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The Monstrous Masculine:
Male Metamorphosis in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

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Contents

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Abstract

There exists a body of detailed and insightful academic work on the monstrous feminine body in cinema, which for the most part draws on psychoanalytical readings of the texts, as is the case, for example, in the seminal works *The Monstrous Feminine* (Barbara Creed 1993) and *The Female Grotesque* (Mary Russo 1995). There is a dearth, however, of material dealing with male monsters, what one may term the monstrous masculine. Contemporary popular cinema provides a wealth of representations of men who undergo striking physical and psychological change through, for example, mutation, technological augmentation or infection. The initial aims of this dissertation are to investigate the representation of male corporeal transformation in science fiction cinema, and to identify the models of monstrous masculinity that emerge from these depictions. Through close reading of some key texts and a consideration of the historical and socio-cultural contexts of the films' production I will determine the mechanisms at work in the construction of men as monsters as well as provide some answers as to why overwhelmingly male directors portray their male protagonists in this way. Furthermore, I will explore growing presence of posthumanism in relation to the monstrous masculine and elucidate the influence of posthuman ideas as a component of contemporary discourse on the creation and understanding of the male monster in popular cinema.

The transformations analysed in this dissertation all instigate or entail, through different mechanisms and devices, the transgression of boundaries upon and within the bodies of the protagonists. The resulting slippage in categories —the blurring of binaries such as male/female, human/machine, self/Other, etc— produces a monstrous masculine body. I offer five categories of masculine monstrosity for consideration in the

chapters that follow, in which the male protagonist becomes: mutant, disempowered cyborg, cyborg super-villain, alien, or transhuman. I will identify and examine which binaries are transgressed in these metamorphosing bodies, what consequences this has in terms of the representation of masculinity, and also will provide some explanations as to why certain transgressions are associated with certain figures. Furthermore, I will address the issue of why these identifiably masculine characters so often undergo profound, often painful, corporeal and psychological change. As part of this endeavour, it will be necessary to take into account the context in which the films were made, released and viewed, since film does not exist in a void, but is of course influenced and shaped by the external reality in which we live.

Introduction: Of Men and Monsters

0.1 Masculine Anxieties and Metamorphosis in Science Fiction Cinema

In science fiction cinema, particularly in the contemporary period, one can observe a proliferation of images of male bodies undergoing extreme transformations. These monstrous masculine figures are a pervasive feature of popular film, and yet very few academic studies have been made relating to this phenomenon. Before expanding on the masculine aspect of monstrosity, it would be appropriate to briefly consider the relevance of the monster in cultural representation. The monster is "an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category and a resistant Other" (Cohen 1996: x) and thus is the canvas onto which we project the parts of ourselves that we would rather repress. They reveal the dark heart of the human —our deepest fears, anxieties and desires. This makes the cultural representation of monsters a fascinating and important area of research when considering the construction of social norms related to gender, sexuality, race, etc. When it comes to existing analyses of the gendering of the monstrous, there is an abundance of research available that discusses woman as monster in cinema. Generally these studies apply psychoanalytical theoretical tools to their analysis, such as Barbara Creed's seminal text *The Monstrous Feminine,* which argues that "every encounter with horror, in the cinema, is an encounter with the maternal body" (1993: 166), and so all monstrous bodies are, on some level, feminine. What I intitally realised was that the tools offered by this argument are not very helpful in analysing muscle-bound male monsters, and upon further investigation I ascertained that, contrary to the psychoanalytical view, most male monsters' monstrosity stems from their embodiment

of masculinity, rather than the feminine. I then became determined to uncover what defines the monstrous masculine, as well as how and why men are portrayed as unstable monsters on screen.

Kirk Combe and Brenda Boyle, who in their book *Masculinity and Monstrosity in Contemporary Hollywood Films* assert that concepts of masculinity and monstrosity are central to a formulation of a predominating world view (2013: 6). The fact that these two concepts are central themes of a large number of popular cinema's most successful releases suggests that the intersection of masculinity with monstrosity is an area ripe for investigation. Furthermore, if we are to understand that masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 1998: 2), the monstrous male body is the perfect site on which to read and analyse masculinities. Equally, cinema appears as an ideal arena for the consideration of gendered representations, since as Halberstam observes "the seemingly banal pop cultural text, with its direct connection to mass culturally shared assumptions is more likely to reveal the key terms and conditions of the dominant than an earnest and 'knowing' text" (2011: 60). In fact, one can argue that film is as much an influence on as it is influenced by society: "Films do more than simply reflect or set up a model for imposing vacuity wherein the real world is reduced to a screenplay — rather they make varying and specific contributions to the nature of that reality". (Adil and Kennedy 2009: 219-220).

This relationship between film and the 'real' is particularly striking when it comes to the representation of technology in popular, and perhaps especially Hollywood, cinema. Despite being inherent to the filmmaking process new or advanced technologies tend to be negatively portrayed —or at least regarded with suspicion— in these texts. When discussing the ongoing dialogue between cinema and the 'real' in his

book *Technophobia!*, which discusses the representation of technology in science fiction texts, Dinello uses the example of the Iraq war, stating that both the war and science fiction films dramatise a disturbing aspect of technology, which "is energized by a deadly alliance of military, corporate, and religious interests" (2005: 4). Thus, "Drawing a vision of the future from attitudes, moods, and biases current among its artists and their audience, science fiction not only reflects popular assumptions and values but also gives us an appraisal of their success in practice" (ibid 5). This vision is overwhelmingly technophobic: machines are portrayed as powerful and threatening, while the fusion of the human with technology creates posthuman entities invariably depicted as monstrous. As Adil and Kennedy observe: "the paranoid gaze on/of technology […] not only articulates anxieties about the threat to the boundaries between self and Other, animate and inanimate and most crucially reality and illusion, but also marks an attempt to imagine a new kind of subjectivity" (2009: 224-225). As part of my investigation into the representation of monstrous masculine metamorphosis, I will take, then, into account the role of technology —or, the cinematic representation of technology— in the (de)construction of masculine identity, and the creation of posthuman corporeal and subjective forms. The thesis I argue here is that the figure of the monstrous metamorphosing man in popular science fiction cinema acts as a reflection of anxieties that arise from a discourse concerning the nature of hegemonic, or ideal, masculinity. Mainstream media propagates the idea of masculinity in crisis not only through debates directly related to what a man should be, but also through a proliferation of varied and often conflicting images of manhood. As a result, defining masculinity become increasingly difficult, and embodying an ideal masculinity almost impossible. Hence the male body under threat, undergoing constant change and fluctuation becomes an enduring image in popular cultural representations. Technology,

another great source of anxiety and fear in the contemporary period, plays an important role in the destabilisation of gendered identities and thus warrants an extended discussion of how masculine anxieties intersect with technophobic fears. It is my contention that technology is portrayed and perceived as a disturbing and subversive force that threatens to undermine borders and binaries relating to the human. The interaction and fusion of the male body with technological elements gives rise to identifiably masculine posthuman subjects who come to perform what can be termed 'alternative masculinities' —successful in their projection of masculinity, but not conforming to the hegemonic norm. In the following chapters we will see how the degree of deviation from the hegemonic ideal varies according to both the monstrous masculine figure in question and the period in which the films were released. I intend to establish whether these characters' potential to offer attractive alternatives to hegemonic masculinity is linked to the category of monstrous masculinity they represent —mutant, cyborg, etc.— or if in fact monstrous masculine characters have become more, or less, subversive over time.

0.2 Methodology: Defining Masculinity, the Monster and the Posthuman

Although this thesis intends to offer a contribution to the field of Film Studies, and therefore utilises its tools in the analyses of the films discussed, the overall approach is interdisciplinary in nature. By drawing together theories of gender, Science Fiction Studies, Masculinities Studies and ideas from Gothic and Horror Studies I am afforded an insight into the interplay of factors in the construction of masculine monsters on screen. Without limiting myself to the view provided by psychoanalysis, I investigate representations of masculine identities as performative elements with a connection to the 'real' world and lived experience. Furthermore, a consideration of the

affective nature of scenes of horror sheds light on the way in which these types of representations encourage the viewer to engage with their own experience of corporeality, their relationship to their own body and its identity. The framework I have constructed allows me to not only perform a textual analysis of specific cinematic constructions, but also to situate them within their socio-historical context in order to observe the ways in which popular cinema engages with contemporary discourse. The representation of technology in these science fiction productions, for instance, reflects and simultaneously feeds into real-world anxieties, fears and hopes surrounding scientific advancements, particularly in relation to human interaction with and dependence on new technologies. The insistence on technology and its increasing interconnection with human corporeality, observed on both a narrative and visual level in the films analysed throughout this thesis, has necessitated that I take due consideration of the image of the posthuman, and analyse it as such, using the tools of science fiction studies and theories of posthumanism. It is my contention that the posthuman in science fiction cinema is inevitably represented as monstrous, a fact alluded to by Fred Botting when he states that "Posthumanity erases all human distinctions and differences, differences sustained precisely in the relation to monstrosity" (2008: 158). Again, an interdisciplinary approach becomes necessary and justified, with technology used and depicted as a gothic device, a fusion of the theories of the gothic and of posthumanism is required.

Having discussed the overall methodology of this thesis, it is now pertinent to provide more detailed explanations of some of the terms and concepts that appear throughout the following chapters, and indeed form the basis of my analysis. As regards masculinity, I examine the various representations of men from the view that masculinity, as a gender, is in no way contingent on biological sex or, in other words, a

male body. As Judith Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* (1990), male and female genital body markings do not 'cause' or produce gender. Instead, gender identity is expressed in the unconscious repetition of sets of learned behaviours that signal masculinity or femininity, thereby constituting what is perceived as a 'natural' or given gender. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Butler clarifies that "Performativity must not be understood as a singular or deliberate 'act' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). Therefore, we can surmise that "masculinity is a performance; or an accumulation of performances. Masculinity is what a body *does* at particular times, rather than a universal and unchangeable condition of 'who you are'" (Hickey-Moody 2019: 31). The application of 'performativity', disassociating masculinity from the male body, allows for an examination of the gendered representations of those nominally masculine characters whose bodies undergo extreme physical transformations in popular cinematic science fiction texts and thereby understand which behaviours and acts signal or express masculine identity in this context.

Secondly, following Raewyn Connell and other masculinity studies scholars, I understand that "We need to speak of 'masculinities', not masculinity. Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct gender differently". Furthermore, it is important to note that these different masculinities co-exist within given structures or institutions —for example in one workplace or ethnic group— in which "there will be different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using a male body" (Connell 2000: 10). These different masculinities do not, however, possess equal status, instead they exist within a complex hierarchy where some are dominate while others are subordinated or marginalised. One constant, however, is that in the overwhelming majority of situations "there is some hegemonic

form of masculinity —the most honoured or desired" (ibid). As Connell set out in *Gender and Power* (1987), a model of masculinity becomes hegemonic, through social ascendancy "embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, welfare/taxation policies, and so forth" (184). One element in play in social ascendancy, and therefore in the production and promotion of hegemonic masculinities, is the Hollywood film industry and mainstream cinema as a whole since it is a key component of mass media content. Hegemonic masculinity changes and evolves over time, along with the socio-historical context of the culture.. It does, however, tend to be a model that "contains no evidence of femininity" (Hickey-Moody 2019: 19), and generally features representations, or performances, of "courage, leadership, protectiveness, strength, power, control and command" (ibid: 1). This idealised version of masculinity often goes hand-in-hand, however, with more negative attributes such as violent aggression, homophobia and sexism. As Connell observes, "The dominance of hegemonic masculinity over other forms may be quiet and implicit, but may also be vehement and violent, as in the case of homophobic violence" (2002: 11).

The hegemonic masculinity model has garnered some criticism in academia, with some arguing that a tendency to reify the term, so that it becomes a fixed character type englobing all the objectionable things men do. In this way the image becomes more and more extreme, and "the less it has to be owned by the majority of men" (Connell 2000: 23). However, it is important to remember that the concept of hegemony addresses relational issues, the connections and hierarchies that exist among men and between men and women, and thus "the hegemonic masculinity model suggests the possibility of uncoupling male physiological attributes *from* masculinity, something that foregrounds the non-necessary character of that coupling" (Vavrus 2002: 358, emphasis in original). In bringing together the concepts of the hegemonic masculine ideal and

performativity, it emerges that "masculinity is an ideal which everyone always (and only ever) 'imitates'. Masculinity is a powerful social fiction around which bodies and subjectivities are organised" (Hickey Moody 2019: 31). The 'successful' performance of a hegemonic masculinity can only ever be provisional, since the ideal 'pure' masculinity is a fantasy, with the result that men continually strive for the impossible ideal while their failure to do so is interpreted as a 'crisis of masculinity'. Although discussions of masculinity in crisis proliferated in discourse from the late 1970s onwards (Kimmel 1987), many academics have noted that masculinity has been 'in crisis' since at least the 1800s and therefore, as Hickey-Moody argues, "Hegemonic masculinity can be seen as somewhat synonymous with crisis" (2019: 34). Since the concept of a fixed idealised masculinity is what drives the sense of crisis in masculinity, deconstructing the idea of a stable, unitary gender identity is central to this analysis.

As the focus of this dissertation is the representation of masculinities through the transformation of the male body I will now briefly explain how bodies are essential to the construction of gender. Bodies are often the site of enactments of gendered performances, which is not to say that biological sex prefigures gender or even that the body is a 'given', fixed entity. As Connell notes "Gender is the way bodies are drawn into history; bodies are arenas for the making of gender patterns […] Masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction. They come into existence as people act" (2000: 12). This is because, as Judith Butler observes in *Bodies that Matter*, bodies only exist within the productive constraints of highly gendered regulatory schemes in which materiality and signification are interlinked from the very beginning. "The regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference" (Butler 1993: 2), which is

to say that biological sex is, in the same way as gender, constructed through the performative acts in order to "qualify the body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (ibid). This process of materialisation, stabilising over time into a categorisably male or female body creates boundaries and fixity, binary oppositions such as self/other or male/female. When a body refuses to conform to this normative system —for example when the body of a character coded as masculine enters into a transformative process— the system itself is called into question, deconstructing the notion of fixed, binary identities.

The transformation of the male body, as mentioned above, results in the male protagonists of the films under discussion becoming monstrous. In order to undertake a detailed analysis of this monstrous masculine aspect, it will be necessary to first define the concept of 'monster'. The word monster is derived from the Latin *monere,* meaning portent or warning, while the related root latin word *monstrare* means to show. The monster is thus something visibly excessive that reveals hidden dangers and reflects repressed fears and anxieties. I contend that, in cinema, a body becomes monstrous through the transgression of multiple unstable boundaries, upon and within the flesh. As Xavier Aldana observes, "Gothic bodies produce fear through their interstitiality: they are scary because they either refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilise received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body" (2014: 5). Monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 1996: 6).

As in the construction of gender and sex described by Judith Butler, when a body fails to stabilise into a categorisable form —with a clearly signalled sex, gender, race etc.— it becomes a site of disturbance in the system. Therefore, "the exclusionary

matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form a constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (1993: 3). The abject outside is essential to the construction and continuation of the domain of the subject, becoming the defining limit of the subject. In other words, for the normative subject the abject represents all that the human is not, thereby allowing the subject to define itself against the repudiated Other. In *Skin Shows,* Halberstam concludes that the success "of any given monstrous embodiment depends on its ability to be multidimensional in terms of the horror it produces" (1995: 110), in other words, it must represent the transgression of a number of normalising boundaries. The author also claims, however, that in contemporary cinema, the monster tends "to show clearly the markings of deviant sexualities and gendering but less clearly the signs of race" (ibid 4). I tend to agree that the monster's construction does rely heavily on the disruption of gender and sex boundaries, though race is a decisive factor in monstrosity in some texts —for example, the *Star Wars* saga and *District 9.*

Despite the monster's status as abjected being, placed outside normative society, they are never wholly Other to the subject, and it is this uncertainty that produces fear. As Margrit Shildrick explains, "So long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into an oppositional category of not-me" (2002: 2). But when a monster is liminal and begins to reflect aspects of ourselves that are repressed "then its indeterminate status —neither wholly self nor wholly other— becomes deeply disturbing" (ibid: 3). Disturbing is an important concept here, as the monster does not always exclusively provoke fear in the viewing subject, feelings such as disgust, unease and vulnerability are also central to the disturbing atmosphere

produced by monstrous embodiment. As we will see throughout the following chapters, monsters are always liminal, and always display a transgression of boundaries on or within the body and psyche. In this way, the monster signals the impermanence and frailty of the binaries that define society, revealing the vulnerability of the self as a unique, independent and fixed entity. If then, following Judith Butler, the body is not a prediscursive reality but instead the site of production of identity, it becomes the locus of contested meanings, and therefore signals that identity is in fact fluid and unstable rather than given and fixed. Thus the body makes strange the categories of beauty, humanity and identity that we continue to cling to in order to define our position as subjects within normative society. In this way the monster can signify "other ways of being in the world" (Shildrick 2002: 10), and may act as a symbol for change, for alternative embodiments beyond the confines of a patriarchal insistence on binary existence. If the monster is neither self nor other, male nor female, masculine nor feminine, it then represents an embodiment that does not rely on an idealised conception of the human that depends on adherence to binaries and a stable, unchanging identity. It could be argued that this thesis focuses on men and masculinities and therefore uses a binary scheme, this is a reflection of the state of popular contemporary cinematic representations of gender. In highlighting and investigating the binary nature of these texts, rather than leave them to be taken for granted, I hope to open up a discussion about the construction of gender on screen.

In its blurring of boundaries, horror "helps us to imagine otherwise, outside of the parameters of 'the human' in its generation of posthuman embodiments both horrific and sublime" (Hurley 1995: 205). For this reason, the posthuman is an important area of study in this dissertation as it is my contention that the creation of monsters leads to the positing of alternative —posthuman— corporeal configurations. It will be necessary to

offer a definition of the posthuman at this point, as it remains a somewhat vague and contested term in critical academia. Different authors understand and define the concept of the posthuman in distinct ways, with some conflating or confusing posthumanism with transhumanism, an altogether different idea. The transhumanist movement is one that actively seeks to improve the human species through the use of technology. As Michael Hauskeller notes: "A radical transformation of human nature is sought and demanded, in the name of reason, science and progress, and in the spirit of enlightenment and humanism" (2016: 11). In contrast, the posthuman "does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human; it does not represent an evolution or a devolution of the human. Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity" (Halberstam and Livingston 1995: 10). So, whereas transhumanism relies on a universal humanism in order to define the transhuman as an improved human, the posthuman is not bound by such essentialist claims. The posthuman as philosophical and academic construction of the kind posited by Rosi Braidotti, "promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming" (2013: 49), thus removing the need for categorical upholding of binaries when defining human identity and opening up the possibility of perceiving the human subject from an alternative angle.

In his doctoral dissertation Jaume Llorens presents the posthuman as an icon in science fiction, arguing that it gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s as an evolution of the cyborg figure —a representation of the intersection of technology and the human. Furthermore, he argues that as an icon the posthuman acts a tool for the interrogation of the impact of technology on society, culture and identity. Taking Llorens's position as a starting point, I define the posthuman as, essentially, a fusion of the human and technology, where the resulting metamorphosed subject is no longer entirely human. What is perhaps not given enough weight in Llorens' original definition is the

importance of embodiment to both the representation and the potential of the posthuman subject. The question of embodiment is central to N. Katharine Hayles's seminal text on posthumanism, *How We Became Posthuman* because, as she observes, "for information to exist it must *always* be instantiated in a medium" (1999: 13 emphasis in original). In other words, a body is necessary in order for a subject to meaningfully exist in the world, as "Experiences of embodiment, far from existing apart from culture, are always imbricated within it" (ibid 197). This is reflected in film, as time and again it has proved impossible to successfully represent a disembodied transhuman subject. Corporeality will therefore remain central to both my definition of the posthuman and my interpretation of the relationship between monstrosity and the posthuman in representations of metamorphosing masculine subjects in science fiction cinema.

Despite focussing on monstrous gothic bodies I have not chosen to limit this study to the horror genre, instead selecting a corpus from science fiction cinema, in particular texts that integrate gothic horror elements into the visual and narrative aspects of the texts. In *Gothic* Fred Botting highlights the diffusion of horror throughout the 20th Century in a multiplicity of different genres and media: "Science fiction, the adventure novel, modernist literature, romantic fiction and popular horror writing often resonate with Gothic motifs that have been transformed and displaced by different cultural anxieties" (1996: 9). Later in the volume, Botting devotes a section to science fiction and its capacity to reflect and address contemporary anxieties from the fear of "disintegrating Western cultural and social formations" in cyberpunk to robotic doubles that in their mechanism and artificiality signal the erasure or lack of any individual human essence (ibid 106). This rupture of the border between horror and science fiction has been extremely productive over the last decades, offering not only visual and visceral portrayals of the transforming body but also the representation of posthuman

bodies —a theme that continues to gain traction in contemporary culture and discourse. Examining these depictions side by side provides both an insight into the (de)construction of masculinity and a vision of the future —the images in cultural discourse that posit potential alternative masculine embodiments.

I identify the trend for depictions of monstrous masculine metamorphoses as having taken off in the early 1980s, at least in part thanks to the advances in special and visual effects that made possible the graphic depiction of corporeal transformation on screen. Steffen Hantke writes of the horror film that "special effects primarily put the body on display, as an object of violence, or in the throes of, or as the final product of, unnatural, accelerated, hybridizing transformation" (2004: 36). It was in this period that the body horror genre really made its mark, as directors such as David Cronenberg (*Videodrome* 1983, *The Fly* 1986), John Carpenter (*The Thing* 1982) and John Landis (*An American Werewolf in London* 1981) put new cinematic techniques to work to visually portray the destruction and reconfiguration of male bodies. The male mutants of 1980s body horror have multiplied and endured in the science fiction genre and sub-genres in the years since, from depictions of cyborgs and cyberspace to aliens and transhumans. This dissertation, then, will draw its key texts from popular science fiction cinema from the early 1980s to the most recent releases of the 2010s, where we have seen more and more representations of disembodied identities.

0.3 State of the Art: Alternatives to the Monstrous Feminine

In the field of Film Studies there exists a relatively small body of work dealing with the monstrous body and its relation to gender. These works overwhelmingly address the depiction of female monsters, what Barbara Creed terms the 'monstrous feminine'. Creed uses in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) a psychoanalytical approach

to analyse the representation of women as monsters in the cinematic horror genre. This perspective leads the author to supposedly challenge the patriarchal view of woman as victim by proposing that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body. Despite claiming that "The presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity" (1993: 7), the reliance on psychoanalysis in this context restricts her view to essentialist Freudian notions of gender and sexuality. Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) encounters similar pitfalls in its exploration of the Final Girl in the slasher movie and its focus on audience identification with either male murderers or female victims.[1] Furthermore, while psychoanalytical readings "open very fertile ground for understanding some of the metaphoric and/or psychological implications of the horror genre […] They do not offer a way into considerations of how horror might be seen as a lived-in experience and, ultimately, do not fully elucidate notions of the body as sentient flesh" (Aldana 2012: 245), and therefore Creed's readings lack an understanding of the visceral appeal of horror and the films' effects on the viewing audience. Despite the growing influence of affect theories, many academics still choose to base their analyses around the psychoanalytical model when examining the gendered monster, as can be observed in the 2020 edited collection *Re-Reading the Monstrous Feminine*. This work, while claiming to provide a critical reappraisal of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, never really addresses its issues, and instead applies her theories to more recent cinematic texts, as well as films from outside the European and North American tradition, such as the Japanese film *Ringu* (1998) and Thai horror-comedy *Oh My Ghosts!* (2009). It is my understanding that a psychoanalytical reading does not leave room for a consideration of a film's wider

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[1] Clover's theories are popular to this day, as proven by the recent publication of the book *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture* (2020), which extends the discussion of the Final Girl beyond the Slasher Film.

context, which, for me, should represent a central concern of film analysis, since movies are clearly influenced by, influence and generally engage with contemporary politics and social matters, as well as the wider cultural context.

One work that does take into account the fluidity of gender, sex, race and other identities in its exploration of the representation of the monster is Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995), which offers an insightful explanation of how monstrous characters defy categorisation, but does not focus specifically on monstrous masculinity. Xavier Aldana Reyes takes Halberstam's approach to the monstrous body and applies it to more contemporary texts within the horror genre, from body horror films like *The Fly* (1986) and *Re-Animator* (1985), through cyberpunk texts of the 1980s, to horror novels *Cows* (1999) and *Under the Skin* (2004). He argues that the gothic body is defined by 'interstitiality': "they are scary because they either refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilise received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body" (2014: 5). The materialist, structuralist viewpoints put forward by these authors provide the opportunity to avoid the essentialism of psychoanalysis, thereby revealing the unstable nature of gender. Despite this, Aldana chooses not to emphasise the importance of gender in the construction of monstrous corporeality, with the result that the gothic bodies he discusses become ghostly, universalised, when in reality the bodies we view on screen are suffused with not only gendered and sexualised, but also racial and class related significance. Upon reading the aforementioned material, it becomes evident that it is necessary to undertake an extended analysis of the monstrous *masculine* body, combining the tools implemented by the likes of Halberstam and Aldana with those of the field of masculinity studies. When focussing on individual male bodies, rather than the body as a universal signifier, it quickly became apparent that the metamorphosing men depicted in North American and European film are overwhelmingly white and

middle class. This is not a fact I ignore in my analysis of the different iterations of the monstrous masculine covered in this thesis, and in fact I aim to deconstruct this recurring model of masculinity in order to determine the role and significance of race and class in the representation of monstrous men.

Examples of this kind of materialist approach to the study of masculinity in film can be found in Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies* (1994) and Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), both of which examine the representation of the male body in popular action films of the 1980s and early 1990s. Tasker, in particular, underlines the importance of studying the visual representation of bodies alongside their place in the narrative in order to avoid giving too much significance to "the moment of resolution as a way to decode the politics of a given text" (1993: 6), a point with which I certainly agree and will apply to my analyses throughout this dissertation. She also draws attention to the 'either/or' opposition between depictions of masculinity as strength or crisis, which has "tended to frame critical discussion of images of masculinity" (ibid 109). She continues: "it is more appropriate to frame an analysis in terms of 'both/and', a phrasing which allows for a discussion of the multiplicity and instability of meaning" (ibid). Throughout the following chapters I will take the 'both/and' approach, acknowledging the layers of meaning present within a text and recognising visual and narrative tensions in the portrayal of masculine monsters.

As well as addressing a gap in scholarship as regards the portrayal of masculinity and the monstrous in popular, contemporary cinema, this dissertation also highlights the role of film in both reflecting and constituting discourse and, therefore, our lived reality. As the movies discussed form part of the science fiction genre, technology is central to their visual and narrative structures. These cinematic representations engage with the fears, anxieties and hopes of the viewing public,

contributing not only to our understanding of existing technologies but also playing a part in its development in a very real sense. "Film" Adil and Kennedy note, "is a form of language that makes visible things that *are* (in this case technology), and in doing so contributes to the bringing forth of that which is *not yet*" (2009: 220, emphasis in original). Thereby, film contributes to what technology is; not only in developments in the filmmaking process itself —such as special and visual effects— but also in its ethical considerations of potential advancements in other areas of society. Genetic manipulation, prosthetics and reproduction, are just a few among many examples of scientific fields represented and discussed in mainstream cinema.[2] In studying the cinematic portrayal of technology as it interacts with the male body, it becomes possible to evaluate the ways in which the changing technological landscape has impacted on masculine and human identity, as well as the anxieties these developments provoke when considering potential future advancements. By examining monstrous masculinity in conjunction with the posthuman ideas also present in science fiction, I highlight the interplay between these two elements in a way not yet widely explored in academia.

0.4 Figuring the Monstrous Masculine: Five Categories of Monstrosity

This dissertation examines the creation of five monstrous masculine figures discussed over the course of five chapters. These are: man becoming mutant, cyborg, monstrous villain, alien and transcendent posthuman. The chapters are organised in chronological order as regards their popularity in mainstream science fiction cinema. It begins, then, with an analysis of the mutants of early 1980s body horror, before moving on to the cyborg —an enduring icon that came to prominence in the mid-1980s and early 1990s and has persisted to the present day. The third chapter deals with the

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[2] I use mainstream cinema to denote high-grossing, widely-viewed films in the English language with a widespread distribution in North America and Europe in particular.

coming of age story represented in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy (1999-2005) which follows a young boy growing into manhood, undergoing a transformation which will eventually turn him into a monstrous cyborg villain. Chapter four explores man becoming alien through an in-depth analysis of the film *District 9* (2009), part of a canon of films that represent the idea of alien invasion and becoming Other. Finally, the fifth chapter is dedicated to the depictions of transcendent posthumanism that have proliferated in recent years in films such as *Lucy* (2014), *Transcendence* (2014) and *Limitless* (2011). A chronological approach reveals an evolution in the portrayal of masculine monstrosity, which, as I will elucidate throughout this work, reflects the socio-cultural and historical context of the films' production and reception.

In Chapter One, a close-reading of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) provides the basis for an exploration of the recurrent theme of the visually graphic representation of men undergoing mutation in those films of the 1980s in which science fiction intersects with the body horror genre. *Videodrome* is the perfect text for this chapter because it not only features the graphic mutation of the male body, but also deals with contemporary issues affecting masculine identity in North America, like visual media, changing gender roles, and the postmodern condition. An analysis of the portrayal of gendered subjectivity in this film reveals how gender —both femininity and masculinity— is presented as a construction, and is fractured and deconstructed by invasive technology. This technology, in turn, provokes an uncontrollable mutation in the body and mind of the male protagonist, causing multiple boundary slippages — male/female, human/inhuman and reality/illusion to name but a few— in the corporeal realm. *Videodrome* is representative of male mutation in the period in question in that it calls into question the binary constructions mentioned above as well as the Cartesian

separation of mind and body, tying human experience to embodiment and reducing human existence to the corporeal.

Chapter Two, to an extent, breaks with the chronological structure of the dissertation as whole, in that it compares and contrasts two films: the original *RoboCop* (1987) and its remake *RoboCop* (2014). A side-by-side reading of these movies exposes the evolution of the cyborg sub-genre and its representation of masculinity. There appears an increased emphasis on fatherhood as a key feature of an idealised masculine identity, a pattern mirrored in *Terminator* (1983) and its sequel *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). Furthermore, whereas in the original *RoboCop* the Cartesian Dualism is quite consistently undermined, in the remake the film's narrative tends toward the upholding of binaries and the elevation of the mind as it relates to (male) human subjectivity. This chapter also examines how the cyborg genre in general draws on Frankenstein's monster to depict a monstrous masculine body built from disparate parts, undermining in the process the concept of a unique and fixed subjective identity. It is also important to highlight that questions of agency and power are central to these films and their representation of monstrous masculinity as one which lacks the ability to control its own body, actions and behaviours.

Chapter Three, in its exploration of the coming-of-age story presented across the saga composed of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), engages with the the influence and effects of the hegemonic masculine ideal of a boy on the path to manhood. The expectations and demands of patriarchal society on boys and young men are seen to place enormous stress on the central masculine protagonist, whose subjective identity becomes confused and ultimately is torn by the competing prerogatives of his own desires, as well as his superhuman powers, and the

desires of a socially restrictive society, ultimately creating a monstrous villain. This villain, Darth Vader, is a monstrous cyborgian meld of human and machine elements, frighteningly powerful and yet subjugated by an authoritative regime. Along with a depiction of blurred boundaries within the human body and psyche as monstrous, this saga suggests the thirst for excessive power and control to be an important element in the construction of the villain as monster.

Chapter Four explores those films in which human contact with aliens engenders a transformation which threatens to dissolve subjective identity as a fixed essence, converting the subject into the marginalised alien Other to the normative human Self. The central text selected for in-depth analysis is *District 9* (2009), as its visual portrayal of the deconstruction and reconfiguration of the male body is revealing with regard to the representation of gender, race and class as they relate to monstrosity. The film engages with the specificity of its South African setting, depicting a fractured society in which marginalised Others —most notably the refugee aliens who have become stranded en masse in the city— are forced to reside in slum-like camps, similar to Apartheid townships, outside the body of the city itself. A reading of the destructive transformation of the male body of the protagonist thus finds itself inevitably intertwined with that of the city, as the authorities struggle to uphold the literal borders they have established to separate the inhabitants into categorisable groups. The central theme becomes that of the fear of contamination and the resulting perceived loss of integrity, whether of subjective or collective identity. The metamorphosis of the protagonist, and his eventual acceptance of his non-normative physiology as something other than human, will be considered as both a comment on male anxieties surrounding the changing nature of masculinity and as a postulation of a model of posthuman masculinity.

Chapter Five, exceptionally, will consider representations of both femininity and masculinity as regards the portrayal of the transformation into transcendent posthuman, taking as its core texts *Lucy* (2014) and *Transcendence* (2014). These films form part of an emergent sub-genre of science fiction that portrays human subjects leaving their bodies behind to pursue a disembodied, digital existence, perhaps the ultimate realisation of the Cartesian dream of achieving the ascendency of the mind over the corporeal. This comparison reveals not only how depictions of posthumanity remain clearly gendered —and sexed— despite the lack of biological body, but also how the construction of monstrous masculinity differs greatly from that of the monstrous feminine. Although these films tend toward the action thriller as it intersects with science fiction, there persists a sense of dread and horror in their rendering of metamorphosing humans and the dissolution of binaries. ,As the final chapter featuring the most recent cinematic texts discussed in this thesis, it will offer a perspective on the question of whether the representation of masculine identity and its attendant anxieties has evolved over time in the context of mainstream science fiction cinema. Furthermore, the analysis of *Lucy* reveals the key role reproduction and mothering continue to play in the construction of woman as monster.

Chapter One

The Male Mutant: Body Horror and the New Flesh in *Videodrome* (1983)

1.1 Mutating Men in the 1980s: Science Fiction Meets Body Horror

This chapter examines the monstrous masculine within the body horror sub-genre where it intersects with science fiction, a defining feature of which is the depiction of male characters undergoing physical mutations that result in a radically altered corporeal form. Body horror is defined by Paul Wells as "the explicit display of the decay, dissolution and destruction of the body, foregrounding bodily processes and functions under threat, allied to new physiological configurations and redefinitions of anatomical forms" (2000: 114). In a similar vein, Clive Bloom's definition of the genre states that "the body is always and ever totally *there*: its thereness is its horror as an object. Thus it is always *too much* there, too much *in place*" (1996: 231 emphasis in original). Thanks to advances in special and visual effects towards the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s[3] filmmakers found themselves in a position to successfully and convincingly bring these kinds of corporeal transformations to the screen, resulting in a veritable boom in the production of cinematic body horror texts (Aldana 2014: 53). It was now possible to replicate the 'thereness' —or physicality— of the body with prosthetic effects that enforce "a recognition of the limits of materiality" (Hantke 2004: 48), thereby signifying mortality —the ultimate limit of the abject.

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[3] The films of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas in particular are held up as among the first to employ this new form of visual filmmaking, which strove to achieve a sense of photorealism in its use of effects. Pioneering special effects artists of the era include John Dykstra, Doug Trumbull and Rick Baker.

Body horror films intersect with the science fiction genre in their portrayal of the causes of bodily transformation; generally the initial somatic changes are brought about through contact or contamination with technological devices. From popular early examples such as *Alien* (1979)*,* through to classics such as *The Thing* (1982) and *The Fly* (1986), classic body horror films entertained and repulsed audiences well into the 1980s, featuring aspects of both somatic dread and technological threat. In fact, the influence of the genre can be observed even today, in the graphic depictions of mutilation and dismemberment of the highly popular 'torture porn' movies[4]. The visually shocking nature of body horror and its visceral impact on audiences, resulting in an enduring popularity, make it a genre ripe for analysis, and yet few critics have focussed on an examination of masculinity in these films, beyond the idea that men are feminised by their violent transformations. I, like Xavier Aldana, take issue with "the potentially reductive monstrous-feminine model" (2016: 16) and its argument that monstrous bodies cause fear by virtue of characteristics that are perceived as female. However, I do not ascribe to Aldana's argument that the body in horror "is largely ungendered" (ibid). I find, instead, that in the case of both female and male monsters, their gender is writ large in their behaviours, actions and also on and within their bodies. I propose, therefore, to investigate the representation of the masculinity of the mutating male protagonists of the body horror genre as a counterpoint to the monstrous-feminine model, and to explore not only their somatic transformation but its effects on masculine identity and the male psyche. As we will see, in the case of the monstrous masculine mutant, both masculinity and femininity are revealed to be constructed categories, and

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[4] 'Torture porn' films such as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) are described by Xavier Aldana as representing "corporeality as the be-all and end-all of existence" (2014:18) in their portrayal of the cold and stark mutilation and dismemberment of the human body and the absence of spiritual salvation.

thus disconnected from biological sex. Characters' gender performances become fluid, defying binary categorisation, a situation that is reflected in their physiological form.

Often dubbed 'the king of venereal horror' or 'the Baron of blood', one director in particular has been present and active throughout the history of the body horror genre in cinema, contributing not only to the initial boom in production but also to the continuing popularity of the genre today. Canadian director David Cronenberg (b. 1943) rose to fame writing and directing low-budget horror pictures such as *Rabid* (1977) and *Shivers* (1975), among the first to graphically portray human mutations on screen. He continued producing visually graphic body horror films throughout the 1970s and 1980s, reaching what might be termed the mainstream with *Videodrome* (1983), distributed by Universal Pictures in the USA, and attracting his largest audiences yet. This was followed by the hugely successful —for a horror picture— *The Fly* (1986), a favourite of fans and critics alike. The term 'Cronenbergian' has since passed into the vernacular as an adjective describing uncontrolled and repulsive mutations while Cronenberg himself remains synonymous with all things body horror. It is a combination of this popularity, a devotion to the visual representation of body horror and the multi-layered nature of his films that have led me to focus on the Cronenbergian oeuvre in this chapter, taking *Videodrome* in particular as a key text, since it is one of his more overtly science fictional texts and features a series of shockingly visceral mutations of its male protagonist. Although Cronenberg's 1986 film *The Fly* also features a compelling visual metamorphosis of its male protagonist, I opted to focus on *Videodrome* here, in part because it is a film more representative of early body horror in its visual and narrative style. In addition, the themes of surveillance, control and the media covered in *Videodrome* were central to body horror and science fiction texts in the period.

The exploration of "anxieties surrounding transformation, mutation and contagion" (Aldana 2014: 54) is a key feature of body horror texts, and is one of the features that belies its interconnection with the socio-cultural and political situations contemporary to the period in question. Anxieties surrounding contagion have been linked by several critics to the AIDs crisis including Edward Guerro, who wrote that AIDS "has been transcoded into the imagination of science fiction and horror cinema" (1990: 87). I would add that this can be extended to include fears of the effects of emerging technology on society and individuals, as Fred Botting explains in *Limits of Horror* when he writes that "the association between Gothic fiction and technical innovations persists over two centuries" (2008: 105). These films almost always incorporate an element of paranoia into their narratives, which serves as a reflection on the rise of conspiracy theories during the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps even contributing to feeding the trend.[5] Governments and/or private corporations conspire to exploit individuals for their own benefit, occluding information from those (men) at risk while at the same time surveilling and controlling those same individuals. Crucially, in *Videodrome* as in many science fiction texts, technology plays a key role in this subjugation, which speaks to the sense that paranoia operates as "an attempt to make sense of a compromised subjectivity, in this context the new subjectivities engendered by new technologies" (Adil and Kennedy 2009: 224). Frederic Jameson, theorist of the postmodern, understands *Videodrome* as embodying the paranoid narratives of conspiracy that constitute postmodernism, stating that "a host of political readings […] compete for the surface of the text […] A residual atmosphere of global 60s and 70s politics also shrouds the narrative" (1995: 27). *Videodrome*, a science fictional body horror text, engages then with the American political concerns of the time that had,

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[5] Examples of popularised conspiracy theories of the period include those surrounding the Kennedy assassination, the claim that the moon landing was faked, and the belief that Elvis Presley was still alive.

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since the Vietnam war and through the Watergate scandal, found their way into public consciousness. This propensity to interrogate dominant discourses may, as Marta Dvorak suggests, be partly thanks to a current present in North American underground artistic creation during Cronenberg's early career "when underground cinema as well as performance art and art video" was produced which interrogated "traditional aesthetics, gender roles, and essentialism in the domain of representation" (2008: 198). It is also notable that almost all his films were produced in Canada, with Canadian and European producers and backers, "producing a cinema of resistance, even deviation" with respect to "the axiological norms" of the United States as a global and homogenising hyperpower (ibid). Essentially, what Dvorak argues is that Cronenberg's position as geographical outsider coupled with his films' ability to engage with issues affecting North America and its citizens, allows themes of marginality and liminality to come to the fore, as can be observed in the movies' treatment of boundary confusions such as mind/body, femininity/masculinity, real/virtual and human/machine, among others. It is through an interrogation of the binary as perceived on or within the mutating human body that Cronenberg's films engage with contemporary concerns surrounding societal and individual transformation in the realm of identity politics —changes related to gender and racial definitions, for example— and the understanding of what it means to be human in the face of technological advancements at home and in the workplace.

Another central issue in a large number of David Cronenberg's is the ubiquity of mass media and its possible influence on the individual and collective consciousness. Screens are seemingly omnipresent in these films and those people who appear on those screens often speak directly to a specific (male) viewing subject, influencing and in some instances controlling, their thoughts and actions. In Cronenberg's films, television —which can be said to represent the dominant culture or discourse— literally shapes

individual men by (de)constructing their psychological and corporeal identities. In his films, therefore, men are shown not to be self-made, and must confront the fact that they do not hold power even over their own lives; to acknowledge the power and sway of the culture over the individual male is to acknowledge that men never had the power they imagined. As Susan Faludi explains "To say that men are embedded in the culture is to say, by the current standards of masculinity, that they are not men" (1999: 14), since power and control are central to hegemonic masculinities. This interrogation of masculinity and manhood was a growing concern in the United States throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s and featured prominently in television news reports, which referred to the phenomenon as the 'masculinity crisis'. Susan Faludi details the ubiquity of the debate thus: "Newspaper editors, TV pundits, fundamentalist preachers, marketeers, legislators, no matter where they perched on the political spectrum, had a contribution to make to the chronicles of the 'masculinity crisis'" (1999: 6). Whether real or imagined this 'crisis' had an impact on expectations as to how men should behave, and on the way men understood themselves. Cronenberg's films engage with the intersection of masculinities and mass media representation by presenting male protagonists like Max Renn who, following exposure to non-normative and therefore threatening images of gendered sexual behaviour, begins to mutate and to develop an alternative sexual and gendered identity.

The fact that these body horror texts are so linked to sociological and political issues and that they place such an emphasis on societal as well as individual transformation makes a purely psychoanalytical analysis insufficient, relying as it does on a certain essentialism in the belief that the human psyche has fixed components which precede experience in the subconscious. Furthermore, psychoanalytical readings cannot offer interpretations of horror as a lived experience, nor can they expand on

notions of the body as sentient flesh, since reducing the image of the abject to the Oedipal tripartite implies an abstraction that cannot accommodate the impulsive nature of shock or disgust (Aldana 2012). For this reason, although previously many critics have used psychoanalysis as an underpinning for their readings of David Cronenberg's work, the following analysis will not feature much discussion of a psychoanalytical nature, instead drawing on post-structuralism and an affective-corporeal approach that pulls together work on abjection and disgust with a consideration of the emotional and affective aspects of the experience of horror, as well as theories from Gender Studies.

The chapter offers next an examination of the representations of gender in *Videodrome,* focussing on Nicki and Max Renn in particular, which includes analysis of the performative nature of these gendered identities, since they are so often represented on stage or screen in the film. Next, I investigate the monstrous male mutant in the film —that is to say, the ways in which the male protagonist is represented as a monster, and the influences on and consequences of the visual depiction of a man as physiologically and psychologically unstable. Not to be ignored is the presence of the posthuman in the film, a monstrous fusion of the human and the mechanical that is not only disturbing and disruptive, but also, as we will see, can be to some extent liberating.

1.2 Performing Gender in a Mediated Reality

Videodrome (1986) opens with a shot of a television screen, a videotaped wake-up call featuring a gentle female voice, recorded for the male protagonist Max Renn (James Woods) by his secretary Bridey (Julie Khaner). As we see in this opening scene, life within the film is almost wholly mediated by television or the screen. The insidiousness of technology is shown throughout the film to normalise certain discourses, conditioning viewers, forming them as subjects. This is particularly striking

in the scenes at the "Cathode Ray Mission" where the less fortunate queue not for food but to watch television. According to Bianca O'Blivion (Sonja Smits), the head of this charitable organisation, without television civilians are not "plugged into the network". This suggests that television broadcasts have become vital to an individual's functioning in society as it is essential to the social construction of the subject.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) Michel Foucault explains that certain discourses are accepted as truth in society, dominating how we define our world and ourselves. In the world of *Videodrome* the media represents truth; it provides the dominant discourse, setting the norms to which society and the individual must adhere. If power "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault 1977: 194) or, in other words, produces the reality in which the subject exists, in the world of *Videodrome* television is power. Rather than simply reflecting subjectivity, television constitutes it. The power inherent in this constitution of reality takes the form of a diffuse and subtle process of normalisation that works to police the mind and the body, ensuring the perpetuation of the 'norm' and the marginalisation of alternatives. Those behind videodrome wish to regulate society by eliminating 'impure' elements: playing the signal alongside violent and sexual images allows them to target subjects they consider transgressive, or abnormal. In all his films, and particularly in *Videodrome*, Cronenberg focuses on the ways in which "the body is invested and colonized by power mechanisms" and how it is "both a means and an end of social control" (Shaviro 1993: 134-5). In other words, the 'technologies' and 'epistemes' described by Foucault work on the material body, shaping and controlling our understanding and experience of the flesh. Therefore, *Videodrome* is one of those cinematic representations of new technology that "commonly make free will a crucial anxiety/problem in the new media environment" (Adil and Kennedy 2009: 233).

Television and cinema screens imply performance, whether that be in scripted shows or reality TV, the viewer is aware that no person appearing on the screen portrays a completely natural depiction of their life: "Audiences understand that the star is both 'essential' —a flesh-and-blood person who shares our world— but also a constructed entity, produced by media discourses" (Lorek, Monaghan and Stevens 2018: 3). In this way, a connection is drawn within the film between the screen and performance. Performance here refers to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, in which reiterative and citational practices in discourse create regulatory norms, the adherence to which classifies a subject as female or male, feminine or masculine. As Butler notes,

> once 'sex' itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. 'Sex' is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies the body for a life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. (1993: 2).

Following Butler's arguments, gender, and therefore biological sex, are constructed by a series of learned behaviours enacted by the subject in an unconscious manner. Since television and cinema are understood as known sites of performance, in its insistence on the representation of subjects on screen *Videodrome* draws attention to the constructed nature of its characters' gender and biological sex. Steven Shaviro refers to this mediated construction of identity thus: "*Videodrome* makes us obsessively aware that it is cultural and political technology —and not natural necessity— that imposes the restricted economies of organicism, functionalism and sexual representation" (1993: 142). Within the film the character Brian O'Blivion —played by Jack Creley and inspired by Marshall McLuhan[6]— predicts that soon everyone will have "a special

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[6] McLuhan was something of a fixture in media discourse of the late 1960s and 1970s, and coined the phrase "the medium is the message", meaning that the transformation of the human

name" only for their television persona, reserving their given name for real life interactions. With this, he suggests that one performs only when on television, but as the border between television fantasy and real life break down, it becomes clear that everything is performed and that the 'true', or essential, self O'Blivion hoped to preserve does not exist. In fact, the only part of him that survives his mutation is the videotapes he recorded before the death of his material body. He lives on through various screens[7], both televisual and human, as his daughter Bianca refers to herself as "my father's screen". His existence is ephemeral but he exists nonetheless, through performance: this is the "new flesh".

