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**“The RoboCop We Deserve”:
Post-human transformations and social critique in Paul Verhoeven’s and Jose Padilha’s *RoboCop***

Mynt Marsellus

“Consider technologies as reflexive phenomenon... culturally mediated systems, the products of human agency... which in turn exercise a potentially constitutive power over human experience” (Graham 10)

Directors Paul Verhoeven and Jose Padilha both used the science-fiction/action-detective film *RoboCop* to explore humanity’s relationship to technology as means of critiquing their respective historical contexts. In 1987, Verhoeven was concerned with the state of masculinity and power in Reagan-era America, seeing television, capitalism, and militarism as major threats to American society (Booker 215). In 2014, Padilha explored modern political issues like drone warfare and political polarization in a similar manner (Rea). To explore all these issues, both films used their protagonist, Alex Murphy, delineating his character into three distinct identities: one human, one robot, and one cyborg. A quintessential characteristic of the detective genre is the detective being torn between his ability to find the killer and actually being able to stop the killer, with the detective’s social and gendered performance impacting these abilities. In *RoboCop*, this tension is negotiated through the body of Alex Murphy in his transformations. In differentiating the human identity from the post-human, the films engage with questions of how the biological and technological characteristics of the protagonist impact three essential aspects of the detective genre: detective skills, crime fighting, and masculine gender performance. This paper will explore how the post-human transformations of Alex Murphy depict and critique gender, technology, and justice in Paul Verhoeven’s original *RoboCop* (1987) and Jose Padilha’s 2014 remake.

Alex Murphy, for the purposes of this analysis, can be divided into three distinct identities: human Murphy (Murphy-Prime), robot Murphy (RoboCop) and cyborg Murphy (Robo-Murphy). The different combinations of Murphy’s human personality and new technological body imbue each of his three identities with unique characteristics. In both films, these characteristics are then directly tied to each identity’s masculine gender performance and crime-fighting skills.

In the original film, Murphy-Prime is characterized as a part of the larger group of police within the film’s diegesis as well as the masculine heroes in other

MARSELLUS

1980s films. At the start of the film, Murphy's police precinct is on the verge of going on strike over dangerous working conditions. The officers are visibly afraid at work, with their sergeant challenging their masculinity and courage as police officers, exclaiming that they "are cops, not plumbers," and equating their fear with weakness. This behaviour stands in contrast with 80s action heroes like Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon* (Donner 1987). Whereas the cops in *RoboCop* complain about their dangerous working conditions, Martin Riggs puts himself in harm's way all through Donner's film. This comparison extends to the physical bodies of the cops in *RoboCop*. They are not the hyper-muscular, hyper-masculine bodies found in the contemporary films of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Mel Gibson (Gates 40). Some of the cops in this film are unfit, some are short, and some are women. To adopt that Stallone-esque hard-body aesthetic, they require armour. The armour they wear is bulky, heavily padded, and shaped into the form of a muscular chest, giving all the cops larger, more masculine figures (Ayers 41). By their behaviour and physical appearance, Murphy and the rest of the cops in his precinct are not typical 1980s action heroes (Telotte, "The Tremulous Public Body" 17).

Murphy-Prime's personality and family life also affect how he relates to contemporary masculine heroes. While Stallone-esque hard-bodies were prominent in films in the 1980s, the late 80s also saw the rise of the "New Man," a softer trend in masculine fashion and gender performance (Craik 191). Clothing with softer colours and being in touch with one's feelings were vital characteristics of the "New Man," as opposed to the Stalone-esque, unemotional, hyper-masculine man. Murphy is depicted in his first two scenes wearing a nicely patterned shirt and being heavily invested in the life of his family, demonstrating this less ostentatious form of masculinity. Murphy's commitment to his family is specifically highlighted in how he mimics the gun twirling trick of a TV detective that his son idolizes (Telotte, "The Tremulous Public Body" 17). This trick is one of the few aspects of Murphy's Prime identity that seeps into the emotionless RoboCop identity after his transformation, emphasizing its importance. These softer qualities are then negatively contrasted with his abilities as a crime fighter when Murphy-Prime confronts criminals in the next scene. While Murphy looks fearsome when he has the criminals at gun point, his body is easily destroyed by their bullets, and his armour is not effective at stopping their assault. The masculine ideal his armour suggests is only covering up Murphy's inability as a crime fighter and as a masculine man (Ayers 52).

