

# Robocop

## *"The anti-automaton"*

Film analysis by Rob Ager 2014

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## Chapter ONE

### COMMERCIAL FIREPOWER

Without even having to delve into the subjects of social or political commentary and relevance, Robocop was, and remains, an astonishing piece of entertainment. I first saw the film when I was fourteen years old and at a time when our household was unique in our neighbourhood in that we had a two-VCR set-up that could copy video tapes rented from stores. So, family and friends came and viewed Robocop in our household and these guest viewers responded to the film very similarly to how I did. They'd watch the opening media break scenes with slight bafflement, then Murphy's intro scenes would hold their attention, but you could see they still weren't sold on the film. But then came the first boardroom scene and ED 209's bullet pumping slaughter of a young executive. THAT got people's attention. It was unexpected, shocking, scary and ... funny. Viewers could tell this wasn't your usual movie rental. The next big shock came with the not-funny-at-all torture and murder of good guy cop Alex J. Murphy. He appeared to be the lead character so we didn't expect him to meet such a brutal ending and certainly not so early in the script – Hitchcock's Psycho was one of the few other movies in history that had treated its lead character (Marion Crane) in such an instantly disposable way.

So within the first twenty minutes Robocop had delivered two increasingly sharp shocks to the system. From here the film went from strength to strength with plot advances that were palatable, but not necessarily predictable. A surreal human-into-machine POV montage led into crowd-pleasing intro scenes for Robohero himself. He looked, acted and sounded the part and you KNEW he was gonna take on the bad guys in style. This was standard action fun, but then the film began to morph into a surprisingly emotional experience as Robo sought to reacquire lost memories of his wife and child. With an action film one would expect viewers to be comparatively indifferent to the scene of a cyborg reminiscing over old family photographs and being haunted by visions of lost love, but no ... they were just as emotionally engaged as they were with the big action scenes.

After a strong scene of Bob Morton's murder, viewers were taken on Robo's personal revenge mission to hunt his own killers and, given the brutality of his murder, we were right behind him – the irony of Robo's physical brutality to Clarence Boddicker while informing him of his rights was a gem. By this point, first time viewers watching Robocop in our household were utterly transfixed and would already be commenting that the movie was a classic, even though they hadn't seen it through to the end yet. But even then Robocop delivered another surprise delight in the form of our steel protagonist battling it out with the terrifying ED 209. I generally found that this scene was where viewer attention peaked, though the toxic-waste melting man has been cited by the film makers as the audience' favourite moment – once again, unexpected, shocking, scary and ... funny. Other third act crowd-pleaser moments included Robo spike-punching lead thug Clarence Boddicker in the jugular, taking out an unsuspecting ED 209 robot with an assault cannon, and gunning down corporate shark Dick Jones, Directive 4 free, in response to the one-liner, *"Dick, you're fired!"*

Watching Robocop twenty-seven years post my first viewing, and with all I've since learned about the film making process in general, I find none of its old charms have been lost. However, the artistry with

which the film was weaved has given me even greater appreciation. The range of emotional engagement with the audience is incredible. The satirical humour infects most of the action and spices up the dialogue-exposition scenes, and even serves to play-down the brutality of how Robo delivers retribution to the evil and the corrupt, but is wisely switched off during scenes of Murphy's murder and in scenes of Robo's personal journey of self-rediscovery. The film deftly alternates between different emotional tones without ever breaking the overall fluidity of the experience. The only off-hand comparison I can recall in this respect is John Landis' horror / comedy / love story / tragedy masterpiece *An American Werewolf in London*.

Watching a commercially well-executed film, it is easy to take artistic subtleties for granted – and *Robocop* is abundant with such subtleties. It comes off as being a much higher-budgeted film than it actually was because the film makers employed hundreds of ingenious techniques to get the most out of their available resources.