Early in the film Max participates in a television talk show about the morality of depicting violence on television. He is confident and relaxed, and flirts with radio presenter and agony aunt Nikki Brand (Deborah Harry). He plays the role expected of him as the successful director of a private, cable television channel specialising in soft porn and violence, stating it is preferable to have violence on TV than on the streets, thus claiming a separation between a lived reality and a mediated one. If Max is to be taken at his word, and we are to believe that the two realities are indeed separate, then Nikki Brand exclusively occupies the mediated reality. She is introduced on a screen, via a shot of a television camera filming her, and thus is presented as a mediated subject, constructed and presented by the screen. In her television performance Nicki is represented as highly-feminised and sexualised, speaking of living in "a highly excited state of overstimulation" when Max comments on her red dress, which he considers to be very provocative. Nicki Brand is represented as a series of theatrical and provocative

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would be driven by the type of medium itself rather than any specific programme broadcast on it.

[7] The 2014 film *Transcendence* also features a male character who represents himself solely on screens, separating his mind from his physical body in order to prolong his life and retain agency. However, in the later film there is no need for the physical medium of videotapes, as the protagonist exists in the networked, digital realm of 21st Century Internet connected computers. See Chapter Five of this thesis for more detail.

performances, stating that she is perfect for Videodrome, revealing a desire to be watched, to be consumed, and for others to be conscious of her performance. Nicki appears to the audience as a fractured being, viewed almost exclusively on television screens, leaving the viewer unsure of her sustained bodily existence due to the fact that outside her television appearances she first appears to Max after his exposure to the Videodrome signal. There is no guarantee that her visit to his apartment is real, it could well be imagined or virtual. In what we assume to be Max's hallucinations, she performs a heightened female sexuality, her gaze both challenging and inviting. She appears in one scene, for example, as a sensuous mouth, filling the television screen, repeating the words "come to me, Max". In another scene, this time inside the Videodrome set —an earthy looking damp cell— a naked Nicki turns to Max and asks: "what are you waiting for lover? Let's perform".

The fact that Nicki is played by rock star and sex symbol Debbie Harry is not insignificant as the audience is aware both of the media construction of the actress as feminine beauty and simultaneously the construction of her character, by means of the television cameras within the narrative, and the film itself, as a beautiful temptress. I agree with Linda Kauffman's assertion that Nicki Brand, as her name suggests, "is a product" (1998:131), constructed and marketed by television executives, attracting viewers to the network, which are then sold to advertisers. Max refers to the inclusion of pornography and violence in television schedules as a question of economics, and Nicki also forms part of this economic model. My reading is that as a media "personality" she embodies the ideal image of women relayed to consumers. She is a screen for projections of largely male fantasies, an object to be used. She is rarely seen "in the flesh" and is instead portrayed *as* a screen, only appearing on television, underlining cinematically the manipulation of her image as a product to be consumed. The product

is sex, and she essentially becomes an advert, driving Max's pursuit of extreme bodily experiences. From this early scene, then, identity is revealed to be constructed rather than essentialist, the medium which presents the subject has just as much influence —if not more— as the subject itself on its gendered identity. Nicki uses the power of performance, harnessing its potential to convert the body into a site of resistance and liberation from normative discourse. In this way, conscious performance deconstructs the sexual inscriptions of society on the body, allowing sex to be enjoyed as a phantasm, not dependent on sites and acts normally associated with sexual pleasure.

As part of his search for more "challenging", hardcore material for his channel, Max is exposed to the Videodrome signal via the viewing of a snuff broadcast purportedly originating in Pittsburgh. At this point the pretence of a separation of lived and mediated realities can no longer be sustained, as both have equally real physical effects on the world and its subjects within the film. This tends to support Halberstam and Livingston's assertion that:

> Technologies that remake the body also permeate and mediate our relations to the 'real': the real is literally unimaginable or only imaginable within a technological society: technology makes the body queer, fragments it, fames it, cuts it, transforms desire; the age of the image creates desire as a screen: the TV screen is analogous to self, a screen that projects and is projected onto but only gives the illusion of depth. (1995: 16).

As television projects onto and penetrates Max, he begins to experience hallucinations which tangibly transform his material body and, in their threatening of his sanity, undermine any sense of psychological stability, thereby highlighting once again the constructed nature of identity including gender and biological sex. Some critics, like Steven Shaviro, argue that the alteration from Max Renn's "stereotypically 'masculine' performance: sleazy, competitive aggressive, and tough in a self-congratulatory way" to "passive fascination" (1993: 143) in the face of technological

penetration is indicative of a feminisation of the protagonist. I reject the claim that Max is feminised, however, as he remains recognisably masculine throughout, but does demonstrate an alternative form of masculinity to that performed before his exposure to the Videodrome signal. In her discussion of David Cronenberg's *Rabid*, Kelly Hurley writes of the inherent binaries in Freudian psychoanalysis as either/or options that can only comprehend, for example, either a penis or a vagina. She goes on to argue that the posthuman sexual economy of Cronenberg's films is "founded on sexual indeterminacy rather than sexual difference" (1995: 213). In *Videodrome* this same sexual indeterminacy is clear in the filmmaker's decision to have Max mutate both a vaginal opening and the phallic symbol of the hand gun. As Cronenberg himself refers to these mutations as a form of human evolution, in which "We're free to develop different kinds of organs that would give pleasure, and that have nothing to do with sex. The distinction between male and female would diminish, and perhaps we would become less polarized and more integrated creatures" (quoted in Rodley 1993: 82). It is not a case, then, of Max becoming feminised, but instead of him coming to embody a differently gendered subjectivity featuring aspects of both the female and the male. As the Videodrome signal takes effect, fragmenting reality, his body begins to betray his performance of a hegemonic masculinity.

The unmasking of performance demonstrates the constructed-ness of gender and sex, as their construction relies on the abstraction of gender from the body, while sex has traditionally been perceived as a natural given, whereas in the film Max's corporeal transfiguration demonstrates that sexual and gendered identities are neither fixed nor naturally occurring. Linda R Williams calls this transformation a "post-modern 'gender fuck'" (1999: 38) as the "truths" that define sex and gender are proven false, replaced by fluid ambiguous borders that open the body and the mind to new

possibilities. Although with his vaginal opening —emphasised in unrelenting close-up shots— Renn now displays an outward marker of the feminine, the markers of masculinity also remain present on his body, even augmented by new phallic, masculine symbols such as the gun that fuses with his hand, thereby exceeding the binary limits of normative conceptions of biological sex. Furthermore, after viewing the Videodrome snuff tape together, Max is encouraged by Nicki to engage in sexual sadism, pricking and therefore penetrating her body with a pin. Although visually this scene emphasises traditional, or even psychoanalytical, representations of gender —the dominant male demonstrating his power over the submissive woman— it is Nicki who manipulates Max, who holds power and agency in the coupling. This argument is supported by Nicki's subsequent domination of Max, on several occasions giving him orders through the television screen. The male character is in control neither of his body nor his mind and actions, a fact that undermines any claim that his (masculine) identity is solid and unquestionable.

Figure 1 Max Renn's mutating body develops a vertical slit resembling a vagina

That said, later in the film the male protagonist does indeed undergo a penetrative process that strips him of power and agency. Therefore, one can argue that

following his exposure to the Videodrome signal Renn no longer enacts a hegemonic, or traditionally patriarchal, masculinity. Instead of exerting power over others, particularly women, Max finds himself manipulated both by men representing shady corporations —Barry Convex (Les Carlson)— and by women who claim to fight Videodrome — Bianca O'Blivion. Both sides use the image of Nicki Brand as part of this manipulation, playing on the protagonist's heterosexual masculine desire for masochistic sex. Although initially, as commissioner of Channel 83, Max commodifies female bodies, examining and assessing photos of nudes in order to choose the one that will best please the paying public, once exposed to the Videodrome signal, it is his own body that becomes an object of value. Its value lies in its susceptibility to manipulation and its status as test subject, as corporations are able to use Max to establish the effectiveness of Videodrome as a weapon of social and population control.

In her discussion of *Videodrome,* Carol Clover claims that in line with other cinefastic horror texts the film has a feminising effect on both its protagonist and, by association, the audience, who in identifying with the protagonist is violated along with him. She states that "Despite the (male) hero's efforts to defend his mental and physical integrity, a deep, vagina-like gash appears in his lower abdomen." (2015: 53). Firstly, I would argue that Max does not make any great effort to defend his integrity, in fact, he seems to enjoy caressing and exploring his new anatomy, thereby negating any sense of violation relating to the vaginal opening. Moreover, the writer/director suffuses Renn's body with a multitude of both feminine and masculine signifiers, we are presented with the pseudo-vagina alongside a phallic gun, which moves around and into the opening. At no point during his mutations are the symbols on and in his body entirely feminine or entirely masculine and, thus, he is never truly feminised. Rather than simply feminising Max and subjugating him, the mutation provoked by the Videodrome signal becomes a

form of liberation and rebellion instigated in the flesh. The body becomes a weapon to fight oppression and control, as evidenced in the scene where the television signal hacker Harlan (Peter Dvorsky) —who although employed by Channel 83 is working undercover for Spectacular Optical— attempts to reprogram Max with a videotape for the second time. Max opens his shirt seductively to allow Harlan to penetrate the vaginal opening; this time, however, it bites. The body has become a site of resistance, blurring the boundaries of gender and biological sex, thereby subverting patriarchal capitalist power structures.

1.3 The Monstrous Masculine Mutant in *Videodrome*

Body horror as a genre "seeks to inspire revulsion —and in its own way pleasure— through representations of quasi-figures whose effect/affect is produced by their abjection, their ambiguation, their impossible embodiment of multiple, incompatible forms" (Hurley 1995: 203), and *Videodrome* is no exception. Not only is the protagonist's body constantly changing, but various forms come together to form one unstable and uncategorisable corporeal configuration. Dylan Trigg explains Cronenberg's use of body horror thus: "the sense of the body dissolving boundaries between inside and out, self and other, and the living and the dead" (2011: 83), to which I would add male/female and masculine/feminine. He goes on to claim that in "each of these dyads, Cronenberg has crafted an account of identity torn asunder by what he terms 'flesh undergoing revolution'" (83). It is this attack on individual identity that I will examine first here.

As mentioned above, mutations taking place on Max Renn's body endow him with both female and male attributes, thereby making it impossible to label his body with a binary biological sex, let alone any one gender. The vaginal gash that opens on

his abdomen does not feminise Renn, since he never ceases to read as a masculine protagonist undergoing an horrific transformation. Instead, "the fear does not stem from an encounter with the 'other' but from the realisation that one is becoming 'other' than one was" (Aldana 2014: 60). In *Videodrome,* the horror experienced by the audience and by the protagonist within the film is a product of visual proof of the fragility of individual identity and in particular white, middle-class masculinity. In this way, the film reveals that the concept of each subject possessing one unique and unchanging psychological and physical identity throughout their life is a fallacy. In Steven Shaviro's words, the Cronenbergian character is "uprooted from the fixity of human identity and submitted instead to a process of continual flux" (1993: 147), with any attempt to preserve identity portrayed by his films as an attempt to conform to social norms. In *Videodrome* specifically, it is clear that Max enjoys the visceral pleasure and pain afforded by his mutant form but feels compelled to hide his mutations from his colleagues and acquaintances, not confiding in anyone about his hallucinatory experiences with hybridity.

Furthermore, since the male protagonist finds himself endowed with elements of female anatomy, without ever becoming female, the binary distinction male/female completely breaks down, since the two are seen to co-exist within one material body. It follows then, that the gender binary masculine/feminine is not only proven to be unconnected to biological sex —since Max has female physical attributes but is not feminine— but also non-binary and in constant flux. Therefore, it becomes impossible to uphold the idea of the female or feminine as 'other', and Cartesian notions about the feminine as materially grounded and the masculine as located in reason are proven to be unfounded. Max Renn's corporeal instability reflects, as in many of Cronenberg's films, his psychological condition —disturbed and changed by exposure to a powerful

stimulus, the male protagonist's psychic identity is shown to be inextricably linked to his somatic configuration, and any change enacted upon the psyche is reflected in the material body. As a result, the Cartesian dualism collapses, and the constructed gendered differences it reinforced along with it. This disavowal of the separation of mind and body in which the idea that monstrosity is born from a mutation of the male mind and that this psyche bears a deep connection with and influence over the body also results in a "progressive uncoupling of not only the monstrous and the body, but also the monstrous and the feminine" (McLarty 1996: 263) by locating "the monstrous in a mind representative of patriarchal social practices" (260), that of the heteronormatively masculine Max Renn. In this way, a specifically masculine monstrosity is created, in defiance of psychoanalytical approaches to depictions of the monstrous in cinema as inherently feminine (Creed 1993). The Cronenbergian male is always grounded in materiality, actions having an effect on the mind are then reflected in the body, and vice-versa.

The destabilisation of the mind/body duality is just the first in a raft of binaries broken down in both *Videodrome* and Cronenberg's other films of the period. Steven Shaviro states that "New arrangements of the flesh break down traditional binary oppositions" and that "the systematic undoing of these distinctions on every possible level, is the major structural principle of all of Cronenberg's films" (1993: 130). The binary perhaps most viscerally deconstructed in *Videodrome* —alongside male/female— is human/machine, as the film features various instances of the fusion of technology and the flesh. The first such moment in the film depicts a technological device taking on organic attributes —a television set begins to bulge and to breathe, giving the impression that it is not an inanimate object but a living organism. The protagonist Max is so enthralled by the sensual transformation of the machine that he caresses it and even

kisses it before the screen begins to give way to allow his head to enter. All the while the screen is showing a close-up of a woman's lips, supposedly those of Nicki Brand. This can be interpreted as a feminisation of a machine, an object typically associated with the masculine, thereby destabilising not only the dualism organic/machine but also feminine/masculine and indeed soft/hard. However, as the surface of the machine softens and gives way, in this scene the feminine remains associated with softness, as in traditional depictions and understandings of femininity. As some critics would argue, *Videodrome* "while it imagines invasive image technology, depends on the feminine tele-body to give shape to the threat. Max is not just invaded by technology; he is specifically invaded by the image of the feminine" (McLarty 1996: 267). If one considers, though, that the monstrous feminine is in fact a creation of the multinational Spectacular Optical, and therefore produced by a monstrous patriarchal order, the disturbing image and its horror are again displaced away from the feminine and onto the masculine patriarchy. Furthermore, as we shall see, the film creates images that represent a specifically masculine monstrosity. In sum, despite the image itself reading as an instance of the monstrous feminine, when examined within the context of the cinematic text it is not so easy to categorise the monstrous technology depicted according to binary distinctions.

Another example of technology taking on the appearance of organic tissue comes later in the film, when a video cassette begins to bulge and ripple organically, and changes colour to resemble human flesh. It is even coated in oozing blood, so that it seems the cassette is an organ recently ripped from a body. In this way, not only is the binary distinction human/machine deconstructed, but that of inside/outside is also blurred, as an organ that usually remains hidden inside the body is removed and continues to work outside of the protective boundary represented by the skin. Not only

this, but the tape is then inserted into Max's body via the abdominal slit, which becomes a biting mouth reminiscent of the *vagina dentata,* symbolically castrating Harlan by ripping off his hand. Any attempt to categorise either Max's material body or the videotape into binary categories are completely confounded by the proliferation of conflicting symbols. That said, the fact that it is a male character's body that becomes visible, inside and out, is significant as regards the construction of masculinity in the film. Men's bodies are typically considered hard and impenetrable and yet, as Linda Ruth Williams observes, in Cronenberg's work, "bodily interiors cease to be private spaces, articulating the breakdown between within and without" (1999: 34). From this one can surmise that Max's heterosexual masculine identity is deconstructed and redrawn, since his is no longer a hegemonic gender performance; the key components of hegemonic masculinity are being systematically denied on a corporeal level. But neither has Max Renn adopted a feminine identity, instead, it is representative of Cronenberg's "ongoing concern with 'masculinity in crisis'", which rather than feminising male characters, dramatises "an impossible vision of male interiority" (Williams 1999: 32), thereby questioning traditionally held ideas about the masculine identity as hermetic and unchanging. The director manages to maintain a sense of ambiguity in the protagonist's identity throughout by depicting graphic and tactile images of corporeal mutations bearing connotations of both male and female anatomy, thereby consistently representing the protagonist as monster.

One of the most famous images from the film, alongside the vaginal opening on Max's abdomen, is the 'handgun' —in which a gun becomes grafted onto Renn's hand. The mutation is depicted in a visually graphic manner, filmed in close-up and showing every step of the process. First, two screws slowly emerge from the gun and pierce Max's hand, passing all the way through and out the other side where they go on to

penetrate his wrist and forearm. As two more screws emerge and continue in the same pattern as the previous, the entry wounds begin to bleed, and the whole hand takes on a moist appearance.[8] After a shot of Max's pained expression, unable to tear his gaze away from the grotesque mutation of his own flesh, his fingers are shown to be attached to the screws —which now look more like tubes— and are bent around so that he is constantly clasping the gun with his finger on the trigger. As well as repeating the transgression of the binary human/machine in the fusion of cold metal and human flesh, the mutation also destabilises the masculine/feminine distinction. The gun, of course is a symbol almost exclusively described as phallic, bringing with it connotations of masculinity and maleness. Although some may argue the protagonist is feminised by the penetrative nature of the transformation in this scene, it is undeniable that this pervasive symbol of masculinity becomes part of his body. Nevertheless, the gun is initially pulled from the vaginal slit in Max's abdomen —a potent symbol of femininity and the female. Ultimately, the protagonist's body is overloaded with signifiers of both genders, making it impossible to categorise within a binary understanding of gender. Again, rather than feminising his main character with penetration, Cronenberg opts to maintain ambiguity when it comes to gender, a decision wholly more unsettling to the audience than would be trading one gender for another, since there is no chance for the viewer to settle into one interpretation of what they are seeing. Furthermore, these scenes are profoundly affective, provoking bodily responses from the viewer in the form of wincing or feelings of disgust. According to Julien Hanich, these somatic responses return us to our lived body and to a form of self-awareness that is embodied and organic (2012: 586). The result, in the case of *Videodrome,* is that images of the monstrous,

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[8] The impressive and convincing special effects were devised by Rick Baker and realised with the help of a team of young creative and technicians. The use of physical effects and make-up lend a sense of viscerality and immediacy to the sequences of mutation.

mutating protagonist draw the attention of the viewing subject to their own corporeal existence and its inherent vulnerability, a deeply disturbing experience.

Figure 2 The fusion of Max's hand with the phallic symbol of the gun is shown in gruesome detail

The scenes mentioned above and the images they contain are clear examples of the abject as "above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it —on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva 1982: 9). Throughout *Videodrome* the male body is constantly under threat and perpetually in flux, thereby revealing not only the fragile nature of identity but also its constructed nature as something made not given or, in other words, artificial rather than natural and essential. According to Csicsery-Ronay Jr, this "uncontrolled proliferation of body-versions […] creates infinite possibilities of construction and a powerful, vague longing for a stable position" (2002: 75). That is to say, when confronted with a series of differing corporeal configurations, each prompting the questioning of of binaries such as human/machine, male/female or even real/imaginary; the viewing subject becomes uneasy as they are forced to consider the mutability and artificiality of their own identity, and this uneasiness, becoming fear, grows along with the instances of mutation undergone by the characters on screen. If the

abject is that which threatens the unity of the self in its representation of the dissolution of boundaries, provoking a physical reaction (Kristeva 1982); it follows that "the experience of horror in the cinema is almost always grounded in the visual representation of bodily difference" (Grant 1996: 6). In *Videodrome,* the difference most viscerally explored (and commented) is gender difference. The fact that Max Renn's male body can be so easily altered, shifting between masculine/male and female/feminine, at times appearing to embody both sides of the binary simultaneously, is shocking and troubling, provoking not only fear but disgust in its graphic portrayals of bodily reconfiguration. As Shaviro notes, "Anatomy is not destiny, precisely in the sense that the corporeal is the realm in which the symbolic inscription of fixed gender identity reaches its limit, and can be broken down" (1993: 143), making the body an ideal site for a disturbing exploration of the deconstruction of a subject's unique identity, highlighting the vulnerability of our understanding of the self. Furthermore, since the protagonist is not identifiably non-human and therefore separate from us, "we identify with the monster, seeing our own reflection in his predicament" (McGinn 2012: 14); Max's loss of identity is a fate that could befall any one of us. In this way "The ideal of the perfect male, white, invulnerable body" is revealed to be "as much a myth as that of the inferior flabby and smelly alien other" (ibid). The transgression and abjection depicted in the film is, therefore, born of intrinsic human vulnerability.

Vulnerability is key across all Cronenberg's films, of this period and beyond, as they not only place an emphasis on the physical vulnerability inherent in corporeal disintegration, but also focus on ideas of surveillance and loss of control of one's own mind and/or body. Many studies of Cronenberg's oeuvre make reference to the body's rebellion; "Cronenberg's early film themes may be summarised as the revolt of the flesh" (Sipos 2010: 26), meaning that the subject's lack of control over the physical

processes governing the body is laid bare. This type of imagery is taken to its ultimate extreme in the film, in the scene featuring Barry Convex's death at the hands of Max's mutant gun. Once penetrated by the bullet Convex begins to convulse, his skin begins to bulge and stretch and ultimately is broken by an eruption of tumours, which continue to proliferate until his corporeal form is no longer recognisably human. Here, it is the reconfiguration of the body itself that erases subjective identity, the character does not simply die, he is completely removed from the world, in a total disintegration of the human form. Thus, the fear here stems not so much from mortality, but from the fear "of one's own body and its potential destruction" (Lopez Cruz 2012: 161). This can be linked to a human fear, and even feelings of disgust towards the biological unknowns of the physical body. In his analysis of David Cronenberg's *The Fly,* Colin McGinn explains that "the visible transformation we witness is not really a crossing of ontological boundaries at all: the human being was *already* a loathsome monster monster, a revolting hybrid […] the tragedy is the tragedy of *being human*" (2012: 13 emphasis in original), and goes on to state that the protagonist Seth Brundle is "at his most repellent when his human body is falling apart" (16). As viewing subjects we are already aware of the inevitable metamorphoses taking place within our material bodies, with ageing and disease just two obvious examples of this fact. What *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and other body horror films achieve is the visual representation of this fear, which is all too easily identifiable and relatable to our corporeal experience —that is to say, the biological rebellion of the body against our psychic will to remain young, healthy and resilient.

The surveillance and manipulation of bodies represents another source of fear in *Videodrome.* The theme of surveillance, or being watched, is presented in various different ways. Throughout the film the television screen is presented as an eye

watching the protagonist, even commenting on his actions. At the very beginning of the film it is the television that wakes Max, seemingly aware of his daily routine, and later in the film screens become a one-way conduit for various characters to impart information or opinions to Renn. The ubiquity of the screen implies the impossibility of privacy, the sense that those people existing within the film are constantly surveilled in what becomes a symbiotic relationship. Not only do the television networks need consumers to remain solvent, but the human dependence on this technology is made clear through the depiction of the aforementioned Cathode Ray Mission, a charity providing exposure to television to those who cannot afford to have one in their own home. The individuals attending the Mission are akin to the typical portrayal of junkies, dishevelled and verging on insane, they are addicted to televisual images. Moreover, on a narrative level, the multinational Spectacular Optical disposes of the necessary resources to plant spies throughout society, with one —Harlan— positioned very close to Max and gaining his trust. The conglomerate is able to observe individual members of society without their consent thanks to the power afforded by great amounts of money. This accumulation of power over individuals is in itself monstrous, and the corporation is depicted as such —it is seen to be cold and ruthless, with no mercy for those, like Renn, coopted into its service. This is portrayed, for example, in the scene in which Harlan and Barry Convex accost the already hallucinating Max Renn in order to 'reprogramme' him to carry out the wishes of Spectacular Optical. Here, it is not only the surveillance of individual subjects that is constructed as monstrous, but also the desire for power and control over others, forcing Max to physically carry out their orders and also imposing a set of rules and values on society as a whole. This kind of monstrosity is what Sara Martín refers to as a moral monster, which by definition "longs to possess and accumulate power and has little or no capacity to feel empathy

towards other human beings" (2002: 149, my translation). I suggest, therefore, that Barry Convex —and by extension the multinational he represents— is a depiction of the moral monster, or villain, not least because he initiates the spread of monstrousness in his exposure of Max Renn to the Videodrome signal without a thought for the value of the protagonist's human life.

The notion of the imposition of a set of morals and values by those in power ties in with Cronenberg's own opinions on censorship. He has posited that "Any person who is a control freak must find video the most threatening technological development ever" (quoted in Rodley 1993: 106), linking this idea to the introduction of censorship and classification of home videos, representing, for the director, "a wave of reaction and fear; control of imagery and dialogue" (ibid. 107). This gives an ironic twist to the image of the fleshly, squirming videotape, seemingly alive. It is a literalisation of the censors nightmare: it corrupts Max from the inside, creating images that distort the way he views the world. As David Cronenberg would put it, "The belief is that the image can kill" (ibid 108), in that its presentation of contentious images drive people to do things they would never have done had they not been exposed to that image. One could argue, then, that the director views censorship as a form of control, dictating to the population what can and cannot be seen, thereby influencing the capacity of the subject to form free thoughts and opinions. This is certainly conveyed in the film, for instance when Harlan accuses Max of causing his viewers to "rot away from the inside", as a result of seeing the kind of images the station broadcasts —for him, the wrong kind of images. In turn, Spectacular Optical use these unsavoury images to draw viewing subjects under their control by associating them with the Videodrome signal. In choosing a multinational corporation —Spectacular Optical— as the purveyors of the Videodrome signal, the director highlights the power of capitalist structures to establish

and regulate societal and social norms. It is my contention that the corporation represents censorship and the attempt to preserve conservative values, to resist and oppress the liberation of the body from the strict regulation of patriarchal society. This aspect of *Videodrome* reflects Cronenberg's view of censorship as "an endless struggle between those who are basically fearful and mistrustful of human nature […] and those who feel that a truly free society is possible, somewhere" (quoted in Rodley 1993: 105-106). Images and interpretations, however, are proven to be uncontrollable and Max manages to find hope in the violent pictures and commands he is made to consume, allowing him to destroy the powerful Barry Convex.

One strategy employed by the writer/director to emphasise the theme of surveillance are the constant references to eyes and sight. Spectacular Optical is a company which primarily manufactures glasses, and a large portion of the closing sequence takes place at their trade show, the stage of which is dominated by a huge pair of spectacles. The theatricality of the mise-en-scène in this scene, with the action taking place on a stage, is designed to draw the viewer's attention to its artificiality thereby creating a distancing effect. This creation of a detached point of view invites a gaze that lingers (Hantke 2004: 46), in a sense tricking the audience into fully absorbing the images of bodily decomposition framed on the proscenium. Not only is Max's integrity violated by the watching eyes within the film, but violent imagery is permitted to penetrate the cinema audience, entering through the eye. The eye as a site of human vulnerability is highlighted in further in this scene by the choice of tag-lines for the trade show: "love comes in at the eye" and "the eye is the window of the soul". Essentially, in *Videodrome* sight represents "the violation of the integrity of the body" (Shaviro 1993:141), not least because the function of vision is no longer just to show, but to act directly upon the physical body. The result of Max viewing the Videodrome

signal is not simply a change in mindset but the growth of a tumour in his brain affecting both his perception of the world and his interactions with it, due to the corporeal mutations he undergoes. There is no longer any distinction between psychic interpretations and outward objective representation, and therefore the binary construction inside/outside and mind/body completely collapse, again revealing the vulnerability of the human subject as an individual agent in the world.

In *Videodrome,* just as the mind is shown to be vulnerable to manipulation by powerful and unseen forces, the inherent vulnerability of the material body is brought to the fore. Xavier Aldana speaks of the gothic in horror as "experienced in the flesh, in its surfaces and crevices, and thus reveals its inherent and universal inscriptability" (2014: 50). The fleshly body is therefore vulnerable to control and manipulation by third parties, it can be infinitely altered, transformed beyond recognition, with each configuration of the corporeal taking on a different meaning; bodily identity becomes, in this circumstance, unfixed and constantly changing, thereby belying the vulnerability subjective identity. To again quote Aldana: "In body gothic, 'to be' is to be in doubt of what one actually is or where one ends" (2014: 39). In relation to *Videodrome,* the limits of Max Renn's body are consistently tested through its constant mutations, with the result that the boundaries the subject sets up to delimit itself are continually destabilised and deconstructed. This serves to reveal the inherent vulnerability of the subject's understanding of its own identity: Max considered himself, for instance, a masculine human but the appearance of a feminine vaginal opening on his torso and the fusion of his body with technological elements call into question and ultimately deny the identity he once believed to define his existence. Therefore the delineations of Max's corporeal existence and their relation to his subjective identity must be redefined according to less rigid categories. The protagonist can no longer rely on the identity that

once gave meaning to his material reality, he can longer be categorised as male, masculine or even human. This creates a sense of intense vulnerability that springs from the threat of complete dissolution; if one's identity is stripped away one can no longer be sure of what one is, and therefore one can no longer be convinced of one's continued existence —a theme that is reflected in the film's confusion of reality and fantasy. By the end of the film Max is so far removed from his previous identity that his body ceases to have meaning within normative society, and ultimately is either destroyed or removed from the realm of the real, depending on one's interpretation of the ambiguous final scene. As Judith Butler explains in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), in order for the body to count as a meaningful or valuable subject in the world, it must be categorisable according to binary considerations. The non-normative subject is, in this schema, condemned to reside in the margins of society, unthinkable and unnamable, just like Max Renn in *Videodrome.*

An enlightening comparison can be made here between *Videodrome* and John Carpenter's *The Thing,* in which a group of scientists face an aggressive, shape-shifting biological parasite that, upon entering a human host, causes that body to mutate beyond recognition before dissolving the subject completely. Interestingly, all the titular thing's victims are male and thus the anxieties arising from the parasitic attacks centre on the male body. The colonisation of the body featured in this film expresses anxieties surrounding corporeal vulnerability and the loss of subjective identity by way of human fear of the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of biology. Eric White claims that "*The Thing* powerfully registers the anguish and horror occasioned by the recognition of human subjection to the evolutionary process", thereby viscerally representing "dread at the prospect of losing definition and essence" (1993: 399). The male scientists of the research station struggle to maintain a barrier between the mutating chaos of biology

and nature and their perceived human fixity, "committed to maintaining 'Man' in a relationship of preeminence with respect to the natural world" (ibid) and by extension the dominance of the mind over the body. The mutating thing, however, defies any attempt at rationalisation and categorisation, continually challenging bodily integrity and coherence, threatening to contaminate the men and make them Other. The thing as a force of nature denies any notion of an unchanging essence or identity, pushing the male subjects of the film into a choice between consenting to a universe in flux or destroying the station and themselves in order to preserve the binary structures that define their existence. Carpenter's film reveals humanity, and more specifically the male subject, to be a transitional phenomenon rather than a fixed essence in a position of dominance, but does not go so far as to posit evolution and mutation as a viable posthuman alternative to rigid, binary understandings of the human. Instead, the remaining men sacrifice the station and themselves —or as White interprets it, "destroy civilization"— so as to protect the boundary between nature and culture and, therefore, man and woman, masculine and feminine.[9] Whereas in body horror classic *The Thing* the male subject strives to uphold binaries both in society and in the body, *Videodrome*'s Max Renn is prepared to embrace reality "as a Joycean 'chaosmos' of perpetual change or metamorphosis" (White 1993: 394), thereby opening up interpretations of the film as a representation of posthuman possibilities for embodiment.

1.4 Long Live the New Flesh: Posthuman Potential in Body Horror Cinema

As we have seen, in *Videodrome* the mutations undergone by the protagonist often involve the coupling of the corporeal with the mechanical. This fusion of human

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[9] Woman has been traditionally aligned with nature, whereas man has been identified with culture in human thought, with woman/nature subordinated to man/culture. See, for example, Ortner 1972.

and machine elements within one body gives rise to what Haraway terms a cyborg: "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of lived reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991: 149). These cyborg figures, Haraway argues, are hopeful in their deconstruction of borders, in their refusal to be categorised according to binary distinctions. Max's body, in its constant metamorphoses, becomes a a cyborg "in a post-gender world" (150); the proliferation of gendered symbols so readily identified with masculinity (eg. the gun) or femininity (eg. vertical slash opening) negates attempts to explain Renn's transformations using psychoanalysis, his corporeal configurations instead remaining ambiguous and partial. Therefore, whereas some may argue that Cronenberg's films simply explore the relation of the human to the inhuman monster (Sullivan 2017: 178), I would argue that they represent early cinematic examples of explorations of the posthuman monster and its potential to disrupt the patriarchal system and its binary understanding of identities. So while Elizabeth Bronfen calls Cronenberg's signature "the disease of mortality in the register of the body" (1998: 402), I take the view that the corporeal transformations of his characters does not represent an acceleration of the ageing process towards death , nor does it respond to a fear of dying, but instead portrays the evolution of the human organism in a political and biological sense. As Lopez Cruz observes, "The uncertainty of what will be produced by the unnatural union is what frightens" (2012: 162), rather than the elements themselves, which in the case of *Videodrome* would be a human male and a television, for example. In any biological fusion or genetic mutation one does not know in advance what may be produced, or whether it will represent a threat to the individual or indeed to society. As N. Katherine Hayles explains, mutation "reveals the productive potential of randomness" (1999: 33). Cronenberg's male protagonists bely the random and unpredictable nature of biology, bringing to the fore our powerlessness over

genetics and mutation, thereby unleashing a sense of anxiety over the integrity of the individual body and identity.

An important source of this biological anxiety within Cronenberg's films is sex, a ubiquitous feature of his early work. Peter Ludlow, in examining the science of these texts, shows that sex "is a process by which we become something else", which shows that "Humans are not fixed creatures. We have no fixed essence." (2012: 48). He describes sexual intercourse, expanded to include all sexual acts in the representational field of Cronenberg's cinema, as a process of information exchange allowing for evolution, whether that be purely biological or also technological, since he describes the human relationship with its technologies as a form of sexual intercourse, claiming that "The technologies do not enhance us. We combine with them to form something new" (ibid). I am in agreement with Ludlow when it comes to the films of David Cronenberg since, to take the example of *Videodrome*, Max Renn's biological metamorphoses are irreversible, leaving him no longer human, but something new, a posthuman. The anxiety and fear produced by images of posthuman hybrid monsters springs, then, from contemplating a cataclysmic dissolution and reconstitution of subjective bodies and identities which is easily relatable to the viewing subject's own experiences of transformative processes such as ageing. The fact that Renn's mutation is caused by an electronic virus is a symptom of what Daniel Dinello terms a "cultural obsession" with invasive biological and technological threats, crystallised in the symbol of the biological hazard sign "as our most widespread and potent symbol of techno-horror" (2005: 16). Dinello observes that this pervasive cultural discourse is inspired by real fears such as the AIDs virus, germ warfare and biological terrorism, to name but a few. Both biological and electronic viruses function as "a potent metaphor for techno-anxiety" (ibid), a fear of losing human identity and freedom to machines or the misuse of

technology. While *Videodrome* does offer a vision of the posthuman, it also —along with a raft of other science fiction texts— reflects, and even contributes to fuelling, a certain technophobia in the public consciousness. And yet, in Cronenberg's film, it is not the virus itself which threatens individual humans, instead it is the powerful multinationals who created and distributed the Videodrome signal. It would seem, then, that the viral element of the film is not so much a force for destruction but a symbol of oppressive corporations' technological irresponsibility. As the director himself may say, the virus is only doing its job.

What Cronenberg achieves in portraying a human body undergoing constant fusion and metamorphosis is to offer a point of resistance to normative society based in somatics, in subjective embodiment. The uncategorisable and marginal cyborg subjects "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 1991: 181) by confusing and ultimately removing borders between dualistic constructions such as male/female, masculine/feminine, natural/ artificial and human/animal, among others. What his posthuman figures do not offer is a vision of transcendence, of moving beyond the material body and its vulnerability. Although the virtual is depicted in his films, it is always shown to be deeply rooted in and to physically act upon the material realm. In *Videodrome,* for instance, Max in one scene wears a large virtual reality headset intended, he is told, to record his hallucinations. The resulting experience, however, is not virtual at all since the hallucinations are embodied, causing visceral pleasure and pain. Rather than the deliver on the promise of the transcendent nature of virtual reality, Cronenberg rejects the separation of mind and body and the idea that the mind can exist in isolation, insisting that any posthuman evolution must take place within the material body. It is precisely this emphasis on the corporeal that allows Max's posthuman configuration to

become a site of resistance to patriarchal and capitalist structures. "Bodies are are sites of both normalization and resistance, since social norms of gender and sexuality are inscribed on the body", therefore, "power is not always possessed as such, with hegemonic forces deciding what one does or does not do" (Harcourt et al 2017: 5). In killing Barry Convex Max effectuates a subversion of the hierarchical power structure, as he seizes power from those who once not only controlled him but also, through manipulation of discourse, had a hand in the construction of his identity, thereby claiming a portion of power and agency for the margin where he is forced to reside. The ending of the film is famously ambiguous, leaving the audience to wonder whether Renn has died or has evolved to a new form of embodiment termed "the new flesh". What is clear, however, is that in either interpretation Max cannot return to normative society, as a posthuman monster he must live a liminal existence or be removed from society altogether, demonstrating that despite interpretations of posthuman embodiment as a hopeful challenge to the establishment, it is not powerful enough to find a place within it or to destroy it.

Over the course of the movie an initially hegemonic masculine performance is deconstructed, becoming increasingly unstable, thereby revealing the vulnerability of masculinity, and of subjective identity more generally. On a corporeal level, the idea that a biologically male body is necessarily accompanied by masculine gender is undermined and ultimately proven a fallacy through physical mutations and metamorphoses. As Max's biology changes, constantly fluctuating to incorporate both male and female elements, the stability and reliability of sexual identity —the categorisation of his body as male— becomes impossible. This interstitiality makes the protagonist monstrous because, as Noël Carroll states, the "categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless" (1987: 55) are an example of the impure, and

therefore threatening. These grotesque mutations are an example of the abject, repulsive and yet attractive, they invite the gaze to linger on that which threatens the unity of the subject and subjective identity, thereby inspiring anxiety and fear. In this way, they appeal to the viewing audience at a physical level, provoking not only fear but also disgust in their depiction of the complete dissolution of the individual and its unique identity, a fate worse than death since it implies a complete loss of power and agency. The effect is amplified when the character depicted on screen is a white male, as these figures occupy a privileged, seemingly unassailable position within patriarchal society and therefore have more power to lose and further to fall. In short, we are not used to seeing white, heterosexual men fail, nor become vulnerable. To quote Michael Kimmel: "men are the 'invisible' gender. Ubiquitous in positions of power everywhere, men are invisible to themselves" (2005: 5). In body horror films like *Videodrome,* however, men and their male bodies are made excruciatingly visible, are probed, examined and ultimately taken apart, thereby revealing the constructedness of both masculinity itself and the hierarchical system that places white, middle-class men in a position of power over women and other marginalised groups and minorities. By screening the deconstruction of a relatively powerful man like Max Renn over the course of just an hour and a half, masculinity and male dominance are shown to be fragile, and not so inevitable after all.

Following the deconstruction of the male body and masculine identity, the film depicts a corporeal and psychological reconfiguration of its protagonist in the posthuman mould. Rather than offering a vision of transcendence, however, Cronenberg opts to demonstrate how embodiment, and its attendant pains and pleasures, is an inescapable aspect of human existence. This is nowhere more obvious than in the repeated cries of 'long live the new flesh', peppered throughout the films denouement.

The human has evolved, has become posthuman, but the flesh is ever present and yet constantly in flux, Cartesian separation and binary categories are consistently denied. In this way the filmmaker manages to avoid the pitfalls of liberal humanism by rejecting the distancing of the subject from embodied life and the social responsibilities that implies. The multiple corporeal configurations of the protagonist, in the words of Sherryl Vint, "give representation to the full range of human embodiment" (184), something she argues is essential in any posthuman representation that wishes to avoid universalising human experience and with it repeating the errors of humanism; "the idea that there is a single, 'natural', or best body" (ibid) which leaves those who do not fit into these categories on the margins, for instance. The film's insistence on the flesh becomes a call to focus on the material, telling us to enjoy our embodied existence while it lasts, as it is fragile, and we only get one life.

Chapter Two

Man as Disempowered Cyborg: Physical Vulnerability and Psychological Strength in *RoboCop* (1987) and *RoboCop* (2014)

2.1 The Cyborg Figure in Cinema: The Rise of the Cyborg Cycle and its Enduring Appeal

The category of male monster under consideration in this chapter is the cyborg, typified by the films of the sub-genre of science fiction termed the 'cyborg cycle' and described by Sue Short as exploring, on the whole, the theme of "humanity's uneasy relationship with technology" (2005: 3). Arguably, the cycle began in the 1970s with the enormous popularity of television series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978), but it was the films of the the 1980s —titles such as *RoboCop* (1983) and *The Terminator* (1984)— that began to accrue momentum and huge amounts of money at the box office. These movies were produced in a period of mass redundancies during which automation, or the creation of cyborgs, gives rise to "anxieties surrounding dehumanisation" (Short 2005: 23). Short argues that these anxieties are ultimately assuaged by heroic male cyborgs that "typically combine advanced intelligence and strength with human values and vulnerabilities" in contrast to those robotic villains that show no sign of this kind of humanity (5). In this sense, though the muscular, seemingly invincible bodies of these male cyborgs signal a return to a virile and aggressive type of masculinity, this is complicated by the films' emphasis on the importance of the psychological, emotional aspect as that which confers humanity on a subject. This ambiguous representation of masculinity in the action film prompted Yvonne Tasker to

propose a critique of powerful male heroes in which "the muscular male hero could be considered as a site for the re-inscription of difference" (1993: 109), since this figure "both enacts and calls into question the qualities they embody" (111). These ambiguities inform my discussion of the male cyborg as I consider the potential of cyborg masculinity as an alternative, progressive and posthuman mode of performing masculine identity.

The cyborg cycle has proven to be a resilient sub-genre with examples continuing to appear throughout the 1990s and into the 21st Century, with films in the *Terminator* and *RoboCop* franchises continuing to be released throughout the 1990s and 2000s[10], proving the enduring appeal of cyborg cinema as well as revealing its importance in the representation and understanding of contemporary masculinities. Whether thanks to its own cyborg-esque fusion of diverse genres (horror, action, film noir), or its reflection of and discussion of contemporary issues, the sub-genre and the figure of the cyborg continue to find relevance to the present day context, as exemplified by 2014's financially successful remake of *RoboCop*. The far-reaching appeal of the genre and the original *RoboCop*, along with its masculine heroes, even beyond the original context of 1980s recession-hit America, warrants an exploration of why the male cyborg has resonated so strongly with (particularly male) audiences over the years, and to analyse to what extent these representations reflect, and indeed influence, masculine performance in Western —and particularly in North American— society.

Largely, the films under discussion portray men whose biological male bodies become physically vulnerable, suffering violence, and are brought close to death by

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[10] *RoboCop 2* (Kershner 1990) and *RoboCop 3* (Dekker 1993), as well as James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and the following sequels *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Mostow 2003), *Terminator Salvation* (McG 2009) and *Terminator Genisys* (Taylor 2015) proved successful with the public.

their experience. Their bodies are then fused with technological elements in order to guard against the threat of bodily disintegration and the attendant fear of losing one's unique identity, while this fear is in turn disavowed by the demonstration of the protagonists' enduring humanity through their retention of previous emotional memories and moral principles. As Samantha Holland writes: "The cyborg film *narrative* operates as a *myth* to reassert the 'mind/body' dualism and those of sex and gender that parallel it" (2000: 171 emphasis in original), despite the emphasis on corporeal disintegration and boundary deconstruction on a visual, representational level. Throughout this chapter I will consider both narrative and visual concerns, by way of a close reading of the two versions of *RoboCop*, the 1987 original and the 2014 remake; firstly, to establish in what way masculinity is (de)constructed in these films as well as how these representations engage with —by reflecting and influencing— the contemporary collective understanding of idealised masculinity and its performance. This analysis of the portrayal of masculinity and the anxieties and fears that drive the depiction of man as monster, will permit conclusions to be drawn as to how and why the heroes of these pictures are portrayed as monstrous. Finally, I turn to the posthuman aspect of the male cyborg to ask: in cyborg cinema, does the blurring of binaries arising from the fusion of technology and the flesh produce a hopeful alternative model of masculinity in the posthuman mould?

I will begin, then, by examining the earlier film before moving on to a discussion of the remake and finally, to a comparison of the two movies, in order to evaluate the evolution of the portrayal of the male cyborg on screen over the decades, and to draw potential parallels with societal developments. In each section I will focus first on the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which the film was produced and is

set. This is followed by a discussion of the portrayals of men and masculinity in the films and lastly a section on the representation of male cyborgs as monsters.

2.2 The Political Cyborg: An Introduction to Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1987)

Central to the analysis of any film is its historical, socio-political context since, as Thomas Schatz explains, Hollywood films can be considered a contemporary myth, "the ritualization of collective ideals, the celebration of temporarily resolved social and cultural conflicts, and the concealment of disturbing cultural conflicts behind the guise of entertainment" (2012: 114). In the case of *RoboCop* (1987), the film acts as a critique and satire of neoliberalist practices of privatisation, austerity, and deregulation in its portrayal of a crime-ridden, corrupt Detroit. In fact, Kevin McCarron describes the film as a "conflict between the individual and the brutal power of 21st Century capitalism" (2000: 272). The multinational company at the heart of the film, OCP (Omni-Consumer Products), is a private enterprise that has been awarded a contract to manage Detroit's previously public police force. As Susan Jeffords states 'OCP is called a corporation, but it clearly functions in Detroit as a government' (1994: 108). Privatisation of this kind functioned alongside policies aimed at shrinking Government services such as social security, medicaid and food stamps during Ronald Reagan's tenure (1980-1988) as President of the United States (Rosembaum 1986). This was a policy shared by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) in the United Kingdom, with both politicians widely recognised as kick-starting a wave of privatisation and deregulation across the world, introducing an era of economic liberalism. In that *RoboCop* depicts a capitalist society characterised by deregulation and privatisation, the film responds to and reflects the political landscape in which it was conceived and created. The 1980s saw the release of a swathe of movies referred to as 'New Bad Future' films, which are

62

defined by Fred Glass as movies portraying the future as a time when powerful governmental and corporate forces consolidate their power by employing advanced technology at the expense of the environment and political freedom. (1990: 2). Other examples of films from this cycle are *Mad Max* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Total Recall* (1990), many of which are also concerned with cyborg themes.[11] With its portrayal of a privatised, repressive, dysfunctional society, *RoboCop* fits neatly into a series of films that use the science fiction genre and its conventions to question the economic, political and socio-cultural circumstances of Western nations and so, accordingly, I will analyse it as part of both the New Bad Future and cyborg film cycles.

Michael Robertson, in his article on *RoboCop,* highlights the extent to which privatisation has taken over US society in the film, with even people being converted into property: OCP corporate executive Morton "makes a powerful private property claim over RoboCop on behalf of OCP: 'He doesn't have a name, He's got a program. He's a product. Is that clear?''' (2008: 219). Robertson goes on to explain that such a claim of property rights over an individual is not unthinkable under current US patents law, and could be achieved by arguing that the corporation 'detached body parts from Murphy and performed scientific work on them which transformed them into a new thing over which they could claim a biotechnology patent' (231). Furthermore, *RoboCop* enters into an emerging discourse on US corporate culture, critiquing the attitudes and practices of large businesses, in particular their treatment of workers and the lack of honesty when dealing with clients and the general public. Other examples of cultural production which portrayed the world of big business as amoral and dangerous in this period include Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street* and John Landis's comedy

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[11] As well as *Mad Max* spawning to sequels in the 1980s —*Mad Max 2* (1981) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) — all three of these films, like *RoboCop*, have been rebooted or remade in the Twenty-First Century. Significantly, *Total Recall* (2012), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) have proved successful both at the box office and with critics.

Trading Places (1983). This trend would be continued through the 1990s with texts including Brett Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991) and writer-director Mary Harron's film of the same name released in the year 2000.

Further nods to 1980s politics include *RoboCop*'s parody of Reagan's 'Star Wars' programme —an attempt to put a defensive weapons system into orbit around the Earth in order to protect against potential attacks from the USSR— in the form of a television advertisement for a family game. In fact, the 'Star Wars' programme could be considered a major inspiration for the film itself, in which government appointed contractors race to create outlandish yet marketable solutions to threats of violence at home and abroad. The criminals of the film are not Russian communists, however, they are drug manufacturers and dealers. Drug use as a personal and societal issue figured prominently in the collective consciousness in the 1980s, in part due to the discovery of and paranoia surrounding the HIV/AIDs virus, as well as the demonization of intravenous drug users as the source of this new disease.[12] Using drug dealers as villains taps into contemporary anxieties, as well as aligning the cyborg hero with a recognisable and sympathetic cause: the fight against illegal drug trafficking and abuse.

