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The Allure and Threat of the Cine-Computer: A Supercut of Onscreen Computers in Speculative Screen Fiction

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://youtu.be/LdHXj-09lVw

Abstract

This video essay explores the enticement and anxiety of onscreen computers across a range of films and television programmes. The onscreen computer is a frequent prop of dystopian fiction within the sci-fi genre, often presented as an allure that promises increased power or knowledge balanced by the anxiety of technophobic otherness. From the late 1950s onwards, cinema and television, particularly sci-fi and speculative fiction, have used computers as a form of adversary, which eventually turns on their human operators. The video essay portrays the evolvement of computing in regard to apparatus and embodiment through user interfaces, software, and hardware, as humans move closer to the machine. Taking the form of a supercut and using the comparative and simultaneous mode of perception enabled by the split-screen technique, the work considers the human-machine relationship through a range of computer-centred films, which include Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) along with contemporary television programming in the form of Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019) and Dan Erickson's *Severance* (2022–present). As a result, the video essay showcases that the representation and development of these technological interfaces have undergone change while the allure-threat dynamic between humans and computers has remained relatively stable.

Creator's Statement

The genre of sci-fi in cinema and television frequently represents computers in ambivalent ways, illustrating their new affordances as well as threats. Many instances of the cine-computer within speculative fiction have been presented in alluring ways. Some of which can be considered a form of early spectacle that (unbeknown to audiences of the time) would later become omnipresent in reality. For example, video calls via Skype, Zoom, or MS Teams have rendered virtual face-to-face meetings ubiquitous, particularly in post-pandemic times. Nevertheless, in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a two-minute videophone sequence plays out as part of the film's futuristic marvel. This is also the case with the Esper sequence[1] in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), which is where the video essay begins. Scott, like Kubrick, perhaps predicts the quotidian way that human voice will come to work and interface with technological apparatuses, which has become domesticated through digital assistants such as Siri or Alexa. Yet in the early eighties, this sequence was considered an inspiring display, and even much later, one that is still described as striking.[2]

The focus of the video essay is on the cine-computer in speculative fiction and how it can be considered a simultaneous threat and allure, as well as a loose template for a number of relationships that modern society has come to establish with screen technology. The subject of the cine-computer within film can be considered a form of "videographic cine-

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1)   The Esper is a fictional supercomputer used by Deckard and other police officials within *Blade Runner*. In the partial sequence of the video essay, a two-dimensional photograph is uploaded to Esper, rendering a "three-dimensional representation offering an impossibility [and extension] of vision." Will Brooker, ed., *The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

2)   Nick Jones, "Expanding the Esper: Virtualised spaces of surveillance in sf film," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (2016), 1–23.

ma" through Jonathan Rozenkrantz's book of the same name.[3] Rozenkrantz "defines videographic cinema [as] theatrical films that incorporate analogue video images,"[4] which also extends to what he describes as "futurity effects."[5] Here, he examines the role of video effects in cinema, ranging from surveillance imagery and CCTV to the digital computer screen. Drawing on Gene Youngblood's concept of videographic cinema as "a metamorphosis of technologies,"[6] he argues how the entwinement of different media is "a means for expanding the experimental horizons offered by cinema, in order to produce new forms of consciousness."[7]

Rozenkrantz illustrates this idea through Scott Bartlett's experimental film *Off-On* (1967), an avant-garde work which was the first to seamlessly merge video with celluloid "so that neither would show up separately from the whole."[8] Within my video essay, selected scenes of computer imagery and digital displays similarly foreground this technological metamorphosis. This is also reinforced in the methodology of the video essay format, particularly with the supercut, which is a process of extracting film fragments "for discerning and demonstrating deep patterns within and across film/media texts."[9] In "The Critical Supercut," author and video essayist, Allison de Fren, demonstrates how creating a supercut — collecting and organizing clips from one or multiple sources around a specific theme or idea — embodies what Lev Manovich describes as a "database logic."[10] As de Fren explains,

> the ability to break down film and media texts into an "archive of sounds and moving images" within software editing programs facilitates and encourages not only "database thinking," but also database-structured outputs, the kind of algorithmic cataloguing of analogous relations found in the Supercut.[11]

Fundamentally, I adopt the video essay and, more specifically, the supercut to simultaneously "draw out thematic continuities"[12] of the cine-computer in speculative fiction. However, the video essay format also allows me to consider the role of the computer through this specific process of media metamorphosis, i.e., capturing and assembling clips through a "database logic," where my computer, editing programme, and DVD ripper all

3) Jonathan Rozenkrantz, *Videographic Cinema: An Archaeology of Electronic Images and Imaginaries* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

4) Ibid., 6.

