

White Futures and Visceral Presents: *Robocop* and P-Funk

PAUL VERHOEVEN'S *ROBOCOP* (1987) starts with a news program featuring a story on the city-state of Praetoria, once of South Africa but now independent after some political upheaval, announcing that they have a French-supplied neutron bomb and are ready to use it. This marks the one and only mention of race in the film, a story set in a futuristic Detroit, which at the time the film was made was led by a black mayor, Coleman Young, and had a predominantly black population—nearly two-thirds of the citizens of Detroit were black, with another third being mostly white. But it's clear, in Verhoeven's placement of that short news item, that race continues to be a source of tension in *Robocop*'s future society; in Detroit, however, it seems like white flight has reversed course entirely, and outside of a black middle manager in the nefarious Omni Consumer Products (OCP) and a black henchman of the criminal mastermind, Clarence, there are only extras to disrupt the monotonous whiteness of the film. Watching it now, it's hard to imagine what could have happened between 1986 and 2043—when the film is set—that could so totally upend the racial mixture of the city, especially when one of the critical plot points in the story is that Old Detroit is so crime ridden that it calls for robot police to eradicate crime there in order for Delta City to be developed—so that two million workers can flood into the city. The Old Man, which is how the head of OCP is referred to throughout the film, reflects on his boyhood spent in Old Detroit, and how it has fallen into the hands of criminals; in the script, Alex Murphy, who will later be the titular Robocop, also recalls a childhood spent in Old Detroit. Something, it seems, happened a long time ago that led to

reverse migration into the city from the suburbs. Or, it was simply lazy filmmaking, substituting Dallas of 1986 for Detroit of 2043, and ignoring the racial realities of Detroit at the time. Or the story of Detroit—and the Detroit that is being played out in this story of robotics and automation—is a story about whiteness and the control of the future.

Our hero, Murphy, is a good cop. The viewer knows this not through any robust backstory but through the actor Peter Weller's easy smile and admission that his gun-handling tricks are indebted to his attempt to impress his son and modeled on the TV hero T. J. Lazer. He jokes with his female partner, Lewis, and rushes into action, eager to uphold the law. When this eagerness leads him into Clarence's headquarters, he gets the drop on two henchmen but is then overwhelmed by Clarence and the rest of his crew. They tease him until they begin to torture him, first shooting off his right hand, his right arm, wounding both legs and torso, and eventually Clarence apparently kills him with a shot to the head, which throws chunks of skull and brain into the air, just to make it clear how damaged Murphy has become. A manager at OCP has been waiting for just such an event, and his team works to turn Murphy into Robocop, replacing his body with a titanium exoskeleton, but saving Murphy's brain and face, which is largely concealed under his visor. Robocop's development depended upon the failure of ED-209, a fully automated policing robot developed by a more senior manager at OCP. During a demonstration, ED-209 malfunctions and kills a middle manager who is playacting the role of a criminal, threatening ED-209 with a gun. The lesson is plain: full automation is dangerous, but an android—a robot with the sensibilities of a human—is exactly what the city needs. And this android, Robocop, has the soul of a white man who can recall a time when Detroit wasn't the crime-ridden dump it has become, waiting to be gentrified into Delta City.

Thinking about *Robocop* in its moment—a moment when Japanese automotive manufacturing was making significant inroads into the American market, and in which the Big Three (Ford,

General Motors, and Chevrolet) were going through financial hardship and restructuring—*Robocop* brings into relief the fears of a future of automation and of corporate control of everyday life. *Robocop*'s future is a jaundiced one, where the tendencies of its moment are extrapolated into intensified versions of themselves. Meanwhile, so much remains the same: clothing, cars, homes and furniture, guns and uniforms. Everything is so familiar, except for the lumbering cyborg protecting the city. There's nothing alien about this future; for some, it might even be a comforting future, a Detroit returned to its original whiteness, a city tamed by the still-somewhat-human Robocop. A machine haunted by the memories he has of a wife and son, of their suburban home, fighting against corporate interests—and the full automation of American labor. Whatever the catastrophes occurring in the real world, whatever the fears people may have about the racial makeup of the city, of economic neoliberalization, of crime, *Robocop* suggests that the future won't be foreign.

