— Race of Robots —

Tesla wanted an extraordinary way to demonstrate the potential of his system for wireless transmission of energy [radio]. In 1898, at an electrical exhibition in the recently completed Madison Square Garden, he made a demonstration of the world's first radio-controlled vessel. Everyone expected surprises from Tesla, but few were prepared for the sight of a small, odd-looking, iron-hulled boat scooting across an indoor pond (specially built for the display). The boat was equipped with, as Tesla described, "a borrowed mind."

"When first shown... it created a sensation such as no other invention of mine has ever produced," wrote Tesla. As happened fairly often with his inventions, many of those present were unsure how to react, whether to laugh or take flight. He had cleverly devised a means of putting the audience at ease, encouraging onlookers to ask questions of the boat. For instance, in response to the question "What is the cube root of 64?" lights on the boat flashed four times. In an era when only a handful of people knew about radio waves, some thought that Tesla was controlling the small ship with his mind. In actuality, he was sending signals to the mechanism using a small box with control levers on the side.

Tesla's U.S. patent number 613,809 describes the first device anywhere for wireless remote control. The working model, or "teleautomaton," responded to radio signals and was powered with an internal battery.

Tesla did not limit his method to boats, but generalized the invention's potential to include vehicles of any sort and mechanisms to be actuated for any purpose. He envisioned one operator or several operators simultaneously directing fifty or a hundred vessels or machines through differently tuned radio transmitters and receivers.

When a New York Times writer suggested that Tesla could make the boat submerge and carry dynamite as a weapon of war, the inventor himself exploded. Tesla quickly corrected the reporter: "You do not see there a wireless torpedo, you see there the first of a race of robots, mechanical men which will do the laborious work of the human race."

Tesla's device was literally the birth of robotics, though he is seldom recognized for this accomplishment. The inventor was trained in electrical and mechanical engineering, and these skills merged beautifully in this remote-controlled boat. Unfortunately, the invention was so far ahead of its time that those who observed it could not imagine its practical applications.

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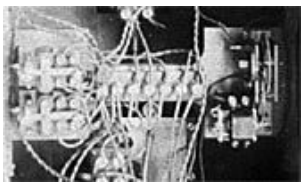
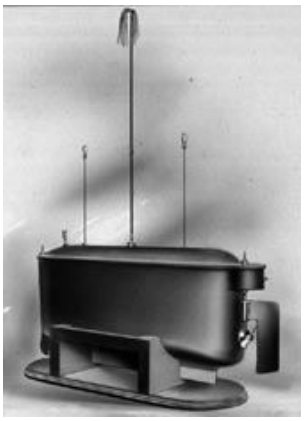
Take a closer look at Tesla's remote control technology.

The first practical remote-controlled robot

View Tesla's remote control patent.



Interior of Tesla's remote-controlled boat



Submergible version of Tesla's remote-controlled craft

View Tesla's "Method of Signaling" patent.