

The Resurrected Cyborg

1. *“The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.”*

-Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”

Paul Verhoeven’s 1987 sci-fi action film *Robocop*, featuring killer robots, explosive blood baths, and face melting toxic waste, can be used as a surprisingly thoughtful object in studying Otherness. The ludicrous premise – a cop who is killed and then resurrected as a cyborg only to seek vengeance on those who wronged him – is indicative of the excessive entertainment typical of the 1980s. Despite associations with 80s machismo and hegemonic masculinity, *Robocop* asserts its value as a cultural product in two seemingly contradictory ways. The first is its cheeky, satirical tone, which embraces the silly aspects of the film’s universe. The acts of the movie are divided by cheery local news reports about the dystopian future and ads for outlandish Cold War inspired products such as “Nuke ‘Em,” a family board game about mutually assured destruction. These elements seem to convey that this cheesy action flick does not take itself too seriously and, with the metatextual commercials, contextualizes itself within low culture objects such as a TV movie of the week. Despite these connotations, the film provides rich areas of analysis in its plotting and character development. Robocop (Peter Weller) is a human-like character. He struggles against his own body, mind, and the system that both created and failed him in order to reclaim his identity. In fact, Murphy (Robocop’s original human name, used throughout this paper to accentuate his character arc) embodies the disabled experience of re-articulating a post-diagnosis identity outside of medical codification and negotiating a system designed for the masses through support and accessibility

accommodations. In the character of Murphy, *Robocop* offers representations of physical disability and invisible passing neurodivergent conditions (such as dementia, cognitive and processing disabilities, and mental illness). Both as a blockbuster loaded with a pastiche of goofy, gory violence, and as an allegory concerning the personhood and identity of the atypical body and brain, *Robocop* as a film could be considered a cyborg in itself.

Since Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” was published in 1984, the image of the cyborg has become a widely accessible metaphor for shifting boundaries in critical theory throughout the humanities. The metaphorical cyborg appears in works concerning projections of gender and race, where the cyborg is either an androgynous boogeyman, sapping masculinity from our heroes (Fuchs), or an analogy for contamination, representing defiance against racial expectations and identity (Nishime). The cyborg, which was first introduced to criticism as a space in-between ideas and disciplines, has now been exhausted by all of them. As technology has become more entangled in our lives, the cyborg has seen a resurgence in representation of something closer to its literal form, as society is now more of a cybernetic-enhanced organism. Today’s rhetoric has shifted to discount the “cyborg” while applying the term “prosthetic” in the same way, creating an imaginary space for conceptualizing abstracted and romanticized possibilities in merging the mechanical with the organic (Sobchack 207). The prosthetic lacks the totality of the cyborg, it can be discarded when the notion of post-humanity fails to align with the fantastic imaginary of science fiction. The irony is that unlike the totally constructed image of the cyborg, the prosthetic techno-body is a day-to-day reality for many of the disabled community.

Theorist Vivian Sobchack incorporates her experiences as an amputee into her writings concerning the lived-body, and the relationship between the body and the self (173). On the subject of the fetishization of the techno-body, she keeps both her prosthetic and organic feet on the ground. Following a litany

of her prostheses (in varying degree of technological complexity, from crutches to fiberglass and titanium tibia and fibula), their various components, their history, and their place in her everyday life and in her house, she writes:

I hope, by now, that you—the reader—have been technologized and quantified into a stupor by what is a very narrow and “objective” register of meaning, the bland (or at least straight-faced) enumeration, detailing, and pricing of my prosthetic parts (whether on my body or in the closet) intended to ground and lend some “unsexy” material weight to a contemporary prosthetic imagination that privileges... is too often thrilled by—the exotic (indeed, perhaps erotic) *idea* rather than the mundane *reality* of my intimate relations with “high” technology. (219)

While Sobchack is quick to discount her autobiographical position as lending her total authority on the subject (206), she writes from a unique perspective among other body theorists. Her focus here is that unlike the fanciful cyborg, the techno-body is not a metaphorical space for the able-bodied to ruminate on aesthetics and culture with cyber-punk inspired delight. The prosthetic and techno-body have been grafted onto the metaphorical cyborg for no reason but to affect the reinvention of the cyborg. The idea of the prosthetic, and by extension, the techno-body, must be reclaimed by the individuals and community in need of accommodation. Only in the context of disability studies does the concept of the techno-body become a new conceptual cyborg, both metaphor of post-modern humanities theories and literal in its representation of function.

The heroic cyborg Robocop embodies the techno-body and acts as a symbol for the experience of the



atypical body and brain. After extraordinary trauma to his organic body (in fact, he is legally dead, meaning that his lived-body is also a resurrected body), evil corporation Omni Consumer Products surgically alters and integrates Murphy’s “wet ware” with mechanical and cybernetic prosthetics. Murphy’s death on the operating table is shot from the point of view of the doctors, there is no doubt of the location and severity of his injuries.

Murphy has consolidated his identity as a techno-body and brain; Murphy and Robocop are one.