The filming script cuts a significant subplot from the previous versions of the script that centers on the police voting to strike due to the appalling work conditions under which OCP forces them to work. In previous scripts, the neoliberalization of the police force leads to this strike at a critical moment in the story, with the police walking off the job just as ED-209's backer, Dick Jones, is revealed to have been in cahoots with Clarence all along. Clarence's gang leads a riot in the city, unchecked by the lack of police. Given military-grade weapons and a tracking device by their corporate benefactor, Clarence and his gang follow Robocop to an abandoned mill, where they ambush him and Lewis. With no police backup, and the city wracked by riots, Robocop and Lewis must fend for themselves against Clarence's rogues. Robocop and Lewis survive, leading to Robocop's final confrontation with Dick Jones, the corporate raider behind ED-209. Jones's duplicity is revealed during a final board meeting, leading both to his dismissal by the Old Man and execution by Robocop. But the strike is precisely where *Robocop 2* (Kershner 1990) picks up the story, with

the city of Detroit in default to OCP for the money owed for their management of the city's police, and OCP threatening foreclosure on the city. The goal for OCP is revealed to be the neoliberal corporate fantasy of replacing the city government with OCP's capitalist bureaucracy. The central drama is whether Robocop is actually human or entirely a machine masked as human, a drama played out against the backdrop of the expansion of a new drug, Nuke, into the market. The white future of Detroit is one ruled by corporations, controlled by robotic, automated police, and sedated by white drug dealers. "Make 'Made in America' mean something again!" the Old Man intones while announcing the corporate takeover of the city, and what it seems to mean is that the paternalistic corporation will achieve its apotheosis in the displacement of politics in favor of shareholder appeasement.

OCP promises us that "the future has a silver lining," thanks to its development of Delta City. But that future is ruled by corporations, where whites have resumed control of the city. It is a future that dresses up the present in a technophilic costume of titanium and heavy weapons. Its thrills are visceral ultraviolence, all flesh subsumed by metal, armor, and corporate greed. Maybe in the 1980s it seemed simultaneously like the future had already arrived and no other future would ever come. Maybe that's why Ford Probes, which seemed so futuristic at the time, filled the futuristic police fleet, and how Dallas could substitute for a future Detroit. How irrepressibly white.

And then there was the strange afrofuturism of George Clinton, captured in the spacey tropes of the Mothership, including raunchy lyrics about sex and psychedelic drug use. If Verhoeven's *Robocop* offers a dour future inextricable from the racialized present built upon the visual fascination of a robotic man and his justified killings (Shaviro 1993), Clinton's afrofuturism relies on entendre, suggestion, and continuity-building referentiality to build an intensified world of visceral connection (Weheliye 2014; Womack 2013; Youngquist 2016). Stretching between the late 1960s and the middle 1980s, Parliament and Funkadelic released albums annual-

ly, toured consistently, and established themselves as a politically and musically progressive voice in contemporary American music. What they didn't do, however, was synthesize their various fictional, political, and music statements into a coherent manifesto.

"Funk," for Clinton and his collaborators, was a feeling, a rhythm. Funk is an alternative viscosity. Popular music of the era—disco, mainstream rock and roll, the growing underground punk and heavy metal scenes, the lingering progressive rock trend—could be reduced to music that was largely anesthetic in its effects, or, if it produced feeling, they were feelings that accorded with normative expectations. Heavy metal and punk offered violence and discontent distilled into black-clad faux nihilism; disco offered a sexuality fueled by heteronormative gender roles, which Clinton referred to as "the blahs" and "like fucking with one stroke." Funk offered a form of embodied experience that struck out at these white, dominant forms of musical aesthetics. After decades of white appropriation of black musical forms, P-Funk offered a distilled critique of the go-nowhere complacency that popular music had become. If not a revolution in politics, P-Funk offered a visceral experience that was characterized by a focus on the body and its repressed features, foremost among them bodily waste and sex. Funk takes on the properties of a substance, a viscous, corporeal groove that binds people together in a psychedelic experience. But, rather than the psychedelia of Timothy Leary and the 1960s, which focuses on "tuning in" to hallucinatory experiences, the psychedelia of P-Funk is rooted in bodily experience, in a connection to the Earth that is evident in our most material of bodily experiences. There's no "dropping out" for Clinton, only "turn[ing] you on," in contrast to Robocop's anesthetized corporeality.

