Silicon Valley

Kill the tech bro, save the world: how CEOs became Hollywood's new supervillains

Upgrade, a new thriller set in a Tesla-like dystopia, is the latest big-budget film to replace the stereotypical evil Russian with the evil Silicon Valley nerd

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32

H ollywood has a history of drawing on collective fears. The dawn of the atomic age saw a boom in world-ending disasters, James Bond battled Russians all throughout the cold war, and the post-9/11 era saw a grimly predictable rise in Arab and Muslim bad-guys. And so it follows, that in the past few years – as the likes of Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos have accrued more power, wealth and influence than most governments – the face of villainy has changed again.

Since the turn of the decade, blockbusters have increasingly cast Silicon Valley's tech-bros as supervillains. And it's not hard to see why. Whether it's the image of a pallid Zuckerberg hauled up in front of congress for disrupting democracy, or Jeff Bezos tweeting images of himself piloting giant robots, their public image has been less than gleaming. The meek have inherited the earth, and now they seem hellbent on destroying it.

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Until recently of course, blockbuster nerds were benevolent figures. From Jeff Goldblum's satellite technician in Independence Day to Simon Pegg's character in the rebooted Mission Impossible series, the computer genius of old was typically on hand to take out security cameras or decode transmissions. They've been affable dweebs: physically inept but capable of saving the day with some last-minute, sweat-inducing hacking.

How things have changed. Take Upgrade, currently in cinemas in the US, which tells the story of Grey Trace (Logan Marshall-Green), a mechanic whose wife is murdered in an attack that leaves him quadriplegic, (all after his self-driving car malfunctions and sends

them to the bad part of town). Enter a tech-savvy CEO – the less-than-subtly named "Eron Keen" – who offers Grey the chance to walk again, and avenge his wife's death, with the help of an implant in his spine. As you can probably surmise, the chip is equipped with lots of, shall we say, additional features, and our gracious developer is in turn revealed to have ulterior designs.
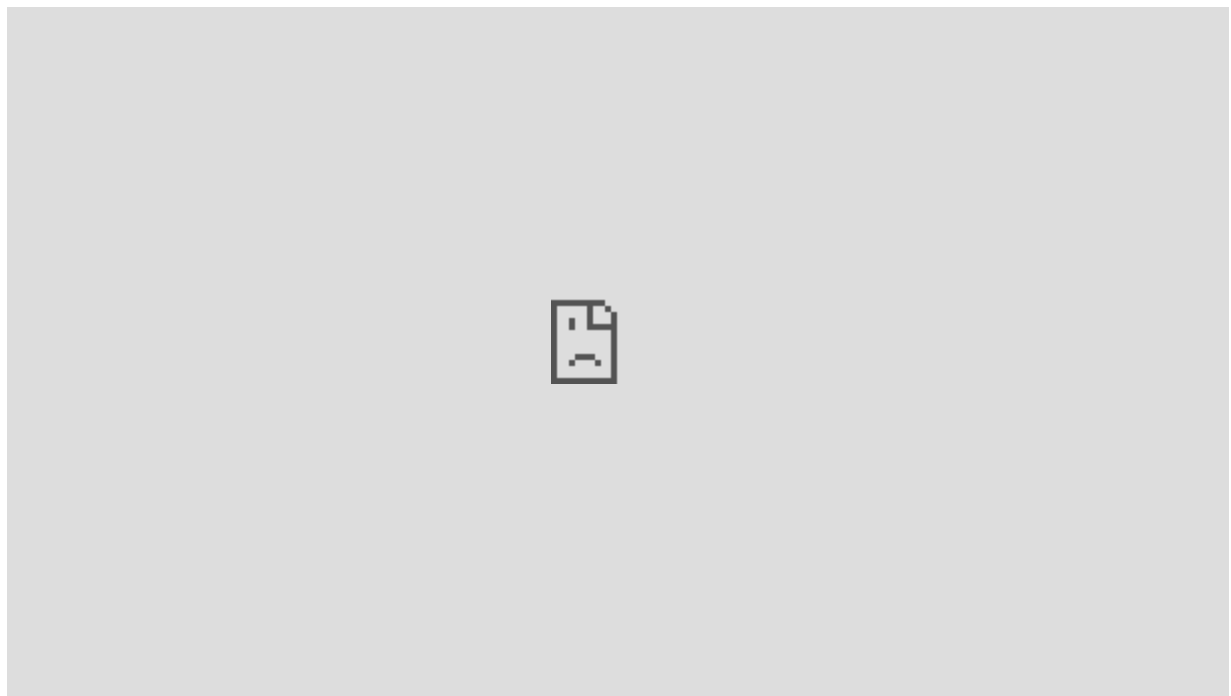
Similarly, Jesse Eisenberg's turn as Lex Luthor in 2015's Batman vs Superman took Gene Hackman's cigar-chomping tycoon and turned him into a T-shirt-clad whizzkid who plays basketball in the offices of his multinational tech-corporation. After all, who better to play the supervillain of the modern age than the star of The Social Network. The ascent of the nerd has also played out across the Jurassic Park franchise. Dr Henry Wu, an unassuming lab technician (played by BD Wong) first seen in the 1994 original prodding dinosaur eggs, has

been transformed into the chief engineer of InGen (International Genetic Incorporated), the bioengineering start-up from 2015's Jurassic World – a role he appears to be reviving in this summer's follow-up.

And if it's not the developers themselves, it's their ideas. While critically panned, 2014's Transcendence, in which Johnny Depp played an AI expert who becomes a sentient computer after his death and tries to remodel the world, reflected an obsession with blending human consciousness and technology that has long thrived in Silicon Valley. Ray Kurzweil, director of engineering at Google, to name one example, advocates a theory of "technological singularity", predicting that humans will soon be reshaped by a merging with nano-technology and artificial intelligence. While the ultimate movie tech-billionaire Tony Stark might use these ideas for good as Iron Man, it's telling that The Avengers: Age of Ultron saw even him undone by his own gear, when an operating system got too smart and ended up trying to wipe out humanity.

As fears go, it checks out. In a world where technology and power is concentrated in a handful of tech corporations, where private companies are racing to fire rockets into space, self-driving cars kill people, and many believe Mark Zuckerberg wants to run for president, it seems right to mythologise this moment. After all, what's scarier? The rise of the machines, or the rise of the morally ambiguous men who pioneer them.