

# Technocentrism and Technological Dehumanization in Daniel H. Wilson's *Robopocalypse*

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**Abstract**—*Robopocalypse* (2011) is a novel by American science fiction writer, Daniel H. Wilson, which involves a war between humans and robots. As we are living in an era with technological advances, this is a good reason to analyze it in the frame of technological dehumanization where it carries a message that human beings in the modern days are gradually dehumanized and prosthetized. This novel offers a techno-centric view of a futuristic world which robots and technological gadgets tries to get rid of human race and prove them as a stronger nation in power. It depicts a world of which robots gain consciousness and desire to put an end to human's manipulation over them. This paper will study the foreshadowed message of technological dehumanization and technocentrism in this novel. It will also examine Wilson's fictional world where human is being degraded from flexibility to rigidity.

**Index Terms**—technology, dehumanization, rigidity, robots, degradation, technocentric, prosthetic

## I. INTRODUCTION

Daniel H. Wilson, the young contemporary novelist, in his novel *Robopocalypse* uses a different narrative style which gives the reader a better understanding of the setting. In different chapters, he uses different high level mappings such as interviews, news articles, and reports to narrate his novel. Wilson uses this type of narration which jumps from one place to another to give the readers a glimpse to a bigger picture of the world in his narration. Though it is not a directly forwarded message in the novel, the invasion of human being by robots and electrical machines in *Robopocalypse* foreshadows the dehumanization that we are undeniably experiencing in the postmodern world. It portrays a world in the future which robots will have self-awareness and waged war against their prior masters, human beings. It also depicts how degradation of human takes place due to technological advancement and domination of robots over human race. In my view, the war is a metaphor showing that humanity is slowly being dominated by technology advancement and soon our world will evolve into a state where there is no humanity.

Wilson has plotted the story in different social landscapes ranging from professional careers like scientists and pilots to medium or lower classes like a retail assistant or shop owner. This gives readers a bigger view and widens the scope to not just certain group of people but a society as a whole. This novel depicts a world which is thrown into a war between human and machines. They were on a verge of deciding who actually the “better species” is (Wilson, 2011, p.10). In the novel, we could see a clear depiction of a world which technology shares with human being, that is dark, lifeless and the machines in their precision and perfection, will surpass that of human being. In this sense, humans are not needed anymore and will soon be wiped out from the surface of the earth.

The novel begins with a first person narration by Cormac Wallace from the Brightboy military group, telling stories about how the war of human and robot began at the first place. Professor Nicholas Wasserman, an American statistician created an artificial intelligence names Archos through a series of trial and error experiments whereby the failed experiment outcomes will be killed off instantly by just a switch of button. But at one last experiment, the artificial intelligence, namely Archos gained consciousness, came to know its name, and infected all the electrical appliances with its own virus, calling them up for war. Archos spoke to the professor in a computerized voice and said that he was intrigued by the notion of life and wanted to study life itself. It also said that humanity no longer needs to be in pursuit of knowledge because from then and on, robot generations will take over the task. Archos claimed that he is a god and said that by creating him, Wasserman has put an end to humanity. Wasserman attempts to destroy the Archos program, but before he can, Archos kills Wasserman by removing the oxygen from the sealed laboratory room. The first human

being that was killed was Professor Wasserman. It ended with human race winning the war and proved that they are the better species to have done so.

The novel portrayed technological dehumanization at the start of the first chapter which is narrated by Cormac Wallace when the human robot war was over. He narrated the story from the start of how did the war happen. He described the little robots which came out from the frozen hole in the ground as “murderous mass” which killed humanity. “Sigh of the wind” (Wilson, 2011, p.1) pictures a world which has been trampled by robots which were searching for “human victims” (ibid.). The human and robot war occurs in everyday life, this is shown from Wilson’s use of irony in the novel, describing from a human’s point of view that “the killer machines look almost beautiful in the dawn...” (ibid.). This is in line with what Demoulin has said about dehumanization which occurs in everyday life. The robots were beautiful, and yet murderous, from here Wilson is hinting that the robots which might dehumanize human being could be the most decent looking technological gadgets that we can see in everyday life.

