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## Hybrid Science Fiction: Paul Verhoeven and His Hollow Men

Violence, action, psychotic characters, the darker side of sexuality, confused realities and unstable, disturbing social spaces: this is the world of Paul Verhoeven's films.<sup>5</sup> A mathematics and physics doctoral student turned filmmaker, Verhoeven has had his share of controversy. Hailing from Holland, his Dutch films include *Wat Zien Ik* (*Business is Business* 1971), *Turks Fruit* (*Turkish Fruit* 1973), *Keetje Tippel* (*Katie Tippel* 1975), *Spetters* (1980), *Soldaat van Oranje* (*Soldier of Orange* 1980), *De Vierde Man* (*The Fourth Man* 1984), *Zwartboek* (*Black Book* 2006) and the international co-production *Flesh and Blood* (1985). Provocation was something he carried over, in a revised form, into the films he directed in the United States: *RoboCop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Showgirls* (1995), *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Hollow Man* (US 2000). In 1996, *Showgirls* (an attempt at grappling with the "reality" of Las Vegas lap-dancers) was nominated for eleven Raspberry Awards following its box-office and critical failure, and then went on (like so many of Verhoeven's films) to become a cult classic. For the first time in the Raspberries' history, the winner was there to accept his award for Worst Director (Van Sheers 1996, viii). This showmanship reflects Verhoeven's irrepressible nature; he tackles his tasks with passion and a sense of the absurd, rarely making compromises by softening the impact of issues he portrays. Despite being embraced by the mainstream Hollywood system, Verhoeven has managed to retain a European sensibility. He has noted the lack of social critique in Hollywood product of recent years, viewing them as "all action, science fiction and over sentimental love stories". Then again, whereas European cinema may have more of a focus on social commentary, Verhoeven "finds these films exceedingly boring" (Van Sheers 1996, xii). Drawing on the best of both worlds, many of his American works immerse audiences in action and science fiction worlds — even "over-sentimental love stories" — but this always drapes itself over a biting social critique.

With the exceptions of his foray into *film noir* with *Basic Instinct* and the underrated *Showgirls*, it is the science fiction works — *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, *Starship Troopers* and *Hollow Man* — for which Verhoeven is best known, and which form the subject of this essay. On his attraction to the science fiction genre, he has stated:

when I went to the United States to work, I knew that I did not know enough about the nuances of American culture to reflect it in film. I didn't want to have to worry about breaking rules of American society or making mistakes because I was not aware of certain expressions or social behaviour. I felt more secure working in science fiction. (*Hollow Man*: Production Notes, n.p.)

Like other European directors who were embraced by the Hollywood system — Fritz Lang, William Wyler, Douglas Sirk and, more recently, Roland Emmerich — Verhoeven's strength lies in his manipulation of generic systems, reflecting both an insight into and a ruthless critique of the American culture that has embraced him. Verhoeven's primary subversive tool comes from creating a dialogic relationship between science fiction conventions and other generic codes, in particular those of the Western. Johanna Schmertz has suggested:Ⓜ

what cultural critics still have some difficulty accounting for are the liberatory aspects of mass culture, that is, when and how a piece of popular culture manages to say something new or to subvert an oppressive ideology, or how it happens that the "enlightened" critic occasionally enjoys it even when it doesn't (1991, 35).

This is precisely the focus that comes into the foreground when we engage with Verhoeven's cinema. While often embroiling us in intense displays of violence, exaggerated macho heroes, and overly sexed females, his science fiction films also display a socio-political dimension that refuses to hold back the critical punches. Underlying the futuristic themes of the fantastic and the illusionistic splendors of effects spectacles, *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, *Starship Troopers* and *Hollow Man* confront the viewer with a critique of current socio-political issues that are specific to what's commonly labeled the "postmodern condition".

By analyzing the thematic concerns of these films individually it becomes evident how these entertainment spectacles also actively reflect cultural transformations that dominated in the late twentieth century. While theorists argue as to whether postmodernism reflects negative or positive cultural changes, it is generally agreed that the postmodern signals a paradigm shift or crisis. Best and Kellner propose that the cultural and technological changes associated with the emergence of a new global capitalism and an advanced information society constitute "an intensification of the modern, a development of modern phenomena such as commodification and massification to such a degree that they appear to generate a postmodern break" with the modern era (1997, 31). The articulation of this postmodern break as crisis point in human history remains central to Verhoeven's science fiction work. As we progress from *RoboCop* to *Hollow Man*, we track his growing concern with the effects of ever-advancing, technologically mediated realities on the construction of subjectivity, and the intensification of globalization and multi-national corporatism.Ⓜ

### **“Dead or alive, you’re coming with me”: *RoboCop***

In *RoboCop*, the movie that gave new meaning to the Arnold Schwarzenegger-style “Terminator” body, the comic book heroes of Verhoeven’s childhood (in particular, the Dutch superhero Tom Poe) and to the conventions of the American comic book hero which writers Michael Miner and Ed Neumeier grew up on (Van Sheers 1996, 182-6) unite and give meaning to the figure of the cyborg – a popular icon in science fiction cinema in the 1980s. Verhoeven merges science fiction with Western, action and cop film conventions, and the union (particularly in relation to the Western) becomes a potent, parodic tool. Generic tropes become a means to exploring the effects of the corporatization of the human. It is “a complex, subversive, and even utopian text which addresses the problem of human alienation within a techno-capitalist society” (Best 1989, 19).

