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Automatons, Robots, and Capitalism in a Very Wrong Twenty-First Century: A Review Essay on Neill Blomkamp's *Chappie*

Abstract

Contrary to prevailing opinions, Neill Blomkamp's recent feature film *Chappie* is not a movie about robots or artificial intelligence. It is not *Robocop*. It is not *Short Circuit*. It is also not *District 9* or *Elysium*. *Chappie* is a movie about humanity's dialectically creative and destructive potential. It is a movie about how it is that humans come to behave how they do through their social and material circumstances, as well as the barbaric results when the two are mixed under the thoroughly undemocratic conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords

Film Review, *Chappie*, Capitalism, Neill Blomkamp

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Contrary to prevailing opinions, Neill Blomkamp's recent feature film *Chappie* is not a movie about robots or artificial intelligence. It is not *Robocop*. It is not *Short Circuit*. It is also not *District 9* or *Elysium* (Blomkamp's first and second major features). It is also not a bad movie—though I don't expect to be able convince people, like those who go out and turn *Fifty Shades of Grey* and all thirty-eight installments of the *Fast and Furious* franchise into blockbusters, of any of these facts. *Chappie* is a movie about humanity's dialectically creative and destructive potential. It is a movie about how it is that humans come to behave how they do through their social and material circumstances, as well as the barbaric results when the two are mixed under the thoroughly undemocratic conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

While I do think there were moments of predictability and heavy-handedness with the narrative, especially regarding the matter-of-factly presented philosophical questions on the nature of consciousness, there remain sophisticated, nuanced, and hugely relevant aspects of this film that demand close, critical attention. After watching this film, I was reminded of Adorno's ever-pleasant aphorism: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly."¹ I believe this is the rhetorical question that *Chappie* demands us to evaluate, how could we possibly live rightly under conditions of instrumentalization, rationalization, and automation of both technology and human(e) life. The answer is clear: we cannot until we relocate the kernels of our undigested humanity and mobilize ourselves, collectively and individually, to move past the totalizing social and material conditions which permeate and dominate our common lives, and serve to annihilate the radical potentials latent in humanity itself.

Chappie, which takes place in the near future in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa corrupted by gang violence and drug-related crime, tells the story of computer engineer and inventor Deon Wilson's (played by the *Slumdog Millionaire* star Dev Patel) successful attempt to create a robotic police force, known individually as "scouts," to combat the incessant crime. Deon soon becomes obsessed with creating a sentient version of the scouts. Because the weapons company that Deon works for, Tetravaal, is perfectly satisfied with the unthinking Scouts as they are, he is spurned in his desire to advance the intelligence of his creations. After being turned down by Tetravaal CEO Michelle Bradley, played by Sigourney Weaver in a rare unremarkable and

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pg. 39 (Verso Books 2005).

functional performance, Deon decides to download his consciousness algorithm into a damaged scout scheduled for demolition. The result is Chappie, an android which initially behaves as a new-born would—ignorant, fearful, but curious. All the while, we are witnessing former soldier-turned engineer Vincent Moore (played by Hugh Jackman in a rare appearance as a character without retractable adamantium claws) attempt to get his massive, tank-like, remote-human operated drone labeled “MOOSE” approved for use. Again, due to the success of the Scout program, Vincent’s aggressive attempts are denied as well, which apparently unleashes his not-so-latent psychopathic tendencies, presumably left over from his years in the military. He becomes the movie’s predictable antagonist. Deon remains the well-meaning inventor dead-set on preventing his creation, which until the last twenty-or-so minutes of the film he views as being his property, from being turned into precisely what his initial robotic invention became—a tool for violence.

Chappie, whom we should recognize as the only non-automaton in the whole film, comes into existence tabula rasa and must learn everything, including how to speak and interact in society. The problem is, Chappie is activated after Deon is kidnapped by a trio of gang-bangers intent on using a scout to participate in a massive heist so they can repay a debt owed to the city’s most notorious kingpin Hippo, played by Brandon Aurret (a Blomkamp regular). The trio plan to train Chappie to be a criminal, but Deon interferes by making Chappie promise to never act violently or participate in any crime. Ninja and Yolandi, two of the gangsters (who are befuddlingly played by South African rap-rave duo Die Antwoord) become Chappie’s surrogate parents. Yolandi diverges from the initial plan, and becomes much more motherly, while Ninja remains focused on getting around Chappie’s promise to Deon. Dev Patel’s character is well-acted, but remains underdeveloped throughout the film, functioning as a kind of plot-mover and foil for Ninja’s “parenting” style. Ninja convinces Chappie that he will die if he doesn’t participate in the heist and that stabbing people merely puts them to sleep. Chappie later realizes he has been lied to and in the process has unintentionally broken his promise to Deon.



(Source: Google Images)

This film is noteworthy for its impeccable cinematography, musical accompaniment provided by the always-proficient Hans Zimmer, and the CGI motion-capture acting of Blomkamp regular

Sharlto Copley, who plays and voices the irreverent and infantile Chappie. All of these dimensions are put together by Blomkamp and his production team in such a way that compels the audience to adore Chappie from the moment he comes to life. In attempting to condition Chappie to participate in the heist, Ninja leaves him far from their hideout, surrounded by a group of young black men. We do not know whether these young men are criminals or members of a gang or anything, but they begin harassing Chappie once they realize he is not like the other mindless scouts, that is once they sense Chappie's fearfulness and childish innocence. They throw rocks at him, beat him with pipes, and eventually break a Molotov cocktail on him. While this happened, I heard a fellow viewer near me in the theatre exasperatedly mutter "How can they do that?" My immediate thought was, people do this to other actual human people almost daily in different cities around the world, and most often it doesn't even make the nightly news.

