Representation of Robots in *Star Wars*

By Elias Truitt

The media's depiction of robots has varied greatly over the last century, as many modern films tend to portray robots as negative or even evil entities, often plotting the destruction of humanity. Modern films like *The Matrix, I, Robot,* and *M3GAN* have consistently reinforced this idea that robots and artificial intelligence are a dangerous technology that could result in deadly consequences. However, this hasn't always been the case. Society's views on robots are constantly evolving and changing, and with this, the media's depiction of robots is also changing and evolving, often alternating depending on society's contemporary views on technology and artificial intelligence. George Lucas' 1977 film *Star Wars* was one of the first popular films to include robots as central characters, having a major impact on how the media would go on to write and depict robots on-screen.

Before the release of *Star Wars* in 1977, there were not a significant amount of films that used robots or artificial intelligence as a key aspect of the plot. One of the most notable examples of this would be Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Released in 1968, *2001: A Space Odyssey* was one of the first major motion pictures to feature a human-made robot as a central character, however this character is ultimately the villain of the film, turning on the crew of the Discovery One spacecraft and attempting to kill them. For the next nine years after its release, *2001: A Space Odyssey* would set the precedent for how artificial intelligence was portrayed in films, until the release of *Star Wars.* The original *Star Wars* film revolves around an intergalactic battle for supremacy between the Empire and the Rebels. In the beginning of the film, we are introduced to two robots named R2-D2 and C3P0, as they attempt to deliver a message from the leader of the Rebels to a long lost warrior named Ben Kenobi. While they are not the

protagonists of the story, RD-D2 and C3PO are integral to the plot of the film, in addition to being two of the first robotic characters to be portrayed in a positive light. R2-D2 is a clever and helpful little robot, who's cute robotic noises only added to the character's likeability. C3P0's quirky British accent and awkward mannerisms gave him a unique charm that made him one of the first friendly humanoid robots in cinema.

George Lucas' uniquely positive take on robots would go on to be an incredibly influential aspect of the Star Wars franchise, leading to popular films like *WALL-E, The Iron Giant,* and *Transformers* expanding society's concepts of how robots could be viewed and portrayed. However, As mentioned earlier, this is a constantly alternating concept, and while RD-D2 and C3P0 would continue to be fan favorites throughout the initial Star Wars trilogy, the 1980s introduced a number of films that would contradict Lucas' charming robotic characters. Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* would provide a new take on humanoid robots, questioning their place in society and how their lack of a conscience or soul separates them from humanity. However it would be the subsequent release of films like *Terminator* and *RoboCop* that would truly shape society's then view of androids and artificial intelligence for years to come. Depicting some of the most intense and violent imagery involving robots at that time, these films provided an important commentary about the potential danger of advanced technology and artificial intelligence in the hands of the police or world governments. Because of this, George Lucas would go on to drastically rework the way robots are portrayed in Star Wars in later years. In the 1999 prequel film *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace,* the audience is very quickly introduced to the robot army that has been plotted against our Jedi protagonists. In this new version of Star Wars, robots are the main soldiers used by the villains in

order to take down the Jedi, going against George Lucas' initial ideas of friendly and helpful robots from the original films.

As we've seen, the media's depiction of advanced technology and robotics can have a direct influence over society's views of these concepts. This evolution of how robots and artificial intelligence are depicted, just within the Star Wars franchise, represents just how quickly and sporadically society's views can change in accordance with contemporary media, as well as how the media will often follow these changes, while occasionally providing a unique perspective that may influence society's views at large. Star Wars continues to be one of the biggest and most influential media franchises in history, and as they continue to produce new content, their portrayal of androids and robots will most likely continue to evolve and fluctuate.