*RoboCop* is set in the future (now our past) year of 1999. A news program immediately and sarcastically makes this future familiar by relating events that were topical for ‘80s audiences: Pretoria’s white militarists have unveiled a neutron bomb (reflecting ‘80s racial unrest in South Africa); the US launch of the “Star Wars” Orbiting Defense Peace Platform (which blatantly echoes Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars project); and the announcement that the multinational corporation OCP (Omni Consumer Products) has been contracted to fund and run the Detroit Police Department (a comment on the increased impact of the corporatization and privatization of public sphere in the 1980s). Following this opening media newsbreak, Murphy (Peter Weller), a cop from Metro South, arrives at the Detroit Police station having been transferred there by OCP. No sooner has he arrived than he is ruthlessly gunned down and killed on the job by a gang of criminals who also happen to be the puppets of the corrupt OCP Vice President Dick Jones (Ronny Cox). Murphy’s body – which is owned by OCP – becomes a test subject for new cyborg technology. By order of aggressive OCP executive Bob Morton (Miguel Ferrer), Murphy is transformed into RoboCop: part organic, part computer, part titanium armor. For OCP, RoboCop, representing the future of the police force, will clean up Detroit of organized crime, thus allowing for the demolition of old Detroit and its replacement with a corporate run, new Delta City. As the President of OCP says, “the climate is ideal for corporate growth”. RoboCop also goes on a hero’s quest in search of his prior identity and the villains who instigated his murder.

Fred Glass places *RoboCop* in a sub-category of science fiction that he calls the “New bad future” cycle. This sub-genre, popular in the 1980s, has leanings towards leftist politics and “deep roots in the present, tapping reservoirs of fear, resentment and anger

at the turn that bureaucratic consumer capitalism has been taking in the late twentieth century" (Glass 1989, 11). While being set in the future and making commentary on the present, Verhoeven also makes the film (and the viewer) journey into the past — specifically, the generic past of the classical Western.<sup>6</sup> Despite being part man and part machine, RoboCop/Murphy's persona is also enriched through Westerner codes. Adopting the Westerner's fetish for the gun, RoboCop/Murphy craftily twirls his weapon before placing it in his "holster" and utters one-liners like "dead or alive you're coming with me". Like the great Western heroes who remain outside society (while also being instrumental in the struggle for it), RoboCop has little use for a name. Yet, after the villains have been disposed and the President of OCP asks, "What's your name, son?", RoboCop embraces his identity and his place in the restored Detroit society by naming himself like the gunslinger of the classic Western. "Murphy", he says, before turning his metallic body and striding on to his next adventure. Jones, the corporate snake, recalls the evil cattle ranchers and marauders familiar from Westerns like *Shane* (Stevens 1953) and *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges 1960), who forestalled the arrival of democracy and social progress. He too has his gang of henchmen (Boddicker and co.) who battle with the hero one by one until the final and inevitable confrontation between good guy and evil oppressor occurs. Such Western codes allow for the exploration of a new frontier: the hi-tech, late-capitalist, corporate-owned, media-infiltrated present. Verhoeven asks the question, "what happened to the civilization that the frontier myth of the Western sought for so desperately?"<sup>7</sup> OCP's corrupt machinations reflect an oppressive and profit-driven control of the public sphere. OCP is the fictive version of the multi-national corporations, which Fredric Jameson theorized as being integral to the postmodern era of late capitalism (1984). OCP owns Detroit's health system, police force, the military, science and technology, its underworld, even its citizens. In the transformation scene, Morton insists that the doctors 'lose' Murphy's healthy arm and replace it with a metallic one. His reasoning? As employee of the Detroit police force, OCP owns Murphy's body, ergo they can do with it whatever they want. Underlying the narrative logic and hidden behind its many humorous moments is a paralyzing fear: that the control of science and technology by corporate organizations has serious consequences for humanity and for what the Western hero once strove for, the establishment of the community.

In reworking the Western, Verhoeven suggests that old heroic myths must, of necessity, change and adjust to new social and political dynamics. The current social logic requires new heroes; the traditional hero is no match for a new world order that is run by characters like Jones, the drug leader Boddicker (Kurtwood Smith), and maniacal

hoods like Antonowsky. Murphy's status as an outsider is doubled. In the first instance it is the human Murphy (the new cop on the block) who enters the community. He closely resembles the old gunslinger type — the individual who initiated social order on the frontier. This very fact costs him his life. The new, RoboCop Murphy embodies the corporation that created him; being a product of this very system, he is equipped to defeat it on its own terms. Glass argues that RoboCop becomes a mediator figure for the audience. Drawing on the theories of psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, Glass views these cyborg characters as "cultural transitional objects", suggesting that they alleviate the audience's fears about the effects of media, technology and science in the hands of money-hungry ruling corporations (Glass 1989, 9). Similarly, Codell sees RoboCop's body as focusing on "literal and metaphoric body imagery...the human body, the corporate body, the body politic, the social body" (1989, 12). As science fiction hero he embodies the traumas inflicted on humanity by the ruling power structures.