The audience tracks his resurrection as he is rebuilt into Robocop through the perspective of his new, robotically enhanced vision. Indicative of his disabled status, the orientation of his point of view is lower than the other people in the scene, as though he is wheelchair bound. Omni middle manager Bob Morton (Miguel Ferrer) remarks during Robocop’s construction “We agreed on total body prosthesis” and then directs the engineers to “lose the arm.” Otherwise, there is no indication as to how Robocop is constructed. As the mechanical components of his new body are built to emulate in form and function human extremities, his body can now be considered a single, massive prosthesis.

Murphy’s disabled body is regulated as if by a medical professional through prosthetics. But as with all cyborgs, particularly those in cinema, he retains outward indicators of his organics. Murphy and Robocop are inextricable. The self is the lived-body, and the lived-body is a techno-body. The ambiguity of the anatomy of Robocop further serves to solidify him as a complete entity rather than a dissectible specimen. In contrast to the spectacle of seeing Murphy blown apart, Robocop is presented as a fully formed being. This shifts how he is conceptualized and identified by external systems (the spectator and the paratext) from the realm of science and medicine into a cultural context.

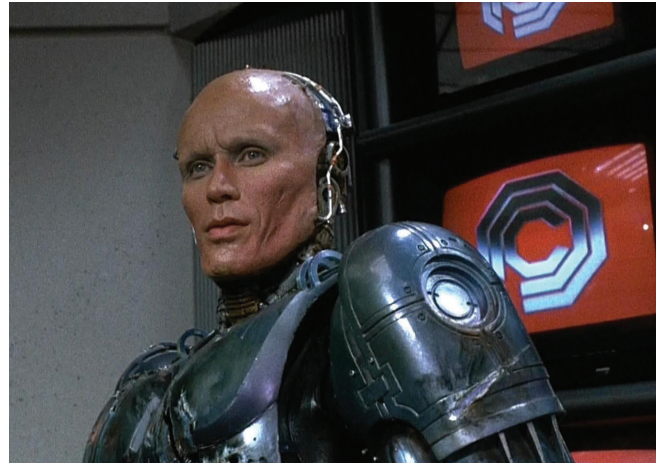
When Robocop is first revealed as a fully integrated techno-body, with organics relating seamlessly to prostheses, he is still under the total control of Omni. Murphy’s humanity bleeds through his physical change only in affectations, such as how he spins and holsters his weapon and what he says to criminals: “Dead or alive, you are coming with me.” As the story progresses, Robocop remembers more from his “organic life,” learns more about his murder, and goes to seek justice. He is injured in a massive firefight and must repair himself. He retreats to an industrial park with his ally Lewis

(Nancy Allen). He is seen testing his joints, removing his mask for the first time, being called by name, lamenting his lost life, and reintegrating his body and brain by relearning to aim a weapon. Just as he is rebuilding his body and learning its limitations, he is rebuilding his identity and how to thrive within those limitations.

Throughout the film, Robocop's point of view is displayed to the spectator as a patchwork of executive orders and residual habits and memories. He struggles to make sense of his memories and how he now relates to them without guidance or support. Included among the various invisible disabilities presented in this film is memory loss. This representation is crucial as our cultural imagination seats personhood in the mind as well as the body; when one's memory, personality, and sense of self wanes, their personhood is dismissed (Price 334). Robocop's access to these memory fragments, dreams, and hallucinations are a glitch, as they were unanticipated by his programmers and handlers. As he reconfigures his sense of self in an industrial park, he says of his family: "I can feel them, but I can't remember them." He moves on from his inability to access his old life in order to consolidate his new identity. This is a subtle turn of events, but necessary to the arc of the character.

Along with his "super-human" physical abilities, Robocop's cognitive capacities are shown as beyond human. He is able to record events, both operating as a form of total recall and (it is implied) providing him with the ability to give privileged testimony in court. He can also interface directly with a computer. In a twisted version of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics (Asimov), his "Fourth Directive" prohibits Robocop from acting against Omnicorp executives, or he will shut down. The dreaded Fourth Directive is among his most overt mental limitations, as it limits his autonomy. Ultimately, for all of Robocop's "superpowers", it is this inherent construction that limits his ability to exist as a full political agent of the justice system and of society.

At the film's climax, Murphy is able to work around the Fourth Directive to enact his vengeance on Dick Jones (Ronny Cox), the man who facilitated his murder. He walks into the room and states his case against Jones to the board of directors. When Jones takes his boss, "The Old Man" (Daniel O'Herlihy) hostage, Murphy calmly explains that he is incapable of acting against an officer of Omni. The Old Man fires Jones, Robocop shoots him, and Jones crashes out the window of the skyscraper. The Old Man asks for Robocop's name, who replies with a grin: "Murphy." The movie ends immediately with a black title card: ROBOCOP. Murphy has consolidated his identity as a techno-body



and brain; Murphy and Robocop are one. The identity of Robocop is resolved in parallel to the resolution of his struggle to articulate his place as an Other within society. His success in avenging himself is contingent on The Old Man recognizing that his request will create a condition for Robocop to act as though he were unencumbered by the Fourth Directive. The limitation is removed, not from the person of Robocop, but from the system in which he operates. The importance of the disability narrative is woven into the climax of the film; in essence, Robocop requests accommodations for his disability. While The Old Man provides Murphy the means to succeed, there is again no doubt among the board of directors, Murphy, or the audience, that it is Murphy who pulls the trigger and saves the day.