Comparatively, Murphy-Prime's masculinity was not characterized negatively in the remake. Physically, Murphy-Prime has a similar body-shape to the ac-

tion stars of the late 2000s like Jason Statham, Mark Wahlberg, and Matt Damon; these heroes are still strong and physically fit, but not cartoonishly muscular like Stallone or Schwarzenegger (Palmer 7). Also, unlike the original, remake-Murphy-Prime does not require body armour when he is on patrol. Behaviourally, at the beginning of the narrative, Murphy-Prime is shown to be an effective and competent detective. Murphy and his partner Lewis are working undercover to monitor firearms trafficking and they identify the mob boss Antoine Vallon who they suspect has ties to corrupt police officers. Murphey and Lewis hastily move ahead to meet Vallon without approval from their superiors in order to avoid alerting the corrupt officers who could tip him off. Nevertheless, Vallon discovers their scheme and Lewis is seriously injured as a result. As opposed to the 1987 film, Murphy's effectiveness at his job is affected not by his masculinity, but by external corruption. This stable masculinity is further demonstrated by his home life. Before the injury that triggers his transformation, Murphy-Prime is shown to have a healthy and stable relationship with his wife and son. These elements of his characterization make remake Murphy-Prime distinct because they align him with the action heroes of the 2000s while also portraying him as a family man like the original film's Murphy-Prime. Rather than simply juxtaposing Murphy with his contemporaries like the original film did, both the macho and 'new-man' aspects of his masculinity are important to his characterization and neither prevent him from doing his job effectively.

In the original film, following Murphy-Prime's confrontation with the criminals, he is pronounced dead and then resurrected as RoboCop (Pheasant-Kelly 60). This transformation is relayed through his computerized point-of-view as he sees scientists and technicians working on his damaged body. When asked if Murphy will remember anything, Bob Morton, the corporate vice-president of OCP running the project, says the scientists will wipe Murphy's memory before making him operational. In these scenes, we also see a scientist argue for keeping Murphy's physical arm since it was salvageable. Morton instead orders him to scrap the arm and give Murphy full-body prosthesis. When Lewis confronts Morton about the extent of Murphy's injuries after the transformation, Morton responds, "he doesn't have a name, he's got a program, he's product." Then when Lewis confronts his former friend with the name 'Alex Murphy,' RoboCop does not recognize it as his own. RoboCop is the opposite of Murphy-Prime; he is almost entirely robotic, physically and behaviourally. The only remaining part of Murphy-Prime's personality is the gun-twirling. In the transformation, Murphy loses not only his physical self, his memory, and mental faculties, but also his entire human identity as Alex Murphy. Physically, Murphy's new body is also

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significant because his chest plate looks similar to the body armour the cops wore earlier in the film. As though molded to look like a hyper-muscular human chest with large pectorals and well-defined abdominals, RoboCop's body glimmers like the sweat-covered muscular bodies of Stallone or Schwarzenegger.

These behavioural and physical traits then affect his skills as a detective and crime fighter in that RoboCop actually does no detection. He is only shown patrolling in his cop car and stopping crimes when the dispatcher informs him of a crime in progress. Once he is directed to a crime to stop, however, he does so effectively and violently because of his new prosthetic body; he is able to easily punch through walls and throw people across rooms while deflecting bullets. This physical embodiment of power becomes more dynamic when applied to RoboCop's gendered performativity in a later scene. RoboCop goes to a dance club to interrogate a criminal, and when the criminal tries to kick him in the groin he hurts himself because RoboCop's groin is fully metallic. This scene insinuates that the logical progression from the seemingly impervious bodies of hyper-masculine action stars is robotic prosthetics that are literally impervious to attack (Ayers 52). This progression implies a gendered definition of post-humanism. Where post-humanism posits that the human body can evolve no further without technology, here the masculine body cannot evolve without technologically trading in the organs that are popularly referred to as one's 'manhood' (Bell 24). Therefore, to be post-human is not to be post-masculine. To eliminate weakness and become a perfect hyper-masculine fighting machine, one has to actually become a hyper-masculine machine, sacrificing talent in detecting crimes for an indestructible power in fighting them.