RoboCop becomes a symbolic articulation of a new "Borgified" humanity (as per the mutant android-human Borg species in the *Star Trek* films and TV series). A typical '80s cyborg figure, he's emblematic of the postmodern, technologized body. He represents "a fear of automated people, people made partial, made appendages of a (literally) dehumanizing economic system which seeks to create a totally manipulated world, wherein people are controlled in production and consumption alike" (Glass 1989, 40). Murphy's transformation signifies the fusion of the human with the technological. As Featherstone and Burrows argue in relation to the figure of the cyborg, "it is not just the making and remaking of bodies, but the making and remaking of worlds which is crucial here" (1995, 2). In *Robocop*, these issues grounded in a specific socio-economic context — a corporate realm that controls the social realm and inflicts its ideologies. RoboCop's struggle for identity becomes a struggle to break free from his role as OCP "product", and to assert his individual humanity.

"Technology is beginning to mediate our social relationships, our self-identities and our wider sense of social life to an extent we are only just beginning to grasp", state Featherstone and Burrows (1995, 13). According to Mark Poster, the altered communications systems of the post '70s era are a condition of postmodern culture:

[W]hat is at stake in these technical innovations...[is] not simply an increased 'efficiency' of interchange, enabling new avenues of investment, increased productivity at work and new domains of leisure and consumption, but a broad and extensive change in the culture, in the way identities are structured (Poster, 1995, 79).

We are now confronted with a humanity that experiences the world through and is constructed by “mediated realities” (Best 1989, 20). *RoboCop* explores these issues through the role played by technology and the media as vehicles of profit, leisure and entertainment. The viewer is bombarded by commercials that continually highlight the falsification of emotions (Codell 1989, 14). In one of these, we see a wholesome nuclear family playing the “Nuke’em” board game: as the father playfully warns his son not to cross his border and a mini-bomb explodes (to the accompanying delight of the whole family) the announcer states (in a heavily coded voice): “get them before they get you! Another quality home game from Butler Brothers”.<sup>8</sup> Echoing the technology that creates RoboCop, an ad for the Family Heart Centre plugs a “series seven sports heart by Yamaha. Finance, credit and warranty are also available!” The announcer adds: “And remember, we care.” Sincere? Discussing Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart: the Commercialization of Human Feelings* Codell states: “in the modern world emotions and feelings are at the service of corporate power and greed for the sake of encouraging mass consumption, as service employees insincerely exhort us to ‘have a nice day’” (1989, 14).<sup>9</sup> Through social parody, Verhoeven elaborates on precisely such strategies that equate our human identity and sense of being with our commodifiability.<sup>10</sup>

The figure of RoboCop becomes, in many respects, a positive solution to a hi-tech future: humanity’s merger with new social structures is inevitable, but the human component, it is suggested, need not be sacrificed. The film suggests that we cannot turn nostalgically back to past frontiers and stand still in history. Glass claims that the film’s ending undermines its politics, arguing that RoboCop’s response to the President signals a return to the original Murphy personality, pre-murder (1989, 5). But this misses the point. Verhoeven goes to great pains to stress the difference of the reborn Murphy/RoboCop. He has searched for and rediscovered his humanity while also accommodating his technological nature. This is a revamped Murphy who understands his new sense of being, and that is why he turns away from his human family. Rather than yearning nostalgically for a modernist ideal, Murphy/RoboCop recognizes the dynamic nature of culture by embracing his altered postmodern identity.

Verhoeven has acknowledged the Christian overtones that inform Murphy’s death and subsequent resurrection. It comes as no surprise that he sees *RoboCop* as an “American Jesus” (Van Sheers 1996, 195).<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the brutality of Murphy’s torture and murder, Verhoeven states that “the basic idea was to do something about a human soul that is destroyed and resurrected. And for a real resurrection, we needed a real crucifixion” (Cronenworth 1987, 35). Thus Murphy’s death is signaled by a motif

that recalls Christian iconography: Boddicker guns Murphy through the hand, like the nail that was driven into Christ's hand on the Cross. Murphy's resurrection is initiated but not really completed until the second confrontation between Murphy/RoboCop and Boddicker. It is only after RoboCop embraces his human identity (in revised, technological guise) that the crucifixion and ensuing resurrection can be completed. And so, in the deserted industrial site, Boddicker plunges a steel rod through RoboCop's heart. Using Christian imagery to highlight the need for new heroic types, the figure of RoboCop represents a resurrected humanity, one that is equipped to adapt and take on big business.

**"You're nothing. You're nobody. You're a dream": *Total Recall***

While God and Jesus make no appearance in *Total Recall*, the next best thing does: Arnold Schwarzenegger. For Glass, Schwarzenegger's cyborg-like, muscular body "may be understood as a swollen penis, throbbing his way through the receptive material of the narrative" (1990, 6). As is the case in *RoboCop*, science fiction and the Western narrative conventions come together (directed by Schwarzenegger's throbbing motions) in order to comment on new and old frontiers and, again, a powerful corporation is the central antagonist. The film is based on Philip K. Dick's short story *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale*<sup>12</sup>. Like Dick's story, and also recalling Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man*, *Total Recall* explores the fine line between fantasy and reality. Framing its narrative firmly within the context of debates regarding the fragmented nature of the postmodern subject, at *Total Recall*'s conclusion the audience is confronted with two possibilities: either the events witnessed have been the product of a delusional mind, or the events have taken place in the real, social space of the narrative universe. RoboCop's desire to piece together his fractured identity is taken further in *Total Recall* in that the paranoid structure of the hero's fragmented existence is also inflicted upon the audience.<sup>13</sup>

Like *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* heralds the arrival of a new frontier. The Western pioneer premise "go west, young man" becomes "Go to Mars, young man". The East/West dichotomy familiar to the Western (and its accompanying thematics of civilisation/chaos, order/disorder)<sup>14</sup> are now relocated to Earth/Mars. Quaid (Schwarzenegger) is a working class man dissatisfied with his life. On the way to work he watches a television commercial broadcast on the train, that espouses the values of memory implants:

do you dream of a vacation at the bottom of the ocean  
but can't float the bill?