5) Ibid., 41.

6) Ibid., 5.

7) Ibid., 5.

8) Scott Simmon, "OffOn (1967)," *National Film Preservation Foundation*, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/offon-1968-2000kbps.

9) Allison de Fren, "The Critical Supercut: A Scholarly Approach to a Fannish Practice," *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), 4, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.thecine-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A_DeFren_TheCineFiles_issue15.pdf. On the affordances and limits of the database logic in videographic scholarship, see Jiří Anger, *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 158–170.

10) de Fren, "The Critical Supercut," 4.

11) Ibid., 4.

12) Ibid., 7.

played parts in the video essay's creation. As such, the supercut's methodology contributes directly to the content, illustrating or emphasising points that would not necessarily be achieved in the same way by simply writing about them. Instead, a process of videographic cinema has been carried out by collecting, arranging, and presenting clips through a range of digital steps which constitutes a supercut. "In the supercut, extraction is both process and output, a method for discerning and demonstrating deep patterns within and across film/media texts."[13]

The video essay accomplishes this through what Patrick Keating describes as a "cumulative mode,"[14] which involves "presenting a wealth of examples to provide compelling support for a generalized claim."[15] This approach allows the video essay to transcend the limitations of the written article and "advance an argument, even when the argument is never stated in so many words."[16] Keating further explains that the video essayist can present clips either simultaneously via split screen or sequentially, one after the other. This essay employs both methods to implicitly demonstrate patterns and comparisons, enabling viewers to "infer the argument"[17] that the cine-computer serves as an ambivalent emblem of both enticement and anxiety in modern societies.

The allure of the Esper sequence mentioned in the opening paragraph is in part owed to the human-technology interfacing that allows an organic user to be extended into a virtual space. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*[18] discusses (albeit in a dated turn of phrase) "the extensions of man," highlighting how media technologies, from the lettered alphabet to the computer, have the ability to extend human corporeal reach, functionality, and agency. In *Blade Runner*, the Esper device allows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) to see beyond his normal limitations. Through his voice, extended as a new form of sight, Deckard is able to optically enter and analyse the space of a digital photograph and see beyond his boundaries. Deckard's spoken instructions, which are visually carried out through the computerised image, are reminiscent of McLuhan's point that "phonetic writing […] is a technology for extending the sense of sight."[19] This contributes to the Esper cine-computer as an alluring device for its capability of extending the senses. The computer is what McLuhan refers to as a form of hot media through its ability to impart "a maximal interplay of all the senses."[20] This is in contrast to a still photograph (an example of cool media), which would illicit only vision, therefore separating the optical sense from others. The interactive cine-computer of the Esper merges the audio of voice with vision and motion, enabling Deckard and the viewer to traverse the space and path of the virtual image in a captivating way.

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13) Ibid., 4.
14) Patrick Keating, "The Video Essay as Cumulative and Recursive Scholarship," *The Cine-Files*, no. 15 (2020), 2, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.thecine-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PKeating_TheCine-Files_issue15.pdf.
15) Ibid.
16) Ibid., 3.
17) Ibid., 3.
18) Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).
19) Ibid., 368.
20) Ibid.

As such, it is used as the prompt for the first section of the video essay to present other engaging sci-fi cine-computers, which move on and off the screen in sync with Deckard's voice commands. This cues Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), with its translucent touchscreen interface similarly foreshadowing the ubiquity of touch smartphone technology. Emphasising the computer's extension of self and senses through gesture, this sequence is juxtaposed with Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996), which presents computer hacking as a full-bodied spectacle of physicality.