- They used real paramedic staff to deliver authentic dialogue and performances when trying to save Murphy's life – as Neumeier says in the DVD commentary, *"You can't write that kind of dialogue"*.
- They opted for a gradual visual reveal of the Robocop character to avoid unwanted laughter responses from the audience. We start with his POV, during which we see his detached mechanical arm moving about (a nice way of putting in the audience's mind that circuitry and wires are to be found inside the Robo suit), we then see Robo briefly on a monitor screen as he walks past it (again this is viewed through his own slightly distorted Robovision) and then we see him walk into the cop station behind a series of frosted glass panels (accompanied by cool sounding foot step effects). By the time we see him in full shot, we know what to expect.
- The presentation of Robo's creation by scientists as a series of fragmentary POV shots from Robo's viewpoint cleverly allows the film to avoid having to explain in detail the unlikely scenario of a human and computer being fused in such a way.
- They dressed up a Beretta to give Robo a bigger hand gun.
- Due to the bulkiness of the Robosuit, actor Peter Weller was unable to get in and out of vehicles. So in the scenes in which Robo gets in or out of vehicles he is shown usually from the waste up so that Weller would only have to wear the top half of the outfit (for example when he approaches his family home and when he shoots an ED 209 outside the OCP building). In the gas station scene editing is used to show Robo, in standing position, pull his leg from the car as if he had just been sitting in it. A similar image was used in the main marketing poster, again putting into the audience' minds the assumption that Robo could get in and out of cars.

Direction is a key area which, in untalented hands, could have resulted in *Robocop* being just another poor quality Terminator clone. But Verhoeven delivers the goods in pretty much every scene, filling the movie with smart details. His knowledge of basic cinematic communication is up there with the Scorsese's and the Spielberg's. He's willing to get his hands dirty and is unafraid of controversy.

It has been acknowledged by Verhoeven many times that he was, at first, not impressed at all with the Robocop script and tossed it aside after reading just a few opening scenes. He has also cited that two scenes in particular, which sold the script to him artistically, were the murder of Alex Murphy and Robo's visit to his lost home. This reveals certain motives. Verhoeven wants to show the audience some of the extreme violence humankind is capable of, but he also wants them to feel an appreciation for love and human relationships. This duality is a key strength in the finished film and the combination is very strong in the scene of Murphy trying to remember his family as he is dying in hospital, Verhoeven using fish eye lenses to show us both the gore of Murphy's gunshot injuries and the emotional pain in his eyes. And it was a smart editing choice to have Murphy only half remember his wife approaching him in the bedroom with the line *"I really have to tell you something"*, and to then have the line *"I love you"*, shown when Robo visits his former family home. It's also worth noting that the key scenes which Verhoeven was drawn to were emotionally very serious. So although he certainly has a sense of humour and can direct in that fashion, it was not his core motive in making Robocop.

I must also mention the marvellous score by Basil Poledouris. Like the story itself, the score encompasses a broad range of emotion from melancholy to formidable terror to victory anthems. And it all fits perfectly.

But there's a lot more to Robocop, and its commercial and artistic duality are nicely summed up by script writer Ed Neumeier in this interview quote from comingsoon.net.

*"I used to tell everyone, 'I wrote this script for two people. The eight-year old, which means we have to make it a great adventure, and the 28-year old, which is really the oldest age that matters in the movie business.' The 28-year old can get the jokes out of it that the eight-year isn't going to get and doesn't need to. So we always wrote it with two audience levels in mind. I kind of wrote it that way just to see if it would work. It worked so well that I tried it again in 'Starship Troopers'."*

## Chapter TWO

### THINKING IN METAPHORS

Making my film analysis task easier, the key creative minds behind Robocop have been quite open about their inclusion of little symbolic details in their film. Some of these metaphors are openly stated in interviews, others on the DVD commentary. Although they don't explain everything in the film, they provide enough examples to confirm that Robocop isn't just a one-dimensional plot-point by plot-point affair. There are all kinds of admitted subtleties, including the following.

- Dick Jones, in his executive bathroom argument with Bob Morton, describes Robocop as an *"Unholy monster"*. This is a Frankenstein reference – both Robo and Frankenstein are branded as monsters and pursued by murderous mobs.
- Behind the top *"Old Man"* executive in the OCP boardroom meetings can be seen a black sculpture of a predatory bird. The deathly-faced Old Man positions his hands in wing imitation gestures as he speaks.



- Interesting symbolic use is made of the baby food jars which Robocop uses for target practice. Verhoeven says that Robo's consideration of the baby food jar suggests the child he will never have and that an implication was being made that Robo might be about to commit suicide. He also states that the three jars that are placed together and successively shot represent *"people linked together"* who are *"going to die"*. I also noticed in the scene that Robo glances from the baby face on the jar to his female cop buddy, Lewis, who is asleep above the warmth of a campfire. Perhaps he is also considering the wife that he will never have.
- Missing in the film, but present in the script, are multiple references to moonlight and Robo looking at the moon. He learns from Lewis that his wife and son signed up for MoonCorp after his death.
- The bullet slaughter of a young executive as he lays on the small model of Delta City symbolizes the blood and carnage that will be unleashed on the city by a police force consisting of ED 209s. The script states, *"blood runs in the streets of Delta City"*.



