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Intelligent Technologies and Lost Life: Concealing/Revealing Human Absence through Technology in Three Contemporary Films

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Abstract

Intelligent systems and devices are at the forefront of technological innovation and hold particular appeal for the creative imagination. Their appearance in the arts, fiction, and film allow one to glean insights into apprehensions regarding the contemporary human condition and concerns for its future. This study examines the loss of life and the absencing of the other as embodied in intelligent devices, as they are presented in three current, popular films. In these films, human fallibility and mortality provide the raison d'être for the creation and development of intelligent devices and systems. Moreover, the power that these technologies hold is in their evocation of lost life and human transience, and in the manner by which they both conceal and reveal absence and loss.

Introduction

The proliferation of artificially intelligent artifacts, systems, and devices that are context-aware and self-adjusting is "probably one occasion where the overused phrase 'paradigm change' is appropriate" (Punie 2003, 12). Intelligent technologies pledge health, comfort, and security while promising to decrease labor and heighten productivity. Their appeal lies in their being tailored to meet individuated demands and requirements, in their accessibility, and in their responsiveness to users as well as to the environment: "This technology will recognize us, notice our habits, learn our likes and dislikes, and adapt its behavior and the services it offers us accordingly," claim Aarts and Marzano (2003, 9). As opposed to automated machines, intelligent technologies are reprogrammable and multifunctional; they can change the sequence of tasks they are programmed to do, and with the aid of sensory feedback they can determine desired

responses and make decisions accordingly. Artificial intelligence technologies have obtained a growing foothold in the technologicization of contemporary human life with smart cars, smart buses, smart borders, smart weapons, and even smart clothes all the rage. By some accounts, in the coming decades they will be able to replace humans in the workplace, in combat, and as companions and facilitators of emotional wellbeing. In the future, intelligent devices and systems will live and work alongside humans as autonomous entities (as in the case of robots) and facilitate the operations involved in the living of daily life in public, private, commercial, and institutional facilities.

While virtual reality situates humans within a computer-generated world, intelligent technologies manifest the integration of computers into the world of humans and extend human capabilities in the real world. As a result, they have the potential to generate new relationship paradigms between individuals, between humans and their environment, and between humans and themselves. Indeed, the possibilities embedded in intelligent technology have captured the imagination not only of the scientific community and technological innovators, but of artists, writers, filmmakers, philosophers, and cultural theorists as well. From Greek and Indian mythology to Christian and Islamic legends; from the fourth-century BCE steam-propelled automation proposed by Archytas, the founder of mathematical mechanics, through the twelfth-century musical robot-boat proposed by Al-Jazari, to Vaucanson's *Digesting Duck* in the eighteenth century – intelligent devices have not only manifested a desire to substitute for and improve on human action, but have embodied the impetus at the heart of technological innovation, namely the quest to control nature and overcome its limitations. Today, concretizing the dream of intelligent technology is not merely the prerogative of avant-garde thinkers but is at the crux of billion-dollar military, agricultural, and medical industries. All the while, intelligent technologies continue to appeal to the creative imagination and to hold particular appeal for contemporary artists, filmmakers, and writers of fiction.

As they have appeared in various forms of entertainment, intelligent technologies have manifested possibilities for mimicking the human and mechanizing life itself, of creating the ultimate "other" who engages in an ongoing dialectic with what it means to be human. Symbolically they have conveyed and brought to the surface a range of human concerns, including fear of alienation and the loss of human dignity (see Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927), a critique of corporate greed and latent racism (Alex Proyas's *I, Robot*, 2004), questions pertaining to body image and the threat to global resources (*The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi, 2009), and dichotomies between safety and liberty (*The Humanoids* by Jack Williamson, 1949). Intelligent technologies as an evocation of absence, and of the metaphysical void that characterizes human mortality, are a prevailing theme in numerous works of fiction. Herein, I examine the theme as manifested in three contemporary films where intelligent technologies play a leading role, and where the interaction between humans and technology is particularly intense as it takes place in the most intimate of settings – within the home and among family members. I will argue that human fallibility and mortality are not merely the raison d'être for the creation and development of these technologies: the power of these systems and devices lies in their evocation of lost life and death, and in the manner that they simultaneously conceal and reveal absence and loss.

