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update

TRASHY ROBOTS

Desire and Disposability in Patricia Yaeger's "Luminous Trash: Throwaway Robots in *Blade Runner*, the *Terminators*, *A.I.*, and *Wall•E*"

Many objects remain unnoticed simply because it never occurs to us to look their way. Most people turn their backs on garbage cans, the dirt underfoot, the waste they leave behind.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford, 1960)



What does it mean for humans to desire human-like relationships with robots? What kind of sovereignty do we want to have over our trash? These two seemingly unrelated questions melded together exquisitely during Patricia Yaeger’s talk “Luminous Trash: Throwaway Robots in *Blade Runner*, the *Terminators*, *A.I.* and *Wall•E*.” Yaeger directed her audiences’ eyes towards robots as trash, and in doing so, linked together present and future possibilities for re-thinking automated relationships, technological power, and wasteful consumption. Yaeger, the Henry Simmons Frieze Collegiate Professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan, spoke to an overflowing room about our fascination with robots and trash, both of whom—or of which, depending on your comfort level with anthropomorphizing non-human subjects—highlight tensions between our desires and their limits.

Yaeger’s work presents a meta-commentary on disposable culture, using trash to interrogate our complex and contradictory relationships to technology and commodities. Obsolescence quickly follows a commodity’s introduction into our lives, she points out; our computers are in need of upgrades almost as soon as we take them out of the box, and we are encouraged to replace

them completely within three years—almost before the physical object itself shows any signs of wear and tear. In robot movies, this technology turnover becomes personified in robots: commodities who behave both as subjects (who can act) and as objects (that can be disposed of once they are no longer valued). We humans want human-like relationships with our robots, but when our robots become obsolete—which is practically instantaneous—we shift our thinking from one of *relating* to one of *discarding*.

Yaeger suggests that while many humans cease to think about trash once we have discarded an object we deem no longer useful to us, this doesn’t mean that the life of the object has ended. Rather, the life of commodities-as-trash persists in what she calls *robot time*. If *durable time* is the increasingly brief period when objects are useful to humans, then we can think of *robot time* as time outside the boundaries of durable time, time that exists before and after durable time. This reveals that commodities have something like half-lives; what we throw away in the trash takes on new life after it is recycled, and again when it is trashed and re-used once again. Yaeger suggests that while commodities are better when they have use-value that transcends ‘first use,’ most humans don’t think of their com-

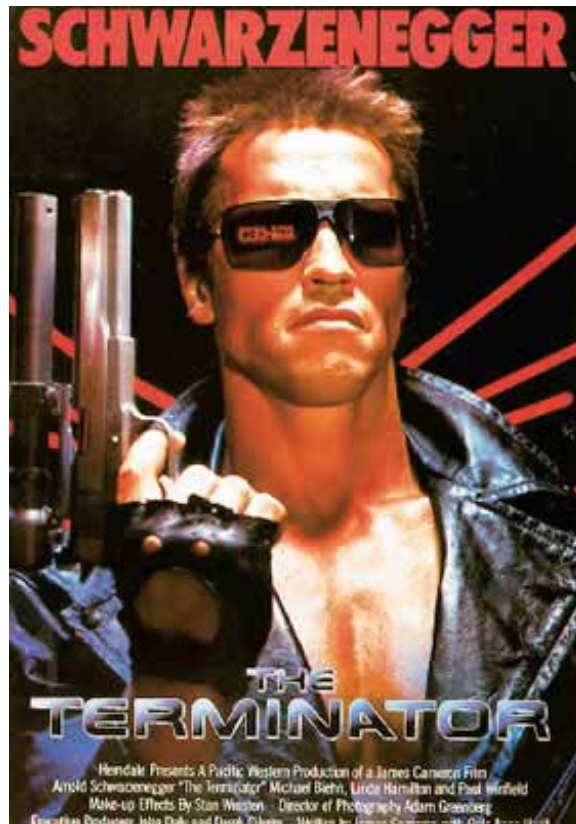


Blade Runner (1982) Ridley Scott, Warner Bros.

modities as having value beyond first use. That is, we are accustomed to brief rather than lengthy durable times. This post-WWII shift in thinking accompanied political and economic strategies to increase production and consumption, and with the shortening of durable time, heightened trashy destruction. Robot time, capable of spanning the present and the future, provides long-sighted thinking about trash.

