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# **Invisible Culture**

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

## **The Return of the Repressed: Cybersubjectivity in ROBOCOP**

**by Dale Bradley**

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Paul Verhoeven's 1987 film ROBOCOP presents us with a question about the possibility of an individual subject's psyche surviving in the form of a cyborg. The ostensible answer is "yes", but the cyborg's (Robocop) process of rediscovering of his/its previous psyche (Murphy, the human cop) reflexively interrogates the initial question in a manner that problematizes the legitimacy of an inherently human-organic psyche. The question is not the obvious one—can or will the human spirit survive the onslaught of techno-capitalism?—but a much more fundamental one: is subjectivity an inherently human phenomenon, or might it be somehow "ported" to non-organic forms of being? Pursuing the question produces a problem: if subjectivity is merely an epiphenomenal trace—a symptom, as it were—that emerges from the interaction between being and environment then does it not logically follow that it may be differentially constituted in different, perhaps non-organic forms of being?

Beginning with Freud, but reaching its apotheosis in Lacan, the psychoanalytic discourse on the construction of the self via

language and socially embedded being certainly suggests that the psyche is a construct, but it fails to address the possibility of this construct emerging from anything other than a human-organic substrate. This should come as no surprise given that the devices and discourses that inform the potentiality of cybernetic subjectivity have only recently emerged. Nonetheless, Lacan's radical decentering of the subject via language and enculturation effected a move toward conceiving of subjectivity as a potentially non-human phenomenon inasmuch as what we typically identify as the self is actually constituted by much of what is not the self. While the constituent elements of selfhood are certainly decentered in this scenario, the presumption of an essential organic substrate for the psyche, self, and subjectivity is not similarly questioned or decentered.

ROBOCOP addresses the potential for non-human subjectivity and can be read as a text that negotiates cybersubjectivity on two planes. The first is the narrative plane: the film utilizes the generic conventions of the fantastic in order to set up a liminal and indeterminate space between the human and machine wherein the experiences that constitute subject formation are gradually revealed to be heavily, perhaps even exclusively, phenomena that belong to the social rather than the individual. Subjectivity is thus framed as the symptomatic manifestation of an individual's ongoing constitutive interactions with, and through, language and culture. ROBOCOP continually negotiates, but never overtly answers, the question of whether or not there can be such a thing as a non-human subject. The only answer given consists of

a collapse and erasure of the binary distinction of machine/human such that a space is left open for speculation concerning cybersubjectivity.

By framing subjectivity as symptom, and arriving at an indeterminate conclusion, the film brings into play another plane of negotiation: an analogical interrogation of a certain bias toward the organic-human in psychoanalysis' theorization of subjectivity. The narrative arc defined by Robocop's quest to recover its previous identity as Murphy functions as a kind of return of the repressed for psychoanalysis. The "extraction" of the mechanisms of subject formation from the human individual first effected by psychoanalytic theory, and thence pushed to the limit by the various iterations of cybernetics, thus appears, as it must, as a *post facto* recognition that the long development of psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity have been a series of symptomatic compromises that have avoided peering too deeply into the biological essentialism that informs it. There then occurs a return of the repressed insofar as the emergence of the theoretical possibility of some sort of non-organic cybersubjectivity reflects back upon psychoanalysis' biological essentialism, rendering the theorization of the human subject as a symptom based on a compromise that institutes biological essentialism in order to preserve subjectivity as a solely human phenomenon. As a fantastic text, ROBOCOP therefore transgresses the law of psychoanalysis' biological essentialism and thereby returns it as a challenge that undermines an unexamined human/machine binary and potentially rewrites what it means to be human, machine, or otherwise.

## **The Fantastic Genre and its Historical Parallels with Psychoanalysis**

The texts that Todorov (1973) addresses in his analysis of the fantastic as a literary genre span a period from around the mid 18th to the early 20th centuries and most deal with what might be termed a pre- or proto- psychological understanding of human subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> The events that appear (indeterminately) as variously uncanny/monstrous or supernatural/imaginary typically revolve around issues of desire and being, the transgression of (ostensibly) natural law, and the negotiation of accepted and/or prohibited social practices. The fantastic tales of this period thus exhibit a working out of subjectivity that not only pre-dates and parallels the development of both Freudian psychoanalysis and early forms of psychology, but also provides material for their constitutive discourses in the form of literary expressions of issues of interest to these fields of inquiry. The fantastic provides a venue through which the socially unspeakable may be spoken, and the unthinkable thought. The fantastic therefore plays a role in the production of our modern notion of subjectivity inasmuch as it marks and expresses a rather tumultuous transitional period wherein Western societies moved from notions of subjectivity based on directly causal and naturally inherent, religious, and spiritual determinants to a much more fluid and flexible notion of subjectivity based on complex symbolic interactions within and through social structures (and strictures), self-reflexive individuality, cultural practices, the "unseen" life of the mind, and the peculiarities of desire and the will.

