

Presenting Fearful Fantasies of the Future as Farce: How *Back to the Future* Used Comedy to Assuage Fears of Technology

Stephanie Goodman

Abstract

When the personal computer was released in the early 1980s, it was met with a great deal of hesitation and fear, and representations of technology in film reflected this distrust and in fact, furthered it. So how has the computer, in just over two decades, raised to such levels of acclaim? After viewing several films and researching perceptions of technology in the 1980s, I came to the conclusion that most fearful representations of technology were created from the technologist determinist viewpoint. However, the movie *Back to the Future* presented an alternative humanist view, and more importantly, combined this idea with humor and comedy to create a movie that made previous representations seem absurd. This paper explores this notion as well as technophobic images, and tries to show how important the film medium is and how differing representations can elicit specific audience reactions in regards to technology and its reception.

Film is a captivating medium capable of eliciting fear, admiration, or even the more alluring—and certainly more profitable—combination of the two. The profitability of this combination implies that these movies reach mass audiences and therefore have the ability to create and reflect social values, as well as expose socially constructed beliefs. One such theme that is extensively covered in film is technology, and in many cases, it is presented as evil, manipulative, and uncontrollable. These negative representations stem from the technological determinist viewpoint, which gives machines human-like intelligence, emotion, and self-derived agency. This negative portrayal of technology dominated films in the 1980s, but it is important to recognize that certain films, like *Back to the Future*, present an alternative view. I argue that *Back to the Future* not only puts forth a user-determinist view of technology but also uses this argument to assuage fears by exposing our mistrust of technology as absurd and foolish. *Who, or perhaps more importantly, what is in control?*

Technology is often critiqued from one of two perspectives, humanist or engineering. Humanists are similar to user-determinists in that they are “engaged in foregrounding our cultural confusions, tuning up our sense of existential befuddlement before the scientifically revealed world of the 20th century” (Murray 4). They put ownership into human hands and believe that the people who use or create various technologies have flaws, which are then reflected in the technology itself. Engineers oppose this somewhat human-imposed, “apocalyptic” view of technology because they believe that the right tools allow us to methodically work through problems that confuse and disturb us (Murray 4). Not unlike technological determinists, engineers believe that technology itself has the power to inform and encourage rational thought.

These two dominant readings of technology have caused friction in the realm of media critics. However, what is more important than finding an identifiable winner on the ideological battlefield is the fact that these scuffles have caused critics to overlook the potentially powerful impact of combining the engineer's viewpoint with the humanist's viewpoint. Janet Murray, director of Georgia Tech's Master and PhD programs in Digital Media, believes that "the two traditions come together most energetically in collaborations focused on the new structures of learning in which exploration of the computer is motivated by a desire to foster the exploratory processes of the mind itself" (Murray 5). In other words, when the imaginative ideas of the humanist find physical realization in the hands of the engineer, the focus is no longer on the positive or negative aspects of the machinery; rather, technology becomes an important tool of impact.

Possibilities of bridging the gap?

One technology that is best embraced from a more balanced critical approach is film, which is a natural combination of technology and narrative. Film requires an underlying narrative because without a story it becomes a disjointed series of frames. This demands the mind of the humanist who can create engaging and enchanting stories that give meaning to the images displayed on screen. However, one cannot forget that most films are driven by economic motivations, which means "audience ratings impose the sales model on cultural products" (Bourdieu 27). This means that today's Hollywood productions need the innovative engineer whose can use technology to create enticing explosives, elaborate environments and engaging effects. Thus, it becomes clear that the production of a successful mainstream movie requires the engineer, who can "build" the movie, and the humanist, who can tell a good story.

Yet what about the promise of “foster[ing] the exploratory processes of the mind itself”? (Murray 5). To determine whether film can actually inform and influence, we must look at what expectations about movie viewing are encoded into the minds of audiences. Audiences expect entertainment when they enter a theater, but if we consider that the highest levels of entertainment are derived when something is understood—not when it leaves people confused and frustrated—then we know that viewers, like readers, are, at least subconsciously, considering form, plot and the ways their thoughts are being informed. This explains why people, when asked what movies they like, often choose a genre over specific movies. They know and expect that different things will be found in comedy movies than in horror movies; more importantly, they get annoyed when something does not meet their expectations. Clearly, film is a comfortable and recognizable medium in which kernels of audiences’ comprehension are infused with emotion; thus, one can see the need for blending the humanist and engineering approaches to technology in such a medium so that audiences realize that technology can be designed in such a way that is powerful and beneficial to society.

Technophobic Origins

Unfortunately, these potentially positive uses of technology are thwarted by technophobic perceptions that break into mainstream media. Simply put, technophobia involves fears surrounding technology, which often involve a loss of control. It might seem unusual that people would fear technology when it has been a source of fascination for such a long time; however, this is not entirely unreasonable if we consider that, as Murray states, “the technophobic response to computers” parallels the introduction of personal computers into the 1980s market (Murray 7- 8). In addition, at this time, two postmodern theorists concerned with metaphysics and epistemology, Deleuze and

Guattari, were looking towards a new way of organizing the informational world and they envisioned a rhizome structure, or “a potato system [that] has no beginning, no end and grows outward and inward at the same time” (Murray 9). As theorists were looking for ways to create a more unified, global system of thought, computers were actually succeeding in bridging gaps because they were moving out of the scientific sphere and into more expressive arts.

