

# Of Mutants and Monsters: A Posthuman Study of Verhoeven's and Wiseman's *Total Recall*



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**Abstract:** The abuse and violence exerted on the posthuman bodies of fiction is born from their resistance to the postulates of the most traditional humanism. The diachronic vision of the figure of the mutant, as a dehumanized and isolated body from the transhumanist perspective, anticipates the debates generated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century about the survival of hierarchy in the typification of bodies into 'more or less' abled. The examples of corporeal alterity are, thus, manifested as a monstrous, mutant image that warns spectators about the dangers of both medical and environmental experiments. In this sense, the analysis of the film *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) and its remake (Len Wiseman, 2012), serves as a starting point to offer a critical vision of the abjection caused by the dismantling of the human form, in the words of Manuela Rossini. The critique emerges from Feminist Studies but also from other contemporary schools which also question the hierarchy between bodies such as Queer or Crip Theory. From a posthuman perspective, the presentation of disabled bodies reflects humanity's propensity for their nullification and, therefore, their capacity to be exploited and discarded.

**Keywords:** mutant, posthumanism, disability, *Total Recall* (1990, 2012), Paul Verhoeven, Len Wiseman

## 1. One short story, two film versions

Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990)

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exploits common fears of contemporary societies in relation to our own place in them. As a text dealing with inhuman excesses, the position not only of the hero-protagonist but also of his fellow mutant companions reflects the fear of the dispossessed in what seems to be—according to popular cinema—the future of humankind. Manuela Rossini states that,

Literature, and science fiction in particular, is an important cultural resource for dealing with advances in medicine, biotechnologies, and informatics. But literature does not merely react to technological development and offer ethical



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guidance. Rather, there is a double movement: the technological potential will affect the way the human body/subject is defined but these new meanings (produced in texts and images) will influence, if not our actual use and even development of them, our handling of technologies. Imagineered in "scientific" texts, I suggest, such embodied subjects can be seen as cultural prefigurations of future human beings in the 'real' world. (2016: 164-65)

Len Wiseman's 2012 version reinforces the divide among those beings which usually blur the category human by erasing the mutants of Verhoeven's film. Yet both films still expose this divide by asserting not only who can be defined as human but also who is worthy of inclusion in the category. As Ferrando explains in "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations",

In the West, the human has been historically posed in a hierarchical scale to the non-human realm. Such a symbolic structure, based on a human exceptionalism well depicted in the Great Chain of Being, has not only sustained the primacy of humans over non-human animals, but it has also (in)formed the human realm itself, with sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric presumptions. In other words, not every human being has been considered as such: women, African-American descendants, gays and lesbians, differently-abled people, among others, have represented the margins to what would be considered human. (2013: 28)

The current cultural climate abounds

with examples of the marginalization of these human beings whose classification puts them outside the human realm.

The two films analysed here are adaptations of Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" (1966). The films, situated in a near future, introduce a protagonist obsessed by the nightmares in which he is not the factory worker he seems to be. In both versions, this obsession gets the protagonist, Quaid (Arnold Schwarzenegger and Colin Farrell, respectively), to Rekall, a company where memories can be inserted in human brains as 'vacations' that cannot be afforded in the flesh. Once the protagonists buy a set package of memories involving a spy adventure, they seem to recover their real identities as spies whose memories have been tampered with to forget their missions. In Verhoeven's film, Quaid (Schwarzenegger), goes to Mars to find the truth about his supposed past as the spy Hauser and what was done to his memory, eventually joining the mutated Martians fighting against the corporate businessman Coahaagen (Ronny Cox), who governs Mars. Coahaagen seems to have hidden a possible solution for Mars' lack of oxygen and Quaid is presented as the person whose technological know-how could help restore the balance broken by Coahaagen. The mutants are, as it turns out, a result of the oxygen deprivation which Coahaagen controls and uses to impose his authority over the human colony on Mars.

