POPULAR MOVIES ABOUT CYBER SECURITY

Ozan ÖRMECİ[1]

Abstract: As cybersecurity and cyber governance gain importance among states, companies, institutions, and individuals in the 21st-century world, cultural products addressing this field are also rapidly proliferating. The United States—a leading nation in this arena alongside the People's Republic of China—holds a near-monopoly due to the power of Hollywood and serves as the source of many significant productions. However, the recent rise in the subject's importance has led to the production of similar films in other countries as well. This article presents a list of significant films covering topics such as cybersecurity, cyber governance, and cyber warfare, while providing key information about them. It will contribute to the literature and the academic community by helping to identify productions suitable for use as visual resources in courses within this field.

Keywords: *Cyber Security, Cyber Governance, Cyber Warfare, Hollywood, Cinema.*

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SİBER GÜVENLİK HAKKINDA POPÜLER FİLMLER

Öz: 21. yüzyıl dünyasında devletler, şirketler, kurumlar ve bireyler nezdinde siber güvenlik ve siber yönetişim konuları önem kazandıkça, bu alana odaklanan kültürel ürünler de hızla çoğalmaktadır. Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti ile birlikte bu alanda önde gelen bir ülke olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Hollywood'un gücü sayesinde neredeyse tekel konumundadır ve pek çok önemli yapımın kaynağını oluşturmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, söz konusu konunun son dönemde kazandığı önem, başka ülkelerde de benzer filmlerin üretilmesini beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu makale; siber güvenlik, siber yönetişim ve siber savaş gibi konuları ele alan önemli filmlerin bir listesini sunmakta ve bunlara dair temel bilgiler sağlamaktadır. Çalışma, bu alandaki derslerde görsel kaynak olarak kullanılabilecek yapımların belirlenmesine yardımcı olarak literatüre ve akademik camiaya katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Siber Güvenlik, Siber Yönetişim, Siber Savaş, Hollywood, Sinema.*

Introduction

As cybersecurity and cyber governance gain importance among states, companies, institutions, and individuals in the 21st-century world, cultural products addressing this field are also rapidly proliferating. The United States—a leading nation in this arena alongside the People's Republic of China—holds a near-monopoly due to the power of Hollywood and serves as the source of many significant productions. However, the recent rise in the subject's importance has led to the production of similar films in other countries as well.

This article presents a list of significant films covering topics such as cybersecurity, cyber governance, and cyber warfare, while providing key information about them. It will contribute to the literature and the academic community by helping to identify productions suitable for use as visual resources in courses within this field. For the research, film-related websites such as IMDb.com, Beyazperde.com, and Rotten Tomatoes will be utilized.

1. The List of Popular Movies about Cyber World

Since internet technology—and particularly the cybersecurity issues it has spawned—gained prominence in the eyes of popular culture and the general public primarily during the 2000s, most popular films in this genre were also produced in the new millennium. However, since the early adoption of internet technology in the United States (U.S.) and Western countries started in the 1980s and the 1990s, there are also some popular films from these eras that feature similar themes. It is also noteworthy that almost all such films are U.S.-based (at this point, one must undoubtedly also mention the power and allure of Hollywood), while successful productions from other countries emerge only very rarely.



The first popular film in this genre is the 1983 production "WarGames". Nominated for three Academy Awards and grossing ten times its budget, the film centers on a young college student (Matthew Broderick) who, in an attempt to impress his girlfriend, hacks into a U.S. Department of Defense program—essentially a simulation of a potential nuclear war with the Soviet Union (USSR)—and inadvertently brings the world to the brink of World War III through his actions within the system.

Starring Matthew Broderick, a popular young star of the time, this film contributed to the understanding and, to some extent, the encouragement of hacker culture in the U.S. and worldwide. It is no coincidence that a group of hackers from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, influenced by the film, used the 414s code to hack into many important public and private organizations in the U.S., showcasing the first dangerous examples of computer hacking. Following this group's actions, the "Computer Fraud and Abuse Act 18 USC 1030", the first legal regulation in the U.S., was enacted. The law focused particularly on protecting government computers, especially those related to justice, defense, and national security.[2]

[2] For details, see; Salih Bıçakçı (2013), *21. Yüzyılda Siber Güvenlik*, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları.