Todorov approaches the fantastic in terms of how it allows for a narrative to present and negotiate some sort of transgression of social and/or natural law such that the law (s) transgressed are interrogated. This potentially troubling interrogation is made safe by the generic conventions of the fantastic. While Todorov's discussion of the fantastic has been revised by others over the last 30 or so years, his definitive foregrounding of the fundamental characteristic of the genre has remained: the fantastic is marked by its tendency to present ultimately indeterminate explanations for unusual narrative events—a situation generated from a sustained textual hesitation between the natural and the supernatural, the real and imaginary, and/or the uncanny and the marvelous. Thus, "the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event". [2](#)

By offering up a series of supernatural events, the reality of which are never asserted but which nonetheless produce very real effects in the characters that experience them, the fantastic not only shares an affinity with psychoanalysis but also parallels its early development. Todorov ascribes a dual function to the fantastic's supernatural events: first, a literary function that allows for the unreal to be presented as though it were a natural event and, second, a social function that authorizes the transgression and interrogation of the law by framing it within the liminal space of the genre's un/real

representations: "we see, finally, how the social and literary functions coincide: in both cases we are concerned with a transgression of the law. Whether it is in social life or in narrative, the intervention of the supernatural element always constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules, and so doing finds its justification". 3  
Todorov also focuses on the fact that the fantastic enjoyed a rather limited lifespan as a genre:

It appeared in a systematic way around the end of the eighteenth century with Cazotte; a century later, we find the last aesthetically satisfying examples of the genre in Maupassant's tales. We may encounter examples of the hesitation characteristic of the fantastic in other periods, but it is exceptional when this hesitation is thematized by the text itself. Is there a reason for this short span? Or again: why does the literature of the fantastic no longer exist? 4

The answer is, quite simply, the emergence and development of psychoanalysis:

psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic. There is no need today to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire, and none to resort to vampires in order to designate the attraction exerted by

corpses: psychoanalysis, and the literature which is directly or indirectly inspired by it, deal with these narratives in undisguised terms. The themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years. 5

Interestingly, Todorov finds that the literary and social functions of the fantastic are similarly taken up in science fiction: "the best science fiction texts are organized analogously. The initial data are supernatural: robots, extraterrestrial beings, the whole interplanetary context". 6

Todorov's definition and analysis of the fantastic fits Cyborg narratives (of which ROBOCOP is but one of many) very well indeed—not only in the way in which the narrative functions, but also in terms of the function or place of the fantastic in the broader socio-historical arena. With a history that could be—and often has been—traced back to uncanny tales of the monstrous (such as the Golem), 7 cyborg narrative originates with the figure of the robot and is therefore most accurately located in a period that overlaps the later stages of the emergence of the psychological subject in the late 19th and early 20th century. While a figure such as the Golem has affinities with the cyborg, the former is most properly understood to be traditionally uncanny. The cyborg has a rather different set of qualities inasmuch as it is less monstrous than it is machinic and therefore requires a suitably machine-ridden social milieu from which to emerge and be understood. Following on the heels of the

industrial revolution then, and preceding the development of sophisticated electronic computing and such things as artificial intelligence, machinic forms of subjectivity begin to appear in stories such as E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops". [8](#) Needless to say, the imagined qualities and capacities of early robotic and, later, cybernetic beings become more and more sophisticated as the technological capacities of the societies in which they appear become more developmentally complex.

### **Posthumanism, Cyborgs, and Lacan**

The significance of this historical positioning of cyborg narratives is simply stated: just as the fantastic pre- and proto- psychological narratives overlapped, reflected, and refracted an emerging notion of psychological subjectivity in the past, so too do the fantastic narratives of pre- and proto-cyborg narratives overlap, reflect, and refract an emerging notion of cybernetic subjectivity for us today. The emergence of discourses concerned with cybernetic forms of subjectivity have been most notably foregrounded by Hayles and Haraway [9](#) as a new problematic that challenges traditional psychological explanations of subjectivity grounded in the organic dimensions of being.