These coinciding developments brought a new awareness of technology’s role in society. While people had once merely discussed the unending potential of technology, this dynamic, interactive tool, capable of more than simple entertainment, had suddenly entered their homes. Furthermore, it became, as it remains, an imperative aspect of daily life. (This might seem like an exaggerated outcry, but one only needs to remember the dire expectations of Y2K to realize that—at the very least—we think of technology as highly as we do of air, water, and food.) Overall, Murray’s historical chronology (which begins with the personal computer’s introduction to the market and continues with parallels between academic circles and socially grounded fears), one can see that technophobia is grounded in fears of losing control, and whether it is justified or not, one can understand fearing something that has, in two decades become a life blood for “normal” societal function.

Technophobia and Film

Though film has the power to change these strict bipolar readings of technology, profit-driven motives have caused technophobic images and themes to fill theater screens. In other words, viewers are fascinated with their fears, and producers and directors cater to and profit from these uncertainties. As stated, the 1980s were full of technophobia, and the film industry, not wanting to lose out on audiences’ reactions to

“evil” technology, created movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Terminator* (1984) that were full of technophobic themes. More specifically, these presentations centered upon the technological determinist viewpoint. Kozlovic, a Research Associate who has published papers on popular culture, film, technology and religion, explores the idea that “because of ‘the widespread social anxiety over new technology, Hollywood screenwriters... [had] fashioned a new standby in their stock ensemble: the computer-as-character’” (343). Suddenly, machinery was put on par with other characters and was capable of thoughtful expression, such as the villains in the original *Transformers* (1986). In the subconscious or even conscious mind of the viewer, technology was given the same level of attention and importance as any lead actor. However, while the technology was personified, it remained oddly distant. It became something capable of independent action, but its portrayal on the silver screen made audiences feel as though they could never fully understand its potential. As Sheehy, a training specialist who designed a program to alleviate fears about technology, states, “Hollywood discovered long ago that villains can make for big box office hits and people have a natural tendency to distrust things beyond their comprehension” (41).

Technophobia was expressed in the idea that “like a virus, technology autonomously insinuates itself into human life and, to insure its survival and dominance, malignantly manipulates the mind and behavior of humans” (Dinello B4). Kozlovic outlines several themes that rely on this idea including, “computers as humanity’s rivals, computers as troublemakers, computers as holocaust sources, computers as cunning liars, computers and cybersex violations, and technology redeemed and sanctified” (346). In these films, computers not only take on human traits, but they take on all the criminally and socially deviant ones. Throughout his

argument, Kozlovic emphasizes that the computer (as a symbol of technology) suddenly had agency independent of human input. An example of this is seen in *The Terminator* (1984), because the creator is unseen, and more importantly cannot be contacted. The creator has trusted the Terminator, a robot, to complete its mission. Audiences never see the creator, which means that all actions are associated with the Terminator itself. In this movie, as well as other movies with similar plots, technology itself becomes a source of fear because “technologized creatures of science fiction often seek to destroy or enslave humanity” (Dinello B4).

These technophobic images are concerned with the loss of control, and if “popular films can function as both windows into and mirrors of society that can impact upon public support for science, it behooves the [media critic’s] profession to examine more closely what these pop culture narratives are telling about the world” (Kozlovic 345). Movies like the *Terminator* and *Colossus* argue that technology itself has unlimited control over our lives, and from this viewpoint, it is easy to see why people described computers as “ ‘powerful’, ‘sinister’, ‘big brother’, ‘threatening’, ‘unknown’, ‘mysterious’,‘electronic brains’, and ‘superior intelligence’ ” (Sheehy 42). These movies construct a technological determinist view that results in a distrust of technology. These images ground fears because they bring the engineers’ belief about “smart technology” to a negative fulfillment. Any mistrust that audience had prior to viewing these films is furthered, which causes audiences to refuse potentially helpful technology that can improve their lives.

A Break from Technological Determinist

Though the technological determinist dominated the big screen in the 1980s, some movies, like the iconic *Back to the Future*, put forth a user determinist view. In

other words, they took the power out of the cogs of the machines and back into the hands of the humans. *Back to the Future* is the first installment of a trilogy that explores the dangers of time travel and how the miscalculating driver of a DeLorean time machine can erase his own existence. Full of “one liners” that can induce nostalgic moments, this movie eases fear surrounding technology’s potential by pairing Marty, a goodhearted teenager played by Michael J. Fox (a popular actor of his time), with Doc Brown, a hermit inventor played by Christopher Lloyd (another classic 80s actor), and showing that even the most bumbling comedic pair can “out do” technology.

