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Isaac Asimov

How I, Robot gets the science-fiction grandmaster wrong.

By Chris Suellentrop
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Isaac Asimov was the steak-and-buffet restaurant of American authors: What he lacked in quality, he made up for in volume. If you didn't like what he was serving, you could wait a few minutes for him to bring out something else. By the time he died in 1992, at the age of 72, Asimov had published more than 470 books, ranging from science-fiction classics to annotated guides of great literature to limerick collections to *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man*, a defense and celebration of lechery. "His first 100 books took him 237 months, or almost 20 years, until October 1969, to write," his *New York Times* obituary observed. "His second 100, a milestone he reached in March 1979, took 113 months, or about 9 ½ years—a rate of more than 10 books a year. His third 100 took only 69 months, until December 1984, or less than 6 years." By the end, Asimov achieved the Grand Slam of book writing, turning out at least one volume for each of the 10 classifications in the Dewey Decimal System.

The thread that connected this prodigious output was Asimov's role as a teacher, "the greatest explainer of the age," as Carl Sagan called him. Whether the subject was science, Shakespeare, or the Bible, Asimov was a popularizer who wrote with clarity and concision. Even in his science fiction, the work for which he will be most remembered, Asimov was as much an explainer as a storyteller, an advocate for science and reason over mysticism. In fact, the rap on Asimov the fiction writer is that his stories are too simple, too obvious, too easy to be the stuff of great literature. In *Wired*, the science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow recently described Asimov's work as "proto-fiction ... from a time before the field shed its gills and developed lungs, feet, and believable characters." True. But if Asimov is so easy, why do so many people—including Alex Proyas, the director of *I, Robot*, and the movie's screenwriters, Akiva Goldsman and Jeff Vintar—keep getting him so wrong?

Asimov's novel *I, Robot*—which "suggested" the new movie of the same name—is basically an evangelical work, an argument against man's superstitious fear of machines. By the end of the book, machines run the economy and most of the government. Their superior intelligence and cool rationality eliminate imperfections such as famine and unemployment. Asimov mocks unions for having shortsightedly "opposed robot competition for human jobs," and he derides religious objections to new technology as the work of "Fundamentalist radicals." Almost without exception, anytime robots in the book appear to be doing wrong or seeking to harm their human masters, it turns out that the suspicious humans are misguided; the robots, as programmed, are acting in man's best interest.

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Asimov's faith in the rule of robots was genuine and based on his faith in the rule of reason. He viewed his now-canonical Rules of Robotics—the code for robot behavior used in his books—as a roadmap for human ethics. Just as Asimov's machines are better than people at calculating mathematics, they're superior at coming to moral judgments as well. Susan Calvin, the book's protagonist, calls robots a "cleaner better breed" than humans because they're "essentially decent." Superior logic produces superior ethics.

The movie takes the exact opposite approach and thereby betrays Asimov's vision. It elevates feeling and emotion over reason as a tool to determine the right moral decisions. Will Smith's character, Del Spooner, sneers at robots as "slaves to logic." When another character pleads, "Whatever you feel, just think," the audience is meant to take his preference for reason over sentiment as a sign of his villainy. And when the main antagonist outlines the Dastardly Plan unveiled during the film's climax, the villain defends the treachery by asserting, "My logic is undeniable."

In defense of Proyas, the *I, Robot* director is not the first to misinterpret Asimov, nor by far the worst. Some Asimov fans would likely select the director Chris Columbus for his mawkish *Bicentennial Man*, based on an Asimov novella, but they are aiming their sights too low. The prize goes to Shoko Asahara, the leader of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, or Aum Supreme Truth, which became famous after it killed 12 people in a sarin attack on the Tokyo subway. "Aum was using the *Foundation* series as the blueprint for the cult's long-term plans," write David Kaplan and Andrew Marshall in *The Cult at the End of the World*. In Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, a scientist named Hari Seldon leads a small band, called the Foundation, that tries to rebuild civilization after the collapse of a galactic empire. In the cult's view, their leader was Seldon, and Aum was the Foundation.

Granted, it's not unusual for sociopaths to glom onto works of fiction and use them to defend their aims. But Asimov may be the rare writer who has been adopted by two WMD-seeking terrorist leaders. Soon after the Sept. 11 attacks, some began speculating that al-Qaida, too, was inspired by Asimov. Why? *Foundation*, when it was published in Arabic in 1952, was translated as *Al-Qaida*. The evidence seems thin, but if it's true, it's as if Jodie Foster had inspired Hinckley *and* Oswald.

Asimov can't be blamed for his messianic adherents. Religiously motivated mass murderers overlook Asimov's vocal atheism and his opposition to violence, among other things, when they adopt his heroes as a model for their aims. But Asimov probably would have known why Asahara failed to understand his books—just as he surely grasped why it proved impossible for him, despite his best efforts, to stomp out the literary archetype of the evil robot run amok. Unlike Asimov's creatures, we're only human.

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