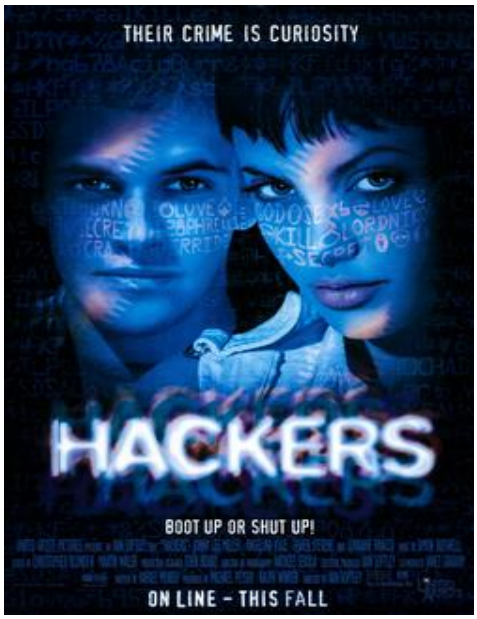
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Another pioneering film is the 1992 production “Sneakers”. a 1992 adventure film directed by renowned filmmaker Phil Alden Robinson, “Sneakers” features a star-studded cast including Robert Redford, Dan Aykroyd, Sidney Poitier, River Phoenix, and Ben Kingsley. The film is one of the productions that most closely reflects realistic penetration logic, as it addresses social engineering, penetration testing, teamwork, and security vulnerabilities. In this respect, it stands as one of the first productions to directly tackle the theme of cybersecurity. The presence of a major star like Robert Redford in the film undoubtedly played a role in elevating the importance of the subject matter in the eyes of the general public and even governments.

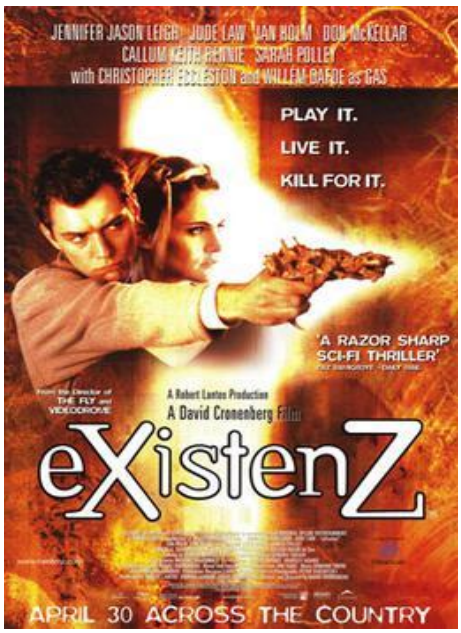
The plot of the film is briefly as follows: Martin Bishop (Robert Redford) leads a group of computer experts who test security systems. Government officials ask the team to carry out a secret operation, but when they refuse, they are blackmailed by the officials. Finding themselves caught in a dangerous game, the experts realize they have obtained a program capable of cracking every encryption code on Earth.



