I’D BUY THAT FOR A DOLLAR!

An Examination of Robocop

and Film Genre

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Film Genre Study: Science Fiction

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“Part man, part machine, all cop” is the tagline for director Paul Verhoeven’s *Robocop*, an ultra-violent, cinematic peek at a dystopian future of lawlessness, terror, and corporate totalitarianism. Not only does the catch phrase look good on the film’s poster, it is also a good intimation of how the film combines different genres to create something new. The filmmakers created something that was part renegade police action film, part science fiction, and all new.

The idea of cross-pollinating film genres is nothing new, especially within the realm of science fiction. In the past, the horror genre has been combined with science fiction on a regular basis. J.P. Telotte says in his article “Science Fiction Film,” “Invariably, for example, the form seems to bulk into the realm of horror, as is evidenced by such varied films as *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Cyclops*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and more recently, the films in the *Alien* Cycle…” (Telotte, 4) This approach is embraced by *Robocop* but instead of using narrative elements from the horror genre, Verhoeven decided to combine science fiction with the action/adventure genre, something he would repeat with *Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers*. In order to understand how *Robocop* crossed genres it is important to have a good understanding of what genre is and its concepts.

Genre is defined by the two simultaneous functions of category and organization. It is a way for audiences and critics alike to view a multitude of films and classify them by their shared form and context. When analyzing a film’s genre there are four categories that are always included: iconography, narrative, character, and theme. These four categories are studied because within them is where the most repetitive attributes of film lie. In them, audiences and filmmakers both find the rules that create a genre.
Iconography, or the visual elements of a film, include sets, props, costumes, and any other physical aspect seen on screen. Narrative is simply the story or plot of a film. Character is exactly what its name states: the varying, repeated characters that appear in film, such as the male and female leads of a romantic musical. Finally, Themes are smaller ideas and concepts that are conveyed within a film’s narrative. All of these elements are manipulated and reshaped in order to help a film find its genre.

Robocop follows the rules of one of science fiction’s most popular narratives—the dystopian future. Released in 1987, Robocop creates a dystopia perfect for its time period, as it should. “Dystopias describe imaginary future societies in which conditions are worse than the present civilization.”(Fletcher, 130) The audience is introduced to a future where Big Business reigns. Big Brother from 1984 has been replaced by “Gordon Gecko-esque” businessmen who value the corporate bottom line more than human life. The company “OCP” appears to have its hands in everything, from the military to government. While the board members grow richer in their glass towers, the streets and the common man have given way to lawlessness and fear. They have become the new rich and glossy version of totalitarianism.

Other than totalitarianism, dystopian films also feature themes like dehumanization, a loss of resources or the environment, and the conformity of the human race. All of these themes are present in Robocop where over-worked and outgunned police officers wear riot gear as a standard practice while crime runs rampant in the streets. Throughout the film, news reports and television commercials give audiences a glimpse of the world outside “old Detroit.” It is a world full of terrorist attacks, warring nations, environmental degradation, and where families play board games about mass destruction. Society in general has become dumb and afraid, having been more or less bought by “OCP.” Writer John W Nelson says, “We have become
understandably afraid of our technology. We pollute our air, poison our water, wipe out our wild, free animals, and defoliate our land. Television is cheap entertainment, but we find that we get what pay for.” (Nelson, 179) The entire film plays off this idea and works as a satirical warning of what could happen to society should we not change our ways.

The only beacon of hope for the citizens of “old Detroit” comes in the form of Robocop who is also the film’s strongest source for science fiction iconography. The film’s protagonist is Officer Alex Murphy, a good cop who is gunned down only to be reborn as a cyborg police officer. Having a robotic star would automatically clue audiences visually that they are entering a world of science fiction. Vivian Sobchack agrees with this assessment in her article Images of Wonder where she says, “Even more obvious in their capacity to change shape and color and evocative power than spaceships are SF robots… as emblematic of that vague term ‘SF technology.’” (79) Having a walking, talking, sophisticated piece of technology as your leading man is a sure-fire way to fall into the SCI-FI genre.

