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## Paul Verhoeven, media manipulation, and hyper-reality

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Paul Verhoeven, Media Manipulation, and Hyper-Reality

by

Emmanuel William Malchiodi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Humanities  
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and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central  
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## Abstract

Dutch director Paul Verhoeven is a polarizing figure. Although many of his American made films have received considerable praise and financial success, he has been lambasted on countless occasions for his gratuitous use of sex, violence, and contentious symbolism—1995s *Showgirls* was overwhelmingly dubbed the worst film of all time and 1997s *Starship Troopers* earned him a reputation as a fascist. Regardless of the controversy surrounding him, his science fiction films are a move beyond the conventions of the big blockbuster science fiction films of the 1980s (*E.T.* and the *Star Wars* trilogy are prime examples), revealing a deeper exploration of both sociopolitical issues and the human condition. Much like the novels of Philip K. Dick (and Verhoeven's 1990 film *Total Recall*—an adaptation of a Dick short story), Verhoeven's science fiction work explores worlds where paranoia is a constant and determining whether an individual maintains any liberty is regularly questionable.

In this thesis I am basically exploring issues regarding power. Although I barely bring up the term power in it, I feel it is central. Power is an ambiguous term; are we discussing physical power, state power, objective power, subjective power, or any of the other possible manifestations of the word? The original Anglo-French version of power means “to be able,” asking whether it is possible for one to do something. In relation to Verhoeven's science fiction work each demonstrates the limitations placed upon an individual's autonomy, asking are the

protagonists capable of independent agency or rather just environmental constructs reflecting the myriad influences surrounding them. Does the individual really matter in the post-modern world, brimming with countless signs and signifiers? My main objective in this writing is to demonstrate how this happens in Verhoeven's films, exploring his central themes and subtext and doing what science fiction does: hold a mirror up to the contemporary world and critique it, asking whether our species' current trajectory is beneficial or hazardous.

First, I would like to express a heartfelt thanks to my thesis committee, Miss Lisa Cook and Dr. Harry Coverston, for their support and for taking part in this project.

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## Introduction

Sitting at a table in a smoke filled room, a group of industrialists argue the fate of their employees. Should they concede to their demands or should the wheels of capitalism continue unabated? Eventually a middle aged man, sitting at the center of the table exclaims: “great corporations, like great nations, are building on the foundation of innocent people” (*The Hoodlum*). This scene from the 1919 silent film *The Hoodlum* illustrates the sentiments of most corporations—profit over people. The OCP boardroom meeting from the first act of Paul Verhoeven’s 1987 film *Robocop* displays the same sentiments. OCP—standing for Omni Consumer Products—Senior President Dick Jones (Ronny Cox) unveils a new weapon: the ED-209. The machine is a menacing, cumbersome beast (even growling like a jungle cat), incapable of reasoning or empathy. The scene culminates in an OCP executive—recruited by Jones to demonstrate ED-209’s law enforcement capabilities—being horribly slaughtered by a barrage of high caliber rounds from the metallic mechanism; a mangled piece of meat left behind by mechanical error. OCP’s CEO turns to Jones, a look of horror on his face and says, “I’ve very disappointed” (*Robocop*). Instead of concern for the death he just witnessed, his sentiments respond instead to the company’s reputation and the money lost by this setback.

This is a common theme in Paul Verhoeven’s unofficial science fiction trilogy, comprised of 1987’s *Robocop*, 1990s *Total Recall*, and the 1997 special effects extravaganza *Starship Troopers*—the priorities of institutions outweighing those of the general population. That

does not mean the antagonists from each film admit this to their constituents or customers, but their actions speak louder than any of their rhetoric. Ultimately, what Verhoeven is arguing in each film is that the individual is a fiction, a phantom constructed for the sake of mass control. The desires of each film's institutions overshadow the individuals, with the public inundated by propaganda. Although the possibility for independent choice in the film happens, are these choices really autonomous or just the result of myriad signs and signifiers influencing the protagonist's perception of their environment? Like Baudrillard's assertions regarding hyper-reality, is there any possible, "distinction between the real and the imaginary,"—in both Verhoeven's landscapes and our own (4)?

Brian Crim, author of the essay *A World that Works: Fascism and Media Globalization in Starship Troopers* claims that, "Controlling information, not politics or resources, is the true hallmark of the future totalitarian state" (18). His comment is about *Starship Troopers* but it could apply to any of Verhoeven's three science fiction pieces, since the media's influence is an integral aspect of each narratives. The media is the catalyst for action in each film, a transmitter of symbols for public consumption; in essence, these symbols beamed through the media shape the protagonists' agency—their actions, their beliefs, and even their ideologies are sculpted via propagandistic signifiers coming predominately from a screen technology of some sort. The information contained in these broadcast, to take a phrase from Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, are "manufacturing consent" by creating a general consensus for the actions of the dominant institutions in each film. From this perspective, how is it possible the public maintains

any degree of liberty, especially when their consciousness is a byproduct of multiple power structures converging onto the individuals perceptions?

My basic assertion is that nobody in Verhoeven's three science fiction films is actually free but rather an edifice of their environments. This is true of just about anybody in any society, but Verhoeven's zeal for presenting a post-modern perspective on this concept comes alive in each work, demonstrating how the individual is an extension of the technological and social forces operating in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America. His critique also originates from a unique perspective; Verhoeven is a Dutch director emigrating to America in the 1980s and perceiving American culture from an outsider's point of view—his outlook towards America is different and shines through in each piece, analyzing American hegemony, imperialism, and popular culture from a European approach. Subsequently, his films do not contain an American bias and are not rife with concepts common to somebody indoctrinated in American dogma during their formative years. It is because of this positioning that Verhoeven's take on late 20<sup>th</sup> century America is unforgiving, demonstrating how private and public interests fashion the individual.

Verhoeven has stated he enjoys working in the science fiction genre, most notably because he, "felt much more secure," working in, "a genre that was not so realistic and was not so culturally defined" (Qtd. in Cornea 135). The freedom one is allowed within this genre is extraordinary; it is a genus allowing for subversive allusions and allegories to flourish without offering an outright critique of the contemporary. Science fiction author Issac Asimov argues, "science fiction authors foresee the inevitable," taking the present and extrapolating it into a

prophetic vision of our future, its utopian potential; but most times, the dystopian nightmares which a contemporary trajectory will create (65). Each of the three Verhoeven science fiction pieces under scrutinization in my thesis present what the director believes is the inevitable outcome of American policy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—unfortunately the result is generally bleak. Some, like *Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers*, are in the distant future but Verhoeven's first American film, *Robocop*, presents a society just around the corner and the recipient of corporate and political despotism. Nonetheless, while Verhoeven's outlook towards the future is generally bleak, he does see potential for humanity to dismiss its adherence to hyper-realistic representations of reality, placing all the hope not in the systems of governance in his films but rather in the people. He allows for the audience to take a step backwards and observe their environment for what it is, urging the viewer to grasp true autonomy and not the construction which passes as liberty.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on *Robocop*, investigating the implications of the media's influence over the citizenry. In addition I will address the relentless violence appearing in the majority of the film's scenes, asking what Verhoeven's intentions are. Finally, I will investigate the film's place and space. Verhoeven picked Detroit as the movie's setting and I investigate what this locale states about the decline in America's industrial superiority during the 1980s. The second chapter discusses *Total Recall* and the implications of the media over the individual's perception of their environment. Although this chapter is shorter than my other two, I feel an exploration of *Total Recall's* mysterious narrative (is it a dream or reality?) is best suited for a considerably longer piece. Instead, I focus my attention on the how the film is an

expression of hyper-reality in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America—its focus primarily on the protagonists' interaction with his environment and how the media fashions his perceptions of this world. The final chapter deals with *Starship Troopers*, Verhoeven's largest budget and grandest cinematic achievement thus far. Where *Robocop* represents the body of the individual and *Total Recall* is an investigation of the mind, *Starship Troopers* is an embodiment of both aspects of humanity. I have separated this final chapter into two sections, one on representations of fascism and the other on the media's influence on this futuristic society. While each of Verhoeven's films investigates other aspects of American society and humanity in general, my primary aim is navigating these worlds through the meta-narratives bellowing from the mass media, asking whether it is possible to possess autonomy in a society saturated by images dictating the parameters of an environment.

# **Robocop**

## Introduction

Beginning with a bird eye's view of Detroit from across Lake Michigan, the camera moves towards the Motor City—an industrial monolith. Large buildings teeming with lights litter the upper half of the screen; the result of America's automotive industry shines brightly in the early evening light while an ominous chord slowly raises and the film's title—*Robocop*—enters the screen. Immediately the scene changes, showing the beginning credits of the evening news broadcast, which sets the tone for the rest of the picture. Starting off his first American feature film in this fashion, director Paul Verhoeven sets the mood and tone of his near-future dystopia picture. It is similar to a fairy tale, almost as if this 10 second introduction is saying, “once upon a time.” *Robocop*, working like a science fiction comic book, is fantasy; Verhoeven's implementation of an overview of Detroit's landscape presents the film's location as a singular instance, a fable foretelling a future that might happen, predicated on the events of Reagan era America. The events following this introduction—fictional news broadcasts, the actions of the ominous OCP Corporation, Murphy's death and resurrection as Robocop—are all events transpiring within a particular location; a location that is both reality and fiction, a place that once promised stable employment and a share of the American dream that is now a dilapidated remnant of its former self and reduced to a shell of its former industrial prowess.

Verhoeven claims his film works like, “a comic book,” playing with contemporary ideas but placing them into a completely fantastic world (Qtd. in Cornea 135). Although the violence and cyber-punk visuals *Robocop* offers are reminiscent of comic books (especially comics like

Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg*), the critique of late 20<sup>th</sup> century media practices and the invasion of the public by the private sphere elevate *Robocop* past the tropes traditionally relegated to comics. *Robocop*'s subtext surpasses the issues explored in the super-hero comics released by Marvel and D.C., functioning more like an independent comic (like *American Flagg* or possibly Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*). Verhoeven's first American film transcends the limitations traditionally associated with comic books and offers a satirical look at 1980s America: a time where materialism reached a new pinnacle, where the hippies traded their morals for business suits and corporate ideals, and a time when the expansion of television via cable, satellite, and home video meant more competition and therefore a change in the presentation of information. Instead of championing integrity, like Dan Rather or Edward Murrow would claim, the news became just another piece of information, packaged for mass consumption and profit instead of public enlightenment and knowledge of the world at large.

Of course, the late Neil Postman would argue there is no such thing as valuable television, especially in regards to what is deemed viable information. Instead, Postman believes the messages of television are not changed by the private or public sector but rather that television itself—the medium of television—is a medium predestined as entertainment: “Entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television” (87). It is not whether the messages broadcasted have lost their integrity, but the medium itself invalidates any argument of integrity to begin with. This is in conflict with the satirical messages in Verhoeven's *Robocop* and this is an issue I will address later in this chapter. Nonetheless, one of the principal arguments at the heart of *Robocop* is the decline in credible and viable information on television

during Reagan-era America. In this chapter I will investigate the effects of *Robocop* on themes of both the body and the mind, asking whether an individual is free in a liberal society or just the sum of myriad environmental influences coming from both the media, reflecting back the influences it receives from a world predominately influenced by mass market culture.

### Violence, Sadism, and the Body

Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* is violent. Extremely violent. In the 1990s The Criterion Collection released an X-rated version on laserdisc (followed in 1998 by a now out of print DVD edition), containing additional scenes deemed too violent by the MPAA for theatrical release. The differences between the R-rated theatrical cut and the X-rated home video version are minute, yet enough for the MPAA to attach the usually dreaded X to the film. Regardless of the cuts made so the film could arrive in theaters in 1987 *Robocop* is excessively violent, incorporating on a litany of cold blooded murders and scenes of blood soaked cruelty.

When Murphy is ruthlessly tortured and murdered by Botticker (Curtwood Smith) and his gang, the catalyst for Murphy's transformation into Robocop, he endures a barrage of pain before his ultimate demise. His hand is blown off, his arm is severed by a shotgun blast, and he suffers through dozens of rounds before he is finally shot square in the head. However, the images of Murphy's suffering do not end there. After a brief reprieve where Murphy's partner Lewis (Nancy Allen) laments over his corpse he arrives at a hospital where doctors attempt in vain to revive his mutilated corpse. In this scene Verhoeven changes perspectives multiple times, showing an objective view of the doctors and Murphy's body (moving periodically up and down

his punctured torso and implementing a close-up shot on Murphy's face where his dead and glassy eyes continually look blankly ahead) and a subjective view from Murphy's perspective where the audience witnesses what Murphy would see if he is capable of comprehension before his brain finally dies. Spliced in-between these shots are moments of Murphy's life—featuring his wife, his kids, and his final moments before Botticker murders him—used as a visual representation of his brain slowly dying, reaching the threshold where it cannot sustain itself anymore. Verhoeven is effectively saying Murphy's "life is flashing before his eyes," many times showing Murphy's vacant eyes and then cutting immediately to a memory. The last shot before the screen fades to black and the only sounds the audience hears are the doctors mechanically going through the motions of declaring a dead body is the camera pulling away from Murphy's family waving to him from their front yard and Botticker shooting him. From either perspective, Officer Murphy is deceased.

