

Film Review of “Robot & Frank”

By

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“Robot & Frank” (2012) is a film set in a small town in upstate New York in the near future. Frank, the main character, is played by Frank Langella in a sympathetic performance. Frank is an almost retired career burglar who is experiencing memory loss. Neither of his children lives nearby. Frank’s daughter, Madison, works in remote places around the world and keeps in touch digitally via a kind of FaceTime. His son, Hunter, routinely drives the five hours to his father’s house to deliver food and check on him. Absent but concerned, they keep tabs on Frank as best they can but are considering other residential options for him.

The other main character in the film is the unnamed robot that Hunter brings for Frank to help him continue to live independently. Frank’s robot is a personal assistant robot. Another service robot in the film is Mr. Darcy, the “worker” in the library who does most of the library work. While she seems to accept the robot, the town librarian, played by Susan Sarandon, must cope with a world in which print material is being replaced by digital data. In fact, Frank is her only remaining customer as his walk to the library is one of his few continuing activities in addition to reading printed books. The film’s narrative focuses on the relationship that develops between Frank and his robot as well as on Frank’s personal and family history.

Sociologist William Ogburn’s (1966) concept of cultural lag hypothesized that non-material culture tends to resist change or to change at a slower pace than material culture. The culture is expected to adapt to fit new conditions and, as a result, the lag between the non-material and material produces challenges for individuals and social structures.

Modernization theory, as used by gerontologists, has been refined to focus on aspects of material culture such as technology. Modernization theory specifies that

adaptive technologies are among the environmental modifications that may be used by those with declining physical or cognitive abilities. However, the theory points to concerns about the “digital divide” when changes in technology outpace changes in nonmaterial dimensions (Binstock et al. 2011, p. 259). Forced to live with the robot as an alternative to being placed in the memory care unit of a nursing home, Frank initially exhibits difficulties in adapting to the new technology because the robot interferes with his life and habits.

We see that the cantankerous Frank is grumpy when his new servant, the robot, changes his diet to a healthy one, insists on creating daily routines including walks for exercise, and encourages new hobbies such as planting a vegetable garden. Many aspects of the depiction of the elderly Frank and his family are accurate. As is typical of the children of the elderly, Frank’s son is concerned about Frank’s safety and concentrates on eliminating risks from his father’s life. Hunter notes the messy house, Frank’s inability to shop and cook for himself, and his memory declines, like forgetting that his favorite local restaurant has closed, and Frank asking Hunter “How’s Princeton?” thinking that Hunter, near 40, is still an undergraduate.

After many long trips from his house to his father’s, Hunter buys a robot to help Frank out. However, good breakfasts and a clean house are not what matter most to Frank. Rather, Frank’s priorities are what Atul Gawande (2014) argues are most important to the elderly -- independence and the ability to live a meaningful life. Only Hunter can program, or turn off, the robot. That fact is symbolic of Frank’s loss of independence. Because Frank is not the one in control of the robot, he has, therefore, lost control of his own life.

However, Frank soon realizes that the robot can be trained to help with a series of burglaries and begins to

appreciate his new companion. In doing so, he learns to adapt to this new technology. Encouraged by the robot's statement that it is *not* programmed to consider the legality of its actions, Frank decides to return to his former "profession." Planning heists and then successfully completing them with robot's help, Frank illustrates the continuity theory of successful aging. Continuity theory (Atchley 1989) holds that older adults attempt to preserve and maintain existing internal and external structures by using strategies tied to their past experiences of themselves and their social world. We see Frank adapt to the robot and its place in his life by using the robot as his burglary assistant; thereby producing continuity in his inner psychological characteristics and his social behavior. With each heist, Frank's activity level and interest in the world increase which results in dramatic improvements in his physical and cognitive abilities. Viewers of this movie also observe the growing bond between Frank and the robot.

Estimates indicate that 5% to 7% of those over 65, and nearly 30% of those over 85, suffer from dementia, a disease characterized by progressive and generally irreversible loss in mental capabilities that may include confusion, memory loss and disorientation (Singh and Upadhyay 2014). Despite his occasional confusion, Frank does remember how to pick a lock, case a building, and deactivate alarms. Such memories demonstrate his long term-memory still functions. However, while Frank clearly feels attraction to and affection for Jennifer, the librarian, he does not remember that she was his wife until they divorced 30 years before. While long term memory is affected by advanced dementia, in the beginning stages, people typically remember significant individuals and events in their earlier lives.

To understand the extent of the cultural gap concerning the use of robots, consider the data on seniors and technology. The most recent Pew Research Center report (2017) on tech adoption among older adults finds that they are moving towards more digitally-connected lives. Almost half (42%) of those over 65 now own smart phones up from just 18% in 2013. Two thirds of seniors use the internet and half have broadband in their homes (Pew 2017). However, there are important differences between the young old (under 75) and the oldest old (over 85). Eighty two percent of those 65 to 69 go online while only 44% of those over 80 do; 59% of the former own smart phones compared to 17% of the later. Among the older population as a whole, the younger, relatively

affluent and/or highly education seniors are responsible for the recent growth in technology adoption with 58% of those over 65 saying technology has had a mostly positive impact on society (Pew 2017).

Seniors increased use of technology and their view that it has a positive impact on their lives may be indicators of the culture catching up to the technology. Seniors of the future may have an easier time welcoming robots into their homes than Frank did initially. The engineers tell us that robots are here to stay and that their functionality is improving all the time (Clotet et. al 2016). The demographics of the near future may tilt the ratio of caretakers from mostly human to mostly machine. By 2020, for the first time in history, the number of older people will outnumber the number of children younger than 5 years of age and In the next 25 years, the number of people older than 65 will double (Das, 2015). As the film's director, Jake Schreier notes:

"From my perspective . . . the question is not 'human or machine?' It's 'nothing or machine.' I visited my grandmother, who has Alzheimer's, maybe twice in the past three years. I'm not there. My family does a much better job but she still lives in Florida. So if this is the way it's going to go, if we're not going to be bringing the elderly into our own homes any more, why not hire a robot?" (Shoard 2013).

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