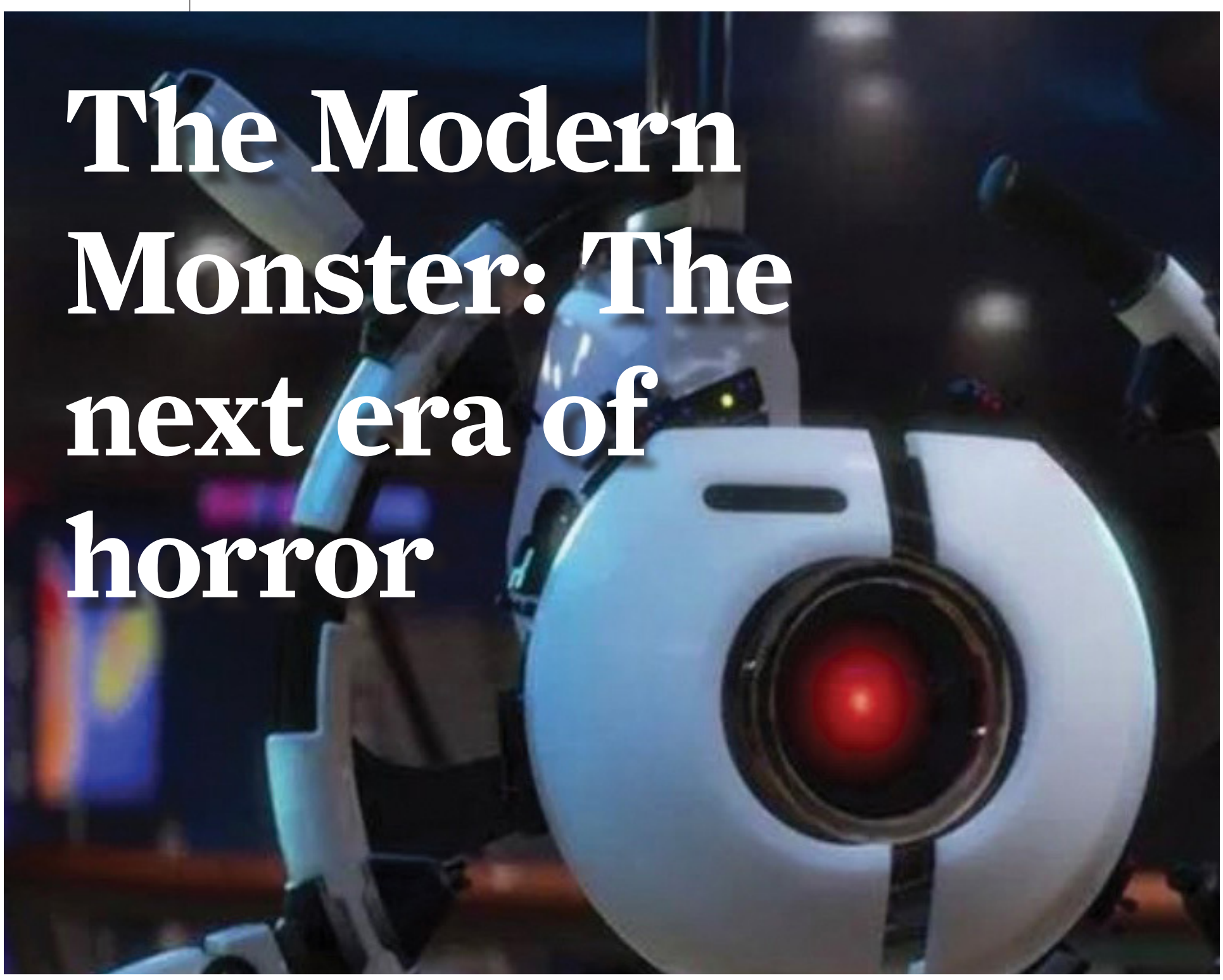
Daily

Life

The Modern Monster: The next era of horror



AUTO from "Wall-E." The robot is the primary antagonist of the movie.
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One of the biggest societal conversations right now is the artificial intelligence boom, and it's no surprise as to why — with the rise of OpenAI and the integration of AI into most social media platforms, it seems like there's a robot around every corner. If I had to guess, I'd say there might be an increase in AI-related horror on the way, but for how long have we worried about machines?

Hello and welcome back to the Modern Monster, a biweekly column about horror and its history. This time around, we're looking at a current day anxiety: artificial intelligence.

"Evil robots" are neither a new concept nor one exclusively seen in horror. Pixar's "Wall-E" features one of the better-known nefarious AIs in the form of a spaceship autopilot, known as AUTO.

While AUTO is the primary antagonist of the film, its status as a villain is questionable. AUTO is responsible for many of the actions that inhibit Wall-E, Eve and Captain McCrea, which specifically involves doing anything in its power to prevent McCrea from learning about Earth's newfound vegetation, which would prompt a return to humanity's home planet.

Although not a horror movie by any means, "Wall-E" presents one of our first questions on the topic of artificial intelligence: is AI evil, or are its creators?

AUTO operates in accordance with code implemented by the humanity of the past, specifically the individuals who made the decision to launch humankind into space following the events of whatever devastating cataclysm had ravaged Earth. This includes acting as a "first mate" to the captain, whoever it may be at the time, but AUTO is notably the only constant of the ship's leadership, given the short lifespan of humans.

