eyes fixed to the ceiling by invisible threads of steel, immovable. And in her ears the little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight, and an electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in, coming in on the shore of her unsleeping mind." Bradbury's media prison is imagined from the world of television and radio, but the anxieties expressed are the same as those we see today, for instance in the short film *I Forgot My iPhone* (2013), where the protagonist goes through her day as the only person not constantly interacting with their phone. The two minute short has nearly 50 million views on YouTube, showing that the motif hits a nerve. *I Forgot* ends with an image very reminiscent of Bradbury: as the protagonist curls up in bed with her boyfriend and turns out the light, he lifts up his phone and stares transfixed at its screen, his face bathed in its light. These two portrayals of humans and technology, created sixty years apart, use the same imagery: media creates distance between lovers.

This paper aims to connect the motif of the human imprisoned and isolated by media as it is expressed in dystopic science fiction to its expressions in mainstream discourse. As a scholar of digital aesthetics and narratives rather than a social scientist, my aim is not to survey a representative selection of science fiction or to provide statistically reliable data, but to explore ways in which we make meaning by analysing passages and scenes that yield productive images about the relationship between humans and media, from science fiction literature, games and movies as well as from contemporary media discourse.

Immersion

Mildred is experiencing an immersive form of virtual reality. She has screens on all her walls and the characters in her favourite soap operas include her in the plots, waiting for her to say her lines. The Holodeck in *Star Trek* and the FlickSyncs in Ernest Cline's

Ready Player One (2011) follow the same idea, and many of today's richly graphical games have a similar ambition. In the 1990s and early 2000s, immersion was a key concept for scholars of electronic literature and video games, and was viewed as highly desirable (Murray 1997, Ryan 2001, Walker 2003). Early cyberpunk fiction expresses some of the same excitement, notably with William Gibson's coining of the term cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" in *Neuromancer* (1984). In the early 90s, video game arcades and fairgrounds allowed visitors to try out simple VR helmets and gloves, and although the internet had almost no images, virtual, textual worlds like MUDs and MOOs were what interested scholars the most. Online and offline seemed like separate worlds, and as Sherry Turkle described in *Life on the Screen* (1995), people often acted out different roles in different "worlds". Today MMOGs like *World of Warcraft* are important alternate worlds for millions of people, but in mainstream discourse, and in some scholarship such as Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011), immersive media have become a threat.

Un-human, post-human, or a corpse?
Nathan Jurgensen, who coined the term "digital dualism" to describe the false but common separation of "real life" and the digital (2012), wrote that *I Forgot My iPhone* "isn't about the problems of digital connection, it's about propping oneself up as more human and alive" (2013). He was referring to the reception of the film, but the contrast is evident in the film itself as well. The protagonist is shown appreciating the beauty of nature, in stark contrast to her phone-loving friends. Birds sing joyfully as she wakes, and she listens, smiling, until her lover reaches for his phone. She goes for a morning run and rests to watch the sunrise, as a man talks into his phone, ignoring the view. She is shown to us as beautiful, alive and healthy, in contrast to the others who are locked to their phones.

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Mildred's husband imagines her as a corpse, with "invisible threads of steel" fixing her eyes to her media. The image of a skull invaded by metal is physically jarring, and reminiscent of the images of wires jacked into skulls in *The Matrix* (1999). The metal in flesh is a graphical expression of the loss of our humanity, or, read in a more positive light, as we likely should in *The Matrix*, it is an expression of the post-human, where we become more than human.

It is harder to find a positive interpretation of the comparison of the media-loving human to a corpse, and yet this is also a common trope in science fiction. Media in science fiction doesn't always lead to our apparent death, but it does often cause us to be in a state other than fully alive as independent animals. In *The Matrix* most humans are kept naked in glass vats, floating in something akin to umbilical fluid. These humans are portrayed not as corpses but as unborn fetuses. The un-human in these stories is linked to the time after death or before birth. We still have bodies, but exist in a form of limbo, with no free will or agency. In the full paper, I will also examine the *motionlessness* of humans trapped by media, as in the children's movie *Wall-E* (2008), and the ways in which the dehumanizing powers of the media are imagined as robbing humans of their free will, as in the simulations that control people in *Divergent* (2013).

There are of course also many examples of positive portrayals of the relationship between humans and media in science fiction. Daniel Suarez's two novels *Daemon*

(2009) and *Freedom* (2010) show how easily the balance can shift from dystopia to utopia. In *Daemon* software and augmented reality media appear to control humans completely and in a very frightening manner, but in the sequel *Freedom* we see how that same software and media tools allow humans to create a better society. But even science fiction that shows the human user in control of media tends to touch upon the same tropes of media as dehumanizing. In *Ready Player One* almost all the plot occurs within the OASIS, a virtual world, but descriptions of the protagonist hooked up to his virtual reality rig use imagery that contrast him to a healthy, adult human, for instance by emphasizing his removal of all body hair, even his eyebrows, to improve the connections between his haptic body suit and his skin.

By providing a better understanding of the cultural imaginaries of humans and our relationship to technology, this paper will be useful to other scholars who wish to understand the actual ways in which humans think about our media.

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