If there is anything close to a manifesto in the work of P-Funk, it is "Standing on the Verge of Getting It On," a song from their 1974 album of the same name. In it, Clinton sings, "You really shouldn't ought to fight it / The music is designed to do no harm / It's just for you / With just a little bit of effort / I can and well, we might just turn you on / Even if you don't admit it / The time for change

is here and here we are / We're just for you." Clinton's lyrics are rife with double entendre so blatant they lack subtext entirely; here, "getting it on" is both a reference to sexual intercourse and experiencing the libidinal energies of funk itself. But those lyrics follow an interchange that gets at the heart of Clinton's libidinal conception of life: "Hey lady won't you be my dog and I'll be your tree / And you can pee on me," he entreats his listener, and it's immediately clear that this is no suburban love song. There's no subtle romance, no polite seduction to be had; instead, there's just the crass sexuality of "dogs" and "bitches." If Clinton's lyrics are unsettling, it's precisely because they traffic in a carnal conception of sexuality, one freed from the polite Protestantism of American nuclear families—and one that seems to treat men and women as equal in their desiring capacities. If it's a turnoff, you might be taking it too seriously. Or, at least, you might be thinking about it too much: funk, at its best, is a feeling, a groove, a way of experiencing your body, a way of being connected to the world in the present. Appeals to carnality attempt to root listeners in the present, in the joking mood of playacting a tree and dog, in disrupting the suburban niceties of dinner and a movie. P-Funk's viscerality seeks to break through the present, the calm of a Fleetwood Mac song on the radio, providing something else, a contrary way to conceptualize one's embodied present and relations with other people and the world. Hallucinogens aren't going to help you get it on, but a little bit of estrangement brought about through the Mothership might.

If "Standing on the Verge of Getting It On" offers a foray into the sexual politics of P-Funk, "Promentalshitbackwashpsychosis Enema Squad (the Doo Doo Chasers)" is a clear statement of Clinton's scatological appeal. Combining a critique of American political life and the kind of subjects it produces, Clinton simultaneously offers one of his most trenchant lyrics about the state of the American consumer and the appeal of the corpological. "The world is a toll-free toilet," Clinton sings, "Our mouths neurological assholes / And psychologically speaking / We're in a state of

mental diarrhea / Talking shit a mile a minute / Or in a state of constipated notions / Can't think of nothin' but shit / And in this world of / Stinky futures, shitty memories and / Constipated 19 now-nows / Emerges from the hiney of your head / The doo doo chasers." Those "constipated 19 now-nows"—in Clinton's case, the late 1970s—seem to be going nowhere, in no small part because "we're in a state of mental diarrhea." Elsewhere on the album, he sings about his inability to "get into the neutron bomb" and a litany of other modern threats. The modern world is full of "drug addict principle[s]," things "that would close the door," "poisoned land," and "bad romance," resulting in our "constipated notions." It's this view of the present, of the failures of imagination, of feeling, that Clinton seeks to remedy, that funk serves as a palliative for. A decade later, *Robocop* seems to confirm everything that Clinton was critiquing: a white, machinic human, trying to reclaim a city from "crime," totally desensitized to his body, deprived of all desire, and fed by something that "tastes like babyfood." But *Robocop* never seems to shit; he really is a "constipated notion," a future that is radically out of touch with his humanity.

It isn't so much that Clinton and his P-Funk collaborators offer an afrocentric future as they do a countergenealogy of the present, one in which the visceral, the corporeal, takes precedence over the cognitive. The Mothership is not from the future so much as it offers an alternative present, one in which the libidinal experiments of Dr. Funkenstein are properly liberating, freeing one's "mind" so one's "ass can follow." The Mothership and its mission are the return of the repressed, doubly so: the body and its vulgar capacities are resurfaced for their anticivilizational effects, and dominated black artists, subject to the hegemonic effects of American popular culture, articulate a visceral mode that rejects the hermetic faux escapism and channeled suppression of contemporary music. P-Funk had a solid run from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, ending during a period in which Clinton was consumed with legal battles to reassert his ownership of the rights to the music that he had recorded. But, simultaneously, P-Funk seems to have run out

of momentum. By his own account, Clinton was hooked on crack cocaine (Clinton and Greenman 2014), many of the participating musicians had become involved in other musical projects, and popular music was moving toward rap and hair metal. The Reagan 1980s seemed like the wrong place for P-Funk to inhabit, and the Mothership's mission was officially over. *Robocop* and its impoverished, retread future was the kind of future that Americans had become invested in; the visceral present that P-Funk offered seemed to be out of place, if not totally alien. Better, it seems, to invest in the hyperviolent reclamation politics of *Robocop*, an empty vessel for the white revanchist politics of the gentrifying city.