Have you always wanted to climb the mountains of Mars  
but now you're over the hill?  
Then come to Rekall Incorporated  
where you can buy the memory of your ideal vacation.  
Cheaper, safer, and better than the real thing.  
So don't let life pass you by.  
Call Rekall for the memory of a lifetime.  
[snappy jingle] Rekall, reka-all, rekaaaall.

Who can resist such poetry? Certainly not Quaid. Things, however, go terribly wrong. He chooses to be implanted with the identity of a secret agent, but before the memory is implanted (or so it seems) Quaid experiences "total recall", remembering that he actually has been on Mars and that agents are trying to get him. Much to the chagrin of his wife Lori (Sharon Stone), who turns out to be a spy, Quaid goes to Mars. Eventually, he becomes a hero by saving the Martian people against the evil corporate dictator, Cohaagen (Ronny Cox), whose wealth relies on his control and distribution of air on the planet.

Miklitsch suggests that the problem broached is a "global one, or...planetary capitalism". Referring to the ESPN commercial for the World Series in Japan that appears on the screen in Quaid's apartment, he states that "although on one level the ESPN commercial is played for laughs...it also raises the question of America's position in the emerging new world order, economic world order" (1993-4, 7). Cohaagen's brand of governance is the product of just such an economic world order, a "liberal capitalism" that tells its people "it's a free planet. If you don't want my air, don't breathe it" (1993-4, 7).<sup>15</sup> Western codes are overt: the train that departs Civilisation/Earth traverses the chaotic wilderness of Mars' red desert landscape on its way to Venusville. On his arrival, Quaid is surrounded by Western tropes such as saloon bars, saloon girls and bar brawls. Cohaagen is the "evil cattle rancher" who oppresses the people. Not only does he have political control; he also withholds information regarding oxygen-producing alien technology, forcing the citizens of Mars to pay for the air they breathe.

Effects of the economic, political and social dynamic are dispersed across the collective body. Citizens, for example, are also mutants (physical and psychic) and their mutations are the direct result of a government, which provided only "cheap domes and no way to clean out the rays". Glass suggests:

the mutants' inhuman bodily appearance is a continuous reminder to the viewer of technological issues: control over the most important technologies on the planet, the air machines and domes, as well as a reminder of the real inhumanity of their oppressor, is part of the mutant make-up — mutants represent the distortion of human potential under authoritarian rule (1990, 5).

Again, it is only the products of this system that can turn on their maker. Thus, the mutants form a rebel alliance headed by Kuato (Marshall Bell).<sup>16</sup> These social anxieties are expressed differently via Quaid's body. Being more developed than the 'natural' and 'uncivilized' Mars, Earth becomes the embodiment of a highly civilized and technologically advanced environment, akin to the East in the West. Glass notes that Quaid's "lack of memory contrasts sharply with the collective memory of the oppressed mutant-workers" (1990, 6). The symbolic wounds of Quaid's citizenship are to be found in his mind rather than his body.

*Total Recall* highlights the role that the media, at the call of the economic gain of multi-national organizations, plays in the construction of identity and subjectivity. Theorists including Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard agonize over our culture's saturated investment in media signs. In "Postmodernism: the cultural logic of late capitalism", Jameson equates the postmodern experience with "the hysterical sublime": the "bounded self of old begins to fragment. The result is a new depthlessness of the subject: a fragmentation of the schizophrenic" (Anderson 1998, 57). Baudrillard argues in *Simulations* that media technologies immerse the viewer in worlds that increasingly blur the experiences of the real and the unreal/virtual (or simulacra) embodied in convincing media representations. The technological image not only mediates reality but also alters subjects. In this context, Verhoeven explores the complex relationship between memory, experience and identity. Landsberg has noted contemporary science fiction cinema's preoccupation with "prosthetic memories" — memories experienced through technologically mediated experiences:

we rely on our memories to validate our experiences. The experience of memory actually becomes the index of experience: if we have the memory, we must have had the experience it represents... If memory is the precondition for identity or individuality, what we claim as our memories defines who we are...(1995,176).

Science fiction films like *Total Recall* complicate issues of memory and identity by inserting the realm of simulation into the reality experience. Such films "thematise prosthetic memories as an allegory for the power of the mass media to create

experiences and to implant memories, the experience of which we have never lived" (Landsberg 1995, 176). The technologically mediated experience becomes as much a part of individual identity as does the experience of material reality. As such, the question that is central to *Total Recall* centers on authenticity: how legitimate is an identity that's formed through experiences based on prosthetic memories?

Quaid's Earth environment is littered with media images: televisions in the private and public spheres, sports holograms that compete with people in physical exercise, news stories that misrepresent real events, illusionistic technology that changes architectural environments into idyllic landscapes and commercials that promise to technologically improve body and mind. At Rekall Incorporated, Quaid can make over more than his mediocre social status. As salesman Bob McClane (Ray Baker) explains: "what is it that is exactly the same about every single vacation you've ever taken? You!" So consumers have the option of the Ego Trip package that alters the memory of who they are. Yet what are we if not our memories? Our memories — the stuff of our experiences — are the very things that construct our subjectivities and shape our identities. What does it mean to be human when technology at the service of capitalist organisations provides the means for tampering with memory?