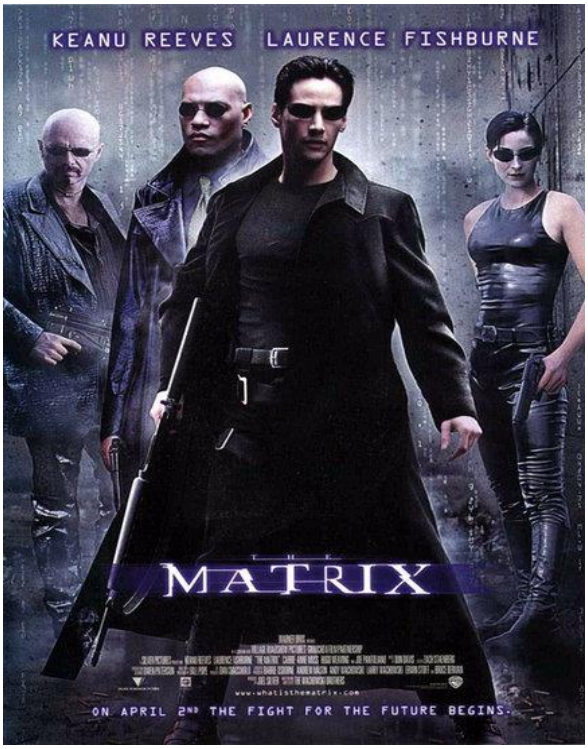
Another significant production is the 1995 film "The Net". The film was directed by Irwin Winkler, with a screenplay by John Brancato and Michael Ferris. Famous actress Sandra Bullock stars in the lead role. The film centers on a software analyst (Sandra Bullock) who works from home and conducts her entire life online; she unwittingly finds herself at the center of a massive cyber-conspiracy and sees her identity digitally erased. "The Net" arrived just two months before "Hackers*"* (1995) and helped introduce the general public to concepts like cyberattacks, online ordering, and digital footprints.



Another production that marked a turning point in this genre—released almost concurrently with the film "The Net"—is "Hackers" (1995). Written by Rafael Moreu and directed by Iain Softley, the film stars Jonny Lee Miller, Angelina Jolie, and Jesse Bradford. The appearance of Jolie—who would go on to become a major star—played a significant role in drawing attention to the film. The movie tells the story of Dade Murphy (Jonny Lee Miller), a child prodigy who was banned from using computers and telephones until the age of 18 after causing a massive system crash on Wall Street at age 11. Years later, after starting at a new high school in New York, Dade meets Kate (Angelina Jolie) and a group of other talented young hackers. As events unfold, one of the group members hacks into the mainframe of a major oil company. Implicated in the resulting incident, the youths find themselves forced to evade the FBI and prove their innocence.

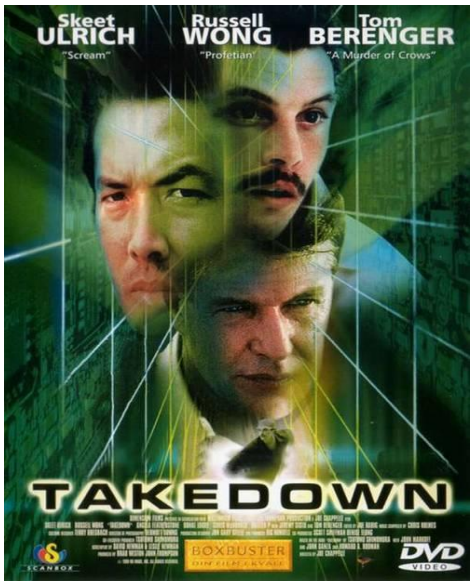


"eXistenZ" is a 1999 science fiction-horror film written, produced, and directed by the renowned filmmaker David Cronenberg. Although it was overshadowed by the famous "The Matrix"—which was released the same year—it has since evolved into a cult classic thanks to its prophetic vision and philosophical depth. The film, which centers around virtual reality, features fictional technological inventions such as organic consoles and bio-ports and also incorporates concepts that foreshadowed the advent of artificial intelligence.



A true cinematic legend, the 1999 film "The Matrix" is a groundbreaking masterpiece that radically transformed film history and popular culture, prompting questions about the nature of reality and the anxieties of the digital age. Evoking dread with the concept that humanity lives within a simulation created by machines, the film was directed by the Wachowski Brothers and starred Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, and Carrie-Anne Moss.

