

# Repo Men lingers on all the wrong things

Hiram Lee  
13 April 2010

*Repo Men*, directed by Miguel Sapochnik, is set in a dystopian future in which the domination of health care by corporate interests has reached extreme heights. A company called the Union manufactures state-of-the-art robotic organs to be used in transplants. Desperate clients, whose lives depend on receiving the expensive new organs, are compelled to enter into risky payment plans with the Union in order to afford them.

Remy (Jude Law) is a “repo [repossession] man” whose job is to reclaim the artificial organs of transplant recipients who are past due on their payments. As Remy says in one voiceover, “Can’t pay for your car? The bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your house? The bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your liver? That’s where I come in.”

The repossession process is a brutal act, often resulting in the death of the client. Repo men stalk a client with a delinquent account and disable them with a weapon similar to a tazer. While they are unconscious, the repo man cuts open their body and removes the Union organ.

While attempting to collect an organ from one client, Remy is electrocuted by a faulty defibrillator. He requires a heart transplant and receives his own costly artificial heart. Now that he is a transplant recipient, Remy finds he can no longer perform repossessions. He begins to see his victims as real people, fellow human beings and not just a means of making money. Unable to go on with his work, Remy falls behind on payments for his heart. Soon, he himself will be hunted by repo men.

In bringing this nightmare scenario to life, the filmmakers seem to have in mind exposing the horrors of the present day health care industry. In this respect, the film could hardly have come at a better time. The Obama administration has just signed into law new health care legislation which will defend and increase the profits of insurance companies, private hospital

chains and pharmaceutical companies, while cutting billions from Medicare and paving the way for a system of rationalized health care in which expensive tests and medical procedures will be placed out of reach for poor and working class Americans.

Unfortunately, *Repo Men* doesn’t even begin to do such a topic justice. Only a few moments, or perhaps just a few lines, ring true. The attempt by Union CEO Frank (Liev Schreiber) to justify the work of repo men in one scene recalls the logic of any number of corporate criminals one can recognize from real life: “You’re not taking a life,” says Frank, “You’re keeping the company viable so we can continue to give life.”

A few scenes involving Remy’s co-worker and friend Jake Freivald (Forest Whitaker) also strike the right tone. Jake is completely callous and alienated. He jokes about his repossession victims and is completely dumbfounded by Remy’s sudden inability to cut them to pieces. Jake’s motto is “A job’s a job.”

None of this is sustained. As is so often the case, the film pursues with far greater diligence the gory special effects of the repossession scenes and other moments of violence, while using a kind of short hand for human relationships.

Among the more gruesome sequences in the film comes when Remy and a fellow transplant recipient Beth (Alice Braga) storm the Union headquarters in an attempt to erase their accounts from the Union’s computer system. They fight their way through a long corridor filled with repo men who block their path, slicing into the bodies of their enemies with knives and hacksaws. The sequence is filmed in an appreciative slow motion. Every stab and slice is savored by the camera.

By contrast, the scenes in which Remy is increasingly burdened by Union debts and begins to fear he will not be able to afford the heart beating in his own chest is

hurried through in a montage sequence.

Remy and Beth discover the only way they can delete their accounts is by scanning their own artificial organs. In a bizarre sequence akin to a sex scene blended with the autopsy sequences from any of the dozen or so forensic crime shows on television, Remy and Beth cut into their bodies, reaching into the wounds with scanning devices. It is difficult to know exactly what the filmmakers are getting at here, but it's more repulsive than intriguing. The influence of David Cronenberg is hard to miss at moments like these.

In choosing to bring out the horror of a corporate-dominated health care system by focusing primarily on the grisly aspects of repossession, the filmmakers have done their subject a disservice. One either turns one's head or becomes numb to the imagery.

The real-life horror story of for-profit health care is never brought out. We don't learn a great deal about the repo men's victims. They are either nervous-looking clients seen briefly in the offices of the Union or faceless refugees hiding out from repo men in "nests." There's nothing here about the economic conditions contributing to the inability of clients to pay, nothing about people forced to choose between paying for food and utilities or their medical bills. So little of life is reflected here. In its absence, the filmmakers build their drama on a scaffolding of chase sequences and fight scenes.

The film concludes with a surprise ending of the kind that was favored in Hollywood a few years ago, throwing into doubt whether or not what we have seen for much of the film even occurred in the first place. This last-minute gimmick threatens to undo the entire work. It speaks to a lack of seriousness on the part of the film's creators.

In *Repo Men* we find another important subject treated in a trivial, careless manner. The filmmakers linger on all the wrong things and skip over the most essential.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**