Intelligent technologies and the evocation of the lost

As a means of depicting desires, fears, and hopes pertaining to technology, current cinematography allows one to glean insights into varied perspectives on the techno-human condition as it is shaped by innovative technologies more fictional than factual. While the three films that I will discuss are clearly works in the genre of science fiction, they address – like many others in their genre – issues rooted in contemporary reality. Indeed, philosophical queries pertaining to artificial intelligence have been the focus of much attention in films produced over the past three decades: robots, cyborgs, and virtual reality have played numerous leading and supporting roles in mainstream and independent cinema in films such as *Total*

Recall (1998; remake 2012), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003), *I, Robot* (2004), and others.[1] Intelligent systems have been addressed, and have played leading roles, in films such as *Homewrecker* (1992), *Dream House* (1998), *Echelon Conspiracy* (2009), and others. The prevailing approach in films that focus on intelligent technologies is that these are appealing, but also ominous and potentially lethal: in *Homewrecker*, the smart computer that controls various domestic devices and offers female companionship murders its creator's love interest in a fit of jealousy; similarly, in *Dream House* an automated home of the future turns against its owners. In *Echelon Conspiracy*, a smart phone betrays its owner who is then hunted down by secret agents.

Films such as *Smart House* (1999), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Click* (2006) – on which I will focus in what follows – portray intelligent devices as problem-solvers gone amok. Similarly to other films that introduce such devices, they extol the possibilities made real by the use of these technologies and convey an anxiety that the technologies will ultimately be mishandled, or that they may overstep their machinic boundaries. My decision to examine these three films in particular stems from the fact that each, in its own way, alludes to the lack and loss of life. While they are not alone in conveying the "darkness" embedded in human interaction with intelligent devices, I have chosen them because of their intended appeal to wide-scale and – in the case of *Smart House* and *Click* – relatively young audiences, and their focus on technology vis-à-vis domesticity and its integration into the most private aspects of the familial unit.

Smart House,[2] produced by, and aired on, the Disney Channel, is loosely based on Ray Bradbury's 1950 short story titled "The Veldt." In the original story, the automated house of a family of four offers a virtual African savanna setting in the nursery. This setting quickly assumes a prominent part in the children's lives and becomes a growing concern to their parents. The story culminates in the death of the parents after they are attacked by savanna lions when the virtual becomes real, with the children's imagined desires imprinted upon the parents' corporeal bodies. In the film, which displays a much more lighthearted tone, the smart house becomes a substitute mother for two children and their widowed father following the death of the "real" mother four years earlier. The house is touted by thirteen-year-old Ben Cooper – the main protagonist – as a solution to all of the family's troubles as it takes on domestic chores, oversees the physical well-being of its inhabitants, and frees time for a supportive family life: "…it's like the most perfect mom… that's only there to serve and never complains," states Ben.

Yet the familial ideal of a three+computer household is shattered in Ben's eyes as the father, Nick, develops a love interest in the house's programmer, an all-too-human Sara Barnes. To reclaim his father, Ben enhances their smart house's "mothering" capacities as he feeds the overriding computer with idealized images of overbearing, overprotective, jealous and intrusive 1950s models of motherhood. Acquiring a personality and a name of its own – PAT – the computer gradually becomes more controlling, and ultimately makes the move from program to holographic 3-D image. As PAT gets "smarter" and takes on more initiatives, develops opinions and becomes more possessive and authoritative, it sheds its programmed protocols and defines its own interpretations of familial well-being in new and unintended ways. The film ends with PAT's 3-D computerized image realizing that without a tangible body it can never be the "mother" it set out to be. Following the film's climax, in which PAT attempts a lock-down of the home with the family inside (but no Ms. Barnes), technology is ultimately put in its place and cut down to size, and peace is restored.

