

# *Chappie*: Is the sum greater than the parts?

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South African-Canadian director Neill Blomkamp's *Chappie* is set in a 2016 Johannesburg plagued by violent street crime. Through the deployment of battalions of robotic police, crime rates are cut dramatically and orders for scores more robots are placed with weapons manufacturer Tetravaal, which produces the machines.

When the young scientist who developed the robots, Deon Wilson (Dev Patel), brings company president Michelle Bradley (Sigourney Weaver) a program that will render the robots sentient, giving them the ability to think independently and, among other examples he excitedly cites, appreciate art, she flatly refuses to allow him to upload the program or even experiment with it. Bradley declares with barely disguised amusement that he must realize he has entered the office of a “publicly traded” military equipment company proposing to create a robot that writes poetry.

Undaunted, Deon steals a robot that had been slated for the scrap heap. On his way home he is kidnapped by Amerika (Jose Pablo Cantillo), Ninja and Yolandi (Ninja and Yo-landi Visser of rap group Die Antwoord [“The Answer” in Afrikaans], for whom Blomkamp developed the roles), small-time criminals who need the clichéd “one big heist” to clear themselves of debt and get out of crime for good.

The somewhat hackneyed question in all stories involving artificial intelligence (AI) boils down to: Can a robot have a soul? *Chappie* treats the question as having been answered, and that answer being “yes,” but not in a religious sense. It goes further in its trans-humanistic outlook in stating that this is the next evolutionary step. Life, in whatever form, metal or flesh, is important. What is “inside” must be preserved.

The world the criminals inhabit is brutal. Miserably poor, despite being surrounded by stolen equipment of great value, the group lives in an abandoned industrial complex in Soweto. Ninja is a desperate, angry man,

and models this behavior for the resistant, but eager-to-fit-in robot-child, Chappie (Sharlto Copley). Ninja's coming to grips with a different way of communicating—the robot is frightened off by violence and refuses to commit crimes, due to a promise he'd made to Deon—and his development of a sense of remorse regarding his actions toward Chappie are realistically drawn. The relationship develops unevenly, with setbacks that seem natural and gains that are honestly arrived at.

Yolandi treats the robot as if it were her child. At one point reading it a book, explaining what a black sheep is—how the outside of a person doesn't matter—and telling the robot she loves it. She is a bright young woman trapped in horrible circumstances, and one gets the sense of someone who belongs to a lost generation, mired in poverty and crime.

There is an unexpected innocence to the interactions between these characters, all of whom are well drawn, and the rest of the world. Blomkamp, in several interviews, has stated that the idea of “What if Die Antwoord were criminals raising a robot” provided the genesis for the film, so this is to be expected. Given free artistic rein, though sticking to the script, the group members act with a surprising naïveté, and are in many ways little more than children themselves. These are people who are doing everything they can to survive in a sector of society that has completely broken down. Their loyalty is to each other, but anything beyond that is questionable.

On the other hand, we have Tetravaal and the people who work for it. Here the characters are very clear-cut—to the point of being stereotypes. Deon, the good scientist dreaming of a better future, has an enemy in Vincent Moore (an almost unrecognizable Hugh Jackman).

In an interview, Blomkamp notes that he and Jackman wanted to make the character an outrageous

parody of a certain type of Australian, yet—stylistic flourishes aside—the ex-SAS killer turned contractor, hyper-Christian bully is of a social type that could find a comfortable home in many countries. His combination of militaristic bloodthirstiness and reactionary religious horror regarding the advance in AI Deon has achieved is unnerving to watch at times. Weaver’s Michelle Bradley is simply a bottom-line businesswoman primarily concerned with the company’s shareholders.

This is typical of Blomkamp, as we saw in *Elysium*, in which Jodie Foster’s scheming, fascistic Delacourt was likewise simplistically drawn. In the face of such characters, we are given leave to shake our heads and tsk-tsk, but little light is shed on the conditions and social relationships that give rise to these anti-human elements. To explain “bad” actions through “bad” people is a tautology that explains little.

After Vincent creates a crisis to provoke the deployment of his own rejected killing machine, *The Moose*, we are treated to scenes of utter mayhem in the streets of Johannesburg. Here there is an element of cynicism—the rapidity with which the criminal element forms a rioting mob on word that the police robots have been taken offline is questionable at best.

While it is clear from the portrayal of Tetravaal and its CEO that Blomkamp bears no love for the military industrial complex, far from it, what does he make of the majority of the South African population?

And what is the filmmaker’s attitude toward the massive police deployment—human or otherwise—apparently needed to quell a situation described more than once as the “city eating itself”?

One is struck by the wasted opportunities, or only half-developed themes and material, in Blomkamp’s works. The subject matter chosen for his three major films— *Elysium*, involving issues of social inequality; *District 9*, with its themes of immigrants and poverty; and now *Chappie* with severe poverty, crime and a militarized police force—is obviously serious, but it begs for more profound and critical treatment.

Science fiction is entirely capable of exploring and exposing social problems. When Blomkamp dismisses in interviews the notion that his films have any socio-political intentions or significance and when he takes artistic shortcuts in character and plot development, he devalues his own work, ultimately offering the

equivalent of a dismissive and self-deprecating “just kidding.”



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