The transformation in the remake is functionally different while also signifying different perspectives on post-humanism and masculinity. The most significant difference is that Murphy's full transformation into RoboCop does not happen until he is presented to the public. Murphy's first appearance after his injury is in a dream, dancing with his wife to Frank Sinatra, and as he wakes up, CGI is used to deconstruct the dream into what is now Murphy's reality in the suit. This first glimpse of his new reality constitutes a shocking and unsettling revelation for the character. Similarly, after Murphy attempts to escape the laboratory, he demands that Norton, the OmniCorp doctor that designed his prosthetics, remove his 'suit'. Again using CGI, the robotic body is deconstructed so Murphy can see what is left of his biological body: a few organs, a hand, and part of his brain, which highlights that the prosthetics are not just a suit, but his new body. This 'fixing' of Robo-Murphy with technology continues as problems arise with his ability to fight crime. Initially, Robo-Murphy is simply not as efficient in training simula-

tions as his fully robotic counterparts, the EM208s. To improve Murphy's performance, Norton further computerizes his brain so the sensation of danger triggers the computer software to take over his actions. This progression is described by OmniCorp executives as convincing a machine to think it is Alex Murphy. In this manner, OmniCorp is able to retain the personality of the human for visibility's sake while achieving the efficiency of the robotic. When Robo-Murphy is being prepared for his first public appearance, however, his personality reacts against his software once he is connected to the Detroit police department's crime database. Norton then drains his brain of certain neurotransmitters to stop his emotional responses. It is at this moment that Robo-Murphy is finally transformed into RoboCop, fully emotionless and completely automated. The transformation in the remake is differentiated thematically from the original because the fully automated RoboCop in the remake is both an effective detective and an effective crime fighter. Using police records and advanced surveillance, RoboCop sets lists of criminal targets and completes his goals with extreme efficiency. With the success of the fully automated RoboCop, the *RoboCop* remake acknowledges the efficiency and effectiveness of automation and surveillance.

The one negative repercussion of the transformation in the remake is on Murphy's gendered performance. Immediately after the full transformation on his way to the public appearance, Murphy passes by his wife and son. Murphy completely fails to recognize them because his personality, and thus his gendered personality traits, are gone. While Murphy the detective is still present and more effective than before, Murphy the father and husband has all but disappeared. Because the remake places a larger focus on Murphy's home life than the original film did, the softer aspects of his character are more obviously lacking after the transformation. Whereas the original is critical of the role of post-humanism as a contributor to hyper-masculinity and the destruction of effective detective skills, the remake instead promotes the idea that post-humanity can benefit raw efficiency but can be detrimental to positively engendered masculinity.

RoboCop's final evolution into Robo-Murphy is where both films assign a judgement about their post-human themes. In the original, this happens in two stages: first behavioural and then physical. The behavioural transformation occurs after Murphy's consciousness dreams about the death of Murphy-Prime. The dream causes the personality of Murphy-Prime to re-emerge, driving him to discover the truth about his death. RoboCop (now Robo-Murphy) goes to the police headquarters to analyze files and learns that he is Alex Murphy and his assailants are still at large. With this new information and the drive of his human personality, Robo-Murphy begins investigating his death like a true detective rather than

just a crime-fighting machine (Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* 173). The physical transformation happens when RoboCop's helmet is critically damaged and he removes it to show his human face, highlighting his cyborg nature and demonstrating the visible distinction between RoboCop and Robo-Murphy. Robo-Murphy's hyper-masculine techno-body is effective at 'fighting' crime and his human mind is effective at detecting criminals, as evidenced by his improved ability to follow clues and interrogate witnesses. His body, however, is required to follow his pre-programmed directives, one of which is to not harm employees of OCP. Because of this restriction, he is unable to arrest Dick Jones, the corrupt chief of OCP who was complicit in Murphy's death, and nearly dies in the process. Only after the senior president of OCP verbally fires Jones is Robo-Murphy able to kill the corrupt chief. Robo-Murphy, while generally an effective crime fighter, is fully hampered by the systemic corruption embedded in his programming (Telotte, "The Tremulous Public Body" 17).