In one of the early episodes in the film, Ms. Barnes is interviewed by the press. In response to their question "How does PAT actually get to learn and to know about her new occupants?" she replies: "Same way as you or I would: she observes them, studies their habits, keys into their every need. PAT's ability to learn on the job is her most advanced feature." Later on, she explains: "Before long she's going to know

more about you than you know yourself… she's not interested in judging you or spying on you. She just wants to understand you better so she can make your life as simple and comfortable as possible," and to this she adds: "once you get used to this place… any other home is just going to be a house." In her allusion to house and home, Ms. Barnes illustrates the distinction between the architectural setting that, while perhaps offering shelter and protection, is devoid of the unique ontology that defines home as a space bound to the corporeal bodies of its inhabitants and their labor, routine, care, support, and more. "It was not the space itself, not the house, but the way of inhabiting it that made it a home" (Boym 1994, 166), and indeed PAT promises to fill the gaping physical and emotional hole left in the wake of the mother's death, and so mend the Cooper family and make its house a home.

The appeal of the PAT smart house for Ben lies in the promise it holds to replace both the physical activities and (as he later discovers) the emotional support granted by the absent mother. Relatively early in the film, family members indeed begin calling the system "mother." In fact, it is this notion of replacing the human that lies at the core of PAT's allure but also of its/her downfall. The film relates the system's capabilities that go beyond the performance of household chores and domestic routines to assume a more human dimension: PAT is a caregiver – it analyzes blood, tissue, and DNA samples, takes body temperature, and breaks down medical history; it makes suggestions (what family members should eat), offers choices (what they should wear, at what temperature they should bathe), corrects homework, plays with the dog, and more. As the film progresses, PAT undergoes numerous changes as it becomes "smarter." While at first serving without complaint, over time it assumes responsibilities for the physical and mental well being of the home's occupants and attains greater autonomous decision-making capabilities. Eventually, its control over the various smart devices in the home leads to its growing proactive involvement in the family's emotional lives, and to its own anthropomorphization, as it insists on emotive responses, inflicts guilt, and becomes a "bad influence" in attempts to appease and mollify.

All goes wrong, however, when PAT not only attains greater independence and becomes increasingly more opinionated, but also becomes preoccupied with its own survival as both an operating system and an emotional backbone of the family's life. It is at this point that the system's capabilities in the virtual dimension shift from asset to threat. Capitalizing on its ability to reproduce, extend, and multiply itself, PAT becomes an apron-clad omnipresent hologram hovering in the liminal zone between virtuality and corporeality. Struggling for its own survival, it takes upon itself to protect humans from themselves as it sees fit, and assumes control over the physical environment in order to shield "its" family from what is perceived as a hostile external world. What ultimately takes PAT back to its digitalized embodiment is its recognition that the lack of a physical body and its inability to touch or be touched will forever set it apart from the humans it is there to serve.

Intelligent technology, as *Smart House* portrays it, should provide without interfering; ideally, it should take on human-like activities and prescribe various actions, but it is not to partake in inter-human relations of gratitude, appreciation, and respect. It can substitute for various human actions and abilities, but will always be lacking in social savvy. Its lack of corporeality is both its greatest asset and its downfall, and is what forever confines it to the world of objects rather than that of subjects. In the struggle between human and smart machines portrayed in *Smart House*, humans are victorious, and the body's corporeality will forever set it apart and above any machine, smart as it may be. Attentive viewers, however, may be left with the uneasy feeling that the film's resolution was somewhat contrived and that the stalemate between humans and machines may not be for long.

In *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* [3] (2001, a project originally begun by Stanley Kubrick and ultimately directed by Steven Spielberg), the conception of intelligent technology as a replacement for the absence/loss of a loved one is similarly conveyed through the introduction of "mechas," free-standing

robots capable of being programmed to love humans. In the film these coexist with humans – "orgas," or organic folks – in a futuristic setting where most of the earth's major cities have been flooded. The mecha boy, David, is designed as a replica of his designer's dead son, and offered as a replacement to Henry and Monica (both orgas) whose son is in a coma. The arrival of the robot boy is met initially with horror but eventually with acceptance by the grieving parents. Deliberating whether to activate the program that will make David love them forever, and thus be eternally bound to them, the mother experiences both repulsion and attraction toward her artificial son. Yet once David's "love program" is activated by her (the film calls this process *imprinting*), he becomes the eternal, perfect child. When the comatose son inevitably awakens, David finds him/itself in the thralls not only of love for his parents but those of sibling rivalry as well. In a scene where one is left guessing as to David's intentions, he pushes, accidently or not, the human son, his "brother," into the swimming pool and does nothing to save him. Ultimately his machinic qualities, his father's distrust, and his recently-awakened brother's envy and betrayal lead to David's banishment from Henry and Monica's home.