Unbeknownst to McCrea, AUTO is not what it seems. The humans of the past programmed it with a special directive: even if a plant is found, humanity must never return to Earth. At the climax of the film, McCrea needs to physically fight off AUTO to confirm the ship's mission home.

While many might consider "evil robots" to specifically be rouge AIs, AUTO represent a side of artificial intelligence that seems like a much better picture of modern-day society. After all, ChatGPT is a large language model trained on the words of humans, and AUTO is driven by manmade code. Both are capable of evolving but remain based upon human ideas.

AUTO and its functions are also reminiscent of another famous machine: Mother from the 1979 horror classic "Alien," which also happens to be one of my all-time favorite films. Much like AUTO, Mother is a computer program responsible for overseeing the lives of humans but contains secret instructions that allow Mother to put those human lives at risk if it means furthering a separate goal. In this case, it's the capture and preservation of the xenomorph alien terrorizing the ship.

Not all AIs are created equal, however. While AUTO and Mother are still operating under a code designed by humans, some robots go rogue.

"Companion" is a 2025 sci-fi thriller directed by Drew Hancock. The movie features Sophie Thatcher as Iris ("Siri" spelled backward), a companion robot designed to meet the romantic and sexual needs of her "boyfriend" and owner, Josh (Jack Quaid). Josh and his friends manipulate Iris's programming (who is unaware of her robotic nature) to stage the murder of a billionaire in the hopes of taking his fortune without any of the blame.

While it may seem like a surefire plan, Iris develops a newfound sense of independence after learning of Josh's betrayal and the fabrication of their relationship. She makes the decision to strike out on her own, which involves, of course, a little bit of murder.

Unlike AUTO and Mother, Iris isn't designed to contain any desire to leave Josh's side. While she does have an adjustable setting dictating how violent she can be at any given moment, she's not programmed to seek independence or kill anyone, least of all ex-boyfriends.

If AUTO and Mother act as a reflection of humanity's darker impulses, essentially behaving as mechanisms of power to exert upon others, Iris is instead a response. For many, AI can pose a threat. After all, there's something disconcerting about an endlessly intelligent machine that's constantly learning, without a need for sleep or rest. Iris could act as a look at what might happen if AI ever suddenly gained enough sentience to rebel.

Ultimately, AUTO, Mother and Iris are all designed to be servants of humanity, but that's not the only kind of metal villain you can find on the big screen.

Released in 1999, "The Matrix" tells the story of Keanu Reeves' Neo, a man who has suddenly learned that his entire life, boring office job and all, is nothing more than a simulation designed by computers. The computers in question, known simply as the Machines, project the simulation into the minds of sleeping humans, who are unaware that their bodies are being used as fuel for this robotic race.

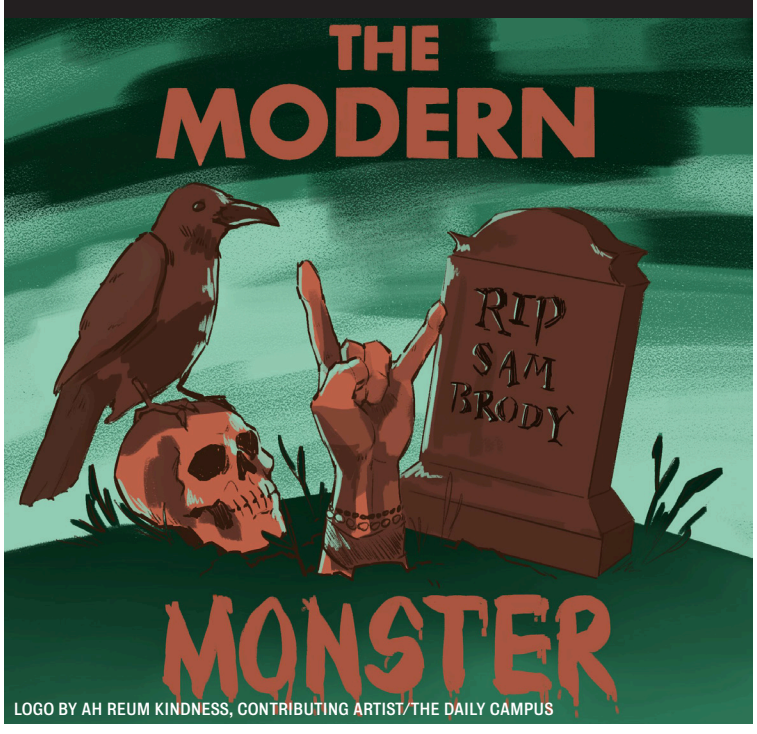
"The Matrix" is essentially an "anxiety piece" — released just before Y2K, the film clearly based itself upon the fears of the era. For some time, humanity feared the turn of the millennium, which could have spelled disaster for computer programs around the world. Many worried it would trigger some sort of catastrophic fallout.

"The Matrix" takes place sometime around 2199, although it's stated that the war between humans and machines took place in the 21st century, which only furthers the Y2K-inspired narrative.

While the current climate surrounding AI is not as intense or as widespread as the Y2K panic, it has some similarities. And if humans were making movies about evil robots in response to that era, it may be time for a new genre of horror to rise: artificial intelligence.



Iris from the 2025 film "Companion." Iris is a robot made to fulfill the romantic and sexual needs of her owner.
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