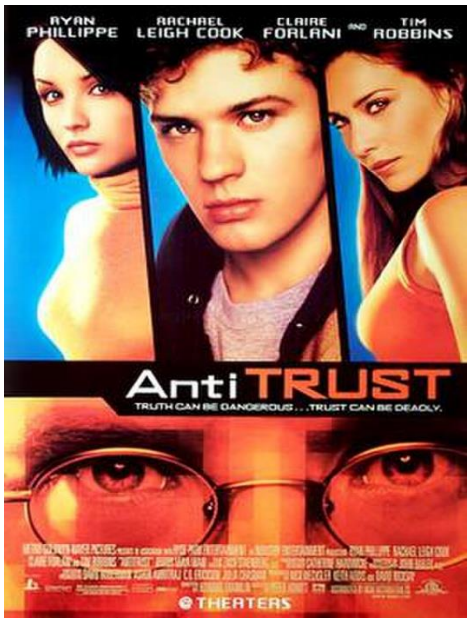
The film draws directly from Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation". By prompting the viewer to ask, "What if the world we inhabit is merely a mental prison?", it transposes Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" into the modern cyber world. The choice between the "red pill and the blue pill" has evolved into a universal metaphor—used in fields ranging from sociology to politics—to illustrate the dilemma of either shedding illusions to confront painful truths (awakening) or maintaining a comfortable lie. Released in 1999—on the threshold of a new millennium—the film struck a chord with societal anxieties at a time when the internet was newly entering our lives and there was intense debate over whether artificial intelligence and computers might one day take over humanity (amidst fears such as the Y2K bug).



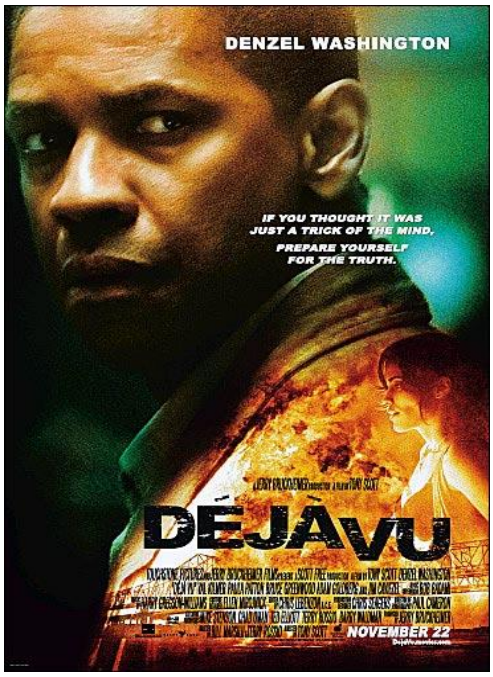
Another important yet little-known film is the 2000 production "Takedown". This film is based on the story of the capture of computer hacker Kevin Mitnick. The film, adapted from a book about Mitnick, is directed by Joe Chappelle and stars Skeet Ulrich and Russell Wong. Kevin Mitnick (Skeet Ulrich) is one of the world's most skilled and most wanted computer hackers. He is constantly pursuing ever larger and more challenging cyber targets. One day, he attempts to breach the computer system of security expert and former hacker Tsutomu Shimomura (Russell Wong). This move pits Mitnick against a worthy adversary, sparking a digital game of cat and mouse between the two. Tsutomu Shimomura collaborated with the FBI to conduct a major operation aimed at capturing Mitnick.



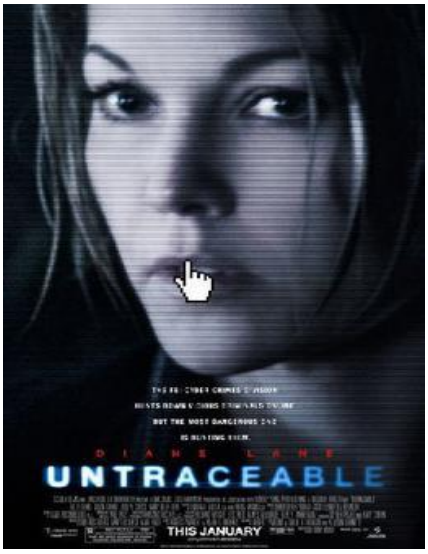
The 2001 film "Swordfish" is another significant production that left its mark on the genre. Written by Skip Woods and directed by Dominic Sena, the film drew a large audience thanks to its star-studded cast, which included John Travolta, Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry, Don Cheadle, Vinnie Jones, and Sam Shepard. The plot centers on Gabriel Shear (John Travolta)—the charismatic and dangerous leader of a covert counter-terrorism unit known as "Black Cell"—and his team as they join forces with Stanley Jobson (Hugh Jackman), an ex-convict and one of the world's best hackers, to recover funds generated from an off-the-books operation.



