

José Padilha's new *RoboCop*: Largely missing the point

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Directed by Jose Padilha; written by Joshua Zetumer.

José Padilha's *RoboCop* is based on the 1987 film of the same title, directed by Paul Verhoeven (*Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*) and starring Peter Weller.

Like the original, the new movie is set in futuristic metro Detroit, "the crime capital of the country." In 2028, the city is presided over in all but legal formality by the mega-conglomerate OmniCorp, which has its headquarters in the city's downtown area.

Alex Murphy (Joel Kinnaman), a Detroit police officer, becomes the victim of a vicious crime, leaving him nearly dead. Through the technological intervention of OmniCorp, he is given a second chance, so that he may continue to serve the cause of law and order and rid the city of crime.

The original 1987 film, something of a "cult classic," identified and satirized a number of social and political processes, including de-industrialization and corporate criminality, as well as the increased commercialization and privatization of American life.

The first *RoboCop* had serious weaknesses (Verhoeven gravitates in all his films toward the sensational and lurid)—an unhealthy fascination with the same violence it supposedly was criticizing and a narrative centering on a lone "hero" who saves the day more or less single-handedly. However, it also packed a certain punch in its depiction of various social types, including corporate CEOs, typified by Dan O'Herlihy as "The Old Man," the head of Omni Consumer Products. The latter and his associates were portrayed as just as ruthless and loathsome as the gun-toting thugs faced by the main character.

The original benefited from the presence of the remarkable Irish-born O'Herlihy (who died in 2005), along with Nancy Allen, Ronny Cox, Kurtwood Smith and Miguel Ferrer.

Given the passage of time (the 1987 film followed by several sequels) and the even more desperate situation facing wide layers of the population (including, of course, in Detroit), the growth of social inequality and the widespread use of unmanned drones, one might have been forgiven for hoping the creators of the new film would have something substantial to say. This is largely not the case, although some pointed commentary about the "war on terror" is to be found.

In the Brazilian-born Padilha's remake, the focus shifts away from the connection between the growth of corporatism, the impoverishment of the population and the emergence of a police state toward the growing use of automation, as a thing in itself, and its implications for humanity.

In the new *RoboCop*'s opening and most ominous sequence, news commentator Pat Novak, host of the television show "The Novak Element" (an apparent reference to Fox News' Bill O'Reilly and played in bombastic style by Samuel L. Jackson), cuts to an on-the-spot report from American imperialism's latest military adventure—US-occupied Iran, where the suppression of the population is presented as its "liberation," à la Iraq and Afghanistan.

The embedded journalist proclaims the greatness of "American machines promoting peace and freedom abroad," while we see hulking drone warriors, manufactured by OmniCorp, leveling residential areas as part of the effort to root out resistance in the population. In a bloody skirmish with insurgents, civilians are killed.

Subsequently, OmniCorp CEO Raymond Sellars (Michael Keaton) testifies before a US Senate committee, the majority of which is opposed to the expanded deployment of robots to police the American populace. "What would one of your machines feel" if it

were to kill a civilian?, one Senator asks. “It would feel nothing,” Sellars replies.

Sellars and his advisors are convinced that the biggest obstacle to OmniCorp’s cornering the US market is an image problem: if only they can find something “aspirational” that the populace can embrace. Keaton’s portrayal of Sellars as a CEO willing to manipulate and wreak havoc in people’s lives in pursuit of profit is quite believable.

Enter Murphy, a Detroit detective on the hunt for illegal arms dealer Antoine Vallon (Patrick Garrow). Murphy has learned that someone inside the Detroit police department is funneling confiscated weapons to the crime boss. Soon afterward, Murphy is horribly injured by a car bomb planted by one of Vallon’s thugs. OmniCorp’s executives seize on this as a golden opportunity. They claim to be giving Murphy a “second chance” at life and begin constructing the RoboCop unit: a cybernetic crime fighter with a robotic body and the mind (and face) of a human.

The remake focuses on the conflict between what’s left of Murphy and his moral sense, on the one hand, and, on the other, the RoboCop fighting suit he wears, which is controlled by OmniCorp scientist Dr. Dennett Norton (Gary Oldman), who states coldly that “consciousness is nothing more than the processing of information.”

According to director Padilha (*Bus 174*, 2002) in an interview with *Collider.com*, the crux of the film lies in the idea “that there’s a connection between fascism and the automation of violence.” Padilha comments, “Consider Vietnam American [forces] pulled out of Vietnam because soldiers were dying. Now, if you replace soldiers with robots, what would have happened? It opens the door to fascism ... Every army or every police force that gets people to do outrageous things, first they dehumanize the soldiers. They get them to training and turn them into machines.”

This is a worthy subject, although the notion that automation or robotics is driving the process toward authoritarianism is wrongheaded. In any case, however, the film largely drops any reference to imperialist violence as it progresses. Aside from the scenes of violent repression in Iran, there is no further development along these lines, and as a consequence, the film ends up abstractly debating the question of man vs. machine.

One senses that the director disapproves of the growth of the police state, but cannot (or chooses not to) place his finger on what aspect of it is truly troublesome, settling for a vague opposition to “machines” in general.

The director’s approach has other consequences.

One of the central elements of the original *RoboCop* films was the takeover of the indebted Detroit metropolitan region by the aforementioned OCP, which unleashed its army of robotic law-enforcement drones on the city to “clean up crime” and make it safe for big business. What’s the current situation in Detroit? An unelected financial emergency manager has been installed to drive the city into bankruptcy, slash services, wages and benefits, in the service of Wall Street and the banks. The parallels almost jump out at one.

Yet Padilha’s film is silent about the current situation, apparently more interested in debating the question of human intelligence vs. technology on a plane removed from reality.

The film’s “storybook” ending, along with its many clichéd and formulaic features, hardly does the subject matter justice. Perhaps it was a great deal to ask, but one would have liked to see a more concrete, urgent and serious treatment.



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