This scene, with its emphasis on prolonged pain and suffering, does not merely use violence and sadism as a tool of exploitation. Naturally that is part of it, since excessive violence is a trademark of *Robocop*, but this scene intends for the audience to feel the pain of the character, juxtaposing it against the mechanical form Murphy later takes as Robocop, where he is devoid of the emotions his human form exhibits. Julie F. Codell argues in her essay *Robocop: Murphy's Law, Robocop's Body, and Capitalism's Work* that, "*Robocop* is about the physical pain inflicted on bodies...and the ways in which we ideologize (because we cannot verbalize) the experience of pain," making the assertion that the audience experiences the pain of the characters (primarily Murphy) through visual and aural cues (2). Codell further claims that Robocop's,

“pain, not his death, is the focus” (3). While I agree with Codell’s assessment of Verhoeven’s use of violence, her article does not explore the scene’s effect on the audience. Instead of approaching *Robocop* purely from a physical perspective she is missing Verhoeven’s ideas regarding Murphy/Robocop as post-industrial Jesus figure, sacrificed for the sake of OCP and resurrected to save the masses from crime.

Murphy’s execution by the gang is indeed an exploration of painful experience, but Verhoeven only presents it from an objective perspective; it is when Murphy is brought to the hospital that the audience receives a firsthand viewpoint of his suffering. While Verhoeven does present this scene from multiple perspectives, it is Murphy’s first-person perspective that demonstrates the horror of experiencing your own death. Codell’s essay discusses the pain associated with bodily torment but fails to touch upon the mental trauma associated with those final moments of existence, helpless against the inevitable but also physically powerless and relegated to a single perspective chosen by others (those who placed him on the operating table) where one’s last moments are a cross section of physical and mental pain: “not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes” (Foucault 58). I am trying to look at *Robocop* from a perspective where the audience receives not only an idea the protagonist’s pain but also the experience of the pain, much in the way Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* imparts Jesus’ experience, regardless of the almost pornographically violent perspective Gibson presents his film in. Murphy’s suffering, prolonged and horrific, operates similarly to Gibson’s film—but for different reasons. Both directors capture suffering, imparting it to the audience but one’s message is spiritual and the other industrial.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault discusses the changes in punishment over the last few centuries. Starting off his book with a detailed description of Damians prolonged public execution, where his death took hours following a torrent of physical cruelties, Foucault demonstrates how punishment has changed from a public affair to a hidden one. For Foucault, at least in contemporary society, “the power that punishes is hidden,” obscured from public view and only allowing signs and signifiers of punishment to exist publically (105). Although Murphy is not necessarily being punished for any transgressions, *Robocop* takes a different approach, making the punishment once again a spectacle and presenting it to the audience. In a sense, Murphy is being punished for adherence to the rules and regulations of a society being slowly taken over by OCP and other such companies.

This presentation of violence, where the recipient of violence is on display, demands empathy from the audience; Verhoeven’s demonstrations of graphic violence bring violence to the forefront and make the audience engage it, not just as a spectator but, as is shown with the hospital scene, as a beneficiary. Verhoeven argues “this universe is a very violent one,” and the person who does not recognize our world as violent, “doesn’t want to look at our world as it is” (Codell 139). The violence in Verhoeven’s films, especially *Robocop*, is not solely for exploitative value but is also a reflection of the world we live in, where the audience confronts something that is not always in plain sight.

The violence in *Robocop* does not just work on a purely physical level—“the acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict”—but also the subversive implications of violence

deeply rooted in social, political, and economic systems (Žižek 1). Slavoj Žižek states in *Violence* that there are two kinds of violence: objective and subjective, where subjective is categorized by two offshoots: symbolic and systemic violence. Subjective violence is expressed in *Robocop* as the physical violence committed and experienced by Murphy/Robocop and others; symbolic violence is “embodied by language and its forms;” systemic violence is the violence that “comes from the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems,” (Žižek 2). Objective violence is a hidden violence, a “dark matter,” which is responsible for subjective violence in the first place (Žižek 2). It is the violence at the root of the structure we all live in—the very foundation of the economic and political systems we inhabit. Where systemic violence comes from the everyday functioning of the environment we live in, objective violence is written into the very core of that system and is responsible for every other kind of violence. While *Robocop* is generally recognized for its heavy amounts of physical, or subjective violence, the film contains a great deal of symbolic, systemic, and ultimately, objective violence.

Symbolic violence occurs throughout *Robocop*, a film laden with aggressive and objectionable language. A prime example occurs during an attempted rape scene shortly following Robocop’s introduction. This scene does obviously feature subjective violence, especially the way the assaulted woman is physically handled by the two assailants, but the inflection the men use is a key example of symbolic violence. After subduing their victim, one of the men exclaims after pulling out a knife that, “she has too much hair,” which prompts them to violently cut her hair; a moment later the second assailant claims, “Hey, there’s more hair *down there*,” which begins the two into the motions of rape (Robocop). Luckily the woman escapes

their violent sexual torments when Robocop arrives and dispatches the two goons (one of which he shoots in the groin through the woman's dress while she's being held at knifepoint). Escaping the intended actions of the two men, the scene demonstrates another instance of symbolic violence which uses a phrase that is generally reserved for the consolation of a rape victim.

When the woman embraces Robocop he coldly and mechanically states, "madam you have suffered an emotional shock; I will notify a rape crisis center" (Robocop). The statement is part of Robocop's benevolent programming and one of his prime directives (protect the innocent), but his emotionless, atonal response to a moment of subjective violence demonstrates a cold approach to humanity and is an example of symbolic and objective violence. It is objective because it treats the woman as second class, denying her any empathy and reducing her to a number; it is symbolic because the inflection, or rather, lack of inflection, in Robocop's voice, reduces the victim to little. What is normally a benevolent action—assisting a rape victim—becomes a sterile symbol, a sign pressing home the fact that a citizen in Verhoeven's Detroit does not matter. While Žižek's ideas on symbolic violence generally relate to things like propaganda posters or representations of repression, it can be argued that Robocop himself, by treating the victim this way is a corporeal depiction of symbolic violence and his barren response to the woman's trauma an embodiment of symbolic violence.

Robocop's unintentional demotion of the female victim in this instance makes her into little more than a piece on an assembly line; she is reduced from a person with feelings and emotions to a cog inside a giant machine—replaceable and of little consequence. Dismissing her experience and the trauma associated with it, this scene illustrates a prime example of how

objective violence, especially towards women, has been a part of Western society for a very long time. In *Violence*, Žižek claims that, “in our societies, a gendered division of labour still predominates which confers a male twist on basic liberal categories (autonomy, public activity, competition) and relegates women to the private sphere of family solidarity, liberalism itself, in its opposition of private and public, harbours male dominance” (144). Although the West is generally perceived (and perceives itself) as progressive, especially in contrast to many Muslim and Eastern nations, the cultural norms comprising the backbone of many Western nations, especially the United States, contains a tendency to view women as second-class citizens. Even though women finally won the right to vote against an oppressive male dominated American plutocracy almost a century ago does not mean many men still do not regard women as secondary. Robocop’s treatment of the female rape victim, although characteristic of the way he treats just about everybody he interacts with, denotes a fundamental feature of his programming and displays the objective and symbolic violence that is part of the environment the characters reside in.

Verhoeven’s attitude towards violence, especially the violence in his films, is a reflection of Žižek’s outlook, where violence is a naturally occurring part of reality. However, Verhoeven’s fascination and exploitation of violence that is a trademark of his science fiction films is not simply an attempt at earning more money because of humanity’s fascinations with carnage but instead is, “a protest...an accusation...against the universe” (Cornea 139). Whereas a film like Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust*, which landed the director in an Italian court on charges of murder (he was later acquitted), relies on authentic depictions of violence and cruelty

(especially towards animals and indigenous people), *Robocop* presents violence in a tongue-in-cheek fashion—it revels in the violence while at the same time criticizing the violence created by powerful institutions. When Robocop slays a medley of hoodlums and drug dealers in a warehouse, implementing exaggerated, pantomime-like movements for each murder, the violence works both as a hook for audiences thirst for violence and a criticism of the violence of everyday life. By placing authority—a license to kill—in the hands of a product, *Robocop* demonstrates how subjective violence is the product of a larger force, a momentum enacted not merely by individuals but by an assortment of forces coalescing into one singular moment—in this case Robocop’s actions.

Setting: Place and Space (both real and fictional)

Detroit: once a hub of industrialization, manufacturing cars on an unprecedented level, has since the 1980s gone into decline. Michael Moore’s 1989 film *Roger and Me* is a love letter to the state he was born and raised in and a highly subjective critique of its degradation at the hands of the automotive industry. Outlining the strategy of former General Motors CEO Roger Smith, Moore presents a summed up depiction of the events leading to the decline of industry in Michigan:

So this was GM chairman Roger Smith. And he appeared to have a brilliant plan: First, close 11 factories in the U.S, then open 11 in Mexico where you pay the workers 70 cents an hour. Then, use the money you've saved by building cars in Mexico to take over other companies, preferably high-tech firms and weapons manufacturers. Next, tell the union

you're broke and they happily agree to give back a couple billion dollars in wage cuts.

You then take that money from the workers, and eliminate their jobs by building more foreign factories. Roger Smith was a true genius (Roger and Me).

Earlier on in the film Moore presents propaganda films GM made in the 1940s and '50s, presenting it as a hotspot for the American Dream: affordable housing and secure jobs. A few decades later when GM, along with other car companies, began closing down plants and moving manufacturing to other nations the jobs dried up and cities like Detroit and Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan deteriorated.

Verhoeven embraces this statistic in *Robocop*, recognizing the decrepit situation in Michigan (especially Detroit) during the 1980s. During a board meeting at OCP's headquarters, the company's president exclaims, "Old Detroit has a cancer; that cancer is crime," acknowledging the situation caused by the decline in production over the last decade or so (Robocop). Unfortunately, his answer is not a return to employment and productivity but increased security and punishment, in addition to demolishing Detroit and creating a new space in its place: Delta City. Like the sand and the sieve in Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, nothing is ever accomplished; instead of alleviating the conditions leading to crime they propose to keep adding sand, regardless of whether the sand keeps falling through the sieve. Of course this benefits those at OCP, since their solutions end up accruing more money for their ventures—all at the expense of the general population, who is paying for the heightened security OCP provides.

Aiding in the continuation of OCP's ventures is the mainstream media, primarily broadcast media, which is displayed periodically in *Robocop*. Through a collection of news broadcasts, accompanied by fictitious commercials, Verhoeven sets the mood and sentiment the public is supposed to embrace. After the film's beginning shot, featuring an overhead view of Detroit, the screen cuts to the fake news broadcast which exclaims, "Give us three minutes and we'll give you the world," giving a summary of prescribed information given in a Reader's Digest format—quick and without real contemplation or exploration of issues (*Robocop*). The broadcast is even co-anchored by Leeza Gibbons, a former head anchor on the tabloid entertainment news show *Entertainment Tonight*. In essence, the news broadcasts, interrupted periodically by the commercials selling a new way of life, such as the series of artificial hearts (the "Sports Heart") or a gas guzzling automobile called the 6000 SUX, are working for those in power while setting the economic standards of a society dominated by corporate interests (*Robocop*).

Jean Baudrillard discusses in *Simulacrum and Simulation* the effects of hyper-reality on humanity's collective consciousness, especially in relation to the way the images projected from our television screens influence our perceptions of the world: "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (5). What is the difference between the real and imagined; true and false (if such a concept is even objectively possible); between reality and fiction? For films like *Robocop*, Baudrillard's views on reality and hyper-reality directly affect the actions in the film, shaping the way the protagonists and antagonists perceive and interact with their world. For example, a scene in the film's first act features

Murphy (Peter Weller) spinning his gun, emulating a television character his son idolizes named T.J. Laser (an obvious parody of William Shatner's '80s television series *T.J. Hooker*, where Shatner trades in his *Star Trek* uniform for a police officers'). Instead of idolizing his father, Murphy's son turns to a fictitious television character—a surefire example of Baudrillard's assertions that the simulation precedes the corporeal in contemporary life. When Murphy's partner Lewis comments on Murphy's actions he exclaims, "role models can be very important to a boy" (*Robocop*). Murphy's beliefs regarding the development of his son displays a genuine interest in his progeny but also demonstrates the media's influence over the domestic sphere—his son does not idolize his father, an actual police officer, but instead a television fantasy, furthering Baudrillard's thoughts regarding the influence broadcasted pixels exert over us. Murphy's actions give agency to *T.J. Laser*, allowing a television show and its influence over his son to redefine how he interacts with the world and his family; basically Murphy is in competition with the images beamed into his living room every day, giving them credence.

In David Cronenberg's 1983 future noir film *Videodrome* the prophetic cathode ray evangelist Dr. Oblivion practices a new version of evangelical faith, professing the spirituality of the television over that of traditional religion. Oblivion asserts through one of his many monologues, only offered via videotape (further validating his belief that television is the new spirituality), that the images we receive through the television augment our reality and eventually replace it, giving way to a new perception of the world we live in:

The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, the television screen is

part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television. (Videodrome)

The images and sounds transmitted via television become part of our physical structure. However, unlike the physical world humans inhabit, the television does not allow discourse, only a one way conversation. It is like Neil Postman argues in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: television does not talk to you, it talks at you. Basically television is a one way street, dictating ideas from far distances that give the appearance of a tangible image within the proximity of the viewer.

Getting back to the notion that Detroit provides ample critique of how a person inhabits their place and space, it is important to understand how television, especially the kind of television dominant in the 1980s, does this. Of course in the 21<sup>st</sup> century television has assumed a different role in everyday life, accessible through a variety of different means, spaces, and times. No longer does one need to sit on the couch and await the start of their favorite show when they can record it digitally and watch it at their leisure or access it online (through both legal and illegal means). Naturally certain programs and events, such as news broadcasts and live events (such as sports), still operate in the same fashion as 1987 but shows like *T.J. Laser* do not. However, regardless of the way people interact with television programming, the effects of television still work in the same way even though the times and place where people engage with

their sets have changed. While the 2011 Super Bowl averaged around 111 million viewers, the days where audiences sat eagerly in front of their sets and watched simultaneously are fading. Even though collective viewing, where citizens are in the same place at the same time and engaging in the same material, is predominately gone, the messages the television broadcast to the masses are similar and have similar effects.

