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Do Androids Go Berserk? Frenzied AI in American Cinema

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Originally coined by Jonathan Shay to refer to the hyperbolic aggression that lies “at the heart of”(98) the psychosocial problems experienced by the veteran who has undergone traumatic stress, the concept of berserk fury is observed in desperate combat, which helps the combatant to “plunge[s] into reckless emergency action” (Farrell 2000, 182) when it is direly needed. While the phenomenon appears to be universal, from the fuming Malaysian brawlers for whom the term going amok was used and the Viking warriors who went berserk during skirmishes, to the Turkish akıncı or serdengeçti units known for their selfless desire for battle, a form of it pops up wherever we look. In his reformulation of it, however, Kirby Farrell refers to a berserk style –a motif shaped through “cultural influences”(2011, vii) in which “the uncanny powers associated with abandon”(2011, 7) are crystallized. Moreover, the trope also involves “fantasies that are pervasive if often unacknowledged in American culture”(2011, 8). The cultural style associated with going berserk, however, is not limited to humans. Indeed, a quick look at some popular US films exploring the concept of artificial intelligence (AI) reveals that berserk abandon is widely used to characterize aggressive, rebellious, or oppositional AI characters. Some of the most popular AI films, for instance, such as Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), James Cameron’s the Terminator (1984), Alex Proyas’s I, Robot (2004), Alex Garland’s Ex Machina (2014), and Gerard Johnstone’s “M3GAN”(2023) involve AI characters who, in one way or another, decide to antagonize human characters, or even humanity itself. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine the common filmic trope of AI-gone-berserk where AI characters contest their ancillary status by going off the deep end. Since they are widely popular, and thus may potentially reflect the zeitgeist better, the paper aspires to do this by analyzing the above films and proposes to explore the ways in which attitudes to AI have changed in the last half century through the concept of berserk abandon.

Key Words: Artificial intelligence, American cinema, Trauma Studies, Berserk, Kirby Farrell

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E-mail / E-posta

saphalilcan@gmail.com

ORCID ID

0000-0001-9340-4693

Institution / Affiliation / Kurum

Country / Ülke

Türkiye

Başlıca yazarlar:: Halilcan Sap (Milli Savunma Üniversitesi)

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