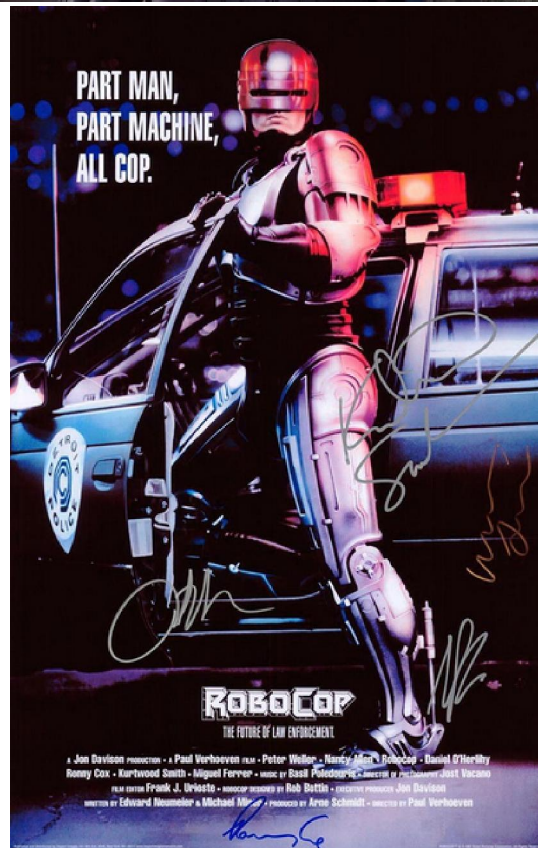
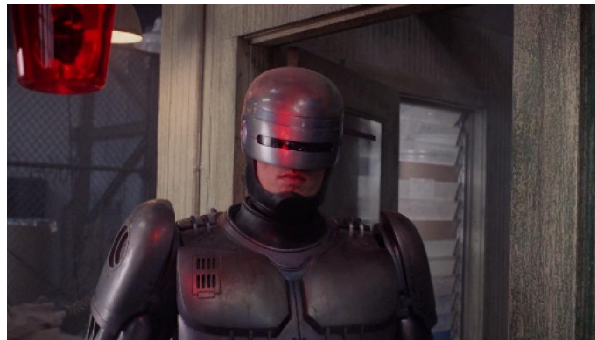
- During the gas station shoot-out between Robo and gang member Emil, a “*SHELL Motor Company*” sign in red neon is damaged. The letter S disappears, leaving the word “*HELL*” hovering in red above flames. This was specified in the script and appears briefly in the movie.



- Murphy’s memories of gun shots during his murder are deliberately paralleled with the electric shocks he receives from the paramedics. When Robo has a nightmare about his own murder, the readouts of his own heart rate go wild.

There are lots more confirmed examples of such metaphors, but I’ll draw your attention to them as they become relevant throughout this analysis. For now here are some other metaphors I picked up on that haven’t been admitted by the film makers to my knowledge.

- At the end of the first boardroom scene we finish with a slow dolly shot moving into executive shark Dick Jones. Jones is angry because his ED 209 program has just been replaced by Morton's Robocop program. As the camera moves into his angry face, we hear an emergency siren growing in volume – fitting with his state of mind.
- Another siren metaphor used to represent emotion occurs when Robo is throwing Boddicker through windows in the drug factory. Red and orange strobe lights are seen in position near Robo's head and reflecting on his helmet. This metaphor is even stronger in the main marketing poster. Robo stands by his car, its red and orange strobe lights near his head, but look at how the strobe light is reflecting on his helmet. It should only be reflecting on one side, but airbrushing has been used to coat his head in red and orange, as if his head is an angry strobe light itself.



- In the scene of Robo visiting his old home there are a number of visual metaphor touches. The presence of a smashed mug with the words *“world class husband”*, which has been left behind by his former wife is a fitting motif of Robo himself. How did the mug get smashed? Did his wife throw it in anger? The burned flowers and photos also suggest that Robo has been purged from memory by his loved ones. And Robo’s flashback to a Halloween family event rather than, for example Christmas or New Year, is a thematically revealing choice. Halloween is a time more traditionally associated with death and bad omens – a foreshadow of the family’s doom. Note that in the family snapshot a full sized image of a witch hovers over the family (visible in the preceding kitchen shot as a decoration on the fridge).