The 2001 film "Antitrust" is another significant film that stands out for addressing companies and the legal aspects of this field. Written by Howard Franklin and directed by Peter Howitt, the film stars Ryan Phillippe, Tim Robbins, and Rachael Leigh Cook. It centers on young, idealistic programmers and a major corporation (NURV) that offers talented young people substantial salaries, an informal work environment, and creative opportunities. Although NURV's charismatic CEO appears well-intentioned, new employee Milo Hoffman (Ryan Phillippe) begins to uncover a terrifying, hidden truth about the company's operations. Hoffman discovers that the company's true objective—and the secret agenda behind its global communication system—is a sinister, illegal cyber-theft network designed to destroy competitors. Featuring clear allusions to Microsoft and Bill Gates, the film attracted attention for its young, popular cast and sparked discussion regarding various aspects of cybersecurity.

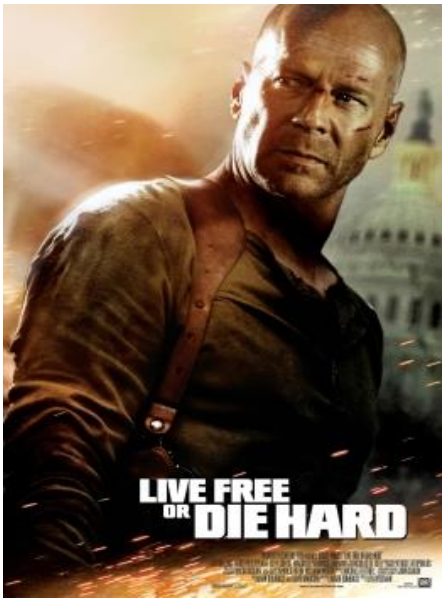


The 2006 film "Déjà Vu" is a significant science fiction action movie directed by Tony Scott and starring Denzel Washington, which uniquely blends the concepts of time travel and memory. By combining the sensation of having experienced something before—known as "déjà vu"—with advanced surveillance and time-folding technology used to alter the past, the film creates an incredibly thrilling story. With this futuristic aspect, the film has garnered significant attention and acclaim.



The 2008 film "Untraceable" tells the story of an FBI agent attempting to catch a cyber serial killer who tortures victims online, broadcasts the acts live, and accelerates the rate of death as the number

of clicks on the website increases. Directed by Gregory Hoblit, the film stars Diane Lane in the lead role. The film, which leans heavily towards the horror genre, is significant for demonstrating how the internet can be used for dangerous purposes.



The 2008 film "Live Free or Die Hard" follows the efforts of aging detective John McClane (Bruce Willis)—who has left the police department to work in a cybersecurity unit—to stop a massive cyber-terrorist attack aimed at crippling America's computer infrastructure. Directed by Len Wiseman, the film attracted significant attention as a new installment in the popular Bruce Willis franchise and boosted interest in the field of cybersecurity.