Of all the implications that first-wave cybernetics conveyed, perhaps none was more disturbing and potentially revolutionary than the idea that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given. Conceptualizing control, communication, and information as an integrated system, cybernetics radically changed how boundaries were conceived.



[...] In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs", Donna Haraway wrote about the potential of the cyborg to disrupt traditional categories. Fusing cybernetic device and biological organism, the cyborg violates the human/machine distinction; replacing cognition with neural feedback, it challenges the human-animal difference; explaining the behavior of thermostats and people through theories of feedback, hierarchical structure and control, it erases the animate/inanimate distinction. [10](#)

At the root of most posthumanist and cybernetic theorizations of subjectivity there rests a fairly simple line of inquiry that begins with the premise that subjectivity may not be restricted to the human species, but is a phenomenon wrought within and through a plurality of mechanisms involving language, social forms, and agents but not, *necessarily*, organic beings.

Hayles critical analysis of the work of Norbert Wiener and other mid-20th century first-wave cyberneticians (Bateson, von Foerster) provides insight into the concerted and ongoing effort to repress the implications of their work with regard to the ways by which it imperiled the liberal humanist and, by extension, the psychoanalytical subject. Having carried further the work of psychoanalysis with regard to decentering the mechanisms of subject formation from within the organic-human, cybernetics produced a problematization of subjectivity so profound, and so troubling, that first-wave cyberneticians (Weiner in particular) began to search for various means by which to preserve subjectivity as a solely human phenomenon. [11](#)

Second-wave cyberneticians (Maturana & Varela, von Foerster, and McCulloch) began to abandon the human-organic as an essential foundation for subjectivity by focusing on notions of autopoiesis, evolution, and emergence in both organic and non-organic systems. <sup>12</sup> With the advent of increasingly sophisticated computing capacities, third-wave cyberneticians (Varela, Ray, Langton, & Brooks) turned to notions of artificial life and began attempting to model autopoietic systems via powerful computer simulations. Having abandoned any notion of an essential human-organic base as a requirement for living systems, third-wave cybernetics thus opens the door to theorizing about the possibility of non-human forms of subjectivity. <sup>13</sup> The essential role of language, communication, social structure, and lived environment first introduced by psychoanalysis is nonetheless retained in third-wave cybernetics, even though the human-organic substrate is jettisoned. Posthumanism's cybernetics-inspired discourse on subjectivity thus takes up the question of epiphenomenal subjectivity and pushes it further still by decentering the human-organic foundation of being and suggesting that subjectivity, self, and psyche may be manifested by any kind of agent—be it human, machine, or computer program.

As Žižek notes in response to Derrida's critique of Lacan's discussion of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, there is always a surplus in any statement that cannot be circumscribed by the intent of its originator:

"There is no metalanguage" insofar as the

speaking subject is always already spoken, i. e., insofar as he cannot master the effects of what he is saying: he always says more than he "intended to say", and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content—in it, "the repressed returns". What are symptoms *qua* "returns of repressed if not such slips of the tongue by means of which "the letter arrives at its destination", i.e., by means of which the big Other returns to the subject his own message in its true form? [14](#)

The "letter that returns" to psychoanalysis is the process of extracting mechanisms of subject formation from the human-organic and placing them in the socius and language. This statement (or, in this case, an entire body of knowledge) has a surplus of unintended meaning (the potential to jettison the human-organic substrate of subjectivity) that cannot be mastered and which returns the (possible) "truth" of non-human subjectivity to the originator via the big Other of language (here, as academized knowledge production).

It is only once the possibility of non-human subjectivity becomes a notion that can be seriously entertained (in both fact and fiction), that the repressed appears: "there is no return of the repression previous to the return of the repressed; the repressed content does not precede its return in symptoms, there is no way to conceive it in its purity undistorted by 'compromises' that characterize the formation the symptoms". [15](#) For Freud and Lacan there really was no way to anticipate how the "letter" might return because they would both die before the full development of a parallel field of theoretical discourse

(cybernetics in general and artificial life in particular) would combine with a related assemblage of sophisticated information and communications technologies in order to complete the circuit by which the letter could return.

Upon its return, the letter exacts upon psychoanalytic theories of the subject something akin to that which psychoanalysis performs upon the patient. There is a radical reconfiguration of meaning prompted by an "invisible" (or, more accurately, a "non-envisioned") facet of one's being.

