Inner screens and cybernetic battlefields: Paul Virilio and Robocop

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Padilha's new *Robocop* film can be read in the light of Paul Virilio's theoretical work, notably *Desert Screen*. Robocop serves as the city's warrior but also as a munition in the hands of global media forces. Still, even if the film presents the fallibility of robotic technology, its true failure is in sustaining the progressivist myth of technology perfectly under human control.

Introduction

When José Padilha released his reboot of the *Robocop* franchise in 2014, many unthinkingly saw it as a dilettante imitation of the bloodthirsty original. "José Padilha's heavy-handed remake of Paul Verhoeven's black-comic film quickly degenerates into a boring action pile-up," crowed Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* (2014). Tim Robey in *The Telegraph* (2014) saw it as a failure of nerve that Padilha's *Robocop* sees Alex Murphy blown up by a car bomb, rather than being dismembered slowly by shotgun, as in the Verhoeven original. "What a Robo-Cop out," concluded the Film Blog (2014), also in *The Guardian*. While there were some lukewarm exceptions – e.g. Mark Kermode in *The Observer* (2014) – the general reaction was to wonder how Padilha's film could dare to tread so meekly in the footsteps of a hard-edged modern classic.

Nevertheless, as this article will argue, Padilha's new version of *Robocop* bears considerable critical scrutiny. Previous versions of the *Robocop* franchise have been cited in a range of analyses, from popularizations of Lacan's psychology (Zizek 1991) and studies of the uncanny (Telotte 2003) to contemporary film studies (Short 2005). Yet in spite of the prima

facie convergence of *Robocop's* themes with the work of Paul Virilio, only Telotte (2001; 2003) has juxtaposed them analytically, and then solely in regard to Robocop's visor. Seen in a richer Virilian light, however, not only does Padilha's *Robocop* dramatize the latest predictions about the myriad possibilities of contemporary technology (the 1987 Verhoeven original now being technologically out-dated). It also rehearses more perfectly than the original the symbiotic dynamics of conflict and perception treated by Virilio in *Desert Screen* (2005) and elsewhere. Indeed, *Desert Screen* is especially pertinent to an analysis of Padilha's *Robocop* since the enduring superiority of Padilha's main protagonist is an example of how the forces of the war of communication, in all their televisual brilliance, outmanoeuvre those of the war of transport. In particular the film's key tensions lie between Robocop as the new man of war, a warrior who incarnates Virilio's vision machine, and Robocop, the cyborg, a victim of the cybernetics revolution whose particular *original accident* – the regressive potential that Virilio (2007) says corresponds to every technology and the possibilities it creates - is to remain vulnerable to the resurgence of the human Alex Murphy on whose body the Robocop prosthesis is built.

Before we go any further, some contextualisation and explanation of *Robocop's* technological backstory will be apposite, along with an outline of some of its principal dilemmas. Designed as a human version of a drone, Padilha's Robocop is the cyborg reboot of Detroit policeman Alex Murphy who is badly injured in a car bombing and subsequently given an almost entirely prosthetic body by robotics genius Dr Dennett Norten. Norten and his Omni Foundation have been until now a non-military branch of Omnicorps, a large multinational corporation headed by the charismatic Raymond Sellars who overturns Norten's brief for the peaceful and therapeutic application of robotic technologies in the human body by offering him

a massive increase in funding. The Robocop which subsequently emerges from Norten's

laboratory and operating theatre functions with digital precision and dromological prowess, his

humanity seemingly a mere grace note to his high-tech substructure. Thanks to his computer-

assisted vision and enhanced cerebral processing power, he deploys an individualised *screen of*

control that coordinates with the city's *central control of information* (Virilio 2005: 79), enabling

him rapidly to synthesise police databases with live televisual perception. A complex set of

sensors and algorithms allows him to foresee the movements of his adversaries whom he then

neutralises with impressive firepower. Thus he emerges as a supremely efficient sleuth, the

ultimate policeman of the polis: Robocop is an analyst and a mobile communications satellite

who also fights crime on the front line. Moreover, Robocop is everything his designers need to

sell his technology to the American public in 2027: a ruthlessly efficient anti-crime machine

with the human touch missing from the drones who at the start of the film police Tehran in the

name of Uncle Sam.

