

The Imaginaries of Merging Minds with Machines

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Abstract:

Throughout the twentieth century, research on brain-machine interfaces has inspired art in many different fields. Science fiction (SF) has taken up this emerging technology and produced various cultural artefacts that ascribe different functions and speculate on possible changes in our society.

The neurointerface blurs the boundary between humans and machines, imagines technomorphised hybrids and leads to new images of human being like the cyborg or the simulated mind within a computer framework. These imaginaries raise technophilosophical questions about the soul, about individuality and autonomy in the face of technological progress, about the qualia of life as well as the question of what it means to be and to be perceived.

Spread through entertainment media such as computer games, books and moving images, these SF imaginaries are more than just entertainment, as they also shape the way we perceive and think about new technologies. They diffuse into areas outside of SF and form a cultural ecosystem surrounding the actual technology. Here, different Visioneers and Entrepreneurs commodify the speculative technofutures, reduce the critical visions to pure gadgetery and cut off the often deeply philosophical questions of SF. Seen in this way, the neurointerface becomes one of many examples of the discursive transformational process on the intersection between technological development and popular culture.

In this paper I reflect on the ecosystem of the neurointerface and trace the transformation of the trope through different discursive fields. I provide an insight into Neuropunk, a SF subgenre that encompasses a variety of science fiction narrations that negotiate the neurointerface as an object that imagines possible social, political and cultural change, and are preceded by different images of humans and notions of human-machine interactions. Through this example, this paper contributes to the study of SF as a resource for hermeneutic research on technofutures.

Biography

Wenzel Mehnert is a cultural and media scholar who works at the Austrian Institute of Technology and the Berlin Ethics Lab at TU Berlin. His research focuses on sociotechnical imaginaries of new and emerging technologies. In addition to the analytical study of technological futures in various discourses, he develops qualitative methods to reflect on contemporary futures using creative means from design and literature. His doctoral thesis is dedicated to the science fiction subgenre neuropunk and analyses the present and past imaginaries of the neurointerface in popular culture.