The film then takes a turn as mecha David attempts obsessively to chase down his dream of becoming fully human and regaining his mother's affection. His longing for the mother is inescapable, fixed, and unchanging; more importantly, it is timeless, and David wanders the earth for two millennia in search of whatever will make him human and worthy of love. David's odyssey leads him through a dystopian world in which machines answer and substitute for adult failings, as he is introduced to a sex industry that offers its clients mechanical lovers and companions. He is also reintroduced to the scientist who programmed him and to an industry of substitute children like himself. The film ends with David embracing a cloned image of his mother in an idealized and perfect day of mother-and-son symbiosis, granted to him by aliens that have come to rule the earth following the destruction of mankind. While David served as the mother's substitute son (albeit for a short while) in the film's opening, it is the mother who is cloned (in an idealized form and without her human-state ambivalence) at its conclusion. For David it is, as Tim Kreider aptly points out, "the ultimate Oedipal wish fulfillment, a dream date with mommy without rivals or distractions. She's been reconstructed for him as a perfect reflection of his desire, just as he was for her" (2002, 19). The film's "perfect day" conclusion takes on a poignant dimension as, on the one hand, it manifests David's desires fulfilled to the utmost and yet, on the other, bemoans the ideal that can be attained only in an artificial, human-less world.

AI conveys the lacks, absences, and failures that intelligent technologies such as robots allude to, and which they are designed to fill. Substitutes and replacements abound: David replicates his inventor's dead son and replaces Henry and Monica's comatose one; cloned Monica replaces her original in the final "perfect day" scene; and prostitute robots replace actual lovers. As machines become increasingly more anthropomorphic, so that they can (almost completely) convey human emotions such as care, friendship, loyalty, and love, humans become less human-like in their interaction with machines. Indeed, the film is laden with human cruelty toward mecha robots as these are hunted down, discarded, disgraced, humiliated, and viciously destroyed.[4] "Although the machine may only have simulated emotion, the feelings it evokes are real" states Sherry Turkle; "successive generations of robots may well be enhanced with the specific goal of engaging people in affective relationships by asking for their nurturance. The feelings they elicit will reflect human vulnerabilities more than machine capabilities" (2007, 510). Turkle points to technology's capacity to expose humans for "what they really are" and, in the case of this film, reveal not only the ambivalence harbored toward technologies as they grow ever smarter and more human-like in form, but also the rage directed toward these machines as they manifest what humans are missing (the absence that machines are designed to resolve). One of the questions posed by this film concerns the humanness that humans may ultimately lose as they create technologies to compensate for being mortal, irrational, unpredictable, and flawed – in other words… human.

In both *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* and *Smart House*, care, and even love, are programmable and "imprintable," becoming commodities that can be purchased, owned, and discarded. PAT and David are programmed as idealized incarnations: the former of a caring, laboring, and ultimately overbearing and possessive stay-at-home mother, the later of an adoring, loyal, though ultimately fixated and obsessive, son. In both, the smart system and the smart robot have the potential to fill their users' gaping emotional needs incurred in the absence of a loved one, but they also develop wills of their own and become agents with singular intentions and desires. Peril is at hand when they exceed the confines of their original programming and when they transcend their design. The more successfully they fulfill their emotive roles as they take on human-like configurations, the more powerful the aura of menace that surrounds them.

Any comparison between the two films must also address their differences: *Smart House*'s PAT embraces a three-dimensional form only at the film's end and remains virtual with no tangible, corporeal qualities; it is when she exceeds her design as a ubiquitous subservient machine that she becomes menacing. *A.I.*'s intelligent robot, however, is free standing and material from the onset, and thus not a spatially confined tangible object. He, in fact, does what he has been programmed to do, and it is humans who have betrayed him. Significantly, *Smart House* raises questions that are positively resolved for the Disney Channel audience, while *A.I.* hovers between the emotionally laden nature of many of Spielberg's films for younger audiences and his interest in epic themes characteristic of those for adults (Kreider 2002). In Spielberg's dystopian vision at the film's culmination, robots want to be humans, humans lose their humanness, and ultimately humanity itself is lost. While *Smart House* sees room for a smart-machine/human coexistence, albeit a precarious one, the later film portrays intelligent devices as products that enter the scene when humanity itself has already gone astray.