This technological backstory, however, raises various dilemmas. As we have already

indicated, Robocop is himself a cybernetic battlefield on which the rapidity of information

processes battles dromologically with ponderous human intellection and emotion. Robocop is

torn between being a human prosthesis built on to a drone's body (as Omnicorps intend), and a

human individual whose body and mind have tragically become almost entirely prosthetic.

Overwhelmed or preoccupied at first with his new cyborg existence, Robocop slowly

experiences an awakening to his high-tech predicament, as hormones and old synapses battle

with recently installed circuitry. 'It's the illusion of free will,' says Dennett Norten confidently,

before seeing Robocop undo his own programming as the film reaches its climax. From an

anthropological perspective, Robocop transposes to a new cybernetic key the old Jansenist-Jesuit dilemma of the human will: the former seeing the human as caught between irresistible forces that control action, and the latter predicting the supremacy of the human capacity for free choice in any given context. Padilha (2014) himself has said that he sees *Robocop* as a retelling of the mind-body conflict in which human action is accounted for either as a matter of free election or as the result of corporeal determination. *Robocop*, surrounded by the newest high-tech glamour, evokes preoccupations that are, nevertheless, centuries old.

Thus contextualised, Padilha's *Robocop* invites two key questions rooted in Paul Virilio's thought and driven by the dilemmas just described. For clarity in the discussion, we will refer to the character as Robocop/Murphy and the film simply as *Robocop*. The first question considers Robocop/Murphy as the robotic warrior: in the light of Virilio's 'Foreward' to *Desert Screen* (2005: 1-11), what does it mean to become a man of war under the current conditions of militarisation, especially when one is half man, half machine? The answer to this question must necessarily take account of the mutual relationship between perception and warfare framed in *Desert Screen*, especially in Robocop's case where his capacity to analyse and deploy images transforms his capacity to fight crime, and where both capacities turn him into a munition for those seeking control of the planet through image manipulation. Media manipulation in the interests of big business is a preoccupation of Verhoeven's original and Padilha's remake, though, as we will argue, the differences between them illustrate remarkable shifts in the technological and political landscape.

The second question addressed by this article will consider how Robocop/Murphy, a participant and an instrument of the Virilian squared horizon, is subject to the law of original

accident (Virilio 2007). Indeed, here is the film's key dilemma in Virilian terms: what is the cost of Robocop/Murphy to the human subject he incarnates? Robocop/Murphy undergoes a double resurrection – of robotization and hominization – and the implications of both require to be elucidated in the light of Virilio's law of original accident; while the failure of the former process is made clear, the triumphant portrayal of the latter is deeply problematic. Finally, we must also consider the implications of *Robocop's* participation in the progressive myth of human mastery over technology and its inability to recognise that man, whether cop or robot, 'is no longer the centre of the world' (Virilio 2005: 98).

Robocop as the warrior robot and munition

Padilha's *Robocop* stages the dilemmas of becoming a man of war at the time of a crucial revolution in military technology. Quite simply, Robocop/Murphy bears within him an extraordinary suite of technological innovations. Now, while such technology might not yet be available, the tactical use of exoskeletons – the robotic enhancement of infantryman's body - by the military is not far away (Hoarn 2013). Clarifying the implications of such innovations, however, requires us to explore Robocop/Murphy's status as a warrior in relation to the city he patrols, and then to consider what kind of technology facilitates his interventions as guardian of that city. First of all, however, we must situate Robocop/Murphy in the context of Virilio's transplant revolution.