In Wiseman's remake, Mars is no longer present and the 2012 Quaid (Colin Farrell) lives on an Earth devastated by chemical warfare where only two geographical areas are still populated by humans: the Colony, occupying the



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Australian area, and the United Federation of Britain, the former United Kingdom. Both areas are connected by a means of transport through the Earth's core, named the Fall, which allows people from the Colony to commute to the UFB for work. The protagonist moves easily between both areas so that he can find the answers he is looking for, and enters the lowest ranks of society to find the leader of the resistance against Chancellor Coahaagen (Brian Cranston). Coahaagen is eager to get more land to allow for expansion and Quaid needs to destroy the army of robots, named the Synthetics, which Coahaagen plans to use on the Colony.

Whether we agree or not with Ndalianis when she states that “underlying the futuristic themes of the fantastic and the illusionistic splendours of effects spectacles, *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, *Starship Troopers* and *Hollow Man* confront the viewer with a critique of current socio-political issues” (2001: 2), it is clear that Verhoeven's treatment of these issues is particularly relevant for the movie by the Dutch director analysed here. As Ndalianis puts it, “as we progress from *RoboCop* to *Hollow Man*, we track his growing concern with the effects of ever-advancing, technologically mediated realities on the construction of subjectivity, and the intensification of globalisation and multi-national corporatism” (2). Borrowing from the theories exposed in “Totally Recalling Arnold: Sex and Violence in the New Bad Future” (1990) by Fred Glass, Ndalianis states that the “effects of the economic, political and social dynamic are dispersed across the collective body. Citizens, for example, are also mutants (physical and psychic) and their mutations are the direct result of a government which

provided only ‘cheap domes and no way to clean out the rays’” (6).<sup>2</sup> Even though the status of these mutated humans as full citizens of Mars is questionable, considering that they live at the margins of civilization and are regarded as part of Mars' “freak show”, Ndalianis is right to point out that the mutations are a consequence of the careless consideration of the needs of the lower stratum of society. The mutants live far off the main colony dome, as the train trip to Venusville shows, in a futuristic ghetto intended for the tourists to gawk at with no second thought about what caused their mutations.

Ndalianis concludes her analysis of Verhoeven's film stating how the movie seemingly articulates in its ending a warning against technological advances and media environments which consists of not forgetting “to allow room for humanity in these new social spaces” (8). As I mentioned earlier, this could be the reason why in Wiseman's version, the mutants disappear to make room for another nonhuman category, according to the film's discourses (as I will explain later): the colonized. Whereas the Martians in Verhoeven's film where once ‘normal’ humans born in Mars, who now show the effects of the oxygen deprivation Coahaagen (Ronny Cox) imposed on them, the colonized in Wiseman's version are

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<sup>2</sup> In his article, Glass suggests that “the mutants' inhuman bodily appearance is a continuous reminder to the viewer of technological issues: control over the most important technologies on the planet, the air machines and domes, as well as a reminder of the real inhumanity of their oppressor, is part of the mutant make-up. [...] Mutants represent the distortion of human potential under authoritarian rule” (1990: 5).



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portrayed as the normal-bodied, dispossessed and powerless inhabitants of a much-coveted territory. Since the latter lack any repulsive features, the traditional “freak show” seems to be absent from the plot, yet the threat of bodily excess is still present in the multicultural and multiracial population. In posthuman terms both Verhoeven's Martian mutants and Wiseman's colonized people embody the nonhuman alignment. By reading Wiseman's depiction of the inhabitants of the colony in postcolonial terms (see Sardar, 1999) and bringing Said's definition of orientalism (1978) to the table, it seems that the colonized inhabitants of Wiseman's story can be paired with Verhoeven's repulsive mutants, for “the human needs the nonhuman to come into the mode of its own becoming” (Clarke, 2016: 150).