The 1980s was also the decade that saw the arrival of affordable home computers intended for personal, non-specialist use, effectively bringing computer programming into the home and into public consciousness. Images of new technologies such as CCTV cameras have come to represent, as Blake and Aldana argue in their volume on Digital Horror, a sustained engagement with broader questions regarding the socio-cultural function of technologies of witnessing" that "have come not to serve our needs but to monitor and putatively shape our activities and sense of ourselves" (2016: 6). The impact of such changes on society, and the fears and concerns to which they

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[12] To bring matters back to the presidency, first lady Nancy Reagan became something of a figurehead in the War on Drugs campaigns of the 1980s, even coining the phrase 'Just Say No'.

have given rise, is reflected in the film's paranoid depiction of the power of the screen, whether it is in the home — screens are omnipresent in the private sphere, not only televisions but also information points— or in the workplace, where RoboCop is controlled by computer programming, with the link between the screen and domination made patent by the fact the protagonist's point of view is represented as a video screen resembling CCTV footage. Thus, *RoboCop* also provides a meditation on the rising importance and visibility of media and high-technology in our daily lives.

2.2.1 (De)Constructing Masculinity: The Cinematic Cyborg in the late 1980s

Paul Verhoeven's[13] *RoboCop*, written by Edward Neumeier and Mike Miner and released in 1987, exudes satirical criticism of Capitalism and neo-liberalism, not only in its portrayal of disenfranchised state employees, but also in series of humorous adverts seen throughout the film, as well as in its caricature-esque portrayals of American businessmen. According to Fred Glass, this is a typical of New Bad Future films, which "tilt towards an intelligent leftish politics, leavened with a sense of (black) humour" (1990: 2). This is certainly true of *Blade Runner*'s (1982) depiction of an out-of-control capitalist consumerism; a city in which run-down apartment blocks sit side by side with polished skyscrapers, highlighting the economic inequality brought about by advanced capitalism. These streets also feature holographic adverts for pornographic services aimed at the rich, with physical prostitutes, some of whom are replicants, street-walking below amongst the working classes, thereby accentuating the patent rift between rich and poor that has come to be accepted as commonplace in New Bad Future societies.

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[13] Dutch director Paul Verhoeven is known for creating Hollywood blockbusters with spectacular and sometimes violent action set pieces as well as for his sense of irony. Aside from *RoboCop*, his more popular films include *Total Recall* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Starship Troopers* (1997).

The cyborg sub-genre, then, is known for its treatment of issues concerning the place of the working-class male in modern day society and, in particular, the troubles he faces when it comes to defining his identity as a man. I refer specifically to men here as cyborg films deal almost exclusively with male cyborg protagonists, very few examples of female cyborgs are to be found in the cycle in the 1980s.[14] So why were issues of class and gender so important during this period? And how did they come to be associated with the cyborg sub-genre?

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the 1980s was a period of rapid change in the United States, with increased mechanisation and the imminent threat of computers usurping human employees in the workplace. This threat is clearly expressed in *RoboCop* (1987) as the police officers of the film face losing their jobs due to government privatisation, leading to private companies developing cost-cutting measures which include introducing robots into the workforce. Not only does this backdrop deal with issues surrounding the situation of the working man in the 1980s but it also represents a direct criticism of neo-liberalist strategies of privatisation and decentralisation, something that was directly and negatively affecting many Americans during Ronald Reagan's tenure as president and stirring tensions with regards to traditional gender roles. In the early 1980s, for example, men's unemployment outdistanced women's for a brief time (Faludi 1991: 81), although a disproportionate amount of budget cuts were made in programs that predominantly served women (Faludi 1991: 8-9). The economic stagnation of the early 1980s, in the wake of the oil crisis and economic recession of the 1970s produced a mass social anxiety caused by job dislocation as the old industrial base of the American economy was progressively

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[14] Although it was technically released in the 1990s, arguably, one notable exception is animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), a Japanese-British co-production, featuring female cyborg protagonist Major Motoko Kusanagi. Based on a Japanese manga of the same name by Masamune Shirow, this film is very much in the Japanese tradition rather than the Anglophone one studied in this thesis.

destroyed by a combination of Reaganist politics and technological progress (Short 2005: 71).

Since according to Michael Kimmel's definition of American masculinity, a man without a job is a not a man at all, since it is "a model of manhood that derives identity entirely from a man's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographical and social mobility" (2002: 137), the very heart of masculinity had come under threat, a situation explored by *RoboCop*'s portrayal of Alex Murphy (Peter Weller) and his fellow police officers. A parallel is drawn between financial and employment security and bodily integrity as the largely male police force is both threatened with job cuts and physical harm, as they are sent improperly provisioned onto the dangerous streets of Detroit. In this way, the filmmakers present a situation in which the male is vulnerable both physically and psychologically. Once physical and psychological centres of masculinity are destabilised, gender is revealed to be something constructed, not given or fixed. In other words, with one element of identity (masculinity) called into question, it follows that identity itself must be examined as something that may be subject to change, that may not have been present and fully-formed since birth. This is the dilemma facing the men of Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop*. As one of these men himself and the protagonist of the picture, it can be argued that Alex Murphy comes to represent all male workers in his quest to discover his own identity.

Murphy's autonomy and identity are stolen from him by OmniCorp (OCP), the multi-national corporation appointed by the government to oversee policing in Detroit. His identity —his mind and most of his body— is removed in its entirety to make way for computer programming, which will be used by OCP to control Murphy/RoboCop's behaviours and actions. As the film's plot unfolds, Murphy gradually recovers

fragments of memory and his previous personality begins to emerge. When faced with the reality of the loss of his masculine and human identity RoboCop turns to violence, seeking out the man who had him shot to pieces in the first place, thereby facilitating the appropriation of his body by OCP. Although RoboCop succeeds in locating Clarence J. Boddicker (Kurtwood Smith), the leader of a gang involved in drug production and distribution, it is a pyrrhic victory, as it comes to light that the gangster was working on the orders of the corporation. Ultimately, it is the quest to uncover those responsible for his loss of identity that drives RoboCop to overcome his computer programming and not, notably, the quest to recover his family, which he readily gives up, stating that his wife and son will be better off without him. Pure aggression and violence, however, are revealed to be ineffective tools to the man seeking to forge an alternative masculine identity, since killing goons in spectacularly gory scenes does not bring RoboCop any closer to regaining control of his body and identity. Instead, autonomy and freedom are key, elements which, according to Michael Kimmel, form a central part of what it is to be a man in America: "Being a man meant being in charge of one's one life, liberty, and property" as well as being "independent, self-controlled, responsible" (2002: 138). When men, like RoboCop and the other disenfranchised police officers, do not possess control over their own body and agency in the public sphere, they are seen to fail to perform the hegemonic masculinity proposed by Michael Kimmel. Thus, the film highlights men's anxieties relating to the embodiment of a socially accepted, normative masculinity in the contemporary landscape of increased mechanisation, economic inequality and corporate dominance.

Not only the police officers are subject to the film's dissection of identity, since Verhoeven's *RoboCop* contains a stinging satire of another model of masculinity which was particularly visible at the time; the corporate male. The corporate male is a

businessman, perpetually seen in the office, wearing an expensive suit and surrounded by other, identical men. Perhaps the most famous example of this type of masculinity is *American Psycho*'s (2000, from the novel by Brett Easton Ellis) Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale); self-centred, manipulative, violent and obsessed with status and money, Bateman is the ultimate representation of a version of hegemonic masculinity that was beginning to be questioned in the 1980s.[15] Both Bateman and *RoboCop*'s top floor businessmen display ruthless competitiveness, a desperation to be perceived as powerful and successful. Importantly, power and success are not as relevant as the appearance of the same; what is depicted in these two films is what Susan Faludi refers to in *Stiffed*, her 1999 study of masculinity in the second half of the 20th Century, as 'ornamental culture'. Whereas at least up to the 1950s hegemonic masculinity was defined by what a man *did* — his job, his service to the community etc. — after World War II, with the rise of television and consumer culture, a masculine *image* became the defining feature of masculinity. According to Faludi it became "something to drape over the body […] personal, not societal […] displayed, not demonstrated" (1999: 35), this is certainly the case in RoboCop, where the businessmen showcase their masculinity through their designer suits, smart haircuts and the barbed comments they shoot at their competitors, rather than by displaying any proven business acumen.

In Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, the private sphere is not given the same weight in the successful performance of hegemonic masculinity as the public sphere. Alex Murphy's family exists in the background, we know he has a wife and son but they are seen only in flashback, as a blurry memory. Murphy's main role within the family seems to be that of provider, in fact, we do not see him perform any other duty related to the home. His paternal role is a traditional, patriarchal one, existing solely in the public sphere, as

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[15] Christian Bale has portrayed both Bateman —a sinister, monstrous figure of 1980s idealised masculinity, and Batman —the flawed, muscular superhero who embodies the independent, strong masculine ideal of the early 2000s in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005).

a man of words and action, as opposed to enacting an emotional role within the domestic sphere. Murphy's performance as father in the film supports Stella Bruzzi's statement that "In the 1980s, traditional fatherhood reasserted itself" (2005 :115). She claims that this revival of the patriarchal father is related to the backlash against feminism that played out in the 1980s, following the relative successes of the women's movement in the 1970s. Faludi explains the backlash thus:

> The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash […] This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of popular version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall. (Faludi 1991: 9-10)

In accordance with this statement, Hollywood films, including action movies, tended to portray traditionally patriarchal male characters as heroes, with their patriarchal qualities put across as positive attributes. Robin Wood refers to this trend as "the restoration of the father", describing it as "the dominant project, ad infinitum and post-nauseum, of contemporary Hollywood cinema" (Wood 2003: 152). Fathers, both biological and symbolic, are appreciated, loved and respected on screen, "even if he is initially inadequate" or "generally deficient, unpleasant or monstrous" (Wood 2003: 154). Furthermore, the 1980s saw the rise of the father-son narrative which was to become so prevalent in American action cinema (Jeffords 1994). This narrative features not only the redemption, or reassertion, of the patriarchal father figure, but also requires that the son "must develop his own individualized characteristics, under the mentorship of the father, to produce a set of abilities that are appropriate for the future" (Jeffords 1994: 89). Susan Jeffords draws a connection between this individualised character development and the national narrative of the Reagan years; "relationships between fathers and sons (or men and their symbolic fathers) as not only the chief determinants of masculine identities but, through those identities, of a national narrative as well" (86-

7). Reagan, Jeffords argues, created a national narrative based around himself as the masculine role model *par excellence*, an ex-soldier and active sportsman who worked all his life to escape poverty and earn his fortune. This model is reflected in Hollywood cinema of the Reagan era with the return of hegemonic role models and powerful action heroes portrayed in a positive light.

In *RoboCop* (1987), Alex Murphy is deemed worthy of his son's love and respect purely because of his success in the workplace. All the audience knows about the boy is that he is a fan of the television programme *TJ Laser*, starring a futuristic tough guy cop who the child aligns with his father, asking him to perform the same tricks as his media hero. Generally, anything appearing on a television screen in RoboCop is intended as parody, and this may be the case with the film's comparison of Murphy with TJ Laser. The programme is indeed over the top, hammy and ridiculous, suggesting that its main character is a comic exaggeration of media representations of the father as hero. The fact that the audience is invited to directly compare Laser with Murphy indicates that the film's irony when it comes to media representations can be applied to the film itself, and therefore, to the film's portrayal of its male characters. In this case, the ironic portrayal of the hero cop on television suggests that the hero cop of the film, RoboCop, is also a somewhat ironic portrayal of the action hero. Since a facet of Murphy/RoboCop's heroism relies on his role as father, the fatherhood portrayed in the movie must also be examined taking comedy into account.

The irony of Verhoeven's portrayal of the patriarchal father is crystallised in Murphy's literally rose-tinted nostalgic memory of his wife and son. We are never shown any realistic scenes of Murphy's family life, only a romantic ideal of the perfect family, as remembered (or imagined) by RoboCop. The film seems to suggest that in contemporary society it is in fact impossible to successfully embody a traditional or

patriarchal model of fatherhood, a sentiment that is underlined by the fact that Murphy as RoboCop knows he will never be reunited with his family. The traditional father *must* be a man, with a recognisably male body, as RoboCop is euphemistically reminded by one OCP employee, a husband must be able to offer his wife "a man's love". It is a bold move on the part of Verhoeven and writers Neumeier and Miner to refuse RoboCop a happy resolution and reassertion of his masculinity in patriarchal terms. The decision suggests a desire to explore possibilities for masculine identity beyond the roles of father and husband, even if the alternative remains that of the self-sacrificing hero seen in so many action and war movies. It is one thing to question an element of mainstream patriarchal masculinity, and another (more difficult) one to do away with it altogether. While Jeffords claims that in the film "the achievement of the hard body no longer seems the goal […] but instead an effort to redefine that body as meaningful in emotional rather than physical terms" (1994: 114), I would argue that although *RoboCop* (1987) succeeds in calling into question certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the film does not ultimately present an alternative model of masculinity in order for its protagonist to continue to act as a father and avoid renouncing the family. Whereas Sue Short argues that the lack of resolution between father and son testifies to Murphy's demasculinisation (2004: 145), in my view it demonstrates his adherence to patriarchal family values and his desire to protect his own family as a normative entity, even if that means sacrificing contact with his loved ones. This suggests that Murphy is in fact not demasculinised but hypermasculinised, with the result that the male protagonist's fear of embodying difference makes it impossible to create an alternative family structure. It is this desire to safeguard the family that reflects the political narrative of the 1980s. Throughout the decade soldiers, astronauts, and frontiersmen in general were held up to be the ideal model of American

masculinity, and a large part of this narrative was dedicated to the promotion of man as father, protector, provider. In effectively removing the protagonist's family from the picture, the husband/father is allowed to emerge as a strong, tough and independent individual.

2.2.2 The Monstrous Male Cyborg in *RoboCop* (1987)

In her volume examining the figure of the monster, Margrit Shildrick defines monstrosity as "a deeply disruptive force" that signals a "vulnerability"; in other words, "a failure of self-protection that opens the self to the potential of harm" (Shildrick 2002: 1). This aspect of monstrousness is depicted in both the original *RoboCop* and its 2014 remake, although it is approached in quite different ways. Whereas the 1987 film offers close-up shots of casual dismemberment of the white male body, the remake opts to avoid a gruesome depiction of the penetration and destruction of the flesh. In Verhoeven's film the camera remains fixed on Murphy as he is literally shot to pieces by Boddicker and his gang, who laugh at his pain and helplessness. In these scenes the movie refers to and borrows from the body horror genre, using state-of-the-art special effects[16] to portray the visually graphic dismemberment of the human body. The sequence further emphasises corporeal vulnerability and disintegration by framing individual body parts separately and in close-up. This demonstrates not only a corporeal vulnerability, as evidenced by the human body open to violent attack, but also a psychological vulnerability, in that within a matter of seconds the protagonist goes from a heroic figure of masculine success to screaming, broken wreck. Furthermore, I would argue that this scene suggests an interdependency of psychic identity and corporeal

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[16] The make-up and special effects team was headed up by Rob Bottin, who had already worked on visually spectacular and effects heavy films *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Thing* (1982). Bottin also designed the armoured suit worn by Peter Weller, drawing inspiration from C3P0, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Japanese anime and Detroit's motor industry.

configuration. Once the integrity of either mind or body is lost, the other begins to disintegrate along with it: in this case, with Murphy's psychological identity threatened by looming unemployment, he loses his position of power over other men, and consequently, within the logic of the film, his bodily integrity is also destroyed as a result of the attack.

This off-hand dissolution of a male protagonist's corporeal and psychic integrity is carried out in a way that is described by Pete Boss, referring to the bodily destruction of the modern horror film, as being "casual to the point of randomness […] mechanically routine in its execution" (Boss 1986: 16). The casual nature of extreme violence in 1980s action cinema was not only a gleeful reaction to the filmmaking possibilities offered by technological developments. It also signals a heightened anxiety when it comes to the vulnerability of the physical self, a sense that the body may at any time, and suddenly, be penetrated or even annihilated in some unforeseen and unprovoked attack. This anxiety can be linked, if not attributed to, various events taking place in the United States and Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s. An increasing awareness of venereal disease, the dangers of cancer, and the AIDs crisis had ensured that the possibility of corporeal weakness and failure remained in the public consciousness, a mysterious and unseen threat with the power to destroy an otherwise healthy body. In the political sphere, American men who had once enjoyed financial and homeland security found their position of power to be greatly undermined by huge job losses and the failure of United States military operations abroad, most notably in Vietnam.

In fact, these latter two themes; financial and homeland security, are central to *RoboCop*'s setting. In the movie, Detroit[17] is practically immobilised by unemployment, crime and violence, while the privatisation of the police force and its consequent job losses are heatedly discussed by characters within the film. The police officers, including Murphy, are vulnerable not only financially due to the threat of being dismissed from their jobs, but also physically, every time they go out onto the streets. Just as Murphy's body is decimated by bullet wounds, so is the body of the city, and by extension, the body of the nation. Detroit is presented as dark, dilapidated, overrun by violent and petty criminals who threaten the integrity of its society, buildings and institutions. This link is particularly patent in the sequence where Alex Murphy is all but killed by Boddicker's gang in an abandoned warehouse. The building chosen to set this scene is an empty shell strewn with rubbish and unused industrial machinery —the picture of a society falling apart as it is pushed to the limit by economic recession and unemployment. As a reflection of collective anxieties regarding the erosion of values and standards of living, the film becomes more than an individual fantasy of self-empowerment and protection, but also a national fantasy in which America and its values are defended from multiple threats. Indeed, Susan Jeffords refers to this link between the individual and the national in her study of representations of Hollywood masculinity in the 1980s, stating that the hard bodies of films like *RoboCop* (1987) and *First Blood* (1982) "came to stand not only for a type of national character —heroic, aggressive, and determined —but for the nation itself" (Jeffords 1994: 25).

RoboCop (1987) is often named among what critics have termed the 'hard body cycle'. In her work on the 'hard body' in the action film, Susan Jeffords defines it as

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[17] Following the steady decline of the automobile industry in the 1960s and 70s, by the 1980s Detroit, a effectively city built around car manufacturing, was experiencing a fall in population and rises in unemployment, poverty and crime —problems that persist to this day, with the city even filing for bankruptcy in 2013.

"the normative body that enveloped strength, labour, determination, loyalty and courage" (1994: 24); and as "refusing to be 'messy' or 'confusing', by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries" (1994: 25). Jeffords approaches *RoboCop* (1987) as part of this cycle, referring to its protagonist as a hard body throughout her analysis. I question the assertion that Verhoeven's Murphy has 'hard edges' and 'clear boundaries', as well as the contention that his is a 'normative body'. The situation that initiates Murphy's transformation into RoboCop is the first to clearly demonstrate that the film does not revolve around the hard body stereotype. Murphy is shot by several gangsters simultaneously, leading to near total corporeal disintegration. The first close-up shot of this scene focuses on Murphy's hand being blown apart, disappearing into blood and matter, leaving him with a ragged, bleeding stump. In this shot the boundary between inside and outside the human body is blown away in an instant, shocking the audience with the camera's lingering attention on the absence of bodily integrity, the boundary that defines corporeal limits suddenly eliminated. Murphy is just as shocked as the audience, barely able to stand up and stagger away. Almost immediately his whole arm is torn off by one bullet. Now that the body's boundaries have been threatened, tested, proven to be unstable, they will be completely undermined and removed. Murphy is literally shot to pieces, but miraculously survives; even the final shot to the head is not enough to kill him. Despite on one level showing amazing resilience of human spirit, this scene, then, represents a failure of the 'natural' male body to maintain its integrity, its hard edges and its clear boundaries. This suggests that rather than simply following the formula of previous hard body movies, *RoboCop* (1987) can be considered a subversive contribution to the cycle; questioning the relevance of the hard body action heroes of the early 1980s.

As Halberstam explains in her work on the monster, they inevitably contain multiple unstable borders, making strange the categories of identity by which we continue to define ourselves (1991: 6). It is the excess of meaning caused by various simultaneous boundary crossings, Halberstam argues, that inspires fear in the spectator, since it acts as a representation of the destabilisation of individual identity that threatens every subject's unique and established sense of self. RoboCop as a monster is no exception, as the boundaries human/machine, inside/outside, and male/female are all called into question within the cyborg body. The separation of human and machine, or organic and artificial elements within the human body, is the most visible border transgressed in *RoboCop* and forms the basis of the film's narrative. Alex Murphy's corporeal integrity is compromised by a violent attack, destroying his original identity as a functional male, a husband and father who acts as provider and protector for his family. Following this attack, his body is reconstructed and transformed through the addition of mechanical and robotic parts, with the result that his identity is lost, since the body has been transformed beyond recognition. The resulting corporeal configuration is rechristened RoboCop to reflect his dual nature as part human part machine. Murphy is provided with a mechanical, computer programmed body, which, being made from bulletproof and impenetrable material, is certainly hard in a literal sense. When RoboCop is first sent out onto the streets, he does indeed embody strength, labour, determination, loyalty, and courage, never erring from the task at hand, fearless and unstoppable, RoboCop at this moment in the film embodies the definition of the hard bodied male. This situation is not to last long, however, for soon enough Murphy's memories begin to interfere with RoboCop's computer programming, allowing him to reflect on the nature of his existence and his past, and thereby begin to subvert OCP's orders and programming by investigating his own murder. Not only is hard bodied

RoboCop short lived, but also he is clearly depicted as a negative character —appearing unfeeling and cold, and therefore inhuman. The audience cheers RoboCop on in his quest to rediscover his past and become Murphy again; although we enjoy the violent action scenes, ultimately we identify with and support the man Murphy, not the cyborg RoboCop. The hard bodied hero here becomes a villain, and must be 'softened' in order to win the support of the viewing public. The ultimate resolution of *RoboCop,* in which the mind holds the key to the recuperation of individual identity, adheres to Jefford's view that the character RoboCop breaks the mould of previously hard bodies such as Rambo, in its "creation of a body in which strength is defined internally rather than externally, as a matter of moral rather than muscle fiber" (1994: 136). Furthermore, this focus on the interior, the inner essence of unique, unchangeable identity, ultimately allays the protagonist's monstrosity, emphasising what remains of his humanity, although there is not a full recovery of his previous masculine identity.

The corporeal transgression of the violent attack that threatens to eliminate the boundary between the inside and the outside of the body inspires an abject fear in the viewer, since its depiction of dismemberment, mutilation and surgery is reminiscent of death invading life, as the physical human body is pushed to the limit of survivability blood, flesh, organs and other bodily secretions come to the fore, breaking through the border that usually holds them in place: the skin. In many ways the skin is the ultimate boundary, that which holds the body together, keeping it human, an idea that is put forward by Halberstam in relation to gothic texts: "Skin houses the body and it is figured in the gothic as the ultimate boundary that divides the inside from the outside […] Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals or contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster (1995: 7). Once this barrier is damaged or destroyed there is nothing left to ensure that the human body remains whole

and self-contained: therein the monster is born. This can be observed in films throughout the cyborg cycle, for example in *The Terminator* (1984) as Arnold Schwarzenneger peels back his skin in order to tinker with the mechanical parts located inside his face, highlighting his monstrosity and thereby counteracting any idea that he may in fact be human; and in *Universal Soldier* (1992), where the deconstruction of Jean Claude Van Damme's body and its transformation into composite cyborg results in a fractured sense of self and consequent monstrous behaviours.

The abject, as Kristeva writes, not only repulses but also attracts: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it *[on enjouit].* Violently and painfully. A passion" (1982: 9). One does not want to look but cannot avoid it. *RoboCop* (1987) plays on this quality of the abstract to elicit powerful physical and psychological reactions in the spectator. Close-up shots of bleeding wounds, of viscera spilling out of the body and the severing of limbs provoke screams, and also shouts of enjoyment. These images are both frightening and exhilarating in their intensity, evoking a visceral, physical response from the viewer, allowing for an identification with the victim's suffering. Seltzer, writing in 1997, describes this form of identification as 'wound culture', "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound", and argues that this entails a "breakdown in the distinction between the individual and the mass" (3). The wound becomes an opportunity to overcome "the distinction between inner and outer, observer and scene, representation and perception […] a collapse of proper boundary maintenance" (21). The wounding and trauma of a subject on screen, abject and therefore both repulsive and attractive, draws the viewing audience into a situation of identification with the wounded character.

In terms of the construction of man as monster in *RoboCop* (1987), abjection and the identificatory response it elicits from audiences is central, as it is a determining factor in building a relationship between the monster on screen and the viewer. When watching the 1987 movie, we live through Alex Murphy's corporeal suffering and transformation along with him, creating a bond of understanding and sympathy that later will allow us to continue rooting for the protagonist despite him having become a monster, the half-human half-robot RoboCop. In this film, abjection transforms the body, placing it on the boundary separating human from non-human, making the subject unrecognisable as a human, and therefore unacceptable and impossible to understand within a normative conceptualisation of society. In science fiction films such as *RoboCop,* a process of reintegration into society takes place following the protagonist's abjection, but their previous, privileged status as white male human is never fully regained. As Clarke explains in her discussion of the cyborg; "although the abject body is made clean and proper, in its transformation it also becomes 'not human'" (2002: 35). Thus, abjection becomes an index of humanity, which serves not only to separate the monstrous other from society, but also to reincorporate rejected bodies without exposing society to a risk of monstrous contamination. As long as the messy mix of organic and inorganic is hidden beneath a smooth, hard outer shell, the cyborg can be allowed to function within normalised society, although it can never hope to be fully accepted as a subject with rights and freedoms and must therefore exist on the margins. The authorities perform a cosmetic reintegration of Alex Murphy into society following his extensive surgical interventions, presenting him as a thinking, feeling robot policeman when in fact he remains under the control of OCP at all times, unable to act independently without the company's observation and approval. Furthermore, in the original 1987 *RoboCop* film Alex Murphy is fitted with a metal helmet, which the

audience assumes is central to his functioning, and yet in reality is revealed to be an aesthetic feature when Murphy decides to remove it and display the mesh of technological components and flesh that form his head. The helmet is intended to maintain the clean and proper nature of the cyborg body, visually and categorisably inhuman, coated in smooth metal plates, appearing uncomplicated as its hybrid nature is hidden from view. This strategy ensures that the monstrous cyborg remains 'other' — and hence essential and non-threatening— to society since outwardly it appears robotic, while at the same time allowing the monster to reside within normalised society by masking its abject nature.
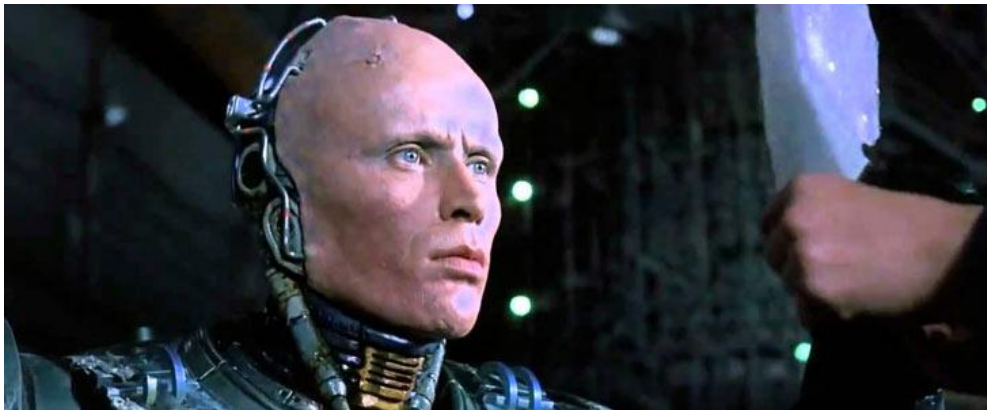
Figure 3 RoboCop reveals the abject fusion of flesh and machine by removing his helmet

Margrit Shildrick explores the tension created by the ambiguity of the humanoid monster, writing that "so long as the monstrous remains the monstrous other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words, it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into an oppositional category of not-me" (Shildrick 2002: 2). Tension and fear arise when the monster's status becomes indeterminate, "neither wholly self nor wholly other" (3), creating a liminal being, impossible to categorise and therefore threatening normative social order. Once Murphy's abject broken body has been reordered, becoming the cyborg RoboCop, his still monstrous body becomes ambiguous. While his humanoid form aligns him with ordinary human

subjects, the fact that his body is a mixture of organic and inorganic makes it clearly inhuman, meaning that he can be neither fully accepted nor wholly exiled, and must therefore exist on the margins, as a worrying and threatening presence. Murphy's gesture in taking off his helmet to reveal his hybrid form demonstrates his willingness to exist on the margins and to fight for justice as a societal outlaw, much akin to heroic characters from classic Western movies or popular characters from contemporary films such as Rambo in *First Blood* (1982). Thus, the monster becomes a heroic masculine figure in the film. RoboCop's decision to assume the role of outlaw can be read as an acceptance of the condition of liminality, in that the monster, or unstable other, is allowed to continue to exist as a marginal being, with his interstitiality writ large on his body in the clear juxtaposition of human flesh and metal robotic parts. In this way, the monster becomes a hopeful figure, demonstrating alternative forms of embodiment and of resistance, fighting against powerful multinationals in order to improve society, making the oppressors pay for their wrongdoings and bringing fairness and opportunities to the oppressed. This is consistent with Fred Botting's observations on the monster, in which he suggests that the "monster, then, is no longer a figure of fear, but a metaphor of change and possibility, a model to be imitated and affirmed rather than abhorred" (2008: 46). At the beginning of the film, Alex Murphy wished to impress his son by living up to the model provided by the boy's hero, the TV cop TJ Laser. At the end of the film he has achieved this, but only by relinquishing his privileged status in society, losing his position not only as human, but also as husband, father and provider.

Although the boundaries separating human and machine, and inside and outside are repeatedly questioned and transgressed *RoboCop* (1987), the performed gendered behaviours of the cyborg protagonist remain masculine, with only hints of possible

demasculinisation. Comments are made by OCP executives regarding RoboCop's supposed inability to please his wife since, we are led to believe, he no longer possesses male genitalia. Insofar as a male body requires a phallus to be understood as such, RoboCop is no longer male. However, various masculine signifiers are employed to replace the missing penis. As in innumerable cinematic and literary texts, aggressive and virile masculinity is symbolised in the use of a weapon, in this case, large guns which in fact now form part of RoboCop's cyborg body. Although the original, organic phallus has been lost, a powerful mechanical one has been incorporated into the corporeal configuration thereby ensuring that the character will continue to project as outwardly male. Furthermore, RoboCop's role as police officer programmed to "serve the public trust, protect the innocent, uphold the law" allows for the embodiment of various behaviours which read as typical of a hegemonic, Hollywood action movie masculinity. In one instance RoboCop saves a girl from rapists, using aggressive threats and his phallic weapon to repel and detain the two male criminals, demonstrating his masculinity in accordance with the tropes of the American film industry by protecting women and proving to be stronger and more heroic than other —lesser— men. If one is to consider only the gender performance of the character in this portion of the film it appears there is in fact no room for the possibility of alternative masculine identities that do not rely on the projection of aggression and violence. There are, however, more factors to take into account, including RoboCop's status as cyborg posthuman.

In order to avoid public concerns over his true nature—man, machine or both—, OCP make clear their intentions to keep RoboCop under their full control at all times, and advertise this fact, by referring to him as a "product", and "property". This reasoning can also be tied into another observation from Shildrick, that "the desire for mastery over the excessive other […] illustrates not so much the strength of the

scientific endeavour as the need to stabilise the uncertainty that the monstrous creates at the heart of human being" (2002: 22). The desire for mastery, expressed in the covering of RoboCop's hybrid body with a smooth metal shell, at the same time demonstrates and assuages fears generated by the powerful combination of human and machine residing within one body. The "product" cannot be sold to the public without convincing them of the safety of their new creation, which means they must prove that it is fully controlled by the authorities at all times. In the 1987 film, installing a software programme onto RoboCop's hardware sufficed to convince the public within the film, and the real-life audience, that the cyborg's movements and calculations, or thoughts, would be overseen and manipulated by the authority in question, OCP. The commercial mastermind behind the idea of creating a cyborg police force, Morton (Miguel Ferrer), is present during the surgical operations, giving opinions and orders on scientific matters for which he is not qualified. Here, the writers and director leave no doubt as to the desire of the business world to control every aspect of the corporation and its activities, even where it concerns the life or death of a human subject. The links between business and the health industry are shown to be deep and strong, reflecting public concerns as to exactly how independent and fair pharmaceutical and medical corporations are and whose interests they have in mind. Pete Boss speaks specifically of public mistrust of medical professionals and institutions, represented on film in gruesome surgical operation taking place in bright, modern hospital space, which portray the alienation and manipulation of the human body, and with it the idea that the subject is but defenceless matter, "becoming integrated into a wider frame of reference in which the institutional and organisational aspects of medicine—denuded of bedside manner—focus their conspiratorial attentions upon it" (Boss 1986: 20). To this we can add the growing sense of paranoia related to multinational corporations and their links

with government, a concept that is placed very much in the foreground in the 1987 *RoboCop* movie in its treatment of in-company power plays, backstabbing and deeply rooted corruption. There pervades a sense of entrapment and helplessness; in fact, one executive remarks that since Alex Murphy signed a release form upon joining the force they can "do pretty much what they want to him". The subject here has no control whatsoever over his own body due to the immoral nature of the ties between business and medicine, his flesh has been sold and his destiny is out of his hands.

In Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991), the author applauds the potential of the cyborg myth to liberate the human species from the limits of binary constructions of gender, sex, and race, but at the same time warns against the threat of manipulation of the cyborg by powerful, militaristic governments and multinational corporations. In *RoboCop* (1987), it is the control of the multinational OCP that prevents the cyborg protagonist from reaching his full posthuman potential. Peter Weller's RoboCop embraces his posthuman form in removing the helmet intended to hide the suturing that represents the transgression of borders within the body, but OCP programming stands in the way of him taking action against injustice within the corporate system; it is only through the help of OCP's owner 'The Old Man' (Dan O'Herlihy) that he can exploit the loophole that allows him to eliminate the corrupt Dick Jones (Ronny Cox). Acting alone in his posthuman form is not enough to effectuate a change.

In cyborg films, through the use and misuse of technology "humans are made monsters, technologically altered, prosthetically enhanced beyond human specifications" (Botting 2008: 46). This creates not simply a monster, but a posthuman monster, facilitating, in Botting's view "flights towards new identities, an expansion into the new and virtual realms of the technocorporate order". Botting goes on to argue that "The monster, then, is no longer a figure of fear but a metaphor of change and

possibility, a model to be imitated and affirmed rather than abhorred" (2008: 46). I agree with this statement up to a point; although I believe the posthuman monster is often accepted in cinematic texts as a model to be imitated and affirmed, its power to inspire change and possibility remains limited. The white male subject, usually dominating not only his own body but those of other, less powerful, less hegemonically masculine subjects, is in cyborg films is faced with the terrifying experience of losing control. The representation of the replacement of human abilities with automated or computer programmed technology plays on fears of a de-spiritualisation of humanity, belying the fragile nature of human, and especially male power, thereby threatening the idea of a unique, unchanging identity. The white male protagonist, previously endowed with the power of agency, is stripped of his privilege in an instant, forcing a reconsideration of the given nature of individual identity. This de-humanising threat, however, is invariably overcome in cyborg films, thanks to the protagonist's masculine heroism, presumed to form part of some essential core of all human men. The hard, muscular corporeality embodied by RoboCop signals to the viewer that despite being penetrated, divested of agency and literally castrated the protagonist remains a heroic, masculine figure worthy of identification and emulation. Possession of a "hard body" denies RoboCop the opportunity to fully divest himself of hegemonic masculinities or to fully embrace a postmodern embodiment of alternative, non-aggressive masculinities that stray from the normative expectations of Hollywood action cinema.

2.3 The Post-Millennial Cyborg: An Introduction to José Padilha's *RoboCop* (2014)

RoboCop (2014) responds to and reflects its contemporary political situation in its portrayal of US foreign policy in the Middle East, satirically addressing military

interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan in scenes showing the attempted pacification of small towns through the deployment of close observation, amounting to the elimination of privacy, and violence. The negative effects of these techniques on civilian populations, and the justification of an army presence in these countries has been a relevant public concern since George W Bush's decision to intervene in Iraq following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and was fuelled further by Wikileaks' release of classified military information and documents on the war in 2010. Both Daniel Dinello's *Technophobia!* and Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes' *Digital Horror* reference the Iraq war in their discussions of the portrayal of technology in post-millenial science fiction cinema. To quote Dinello, the Iraq war, as well as technophobic science fiction, "is energized by a deadly alliance of military, corporate and religious interests" (2005: 4), part of a wave of recurring images and themes both reflecting and influencing the public consciousness and its discourses. In this way, these films can "reveal behaviours that are culturally valued while advocating a point of view for discussion" (ibid 5). To return to the films under discussion here, whereas Verhoeven's *RoboCop* addressed concerns about the privatisation of national services and resulting job losses, the 2014 remake takes a more global view, while reflecting the 'will to truth', which is "particularly pronounced, not least in the shadow of governmental lies regarding weapons of mass diestruction in Iraq, legitimated globally by the media's reportage of the so-called War on Terror" (Blake and Aldana 2016: 3). Furthermore, in Padilha's film there is an increased focus on corruption and collusion on a more individual level since the police chief is revealed to have been involved in the plot to kill Alex Murphy (Swedish-born Joel Kinnaman)[18]. Rather than portray the fight against drug barons

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[18] Brazilian director José Padilha dealt with themes of individual and systemic corruption in his earlier films *Tropa de Elite* (2007) and *Tropa de Elite 2: O Enimigou Agora é Otro* (2010), both set in Rio de Janeiro and met with great critical and public acclaim on their release. It is

waged by Peter Weller's RoboCop, alongside the corrupting influence of corporate America as a whole, in 2014 the majority of the action centres around the uncovering of political plots involving individuals, rather than entire corporations.

A public distrust of large multi-nationals has continued to develop into the 21st Century, where fear lies not only in the capabilities of new technologies but in how they may be used against the population by those who occupy positions of power. This public suspicion only grew after the events of the 11th of September 2001, the first ever large-scale attack on mainland American soil. As Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller write in their work on horror cinema after the event; "9/11 ushered in a period that would be framed by the government and the media as one in which the fundamentals of our society […] were threatened" (2011: 2). Paranoia and conspiracy theories were rife, and the fear of the interference of big business in government grew, especially with the release of Michael Moore's *Farenheit 9/11* (2004), exploring the Bush family's middle eastern connections, in particular with the Bin Laden family, one of whom, Osama, is widely accepted to be responsible for the attack. All of this is reflected in *RoboCop* (2014), in particular, in two elements of the film: OmniCorp boss Raymond Sellars' (Michael Keaton) bribing senators in order to pass a bill allowing the rollout of robotic police officers on the streets of America; and the Fox News parody fronted by Pat Novak (Samuel L. Jackson), in which Novak is seen to promote OmniCorp products at the behest of the company itself. Taking these elements at face value suggests that the leftish politics of the original New Bad Future movies has survived into 21st Century cyborg productions, preserving some of the political subversion of 1980s science fiction film. The problem with this view, however, is that the film relies on the same rhetoric that it parodies, thereby undermining its potential subversion.

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interesting to note that neither Padilha nor Verhoeven is American, and therefore it could be argued that they bring an outsider's view of the United States to their films.

In the film's opening sequence, newly developed robotic warriors (ED-209s) are seen performing house to house searches in a residential area in Iran—an Iran which bears a striking resemblance to the Iraqi towns targeted as part of George W. Bush's offensive against the Saddam Hussein regime.[19] As a cinema audience we are afforded a privileged view behind Pat Novak's Fox News inspired television cameras, where we see terrified families grappling with American-led oppression and the very real possibility of death. In fact, a young boy is killed by an ED-209 drone after entering into an ineffectual rage at the loss of his father moments before. The robot of course does not hesitate, it sees a weapon —a knife, rather inadequate for confronting armoured drones— and shoots to kill. This sequence represents a caustic commentary on the United States's blunt force treatment of Middle Eastern populations, drawing together the desire to protect the American mainland and to carry out reactionary post-9/11 violent incursions abroad.

Also noticeable in *RoboCop* (2014) is the omnipresence of surveillance technology, especially in the form of CCTV recordings which often capture the same event from several different angles. The increased presence of this type of images compared to the original film reflects the growing use of surveillance technology in the United States and elsewhere as well as heightened public awareness and concerns surrounding its use. Blake and Aldana attribute the use of this style of cinematography to an attempt "to convey the affective truth of that which it depicts" as part of the American public's embrace of 'will to truth'. Moreover, RoboCop is connected to data networks that allow him to access a plethora of live camera feeds and recorded images whenever he pleases. Meanwhile, OmniCorp not only monitor RoboCop visually, but also observe and interfere with the cyborg on a biological level. On a visual level, the

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[19] These new, efficient, privately-manufactured drones may be an allusion to the privately trained operatives of Blackwater USA, which allegedly operated as a mercenary force in Iraq and Afghanistan.

laboratory used to transform Alex Murphy into RoboCop is brightly lit and packed with modern equipment encased in glass walls. This, I believe, is a reflection of a heightened public concern surrounding surveillance in the United States of America, as well as the United Kingdom, reflecting paranoid fears of the advent of a big brother-esque micromanaged nation state in which the citizen's every action can be traced, and every movement observed through a network of security cameras. The fact that Murphy's transformation takes place within a transparent glass-walled room highlights the power of the multinational corporation OCP to view and control his every moment, much as the average citizen has become aware of the transparency and traceability of their internet activity by corporations, criminals and governments, a concern not present in the 1980s before the advent of the affordable home computer. That the issue of surveillance is more prominent *RoboCop* (2014) movie is hardly surprising given the considerable technological advances in the area, including facial recognition software and cameras, which has become a viable alternative to iris or fingerprint recognition, and is gaining popularity thanks to its non-invasive nature which allows for real-time monitoring both via cameras and on social media networks. *RoboCop* (2014) is somewhat more reassuring than the original when it comes to the power of the subject to resist corporate and government control though, since Joel Kinnaman's RoboCop is able, through his own efforts, to overcome the prime directives written into his programming and thereby eliminate the corrupt head of OCP Raymond Sellars, rather than having to rely on support from a benign senior member of the company.[20] Here, the film ultimately assuages fears related to misuse of technology by the powers that be in assuring the viewing public that human nature is equal to any attempt at subversion of its autonomy. In this way the film largely evades ethical questions about the correct use

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[20] Kinnaman returns to portraying physically powerful individuals subject to surveillance and control in Netflix series *Altered Carbon* (2018), based on Richard Morgan's 2002 novel of the same name, in which he plays posthuman ex-military operative Takeshi Kovacs.

and protection of scientific developments, resolved in its finale with the passing of a law controlling cyborg experiments.

2.3.1 (Re)Constructing Masculinity: The 21st Century Male Cyborg

When it comes to masculinity, the *RoboCop* remake fails to fully capture the subversive nature of the original film's portrayal of hard body masculinity. Whereas Verhoeven's film is laced with irony, Padilha's 2014 remake, written by Neumeier and Miner —writers of the original film— with Joshua Zetumer, is steadfastly straight-faced in its portrayal of Alex Murphy as policeman and father. Murphy is certainly a hands-on father, fulfilling the promise of the oft-discussed 'new man' by spending his free time with his son watching hockey games and tucking him into bed at night. The film is eager to stress that he is a positive father figure with a successful home life, both in socio-economical terms —he lives in a large house and drives a new car— and in terms of his loving, trusting relationship with his wife and son. At the beginning of the 1990s Jeffords predicted the demise of the father/son narrative, both real and symbolic (1994: 90), but in my view it has experienced a resurgence, with action films such as *The Road* (2009), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) among others, employing the trope. Claire Jenkins writes that 'Even when the father is not the hero, he is central to the narrative, as dysfunctional relationships with him are the cause of family troubles (that are reconciled over the course of the film/action) […] demonstrating that this is a genre concerned with patriarchy and restoring the father" (Jenkins 2015: 104). Jenkins goes on to argue that this is a form of backlash against the so-called 'soft bodied' father of 1990s cinema, where the paternal figure tended to be portrayed in melodramatic or comedic roles. This view is shared by Faludi, who considers the phenomenon indicative of a return to "an era of neofifties nuclear family 'togetherness', redomesticated

femininity and reconstructed Cold war manhood" (2007: 3-4). *RoboCop* (2014) certainly paints the traditional post-WWII patriarchal father figure in a positive light, with Murphy performing the role of breadwinner as well as representing the solid and stoic emotional core of his nuclear family. Although the brief scenes featuring contact between father and son encourage the audience to consider Murphy a modern, hands-on father; the overarching narrative and feel of the film suggest otherwise. Particularly notable is the sequence in which Alex Murphy has just become acquainted with his cyborg body, and is allowed to contact his family via a video link. He refuses to speak with his son, stating: 'I don't want him to see me like this'. By 'like this', Murphy is referring not only to his new physiology, but also to his unstable emotional state, shock and fear are visible in his eyes, and he is on the verge of tears for the duration of the call, hanging up abruptly moments before breaking down. The father's refusal to share his emotions with his son —a decision that is not criticised or questioned within the film— demonstrates the extent to which traditional paternal character traits are valued and revered in the film and in Hollywood action cinema more widely. The father is expected to remain strong, unemotional and dependable no matter what may befall him and the family, just as he was expected to do so in mainstream narratives of the post-war era. So, although the film presents a veneer of emotional connection on the part of the father figure, it fails to really penetrate the hard surface of the male to access any real expressions of sentiment that ultimately remain hidden inside.

In her 1994 book *Hard Bodies,* Susan Jeffords draws a link between masculinity as portrayed through the figure of the father in Hollywood cinema and the national narrative of the revival of the strong, heroic, American male promoted by President Reagan in the 1980s. She argues that the "restoration of a happy father/son relationship to the benefit of the community/nation/universe as a whole" attempts to offer a

resolution to American men's anxieties (87). In contrast to the original movie, *RoboCop* (2014) revolves around Murphy's desire to maintain and safeguard his family at all costs. In fact, this desire is what allows him to overcome his programming and recover his identity. This demonstrates the centrality of fatherhood to Murphy's masculine identity —he is first and foremost a father figure. Furthermore, the filmmakers have managed to reconcile violence with the Hollywood ideal of masculinity of man as father since family becomes the excuse or motivation for violence. This narrative trope is not exclusive to *RoboCop*, however, as it has been successfully employed in a range of films including the box office hits *Signs* (2002), in which a father (Mel Gibson) is obliged to protect the family home from invading aliens, and *War of the Worlds* (2005), in which a father (Tom Cruise) must undertake a dangerous and violent crusade in order to find refuge for himself and his two children.

Hannah Hamad, in her chapter on fatherhood in contemporary Hollywood cinema, argues that this trope is a manifestation of a "masculinist post 9/11 cultural logic of protecting the family homestead" (2013: 110). Hamad is not alone in her assertion that the events of 9/11 had a profound effect not only on the American people, but also on American film production. Susan Faludi, in her analysis of the aftermath of the terrorist attack, draws the reader's attention to the fact that "several weeks after the attacks, the Bush administration called on Hollywood directly to help 'communicate'— or rather, market—the new war on terror to the American people" (2007: 6). Faludi argues that the strategy employed to sell this new war was to displace the idea that America had become weak and ineffectual into the domestic realm, placing the blame squarely on depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood (9). The media, in both fiction and news reporting, broadcast stories featuring "the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity and the

search for and sanctification of helpless girls" (14). The war on terror is clearly alluded to in *RoboCop* (2014) in the opening scenes depicting a middle eastern insurgency by the US military, even before Alex Murphy is introduced. This demonstrates the importance of post 9/11 foreign policies as part of the setting and background of the film. It is cited as a direct influence on the development of the cyborg RoboCop and the proposed changes to laws prohibiting artificially intelligent robot law enforcement within the United States. Furthermore, gender ideals concerning femininity are clearly expressed in the character of Clara Murphy (Abby Cornish), whose role is simply to perform her duties as wife and mother. There is absolutely no character development or backstory for this character —or any female character—, her only motivation appears to be to support her husband no matter what the odds and to provide the excuse for Murphy's violent struggle.