This emotional connection forged between the audience and a previously automaton robot is a testament to the writing and directing of Blomkamp and his team, but beyond that speaks to a greater capacity in humans for empathy than we often assume possible. This lack of empathy of humans for other humans is what I took to be the core message of the film. When Chappie eventually accepts his role in the heist and begins to be violent, the audience feels badly for him. This reaction is because we witness every stage of his corruption. Yet, it seems when these very same people watch the news and hear about gangs doing drive-by shootings or that an impoverished teenager kills another innocent person to get accepted into a gang, I highly doubt their reactions are even remotely similar. It is the mystification of how criminals become criminals which Blomkamp's film destabilizes. The veil is lifted and our capacities for understanding and empathy are reinvigorated. The ideology of individual blame is incompatible with the series of events we are shown that turn Chappie from an innocent child into your average gang-banger. We see a sentient being with no knowledge of the world turned into an instrument of destruction because of the material conditions and social structuring he experiences. Chappie is surrounded by a world that rejects him, or only accepts him instrumentally, providing him with few other options for continued existence.

What Chappie never loses, which is entirely absent in Hippo, Vincent, and Michelle Bradley, and is only seen in Ninja at the very end, is a critical view towards his own beliefs and behaviors. Chappie is a skeptic, even while trying to meet the expectations of others, especially those he comes to care for. Throughout the film we witness Chappie's difficult but eventual reconciling of violence, necessity, and love. The message is clear, if still unstated in the film: Love for our fellow man is incompatible with violence, but when faced with immediate and structural violences, counter-violence may be they only practical means of ensuring we all still exist to love each other at a later point. This is to say, even if we take the position—as I think we should that all violence is unethical—there is status quo supporting, counterrevolutionary violence that maintains hierarchy and exploitation, and there is violence aimed at survival or towards an alternative, emancipated way of life. We still need not accept the necessity of any violence, but *Chappie* reminds us that not all violence is created equal. We see this perfectly when Vincent's MOOSE is eventually unleashed on the city, hunting down Chappie. Hugh Jackman delivers some of the best psychopathic, near-orgasmic laughs while he makes his robotic killing-machine rip a defenseless man in half, literally. All of the violence which Vincent carries out is not only a reflection of some damage done to him through what we can infer was the typical dehumanizing

and desensitizing brain-washing training in the military, but also his mindless desire to prove that his machine is profitable at any cost, especially so long as that price is merely human life.

In the end, what lives on? Is it Chappie and Deon? The movie gives us a shallow answer to that, but delving deeper the suggestion posed by the film is more powerful. . The struggle for life under poverty, privatization, and exploitation continues. *Chappie* reminds us that the organized struggles of the Left do not take place in a vacuum disassociated from other struggles—and I don't mean the struggles of other organized movements like equal rights for racial minorities, subjugated ethnic group, non-heteronormative sexual orientations or identities, or conventional gender equality (feminist) movements even. All of these struggles take place within a social structure where people are born into poverty, into gang-ridden neighborhoods, where people are trying to raise children or cultivate loving relationships with one another.

Other than the issues with cast utilization, especially in the cases of Sigourney Weaver and Dev Patel or the undeveloped use of the controversial question of the nature of consciousness, the only potential problem one might have with Blomkamp's *Chappie* is that it tries to do too much but almost necessarily so. Again, it is not *Robocop*. It is not dealing with the radical potential of a single man to inspire a people to resist the neoliberal fascist takeover of a city. It is not *Short Circuit* where we have movie about a cute, semi-sentient robot with little to no discussion of broader social or political issues beyond an undeveloped anti-war message. It is not *Transcendence* where we have a movie where society is called to deal with the question of whether cybernetic intelligence is truly alive and deserving of the label "life." *Chappie* isn't *Wall-E*. *Chappie* doesn't save humanity from the gluttonous, mass consumptive forces of late capitalism. *Chappie* borrows a bit from each of these plots, and puts them together in a truly unique way. In *Chappie* the characters don't seem to learn any clear lessons, and based on the audience around me in the theater and other reviews I've read, neither will most viewers. However, that doesn't mean there is a not a lot to learn or critically consider from this somewhat campy and cheeky sci-fi flick. There is, and just with the technological lesson of the movie, how we think about *Chappie*, how we use *Chappie* will determine the radicality of its legacy.



(Source: Google Images)

Lastly, for those of you who have seen the movie, you may be thinking: wow he wrote a whole review and didn't once mention Hugh Jackman's haircut. It is true, in this film Hugh Jackman's character does indeed sport a repulsively barbaric and perfectly appropriate mullet. This is Blomkamp's reminder to us, not that all former soldiers are psychopaths wearing khaki shorts, combat boots, and a mullet—that I believe makes moonshine at several points in the film—but rather that human beings have not become less violent, because our social conditions have not become less violent. No matter what color their skin is or how stereotypically styled or un-styled their hair is, people are a product of their social conditions; these conditions can degrade or enhance our psycho-biological capacities for compassion, cooperation, and freedom. People, as such, have the potential for great destructiveness, but we can also create (and presumably create things that are not necessarily violent, but we can only do so consistently under the right, or at the very least not wrong, social conditions). It is worth reminding ourselves again of Adorno's aphorism: "wrong life cannot be lived rightly." What we need now is to build the right lives for ourselves against a neoliberal, late capitalist system that makes violence, profit, and human creativity, identical. When automation, efficiency, and technical rationality become the driving forces of society, the danger is not that technology will become self-aware, empathetic or disobedient but that humanity will cease to be.