Wiseman's adaptation unrealistically continues some of the plot dynamics Verhoeven's exploited. There is a female partner for each side of the hero that sits in opposition to the Quaid/Hauser (Colin Farrell) pairing: the meeker the hero, the more savage the female partner. Likewise, the dreams of an alternative reality are a burden for the meek Quaid incarnation although the locations have changed. The most extreme change, however, is the change from the nuclear threat that is at the core of Verhoeven's version to the threat of overpopulation and the scarcity of resources on an Earth devastated by a chemical war. However, this fundamental change from the previous version just reinforces the same political agenda present in Verhoeven's film and embodied in the Quaid/Hauser dilemma, which still clearly represents the fight between the oppressors and the oppressed for vital resources, in this case

for living space. The elimination of the mutants from the 2012 version does not erase the fight but tries to create a cautionary tale about the excesses of neoliberal market economies and the new threat of chemical war. Moreover, it bases its critique on the presentation of future working conditions in which 20<sup>th</sup> gains are erased. In fact, as Stewart convincingly argues,

Labor is outsourced there [in the Colony], but via warp-speed transport rather than networked transmission (as in the normal course of an offshore service force). This involves a further dodge of global warming fears—when the antipodal labor squads make their daily commute through the earth's burning core: an endurance test thousands of degrees more intolerable, even though heat-shielded, than the worst vulnerabilities of an atmospherically depleted terrestrial surface. Everything urgent is fictionalized into a haze of defused planetary premonition, including an imputed terrorism which is really revolution—and which succeeds in the end, thanks to our hero, only when the most dramatic political threat, panoptic coercion, is reversed. (2012: 9-10)

Both texts, then, present the same abuse and oppression by one powerful segment of the population over the other. At the same time, the regime creates a divide among human beings that classifies them according to their status within the societies presented as more or less human. Venusville, the dwelling of the mutants in Verhoeven's version, and the Colony in Wiseman's are presented as a dystopic evolution of present-day slums. If, as Shaw has noted, “the imagination of another world is an exercise in urban planning” (2018: 36), both texts manifest



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the indestructibility of the peripheral and marginal neighbourhood which creates categorizations of humanness among city dwellers. And what these neighbourhoods have in common is the depiction of oppressed members of society easily forgotten and disposed of by the powerful elite that rules. Hence, through an analysis of Cudd's study on oppression (2006) together with an introduction of Tyler's concept of revolting subjects (2013) and Shaw's study of the parasite in posthuman urbanism, it is my contention that both films base their main plot line on the traditional hierarchical distinction of humanness. By positioning the hero in league with what both films portray as the nonhumans, both play with current fears of dispossession and human oppression resulting in a technophobic ideal of the future. In this sense, Ellis states:

In this construction of the fantastic's hesitation, the audience can become identified to themselves as cultural dreamers, and in their dream-text (their reading of the film) flows forth displaced (to a Martian future) and condensed cultural anxieties that they possess concerning the unfolding of multi-national, globalised late corporate capitalist practises, involving a deep-seated disruption of established expectations concerning industrial inertia. (1995: 88).

Thus, current fears of "globalised late corporate capitalist practises" permeate texts covering roughly a period of over thirty years, as the two films under analysis here show in which the position of the humans is threatened by market value.

Hence, these texts can be and should be dissected with a feminist posthumanist critique. Throughout the following pages,

the posthuman beings portrayed in the texts are discussed in the nonhuman category which the films place them in to facilitate the lasting dualism they rely on. However, given that the texts seem closer to transhumanism than to posthumanism, the posthuman encompasses the characters presented as nonhumans, the mutants and the colonized, embodying thus the posthuman inclusivity that Ferrando aptly advocates (2016: 220). Moreover, the Cartesian distinction between body and mind no longer holds, as seen in the protagonists' dilemma together with the presentation of a physicality that transcends the human. By establishing the category nonhuman as an equivalent of disposable, the analysis that follows tries to advocate for an inclusive understanding of human that critically signals the unethical position of the dominant set of the population depicted in the films.