A further response to the terrorist attack of 2001 was, as Leo Braudy sets out in his book on the links between masculinity and war, a need to establish new home front heroes in policemen, firemen and other civil servants (2005: 12), to the chivalric acts of whom the average man can aspire. As in many action films post 9/11, Alex Murphy and his colleagues are portrayed in the best possible light, putting their lives on the line to ensure the safety of American families. To represent them in any other way would put at risk the successful identification of the North American audience with these characters, since they have become accustomed, through exposure to various American media outlets, to revere the policeman[21] as hero. One ramification of the change in status of the policeman is that Alex Murphy's partner Anne Lewis (Nancy Allen) from the 1987 film and 1990 sequel *RoboCop 2* has been eliminated in the 2014 remake, to make way for a black male partner, Jack Lewis (Michael K. Williams). Here, the

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[21] The word police*man* is used deliberately here, as this heroic treatment is reserved only for male officers.

woman has been displaced in order for the masculine role to be expanded and redefined in alignment with the change in expectations in men's behaviour. More time and space need to be dedicated to the portrayal of man's ability to emote, communicate and relate to other men. Carol J. Clover explains it thus: "Crudely put, for a space to be created in which men can weep without being labelled feminine, women must be relocated to a space where they will be made to wail uncontrollably" (Clover 1992: 105). In the case of *RoboCop* (2014), Alex Murphy's wife Clara exhibits a constant hysteria, forever on the verge of tears, in order to maintain a clean boundary between masculine and feminine behaviours.

The reliance on more hegemonic models of masculinity is also suggested by the fact that the critique of corporate masculinity is absent from Padilha's *RoboCop,* the cutthroat Bob Morton, the man responsible for Murphy's transformation in the original movie, is replaced by the weak but essentially well-intentioned Dr Dennett Norton (Gary Oldman), who is a scientist, not a businessman. The motivations of Morton and Norton are entirely different. The former, looking to forward his career with a spectacular new product, is interested only in material gain and personal prestige in the eyes of his male rivals. The latter, however, is convinced to complete Murphy's transformation into RoboCop only when threatened with the withholding of the funding needed to continue his emotionally rewarding work in the physical rehabilitation of war veterans. Bob Morton is utterly devoid of morals, as proven by the scene of him taking cocaine with prostitutes in his penthouse apartment as well as his utter disregard for the sanctity of human life in choosing to convert Alex Murphy into a product. Norton, by contrast, is a principled man corrupted by his immoral superiors, affected only by a temporary loss of values. From this I conclude that whereas Verhoeven's film achieves a satirical criticism of male corporate culture within the capitalist system, with the

inclusion of an irredeemable set of male businessmen headed by Morton, a widespread plague of malignant masculinities, Padilha's version portrays the manipulation of one good man by a bad individual —Michael Keaton's Raymond Sellars— diverting the blame from the corporate system that creates destructive masculinities, and placing it squarely on the failures of one man alone. One could argue this is indicative of the continuing emphasis on individualism in American culture as whole, which Sherryl Vint argues stems from the separation of nature from culture combined with a sense of human society as based on market relations of exchange. This results in "a profound individualism that marks many versions of the posthuman" evidenced by the concept of the subject as "owning himself and owing nothing to society for this self or its capacities" (Vint 2007: 13). Alex Murphy's anguish at losing control of his body, of undergoing a corporeal alteration without his knowledge, belies the liberal humanist need to retain agency and individualist subjecthood. This "Mastery through the exercise of autonomous will", representing "merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures", is necessary to the "ethical imperative that humans keep control" by maintaining boundaries, so as not to lose their autonomous independent status and thereby their identity (Hayles 1999: 288). As Hayles goes on to explain, this view of the self as autonomous with unambiguous boundaries "authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self's complete dissolution" (1999: 290).

Although in *RoboCop* (1987) the cyborg protagonist's hard body and hard masculinity is questioned by his decision to reveal the sutured body beneath the shell, revealing the breached boundaries upon and within his body, in the 2014 remake that the hard body remains solid and impenetrable, with Alex Murphy/RoboCop as the

flawless hero encased in an equally flawless metal exoskeleton. His character, and the level of control to which Murphy is subjected, is not in this film reflected in the body shown on screen. In 1987 when he possessed little to no agency RoboCop was depicted as hard, smooth and invincible, yet once he had regained his memory, and therefore his autonomy, was represented as a patchwork of flesh and machine. In 2014 the body remains hard and smooth during the dramatic denouement, suggesting that the filmmakers have put less emphasis on the interconnectedness of mind and body, instead depicting them as independent elements in the Cartesian tradition. Kinnaman's Murphy does not exhibit a composite body to reflect his complex, posthuman mind. Cyborgian Alex Murphy refuses to be defined by his monstrous hybrid body, and in hiding it away, insists that he is defined only by his psychological processes, unchanged despite the great changes wrought upon his physical body. This suggests that the newer film serves to uphold the Cartesian ideal to a greater extent than its predecessor, locating masculine identity solely in the mind, seeming to claim that the corporeal configuration has no bearing on the makeup of the human mind, essence or 'soul', which remains fixed despite its reembodiment.

It is often claimed that as the locus of the self, the body represents the site of a given subject's identity, and acts as an outward demonstration of it: for example Alex Murphy's body at the beginning of *RoboCop* clearly represents a white, male, middle class subject, the audience can identify him as such simply by observing his skin, muscles and clothes. As Baudrillard argued in 1998, "the body has become an *object of salvation*. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul" (Baudrillard 1998: 129-130). In this argument, rather than focussing on the deliverance or emancipation of the psyche, as was the case during the enlightenment for example, the body has become that which must be saved and preserved in order to ensure the

survival of the self as individual. Therefore, once the body is opened up, split, destroyed; the very identity of the subject comes under threat and is called into question. Baudrillard's assumption is relevant in the case of the 1987 *RoboCop* film as it proves impossible for Murphy to recuperate his previous identity despite the partial retention of his pre-conversion psyche —he can remember his role as husband and father but cannot feel any emotion in relation to these fleeting fragments of memory, his identity essentially resides in the fleshly human body he has lost. In 2014's *RoboCop,* however, Murphy does not permanently lose any emotional connection to his past and present, ultimately his role as husband and father remains unchanged, allowing him to continue acting in the same manner as is seen before his transformation into cyborg. At the end of the movie, during a tense rooftop encounter, Murphy's strong emotional impulse to protect his family compels him to overcome the demands of his programming and turn against the head of OCP Raymond Sellars. This triumph of the human psyche suggests a change in the socio-cultural understanding of the location of the identity of the subject, and a return to the Cartesian dualism, which separates and elevates the mind, or soul, above and beyond the corporeal realm.

Whereas in the original RoboCop film, Murphy is driven by a belief in justice and fairness, in the 2014 remake these political ideals are replaced by a need to protect one's private property, whether that be loved ones or the home. A marked return to traditional patriarchal family values can be plainly observed when comparing the original movie to the 2014 remake, and it is easy to link these conservative ideals with the rhetoric of the Bush administration, and by force of repetition, the rhetoric of the media. As Michael Kimmel attests, in the 21st Century media pundits "yearn for a traditional nuclear family, with traditional gender inequality" (2013: 323). As mentioned previously, in the film Murphy's wife Clara is portrayed solely as wife and

mother, there is no depth to her character beyond these domestic roles. On the one hand, Clara seems to exist only to serve the men with whom she shares a home, her husband and her son. On the other, it is her acceptance and encouragement that allow Alex Murphy to build an alternative masculinity

2.3.2 The Monstrous Masculine Cyborg: *RoboCop* (2014)

Contrary to the cyborg film's narrrarive reassertion of the Cartesian dualism, in the 2000s the media is replete with images of the healthy body. On the news, in advertising, on popular talk shows, we are told that the body is a temple, that what we put into our bodies and what we do with them will protect them from disease, aging, decay. What this rhetoric describes is that the body defines identity, it is through the body that we display ourselves to the world as healthy, successful individuals. The corporeal state has become linked to the question of identity to such an extent that is impossible to imagine a successful identity within an imperfect body. As a result, on a visual level in *RoboCop* (2014) images of the broken body are evaded and rejected by both the characters within the movie and its cinematography.

Whereas Verhoeven's film relishes in showing the audience long, close-up shots of bullets ripping through flesh, severed limbs, and spilling guts, in Padilha's remake the camera evades such images of horror. This may be intended in part to achieve a PG-13 rating in the USA and a 12A certificate in the UK, thereby reaching a larger audience. It could even be a consequence of the decreased novelty of special and prosthetic effects and an increased interest in mostly computer generated large-scale action sequences. Regardless of the intention, the filmmakers employ a technique whereby the camera cuts to black instead of allowing the audience to vicariously experience physical pain and suffering. According to Laura Frost, this trope became

noticeably more frequent in cinema following the events of 9/11. She argues that this mode of representation "constructed a particular relationship between spectacle and viewer", and "Although the mode was meant to protect people from the most upsetting images of 9/11 devastation, the strategy resulted in representations that remained stalled in the preliminary stage of suspension and confusion" (2011: 14-15). This sense of confusion is certainly apparent in *RoboCop* (2014) since the expected release of tension through violence is often denied. This is exacerbated by the fact that the film, being a remake of and sharing its title with *RoboCop* (1987), invites the viewer to expect certain similarities with the original movie, known for its fearless depiction of bloody violence and torture. Therefore, although the characters in the film are represented in vulnerable situations, there is not the same emphasis on corporeal vulnerability and instability, as these images are generally not shown. There is one notable exception to this rule in Padilha's film, in a scene in which Murphy demands to see what is left of his organic body underneath his outer casing. Dr Norton opens the suit to reveal a beating heart, breathing lungs and little else, but rather than inspiring terror, the reaction of both the protagonist and the viewing audience is one of disgust. This is a phenomenon described rather effectively by Robert Rawdon Wilson as one in which the monstrous event, which in its very nature threatens to make borders liquid, provokes not only fear, but a rejection of the composite state where "Human persons are de-integrated, dissolved or broken down into distinct parts. The integrity of the individual, normally so secure behind its defences of being and identity, slips into self-loss and abjection" (Wilson 2000: 247). This disintegration of his own body, his own understanding of his identity, drives Murphy to hate his own existence, disgusted by its hybridity. After this scene the protagonist's corporeal state is never again revealed, thereby reinforcing the notion that the disgusted reaction is correct and which works to deny any notion that the hybrid

body could be a positive or hopeful one, in contrast to the original picture where the importance of Murphy's cyborg embodiment to his success is underscored by the removal of his helmet to reveal his scarred and sutured head. So, whereas the original film consistently portrayed slippery, fluid borders that evoked disgust along with high levels of horror-inflected violence, the remake largely avoids such border transgressions, an element which in the film contributes to the fact that RoboCop remains a hero, his human masculine identity largely intact and not so profoundly questioned.
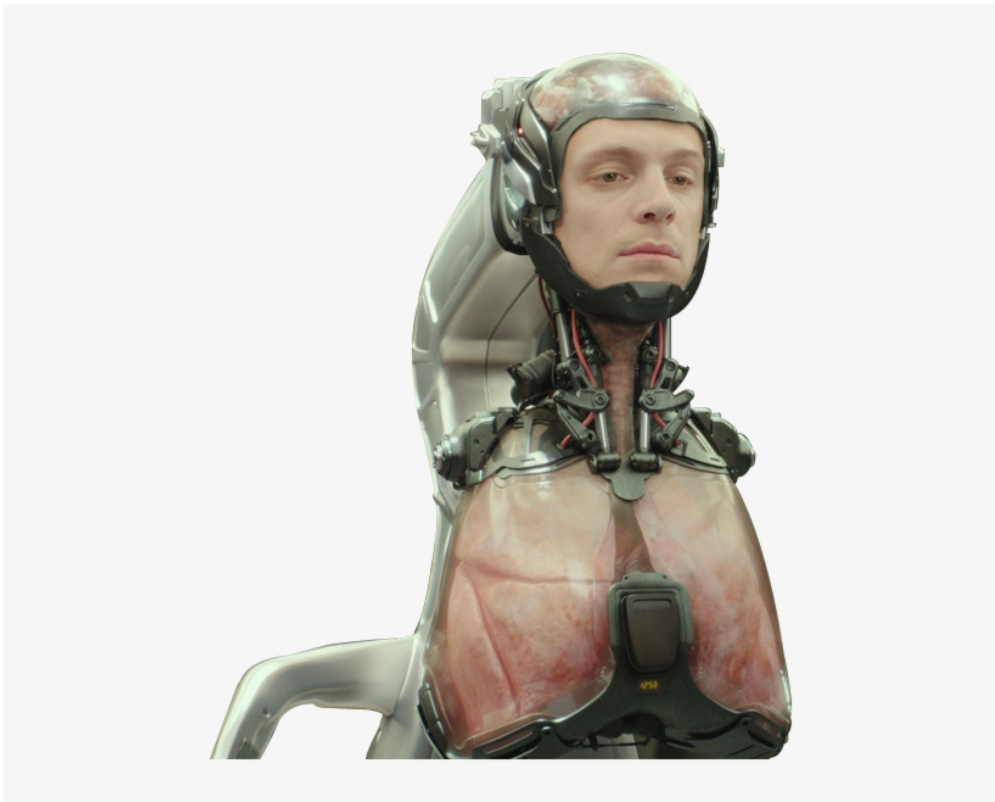
Figure 4 In the only instance of true body horror in Padilha's *RoboCop* we see what is left of Alex Murphy's human flesh —lungs, heart and face

Where in the 1987 film installing a software programme onto RoboCop's hardware was evidence enough of corporate control over the individual, in 2014 it became necessary to provide more detail as to the level of control that could realistically be achieved when dealing with a human brain. Instead of referring to software, the scientists involved manipulated chemicals and hormones already present in the human

body to obtain the desired response from RoboCop, lowering his emotional responses almost to zero, and effectively having him act as a machine. These bioengineering techniques reflect more contemporary ethical concerns, with biotechnology having become a widely known and successful branch of science, which has entered into the public consciousness. The contrast set out here is significant as it indicates a change in the basis behind the fears that exist in the public consciousness. In other words, the fears remain the same; fear of the other, fear of ambiguity that threatens order, and so on, but these fears are driven by different social, political and cultural factors. Whereas in 1987 computer technology was new and relatively unknown, enough to give rise to fears as to the power and intelligence of machines and their possible rebellion; in 2014, when at least one computer can be found in almost every household in what is referred to as the developed world, these fears had given way to the new cutting edge, the power of scientists to engineer and control nature, human or otherwise, without the need to rely on a computer chip or implant, by using gene engineering and other biotechnologies. The result in both cases is the same, a monstrous being is created using new technologies, unsettling the viewer by interfering with the 'natural order', subverting the belief that life and death, organic and inorganic, and human and machine are fixed and unchangeable. As we have seen, the monster always threatens binary conceptions, existing as it does on the boundary, rather than on one side or the other. However, in José Padilha's 2014 remake of *RoboCop*, the loss of self-control is significantly less present throughout the film than in Verhoeven's film. Whereas in the original movie the protagonist is subjected to OCP's control via computer programming for almost the whole running time, in 2014 this is reduced to a short section of the picture. Having been transformed into RoboCop, Murphy is permitted to remain in control of his movements and decisions; the only effect of the computer programming is

that he benefits from super-fast reaction times. Murphy's masculine identity is not taken from him all at once, but progressively, and although he is conscious and aware, OCP are able to erode his human identity over a period of weeks, until they have gained full control of his consciousness. This removes much of the horror present in the original film since cyborgs create horror partly "because they can be supposed to behave soullessly […] and hence without pity or compassion" (Rawdon Wilson 2000: 246). The presence of Alex Murphy's human identity within the cyborg is never fully questioned, thereby avoiding the characterisation of RoboCop as unfeeling monstrous robot.

Nevertheless, the two films differ on one very important narrative point; whereas in *RoboCop* (1987) the protagonist decides to fight for justice on the margins of society, renouncing his family and previous identity in general, in *RoboCop* (2014), the main character undertakes a mission to regain his previous identity and return to his position as husband and father, providing for and protecting his family. In *RoboCop* (2014) the protagonist refuses to accept his ambiguous condition of marginality and strives to return to his previous privileged status as a successful breadwinner and family man, a role that is given significant weight in the film's opening scenes. Murphy believes that neither his wife and son nor society as whole will accept him as a monster, and endeavours to hide the unstable elements that exist within and upon his hybrid body. This is largely achieved by remaining hidden under a smooth metal shell, including a helmet that leaves only his face visible, just enough to enable it to be identified as the face of Alex Murphy. Tellingly, the scientist responsible for Murphy's transformation into RoboCop, Dr Norton, consistently refers to him as Alex or Murphy throughout the film, avoiding the moniker "RoboCop" preferred by the OCP executives. In this way, rather than constructing RoboCop as an outsider, the movie insists on the

protagonist's humanity for the duration of the picture, suggesting that what is important is that RoboCop be able to 'pass', in other words, to exist within normative society without being pushed to the edges and forced to live as an outlaw. On the one hand, this can be read as an attempt to portray an inclusive society capable of accepting any kind of corporeal or psychological configuration. On the other, it elides a possible depiction of alternative modes of existence within society, or any hope for their creation, since Murphy is required to strive towards a hegemonic masculinity defined by heterosexuality, fathering, breadwinning and protecting the homestead. Therefore, in *RoboCop* (2014) the monster is not hopeful, and does not create a space for the formation of or even speculation on alternative modes of existence. In fact, the monster is eliminated, made to prove its humanness until their remains no doubt that it is, in fact, one of us, despite its mechanical parts and metal shell. Once RoboCop puts his life on the line to protect his family and, indeed, the homeland, he recuperates his status as Alex Murphy; husband, father, protector, provider.

In the 2014 film, the theme of demasculinisation, the fluidity of the binary masculine/feminine, is explored through the examination of Murphy/RoboCop's desire to remain a traditional father figure at the heart of a nuclear family. Although ultimately a conservative model of fatherhood is upheld as an ideal, the film does allow for an exploration of its construction as Murphy questions his own ability to embody this particular masculine identity. The protagonist's struggle to enact this role belies the fragility of conservative masculine identity constructions, and especially its reliance on a specific type of male body. Without an organic, muscular body Murphy constructs his own identity as monstrous in his belief that a mechanical cyborg or in fact, anything other than a visibly male, organic, and therefore fully human corporeality, can be accepted as part of a nuclear family. It is suggested that these ideas are to some extent

imposed on Murphy by the society that has created him, as initially it is the multinational company OCP that ensures he is not reunited with his family, for fear that they will reject their new cyborg husband and father. This is an indicator of how men are conditioned to create and maintain hegemonic masculinities, following the ideals set forward by corporations in the media and advertising, with the result that these masculinities are fragile, supported only by fleeting images which prove impossible to sustain in real life. Unstable identities breed monsters —bodies housing undefined boundaries demonstrate that any given subjective identity is not in fact given, but is constantly undergoing flux and change, creating a sense of uncertainty as to who one really is, a concept that has gained considerable weight in the postmodern age and has come to denote the monstrous, that which is indefinable. As Shildrick writes, the monster is "always a figure of ambiguous identity" (2002:5), just like our RoboCops.

2.4 From Marginal Monster to the Heart of the Nuclear Family: The Evolution of the Male Cyborg Figure in Cinema

Examining *RoboCop* (1987) and *RoboCop* (2014) and their representations of masculinity, monstrosity and posthumanity highlights a number of similarities and differences in both narrative and visual aspects, often demonstrating a change in attitudes towards specific issues surrounding the representation of gender and the monster.

Firstly, whereas the original film critiques toxic corporate culture, which had led to the unfair treatment of workers and insincere behaviour by managers and executives towards not only their own staff but also their clients, the 2014 remake presents a narrative of individual villainy faced off against individual heroism. In *RoboCop* (1987) the monsters of the film, those who present a constant threat of corruption of society

and its ideals, are the corporate executives who work at OCP. Kevin McCarron, in an article on cyberpunk and cyborg texts, refers to global, multinational corporations, as well as "the Faustian characters who are at the apex of the corporate structure" in texts such as *RoboCop* or *Blade Runner* as "The demonic, the truly inhuman"(McCarron 2000: 271). He suggests they are monstrous bodies, and I believe these are typified by the identical, faceless businessmen of *RoboCop*, absent of morality, and Omni*Corp* itself, a body made not of flesh but of money. There is not one individual villain but instead villainy and monstrousness are represented by a group of people, a certain stratum of society with money and power composed in the film exclusively of men. In this film corporate masculinity is represented as pernicious, as a monstrous masculinity that the hero, RoboCop, seeks to eliminate. In *RoboCop* (2014), at the end of the film, the monster who must be eliminated is one man, Raymond Sellars, the unethical, immoral director of OCP. Again here one can observe an evolution from a focus on the societal, represented by groups of people and their position in society; to the individual, how certain subjects act within society as a whole and may wield a corrupting or positive influence. As Sara Martín has observed, "attributing to the villain an exceptional nature outside the norm rather than see him as an integral part of it" operates to conceal the everyday nature of specifically white male villainy (2011: 151). Whereas in the cyborg films of the 1980s the monstrous male cyborg was invoked to examine or challenge ideologies and the structure of societal institutions, in the 2010s the monster operates on the individual plane, wrestling with personal identity constructions and eliminating individual monstrous threats to the successful working of normative society. This increasing individualisation operates as a form of redemption or exoneration, which distances patriarchal white society from extreme examples of

corruption, bad deeds or indeed evil, thereby allowing for the maintenance of its cultural privileges (Lopez 2005: 23).

Interestingly, Jeffords writes that "the Reagan presidency, in conjunction with the New Right, nationalized *bodies* by equating individual actions with national actions in such a way that individual failings were to be seen as causes for national downfall" (1994: 14, emphasis in original). Following my analysis, I contend that *RoboCop* (1987), as a critique of so-called 'Reaganomics' represents an exception to this rule, with the blame placed on the privatised corporate system as a whole. Jeffords' assertions do seem to hold true, however, in the case of *RoboCop* (2014), suggesting a return to the individualistic white male heroes of the early 1980s. This emphasis on providing a heroic, unproblematic male role model is also present in the Padilha's film's insistence on keeping RoboCop's hybridity hidden beneath a smooth metal shell. Instead of Murphy's moment of realisation coming along with his decision to reveal his sutured skin and therefore his liminality as in the 1987 movie, in 2014, subsequent to the first reveal of Murphy's new hybrid machine-human body, a decision is made by the protagonist to conceal the transgressive nature of his corporeality, thereby maintaining the hard body image that is deconstructed in the original film. In this way Padilha's film provides a flawless masculine hero for the viewing public to rally around, rather than offering up a damaged, marginal monster for identification. In my view, this fact is related to the post-9/11 public discourse in the United States, which puts an emphasis on everyday male heroes, especially civil servants such as firefighters and policemen. This discourse declares them saviours of the nation, while at the same time making adherence to prescribed political discourse necessary to the survival of the nation state in the face of foreign menaces that, according to the state department, wish to destroy the United States of America. For this reason, post-9/11 political discourse is incredibly

powerful and pervasive, and counter discourses tend to be difficult to convey (See Butler 2004: 1-18). The dominant discourse dictates that a heroic individual male is necessary to safeguard the nation, and Hollywood both responds to and feeds this discourse, providing an infallible model of heroic masculinity in RoboCop and others, a saviour the people can believe in.

In the 2014 film RoboCop's infallibility is expressed, in part, in Murphy's inability to show emotion or discuss his thoughts and feelings, despite an attempt by the writers —Joshua Zetumer, Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner— and director José Padilha, to underscore Murphy's attachment and commitment to his wife and son. What actually comes across is that Alex Murphy embodies a traditional, hegemonic fatherhood in which stoicism and dependability are more significant than a real emotional connection which would allow the protagonist to shed tears and share his feelings with his family, actions that in this film are determined weak and inacceptable in a father figure. On the other hand, in the 1980s RoboCop was able share his inner emotions with his co-worker Anne Lewis, revealing his grotesque, hybrid form along with them, with no need to maintain an aura of impenetrability and infallibility as seen in the more recent picture, in which Murphy decides to keep his hybrid form hidden beneath the metal shell, thereby maintaining his status as a hard body. So, whereas in the 1980s the protagonist and hero does not need to rely on a hegemonic embodiment of masculinity, allowing the character to explore alternative modes of psychological and physiological existence, in 2014 the presentation of hegemonic masculinity as an ideal would appear to be prioritised, above the idea that there may be more than one way to embody manhood.

The two films also differ in their portrayal of RoboCop's monstrousness, as although both draw on themes of vulnerability, abjection and transgression, the

resulting representation of the monster is quite different. In *RoboCop* (1987), the film does not shy away from displaying images of broken and deconstructed bodies; the vulnerable male. *RoboCop* (2014), however, evades these images almost entirely, and the two instances of body horror imagery in the film show Murphy giving his consent for his vulnerable body to be revealed. This suggests that the willingness to explore the weaknesses and fallibilities of the male body present in 1980s cinema no longer features to such a degree in post-millenial science fiction cinema, a conclusion that is supported by the general move away from body horror in the genre, and the move towards a non-conflictive portrayal of male heroes. In the Terminator sequels *Terminator Salvation* and *Terminator Genisys,* the creators deliberately cultivated a male hero notable for being muscled and able to resist pain and injury. *Salvation* director, McG, for example, chose Sam Worthington for the role of the terminator Marcus Wright because: "I just wanted a guy who you could hit with a shovel and it would look like he'd just shake it off […] I find that a great many of today's young actors are pussies […] Sam is a fundamentally tough guy from Western Australia. He's a no-tears kind of guy" (Rosemeyer 2008). In these modern cyborg films any diversion from the hegemonic norms of masculine identity are inconsequential and quickly resolved, in this way avoiding the examination of masculine embodiment typical of the 1980s cyborg movie. The hard, muscular corporeality embodied by RoboCop signals to the viewer that despite being penetrated, divested of agency and literally castrated the protagonist remains a heroic, masculine figure worthy of identification and emulation. Possession of a "hard body" denies RoboCop the opportunity to fully divest himself of hegemonic masculinities or to fully embrace a postmodern embodiment of alternative, non-aggressive masculinities that stray from the normative expectations of Hollywood action cinema.

This evasion of issues concerning the inconsistencies and possible flaws in the protagonist's personal masculine identity is continued in *RoboCop* (2014), in the way the film deals with border transgressions such as human/machine, human/monster, inside/outside and masculine/feminine. Whereas in 1987's *RoboCop* the breakdown of boundaries within and upon Murphy's body situate the protagonist in the margins, allowing him to operate as an outsider figure and symbol of progress and change; in the 2014 film Murphy is ultimately re-assimilated into 'normal' society, proving that he is in fact human and not a liminal being. It is impossible, then, that Murphy embody progress and change since great effort is expended to prove that he has not in fact changed in any meaningful way. Alex Murphy remains the same at his core in the Padilha's film because the internal logic of the picture argues that his unique identity and humanness is located inside his mind, or soul, representing an essence that cannot be physically located and therefore cannot be removed or altered in any way. This location of the essence or soul of the subject in the mind, beyond any physical interference, is typical of enlightenment ideals of the separation of the pure psyche from the impure flesh, and the situation of the former in a position of greater importance above the latter. This ideal is not present in Verhoeven's film; the physical transformation that takes place on and within Murphy's body irreparably modifies the protagonist's unique identity, demonstrating that if indeed an essential essence of the subject exists, it is located within or upon the physical body and therefore can be corrupted, changed, or removed entirely. Overall, in both films the transformation of the human male body into cyborg is used to highlight the fragility and vulnerability of the male body and its masculine identity construction, both of which are deconstructed as part of the visual and narrative aspects of the films. Although the physical and psychological vulnerability of the protagonist is more apparent in *RoboCop* (1987), in

RoboCop (2014) it remains present, but is ultimately resolved, unlike in the original film, demonstrating the importance of the male hero as powerful defender of the nation in post-9/11 contemporary society.

The transgression and dissolution of boundaries within and upon the protagonists' bodies creates liminal beings, indefinable subjects neither human nor machine, male nor female. In this way, the main character in both films becomes monstrous, inhabitants of a patchwork body and psyche that refuses categorisation, pushing the subject to the margins of society, beyond the realm of the 'normal'. The monster's struggle to prove its humanness, however, creates heroes. As the protagonist of the 2014 film strives to return to a dichotomous existence, to embody father and protector, his behaviour and actions become more and more heroic, as we see Murphy characterise the traditional Hollywood masculine hero role, rescuing women and children (his wife and son), and saving society from the influence of a destructive tyrant (Raymond Sellars). In the 1987 film, however, although Murphy commits a heroic act in confronting the corrupt executives responsible for his conversion into cyborg and for the production and distribution of large amounts of drugs, he never achieves the position of human, and remains monster throughout the whole film and its resolution. Rather than return to a dichotomous existence, performing a traditional masculine role as father and protector of the nation, cyborg Murphy chooses to remain on the margins, altruistically regulating the system from without. What has changed here is the protagonist's motivation, whereas in 1987 RoboCop is moved to act by a desire to improve society for the middle and working classes, protecting them from unethical and immoral rich executives; in 2014 Murphy is motivated by his desire to restore himself to his former position of power, as father, protector and provider within his own family unit. This reflects a shift in public attitudes in the United States from a concern with

societal issues such as unemployment, workers' rights and poverty to a more individualist viewpoint which values the right of the individual subject to own and protect property, goods and status. Padilha's Murphy is concerned with recuperating the position of power he previously enjoyed, and ultimately succeeds in his mission to do so. Verhoeven's Murphy, however, cedes his privileged position in order to fight for justice and freedom for others. Here we can see that despite the fact that the construction of monsters has changed relatively little between the 1980s and the 2010s, the construction of the hero and his representation is entirely different, and in fact reflects rather well the contemporary socio-political situation of the United States of America and Western society.

Chapter Three

The Male Cyborg as Villain: Coming of Age in the *Star Wars* Saga

3.1 Four Decades of Male Heroes and Monsters: An Introduction to the *Star Wars* Saga

Star Wars is not so much a series of films, but a global cultural phenomenon, with Douglas Brode, in his introduction to an edited collection on the saga, claiming it has become "an essential element of how we define ourselves through the movies" in that it has not only been "absorbed into the mainstream of American (and international) thinking but that it has come to define that enormous area in a way no other phenomenon […] ever managed to do" (2012a: x). When one considers that the first film, *Star Wars* —retrospectively renamed *Episode IV: A New Hope*— first hit cinema screens in 1977 but continues to be watched and enjoyed today along with the two immediate sequels *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) one must admit it certainly has sticking power. Taking into account the hotly-anticipated and profitable prequel trilogy (1999-2005), the most recent and enormously successful sequel trilogy (2015-2019) and spin-offs *Rogue One* (2016) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018)*,* not to mention merchandising and animated series[22], the franchise emerges as a defining feature of the contemporary cultural landscape.

A swashbuckling tale of good Jedi warriors pitted against the dark, evil monsters of the Empire, the Sith, *Star Wars* revived and celebrated the characters and narrative of

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[22] There have been a total of ten *Star Wars* television series to date, the most successful of which are, perhaps, *Droids and Ewoks* (1985-87), *Clone Wars* (2008-2020) and *The Mandalorian* (2019-present).

the Western, repackaging the success of the Western epics with state-of-the-art special effects.[23] Both *Star Wars* and the Western represent the struggles and triumphs of American men, presenting role models who prove their manhood fighting on the frontier, whether that be in the United States or in space. As Douglas Brode points out, "Rightly or wrongly, people love heroes, male heroes, and respond to tales about them" (2012: 9) and the late 1970s was a time during which the American public was searching for a way to redefine heroic masculinity after the turmoil of the Vietnam war, with Susan Jeffords claiming that "America's confidence was broken" (1994: 7). In politics, the public desire for a strong masculine hero was reflected in the presidential campaign of former actor Ronald Reagan[24], often seen campaigning in a cowboy hat, he made much of his military service history. As a Hollywood actor, Reagan surely understood the call for heroic stories better than many, and managed to become "the premiere masculine archetype for the 1980s", portraying himself successfully "not merely as a man, but as decisive, tough, aggressive, strong and domineering" (ibid 11). The connection between Ronald Reagan and the movie business parallels the way in which mainstream films not only reflect their socio-political and cultural context but also play a role in creating and shaping it. Through the repetition of certain images and narratives —in the case of *Star Wars* white male heroism on the frontier, for example— "Movies not only can tell us something of how the cultures from which they arise understand themselves, but they can equally creatively engage with the way their audiences come to understand themselves and thus shape what and how they see" (McDowell 2012: 66). For this reason it is important to first understand the context of

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[23] George Lucas established special effects company Industrial Light & Magic to work on *Star Wars*, hiring John Dykstra to head up the team. They famously invented new cameras, as well as filming and animation techniques in order to achieve the photorealistic effects Lucas desired.
[24] As an actor, Reagan is largely remembered for playing all-American characters in dramas, westerns and war movies.

the various films' releases before entering into an analysis of the masculine models they portray.

The first film, *A New Hope,* arrived in cinemas in 1977, during the Carter presidency and shortly after the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal. These two events had seriously knocked American confidence in the capacity and trustworthiness of their (male) leaders, and the huge casualties of the Vietnam war in particular threw the human vulnerability of the frontiersman warrior into sharp relief. Since, as Leo Braudy explains, "Questions of heroism shade imperceptibly into questions of masculinity, which in turn often point to a deep and ongoing confusion over where we are going as a society" (2005: 13), there arose in this period a necessity to redefine the heroic warrior masculinity for a new age. Cinematic heroes like Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were part of a general resurgence of traditional white male hero figures encapsulated by Reagan's ascension to the White House in 1981. As Brode concludes "it only made sense that pop culture would likewise embrace if not the older order then some sort of reconfigured hero worship" (2012: xiii), as seen in the popular characters Superman and Indiana Jones, among others. But what of the villain? What form would the villainous monster take in these changing times? Through a study of Darth Vader's portrayal in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, this analysis will show that the villain is defined by the desire for excessive power leading to their embracing of a faceless mechanistic culture and its technology, which overrides individuality and agency.

In juxtaposing concepts such as black and white, or light and dark, in the construction of the *Star* Wars films, the binary opposition good vs evil is established and highlighted by filmmaker George Lucas. He employs a narrative structure based on the hero's journey described in Joseph Campbell's seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a cyclical monomyth to chart Luke Skywalkers journey from a

simple farm boy called to adventure, through trials and adversity, and culminating in his darkest hour —helpless at the hands of the evil villain Darth Sidious. He returns from the fall thanks to an encounter with his father, the understanding that forms between the two and their ultimate atonement, allowing him to return from his quest victorious. As we can see, Darth Vader's story is deeply intertwined with that of the hero Luke, and in fact the heroic journey is mirrored by that of Anakin/Vader throughout Episodes I-VI. With the release of the prequel trilogy the villain Darth Vader is given his own backstory, a chance to redeem himself as a white, male figure.

The socio-cultural and historical context of the release of Episodes I-II in the late 90s and early 00s is of course markedly different to that of the original series. Two decades of the women's movement and the increased presence of women in the workplace, along with rising unemployment and mechanisation, had forced society to reevaluate masculine identity in both the private and public spheres. The role of the media is key in understanding the construction of masculine roles since, "the media representation process plays an integral part in extending, constraining, and promoting particular ideals as appropriately masculine" (Vavrus 2002: 353). Vavrus's study shows that television news accounts of stay-at-home fathers in the late 90s, operated "ideologically to legitimate domesticity and nurturance as appropriately masculine", while ultimately upholding "the idealized nuclear family, allowing the mythology surrounding it to remain virtually intact" (ibid). This is equally true of much of Hollywood cinema of the period, which sought to redefine masculine identity by incorporating care-giving and nurturance without suggesting emasculation. One example can be found in Arnold Schwarzennegger's movies in this period, during which his "star text gradually embraced a softening of his hardened image, primarily through the construction of Schwarzennegger as an ideal loving father in films like

Kindergarten Cop (USA 1990) and *Terminator 2* (USA 1991)" (Gotto 2002: 120)*,* and even *Junior* (1994). This attempted redefinition of masculine identity is reflected in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy in its depiction of Anakin Skywalker's struggle to identify with mentor and father figure Obi-Wan Kenobi, as well as in Anakin's desire to become a successful father to his own children, not to mention the overall narrative aim of the trilogy to redeem and reinstate Darth Vader as a father figure. In contrast to the Schwarzennegger films mentioned above, however, the *Star Wars* saga also reflects anxieties surrounding the changing nature of fatherhood and masculinity in its portrayal of the physical and psychological transformation of Anakin Skywalker.

In the public sphere, Anakin's frustrations at his perceived failure to accrue power and status within Jedi society seem to respond to male anxieties surrounding the shifting definition of masculine identity in a changing society. Substantiated or not, the anxieties were real, and discussions about the future of white, male, American youth were all over television broadcasts (Faludi 1999). With the nature of masculinity the subject of debate or, in Faludi's words, "conceiving of masculinity as something to *be"*, manliness and the male body became increasingly detached from one another (Faludi 1999: 607, emphasis in original), resulting in masculinity taking on an 'ornamental' quality. Ornamental in the sense that rather than an innate quality proven through the pursuit of power and authority, masculinity came to be something "to drape over the body […] displayed, not demonstrated" (ibid 35), and therefore an even more unstable and undefined quality. As both Susan Faludi (1999) and Michael Kimmel (2013) have noted, the generalised reaction of men was to blame feminism, women and minorities in general, while attempting to perform —impossibly— the 'traditional' masculinity of their fathers' generation. These young white males are the 'angry white men' identified by Kimmel, who "fall back upon the same traditional notions of manhood —physical

strength, self-control, power— that defined their fathers' and their grandfathers' eras"
(2013: 57). Anakin Skywalker is an example of an angry white man, striving to perform
an impossible hegemonic masculinity. The "institutional inflexibility" of both American
and Jedi society drives young men to attempt to conform with "an ideology of
masculinity that promotes robot stoicism over nurturing, competition over patience,
aggression over justice" (ibid 322). The anguish provoked by this outdated model of
hegemonic masculinity and the growing Anakin's doomed endeavours to embody it, as
we will see in this chapter, is a defining factor in his transformation into monstrous
villain.

The starting point for this study of male coming-of-age and cyborgian
monstrousness is an examination of the failure of fathering and its effects on boys who
find their path to manhood and its concomitant independence frustrated by the
patriarchal system. Secondly, I analyse the key factors in the creation of a monstrous
villain through a discussion of Anakin Skywalker's transformation into the evil Darth
Vader in *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*. This includes a consideration of
the role of whiteness in *Star Wars* and its representation of villainy, as well as the
pursuit of excessive power as a threat to patriarchal society. Finally, this chapter
addresses the villainous monstrosity of the character Darth Vader, taking into account
the mechanical and posthuman aspects of his cyborgian monstrous physical
configuration along with the importance and prestige conferred upon individualism as a
characteristic and essential element of humanity and heroism.

3.2 Fathers and Sons: Patriarchy in the *Star Wars* Saga

The prequel trilogy of the *Star Wars* saga —Episodes I, II and III— features a
curious triad of father-son relationships in which Anakin Skywalker represents the son
torn between two opposing models of fatherhood. While Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin's

Jedi mentor, raised Skywalker from a young boy to a teenager, Chancellor Palpatine comes to act as a father figure to the Padawan at a crucial moment in his development and greatly influences his path to manhood. An examination of the influences of these two distinct models of fatherhood serve to elucidate Anakin's transformation from earnest and promising young Padawan to the supreme galactic villain Darth Vader. In so doing, the masculinities of the three characters are brought into focus and can be deconstructed and investigated thoroughly, thereby revealing their hegemonic and patriarchal nature and their contribution to the construction of "overarching narratives in society that shape cultural values and identities of audiences" (Atkinson and Calafell 2009: 5). I will begin, then, by analysing Obi-Wan and his fathering of Anakin, as well as the patriarchal nature of the Jedi Order itself, before moving onto an analysis of Palpatine's fathering and the patriarchy of the Empire.

Early in *The Phantom Menace* Obi-Wan's mentor Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) takes it upon himself to act as saviour to Anakin and his family on the desert planet Tatooine. He rescues seven-year-old Anakin (Jake Lloyd) from slavery at the hands of an alien race, ultimately separating the boy from his mother Shmi, an event that would continue to instil feelings of guilt and fear in the boy for years to come, something Cyrus Patell refers to as "the separation-from-mother complex" (2012: 74), an anxiety about which the Jedi are particularly concerned. The argument put forth by top Jedi mystic Yoda is that this complex produces fear in the subject, and that "fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering", thereby claiming that the fear of loss is a path to the dark side. The implication is that, not only is fear anathema to the successful performance of Jedi (hegemonic) masculinity, but also that emotion and feelings of love are to be discouraged and, ultimately, avoided. Any display of emotion runs counter to the successful performance of heroic masculinity in these films, thus

suggesting that there is no place for the development of emotional responses in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. One can argue, then, that Qui-Gon's decision to remove the mother figure from Anakin's life in the belief that an all-male Jedi upbringing would be beneficial to the young boy, plays an important role in Skywalker's emotional development towards manhood. The *Star Wars* prequels are not the only 21st Century films to elide the role of the mother in the raising of children, a phenomenon which has resulted in an upsurge of 'post-feminist' fatherhood in Hollywood cinema in which fathering acts as "the anchoring trope of contemporary Hollywood masculinities" (Hamad 2013: 99). The prominence of fatherhood in popular film narratives allows for both a positive expression of patriarchal family values and the modification of idealised masculinities to adapt to changing understandings of masculinity in society. In this way, patriarchal values are preserved while maintaining a façade of progressiveness by showing male characters superficially embracing a more hands-on fatherhood.

From these early scenes it becomes clear that male Jedis' fathering choices and methods are not only potentially harmful, in that they create trauma in the young boy Anakin's life, but also that they are patriarchal in their denial of the mother's role in the child's upbringing. This is a fact that has not gone unnoticed in academic criticism of the saga, with Callahan arguing that "In Lucas's fictional universe, traditional male dominance is still the most powerful expression of masculinity" (2016: 88). Furthermore, the Jedi order reveals its patriarchal nature in a number of ways throughout the saga: it is a strongly hierarchal and male dominated system; it is clearly influenced by ideas of medieval chivalry; and demands adherence to hegemonic masculine norms including repression of emotion. To expand on the first point, the Jedi Order is governed by a select group of high-ranking members, who exert power and

control over and issue orders to those who rank below them. Moreover, the saga concerns itself with the maintenance and perpetuation of "The Law: the social law of its world and the moral dimension that stands behind any rules of order" (Brode 2012: 9) and, since the law in Star Wars is patriarchal, the cinematic text functions as a celebration of the upholding of the social and societal norms of contemporary patriarchal society. By representing a structured and hierarchical society, *Star Wars* "articulates and feed on its audience's feelings of frustration and desires for escape, mobility and power" (Rubey 2012: 52), while at the same time resolving those same frustrations and desires with conventional fantasies about good and evil and individual heroism that are easily applied to the viewer's actual situation. In the process, the film endorses "the traditional structures of racism, sexism and social hierarchy that have helped to create and maintain those frustrations" (ibid). Rather than act as a counterpoint to the tyrannical Empire, the Jedi Order in actual fact reflects its autocratic nature, with ultimate power in the hands of just a handful of aristocratic leaders, almost entirely men. This hierarchical structure is shown to be particularly important to Anakin's father figure Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor), who in *The Phantom Menace* remarks to his mentor Qui-Gon Jinn: "If you'd only follow the code you might be on the council", a statement that suggests Kenobi is invested in advancement up the Order's hierarchy.

Moreover, a number of critics attest to the *Star Wars* saga representing a chivalric romance plot both as a result of Lucas's "conservative ideological bias" (Rubey 2012: 53) and the Jedi's "rigid views of knighthood and chivalry" (Martín 2019: 38). Much emphasis is placed, particularly by Obi-Wan Kenobi during his mentorship of Anakin as a teenager (played by Hayden Christensen), on the importance of celibacy and avoiding of emotional attachments. Historically, the celibacy of knights arose as a

product of misogyny; women were to be avoided since they were accused of possessing an insatiable sexual appetite and a weakness to the devil and his designs. Simultaneously, it functioned as a mechanism of social control, encouraging men to limit their sexual encounters in order to better trace the lineage of male heirs. The same may be said of the *Star Wars* universe, since the reason given by the Jedi for enforced celibacy is that it results in the formation of strong emotions —presumably caused by female sexual partners. Anakin is of unknown heritage —it is suggested he is the son of Palpatine, who has used some obscure dark manipulations of the force to impregnate the boy's mother. The implication is that the subversion of patriarchal lineage and the nuclear family causes an imbalance in the Force allowing for the fall of the Republic and the start of the Empire's tyrannical reign. I propose that although the absent father is put forward by the filmmakers as justification for Anakin's later transformation into monstrous cyborgian villain, when reading the film, this aspect does not emerge as the most influential element in Anakin's path to the dark side. Instead, I concur with Sara Martín that Obi-Wan's obsessive adherence to and foregrounding of the restrictive Jedi code undermines him as an effective mentor and father figure (2019: 42), and results in a growing anger and resentment in Anakin towards the Jedi Order, ultimately leading to his downfall. It becomes clear, then, that the patriarchal hierarchy and the enforcement of medieval chivalric codes leads to a failure in fathering and the creation of a villainous monster in Anakin.

Overall the male Jedi knights of the saga perform a hegemonic masculinity, a concept defined within American culture by Nick Trujillo as having five principle features: "(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality" (1991: 291). Jedi knights almost exclusively use physical violence to exert power and control in the galaxy, in

order to achieve their ends. The importance of occupational achievement within the hierarchy is demonstrated by the desire to please the leaders and thereby attain a place on the Jedi council. The structure of the organisation is, as previously mentioned, decidedly patriarchal, with individual mentors acting as paternal figures to the younger Padawan they have been assigned, as well as acting in a protective manner towards female characters. The two prime examples are the male jedis' constant work to hide and protect Padmé Amidala, and the numerous situations from which Princess Leia must be saved. The idea of frontiersmanship is central to the entire *Star Wars* saga, since the Jedi are warriors operating on what is often referred to as the final frontier, battling in territorial disputes in a galactic context. Much has been made of Lucas's fondness for the Western and his intention of making a film about cowboys in space, with Brode going so far as to claim that *Star Wars* "has far more in common with epic Westerns than science fiction" (2012: 10). As Trujillo states, "the *cowboy* stands very tall as an archetypal image" of hegemonic masculinity (1991: 291, emphasis in original) and the director's desire to bring the cowboy image into the modern era through the creation of the Jedi suggests a will to reinforce traditional models of masculinity and heroics. Finally, homosexuality is remarkable by its absence in the Lucas's universe; any love interests, potential or realised are exclusively heterosexual.

Following Qui-Gon Jinn's demise at the hands of the sith Darth Maul, Obi-Wan Kenobi takes over the mentoring of Anakin Skywalker and asserts himself as paternal figure to the young Padawan. To begin with, Obi-Wan is not enthused by the prospect of mentoring Anakin and it is only due to a sense of moral debt towards his mentor Qui-Gon that he agrees to continue the boy's education. From this inauspicious start, Obi-Wan's fathering of Anakin leaves much to be desired, and I would argue, is fundamentally flawed, concurring with Sara Martín when she argues that "Obi-Wan's

inability to empathize with Anakin and his consequently flawed mentoring —and not just Anakin's damaged personality— are the root of the disturbance in the Force" (2019: 38). Firstly, the older Jedi's fathering of Anakin is characterised by the hierarchical relationship between the two, with Kenobi assuming the role of leader and Skywalker the underling. Obi-Wan consistently denies his pupil a sense of agency, asserting his authority rather than entering into discussion and compromise. In the words of Tony Vinci: "Obi-Wan's tutelage of Anakin is decidedly oppressive and creates open hostility towards Anakin's developing individualism" (2007: 22). For instance, when teenage Anakin has premonitions of the torture and impending death of his mother, Obi-Wan refuses to investigate further, dismissing them as simply dreams that will pass. This only serves to compound Anakin's feelings of guilt surrounding his perceived abandonment of his mother as a child, a negative emotion that helps push the young Jedi towards the dark side. As John C. McDowell observes, "Obi-Wan, it seems, has been unable to properly direct Anakin's emotional maturation and has become a figure that Anakin, in many ways, deeply resents" (2012: 76). In his inability to engage with Anakin's issues and help him to resolve them, Kenobi not only engenders resentment in his pupil but also denies the boy's nascent desire for agency and individualism, the power to make decisions concerning his life and future.