Characters that Reinforce the Power of the Human

In this character-driven movie, the users of the technology become the focus and technology is simply the plot device that allows the characters to grow. The emphasis on characters can be seen in the fact that, in *Back to the Future*, there is an immediate juxtaposition between the good users and the bad users. The technology of choice is plutonium (which is needed to power the electrical charge for the time machine). The Libyan terrorists want to use it to make bombs, and Doc Brown wants to travel through time. Doc Brown is the victor in the movie, which implies that he is morally and ethically good and the gun toting Libyans are meant to be condemned. While this striking contrast could fill academic journals with its implications about racial representations, it is more important to recognize that the technology remained the same throughout the movie, but the outcome that would result from the plutonium’s use depended on the choice and motivation of the user. When Doc Brown uses the plutonium, audiences sympathize with his desire to explore the past (or future) and they know that he is not trying to harm other people. On the other hand, the Libyans are trying to build bombs, which are meant to kill other people, and therefore, audience members are more likely

to side with Doc Brown's use of technology. This dichotomy emphasizes the user determinist viewpoint because it shows that the user has the power to determine how technology is used and perceived.

How Users Make Fun of Technology

To further emphasize human control, *Back to the Future* makes fun of technology. The humor in this movie is not subtle, and the overt displays of comedy allow audiences to laugh alongside the characters who are also making fun of the situation. One of the earliest depictions of humor is when Marty, the young man who almost erases himself, asks Doc Brown, the inventor, "Wait a minute, Doc. Ah... Are you telling me that you built a time machine... out of a DeLorean?" The second well-placed pause shows that Marty is less surprised by the time machine itself than he is about the form of the machine. When most people think of time travel, they think of going faster than time itself, however, the DeLorean is a car whose heavy stainless steel body means that its top speed is around 105 mph, hardly an impressive speed at all. Pair this with the doors of the car, which open upwards and not sideways, and one gets the idea that this would make poor time machine, even if Doc Brown claims its stainless steel body is needed for construction.

The names surrounding the components of the time machine also elicit laughter. They seem foolish, and though they might have some scientific basis, the characters use them in ways that invoke laughter. First, the time machine relies on a "flux capacitor," which literally means able to hold instability. The flux capacitor is the heart of the machine, and yet all it is really is a series of lighted tubes that do not seem very sophisticated. It looks as though one could spill a Pepsi Tab on it, and the whole thing would combust. The machine also needs 1.21 gigawatts of electricity to fuel the flux

capacitor, which many audiences will likely respond to as Marty does, asking, “What-what the hell is a gigawatt?” Marty’s constant disbelief about the odd sounding names is especially comical in relation to Doc Brown’s clear understanding of the science. More important is that although most audience members would probably understand less of the science than Marty, he is constructed as someone at whom audience members are allowed to laugh and thus ease our own discomforts. Moreover, despite Marty’s confusion, technology is presented as non-threatening and humorous, which allows viewers to have stronger confidence in the power of the human to reverse any harm caused by technology. Much like the use of “vignettes” of terrifying computer movie scenes to “draw snickers and laughter as people watching [began] to realize how ridiculous the pieces are” that Sheehy outlines in his article, “A Feature Film Remedy for Computerphobia”, *Back to the Future* shows how technology cannot thwart even the most scientifically inept mind (42).

In *Back to the Future*, a failure of technology is set up from the very beginning: a malfunction that results in audiences laughing at the irony of Marty’s mother falling in love with him. Despite this technology, Marty is able to find Doc Brown, and together, they send Marty back to the 1980s, without negative consequence, which prevents audiences from fearing any repercussions from using new technologies. Humans are able to overcome technology’s failure in an equally satirical scene in which Doc and Marty use lightening to produce the 1.21 gigawatts of needed electricity. During this scene, Doc is forced to zip line down an electrical cord connecting the time machine to the source of lightening because the cord is caught on a falling tree and pulled from the machine. Even though the technology fails once again, Doc Brown overcomes this failure and is able to send Marty back to the future. These two moments show that even

if technology puts up a fight, humans are still able to manipulate it to their needs and make any fears about lost control seem foolish and absurd.

Laughing at the Absurdity of Our Fears

By putting forth a user determinist view of technology, *Back to the Future* is able to assuage fears about technology by helping audiences laugh at how ridiculous their fears about technology are. At the same time, however, it upholds the powerfulness of technology—if it is used properly. More importantly, in the decision to focus on time travel and time machines, this movie creates the perfect symbol to blend the humanist's view of technology with the engineer's. In their potential to allow unrestricted explorations in time, time machines provide the perfect opportunity to better understand “cultural confusions” in “a more systematic way” (Murray 4). They would allow people to revisit moments and place them into a structured timeline in ways that textbooks have failed. With the aid of such technology, humans would be able to connect shifts in society to specific moments in time, and in doing so expose moments of weakness and failure, as well as strength and success, to allow growth and self-discovery on a broader, societal level. Overall, unlike most of the technology centered movies of the 1980s, this movie presents a user-determinist view that proves that even if “where we are going, we don't need roads,” humans will always manipulate technology to their benefit.

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