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- In Morton’s death scene, the soundtrack very subtly incorporates a ticking clock melody when Boddicker places a timed grenade on the table.
- The choice of having dying Murphy taken to hospital at night is good, it adds to the feeling of Murphy’s world fading into darkness, so to speak.



- As Robo struggles against his Directive 4 program in Jones office, Jones sits on the desk, hovering over him. Robo manages to half-heartedly grab at Jones' hand before Jones pulls it away. It's a nice visual touch, further communicating Robo's internal conflict.
- And here's one of my favourites. Robo destroying an ED 209 with an assault cannon is preceded by a very clever piece of cinematography. Robo drives toward the OCP building entrance. As he does so we see the front of the moving car, side on, with ED209 appearing small in the distance. The combined movement of the camera and the car gives a symbolic effect of a tiny ED 209 being crushed under Robo's wheels, which symbolically is about to happen.



The above examples are a handful among hundreds and I've listed them here being that a lot of them are fairly simple, stand-alone metaphors. The many other metaphors will be organised into thematic groupings throughout this article.

Incidentally, director Paul Verhoeven is a huge fan of another director who used a lot of non-verbal subtlety ... Alfred Hitchcock. He told the Cornell Daily Sun:

*"Basic Instinct was a breakthrough, because I am a big fan of Hitchcock. I've studied Hitchcock forever. For me, he is one of the most powerful figures in [cinematic] style."*

**Chapter THREE**  
**THE BADDEST MOVIE GANG IN TOWN**

Many sophisticated film makers are one-man bands when it comes to layering their movies with metaphors. Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, David Lynch and Ridley Scott (during his Alien / Bladerunner era) would simply instruct cast and crew what to do with the details of a given scene, but would not bother explaining the conceptual meaning behind the requested details. And often these directors would pacify, with white lies, those who asked questions about their creative choice motivations.

With Robocop the scenario was different. I already knew from previously studying the production history of Starship Troopers (the second collaboration between the writing and direction team who first gave us Robocop) that Paul Verhoeven and script writer Ed Neumeier were a close-knit team who shared more or less the same artistic motives and closely consulted with each other during filming. Although not explicitly stated, the impression given is that Neumeier basically hung around on set during production as a consultant to Verhoeven, or at the least was available for regular telephone discussion.

It's also very clear in Neumeier's scripts that he thinks visually like a director. Scripts tend to be heavily dialogue-driven, but Neumeier generally includes a lot of description of visual metaphor. He also directed Starship Troopers 3, another film strong in visual communication.

But the artistic motivation of these two key players was shared by others on the production. Although Neumeier is solely credited for the Starship Troopers screenplay, on Robocop he worked with another writer Michael Miner. Comingsoon.net interviewed the two writers and explained:

*"Miner says he had lunch with Neumeier and discovered they had similar ideas about the future of law enforcement."*

The direction and writing teamwork spirit is also outlined in the same interview:

*Neumeier, "I think that Paul Verhoeven is one of the best filmmakers of his generation. I now think about how lucky I was that he would come along and direct that movie. It really worked out. We worked on the script together."*

*Miner, "Paul Verhoeven really made our script, which is a dream for writers. English is his second language, so he kept coming to us and asking, 'How does this joke work?' and 'How does that joke work?' I think 95% of our screenplay finished up on the screen."*

This is unusual. Many producers and directors take considerable efforts to shut the script writer out of production so they can rework the material to their own wishes, for better or worse.

The strength of collaborative efforts on Robocop resulted in several team players working again with either Verhoeven on Total Recall or Verhoeven and Neumeier on Starship Troopers. For example exec producer Jon Davison (who has a bit part as a Buenos Aeros survivor in Starship Troopers – a man whose dog has been killed, *“The only good bug is a dead bug!”*) was a producer on Starship Troopers. He is also present in the Robocop DVD commentary, along with Neumeier and Verhoeven, in which he and the director jokingly blame each other as to who was responsible for adding so much blood to the malfunctioning ED 209 boardroom scene (I’ll put my money on Verhoeven being the culprit, considering his equally bloody direction of Total Recall and Starship Troopers). Another mismatch of information is that in the commentary, it is claimed that Jon Davison came up with the end punchline, *“Dick, you’re fired!”* but the line is actually present in the 4<sup>th</sup> draft screenplay. Perhaps this was just a lapse of memory during the commentary.

Davison’s willingness to produce controversial and risky films is most evident in that he produced Sam Fuller’s excellent movie about racism, White Dog – a movie that was withheld by its own studio for many years for fear of generating controversy.