### 2. 'Waste populations': The parasite

In her ground-breaking work *Philosophical Posthumanism*, Ferrando, in a diachronic reading of de Beauvoir, Irigaray and Butler, affirms that "the human, in tune with de Beauvoir, is not an essence, but a process; one is not born, but rather becomes human through experience, socialization, reception, and retention (or refusal) of human normative assets" (2013: 71). Ferrando continues her theory by stating:

Simultaneously, revisiting Irigaray, the human has been established in the ontological denial of the nonhuman; the recognition of the human has been sustained by a negative reduction of the others—or better, by the absence of a real acknowledgment of embodied alterity and



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onto-epistemological plurality—through related concomitant exclusions, marked as the inhuman, the subhuman, the less-than-human, and so on. (71-72)

This rightful appropriation of de Beauvoir's claim clearly indicates the struggles seen in post-apocalyptic films such as Wiseman's. From the visual adaptation of the *Hunger Games* saga to Korean action thriller *Time to Hunt*, recent science-fiction and dystopian films—among other fantastic genres—are keen to continue the thread and the threat of how the neoliberal human enhancement and resource appropriation result in post-apocalyptic plots in which 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries anxieties about the neoliberal climate transform Western idealization of democracy into oligarchies centred around the exploitation of resources by a powerful elite. Be the cause medical, technological or agrarian resources, the result resembles the 19<sup>th</sup> century class struggle.

This exploitation of resources also includes human beings that, by their transformation into assets, are not only disposable but also dispossessed of their humanness. In this respect, the oppression suffered emanates from the dehumanization of this human group which not only helps create the atmosphere in which current social distinctions are presented but also establishes the obvious link between oppression and dehumanization, which according to Ann E Cudd is one of the harms suffered by oppressed populations together with "inequality" and "limitation" (2005: 22). Drawing from Agamben's definition of the 'anthropological machine', Ferrando explains that "in the historical process of humanizing the human, the animal has

been placed, more than as the antithesis of 'man', as another gradient in a hierarchy which would pose a whole spectrum of human others between the animal and the human, so that women, nonwhites, queers, 'freaks', among others, would be placed accordingly" (2013: 74). I am interested here in the inclusion of the word 'freaks' by Ferrando when defining who are 'the' nonhumans, even though her discussion continues to point out the absence of the category woman in Agamben's theory. Yet, her classification of human others as, in her vocabulary, nonhumans is useful to establish how the mutant population in the Mars colony are articulated throughout Verhoeven's movie and how their articulation 'contaminates' the hero.

The lack of power of the mutants and the members of the Colony in each movie is quite evident. The control over oxygen in Verhoeven's film and over the Fall in Wiseman's version establish not only the unequal situation of these social groups but also their dependence on the governing oligarchies. This presentation of the two oppressed social groups reinforces the anxieties of contemporary societies about their disenfranchisement, dependence, and dehumanization. In posthuman terms, inequality and oppression are perceived as the basis for inhuman treatment and classification. In fact, Ferrando's discussion of feminist epistemology and the possible "starting point of knowledge production" is also grounded in terms of oppression and applies to the mutants and the colonized:

Since marginalized and/or oppressed individuals and groups must learn the views of those who belong to the privileged hegemonic positions, they can be considered bicultural; therefore, their



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perspectives may be seen as more objective than the views of the people located at the center of the hegemonic discourse, who are not required to learn about the margins. (2013: 151)

Although this group of oppressed individuals may be bicultural, as Ferrando establishes, they are also, by means of the oppression they suffer, regulated as nonhuman subjects that do not belong to the privilege/mainstream group, as her discussion of the position of women as oppressed reflects later (151-2). Bringing this idea to the analysis of these marginalised groups in the films under discussion here reinforces the issue of their marginalization and oppression, and the need for rescue both films express. By becoming a member of the marginalized group of oppressed nonhuman beings, and by virtue of his understanding of both cultures according to Ferrando, the hero Quaid also assumes his bicultural position, after his encounter with both the oppressor and the oppressed groups. The fact that his new positioning is the result of tampering with his memory reveals how the hero is portrayed as the possibility of human redemption from the excesses granted by the neoliberal market presented in the movies.