2. "Role models are important..."

- Officer Alex Murphy, *Robocop*

In a century's worth of cinema, representations of the disabled community have been problematic. The body of the disabled other has been fetishized, their mind has been dismissed, and the narrative has been built to favor the feelings and perspective of the abled-bodied audience (Norden, *Cinema* 1-3).

The reboot of *Robocop* (José Padilha, 2014) – hereafter referred to as *Robocop* 2014 – is a significant example of this. *Robocop* 2014 also features a police officer named Alex Murphy, who is brutally murdered and resurrected as a cyborg. Here the two films diverge in plotting and tone. In *Robocop* 2014, Alex Murphy is confronted with his new body in a large, sterile lab, with his "creator" and prosthetist Dr. Dennett Norton (Gary Oldman). He faces a mirror, and his prosthetics are mechanically removed with lavishly deliberate pacing to underline Alex's growing horror: the legs, the groin, torso and arms, and finally the chest plate. Alex watches

this controlled vivisection in the mirror, as does the audience. In this way, his body is only ever framed as image and spectacle, separate from our understanding of Alex. The focus is racked from Alex to Norton, accentuating the authority of the medical professional over the specimen of the disabled body; it does not matter what Alex sees, it matters what Norton says. This is followed with a lingering pan from the top of Alex's exposed brain to his face. "You're in control," explains Norton. "If I'm in control," responds Alex, "I want to die."

The underlying aim of disability studies is to present the disabled outside of the alienating and categorizing framework of medicine (Mitchell 222). Disability often becomes the superior political identity of a person, and that identity is always packaged by the medical profession (Davis 10). In our introduction to Alex, he is presented not only as a discorded body but framed as a specimen to be gawked at by the cinema's "abled-bodied" audience. This is a stark contrast to Murphy's *Robocop* awakening, which is only his point of view, demanding that the audience empathize with him as an autonomous subject rather than object. Alex is framed as a less-than-human object, in literal terms of anatomical subtraction. The disabled body is not presented as human, but rather an inhuman figuration to serve as the object of horror and pity. This scene arguably also recalls the freak show, one of the earliest modern era examples of reducing disabled bodies to objects of spectacle and commodification (Garland Thomson 58).

The plot of *Robocop 2014* revolves around Alex's lack of agency. Like Murphy, Alex is subject to a litany of programming functions which limit his autonomy and serve as allegory for the neurodivergent disabilities. He is controlled by a team of specialists, who short-circuit his personality to send him on mindless murder missions. His lack of control is never framed in terms of his own existence, but only as a torment to his wife and child. He must bear the burden of placating them. Most indicative of this is the climax of the movie. In stark contrast to the accessibility affirming climax of *Robocop*, the climax of *Robocop 2014* is an exercise in sentiment, that again leans on the damaging tropes of disability portrayal throughout the history of cinema (Norden *Changing* 137). Alex must kill the modern incarnation of the evil executive, Raymond Sellers (Michael Keaton) to save his wife and child. Although Alex is programmed not to harm anyone wearing a certain electronic bracelet, he is able to shoot Sellers. Alex is able to overcome his programming, and in effect, his disability. His limitations within the system and society are not reconciled by his character growth, but dismissed by his overpowering

desire to be able bodied. This privileges the "power of love" over the pre-established narrative rules in relation to his cyborg nature. He is able to extend his limitations just by trying hard enough, and only in service to the able-bodied characters around him. In a sequence clearly created to evoke an emotional response from the viewer, he lies on the rooftop, his wife holding his human hand. An inversion of the long held and problematic trope of internal evil being visually conveyed by external deformity (Norden, *Changing* 128), Alex's humanity and identity are represented by his body's last organic affectation. His personhood is still tied not to his actions or self-actualization, but to his flesh.

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Whether articulated through medicine, culture, or film, the aesthetics of disability have yet to be fully extracted from the concept of disempowerment. Although the representation of historically disenfranchised identities is being evaluated in the current mass media market, the legacy of the use of identity as symbol, such as disability signifying disempowerment, persist as a mythological inherence in our cultural memory. Murphy's journey in *Robocop* demonstrates the existential value of demanding accessibility in working and thriving in abled spaces. There is also a demand for accessible representation from film texts. So long as textual representation of disabled characters is used to signify the pitiable or "inspiring" other, the task of appropriating representation of disabled experiences in popular media becomes an exercise in the autonomy of the audience.

Opening abled spaces to the disabled is contingent on the use of literal prosthetics and accommodations. Opening narratives of self-discovery and triumph against a sometimes dehumanizing system requires the political imaginary articulated by Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto". "This is a struggle over life and death," she wrote a handful of years before the campy, ultra-macho *Robocop* was first in theaters, "but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (149). The film is the cyborg; and the shifting boundary is between text and audience.

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