The fabricated news broadcasts throughout *Robocop* present a false vision of Detroit, one that represents the interest of OCP and its business partners. The first of these, appearing at the film's beginning, presents a news story involving a battle between police and a gang headed by the film's primary antagonist Clarence Botticker. The anchors identify Botticker as the principal suspect in the skirmish and categorize him as one of the city's most notorious criminals, dubbing him, "Detroit's unofficial crime boss" (*Robocop*). However, what is learned later on in the film is that Botticker is working with OCP's Senior Vice President Dick Jones (Ronny Cox), and running drugs and performing other illegal activities for the benefit of OCP and Jones'. Working in tandem, Jones and Botticker have created the conditions necessary for OCP's takeover of Detroit's police force (now operating as a for-profit venture) and their development of Delta City. Through media, both Jones and Botticker have shaped public opinion of Detroit, making the construction of a new Detroit over the crime ridden one not only necessary but desirable.

This duality in the motivations in *Robocop* permeates the entire film, whether it is the merging of man and machine and questions regarding technology and subjectivity or the conflicts between the desires of institutions of power and the general population. In the essay

*Robocop: Murphy's Law, Robocop's Body, and Capitalism's Work*, Codell discusses, aside from the body issues running throughout *Robocop*, the “incongruities of consumer capitalism” (1). These incongruities between crime and punishment, merging because of the relationship between Jones and Botticker, are also reflected by OCP's attempt to tame and subdue Detroit. Codell suggests that the body politic is, “caught in the middle of these contradictions and forced to serve polar opposite masters,” throughout the film; a suggestion that seems highly valid, especially when looking at the conflicts between multiple groups throughout the film: the police and their corporate bosses at OCP are a prime example (Codell 7). In *Robocop*, OCP and other corporations like it are both the cause and solution to the problems created by a defunct automotive industry which has displaced thousands of workers and changed the economic landscape of the city.

Later in Codell's essay she discusses the choice of Detroit as a prime vehicle for expressing America's anxieties in regards to the change in economic landscape. Like Moore argues in *Roger and Me*, the change in corporate strategy which placed many thousands into economic despair is directly reflected in a community. When Moore travels through his hometown of Flint, Michigan and films the rows of threadbare homes, he is showing the exterior, domestic spaces damaged by the automotive industry's choices; *Robocop* presents a different perspective on what GM and other car company strategies have caused—crime, economic upheaval, and increased control by powerful institutions. Codell's assessment of Verhoeven's choice is apt, proposing that the choice is both tragically comedic and politically conscious:

The images of the city...all express the ironies in the choice of Detroit as site. The reputation of Detroit rests on both murder and the automotive industry as a barometer of our economic well-being. The film's Detroit has passed into its current state of collapse: the dismantled car industry, which in the 1920s invited workers by the 1000s...to a new life, and then rose to become a symbol of American prosperity and know-how. Now it stands for technological incompetence and the deficit in our exports and imports of the automobile, the product as central to the American Dream as the suburban home. (9)

Codell's recognition of Detroit's defunct automotive industry, comparing its vitality to home ownership as a site of prosperity, is quite valid. When looking at Moore's 1989 documentary side by side with Verhoeven's film it is obvious the two are interlinked and unintentionally dependent on each other as symbols of economic prowess for American citizens.

There is a scene in *Robocop's* second act when Robocop, exploring and struggling with his former life as Murphy, visits his old family home. Now unoccupied and on the market, Robocop walks through the house, accompanied by a virtual real-estate agent appearing on strategically placed television screens throughout. The house, which the agent says has a "growth factor of seven," is primarily empty, exhibiting the remnants of a former life (*Robocop*). The number the prerecorded agent states for both Robocop and the audience is immaterial but implies the reduction of the American Dream to a prefabricated numerical system dictated not by a community but instead by a corporate body. Given OCP's plans for Delta City and the company president's distaste for Old Detroit, such an analysis reflects the further encroachment of

companies like OCP over a piece of the American landscape once under the control of the neighborhood's citizens. Just as companies like GM produced the conditions for growth and vitality in a community (creating jobs and a sense of pride in one's work), their removal of these jobs and their impact on the district have made the infringement of an exterior force into such issues possible—these neighborhoods once supported through the jobs and funds received from a large conglomerate are still reliant on these same corporations for support but the terms have changed. Now these communities are treated with contempt and marked with numbers—such as the growth factor assigned the former Murphy residence—instead of seen as communities where productive citizens reside.

In the essay *Place and the Paradox of Modernity*, Timothy Oakes investigates the politics of place, on a social, economic, and political level. Exploring Doreen Massey's *A Place Called Home* and *Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place*, Oakes discusses place and space as a political site, influencing beyond the social or personal and marking the terrain itself with the pressures of larger institutions. Looking at Massey's writings, Oakes claims, "Her [Massey's] argument implies that place has merely been used as the latest medium through which 'culturally aware' geographers can establish more through critiques of capitalism" (523). While Oakes' argument revolves around a geographic investigation of place and space and its relation to socioeconomic conditions, this concept translates to *Robocop* sufficiently, explaining the choice of Detroit as the film's location. Detroit is a site of urban decay, both moving into prominence and decline because of corporate institutions, and its deterioration responds directly to a place's dependence on imposing forces—in this case GM, Ford, and other industrial companies.

Where Oakes' commentary becomes valid is he sees "an unstable terrain which in fact problematizes not only hegemony and domination but resistance as well," a notion that lies at the heart of Verhoeven's criticism of power in *Robocop* (525). Oakes' exploration of writers like Massey is demonstrating the one dimensional attitudes taken towards politicizing place and space, which generally looks at the subject from a single perspective, not taking into consideration the symbiotic nature of the relationship between institutions and the population. Where Massey's writing focuses solely on "the way place identities are conditioned, threatened, and reproduced," by industrialization and corporate influence over a region, Oakes' answer is that power does not flow from a singular source, where the people are subjected to exterior forces without any say in what happens (Oakes 523). In relation to *Robocop*, Oakes' essay shows how Verhoeven's film is more than just a critique of the political or economic effects of place and are instead an amalgamation of factors influencing everything from the sociopolitical to the personal.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault elaborates on Bentham's idea of the panopticon, arguing that punishment in a modern context is not simply dictated from a higher authority. Instead, punishment is reciprocal. By examining a prison (thought a fiction) and employing Bentham's concept, the prisoners are, "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). Not only does the omnipresent eye of authority look upon the prisoner's body but also the prisoners are aware of the gaze and act accordingly. Relating this to Oakes' article, and *Robocop* in general, this brings us back to the relationship between Botticker and Jones—a mutually beneficial relationship where crime and punishment

work together. The lines between cop and criminal are blurred here. It is obvious Verhoeven's intention was a criticism of corporate corruption and what former but instead of presenting his condemnation through strict protest of corporate domination he instead presents the seizure of Detroit from a mutual standpoint. Interestingly, other aspects of the panopticon are absent from *Robocop*, which primarily positions its critique from one perspective, where authority comes from a singular source (Robocop) and self surveillance is missing.

This does not negate the effects of multiple discourses on the individual but it does not explore the wider implications of Foucault's theories regarding punishment and discipline. Instead *Robocop* depicts a protagonist/antagonist representation of crime and punishment. Where Verhoeven's other films (*Total Recall* and *Starship Troopers*) are prophetic about technologies used for subjugation and surveillance, *Robocop* is not. Instead it looks at law enforcement from a very traditional perspective, a cops and robbers aspect where there is a clear cut hero and villain. Of course Verhoeven blurs the line between good and evil in *Robocop* but his representations of law enforcement does not incorporate technological alternatives (such as video cameras or digital monitoring) for his futuristic police state.

Douglas Keesey claims in his book *Paul Verhoeven* that *Robocop* contains, "terrific potential as a satire on Reaganomics and corporate greed," tying it into Verhoeven's original take on the Ed Neumeier's screenplay (95). Of course the relationships between Botticker and Jones, along with other tropes in the film are a direct critique of America under Reagan's tenure, a time rife with controversy such as the Iran-Contra scandal and others. However, *Robocop* goes

a little deeper than that, probing the issues inherent in American society rather than offering just a critique of Ronald Reagan's time in office. Like Žižek's assertion that objective violence is an inherent part of any system, Verhoeven is offering more than just a surface parody of the 1980s, instead exploring many of the factors responsible for the dystopia Robocop comes from. One of the most important aspects of this is how information reaches the masses and creates public opinion: the mass media. By implementing media breaks throughout *Robocop*, Verhoeven suggests that the way people interact with their environments and think about them are directly related to the information digested through various media. It is the leading unifier in the film, positioning people's attitudes towards how they interrelate with their place and space and ultimately themselves. This next section goes further into *Robocop's* media depictions and how they fashion the individual.

#### The Media and its influence over Old Detroit

The interspersed broadcast media segments positioned throughout *Robocop* do have an influence over the public's perception of their place and space, marking it as a site of fear and violence. However, they are much more than just signifiers of Detroit as a vicious city; they also shape the environment the viewer lives in, the products they buy, and ultimately the society they are a part of and should contribute to—both ideologically and monetarily. Verhoeven's inclusion of these brief media breaks not only bring the film's actions into a larger context but also give the audience a glimpse into how the film's events obtain a different slant when packaged for the masses. From the media's perspective, which describes Robocop, "as the latest tool in OCP's fight against crime," OCP is a benevolent force, working for the benefit of the city and the

nation, not a heartless corporation abusing the body and mind of an individual (Murphy) and American citizens (*Robocop*). Yet, OCP, and especially executive Bob Morton (Miguel Ferrer), do not have the public's best interest at heart, instead looking at the situation as an excuse for corporate advancement and higher profits. Like the documentary *The Corporation* states, corporations are, "proto-typical psychopaths," whose interests are self motivated; Morton, OCP, and other real-life corporations embody all the criteria laid out in the *DSM-IV* for antisocial behavior (*The Corporation*). These include a disregard for the personal safety of others, lack of remorse or empathy, a history of mendacity, and overall aggressive behavior—all traits OCP and the company's executive's display chronically throughout *Robocop*.

An investigation of the effects of the media on the general public is necessary for understanding how Verhoeven's utilization of these scenes. Neil Postman argues that television—the medium as a whole—is an, "instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of *ways of knowing* as well" (79). In essence, the medium itself dictates how people think, not just how they think about the information provided. Postman also believes that, because of television, we now live in an entertainment age, where information becomes a form of entertainment and not enrichment or knowledge about the world we live in: "the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining" (Postman 87). The news vignettes sprinkled throughout *Robocop* operate as entertainment disguised as relevant information vital to a functioning democracy; what Verhoeven is arguing through these scenes is the lack of democracy in his near-future society—a society fashioned by discourses moving invisibly through the airwaves.

In a chapter titled *The Age of Show Business in Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman makes his case for television as the leading channel of information for American society:

Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore—and this is the critical point—how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged. It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse. It is that off the screen the same metaphor prevails. (Postman 92)

In *Robocop* there are many instances when characters quote a line from a popular television series—"I'd buy that for a dollar"—demonstrating how the information digested from television becomes part of everyday discourse (*Robocop*). Instead of original insight, these characters insert a popular line into their speech, making it their own. This is a regular occurrence in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, where people go around quoting lines from *Family Guy* or any other television series (the infamous line, "Where's the beef?" from the '80s *Wendy's* commercial is a prime cultural example). What this proves is that Postman's assertions regarding television as a force shaping environments is valid, where the information beaming from televised programs is not a reflection of the world around us but indeed constructs the world itself. Verhoeven's use of media breaks presents two voices surrounding *Robocop*, *OCP*, and *Detroit*: one is an objective voice which shows the actions firsthand and the audience can draw their own conclusions regarding the pros or cons of the situation; the other voice (the media) presents itself as objective voice but is

actually only supplying a sculpted version of events, passing itself off as objective and balanced but is instead serving the interests of institutions like OCP.

On his stand-up record *Flying Saucer Tour, Volume 1*, the late comedian Bill Hicks claims the news is not an honest representation of the world and that every time he turns on the news all he sees is, “war, famine, death, AIDS, homeless, depression, recession, drought, flood, pit bull, war, famine, death, AIDS” (Hicks). He then continues that, “then you look out your window, and it's like, where's all this stuff happening” (Hicks)? Although Hicks’ performances were marred with profanity he makes a strong point, questioning the validity of the media’s representation of world events. Just like Postman, Hicks believes the world we live in is not represented correctly, relying on a barrage of marketable events instead of valuable information. However, where Postman and Hicks disagree is that Postman believes television constructs the environment we live in, where television reflects reality and reality is a construction of what we see on television (which is what Dr. Oblivion claims in Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*). Of course the information provided by news outlets like CNN or the local news exhibit real-life events—robberies, fires, political happenings—but it is not the minor events in question but the presentation and the way it shapes communication. Like Baudrillard’s simulacrum, the medium and the presentation through it create an alternate reality which becomes authenticity.