In this respect, it seems useful to bring to the analysis British sociologist Imogen Tyler's study of non-privileged subjects published in her volume *Revolting Subjects* (2013). In her definition of the concept of "social abjection", Tyler, after defining abjection as a process "that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste" (21), indicates that "The disciplinary forces of sovereignty, its processes of inclusion and exclusion, produce waste populations: an excess that threatens

from within, but which the system cannot fully expel as it requires this surplus both to constitute the boundaries of the state and to legitimize the prevailing order of power" (20). Interestingly enough, Tyler is analysing media coverage of marginalised groups' expulsion from the city and/or the land. Moreover, both the mutants and the inhabitants of the Colony are positioned in this spatial marginality for, as she further argues, "Waste populations are in this way *included through their exclusion*, and it is this paradoxical logic which the concept of abjection describes" (19, original emphasis). In Verhoeven's film, the mutant leader Kuato personifies the abject and with him both the mutant population and Quaid himself, as it has been widely discussed before.

In Wiseman's version, the abject is constructed as the racialized and culturally distinct other, as the inhabitants of the Colony, on the one hand, and, at the same time as villainous Chancellor Coahaagen, on the other. According to Kristeva, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982: 4); hence, for each populated area the other is the abject. The comparison in the movies reflects this anxiety of dispossession, which recalls the ideology so well-articulated in the extreme-right political discourses of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as it is eerily exposed in the films.

In the two scenes from the films in which typically the villains explain at length their motivations, these issues of marginalization and oppression are articulated by means of power dynamics. Both in Verhoeven's 1990 and Wiseman's 2012 versions, the Coahaagen character is



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painted as the puppet master—in alliance with Hauser in Verhoeven's version—of the Quaid character. In both cases the villain is the creator of the plot to bring Quaid to existence by making Hauser first infiltrate the resistance and then by making him forget their existence. Thus, the hero, Quaid, is a double agent who does not know that he is a double agent and, at the same time, a willing fabrication by his alter ego, Hauser, as the 1990 Coahaagen tells him. By his own ignorance of the scheme, once he has lost his memory as Hauser, Quaid's position as part of the resistance is constructed as the perfect disguise for a double agent, in that he is not aware of his own duplicity; hence, his heroic role as saviour of the oppressed, marginalized group of mutants is destroyed. His embodiment as a rightfully "moral outcast", in the sense used by Tyler, disintegrates the moment the fabrication of the person Quaid is exposed by the 1990 Hauser, in Verhoeven's film, when Hauser, that was thought have disappeared by memory tampering, states "it's my body that you have there, and I want it back" to a Quaid too much astonished to react in the scene in which Coahaagen confronts Quaid. Quaid's turn to nonhumanity is thus constructed as a ploy by Coahaagen to achieve his desired totalitarian authority by undermining the mutant resistance. Besides, Quaid's chosen role as "moral outcast" is proved to be the "logical" result of Coahaagen's tampering with his memory and not a real ethical choice.

In a similar way, Wiseman's Quaid acts as the double agent which gives the location of the resistance headquarters to Chancellor Coahaagen, an act of betrayal which precipitates the death of the resistance leader Matthias and the invasion of the Colony. Both versions of

the hero have been imposed on the marginalized and oppressed populations as the bicultural member(s) of society Ferrando mention(s) under cover of a convenient memory loss which allowed them to mingle with the outcasts and become part of the nonhuman population. Moreover, it seems that these two Quaid's are the embodiment of these "waste populations", these social "parasites", which need to be eradicated and eliminated, since the two Coahaagen—and Verhoeven's Hauser—reclaim their human bodies and expect to eliminate their bicultural consciousness and nonhumanness by re-installing their previous selves.

