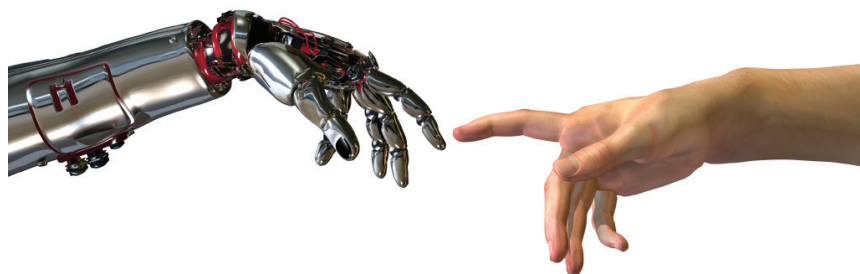




Android Nightmares

Google's plot to take over mind, body, and soul

HAVE YOU NOTICED the latest TV ads for the Droid, a Verizon mobile phone that uses Google's Android operating system? One features a handsome young man sitting in a business meeting. He pulls out his Droid, flips open the keyboard, and begins typing at increasingly superhuman speed. First his fingers, then his hands, and finally his arms turn into sophisticated circuitry—the bionic man. The sell line comes via a voice-over at the end of the commercial: “Turning you into an instrument of efficiency.”



Another ad for the device shows the iris of the user's eye transforming into digital circuitry as he merges with his technology.

What's the message here? I believe it's that Google, the company whose maxim is “Don't be evil,” has given itself over to a vision of the future in which human and machine morph into a monstrous hybrid. As Google's cofounder Sergey Brin recently declared, “We want to make Google the third half of your brain.”

Brin and Larry Page, the visionary entrepreneurs who together founded Google, are unabashed enthusiasts and promoters of what has come to be known as “the Singularity,” a vision of the near future in which human beings and machines merge so that illness, old age, and even death become things of the past.

Computer pioneer Bill Joy sounded the alarm about the Singularity a decade ago, in a *Wired* article titled “Why the

Future Doesn't Need Us.” He argued for voluntary relinquishment of genetic, robotic, and nano technologies, warning that intelligent robots could soon dominate humanity, and that all of nature could be swallowed in an oozing sea of tiny “gray goo” machines.

In two recent books, authors Kevin Kelly (*What Technology Wants*) and Steven Johnson (*Where Good Ideas Come From*) argue that the Singularity is already here, and that we couldn't stop it even if we wanted to because technology has its

own imperative. Well, I'm not ready to surrender.

In 2008 Brin and Page helped set up Singularity University, which meets in a NASA facility and offers a 10-week “graduate” course and a concentrated, nine-day program for CEOs, inventors, and venture capitalists. There, according to *New York Times* reporter Ashlee Vance, they discuss a time, possibly just a decade or two from now, when nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, robotics, and computing merge with human life, producing a “superior intelligence that will dominate and life will take on an altered form that we can't predict or comprehend in our current, limited state.”

Humans, we're just so, well . . . human.

Many of Silicon Valley's elite have embraced the Singularity, hoping that technology will allow people to seize control of the evolutionary process. “We will

transcend all of the limitations of our biology,” inventor Raymond Kurzweil, author of the movement's seminal work, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, tells the *Times*. Kurzweil is the Singularity's highest-leaping cheerleader and boasts that he intends to live for hundreds of years and resurrect his dead father.

I don't know about you, but the Singularity is not the world I want for myself, or for my children. Not that I'm willing to give up Google Search, or Google Earth, mind you. I just don't want to merge with a machine, or be dominated by one.

Mystic philosopher Rudolf Steiner predicted nearly 100 years ago that a cold evil would rise to prominence at the beginning of the 21st century. This malevolence, which Steiner dubbed Ahriman, is characterized by the denial of soul and spirit in favor of scientific materialism and the dominance of humans by machines. Google's multimillion-dollar ad campaign for Droid is putting images of the Singularity into the public's consciousness, and I don't want impressionable kids (or adults) to digest those images.

No one's talking these days about Google's vision of our future, though, or asking what the Singularity's implications are, or wondering what safeguards we need, or whether this vision is a world we even want. It's time for us to discuss the role of technology, and Google, and the Singularity. And it can start with one simple question.

What kind of future do you want? 

Eric Utne is currently editing a book featuring critiques of Google's guiding vision and the Singularity movement. If you'd like to contribute to this collection, recommend potential contributors, or join the discussion, please visit www.UtneInstitute.org/singularity.