RoboCop

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Omar Ahmed. *RoboCop*. Auteur, 2018. Constellations Studies in Science Fiction Film and TV. Paperback. 117 pp. $15. ISBN 9781911325253.

IT is disappointing, though no longer surprising, to see an academic book so riddled with compositional errors and infelicities as this one is make it into print. One can find writing problems—sometimes more than one—on many pages in this book. These range from the relatively minor (e.g. recurrent problems with punctuation, or inconsistent italicizing of titles—especially problematic when the main character and the movie have the same name) up to sentence-level issues. On page 25, for instance, a sentence says the opposite of what it evidently means: "A departure from the whiteness of the American Western is reversed by the presence of a black sergeant"; presumably, the black sergeant's presence reverses the whiteness of the Western, so a departure from that reversal would in fact *restore* said whiteness. On the following page, we read, "By having Reed refuse the advances of the lawyer signifies both his authority as an honest blue-collar lawman and establishes the power he exercises over the precinct" (26). Such sentences suggest, at best, inept revision, but the problems seem more basic and extensive than that. For instance, a sentence such as "[*Outland*] reworked *Alien*'s theme of the merciless corporation with a deceptively savage rapt" (49) is simply incomprehensible (unless "rapt" as a noun has some specialized meaning that escapes me—and the dictionary). Incorrect or eccentric word choices are especially problematic; for instance, we read of an "apocryphal clash" (93) between Boddicker and RoboCop, when, presumably, "apocalyptic" might be the intended word, but if so, it's not really an appropriate word in that context, either. That such extensive and basic slips, whether merely accidental or the result of poor writing, survived the editing and proofing process is disheartening. Nor do such problems encourage one's faith in the content; if writing problems are so pervasive, can we rely on what the book is actually saying to be accurate? A professionally-published book should not be this riddled with basic errors.

Such problems are especially unfortunate, as a short (under 100 pages of actual text), basic reader such as this could be a useful and inexpensive tool for

undergraduate students. The frequently casual and subjective tone of this book suggests that its target audience is the general reader or student rather than the more seasoned academic, though Ahmed certainly shows that he has done his research. Despite its brevity, the book does show a good range of scholarly influences and cites reasonably extensively from earlier work on *RoboCop*. Unfortunately, though, the book lacks an index, so tracking how Ahmed uses his sources (and even where in the book key scenes or characters are discussed) is a bit of a challenge. The book is divided into four chapters, plus an introduction and afterword. The first chapter focuses on "Genre Mutations," and explores the generic hybridity of the film. Its main focus is the ways in which *RoboCop* plays on the tropes of the Western, though other genres, such as horror, noir, and the cyborg film, are also considered. *RoboCop*'s echoes of the Western have been explored before, but Ahmed's reading provides some additional insights. His comments on race, for instance, are of value, though the blackness of corporate drone Johnson is oddly ignored. The second chapter, "Neo-fascist Corporate Bodies," addresses the film's politics, especially its ambivalent treatment of RoboCop's relationship with OCP. The focus here is perhaps a bit fuzzy—more on ambivalence than on constructing a reading—but again, Ahmed has some interesting things to say, albeit arguably more for those less familiar with the critical tradition. Chapter three, "American Jesus," is potentially the most interesting but also the least successful, as it does not have a sufficiently sharp focus on the film itself. The final chapter, on "The Legacy of *RoboCop*," offers a brief account of how the film was initially reviewed (more positively in England than in North America), how it was marketed and franchised, and how it might be seen in relation to some of Verhoeven's later films, notably his other SF films: *Total Recall* (1990), *Starship Troopers* (1997)—which together with *RoboCop* tend to be viewed as a loose SF trilogy, the former of which is overrated and the latter of which is underrated, according to Ahmed—and *The Hollow Man* (2000), Verhoeven's final SF, and final Hollywood, movie. The shortness of each chapter does not allow for close or detailed reading, so generally the book offers limited insights. All the books in this series are similarly brief, so Ahmed cannot be faulted for the limitations the brevity imposes, but nevertheless, the book is unable to offer much depth or detail.

Overall, the book would work best as a basic introduction to the film for undergraduates, if not for the extensive writing problems. Those already steeped in the critical tradition surrounding the film, or SF film generally, may find occasional

insights and useful rehearsals of the film's key elements, notably its satirical and subversive agenda, but will not find much new. However, I cannot advise assigning this book for students, either, given its extensive compositional problems. Overall, then, this is not a book I can recommend, for either the advanced or the beginning scholar.