Though the film’s star is a cyborg, which casts the movie firmly into the realm of science fiction, Director Paul Verhoeven still wanted the world of Robocop to be recognizable. The film is set in what could be a not-too-distant future. Every societal problem seems to have reached a boiling point. Verhoeven only enhances certain items to help imply it is the future. Robocop’s handgun is a large, one-handed machine gun that only he could ever hope to use. Later in the film, one of the major antagonists and his gang of criminals are all equipped with large futuristic guns that act more as canons than guns. Now, while these are not massive indications of the future, the weaponry of a film can carry important messages as part of the iconography of a film. Edward Buscombe agrees, saying this of weapon selection as part of a western’s film iconography: “Such care in the choice of weapons is not mere pedantry nor dictated purely by
considerations of historical accuracy, for an incredible variety of arms were in use. The weapons employed in the films are there for largely stylistic reasons…” (Buscombe, 14) This way, the weapon selection of Robocop becomes a message of era as well as a means to act out its ultra-violence.

A cybernetic leading man, futuristic weapons, and a grim future all help to move Robocop into the science fiction realm of the uncanny. Here, films deal principally with the idea of “technological alterations in and substitute versions of the self.” (Telotte, 12) The dark dystopian future of Robocop paints a world where crime has become so bad that only the advancement of technology can produce salvation in the form of an inhuman machine that will protect the innocent and the interests of its corporate creators. Telotte says, “All the stories of created selves, of robots, and androids practically indistinguishable from the human… lead us back precisely to inquire into our very humanity and its place in the construction of a human world.” (16) Likewise, by showing audiences a world where a robot is necessary to solve human problems, they enter a world where the humans are the problem.

All of this helps to follow the most important element of dystopian fiction, cognitive estrangement—the concept of taking everyday ideas and objects and making them fantastic and strange to the average person. Without Robocop’s leading man, weapons, and boardroom totalitarianism, it would be too recognizable to its viewers and most likely would not have been as successful. It is through cognitive estrangement that audiences are able to relate to the possible future and see that it is something to be avoided. By Robocop’s end, viewers are shown how important self-identity, freedom from violence, and justice truly are.
The narrative of *Robocop* and more specifically its chief protagonist, Alex Murphy follows the traditional heroic monomyth created by Joseph Campbell almost entirely. The monomyth is a pattern of events Joseph Campbell found within several works of fiction and film. The largest component of the monomyth is the formula for a hero to go through the cycle of separation- initiation- return. (Campbell, 34) The hero of the story always goes through variations of the same steps; they are often but not always referred to as 1) the Call to Adventure, 2) the Refusal of the Call, 3) Supernatural Aid, 4) the Crossing of the First Threshold, and 5) the Belly of the Whale. (Campbell, 36)

The biggest difference from the monomyth formula comes in the beginning of Alex Murphy’s journey. At the film’s opening, Murphy is already an honorable man and hero as an exceptional police officer. There is no real Call to Action for the character or resistance to events that happen to him. He is murdered on the job and is then transformed into Robocop without his knowledge. His death is the most important part of the opening act and may substitute the Call to Action/Refusal to the call. Campbell says of a hero’s death, “[T]he really creative acts are represented as those deriving from some sort of dying to the world; and what happens in the interval of the hero’s nonentity, so that he comes back as one reborn, made great and filled with power…” (Campbell, 35-36) Only through Alex Murphy’s death could his real journey begin as the man-made hero Robocop.

Murphy as Robocop receives help in the form of Sharon Lewis, his partner at the time of his murder. She fills the helper roll of the myth but does not act in any shape or form as a mentor character that is usually present. The turning point of the film comes when Robocop begins to retain memories of his former self and begins to track down and apprehend his murderers. With his killers in jail, Robocop suffers the failure of having “OCP,” his creators, and other law
enforcement turn against him. In the end, Robocop and Lewis vanquish their enemies and Murphy returns to his status quo from the beginning of the film. He becomes an exceptional cop now with the tools to hopefully return law and order to the masses.