Therein lies the reason of the uncanny power of psychoanalytical interpretation: the subject pursues his everyday life within its closed horizon of meaning, safe in his distance with respect to the world of objects, assured of their meaning (of their insignificance), when, all of a sudden, the psychoanalyst pinpoints some tiny detail of no significance whatsoever to the subject, a stain in which the subject "sees nothing" [...] and says: "you see, this detail is a knot which condenses all you had to forget so that you can swim in your everyday certainty, it enframes the very frame which confers meaning on your life, it structures the horizon within which everything makes sense to you; if we unknot it, you will lose the ground from under your very feet!". [16](#)

While it may be the case that cybernetic notions of subject formation may radically rewrite the role of the organic in psychoanalytic theory, it is by no means certain that many of the findings of psychoanalysis itself may be rendered irrelevant. If machines and/or programs may sometime be said to have the potential

to develop subjectivities, then it follows that whatever theories we have concerning the formation of subjectivity, identity, and the self will apply in some form or other to such beings. The posthumanist view of subjectivity does not necessitate the rejection of human subjectivity so much as it expands the notion of subjectivity itself to include the non-organic. As Hayles notes in relation to the body of work emerging from feminist critiques of science (such as those of Haraway, Harding, and Fox-Keller):

the posthuman offers resources for the construction of another kind of account. In this account, emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body as seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. Of course, this is not necessarily what the posthuman *will* mean—only what it *can* mean if certain strands of its complex seriations are highlighted and combined to create a vision of the human that uses the posthuman as leverage to avoid reinscribing, and thus repeating, some of the mistakes of the past. Just as the posthuman need not be antihuman, so it also need not

be apocalyptic. [17](#)

Assuming for the moment that a cyborg possessed of some form of agential, being-dependent, autonomous subjectivity *could* exist, there is therefore no reason why it would not also be exposed—just as we humans are—to the mediating and formative effects of language and the socius. Such a cyborg would thus provide humans with a means by which to avoid solipsistic human-centered theorizations of subjectivity by providing another, and rather different, manifestation of it.

While we are far from having cyborgs exist any time soon, science fiction does at least provide some cogent examples of the contemporary negotiation of cybersubjectivity. I want now to turn to *ROBOCOP* in order to address the negotiation of cybersubjectivity in relation to how it problematizes the essentialist notion that subjectivity requires a human-organic substrate. The film's ironic deployment of the fantastic's generic conventions ostensibly asserts the biological essentialism inherent in popular notions of identity, the psyche, and the human spirit while simultaneously undermining them by using the figure of the cyborg to explore the liminal subjective space between human and machine. In addition, the film will act as an exemplar for the ways in which the repressed returns via, and is revealed in, the accretion of identity-defining symptoms in *Robocop* manifested by its quest for subjectivity.

### **ROBOCOP's Fantastic Cybersubjectivity**

What *ROBOCOP* shows us is not that

machines are becoming more human, or humans more machinic, but that subjectivity is a process of formation that does not belong exclusively to either machine or human, but to the language-driven mechanisms of the socius itself and, further, that machines and/or humans are simply vehicles by which the process of subject formation is agentially actualized within environmental situatedness and individuated performativity.

The supernatural event encountered in *ROBOCOP* is the creation of an uncanny cyborg. The hesitation characteristic of the fantastic is played out between explanations which, on the one hand, root the cyborg's being and actions in either a purely machinic form of subjectivity (the uncanny/monstrous) or, on the other hand, construe the cyborg to be machinic in body only while its subjectivity consists of a resurrected human psyche as the cyborg becomes aware of the identity of the person (Murphy) who provided the raw material for its creation. The ostensible message of the film is explicitly framed by the latter option: the faith that there is a "ghost in the machine". The message, then, is that an indomitable human spirit will always survive being assailed by dehumanizing and/or inimical technologies. Verhoeven has stated that this is indeed the thrust of the narrative: "the basic idea was to do something about a human soul that is destroyed and resurrected. And for a real resurrection, we needed a real crucifixion". <sup>18</sup> The film's obvious death/rebirth scenario makes this reading clear enough, but the generic conventions of the fantastic—hesitation, liminality, indeterminability—opens up a hermeneutic space that simultaneously undermines this

overt meaning.