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman argue in *Manufacturing Consent* that any information runs through a series of filters prior to being passed on to the public. The close relations between media groups, multi-national corporations, and politicians directly influence

what is being doled out to the public; it also creates the angle the public receives. What questions are asked, how they are asked, and in what context information is received by a mass audience is not dictated by what the audience wants but by a mingling of these various institutions:

In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's cost of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become "routine" news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers.  
(Chomsky 22)

Like Foucault, who believes power is not a one directional street but instead a web of relations converging together, Chomsky believes the products of the mass media are an amalgamation of voices intersecting together and making a product suitable for viewers. Chomsky's view of mass media correlates with Verhoeven's take on American media in *Robocop*, a tailored product serving the interests of various institutions. However, Chomsky and Foucault have differing beliefs regarding the way people's consciousness is fashioned. A debate between the two from the early 1970s demonstrates this, where Chomsky believes language is responsible for creating the way people view the world and Foucault argues it's the signifiers and signs in a society which create a person's subjectivity. In the case of *Robocop* both are correct in some manner: the environment (a dilapidated Detroit) is responsible for people's attitudes and world outlook but it is also the media which brings this information into the domestic sphere and

mixes it with a variety of other voices which dictate social, economic, and political beliefs. *Nukem*, the fictitious board game advertised during *Robocop*'s news broadcast, is both the receiver and supplier of motives regarding world events in that it reflects the world's circumstances; it also dictates the way the viewer relates to them—by making it into a product.

When Marshal McLuhan and Quentin Fiore claimed, “the medium is the message,” their assertion maintains that public opinion is fashioned by the medium in which information is received (much like Postman) (1). In *Robocop* the medium is truly the message, since the images and information given in the news broadcasts are meant to create a public consensus which benefits institutions like OCP. If crime in post-industrial Detroit is a problem the answer is more industrialization, brought in the form of either Robocop or OCP's other law enforcement product: ED-209. The public, through Verhoeven's lens, is not really given a choice in these matters and the slant the news broadcasts give subconsciously proclaim the arrival of Robocop instead of opening the issue up to public debate. Just like Chomsky argues, the media's functions to, “amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (1). In essence, the media does not really wish to engage the audience but instead shout commands at them.

Ultimately, Verhoeven's mass media representations are a decree from one institution to Detroit's population instead of a two way street. Since *Robocop* is a critique of the inflated power held by corporations and how they wield this power over the masses, the media is not

represented as a democratic medium. Of course, Postman's belief that, "how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged," and continues, "It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse...it is that off the screen the same metaphor prevails," applies to more than just *Robocop* and the whole medium in general (92). Verhoeven takes a concept like this and demonstrates how at its most oppressive television can use information as a form of imprisonment. Verhoeven sums this up best when he claims, "the way the surroundings are presented (in *Robocop*)—I mean the media breaks—I'm pointing out that these people are victimized by propaganda" (Qtd. in Cornea 139).

### Conclusion

*Robocop*, almost a straightforward critique of American life in the 1980s, does not look at issues of power and institutions from more than a few perspectives: corporate power over the mind and body, surveillance and control from aggressive forces, and socioeconomic forces relating to one's place and space. However, *Robocop* does explore the way an individual relates to their environment through each of these influences, demonstrating how freedom, autonomy, and liberty are nothing more than constructions fashioned by the media, authority figures, and economics. From the perspectives of the theorists discussed in this chapter there are many other aspects erecting individuals but Verhoeven does not include them in his narrative. Instead he approaches the film from a very straightforward perspective. While the line between good and evil is blurred in *Robocop* the depictions of right and wrong are still fixed. Ultimately *Robocop* represents the good and his self awareness by the film's end, which concludes with *Robocop* embracing his original identity and identifying himself as Murphy, demonstrates Verhoeven's

concept of the virtuous human—a self aware person who champions the people over profit, who believes in the letter of the law, and, ultimately, in the freedom of the American population against corruption and violent suppression. Naturally these issues only work within a certain context but Robocop, and its world, are its context; Robocop cannot function outside of this framework and is therefore an embodiment of it. Robocop/Murphy is, like Foucault’s concepts of power, a blend of environmental factors and Verhoeven’s symbolic hero against his representations of injustice in 1980s America.

## **Total Recall**

### Introduction

*Robocop* provided Verhoeven a great deal of both financial and critical success, with the film becoming one of the top box-office earners of 1987. For his first venture into American cinema, Verhoeven was off to a great start and caught people’s attention, making his next film—*Total Recall*—a possibility. Based on Phillip K. Dick’s short story *We Can Remember it for You*

*Wholesale*, Verhoeven's vision for the film moves in a new direction, exploring issues much more existential than those in *Robocop*. Instead of focusing more on the body, *Total Recall* is an exploration of the mind and the validity of personality. What is an individual? What makes up an individual and is it possible a person can be counterfeit?

Like *Robocop* the environment the characters live in and the signs and signifiers they are bombarded with shape them. However, *Total Recall*'s representations of the media are much less obvious. Instead, Verhoeven relies on the political atmosphere for a demonstration of this dystopia, only incorporating depictions of media in a few spots throughout the film. Nonetheless, these brief moments are telling, allowing for a concise view of the world *Total Recall*'s protagonist, Douglas Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger), navigates. Much like the media in *Robocop*, *Total Recall*'s televised propaganda only presents one side to a story and disrupts exploratory discourse of the characters' surroundings but the key difference is it seems much less entertaining and more totalitarian—it tells the viewer sternly about the actions on Mars. What marks *Total Recall* as different from *Robocop*'s media portrayals is what the environment, and those residing in this world, say. Of course there are myriad depictions of television signifiers throughout the film—commercials on the subway (which is the instigator for the film's events) and news broadcasts—but they are limited and make an investigation of how this limited information reinforces Verhoeven's futuristic world necessary. Ultimately, these media segments, and the clearly visible commercialization of Quaid's surroundings, are telling; the world Verhoeven crafts is not a free society, regardless of the choices one believes they are free to select.

In this chapter I will explore two aspects of *Total Recall*: the media and the signs of hyper-commercialization on both Verhoeven's representations of Earth and Mars. I will also discuss the individual as a site of inauthenticity. In the second section, I will delve into the film's protagonist as a centriole of influences, asking which personality—Quaid or Hauser—is the defining personality. By doing this I am questioning what makes an individual. I believe attempting to discern positively whether the narrative in *Total Recall* is a dream or reality is not necessary (and open to much debate) but I will bring this up at certain points as it is integral to the film. However, my main intention in this section is discussing what makes Quaid believe what he does, what compels him to action, and what factors come together to make the personality he believes is his own.

### The Media in Total Recall

Unlike Verhoeven's previous American film *Robocop* (and later *Starship Troopers*), *Total Recall* includes less media broadcasts in its narrative. However, the times the media does appear in the film are undoubtedly important, demonstrating how the world Quaid inhabits receives its cues from mass media and powerful institutions. The first example of broadcast media in *Total Recall* appears in the film's first act, when Quaid and his wife Lori (Sharon Stone) are sitting down for breakfast. Quaid is watching a broadcast about the insurgency on Mars, prompting Lori to exclaim, "no wonder you're having nightmares; you watch too much news" (*Total Recall*). While sitting down she changes the television (an integrated part of the wall, akin to the parlor in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*) to a serene and pastoral view of a lake.

Chomsky and Herman discuss in *Manufacturing Consent* the way American media is fashioned, providing a specific narrative on world events. By moving information through a series of filters, these filters sanitize the news for public consumption, thus making it suitable for the population. There is only one instance of televised advertisements in *Total Recall* (for a baseball game appearing on *ESPN* between the Tokyo Samurai's and the Toronto Blue Jays) but the influence of corporatization in the film is not absent—a plethora of advertisements appear both on Earth and Mars for such companies as Pepsi, Jack in the Box, and a parodied version of *USA Today* titled *Mars Today*. The main filter noticeable in *Total Recall* is the sources of information the media cites, which Chomsky and Herman claim render the message undemocratic:

In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news. The large entities that provide this subsidy become “routine” news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers. It should also be noted that in the case of the largesse of the Pentagon and the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy, the subsidy is at the taxpayers' expense, so that, in effect, the citizenry pays to be propagandized in the interest of powerful groups such as military contractors and other sponsors of state terrorism. (22)

The media shown in the film do not approach other viewpoints and receive everything straight from the source; a source, in the case of *Total Recall*, which is solely interested in

maintaining the status quo and subduing dissenters, such as the non-traditional sources Chomsky and Herman discuss. However, unlike *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*, the media's output is not taken at face value by everybody in Verhoeven's futuristic dystopia. Lori, when Quaid cites Mars' de-facto leader Coahaagen (Ronny Cox), asks her husband, "you actually believe him?," showing a perspective regarding the media that's absent in Verhoeven's other two science fiction films (*Total Recall*).

Verhoeven's critique of late 20<sup>th</sup> century American media is different in *Total Recall* than in his other films because it does not present itself as entertainment like in *Robocop* nor does it present fascist and totalitarian propaganda under the guise of autonomy. Basically, what you see is what you get. The media is not attempting to convert itself as anything other than basic information, given for the functioning of a society. Because Verhoeven alludes to an ongoing war between Earth's northern and southern hemispheric power it is possible the media presents information in this fashion. Possibly the dialogue between institutions and citizens is suspended because of a continuous military conflict and not because of an overarching oppressive ideology. However, within this society, in what seems like a perpetual state of war (and mirroring the nation-states in George Orwell's *1984*), there is conflict over the colonization of Mars by the northern block—a conflict which could potentially change the outcome of Earth's violent, yet unseen, military conflict.

In the essay *Arnoldian Humanism, or Amnesia and Autobiography in the Schwarzenegger Action Film*, Frank Grady comments on the commercialization of Verhoeven's

future and claims the advertisements in the film, “are often treated in the usual manner, placed unobtrusively but inescapably within our line of vision: neon advertisements for Coca-Cola and Fuji on Earth, Pepsi and Jack-in-the-Box on Mars” (44). From Grady’s perspective, Earth and the Mars colony are not any different from Earth of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where advertisements litter the landscape and repel any escape from a commercialized civilization. I agree with Grady’s writing about the representations of commercialization in *Total Recall* but I do not believe he delves deep enough into the implications of such images. Like Naomi Klein’s assertions in *No Logo* that post-modern humans are entrenched in pastiche communities where authenticity is replaced by brand awareness, the inhabitants of Verhoeven’s dystopia are caught in the same kind of locales. However, and this is where I believe Grady’s exploration stops too soon, he does not survey the larger ramifications of such an intrusion on the landscape. If Coahaagen’s status as Mars’ dictator, ruling a private natural resource corporation given free reign by the government, is any indication of the world Quaid navigates, there is no escaping this hyper-commercialization, no reprieve from brand awareness, and living a life devoid of corporate governance seems unlikely. When *Total Recall* arrived in theaters in the summer of 1990 the level of hyper-commercialization Klein discusses in *No Logo* had not arrived; it was on its way, marching through the minds of advertising teams but the level of infringement upon the suburban and urban landscape was still in its infancy. If anything, Verhoeven’s depictions of hyper-commercialism are the end result of tactics devised during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But what are the wider social and political implications of such a presence in society? Although Baudrillard's concepts regarding hyper-reality are most apt when discussing war (such as his essays *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* or *War Porn*), the notion that there is nothing real anymore because it is all experienced through signs and signifiers transmitted through various images (such as television) should also apply to the way one imbibes their surroundings. In the article *Total Recall: Production, Revolution, Simulation-Alienation Effect*, Robert Miklitsch claims the advertisements in *Total Recall*, "are here, there, and everywhere, like some super-permissive parent, ready to channel our every wish before we can even begin to articulate it," and continues, "It is as if we cannot escape its panoptical gaze" (8). Like Spielberg's depictions of advertisements in his adaptation of another Dick story, *Minority Report*, advertisements are specifically catered to the individual. When John Anderton (Tom Cruise), Spielberg's protagonist, walks through a mall his retinas are scanned and the advertisements for various products—beer, Lexus, and so forth—are tailored especially for him; even an American Express advertisement states he has been a cardholder since 2037. Verhoeven's advertising is not as intrusive as Spielberg's rendition but it does share similarities. For instance, when Quaid first enters a subway car during the film's first act he sees an advertisement for Rekall and this is the catalyst for his counterfeit vacation purchase (and the film's action). Later, after the Mars vacation memory implantation goes awry and he is the target of Mars intelligence officials and he leaps into a subway car amidst a barrage of bullets he sees an advertisement for a corporeal budget vacation. Although Verhoeven makes no reference to advertisements being individually tailored for each individual, and the scene's placement attempts irony, the similarities between

the two films is uncanny, reinforcing a theme in both Dick's writings and Hollywood's adaptation of it: obtrusive institutions and the paranoia accompanying it.

Miklitsch also claims the advertisements in *Total Recall*, and the products promoted, are not merely inventions and services a person or corporation push out into the public and hope to sell but rather the means of industrialization: "Quaid is merely responding to desires that have always already been induced by Capital and its new, cool forms of persuasion: advertising and marketing, promotion and publicity" (8). This relates back to a Marxist critique of industrialization, where the workers make the products they then consume with the funds they receive for their labor. The Southern Agrarians, consisting of poet Donald Davidson, Henry Kline, John Crowe Ransom, and many other writers and scholars from the American South, believe the items crafted through industrialization are, aside from detaching American farmers from a relationship with the land, unnecessary and therefore require an impetus for their consumption. Their manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, claims:

It is an inevitable consequence of industrial progress that production greatly outruns the rate of natural consumption. To overcome the disparity, the producers, disguised as the pure idealists of progress, must coerce and wheedle the public into being loyal and steady consumers, in order to keep the machines running. So the rise of modern advertising-along with its twin, personal salesmanship-is the most significant development of our industrialism. Advertising means to persuade the consumers to want exactly what the

applied sciences are able to furnish them. It consults the happiness of the consumer no more than it consulted the happiness of the laborer. (xxxvii)

In essence it is claiming the products of the Industrial Revolution, most notably in the United States, need a catalyst for their proliferation in the marketplace; without it the whole system of industrialization is impotent. When relating this to Miklitsch's article it seems these ideas ring true in Verhoeven's 21<sup>st</sup> century society: a world where a heightened version of advertising is still selling luxury items but using technology enhanced beyond those available in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to sell fictitious items and services. While the world in *Total Recall* has changed and the version of nationalism prevalent in the two decades following the film's theatrical release are different, the methods for reaching consumers and the prevalence of product and brand awareness have not.

