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ISAAC ASIMOV VS. THE FRANKENSTEIN COMPLEX

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To Isaac Asimov, who calls the fear of mechanical intelligence the "Frankenstein complex" (Warrick, 2002:170), machines just take over dehumanizing activities and thus allow humans to become more human. "The […] computer," he states, "is far superior at those mental tasks that are dull, repetitive, stultifying and degrading, leaving to human beings themselves the far greater work of creative thought in every field from art and literature to science and ethics." (Warrick, 2002:170)
Literarily, Asimov upholds his statement by the three laws of robotics that he himself devised, analogous to the Ten Commandments in the *Old Testament* (Moore, 1976:101):

> *1. A robot may not injure a human being nor, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.*
> *2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.*
> *3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (Asimov, 1983:269-270).*

These laws, which are obviously designed to protect humans from any harm resulting directly or indirectly from the action of a robot, are written into the robot's positronic brain. More than that, in Asimov's stories at least, only robots with this powerful safeguard are produced and they are manufactured by the same company - United States Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc.

Asimov's laws, however, are more like moral rules that can be easily broken, many of their features resembling those of traditional ethical norms, as Susan Calvin, on of the characters in "Evidence" (1946), says:

> *[…] if you stop to think of it, the three Rules of Robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems. Of course, every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self-preservation. That's Rule Three to a robot. Also every "good" human being, with a social conscience and a sense of responsibility, is supposed to defer authority […] even when they interfere with his comfort or his safety. That's Rule Two to a robot. Also, every "good" human being is supposed to love others as himself, protect his fellow man, risk his life to save another. That's Rule One to a robot. (Asimov, 1983:530)*

The main difference is that, while robots invariably submit to these rules, humans tend to break them all the time. Maybe that is the reason why the same Susan Calvin adds, "I like robots. I like them considerably better than I do human beings." (Asimov, 1983:544) Although the robots' behaviour seems irrational sometimes, scientific investigation proves

not only the opposite but also that their rationality, of a strictly mechanical nature, "is the answer to social and moral problems." (Wolfe, 1979:158).

Asimov's themes

Many of Asimov's robot stories explore the way in which the three laws influence the man-machine relationship, the author rarely using dramatic conflict to develop his plot. It is a puzzle or problem that he more often than not brings to the foreground and the suspense thus created moves the plot forward. The action is more cerebral than physical and follows the scientific method pattern: defining the puzzle/problem; collecting and evaluating the data; forming the hypothesis and the possible solution; testing the solution and, if this is not correct, re-examining the process until discovering the difficulty.

Identity confusion. Although Asimov strongly insists that, "My robots were machines designed by engineers, not pseudo-men created by blasphemers" (Frude, 1984:89), he deliberately creates confusion between robots and people. Some of his characters appear as robots firs, to be revealed as people later, while in other stories the process is reversed or ambiguity is preserved until the end, leaving the reader in a state of uncertainty. In "Evidence," for instance, Susan Calvin is called in to help decide whether a prominent politician is a human or a robot. Resorting to the three laws, she uses the following line of reasoning: if the politician obeys the laws, he could be either a human or a robot; if he does not obey the laws, he cannot be a robot, therefore he is a man. The minute the politician punches an opponent the problem seems to be solved, but Calvin explains that a robot might appear to break the first law only when the "person" harmed is not a human but a robot.

Humanization. Even when their identity is not in doubt, Asimov's robots get features which humanize them. The author carefully provides not only their specific physical details but also their personality characteristics, creating essentially human "personalities" which push the basic function of the machines into the background.

Such engaging robots often stimulate emotional attachments in the humans around them, as in Asimov's first robot story, "Robbie" (1940), in which the machine listens in rapt attention while Gloria, an eight-year-old girl, reads him his favourite fairy tale. Since Robbie enjoys all Gloria's games, the girl's mother gets worried, in spite of her husband reassuring her that, "Robbie was constructed for only one purpose really – to be the companion of a little child. His entire 'mentality' has been created for the purpose. He just can't help being faithful and loving and kind. He's a machine – *made* so." (Asimov, 1983:171) Robbie's impact on Gloria is extreme, the girl preferring to spend all her time with him and, when her mother replaces him with a dog, she screams, "He was *not* no machine. […] He was a person just like you and me and he was my *friend*. I want him back." (Asimov, 1983:175)

The relationship between robots and the humans they interact with can also be maternal or romantic. Susan Calvin, a psychologist specialized in robot psychology, tends to treat robots as colleagues and in "Lennie" (1958) she teaches a retarded robot to speak, his first words being, "Mommie, I want you. I want you, Mommie" (Asimov, 1983:384). And the psychologist hurries longingly toward "the only kind of baby she could ever have or love" (Asimov, 1983:384).

Most of Asimov's robots are male and this limits the possibility for human-machine romantic relationships. There is no *femme fatale* robot in his stories, the explanation being indirectly offered by one of the characters in "Feminine Intuition" (1969): "No woman wants to feel replaceable by something with none of her faults" (Asimov, 1983:582)

In “Satisfaction Guaranteed” (1951), however, Asimov does not reject the possibility that a woman might fall in love with one of his robots. Claire Belamont is irresistibly attracted toward Tony, a sophisticated robot, extremely handsome and well-mannered. Soon Claire will share all his emotional problems and be impressed by the robot’s understanding attitude: “Why did she keep forgetting that he was a machine. […] Was she so starved for sympathy that she would accept a robot as an equal - because he sympathized?” (Asimov, 1983:357) But while Tony behaves according to the three laws of robotics, Clair gives vent to her passion to later discover that “machines can’t fall in love, but – even when it’s hopeless and horrifying – women can!” (Asimov, 1983:367)

The robots’ rights and evolution is the theme of Asimov’s masterpiece, a novella called *The Bicentennial Man* (1976). Told in twenty-three episodes, it covers two hundred years in the life of the robot Andrew Martin. Inverting the classical approach – man examining artificial intelligence – Asimov has Andrew explore the nature and implications of human intelligence.