The narrative dilemma is echoed in Quaid's words: "if I'm not me, who the hell am I?" Quaid never knows. We never know. In fact, the audience is thrown, like Quaid, into a dream/reality interplay that can never be resolved. The audience falls victim — via the very technology that produced *Total Recall* — to traps similar to those Quaid experiences. Like Quaid, we are left in a state of "schizoid embolism", never able to untangle the narrative web we have just witnessed. Have the narrative events occurred in Quaid's objective, immediate reality? Did the trip to Mars, his secret agent identity, his real identity as Hauser and the rebel war really happen? Or has it all been a journey into a delusional and paranoid mind, in which case we have just witnessed a Rekall vacation implant gone terribly wrong?

Both versions are presented as equally possible. The Rekall implant scene, in particular, sets up the key narrative components that will appear later as the plot unravels: Quaid will be an undercover secret agent; he will meet an exotic, brunette woman (and, as he makes his choice, Melina [Rachel Ticotin] appears on a television screen); descriptions of the Mars setting, complete with blue sky; references to ancient alien cultures; and the prediction that, by the time the implant vacation is over, he will "get the girl, kill the bad guys, and save the entire planet". However, Verhoeven throws all this into confusion. There is the scene in which Dr. Edgemar (Roy Brocksmith), who

had also appeared in the *Recall* commercial, logically presents arguments that prove Quaid's schizoid embolism, then undermines his argument by allowing a drop of sweat to trickle down his temple. And the opening scene, Quaid's "dream", is also problematic. It includes Quaid and Melina on Mars. If this space does belong to Quaid's unconscious dream realm, then how does *Recall* have access to Melina's image on the video screen when he finally visits *Recall*? We find ourselves in a narrative labyrinth. Even in the end when we appear to have closure — a cliché ending where the narrative is literally sealed with a kiss — a question is posed to Melina that is also on the audience's mind: "what if this is a dream?" She responds: "then kiss me quick before you wake up". As Glass notes, and as Verhoeven is surely aware, the social problems raised by the narrative "cannot in fact be successfully resolved in the story. There is too much material here, the convention of the genre too constricting, the issues too complex, for anything resembling closure to occur" (1990, 12).

Abandoning the literal cyborg body of *RoboCop*, Verhoeven explores ways in which human subjectivity becomes cyborg-like as a result of mass and technologically mediated images. In the process, the Jamesonian and Baudrillardian "notion of authenticity — and our desire to privilege it — is constantly undermined by *Total Recall*'s obsessive rendering of mediated images" (Landsberg 1995, 179). Quaid is, in many respects, Jameson's fragmented, schizophrenic postmodern subject. He is an individual who experiences life and whose subjectivity is constructed via simulacra in the true Baudrillardian sense; his experience of reality is mediated through television screens, video phones and fabricated memories. Yet, as Landsberg argues, the film ultimately "rejects the idea that there is an authentic, or more authentic, self underneath the layers of identity" (1995, 182). In fact, while Hauser may be the real subject, his identity perceived as the one that comprises authentic experience, it is Quaid who remains the character with whom the audience most identifies. "The question then becomes is realer necessarily better?" (Landsberg 1995, 182). As with *RoboCop*, Verhoeven refuses to regret historical transformation. Instead, he asks the audience to embrace the new postmodern subject, for it is only by acknowledging the dynamic and changing face of culture that we can face the challenge of new frontiers. Like it or not, our media environments are an integral part of our identity. But the warning — evident also in *Robocop* — is to allow room for humanity in these new social spaces.

### **"The only good bug is a dead bug": *Starship Troopers***

Earth, three hundred years into the future, is under the rule of the Federation world government. Multi-nationalism has finally become multi-planetarism. Utopia appears to

be in humanity's grasp. On the surface the viewer is presented with a grand-scale global government. Education is available to all, poverty and racial strife are non-existent. In this future, citizenship is attained by enrolling in the Federal Service. Institutions, authorities and the media are unquestioned and, indeed, there seems to be little reason to question the Federation because the power it embodies works for the good of all people.

From the opening scenes of *Starship Troopers*, Verhoeven's penchant for '50s science fiction bug and creature films such as *Tarantula* (Arnold 1955), *Them!* (Douglas 1954) and *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby 1951) is evident. Via a news broadcast, the audience is introduced to the struggle that humanity faces with aggressive alien invaders — the Arachnids (or Bugs). A group of high school comrades hailing from Argentina — Johnny Rico (Casper Van Dien), Carmen Ibanez (Denise Richards), Dizzy Flores (Dina Meyer) and Carl Jenkins (Neil Patrick Harris) — decide to enlist in the Federal Service and join the fight against the Arachnids. Reflecting the cultural climate, *Starship Troopers* extends its predecessors' focus on the corporate era of late capitalism by painting a dark and parodic picture of the effects of globalization on collective identity. The Bugs are actually protecting themselves against the invasion and colonization of their Klendathu system by Earth forces.<sup>17</sup> The viewer is actively invited to search for the flaws — and the hollow men — occupying the Federation's ruling order and its dominant ideologies, an order associated quite blatantly with the USA.