Miklitsch compares the advertising in *Total Recall* to a panopticon, bringing Foucault's representations of Bentham's invention into the discussion. However, in *Total Recall* it is not just the advertisements and media broadcasts creating a heightened sense of self regulation but a combination of both public and private institutions. As mentioned before, the society Quaid inhabits is in a perpetual state of war and there is heightened security on Earth—X-ray devices at the subway's entrance (which are eerily similar to the TSA devices implemented in 2010 for airline passengers) and surgically implanted homing devices (one of which is located in Quaid's skull) are but a few examples of the surveillance methods employed by Verhoeven's future government. But it is not just these technologies regulating the body politic, which is pictured on

Earth and Mars as passive, moving through public transportation hubs like automatons. Instead of reacting individualistically during gun battles between Quaid and his nemesis Richter (Michael Ironside), the civilians either duck and cover or just stand there. In one instance a man on an escalator stands bewildered when he sees Quaid approaching from behind holding a gun and inadvertently becomes the protagonists' human shield, sheltering Quaid from a salvo of bullets from Richter and his cronies (and this, incidentally, is one of the most violent scenes in the film). Miklistch is correct in asserting *Total Recall* is a panopticon, since the population is heavily self regulated and the shadowing technologies present serve merely as reminders of authority but his article only really looks at this concept from a consumerist perspective. Later in his essay Miklistch does discuss the political aspect of *Total Recall*, calling it, "hyper-nostalgia of the Reagan 80s," but ultimately his critique of Verhoeven's society revolves around the hyper-commercialization of Quaid's environment, not state apparatuses (28).

Perhaps Miklistch's most insightful writing on *Total Recall* comes from his discussion of the media's influence on the characters, a reflection of the assertion I made above. He argues that, "the thoroughly mediatized world of *Total Recall*, where the televisual screens that are the privileged metonym of the mass electronic media haunt every frame, re-framing the composition," and is basically claiming the hyper-real world in *Total Recall* is just a reflection of early 1990s America (Miklistch 28). Just coming off eight years of Ronald Reagan and in the midst of George H.W. Bush's first, and only, term as president, *Total Recall* is, at least in my opinion, a direct reflection of the hyper-material 1980s—a decade rife with egocentrism (the yuppie revolution) and also a decade featuring a former Hollywood actor in the Oval Office and

implementing tenets of Hollywood filmmaking for his political agendas. Douglas Keesey claims there are many instances in *Total Recall* which reek of 1980s American politics, using Cohaagen as a comparison to, “the privatization of public services under US Presidents Reagan and Bush” (121). The images of Cohaagen beamed through television screens in *Total Recall* mimic those used by politicians, prior to and long after Reagan’s tenure (the talking head, imparting information and authority), and are also a commentary on cable television’s influence over the mass media market, especially in the ‘80s. In short, Miklistch’s comments regarding mass media’s pervasive effects are accurate, even if Verhoeven’s depictions receive less screen time than in *Robocop* or *Starship Troopers*, which feature vignettes devoted solely to the media.

#### The Individual as a Site of Inauthenticity

In the last section I discuss the media’s influence over the characters in *Total Recall*, claiming they are not acting on their own volition but instead the agents of myriad influences. Like Foucault’s concepts of power, the individual in *Total Recall* does not receive directions from a singular source but from multiple arenas which reinforce each other and fashion the individual into a being whose actions benefit powerful institutions. The individual itself seems disingenuous in *Total Recall* and asks whether the personality the audience accompanies is real or not. In fact, it even asks if the environment he inhabits is real or not or if the individual is indeed real. Going into a discussion on whether the film’s events are a dream or reality is an ongoing debate and even avoided by scholars like Miklistch and Keesey. I feel an investigation into Verhoeven’s intentions is best suited for another time and this piece’s size is not sufficient enough to fully explore this question. What is important, at least for this piece and this section in

particular, is the effects of the environment on the individual's body and mind; an exploration of a 21<sup>st</sup> century dystopia, marked by hyper-capitalism and a perpetual state of war, on a person's body and mind.

In a second season episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* titled *The Measure of a Man*, Lt. Commander Data (Brent Spiner) finds himself an object of fascination by a zealous cyberneticist (Brian Brophy). Believing Data is not a sentient being and therefore the property of Starfleet, Maddox orders the androids submission to deconstruction for the purpose of scientific analysis. Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) objects to Maddox's proposal and a legal case ensues, asking whether Data is indeed a legitimate form of life. Eventually Picard asks Maddox what are the qualifications of a sentient being; to this he is answered intelligence, self-awareness, and consciousness. Eventually Picard proves Data meets these criteria, Maddox relents, and the episode concludes happily.

The argument in this *Star Trek* episode revolves around whether Data is a legitimate life form or a machine; basically, is he an individual, with control over his own destiny or just an automaton performing a function like a personal computer? While Picard and Starfleet conclude Data is alive, albeit in a fashion different than humans, they do not question whether his life is the effect of his individual choices or rather programming, acting in accordance with a medley of symbolic cues interacting with a preconfigured digital schema. Like Quaid in *Total Recall*, the character appears sentient and free but is that really the case? Is the story even dealing with a real person or just a fallacy; a simulated representation which does not reflect the individual

potentially dreaming the film's actions? Even if *Total Recall's* narrative is genuine, and not an implanted dream, Quaid's personality, actions, beliefs, and any other factors making up his consciousness are false—a construction fashioned the same way Data's positronic brain was crafted by Dr. Noonien Soong, Data's creator. His wife, his job (which, incidentally, is ironically real), and all his memories are fraudulent and questions whether his actions are those of an autonomous individual or just agency based on a fabricated criterion.

Quato, the leader of the mutant uprising against Coahaagen, tells Quaid, “A man is defined by his actions, not his memory,” but Quaid's actions are not sincere (*Total Recall*). John Locke believes memory is the foundation of the individual and a prerequisite for our agency; relating this to Quaid's situation, Locke's theories demonstrate Quaid is not an individual but a fiction—a product crafted by committee to serve a function (dismantling the Martian insurgency). Quaid is acting based on the sum parts of his consciousness but his consciousness is not real, asking whether he can make any genuine choices. According to Coahaagen and Hauser (the former personality inhabiting Quaid's body), Quaid is a dupe, a character formed and embodying personality traits drastically different from Hauser, who is a cold, calculated, and selfish Coahaagen operative. Coahaagen and Hauser's goal was creating “the perfect mole,” a man who could penetrate the rebellion's network, gain their confidence, and lead Martian authorities to their central command (*Total Recall*). The tough, yet sympathetic and kind, Quaid is nothing more than a dream.

Regardless of Quaid's inauthentic personality he still meets the criteria set down in *Star Trek* for a sentient being: he is intelligent, self-aware, and conscious. But it does not necessarily mean he is an authentic individual. After all, Quaid could be a dream, implanted by a company selling discount memories. In relation to the media's impact on Verhoeven's trans-planetary civilization, Quaid's fictitious personality, regardless of moving forth from an authored past, is still subject to the environment he inhabits. It is an advertisement, after all, which prompts his visit to Recall for a implanted Mars getaway and his daily actions—going to work, a wife and child (which is briefly mentioned but never shown), and living a late 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the nuclear family—are also the actions of a man conforming to the demands of his environs. *Total Recall*, both the concept of the film and the narrative itself, are a cinematic embodiment of Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality, where “simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6).

Ultimately, simulation, in both the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in *Total Recall* is primary; the chances for a world, a universe, or a reality outside of this context is impossible. The signs and signifiers working in Verhoeven's world—advertisements, authoritative figures howling decrees through the media, and the mechanisms of control (the before mentioned X-ray scanners and so forth)—cry simulation and suggest there is nothing beyond this environment. Even if characters like Quaid found refuge from the various symbols molding his civilization it would not matter; the effects of living in a simulation are so ingrained, making it impossible to interact with the phenomenological world without calling upon these frames of references. It is akin to Wittgenstein's remark, “If a lion could talk, we could not understand

him” (Wittgenstein, qtd. in Bambrough 37). British comedian Ricky Gervais summed this point up best (in a conversation with the infamous comic dullard Karl Pilkington) by claiming a lion is, “from a different world; it's frames of reference would be so bizarre...it's reference points would be so far removed,” that any attempts at communication would end in nothing of substance (Gervais). This is how Quaid’s interactions with anything outside the world he inhabits would work—he would not comprehend anything outside of the schema he is indoctrinated in, he would not find any common ground with the corporeal world without calling back to a sign or signifier from his civilization. In this regard, Quaid, and nobody living in the fictional world Verhoeven created for *Total Recall*, has any liberty. This could be said of anybody living in any epoch but the constant barrage of symbols dictating life’s flow within a post-modern system implementing multiple media formats renders it impossible to rely on anything other than our environmental stimuli to interpret our surroundings. Thus, Quaid is not actually free. Even outside all the other factors Verhoeven injects into the film (questions regarding the story as a dream or reality, multiple consciousnesses, and so forth), the potential for finding true autonomy are absent; only myriad influences focusing in on the individual exist—the simulacrum—which shapes one’s agency, designating how they act.

### Conclusion

Verhoeven’s second American film, *Total Recall*, was a box-office success and also hailed by critics as an excellent piece of cinema. Schwarzenegger received praise from multiple sources for his performance; Roger Ebert’s claims the Austrian born actor’s willingness to let the story override his massive popularity and financial prowess lends strength to the film’s vitality:

He isn't a superman this time, although he fights like one. He's a confused and frightened innocent, a man betrayed by the structure of reality itself. And in his vulnerability, he opens the way for "Total Recall" to be more than simply an action, violence and special effects extravaganza. (Ebert)

Verhoeven once again incorporated a great deal of social criticism into the film and even though he only implemented a shell of Dick's original short story, *Total Recall* still contains a great deal of the psychological swordplay common to Dick's writing. Like Dick's short story, where a man's memories (about an alien race which will destroy the planet unless he survives) ultimately dictate the actions of those instilled with authority, the actions of those in Verhoeven's adaptation are not their own.

Unlike Verhoeven's first American film, *Robocop*, the media's visual presence in *Total Recall* is minimal but its reach is extensive. Instances of product placement, television news broadcasts, and seemingly personalized advertisements permeate the story and are even the catalyst for the film's action; if it was not for Quaid's attentive viewing of a commercial in a subway car the onslaught of carnage that ensues following his fateful trip to ReKall would not have happened. The similarities between Verhoeven's prophetic look at late 21<sup>st</sup> century civilization and contemporary America are uncanny, reflecting Baudrillard's assertion, "In fact, science fiction in this sense is no longer anywhere, and it is everywhere, in the circulation of models, here and now, in the very principle of the surrounding simulation" (83). What

Baudrillard's statement imparts is the lack of fiction in films like *Total Recall*, instead maintaining that the fictional aspects of science fiction (Baudrillard explicitly investigates Dick in *Simulacra and Simulation*) is no longer just an illusory device but a substantial facet of first-world civilization. Just like Quaid, America in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is engaging directly with technologies once reserved for futuristic fantasy and the distinction between literature and reality are dwindling rapidly.

Up to this point I have discussed two of Verhoeven's films, *Robocop* and *Total Recall*, examining the implications of the protagonists' surroundings on their autonomy. Through private and public institutional influence the characters have proven they are not truly free but instead receptors for numerous stimuli, reacting to a barrage of signs and signifiers and reflecting them back onto their environments. In both films the environments are a hybrid of private and public concerns, generally mixing the two into one, authoritative system where the lines between government and corporate power are considerably blurred. In the next chapter, which focuses on Verhoeven's 1997 film *Starship Troopers*, I will investigate what happens when the state is overwhelmingly totalitarian and the line between private and public is not blurred but completely absent.

## **Starship Troopers**

### Introduction

Following the successes of both 1990s *Total Recall* and 1992s *Basic Instinct* (a sexual thriller starring Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas and primarily notorious for a one second shot

of Stone's vagina), Verhoeven again attempted another trek into sexual eroticism with the only high budget NC-17 film in Hollywood history: *Showgirls*. Released in 1995 and starring Elizabeth Berkley, Gina Gershon, and Kyle MacLachlan, the film was both a financial and critical failure, recouping only half of its \$38 million dollar budget during its theatrical release. Verhoeven also earned a laundry list of Razzies for *Showgirls* and is the only director up to that point who attended and gave an acceptance speech:

When I was making movies in the Netherlands my films were judged by the critics as decadent, perverted and sleazy... so I moved to the United States. This was ten years ago. In the meantime, my movies are criticized as being decadent, perverted and sleazy in *this* country... I am very glad that I got all these awards, because it certainly means that I am accepted here and that I am part of this great American society. (Qtd. in Keesey 143)

With his first Hollywood failure on his hands Verhoeven returned to the genre responsible for two of his three blockbusters: science fiction. Keesey claims, "Verhoeven was shaken by the failure," of *Showgirls* and even though the film has become a cult favorite over a decade later (appearing at revival cinemas and cult classic festivals) such an overall disapproval of the film no doubt shaped his outlook towards America and the Hollywood film system (144). It is no wonder his next film, *Starship Troopers*, offers such a harsh critique of the American political and cultural landscape in the late 1990s. Although Verhoeven's satirical look at Robert Heinlein's 1959 novel of the same name offers an insightful glimpse at the decadence of American popular culture and the imperialism of American foreign policy during the Clinton

years it is also brazen in its critique. Its use of Nazi imagery and symbols, especially in reference to America's actions and perceived trajectory, has been highly condemned by critics and scholars alike, with the general consensus being that Verhoeven is celebrating fascism and not condemning it.