At first, Andrew is a household robot that serves the Martin family, much the role of Robbie. But Andrew produces exquisite wood carvings, an unusual talent which, as a robopsychologist suggests, must be the result of a mutation of the robot’s positronic brain. Andrew’s owner realizes there might be a market for the robot’s works of art and opens a bank account in the robot’s name. Andrew uses the money to pay for his own repairs and, when he has grown rich enough, he declares he wants to buy his freedom. Since this is a legal matter, the Martin family takes the case to court. After a long struggle, the court declares Andrew free stating that, “There is no right to deny freedom to any object with a mind advanced enough to grasp the concept and desire the state.” (Asimov, 1983:646)

Andrew has a house built near his former owner’s, begins to wear clothes, which make him feel human, and decides to go to the public library in order to increase his understanding of human affairs. On his way to the library two young men accost him, ask him to take off his clothes, and want to dismantle him. Saved in the nick of time, Andrew hires a lawyer and starts to fight for robot rights. In his plea, the lawyer says that, “a robot is not insensible; it is not an animal. It can think well enough to enable it to talk to us, reason with us, joke with us. Can we treat them as friends, can we work together with them, and not give them some of the fruit of that friendship, some of the benefit of co-working? […] With great power goes great responsibility, and if the robots have Three Laws to protect men, is it too much to ask that men have a law or two to protect robots?” (Asimov, 1983:656-657) Finally the principle of robot rights is established.

Andrew writes a history of robots and intends to use the royalties to replace his mechanical body by an organic android structure. After a long series of operations his metal shell is replaced with the type of body he has longed for. Nevertheless, Andrew is far from being happy. By now generations of Martins have passed and the robot realizes that mortality is a necessary condition of humanness. And he makes the ultimate sacrifice – he gives up his deathless inorganic brain to fulfil his greatest dream: to be as nearly human as possible.

Asimov’s novella, as Patricia Warrick points out, follows both the movement of mechanical intelligence toward human intelligence and death, and man’s development of technology and movement toward artificial intelligence and immortality (Warrick, 2002:177) Knowledge eventually dies in the organic brain, but it can survive in a mechanical one. Thus the inorganic form may well be the only form for the survival of intelligence in the universe. A second implication of the novella is that the line between the organic and the inorganic seems to be extremely blurred. If the essential elements of the universe are matter, energy, and intelligence, then man is not unique, on the contrary he exists on a continuum with all intelligence, and ethical behaviour extends to all systems

because any organizational pattern – human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic – represents intelligence – a "sacred view of the universe, the result not of religious mysticism but of pure logic" (Warrick, 2002:177).

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Abstract

In his stories, Isaac Asimov rejects the fear of artificial intelligence, which he calls the Frankenstein Complex, claiming that machines, no matter how advanced they are, cannot but ease man's life by taking over the most dehumanizing activities. The author upholds this idea by putting forward the so-called laws of robotics which, being inserted in the robots' minds, prevents them from affecting man's integrity. Asimov's stories, whose favourite themes are confusing identity, humanization, robots' rights and evolution, ingeniously show that, no matter how hard they try, robots are not able to betray the human beings; on the contrary, their irresistable temptation is to be taken for them.

Résumé

Dans ses contes, Isaac Asimov rejette la crainte de l'intelligence artificielle qu'il nomme le « complexe Frankenstein », soutenant l'idée que les machines, quelques évoluées qu'elles soient, ne font qu'alléger la vie de l'homme, en prenant la charge de ses plus deshumanisantes activités. L'auteur traduit son idée par l'élaboration des soi-disant lois de la robotique qui, par l'insertion dans le cerveau des robots, empêchent ces derniers de porter atteinte à l'intégrité de l'homme. Ces contes où les thèmes de prédilection sont la mêlée des identités, l'humanisation, les droits et l'évolution des robots, démontrent avec ingéniosité que les robots, quoi qu'ils fassent, ne peuvent trahir les gens mais, bien au contraire, éprouvent l'irrésistible tentation de se confondre avec eux.

Rezumat

In povestirile lui, Isaac Asimov respinge teama de inteligenţa artificială, pe care o numeşte „Complexul Frankenstein", susţinând că maşinile, indiferent cât de evoluate ar fi, nu fac decât să uşureze viaţa omului prin preluarea celor mai dezumanizante activităţi. Autorul îşi susţine ideea prin elaborarea aşa-numitelor legi ale roboticii care, prin inserţia în creierul roboţilor, îi împiedică pe aceştia să atenteze într-un fel sau altul la integritatea omului. Povestirile lui, în care temele predilecte sunt confundarea identităţii, umanizarea, drepturile şi evoluţia roboţilor, demonstrează cu ingeniozitate că, oricât de mult ar încerca, roboţii nu-i pot trăda pe oameni ci, dimpotrivă, tentaţia lor irezistibilă este de a se confunda cu ei.