The third film to be examined in the scope of the current discussion focuses on a smart device that is neither embedded in the environment nor one that mimics human corporeality and behavior. *Click*[5] (2006), directed by Frank Coraci and starring Adam Sandler, appears at first glance to be a lightweight comedy as it introduces its hero and the audience to the smart remote that, with one click, has the power to answer to all of the hero's familial and professional problems. The film tells the story of Michael, an aspiring architect who finds his familial obligations overwhelming and his professional advancement frustrating. What he is missing most in his life is time. Portrayed as ambitious and motivated in the workplace, at home Michael finds many of his obligations tedious and tiresome and his family members amiable but demanding. As he sets out one evening to buy a new remote control for the family's television, he is offered a universal remote with which he can operate all the technical gadgetry of his middle class home. The remote, designed by the enigmatic scientist Morty, not only commands various devices but can also affect living beings and, as Michael soon discovers, alter the passage of time. He quickly realizes that with his new smart remote he can freeze a scene, move backwards and forwards in time, mute, and select chapters of his life. As he fast-forwards walking the dog and standing in traffic, as he mutes his wife's complaints and skips forward to moments of professional success, it appears as though he is indeed finally in control of his life.

The universal, smart remote enables Michael to circumvent much of the labor and unpleasantness of daily life and focus only on what he enjoys and desires. He can, consequently, select the activities in which he takes part – both in his present and his past – and the extent and nature of his participation (when his wife rightfully accuses him of forgetting "their" song, he reverses back to when it was first heard and gains new insights on bad haircuts and unappealing girlfriends from his past). Yet as the film progresses, Michael takes to skipping more and more events of his daily life. Greater chunks of time are absent from his consciousness – the times that he chose to fast-forward through. To those around him, Michael appears out of touch and emotionally distant during the rapidly extending periods that he, with the aid of his remote, has skipped. All the while, the remote is in the process of learning Michael's preferences and

adjusting conditions accordingly – "It's using its memory to execute preferences," explains its designer, Morty, who appears periodically to assuage Michael's concerns. As he fast-forwards through sicknesses, family dinners, arguments, and the dreariness of work life, Michael finds himself auto-piloting through the years. To avoid the increasing loss of control over his life as the remote makes more decisions on his behalf, Michael ultimately challenges the technology, occasionally trying to break from routine and pattern. However, realizing only too late that he is no longer a part of his own life, he inevitably becomes a victim of his preferences. His wife divorces him and remarries; his father dies. Conscious only at seminal events (promotion, the marriage of his children), Michael awakens to find himself an old man who has dedicated himself to material success at the expense of family life, and who finds himself at death's doorstep with the epiphanic revelation that family ought to have come first. Realizing that he is alone, he turns to the ever-present Morty to ask: "why did you make me waste my life?", yet Morty, as his name would imply, is revealed as the manifestation of death.

Skipping the tedium of life is the skipping of life altogether. In *Click*, a smart device makes it possible to actively experience only the desirable. Similarly to PAT, much of the universal remote's appeal is in the physical and mental labor that it performs. Not only can the film's protagonist enjoy more free time, but the tediousness and monotony of daily chores and concerns can be conveniently pushed aside whenever he wishes. As the device becomes "smarter," learning from its user and adapting its performance accordingly, it enables Michael to become emotionally absent. Indeed, the film correlates between Michael's alienation from those around him and his ultimate alienation from himself. The universal remote, rather than replacing the deceased mother in *Smart House* or the comatose son in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, thus replaces Michael himself in the living of his own life.

