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Rezensiert für H-Soz-u-Kult von Angela Schwarz

Man's dream of creating a living organism, an organic and/or mechanic being resembling himself, in essence of acquiring the divine ability to create life, is much older than is generally assumed in the industrial, some would say post-industrial age we live in. The technological visions shared by machine enthusiasts since at least the seventeenth century, the obsessions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century eugenicists, today's projects of genetic engineering and the more or less realistic designs of blending human existence and digital technology, man and the computer, are only the more recent forms of this dream. However, due to countless reproductions and variations of man-like machines and machine-like men in the mass media, particularly in film, it is the more recent conceptions of artificial life that are uppermost in our minds. And they certainly are, for who would not be fascinated - either with enthusiasm or with horror - by screen creations such as Frankenstein's monster - superbly played by Boris Karloff in the early 1930s -, the Golem versions of Jewish mythology in German and French cinema, the divers robots appearing as either obedient servants or (near-)invincible threats to their human and thus imperfect makers, the killing machine „Terminator“, the character Data from „Star Trek - The Next Generation“, i.e. the android who would be man, or the replicants of „Blade Runner“, artificial beings who are more human than their creators. In the last twenty years or so cinema has also experimented with humans entering the artificial world of cyberspace and with the possibility to resuscitate actors who died long ago by means of the computer. In film at least, if not already in real life too, the dividing line between what is real and what is artificial has long since disappeared.

„Artificial Humans, Manic Machines“ refers to mythical or technological creations of that kind, to monsters, homunculi, mandrakes, robots, androids, cyborgs¹. The title, however, spans an even wider spectrum of artificial creations, including characters who, like Lara Croft or Kyoko Date, only exist virtually, in cyberspace, as well as human beings who are real but whose personalities are fabrications, meaning pop and film stars. The ways artificial life thus defined has been modelled and remodelled on the screen throughout the twentieth century is the central theme of the book. The films discussed are mostly German and American films, including a few French, Italian and British productions. However, one of the lengthier essays of the anthology turns to Russian avantgardist film after the Bolshevik Revolution, and another, shorter one, to Japanese productions in the line of Manga and Anime films. Fortunately, the editors, all of them on the staff of the Museum of Film - German Film Archive in Berlin, have decided to not only discuss the robots and artificial humans as they appear on the screen, but to include an exploration into their childhood and adolescence, i.e. into the literary and cultural history that formed them - and, in the case of National Socialist racial policy, into the ideological background too. This is why some of the twenty-four chapters offer collections of documents, interpretations of man, of the machine, of the Golem, a libretto and screenplay of a Russian play called „The Edison Woman“. Texts like these bring back into mind that in most cases the film representations of artificial life so familiar to us only constitute the most recent manifestations of a long-standing myth. It is another asset that the book is profusely and excellently illustrated. In general expressive film scenes or film posters are reproduced so that, even though they might still have them on their minds, the readers may see the screen beings created in the image of man again and study them more closely.

Although the majority of contributions is rather short, the introductory essay on „Dream replicants of the cinema“ by Georg Seesslen gives its topic a broader scope and offers a profound and multi-faceted analysis of the relationship between man and the machine, an intriguing overview of the various aspects to be dealt with in more detail in the respective essays on the following pages. Seess-

¹This review is based on the German original of „Artificial Humans“. As can be deduced from the information provided by the publishers, the text of the English translation has been abridged, the number of illustrations reduced.

len shows the relationship to be an ambiguous one, since mankind projects its hopes and dreams of immortality as well as its fears onto the object - or rather being - brought into existence. He draws the reader's attention to the influence of monotheistic religion, which, according to Stanislaw Lem, declared all attempts at creating an image in kind to be heresy. He takes us back to the roots of superhumans, robots and androids, i.e. to fables and medieval superstitions, to romantic and gothic literature, to the first dreams of what might be achieved if mankind could only make technology help it overcome its limitations, the mental and physical ones. And he discusses the development artificial humans and manlike machines have undergone in twentieth-century cinema, based on the image of two complementary forms: the creature that looks like a human being though it is a machine and the one that looks like a machine but thinks and feels like a human. In most films it is science combined with ritual that determines the act of creating life out of dead matter.

It has been argued that the creation of artificial life in films, nearly always depicted as a male activity, is to be understood as the attempt of men to generate life without woman. Thus, in women studies, the robots, androids and cyborgs have been read as expressions of male dreams and nightmares. In a thought-provoking essay, Elisabeth Bronfen looks at the female cyborg, her power and powerlessness. To her, the self-sacrifice of the cyborg character at the end of Terminator 2 is proof of feminine or rather motherly qualities acquired by the T-800.

Since the book's understanding of the term artificial is a broad one, the subsequent essays move on to deal with the female vamp of the silent movie era as an artificial creation just as with fabricated biographies and images of actors and pop stars in our age of mass media and mass consumption. An essay on virtual celebrities like Kyoko Date, Max Headroom or Lara Croft serves as a reminder of the extent to which real space and cyberspace have already intermingled. Today, everyone may create - virtual or artificial - „life“, can produce his or her own movie with „artificial humans and manic machines“, if only in cyberspace. It just needs a computer. It is to be wondered at which - virtual - creations the future may catapult into existence.

The approach embracing predecessors and traditions, the first-rate illustrations and, of course, the essays themselves with their broad range of

topics make the book a delight to read. In addition, readers asking for more may turn to an excellent, if short annotated bibliography (twenty-seven titles), biographical notes (forty-five entries) - some of them rather short - and a glossary (nineteen entries) on artificial humans. Furthermore, all the films mentioned in the text are listed in a „filmography“ at the end of the book.

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