Like the revolutions of transport and transmission, the Virilian transplant revolution involves the crossing of a boundary. Virilio imagines the logical outcome of initial transplant experimentation to be the total body prosthesis that Robocop/ Murphy incarnates. In other

words, this crossing of the boundary brings about specifically the quasi-complete technological colonisation of the human body (Virilio 1995: 100). Indeed, Virilio's remarks on corporeal colonisation in *The Art of the Motor* could almost have been inspired by Verhoeven's *Robocop*, although admittedly cyborgs are found scattered across popular culture, from *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* to the *Terminator* franchise.

Still, the sense of colonisation and colonised is particularly strong in Padilha's *Robocop* when Robocop/Murphy realises for the first time after his accident that he is not in a metal suit (as he first supposed when he awoke) but that the metal suit has become his very body. As Virilio predicts, the perception of having been thus technologically invaded leads to a critical loss of egocentration; not so much the loss of the ego as such, as the loss of the bodily self as a triangulation point in the experience of subjectivity. A similar loss but with very different results occurs later in the film. When Robocop/Murphy risks having a psychotic crisis after the upload of massive amounts of data to his mind, Norton reduces his dopamine levels to such an extent that Murphy's human self cedes to his cyborg alter ego who then ignores all social niceties at his own public unveiling. In the first scene just mentioned, the loss of egocentration confirms Murphy's continuing self-mastery or, at the very least, his sense that it is under threat. In the later scene, Norten's capacity to shift Murphy's self perception shows that the loss of egocentration is now out of his control. All the subsequent tensions in Padilha's film originate in the demand that Alex Murphy's broken body be colonised technologically and then its parts accelerated to the speed of electromagnetic waves (Virilio 1995: 104) in the person of Robocop/Murphy. A subject of the transplant revolution, Robcop/Murphy is thus prepared for war.

The individual tension between transplant and colonised body in *Robocop* finds a social parallel in the status of Robocop/Murphy within the city. The transformation of this individual into a powerful agent of war – in this case, the war on crime - relocates his status within the categories and dynamics engendered by the possibilities of political authority. Robocop/Murphy, the supremely technologically-enhanced policeman, is unwittingly a player on the techno-political stage.

The techno-juridical dilemma evoked at the start of Padilha's *Robocop*, of whether drones can be used for policing duties, recalls Virilio's commentary towards the beginning of *Desert Screen* on the possibility of allowing 'questionable comrades' within the Greek city's militia (Virilio 2005: 6). Detroit, where most of the action of *Robocop* is situated, is a city facing an internal battle, and yet America's crime fighting drones, trustworthy slaves when used overseas, simply cannot be deployed within the city walls. America will not tolerate emotionless droids mistakenly executing citizens without compunction, and the film portrays the fictitious Dreyfus Act banning the use of such machines on American soil. No one can trust these questionable comrades and there remains a gulf between the *civitas* and these potential servants of civil order.

Robocop/Murphy's specific difference as soldier-citizen or *miles* – the one who '[defends] his possessions, his family and the entire city, as well as his own person' (Virilio 2005: 6) – at least according to his designers' intentions, is that he alone, a human-droid can cross this divide. It is precisely his hybridity that renders him equal to the task and acceptable in political terms. Robocop/Murphy conquers not only as a robot, the acceptable slave-become-citizen, but also as a human figure who has cast off the uselessness – the impotence and lack of

productivity – that the megalopolis assigns to mere technologically unmodified humans. Indeed,

his humanity alone ensures he does not ostensibly fall foul of the Dreyfus Act, even if in combat

mode he is, by Norten's design, operating robotically. In *Robocop*, as in *Desert Screen*, this debate

over the status of the city's warrior provides the background on which the interweaving of

perception and conflict can be played out.