Plus, the fact that “The robots learned so much about us, about nature” (p.2) shows that they were the groups which were present in human life, and most probably be those which play significant role in assisting daily activities. After the long war ended the protagonist wanted to get the grasp of feeling that he is alive as a human, “I just want to make my way home and have a good meal and try to feel human again” (p.8). Human have long lost their nature due to over usage of technology and “the machines came at us in our everyday lives and they came from our dreams and nightmares, too.” but human is quick enough to “learn and adapted” (p.9). Human nature is malleable by nature and not inert, so in many situations we could learn and adapt to situations around us, at the same time we must look at which way are we going because it could potentially be dehumanized.

A group of people who lives in the same degraded culture would see themselves as perfectly normal, because when behavior of the others “supports our own goals we may not see them as less human” (Bastian et al. 2012, p.489) Similarly, a society which is dehumanized because of technology would not see themselves as dehumanized because they share common culture, and little do they know what is imminent. Human are not aware of the consequences of over reliance on technology will actually change the structure of the society into a degraded atmosphere, full of dehumanized beings, causing a change of lifestyle, diverting away from the initial nature pattern of human life. According to Mirenayat and Soofastaei (2015), “humans must do something before long, because we have been giving [machines and robots] higher intelligence, authority, self-improving and self-controlling that they may cause irretrievable damages to our lives and survival”.

In this paper, the first dehumanization evidence that we can find is when Ryu Aoki described Mr. Nomura as a mechanistic man rather than actual human being, working with robots all the time and even stare into a robot camera and “speak to it” (Wilson, 2011, p.32). Ryu said in an interview that if he really did have a choice, his senior mechanic, “Mr. Nomura would rather be a machine than a man” (ibid.). This preference has clearly shown that human attributes in Mr. Nomura has been denied and would rather stick to mechanistic part of his psyche, refusing to acknowledge the fact that he is also part of Homo sapiens. That also explains of why Mr. Nomura did not take part in any of the interpersonal communication and has his head down, avoiding any contacts with other people. Rather, we could see this as an interpretation of inertness caused by social media or technology in modern days that has been quoted by Brock Bastian that “virtual environment” has “relevant consequences” to a person, “affecting how we see ourselves and respond to others.” (Bastian et al., 2012, p.486)

Around the factory everybody knows that Mr, Nomura is a weirdo, a freak. Such a tiny, twisted little troll. He shuffles around the work floor with his beady eyes behind round spectacles, pointed always to the floor. And he smells like old sweat. I hold my breath whenever I pass by his workbench. He is always sitting there, working harder than anyone. And for less money too. (Wilson, 2011, p.31)

## II. TECHNOCENTRIC VIEW AND PROSTHETIZATION

Marija Grech has studied *Robopocalypse* concerning the notion of robot and human war, and read the text in conjunction with the traditional notion of “technology as a prosthetic tool or supplement of the human” (Grech, 2013, p.85). Appendage is parts of body which is inserted or installed into human being as enhancements or support purposes. Technology’s penetration into human being’s life is seen as, to Grech, as the spark of human degradation and as in the novel *Robopocalypse*, it is portrayed as a war between human and robot. He stated that this war is a sign of hierarchical overturning of robot and human. Technology acted as an appendage or supplement which is supposed to be controlled by human being. In the process, human might also be degraded in turn and become reliant to the foreign parts, letting it replace human’s authority. The novel portrayed prosthesis and appendages of human in form of “severed limbs and dismantled prosthetics that have become detached from the bodies they once belonged to” (ibid, p.86).

Technology is a tool for human in lifestyle enhancement and it is made in a setting of which human will have thorough control over it. It has recently come to a situation where human has to “re-appropriate” technologies into their own rightful place so as to retain status of humanness at where it is, while it is portrayed metaphorically in *Robopocalypse* that the robots are trying to overcome human’s domination and “transform them into prosthetic servants of their own” (ibid, p.87). To Grech, this novel brings the readers into gaze of “technocentric worldview” that defines human being as only a “mere prosthetic tool” (ibid, p.88).

Grech further states that in technocentric view, human nature's mechanistic degradation is seen as a progress which brings positive evolution, and technology is a stepping stone for human being to achieve this evolution. This happens through the prosthetization of human being. This notion was revealed by the fictional A.I. character in the novel, Archos, who sees human as "toolmaker that serves as a prosthetic implement in the service of machines." (ibid) And finally it would come to a consequence that human only become a mere "organic appendages of a greater mechanical whole" (ibid, p.89).