As before, Verhoeven revels in his fascination with media presentation. Scenes like the parallel representations of the Klendathu attack, seen both from the mediated perspective of a news broadcast and the actual event taking place show how the media serve a "derealising function...how reality is distanced from us" (Telotte 1999-2000, 34). Shifting his focus away from television broadcast and video imaging, Verhoeven turns to a media technology that flourished after the release of *Total Recall*: the internet, and particularly the central function it plays as a tool of propaganda. A Federation Mobile Infantry advertisement suggests: "to ensure the safety of our solar system, Klendathu must be eliminated". This is followed by a news story showing Bugs brutally attacking and dismembering humans, information that withholds the fact that the Terrans initiated the attack on Bug territory. Another net commercial (entitled "A world that works") shows the military displaying its latest weaponry to schoolchildren. As the kids take turns in fighting over the weapon and the soldiers laugh and distribute bullets, a voiceover narrator states: "citizen rule. People making a better tomorrow." Likewise, executions are advertised and broadcast through FedNet. Kids, through advertisements, are told to "do Your Part" and are seen maniacally stamping and squashing Bugs. Verhoeven states: "the point is simple, as well as a simply violent one: in this world,

perceptions are always carefully guided, controlled, even obscured by video, teachers, by all of our training" (Telotte 1999-2000, 34). The classroom indoctrination by Mr. Raszak (Michael Ironside) indicates the level and effectiveness of ideological control achieved by the Federation. He preaches: "We've talked about the failure of democracy. How the social scientists brought our world to the brink of chaos. We talked about the veterans, how they took control and imposed the stability that has lasted for generations since." His lesson extols the virtues of violence. In the end, such indoctrination veils dictatorship as democracy.

Interpreting *Starship Troopers* along the lines of Robert Heinlein's controversial 1959 novel,<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Cass views it as a straightforward fascist fantasy that seeks to wipe out other cultures or, rather, projects the Other onto the figure of the alien. In particular, he suggests that Neumeier's childhood fear of Bugs and his memories of a teacher who spoke of the communist Chinese who will "march at you like zombies with wooden sticks in their hands" is transferred onto the enemy arachnids. For Cass, this is why a "suspicious lack of Asian characters undermines the democratic globalism seemingly promised by the UCF (United Citizen Federation) and points to the political danger posed by Asians, reified both by the Bugs' bodily invulnerability and implausibly cunning intelligence" (2000). Yet this absence of Asians and overt "others" is precisely the point. Verhoeven and Neumeier modify the fascistic and militaristic tendencies of their source material. They seek to convey the disintegration of the other through global (i.e. US) politics, economics and ideological indoctrination.

Definitions of globalization (like postmodernism) are multifarious and hotly debated, but certain key concepts recur.<sup>19</sup> In particular, globalization implies the expansion of the world market through economic means, and communication through technological means. Cultural theorists such as Jameson view postmodernism and globalization as being closely intertwined: the logistics of the latter gives rise to the former (Anderson 1998, 62). In this culture of late capitalism, multinational corporations have extended their production to a global level, integrating "virtually the whole planet into the world market" (Anderson 1998, 63). In *Starship Troopers* this expands to planetary dominance of literal universal proportions.

For Jameson, "globalization is a communicational concept which masks and transmits cultural or economic meanings" (in Jameson and Miyoshi 1998, 55). National markets have been integrated into an expansive system of economics that spans and connects the globe (Jameson in Jameson and Miyoshi 1998, 57). Transnational corporatism and globalization was in place by the '80s; the narratives of *Robocop* and, in particular, *Total Recall* explicitly deal with the colonizing nature of this phenomenon.

Government incentives favored the increased privatization of industry and corporations aimed for international scale. Globalization and transnational corporatism transform society, culture and the political into a “commercial program” (Miyoshi in Jameson and Miyoshi 1998, 259), as is so brilliantly parodied in OCP and the Cohaagen Corporation. While the logic of globalization is economic, the “export and import of culture” is also a feature. As the current major global leader, US culture has infiltrated foreign domestic spheres through its mass culture forms and commodities. It is not commodities alone that move beyond the geographical borders, but also their cultural content (Jameson in Jameson and Miyoshi 1998 50-9). In Verhoeven’s work, such national disintegration and cultural export are analyzed via generic collision.

In *Starship Troopers*, the Western and science fiction genres find a new generic partner: melodrama or, more specifically, nighttime TV soap melodrama in the tradition of *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000) and *Melrose Place* (1992-1999). The love interests of the main characters develop in pure soap-style, not only in the cliché, cardboard cut-out acting styles but also the plot. Johnny wants Carmen who had wanted Johnny but then falls in love with Zander, while Dizzy loves Johnny who still loves Carmen who later decides that he loves Dizzy. Verhoeven has highlighted his concern with “looking at the hyperbole of reality” (McBride 2000, n.p.). How better to emphasize this than by delving into the terrain of melodrama? It comes as no surprise, therefore, that all the main actors were previously as soap stars (figure 3). Van Dien starred in *One Life to Live* (1968 –) and *Beverly Hills 90210*; Richards appeared in *Life Goes On* (1989-93) and *Melrose Place*; Muldoon was a regular on both *Days of Our Lives* (1965 –) and *Melrose Place*; Meyer starred in *Beverly Hills 90210*; and Harris played the irrepressible child genius on *Doogie Howser, MD* (1989-93).