Nevertheless, this inclusion of the robot-citizen within the city is problematic. While

apparently conferring on Robocop/Murphy the status of citizenship, it nevertheless leaves him

in some sense concealed, akin to the unknown soldiers that Virilio describes in *Desert Screen*

(Virilio 2005: 52-4). For a large part of Padilha's film, Robocop/Murphy's dilemmas are totally

hidden from the public by Omnicorps's publicity machine. Like Virilio's unknown soldiers,

Robocop/Murphy is the primary material of conflict, but with this advantage: he is free of the

military drawbacks of mortality and cowardice.

Nevertheless, the unknown soldier is a powerful meme. The combination of indomitable

heroism and technological complexity in this unknown soldier evokes both nostalgia and a taste

of the future. First, Robocop/Murphy's extraordinary suit, which is in fact his prosthetic body, is

a nostalgic reincarnation of the confidence of the uniform-become-weapon – a contemporary

recasting of the suit of armour or the commando's utility belt but now enhanced in the most

extraordinary ways. For Robocop/Murphy it is indeed the uniform that makes the soldier

(Virilio 2005: 51). Second, this inexorable soldier also looks forward. In the wars to come, as

Virilio implies, we need a soldier who is not permissive but entirely dissuasive, especially of the

kinds of actions that foment war within the city. Robocop/Murphy conquers because he belongs

to the next revolution of technological warfare; he ensures the future because he is one step

ahead of the gun-toting criminals of the present. It is with such an assurance – correct in itself –

that Omnicorps hope to change the face of policing, even if it means ignoring the drawbacks to

the technology Robocop/Murphy embodies; even if it means leaving the real character of the

newly incorporated soldier Robocop/Murphy unknown and in the shadows.

Robocop/Murphy's place within the transplant revolution necessarily raises the

question of the kind of machine he is. Indeed, so too does his hybridity as a cybernetic organism

which enables him to become the acceptable robotic warrior of the city. In this limited regard,

Padilha's 2014 *Robocop* follows closely Paul Verhoeven's 1987 version. In both films

Robocop/Murphy has rapid and effective firepower, is not subject to fatigue and withstands a

remarkable number of direct bullet hits. Robocop/Murphy is the technological cousin of the

machines that typified the transport revolution: in Verhoeven's original and Padilha's remake,

Robocop/Murphy is the tank made man.

Still, one crucial difference between the two *Robocops* is that Padilha's version shows us

a cyborg in the age of the information network and the squared horizon where war is now

dependent on televisual transmission of the enemy's locations and assets; where the speed

transmission allows shapes the tactical and strategic options open to Robocop/Murphy as a

belligerent. Another crucial difference is that Padilha's version shows us how Robocop/Murphy

himself becomes a televisual munition in the hands of those seeking planetary regulation under

the communication satellite. To elaborate further an answer to the question of what kind of

machine Padilha's Robocop/Murphy is, we must consider these two differences between the

films in turn.

Due to his televisual capacities, databases of CCTV and ability to plug into live feeds, Padilha's Robocop/Murphy brings to the individual level the omni-visual possibilities of the desert screen (Virilio 2005: 60). Frequently we are shown Robocop/Murphy's inner view, a multiscreen affair showing simultaneously retrieved moving images, static data and live input. Robocop/Murphy can win his fight on crime precisely by not 'losing sight of the enemy' (Virilio 2005: 78) or by summoning sight of the enemy on command. His powerful analytic capacities detect hostility and threat in a subject even before the subject has made a move. Robocop/Murphy's vision is thus effective remotely and in proximity. His capacity to strike the criminal remains firmly territorialised, but not so his perception, and it is arguably this that makes him so different from his crime-fighting predecessors. Indeed, it is this difference between Robocop/Murphy and his adversaries that ensures the conflict they enter does not spill over into the national and international domains. Robocop/Murphy can contain or even suppress warfare on the streets of Detroit because he belongs to a higher order of conflict framed by the squared horizon.