The alluring interplay of Tom Cruise's graceful gestures, Ford's soothing voice, and the motion of the videographic multi-screen composition begins to be interrupted with the second and more conventional representation of the cine-computer as a threat. This is considered through Anton Karl Kozlovic's paper "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films."[21] The threat is introduced via the imagery of the fictional A.I. computer HAL, who, as Kozlovic notes, is "the only computer to achieve the status of a famous fictional character"[22] in the form of an "epic villain."[23] In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, HAL is presented as an adversary to humanity, which also underpins the structure of the video essay in the sense that HAL emerges at the beginning but is killed off by the end. After HAL's introduction, the video essay utilises Kozlovic's paper to consider how technophobia in the cine-computer dynamic is manifested in speculative screen fiction.

Published in 2003, Kozlovic's work highlights how computers in mainstream cinema were "technological cautionary tales, whose genesis is rooted in societal fears about intelligent technology, particularly the supplanting of humanity."[24] Like videophones and touchscreen interfacing, this onscreen fear is palpable in reality. Andrew Utterson's *From IBM to MGM: Cinema at the Dawn of the Digital Age* highlights how audiences at the time were ambivalent about computers in relation to Kubrick's film, asserting how "they both loved computers and [were] scared of them."[25] The fear fundamentally comes down to "HAL and the human crew [being] pitted as evolutionary rivals, competing species […] as cybernetic creation is pitted against organic progenitor."[26] This is a theme that continues into the millennium with Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* franchise (1999–2021), and morphs into new forms of fear through humanity's technological reliance on machines for work, recreation, and, in more recent years, simulated empathy (as seen in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013)), frequently decried by technology sociologist Sherry Turkle.[27]

Referring again to Kozlovic, the video essay incorporates a range of specific categories in which computers threaten humanity. "Computers as rivals to humanity" is Kozlovic's first category and bookends the essay, introduced through HAL's silent observing at the beginning and concluding with the computer's demise. In Kozlovic's paper, he highlights

21) Anton Karl Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," *Science as Culture* 12, no. 3 (2003), 341–373.
22) Ibid., 342.
23) Ibid., 348.
24) Ibid., 343.
25) Andrew Utterson, *From IBM to MGM: Cinema at the Dawn of the Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 112.
26) Ibid., 109.
27) Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

the danger of the cine-computer as a "troublemaker, oppressor and exterminator,"[28] all of which overlap in a number of selected films within the video. For example, in John Badham's *WarGames* (1983), the computer can be considered a trickster character when David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) unintentionally brings America under threat of nuclear war while hacking a computer to play what he believes to be innocuous computer games. Seduced by the allure of the computer, highlighted by the human captivation towards the alterity of the computer's anthropomorphic robot voice, Lightman fails to see his device as a troublemaker until humanity is threatened. Joseph Sargent's *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970) is a more extreme version of this, in which supercomputer, Colossus, aspires to world domination after being created by Eric Forbin (Eric Braeden) with a system design flaw. Like HAL or Frankenstein's creature, the computer turns on its creator, bringing threat towards its makers in the form of world destruction.[29]

This motif addresses another of Kozlovic's categories, in which he refers to computers as holocaust sources. "Pop culture computers have frequently been depicted as the root sources of mayhem,"[30] either deliberately or as "accidental sources of chaos."[31] The premise of *Blade Runner*, for example, is built on this latter idea in which replicants (synthetic humans) break their programming, putting human life in jeopardy in order to survive. As Kozlovic notes, accidental computer chaos has been prevalent in a range of films at different levels; EMARAC (**E**lectromagnetic **M**emory **A**nd **R**esearch **A**rithmetical **C**alculator), the computer in Walter Lang's *Desk Set* (1957) (the first to feature a computer outside the science fiction genre)[32] fires all the office employees due to a malfunction, while the faulty ED 209 from Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1988) mercilessly opens fire, killing an innocent employee because of a glitch.[33]

Computer mistakes occurring due to rigid algorithmic coding, clashing with the ambiguity of human action, bring Kozlovic to another category of "computers as self-damaging aids."[34] In this category, computers are enlisted to help a situation but instead create devastating effects through inflexible programming or error. In David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) is transformed into the monstrous Brundlefly when his computer gets confused over separate genetic patterns after a housefly gets into a teleporter with him. As Steven Shaviro notes, the teleporter, which is Brundle's response to travel motion sickness, puts the character through an extreme form of motion sickness as his human body and identity rapidly decay.[35] The promise of teleportation to "change the world as we know it" is the allure that prompts Brundle into the machine before the computer's confusion "quickly reveals its deeper, unintended purpose as a gene splicer."[36]

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28) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 346.