While the main characters are Argentine, they all represent an all-too-familiar Hollywood look. They embody the ideal, depthless human, the Los Angeles plastic surgery aesthetic, that has been popularized by soaps and shows like *Baywatch*. Perfect bodies, flawless faces, perfect big white teeth and big fake smiles (so wonderfully mastered by Richards). We return to the “have a nice day” world of “emotions and feelings...at the service of corporate power” that Codell argues is at the heart of *RoboCop* (1989, 14). In *Starship Troopers*, however, the implications of this packaging of emotion are more pernicious, for now it is the human body itself that is displayed as a consumer product. The future — on a global scale — will be the utopian Hollywood aesthetic conveyed in shows like *Melrose Place*.

In predicting future outcomes, Verhoeven also retraces the myth of America’s frontier past. We are presented with Western allusions that include John Wayne-style

dialogue (“saddle up!” and “come on you apes. Do you wanna live forever?”); the desert backdrop of Klendathu (that recalls the iconic wilderness expanses of Western landscapes such as Monument Valley); and dances and music, complete with toe-tapping fiddle music that plays to tune of “I wish I were in Dixie”, harking back to movies such as John Ford’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). In addition, we are also presented with battles that establish visual parallels between the American Indians and the Arachnids; forts such as Fort Joe Smith, which directly conjure images of the Western forts that housed cavalry communities and ensured protection from the Indians. The Arachnid planet, like the land of the American Indians, has been invaded by aggressive colonizers. Joseph McBride refers to the Terran propaganda slogan, “the only good Bug is a dead Bug”, pointing out that “it was originally applied to American Indians by General Philip H. Sheridan in 1869: ‘the only good Indian is a dead Indian’”. Verhoeven stresses that, in many respects, the film “is a Western”. The attack on the fort by the giant Bugs recalls Ford’s *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939) (McBride 2000, n.p.).<sup>20</sup> Verhoeven also points to the slippage that occurred during WWII to the phrase: “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”; which was transferred to a different enemy — the Japanese.

Verhoeven’s reference to WWII is significant. The propaganda internet footage recalls and parodies Allied films of the ‘40s, including the Fox Movietone newsreels, and the Frank Capra documentary series *Why We Fight* (1942-4) (Van Sheers 1996, xvi). Verhoeven also invites the spectator to compare Federation propaganda to ‘40s German propaganda. The Californian-beauties who masquerade as the film’s heroes recall the Aryan “perfection” embodied by the Hitler youth. During the public meeting in Geneva (when Dienes addresses the people, stating “we must meet the threat with our valor, our blood, indeed with our very lives to ensure that human civilization, not insect, dominates this galaxy, now and always!”), the camera presents the viewer with a low point of view shot of Dienes — complete with Nazi-style uniforms and a backdrop of banners with eagle insignias. This entire scene (along with its follow-up, “to kill the Bug we must understand the Bug”) is a reconstruction of similar scenes of Hitler ranting in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935). The Federation Military Intelligence sport uniforms modeled on the SS, and Jenkins, the telepath working for Military Intelligence, is presented as a hybrid version of Himmler and Dr. Mengele. When, at the end — after feeling the Brain Bug’s fear — Carl states that “we’re in this for the species boys and girls”, his words collapse time and history. Verhoeven comments: “certainly the film is saying, ‘Every militaristic society has the possibility to grow into a fascistic one, if they take over too much’. Because the military is authoritarian, and an authoritarian attitude



is measured highly on the fascistic scale". (McBride 2000, n.p.). At the end, the audience is left with a sour taste, as in the famous "unhappy happy endings" codified by Sirk in his '50s melodramas. The three friends, Johnny, Carmen and Carl, trek off together, celebrating "the ultimate victory of the human species" (Telotte 1999-2000, 35). But it is a human species devoid of difference, dictated by pre-programmed emotions and beliefs.

**"It's amazing what you can do when you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror anymore": *Hollow Man***

Verhoeven's most recent production, *Hollow Man*, continues his exploration of military power. However, a shift has occurred. Like *Total Recall*, *Hollow Man* explores the fine line that exists between normality and psychosis. But rather than focusing on a collective, social context, attention has now turned to the individual. Again returning to B-grade science fiction, Verhoeven reworks the mad scientist tradition going back not only to multiple screen versions of the invisible man/woman/teen/etc story (1933, 1940, 1941, 1944, 1988, 1990, 1992 et. al.) but also to the H.G. Wells' novella *The Invisible Man* (1897). The issues of globalization and corporatism that so obsessed him in the earlier works have been replaced by a closer study of human nature. Whereas *Robocop*, *Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers* investigated the ways in which political and technological infrastructures can invade and inform human identity, *Hollow Man* delves into what happens when man is the keeper of his own identity. Dr. Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) is an arrogant scientist who, working for a top-secret military organization, discovers the secret of invisibility. Keeping his successful metamorphosis of a gorilla a secret from government officials, Caine decides to test the drug on himself, only to discover that the process is not reversible in humans. And so another process of transformation occurs: as Caine disappears, so do his social inhibitions, and Caine's further metamorphosis from egomaniac to megalomaniac to psychotic begins.

