

# Robocop ★★★

**Year of Release:** 1987

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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*Robocop* is an intelligent science fiction thriller and social satire, one with class and style. The film, set in Old Detroit in the year 1991, stars Peter Weller as Murphy, a lieutenant on the city's police force. 1991's Detroit suffers from rampant crime and a police department run by a private contractor (Security Concepts Inc.) whose employees (the cops) are threatening to strike. To make matters worse, a savage group of cop-killers has been terrorizing the city. On Murphy's first day of duty, after his transfer from another precinct, these cop-killers brutally murder him by shooting off his limbs one by one. Orion Pictures had to edit this extremely graphic scene in order to get an R rating from the M.P.A.A.

After the emergency room staff at the hospital cannot save Murphy and declare him clinically dead, S.C.I. recruits his remains for their new "Robocop" program. Using the remains of Murphy's body as a foundation, the S.C.I. scientists build a cyborg, made of both flesh and metal. The cyborg (Robocop) is half human (Murphy) and half robot; their engineers have erased Murphy's memory and replaced it with a computer program (or so they think). With his lightning quick reflexes, immense strength, and impenetrable armor, S.C.I. envisions Robocop as an indestructible super-cop: the solution to Detroit's problems. The remainder of the plot follows Robocop's crime-foiling and vengeance on his murderers.

As a science fiction action-thriller, *Robocop* is extremely effective. Dutch director Paul Verhoeven combines gritty action with suspense, shocking gore, and spectacular special effects. Several sequences in the film, such as the one in which Robocop employs his extremely precise aim to stop a rapist, are destined to become cult-classics. Because *Robocop* is so visual and emotionally rousing, it demands to be seen on a large screen with an audience—in other words, in a movie theater.

Although the special effects and action are exciting, they do not by themselves set *Robocop* apart

from other films in the genre. Rather, *Robocop* stands out for its accurate and biting satire of American society. The movie makes a mockery of the Star Wars Defense Initiative, terrorism, board games, and television news broadcasts with air-headed anchors. These news broadcasts, which are exceptionally clever, recur periodically throughout the movie and help to provide comic relief from the intense action and gore. The satire in *Robocop*, however, is almost as frightening in its own way as the suspense and blood. 1990's America, as portrayed in the film, may seem far fetched but is in actuality (I think) only a slight exaggeration of the current state of our society. The humorous satire in *Robocop* is simultaneously credible and absurd. Verhoeven adroitly balances the satirical comedy with the gory action to create an entertaining and enlightening piece of science fiction/social commentary.

Unfortunately, *Robocop* possesses several flaws which prevent it from qualifying as a classic within the genre. The movie lacks the lasting impact of such films as *The Road Warrior*, *The Terminator*, and *Aliens*. *Robocop*'s main problem, aside from its dumb title, is that it does not sufficiently develop Murphy's character. We never learn the degree to which Murphy (as Robocop) is human and the degree to which he is a robot. Does Murphy have any human spirit or free will left, or is he merely a computer following a program? The script half-heartedly raises these issues but then abandons them in its climactic flurry of gory action. Moreover, it almost completely ignores the question (and tragedy) of denying a man his right to die in favor of turning him into a machine. *Robocop* also contains several bothersome loose-ends.

As you watch *Robocop*, you experience déjà vu; you feel as if you have seen the film before. In many respects, *Robocop* is reminiscent of several other films, including *The Terminator*, *Return of the Jedi*, and even *Death Wish*. However, to its credit, *Robocop* easily has enough originality and unique personality to avoid becoming a cheap rip-off.