This final transformation and the confrontation that follows are significantly different in the remake. As RoboCop is confronted with parts of Murphy's past, his biological strength is able to reverse the changes made to his neurotransmitters. His brain adapts to the software that it initially tried to reject and he returns to being Robo-Murphy with his human and robotic elements working harmoniously. This harmony continues until he confronts Raymond Sellars, the OmniCorp CEO. As in the original film, Robo-Murphy's programming initially prevents him from arresting Sellars. However, with intense effort and mental fortitude, he is able to overcome his programming and kill Sellars. What makes this change significant is the fact that it is likely the hardware alterations, made during Robo-Murphy's training, specifically the alteration which automated his actions when faced with danger, which allows him to bypass his robotic restrictions. Biological willpower alone could not physically alter his hardware, so in order to reclaim his autonomous cyborg identity and break free from the shackles of his programming, Robo-Murphy requires a combination of technology and humanity. The robotic instincts to fight crime formed by his technological brain interact with his human understanding of Sellars' corruption to do what the original film's Robo-Murphy could not do, override his corrupt programming.

Murphy's characterization informs how the social criticism offered by both films is performed. The original film, through satirical references and performances, criticizes hyper-masculinity and the Reagan Era in a wholly negative way, summarily condemning their place and influence in American society (*Science Fiction Film* 175). This criticism is reflected in how Murphy is, to a degree, always ineffective at fighting crime (178). Whether as the new-man Murphy-Prime

who gets blown away by the criminals, the hyper-masculine RoboCop who does no detection, or the cyborg Robo-Murphy who is entirely bound by his programming, the original film emphasizes a fundamental conflict between humanity and technology in crime-fighting ("The Tremulous Public Body" 17). Murphy's masculinity always makes him either too weak to be a hero or too strong to be a man, and his technological transformation can never make him the perfect crime fighter. No mix of humanity, masculinity, and technology result in effective crime-fighting in the original film.

Padilha's Murphy, in contrast, is almost always effective at fighting crime. While their gender performance and post-human elements fluctuate throughout the film, Murphy-Prime and RoboCop are only limited as crime fighters by external corruption, a limitation that Robo-Murphy is able to overcome by killing Sellars. This depiction of technology as a positive force in fighting crime directs the remake's social criticism at significantly different targets like drone warfare and the hyperpolarization of politics (Rea). It is because of these targets that the remake's method of criticism differs from the original. The original could make a purely one-sided statement about Reagan-era America because it was criticizing specific parts of Ronald Reagan's political policies and cultural impact. Unregulated capitalism and corporate corruption, hawkish military policies, and violent police crackdowns on crime were specific targets of condemnation.

The remake remains purposefully ambiguous because it targets polarization itself rather than one particular political ideology. The issue of drone warfare being used for security is an illustrative example of Padilha's social critique. In the film, RoboCop and Robo-Murphy are effectively drones being used domestically for fighting crime. In reality, drones are a politically polarizing issue because they represent a technological distance from traditional warfare, a dehumanization of war. The Right says they are necessary for national security while the Left says they remove the human connection to the taking of life and soften its impact. Padilha's *RoboCop* takes a middle-ground approach because the drone-like Murphy-Prime, RoboCop, and RoboMurphy are all effective crime fighters and society is saved by the combination of technology and humanity. By leaving the question of technology's role in fighting crime deliberately ambiguous, the film resists engaging in a polarized discourse and criticizes who refuse to recognize opposing viewpoints.

In her review of Jose Padilha's *RoboCop*, critic Manohla Dargis posits that "every generation, apparently, gets the "*RoboCop*" it deserves" (Dargis). Dargis, among other critics who gave positive reviews to the film, suggest that the trend in recent years towards 1980s film remakes is more than just a movie-studio cash

MARSELLUS

grab. *Red Dawn*, *The Karate Kid*, *Total Recall*, *Batman*, and *RoboCop*, among so many others, may be financed by box-office nostalgia; however, such films update their themes to offer a reflection of contemporary issues for contemporary audiences (Edelstein). The differences between Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* and Jose Padilha's *RoboCop* are more than aesthetic in nature. Rather, each film is a political commentary on its respective time. While some reviewers criticized the remake for being less satirically biting than the original (What the Flick!), Michael Phillips said that Padilha's optimistic humanism is what makes his adaptation of *RoboCop* distinct from the cynical satire of Verhoeven's original. Comparing these films speaks not only to how filmmakers engage with the issues of their time but also to which issues are the most pressing for the filmmakers. 1987 audiences deserved a cynical *RoboCop* that lambasted the conservative, consumeristic culture in which the audience itself was complicit. 2014 audiences deserved an optimistic *RoboCop* that criticized the contemporary political climate by thematically demonstrating compromise in the changing body of Alex Murphy.

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MARSELLUS

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