The Terminator, WALL-E, R2D2, Optimus Prime. The answers to a quick, and very unscientific poll of my S1 class asking; ‘who’s your favourite robot?’ Despite finding their enthusiastic admiration for the red eyed, indestructible cyborg somewhat alarming, it did lead to the discussion; ‘what even is a robot?’ and, ‘why don’t we have robot butlers yet?’ And it was with these questions in mind, I entered into V&A Dundee’s latest exhibition ‘Hello, Robot. Design Between Human and Machine’.

Pupils will travel through four areas of robotic impact and evolution; with the first focusing on the social and cultural understanding of robots and robotics. English and Design Technology teachers will enjoy the opening cosy nook, offering a spot to read a plethora of books relating to robotics and sci-fi, and encouraging the interesting and controversial debates teenagers do so well, before even entering the main space.

Seconds in, I was struck by Douglas Coupland’s brightly coloured slogan posters tiling the wall. The cheerful, neon shaded backgrounds contrasting with humorously confrontational and unsettling text relating to technology; ‘Robots yearn to de-throne you.’ ‘Getting sh*tfaced in a driverless car is going to be awesome’. My Highers would love this, I thought. And not only for its extremely Instagram-able aesthetic, but rather that they are the young people who have grown up in a world constantly connected and submerged in technology, ‘swiping’ before they thought. I wondered what slogans of their own they might create in an Art and Design class, and how this could link into classic wartime propaganda posters in a Modern Studies or History lesson.

This idea of questioning our relationship with technology continued with the next piece that caught my attention: ‘Dragon Runner’; a robot used in the military during 2003’s ‘Operation Iraq Freedom’ to collect video footage for reconnaissance and aid in the detection of explosive devices. This fairly small, unexciting looking arm-on-wheels could potentially lend itself to igniting debates in the RME classroom around ethics, humanity, and how robotics could be used for great things within terrible contexts.

Even within the ordinary, everyday moments that make up our lives, we are relying more and more on robots as friends and personal assistants. How many of us have found ourselves saying ‘thanks’ to Alexa for adding milk to the shopping list, or dutifully get up off the sofa and go for a brisk walk to the fridge when prompted by the tiny robot on our wrists? And it’s here in the exhibition where pupils would be challenged to reflect on whether robots might ever replace humans in a social or cultural context. Confronted with a large mechanical arm holding a baby’s bottle, and a robotic ‘hand’ comforting the terminally ill with a gentle touch, I am simultaneously fascinated, impressed and terrified of these machines. As a creative-writing prompt, these particular robots could be the start of an interesting conversation, or a dramatic short piece. ‘Do we want robots to feed our children? Can it tell when a baby is full? What happens if...’

The team at V&A certainly saved the best ‘til last, with the final part of the exhibition exploring the physical and psychological barriers between humans and robots. Containing wearable and technology-embedded fashion, products, architecture and urban planning, I was blown away by Spider Dress 2.0 – designed by Dutch fashion designer Anouk Wipprecht. It’s form, resembling a human-sized arachnid exoskeleton, extends from the shoulders, sensing and protecting the wearer from unwanted physical contact. In the current political, social and cultural climate, and the #MeToo movement, this piece has the potential to really spark dialogue and debate from pupils studying across many disciplines. Art and Design students might consider the unsettling yet simultaneously beautiful aesthetic and consider the form vs function of the dress. Design and Technology, the practicalities of wearable tech and materials, and RME, Modern Studies, History could undoubtably unpack the social and cultural climates surrounding such a piece being created.

Despite the name, ‘Hello, Robot’, is about so much more than that. It’s about us; who we are, who we want to be and what this complex, symbiotic relationship with machines exposes. Although as Secondary teacher I naturally view things through my own subject lens, the opportunities for learning and teaching across all disciplines is basically infinite and to quote everyone’s favourite cyborg, I’ll be back.

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