Verhoeven draws his inspiration from a number of literary sources. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men", about the desolation and emptiness of humanity, resonates throughout, as does Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. Caine's pact, however, is not made with the devil but science, whose mastery allows him to play God. Verhoeven's interest is in what happens when civilized mores are removed and an individual is no longer pressured to abide by social rules. As Caine's body disappears, so does the social contract that binds him to society. Discussing Plato's commentary on the question of invisibility (from *Republic*, Book II), Verhoeven notes that:

morality was not inside us; it is defined by what others know and expect of us...He [Plato] said an invisible person would become intoxicated with power, and abuse it simply because he could get away with it. He would steal, and he would enter homes and rape and kill at will. Plato suggested there is no universal moral code inside us that leads us to being good and just (*Hollow Man*: Production Notes, n.p.).

This is played out forcefully in *Hollow Man*. Caine's controlled, passive voyeurism of his female neighbor in his pre-invisibility stage suddenly changes into erratic, active aggressiveness when he realizes that invisibility has "freed" him. This results in his ruthless rape of the woman who had previously been the object of his gaze. Caine's fantasies, passions, perversions are unleashed.

Verhoeven's background in physics leads him to muse, "if someone were to really become invisible, they would be blind, because their retinas would no longer collect light, but pass it on through" (Warren 2000, 70). Ironically, this understanding of the logistics of "real" invisibility is reversed, because *Hollow Man* is in many respects an essay on vision — especially cinematic vision. Via allusions to Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and De Palma's *Body Double* (1984) — itself already a study of Hitchcock's film — *Hollow Man* becomes a game about the watcher and the watched, and being caught out watching. Numerous times Caine becomes the audience's surrogate voyeur. We are often made uncomfortable as Caine lurks invisibly around characters. In fact, not only do we watch with him but sometimes through him when his and the camera's view points collapse into each another — while the other characters remain vulnerably unaware of his (and our) omnipotent gaze.

From the perspective of genre, new hybrid forms manifest themselves in *Hollow Man*. Its second half shifts into the horror stalker genre: trapped in the secret, underground laboratory, with Caine having slipped totally into the realm of psychosis, the cast are hunted down and killed off one by one. As is typical of the stalker tradition, the role of the hero is transferred to the figure Carol Clover calls the "final girl" (1992). Linda McKay (Elisabeth Shue) shifts from being stalked to becoming the stalker. From being the one whose actions are controlled by the stalker's controlling gaze she becomes the one who controls the gaze. In true final girl tradition she outwits Caine and kills him, putting an end to his psychotic reign.<sup>21</sup> This stalker section reverts to conventions of first-person shooter action computer games like *Duke Nuk'em 3D* and the *Quake* games. The pacing, the action, the privileging of the tracking shot and the action unraveling in a labyrinth of corridors all directly reflect Verhoeven's fascination with this major media

competitor. As we increasingly merge with imaging technologies that extend or alter our minds and bodies, what will the impact be on our culture? Caine's ability to use the technologies of science to alter the visibility of his body allows a dual focus. The first focus exists within the diegetic space: as the narrative unravels, Caine's genius is revealed in his invention of new technologies of vision (the science of invisibility), but the result is psychosis.

Verhoeven foregrounds broader issues regarding the capacities of film as a technology of vision. For all cinema – and contemporary science fiction, in particular, given its reliance on digital effects – make visible the invisible. As Landon has suggested:

though all movies confront us with the simultaneous sense that we are seeing something real and the realisation that it is only a movie, only images...science fiction and fantasy films in their most spectacular moments show us things which we immediately know to be untrue, but show them to us with such conviction that we believe them to be real (1992, 67).

Verhoeven's science fiction works are typical of the genre, which increasingly depends on technological wizardry to produce convincing futuristic worlds. The bodies of RoboCop and ED209 in *Robocop*, Schwarzenegger's transforming female-to-male disguise body in *Total Recall*, the alien Bugs in *Starship Troopers* and the digital effects that allowed us to witness the layers of Caine's body morphing into invisibility – all these feats of technological mastery were in their day at the forefront of showcasing radical cinematic advances in effects illusionism. Yet, as Landon has argued, such films present us with an "aesthetic of ambivalence" (1992). This occurs "when the production technology of a film is so seductive that the technological accomplishment of the film sends a quite different message than does its narrative" (Landon 1992, xxv). The paradoxical nature of these works is that they often present us with narrative dilemmas regarding the implications of technology that are then undermined by the actual effects technology used to depict that technology. The technological images that generate critique also evoke in the viewer a state of awe and delight. While we fear ED209's total mechanization, we also revel in the technology used to construct his form. In *Starship Troopers*, as we witness the Bugs desecrate hundreds of human bodies, we admire the computer technology that made possible these wonderful, agile creatures. Likewise, while we watch in horror as Caine reverses the state of invisibility in a gorilla who is clearly in agonizing pain, we sit back in amazement, wondering at how the crew

produced such astounding effects.<sup>22</sup> In the words of Landon: “the science fiction film uses its plot to say ‘no, no!’ to a new technology, while the powerful look of its foregrounded special effects unmistakably say ‘yes, yes!’” (1992, 157). The ambivalence, therefore, emerges when the “special effects become intrusive or interruptive — so striking that they interrupt the narrative or actually work to undermine it” (Landon 1992, 68).

Such ambivalence operates to heighten the complexities of Verhoeven’s science fiction films, highlighting the significant role futuristic narratives play in our contemporary life. The boundaries that Verhoeven and his effects crews keep pushing in terms of computer effects technology are also pushed on the levels of narrative, style and theme. Where his next venture will lead him we can only guess, but one thing is certain: Verhoeven’s science fiction films will continue to paraphrase Eliot’s poem.

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a whimper but a bang.<sup>23</sup>