The nonhuman categorization of the mutant or the Colony's population, also classifies them as both "parasites" and "scavengers", incorporating here Shaw's definition and theorization in her *Posthuman Urbanism* (145). This categorisation, which emanates from both Coahaagen's villainous discourses in the films, clearly problematises their right to humanness. Labelled as terrorists, the utmost inhuman aberration of our present-day anxieties in both films, these populations—and the leaders who represent them—have to ascertain the rightfulness of their fight and plight to the hero, and, for the benefit of empathy, to the audience. By convincing the hero of their right to fight for their place in the human hierarchy that excludes and marginalises them, Quaid then moves towards parasitism and aligns himself against the system "which fears parasites" (Shaw, 2018: 152). At the same time, the location of these parasites in underdeveloped urban areas (in Wiseman) or outside them (in Verhoeven) characterizes them as "the abjected other", following the ground-breaking





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work by Julia Kristeva; as Shaw points out, the parasite is excluded from this hierarchy and, at the same time, “both unacknowledged and essential to the maintenance of both the myth itself and the bodies that perform it” (36).

It seems clear, following Shaw, that “capital is a parasitical system which fears parasites. The more unstable the system, the more parasites are feared, and the more energy is expended to find and destroy them” (152). Thus, the two Coahaagens, together with their villainous side-kicks, become aware of their own fragility and set out to destroy the “parasites”. By enacting this misdeed, their fellow humans, mutated or not, are sunk further into nonhuman categories which position the hero(s) among them. This dehumanization strengthens their oppression and the precariousness of their lives and places the two Quaid in the uncomfortable position of hypocritical heroes. Likewise, the reclaiming of the heroes’ bodies to restore them to their previous consciousness also places each Quaid in this nonhuman category and, at the same time, shows how precarious their lives are. As Judith Butler puts it, these nonhumans/others are placing demands on the hero to ethically end the oppression and rejection that makes them disposable (131). However, the constraints of the popular genre the films belong to prevent the successful resolution of the social conflict.

According to Fernández-Menicucci, “in Verhoeven’s film the marginal, the excluded—the Others, in short—must gather again in grateful awe around heroic manhood, their saviour and protector. Gender and class divisions are still most evident, but they have magically ceased to matter” (2014: 15). In this sense, bringing back Cudd’s analysis of oppression, Quaid ceases to be an oppressive agent by

renouncing his position in the oppressor group since, as this theorist states, “to be an oppressor, one needs to be a member of a privileged group, to gain from oppression of another social group, to intend to so gain, and to act to realize that intention by contributing to the oppression of the oppressed group from whose oppression one gains” (2005: 23). Yet, the personification of both heroes as saviours simplifies the complex dynamics the films are required to depict. Neither Quaid can successfully be the heir to the murdered resistance leaders, neither world can successfully erase the distinctions that created them.

Once the alien technology which Coahaagen was hiding from the Martians in Verhoeven’s film is switched on, the new green Mars recalls Earth; however, the people that inhabit it comes from Earth, the distance between the tourist resort and Venusville is still intact. Once the Fall, the transport that united the Colony and the UFB, is destroyed in Wiseman’s version, the Colony stays the same. It is true that the threat represented by the uber villain Chancellor Coahaagen has been eliminated, yet there is no real ethical change unless it is accepted that the individual change of the heroes can facilitate the collective ones. In fact, it could be contented that by absorbing “the identity of the other” (Sardar, 1991: 195) in their own heroic discourses what really happens is that the others are ridiculed and presented as “an ahistorical identity-less mass isolated and excluded from representing the existing social and political powers” (Sardar: 201). Thus, the two Quaid trivialize the nonhumanness and precariousness of those others by enacting their only possible role as the lonely patriarchal hero of popular cinema who saves the world and whoever they choose to protect.