This final chapter explores *Starship Troopers* from two perspectives: its uses of various media to control the population in the film and the uses of fascist symbols and ideology. My aim here is to dispel much of the criticism Verhoeven's received for the film, while also furthering this work's goal of investigating the importance of Verhoeven's films in relation to liberty in contemporary American society. I intend to demonstrate how *Starship Troopers* is a prime example of the limits of freedom in a functioning democracy while also working as a warning; a cautionary tale of what America's actions, both in the late 1990s and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can lead to: a world where freedom is illusionary.

### Fascism

In the audio commentary for the 2002 DVD Special Edition release of *Starship Troopers* Paul Verhoeven, along with writer Ed Neumeier, provides an aural defense of the film's themes and symbolism, claiming the film, "is not fascist," repeatedly (*Starship Troopers*). Although many critics deemed *Starship Troopers* fascist, such as *Time* magazine's Richard Schickel who states, "In short, we're looking at a happily fascist world," and continues, "maybe the filmmakers are so lost in their slambang visual effects that they don't give a hoot about the movie's scariest implications," their exposes primarily look at the film as a celebration or exploitation of fascist

symbols, tropes, and actions, ignoring the film's satirical overtones (Time). Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* claims *Starship Troopers* is, "spiritually Nazi, psychologically Nazi," offering perhaps one of the boldest criticisms of Verhoeven's film (Hunter). Many of *Starship Trooper's* reviews are quite similar to Schickel and Hunter's, criticizing the film and its director for celebrating fascism. It seems they missed Verhoeven's point.

Verhoeven does import myriad overtly Nazi-esq symbols into the picture but not because he is glorifying the Third Reich or other totalitarian nation-states; instead he is offering a critique of late 20<sup>th</sup> century America's trajectory, cautioning where it could potentially lead. Verhoeven, a young child in Nazi occupied Slikkerveer, a Dutch village near Amsterdam, witnessed many horrors from Nazi and Allied bombings. Verhoeven states about his early childhood experiences: "In my town, people were literally starving, dead bodies were scattered around the streets, windows would blow out all over us at dinner as the bombing started and planes crashed in flames on top of houses... When you are a kid, living in such a world is such a shock that it never really wears off" (Qtd. in Keeseey 21). His childhood experiences demonstrate the profound influence Nazi occupation amidst the second industrialized world conflict would have on his career, a filmography featuring some of the most exploitative scenes of violence in Hollywood history. Verhoeven claims spending his formative years amid the final pre-nuclear war in an occupied zone is, "the origin of my adult fascination with violence" (Qtd. in Keeseey 21).

Verhoeven's numerous defenses against *Starship Troopers'* detractors are ample evidence of his intentions, especially those given with a zealous fervor on the DVD's commentary.

Regardless, both critics and scholars offer disparaging examinations of *Starship Troopers*, saying Verhoeven's allusions are "one-dimensional," and omitted the "warmth of human nature," characterizing blockbusters like *Star Wars* (Ebert). Florentine Strzelczyk claims, "Starship Troopers re-enacts such visual and narrative clues of the Third Reich and WWII without engaging with that history in a discursive manner;" an assertion I severely disagree with (90). In fact, *Starship Troopers* does make reference to World War II events, even if it does not provide a mannerly history lesson prior to beginning the story; it basically concludes the audience (in 1997) is familiar enough with the events of only a little over a century earlier and capable of catching the symbolism and critique sufficiently. As the film ages and the Second World War becomes more distant it is questionable whether audiences will catch the symbolism of Nazi Germany, especially in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century where World War II veterans are passing away at a fast pace, or if it will not resonate as sharply as it did with late 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences. The criticism of late 20<sup>th</sup> century America's imperialist aims, especially considering the events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade, is and will still probably remain viable so the film will contain a moniker of relatability in the years to come.

Moving back to Strzelczyk's analysis of *Starship Troopers*, his basic assertion concludes the film does not place representations of fascism in a viable context, thus, "obscuring the contours of these historical events" (90). She basically believes Verhoeven is fetishizing the actions in the film instead of exploring issues from his childhood and using his own experiences as a commentary on late 20<sup>th</sup> century America's course—demonstrating where he saw similar actions go askew in the past. Even her belief *Starship Troopers* does not offer any background

from the Second World War is incorrect. The civics classroom scene in the film's first act featuring a lecture from Raszak and comments from Carmen, illustrates Verhoeven's recognition of World War II and the destructive lessons learned from it:

Dee: my mother always says violence never solves anything.

Raszak: Really? I wonder what the city fathers of Hiroshima would say about that. You (to Carmen)?

Carmen: They probably wouldn't say anything. Hiroshima was destroyed. (*Starship Troopers*)

Verhoeven does not directly reference the Holocaust but does discuss American forces utilizing the atomic bomb on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is possible Verhoeven believes nuclear arms are more dangerous in the late 20th century than genocide. He also makes the Arachnids stand in for Russians, Jews, Gypsy's, and the many others demonized and slaughtered by the Third Reich, with this theme becoming more apparent as the film's narrative travels and the audience realizes the Federation is not the heroic institution their propaganda makes them out to be. The film presents the Federation's perspective, following the human protagonists and their actions and, "the audience is positioned with the Mobile Infantry rank and file," experiencing the film from their subjective level and creating a degree of empathy (Williams 40). It portrays the human struggle within a fascist system where autonomy and choice is an illusion and, "force...is violence, the supreme authority from which all other authority is derived," demonstrating the

similarities and contradictions between the contemporary world and a fictitious fascist one (*Starship Troopers*).

Strzelczyk's position, that Verhoeven does not offer any historical milieu for the film, is not entirely without merit, especially since the bulk of her argument claims the movie is without a "historical referent," (and there are but a few citations from World War II) but I do not believe her argument is absolute. The classroom scene listed above, along with the media breaks' references to Capra's *Why we Fight* propaganda series, the military uniforms, and the intentional choreography mimicking actual World War II events and machinery, show the allusions Verhoeven makes to this period. His early childhood, growing up during the Second World War, demonstrate his familiarity with the period and explains his fascination with violence (especially war violence). Strzelczyk's opinion follows the general consensus regarding *Starship Troopers*, which believes the film is, "pro-fascist—a gung-ho recruitment film glorifying war," and does not investigate the film's satirical circumstances (Keesey 153). Where Strzelczyk believes, "*Starship Troopers*... does not discourage viewers who might experience the film's fascist universe as tempting," Verhoeven counters the film is "subversive," and, "lures you in and presents you with the bill (Sammon 65, Keesey 157), making the audience side with fascism before realizing what they are doing and understanding the consequences.

Strzelczyk's article, aside from her criticisms of Verhoeven's intentions, does offer a great deal of information regarding *Starship Troopers*' fascist images, pointing out the director's

cognizant awareness of fascist symbolism. She points out regarding the film's aesthetic and art direction that:

Starship Troopers owes its visual appeal to its fascist décor and design, its surface and style. The federal eagle, the swastika-like logo on flags and insignia, the well-cut SS outfits..., or the Speer-inspired grand architecture (Strzelczyk 92).

Many of *Starship Troopers'* shots, especially those featuring Federation bigwigs, are derivative of director Leni Riefenstahl, lifting shots almost directly from her Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. The mannerisms of the Sky Marshalls and higher ranking military figures are reminiscent of Riefenstahl's masterful, albeit deplorable, depictions of Nazi officials.

Verhoeven's inclusion of these tropes is another throwback to World War II propaganda, marking his desired effect—getting the audience to empathize with the protagonists before realizing their folly. Aside from the visual homage's taken from Riefenstahl's Third Reich propaganda films, Verhoeven incorporates a good deal of Allied imagery into his film—a possible comparison between the tyranny of Hitler's reign and the trajectory of late 1990s America. The Mobile Infantry transport crafts used initially during the first Klandathu invasion and then periodically throughout the remainder of the film are a modern take on the Higgins boats used by the Allies on D-Day (June 6, 1944). The way the Mobile Infantry exit the boat is almost identical to the Allies' egress onto Omaha or Utah beach, minus the water, and their subsequent slaughter by the Arachnids is another instance of Verhoeven replicating World War II events. The only difference between the Federation's first offensive and D-Day is the Allies eventually won the

battle, pushing forward and liberating France. Even though the Federation's aesthetic, symbols, and propaganda are reminiscent of Nazi Germany, Verhoeven's use of familiar battle tropes (such as the Higgins boats and D-Day) reinforce his stratagem: lure the audience into siding with the enemy and change their loyalties by the film's end.

Strzelczyk's criticism of *Starship Troopers* is by and large incorrect. Saying Verhoeven's film does not offer any references to the atrocities of the Nazi's or uses either visual or verbal allusions to the Second World War is erroneous. What Strzelczyk is missing is Verhoeven's overarching thesis: the Federation is the Third Reich, spearheading a proto-fascist society. Rico, Dizzy, Carmen, and the rest of the cast are members of a fascist government very similar to Hitler's Third Reich, not only because of their apparel but their logic, reasoning, and outlook.

In Heinlein's novel a character named Major Reid (who does not appear in the film) claims, "we require each person who wishes to exert control over the state to wager his own life—and lose it, if need be—to save the life of the state"—an assertion also ringing true in Verhoeven's adaptation (184). Reid states only one paragraph earlier that the errors of democracy arose because, "no attempt was made to determine whether a voter was socially responsible to the extent of his literally unlimited authority;" a declaration underlining Verhoeven's critique of Heinlein's novel and late 20<sup>th</sup> century America in addition: citizenship is not something inherent but something the state bestows on you because your actions and ideology reinforce those in power (Heinlein 183). The source material Verhoeven and Neumeier crafted their story from is rife with authoritarian jingoism, claiming (just like the film) might makes right and fascism is the

best way to combat communism. The difference is Heinlein believed his society was a utopia and Verhoeven believes Heinlein's vision abysmal and a diatribe for American-style fascism. Strzelczyk's arguments against *Starship Troopers* not only miss the what the characters and their society is but what it is rallying against—a pro-fascist Cold-War science fiction novel and America's imperialist actions post-World War II.

A major question surrounding the fascism in *Starship Troopers* asks how does the Federation create the consensus for their despotic agenda? In this next section I briefly discuss the role of propaganda and media in shaping public consent for state actions, many of which do not benefit the population as a whole but further a small group of individuals' hegemonic desires. However, the Federation's agency is not possibly simply by decree, especially since choice, even in an oppressive society, is still an option in some cases (citizenship). Ultimately, like the title of Chomsky and Herman's book, the government is *Manufacturing Consent*, making their decisions seem both viable and beneficial for the state and its population. In the next section I will further investigate the effects of mass media in *Starship Troopers*, drawing parallels between its role in Verhoeven's film and in contemporary American society.

### Media, Hyper-reality, and liberty

Starting off *Starship Troopers* with a Federal Network news broadcast, a mixture of traditional television and the internet, Verhoeven is setting the audiences motivation for the rest of the film—a world where opinion is controlled by propaganda. The Federal Network's broadcasts appear open, where information flows unfettered, but as Brian Crim claims, "it

convinces individuals that they are autonomous subjects and that the network is simply a reservoir of information” (23). Nothing is further from the truth; the Federal Network vignettes, appearing strategically throughout the film, are nothing more than propaganda pieces providing illusions of liberty. A small menu appears on the top of the screen, offering various navigation options—many times accompanied by a voice asking, “Would you like to know more?”—yet these choices are prescribed, providing only sanitized representations of events, events benefiting the all encompassing Global Federation (*Starship Troopers*). When approaching these clips from the audience’s perspective, a choice is offered but impossible to take, reinforcing the agency of these devices: they only provide information that serves the interests of the state. They create opinion, fashioning it for the Federation’s benefit, and contain the distinct ideology of Verhoeven’s adaptation of Robert Heinlein’s 23<sup>rd</sup> century allegorical Cold War novel. However, there are drastic differences between the politics of Verhoeven and Heinlein, suggesting Verhoeven’s film (written by Ed Neumeier) is parodying the original source text. Where Heinlein’s novel is blatantly conservative, anti-communist, and reduces America’s enemies to insects, Verhoeven takes these tenets of the science fiction classic and capsizes them; they become parodies of aggressive militarism, America’s imperialistic aims (especially following the Cold War), and their perceptions of others.

Jamie King asserts Verhoeven is “at pains to show” that Heinlein’s novel is a direct commentary on “the concerns of the 1950s,” believing the director may have missed the original intention of *Starship Troopers* (1019). Although she does point out correctly that, “the film situates itself firmly in the post-modern 1990s,” she is missing that Verhoeven’s film is an

obvious critique of American policy—both past and present (1019). Verhoeven’s adaptation is indeed a critical reflection of 1990s America, but its critique is not exclusively relegated to a single decade or singular instance; it is an evaluation of policies and decisions bringing the United States to a singular point in history. America did not land itself in the midst of global expansion, militarily and ideologically, overnight; rather it is the culmination of numerous events, shaping the nation’s world standing, influence, and desires. Not critical of the film’s construction, King notices the “caricatured and exaggerated,” performances and motivations but believes they do not offer any analysis on America’s expansion (1018). Her failure to overlook the Federation’s official impetus for war—the Arachnid’s rebuttal against Mormon settlers on a distant planet—is a vital example of expansion. Verhoeven’s use of Mormon’s, who originally trekked into the relatively unexplored America’s west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflects both America’s expansion two centuries ago but also the late-20<sup>th</sup> century religious extension into third world countries—an expression of pioneer ideology that lies at the heart of her essay. Heinlein’s novel contains a desire for expansion; so does Verhoeven’s film. However, whereas Heinlein’s text argues for the maintenance of conservative American ideals and extinguishing the spread of communist rhetoric Verhoeven argues these tenets are also excuses for fascism. *Starship Troopers*, both the novel and film, discuss two kinds of expansion—ideological and territorial—but Verhoeven’s adaptation is highly critical of these actions, claiming they can inherently serve the whims of aggression. King’s exploration neglects this criticism, instead only looking at a superficial representation of expansion and avoiding any in-depth investigations of philosophical expansionism.

