

Machine of Death: An Introduction

The machine had been invented a few years ago: a machine that could tell, from just a sample of your blood, how you were going to die.

It didn't give you the date and it didn't give you specifics. It just spat out a sliver of paper upon which were printed, in careful block letters, the words "DROWNED" or "CANCER" or "OLD AGE" or "CHOKED ON A HANDFUL OF POPCORN." It let people know how they were going to die.

The problem with the machine is that nobody really knew how it worked, which wouldn't actually have been that much of a problem if the machine worked as well as we wished it would. But the machine was frustratingly vague in its predictions: dark, and seemingly delighting in the ambiguities of language. "OLD AGE," it had already turned out, could mean either dying of natural causes, or being shot by a bedridden man in a botched home invasion. The machine captured that old-world sense of irony in death: you can know how it's going to happen, but you'll still be surprised when it does.

The realization that we could now know how we were going to die had changed the world: people became at once less fearful and more afraid. After all, there's seemingly no reason not to go skydiving if you know your sliver of paper says "BURIED ALIVE." But the realization that these predictions seemed to revel in turnabout and surprise put a damper on things. It made the predictions more sinister: yes, skydiving should be safe if you were going to be buried alive, but what if you landed in a gravel pit? What if you were buried alive not in dirt but in something else? And would being caught in a collapsing building count as being buried alive? For every possibility the machine closed, it seemed to open several more, with varying degrees of plausibility.

By that time, of course, the machine had been reverse-engineered and duplicated, its internal workings being rather simple to construct. And yes, we found out that its predictions weren't as straightforward as they seemed upon initial discovery at about the same time as everyone else did. We tested it before announcing it to the world, but testing took time – too much, since we had to wait for people to die. After four years had gone by and three people died as the machine predicted, we shipped it out the door. There were now machines in every doctor's office and in booths at the mall. You could pay someone or you could probably get it done for free, but the result was the same no matter what machine you went to. They were, at least, consistent...