One powerful image of the differences in perception technology between Verhoeven's and Padilha's Robocop/Murphy is found in his visor. The robotic visor on the humanoid machine was first captured for the cinematic imagination by the character of Maria in Fritz Lang's 1927 classic *Metropolis*. Moreover, its importance surely draws on the scopic regime of ocular-centricity in which vision is utterly dominant (Jay, 1993). In Verhoeven's film the visor is first shown being screwed down onto Robocop/Murphy's eyes, the screen shot captured from his perspective. The whirring sound of the drill underlines the mechanical transformation of Robocop/Murphy as his robotic vision splutters into life. In a significant moment later in the

film, however, Robocop/Murphy's sidekick Lewis brings him a drill so he can remove the visor. In Verhoeven's version, the removal of the visor is an essential stage in Robocop/Murphy's hominization; to rejoin humanity – and indeed to throw off he control of his corporate designers (Telotte 2003: 118) - Robocop/Murphy must take off his robotic instrument of sight and see with his own eyes again. Here, the contrast with Padilha's film could not be sharper. In the latter, Robocop/Murphy's human face is constantly exposed, except when he goes into combat mode. Then his visor snaps shut and his automated perception takes over. In Padilha's film, as we noted above, the uniform makes the soldier, and in Robocop/Murphy's case, the visor embodies the film's portrayal of how perception and conflict are now intimately bonded.

Unlike in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, however, there is no commentary in Padilha's *Robocop* on the dilemmas of placing the power of omni-visualisation in the hands or in the head of one individual. In Nolan's film Lucian Fox resigns from Bruce Wayne's company after Batman pressures him into turning all the mobile phones in Gotham City into one giant surveillance system to track down the Joker. Padilha's *Robocop*, in contrast, leaves the progressive myth of the benevolence of technological omni-visualisation entirely unquestioned.

Where the film is arguably on firmer Virilian ground is in the uses it envisages of Robocop/Murphy as image; as a televisual instrument in the hands of those seeking planetary regulation under the communication satellite. This is, as we have noted, another difference from Verhoeven's version that illustrates what kind of machine Padilha's Robocop/Murphy is. 'One does not discuss a large image,' says Virilio in *Desert Screen*, 'one undergoes it' (Virilio, 2005: 34). In Padilha's *Robocop* the chief manipulator of images is *The Novak Element*, a fictional news show introduced by its eponymous host, played by the incomparable Samuel L. Jackson, who

perorates in front of a huge, pixelated image of the Stars and Stripes. Novak soon becomes

Robocop/Murphy's chief apologist on the satellite news networks and Robocop/Murphy

features in Novak's reports.

In this respect, Robocop/Murphy becomes a munition deployed against America's

politicians who want to keep Omnicorps's drones off the streets of the USA. The war that Novak

is engaged in is ostensibly one on crime but, seen from another perspective, it is a war for the

greatest commercial exploitation of the next technological innovation. Just as Robocop/Murphy

conquers by his 'arms of communication' (Virilio 2005: 80), so Novak is aiming to prevail by the

same means deployed in a different mode. Here again, the differences between Verhoeven's film

and Padilha's are illustrative. In Verhoeven's film the media is used to present a global situation

where violence has become banal and commercialized. This agenda is epitomised by a character

called Bixby Synder who regularly appears on television surrounded by buxom blonds and leers

towards the screen while gurning lasciviously, "I'd buy that for a dollar." In one scene, the

television news reports violence from around the globe but breaks for an advertisement of a

board game called *Nuke 'Em* which satirizes the cold-war feelings of the mid-1980s. The media

in Verhoeven's film seem engaged in a commercial battle that is primarily consumerist in

nature. In contrast, in Padilha's *Robocop* Novak himself is clearly a combatant, grappling with

political leaders by means of images and hard selling the automation of violence not to

individuals but to peoples and states. What is on sale is not domestic consumer products so

much as the automation of conflict under the guise of patriotic belligerence. The commercial

exploitation underpinning this process is driven by and feeds the symbiosis of perception and

conflict that *The Novak Element* perfectly embodies. The global stakes that Padilha's Novak is

prepared to play for are illustrative of the shifts in the political and technological terrain since

Verhoeven's consumerist anxieties of the 1980s.