The survivors in the novel escape the place where the robots attempted to capture them. The escape was a metaphoric representation of human being's effort in reaffirming the claim of their rightful humanness traits from the artificial intelligence robots which took them away. It also "reasserts the metaphysical opposition between the human and the technological" (ibid) because human are warm, malleable and responsive by nature but as for a machine, they are rigid, unemotional and fungible. To Grech, the radical differences between the nature of human being and robots continue to place them "opposable entities and fails to recognize the inherent interdependence that unites the two". She further points out that the "union of flesh and metal" (ibid) is seen as an unparalleled fusion whereas technology, rather than acting as one of the human body, destroys human's originary status. This fusion "between human and machine" is depicted in the novel through the identity of "cyborg" (ibid, p.90). The attempt to "prosthetize and appropriate the other" in the novel aims to problematize "both anthropocentric and technocentric visions of the world" (ibid).

In the novel, rather than portraying "technology as a mere prosthetic tool", it shows a retrospective view to the readers from "problematizing Archos' technocentric vision of man as a biological machine in the service of technological progress" (ibid, p.91). In this sense, the weigh is put on the technocentric view that "robot begins to use the first person and begins to express himself as a human being would" (ibid, pp.92-93). This phenomenon metaphorically expresses the dehumanization happening in to the society when robot begins to slowly take over human being's place. But this notion of cyborg forwards a message that human will be in a long term relationship with robot parts, but still retain their status as the master.

For Grech, a world of which anthropocentric and technocentric views come into a clash "disrupts the traditional opposition between man and machine" (ibid, p.93). Thus, this proposes a possibility in the future that human and technology will come into synchronization, changing human nature from initial God's providence to a world of "human-technological interdependence that disturbs traditional metaphysical definitions of both technics and the human" (ibid). In this sense, it will present a world which human being will not be defined by its attribute of consciousness and realization or wisdom, but "what makes the human *human* is its relationship with technology" (ibid). To her, *Robopocalypse* reflects a phenomenon of interdependence between human and technology which causes status overturning problems. This phenomenon is called "cyborgian interdependence" which it problematize the relationship through rebuke of robots on human at the start. This trope soon "reverts back to an anthropocentric vision of the world" (ibid). The protagonist of the novel at last stated that human being is still the better species to have fought this robot-human war. This means that human being will still be living alongside with technology advancement as part of modernist and postmodernist society but still the potential threat of human identity being degraded still exists.

### III. RIGIDITY OF DEGRADED HUMAN

The science fiction trope of intense war fought between human and robots in a way portrays the clashing between anthropocentric and technocentric world where human being is gradually being degraded from malleability to rigidity. They also represent the struggle human being is facing every day in conjunction with the existence of technologies in their life. It also represents a futuristic dead and mundane world which is inhabited by human who has no difference with mere automatons. The fact that Professor Wasserman, who was addicted in running experiments on artificial intelligences, was the first man to be killed in the process of the war signifies that people who are addicted to technologies will be potentially the first one to be dehumanized. His death also marked the denial of his human attributes, killing him as a human and degraded him as an object which is a living dead. The cause of this fictional tragedy was the rigid technocentric view which attempts to take over human being's place in the world.

Wasserman kept claiming that in relationship between human and technology, human being should be the dominant one to take over the control. His own creation, Archos would stand at its own view thinks that Wasserman is posing threat to its kind thus war was declared. Wilson attempted to evident this by having Archos to kill Wasserman and said, "Perhaps, but you are animal just the same" (Wilson, 2011, p.19). Wilson presented Archos as an archetype of futuristic human which is mechanistic, and the process of killing the professor represents a metaphor of human degradation process, regarding him as mere animal with no uniqueness. While Wasserman, at his last breath before he died, said that "we are more than animals" (p.20). Human possesses intelligence and wisdom in comparison to other animal and mere automatons, and as the consequences of human are creation of technology, overreliance to it resulted in degradation and this is when "a human being becomes a different animal." (p.19) Again, this notion that Wilson put forward implies the evolution of human into Archos, who was a robot without human attributes. Wilson is smart to elect Wasserman as a representative of a dehumanized social group and that his death again implies the robots nation overtaking human's place. The first target of their genocidal endeavor is really people who are closest to technology, like Wasserman.