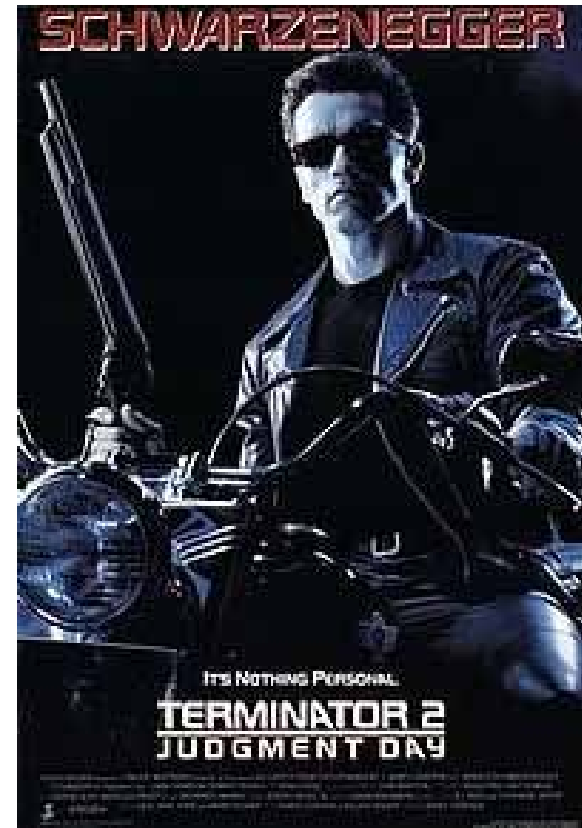
The robots in the four films discussed—*Blade Runner*, the *Terminator* movies, *A.I.*, and *Wall•E*—personify the commodified objects that we so desire when they are ‘luminous,’ that is, shiny and new, but later yearn for after we have thrown them away. Additionally, robots, cyborgs, and androids make us question our humanness. We want to create something ‘just like us,’ but the more like us they become, the more we fear them in their capacity to throw us away. In *Blade Runner*, for example, the shared intimacy between maker and cyborg creates an “atmosphere of radiance,” in a moment of recognition. We personify commodities but in choosing to see commodities as humanlike, we give them power to make choices: about what to throw away and what to destroy. Robots can choose to trash us, a theme particularly acute in the *Terminator* series.

Robots connect us to our refuse, illuminating our desires for the new and the old, for relationships of pleasure and consumption, relationships both human-like and commoditized. When a commodity has been anthropomorphized, its inevitable



***The Terminator* (1984),
James Cameron, Orion Pictures**

transformation from being a human-like object to simply ‘trash’ forces us to confront our personal relationships with the things we throw away. In Yeager’s terms, this leaves us with a “strange metallic mourning for that which we throw away.” But are we mourning the objects we throw away, a kind of longing for that-which-is-no-longer-new? Or are we mourning the destruction that



***Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991),
James Cameron, Carolco Pictures**

our waste creates: the large scale global trashing exemplified in the “vortex of trash,” a region in the Pacific Ocean the size of Texas?¹ Yeager assures us that it is both.

Yeager suggests that in disposing of both old and new commodities, we reveal that our desires

1. See http://oceans.greenpeace.org/en/the-expedition/news/trashing-our-oceans/ocean_pollution_animation



***Pardon our dust* (2005), Spike Jonze, Gap**

for commodities may be less motivated by an attempt to gain material status as the one who has the most stuff than by a fetishistic desire for novelty. This desire leads us, as consumers, to live in perpetual futurity, grounded not in the present landscape of our waste, but in a future of needs and wants defined by the new, located a comfortable distance from the refuse of material reality. Robots, at once both disposable and destructive, personify our human needs and desires while they also expose our contemporary role as “the destructive consumer” rather than “the creative producer.”