Other key players include cinematographer and career-long Verhoeven collaborator Jost Vacano (he’d developed a streamlined relationship with Verhoeven on multiple film shoots before working on all three of the director’s sci-fi trilogy films) and editor Frank J Urioste (The Hitcher, Die Hard and, with Verhoeven, Robocop and Total Recall).

A less happy collaborator was Robosuit creator Rob Bottin (the special effects genius behind John Carpenter’s The Thing). Although various reports indicate clashes between he and Verhoeven, Bottin did return to the Verhoeven fold to work on Total Recall.

Another special effects wizard, Phil Tippet, created the ED 209 stop motion sequences. Neumeier noted in his comingsoon.net interview that Phil was clued in to the film’s themes.

*“When I met Phil Tippet, I gave him a little Japanese model kit and said, ‘It should look like this.’ He knew exactly what it was and said, ‘Yeah, we’ll do something like this!’ He said, ‘It really reminds me of Vietnam, this helicopter and I noticed the guy’s name is McNamara.’ He really got that stuff.”*

The DVD commentary also specifies that Tippet introduced the feature of toppled over ED 209 thrashing about *“like a baby”* on the stairway.

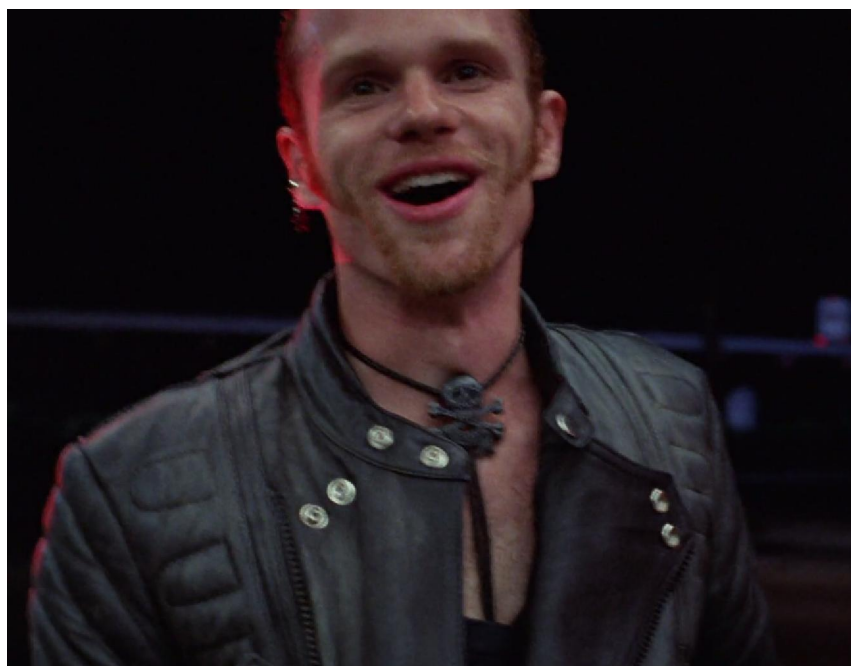
The key to all this strength of collaboration lies with Verhoeven. Although he is often described as a demanding director, he is also very open to ideas and suggestions on set – a real team player. Inviting and assessing new ideas during production is a key part of the directing role, but many directors do ignore it and simply take the autocratic approach. But a prerequisite of such successful team work is choosing the right players. Many movie productions involve one-off creative relationships, resulting in misunderstandings and creative differences, but Verhoeven, like many of the directing greats, tended to

repeatedly use reliable collaborators who not only would give him freedom in his creative flow, but would participate in it.

Verhoeven's willingness to collaborate and improvise resulted in the scene of Robo witnessing a New Year celebration in the labs, with the drunk girl falling on her behind apparently being a happy accident on set. Verhoeven apparently also came up with the thug rapist joke, *"I know, there's more hair... down there!"* His habit of being intensely physically involved on set is amusingly present in the nightclub scene. When Leon kicks Robo in the groin, we get a split-second close-up cut to Verhoeven manically dancing to the music with the crowd.



Verhoeven had previously been a math and physics major, and he experienced war torn Europe as a child. He combined these experiences in the gas station scene of Robocop – the gas station employee hides behind his math books as a violent thug, wearing a Skull and Cross Bones insignia around his neck, threatens to kill him.