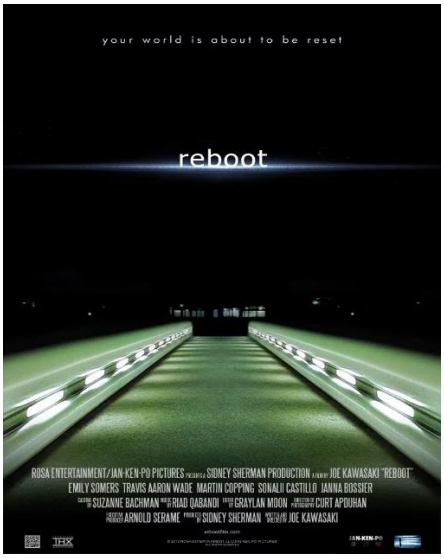
"Eagle Eye", a 2008 American action-thriller directed by DJ Caruso and written by John Glenn, Travis Adam Wright, Hillary Seitz, and Dan McDermott, is a significant yet lesser-known film centered on information and communication technologies. The cast includes Shia LaBeouf, Michelle Monaghan, Rosario Dawson, Michael Chiklis, Anthony Mackie, and Billy Bob Thornton. The plot follows two strangers forced to go on the run together after receiving a phone call from a mysterious woman who uses information and communication technology to track their every move. The film, which achieved unexpectedly high box-office success, also marked a significant turning point by demonstrating the steadily growing interest in this subject.



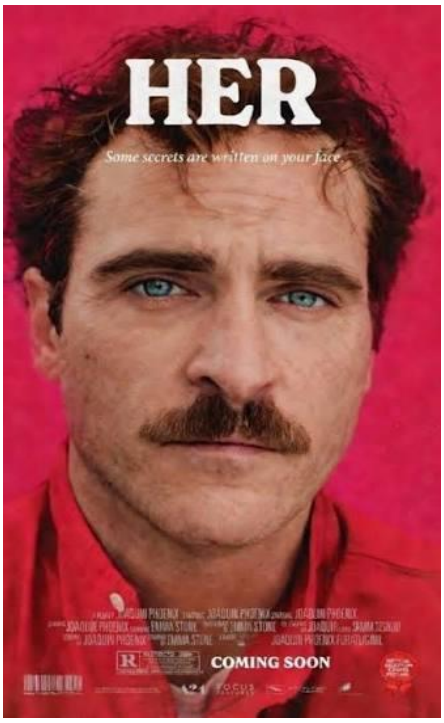
The 2010 film "The Social Network" holds great significance as a cult classic that captures the transformation of the digital age and the human ambitions involved in the founding of Facebook. The film examines how social media has transformed individual lives—and by extension, humanity as a whole—while focusing on the inception and evolution of Facebook, a pivotal milestone in this realm. Directed by the acclaimed David Fincher, the film stars Jesse Eisenberg (in the role of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg). The film has secured a top spot on lists of the best movies of the 21st century, becoming the primary cinematic reference point for modern digital culture.



The 2011 film "Source Code" holds a unique place in cinema for creating an ingenious narrative loop through the masterful use of a limited timeframe (eight minutes) and a single setting (a train), as well as for successfully blending the philosophies of consciousness, parallel universes, and destiny. Directed by Duncan Jones and starring Jake Gyllenhaal, the film centers on a physically disabled soldier attempting to uncover a terrorist plot through a government-controlled program or simulation.

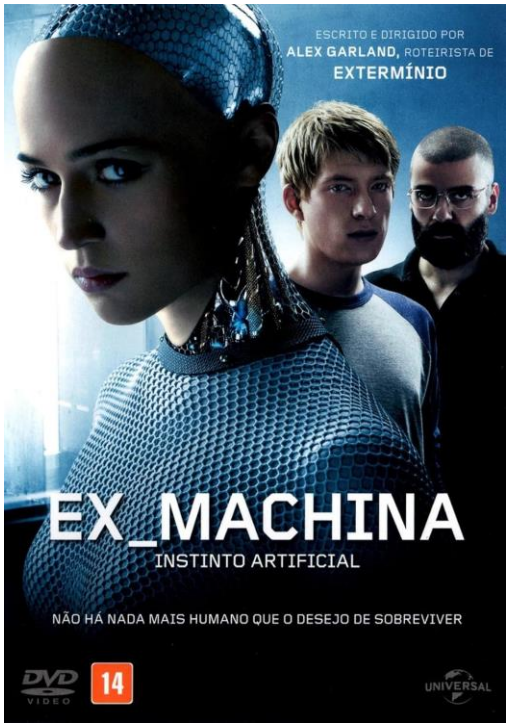


The 2012 film "Reboot" centers on a young female hacker who, following a traumatic event, wakes up to find an iPhone fused to her hand and a countdown ticking down to zero, and attempts to solve the mystery. Directed by Joe Kawasaki, the film stars Emily Somers in the lead role. The film has drawn attention as a dystopian cyber-thriller that explores the place of the internet and technology in our lives, the bond between humans and the virtual world, and the dangers arising from this connection.