29) Utterson, *From IBM to MGM*, 109.

30) Ibid., 354.

31) Ibid., 355.

32) Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 48.

33) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 355.

34) Ibid.

35) Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 128.

36) Ibid.

The computer in *The Fly* coldly and systematically alters human subjectivity, while in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), the spaceship computer MU/TH/UR 6000 ("Mother") stonily informs Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of her and the crew's expendability during the mission. As Kozlovic notes, the negative message is "made even more psychologically unpalatable given the betrayal of its crew-cum-metaphoric children by a real and metaphoric mother."[37] Similarly, Brundle's computer can also be read as a type of sadistic technological mother by rebirthing the character into the grotesque hybrid of human and insect, which later in the film is respliced with machine parts from the teleporter. In each case, the respective computers unemotionally reflect problematic human behaviours. In *The Fly*, hubris is embodied by the character of Brundle, whose feelings of pride and jealousy (combined with intoxication) are the prompts for his risky and premature self-experiment. In *Alien*, the computer (Mother) highlights corporate greed through the ruthlessness of capitalistic operations.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the Brundle and Ripley scenes share further similarities in the way that they use their computers to learn about themselves, indicating how the machine knows more about their "human" characteristics or fate than they do. This is reminiscent of the way knowledge, particularly health tests, is often coldly mediated through screen data, via the automation of "telemedicine" discussed in detail in Jeremy A. Greene's *The Doctor Who Wasn't There*.[38] Greene points to "a digital divide in healthcare access that has been getting worse, rather than better, as we have come to rely more completely on an electronic medium of care."[39]

These medical concerns are also typical of the way computers have come to be relied upon for social and emotional care, which is indicated in the adjacent scenes of *Her* and Steve Barron's *Electric Dreams* (1984). In both films, an emotional reliance between humans and technology is presented. In the former, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with his operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), while Edgar, the sentient computer in *Electric Dreams*, becomes jealous of a relationship between his owner Miles (Lenny Von Dohlen) and his musician love interest, Madeline (Virginia Madsen). Edgar's machinic jealousy is presented in a form of troublemaking duplicity, tricking both Miles and Madeline, as we can see in the duet sequence. In *Her*, it is Theodore who eventually becomes insecure when he realises that Samantha's developing intelligence has transcended a human level and that it is able to conduct intimate relationships with thousands of other people while conversing with him.

As I have argued elsewhere, the allure of Samantha is initially one of narcissism. In the McLuhanian sense, the computer operating system begins as an extension of Theodore. Samantha's personality is constructed by its interaction with Theodore's hard drive, emails, digital files, and online behaviour, but through continuous learning and self-sufficiency, it transcends beyond its human operator.

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37) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 356.

38) Jeremy A. Greene, *The Doctor Who Wasn't There: Technology, History, and the Limits of Telehealth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

39) Ibid., 242–243.

> In a sense, Theodore narcissistically falls in love with himself or an apparatus that re-presents an extension of himself. This is often alluded to in the use of colour throughout the film. Theodore's warm red shirts and jacket are a similar shade to the warm red glow of Samantha's home screen, aesthetically mirroring her host.[40]

Again, the pattern of the computer allure through extension becomes an emotional threat once Samantha's A.I. transforms into something beyond human comprehension. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle asserts that "the robot cannot feel; it cannot feel human empathy or the flow of human connection. Indeed, the robot can feel nothing at all."[41] The video essay aims to remind its viewer of the simultaneous allure and threat that characters and real people invest in robotic empathy.

Elsewhere, the video essay explores what Kozlovic describes as computers being "hi-tech sources of evil."[42] This is presented through Rachel Talalay's *Ghost in the Machine* (1993), in which a serial killer possesses computers, using them to carry out murderous desires. The messaging sequence between computer killer and human victim seems to inspire moments from *The Matrix* (1999), where machines also carry out evil towards humanity by enslaving them on a global scale. This emphasises the onscreen computer's role as an emblem that represents the fear of the unknown. Older and newer dystopian texts highlight this, from Dan Erickson's *Severance* (2022–), in which employees of a corporation classify raw data through the negative emotions it evokes in them, to George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971), where computer surveillance is employed to instil fear and prevent society from engaging in an emotionally fulfilling life. Computer threat, however, is still balanced with allure, stressing how the dystopian desire that allows a virtual environment to swallow users is often negotiated onscreen via affordances of extension and changeability, presented in *The Matrix*'s loading programme sequence and Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018).