If *Robocop* offers a future of whiteness—mechanized, featureless, haunted by a past that is impossible to reclaim, bodies that eat but do not shit—then P-Funk offers its opposite. It doesn't feel entirely accidental to me that *Robocop* is set in Detroit and that Clinton found a home there for years, first working for Motown as a songwriter, and then working on several P-Funk albums there. Detroit was a city of tomorrow, first in the early part of the twentieth century when it forecast a world of endless roads and manufacturing jobs for the working class, and then, after white flight, it offered a vision of minority rule—what Clinton referred to as “Chocolate City” on a Parliament album of the same name. Maybe in another era—one in which the manufacturing base was intact—a minority-led city could have been successful, but Detroit faltered in no small part due to antagonisms between municipal leaders in the suburbs and the city. I was too young to know any of what was happening in the city. The cleverness of Southeast Michigan's urban planning is such that one can drive into the city from any direction and be visually unaware of what is happening at street level: the highways largely exist below street level with tall soundproofing walls protecting neighborhoods from traffic noise, but also obscuring the vision of suburban drivers commuting into the city. One can leave home and arrive in the downtown stadium and theater district and never see a Detroit neighborhood, never coming into contact with the everyday realities of life

in the city. In that void of civic experience, it's easy to imagine a city rife with crime, like *Robocop* does.

Clinton didn't do much to appeal to white listeners, and as the 1980s wore on and he returned to making music, he was less invested in funk and more directed at emerging "urban" radio, which built on his deepening reputation among hip hop artists as a father of afrofuturism. Meanwhile, *Robocop* would inspire two sequels, with diminishing returns; whereas the first film was cluelessly out of touch with the urban realities of Detroit and struggled with the inevitabilities of industrial automation, the later films pit *Robocop* against white drug dealers and had him team up with a band of mostly white people in an attempt to resist the corporate gentrification of the city (Dekker 1993). Whatever visceral thrills might have underwritten the first film, with its hyperviolence and car chases, its absurd critique of corporate America, and its sentimental robot, by the time the films had become a serial, *Robocop* was merely a vessel for vapid critiques of American corporatism. Like *Robocop* himself, the films became empty of any humanity; the politics they forwarded were insubstantial too, defanged of any proper critique, any vision of a future that overcame the racially divided present they were made in. The future became unimaginable—other than a new jetpack for *Robocop*. Even the gentrification plans are always the same: it's always Delta City coming to replace Old Detroit. Doesn't corporate America learn? Can't they work past their "mental diarrhea" and "constipated notions"? *Robocop 3* wants to be revolutionary, wants to inaugurate some revanchist return to the city, but it founders on its inability to imagine a proletarian revolution that actually builds alliances between people, across racial and class divides. The Mothership might offer something revolutionary, but it requires reinvesting in Clinton's project, one that appeals to the visceral, disrupts politeness, and unsettles suburban contentment.

Robocop offers an intensified version of white futures. Between its galloway portrayal of the future of corporate life, where every manager is in desperate need of impressing the Old Man for fear

for his or her life, the corporate takeover of a once-diverse city in an effort to replace “crime” with white workers, and the robotized version of visceral experience in *Robocop* himself, whiteness is projected into the future as a tightly controlled experience of the self and society. Beyond the corporate and corporeal, there lies the full automation of ED-209, looming as a threat of what the consequences will be for allowing crime and corporate culture to run amok. The other side of control is domination through automation. P-Funk offers an alternative to this intensification of control, this robotized viscosity; funk in all its viscous feeling, all its affective disruption, with its raunchy humor and weirdness in its lyrics and music, seeks to reconnect people with the world they inhabit, and with their surprising and unsettling possibilities. If *Robocop* offers a view of desire as always historical—*Robocop*’s longing for the suburban family he lost, the Old Man’s efforts to restore the homeliness of Old Detroit—then P-Funk offers a model of desire that revels in its abjection. Playing with bodies as Clinton does—the effluvia of snot, excrement, and urine, and the sexual desires that connect bodies in more than heterosexually monogamous ways—intensifies the abject qualities of the body in an attempt to disrupt tendencies toward control. It might not be enough, though. The forces that *Robocop* seeks to critique are the same that led to Clinton’s eventual financial and legal troubles, and by the mid-1980s the future seemed certain to be tightly controlled, its visceral pleasures few and highly scripted. P-Funk’s revolution without a manifesto wasn’t sufficient, nor was *Robocop*’s easily coopted critique; the system persisted and was likely to intensify along predictable lines.