Thus, Novak is a fourth-front practitioner of ruse and deception whose word is only

guaranteed by the technical virtuosity of the satellite communications technology that brings

his message into people's homes. At the same time, he combines these techniques of the fourth

front with old-fashioned rhetorical war, the kind that induces thought paralysis, asking his

virtual audience with crushing scorn, "Why is America so robo-phobic?" Novak, like

Robocop/Murphy, can vanquish his competition because he remains a step ahead of them,

thanks to the technological resources that bring live feeds from overseas and interviews from

leading military and political stakeholders. With Robocop/Murphy as a munition in his hands,

Novak himself is perfectly well equipped for the strategic battles evoked by the transmission

revolution.

The Robocop accident

As with all Paul Virilio's writings on technology, *Desert Screen* contains various attacks on the

progressivist assumptions that characterise many technological discourses. In an interview

added to *Desert Screen* in 2000, Virilio quotes Nigel Calder in saying, 'We generally believe that

AUTOMATION (*sic*) does away with the possibility of human error. In fact, it transfers this

possibility from the level of action to the level of conception and development (Virilio 2005: 98).

In other words, in their nexus with the dynamics of warfare and strategy the technologies that

Desert Screen refers to are themselves subject to the law of error that Virilio elsewhere has

called the original accident (Virilio 2007). From this Virilian perspective, however, Padilha's

Robocop is somewhat problematic. While the film's plot depends to a great extent on the

accidents latent in a cybernetic organism as complex and advanced as Robocop/Murphy, the

film arguably shies away from the problematisation of the automation of perception on which

Robocop/Murphy's superiority as a warrior is based.

Accordingly, we must now explore the ways in which a Virilian understanding of the

inherent fallibility of technology casts light on Padilha's *Robocop*. The film is such a monument

to technological innovation that its techno-pessimist overtones lend it a deeply paradoxical feel.

Yet, also in this light, we must consider ultimately whether the failure of nerve in Padilha's film

is found not so much in its lack of gore and irony à la Verhoeven (*pace* Tim Robey), but rather in

its imitating Verhoeven's confidence in technology and the human capacity to master it.

The failure of the technology that supports Robocop/Murphy's hybridity comes about

precisely through his hominization (or re-hominization). Perhaps the most important of original

accidents in the Robocop technology is that cyborg equilibrium and reliability are prone to

instability as the human substructure reasserts its own freedom. For example, using his link to

live CCTV cameras, Robocop/Murphy is able to spot his son from across the city and reflect on

the boy's appalling stress levels induced by long separation from his father. It is the first step in

Robocop/Murphy's second resurrection: after his cyborg reincarnation, the revival of his

humanity. This is not just a matter of human desire replacing mechanical drive, leading to

subjectivation (Zizek, 1991: 22). In Robocop/Murphy's case, his re-born human desires lead to a

victorious conquest over his own technology.

After Murphy is blown up by the car bomb, the dramatic trajectory of Padilha's film

plays out in three stages all of which are related to the fallibility of the cyborg technology: first,

Robocop/Murphy's initial rebellion against his own technology, next his massive dopamine

privation as Norten controls his reactions, and finally Robocop/Murphy's subverting his

programming, even to the point of breaking his robotic protocols. With respect to the last of

these, in Verhoeven's film the villain Dick Jones, whom Robocop/Murphy cannot arrest because

it goes against his programming, is dealt with by Robocop/Murphy as soon as he is sacked by

the company. Here, the failure of Robocop/Murphy's technology is only that it prevents him

catching the criminal. In contrast, Padilha's film recreates this moment by having

Robocop/Murphy overcome his programming through sheer mental strength to shoot Raymond

Sellars. This hominization – the affirmation of Robocop/Murphy as a human subject freely in

control of himself – is also underlined in Padilha's film by Robocop/Murphy's rediscovery of his

family and the way in which he protects them from Sellars in the final scenes. In other words,