Political ideology is the key difference between both men—with Heinlein conservative and Verhoeven liberal—and arguing Verhoeven’s movie misses Heinlein’s intentions seems incorrect. Rather it appears Verhoeven dismisses Heinlein’s politics and takes the story where he desires, using a piece of pro-American literature against itself. This turns Heinlein’s political beliefs into a farce, a relic of a rather authoritarian time in American history. The film assumes these moments were dangerous to liberty and free societies, championing fascism in exchange for security. Both contain the same political ideology yet one is used for charade and the other is serious. Heinlein’s novel does not contain the media illustrations found in Verhoeven’s film and his textual depictions of a global, militaristic “society in which citizenship is earned through military service, and values are learned on the battlefield,” is viewed as a positive; Verhoeven’s is not (Ebert). By incorporating these propagandistic media segments into the film, coupled with a false sense of autonomy, Verhoeven mocks the proto-fascist state Heinlein envisions.

The Federation Network is an arm of the Global Federation, the nexus for authoritarian institutions pressing the appearance of a free society. Everybody in the Federation is given a choice, become a citizen through military service or remain a civilian, obtaining no voice in civic affairs. Of course civilians are not entirely without rights but they maintain no control over governmental affairs, relegated solely to the private sphere, which, aside a product placement spot for AT&T, does not have a place in the film at all. The schools are breeding grounds for propaganda and the massive military transport spaceships house large posters reminiscent of Nazi and Soviet agitprop along with tinges of Shepard Fairey’s street art—a mixture of 1990s pop culture and fascist symbols. The media is the same, only displaying views supporting an

institutional agenda. Essentially the only option for political agency in *Starship Troopers* is giving your entire being over to the Federation; through military service the individual is subsumed into a fascist collective, willing to give their body for Federation ideology and thereby giving their mind also. Relinquishing one's body and mind is common in all military services but it is how *Starship Troopers* spells out the rewards, and the accompanying society, that makes it different from contemporary America.

Verhoeven did intend *Starship Troopers* as an allegory about late 20<sup>th</sup> century America but like Issac Asimov's assertion that "science fiction authors foresee the inevitable" (65), "he is predicting it" (Crim 18). Verhoeven is not saying this is the America of 1997 but what he sees as the inevitable outcome if things remain constant. Regardless of Verhoeven's prophetic concepts, there are aspects of his narrative that, just like Asimov's belief, are not predictions but rather reflections. Looking to Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman for a viable representation of how post-modern media works, especially in relation to *Starship Troopers*, the authors maintain the illusion of a free press is necessary in a democracy, claiming:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda. (1)

The role Chomsky and Herman assign the media of 1980s America is no different than that in *Starship Troopers*, except Verhoeven's film exaggerates the media's actions, revealing its basic precepts through mimicry. His film waters down the intricacies of the mass media, reducing them to easily recognizable stereotypes. Verhoeven is demonstrating the fallacies of late 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media, much in the same way Oliver Stone uses *Natural Born Killers* to demonstrate the absurdity and sensationalism of the 24 hour news cycle and abundant information.

There are two key differences between Chomsky and Herman's depictions of American media and Verhoeven's media clips: the first is the tighter control over information in *Starship Troopers* and second, the advent of the internet, which made Neil Postman's assertion that late 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture may, "suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms," somewhat accurate (70). The internet, at the time of *Starship Troopers*' release, was still not as prevalent as in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but still contributed to Postman's "information glut;" Verhoeven's inclusion of internet browsing devices, such as dropdown menus, was a forward looking concept (61). The Federation's version of mass media—a comingling of internet and television—represents a gentrifying of the internet, an internet that serves the purposes of an authoritarian master. As stated before, it gives the illusion of autonomy but with very narrow choices.

Regardless of these differences between *Starship Troopers* and Chomsky and Herman's analysis, the principal arguments the two theorists make correctly reflect the effects of

propaganda in Verhoeven's film. Of course, Chomsky and Herman's investigation defines a propaganda model in a society where public and private institutions work in tandem instead of being the same entity but propaganda's functions is identical. Out of their five filters of a propaganda model (concentrated ownership of media outlets, commercial interest and censorship, institutions as sources of information, institutional discipline when the media deviates from the status quo, and anticommunist rhetoric) the Federation implements elements from each but under the umbrella of one totalitarian monolith. What is important is the common motivations between contemporary mass media and Verhoeven's dystopian representation: "They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns" (Chomsky 2). The audience is privy to the Federation's fascism and so are some of the films civilians but, for the most part, *Starship Troopers'* protagonists see their environments governing body as benevolent and righteous; Chomsky and Herman's comments explain exactly what the media does, how it recruits potential citizens, and how it structures information towing the party line. There are numerous differences and similarities between the Federation and contemporary America, especially America of the late '90s, but the prime difference is America is arguably mostly a free society using the media to mold popular opinion and the Federation is a fascist state disguising repression as freedom and transforming civic duty into a commodity earned through optioned physical and mental submission.

*Starship Troopers* contains a great deal about dystopian political systems but its motivations and workings—the intricate details of how the Federation, as a governing body

operates—are secondary to the mass media representations of it. Crim agrees on this point when he claims, “Verhoeven is less interested in the political structure of the Federation and more interested in the powerful media presence...charged with ensuring that the Federation’s version of reality is effectively communicated to the population” (18). The fascist symbolism and impulses driving the Federation consume a large portion of Verhoeven’s story, but the inner workings of the Federal system are ambiguous; the audience does not know how one becomes a Sky Marshall (the equivalent to president) or what the layout of their political body looks like. This is material usually suited for a documentary whereas Verhoeven is attempting to create a subjective view of the Federation, essentially making the audience become an honorary citizen in the dystopian government.

Shrouding the Federation’s inner workings creates a sense of secrecy, an opaque representation of the proto-fascist government, which operates like a totalitarian system would: with the masses in the dark. It also allows the audience to feel part of this futuristic civilization and compare it to the world they currently inhabit. The audience’s only choice is discerning the Federation’s structure is through the media broadcasts and watching the protagonists, who are also influenced by the media broadcasts, navigate their environment—which spells out Verhoeven’s dystopia as fascist and devoid of autonomy outside of superficial decisions and the choice of becoming a citizen/remaining a civilian.

At the graduating dance Rico asks his teacher Mr. Raszak (Michael Ironside) whether he should sign up for military service and receives this response from his civics teacher: “Figuring

things out for yourself is the only freedom anybody has; use that freedom” (*Starship Troopers*). Later in the film Raszak returns as a Lieutenant, hard as nails, and a paragon of Federation citizenship. In the classroom Raszak endorses the Federation’s “might makes right” ideology but does not outright recruit students for military service. Instead, as Rico tells his parents, “he sort of discourages you” (*Starship Troopers*). The environment does the recruitment for Raszak and he merely provides the counterargument against citizenship in a halfhearted way. In essence, Raszak is making pacifism into a vice and turning reason, empathy, and exploring alternatives to violence and force into weakness, especially when contrasted against the barrage of Federation propaganda coming at the students from almost every portion of their environment. Raszak’s teaching method, and the advice he gives Rico, conveys, “He (Rico) is free in his head,” but not in reality, especially since joining the Mobile Infantry means, “his body belongs to the State,” and with that comes Rico’s mind (Crim 19). Any chance at true self sovereignty is deficient, since becoming a citizen means giving one’s body and mind over to the Federation and remaining a citizen means a lack of political choices.

But what exactly is the *Starship Troopers*’ governing body, especially the Federal Network, implementing to control the Federation’s population? Verhoeven’s comparison to modern and post-modern propaganda tactics are obvious, especially his throwbacks to WWII propaganda (both American and German), but above this surface level exploration what exactly is the Federation doing that keeps civilians docile and encourages citizenship? Besides the obvious threat of punishment, which brings castigation back into the public sphere and is a reversal of Foucault’s explorations in *Discipline and Punish*, there is more at work than just

simple, repetitive slogans and utilitarianism artwork. Geoff Danaher claims Foucault's ideas regarding discipline involves, "producing docile, healthy bodies that can be utilized in work and regulated in terms of time and space" (50). But the government in *Starship Troopers* is not exactly using Foucaulian techniques, since punishment is not hidden and is reversing back towards the tendencies of hundreds of years ago, to create these docile bodies. Danaher also claims about Foucaulian disciplining that, "disciplinary power accords a person a space within an institution and a rank within a system," and continues, "Such ranking enables institutions to regulate both the movement of people throughout its space and the progress they can make from one task to another" (51). Here is where the Federation's use of Foucaulian power becomes apparent: it wants the populace fitting into a specific category (citizen and civilian) and uses its propaganda like Foucault's concept of the gaze, an, "instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance" (214). However, where Foucault discusses the gaze in this section of *Discipline and Punish* in relation to police forces compartmentalizing individuals, the overall effect of the gaze is at way of, "looking at our own behaviors...making ourselves the subject of our own gaze," relating ourselves to dominant institutions and acting in accordance with the prevailing social norms (Danaher 54). It is through these sorts of methods that the Federation in *Starship Troopers* uses its various forms of propaganda to keep people in line, keeping their doctrines and ideology intact and making the populace believe them.

Going back to *Starship Troopers*' first media vignette, the pre-recorded segments about military service and the arachnids cuts live to the initial battle of the human/arachnid war, where the audience is taken into the heart of the human invasion (incidentally, any choices regarding

information are immediately severed here and the dominant voice is that of the Federation, dictating what information is important). This scene, rife with graphic violence, is demonstrated behind a field reporter (dressed in military garbs) and does not present the war from any view other than the prescribed Federation one. Consisting of high quality production values, mimicking those of a reality show like Fox's *Cops*, the Federation's broadcasts, and this initial one in particular, reflect what Baudrillard calls War Porn—a high budget and quality representation of armed conflict that fetishizes violence in the same way pornographic films do sex. For Rico and the rest of the Mobile Infantry immersed in the conflict the events are real; for those watching from various parts of the Federation the images are fantasy, not affecting their lives in any immediate sense. They are a simulacrum, presenting reality from a falsified perspective. Baudrillard asserts that, "For the images to become a source of true information, they would have to be distinct from the war," and continues, "They have become today as virtual as the war itself, and for this reason their specific violence adds to the specific violence of the war" (87). Of course the violence is real, at least in the film's context, and real people experience real pain and violence but the masses experience them in an entirely different context. Indeed their relation to the war is experienced differently because of where and how they view it; in fact, their viewing of it in general changes their relation to the events depicted. When Baudrillard claims these images of war "have to be distinct from the war," it is a statement asserting that for the viewer the images are another function of the conflict altogether, changing their relation to events and even the representation of the war itself; in essence, there are two wars: one the

soldiers experience and another, almost parodic and exaggerated version the general public digests (87). It even begs the question: are these events taking place at all?

The central argument of Baudrillard's essay *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* is that the images beamed to the masses watching the first Gulf War on television are disingenuous. Just like the protagonists' battles in *Starship Troopers*, the U.S. soldiers in 1990 and '91 were living real events, fighting corporeal beings, but their experiences do not match those watching from afar. Bill Hicks' claim about the Gulf War, "you need two armies to have a war," coincides with Baudrillard's but Hicks' observation does not reveal the extent of Baudrillard's argument, saying the simulacrum is more important to the general population, superseding the soldier's experience (Hicks). From this perspective the war's occurrences do not take place, they are a fiction because they filter through the biases and motivations of the media and lose all their original connotations; their signs and signifiers become meaningless. Baudrillard claims these images validity, "if they are true or false, is irrelevant," since the perspectives and perspective is so obscured (87). This is the case in *Starship Troopers*.

What marks these images as pornographic, at least in regards to Baudrillard, is not only their construction and likeness to pornography, but their availability, claiming, "due to the prevailing rule of the world of making everything visible, the image, our present-day images, have become substantially pornographic" (87). *Starship Troopers* revolves around a proto-fascist government body where information is controlled by the state; there is only an illusion of choice. Regardless of the Federation's totalitarian manifesto they still convey information as unrestricted

and this counterfeit representation, where the masses can navigate through stipulated figures, is still subject to simulation. Like Chomsky and Herman argue in *Manufacturing Consent*, a propaganda model's primary function is indoctrination into a system's beliefs and ideological patterns. The Federation's propaganda does not deviate far from Chomsky and Herman's study nor Baudrillard's beliefs about disingenuous images, despite the differences between the governmental systems of contemporary times and those of Verhoeven's 23<sup>rd</sup> century society. Really, the only key difference is what each civilization deems objectionable.