As we have seen, one of the defining features of hegemonic masculinity in an American context is control, therefore, when Obi-Wan denies Anakin the power to make his own decisions and gain a sense of control over his own life, he is effectively blocking Anakin's path to manhood. Furthermore, he repeatedly refers to Anakin as "my young Padawan", especially when it is not convenient for him to listen to Skywalker's concerns or arguments. This phrase expresses both possession in the use of "my" —suggesting that Anakin has no agency or independence— and infantilisation in

the use of "young", which must be extremely frustrating for the teenage apprentice who is already discovering his sexuality and developing high levels of skill and strength. Again, Obi-Wan is denying his male charge the opportunity to express an adult, and hegemonic, masculine identity. At the end of the prequel saga, Obi-Wan and the patriarchal system once again fail Anakin, condemning him to death or a life on the margins. Even Obi-Wan admits his own failure as a mentor —"I have failed you Anakin"— and, tellingly, says of Skywalker "he is like my brother"; no longer does he refer to the younger Jedi as "my young apprentice". In this way, Kenobi both admits to failure and distances himself from the consequences, painting the two as equals, rather than the admitting the reality of their hierarchical relationship, in which the mentor Obi-Wan is responsible for his pupil's development.

Kenobi also fails in his attempts to act as an effective mentor and father figure to Skywalker in his obsessive adherence to and promotion of the Jedi code, as well as his submission to the Jedi hierarchy and the orders of its leaders. He insists his Padawan follow the code and the authoritarian commands of the Jedi council without offering him any real guidance on how to achieve the required purity and acquiescence. With Anakin growing into a rebellious teen, highly skilled in the Jedi arts, the boy has a growing need for independence and autonomy, just like any young person reaching their adult years. Obi-Wan either cannot or will not understand this, however, and continues to deny him the power to choose or any opportunity to advance with his training. Kenobi's constant assertion of dominance over Skywalker in this way cause Anakin to demonstrate "jealousy and loathing of Obi-Wan's position and authority" in *Attack of the Clones* (Atkinson and Calafell 2009: 10), when in an angry outburst he cries "It's Obi-Wan's fault, he's jealous, he's holding me back". What Atkinson and Calafell argue is that Anakin's lack of autonomy leaves a convenient vacuum, which allows him

to instead be moved by patriarchal motivations, such as protecting the family, as well as the Emperor's manipulations, which I would add often appeal to Anakin's desire to prove his manhood.[25] It is this drive to assert a hegemonic —and in this case, patriarchal— masculinity that cause Anakin to break the Jedi code and move inexorably towards the dark side. His secret marriage to Padmé Amidala, for example, is nothing if not a declaration of loyalty to patriarchal norms dictating the sanctity of heterosexual couplings and the nuclear family, and thus it allows Anakin to present himself as powerful patriarch within the private sphere, in a way compensating for his inability to do so in the public sphere. Obi-Wan's relentless application of the Jedi Code represents his failure to effectively father Anakin, since it explicitly forbids a bond —between Skywalker and Amidala— that "could have aided Anakin's psychological well-being" (Martín 2019: 44). However, one must take into account that the marriage also provides Anakin with an excuse for "the violence and physical dominance demanded of the hypermasculine ideal" (Atkinson and Calafell 2009: 9), which the protagonist expresses thus: 'I am becoming more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of and I'm doing it for you. To protect you'. Consequently, Anakin can now present himself as 'family protector', one of the patriarchal representations identified by Trujillo (1991) as central to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. The primary display of this violence and physical dominance driven by Anakin's desire to embody the patriarchal ideal, is the slaughter of the alien Tusken Raiders who have killed his mother, during which he is seen to be driven by all his repressed feelings of guilt, rage and revenge.

The repression of emotion has formed part of the hegemonic masculine ideal at least since the time of the World Wars, and gives an impression of toughness or

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[25] In *Episode II: Attack of the Clones,* Palpatine flatters Anakin thus: "I see you becoming the most powerful of all Jedi, Anakin. Even more powerful than Master Yoda himself". Thereby appealing to Skywalker's hegemonic patriarchal need to assert himself within the Jedi hierarchy, achieving a position of power and status.

hardness that functions to cement the male as protector of the home and nation, and is crystallised in the cinematic appearances of stars like Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne (Mosse 1998: 182). This tradition is continued contemporary Hollywood action blockbusters like the *Star Wars* saga, in which the heroes are stoic and calm in the face of danger and hold no emotional attachments. However, as Mosse notes, as traditional masculinity came under greater pressure towards the end of the 20th Century, the masculine ideal was forced to change, in part due to "The search for personal identity" that motivated male groups from the beat generation through to the punks when "youth demanded to be itself without much regard for tradition" (185). This is something the Jedi Order appears to have overlooked, as in Lucas's films it continues to demand both emotional self-control and the renunciation of individuality in submission to the organisation's hierarchy. Obi-Wan and the Jedi Council's inability of refusal to accept or understand Anakin's emotional turmoil surrounding, among other things, his separation from his mother, ensure that his emotions remain repressed, growing until they are finally released in a fit of rage and destruction. This represents, yet again, a failure of fathering on the part of Obi-Wan and reveals the Jedi code as "an aberrant patriarchal instrument of emotional repression, aimed at enhancing the military efficiency of its members and not at all connected with goodness" (Martín 2019: 49).

Chancellor Palpatine, who becomes an alternative father figure to Anakin when the boy's relationship with his mentor becomes strained, takes an altogether different approach to the management and expression of emotion. Chancellor Palpatine is of course the alter ego of the powerful Sith leader Darth Sidious, and is set on installing the Empire, thereby gaining control of the galaxy. The Sith, unlike the Jedi, believe in the power of harnessing negative emotion in order to manipulate the force and become more powerful as a result, an attitude that allows them to assert agency over their own

lives and events taking place in the galaxy. Independence and autonomy appeal to Anakin since he is struggling to assert a hegemonic masculine identity while under the oppressive tutelage of Obi-Wan, who forbids the boy expressing personal feelings, making decisions or taking action as an individual. What Palpatine in fact offers Skywalker is the illusion of autonomy since the Chancellor takes advantage of his desire to act as protector towards his family and therefore prove his hegemonic masculinity and earn his place in the patriarchal hierarchy to force Anakin's hand. As Atkinson and Calafell observe, "He does not so much covet the power of a sith lord or or desire to do evil as much as he is driven to Palpatine to save his wife and unborn child, and in order to save them both, he must now do the sith lord's bidding" (2009: 10), and has therefore surrendered his agency to the Emperor. In this way, responsibility for Anakin's heinous deeds is displaced onto the evil Emperor, which leads Atkinson and Calafell to conclude that Skywalker inhabits the so-called 'gray area': "the nebulous and confusing space where responsibility for inappropriate actions becomes tangled and lost" (2009: 3), which "hides the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and thus naturalizes all those characteristics". The 'gray area' thus emphasises "that men are not at fault for the actions associated with hegemonic masculinity and, instead, the blame lies elsewhere" (ibid 16), in this case, with one corrupt individual — Palpatine—, an anomaly within the patriarchal society of the film. Evil is displaced from the oppressive hierarchical system onto the individual villain, a pattern repeated across contemporary Hollywood film.[26] This distancing of Anakin from responsibility for his actions serves to deny the character's construction as evil, allowing for his later redemption in Episode IV. The monstrosity that would otherwise have taken over

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[26] See, for example, the discussion of *RoboCop* (2014) in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Anakin is instead displaced onto the all-powerful and hideous Emperor Palpatine, who becomes the ultimate villainous monster of the saga.

As Anakin cannot be judged for his actions as a young adult because it is established that he is not responsible for them, he can only be assessed according to his actions and demeanour as a young boy in *The Phantom Menace* (1999). He is shown to be selfless and altruistic, not hesitating to invite a group of strangers to his home to shelter from a sandstorm. Later, he puts his own life at risk to help those same strangers, with no promise of reward for himself. Through hard work and strong sense of moral obligation Anakin manages to extricate himself from slavery and rise to join the ranks of the elite — the Jedi. This narrative bears a clear resemblance to the American Dream, in that hard work leads to just rewards, and it has been argued that the American Dream and its centring of white male subjectivity serve as a basis for the *Star Wars* saga (Atkinson and Calafell 2009: 7), allowing audiences to identify with Anakin and understand his position as not so different from their own as they navigate patriarchal society, following its rules in order to better their position. Both the presentation of Anakin as an inherently good person, and the depiction of his trajectory as one of following the American Dream, work to avoid the character reading as truly evil in the prequel films, and even allow him to be considered, at times, a heroic figure in his defence of normative society and embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. To the viewer, Anakin is not a villain but a victim, "too human, too vulnerable for the demands of hierarchical Jedi life" (Martín 2011: 155) and therefore all too easily manipulated by the true villain, the Emperor Palpatine.

3.3 From Anakin Skywalker to Darth Vader: Becoming a Monstrous Villain

In her discussion of monstrosity in contemporary cinema, Sara Martín defines the villain as a moral monster who wishes to accumulate power and demonstrates little or no empathy for other human beings. She goes on to observe that any significant relationships these characters establish are almost always obsessive, since the villain views others as objects to be possessed or destroyed (2002: 149). This analysis could easily pass as a description of Anakin Skywalker as he comes of age and finally becomes the villain Darth Vader. Anakin longs for power, though not within the Jedi Order or even normative society as a whole; instead, he desires enormous power in the context of the universe, stating: "I want the power to stop death". This magical power is precisely what is offered to him by the Emperor Palpatine, in exchange for the boy working for the dark side. Skywalker's desire to break with the norms established by the Jedi Order's hegemonic discourse represent a failure of the patriarchy in the education of its sons, since despite Obi-Wan and the council's best efforts they have raised a monstrous Other anathema to the system. The suggestion here is that "evil does not come from nowhere but is 'made'", which reveals *Star Wars* to be a narrative of "development and misdevelopment" (McDowell 2012: 68). The fact that Anakin is made a monster by the patriarchal society in which he grows up in a sense reveals the patriarchy to be monstrous itself, while at the same time allowing the hegemonic system to continue to exist by highlighting the limits of acceptable behaviour. In this case, Anakin wanting to become the most powerful Jedi ever to exist, effectively becoming a superhuman, brings into focus the requirement that no individual demand more than their fair share of power, since this could ultimately endanger the system itself. The danger of this excessive accumulation of power is laid bare when Anakin slaughters every last boy training to be a Jedi, he wipes out a generation of male heirs in a matter

of minutes. Skywalker's superhuman skillset has become a threat to hegemonic patriarchal order and therefore he must be eliminated.

Anakin's fall from grace into the role of marginalised outsider represents not only a threat to the system but also to the individuals within it, as well as offering a cautionary tale to the viewing audience. "To hold open the idea of the other, in whatever form she takes, is to enter into the risk of mutual becoming" (Shildrick 2002: 102), that is to say, the encounter with the Other unveils the vulnerability of the subject, since one could all too easily find oneself in the place of that abject Other by some twist of fate, as is the case with the once model citizen Anakin Skywalker. Audience identification is key in the construction of any villain, since they act as a mirror to our deepest fears, anxieties and forbidden desires, and therefore "Our conflicts with monstrous villains reproduce conflicts with monstrousness —i.e. social unacceptability— within ourselves" (Cámara Arenas 2011: 12). Anakin states that he is aware that directing his uncontrolled rage at the Tusken Raiders is wrong, but he cannot avoid it, much as any human is aware of their own flaws. In fact, Padmé remarks that it is normal to experience strong emotions, that he is only human, but Anakin rejects this consolation replying: "I'm a Jedi, I know I'm better than this!", the implication being that the Jedi are more than human, superhuman. As Shildrick explains, the monster "comes to embody those things which an ordered and limited life must try, and finally fail, to abject" (2002: 5). In Anakin's case, those abject traits are his excessive thirst for power, his violence and his egocentrism, all of which allow him to position himself above the 'proper' order of things, disrupting the 'natural' hierarchy of the Republic and the Jedi, and manipulating the Force to both overcome death and to kill. However disturbing, the monster or villain is essential to the continued existence of any system as it demarcates its limits and acts as an example of what an acceptable subject is not. The abjected

outsider is necessary to define normative society, as the rejected Other to the Self. This of course applies to both the patriarchal system under which we live in the West and the patriarchal hierarchy of the *Star Wars* saga. As Sara Martín writes of patriarchy: "the villain is one of the main figures ensuring its permanence, as he provides the hero with a function" (2011a: 30), in this way, the villain is not a threat but a fundamental element of patriarchy.

Key to the construction of hegemonic masculinity is whiteness since, as Dyer explains, "Race and gender are ineluctably intertwined, through the primacy of heterosexuality in reproducing the former and defining the latter" (1997: 30). This is an element which remains invisible within the saga, except when juxtaposed with darkness or blackness. Anakin is undeniably a white man and, as we have seen, performs a patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, acting with "the arrogance and disdain associated with white Euro-American empire-makers" (Martín 2019: 146). Andrew Howe dismisses claims of racist representation in *Star Wars* claiming that "the association of whiteness with purity and good, and blackness with taint or evil, cuts across religions and cultures", thereby excusing George Lucas by attributing the binary colour scheme of his films to "a symbolic form of cinematic narrative extending back […] to the very roots of Western expression" (2012: 17). Conversely, I would argue that the binarism evident in the presentation of the saga's characters is central to understanding and interpreting the construction of monstrous masculinity within white patriarchy. In *The Phantom Menace* the child Skywalker appears dressed in white, to reflect his goodness and the purity of his soul in stark contrast to the Sith Lord Darth Maul, clad in all black. By *Attack of the Clones* he has begun to wear black clothing that as well as contrasting with Obi-Wan's white robe in colour, is also of a more modern and figure complimenting cut. In this way, a visual seed is sown in which Anakin is beginning not

only to move towards the Dark Side, but also to separate himself from Jedi tradition, signalling his intent to mark himself out as a unique individual, not simply another cog in the Jedi machine. Despite the constant contrast of black and white in the films, whiteness remains invisible and therefore normalised, as it is consistently and exclusively the characters associated with blackness who are marked as Other. Darth Maul, for instance, is referred to by Qui-Gonn as 'it' following their first encounter, he remarks that "it was well trained in the Jedi arts". In this way the character marked as dark is dehumanised and set up as the Other to the white Jedi. As Daniel Bernardi notes, this strategy is consistently applied in Hollywood productions as "Hollywood attempts to segregate whiteness from color in ways that make the former invisible and the latter isolated and stereotypical" (2008: xv). This stereotypical representation is also present in the depiction of the aforementioned Tusken Raiders, racialised alien Others who are portrayed as brutish, murderous savages and, to ensure their complete dehumanisation, "Lucas withholds from the Tuskens any sort of humanizing speech" (Howe 2012: 13). Anakin's transition from innocent white boy to black-clad evil despot signals, then, a process of dehumanisation, of becoming monstrous Other to the pure, white Jedi. As Anakin becomes more individualised he becomes more visible, and comes to represent what Dyer (1997) refers to as 'extreme whiteness', a whiteness that is "exceptional, excessive marked" and "exists alongside non-extreme, unspectacular, plain whiteness" (222). Thus, "the extreme image of whiteness acts as a distraction. An image of what whites are like is set up, but can also be held at a distance […] Whites can thus believe that they are nothing in particular because the white particularities on offer are so obviously not them" (ibid 222-223). This works both to allow the white audience to associate the heroic deeds of good white characters with whiteness, and to distance themselves from the evil deeds of white villains. Therefore, the saga can depict white

Anakin as an exception to the rule of whiteness, presenting him as a white villain without forcing the audience to confront the darker aspects of white history and culture and its role in constructing and maintaining patriarchy and hierarchical structures in general.
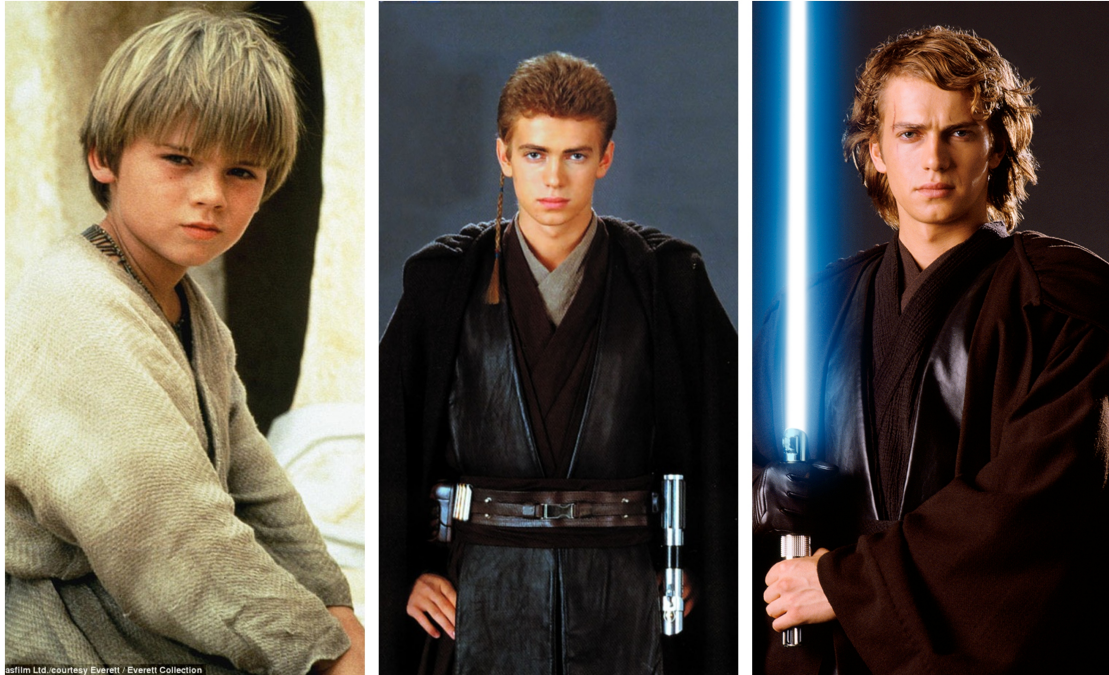
Figure 5 As an innocent boy Anakin dresses in simple, light-coloured clothing. As he grows older, his psychological struggles are reflected in his decision to wear black, his loss of a hand, and the scar on his face.

Despite Anakin's gradual embrace of the Dark Side, of all things black, I agree with Sara Martín that it is more productive to expose Vader as a white patriarchal villain than to re-imagine him as symbolically or literally black (2011: 145). In her book, *Performing Whiteness,* Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues that films featuring white bodies undergoing a physical transformation —what she calls the "bad-white-body"— "remind whites that dualism exists in the white body and its performances and cannot be summoned forth without consequences" (2003: 82). Therefore, these films work to expose the instability of binaries such as white/black, male/female and human/machine, while at the same time insisting on upholding those same dualisms. So, even as

134

whiteness is normalised it is destabilised by the deconstruction of white bodies, whether that be through disease, mutation, technological augmentation or any number of attacks on supposedly immutable individual identities. Anakin's white body is broken at the end of *Revenge of the Sith* fittingly, by Obi-Wan, so that his physical transformation into monster is initiated by the failed father figure, just as his psychological instability was set in motion by that same mentor. Anakin has travelled to Mustafar, a planet of the Outer Rim, quite literally on the margins, a place characterised by volcanic activity, intended to represent a symbolic hell. As a monster, Anakin can no longer connect with those he once loved, a fact demonstrated by Padme's fear of him in the moments before he strangles her to unconsciousness, channeling his rage and possessiveness through the Force. Padmé refuses to follow Anakin on his path to evil, disobeying his orders and refusing to be controlled. Anakin's failure to display authoritative domination over those he considers inferior —in this case, women— drives him to take even more extreme measures to assert power. The act of violence against an unarmed and pregnant woman is proof for the audience that Skywalker is now a moral monster, undeniably a villain. His imminent descent into physical monstrosity is signalled by his eyes briefly turning an unpleasant yellow colour after he has finished butchering the Viceroy and his aides on Mustafar. It is significant that it is the eyes that change since they are considered the window to the soul, thereby suggesting that the protagonist's inner monstrosity is searching for representation on a physical level.

According to Cámara Arenas, the visual aspect of the villain is important since "The aesthetic properties of monstrous villains are exactly those that spectators need in order to project over them their fears and anxieties, as well as their subconscious and forbidden desires —power, freedom, vitality, independence" (2011: 12). Whereas the beautiful, strong Anakin embodies the desire for power and vitality, his broken body

represents the fear of failing to attain or of losing these qualities. Anakin is first stripped of all his limbs —except of course his mechanical arm— thereby removing any sense of agency or power from the character. He is helpless, he cannot even stand to fight. Secondly, he is engulfed in flames, destroying his handsome face and leaving him writhing in agony, in this way ensuring that he will no longer have access to vitality or youth. At this point all Anakin's fears and anxieties have been realised: he has lost his love Padmé, and can no longer possess and control her; he cannot wield a lightsaber to demonstrate his power above and beyond that of any other; he has been proven inferior to his Jedi master, not only proving his mistrust of Obi-Wan correct but also showing that he has not yet achieved a level of skill and preparation necessary for the independence he so desires.

Foster writes that bad-white-body representations "exist and multiply because of white shame and white fear of its own hybridity" (86); in other words, the fear of losing power and privilege in a patriarchal society which relies on the subjugation of Others, while at the same time experiencing a sense of guilt related to the same. With this in mind, it is no surprise that Lucas chose to endow Vader with a redemptive arc that to some extent justifies his actions as a white criminal, thereby assuaging any sense of white guilt. As Sara Martín observes, the *Star Wars* saga forms part of a pattern of American stories that "try essentially to exonerate white Americans from guilt" (2011: 153), since it was not the fault of the innocent victim Anakin Skywalker, but the dark, ugly and satanic Palpatine in his role as Darth Sidious. Thus the patriarchal system that transformed Anakin into the monstrous villain Darth Vader is redeemed, displacing the blame onto one corrupt individual, the Emperor. In their discussion of the 'gray area' that excuses Anakin from responsibility for his actions while at the same time shielding his hegemonic masculinity, Atkinson and Calafell claim that the juxtaposition of

Anakin and Darth Vader works to separate Anakin from his actions both before and after his transformation. I agree with their claim that whereas Anakin's whiteness is invisible and therefore insignificant both to characters in the films and the audience, "Vader's Otherness is continually apparent throughout the film through his dark body armour, his voice, and heavy breathing" (2009: 12-13)[27]. This juxtaposition in turn works to naturalise the association of whiteness with purity and blackness with the abject Other in Western discourses. It is significant that Skywalker plays a passive role in the construction of his new identity; firstly allowing the Emperor to christen him with a new name —Darth Vader— and secondly, lying still and compliant while his body is encased in a black cybernetic uniform, complete with an impersonal and inanimate mask. The resultant sense that he has no say in what happens to him, his destiny completely out of his control, allows the audience to imagine Vader as a character completely distinct from that of the impulsive and lively Anakin Skywalker. This distancing process allows for the consequences of Anakin's hegemonic masculine performance —including violence and subjugation of women— to be excused, as the impression given is that it was not his fault but that of the inhuman Emperor, who with his repulsive physical appearance and overt lust for excessive power is already positioned as Other to the patriarchal system, since he threatens its continued functioning. By the time Darth Vader is introduced in Episode IV, the audience no longer envisions any link between the dark Sith villain and the handsome white boy of the prequel sagas, thereby exonerating Anakin of any action carried out by the evil Lord Vader and adding believability to his eventual redemption.

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[27] Production designer John Barry and costume designer John Mollo created Darth Vader's iconic suit, while artist Brian Muir was respobsible for sculpting his helmet and mask.

3.4 Darth Vader: A Mechanical Villain?

In his attempt to define the villain, Enrique Cámara Arenas offers an interpretation of the 'mechanical villain', one example of what he calls 'borderline villains', that is, those that do not present an entirely human embodiment. He claims that in the case of the mechanical villain, "motivation has been substituted by programming", although he does not believe that "the actual robotic complexion of the villains is a sine qua non condition" (2011: 8). Ultimately, his contention is that "mechanical villains are absolutely blind to empathy and coldly committed to a devastating routine" (ibid). When one considers that in *Revenge of the Sith* Anakin surrendered all agency, subjugating himself to the control of Darth Sidious, it can be argued that his motivation has been substituted by a kind of social programming, since he responds only to the commands of the evil Emperor, with no regard for his own motivations or desires. In fact, there is a suggestion that the mechanical mask has some part to play in Lord Vader's programming, since it becomes necessary for him to remove it at the end of *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* in order to defy the Emperor and achieve redemption. Vader is certainly portrayed as being blind to empathy; at the beginning of *Episode IV: A New Hope* he is introduced to the audience in a scene in which he storms Princess Leia's resistance ship, where one of his first acts is to casually choke to death a member of her crew who cannot provide the information the Empire seeks. This pattern of behaviour is repeated throughout the film, only ever reigned in by Grand Moff Tarkin (Peter Cushing), a favourite of the Emperor and one of very few who outrank Vader in the Empire's hierarchy. Finally, the commitment to a devastating routine is, of course, present, as the villain spends *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* attempting to track down his son Luke Skywalker and turn him to the dark side so that together they may become supreme galactic leaders. Darth Vader can, then, be

considered a mechanical villain, but I will now argue that although useful and somewhat insightful, this is not the only, or even most useful reading of his character as a villain.

Darth Vader is a cyborg figure, since the majority of his organic body has been replaced by robotic components, most notably his limbs and the full-face mask that allows him to breathe and speak. This fusion of the technological and the organic within one body marks his existence as liminal, and therefore monstrous, since the monster is a physical representation of the transgression of binaries, in this case human/machine. These monstrous bodies are fundamentally disturbing in that they cannot be categorised according to the binary parameters on which patriarchal society is built, "they transgress boundaries in being simultaneously too close, too recognisable […] and being excessive, in being irreducibly other to the binary itself" (Shildrick 2002: 74-75). Darth Vader has a recognisably human form, but his mechanical mask betrays his cyborgian configuration, marking him as Other to the human; an Other so disturbingly close to the human self that he becomes monstrous. The Other is necessary to define the centre, the self in patriarchal society, so the notion that an Other could so resemble a normative subject is disturbing, and is what ultimately defines the liminal monsters we see on screen. What is more, the fact that Anakin's perfectly formed body can so rapidly become monstrous reveals and responds to anxieties not only about loss of status but also the difficulty of defining the human in the first place. As Margrit Shildrick explains: "The more we believe that we can control our bodies, the greater the anxiety that is generated by the evidence of vulnerability" (2002: 73). In the prequel trilogy, after he is convinced of his position as the 'chosen one', the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy, Anakin is confronted with his own (relative) weakness in battle and becomes angry, acting rashly, thereby bringing about the dismemberment and deconstruction of

his corporeal body, revealing its inherent vulnerability. The viewing subject as witness to the visually graphic destruction of the once powerful white male body is alerted to their own physical vulnerability, which occasions feelings of unease and anxiety. These feelings coalesce around the spectacle of Anakin's mutilated body, making him the object of fear that must be rejected or eliminated in order to restore (patriarchal) order.

The image of Anakin engulfed in flames, his skin burnt and melted away to reveal the flesh and bones beneath also inspires horror in that it is an example of the abject as that which defies borders, deconstructing the image of the clean and proper self as a distinct and defined entity. The skin represents the ultimate boundary between the self and others. Its dissolution is disturbing to the viewer as it is a demonstration of the potential disintegration of the borders —between Self/Other and interior/exterior— that define the individual subject. Moreover, Anakin's existence in this moment becomes liminal, since he resides on the border between life and death, a space uncomfortably close to the ultimate abjection represented by the corpse, a symbol of death or, in other words, the complete destruction of the individual subject and their unique identity. The depiction of Anakin as abject is furthered in the sequence portraying his transformation into Darth Vader. Lying prone on an operating table in a cold, sparse room which could conceivably be a morgue, he appears lifeless and his disfigured head is abject in its lack of definition, its scarred shapelessness so far removed from the image of a living, human face. Darth Vader's embodiment in itself is abject, part-human and part-machine he occupies an in-between space, any trace of his human identity constantly threatened with complete dissolution by its mechanical components, which seem to influence every aspect of his behaviour and presentation. Not only is his voice robotic but he is also mechanical in his decisions and actions, he is represented as cold and as soulless as a machine, arousing anxieties surrounding the

idea of automata invading the realm of the living human, threatening human uniqueness in their ability to mimic and replace human abilities (Botting 2008: 87). Robert Rawdon Wilson observes that "Robots, androids and cyborgs all can create genuine horror effects in part because they can be supposed to behave soullessly, like Cartesian animals, and hence act without pity or compassion" (2000: 246). This horror is represented in *Star Wars* by the machine menace of Darth Vader, who in becoming cyborg experiences a loss of agency —or soul— signalling his death as a unique individual subject.

Figure 5 Darth Vader's mechanical mask and the abject sutured flesh beneath

The fact that Anakin's technological transformation acts as catalyst for his becoming monster is a symptom of technophobia, which Daniel Dinello describes as "an aversion to, dislike of, or suspicion of technology" (2005: 8). This is a recurrent theme in cultural representations and in particular science fiction, a genre that examines current technology and extrapolates it into a hypothetical future in order to explore the possible consequences. Technophobia is key to the narrative of the *Star Wars* saga, since it portrays a battle between the evil Empire, defined by their world-destroying advanced technology; and the Jedi-led Resistance, which relies on its human —and in

few cases alien— fighters and the mysterious Force, rather than technologically advanced weapons. This binary is repeated in the presentation of the fighters themselves; the famous Storm Troopers are dehumanised and mechanised by their external armour and full-face masks, whereas the Resistance fighters wear simple jumpsuits and helmets, emphasising their 'natural' humanity. Even in *The Force Awakens* (2015), the first entry in the most recent trilogy, the protagonist Finn must discard his homogenising, hard-edged stormtrooper outfit and learn to act independently in order to be accepted and trusted by the resistance. Although less advanced, the Resistance do use technology, so in fact what Lucas achieves in his saga is a confrontation between 'good' and 'bad' technology. Patell argues that "The suspicion of technology at work in *Star Wars* is a manifestation of larger fears about the erosion of traditional individualism" (2012: 173). In other words, in Lucas's saga, as in a number of films released in the 1970s and 1980s, 'good' technology is defined by individualism, while 'bad' technology is characterised by the subjugation of the individual to either literal machines or a mechanistic system. There are two principal strategies Lucas uses for denoting 'good' technology: the assertion of human control over the machine in question, with clear boundaries between the two; and an emphasis on individual agency during any large scale attack or battle. The looming threat of the Death Star, operated by an army of faceless workers, is destroyed by the heroics of the individual hero Luke Skywalker, personally piloting a small, relatively simple space ship that resembles existing real world fighter jets. The storm troopers are framed in shot in which they are lined up in precise rows, a military position which represents "an attempt to deny the weakness and vulnerability of the human body, to make human beings hard-edged and precise like their weapons" (Rubey 2012: 55). The Resistance fighters on the other hand, are seen always in motion, running seemingly randomly

through and around the frame, each individual pursuing their own personalised task. In this way, the Empire becomes defined by controlled, machine-like impersonality, in contrast to the organic freedom of the Resistance.

On a corporeal level, Darth Vader's mechanical body parts are completely merged with organic components, with no clear borders between the two, coming to represent, in Patell's words "US pop culture's image of the cyborg as a monstrous hybrid" (2012: 179). By contrast, although Luke is endowed with a robotic arm, it is always demarcated from the rest of his body, and is portrayed as insignificant, only an external and symbolic manifestation of the link to his father Lord Vader. Patell also claims that the overall arc of the prequel trilogy "suggests that the mechanization of Vader is only an external manifestation of his decision to dehumanize himself by embracing the 'Dark Side' of the force" (ibid). While I agree that Anakin's transformation into the cyborg Darth Vader does represent dehumanisation, I would give more weight to the role of individualism and power in his metamorphosis. In becoming cyborg, Anakin/Vader surrenders his unique identity as white male to the machine-like Galactic Empire, emerging as a part of a greater whole, rather than the powerful leader he hoped to grow into. He does not decide to be dehumanised, instead it is a result of his desire for excessive power, which is ultimately denied by Palpatine, who in providing Vader's name and body submits him to his control. In this way, Vader is incorporated into a larger body, that of Palpatine's Empire, where the loss of agency and individual identity —he does not even have a face— defines his monstrosity.

Technophobia is driven, in part, by emerging technologies that shift the balance of power between human and machine, thereby altering our conception of humanity and diminishing human self-image (Dinello 2005: 5). Darth Vader inspires technophobic suspicion and unease in the viewer because his technological enhancements have

converted him into a superhuman, a posthuman, more powerful than the human individual. His superhuman qualities are first flagged in *Episode I,* when Qui-Gon Jinn discovers young Anakin's remarkable midi-chlorian count[28] —far higher than any other Jedi, even Master Yoda. Whereas this superhuman quality is initially offset by the boy's altruistic deeds, as the saga progresses it plays an important role in his transformation into monstrous villain. Aware of his innate power and perceived superiority, Anakin's posthuman status instills in him a sense of entitlement; he comes to believe he deserves power above and beyond any other Jedi, or indeed any other being in the galaxy. Anakin's enhanced posthuman body and capabilities, coupled with his mechanical augmentations upon becoming Vader, poses a technological threat to the human and reducing, as Daniel Dinello observes, "the values of our own minds, bodies, individuality and consciousness" (2005: 6). The posthuman Darth Vader is disturbing because he accents our human weaknesses and vulnerabilities; he is stronger, more dangerous and more capable thanks to his natural and artificial mutations. Furthermore, his proximity to absolute power, as the most powerful manipulator of the Force in the universe, a status granted by his posthumanity threatens to upend and supersede normative (patriarchal) structures of society and government.

As a threat to the system, and a representation of the vulnerability and mutability of the human, Darth Vader must be eliminated in order to restore patriarchal order and also, narratively speaking, provide a sense of closure to the viewing audience. This catharsis is provided by way of a redemption of the white male villain, who sacrifices himself in order to aid the hero in his quest to defeat the faceless machine-like Empire and restore the traditional patriarchal hierarchy of individuals. By positioning Vader as an anomaly or, in Sara Martín's words, "attributing to the villain an exceptional nature

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[28] Midi-chlorians are intelligent microscopic life-forms that live inside the cells of all living things. when present in large enough numbers, they grant their host the power to perceive and manipulate the Force.

outside the norm rather than see him as an integral part of it", Lucas distances the powerful, white monster from the ideology of white privilege, celebrating instead "Vader's redemption and the ascent of his not less white son, Luke, to the status of hero" (2011: 152). This strategy is aided by shrouding Vader in black, effectively masking his whiteness, thereby highlighting his position as Other to the Jedi hierarchy and the normative Resistance. His redemption relies on fatherhood, an aspect largely overlooked by academic work discussing the original *Star Wars* trilogy. As Stella Bruzzi highlights in her 2005 book on cinematic fathers, fatherhood was generally defined in the 1960s and 70s through feminism and women's issues, with absent and returning fathers featuring as problematic in relation to their heroic sons. Towards and into the 1980s, however, following a certain crisis of masculinity and fatherhood in popular culture and discourse in the United States, fatherhood "came once again to be defined, as it had been in the 1950s, by and for men" (115). Driven in part by the backlash against feminism of the late 1970s and 1980s, a need arose to redefine masculinity as it relates to fathering, both presenting images of positive father figures and offering narrative redemption to more traditional models of fatherhood on screen. Susan Jeffords (1994) also links the resurgence of the father-son narrative to the rise of conservatism, the need to instil a sense of continuity in the patriarchal system which could be observed both in the policies of the Reagan government and narratives such as that of *Star Wars* and other action movies of the period. Anakin's return from the fall restores faith in both fathers and patriarchy, and allows the saga to come full circle, from Obi-Wan's failure as a father figure to Anakin successfully positioning himself as a caring father to Luke —patriarchal order is thereby restored.

Having demonstrated a commitment to human values and systems by investing in the importance of fatherhood, Vader must now demonstrate a physical pledge to

uphold humanity within his own body, and deny his monstrous cyborg corporeality. "[H]e understands the importance of discarding the mask of technology" Leah Deyneka writes, "so that the shadow of Darth Vader can die and be replaced by the frail *human* image of Anakin Skywalker" (2012: 44 emphasis in original). Thus the monstrous cyborg villain is eliminated and redeemed, replaced by a caring father with a human face. This unveiling of the face is doubly important since it is a testament to Vader's rejection of the machine-like collective of the Empire and his acceptance of the individual humanity embodied by the Resistance. Margrit Shildrick writes of the face-to-face encounter with the other, described by Levinas, as a situation of the utmost vulnerability which, as well as defining normative subjectivity, allows the normative subject to "exercise moral agency by taking itself as the model to which others must be made analogous" (2002: 89). When the white male hero Luke comes face-to-face with the deformed hybrid Darth Vader, a clear opposition is formed between the pure human and the corrupt cyborg. The male hero faces the threat of pollution and does not succumb to its corrupting presence, ensuring that in this scene the reassuring binaries undergirding patriarchal society are upheld, represented by the juxtaposition of Luke and Vader, the old and the new, black and white, good and evil.

The face beneath the mask is one that belies Vader's human vulnerability, despite his cyborg augmentations. It is ghostly pale and features at least two large ugly scars as well as dark rings around the eyes. Furthermore, it is clearly an ageing face, bloated and wrinkled in stark contrast to both the hero Luke and the young Anakin Skywalker of the prequel trilogy. The sight of Vader's face works to negate his superhuman status, and align him with the human, thereby allowing his redemption. This redemption, along with Luke's triumph, effectively equates white humanity with heroism and goodness, while at the same time condemning the hybridity of the dark

cyborg, which must be eliminated. The hideous visage parallels Darth Sidious's deformed and inhuman physical appearance, thereby associating the evil actions of the dark side with materiality, as well as a specifically non-normative corporeality. The decision of each to dedicate their life to evil-doings has left its mark on their material bodies, thereby negating any separation of mind and body, denying the Cartesian dualism. In contrast to the Jedi, who rely on the elevation of mind/spirit over the corporeal to become powerful, the despised Sith are defined by their corporeality, as material beings, as part of which all psychological activity is imprinted on their bodies. When considered alongside the fact that through their association with the colour white the Jedi are aligned with purity and goodness, whereas the black Sith are evil and corrupt, it becomes clear that on the whole the *Star Wars* saga works to uphold the Cartesian dualism and reinforce the idea that the human ideal is located in the spirit, or mind, of the individual subject.

3.5 The Monstrous Male Villain in the *Star Wars* Saga

The *Star Wars* saga is built on dualisms, the binary thinking which underpins patriarchal society, categorising its subjects into a complex hierarchy based on racial, sexual, gender and class distinctions, among others. The Jedi, dressed in white, moving in open and well-lit spaces are placed in opposition to the Sith-led Empire, clad in black, inhabiting closed and oppressive dark spaces. The opposition of black and white is just one manifestation of Lucas' reliance on, as Deyneka puts it, not only "the antediluvian theme of good vs evil but also humanity vs technology" (2012: 33), updating Joseph Campbell's heroic monomyth for the modern age. The filmmakers cannot resist, however, offering a technological spectacle for the viewer through the use of advanced special and visual effects, with the result that "every frame of the film celebrates machines and the speed and power they seem to promise" (Rubey 2012: 47).

What separates 'good' from 'bad' technology within the logic of the films is the degree of human control involved in the implementation of machines and the maintenance of individual identities of the humans operating within these mechanical systems. Both the Jedi's personalised lightsabers and the Resistance fighters' small ships, the emphasis is on the skill or art of those wielding technological weapons, rather than the technology itself. Therefore, the technophobic anxieties in the film arise, as Patell observes, "not from the fear of technology per se, but rather, the fear that technology will be removed from [individual] control and misused to enhance the agency of the few at the expense of the many" (2012: 177), as seen in the planet destroying Death Star, which seems to swallow up its technicians, stripping them of their unique identities in hiding their faces behind a hard mechanical mask, with only the push of a button required to unleash enormous destructive potential. In this opposition it becomes apparent that the saga advocates the protection and promotion of human individuality and subjectivity in the face of technological developments —for example in mechanisation of production— that seem to threaten individual agency.

It is only Anakin/Vader who transgresses the film's binaries through his transformation from innocent boy to evil Sith Lord, thereby situating himself at the centre of the saga's narrative structure. The monster is thus placed at the heart of the film, and yet on the margins of normative society, a liminal, abject figure. It is only Anakin/Vader who transgresses this binary through his transformation from innocent boy to evil Sith Lord, thereby situating himself at the centre of the saga's narrative structure. The monster is thus placed at the heart of the film, and yet on the margins of normative society, a liminal, abject figure. Darth Vader represents a subject whose unique human identity as Anakin Skywalker has been erased by his fusion with technology to create a posthuman hybrid subject, subjugated to the will of the crushing

machine-like imperative of the Empire. Donna Haraway hoped the representation of the cyborg myth of 'hopeful monsters', taxonomically unstable beings "not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (1991: 154), may provide a metaphor through which to deconstruct the binaries on which patriarchal society is built. Darth Vader, however, represents what Haraway identifies as the main problem with the cyborg metaphor, that it is "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (151). Rather than challenge the binary logic of the *Star Wars* universe, the cyborg Vader exists under the control of the patriarchal and militaristic regime that created him. He remains the monstrous Other that defines and justifies the norm —in the case of *Star Wars* represented by white, male, heterosexual Luke Skywalker.

Far from demonstrating liberating potential, Anakin's transformation into the cyborg Darth Vader is defined by abjection and the loss of individual agency. The transgression of boundaries inside/outside, human/machine etc. make his body the site of monstrosity, a quality that he carries into adulthood as Vader's body is marked by the blurring of these same binaries. This abjection is not, however, the defining feature of Anakin/Vader's monstrousness. Instead, it is his apparent lack of identity and agency that inspires fear. As a teenager in *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith* Anakin's greatest desire is to prove his manhood according to the hegemonic masculine norm in order to earn his place as a man in the patriarchal hierarchy of the Jedi. He finds himself constrained by the failings of his mentor and father figure Obi-Wan who, in disregarding Anakin's need to assert himself as an independent adult subject, effectively blocks his path to establishing a functional masculine identity. Anakin's resulting frustration at being denied his perceived entitlement to power and status as a man operating within patriarchy ultimately develops into rage directed at not only the father figure but also the system he represents. What Anakin experiences is 'aggrieved

entitlement', a term conceived by Michael Kimmel that he defines as "the sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by forces unseen and more powerful" (2013: 63). Kimmel applies the term to those young white American men who have come "to believe that power was what they were entitled to, by birth" (54) and who consider that birthright to be eroding, resulting in a kind of directionless anger which can easily be manipulated and directed towards specific groups of people who become scapegoats, for example women and other minorities (89). Anakin's discontent is manipulated and channeled by Chancellor Palpatine/Darth Sidious into a hatred of first Obi-Wan Kenobe and later the Jedi as a whole. Anakin is therefore constructed as monster by a monstrous Other to the Jedi hierarchy, removing the weight of responsibility from the protagonist and the patriarchal Jedi, placing it instead at the feet of an evil outsider, an anomaly. In this way, the film attempts to excuse hegemonic masculinity, to suggest that it is not white men who are at fault but those who threaten to disrupt the system, as is the case with Darth Sidious. Despite the filmmakers intentions, it remains clear that if it were not for the failures of the patriarchal hierarchy of the Jedi in their upbringing of young Anakin, he would not have sought an alternative father figure in Palpatine and thus would not have become angry and therefore open to the manipulations of the Dark Side.

When examined from this point of view, Anakin/Vader does emerge as a victim, as George Lucas intended, although I would argue he is not only Palpatine's victim, but also a victim of the patriarchal Jedi hierarchy. Palpatine and Obi-Wan represent two sides of power: "the one that is excessive and must be, therefore, limited for the Force (patriarchy, of course) to stay balanced and the one that […] is not ready to abolish Jedi privilege, masked as duty, for good" (Martín 2011: 160). Anakin is trapped between the two powers, faced with an impossible choice between two flawed systems. Ultimately,

he chooses to join the Palpatine on the Dark Side, convinced by the promise of unlimited power and control over his own life and that of others, as opposed to the eternal submission of the Jedi to both the Force and the control of the Jedi council. It is, in the end, Anakin's desire for excess power that constructs him as literally, physically monstrous, in aiming to surpass and destroy the patriarchal order —an intention that is signalled by his attack on the Jedi temple— he positions himself as Other to the hegemonic system and, therefore, a monster.

Chapter Four

Man as Alien: Becoming 'Other' in *District 9* (2009)

4.1 Aliens in Johannesburg: An Introduction to *District 9*

The South African film *District 9,* written by Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell and directed by Blomkamp[29], celebrated its global release in 2009 following a publicity campaign that proved hugely successful in intriguing and exciting critics and audiences alike. The campaign consisted of a series of viral videos showing a mysterious space ship hovering over Johannesburg accompanied by clips of news reporters speculating as to what this unidentified object may contain, and what its purpose may be. These trailers, as well as the 'For Humans Only' signs found on bus stops around the country, did not disappoint science fiction fans, with District 9 widely hailed as a breath of fresh air for the genre, transposing classic motifs to a modern ghettoised South African setting.

District 9 explores the consequences of a spacecraft full of desperate alien refugees appearing above an alternate-reality Johannesburg. The aliens are forced into a ghettoised slum called District 9, fenced off from the city proper, and are prohibited access to Johannesburg, its facilities and opportunities. At the beginning of the film we are introduced to Wikus Van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley), the bureaucrat in charge of the aliens' resettlement in a new purpose-built internment centre called District 10. The rest of the film follows Wikus' contagion and subsequent painful transformation into an

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[29] After having started his career in the visual effects industry, Neill Blomkamp found success with the short film *Alive in Joburg* (2006), the themes and styles of which were extended and enhanced to create the his debut directorial feature *District 9*. Blomkamp and long-time collaborator Canadian screenwriter Terri Tatchell are married.

alien and his experiences contending with the simultaneous threats of multi-national weapons manufacturers and Nigerian gangsters. Wikus' mutation represents a Kafkaesque metamorphosis, in which the subject becomes an alien —as in foreign, or unknown— Other. Just as in *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka 1915) Gregor's masculine status is diminished by his unexpected transformation, so is Wikus'. Both lose their jobs and therefore their positions as household provider, and become vulnerable at the hands of the humans who now regard them as non-human, animalized Other. These texts form part of a cannon including films such as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), which deal with the horror of losing control of one's body to the extent that it becomes unrecognisable, it becomes other to the self.

District 9 acts as the central text in this chapter examining the monstrous transformation from male subject into alien other, and the possible vulnerabilities and empowerments this metamorphosis entails, as well as the relevance of this kind of monster when considering alternative articulations of masculinity and configurations of the male body. In this analysis I introduce and examine the models of masculine identity presented in the film, before moving on to a discussion of how masculinity is intertwined with the representation of monstrosity in the depiction of man becoming alien. I also analyse the intersection of the monstrous masculine with ideas of posthumanism in the technological and biological enhancement of the protagonist's corporeal form. Firstly, however, it will be necessary to provide a brief overview of the *District 9*'s socio-historical context, which is key to its narrative and visual construction.

As *District 9* is generally considered an action-packed, fast-paced, thriller movie, it could be easy to forget that this is not a Hollywood production —if it weren't for the constant references to South African socio-cultural specificities. The director

declares his intentions in the first minutes, using docu-realist footage with local (non)actors filmed in the Johannesburg townships to set-up the story and setting. All classes, races and communities are represented here, along with the social and geographical differences that separate them, from the urban, poor, black population to the white Afrikaner and English experts hired as talking-heads to give an explanation of the aliens' arrival on Earth and its immediate aftermath.