To consume conspicuously, we must trash conspicuously, says Yaeger. We have a commercial fascination with trash, evidenced not only in the destructive landscapes in robot movies, but also in a smorgasbord of destruction in commercials, such as a recent Gap commercial directed

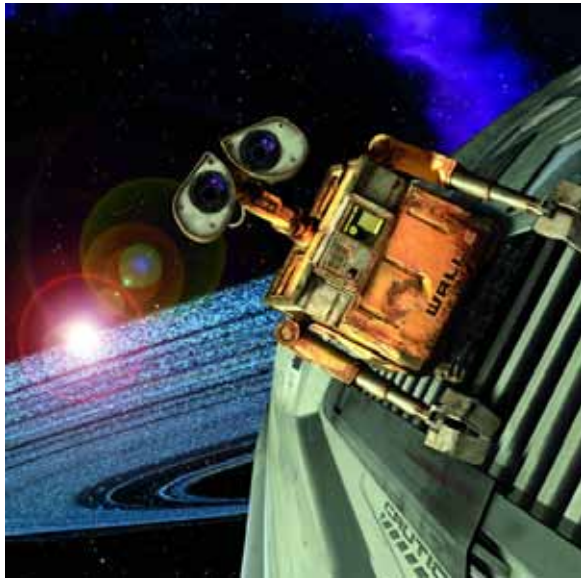
by Spike Jonze. Economic strategies of waste have been more viable than tactics of reuse and recycling, as exemplified in *Wall•E* with an advertisement by Buy n Large (BnL), the movie's fictional mega-corporation, :

Too much garbage in your face? There's plenty of space out in space! BnL StarLiners leaving each day. We'll clean up the mess while you're away!

The idea of space being empty, that we can fill it with trash and move on, and thus perpetuate our endless consumption, is another faulty human hubris of avoidance. Robot movies offer up trashing as a regenerative activity, even—or perhaps especially—via the destruction of humans and human presence. Each of the robot movies Yaeger draws upon provides us with spectacles of destruction. James Cameron's 1984 *Terminator* film begins with a garbage truck as vector of arrival for the

Terminator robot, who possesses the power to come back to life when humans try to trash him. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), we view a tension in the landscape of high-tech future, which is simultaneously luminous and decayed. These two films, as well as the circus-like display of robot execution in *A.I.* (2001) and the barren wasteland dotted by trash skyscrapers in *Wall•E* (2008), offer up spectacles of *our* destruction.

Yaeger proposes that robots remind us of our own obsolescence in the face of increasingly “smart” technology. Calling attention to the disposable workforce of childcare, welfare, and social workers in *A.I.* (2001), and the sole inhabitant of planet Earth, a loveable lonely trash compactor in *Wall-E* (2008), it appears that throwaway workers and programmed obsolescence bear the marks of gender, race, and class politics. The movie *A.I.* renders useless the labor



**WALL-E (2008), Andrew Stanton,
Pixar Animation Studios/Walt Disney Pictures**

apparatuses who no longer serve industrial needs, nor even the emotional and psychological needs of humans. Yet despite the destruction of those robots marked as no longer valuable, humans are afraid of cyborgs, our trash-turned-subjects, taking over. What remains unclear is which humans, if any, will survive the technological takeover: those who create waste or those who reuse it?

During the question and answer session, Yeager suggested there are no clear answers to these questions because it is “complicated thinking about trash.” We suggest this complication can

be linked to the unsettling relationship between robots as object and subject: robots themselves can be both disposable objects and subjects who create trash. Robot movies remind us that when we throw robots away or attempt to destroy them, we are also participating in their next half-life creations by removing them from durable time as first-use commodities and allowing them new life as subjects in robot time. Through our acts of trashing, we create the potential means of our own human destruction.

Yeager’s talk was delightful in that it prompted the audience to notice trash, to begin asking questions about trash, and to ask what it might mean to behave ethically in relation to trash. If the point of robots is to call attention to questions of subjectivity and choice, our ability as humans to trash robots and their potential to trash us complicates seemingly over-determined consumer relationships not only to the means of production, but also to the means of destruction. Wall•E, that lovable trash-compacting dumpster-diving robot extraordinaire, finds a plant in a discarded refrigerator, and instead of destroying it per his human instructions, nurtures the plant in an old boot. The use-value of the plant, for Wall•E, occurs in robot time; more than 700 years after humans have declared Earth uninhabitable and “impossible to recolonize.” After the humans’ flight, it is a robot, operating

with old-fashioned robot values and working steadily in robot time, who sifts through trash and discovers the potential for a human future on Earth. Reveling in the pleasure of trash, Wall•E saves items valuable to a quirky robot, reminding us that it is not a limited understanding of durable time that provides the means for regenerative ecological and human reproduction on earth, but rather, an expansive robot time that considers the endless possibilities in trash.

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