Crim asserts "waging war through media technology allows for limitless violence in a consequence-free environment," and his proclamation attests to the power of simulation, where excessive violence against perceived enemies is justifiable (22-3). What is the physical, corporeal consequence to somebody on the other side of the world or galaxy watching a conflict? Of course, like the second Gulf War, there are consequences—financial burdens, loss of liberty in the face of authoritarian propaganda, and so forth—but the audience for a conflict does not sacrifice their body for the war effort. Possibly their minds and freedoms, but not their bodies. A media driven conflict does reap benefits for the various institutions caught up in the struggle, with the "enemy" the recipient of both objective and subjective violence. If a certain event's coverage is not desirable, just edit it out or show it from a different perspective; the possibilities when dealing with simulation are pretty much endless. By presenting a conflict via the airwaves and using the conventions of fictional storytelling the line between reality and invention is not just blurred but absent. Crim says when the Federation does this they are, "some sort of militarized 'McWorld,' offering up horrific events in a sanitized, prefabricated mold akin to

mass produced chicken nuggets (22). Once again this brings us back to Baudrillard's simulacrum and his assertions regarding War Porn: these representations of military quarrels lose their barbarity and become sterile snapshots not conveying what really happens but what somebody else wants you to believe is happening. It is like the 2011 Taco Bell controversy over their taco meat filling, which is 30% actual beef and 70% filler: if it is presented as authentic ground beef but is actually mostly not, should it really carry the name, adding to its legitimacy?

What the media footage of the war in *Starship Troopers* is attempting is falsification of events for the sake of public approval. While the Federation's civilians are supposedly vast and controlled through violence and the intimidation of violence, the Federation's illusion of freedom is necessary for their society; they do not wish their fascism to be perceived as outright totalitarianism. Like Chomsky and Herman, who believe thought control is necessary in a democratic state, The Federation does not desire dominion solely through physical subjugation—that would mean people would realize their government is overtly fascist; it is easier to rally public support for a cause when that support is given under the guise of liberty. Verhoeven wishes his totalitarian future to appear, “attractive, familiar, even desirable,” and ruling with an iron fist does not necessarily make this possible (Crim 24). Hence the necessity for controlled, barren information under the guise of self sovereignty. While a certain portion of the Federation's population lives as second-class citizens, it is not a system like South Africa's apartheid, which is based on race. In Verhoeven's 23<sup>rd</sup> century, race matters seem conquered (so do gender issues as well and scenes with multi-racial, unisex showering in the Mobile Infantry's basic training attest to this), and the only blockade to full participation in the Federation is

military service. Like the Spartans, those who defend their home receive a voice regarding its path.

Like in *Robocop*, where news broadcasts are not imparting vital information but instead entertaining the masses, the Federal Network's segments are portraying a diluted representation of events. Each event, aside from the live broadcasts of the invasion, is short and concise, giving only a superficial account of activities. This coincides with Postman's claim about brevity in television segments: "It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute's time" (103). Postman furthermore claims, "TV news has no intention of suggesting that any story *has* any implications, for that would require viewers to continue to think about it when it is done and therefore obstruct their attending to the next story that waits panting in the wings" (103). What Postman's suggesting is that the pithiness of news stories depart information not meant for contemplation; instead they give the illusion of democratic participation while in reality pacifying the masses. Postman calls this (as before mentioned), "information glut," and the purpose of this is making information available but leaving it out of any context but the official one, limited in scope, which supports the intentions of various institutions.

In *Starship Troopers* the information in the Federation's broadcasts do exactly what Postman claims television news broadcasts did in the 1980s; the only differences are ideology and the media's interactivity. Of course an trial in *Starship Troopers*, where the, "murderer was captured this morning and tried today," and his publically broadcasted execution on "all net, all

channels,” during dinner does not reflect American society of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the intentions of the contemporary mainstream media are still quite similar: they give information serving society’s dominant institutions and keep the masses docile (*Starship Troopers*). Like Fox’s *Cops*, it serves as a mechanism of either control or camaraderie. For those in America’s lower socioeconomic classes *Cops* is a vehicle for subjugation, reminding the citizenry to stay on the straight or narrow or become subject to state power; for those of a higher socioeconomic class it both reinforces the policies of dominant institutions and marks poorer Americans as others, to be feared and kept at a distance. Verhoeven omits representations of non-news media in *Starship Troopers* so an assessment of what sitcoms or films look like in his fascist dystopia are uncertain but the militarism of the broadcast news is similar to the militarism of television and film in contemporary America. A news featurette depicting soldiers showing children their weapons and passing out bullets as souvenirs is obviously a farcical parody of modern military propaganda, taking what Verhoeven sees in U.S. military advertisements to a ludicrous extreme. Regardless, the sentiment is still similar and the images frighteningly familiar.

According to Jackson Katz in his essay *Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From Enimem to Clinque for Men*, “The U.S. military spends more than \$100 million annually on advertising,” and their marketing reaches across a wide spectrum of entertainment outlets (355). Military advertisements, “with references to 'leadership,' 'respect,' and pride,” appear in magazines, during sports broadcasts, at movie theaters before the featured attraction, and a plethora of other places where young, impressionable Americans will see them

and those exempt from military service will understand the U.S. military's stance (Katz 355). There are only a few differences between the tactics implemented by the United States and the Federation with regards to military service and Verhoeven's critique of these institutions; both legislative groups promote the values Katz claim appears in the U.S. military's advertisements but Verhoeven's futuristic society offers an active role in civic activities in exchange for military service and in contemporary America this is a right most citizens enjoy.

Paul Williams claims in the article *Starship Troopers, the War on Terror and the Spectacle of Censorship*, "*Starship Troopers* illustrates how twentieth-century mass-entertainment apparatuses can be exploited to manipulate allegiance and to mobilize political participation" (41). Just like the media representations of the 2003 Iraq invasion or post-9/11 American events, the media in *Starship Troopers* takes a singular stance regarding their enemy, quelling and dismissing other viewpoints. The difference is that the Federal Network does not air these criticisms whereas 21<sup>st</sup> century American media does but adds a disclaimer, a rider coming from a medley of voices discrediting dissent—a cursory viewing of Fox News or MSNBC's punditry attests to this point. While *Starship Troopers* does present a point/counterpoint debate, mimicking the format of cable editorial programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor*, *The Rachel Maddox Show*, or *Glenn Beck* (whose official Fox News website says is a, "fusion of entertainment and enlightenment"), this short segment features heated argument, melodrama, and the typical talking head shots (Foxnews.com). The segments title, "Bugs That Think," uses a derogatory terms for the Arachnids (further reducing them to others and removing their identity) and features one talking head appealing to emotion for his argument: "Brain bugs? Frankly I find

the idea of a bug that thinks *offensive*” (*Starship Troopers*). In short, the Federation’s attempt at serious investigation of contemporary issues imitates entertainment programs like Jerry Springer by incorporating physical violence into the equation; it also only presents arguments from a strictly pro-war angle, reinforcing the Federation’s stranglehold over information—there are no voices in the media criticizing the war or if they are the notion is immediately rebuked.

Williams’ observation above exhibits Postman’s sentiments regarding news as entertainment and nothing else but also explores the impact media can have on a population. Once again, the key difference between the Federal Network and 21<sup>st</sup> century media outlets is control—the media in *Starship Troopers* is governmental whereas media groups in contemporary America are privatized (with the exception of NPR and PBS). This does not mean these groups are without influence; on the contrary, private news media is at the whims of their advertisers and the government, reliant on them for not only funding but also information. Without the support of corporate patrons broadcast news outlets (network, cable, and radio), print publications, and websites would crumble, making it necessary for information to serve the interests of the institutions propping up these outlets. When information comes solely from one perspective, such as the Federation’s perspective (which justifies war and champions violence), it cannot create an informed citizenry; what it does instead is, as stated before, pacifies the masses and allows consent for institutional actions. It deters freedom by fashioning any dialogue between the masses into a prescribed arena and leaves out any chances for other viewpoints. In the case of *Starship Troopers*, the media is the civilization’s viewpoint, its representation of reality, and, ultimately, fashions the way an individual approaches the phenomenological world.

By limiting information and reducing it to a small set of variables, the population in *Starship Troopers* only has the option of approaching quandaries from a few positions. Concepts of freedom, like Raszak's assertion, "Figuring things out for yourself is the only freedom anybody has; use that freedom," are a ruse; it is impossible to figure anything out and use that freedom when the parameters used for navigation are fixed and superficial (*Starship Troopers*).

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the two primary themes in Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film *Starship Troopers*: fascism and the media's participation in shaping public opinion. Critics of Verhoeven's film deem it fascist, possessing a celebration of fascism—a belief that only stands when ignoring the director's sardonic representation of late 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Critics like Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post* are missing what the film is saying: America is, as of the late 1990s, heading in this direction. Mass media, not only rendered impotent by the revocation of the Fairness Doctrine in 1985 but also incapable of possessing the capability for distributing information necessary for the functioning of a free, well informed citizenry, is extinct. When the news is just another form of entertainment and does not make real contemplation of political or social issues possible the chances for a government by the people and for the people is impossible. What you get instead is the appearance of a free society, actually dictated by a wide range of interests which do not normally reflect what the average citizen wants.

Neil Postman concludes *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by comparing our civilization to the one in Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* and claims Huxley, "was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking" (163). What is important about Postman's final lines of his book, and his comparison of American society to Huxley's futuristic dystopia, is that the world people perceive through the media is a carnival, a world of illusion where issues mimic all the lights and enjoyable sights. Just like a carnival, or any amusement park, the details of the rides are invisible; a roller coaster's inner workings are hidden from sight, much like the information necessary for contemporary Americans to see whether the ride the media presents is safe or factual. Unfortunately the illusions precede everything and this is Verhoeven's ultimate statement, his thesis for *Starship Troopers*: if the media is the sole source of democratic values and information there is nothing stopping those with subjugation in mind from creating a fascist dystopia. Although Verhoeven's prophetic representation of America's trajectory is rife with satire and tongue-in-cheek jabs at the status quo, it is a stabbing examination of how the "land of the free" is specious, how simulacrum fashions the antonym of liberty, and how the characters in *Starship Troopers* are quite similar to Americans of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: perceiving themselves as free but actually only engaging their environment through a specific set of prescribed parameters.

## **Conclusion**

Through the last three chapters I have explored Paul Verhoeven's three science fiction films – *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, and *Starship Troopers*—investigating whether the protagonists in the films are truly autonomous individuals or merely reflections of the environments they inhabit. Ultimately, they are not anything more than constructions of exterior forces, shaping the

individual's consciousness for the sake of various institutions. In each film Verhoeven goes after both private and public institutions (sometimes in tandem) and delivers his own vision of how both sectors of Western culture's legislating apparatus influences the population. There are times where critics dub him a fascist, claiming his film's do not offer a multi-dimensional look at the establishments he is critiquing (this is mostly true of 1997's *Starship Troopers*, whereas *Robocop* and *Total Recall* are overwhelmingly critical successes, only admonished for Verhoeven's excessive use of violence). However, what Verhoeven's films are doing, like any good science fiction, is offering an over exaggerated vision of contemporary American culture, holding a mirror up to society and commenting on where we are and where we are heading.

Issac Asimov's assertion that science fiction is a projection of contemporary situations and just merely extrapolates on them holds true and Verhoeven's science fiction trinity follows this rule to the letter, imparting his vision of where society is heading if it stays upon its current trajectory. In this paper I have primarily explored the media's culpability in fashioning a society's views and subjectivity, rendering the individual impotent in regards to any definitions of liberty. In *Robocop* and *Total Recall* the citizens are free when it comes to market choices, such as board games, cars, and virtual vacation destinations, but not regarding issues such as corporate and governmental oppression. In essence, these characters are not free; they do not choose the path their civilization takes and are not living in democratic societies. Such statements can be uttered about the contemporary world, and are by many of the theorists mentioned in the previous chapters; Verhoeven implements science fiction as a tool for pointing

this out to his audience. Sometimes it takes a caricature for a veil of illusion to crumble and a moniker of truth to seep out.

In *Starship Troopers*, Verhoeven's highest budget film and his most realized vision, there is not a critique of multiple systems but only one—an authoritative political system which maintains itself through intensified propaganda and a political system based on military might. Taking a cue from Nazi Germany, Verhoeven is investigating fascism, primarily America's export of hegemony in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and proposing America could potentially end up in a similar situation. Again, Verhoeven is implementing extremes to make his point but his point is powerful nonetheless. In essence, he is asking whether the path we are on is beneficial to humanity, hoping he is wrong and admonishing his audience to realize the simulated world they live in. Critics lambasting Verhoeven for incorporating fascist symbols into the film's visuals are missing the point and maybe that is the ultimate irony of their criticisms: maybe they are defending a system Verhoeven sees as potentially fascist and embodying the tenets he is analyzing with the film. After all, does not fascism work best when consistently defining the enemy and not their own behavior?

Regardless of the highly entertaining aspects of Verhoeven's science fiction films, they are movies that are not solely popcorn entertainment—they ask their audience to think. What is it about our own civilization that is so sorely askew and how can one fix it? How does one realize their interactions with their environment are not their own but the result of living in a hyper-real world, where every action has its basis in a simulation of some sort? Although Verhoeven's films

are just another example of simulacrum and just part of a larger mechanism which he criticizes with his works, it is acting subversively and asking the audience to wake up and see the problems they navigate through and around every day.

Amidst a sea of banal celluloid products, Verhoeven's films stand alongside other contemporary filmmakers working in the same genre and attempting to engage their audiences at a level above the mediocre—Ridley Scott, David Cronenberg, John Carpenter, and others of the same caliber. Working along the same lines as such luminary science fiction authors as Dick, Aldous Huxley, Frank Herbert, and comic book author Alan Moore, Verhoeven and his contemporaries see film as arguably the most influential medium of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a form where audiences go for a retreat into fantasy; these directors attempt to create a product which does not merely amuse but engages—a difficult task, especially in a genre dominated by less socially critical films like Lucas' *Star Wars* series or family entertainment like Spielberg's *E.T.*. However, for the two hours or so their narrative holds the audience's attention, Verhoeven, and directors of the same ilk, are demonstrating through entertainment philosophical issues, making them digestible and spelling out through the actions of their protagonists: you are not really free.

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