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### 3. 'Symbolic dehumanization': The freak show, the Synthetics and the grotesque body

In Verhoeven's 'freak show' the grotesque bodies of the mutants seem to exist in order to allow "the sensationalism of the spectacle"<sup>3</sup> (Sardar, 1991: 196) of the traditional freak show, rather than to show the consequences of utter oppression, exploitation and rejection. In contrast, in Wiseman's multicultural Colony the grotesque bodies of its inhabitants, as multiracial and multicultural ones, allow a similar proposition.<sup>4</sup> The nonhuman categorization of these human beings is not questioned when the heroes' tasks focus on destroying both Coahaagens and their assistants. However, as Ferrando asserts, "the freak has historically challenged the us/them paradigm"; and as she continues, "the symbolic significance of the 'freak' in Western culture, as that human which cannot be reduced to a fixed

entity, but represents the bridge, the dissolution of strict binaries" (2019: 80). As a result, as they can't be labelled "a 'normal' human"—that is "a body that had been posed as the human norm in separation from other less-than, or more than, human bodies" (80)—both the mutants and the inhabitants of the Colony, as Fernández-Mendicucci has stated, have to look up in awe to the heroes' accomplishment. Even though it seemed that the heroes aligned themselves with the dispossessed, in the end in their isolation from the rest of the members of this (non)human group, they maintain their distance and the hierarchy of humanness and of able bodies. In sum, Verhoeven's Quaid transforms himself from a nonhuman body into a superhuman one which sets him apart from the rest of the inhabitants of the worlds introduced and prevents the hierarchy of humanness to disappear. This hero's body clearly stresses the distinction between his body and the bodies of the mutated human beings, for, as Bakhtin affirms,

The grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one. (1984: 318)

Dehumanization is brought a step further in Wiseman's remake. This time, the leader of the resistance wants to destroy the synthetic army of robots which Chancellor Coahaagen has created with the sole purpose of conquering the Colony—at whatever cost. These machines are not imbued with life as

<sup>3</sup> Sardar quotes David Harvey who in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989) states: "the immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle (political, scientific, military, as well as those of entertainment), become the stuff of which consciousness is forged" (54).

<sup>4</sup> My understanding of 'grotesque bodies' follows here the one proposed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, "Not only parody in its narrow sense but all the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh. This is the peculiar trait of this genre which differentiates it from all the forms of medieval high art and literature. The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes" (1984: 20).



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others are in current popular texts, yet their role in the narrative agrees with Rutsky's proposition in that

The starkness of this opposition between 'good' and 'bad' technologies seems to affirm the idea that the dividing line between technology and humanity must always be upheld; technology must know its 'proper' place, even when—or especially when—it comes to life, as can be seen in the long series of artificial beings, sentient machines, robots and androids, cyborgs, and artificial intelligences portrayed in literature, films, and other media that have threatened to destroy, enslave, or replace humanity. (2016: 182-83)

The 2012 Quaid seems to be the only one who knows the kill switch that can stop these robots. The machinations orchestrated by Chancellor Cohageen are the same ones that Verhoven's Cohaagen intended: to create the perfect double agent. In the traditional 'villain-explains-himself' scene, the 2012 Cohaagen not only informs Matthias, the resistance leader, that there is no kill switch for the synthetic army, but also tells Quaid how he was implanted with a "memory cap" to find the resistance headquarters and their leader. Like the Quaid in Verhoeven's film when he faces Hauser, Wiseman's Quaid is left speechless and, although this time there is no visual recording of Hauser claiming back his body, Hauser's memory is preserved in a drive which will be used to return to it.

Dehumanization is secured as well by the introduction of a "synthetic federal police force". In Wiseman's film, Cohaagen withdraws humanitarian help "to clean up the Colony" because of the "terrorist attacks" since "the protection" of the citizens from UFB should "come

first", he argues. It is quite interesting that the resources that could be used on humans are used on machines, and that those machines are what Quaid is professionally involved with as a mechanic. This police force is not only introduced early in the narrative, policing the public areas after the terrorist attack, but a little later when Quaid gets to work in the assembly line. The extra shift the workers are to complete, together with the extra resources the Chancellor announces he is going to devote to this police force, are a clear indicator of the less than human status of the Colony's inhabitants in comparison with the Synthetics, that is, the robotic army.