Further adlibbing and other contributory ideas came in the acting department. Weller is reported to have come up with his line to injured cop-buddy Lewis, *"They'll fix you. They fix everything."* Kurtwood Smith did a fair bit of adlibbing, especially in the drug factory scene – creating his own line (pun not intended) of insult for the coke dealer and adding odd little details such as sniffing wine from his fingers and talking bizarrely about sports. The bathroom argument acting between Jones and Morton was partially altered on set based on contributing ideas from the two actors that there should be a homoerotic element to the relationship – though the specifics of the script were already suggestive of such a theme. Morton is bent over a sink as Jones stands directly behind him in a penetration position while they look in a mirror – at this point the words, *"Ironbutt"*, *"boner"* and *"asshole"* are used.



They stand uncomfortably close together, Morton emphasizing Jones' nickname *"Dick"* and breathing heavily after having his hair affectionately stroked and then aggressively pulled in line with the emphasized word *"FUCKED!"* It's a cleverly worked out scene.

The end fight scene in the industrial junkyard was significantly altered to take advantage of the impressive location architecture – with improvements including the dropping of girders onto Robo, and Robo spike punching Boddicker in the jugular rather than just squashing his head with a standard punch, which was how it stated in the script. And all other sets in the film were found locations, with the exception of Jones' office, the executive bathroom and occasional matt painting alterations of corporate building structures to make them more imposing.

In another wise alteration ED 209's *"soothing mechanical voice"* (probably akin to HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey) in the script was altered in the edit and became a mixture of animal growls and deep throated speech.

And in a final act of budget maximization, the crew left Murphy's death scene to be filmed last, thus putting the studio in the position of having to finance a scene that absolutely could not be cut from the narrative. That's smart.

## Chapter FOUR LAUGHTER, DISBELIEF AND TRAGEDY

A striking feature of Robocop is its ability to engage the audience while also being exaggeratedly unrealistic in style and delivery. If we were to take the currently popular-online approach of nitpicking at the film for *"plot holes"* and *"unrealistic"* details, we'd find plenty with which to attack the film. For example:

- Robo never gets shot in the face, nor is he burned in the face by the flames of the gas station explosion.
- When heavy iron girders are dropped on Robo his exposed fleshy face is undamaged.
- The notion that a man (Emil) whose entire skin surface has been melted by acid would remain conscious and able to walk and talk is plain ridiculous. In fact it's extremely unlikely he'd be alive and conscious for more than a few seconds.
- The chances of a huge container filled with such hazardous material being left behind in an abandoned industrial estate are extremely unlikely, though we could conveniently assume it's a comment on the future society being not safety conscious.
- Murphy, when faced with the possibility of brutal torture at the hands of a murderous street gang, would be unlikely to make his own situation worse by provoking his captors with a line such as, *"Buddy, I think you're slime"*.
- Murphy being able to stand in position as he is blasted dozens of times with shotguns is nonsense. A single blast, especially the ones hitting his body armour, would propel him across the room.
- The recoil from Murphy's limp wristed firing of his handgun over the bonnet of his car (early road chase scene) would likely break his wrist.
- When Robo blasts the executive in the boardroom, we'd expect the bullets exiting the back of his body to smash the windows.
- The bad guys in the drug factory wouldn't carry on shooting endlessly at Robo after watching him already resist dozens of bullet impacts. They'd turn and run.
- Robo's bending of a street thug's machine gun barrel in the store hold up scene is physically impossible. The pressure placed on the gun by Robo would either force the gun, undamaged, out of the bad guy's hands or would instead break the bad guy's arms.



- When Robo surprises the gang, thus *triggering* the end fight, he shoots Joe three times, when he could have instead taken out Joe, Leon and Boddicker with the same three shots.
- In the scene of Bob Morton's murder it's unlikely Boddicker would allow the prostitutes / models to leave the premises, having seen the face of Morton's murderer.
- It's also unlikely that Dick Jones would supply Boddicker with a video presentation to play to the dying Bob Morton. Such a recording, if discovered among the ruins of Morton's house, would incriminate him. Jones was also running the risk of Boddicker making a copy for potential blackmail purposes.
- And lastly, when Robo escapes the attacking police force in OCP's underground garage, he climbs down multiple levels where Lewis turns out to be waiting for him. There's no way Lewis would know he would end up in that exact spot.

These kinds of *unrealistic* details are actually commonplace in movies. They have to be. Movies don't reproduce reality – they distort it in ways that are stimulating and interesting for the viewer. Unrealistic features, such as Lewis magically arriving at the right time and place to rescue Robo from attack, are there to progress the story forward quickly and dramatically. It's a subtle balance to achieve. Too unrealistic can come off as silly and disengaging, and too realistic can be plain boring – we get enough of reality on a daily basis.