This emphasis on the patchwork nature of the South African reality is maintained throughout the film, as the director consistently highlights the country's contrasts both visually and narratively. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is *District 9*'s focus on architecture and urban planning, using emblematic images of the Johannesburg skyline, with its jumble of sleek skyscrapers and rundown social housing, to underline the huge socio-cultural differences between rich and poor, despite their geographical proximity. A key element in making this contrast is the depiction of borders and barriers. The Johannesburg of *District 9* is a labyrinth of walls and fences, which define and divide social groupings. These, along with the signs denoting the 'human only' areas, are a clear visual link to South African Apartheid —the period lasting from 1948 until 1991, during which the minority white ruling class enforced a system of segregation of white and black, and coloured, peoples.[30] It is impossible to formulate a reading of *District 9* without taking the historical realities of Apartheid into account, as it is an ever-present element in the film, with parallels inevitably drawn between the forced eviction of the film's aliens and the Group Areas Act of the Apartheid era. This legal act paved the way for the 'relocation' of 3.5 million non-white South Africans from their inner-city homes to 'locations' found outside the city

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[30] Apartheid was introduced by the South African government in 1948, following the National Party's ascension in that year's election. Negotiations between the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela and the De Klerk government, as well as other parties, lasting from 1990 to 1993, finally brought Apartheid to an end in South Africa with the formation of a democratic government in 1994.

boundaries (Adler 2016). Ben Walters observes the following similarities between the situation of black South Africans during Apartheid and that of the alien refugees in *District 9*:

> The 'prawns' seem a fairly obvious analogy for black South Africans, especially under apartheid: they are barred from participation in large parts of society and live in townships subjected to violent raids by the authorities. The clicks of their language even suggest Xhosa. (2009: 57).

To focus on the Apartheid allegory within *District 9* is somewhat problematic, however, since, as Andrew M. Butler notes, "The 'prawns' may be an allegorical denotation of a race, but the denotation risks being racist" (2015: 101). While the audience will inevitably draw parallels between the film's narrative and Apartheid, it is also important, as Joshua Clover argues, to consider its divergences from that history as "Though there are elements of Apartheid's history mixed throughout the movie —as with the forced relocation of the the aliens from Johannesburg to distant townships— that history doesn't provide a consistent or coherent structure" (2009: 8).

Some critics look back further than Apartheid in their readings of *District 9*. Lorenzo Veracini, in his article on *District 9* and *Avatar* (2009), argues that both films are settler colonial narratives. It is the need to enforce the displacement of the aliens that produces a crisis, just as in any instance of colonisation. "The aliens of these movies, like indigenous peoples in other cinematic representations are primarily expected to move on" (Veracini 2011: 361). The fact that the principal alien character of the movie, Christopher Johnson, wants to return to his home planet responds, Veracini maintains, to settler fantasies about aliens *wanting* to leave settlers alone. The fact remains, however, that the aliens of the film are not natives, they are refugees, somewhat undermining the settler colonial reading. That said, the elements outlined by Veracini remain present, colouring the film with a hue of colonialist sentiment, particularly in the

decision of the MNU to assign 'human' names to the aliens, thereby undermining and attempting to erase their culture. He is no doubt correct when he writes that the fact "that neither director *wanted* to present a settler colonial story […] confirms that settler colonialism in many ways still goes without saying" (364, original emphasis).

It is equally important not to ignore the contemporary realities of the South African socio-political landscape. It is essential, as Eric D. Smith maintains in his discussion of *District 9*, to bracket and re-historicise the standard allegorical reading that "the transformation is from white man to poor black man" in order to "clearly perceive that such a description is as applicable to […] Wikus […] as to the alien multitude" (2012: 158). Furthermore, the lack of representation of the nation-state makes it clear that within the film it is the corporate sector that controls and runs the country, not only in the economic sense, but also the socio-political. This is interpreted by Smith as a criticism on the part of the director of a South Africa that is constrained by a mostly white internal corporate sector that is allied to powerful external forces of globalised capital (150). Smith goes on to argue that the film criticises both the ascendence of this symbol of corporate capitalism and the "liberal humanist social discourse that reinforces its political and cultural authority" (151). Another pertinent contribution to the discussion comes from Charles Ramírez Berg, who argues that films depicting "the sympathetic alien", represented in *District 9* by Christopher Johnson, "provide a cinematic arena for the unconscious reflection on the immigrant 'question'" (2012: 403). It is my contention that the aliens of *District 9* not only symbolise non-white South Africans of Apartheid, but also those African refugees and immigrants who have arrived in South Africa over the past decade. These individuals and communities have suffered exclusion and violence of the sort experienced by Blomkamp's aliens. In May 2008, for example, at least 70 immigrants were killed by rioting South Africans,

and thousands were displaced (Harris et al. 2018: 228). In short, the cultural socio-cultural context of *District 9* is as complex as that of South Africa itself, with no one historical event or social group influencing a reading of the film more heavily than any other. When interpreting this film it is important to keep the patchwork nature of South Africa's past and present in mind at all times, as I attempt to do here, avoiding simplistic readings which respond to but one of the country's many historical, cultural, geographical, political or social facets.

4.2 Soldiers, Civil Servants and Aliens: Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity in *District 9*

As a film populated entirely by male characters, there are a variety of masculinities portrayed in *District 9*. Here I will focus on three characters: Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope)— the main alien character in the film; Colonel Koobus (David James) — the soldier who is intent on bringing about Wikus' downfall; and Wikus Van de Merwe himself, whose transformation from human to alien has important repercussions on his gendered identity.

I shall begin, then, by examining Wikus' masculine identity as it is depicted before his physical mutation takes place. When we first meet Wikus he has been promoted, thanks to his father in law, to a managerial position in the MNU (Multi-National United), the privately owned conglomerate that deals with the management of the aliens that inhabit District 9. He is tasked with leading the operation to evict the aliens from their current settlement in order to move them to District 10, a walled internment camp even further removed from Johannesburg than the original settlement. The viewer's first impression of Wikus is that of a naïve, not too bright bureaucrat, perhaps something of a fool, but inoffensive. He is shown to be an ineffective leader,

who is unable to give orders as Colonel Koobus openly and aggressively defies him. He is unsuited to the hyper-masculine military environment of which he is supposedly in charge. In this exchange it becomes clear that Wikus does not embody a typical, hegemonic Hollywood style masculinity because he lacks strength and aggression as well as the ability to seize control in a military situation. The juxtaposition of Wikus and Koobus invites a comparison of their embodiment, highlighting the soldier's hardness and muscularity —features Richard Dyer (1997) claims are central to the construction of white, male heroism, particularly in a cinematic colonial setting. In contrast, the protagonist Wikus, devoid of muscular vigour, is characterised by passivity, the opposite of the embodiment of action Dyer claims is essential in visual representations of heroic masculinity.

This confrontation leads the viewer to conclude that it is Koobus who successfully embodies a hegemonic model of heroic masculinity, whereas Wikus only manages a failed performance of the same role. I use the word 'performance' here to refer to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, set out in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to this theory, identity is formed by the subconscious repetition of a series of mandated learned behaviours that we call the norm. The film draws attention to Wikus' masculine performance by highlighting behaviours that demonstrate his failure to embody the masculine identity expected of him as a manager and indeed as the protagonist of an action picture. As Butler explains, since performance is subconscious, it only becomes visible when it does not comply with the norm, so although all gender is performance, we become aware of the fact Wikus is performing due to his lack of success in inhabiting the expected male role. We are left with the impression that he is striving for a masculine identity that does not come naturally to him. In this way, the heroic masculine ideal is subverted early in the film, performed as it is by the menacing

antagonist rather than the protagonist. The sense that masculine identity is performed is enhanced by the docu-realist style of the film, which serves to draw attention to Wikus' insecurities in front of the camera, and therefore in front of an audience. Here he is seen to be performing in the literal sense of the word, he glances at the camera when giving orders, concerned at how he is coming across in the documentary and wanting to appear assertive and in control. This reveals his insecurity in his masculine identity, aspiring to a hegemonic norm he cannot fulfil.

Generally, the hero of the action thriller is not only white and male, but also physically strong, independent, aggressive and undeniably in control of himself and his immediate surroundings. This is the figure Susan Jeffords famously christened the 'hard body': "the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty and courage' standing for a national character that was 'heroic, aggressive and determined" (1994: 24-25) In *District 9,* the protagonist, or hero, has up to this point failed to live up to any of these criteria, until now he has been a figure of ridicule, and played for laughs.. As Michael Kimmel states in his work on the self-made man: "manhood must be proved — and proved constantly" (2002: 140), it is a state that is never fully realised. This entails a constant performance of what are considered to be male behaviours and attributes in an attempt to remain a man, most importantly, as Kimmel goes on to assert "in the eyes of other men" and "in the public sphere, specifically the workplace" (140). Consequently, competition between males is constant and hugely important, as seen in *District 9* within the MNU. This masculine competition based on the successful performance of norms, results in a hierarchy quite separate from the official rank of the employees. Therefore, in terms of successful embodiment of the masculine, Wikus finds himself at the bottom of this hierarchy. Despite attempts to prove otherwise, his masculine performance is just not up to scratch. It is during one failed attempt to

perform a hegemonic masculinity, by demonstrating bravery and independent action, that Wikus becomes infected by a mysterious, black liquid we later learn is an alien fuel source. This precipitates Wikus' transformation into an alien —altenately dubbed a 'Prawn' by human characters in the film—, a process that will cause Wikus' body to be completely altered down to the genetic level. This mutation causes the protagonist to reconsider all facets of his identity, as they are increasingly destabilised as his metamorphosis progresses.

Although during the film's opening sequences the audience is invited to pity Wikus' non-hegemonic masculine performance, once borders begin to disintegrate so do the sureties the viewer previously enjoyed. Even the humans are revealed to be more dangerous than the prawns they go to such lengths to control. The strong masculine figures in the torture sequences are sadists, revelling in the torture of Wikus as well as a series of prawns they are subjecting to various gruesome tests. For this reason, the viewer becomes inclined to doubt the value of the masculine norm especially when it implies aggression, power and control. Furthermore, all those who are eviscerated in *District 9* are MNU soldiers, theoretically the men best prepared to defend their physical integrity and to attack others, the traditional heroes of Hollywood action cinema. That they are shown to be at the mercy of the more physically powerful alien Others is demonstrative of how the film questions the superiority of traditional hegemonic masculinity.

This is perhaps most obvious in the story arc followed by Koobus, the military man charged with tracking down and eliminating Wikus. From the very beginning of the film he is portrayed as having a 'hard body' masculinity typical of Hollywood action movies. He demands to have more weapons than are normally allotted to each soldier, and is seen to be in command, despite Wikus technically holding a superior

position in the company. All this contributes to a performance of an aggressive, old-fashioned, hegemonic masculinity, the sort that Wikus, at the start of the film, fails to perform. This hard-bodied performance gives Koobus an air of invincibility that makes his sudden and complete evisceration during the film's denouement even more shocking. His assertive shouts of "stay back, you fuckers" and his handgun are no match for the gang of 'prawns' who round on him in order to save Wikus, who is left untouched. In this scene we see hard-bodied masculinity reduced to nothing in an instant, revealing the fragility of identity and the material body, even that of the ostensibly invincible traditional masculinity of the soldier. Although in the 1980s the hard body masculinity that Koobus represents was performed by cinema's action heroes, as seen in films such as *First Blood* (1982) and *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), as Jeffords explains, by the late 1980s and early 1990s these muscular heroes had become "self-parody" (1994: 172), and consequently it became necessary to offset the hard man personality with an element of emotional depth, as seen in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), or by humour, as seen in *Die Hard* (1988). As *District 9* makes frequent use of irony, and since it paints the MNU soldiers as the enemy, Koobus must be considered a ridiculous figure, rather than a model to be admired. This is why the cinema audience cheers when Koobus is ripped to pieces, they are elated because they have witnessed the downfall of an impossible masculinity, now passé, one that they could never hope to embody, which has become the typical masculine identity of the enemy rather than the hero.

The final element in *District 9's* triad of masculine identities is represented by Christopher Johnson, the prawn who promises to return Wikus to his previous human state in return for helping the aliens repair their ship so that they can return to their home planet. Although 'he' is a prawn, and therefore has no sex —the prawns are hermaphrodite and reproduce asexually— 'he' displays a masculine gender identity.

Christopher Johnson is, of course, the name imposed by the South African authorities, and aside from selecting Christian names, it is also interesting that they have chosen to masculinise the entire alien population, including the children, with Christopher's child referred to as his 'son'. This belies a desire, of both the authorities within the film and Hollywood, to create masculine fantasies with male heroes, rather than questioning the validity of rigid gender binaries when the opportunity arises. Hannah Hamad, for example, points out what she calls "a full-on paradigm shift in Hollywood's articulation of ideal masculinity" (2013: 108) in fatherhood narratives which allow for the privileging of masculine subjectivities and the concomitant elision of motherhood" (2013: 102). Although the use of alien characters with no fixed sex represents an opportunity to explore alternatives to the binary system of sex and gender, this is eschewed in favour of the promotion of traditional masculinity characterised by strength, aggression and practical intelligence, while at the same time removing women from the picture—Christopher is a single father, and the only woman to appear in the film is the largely absent Tania Van de Merwe (Vanessa Haywood), Wikus' wife. Therefore, within the symbolic economy of the film, and —assuming that Hollywood films act as a reflection of their socio-historical and context— Western society, the lack of a binary sex cannot be understood, and an inability to conceive of a genderless society can be observed.

Despite this conservative representation of masculinity, the disruption of the heterosexual matrix is undeniably present. Judith Butler explains the heterosexual matrix as "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender" —adhering to the binary oppositions male/female and masculine/feminine— "that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (1990: 206). Christopher Johnson's masculine gender is not a consequence of a male body. This

denial of the heterosexual matrix makes the alien body a site of subversion of patriarchal and hegemonic norms, as it becomes a space for alternative masculine identities to be embodied. This theme is picked up again in the aforementioned Nigerian gang leader, whose vulnerable, wheelchair-bound body belies an invincible position within the masculine hierarchy of District 9. Christopher's masculinity is non-hegemonic in the context of the action film as he is sensitive: a single father caring for his child within the domestic sphere has not yet been accepted as a hegemonic model of masculinity in contemporary cultural production. Although a more hands-on fatherhood has become an important element of the Hollywood masculine norm, it is only ever a lesser aspect of masculine identity, with this masculine model only being successful if fatherhood is accompanied by the male being the principal breadwinner; and/or a protector figure for a nuclear family. In José Padilha's *RoboCop* (2014), for example, the male protagonist is shown to be a hands-on father at the beginning of the film, but once he can no longer work as a policeman and provide for his family as an autonomous man, he is too embarrassed to visit his son – he fears his family discovering that he is less masculine now that he is physically and economically reliant on others. Masculinity remains inextricably linked to the work ethic and financial autonomy of the self-made man. Although Christopher Johnson is fighting to improve his situation, he is in fact helpless as he has no hope of earning a living and remains at the mercy of the MNU when it comes to his physical security. He is not, therefore, a typical embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, although he will become a masculine model to admire and follow in the context of the film.

It is by following Christopher Johnson's example that Wikus renounces his attempted performance of hegemonic masculinity and exchanges it for an alternative masculine role that does not depend on the heterosexual matrix or societal norms. When

entering MNU's secret alien-experimentation facility both characters are depicted as soldiers, apparently channelling the frontiersman masculinity of old Hollywood, a parallel drawn by Yvonne Tasker between "The figure of the individual hero, pitted against the state" and "pioneer rhetoric" (1993: 105). Wikus immediately takes on the role of leader, literally leading the way as well as giving orders. It soon becomes clear that he had promised Christopher that they would not kill anybody, but Wikus finds that once he is shot at it is all too easy to return fire, blowing his attacker to pieces with a huge alien gun. From this point onwards, Van de Merwe is assertive and aggressive in combat, though he does avoid killing unarmed MNU workers, ordering them to leave the building. In this sequence, our protagonist demonstrates a successful and coherent performance of masculinity that does not depend on an idealised male body. He is no longer an ineffectual leader, failing to perform a white, middle-class masculinity. He is now strong, brave and just. This frontiersman, soldierly model of manhood is characterised by Brian Baker as aggressive and individualistic, the rhetoric of which has been mobilised on several occasions in American politics to revive the idea of heroic masculinity as a symbol of Americanness (2008: 147).

Leadership, violence and aggression are not enough, however, to build a successful contemporary masculine identity. Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly important for men to incorporate sensitivity into their masculine identities. This came to be known as the 'new man', a construction that emphasises the importance of hands-on fathering and emotional sensitivity. In the contemporary setting, muscular heroics and the qualities of the 'new man' are increasingly brought together in one male body since, as Tasker explains "Hollywood cinema, indeed popular culture more generally, does not operate within a simple binary system and is routinely able to bring together such sets of seemingly contradictory qualities" (1993: 106). We have already

seen Christopher Johnson as caring father, and now we see further proof of his sensitivity, as he is visibly affected by the discovery of rows of dissected alien bodies, the result of the MNU's clandestine experiments. Wikus, however, is more concerned about saving his own skin at this point, and limits himself to making excuses, claiming ignorance of what went on in the laboratories. It is clear to the audience that despite Wikus' changes in attitude to become a leader, a soldier on the frontier, he has not yet completed his transformation; he has more to learn from his alien companion to achieve a successful, alternative masculinity. Now that the transformation into alien has been initiated, his human body polluted, he must instead prove his emotional human qualities in order to win acceptance.

4.3 Becoming Alien: The Monstrous Masculine in *District 9*

As the protagonist's metamorphosis progresses, the film itself also transforms, integrating more and more horror elements into its action movie framework. Up to this point the feel of the film is been generally upbeat and fun and avoids visually confronting any suffering; the camera's gaze, and therefore the viewer's gaze, is averted when the horror threatens to become too intense, as in the case of Wikus vomiting black liquid at the beginning of his mutation. We are saved from the sight of this corporeal horror by his blackout, which is reflected in the camera fading to black. With the somewhat abrupt switch to more challenging horror inflected and gory images, the mechanics of the film contribute to the feeling of instability caused by the undermining of the human male body. The audience can no longer rely on the permanence of any element of the film. As Wikus is forced to reconsider everything he previously believed to be fixed and unchangeable, the spectator is subjected to a similar feeling of instability and insecurity.

Firstly, Wikus' corporeal integrity is threatened, as his nails and skin begin to fall away. Secondly, he begins to bleed and vomit a black liquid, a foreign substance that has no place within the human body. Here, the deconstruction of the body is used as a metaphor for the destabilisation of the whole identity of the protagonist, and in particular his masculine identity. When even the seemingly undeniable immutability of the material body is removed, everything that may once have seemed stable and natural is called into question. This trope is typical of horror cinema, and more recently science fiction cinema, to explore issues of gender, sex, sexuality and race, demonstrating that they are constructed elements of the subject's identity, and therefore that identity is itself of a constructed nature. This denial of the immutability of identity is terrifying for both Wikus and the audience as in Western representations the male body is seen as stable and autonomous, from a socio-cultural point of view. To see the power and dominance of the white, male body called into question subverts usual Hollywood portrayals of the hero. Wikus is determined not to reveal his mistake, or his increasing sickness, for fear of appearing weak, which would undermine his leadership in a masculine environment. This effort results in failure, however, as he loses consciousness at a surprise birthday party thrown in his honour. In this scene, passing out represents Wikus reaching his most vulnerable state, as he has no control over his body and is open to manipulation by others. The loss of control is significant with regards to masculinity because "Given the extent to which control is for many men the defining mark of their masculinity, any suggestion or threat of being out of control challenges the very essence of what being a male is all about" (Clare 2001: 5).

This is also the point at which Wikus' body is approaching a point of no return: his DNA is now exactly half alien half human. This is visually portrayed in Wikus removing the bandages on his injured arm to reveal that the human appendage has been

replaced by an alien claw. The contrast between the hard, black powerful claw and the pale, human flesh acts as a visual metaphor for the assault on his bodily integrity that deprives him of his manhood. His humiliations, however, do not end with Wikus blacking out and soiling himself at his own birthday party. He is transferred to the hospital before being forcibly removed and taken to the Multi-National United (MNU) laboratory where he is restrained and sedated. In the world of District 9 MNU is the world's second largest weapons manufacturer and has been placed in charge of controlling the alien population of Johannesburg. Wikus' vulnerability is brought into sharp relief in these scenes as he is completely at the mercy of the authorities. The use of a multinational corporation as captor and antagonist here plays on contemporary paranoia and speculation about the hidden activities and seemingly unlimited power of large conglomerates. Pete Boss writes that these instances of physical helplessness in brightly-lit public-funded institutions is informed by "a paranoid and conspiracist tendency in social and political thinking" as well as the horror film's "unquestionable obsession" with the destruction of the human body and a complex of negative images which inform popular attempts to address the problems of death and dying (1986: 15).

As a result of his incarceration, the white male, Wikus Van de Merwe, who formerly occupied a position of power, has been reduced to his most defenceless state. This state of instability and doubt reflects what is referred to as the 'crisis' of the modern masculine subject. Thomas B. Byers, for example, states that the 'the traditional subject, particularly the masculine subject, is in the throes of an identity crisis', and goes further, claiming that this crisis is "too radical, in fact, to be contained within traditional humanist boundaries" (Byers 1995: 7). This suggests that the postmodern condition has made the successful embodiment of a masculine identity impossible, as it would require an immutable subject of unquestionable integrity, both bodily and

mental, a condition that is negated by the fractured nature of the postmodern world. The sudden change of fortune inflicted on Wikus accentuates the precariousness of the individual subject and their identity; in a matter of hours a middle-class white male has been stripped of his privileged identity and associated with the 'prawns', who are the focus of the MNU's testing and rank, in Johannesburg's social hierarchy, below the black immigrant slum inhabitants —represented in the film by the despised and marginalised Nigerian gangs. Wikus' body is fractured, unreadable and unclassifiable, it can no longer even be termed a human body. Thus, Wikus becomes a monster, boundaries are blurred upon and within his corporeal form, marking him as a liminal presence, threatening to the normative, binary categorisation that underpins patriarchal society.

As well as being probed and penetrated during his hospital stay, Wikus' body is bent to the will of others, he is forced to use alien weaponry to kill first pigs and then 'prawns', all the while crying and pleading. Wikus' body is no longer his own property, it is now owned by MNU. This, of course, is a frightening prospect for any subject, male or female, but is particularly telling when what is represented on screen is a white male, the subject perhaps least accustomed to being controlled, also the subject with the most to lose in terms of privilege and status. The multinational taking ownership of the body plays on fears of losing control over the corporeal, in the vein of horror films featuring possession or nightmarish paralysis, as, for example, in the case of someone waking up during surgery unable to move or cry out. To refer again to Boss, he argues that the impulse by filmmakers and audiences to rehearse the loss of this control is so strong that "the coherence of accepted patterns of film language is frequently relegated to a position subordinate to the demands of presenting the viewer with the uncompromised or privileged details of human carnage" (1986: 15). This fact has

become ever more present in contemporary film, especially with the rise of the torture porn genre in the 2000s, which centres white, middle-class subjects deprived of agency undergoing horrific and graphic visceral torture. As Catherine Zimmer has observed of the genre's deployment of a rapidly changing proliferation of torture images presented as captured on video in horror film, "surveillant representation and the proliferation of images of violence *enhance* torture narratives and, indeed, become a part of the deployment of power in torture scenarios" (2011: 92 emphasis in original). In the case of *District 9,* the camera takes a detached view of Wikus' bodily torture, with narrative giving way to the intensity of the images accompanied by the protagonist's incoherent pleas and cries. The shots are short and mostly filmed in close-up, using a variety of cinematic techniques including a shot of a screen showing the real time feed from four security cameras; hand-held camera shots, as well as point of view shots allowing the viewer to see through Wikus' eyes. These rapid changes of viewpoint and camera quality deny the audience any stable position from which to observe the actions of the scientists, while the close-ups of damaged flesh inspire repulsion in the viewer. This destabilisation disorientates the spectator, heightening the sense of fear. It also contributes to the audience's understanding of Wikus' plight: he is not rooted in any stable identity, and the viewer is denied a stable viewpoint. Catherine Zimmer argues that "the narrative formations of surveillance and torture insist on the production of boundaries only to blur them" (2011: 104). Although the scientists impose a boundary between themselves and their subject in the form of CCTV cameras and screens, their emotionless reactions to the torture they enact acts to blur the boundary between the erstwhile monsters —Wikus and the aliens— and themselves as human. The detached nature of the shots of torture viewed not just through the lens of the film camera but also through the screen replaying security camera footage, reflect the absence of

empathy on the part of the scientists and medics. They are unaffected by Wikus'
suffering and begging, continuing their work regardless and showing a cold detachment,
in a way that enhances the distance between the body of the torturer and that of the
victim, in this case, Wikus. Their ignoring of his pleas and bored expressions represent
"The most radical act of distancing", a "disclaiming of the other's hurt" (Scarry 1985:
57). In this way, while Wikus' status as human is undermined by his transformation, at
the same time the audience is invited to question the humanity of his captors, thereby
beginning a questioning of what it means to be human that remains present throughout
the entire film.

Wikus' imprisonment represents the key moment in the development of an
alternative masculinity. The shots of the surgeons preparing to remove his heart are cut
with shots of his boss telling his wife that Wikus will probably not survive septicaemia,
as "he never was very strong". It is at this point that with a cry of rage, Wikus, using his
alien claw, slaps the surgeon's tool out of his hand, freeing himself from the operating
table. Shirtless, he wrestles MNU employees out of the way before taking a hostage,
shouting "you a big fucking man, huh?" His genetic mutation seems to have triggered a
process giving him masculine qualities more reminiscent of Rambo than of Wikus the
bumbling civil servant we have seen so far. To anchor his new masculine strength to his
transformation, it is made clear to the audience, by way of a close-up, that he is
restraining the scientist with his alien claw. His state of undress can be read as a
reference to 1980s action film starts like Stallone and Schwarzenegger, who are famous
for revealing their muscular torsos, thereby creating an action movie trope equating
nakedness with an aggressive masculine performance. Dyer argues that naked men on
screen must perform aggressive behaviours in order for their bodies to be viewed as
active rather than passive objects, thereby avoiding the sexualisation of the male form.

"it remains the case that images of men must disavow this element of passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity" (Dyer 1982: 66). This belies a fear of the feminisation of the male body, for if it were to become sexualised it would be objectified in the same way as a female pin-up. This is unthinkable for the male action hero who is considered by many to be the embodiment of masculinity. But where does Wikus fit into this schema? The director includes Wikus' naked torso in order to imply a savagery and lack of control intended to shock the viewer with his abrupt and total change in character. In the same article of 1982, Dyer explains that the black male nude is presented in settings, poses and actions that suggest notions of "the jungle, and hence savagery" (68). Something similar is at work here, but instead of the black body being animalised, or jungle-ised, it is the white body that is linked to these ideas. This is indicative of Wikus' transformation into 'Other,' as regards his previous identity of the white middle-class management of MNU.

The vulnerability of this white, middle-class male identity —and, consequently, the racial and species hierarchy of the film— is highlighted by the loss of Wikus' corporeal integrity through the rupture of a series of somatic boundaries. Firstly, his skin is damaged, thereby breaking down the border between interior and exterior. As Halberstam argues in *Skin Shows* (1995), the skin is what ensures that our body remains contained, protecting it from exterior contamination and even collapse, but at the same time it represents a site of anxiety, as something that must be protected at all costs. "Skin is at once the most fragile of boundaries and most stable of signifiers" (163). The skin is all that stands between the maintenance of a healthy, normative body and bloody horror, as is made very clear in *District 9* in the gory eviscerations of both human and alien characters. The vulnerability of the skin, and therefore the interior/exterior and the life/death boundaries, are constantly present in the mind of the viewer during these

violent scenes. The rupturing of Wikus' skin is visually brought to the fore, as hard, black protuberances break through the skin from within the body, so that which should remain inside becomes visible on the exterior. This sight, as well as that of Wikus peeling off his skin to reveal the black shell underneath provokes physical repulsion in the viewer, a reaction typically produced by body horror texts. Xavier Aldana proposes three areas of shared concern in the genre: "anxieties surrounding transformation, mutation and contagion" (2014: 54). As Wikus is infected by a foreign body, and undergoes a transformative mutation, all of these anxieties are foregrounded in *District 9,* which makes it, to my mind, a body horror text.

Figure 6 Multiple boundaries are destabilised in Wikus' body. Here a hard black exoskeleton erupts from beneath his human skin and his eyes turn an alien yellow

District 9 borrows heavily from David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) in its use of body horror, with the bodies of the two films' protagonists being contaminated by gothic technology and, as a result, beginning to disintegrate. In fact, Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) and Wikus Van de Merwe undergo a very similar process of painful corporeal transformation. Both are shocked to find their fingernails falling off and the colour and texture of their skin is changing, and, in a clear reference to *The Fly*, Wikus

first begins to realise the reality of his transformation when looking in the bathroom mirror, just like Brundle. Neill Blomkamp establishes this close link with Cronenberg's film in order to highlight not only the similarity of the two films' themes, but also the differences. Whereas in *District 9,* Wikus' mutation immediately robs him of his strength and virility before endowing him with superhuman power and a successful masculinity, *The Fly*'s Seth Brundle is initially stronger, healthier, quicker and smarter than ever, before eventually suffering a regression, which is clearly based on the effects of a deadly disease (Mathijs 2003). Cronenberg's film is ultimately a dark, pessimistic portrayal of the dangers of masculine pride, with little or no space for imagining an improved or alternative future for masculine bodies. The mutated, hybrid body of the protagonist is ultimately doomed and must die. In *District 9,* however, Wikus' body becomes a site of resistance, allowing for invention and experimentation in new physiological configurations, in an attempt to construct an alternative model of masculinity.

This is not to say that it is only worthwhile attributing importance to the films' differences, however. The common theme of liminality, the investigation of the border that separates masculine and feminine, human and animal, self and other is key to any reading of *District 9.* Both works linger on the in-between stage of the male protagonists' transformations, the point at which it is difficult, or impossible, to say whether they are more human or more animal/alien. The two texts revel in the confusion brought about by contamination, the destruction of identity by an outside force, wresting control away from the masculine subject. This is one of the main points of convergence: the white, male subject losing control not only over events, but over his own body, that which we believe to be uniquely ours, non-transferrable, unchangeable.

According to Xavier Aldana, the heightened sense of corporeal vulnerability in contemporary body horror cinema is attributable to "a noticeable shift towards materialist understandings of the human that see us as constituted largely by our sentient bodies" (2014: 20), which can appeal to "a generation that has largely left the spiritual world behind and prioritised the material reality of the body" (26). Aldana argues that as a result of this shift in contemporary thought, horror films have in turn become more grounded in the material, resulting in visceral scenes of torture, mutilation and degradation of the human body. All of the above are present in Wikus' experience in *District 9,* highlighting the concern with the vulnerability of the flesh to outside interference, and therefore the fragility of binaries. Once the Other is no longer separated from the self by a protective layer of skin, it has colonised the subjective space of the body, denying all attempts to separate self and other. This negation of the border between self and other is repeatedly emphasised throughout the film, for instance in the moment in which Wikus steals through the fence that separates Johannesburg from District 9, them from us, self from other, which effectively subverts the literal and the metaphorical border. The fact that Wikus' metamorphosis makes the binary definition of his identity impossible is reflective of the complex racial relationships of contemporary South African society. Just as any attempt to categorise Wikus' body according to normative binary thinking is doomed to failure, so is the separation and hierarchisation of races and species within the film.

Abjection, as in many horror texts, undeniably plays a key role in the destabilisation of boundaries in *District 9*. Julia Kristeva (1982) describes abjection as that which lies "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1). This abject "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*", and thus reminds the subject of the borders between the pure and impure, inside and

outside and life and death (69). It is "what disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Wikus' mutation is undoubtedly abject, with multiple borders blurred or called into question. According to Judith Butler, abjection is essential to the construction of the subject: "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 1993). In other words, the normative subject, in this case a human male, cannot be defined and therefore cannot exist without an abject object that embodies what the subject is not. The two principle examples of this in *District 9* are District 9 itself, the abject Other to the city of Johannesburg, and the 'prawns', the abject Others to Johannesburg's human inhabitants.

Mocke Jansen Van Veuren argues that the abject mutations that take place on Wikus' body can be considered analogous to those brought about by Apartheid on geographical, social and visceral bodies in South Africa (2012: 571). So, as Wikus' mutating body is abject, so are the city of Johannesburg and its inhabitants. During Apartheid, black South Africans were ejected from the city and forced into the townships, much like the aliens in *District 9*. The white ruling class erected literal borders within and around the city, which scarred its geographical body. Loren Kruger refers to Johannesburg as "the edgy city":

> focusing on the *edgy city* rather than the old idea of depth and surface highlights the historical as well as present conditions of extreme contrasts in plain view (for those who choose to look) between the shopping mall and the shanty town, natives and foreigners, and between grandiose claims of cosmopolitan modernity reflected in glass-curtain skyscrapers and the intractable problems of inequality, scarcity, and xenophobia that lodge in their shadows. (Kruger 2013: 3 emphasis in original).

This is the Johannesburg shown in *District 9,* a dissected, disjointed city of contrasts. Border fences and geographical distance are imposed to allay fears of

contamination of the white body of the city by black South Africans, or indeed the human body of the city by alien outsiders. This is an attitude that we may observe today in the treatment of immigrants who come to South Africa from other parts of the continent. They also are expelled from the 'clean and proper body' of the city and forced into internment camps — an abject space for abject bodies. As Adèle Nel argues, "The chaotic environment and dystopian urban decay within which the aliens function stands in direct opposition to the orderly and neat encampment of government housing" (2012: 553). Within a normative scheme of categorisation this space is labelled uninhabitable, unthinkable, impossible for a normative subject to occupy. That is why these abject spaces —townships, internment camps, District 9— are kept at a distance from the normative space of the city and surrounded by insurmountable barriers, both literal —fences—, and metaphorical —the imposition of social codes and norms. These barriers designate those '"unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under sign of "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject (Butler 1993).

The patchwork monstrousness of Johannesburg, its townships and District 9 is reflected in the conflict that takes place in and upon Wikus' body. It is no longer an untouched whole but instead is the site of multiple changing identities loosely held together in one disintegrating body, which has lost its clearly defined borders. His teeth and nails are expelled from his body, he vomits a black, viscous liquid and defecates in his clothes. All these occurrences are abject, as what should be interior becomes exterior and the boundary between the self and the outside world is broken down by corporeal decomposition. Whereas Johannesburg's ruling class expelled the Other from the body of the city, Wikus' body is expelling the self, allowing the Other to take hold from

within. This plays on one of the greatest fears of the white, male subject: being contaminated by and acquiring attributes of the Other, thereby provoking the unravelling of patriarchal hierarchy, threatening the previously guaranteed power and status of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male. Again, a parallel can be drawn with South African history, as following the dismantling of Apartheid the white community was forced to accept the artificial nature of the racial hierarchy when black South Africans rose to positions of prominence in government and elsewhere in the public sphere.

The idea of colonisation of the Self by the Other inspires horror because it forces Wikus, and the viewer, to question the existence of a stable, unified subject and the system of thought that brought this concept into common consciousness. In the Western world, we are constantly told to be true to ourselves, to find our true identity; suggesting that to be human is to have a fixed, unchanging essence. This was established by Foucault: "The individual with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces" (1980: 73-4). The instability, or corporeal transgression, of Wikus' body makes it an example of the "body gothic", which Aldana defines thus: "Gothic bodies produce fear through their interstitiality: they are scary because they either refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilise received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body" (2014: 5). While he is undergoing his transformation Wikus' body is not socially intelligible as it does not comply with cultural or societal norms dictating what makes a 'normal' human with a normal gender, sex, or race. His masculinity is undermined by his fainting in the middle of a party, humiliating himself, and also by the power his wife's father wields over him. Meanwhile, normative ideas of fixed sex and race are destabilised by the co-existence of both alien and human DNA within one

body, making it neither human nor alien, male nor female, black nor white— in all senses it refuses "absolute human taxonomies". Thus, in his body's refusal of categorisation, its integration of Self and Other within one body, Wikus becomes monster.

But what of the original monsters of the film, those that black and white South Africans alike both pity and fear —the alien 'prawns'? Margrit Shildrick states that "What monsters show us is the other of the humanist subject" while also incorporating "the spectre of the same" (2002: 2). The 'normative' subject is constructed in opposition to these 'others', which provoke fear due to the traces of the self that society perceives in them. The bodies of the alien 'prawns' are monstrous as they are an amalgamation of human and insect features. They stand upright, and their legs and torso are shaped like that of a human, albeit monstrously tall and strong. Their faces however are composed of an insect's mandibles beneath large, yellow or red eyes. The whole body is encased in a brownish exoskeleton, only occasionally hidden by ill-fitting human clothes. In place of a human five-fingered hand they have a three-fingered claw, with long, flexible fingers. The aliens' monstrousness stems from this confusion of foreign and recognisable features that both reassures and threatens the normative subject at the same time, as they represent both self and other. The same ambivalence can be observed in the aliens' behaviour and actions; their love of cat food is distinctly 'other' whereas their familial bonds and intelligence are interpreted as reflected elements of the normative 'self'. As Shildrick states: "The animal is the other in the comforting guise of absolute difference, but in its lack of humanity it cannot appeal directly to the heart of our own being. Those monsters that are at least in an ambivalent relationship to humanity, however, are always too close for comfort. They invoke vulnerability" (2002: 20). This vulnerability is what provokes fear in the horror text, as it gives the

impression that any body might be violated at any time. This reading of the film is supported by Adèle Nel's observation that "Because the alien is neither entirely animal nor human and hovers on the boundary, he therefore represents the ambivalent horror of the abject" (2012: 559). It is this destabilisation of boundaries that makes these creatures monstrous. Neither human nor animal, their bodies are a liminal site, their sheer difference and the impossibility of categorisation provoke fear and disgust in the viewer. This represents a threat to normative society and its schemes of classification, which is mirrored in the erection of fences to delineate the 'safe' city inhabited by humans and the 'polluted' space reserved for the 'prawns'.

Figure 7 The alien prawns are visually represented as Other to the human with their three-fingered claws, tentacled mouth and hard exoskeleton. They also threaten in that they are taller and stronger than humans

The aliens' status as monster is highlighted in the scenes showing their superhuman strength. The 'prawns' are capable of entirely dismembering a human with one kick, a spectacle that is repeated several times throughout the film in gory detail. These moments of violence at close range are intended to reinforce the audience's

perception of the aliens as monstrous while at the same time bringing to the fore the vulnerability of the human body, particularly the male body, since no female bodies are threatened in the film. The scenes are shot in the style of hand-held news camera footage in order to heighten the sense of realism and immediacy. The representation of the male body as vulnerable, particularly that of the soldier, who is generally portrayed as powerful and invincible in Hollywood cinema, instils a sense of unease in the viewer, unaccustomed to seeing the hegemonic male dispatched so quickly and gorily and at such close quarters. This uneasiness builds as the scenes of body horror accrue, until the male body in general is transformed into a site of monstrousness due to its failure to uphold its own boundaries and identity. When a body explodes in this way all boundaries explode with it, there is no longer any border between inside and outside, and the border between life and death is traversed, making it fully abject. This is pure horror as "Horror makes one look away from an unbearable image that threatens complete dissolution. The imagined integrity of the body is ripped apart and so is sense: the abject […] slices through comfortable modes of viewing, representing a body in pain and causing a bodily disturbance in other bodies" (Botting 2008: 140). In *District 9* the camera looks straight at and lingers on physical torture, death and the destruction of the body, challenging the spectator to confront the abject and accept the ephemeral nature of corporeal existence.

As discussed above, the Other in the South African context is complicated to define. This has led some critics to claim that the prawns represent a generalised racial Other, rather than any specific group. I, on the other hand, would argue that the aliens stand in for specific, multiple Others. One cannot simply state that the aliens represent black South Africans in general, or even the black urban poor, as they are obviously constructed as Other to those groups within the film. We are shown, for example,

documentary footage of black inhabitants of the townships declaring the prawns a dangerous menace that needs to be dealt with, by separating 'them' from 'us'. Here, a clear self/other dichotomy is established between black South Africans and the alien arrivals. This is an opinion I share with the Eric D. Smith, who, in his chapter on *District 9,* writes of the dangers of restricting any reading of the film to an allegorical retrospective on Apartheid. This, he argues, "not only simplifies the complex negotiations of cultural and racial identification but also obscures the prevailing material circumstances out of which they emerge" (2012: 146). The prawns, then, do not simply represent a repressed section of South African society, they signify something else, something Other to the whole nation. As Kruger states; "Strangers have haunted the imagination of Johannesburg's residents and rulers, whatever the names that they have been called […] Their identities have never been fixed however." (Kruger 2013: 7). For me, the otherness of the aliens in the film is inextricably linked to the fact that they are foreign. Therefore, I believe that they stand in for the immigrants that in recent years have arrived in South Africa in large numbers from other parts of the continent. The fear inspired by large groups of immigrants has, by some academics, been identified with the resurgence of the zombie in popular culture. As Jean and John Comaroff argue, referring specifically to South Africa; immigrants, like zombie hordes, are cast as "nightmare citizens, their rootlessness threatening to siphon off the remaining, rapidly diminishing prosperity of the indigenous population" (2002: 789). Eric D. Smith, elaborating on this idea, suggests that "The zombie as subject is thus the 'monstrous' remainder of the human in a posthuman world, the stubbornly unassimilable" (2012: 133). Thus, the immigrant, as the zombie, becomes a monstrous figure, their bodies metonymically representing the failure of global neoliberalism, and thereby inspiring fear: fear of losing one's individual subject position within societal

order. Anti-immigrant sentiment has been vocally and violently expressed, notably in the 2008 Alexandra riots during which locals attacked migrants from Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, accusing them of committing crimes and stealing jobs from naturalised South Africans (Bearak 2008) and similar attacks in Durban and Johannesburg in April 2015 (Karimi 2015). This fear of the immigrant Other is clearly present in *District 9*, as Johannesburg residents in the film express the same concerns as the rioting locals of 2008. Not to mention that the aliens are in fact refugees, having arrived on Earth seeking assistance in a time of need. My intention here is not to erase race as a factor in any interpretation of the film, but only to point out that is not the only element at work in the construction of the Other in *District 9*. As Loren Kruger so effectively argues in her book on Johannesburg, it is not necessary only to look to the past for explanations of current unrest and injustice, when we find "habitual marginalization of unwanted others in the present, when more than 17 per cent of the population has no visible income in the city that contributes 17 per cent of the country's GDP" (2013: 7).

With Wikus now identified as the Other to white middle-class society he is forced to go on the run. He immediately heads for the border that separates Johannesburg from District 9. His liminal body is drawn to a liminal space. As Wikus can no longer be defined in a normative scheme of categorisation he is compelled to exist in the margins, in District 9 since, as argued by Sherryl Vint in her book *Bodies of Tomorrow*, "non-normative bodies do not have discursive existence and therefore cannot shape hegemonic ideology" (19). They simply do not fit and cannot be allowed to remain within the body of society, they must be expelled. Wikus is shown standing beside the fence that separates Johannesburg from District 9, framed in a long shot too emphasise the derelict space. Once inside the camp he stops for a while just behind the

barbed wire. Another long shot highlights a rubbish-strewn wasteland, with no one but Wikus for miles around. He is alone in no man's land. This reluctance to choose one side or another is reflected in Wikus' corporeal appearance. As well as the black claw his human skin is beginning to peel off, revealing a black alien skin underneath; he is neither human nor alien. As this instability is exposed, so again is the instability of his gender identity. He is a helpless wreck, sobbing and desperately telephoning his wife in search of support rather than using his own skills to deal with the situation. In other words, he does not act in the way the audience would expect from a male action hero. In these scenes the alien ship looms over the city as a menacing presence, connecting its arrival and that of the refugees with Wikus, and Johannesburg's current crisis. The combination of internal and external boundary crossings acts as a catalyst for the transformation of multiple bodies in the film: the geographical space of the city, its inhabitants as a whole, and its individuals.

Our protagonist finds a place to sleep in an abandoned shack. He has hit rock bottom. Once it has been established, then, that Wikus' situation, caused by his mutation into alien, could not get any worse, we begin to see hints that an alien corporeality might be an advantage. Following his daring escape from the MNU buildings, Wikus volunteers to meet with District 9's Nigerian gangs in order to purchase some weaponry. There, he is ridiculed by the gun-toting gang members, who, it is insinuated, want to cut off and eat his claw to absorb its power. They attack an outnumbered Wikus from behind, pushing him to the ground. In a moment of inspiration, he reaches for a large alien gun lying a few feet away. It activates and he blows a couple of Nigerians out of the hut. Once he has a gun — that phallic symbol of masculine power— in his alien claw, Wikus immediately and fully inhabits the role of action hero, displaying hyper-masculine aggression. A close up of his face with the gun

poised beside it ready to shoot shows a hardened expression devoid of the fear and nervousness he displayed just seconds ago. "Don't even look at me" he hisses to the Nigerian gang leader, asserting dominance and the hegemonic male status conferred on him by the powerful weapon. Wikus appears to be unworried by the gang leader's threats that he is 'coming for you'; his corporeal transformation has brought him the sense of invincibility crystallised in the warrior figure. "All questions, all ambiguities, all contradictions in what it means to be a man or a citizen are banished in the creation of the warrior" (Braudy 2005: 29-30), here there is no question that Wikus embodies and performs masculinity, despite the composite nature of his body, distinctly lacking the smooth, impenetrable muscularity of the hegemonic hard body. The uncoupling of an assertive, powerful masculinity is reinforced by depiction of the leader of the Nigerian gang. He is a paraplegic and as such uses a wheelchair, and yet he is respected as the alpha male of the gang, doling out orders and threats that are always heeded. In this scene, it becomes clear that is not strictly necessary to have a 'hard body' in order to represent a successful performance of an aggressive masculine identity, though a hard-body is the norm.

4.4 Posthuman Potential and Alternative Masculinities in *District 9*

The dismantling of the boundaries self/other, nature/technology and human/animal within the body is a defining element of the posthuman condition. As set out by Donna Haraway (1991), these border crossings erode the abstract dualisms so deeply engrained in Western society and circumvent the concept of the unified, essentialist subject. This is certainly the case in *District 9,* where the focus on the mutation of the material flesh demonstrates in a very visual way the potential of technology to subvert binary oppositions. A wide range of posthuman embodiments are

shown throughout *District 9*, dealing with both the positive and negative ramifications of a dramatic shift towards a posthuman subjectivity. This ambivalence is in line with Haraway's cyborg theory, in which the non-normative, fractured body is labelled "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism." (1991: 151). In 'A Cyborg Manifesto' the cyborg is defined as a "cybernetic organism", a "hybrid of machine and organism" and "a creature of fiction" (141). She goes on to explain that both lived social reality and fiction count as shared experience within a collective as there is no objective difference between the two states. Therefore, the cyborg becomes a common fiction, a myth that can be utilised to forge connections within a collective, which does not rely on identity politics. This is certainly true for the cyborg bodies in *District 9*, brought together by their ostracisation. They are marginalised by society due to the accepted notion that they are dangerous monsters as well as the fear and envy produced by their use of advanced technology. The prawns are not cyborgs, however, they are posthuman, as can be observed in their innate ability to interact with their organic technology, while they are not altered on a corporeal level with the addition of cybernetic or robotic elements. Whereas a cyborg is unable to reproduce and its modifications stop at the individual level, the posthuman represents a new species, passing on its traits to later generations, as is the case with the 'prawns' of *District 9*. These aliens have evolved to be inextricably linked to technology; in fact, they are stranded in Johannesburg because their organic link with their ships and weapons has been severed.[31] These machines have become part of the bodies of the prawns to such an extent that they are helpless without them. Once borders are reinstated between the natural and the artificial they cannot properly function, demonstrating that fluid boundaries are necessary to a successful, posthuman existence.

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[31] Neill Blomkamp has stated that the aliens' society is based on the idea of a hive mind, those stranded on Earth are unable to function without receiving commands from their superiors on their home planet. None of this, however, made it into the final cut of the film.

For Rosi Braidotti, this multiplicity is essential to any definition of the posthuman: "I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated" (2013: 49).