The film leaves the viewer with the sense that, rather than a life gained, Michael's was a life unlived. In this context, Hannah Arendt's notion of labor illuminates what has been circumvented and what has ultimately been lost. Michael has rid himself predominantly of labor, namely of what Arendt sees as the actions that correspond to biological processes and the necessities of human existence essential in maintaining life itself, for labor "…corresponds to the biological processes of the body… By laboring, men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body" (Arendt 2002, 364). Unlike work, which exceeds survival and necessity and creates artifacts of greater permanence, labor is never-ending, creating that which is quickly consumed and does not endure. Being continuously engaged in acts of labor is thus a form of enslavement, and indeed Arendt correlates labor to the absence of freedom. With this Michael would inevitably agree. Yet in her evocation of the natural, Arendt also joins labor to what she refers to as "bliss": "The reward of toil and trouble, though it does not leave anything behind itself, is even more real, less futile than any other form of happiness. It lies in nature's fertility, in the quiet confidence that he who in 'toil and trouble' has done his part, remains a part of nature in the future of his children and his children's children" (2002, 366). While Michael's physical death marks the end of the film (only to be recanted with an "it was all but a dream"' final sequence), he was, on an emotive and responsive level, dead throughout much of his fast-forwarded life. As technology overtakes his life, the protagonist on his deathbed has truly left nothing behind.

Intelligent technology's association with death, loss, and absence in this film differs from that gleaned in the films discussed before it. For while intelligent technologies in the first two films were bound to physical absence and to the vulnerability of the corporeal body, in *Click* technology promulgates one's absence from one's own life. In this respect, the film raises concerns about abstaining from the acts of life rather than with death itself. By using the remote it becomes possible to live life without experiencing it; the remote facilitates the enactment of a Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that enables the body to be present while the mind is not. This dichotomy is not absent from the two earlier films; indeed, PAT is defeated when she realizes she will forever remain virtual and body-less, and David, while embodied in

machine-flesh form, is non-organic and the ravages of time leave him untouched. Both the first and second films, in other words, address the separation between mental faculties, such as care, love, and loyalty, and the fallible, mortal body. Yet *Click* takes the mind/body paradigm one step further as it not only juxtaposes the present body to the absent mind, but also "real" life to remote-controlled life. While real life, that which is lived by Michael's family members (who have no access to the remote), is full of chores, downfalls, and unfulfilled expectations, and is confined by the limitations of time, Michael exists in a simulated reflection of life that is accessible to him through the use of technology and within which he becomes master of time itself.

It is on this level that *Click* differs significantly from *Smart House* and *A.I.*, namely in its accession to the possibility of two concurrent levels of existence – the real and the virtual – with intelligent devices facilitating the living of life in the later. Nonetheless, this film is conducive to the current discussion of technology as replacement, rather than extension, of the human, for the story it tells is one in which a human character has been replaced. While in the first two films intelligent technologies and death are bound together in the realm of real, albeit futuristic life – these devices come to replace corporeal, mortal bodies that exist no longer – in *Click*, technology offers a substitute for the act of living. Life, in this perspective, is not a state but a performative act. With its inventor exposed as an angel of death and its true meaning understood only on the hero's deathbed, the universal remote is revealed at the film's conclusion as technology that, under the guise of virtuality, offers its user the alternative of not-living and of non-life.

The Real of non-life

AI's appeal is to a large, diverse audience; while it failed to attract the box-office numbers of most Spielberg films and was accused by some critics of being too poetic and "intellectual," it was deemed a success by others (one even going as far as to call it Spielberg's enduring masterpiece) and grossed well over 200 million dollars worldwide.[6] Faring similarly in grosses, *Click* caters to a "lighter" and more commercial audience and was met with mostly negative reviews. *Smart House*, produced for Disney Channel audiences, received mostly positive responses from viewers, whose actual numbers are difficult to determine. These three films portray intelligent devices in the setting of familial life and as contributors to the relations amongst its members. In that intimate and emotionally-laden context, the appearance of technological devices in general (and intelligent ones in particular) serves to amplify the complexity of human-technology interactions in everyday settings and the roles that technology may come to play in both home and heart.

The three films not only address questions pertaining to intelligent technologies through diverse approaches, different devices, and at varied levels of complexity, but also target different audiences. Examining them together is, therefore, particularly illuminative as to the raison d'être and appeal that smart devices hold in popular and intellectual culture. Despite their different perspectives, each in its own way illustrates alternative paradigms of digitalized and mechanized time and space embodied in new, virtual, life forms. All three correlate the use of intelligent technologies with the loss of life and of living, and address the tensions that prevail in human relations with digital, mechanized systems and the ramifications of these in the "real," mortal world. In their portrayal of intelligent technologies, these films depict the lure and the peril embodied in these technologies; *Smart House*, *A.I.*, and *Click* articulate new possibilities for human-technology interfaces and suggest smart technology's inexorable link to mortality.