How can we consider ROBOCOP to be a fantastic—rather than uncanny or marvelous—narrative? If the narrative posits a death of the human followed by its reconstruction as a machine and, ultimately, the resurrection of an indefatigable human spirit, then it would seem that the narrative is simply and straightforwardly supernatural rather than fantastic. Similarly, we might read the text against itself and suggest that Robocop doesn't become the repository of a resurrected humanity at all but instead presents us with a machine who slowly but surely becomes mistakenly convinced that it possesses some form of human spirit due to its tenuous connection to the human that preceded it. In this case we would have an uncanny and rather monstrous narrative. That we have these two potential readings is an indication that placing ROBOCOP in the fantastic is not only possible but is actualized via the narrative hesitation between the monstrous and the uncanny.

### **Subjective De/Re/Territorializations**

ROBOCOP's crisis of subjectivity is not that of the organic under siege by the technological or economic (an identity lost and regained), but a problematization of the constitution of the subject. The crisis is not that a unitary and unproblematic identity/subjectivity might be lost in the face of advanced techno-capitalism, but that the results of advanced techno-capitalism (cyborgs, robots, and a media saturated, corporatized *socius*) reveal the ways in which subjectivity is *a/ways* artificial in the sense that it is a dynamic construct rather than a universal given.



In *ROBOCOP*, this process occurs through a series of narrative de- and re-territorializations that take the form of a fantastic text. There is an oscillation between the uncanny figure of the cyborg (both monstrous and heroic) and the metaphysics of humanity (the psyche). Rather than ghosts and spirits fantastically haunting either the mind or physical world, *ROBOCOP* presents traces of identity haunting the newly (re-)problematized terrain of subjectivity produced by the creation of a cyborg. The issue of the real or imagined existence of the inherent and indomitable spirit of Murphy remains undecidable other than in the form of a faith in an abstract concept of human spirit. As a site of both tension and friction, this hesitation is also the stage upon which the various textual de/re/territorializations of the cybersubject occur. This hesitation reveals the problematic of subjectivity as construct and reveals two related, although opposed, textual readings. First, there is the more conservative reading by which Robocop *recognizes* itself to be Murphy. Second, a more radical reading is possible whereby Robocop *acquires* its own identity by way of appropriating and performing key markers of the late Murphy's identity. Neither position is ultimately decidable and the fantastic quality of the film emerges from its navigation and negotiation of the ghostly traces of identity that haunt Robocop's quest for subjectivity. The quest is driven by the audience's extra-textual desire to legitimate human essence and find meaning in the face of a potential loss of the human-organic grounding of subjectivity.

The film's first subjective deterritorialization is the death of Murphy. His murder at the hands of Boddiker's gang is prolonged,

exceedingly violent, and ends with Boddiker executing Murphy by way of shooting him in the head. Murphy's cognitive self has been obliterated and any "return of Murphy" must, one assumes, come from somewhere else than the biological. The founding premise of the film's narrative arc is thus that there is nothing left of Murphy except for, perhaps, some sort of life spirit. The lifeless body of Murphy is then reterritorialized by becoming the raw material for the production of Robocop. The relation of machinic to human 'parts' in Robocop is mentioned but never explicitly stated—we do not know what was saved. What we do know is that *something* of Murphy has apparently been retained because the first dream of Robocop is the last memory of Murphy: his execution. The film's exploration of subjectivity thus begins with the erasure of the organic.

So there is a problem here. Perhaps Robocop's dream is not its own, but ours: the dream of a psychoanalytic subject founded upon the organic. The dream that marks the ostensible return of Murphy's memory and spirit is mediated via video screens and computational devices. Rather than a traditional flashback we have a dream presented to us as a technologically mediated record of events—a machinic, albeit irruptive, trace disconnected from, and yet related to, the experience of an event. It is at this moment that the narrative mechanisms of the fantastic begin in the film. The dream may be either supernatural (the re-awakening of Murphy's spirit) or uncanny (a lost record from Murphy entering the mind of Robocop). In either case it is a *dream* rather than a *memory* and the mediation introduced by the video screens upon which the dream occurs

suggests a disarticulation of body, mind, and psyche rather than their unification. We thus enter the fantastic by way of irony: the video screen dream is intended to suggest that the Murphy's psyche survives but the presentation of a video-mediated dream hints at the idea that the life of the mind is machinic: a multi-platform phenomenon realizable in and through recording media and databanks as much as in human minds.

