

Film Review: ‘RoboCop’



Jose Padilha's smarter-than-expected remake of the 1987 action classic holds a mirror to the political present.

Guy Lodge

If anyone was under the impression that Paul Verhoeven’s 1987 “RoboCop” was a vision of the future, Jose Padilha’s pumped-up, cleaned-up update makes it clear that this sci-fi concept merely holds a mirror to the political present. Shifting the prime target of its satire from corporate greed to post-9/11 jingoism, this well-cast, smarter-than-expected remake repairs much of the damage done to the iron-fisted lawman’s reputation by meat-headed sequels and spinoffs; it’s a less playful enterprise than the original, but meets the era’s darker demands for action reboots with machine-tooled efficiency and a hint of soul. The new model should capitalize on a dearth of equivalent genre fare in theaters, without automatically activating a franchise relaunch.

The once-mooted prospect of a Darren Aronofsky-directed “RoboCop” was certainly tantalizing, but producers Eric Newman and Marc Abraham were wise to secure Brazilian adrenaline-monger Padilha (best known for his hard-edged “Elite Squad” thrillers) to take the reins here on his first English-language feature. Just as the bleakly cynical liberalism of the original “RoboCop” was ideally suited to Verhoeven’s European perspective, so the new film benefits from a foreign helmer’s distance as it sends up American right-wing security concerns with a mostly straight face. Stylistically, however, Padilha and Verhoeven are very different brands of outsider: While the Dutchman aimed to beat Hollywood at its own flashy game, the Brazilian brings a rough, street-level energy to the proceedings, sometimes to the point of affectation.

Set in an eminently recognizable 2028, “RoboCop” begins, as did the first film, with a current-affairs broadcast. Rather than the chirpily delivered evening-news bulletin of the original, however, we’re now tuned into “The Novak Element,” a Fox News-style outlet for the heated political commentary of Pat Novak — a Rush Limbaugh-like figure played by Samuel L. Jackson, and an unreliable Greek chorus of sorts for the film. Blessed with a toupee straight from the “Hunger Games” school of future hairstyling, Novak is a vocal ally of OmniCorp, a U.S. robotics development corporation whose peacekeeping machines are — in the first of several key deviations from the original script — already in use abroad, though not in “robophobic” America, where politicians fiercely debate the ethics of non-human policing.

Working with brilliant but ambivalent scientist Dennett Norton (Gary Oldman), OmniCorp CEO Raymond Sellars (Michael Keaton) hits on a solution: a robot fused with human body and brain parts that is capable of making moral judgment calls. Over in Detroit — the city's crime-ridden image scarcely updated from 1987 — a prototype emerges in the sharp-jawed form of slain cop Alex Murphy (Swedish star Joel Kinnaman). With his comatose remains signed off to OmniCorp by grieving wife Clara (Abbie Cornish), Murphy is reformulated as RoboCop — though when he underperforms in initial testing runs, Norton has his brain rewired to follow software rather than human impulses.

This essential elimination of the moral conscience that makes RoboCop politically palatable is snuck through the system, and the android Murphy is a hit on the Motor City streets, while Clara grows increasingly suspicious of OmniCorp's motives. Order is short-lived, however, as Murphy's emotions gradually override his programming — a development that the script's already sketchy movie science sentimentally attributes to the power of the human spirit — and he sets about solving his own not-quite-murder.

Joshua Zetumer's script cleverly reshapes the psychological quest of the original film to fit a 21st-century American culture arguably more preoccupied with emotional intelligence than it was in the late Nixon era: Where the first film had RoboCop discovering his humanity after being conceived and introduced as a robot, his more complex goal here is to regain the human qualities he was initially given, and by which he has been advertised to the public, politicians and his family alike. There's an increased satirical focus here on the corporations' positioning of RoboCop as both product ("He transforms!" a marketer enthuses, slyly referencing a certain other metallic action series) and patriot. Tellingly, as befits a humanized, Captain America-style national protector, the new RoboCop suit has a retractable visor that allows the audience access to Murphy's face earlier and more often than in the 1987 film. (Purists may object, but there's only so long you can reasonably keep the model-handsome Kinnaman covered up.)

Placing Murphy's wife and child at the center of the narrative is essential to this more EQ-driven approach, though it's also a more predictable — even conservative — route than that taken by the original film, which effectively wrote the family out of the picture, instead placing the emotional burden of recognition on his spunky female partner. Zetumer and Padilha's modernization of the RoboCop mythos doesn't extend to feminism: Though played with some steel by Cornish, Clara has no identity or agency beyond her marriage to Murphy, while more coldly high-powered roles for Marianne Jean-Baptiste and Jennifer Ehle (both excellent) are hardly flattering.

The cast in general performs well above the minimum demands of the material. Kinnaman lacks the lithe wryness Peter Weller brought to the 1987 film, but has his own cool authority, while Keaton (perhaps having less fun with the role than the initially cast Hugh Laurie might have done) is a reserved, genuinely off-putting villain, leaving the maniacal business to a ripe Jackie Earle Haley as OmniCorp's chief militarist. Best in show, handily, is Oldman, whose tender ruefulness as Norton does a good deal of the film's emotional legwork.

Verhoeven's film stirred controversy with its level of bloodshed, though the franchise's strange evolution toward a youth audience not necessarily attuned to the first film's irony — fans may even remember the "RoboCop" cartoon series — diluted that intensity. The new "RoboCop" hits on a compromise: The degree of direct onscreen gore is sufficiently modest to ensure a PG-13 rating, but the clammy, on-the-ground atmosphere conjured by Padilha and Lula Carvalho's restlessly roving camera feels both urgent and adult. After the "Elite Squad" films, Padilha knows the perils of urban warfare better than most, though the handheld authenticity card can be overplayed in the film's talkier interior scenes.

On the design front, the updates to the familiar RoboCop iconography are respectful but sleekly streamlined. Gone are the endearingly clunky robot effects of the original film, as all the machinery here — including, of course, that all-important suit, here given a slight Daft Punk accent — exudes contempo architectural glamour. Uniformly solid visual-effects work is most arresting in the lab scenes that show what remains of Murphy without his armor — a reveal that leads one to wonder, at least fleetingly, how a David Cronenberg "RoboCop" remake might play out.