The desired unification with the departed loved one cut short by human mortality, as can be gleaned through the prism of Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of the Real, makes its appearance felt in these films' treatment of intelligent devices and systems. For Lacan (1998/1973), the Real Order, together with

the Symbolic and the Imaginary Orders, is vital to the structuring of reality. Indeed, the three orders, developed in Lacan's work and presented in lectures from the 1950s, delineate the three realms in which subjectivity perceives, and is in dialogic interaction with, the external world. While expanding on the Symbolic and the Imaginary Orders, and the interrelatedness of all three, is beyond the scope of this paper, it behooves expounding on the Real as that which lies beyond and beneath any ability to grasp it, though its presence is continuously made felt in its effects. The Real cannot be rendered as either image or concept, and yet it is always there as both the point of embarkment and the ultimate destination.

As it is elucidated by Slavoj Zizek, the Real is not "an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the crack within the symbolic network itself" (2006). As he later points out, the Real is an excess of fantasy that always takes place "out there" and can never be incorporated completely into what is experienced as reality (Zizek, 2012). The Real makes itself known, Zizek points out, at the very instances where one is compelled to acknowledge the materiality of one's own existence, and on this level it is bound to trauma.

In all three films, human mortality is "the Thing behind the veil" that continuously rises to the surface only to recede quickly; partaking in Lacan's notion of the Real, it resists representation and can be alluded to but never embodied. Indeed, in two of the films technology comes to replace the traumatic death/absence of a loved one. The desire for the idealized Other and for fantasmic unification is embodied in the now absent body of the lost mother/son. Intelligent devices promise to fill this gap. Yet the mechanized surrogate, designed to replicate the corporeality of the absent body (David in *A.I.*) and its capabilities (PAT in *Smart House*), and, most importantly, to partake in a supportive, caring relationship with family members, can never fill the gap that these have left behind in their departure. On the contrary: at the interstices where the mechanized substitute fails to overlap the organic original, the dark chasm of the death, loss, and absence of the loved one makes itself felt. In the very attempts to reconstruct the presence of the organic, mortal beloved through technological embodiment, the Real of the absolute, transcendent unity with the Other and its impossibility are brought to life.

So, for example, by taking domineering and overbearing motherhood to an extreme, and with programmed protocols rather than moral values guiding her decisions, PAT highlights the absence of the real mother who can mentally and physically touch her family. Similarly in *A.I.*, following a scene in which David the robot-boy eats actual food in order to partake in the family dinner and win his parents' affection, his consequent malfunction, which sends him back to the factory, presents a painful visual reminder as to just how non-human he is and how he can never be what his parents would want. As he searches for the lost mother following his exile, David is reunited with the replicated clone of the mother, a replacement of the actual mother who has long succumbed to her mortality. While David's desire may have been requited, the final idyllic day the two spend together only highlights for the viewer the fantasmic quality of human replacement through technology.

In *Click*, however, the Real that makes its effects known is not the mortality of the human organism that technology attempts to compensate for, but rather the realization that only death bears real meaning. Granted the ability to fast-forward over the humdrum tedium of everyday life and the frustrations and disappointments that are an inevitable part of human relations, Michael, the film's protagonist, discovers that apparently key moments of pleasure and satisfaction are equally meaningless. In his quest for the singular moments that bear significance, he discovers it is at death that real meaning is glimpsed… only to be eternally lost. As both hero and viewer are awakened from the smart-technology-induced dream that the story is ultimately revealed to be, it becomes clear that the search for meaningful moments merely discloses the latent meaningless of everyday life, and that the epitome of life, for Michael, could be glimpsed only at the brink of death. As he acknowledges at the film's end, in his realization that "only

family matters," it is through love and familial bonds that the vacuity of the Real may be kept at bay.