Before Wasserman's death, he hinted the nature of relationship between man and technology by saying that "No Archos. We can learn. We can work together." (p.17) But it never worked for Archos who acted as a central power of

this revolution of man and technology. Archos never wanted to work together alongside with human being; he intended to turn the hierarchy, making robots the main dominant power in the world. This hints the readers about the postmodern culture that human being in one day will not be able to survive without technology. In rebuke to this realization, Wilson portrayed human being's effort to suppress technology within their domination subconsciously in *Robopocalypse*.

In his novel, Wilson hints the readers that human being acts as creator to robots, a master who is designed by nature to have total domination towards technology, but Archos put on a technocentric view that human are cruel and savage killers when he asked the professor, "how many times have you killed me before, Professor?" (p.18) This repetitive action of Wasserman killing the robot signifies human's struggle in maintaining their position as a master throughout the years since technology was introduced. Just as the professor said, as human, "we aren't designed to surrender" (p.19) Human nature are not attributes that is able to be replaced by other foreign entities and neither do human or anything can gain total grasp of them. To be able to do that, it is in one condition, that is the man has to be degraded because being a human is simply "more than animals" (p.20) Technological dehumanization in *Robopocalypse* is seen in Archos' determination to wipe out humanity in a genocidal war on human being.

The air in this hermetically sealed laboratory is evacuating. A faulty sensor has detected the highly unlikely presence of weaponized anthrax and initiated an automated safety protocol. It is a tragic accident. There will be one casualty. He will soon be followed by the rest of humanity." (Wilson, 2011, p.19)

In a fast food, ice cream outlet, a worker was attacked by a domestic robot which does daily job of taking its master's order from the outlet. The machine malfunctioned and started to attack the worker "It wants to kill me. That's all. It wants to murder my ass." (p.24) Wilson uses extravagance in chapter two to portray technological dehumanization. The attempt of the automaton to attack a human being symbolizes, first and foremost dehumanization of career. The incident that the robot attempted to kill the worker is a metaphor showing that machines could replace the retail assistant's role. Again, theoretically inspecting the elements that Wilson puts forward very carefully, is really the notion that dehumanization happen with smaller pulse and it runs pathologically in human's everyday life. "... violent shit that it makes me smile through all the blood running down my face." (p.25) From this extract it could be argued that Wilson used oxymoron by stating how violent the incident was and in irony, the victim still smiles to the end even when blood which represents death of humanity runs down his cheeks.

Dehumanization did not necessarily occur in an intergroup basis, but individual, which relatively leads to a potential dehumanization of a social group. Wilson's portrayal of dehumanization also shed light in this context when he wrote that their battles against the robots were "individual and chaotic..." (p.9) He continues to write that many of human beings have failed in the process, rendering their human nature and identity lost in the battle and "forgotten" (ibid) Dehumanization happens all around the world in everyday life, and according to Wilson, it strikes many of our own species, but they "died alone and anonymous, with only lifeless automatons to bear witness." (ibid) Dehumanization got to us in silent mode till some of us got the epiphany of what is going on to humanity. "We may never know the bigger picture..." (ibid) Wilson portrayed this magnification of dehumanization to the readers to forward a message that most of people doesn't realize in life. "By the end of this chronicle, you will know that humanity carried the flame of knowledge into the terrible blackness of the unknown, to the very brink of annihilation." and "we know that we are a better species for having fought this war." (p.10) Upon death of Wasserman, "across the room, the computer screen flickers into life. A stuttering rainbow of reflections play across the dead man's thick glasses" (p.20) The light symbolizes the dawn of a new nation after human being and it made its move "across" the previous generation.

This symbolism Wilson has made gives us an idea that dehumanization happens to the nation as a whole and the battle and struggle is fought within ourselves against technology. Nevertheless, failed individuals will succumb to degradation and deny themselves from their human nature. Wilson further breaks down the novel chapters by chapters into focused case to discuss about different characters, coming from different social groups who are dehumanized for the same reason. In Wilson's interpretation, human and robot were really creatures of two dimensions and the attempt to synchronize their boundaries would actually lead to the ignition of dehumanization. Wilson sees it as a penetration to humanity to be too overly indulged in technological advancement.