While ROBOCOP establishes a fantastic liminal space for the exploration of cybersubjectivity, it cannot help but impose the human upon it. This imposition undermines, rather than reinforces, the model of inherent human subjectivity and functions as an act of repression rather than revelation. A number of the narrative moments intended to further the notion of a subject under siege by the mass mediated hyperrealities of technocapitalism have the quality of imposing a desire for the legitimation of an inherent human subjectivity in a manner that actually undermines this very notion. Robocop's constant battles with both humans (cops and criminals) and machines (ED 209) not only places Robocop somewhere between the human and machine, but also resonates with a certain repression of the notion of non-organic subjectivity. Robocop's existential troubling of the human-machine binary is met with a series of violent efforts to subjugate and/or obliterate the liminal non-organic subject represented by the cyborg.

A crucial moment in the film occurs when Dick Jones (a Vice President of the company that produced Robocop) states that Robocop is "product" and that "we can't very well have our products turning against

us, can we?". This statement can be read to mean that the "product" here is a something which is supposed to affirm, but which also ends up undermining, the notion of the organically-bound psychoanalytic subject. Robocop appears as a provocative confrontation to the machine-human binary. While Best, Poster, and Tellote read this as a confrontation between a resisting subject locked within the enframing machinations of techno-capitalism, I read it as the moment when the surplus of unintended meaning makes its appearance (the letter finally arrives). This is not to say that the analyses of Best, Poster, and Tellote are inaccurate or without merit—quite the opposite—for, as Cronenworth notes in his interview with Verhoeven, "his movies frequently suggest that 'different realities [are] possible at the same moment". [19](#) Such is the nature of the generic conventions of the fantastic: its core indeterminability not only allows for, but demands, multiple readings of the events presented.

The film's textual repression begins in earnest right after Jones tells Robocop that he is "product" and calls upon both sides of the machine-human binary to eradicate the troubling presence of Robocop. First, ED 209 is called upon to destroy Robocop. When that fails, the other side of the binary (humans represented by a unit of the Detroit police force) is brought to bear as a collective killing machine. The liminal space of subjectivity represented by Robocop must be closed (repressed) if the gap between human and machinic is to be maintained. As long as Robocop exists, this gap presents a problem because it allows for the collapse of both human and machine into the void presumed to separate them

(and from out which Robocop troublingly peers, and appears, as a reality that should not be there). Such a collapse would constitute a fusion of human and machine such that the binary is erased and substituted with a notion of subjectivity based upon emergent antipoetic systems rather than human-organic life.

One of the best examples, however, of this conflicted fantastic liminality is when Robocop visits Murphy's house only to find it empty—as empty, perhaps, as the notion of inherent subjectivity itself. The memories (if they can properly be called memories) become unhinged from Robocop/Murphy by way of a continual cycling through subjective points of view displayed as either traditional cinematic flashbacks or as mediated cybernetic video feeds. The oscillation between these two filmic points of view demonstrates the film's subjective liminality. The mediated memories represented in this sequence conveys the film's concern with the besieged mass mediated subject of technocapital, [20](#) but it also serves to undermine the resurrection premise by introducing an indeterminability at the centre of human memory. Robocop and Murphy fuse into a singular space, and indeed a singular subject, insofar as the Polaroid camera that acts as the locus for memory itself ends up in the same location as the observing Robocop and Murphy the photographer. That the remembering subject can be equated with a camera not only recalls the earlier video-mediated dream sequence but also suggests that subjectivity is not only machinic, but that it can be reduced to the status of a recording device. The frequent use of shots from Robocop's point of view conflates the viewer with the cyborg and foregrounds,

rather than resolves, the questions that arise once one considers the tenuous and constructed quality of subjectivity.

### **Conclusion: Alone in an Empty Space**

The sequence of Robocop in the abandoned factory recovering from the attacks of the police and ED 209 is crucial because it completes the collapse of the machine-human binary and yet still holds fast to the fantastic's liminal indeterminability by refusing to answer whether or not Murphy/Robocop is human, machine, hybrid, or something else entirely. Rather than offer an answer, the film presents an emptied space wherein the understanding, interrogation, and production of subjectivity must occur anew. Robocop finally removes his helmet in order to reveal the face of Murphy and this, at least in theory, is the moment when all questions concerning the authenticity of the resurrected human psyche should be laid to rest. We see Robocop as a being whose only identity seems to be based on avenging the death of a self it cannot *remember*, but can still (miraculously) *feel*. This newly produced cybersubject, fully integrated into mass-mediated fields of social meaning, sits alone in the rotting hulk of a soon to be obliterated space pondering what it is to be 'who' or 'what' it is or was. Behind the mask of technology we find the reassurance of a human face and, perhaps, an intimation of the soul behind that face. We glimpse the ghost in the machine. But the face is pasted on. It seems less like an affirmation than a cruel joke. The notion of human subjectivity and the modern psychological subject becomes more a matter of socio-symbolic performance than an inherently human-organic phenomenon.