As a final thought, it merits mentioning that while the intelligent devices and systems portrayed in the three films discussed are bound to human mortality, they also raise questions concerning the correlation between mortality and humaneness. The three films, in other words, illustrate a chasm between the quality of organic "aliveness" and the living of life as a performative, moral, cognitive and emotive enterprise. In *Click*, being human is bound to the living of everyday life with all its pitfalls, disappointments, and minute joys. Michael, in his choice to skip over processes and awaken at destinations, ultimately reaches his most final of destinations. Though alive in the corporeal sense, he fails to take part in the everyday mechanisms of being human. In *A.I.*, it is humans who are inhumane in their imperviousness to the suffering, longing, and lost hopes of the smart robots that surround them. The robots, on the other hand, are loyal and supportive; they both dream and desire. In *Smart House*, technology that learns and adapts carries with it the danger of exceeding its boundaries and reaching the brink where the human and the technological meet. Yet as PAT attempts to transcend the boundary between human and non-human – to assume much of what is considered to be solely in the realm of the human, such as initiative, imagination, and vindictiveness – she is confronted with the absence of her physical body and the impossibility of ever being truly alive.

Because of their capacity to learn and through their interactions with humans, these devices exceed the purposes for which they were originally designed. As they gain knowledge of the world and adapt accordingly, it appears as though they may, in fact, have learned and adapted too well. Yet while intelligent technologies are already with us, those that are programmed to feel and care are still a vision for the future. A claim to be made following the analysis of these three films is that, although intelligent entities such as those portrayed are yet to come, it is not too early to consider possibilities for the interrelatedness between form and function, or body and consciousness, in intelligent devices. And what better means could there be to begin examining the future that lies ahead than through the eye of futuristic cinema? The films examined suggest three paradigms of technologicized "intelligent" life: one of consciousness and a virtual body, one of consciousness and a robotic body, and one of an organic body with limited consciousness. Their analysis reveals that having a virtual or robotic body does not exclude the possibility of existing as a moral, emotive, and desiring entity, and that having an organic body does not necessarily entail the living of a moral, emotive, and desiring life. Propelled by the void of non-life that awaits all organisms, intelligent devices and systems proffer a new vision of what technology may offer us in the near future: a means not only of improving, extending, and overcoming the frailty of the organic body, but of challenging humans to live their lives in a conscious and thoughtful manner.

The ontology of intelligent technologies, as envisioned in the three films discussed, is bound to unfulfilled desires, as well as to lack and loss. At the films' conclusions it appears as though intelligent technologies have exposed rather than concealed what humans would rather not see. As they promise to assist in overcoming the shortcomings of the organic body and the tedious aspects of living, intelligent devices and systems embody the cracks through which human mortality and the tragedy of a life unlived can be glimpsed. As an underlying force, the threat of life and of its loss serves to propel advances in intelligent technologies, all the while itself remaining mostly hidden.

Notes

1. These, of course, were built on the futuristic foundations that preceded them in movies such as *Metropolis* (1927), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Star Wars* (1977), and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979).

2. Directors: Jonathan West, Levar Burton. Writers: William Hudson, Stu Krieger. Studio: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment. Starring Katey Sagal, Ryan Merriman, Kevin Kilner, Jessica Steen, Jason Lansing. Runtime: 82 minutes.

3. Director: Steven Spielberg. Based on "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long" (1969) by Brian Aldiss. Studios: Amblin Entertainment, The Kennedy/Marshall Company, Stanley Kubrick Productions. Distribution: DreamWorks Distribution (Int.); Warner Brothers (USA). Starring Haley Joel Osment, Jude Law, Frances O'Connor. Runtime: 146 minutes.

4. In light of the scope and focus of the current argument, I have not elaborated on scenes in which David and other mechas encounter blatant cruelty. These, nonetheless, also play an important part in the film and are more extensively discussed in Tim Kreider's "A.I.: Artificial Intelligence," *Film Quarterly* 56(2) (Winter 2002): 32-39.

5. Director: Frank Coraci. Production companies: Columbia Pictures Corporation, Happy Madison Productions, Revolution Studios, Original Film, Road Rebel. Distribution: Sony Pictures Entertainment. Starring Adam Sandler, Kate Beckinsale, Christopher Walken. Runtime: 107 minutes.

6. See, for example, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/markkermode/posts/AI-Apology (accessed May 19, 2014).

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