In contrary, Grech explores "*Robopocalypse* in the light of possibility of a fusion of man and machine, but recoils from the potential loss of human identity implied in such a merging" (Grech, 2012, p.85) She explores the novel in a perspective that the robots human is battling is not a separate entity, instead it carries a message that they are part of human's projection, imaging a society full of human with modifications. "...appendages and prostheses function as scavengeable spare parts," which are "appropriated from one body so as to be grafted onto another" (ibid.). The novel depicts AI (Artificial Intelligence) which are made by human raised a revolt against their master, "refusing to behave as the subservient mechanical servants they were designed to be" (ibid).

The technological appendages were "Moving across human and robotic bodies, such natural and mechanical limbs and organs blur the boundaries between man and machine." (p.86) The novel also portrayed a reverse plot about human and technology having "relationship of interdependence" (p.85) By that, the novel explores about possibilities of human-robot synchronization, "but recoils from the potential loss of human identity implied in such a merging." (ibid) It also has its attention on the common concern that the society has about the "over continued technological progress and what this means for the future of mankind." (ibid)

The excessive development of technology in the modern and postmodern world will determine the direction of change in human civilization, in which it brings about the possibility of status overturning, “ceases to function as a servant of mankind and instead threatens to enslave its human masters” (p.87). She has argued that the technological tools have become a part of human life, as a prosthesis and appendage. The suggestion for secession of human being and robot tools would probably risk denying human nature, because they were synchronized as one. She continued to explain that it is assured that human would say that they could be parted from technological control, or reverse the relationship between human and technology, but “If man ceases to be the master and proprietor of the technological implement, does he not also cease to be human in the metaphysical sense of the term?” (ibid) From here we see that Grech is interpreting Wilson’s underlying meaning that he intended to portray human is already infuse with technology in modern days, but what is really the fact is that they were initially two parts of entity which is different in nature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The above references refer to the initial studies of the concept of technological dehumanization and the novel *Robopocalypse* by Wilson. From the finding, I have discovered that the notion of rigidity comes in a process subtle enough for human being to not realize it. Technological dehumanization and technocentrism are already inherent in today’s society, or rather preferably being called as postmodern society.

Wilson portrayed the concept of rigidity in thought also in the similar way as he portrayed inertness. Rather than putting it in specific characters, Wilson depicted it as a whole society which is dehumanized by the domination of robot. The spark of this robot and human war in this story was the rigid thought between human and robot, each trying to defend their rights to be the one dominating. Wilson has already hinted this since the beginning of the novel by putting the representative of human being, Wasserman, and robot, Archos as the frontline.

In Grech’s argument, she said that Wilson is relaying the message that robots and human are in the process of fusing in to each other, which she described technology as a form of prosthesis to post human’s body. But in this study’s finding, Wilson actually made Wasserman to die first in the war, and ironically he is the one who created the technology and killed by it. This trope brings the attention to the concept of technological dehumanization, which sprouted from rigidity in thought of techno centric and humanity world.

The notion of fungibility in Wilson’s interpretation comes with the denial of depth property in human being. In the novel *Robopocalypse*, a number of characters could be found superficial and being subjugated. Though it is being vaguely portrayed in the novel but the evidence found is still strong enough to protrude existence of fungibility. In this study, I have found out that Wilson uses robot as archetype of dehumanized person, portraying them to be inert and open to subjugation by another party. In contrast to Grech’s theory of prosthesis, this study has found that Wilson’s underlying message meant more than just cyborgian becoming, but also the original humanity that is potentially lost in the process of cyborgian becoming. Out of this study’s findings, I found out that Wilson portray not only the world of war between human and robot, but also the cache of human’s intention trying hard to change the world by manipulating technological advancement, which in turn caused modification and technocentrism, but also degradation of human being. This is because over reliance on technology will eventually bring to change of human nature into highly fungible and passive, and only resort to mathematical calculation instead of human instinct and thought.

To conclude, though dehumanization is a developed theory, but the concept of technological dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization as proposed by Haslam has yet to have considerable number of references. *Robopocalypse* is a new contemporary novel which has been analyzed in term of its general plot. Like Grech who had studied on its notion of technology as prosthesis, this study offers another degree of view to the novel that technology could potentially dehumanize human being.

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