Apocalyptic eschatology, or the examination of the apocalypse and the purposed rebirth that follows, does not pertain to Robocop as a concept the way it does in other dystopian future narratives. The world portrayed in this film still has yet to suffer a true apocalypse but it is definitely on the road to one. As stated earlier, the condition of the world at large in the film is grim and has little signs of getting better. It could be argued that Robocop portrays the outcome of the fictional world’s future through Alex Murphy himself. Writer John W. Nelson reminds us “Apocalyptic eschatology is the tradition which expects the Last Days (of the world, history, the present time) to be ushered in by a radical, supernatural break in history.” (Nelson, 157)

Murphy suffers a personnel apocalypse in the form of his death but is reborn and able to recapture all of who he is in his new body. By having its hero follow Campbell’s monomyth, Robocop could be stating that there is hope for the future or that there will always be a rebirth after an apocalypse.

Like a futuristic Frankenstein, Alex Murphy is transformed from a corpse to Robocop. The process is one of the film’s most iconic scenes where the audience sees from a POV shot, various scientists using random pieces of technology to create the metallic hero. The actual process is hidden from the audience because really no one knows how to truly animate a corpse as a cyborg. This adds an element of science-magic-religion to the film, in that the actual process of Robocop’s transformation cannot really be explained. It is portrayed as science but could very well have been magic, and the idea that Murphy’s mind or soul remains trapped in this mechanized body could be argued as the work of the divine. Writer Vivian Sobchack
confirms this by stating, “What distinguishes magic from science, the horror film from the SF film, amounts finally to how much we know about the process and product, how much we are told about the cause and effect.” (Sobchack, 59) This shows that audiences have no idea how a “Robocop” is made but we believe it within the confines of the film because of the world the film creators have portrayed.

Robocop uses all the conventions of a science fiction film to attract its audience but it also retains the familiar narrative of a lawman versus a wild band of outlaws. This type of narrative has been seen in many different genres including westerns and police thrillers. The fact that Alex Murphy must be transformed into a half-man half-machine hybrid to return order to his imaginary world is just the convention used to tell a familiar story in a new way. This idea of taking familiar cinematic or literary formulas and combining or adapting them is not new. It is how fiction survives and evolves.

By using familiar types of characters, themes, and narratives, films and literature can make their work seem already familiar to audiences. This way people feel like they already have an idea of what they are going to experience, but this does not mean that they do not want to be surprised or witness something new. Author John Cawelti says, “Audiences find satisfaction and a basic emotional security in a familiar form; in addition the audience’s past experience with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in new individual examples thereby increasing its capacity for understanding and enjoying the details of the work.” (Cawelti, 9) Through this, Verhoeven and the other creators of Robocop were able to take a familiar narrative that audiences could get behind and adapt it to become something else.
One tool that was used in order to attract audiences to the familiar plot was the aforementioned ultra violence that permeates the world of Robocop. Originally given an X-rating for excessive violence, Robocop and the villains he’s pursuing blow holes in everything from cars to each other. Excessive violence is a common tool of the film industry to help audiences escape their average lives. Cawelti says, “No doubt violence, like sex, plays an important role in formulaic structures because of its capacity to generate the kind of intense feelings that take us out of ourselves.” (Cawelti, 15) This concept works for the dystopian future as well. Audiences can sit back and watch bad guys be taken out by Robocop in a bleak future from the safety of their local movie theaters.

Starting off with bang in its box office success, Robocop went on to become a thriving franchise with two sequels, an animated series, and a slew of graphic novels. It is rumored that the franchise may even be rebooted as a new film in the near future. All of this achievement can be attributed to the film’s ability to break new ground by crossing genres, giving a glimpse of a possible future, and keeping audiences on the edge of their seat with fast-paced action. More than twenty years after its original release, it is easy to answer Robocop’s catchphrase; Dead or Alive, audiences will always be willing to come with him.
Bibliography