The aliens' reliance on technology is made patent in the film in the interiors of Christopher Johnson's living space. The mise-en-scène within his shack shows a small, claustrophobic room in which the walls are covered from floor to ceiling in computer parts that Christopher and his child interact with freely. Father and child come to life once they descend into the basement they have built hidden beneath their home, which houses the module they plan to use to escape to the mother ship. Surrounded by technology they are both more animated and move around quickly, adjusting equipment and explaining various pieces. This stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of human interaction with computer technology, always shown in a highly controlled office setting with machines remaining static and separate from the human body, nothing like the ease and spontaneity observed in the high-tech alien environment. As Allucquére Roseanne Stone states, humans strive to keep technology visible as "something separate from our 'natural' selves and our everyday lives" (1999: 89). In *District 9* it is this need to maintain a solid border between the technological and the human that puts the inhabitants of Earth at a disadvantage if they could embrace a symbiotic relationship between the biological and the mechanical the potential of the aliens' transportation and weaponry would be unlocked. Their inability to evolve beyond the human, to embrace multiplicity, is what prevents progress. This is mirrored by the human authorities' refusal to engage with alien individuals and their culture, the desire to maintain a hierarchical structure, segregating groups according to race and species, impedes any positive development in society as a whole, development which could serve to benefit

all in that it would provide access to advanced technology and new, more open, ways of thinking and existing in the world.

As Yvonne Tasker explains, postmodernity "signals significant shifts in the definition of work and the masculine identity that it proposes. Postmodernism also calls into question the production and status of knowledge and categories of truth. These developments help to situate and historicize […] shifts in Hollywood's representation of the male hero" (1993a: 242-243). In other words, since the postmodern implies the fracturing of established categories and ideas previously regarded as truth, it becomes possible to question these categories and ideas, allowing for the creation of new definitions of principles like sex, gender, race, class, etc. The defining feature of posthuman masculinities, I would argue, is their capacity for transformation and adaptation. Posthuman masculinities are fluid, with no need for a fixed interpretation of the subject's identity. These fractured, uncategorisable identities are what Haraway calls "inappropriate/d others" (1992). Their non-conformative gender identity and un-categorisable corporeality challenges and resists normative perceptions of the human, allowing us to view alternative ways of existing in the world that do not conform to the hegemonic ideal. Margrit Shildrick explains in her book *Embodying the Monster* (2002), that the ontological uncertainty produced by these kinds of alternative embodiment works "against an ideal bodyliness — that is the being of the self in the body —that relies on the singular and unified where everything is in its expected place" (10). The value of this destruction of the binary is, as Shildrick suggests, that it brings an "explicit challenge to normative categories of being" (47), and, borrowing from Butler, to act "not only as an imaginary contestation […] but as an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter" (Butler 1993: 23).

Biological interaction with technology —and thus the erasure of the binaries artifical/natural, human/machine and Self/Other— is something that Wikus must learn to embrace; in order to survive he must become posthuman. This first becomes evident in Wikus' confrontation with the Nigerian gangsters, where he discovers that his ability to operate alien weaponry can be used to his advantage, despite the dangers it carries. To reveal his new abilities is dangerous as it makes his body a valuable commodity, a target for both criminal and governmental groups. Wikus is well aware of the vulnerability this can entail due to his experience of torturous 'experiments' at the hands of the MNU, during which he was imprisoned and subjected to various painful and humiliating procedures.

The final step Wikus takes in his journey towards posthuman embodiment is entering a full body armoured suit —of alien design—and fusing his body and mind with it. His fleshly body is entirely subjugated by the power of the mechanical suit; his corporeal experience becomes entirely mechanical. His brain is fused with the suit's computer controls so that he no longer commands his human body, instead his mind moves the suit's limbs. In this sequence we see Wikus face in close-up, with lines of computer coding superimposed on it. His expression is pained, and his eyes have already turned the yellow colour of the aliens'. This sequence is doubly significant: firstly because it represents Wikus' final moments as at least partially human, before becoming posthuman; and secondly because it brings together questions of gender and of posthumanity. As well as being the turning point in the protagonist's transformation from cyborg to posthuman, it also demonstrates a dramatic shift in his masculine identity. For the first time Wikus is prepared to sacrifice himself to help another, without any guarantee of personal gain. As he fights off the MNU soldiers we see him to be strong, resilient, resourceful, intelligent, and empathetic. Finally, Wikus embodies

a coherent and confident performance of masculinity with no semblance of doubt, thanks to the fusion of human and machine, self and other. This suggests that technology and boundary crossings play a crucial role in the construction of gender identity. Technological advancements have the capacity to erase borders and break down binary constructions, creating a space on and within the body for the construction and expression of new configurations of gender. In this way, technology becomes a powerful tool in the search for alternative interpretations of masculinity, especially ones that do not rely on the conventional understanding of what it means to be a man, which permits the uncoupling of sex and gender, freeing up new conceptions of male and female, masculine and feminine. Although in *District 9* technological advancements tend to be shrouded in an aura of fear and terror, by the end of the film it is clear that when in the right hands it can be a useful and positive engine for change. The message is that technology in itself is not evil, it is neutral; only its use can be assigned a value judgement. Wikus' transformation, then, is not a simple case of becoming the other, but a mutation into an alternative version of himself. His new embodiment complies with Shildrick's definition of the posthuman monster as providing not "unproductive, limitless, fragmentation, but rather […] dynamic new incorporations" (1996: 8). His identity does not simply disintegrate into unconnected parts; instead, it is reformed into a new, alternative identity shaped by visceral, corporeal experiences.

The varied masculine performances in *District 9* attest to Yvonne Tasker's "both/and" theory, in which it is possible for a representation of the male body to be *both* triumphant *and* crisis-ridden in the action film. It is not necessary to limit a reading of the characters to one definition or the other. This allows for "a discussion of the multiplicity and instability of meaning" (1993: 109), so that it can be argued that male figures "offer a parodic performance of 'masculinity', which both enacts and calls into

question the qualities they embody" (111). As shown above, both Koobus and Wikus are figures of parody, embodying traditional hegemonic masculinities while at the same time opening up a space to question their validity. In short, hegemonic definitions of masculinity are called into question and alternative definitions of the masculine are presented. These alternative configurations do not conform to the heterosexual matrix; the continuum male-masculine-heterosexual is disrupted by the portrayal of hermaphrodite bodies performing masculine gender identities and male bodies failing to perform the same. In this way, a performative space is opened up in which alternative ways of being can be imagined, which reject binary constructions, thereby freeing the subject from the constraints of an identity politics based on the idea of a cohesive, unchanging identity.

As we have seen, in order to subvert the heterosexual matrix it is necessary for the subject's body to become monstrous. The body must defy traditional borders that define limits between male/female, black/white, human/machine, etc. and thereby inhabit society's liminal zones, border areas inhabited by the uncategorisable, the abject, the unwanted; in other words, the monstrous. These monsters inspire fear within the 'normal' body of society, the body that maintains defined borders and boundaries in an attempt to protect itself from the threat of the monstrous outside. This is a fear of corruption, of contagion, that contact with the other will spread to the clean and proper body, which will, in turn, become monstrous. This inspires fear, and horror, because monstrous others imply the failure of society to maintain its own borders —no matter how much emphasis is put on the importance of the binary the monsters continue to exist— difference cannot be eradicated. In regarding the monstrous other we see not only difference but sameness; the monster reminds us of our ultimate vulnerability —

our body may at any moment revolt and become monstrous. The monster threatens our illusion of control, reveals our inability to establish a cohesive, fixed identity.

This vulnerability, however, need not be interpreted negatively. To accept one's lack of control over the only thing that truly belongs to us —the body —is terrifying, it requires that we acknowledge our identity as constantly in flux, susceptible to external influence. If this fear is overcome, however, as we see when Wikus Van de Merwe accepts his new monstrous corporeality, the subject gains a new power: the power to subvert the norm and its hegemonic identities. Therefore, vulnerability brings power, an embodied, and as such undeniable, threat to the status quo.

Chapter Five

Gendering the Transhuman: Multiplicity and Ambiguity in Representations of Transcendence

5.1 Transhumanism and Cinema

In this chapter I will discuss transcendence— the separation of mind and body which allows the individual psyche to continue to exist beyond the realm of the corporeal— focussing on the monstrous aspects of disembodiment and the fusion of human and machine elements. The separation of mind and body somewhat paradoxically implies the dissolution of numerous boundaries resulting in not only hybridity but also a multiplicity and ambiguity that threatens the individual unique identity at the heart of traditional subjecthood. The posthuman protagonists under discussion in this chapter are feared for their great power and control, considered within these texts as a portent of the superceding of humanity and human values by a powerful Other. The films *Lucy* (2014) and *Transcendence* (2014) have been chosen as representative depictions of transhumanist narratives, that is, narratives in which an individual subject, using technological enhancement, embarks on an existence beyond the strictly material, ultimately releasing the psyche from the corporeal, continuing instead a digital or metaphysical —and therefore immortal— life. Although my aim is to investigate monstrous masculine protagonists I have decided here to analyse the film *Lucy,* featuring a female protagonist, in order to provide a point of contrast with the masculine portrayal of *Transcendence,* in part due to a lack of similar masculine roles with which to compare the title. There are a number of very interesting points of comparison and contrast in the two films' depictions of the transcendent posthuman

condition, including concerns surrounding reproduction and power relations within patriarchal society, which allow for conclusions to be drawn about how the representation of transcendence and the resulting disembodiment are conditioned by gender in mainstream science fiction cinema. I will begin with an analysis of the monstrous feminine transcendence in *Lucy*, before going on to interpret the masculine equivalent depicted in *Transcendence*. First, though, I will provide definitions of key terms such as human and transhuman and provide some necessary context relating to fictional and wider societal representations and understandings of transhumanism and the posthuman.

Since this chapter is in part be concerned with identifying in what ways representations of the posthuman may differ from, or mimic, understandings of what it means to be human, I begin with an exploration of the concept of humanity. Although it is notoriously difficult to achieve a functional definition of 'human', the word, as Michael Hauskeller points out, generally denotes honour, value and worth, and 'is associated with a particular moral status that is deemed considerably higher than the moral status of non-humans' (2016: 41). Along with this elevated moral status, the human must display physical and psychological agency, or the ability to think and act freely. This definition was born of what is referred to as the human of the Enlightenment, described by Rosi Braidotti as "The Kantian 'community of reasonable beings', or, in more sociological terms, the subject of citizen, rights-holder, property-owner and so on" (2011: 1). In these examples the figure of the non-human, or the category of the inhuman, is placed at the centre of the definition of the human, thereby implying the necessity of the marginalised 'other' to act as a negative value by which to attempt to define humanity. Judith Butler writes that the "exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject

beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (1993: 3). In this chapter, I explore the abject beings who represent the binary opposite of the human and at the same time define them, depicted in the films under discussion as posthuman or transhumanist characters. Therefore, it would be pertinent to begin by providing a definition of the terms transhumanism and transcendence, as well as a brief history of the transhumanist movement, before discussing the representation of the aforementioned concepts in literature and cinema.

Firstly, I propose that transhumanism can be defined as the belief that humanity can and should evolve beyond its current capabilities, embracing scientific and technological advances in order to achieve this goal. This is echoed by the auto-description of humanity+, the organisation originally founded by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce as the WTA, or World Transhumanist Association. The front page of the humanity+ reads thus: "Humanity+ is a […] membership organization that advocates the ethical use of technology, such as artificial intelligence, to expand human capacities. In other words, we want people to be better than well. This is the goal of transhumanism" (humanity+.org) This mission statement fits in well with Michael Hauskeller's understanding of the main goals of transhumanism, as set out in his book on the subject: "Guiding ideas are the desirability of human self-design, the elimination of all suffering, and the expansion of human autonomy, immortality and ultimately the complete defeat of (human) nature" (2016: 3). Consequently, transhumanist associations promote and invest in an array of scientific activities such as artificial intelligence, prosthetics and gene therapy, among many others. I will return to the ethical considerations related to transhumanism shortly, including its dependence on humanism and the Cartesian dualism. In the meantime I will turn to the origins and development of the movement in relation to its influences on and by science fiction texts.

Although some claim that transcendentalist thought can be traced back to Nietzsche, in his discussion of the übermensch, or even as far back as quests for immortality in the ancient epics, the first group to self-describe as transhumanists met at the University of California in the early 1980s, and were led by philosopher FM-2030.[32] These early transhumanists drew their doctrine largely from science fiction literature and cinema, including ideas created by Arthur C. Clarke for the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which an alien species grants transcendence to a human male individual. In fact, the term "transhumanism" was popularised by biologist Julian Huxley in the 1920s, when he described the responsibility of man to realise his possibilities to the fullest. The beliefs and aims of the transhumanists of the contemporary period were set out in the transhumanist declaration[33] in July 1998 by Nick Bostrom and were adopted by the WTA in 2002. Principles include putting serious effort and research into ageing, limitations on human and artificial intellects, unchosen psychology, suffering, and our confinement to the planet earth; and to emphasise the moral right of the individual to seek to expand their mental and physical capacities and extend their control over nature; as well as stating that transhumanism supports scientific humanism[34]. The stress placed on individualism and humanism, along with the rhetoric placing nature and the human in binary opposition to each other, are worthy of examination and are key to an analysis of the representation of transcendent masculinities.

Michael Hauskeller (2014), along with N.Katherine Hayles (1999), note that the founding narrative of transhumanism is based on the ideals of humanism; on promoting

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[32] FM-2030 achieved notoriety on the publication of his book *Are You A Transhuman?: Monitoring and Stimulating Your Personal Rate of Growth in a Rapidly Changing World* (1989) and taught at several American universities.

[33] The transhumanist declaration can be accessed on the humanity+ website: https://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration

[34] Scientific humanism is one which is wholeheartedly committed to the scientific method. Beyond this, it has been described as naturalistic, one which places human beings alongside other elements in the natural world but ultimately views human beings as superior intellectually and morally, as a result of a long evolution from animal status (Otto 1943: 530).

the view that every individual is unique and that this uniqueness, or essence, is located in the mind, or psyche. This results in the creation of a binary opposition between the mind and the body, the Cartesian dualism, according to which the mind occupies a dominant, or more valued, position over the material body. This concept is reflected in transhumanism in the understanding that the physical body is but an appendage or "external restraint" (Hauskeller 2014: 19) to the higher purpose of the mind. As a result, one of the great goals of transhumanism is that of releasing the psyche from the confines of the physical body, thereby effectively achieving immortality. This reliance on the Cartesian dualism and desire to eliminate the body is contingent on the possibility of abstracting the subject from the body and from nature, a view that Sherryl Vint claims is hinged on a "false universalism" (2007: 11), since it assumes that all humans have an essential "nature" in common that confers humanity, thereby ignoring differences such as gender, race, or class that differentiate individual, lived human experiences. Furthermore, N. Katherine Hayles refers to the transhumanist view as one that "privileges information over material instantiation" with the body as "the original prosthesis" (1999: 2-3). She concludes that the transhumanist view conceives of the individual as "essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities" (3), where "the body is understood as an object for control and mastery rather than as an intrinsic part of the self" (5). Both the liberal humanist and the posthuman subject possess a body but they do not consider themselves as being a body. In terms of gender, distancing the material body from the psychological arena feeds into representations, or performances, of masculinities characterised by dominance, self-determination and control, due to an historic association of the female with the material and corporeal and the male with the rational, the abstract. Kirsty Stevens makes the point that "the Cartesian divide between mind and body is often perpetuated within SF texts through the representation and

gendering of the male mind and the female body: where rationality, technological advancement and science become synonymous with masculine achievement, emotionality and nature are feminised" (Stevens 2018: 22); for her part, Mary Ann Doane notes that "when technology intersects with the body in the realm of representation, the question of sexual difference is inevitably involved" (1999: 20). The model of masculinity labelled the self-made man by Michael Kimmel, for example, is defined by "being in charge of one's own life, liberty and property […] independent, self-controlled, responsible" (1995: 18). Within this masculine construction the disciplined mind maintains mastery over its environment and possessions, including the material body. This separation and hierarchisation of the psychological and the physical is absolutely key to transhumanism, since without an unwavering belief in the preeminence of the mind as opposed to the body, transcendence would be impossible, unthinkable. The centrality of individual agency and self-determination to both masculine identities and the transhumanist movement suggests that liberal humanism influences both, and as a result individualism and the question of agency will be central to my examination of the films under discussion and their representations of the transcendence of male and female individuals.

In the cyberpunk era of the 1980s and early 1990s, cinematic and literary science fiction texts tended to explore the effects of successfully separating the mind from the body, as well as its inherent freedoms and dangers. It is important to note that early cyberpunk tends to portray a temporary transcendence, allowing the subject to move in and out of the body thanks to technological augmentations, rather than depicting a definitive and permanent transcendence of any given individual or community. In general, separating the mind from the body in these texts is a liberating experience, allowing the subject to subvert or defy the identities they inhabit in the

"real" world. Some, like Anne Balsamo, emphasise the promise of cyberpunk dis/re-embodiment and its potential to represent non-normative, non-binary configurations of the subject: "cyberpunk narratives radically decenter the human body, the sacred icon of essential self" (1994: 128). Others, like Kevin McCarron, consider it to be more dystopic: "Despite cyberpunk's reliance on and fascination with technology, the genre is deeply conservative and anti-technology, implacably hostile to any further erosion between the human and the mechanical" (2000: 271). Transcendent representations in cinema not only have a tendency to insist on the upholding of binary categorisation, but also tend to insist on traditional humanist subjectivity. A case in point is *The Matrix* (1999), which features "the deification of a unique, embodied, and romantically/erotically loved subject" who "asserts the triumph of one form of traditional humanist subjectivity over the posthuman" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 36). The emphasis being not so much on the posthuman potential of cyberspace existence, but the recuperation of traditional humanist embodiment and values. Whichever view one takes, it is clear that in the genre canon, as Claudia Springer has noted, "while popular culture texts enthusiastically explore boundary breakdowns between humans and computers, gender boundaries are treated less flexibly" (2005: 74). Not only are gender identities maintained from the physical world through to cyberspace but they also tend towards hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities and femininities, with Samantha Holland claiming that "cyberbodies are represented in such a highly gendered way to counter the threat that cyborgs indicate the loss of human bodies, where such a loss implies the loss of the gendered distinctions that are essential to maintaining the patriarchal order" (2000: 159). By comparing *Lucy* and *Transcendence* I will be able to ascertain to what extent this statement holds in representations of female and male

transcendence, as well as considering the how the deconstruction of binaries implied by acts of transcendence creates monsters.

5.2 From Damsel in Distress to Powerful Witch: Representing the Feminine Transhuman in *Lucy*

The audience is introduced to Lucy as she returns from a night out with casual boyfriend Richard in Taipei. In these opening sequences she is wearing a short, tight, leopard-print dress and demonstrates a sassy, flirty attitude in her exchanges with Richard. This characterisation emphasises her curves, the erogenous zones associated with the female, thereby constructing Lucy's feminine identity around male expectations: her body adheres to the beauty ideal that is considered to appeal to most men —a sexualised object offered up to the male gaze. Scarlett Johansson's star power, described in a symposium on her work in science fiction as an actress who "has achieved renown as a superlatively beautiful and desirable individual, a feature that has been a central part of her image for over a decade" (Lorek, Monaghan and Stevens 2018: 2), contributes to the initial establishing of her character as one with a heightened feminine sexuality. Furthermore, as Kirsten Stevens argues, "Johansson's body, within the construction of her stardom, becomes an enduring site of feminine sexuality as performed for and sustained by a heterosexual male gaze" (2018: 23). At the same time, this same star power highlights the constructedness of both the actress and the protagonist's identities, since the audience is aware that Johansson is a 'real' person with her own body and personality, and at the same time that the media produces a version of her for public consumption which does not necessarily reflect reality. With this reading in mind I ask: to what extent does Lucy's transformation subvert or destabilise ideas of the feminine body as an object for male consumption?

A specific trope of femininity is deployed when it comes to Lucy's reaction to adversity in the opening sequences of the film. When she is tricked into handing over the briefcase full of drugs and subsequently kidnapped, Lucy quickly becomes hysterical, alternately crying and begging. This behaviour forms part of a template of femininity that has become hegemonic in mainstream American action films, wherein female characters are presented as being overly sensitive, emotional and helpless. This forms a trope that Susan Faludi identifies as having resurfaced in cinema after 9/11 (2007: 14), and that she refers to as a "national fantasy" (14) involving "the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly man, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls" (14), all of which is recognisable in *Lucy*, despite its European origins.[35]

At the beginning of the film Lucy is living independently in a foreign country, studying and supporting herself. In this sense she is a 'capable woman', a powerful figure that is short-lived within the logic of this movie. The fact that Lucy can be manipulated and imprisoned by a series of foreign men gives the impression that the ability of a woman to lead a successful life without the protection of not only a traditional patriarchal system but also the homeland is not possible, it is in fact an illusion, since women are revealed to be vulnerable to attack by foreign enemies in the public sphere. This responds to and feeds into the heightened call for domesticity in the United States, where "what mattered was restring the illusion of a mythic America where women needed men's protection and men succeeded in providing it" (Faludi 2007: 118) and can also be observed in films of the torture porn genre that emerged in the mid 00's, "connecting the threat of torture with foreign travel" (Zimmer 2011: 84)[36].

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[35] Prolific French producer and director Luc Besson has been known for his fast-paced action films since the 1980s. One of his most famous creations is science fiction film *The Fifth Element* (1995), which features the posthuman female protagonist Leelo (Milla Jovovich).
[36] A theme particularly highlighted by the *Hostel* film franchise (2005-2011).

Essentially, Lucy's failure to embrace male protection and American domesticity lead to her being placed in a situation of ultimate vulnerability as a 'helpless girl', rather than an independent woman, leaving her "distraught", like those "single women who had placed 'career ambition' ahead of matrimonial aspirations" portrayed in American media post-9/11 (Faludi 2007: 120).

Lucy's captors surgically insert a package of drugs into her abdomen to be transported overseas. During her captivity prior to the journey, however, one male criminal kicks her in the stomach, breaking the open the plastic casing separating the artificial chemical compound from Lucy's biological self. Once the drug CPH4 is released into her bloodstream, Lucy's personality and behaviours change drastically, leaving behind the trope of the hysterical female. She becomes ruthless and emotionless, not worried about taking individual lives if it is logically justified. As soon as the chemical process is activated Lucy acquires a gun and murders all her captors without a second thought. The gun here could be considered a phallic symbol which, along with the aforementioned behavioural changes, confuses the protagonist's gendered identity. Even innocent people are not spared: when seeking treatment at the hospital, Lucy dispatches the patient on the operating table, her defence being that he was going to die sooner or later anyway and she even kills a taxi driver because his language skills are limited. In short, gone is the frightened hysterical woman, the typical damsel in distress of the mainstream Hollywood action movie, to be replaced by an emotionally inhibited killing machine in the mould of Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator or Sylvester Stallone's Rambo. Scarlett Johansson also chooses to alter her voice as part of her character's transformation, delivering dialogue in a deep, expressionless monotone as opposed to that used at the beginning of the film, which

Laura Turnbridge calls a "highly modulated delivery, of a type associated with a sexualised female body" (2016: 143).

Johansson even adapts her posture and gait in order to appear more masculine, using long strides and letting her arms swing loose at her sides. She is shown in long and medium shots, looking directly into the camera as she moves purposefully towards her goal, thereby subverting Laura Mulvey's ideas on scopophilia, in which the woman represents the sexualised object of the male gaze. This, along with swapping the dress for a simple t-shirt and trousers, may give the impression that Lucy has been masculinised by her exposure to the experimental drug. This is not my view of the matter, however, since although certain aspects of her character widely considered overtly feminine have been eliminated, her body continues clearly to read female, with her clothing emphasising her breasts, for example. Though Lucy has gained a certain power in acquiring female viewpoint, a gaze of her own, she remains the object of a sexualised male gaze. As I will now explain, a series of strategies are deployed within the film to ensure that Lucy is defeminised but without reading as a masculine character, a move that would work to destabilise the binaries that are otherwise so rigorously upheld throughout the film.
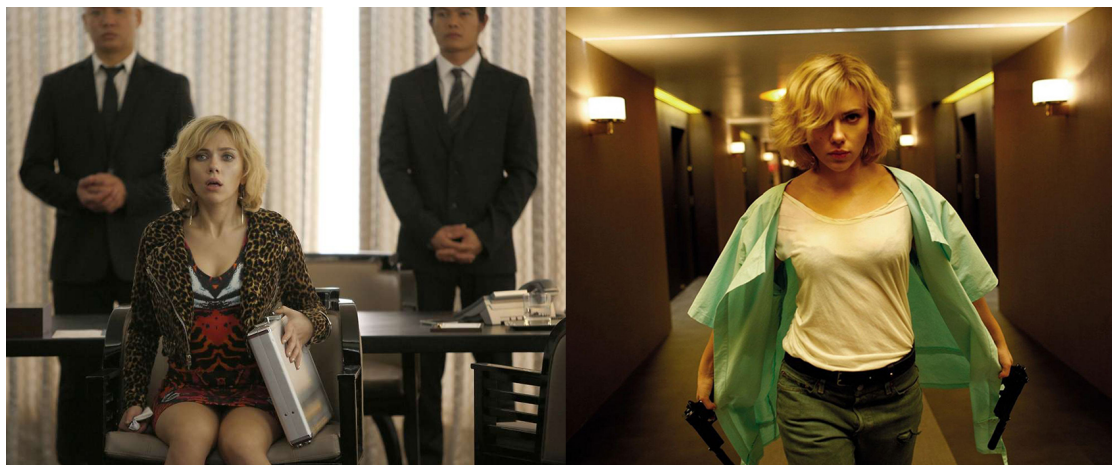

Figure 8 Lucy before (left) and after (right) her transformation

I concur with Kirsten Stevens' argument that "In gaining access to (masculinised) knowledge and expertise, Lucy must then also distance her female self [...] The film thus conditions Lucy's accumulation of knowledge with a commensurate loss of desire and 'natural' feminine qualities" (Stevens 2018: 24-25). The 'female self', or femininity, is distanced rather than completely eliminated. The loss of desire is exemplified by the moment in which Lucy briefly kisses Inspector Del Rio (Amr Waked), describing it as a "reminder" presumably to herself, which suggests that sexuality is lost to her as a highly intelligent being. In this way, not only are aspects of Lucy's femininity eliminated, making her unable to emotionally connect with others, but also she is denied any feminine sexual desire, thereby distancing her from the pains and pleasures of the body. Not only are mind and body separated, but also it seems that femininity and knowledge cannot co-exist within one body, and the film becomes incapable of representing an intelligent and competent female as feminine. By denying the intelligent central character access to her previous feminine, sexualised identity and at the same time ensuring her body remain coded female, the film implies that an overtly feminine person cannot enjoy power and knowledge, as well as suggesting that gendered identity is fixed and unchangeable at an essential level, since despite all the changes to Lucy's physical and psychological makeup she remains female and feminine.

At first glance the film *Lucy* may appear to be a feminist tale of female empowerment, in which a previously subordinated woman gains agency, physical strength and knowledge, which allow her to escape a position of subordination and imprisonment by males. In this vein, Vernon Shetley reads the film, along with two other science fiction movies starring Scarlett Johansson: *Her* (2013) and *Under the Skin* (2013), thus: "her character begins in a position of subordination to some kind of male

authority, but ultimately rebels against her use as an instrument, attempting to achieve some form of autonomy or self-determination" (2018: 13). It is true that Lucy is able to escape literal imprisonment at the hands of the mafia and undertake a crusade against those responsible for her capture and subsequent torture, but this violent revolt is not extended to include the patriarchal structures that ensure male dominance, or the male-led power systems that fail to deal with violent crime and human trafficking. It is important to remember that Lucy's transformation is forced upon her by a group of men, and triggered by a violent act against her, rather than stemming from a free choice or conscious decision to enhance her own mental or physical state as is typical of transhumanist narratives about men, such as *Transcendence* (2014), *Avatar* (2009) and more obviously cyberpunk narratives like *The Matrix* (1999). From this inauspicious beginning the film continues to portray Lucy's metamorphosis in a negative light; a burden to be carried, a loss rather than a gain, something the protagonist accepts without considering the possible rewards of a posthuman existence, unlike her male counterparts. Woman is portrayed throughout as lacking: before her transformation Lucy lacks strength and wit; during her transformation she lacks emotion and therefore humanity; and by the end of the movie she lacks physical embodiment and thus any discrete identity or subjecthood. Unlike the male protagonist of *Avatar*, who is allowed to own and enjoy a posthuman existence while retaining a masculine identity[37], Lucy is consistently reminded of what she is not: neither woman nor human. Rather than a hopeful exploration of posthuman possibilities, *Lucy* puts across an overwhelming nostalgia for the human, with the main character full of vengeful anger against those who stole her humanity and the film itself encouraging the viewer to pity Lucy, despite her awesome power.

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[37] Sam Worthington's protagonist is a disabled war hero who recovers mobility in his lower body through the transference of his mind to an artificial body (an avatar). In the process he gains strength, respect, agency and power.

The film fails in various aspects to do anything other than portray Lucy as a soldier fighting for the perpetuation of current systems of government and the upholding of societal norms. Firstly, as mentioned above, because Lucy must renounce her feminine identity in order to access the strength, power and knowledge usually reserved for males in mainstream cinema. Femininity and knowledge are represented as incompatible in the movie, thus giving the impression that a powerful embodied female is an impossibility and even undesirable, since the protagonist at no point embraces the positive aspects of her newfound power. Furthermore, once Lucy has obtained supreme intelligence and power thanks to the adoption of masculine behaviours and attributes, she chooses to surrender her female body rather than embody a challenge to the binary construction of gender roles inherent to patriarchal systems. Here we see that the Cartesian dualism is clearly embraced and reinforced in this film. Not only is the separation of mind and body shown to be possible and desirable, the psychological is strongly aligned with the masculine and the physical with the feminine. This theme is highlighted by Kirsten Stevens in her article on the film: "At its core, the film reinforces the Cartesian mind/body split, suggesting that in the presence of the feminised body, the mind and feminine intellect must remain curtailed and contained" (Stevens 2018: 26-27). For this reason Lucy must transcend at the end of the film because she can never truly be free or reach her full potential while living in a female body. In fact, Stevens attributes this reinforcement of defined binary constructions to "a pushback within sf texts against the destabilisation of conservative gender roles that is brought about by the representation of embodied female knowledge and sexuality" (2018: 27), and I am inclined to agree, especially taking into account the attempted return to the tropes of manly man and helpless girl identified by Susan Faludi, as discussed earlier in this thesis.

Even with the reliance on extended action sequences, Lucy is only ever seen to fight or to challenge marginal individuals like the members of the Taiwanese mafia, she does not consider extending her struggle to abusive or corrupt hierarchical systems that subordinate women and minorities and exclude those, like the protagonist herself, who do not conform to established societal norms. In this way, *Lucy* negates the possibility of adapting existing systems to accommodate not just powerful females who identify as feminine, but all liminal subjects who defy traditional binary constructions. As Halberstam and Livingston write, the 'Other' is "a matrix against which the self is made to appear and from which it can never be extricated; the 'conservation of Otherness' dictates that any 'assimilation' or 'incorporation' will also be a transfiguration" (1995: 5). For this reason Lucy must undergo a transformation, rejecting her alternative embodiment of femininity, if she is to continue to exist within a normative society built on binary oppositions. Without a singular female 'Other' against which to define the male 'Self', patriarchal society would collapse. To underline the protagonist's — and therefore the film's— commitment to maintaining this patriarchal system, Lucy chooses to entrust the vast amount of knowledge and data she has amassed, information that accords great power and responsibility to its holder, to a group of exclusively male scientists, contemporary representatives of patriarchal order.

5.2.1 Reproduction and Mothering: Woman as Transhuman Monster

The principle factor in the construction of Lucy as a monstrous woman is that her body and mind defy categorisation, refusing binaries, thereby creating a fluid, unstable identity. As Margrit Shildrick contends, monsters "are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject"

(2002: 4). Throughout the film various boundary transgressions take place upon and within Lucy's body, thereby destabilising the binary oppositions natural/artificial, male/female and human/machine, thus calling into question the notion that her identity as white female human is fixed and unchanging. The coding of Lucy as monster is made clear during the film when one of the Asian businessmen intent on eliminating Lucy calls her a witch. This is significant as regards transgressive embodiment as, according to Barbara Creed: "The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary" (1993: 76), defining the central reason for their persecution as "morbid interest in the witch as 'other' and a fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration" (74). Lucy, like the witch, has become a threat to the stability of the binary constructions that govern normative society, thereby presaging its destruction. While proponents of psychoanalytical theories may argue that she threatens symbolic castration in her violent confrontations with individual men, I would argue that the fear provoked here is of male powerlessness and the subversion of patriarchal hierarchy. For example, when confronting the lead gangster to force him to give up a briefcase full of drugs, Lucy paralyses her attackers one by one without even touching them, leaving the men helpless and struggling. It is this removal of male power of agency that prompts the mobster to call Lucy a witch when reporting to his superior. Interestingly, in Steven Asma's account of the capture and execution of two witches in 1649, it is clear that one of their central crimes was the desire for advancement in knowledge (2009: 109), an enlarged intelligence and huge capacity for knowledge being precisely Lucy's crime.[38] Here, as in the 17th Century, a female on a quest for knowledge is coded monstrous since it represents a failure to adhere to the societal

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[38] In fact, one of the witches, John Palmer, was a man who "rather than keep his station, will trial what the Devil can do for his advancement in knowledge" (Asma 2009: 109). Beyond this one example, women were often suspected of witchcraft for possessing extensive knowledge of natural medicine or midwifery.

construction of femininity and the feminine as something material and close to nature. At the same time as the protagonist's metamorphosis engenders transgression and monstrosity however, the film deploys a series of strategies to counteract Lucy's conversion into outright monster in order to conserve audience support for and identification with the main character.

The writers' choice to make evolutionary biology a key theme of the film means that the binary artificial/natural becomes central to the main character's development, that is, her journey from regular girl to powerful posthuman saviour. The film is constantly at pains to anchor Lucy to the realm of the natural since natural order and progress are presented as desirable correct throughout the picture. One example appears at the beginning of the film in a sequence that cuts between images of cheetah hunting gazelle and male gangsters capturing the innocent and vulnerable pre-transformation Lucy. This sequence ensures that the protagonist is cemented not only as worthy of the viewer's support and identification, thanks to the portrayal of her innocence in stark contrast to the brutality of the violent criminals, but also that she is immediately placed within the natural order which will quickly become so important to the evolution of the film as a whole. This association of Lucy with the natural and her status as righteous innocent is immediately challenged by the insertion of a packet of drugs into her abdomen, in what can be considered a form of artificial pregnancy or reproduction, especially since the result is the creation of a new being: posthuman Lucy. Following a beating, the packet is split open and the drugs are released into her bloodstream, thereby fusing the human body's natural cells with laboratory-produced compounds. The line between the natural and the artificial within Lucy's body is now indistinct, the boundary is blurred on both the physical (cellular) level and the psychological (increased intelligence), placing the protagonist in the realm of the monstrous.

This monstrosity is evident in the change in the protagonist's behaviour and actions. Immediately following her transformation Lucy adapts to some degree the ruthless violent behaviour of her captors, shooting and killing them without a second thought, albeit without revelling in brutality as sadistic torture, as did some of the male gangsters who held her captive. Lucy's acts are undoubtedly monstrous and the suggestion is that they are caused by the introduction of an artificial element into a natural human body, that is to say, it is suggested that the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the artificial, or nature and technology, is monstrous, in that it transforms a previously innocent woman into a killing machine. Although the sequence is shocking the audience does not cease to identify with Lucy as at this point she is somewhat justified in her actions, since she must escape imprisonment, and has suffered under those she has killed. This continuing identification is ensured in the hospital scene, during which the drug is determined to be CPH4, a compound that occurs *naturally* in pregnant women. The writers once again go out of their way to associate Lucy with the natural realm, in an attempt to avoid an outright elimination of the natural/artificial boundary within her body and therefore her conversion into 'Other' to the human. In this way the threat represented by the transgression of the natural/artificial boundary and thus any representation of a functioning posthuman female identity is neutralised.

This scene contains another humanising strategy that aims to both highlight the protagonist's yearning for her lost natural, human body and her continued ability to empathise, which had been called into doubt in the previous scene's killing spree. Lucy telephones her mother in order to express her love and appreciation for her family as well as to seek, for the last time, to share her feelings of fear and of being overwhelmed by the changes to her body and mind. During the conversation Lucy recalls previously

forgotten experiences of feeling loved and protected as a baby and recounts them to her mother while crying. Not only is the protagonist demonstrating her continuing humanity by displaying emotion, but also shows a nostalgia for human embodiment, and in particular female human embodiment. In science fiction texts, "memory is a crucial marker of lost identity" (Short 2005: 27), operating in films such as *RoboCop* (1987) and *District 9* (2009) to prove the humanity of physically altered protagonists.[39] As Sue Short explains: "romance, family kinship, networks and a respect for life" serve as "the conventions by which human identity is understood" (2005: 30). Here again Lucy's transgressive posthumanity is denied by an instance on her portrayal as decidedly female and as possessing the most positive traits of the human. Moreover, in the scene under discussion, while the surgeon performs a symbolic abortion to remove what remains of the drug and its packaging, Lucy laments the fact that she will never be able to reproduce naturally and raise children of her own.[40] Since within the logic of Hollywood film reproduction is linked to motherhood, and motherhood is in turn a central feature of femininity and the female, Lucy's desire to reproduce ensures the feminine/masculine binary is maintained despite elements of post-transformation Lucy's character, such as her voice and behaviours, reading as masculine.

In fact, Jennifer Skinnon argues that in post 9/11 Hollywood science fiction cinema, there exists a trope that "proffers the pregnant female body (and by extension the social construction of motherhood) as a source of redemption for individuals and society-at-large" (2011: 58). This discourse is certainly at work in *Lucy*, with the film centring on reproduction as the most important factor in determining the humanity of

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[39] See relevant chapters in this thesis.
[40] In the Marvel movie franchise Scarlett Johansson plays Black Widow, a female superhero who is portrayed as a monster because she was sterilised as a teenager. Her inability to reproduce is even used to justify her sacrificing her life in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).

the female subject, since even at a cellular level, any refusal to reproduce is labelled selfish by Professor Norman (Morgan Freeman) in the speech that frames the film:.

> For primitive beings like us, life seems to have only one single purpose: gaining time. And it is going through time that seems to be also the only real purpose of each of the cells in our bodies. To achieve that aim, the mass of the cells that make up earthworms and human beings has only two solutions. Be immortal, or to reproduce. If its habitat is not sufficiently favorable or nurturing, the cell will choose immortality. In other words, self-sufficiency and self-management. On the other hand, if the habitat is favorable, they will choose to reproduce. That way, when they die, they hand down essential information and knowledge to the next cell. Which hands it down to the next cell and so on. Thus knowledge and learning are handed down through time.

This speech sets the tone for the rest of the film, introducing key themes and signalling the direction the narrative will take. Therefore, as a failure to reproduce is considered within the film to be an unnatural act, in order to avoid aligning Lucy with the monstrous she must find a way to reproduce, to become a mother, thereby avoiding a direct transgression of the binary construction natural/artificial. Above and beyond questions of reproduction, the suggestion seems to be that women are ultimately little more than vessels or brainless cells, tools for the perpetuation of male knowledge.

Towards the end of the film, Lucy is convinced to pass on her extensive knowledge to humankind by, significantly, entrusting it to a group of male scientists. This is achieved by converting her cognitive power into an organic computer to produce a hard drive containing her vast accumulated knowledge. The sequence is described by Kirsty Stevens as "a form of digital-era mechanical reproduction, which enables her accomplishments and knowledge to be put to use in service of humanity" (2018: 26). During the creation of the hard drive Lucy appears to travel through space and time, ultimately arriving at the dawn of humanity, where she meets the primitive being considered to represent the first human —Lucy. When their hands touch the process of identification between the two women is complete, with both now acting as mother of all humanity, goddesses, the first creating life and the second ensuring its continuation

long into the future. This comes at the price, however, of Lucy having to surrender her female embodiment and therefore any material power she has gained as a result of her posthuman transformation. As in so many science fiction films, the posthuman character must make the ultimate sacrifice in order to prove their humanity, Lucy must cease to exist within the human realm in order to prove she has no intention of continuing to question the established binaries at work in society, nor any desire to perpetuate a liminal and therefore subversive existence. In other words, Lucy must prove she poses no threat to the status quo and, therefore, the monster must be eliminated. At the film's close, reproduction complete, Lucy disappears into disembodiment, allaying male fears within the film of a female power dismantling existing patriarchal systems and ultimately eliminating the source of her monstrosity — her posthuman, yet female, body.

5.3 From Privileged to Powerful: Representing the Masculine Transhuman in *Transcendence*

Having analysed the transcendence of the female character Lucy, it is now possible to compare and contrast this representation of female transhumanism with that of its male counterpart. The film *Transcendence* (2014), written by Jack Paglen and directed by Wally Pfister, portrays a man's determination to continue life beyond the confines of the material body upon learning he is terminally ill with radiation poisoning. The differences both in the motivation for the transformation and the physical change itself between this film and *Lucy* are multiple and telling, as will become clear as I proceed to analyse *Transcendence* in this section. I will first examine the portrayal of gender and biological sex, before moving onto an exploration of the representation of monstrosity and posthumanism.

What is perhaps most striking when comparing these two films is the fact that Lucy's transcendence is set in motion against her will, whereas Dr Caster actively seeks to transcend. Although the narrative of each film is initiated by an act of violence against the protagonist, these acts have very different immediate consequences. The attack on Lucy endows her with superhuman powers which allow her to overcome a desperate vulnerability, while the shooting of Will with a polonium-laced bullet reduces him from a position of power and prestige to one of abject vulnerability. He is seen to become physically weaker; he is visibly thin with wasted muscles; he loses his hair; and eventually must be fed and clothed by his wife, reducing him to the helplessness of a baby. I contend that it is this loss of power and autonomy, along with being confined to the home and therefore lacking a public role and voice, which drives Will Caster to seek to transcend in order to regain his lost agency and regain a hegemonic, patriarchal masculine identity.

Whereas Lucy's journey towards transcendence alters her gendered behaviours, going from more "feminine" to more "masculine", from emotional to rational, from markedly physical to purely psychological being, Dr Will Caster (Johnny Depp) is neither feminised nor becomes hyper-masculine. Instead, two distinct models of masculinity are represented by the protagonist, one before his transcendence, and one after. At the beginning of the film we are introduced to Will as a loving and attentive husband in a stable relationship with his wife and business partner Evelyn (Rebecca Hall). He is seen constructing a quiet place for the couple to relax and enjoy each other's company, as well as laughing and joking. He is confident in public, and dedicated to his work, as demonstrated by early scenes featuring Will successfully delivering a speech to an audience of his peers, proving his professional accomplishment. He is framed on a raised stage, visually rising above others,

underlining his status as powerful within his sphere. Overall this portrayal suggests he is a dedicated and responsible man of integrity, while also remaining sensitive and understanding. This fits quite neatly into what is considered a hegemonic masculinity, especially within the context of Hollywood. Hegemonic here is used to refer to "a social ascendency achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes" (Connell 1987: 184). In *Transcendence*, private life and cultural processes are shaped by the forces of industrial capitalism —competition and the open market— as is made clear by the fact that Dr Caster and his colleagues must hold conferences in order to compete for funding from private donors. The hegemonic masculinity existing within under circumstances is described by Michael Kimmel thus: "A definition of manhood based on self-creation in the marketplace is a masculinity specific to an industrial capitalist marketplace. The generic man turns out to be a very specific construction: he is a white, middle-class entrepreneur" (2005: 8). However, this position of patriarchal privilege is revealed to be precarious by scenes cut with those showing Will presenting his ideas on stage, in which scientific laboratories with ties to transhumanist investigations are attacked, killing unsuspecting scientists who are working in presumably secure spaces. Male-dominated, government protected areas are destroyed in an instant, laying bare the vulnerability of the patriarchal structure and the material body. This vulnerability is immediately extended to Dr Caster himself, as he, oblivious, walks among the conference attendees, greeting them and signing autographs. The cinema audience is acutely aware of the impending danger, of his human vulnerability, while he is not. It is an anonymous assailant who all too easily subverts the hierarchy of the powerful and powerless, an outsider accepted into the scientific community seizes control and shoots Will before shooting himself.

The film goes on to contrast Will's post-transformation masculinity with the hegemonic masculinity he performed beforehand, in order to encourage the audience, along with Evelyn and Will's best friend Max (Paul Bettany), to question if the intelligence inhabiting the computer network really is Dr Caster. First of all, Will's disembodied consciousness demands an internet connection, which would allow him to extend his reach globally and to begin working not only on keeping himself and Evelyn safe, but also to embark on a new, far-reaching scientific project. In his first request, Will betrays a desire to attain greater power, to grow and expand in superhuman proportions, asserting a form of male dominance in society at large, as well as a protective role over his wife, leaving her subordinated, going from business partner to dependent. Will's control over his wife is proven to go farther than just the offer of protection, however, when it is revealed that he has been monitoring her hormonal levels and heartbeat in order to accurately predict and deal with her moods and emotions. All this points to a shift from a previously balanced, sensitive model of masculinity to a perhaps more traditional, or indeed patriarchal model, based on the accumulation of power and the exercise of dominance over women and other minorities. This change reflects Peter Lehman's assertion that "the important character traits given to the misshapen man involve an intensification of traditional male patriarchal attributes, mental and physical powers, command of language, and so on" (2017: 9). Here I extrapolate "misshapen" to include disembodied since, as Steven Asma has demonstrated, disembodied minds are examples of "monsters of our own making" that "promise the classic 'playing God' transgression" (2009: 267), and therefore represent non-normative monstrous configurations. I argue then that this transformation into patriarchal figure is in part an attempt to compensate for the lack of a material embodiment, as the lack of biologically male body undermines Will's manliness as well

as both his masculinity and his humanity. It seems that attempting to portray a sexless or genderless individual on screen remains unthinkable in mainstream cinema.

The lack of a physical body and the consequences of disembodiment in terms of Will's gendered identity and humanity are highlighted throughout the film, narratively and visually. To focus first on the visual aspect, Dr Caster is generally presented on a television screen or even several screens at once, usually situated above the heads and out of reach of the other characters. This serves to underline not only Will's desire to assert power over others, but also the fact that he has no physical form and thus nothing to materially demonstrate his masculinity, his humanity, his existence. In the age of fake news, photoshop, and the rapid advancement of media technology allowing for the alteration of still and moving images, the audience is more than aware of the potentially misleading nature of the screen. On a narrative level, in his transcended state, Will is unable to understand his wife, let alone please her because, as the film suggests, he has lost his 'essential' humanity in losing the physical connections represented by the material body, although he does seem still to care for her. He cannot understand why his intrusive monitoring of her hormone levels upsets Evelyn, ultimately one of her main motivations in finally betraying her husband, and despite repeated attempts he is incapable of connecting with her, due to the absence of touch and, it is suggested, truly felt emotion. Here, the lack of material embodiment prevents the forming and maintaining of romantic relationships, not to mention friendships, since Dr Caster's male colleagues cannot trust his disembodied form, despite having dedicated their lives to achieving the transcendence that Will has enacted. The most important indication that a body remains necessary in order to successfully perform human maleness and masculinity in Hollywood cinema is that Will Caster proceeds to construct an identical body to his pre-transcendence form in order to win Evelyn's trust and faith in him as a

man, as her husband and as a human. Although, as Hayles observes, the transhumanist view "privileges information over material instantiation" (1999: 2) in its belief that "we are essentially information, we can do away with the body" (1999: 12); in *Transcendence* the ultimate marker of humanity in fact becomes materiality, the inhabiting of a biological body.

