

death of a robot

Watching two sci-fi classics again recently set Paul Vincent musing on metaphors of life and death

Surely 'Death of a Robot' is a daft title? Machines, even complicated ones, can hardly be described as living so how can they die? Yet two films most of you will have seen the first time they came out were shown again on television a while back, and they invited us to consider just that question.

Bladerunner

In the first film, Harrison Ford is a futuristic cop working in a bleak cityscape where it is always night, tracking down a group of robots indistinguishable from humans. These robots have started to follow their own agenda, which is a quest for immortality. The robots look and behave like people and are given personalities and emotions.

When the Harrison Ford character guns down a fleeing female robot, or in his chilling phrase brings about 'a routine retirement', we see a human figure crash to the floor. The character wonders, as we do, whether the fact that it is a robot, or is meant to appear to be one, makes shooting people in the back more acceptable.

At the end of the film we see another robot save the Harrison Ford character from death, and then die himself after mourning that he cannot pass on the memories of the wonderful things he has seen. At this point we watch a white dove fly into the sky, presumably to suggest a soul escaping.

Terminator 2

In this film, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a robot sent back through time to protect a young teenager from an even more destructive robot also sent back through time to kill him. With a nice touch of irony, the killer robot mostly appears as a policeman, and has the frightening ability to turn into liquid metal and reconstitute himself when shattered by freezing with liquid nitrogen.

The Schwarzenegger character is taught by the boy to behave as if he were a father figure. At the end of the film he sacrificially saves the teenager and the world, and then obliterates himself, having ensured the destruction of the liquid-metal killer-policeman robot. The viewer sees the world through the computer's eyes; or, as if looking at a computer screen, a digitised image reduces to a thin red line and then blankness. We are supposed to feel the death of a person, not the end of a machine.

Machines and metaphor

Both these films explore human death via the proxy of machines. People without Christian faith often find human



death too painful to think about deeply, but perhaps they can consider death from a safe distance by looking at the demise of a machine.

The films seem to imply that machines can have souls. In *Bladerunner* the soul is produced partly through memories and partly through pre-programming, while in *Terminator 2* it is through learned behaviour. In both films, the robots have reached such a high degree of sophistication that they can appear to act of their own volition, although this can only be dependent on their pre-programming, or other phenomena controlled by their creators.

Since the makers of *Bladerunner* show their robots as being almost human, do they mean to say that humans are simply a mixture of pre-programming and memories? Do these processes therefore create life, and therefore the possibility of death?

Here we come to the nub of the thing. Humans might create robots in their own image, but we can only give them instructions, and not souls. What is a soul if it is not the part of us that communicates with our Father?

On the other hand, our Father gives us souls and an instruction book, but not pre-programming. He lets us make our own mistakes, if we want to. And he has made us in his image, and not the other way round. The really good bit is that when we die we go and meet our Creator. And Christians get a perfect new body and clothes thrown into the bargain. Who could resist a deal like that? Yet the secular world hardly dare consider death except at arms' length through machines in movies.

Still, will you feel quite the same when you chuck your obsolete old 386 into the bin?

Paul Vincent is a GP in County Durham