Padilha's film grants Robocop/Murphy's humanity a social halo earned by defence of the

domestic, whereas in Verhoeven's film the family's absence and the memory of his wife's

assurances of love become for Robocop/Murphy only a source of burgeoning bitterness about

his cybernetic state. In Padilha's film this domesticity serves the opposite function to those films

where safe robots are placed in families and technology shown to be reconcilable with the

family setting (Short 2005: 134). Instead, the family subplot in *Robocop* is further proof of

Robocop/Murphy's return to the human fold and underlines the strand of techno-pessimism in

the film.

      Yet another reinforcement of this hominization is that Padilha's film recapitulates

Verhoeven's Christian symbolism. Perhaps surprisingly, Verhoeven described his

Robocop/Murphy as a Christian fairy tale, rehearsing in another register the Christological

dynamics of death, resurrection and victory (Roberts 2010). Moreover, like Christ,

Robocop/Murphy emerges from fallen humanity but, untouched by human corruption, pits

himself against the powers of this world and defeats them. According to Sue Short (2005: 233, n.

53), such dynamics are a feature of cyborg films as diverse as *Blade Runner*, *The Terminator* and

The Matrix where a Christian imaginary serves as an anchor point in the moral tumult caused by

cybernetic upheaval. Robocop/Murphy somehow emulates the *Word made flesh* by becoming

the *Machine made man*, but even then, this process comes about specifically by the failure of the

technology that is meant to have utterly transformed him into a high-tech tool.

Nevertheless, in Padilha's film, Robocop/Murphy's hominization is not simplistic or

reliant on progressive narratives of human nobility, as if human perfection could supply where

technology fails. Instead, it seems rather to induce many of the anxieties that are attendant on

the problems of power and authority. For example, Padilha's Robocop/Murphy constantly

processes images with lightening rapidity and acts on the information he deduces from them.

Yet if Virilio (2006 140) is right to argue that acceleration leads to a place where politics attain a

state of emergency, then speed surely provides its own commentary on Robocop/Murphy's

taking the law into his own hands. Disturbingly, in this robot warrior technological power and

dromological prowess beget juridical autocracy.

This darker, conflictual side of Robocop/Murphy's hominization is hardly concealed by

the narrative of man conquering technology. War, Virilio reminds us in another essay in *Desert*

Screen, is an ascent to extremes, even if the Clausewitzian form of war is becoming obsolete

(Virilio 2005: 38). This emphasis anticipates René Girard's analysis in *Achever Clausewitz*

(2007) where the ascent to extremes, *la montée aux extrêmes*, is foregrounded as the key insight

of *Vom Kriege*, Clausewitz's treatise on the nature of war. It is surely significant, therefore, that

Robocop/Murphy as a human proves to be as prone as anyone to the uncontrollable dynamics

of the mimetic violence that Girard sees in Von Clausewitz. If Robocop/Murphy avoids the

horror evoked by the liberation of machines from their human masters – by being conversely

the human liberated from his own robotization - it is only to sink back into the traditional cycles

of imitative human violence about which Girard has written so eloquently. Surprisingly,

Robocop thus evokes not only the *original accident* of technology but also the meme that

inspires this Virilian terminology: the *original sin* of man. Robocop/Murphy must become as

violent as the criminals he pursues, even to the point of extra-judicial execution.

Robocop/Murphy, the soldier citizen, becomes the self-appointed maker of exceptions: not so

much the soldier citizen as the soldier judge, and if the soldier judge, why not the soldier king?

In this regard, the cybernetic battlefield on which Robocop/Murphy's inner self is forged

achieves hominization in the stark terms of a primitive instinct for conflict. The original accident

of Robocop/Murphy thus poses problems not only for a progressive view of technology but also

for a progressive view of the human.