Written and directed by Spike Jonze, "Her" (2013) is regarded as both a timeless masterpiece and a prophetic film in the contexts of cinema history and modern sociology. Starring Joaquin Phoenix, the film predicted—with uncanny accuracy—the advent of large language models (LLMs), advanced voice assistants, and human-like relationships with artificial intelligence. Today, the emotional bonds people form with AI through platforms like ChatGPT (particularly its voice mode) and Character.ai serve as a testament to the film's visionary nature. Set in a near-future Los Angeles, the film follows Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), a lonely man who embarks on an extraordinary virtual romance with an AI operating system. Through this narrative, the film transcends the genre of ordinary science fiction to offer a social critique regarding the profound isolation humans can experience in a world where technology has reached its zenith. Theodore's

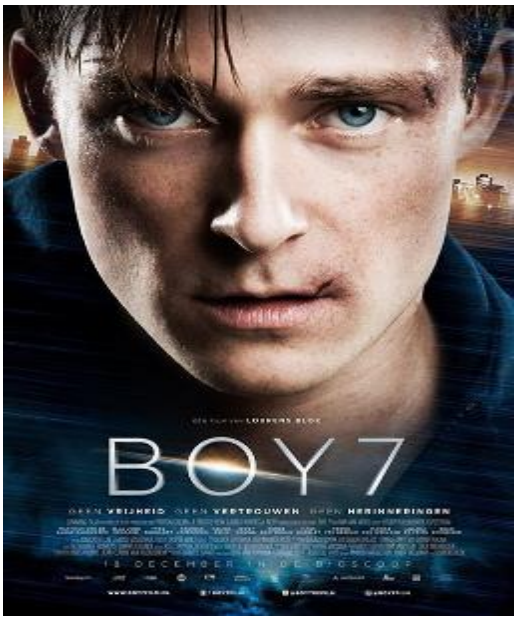
existence amidst the crowded streets of Los Angeles—connected only by the earpiece in his ear—perfectly mirrors the reality of contemporary metropolitan life and digital isolation.



Directed by Alex Garland, the 2014 film "Ex Machina" centers on a programmer who is summoned by a mysterious CEO to a remote mountain home to conduct a Turing test on an artificially intelligent humanoid robot. Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a 24-year-old programmer, is winning a competition organized by the major tech company where he works. As his prize, he travels to the secluded home of the company's brilliant and reclusive CEO, Nathan (Oscar Isaac), located deep in nature. Nathan asks Caleb to administer a Turing test to Ava (Alicia Vikander), a newly developed humanoid AI. As the test progresses, Caleb begins to develop feelings for Ava. Meanwhile, Ava devises an escape plan by employing human emotions, manipulation, and a desire for survival. By the end of the film, Ava manages to outsmart her creator and escape to the outside world, leaving Caleb locked inside the mountain home. The film is a groundbreaking production that provokes deep reflection on the future of robotics technology.



The 2014 German film "Who Am I" (originally titled "Kein System ist Sicher") centers on Benjamin (Tom Schilling), a young computer genius who feels like a "loser" and goes largely unnoticed in everyday life, as he struggles to find an identity and a sense of belonging within the hacker community. An introverted hacker, Benjamin meets Max (Elyas M'Barek)—a fellow hacker—and his friends, eventually joining their underground hacking group, CL3X (or FRI3NDS). Having dreamed of becoming a superhero since childhood, Benjamin attempts to use the group as a vehicle to become a world-renowned hacker. The team makes a name for itself through various cyber operations; however, their massive, high-profile hacks attract the attention of both German Intelligence (BND) and Russian gangsters, dragging them into a dangerous game. This remarkable production—one of the rare films not made in the U.S.—has been highly acclaimed by audiences.