Through its agential interactions within the socius, the cyborg has independently developed, and now quite literally *wears*, a hybridized cyber-subjectivity. In other words, we find the machine in the ghost.

The liminality introduced by the fantastic narrative qualities of the text leaves us in an indeterminable space of contemplation not unlike that of Robocop itself. In the final sequence of the film, Robocop is finally granted the status of being a legitimate subject after killing Dick Jones (the corporate criminal antagonist). OCP's fatherly CEO (known as the "old man") asks him his name, to which the Cyborg replies "Murphy". On the face of it, this would seem to confirm that Murphy has indeed been resurrected in the body of Robocop, but the very next image is the sudden full-frame appearance of the word "ROBOCOP" (which provides the transition to the film's credit sequence). The film therefore ends without resolving the tension between human and machine and, in so doing, maintains the indeterminability of the fantastic by refusing to allow the cyborg to be either fully machinic or human. The "return" of Murphy is thus rather hollow because, as Tellote argues, it seems to "pose both a question and a warning: a question about our desires for the self and a warning about the consequences of following through on those desires, particularly of tracing the trajectory that the reason-science-technology triad seems to be staking out for remaking and effectively transforming the self". <sup>21</sup> The surplus of unintended meaning in the psychoanalytic discourse on subjectivity returns and a new symptom—cybersubjectivity—is produced wherein the binary between human and machine collapses to the point where both

are finally rendered as related, although different, substrates for the emergence of a systemic phenomenon we term the "subject". All we are left with is an agency in search of an identity that will, inevitably, take on the mantle of a subjectivity acquired through interactions and events not always of its choosing. It no longer makes any difference whether the agent is human or machine. Perhaps it never did.

What has happened to the troubling ghosts of subjectivity that haunted the proto-psychological narratives of the fantastic genre two centuries ago, and which were subsequently absorbed into the later theorizations of Freud and Lacan? They never left: they simply bided their time as we carefully crafted a symptomatic discourse on the psychological subject founded upon the notion that subjectivity is a phenomenon restricted solely to the human-organic. The ghosts return the letter in the form of cybersubjectivity whence they find a new entry into the imagination and discourse of the subject. Real or not, narrative cyborgs such as Robocop present us with a new form of subjectivity wrought as a figurative manifestation of a ghostly trace: a lineage of theorizing subjectivity haunted by questions of just how human subjectivity is, and whether or not what we name "the human" is, in fact, more machinic than many of us might like to admit.

*Dale Bradley is an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Communications, Popular Culture, and Film at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. His research interests include the discursive analysis of contemporary technoculture and the historical emergence of cybersociety. He*



can be reached at [dbradley@brocku.ca](mailto:dbradley@brocku.ca).

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4. Todorov, 161. ↑
5. Todorov, 172. ↑
6. The Golem is a figure from Jewish folklore. It describes a zombie-like being crafted from inanimate material (often sand, clay, or rock) and brought to life via magical incantation. Golems are typically portrayed as slavish servants who follow their instructions to the letter. Hence the oft-noted connection to robots. ↑
7. E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1997), 87-118. ↑
8. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991). ↑
9. N. Katharine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 84-112. ↑
10. Hayles, 131-159. ↑
11. Hayles, 222-246. ↑

12. Zizek, 14. ↑

13. Zizek, 14. ↑

14. Zizek, 15. ↑

15. Hayles, 288. ↑

16. Cronenworth, 35. ↑

17. Cronenworth, 31. ↑

18. See Steve Best, "Robocop: The Crisis of Subjectivity," in *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Website*. <<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/best1.htm>>, (1987). Steve Best, "Robocop-out: The Recuperation of the Subject," in *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Thought* 13, no. 1-2, (1989): 44-55. Mark Poster, "RoboCop," in *Zone 6: Incorporations*, eds Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, (New York: Urzone, 1992): 436-440. ↑

19. Tellote, *Science Fiction Film*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 177. ↑

20. See

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