Sam Esmail's *Mr Robot* (2015–2019) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) bring the video to a penultimate close with humans combating "evil" machines from the corporate belly of the beast, as characters are presented inside colossal computer server rooms, attempting to shut them down. As these are hacked, the video returns to a final confrontation between humans and A.I. "epic villain"[43] HAL, as its memory bank is infiltrated and destroyed. Kozlovic is again used to remind the viewer of his first point that the cine-computer is often a rival to humanity and that comfort (in some sci-fi films at least) highlights how "humanity will not be superseded by machine intelligence."[44]

Computers assist our social and working lives, along with our health, interests, navigation, and sometimes emotional life. An allure to the machine is omnipresent but can often be balanced with fear through a technological sense of alterity and the unknown. From

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40) Daniel O'Brien, "Digital love: Love through the screen/of the screen," in *Love and the Politics of Intimacy: Bodies, Boundaries, Liberation*, eds. Stanislava Dikova, Wendy McMahon, and Jordan Savage (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 118.

41) Turkle, *Alone Together*, 187.

42) Kozlovic, "Technophobic Themes in Pre-1990 Computer Films," 355.

43) Ibid., 348.

44) Ibid.

early sci-fi films to contemporary television, the cine-computer has and continues to entice and alarm audiences and users in equal measure. The video essay, and indeed the supercut, has enabled me to present this idea through both the content of selected cumulative clips and the format of database thinking. My endeavour to focus on respective cine-computers is emphasised through the form of the supercut which adheres to a database logic. As Manovich claims,

> digital technologies have made the database "both the centre of the creative process" and the dominant "symbolic form" of our age, supplanting the narrative as the way we organize and "structure our experience of ourselves and of the world."[45]

In this sense, the supercut and database logic can be seen as a form of rivalry towards narrative and, by extension, a further threat towards humanity. Janet Murray, for example, has argued that "storytelling is a core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from the oral-formulaic to the digital multimedia."[46]

Consequentially, the supplanting of narrative by a database logic reinforces the video essay's central rivalry between humans and machines. Although a database logic is evident in the creation and output of the supercut, this is balanced with a focus on HAL's entrance and demise at the beginning and end of the video essay, providing a loose narrative framework that subtly underscores the importance of narrative within genre cinema. This integration of narrative into database logic echoes Rozenkrantz's videographic cinema, which is predicated on a metamorphosis or co-existence of different technologies and styles within the same space. This helps to shape a subtle closing remark of the video essay through both its form and content. Modern society cannot conquer the computerised machine but instead must continue to adapt, evolve, and co-exist with it.

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45) de Fren, "The Critical Supercut," 4.
46) Janet Murray, "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 3.

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Filmography

A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, 2001)

Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979)

Alphaville (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)

Colossus: The Forbin Project (Joseph Sargent, 1970)

Desk Set (Walter Lang, 1957)

Electric Dreams (Steve Barron, 1984)

Eyes Wide Shut (Stanley Kubrick, 1999)

Ghost in the Machine (Rachel Talalay, 1993)

Her (Spike Jonze, 2013)

Minority Report (Steven Spielberg, 2002)

Mission: Impossible (Brian De Palma, 1996)

Mr. Robot (Sam Esmail, 2015–2019)

OffOn (Scott Bartlett, 1967)

Ready Player One (Steven Spielberg, 2018)

RoboCop (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)

Severance (Dan Erickson, 2022–present)
The Fly (David Cronenberg, 1986)
The Matrix (Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 1999)
THX 1138 (George Lucas, 1971)
Tron (Steven Lisberger, 1982)
WarGames (John Badham, 1983)
2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

Biography

Daniel O'Brien's research considers the relationship between cinema, interactive art and computer gaming. His work focuses upon the interdisciplinary nature of visual media, particularly how audiences have become participants in visual and audible storytelling through a postphenomenological framework. He has taught and had work published across each of these areas at a range of research institutes and academic journals, including the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, *European Journal of Public Health*, or *NECSUS*.