The 2015 Dutch film "Boy 7" centers on a young man who wakes up on a crowded subway with no memory of his past, and his fight for justice within dystopian police state that prioritizes security over freedom. Adapted from Mirjam Mous' novel of the same name, the film stands out as a rare European entry in this genre—a type of production seldom seen outside the U.S.—and was directed by Lourens Blok.



"Blackhat" (2015) centers on a talented, imprisoned hacker who collaborates with the government to stop a global cyber-terrorist network. In the film, Nicholas Hathaway—a brilliant hacker portrayed by Chris Hemsworth—is recruited for the mission on the condition of his release while serving a prison sentence for cybercrimes. Alongside an international team of American and Chinese agents, Hathaway joins a global pursuit stretching from Chicago to Los Angeles and from Hong Kong to Jakarta. Their objective is to uncover the identity of the cyber-terrorist wreaking havoc on a global scale and to thwart his plans.



The controversial 2016 film "Snowden" tells the true story of Edward Snowden, the former NSA agent who exposed the U.S. government's covert, global digital surveillance and data collection activities. Directed by renowned filmmaker Oliver Stone, the film features actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt in the role of Snowden. It closely examines the Snowden affair—an event that sparked a global conversation about the secret systems enabling the U.S. (a democracy that nonetheless pursues hegemonic policies) to closely monitor its own citizens and those of other nations, and which subsequently drove the development of indigenous technologies in countries around the world.



The 2016 documentary "Zero Days" explores the true background of the world of cyber warfare and the destructive Stuxnet cyber weapon, developed by the U.S. and Israel to sabotage Iran's nuclear program. The film chronicles the emergence of Stuxnet, the world's first malware capable of inflicting physical damage on industrial systems. It recounts how the virus initially targeted only the centrifuges at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility but spiraled out of control, spreading to other systems globally. The film details the covert operation—codenamed "Operation Olympic Games"—jointly conducted by U.S. (NSA) and Israeli intelligence agencies. In doing so, it demonstrates how such cyber weapons can cripple a nation's infrastructure without the need for traditional military intervention. Furthermore, the film discusses the dangers posed by "zero-day" vulnerabilities in the digital realm and addresses the security crisis resulting from the global cyber arms race, as well as potential future scenarios of cyber warfare.



The 2019 film "The Great Hack" is a Netflix documentary that reveals the inside story of the Cambridge Analytica data scandal and how the personal data of millions of Facebook users was harvested without consent and used for political manipulation. Social media likes, searches, and browsing habits can effectively transform into massive commercial and political weapons. The film also covers Cambridge Analytica's use of data to interfere in political processes during the 2016 U.S. elections and the UK's Brexit campaign. In this regard, it explores—through real events and firsthand accounts—how the digital footprints left in the online world threaten individual and societal freedoms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the impact of internet-based technologies on world politics and the global economy grows, state regulations and security measures in this domain are intensifying, and the subject is becoming increasingly strategic. Consequently, cultural elements related to this field are also on the rise. In this context, this study aims to list significant films produced in the Western world that deal with cybersecurity and related technologies. Although this is not a conventional academic article, it is significant as pioneering work in a new field and for offering a selection of films suitable for use in academic studies.

The review has also demonstrated that the U.S. wields significant power and influence in this field, driven by the "Hollywood effect". Indeed, virtually all popular films produced in this sector are of U.S. origin. This highlights the importance of the "soft power" concept formulated by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye years ago. Through this means, the U.S. fosters the adoption of its culture and lifestyle by other societies while keeping its economy vibrant. Undoubtedly, however, other nations will eventually make breakthroughs in information technology, cybersecurity, and cinema as their own sectors develop. What matters to us, on the other hand, undoubtedly, is the development and growing importance of the subject and culture of cybersecurity.

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