It is somewhat telling that the scientific community depicted in the film is overwhelmingly male; the only women are Evelyn—who is dedicated to business and charity work rather than science—and Bree (Kate Mara), previously a research assistant and now vehemently opposed to advancements in AI technology. Both women are depicted as emotional and sensitive: Evelyn because of her dedication to Will and the struggle to create a better world for all, and Bree because she experienced a strong emotional reaction in response to an experiment which attempted to transfer a monkey's mind to a computer, during which it "screamed and screamed". The male scientists—Will Caster, Max, and the mentor/father figure Joseph (Morgan Freeman)—are, by contrast, highly rational and display little emotional response, preferring logical reasoning. Here, as in *Lucy,* a clear binary distinction is produced separating male from female, feminine from masculine and at the same time aligning the emotional, visceral, physical aspect with the feminine, and rational cognition with the masculine, in line with the ideas represented by the Cartesian dualism. It is liberal humanism that makes transcendence possible by allowing the subject to think in such terms; that "severs the subject from his or her embeddedness in material circumstances, just as mind/body dualism severs the mind from its relation to the body" (Vint 2007: 90). As Braidotti explains it is impossible to disengage the positive aspects of humanism from the negative, " individualism breeds egotism and self-centredness; self-determination can turn to arrogance and domination; and science is not free from its own dogmatic

tendencies" (2013: 30). Liberal humanism and the Cartesian dualism, then, encourage binary thinking, without which transhumanism and transcendence would be inconceivable, upholding restrictive binaries while at the same time claiming to work for individual freedom and autonomy.

5.3.1 Man as Posthuman Monster: Excessive Power and Uncertainty

As in *Lucy,* the protagonist of *Transcendence* becomes monstrous following the breakdown of psychological and physical boundaries, on and within the body. When Will Caster chooses to abandon the material flesh, multiple borders are blurred. Although the mind/body divide is upheld by this transformation, the binaries natural/artificial, human/machine and male/female become confused. As Fred Botting succinctly puts it: "to discard substance is to enter a virtual world and fly into groundless multiplicity" (2008: 171), where multiple unstable borders become a defining factor in the construction of the monster. Will now occupies an uncertain, liminal space, his being uncategorisable by societal norms. This results in fear, mistrust and confusion on the part of those subjects who witness his metamorphosis and his resulting bodiless configuration.

The central question posed by the film and its characters is whether a disembodied, transcendent consciousness can be considered human, or whether the influence of technology eliminates the nuances of human perception. Within the film, as is standard in current science fiction cinematic texts, technology is aligned with rationality and logic, whereas humanity is defined by empathy and emotion. This same discourse can be observed, for example, in the film *Her* (2013)*,* in which an AI—coded feminine in voice and mannerisms—attempts to assimilate itself into human society via a romantic relationship with a human male. The AI, Samantha, uses learnt behaviours to

simulate emotional responses and specifically feminine inflected language, thereby performing a specifically feminine humanity. In this way "performance becomes constitutive, imitation reifies itself as nature: Samantha is filtered into a gendered position (Kornhaber 2017: 8-9). Donna Kornhaber describes the story as "a failed attempt to incorporate the posthuman into our already known systems, to make it intimate to ourselves and inscribe it with the mark of the human, the material, and the tactile—to represent it in forms we already understand" (2017: 6). The same narrative is at work in *Transcendence*, with post-transformation Will Caster making various attempts, including the creation of a cloned body, to simulate a romantic relationship with wife Evelyn. His humanity is unrelentingly questioned, however, by the male characters of the film who refuse to accept the validity of his posthuman form, preferring to view him as a purely technological, or virtual, threat to society, rather than a machine/human hybrid. In this way, Max and Joseph, alongside the FBI, fight to uphold the binary constructions that form the foundation of patriarchal society. Will's position as monstrous outsider is compounded by his refusal to uphold a strict separation between human consciousness and technology; a position that adheres to Hayles' postulation of a non-liberal humanist posthumanity as "a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines" to replace "the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature" (1999: 288). This ambiguous position is monstrous in its refusal of categorisation and binarism, but hopeful in that it makes possible the subversion of repressive hierarchies and systems, in particular that which places humanity in a dominant and controlling position over nature.

Sherryl Vint claims that in society "Articulating an identity outside the space of community is psychosis" (2011: 76), and as we will see Will's endeavours to create a

new posthuman identity are certainly viewed as such by the film's male characters. Will's best friend and fellow scientist Max describes transcended Will thus:

> "This thing is like any intelligence. It needs to grow, to advance. Right now it's settling somewhere it thinks it's safe from outside threats. Somewhere its massive appetite for power can be met. But it will want more than that. After a while survival won't be enough. It will expand, evolve, influence—perhaps the entire world".

Firstly, the use of "it" as opposed to "he" as personal pronoun, as well as referring to his erstwhile friend as "this thing", are indicative of a refusal to confer any sense of humanity on Dr Caster's posthuman form, instead positioning posthuman Will as monster. Furthermore, the assumption is that this monstrous technological consciousness will seek power and control over humanity as a superior being, suggesting that an excess of logic or rationality indicates psychosis. This functions as a response to the ethical imperative that humans maintain control in order to demonstrate their status as a liberal humanist subject and therefore their humanity as autonomous independent beings. As Hayles writes: "Such an argument assumes a vision of the human in which conscious agency is the very essence of human identity. Sacrifice this, and we humans are hopelessly compromised, contaminated with mechanic alienness in the very heart of our humanity" (1999: 288). As in so many science fiction texts, "the encounter with the posthuman is figured as an experience of catastrophe and peril, what Hayles calls 'the primal scene of humans meeting their evolutionary successors, intelligent machines'" (ibid xii). It is Will's excess of rational logic, which confers great power, that makes him monstrous. Hayles asks what is the role of gender in this primal scene, why is gender so intwined with questions of the erasure of embodiment and the merging of machine and human intelligence. In *Transcendence* the other male characters label Dr Caster a monster in response to the fear that agency has been removed from Will as a human male individual, replaced by a technological intelligence

beyond human control. As in *Lucy,* the presence of a powerful posthuman subject threatens normative society with a radical restructuring, but whereas Lucy chooses not to take direct action on the current socio-political architecture, Will Caster intends to do just that. For this reason Lucy avoids remaining a fearsome monster, representing instead the nurturing mother, while Will constitutes a terrifying monstrous being intent on destroying society as we know it. The result is that the posthuman female chooses to embrace disembodiment and disappearance, surrendering her gendered body and agency in order to prove her humanity, whereas the male posthuman seeks to maintain links to corporeality and the material, embracing instead the confused and blurred boundaries of a hybrid existence. Though Lucy is allowed to continue her existence, having chosen an existence which avoids border confusions —she falls into the category of mind rather than body, and female due to her alignment with the mother figure, for example— Will, as a liminal monster threatening not only capitalist society but also to destabilise binary thinking, must be destroyed.

While in *Lucy* reproduction represents a form of redemption for the female protagonist, in *Transcendence* Will Caster's endeavours to create new forms of life are what finally convince Evelyn of his monstrosity. In order to continue the expansion of his high-tech laboratory Will requires a larger workforce, and so offers to heal the ill and disabled in exchange for their commitment to aiding his scientific programme. These individuals voluntarily undergo a transformation not only to repair their bodies but to alter their minds, agreeing to permit Dr Caster's consciousness to take control of them both physically and psychologically whenever he deems necessary. As Caster's mental capacities grow, so does the area he inhabits, as well as the reach of his influence, now including human minds. I would agree with Silvia Magerstädt that this "highlights the problem of power and control" (2014: 51) converting the protagonist

into the "single, mysterious leader" figure described by Deleuze (1989: 265), representing a tyrant, an authoritative automaton. Male-only procreation was already figured as monstrous with the publication of *Frankenstein*, since "The novel serves as an anxious rumination on the role of women in reproduction, and the potentially disastrous implications of a world in which women are excommunicated from the reproductive process" (Conley 2018: 250). I contend that reproduction, when controlled by a masculinised technological entity as in *Transcendence,* is monstrous due to the fact that biological power is conferred onto a machine, and also because in this instance it is the male character who 'gives birth', thereby blurring the boundary between the artificial and the natural as well as between male and female. Sue Short remarks that "The increase of clone themes in cinema suggests prevalent anxieties surrounding bio-technologies […] yet the biggest fear in these films is that material power over life will result in exploitation" (2005: 124). In other words, in *Transcendence,* when a powerful, technological being demonstrates the power to create and control living humans, the result is a sense of horror, as the film's human characters and the cinema audience contemplate a loss of physical and psychological agency.

Here, rather than demonstrating his humanity in his desire to improve the lives of others, as is the case in *Lucy,* the process of reproduction is portrayed as monstrous and frightening in its depiction of a porous border between self and other, instilling horror in Evelyn and driving her to escape Will's compound and seek to help those who aim to eliminate the powerful intelligence her husband has become. Furthermore, by giving life, the male posthuman takes on the role of mother, thereby destabilising the categories of male and female, in which the female body "is persistently coded as a cultural sign of the "natural, the 'sexual' and the 'reproductive'" (Balsamo 2000: 233). In psychoanalytical parlance, transcended Will Caster could be considered a

222

representation of the archaic mother described by Barbara Creed, when expressed in patriarchal signifying practices, as "the abyss, the incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed" (1993: 27). Like the archaic mother in this description, in the film Dr Caster gives life to others, but also removes their agency in order to absorb their bodies into his networked consciousness. This also parallels Stone's assertion that "In psychoanalytical terms, for the young male, unlimited power first suggests the mother", and therefore a need for control, since it produces an "unresolvable need for reconciliation with an always absent structure of personality" (Stone 1999: 90) — the feminine, the mother. The protagonist's continued defiance of binary categorisation, particularly with regards to gender, denies other characters within the film and the audience the ability to domesticate the monster "by pointing up not only its non-identity to the dominant standard, and assigning it to binary difference, but by fixing it within a network of degraded qualities" (Shildrick 2002: 29). In his insistence upon being a hybrid being, part-human part-machine, and his desire to change society and the environment, Will can never be positioned as absolute Other to the human, and so embodies Shildrick's definition of the monster straddling both radical otherness— his superhuman intelligence and power— and "the always already other at the heart of identity" (2002: 28). He remains an ambiguous, and therefore threatening, presence.

As was discussed in relation to *Lucy*, it is necessary for powerful, hybrid, monstrous beings to "prove their loyalty, defer to humans, and adopt certain values" (Short 2005: 132), thereby demonstrating their loyalty to existing systems of government in order to avoid becoming wholly monstrous and inviting destruction. Although Lucy achieves this by passing on her knowledge to male scientists before disappearing, Will refuses to comply with societal demands, instead defending himself

with retaliative violence with a view to continuing his programme of change, ensuring his monstrosity in the process. Short says of posthuman representations that "far from being colonised or subordinated figures they negate the idea of intrinsic distinctions and confirm humanity to be a universal concept based on community and compassion" (2005: 126). I believe, however, that the opposite is true in the films discussed here, since Lucy is forced to continue her existence on the margins, whereas Will's defiance of normative categorisation is rejected by those around him, ultimately leading to his assassination. As Silvia Magerstädt argues, "the idea of accepting mortality is important for the conclusion of *Transcendence* and death becomes one of the defining factors in our identity as human beings" (2014: 53). For both characters, a symbolic death is what allows them to partly regain their humanity, in this way placing mortality at the centre of the definition of the human with any immortal being characterised as unnatural or artificial. This contributes to the understanding that humanness remains a narrowly defined category which requires a 'natural', material body without any psychic or physical enhancements, and must be easily categorisable within current hegemonic discourse. This emphasis on the 'natural' is a key point of comparison between *Lucy* and *Transcendence,* featuring prominently in both films as a visual and a narrative element. As discussed above, in *Lucy* the link between the protagonist and he natural is consistently emphasised in an attempt to humanise her and distance her from the monstrous. In *Transcendence*, on the other hand, Will Caster is surrounded by high technology and separated from the natural world and even natural light as he is confined to his laboratory buried beneath the desert. In Pfister's film, there is an obvious and stark contrast between the dark forest where the anti-tech terrorists dwell and the white sterile laboratory inhabited by Will. In this juxtaposition, the sanitised environment becomes not only a symbol of artificiality, but also a symbol of "a longing for

perfection and ultimately a longing for immortality" (Magerstädt 2014: 40). Of course, the presence of nature in the film is also necessary to make technology visible, as well as acting as a "strategy for maintaining boundaries for political and economic ends, and thus a way of making meaning" (Stone 1999: 85). As Anne Balsamo indicates, the construction of a boundary between nature and culture "guarantees a proper order of things and establishes a hierarchical relationship between culture and nature" (2000: 215), in which "culture/man will prevail in his encounters with nature" (2000: 216). In *Transcendence* nature is certainly portrayed as vulnerable to culture/man, in that a central thread of the film deals with the need to protect and heal the planet, or in Dr Caster's words, to "make the world a better place". Man (Will Caster) demonstrates his superiority over the natural realm —and, it could be argued, the female— by saving it.

This insistence on the separation of nature and culture ultimately represents a denial of border transgression, and therefore a departure from the monstrous, keeping Will clearly separate from and superior to nature in line with patriarchal discourse. However, it is not enough to humanise the protagonist, leaving him an ambiguous character, a well-intentioned monster. The desire to supersede, to change or to supplant natural processes and eliminate binaries, the ultimate representation of which being the production of a cloned body for himself, results in the suggestion that transcended Will is an entirely artificial being intent on undertaking a technological, artificial form of male reproduction. Here, the protagonist becomes monstrous due to a latent fear that machines may begin to create, recreate and reproduce thereby undermining the perceived superiority and singularity of the human race, which, unlike machines, is able to imagine and create. As Fred Botting explains: "Technology, once seen as merely a tool for patriarchal production and dominance, becomes threatening when it emerges as a dangerous supplement that supplants and exceeds its control [...] technology

monstrously undoes the system which designed it" (2008: 43-44). With this technological mimicking of human abilities, fears of a de-spiritualisation of humanity arise; "automata manifest the doubleness that threatens individual uniqueness" (ibid 87), and with this doubleness comes the question of the uncanny, characterised by "disturbances, uncertainties and anxieties resulting from Things that do not stay in their place" (ibid 106). In *Transcendence,* the double that threatens the idea of the subject's unique unchangeable identity is disembodied, transcended Will Caster who, in choosing to leave his body and accept a virtual existence, has affected what Virilio has called "an instantaneous cloning of living man, the technological re-creation of one of our most ancient myths: the myth of the double, of an electromagnetic double whose presence is spectral —another way of saying a ghost or the living dead" (1997: 39-40). This is reflected, for instance, in Will's decision to present himself on screens —although present, it is not clear if Caster exists in the embodied 'real' inhabited by the human characters of the film. The uncanny, now as in ancient myths or ghost stories, signals shifting boundaries, border crossings and reversals, both signalling a disturbance and highlighting the limit that upholds the binary. Will's disembodiment, his spectral existence, haunting material others with multiple visual representations of himself covering large spaces, able to cross any boundary and inhabit any space he wishes, is the epitome of the postmodern uncanny, the ghost in the machine, the monstrous other who is in fact a reflection of the self. Will's consistent undermining of unique, individual, fixed identity, in contrast with Lucy's desire to retain self-contained embodiment for as long as possible in order to maintain binary categories, ensures the construction of Will's posthuman identity as monster, an entity which seeks to subvert binaries, the 'nature' of selfhood and therefore the patriarchal society that is built upon the protection of these ideas.

Figure 9 Will Caster in a visibly weakened state pre-transformation (left) and transcended Will Caster representing himself on a series of screens positioned above the heads of his visitors (right)

If it is the ambiguity of the male protagonist that makes him monstrous, then the film itself must also be monstrous, since neither the narrative nor the viewer's questions as to posthuman Will Caster's identity are never fully resolved. Furthermore, ambiguity can be found in "an increasing fusion between the actual and the virtual within the narrative and visual representation […] which also reflects people's own struggles with an increasingly complex digital environment" (Magerstädt 2014: 62), as seen in Will's flickering presence across multiple screens. Magerstädt goes on to claim that this fusion is now typical of contemporary science fiction cinema. Although there is a strand of contemporary science fiction film that embraces the ambiguous narrative, I argue that the majority, at least of Hollywood productions, provide closure as well as placing significance importance on the uncovering of truth.[41] Whereas Magerstädt goes as far as to state that "Caster regains his humanity in death" (2014: 55), I would argue that he remains an ambiguous figure, since it is implied that he lives on, perhaps in the form of some mysterious micro-particles which serve to heal the planet. The images of

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[41] Examples can be found in titles such as *Ready Player One,* in which virtual and real world identities remain distinctly separate, thereby allowing for binaries to be upheld. Moreover, the mystery driven narrative is fully resolved, leaving it clear who are the villains and heroes of the film.

sunflowers blooming in his garden suggest Will is not really gone, and therefore is not mortal, or indeed human. Rather, Dr Caster is an example of the posthuman, remaining ambiguous and consistently defying normative binary categorisation.

5.4 Gendering the Posthuman in *Transcendence* and *Lucy*

When comparing *Lucy* and *Transcendence* from a gender perspective, what stands out as a major difference is the question of agency. Put simply, the woman is forced to abandon her body and become posthuman, whereas the man chooses to transcend in order to achieve immortality, thereby retaining power and agency. The male, Will Caster, although physically weak since he is terminally ill, still has a choice thanks to access to science and technology and the advantages that come with being a middle-class, white, male professional. Lucy, however, is both physically weak and helpless at the beginning of the film, with no hope of escaping her desperate situation and therefore no real agency. This initial difference in circumstance conditions the rest of the film in both cases: the fact that Scarlett Johansson's Lucy mourns her stolen human form as well as her femininity—insofar as she regrets not being able to have a relationship and reproduce— evoke sympathy in the viewer whereas Will Caster's desire to cast off the material markers of his human masculinity are considered suspicious. Will as monster constitutes an assault on integrity as when "threatened by dissolution from all directions, characters can lose their discursive formations (such as gender) as easily as their body parts" (Rawdon Wilson 2000: 250). Therefore, Dr Caster's rejection of his previous identity provokes an uneasy response among the film's audience, as it demonstrates the fragility of not only human bodies, but also individual human identities. Moreover, Lucy at no point opposes existing societal systems and structures, and does not flagrantly subvert binaries such as natural/artificial,

masculine/feminine, material/virtual. Instead she retains her physical, specifically female body and, as a woman, chooses to serve patriarchal society by performing mechanical reproduction, taking the form of the transference of knowledge. Dr Caster, in willingly rejecting the corporeal and actively working to change socio-economic and political systems, denies binary categorisation, and thus threatens normative patriarchal society. For this reason, in *Transcendence* the posthuman male protagonist is monstrous, and must be destroyed, whereas in *Lucy* the female protagonist ultimately avoids becoming monstrous and is allowed to continue to exist on the margins, as the posthuman reflection that confirms the status of the human as compassionate, emotional and grounded in materiality.

Interestingly, both posthuman representations are clearly gendered, with the feminine remaining grounded in materiality while the masculine severs all connection with the flesh. As a disembodied posthuman Will Caster's masculine performance is not altogether successful, however, since he is unable to fulfil his wife emotionally and sexually. This suggests that in contemporary science fictional representations of transcendence in cinema, the body represents a defining and fundamental element of gendered identity, without which gender performance on screen becomes unstable and undefined, provoking unease in the viewer due to the resulting subversion of normative binarism. This is largely down to the continuing insistence on the Cartesian dualism in mainstream cultural production; the idea that there exists a kind of essential soul or essence separate from but inhabiting the material body is to this day a widespread belief, or at least is presented as such on screen. Magerstädt observes that "what these stories indicate is that disembodiment can pose a threat to the soul. As the body is part of what we have described as 'soul', the separation from it leads to problems" (2014: 46). In *Lucy,* the Cartesian separation is protected and upheld, the mind is seamlessly

removed from the body at the end of the film, and the filmmakers even manage to anchor the female and femininity to materiality and immanence, as evidenced by the fact that in order to access higher rational functionality—masculine attributes within the Cartesian distinction— Lucy must abandon her female body. In *Transcendence*, however, it is never completely clear whether the separation of mind and body has been a success, leading to a Cartesian ambiguity which persists throughout the film. I believe this contributed to the film failing to be a complete success with audiences[42] since the film consistently insists on the ambiguous nature of its protagonist, and the viewer is thereby continually pushed to question the idea of solid boundaries and fixed identities. Although some academics have argued that screen portrayals of the monster rely on feminine characteristics to produce feelings of fear and abjection —notably Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993)— in *Transcendence* the protagonist and his monstrous technology are penetrative and militaristic, and certainly masculine. Despite the claim that "A certain anxiety concerning the technological is often allayed by a displacement of this anxiety onto the figure of the feminine" (Doane 1999: 20), in *Transcendence* the horror is focussed on the masculine protagonist who is not feminised, and whose actions cannot be displaced onto a feminine figure or symbol. In fact, actions which would be considered heroic in an action film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone are here viewed as monstrous, for example using explosives to protect Evelyn from invading forces. The masculine figure is portrayed in these moments as monstrous, moral uncertainty and the destabilisation of boundaries creating an atmosphere of ambiguity and unease.

Transcendence and *Lucy* alike place a positive emphasis on the material, on analogue objects and the importance of touch. Evelyn and Will's home is full of books,

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[42] The film cost $100 million to make but made just $11 million on its opening weekend and received largely negative reviews from critics.

and the opening sequence of the film utilises a close-up shot of an antique record player, symbols of the pre-digital age, items that the protagonists value and that anchor them to material existence. Also operating on the visual level is a thread running throughout the film that focuses on hands. When Will is dying of radiation poisoning there are several close-ups of clasped hands, of Evelyn touching her husband to comfort him. Once transcended, the protagonist, recognising the human need for physical contact, creates a cloned body for himself, and it is in this moment, with his embrace, that Evelyn realises that this consciousness really is Will. In this way the film affirms that materiality is an essential part of humanity, without which we are unable to connect to and understand others. It is only through the possession of a normative fleshly body that the posthuman Will could return from the margins and enter society once more. Nevertheless, it is too late, and humanity's fear of the unknown, of an entity greater and more powerful than any individual human—a monster— has necessitated Will's destruction.

Ultimately, in the case of the male protagonist of *Transcendence*, it is the ambiguity and fluidity surrounding his identity and embodiment that make him monstrous. As a subject who performs a masculine subject identity without a male body; a purportedly human mind inhabiting a digital data network; and even an artificial entity using artificial means to interfere with 'natural' processes—such as reproduction and the ecosystem—, Will Caster represents the monstrous masculine in his defiance of binaries, making boundaries porous and thereby threatening the concept of a unique, fixed, and specifically masculine identity; while at the same time unconvincingly performing masculinity in his behaviours and appearance, thereby drawing attention to the constructed nature of gender identities. Since, as Halberstam and Livingston state, "The human functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the

human and the nonhuman" (1995: 10), Will Caster and the filmmakers' insistence on questioning the category of the human itself is deeply unsettling. While *Transcendence* does not demonstrate the impossibility of transhumanism, it does show that society is not ready to reassess and reconfigure the term 'human', or indeed 'male', and is therefore not prepared to embrace the posthuman era, defined by the improvement, replacement, or rejection of the human body and with it the fixed, gendered identity which is so desired by the transhumanist movement.

Conclusions

Over the past five chapters, we have seen how men become monstrous as a result of physical metamorphoses that destabilise borders and binaries, thereby creating liminal subjects whose fluctuating corporeal forms call into question the notion of a fixed and bounded masculine identity. I embarked on this project hoping to find answers to a series of questions relating to the trope of the metamorphosing male monster. Firstly, why are men so often portrayed as liminal and unstable monsters in mainstream science fiction cinema? Throughout this thesis I have situated these cinematic texts in their socio-historical and cultural context in order to ascertain whether there exist links between lived reality and the crises of the male protagonists. I have also addressed how the representation of male characters' liminal, monstrous embodiment reflects and engages with contemporary concerns surrounding the nature and definition of ideal and marginalised masculinities. In their portrayal of the monstrous masculine, these science fiction films reveal the constructed nature of identity and show that masculinity can —and in some cases must— adapt and evolve. In the process certain models are questioned and others promoted, thereby perpetuating some elements of hegemonic masculinity while incorporating new elements considered progressive. Given the centrality of modern and advanced technology to the films discussed, as well as science fiction as a genre, it has been necessary, and enlightening, to examine its role in the creation of monsters. Although it became immediately clear that technology acts as a catalyst for corporeal transformation, it was not obvious why this was the case. This warranted further consideration, which ultimately revealed technology as a gothic device, a site for the projection of multiple and overlapping anxieties that, when acting upon and fusing with the male body, becomes intertwined

with fears relating to masculinity and the human. Finally, having established that the metamorphosing men at the heart of these science fiction movies adopt posthuman embodiments, I sought to establish whether these monstrous characters could be considered hopeful. That is to say, if they represent potential alternative masculine identities that break away from the hegemonic norm or subvert the binary system of gender that underpins patriarchal society. Before exploring these conclusions in detail, it is pertinent to offer a brief overview of the key observations relating to each iteration of the monstrous masculine covered in this thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis investigated the figure of the monstrous masculine mutant in body horror films of the 1980s, through an analysis of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). In body horror the corporeal integrity of the male protagonists is threatened and subsequently deconstructed by way of graphic images of the penetration and transformation of the human body. The bodies featured are invariably male, as is the case in *Videodrome,* in which Max Renn is exposed to a televisually transmitted virus that causes him to mutate uncontrollably. Borders are blurred upon and within his body as the flesh is alternately distended, opened and augmented, resulting in the growth of new appendages that exist simultaneously and signal both masculinity —a gun for a hand— and femininity —a vaginal opening in his abdomen. This subversion of binaries such as male/female, masculine/feminine, interior/exterior, human/machine and even reality/illusion works to maintain a sense of ambiguity as regards any definition of what the protagonist is. His previous identity is stripped away and he never again settles into a stable physiological form or subject position. The ambiguous representations of physical form and subjective identity highlighted in body horror texts creates monstrous masculine figures due to the fact they are uncategorisable according to the normative binaries that pervade patriarchal society, creating subjects and

separating them into distinct, easily identifiable groups —man, woman, black, white etc. In their defiance of binaries representations of mutants on screen serve to call into question the validity of binary categorisation. They present possibilities of embodiment outside of the norm, and in their focus on male metamorphosis, alternative modes of existence which do not necessarily adhere to hegemonic models of masculinity. In *Videodrome,* for instance, the male hero is allowed to become vulnerable, and although initially his vulnerability is shocking, horrific and frightening in its deconstruction of the body and masculine identity, it is ultimately empowering, as it allows the protagonist to subvert the corporate hierarchy. Harnessing his corporeal vulnerability, permitting the penetration of his body, accords Max the power to assume a posthuman form that can defeat those who control him through the production of manipulating discourses. The rejection of hegemonic masculinity here can be read as hopeful, as the monstrous masculine protagonist reveals the constructed nature of identity and demonstrates the possibility of alternative modes of existence. However, there is no depiction of the restructuring of patriarchal society, instead, the posthuman monster must exist on the margins as a liminal figure.

The second chapter examined the cyborg figure in science fiction cinema through an analysis of the original *RoboCop* (1987) and its remake of the same name, released in 2014. The two films deal with a number of common themes, including the separation of mind and body, what it means to be human, the nature of ideal masculinity and fatherhood. A comparison of these themes across both texts reveals a change in attitudes regarding the understanding and performance of hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, whereas in the original film there is a detailed visual representation of the violent destruction of the protagonist's body, in the remake the filmmakers opt for an explosion and a fade to black, thereby avoiding visceral images of male corporeal

vulnerability. Although both iterations engage with male anxieties surrounding bodily integrity, cyborg films of the 1980s were more willing to question the validity of a fixed and unchanging hegemonic masculine ideal than their contemporary counterparts. Furthermore, while both films put the male body on display as abject, in Verhoeven's 1987 version abject images of the protagonist proliferate throughout the movie, whereas in Padilha's production it is concentrated into one short sequence. *RoboCop* and other cyborg films of the 1980s, much like the body horror movies of the period, revel in the ambiguity of the male protagonist's metamorphosis, consistently destabilising binaries to maintain their status as a monstrous masculine figure. The contemporary reimagining, however, eschews body horror imagery and insists instead on the upholding of binaries, highlighting the protagonist's hard body in order to project his distinctly hegemonic masculine identity. It is my contention that this change in visual and narrative presentation is a reflection of developing male anxieties closely related to the socio-political context in which the films were produced and released. Following the events of 9/11, in the 2010s media discourses in the USA centred on challenges to the United States' powerful status in global politics, as well as real and potential threats to the integrity of the nation and its social fabric. Thus, Padilha's Murphy is depicted as a crusader for the defence of national security and of American moral integrity when it becomes jeopardised by corrupt individuals. In fact, it is apparent that there has been an evolution in the definition of hegemonic masculinity in the context of Hollywood cinema, since in *RoboCop,* as in other action and science fiction films of the 21st century, there is an emphasis on the importance of fatherhood as a key component of a successful masculine performance. In contrast, men in this later period are portrayed as more stoic, they avoid the display of emotion, as seen in the scenes where Alex Murphy refuses to allow his family to see him crying. My interpretation is that this represents a

resurgence of a 'traditional', post-war model of masculinity, a reversal of the "fragmentation —or at least the dissipation— of the traditional paternal role model" (2005: 153) identified by Stella Bruzzi in Hollywood cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s. There is also a shift in the representation of Cartesian notions of mind/body separation, with 1987's Murphy unable to retrieve more than fragmentary memories of his past identity, while 2014's Murphy is for the great majority of the film, fully aware of who he was and is. What can be observed here is a trend in which post-millennial cyborg and action movies present a vision of the human in which the Cartesian dualism is central to the definition of humanity, with the mind as the locus of individual subjectivity taking precedence over embodiment. In order to successfully perform hegemonic masculinity the subject must display an independent and unique psyche unrelated to the metamorphoses of the body. So, whereas Xavier Aldana identifies in post-millennial horror cinema "a noticeable shift towards materialist understandings of the human that see us as constituted largely by our sentient bodies" (2014: 20), it is clear that in the realm of science fiction and action cinema the opposite is true, with the psyche acting as the be-all and end-all of human existence.

Chapter Three takes Anakin Skywalker's story in the *Star Wars* saga as the basis for an examination of male coming-of-age as a path to evil and the embodiment of the monstrous masculine villain. Within the saga Anakin emerges as a victim of patriarchy and oppressive, ineffectual fatherhood as both the Jedi hierarchy and his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi thwart the protagonist's attempts to become a man who embodies a hegemonic masculinity. He is denied the independence and autonomy necessary to demonstrate a unique individual identity, key to the formation of an adult masculine performance, as well as the opportunity to express heterosexuality within a nuclear family, a subject position still privileged within patriarchal society. The inability to

assimilate himself into the patriarchal hierarchy of Jedi society transforms Anakin into a monster. He is increasingly marginalised until he is pushed to perform a series of horrific acts of violence, which ultimately culminate in the positioning of the protagonist as outsider, 'Other' to normative society. This change in status is mirrored by the visual presentation of his body, which becomes more and more distorted as his acts become more and more monstrous. Above all Anakin desires a position of power beyond that available to him within Jedi society, he wishes to assert control over not only other humans, but also the defining condition of humanity —mortality. In seeking to subvert the established hierarchy through the accumulation of excess power, Anakin is positioned as a monstrous villain, anathema to the patriarchal democracy, threatening its destruction. Again, the visual presentation of Anakin, now renamed Darth Vader, reflects his villainy as he is clothed in black, and his face is covered with a mechanical mask that serves to dehumanise him. Darth Vader is a cyborg, a representation of 'bad' technology characterised by the fusion of human and machine to create a monstrous hybrid. It is not only the creation of hybrid beings that distinguishes 'good' from 'bad' technology, however, as the gothic technology of the evil empire is also characterised by the suppression of individuality. Anakin's tragedy is that by joining the 'dark side' in search of a powerful, individual subject position he in fact finds himself subjugated to an even greater degree, becoming one of a raft of faceless robot-like workers with all autonomy surrendered to the regime's dictator, Darth Sidious. The monstrous masculine is seen to stem from not only individual acts of evil, but also the loss of autonomy and agency in the face of an authoritarian, faceless, machine-like regime.

Chapter Four is concerned with the portrayal of man becoming alien in recent science fiction cinema, and uses the 2009 film *District 9* as the central text for the examination of this model of monstrous masculinity. The film uses abjection to address

underlying anxieties surrounding the fear of contamination of the Self's clean and proper body by monstrous 'Others', represented by the aliens, who are separated from the city's population and corralled in internment camps. The protagonist's metamorphosis is a corporeal manifestation of his changing understanding of his identity as he comes to terms with the instability of his position as white, middle class, male human. Visceral images of the dissolution of the male body highlight the constructed nature of subjective identity and, therefore, its inherent vulnerability. Hegemonic masculinity is thus subverted, as the movie's heroes reject categorisation according to the norms of patriarchal society, embracing instead an identity in flux, with unstable borders, fusing human and alien, organic and machine and masculine and feminine attributes. This fracturing of binaries produces posthuman monsters, powerful hybrid beings capable of overcoming the militaristic authorities who subjugate aliens and marginalised Others. What Wikus and his alien friends present is an alternative posthuman model of masculinity, outside of the demands of a hegemonic masculinity that relies on patriarchy, the nuclear family and individualism. Ultimately, though, the film avoids postulating an alternative posthuman society on Earth and instead suggests, in its closing sequence, that the protagonist remains an outsider, existing in the margins of society. Furthermore, Wikus displays a nostalgia for the human and his lost identity, despite his posthuman corporeal configuration, and thus the Cartesian dualism is reinforced.

Finally, Chapter Five analysed the representation of transhumanism in the films *Lucy* and *Transcendence,* concluding that the transformation of the protagonists is markedly gendered. Despite the separation of mind and body offering the possibility of a genderless and sexless embodiment, transhuman characters retain distinctly masculine and feminine behaviours and physical features. This suggests that although Donna

Haraway (1991) argued that posthuman representations could act as a tool to avoid identity politics that separates individuals into groups according to race, gender, class and other factors, in mainstream cinema, at least, traditional binaries associated with humanism are upheld and reinforced. This is not to say that there is no blurring of boundaries in the films under consideration; in fact, the male protagonist of *Transcendence,* Will Caster, is haunted by a sense of ambiguity throughout his metamorphosis. He remains uncategorisable according to the binaries human/machine and organic/artificial, a fact that positions him as a monstrous masculine character. This portrayal of man as monster engages with technophobic anxieties relating to the rise of machine intelligence and AI, addressing contemporary fears of the end of the human — and humanism— in the face of an increased reliance on ever more advanced technology in everyday life. The depiction of the monstrous feminine observed in *Lucy* also draws on technophobic anxieties, but rather than highlight the ambiguity of the female characters posthuman form, the film seeks to disavow it. This is achieved by way of a series of strategies, including an insistence on aligning the feminine with nature, thereby strengthening the binary organic/artificial, and by having the female protagonist reproduce in order to prove her commitment to the furthering of the human race. In contrast to Will, whose ambiguity threatens existing patriarchal societal structures, Lucy grants authority to male-dominated institutions by entrusting her vast knowledge to a group of men before eliminating her powerful female body, the last remaining menace to patriarchal hierarchy. Power too is central to the construction of the monstrous masculine in *Transcendence*, as the male desire to become transhuman is a result of the drive to gain and to retain individual power. In transcending his human body and fusing with advanced technology, Will subverts the 'natural' order which insists on the purity of the human, the upholding of binary divisions and a hierarchy in which human culture

and patriarchal, capitalist ideals dominate. Transhuman Will is a kind of superhuman, more powerful than other men over whom he asserts dominance, proving himself superior, thereby revealing the inherent vulnerability of the male and masculine identity, as well as the patriarchal system that perpetuates their privileged position in society. He manipulates and controls male bodies, as well as creating for himself a replica of his previous corporeal form in a kind of artificial male reproduction. His ambiguity, superhuman power and subversion of traditional gender roles make the protagonist a monstrous masculine posthuman figure requiring elimination in order to protect existing patriarchal system of binary categorisation.

Throughout this thesis we have seen time and again that the representation of male characters is closely linked to the socio-historical context of the films' production and release. Cinematic texts not only reflect but also engage with the dominant discourses of the time. As regards the science fiction films addressed across the preceding chapters, the representation of men as metamorphosing monsters responds to and feeds into anxieties surrounding the changing role of men in society and the struggle to identify with an unattainable hegemonic masculinity. In the 1980s, for instance, the increased visibility of the women's movement and of the presence of women in the workplace provoked a reappraisal of gender roles, as part of which there arose a dominant discourse, particularly in the media, which called for a redefinition of masculinity and a move towards the 'new man'. Men were asked to rethink their masculinity, to adapt to changing societal expectations and found themselves torn between a post-war model of masculinity that emphasised breadwinning and success in the public sphere, and a developing 'new' model that demanded the incorporation of hands-on fatherhood and emotional sensitivity into the 'old' masculine identity. The resultant confusion and sense of vulnerability is reflected in the body horror and cyborg

films of the period, which portray the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of identity as a defining feature of the male protagonists' physical transformations. In both *Videodrome* and *RoboCop* the main characters' masculinity is destabilised by unwanted corporeal alterations that, at first, seem to strip them of their male attributes. It becomes clear, however, that these men are not feminised but re-masculinised —they are pushed to perform gender differently in order to survive in an ever-changing landscape. Monstrous men must display emotion in order to prove their humanity and therefore their place in society, thereby aligning their masculine identity with the new hegemonic norm.

Moving into the 1990s, Hollywood cinema produced a large number of father-centred films, which Stella Bruzzi argues are defined by "variety as well as quantity" (2005: 153). Yet she goes on to state that in several genre movies of the 90s "patriarchal males are, if not disempowered, then undermined" (158). Although the nature of successful fatherhood is interrogated in films such as the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, an alternative, non-patriarchal model is not postulated, a fact which serves to perpetuate the idea that men as fathers have no option but to continue to operate according to hegemonic masculine norms. Father figures such as Obi-Wan Kenobi remain traditional in their methods, raising their sons in accordance with strict and oppressive patriarchal strictures. Though these methods do not prove successful, blame is displaced from the patriarchal system and onto evil or corrupt individuals. The *Star Wars* prequels, for instance, serve to cement the male villain's redemption by endowing him with a backstory that celebrates him as an individual man attempting to embody a hegemonic masculinity in a world in which it is increasingly difficult to do so. Susan Jeffords, then, was correct in her claim that "Male viewers —particularly white male viewers— who may feel increasingly distanced from what they understand to be traditional male forms

of power and privilege can be empowered through the assertions of the role male individualism must play in the future of humanity" (1994: 170). What begins to emerge is a backlash against the redefinition of masculine identity and the move away from a traditional model of the unassailable integrity of masculinity. Men are transformed into monsters as a result of the inability to perform a hegemonic masculinity, but the responsibility is placed with corrupt individuals as opposed to with the patriarchal society that fails to shape successful masculine subjects. The project is that of a restoration of the father figure —a commitment to fathering, to forwarding a generation of heroic sons, is enough to redeem male monsters like Darth Vader.

Post 9/11 the socio-political landscape and media discourses shifted once again with an increased focus on the defence of the nation state by heroic men, not only in the United States as evidenced by the 2014 film *RoboCop*, but also in other parts of the world, as seen in films like *District 9*. Violent and indeed monstrous acts are justified by the need to protect the family and homestead, which stand in as symbols for the nation and its social fabric. In the 2000s and 2010s soldiers, firefighters and policemen are held up as idealised male heroes to which all men should aspire. As with its previous incarnations this hegemonic model of masculinity is unattainable, a fact that again inspires masculine anxieties, that are in turn reflected in the metamorphosing men of popular contemporary cinema —history repeats itself. Physical metamorphosis becomes a rhetorical tool that allows individual men to incorporate new facets into the traditional masculine model. An increased emphasis on hands-on fatherhood, for example, allows male protagonists to display a superficially softened masculine identity in line with calls for men to accept a more active role in the private sphere, while at the same this concern for the protection of the family acts as a justification for the perpetuation of masculine models that rely on strength, aggression and a privileged position in the public sphere.

This trend appears as a continuation of the "paternalization" of action films in the 1990s identified by Hannah Hamad, which "at once enabled the reification of patriarchal family values alongside the apparent accommodation of changing mores regarding ideal masculinity" (2013: 105). In this way, Hollywood persists in its project of incorporating or naturalising aspects of feminism into its narratives and imagery, "thereby appearing, disingenuously, to negate the imperative for feminist critique" (ibid 102). This is particularly evident in *Lucy,* in which the female protagonist is superficially presented as powerful, but is ultimately stripped of agency and embodiment, and through the insistence on traditional feminine values and attributes is reduced to a clichéd nurturing mother figure.

As in the 1990s, in the 21st Century individualism is a key concern, as men strive to hold on to a sense of their unique individual identity in the face of overwhelming physical and psychological change. A failure to present a unique and fixed identity creates liminal monsters, abject 'Others' who must be ejected from normative society. This can be identified in transhumanist films like *Transcendence,* in which male characters, following a liberating transformation, are vilified for having evolved in terms of their subjective identity. In these narratives one can identify a conservative pushback against not only the fusion of human and machine, but also any sense of fluidity in the expression of gendered behaviours and embodiment. In movies dealing with man becoming alien this trend is also present, since in films such as *District 9* and *Avatar* (2009) the narrative is at pains to emphasise that despite the physical metamorphosis of the male protagonists, their subjective masculine identity remains unchanged. In viewing these films men are reassured that despite developments in the socio-political landscape that alter mens' role or position in society —a situation

giving rise to specifically masculine anxieties and fears— male individualism will ultimately be protected.

What emerges from this study of monstrous masculine metamorphoses across three decades is that these figures are representative of masculinity in crisis, an engagement with specifically masculine concerns regarding what a man is or should be. Barbara Creed writes in *Phallic Panic* (2005) that the "male monster is made monstrous when he enters the domain of woman, animal and nature" (17), but I contend that what we observe in the portrayal of male monsters is quite different. Far from men becoming monsters expressing a fear of femininity arising from psychoanalytical castration anxieties, as argued by Creed and others[43], monstrous masculinity is born of specifically masculine anxieties.

Another theme that emerges from the preceding analyses of metamorphosing men in science fiction cinema is that the male characters' transformations are invariably initiated and driven by contact with advanced technologies. This indeed reflects a technophobic current in contemporary discourse which stems from suspicion of technology and its effects, as Daniel Dinello (2005) observes when he writes that in science fiction "Posthuman technology threatens to reengineer humanity into a new machinic species and extinguish the old one", a process that "will subvert human values like love and empathy", fortifying "genetic discrimination, social fragmentation, totalitarianism, surveillance, environmental degradation, addiction, mind control, infection, and destruction" (273). I have to diverge from Dinello's argument on this last point, however, as although technologies *threaten* to subvert traditional human values, in the technophobic narratives I have studied throughout this thesis the human psyche

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[43] In their 2020 re-reading of the monstrous-feminine proposed by Creed, Chare, Joon and Hue state that "His monstrousness does not spring from his male reproductive or paternal functions, but rather from his alignment with the sexual and reproductive nature of the monstrous-feminine" (ebook edition)

always triumphs over technological menace. The Cartesian dualism is reaffirmed, as monstrous machine-human hybrids prove themselves essentially 'human' through a commitment to human values and a societal structure founded on binaries, thereby assuaging the technophobic anxieties of the viewing public.

As Cyrus K. Patell briefly states in his chapter on the *Star Wars* saga, "in contemporary U.S. popular culture, worries about technology are often about more than just technology itself. They are also about shifting paradigms for identity" (2012: 181). In my analyses I have similarly observed that besides symbolising technophobic fears, in cinema technology also acts as a canvas onto which filmmakers can project diverse anxieties relating to masculinity, individualism and hybridity, to name but a few. Technology gives form to the shapeless threat of the fracturing and the dissolution of not just the human, but a specifically masculine subjective identity. Thus, technology is used as a gothic device, compromising the understanding of identity as a fixed entity and undermining the hegemonic ideal of masculinity —particularly heterosexual white masculinity— as a bounded whole, separate from and superior to women, homosexuals and other minorities. In this way the representation of technology in science fiction cinema addresses fears of contamination, most obviously of the human ideal by machines, but also, and no less significantly, of the subjective identity prized as the locus of the Self by abjected 'Others'. The resultant hybrids are powerful, subversive entities who, although capable of heroic acts, are feared and rejected, forced to conform to binary norms or else cease to exist.

Daniel Dinello closes his book on technophobia with the argument that "science fiction illustrates technology's corruption and destructiveness, demonstrating that it mirrors the corruption of corporate manipulation and the destructiveness of the military agenda" (274). What I have observed in studying science fiction cinema, however, is

quite different. Generally speaking, the technology itself is not portrayed altogether negatively, and in fact, is often depicted in a positive light. Examples include *Star Wars'* lightsabers and resistance fighter ships, the planet healing nanobots of *Transcendence* and even the robotic prosthetics used to to turn Alex Murphy into a cyborg in *RoboCop* (2014) which, it is shown, were originally developed for amputees. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that these big-budget science fiction blockbusters necessarily celebrate technology in their reliance on the foregrounding of impressive and often groundbreaking special and visual effects. I contend that rather the technology itself being presented as monstrous, it is those individuals and corporations using technology for nefarious means who are depicted as monsters. Technology confers great power on the individual protagonists featured in these films, and allows them to perform heroic acts, it is only when technology is used to control or manipulate individuals —as in both *RoboCop* films and *Videodrome*— or is used to accumulate excessive power — as in the *Star Wars* saga and *Transcendence*— that it becomes menacing, as it represents a threat to individualism and societal order.

From the early iterations of the posthuman represented in films like *Videodrome* and *RoboCop,* to the emergence of the transhuman in films like *Transcendence*, the metamorphosing male monsters of science fiction film have pushed the boundaries of human experience, destabilising once unquestioned binaries and categories. Though academics and writers of late 1980s and 1990s predicted great potential for these fictional figures in terms of the rejection racial and gendered binaries among others, they have not had quite the impact on lived experience that was once hoped. Donna Haraway wrote in her seminal work *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* that "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves […] It means both building and destroying machines,

identities, categories, relationships, space stories" (Haraway 1991). I do not question the destabilising potential of images of human/machine couplings, but I have observed that in mainstream cinema this potential is not fully realised within film narratives. Although in the science fiction and body horror crossover films of the 1980s one can identify a fluidity in gender expression, the non-normative, posthuman bodies that defy binaries and fixed identity are never accepted by society, and neither are they seen to establish new, alternative communities. These characters are instead marginalised, or in the most progressive of cases, their fate remains ambiguous. In *Videodrome,* for instance, the protagonist's corporeality and psychology consistently denies any kind of binary categorisation, which proves to be a powerful subject position. The film's ending, however, is shrouded in ambiguity, leaving the viewing audience with the sense that the posthuman figure is destined to be eliminated, a fade to black suggesting death. From the 1990s onward, the possibilities of posthuman embodiment are further curtailed, as male protagonists are, despite overwhelming physical transformation, destined to revert to their original masculine identity, if not corporeally then psychologically. This increased reliance on the Cartesian dualism suggests the impossibility of a significant evolution of subjective identity, at the same time as it distances this identity from posthuman embodiment. A glimmer of hope appears in post-millennial science fiction films like *District 9* and *Transcendence,* which successfully portray the reevaluation of the privileging of certain identities —white, male, human— within patriarchal, capitalist hierarchy. Hopeful alternatives to hegemonic identity are not offered, however, as again posthuman characters are marginalised within the existing system, instead of being allowed to establish more accepting communities that do not rely on binary categorisation and oppression of minorities. Veronica Hollinger wrote in 1990: "there remains much work for the

women/monsters in SF to do if the hope which they promise is to be realised" (134). Sadly, this statement rings true today, thirty years later, as it seems science fiction cinema is still not ready, or not willing, to accept the image of the posthuman monster as a positive, or promising, evolution of the restrictive and oppressive demands of the definition of the human condition.

In undertaking this doctoral investigation, it was necessary to limit my study of the monstrous masculine in three key areas; I chose to draw exclusively from film, the science fiction genre and from the period 1980 to the present day. When embarking on future research it would be interesting to compare the representations of mainstream cinema with those of science fiction television and literature, as well as in other genres, such as horror, or the superhero movies that have proved so popular over the last two decades. My curiosity is particularly piqued by the villains who allow superheroes to exist, and seem to be portrayed ever more ambiguously, and even sympathetically, as seen for instance in 2019's *Joker*. In short, there is plenty of opportunity for further research to be carried out in the area of cinematic portrayals of masculinities, in particular in the fantasy, horror and science fiction genres. Such work would contribute to a fuller understanding of the patterns of male representation in popular culture, of how and why men are repeatedly presented in certain, very specific ways.

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