Robocop certainly veers toward the ridiculous at times, but it gets away with it by adding the conceptual glue of comedy. Comedy allows artists and film makers to make extreme deviations from audience expectations of *realism*. It pushes the line of audience tolerance back, thus creating a much more open creative playing field. The film maker can show things that are obviously unrealistic and be met by the audience not only with acceptance, but even with approval. Verhoeven told the Cornell Daily Sun:

*"If you don't wink. Because they are silly stories. I mean they are nonsense, though RoboCop is less nonsense, but still. If you take that very seriously — like, Iron Man worked so well because Robert Downey Jr. plays it with a wink. You don't have to take that so seriously. But they took [the new Total Recall and RoboCop] very seriously. The new RoboCop is an Iraq War amputee with a family and child and that adds a lot of, what you call, melodrama. To put that into that formula, to give it that sense of reality, is destroying itself. It's like a bomb. You put something serious there and then the whole building explodes, because it's built to be taken not seriously."*

He also told thearnoldfans.com:

*"Sometimes you need to not take things so serious. Look at the biggest and most important innovation science fiction movie, which is Star Wars. That opened the road to many other movies. And I think Star Wars was funny and it was light. It was suspenseful but also light. When we did Total Recall, we were certainly aware of Star Wars. I hope the people behind RoboCop (remake) do not take themselves too seriously."*

In the context of Verhoeven's statements it is important to remember that several key scenes in Robocop are filmed seriously in the dramatic sense, even though some of the details are unrealistic .... and it works. But there was always great danger that the film would be too silly, particularly given its title. In fact Verhoeven discarded the script after reading just a handful of scenes because he thought it was stupid and generic, but says his wife then read it and began talking to him about its deeper themes, at which point the more serious scenes drew him in. And so, scenes involving Robo's emotions feature little in the way of direct comedy.

As an example of the psychological subtlety in balancing realism and unrealism, most of us at some point in our first viewing of the film would wonder why Robo never gets shot in the face – ED 209 even points one of its gun barrels directly at his face at close range. Rather than have Robo walk around in all of the action scenes covering his face with one hand, like Bela Lugosi's double did in Plan 9 From Outer Space, he only covers his face for protection from bullets in a single scene – the attack by police SWAT teams. We're even specifically shown bullet impact sparks bouncing off his fingers.



This is clever in that it puts to rest the audience question of whether the film makers had stupidly ignored the possibility of facial bullet impacts, and it also emphasizes the danger Robo is in. He never felt the need to cover his face during an onslaught of bullets in the drug factory because it wasn't dramatically relevant – Robo was there to kick drug-dealer arse in crowd-pleasing style such as what Verhoeven describes in the commentary as his *"trick shot"* (aiming at and shooting a bad guy to his upper left while not even having to look in the direction he's shooting).

Another example of the film thwarting audience assumptions of unrealism is present in Robo's stiff movements. Probably due to the bulkiness of the Robosuit, Weller's performance was largely restricted to slow walking, which in itself provides an underhanded joke. Robo would be unable to run after and catch bad guys, so his default would be to shoot them. But the film makes a one off exception at just the right moment. Emil is intending to run down Robo in a van, but Robo swiftly turns and runs a couple of steps out of the van's path before it crashes into the toxic waste container.

The silly aspects of the plot are also played up endlessly in jokey dialogue and other details.



- After Leon kicks Robo in the groin he is seen limping about when Boddicker delivers assault rifles to the gang. His limp is gone by the time of the industrial wreckage fight, but it was no longer needed.
- In the first cop station scene a lawyer's twisted logic is aptly summed up in the self-contradicting line, *"Attempted murder! It's not like he killed someone!"*
- Lewis tells bad guy Joe to *"freeze"* as he's urinating. As ordered, his stream of urine stops flowing.
- After the executive Kinney is murdered by ED 209, someone shouts for a paramedic, even though the guy is obviously dead. In the script it was specified that the rest of the boardroom would laugh out loud at the irony.
- When Morton and Johnson discuss the aftermath of the bloody boardroom meeting, they are oblivious to the fact that their buddy has just died. Morton says, *"That's life in the big city"* – but the phrase certainly doesn't apply. His friend isn't alive, he's dead.
- The OCP boss is amusingly calm, while the rest of the executives panic during ED 209's countdown to Kinney's slaughter. He remains seated with his hands clasped in front of his face. He then tells Jones angrily, *"You call this a glitch!"* We're allowed to assume he's dismayed at Kinney's death, but the Old Man then explains that what he's annoyed about is the *"fifty million in interest payments alone"* caused by the setback of the ED 209 program.
- When Boddicker tells the women to leave Morton's apartment, it is obvious Morton is going to die. Nevertheless, one of the woman asks, *"Are you gonna call me?"*
- Boddicker makes a sly sexual joke to Jones' secretary that's easy to miss. *"Listen I'm here to see Dick Jones. But when I'm done I've got some free time. Maybe you could eh (glances down her body) fit me in."* This is certainly a penetration joke, as verified by the less subtle version found in the script, *"After I'm done talking with Dick I thought maybe you might like to play with mine. I've got some free time later on. Maybe you could fit me in."*