 This portrayal of technological and human fallibility described above is, nevertheless,

troubled by other significant elements in the film. From a Virilian perspective, Padilha's *Robocop*

insists on perpetuating certain myths that accompany progressive accounts of technology: for

example, that the automation of perception carries with it no possibility of error or that the

screen of control (Virilio 2005: 79) is under control. Contrariwise, even the most cursory reading

of *Desert Screen* is enough to suggest that these assumptions are at best foolish and at worst

deadly.

More precisely, in *Desert Screen* Virilio underlines the problematic nature of the automation and acceleration of perception. Along the squared horizon, 'What was previously played out over the course of a day in the newspaper, then in an hour on the radio, henceforth plays out in an instant, the real instant of the televised communiqué." Virilio further reflects on a "practical durée that permits no reflection, no critical distance, a time lapse that no longer distinguishes between the before and after – attack or defence – with the fatal risk of confusion that this entails." (Virilio 2005: 18-19) Now, while these passages refer specifically to the mediatisation of the Gulf War, one of Virilio's key theses is that the distinction separating war from its visualisation has become porous (Virilio 1989). Moreover, how is it that Robocop/Murphy can deploy such a rapid visualisation of the entire city without once making an error or mistake in perception? Even as Padilha breaks down the mystique of the machine to hominize Robocop/Murphy, his film unwittingly pays a tribute to the progressive refusal to problematize the automation of perception. In particular, Robocop/Murphy seems immune to the most frequent combat error of automated perception: the mistake of firing on one's allies.

Indeed, Robocop/Murphy presents us with a picture of what the automation of perception would look like without the original accidents of such automation. Not once does the film echo Virilian anxieties over the notion of image pollution (Virilio 2008: 97); not once does it entertain the need for suspicion about the traffic of images (Virilio 2005: 68). Robocop sets himself at odds with corrupt police and with Omnicorps and yet is able unproblematically to draw on the central screen of information that his adversaries sustain.

In contrast, therefore, with the various critiques of Robey (2014) and others, the film's true flaw lies arguably in failing to question the infallibly automated perception on which

Robocop/Murphy's military superiority is based. Robocop/Murphy's reputation as a hero, in

Padilha's film as in Verhoeven's, consists in standing up to the sources of corruption in business

and the police. Yet to do this, Padilha's Robocop/Murphy observes all the pieties of the squared

horizon where a progressive mythology of automated perception endures. It is not that Padilha

is ignorant of the dangers of the squared horizon, as can be seen in the figure of Novak. It is, we

could argue, simply that the canons of filmic heroism require this falsification, contrary to what

the experience of technological warfare urges.

Conclusion

Padilha's *Robocop* comes at a cultural moment where the human has been not only theoretically

deconstructed but also technologically displaced. Virilio comments specifically on this moment

in the conclusion of *Desert Screen*, "In fact, man is no longer the *centre of the world* of

anthropocentrism or geocentrism; he has become, in the course of the twentieth century, the

end of the world of a technoscientific nihilism." (Virilio 2005: 98) In this light, we could read

Robocop the franchise, both in its Verhoeven original and its Padilha remake, as a myth about

man's ability to regenerate under the conditions of the current technological revolution.

Through his two resurrections *Robocop* rehearses respectively the myth of the god-machine, the

deus ex machina of technology, and the myth of Prometheus, the *homo technologicus*, whose

boast is to dispose of technology like the gods.

Nevertheless, our Virilian analysis of *Robocop* also suggests that the Robocop/Murphy

solution is not one that Virilio could embrace in either of its mythic forms. As a solution to the

displacement of man, the colonized body of Robocop/Murphy, fatally flawed by its own original

accidents, would be as false as clinging to the *homo technologicus*, fatally flawed by original sin.

In an interview with John Armitage, Virilio declared fiercely, "I want to be neither a God nor a cyborg! I want to be a man." (Armitage 1999: 51) To allude to one of the film's most iconic lines, Virilio might simply of have said: *Dead or alive, I would rather just be Paul Virilio*.

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