Humour is even used to spell out in words the film's commentary on a general decline of morality in the US. An *"unemployed person"*, presented as a near-idiot, tells a news team, *"This is a free society. Except there's nothing free, 'cause there's no guarantees, ya know. You're on your own. It's the law of the jungle."* Ironically, he's talking sense – and so the film makers are offering a direct social critique without it coming off as preachy.

But the humour in Robocop serves an additional purpose of making the film more consciously acceptable to an audience who might not be so willing to engage its darker themes more directly. And those themes are certainly very dark; so much so that the film would be a rather depressing experience without the touches of humour and intentional unrealism.

**Chapter FIVE**  
**BLOOD IN OUR EYES**

The combination of comedy and extreme, yet frequently unrealistic, violence in Robocop certainly amounted to commercial appeal, but the violence in particular served another function – it distracted the audience from consciously pondering the deeper social commentary at work. This isn't unusual. Movies like Hellraiser, Cape Fear (remake), Death Wish 2, Mad Max 2, and Verhoeven / Neumeier's other sci-fi movie Starship Troopers have hidden layers which were near universally overlooked because critics and audiences were simply too goggle-eyed in the face of on screen violence.

Robocop is especially violent, with women reportedly having walked out of test screenings of the uncut torture and murder of Alex Murphy. Yet at the same time the *melting manscene* is cited as an audience favourite moment – despite the scene depicting an arguably even worse form of suffering than Murphy's death. As a teenager I found the scene pretty disturbing and it's still uncomfortable to watch thanks to the nauseatingly detailed make-up effects.

Coming away from the film after the first viewing the things that stuck in my head were the action scenes – drug factory shoot out, ED 209 scenes and so on. Movies first leave sight and sound impressions on our brains, while familiarity with dialogue and nuances of acting tend to come with repeat views and after we've gradually become desensitized to the violent moments. And maybe after all this, if we still hold enough interest in the movie, an appreciation of hidden themes has an opportunity to emerge.

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Some themes in Robocop were so openly presented that even the violence couldn't disguise it. One or two early reviewers of the film almost caught onto the anti-corporate element, such as Walter Goodman in his review for the New York Times:

*"The plot, in case you need a respite, involves a corporate vice president (Ronny Cox) who is in cahoots with the bad guys, and another executive (Miguel Ferrer) who is a cocaine-sniffing decadent. Is that meant to be a comment on big business? Don't worry about it. Whatever may have been in the minds of the writers, Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, has more trouble emerging from Mr. Verhoeven's sizzling battles than poor Murphy does from his robosuit."*

Roger Ebert noted in his review an appreciation of the satirical cop-hero propaganda element:

*“There is comedy in this movie, even slapstick comedy. There is romance. There is a certain amount of philosophy, centering on the question, What is a man? And there is pointed social satire, too, as the robocop takes on some of the attributes and some of the popular following of a Bernhard Goetz (famous citizen turned vigilante of the 1980’s).”*

On another level, sometimes it is mere cinematic snobbishness that prevents appreciation of deeper themes in commercially effective films. For some, movies are to be clearly categorized into commercial and arthouse, but not considered to be both at the same, especially when the commercial element taps into childish and hedonistic audience urges.

In the twenty-seven years since I first saw Robocop, it was only after around 2009 that I started hearing people express an appreciation for the film that went beyond action-comedy appeal. And it was around 2010 that I started considering a deeper investigation of the film myself, prompted mainly by my appreciation of deeper themes in Starship Troopers. Knowing that the same director and scriptwriter worked on both films, I knew if I went back to Robocop I’d find something of interest.