The white metal perfection of the Synthetics, their smooth features contrasts not only with the aggressive weaponry they display but also with the disarray of diverse human bodies that the Colony contains. The Synthetics' immaculate bodies are modelled on the classical study of the human body: lean, male, self-contained—as Bakhtin described in his study *Rabelais and his World*:

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. (1984: 320)

Nonhuman bodies, such as the ones the Synthetics exhibit, are portrayed as perfection, adding then a new category to Ferrando's typification of nonhumans quoted above. These artificial bodies sink



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the nonhuman inhabitants of the Colony further down this hierarchy and highlight the similarities between the grotesque bodies of the mutants and these ones from the Colony's population. Additionally, one black Synthetic, with superhuman strength, is positioned against Colin Farrell's Quaid in the final scenes of the movie. Quaid's body then is also labelled as imperfect, nonhuman in both its lack of strength to overcome the threat and his positioning against the society the Synthetics, and the Chancellor, stand for.

Thus, the representation of the perfect body as the body of the Synthetic also reinforces human imperfection as undesirable. As the mutants were ridiculed in Verhoeven's 1990 *Total Recall*, and the enhanced psychical abilities that came with mutated bodies disregarded, the bodies of the members of the resistance and the bodies of the inhabitants of the Colony in Wiseman's are ridiculed and almost discarded. The 'terrorists' are no match for a police force with superhuman abilities as the colonists discover. To turn to a perfect body whose features mark it clearly as superhuman is to relegate the human body to a subhuman categorization, especially if the synthetic body does not obey your orders and is keen to destroy you. It could be understood, then, that the only able human bodies are the artificial ones created in the assembly line. With this proposition in mind, Wiseman's film relies on current fears about technological invasion as many others have done during the last fifty years or so. Furthermore, it could be contended that if Quaid's body in Verhoeven's was the measure by which the bodies of the mutants were found lacking, in Wiseman's there is not a single human body that can be defined in these terms; all the bodies that survive in the end are more

nonhuman than human in the imperfection that the wounds inflicted by the Synthetics cause. In this respect, it is quite interesting that the Frankensteinian 'father' of the Synthetics, Chancellor Cohaagen, perishes too, leaving an open question about what is going to happen to the factory where this police force was being assembled.

Yet, there is another instance of dehumanization that results quite problematic and that requires further analysis: the two female agents and two resistance fighters that create a continuum in the two films. In their ability to fight and the physical prowess both pairs exhibit, these characters may well be equated to the anonymous Synthetics in Wiseman's text. The first fighter in Verhoeven's film, Lori (Sharon Stone), deserves critical attention in her categorization as a patriarchal projection of the *femme fatale* and traditional fears about sexuality, whereas her counterpart, Melina (Rachel Ticotin), projects the necessary sexual innocence becoming the hero's heterosexual partner (Fernández Menicucci, 2014: 19; Palumbo, 1991: 70; Tybjerg, 2016: 5; Wood, 1997: 35-36; among others).

The two Loris (Stone and Kate Beckinsale) could be modelled after what Ferrando calls "human 'monsters'", together with the freaks, a concept she adapts from Braidotti and defines as "the manifestation of these not normalized embodiments to supernatural causes, such as women's power to create—and consequently deform—life" (2019: 80), even though their role in the narrative is not to deform life—unless its destruction is considered as such. Glass affirmed, in his article "Totally Recalling Arnold: Sex and Violence in the New Bad Future" that "we fear what we cannot control" (1990: 9)



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and, in this sense, the two Loris seem to embody that (male) fear in their continuous pursuit of the two Quaid; even though arguably 2012 Lori absorbs in her role the male agent who relentlessly hunts Verhoeven's Quaid together with Stone's Lori. Both Loris, posing as Quaid's wife, possess perfect bodies for the hunt, both as hunters and as prey in their performativity of the *femme fatale* identity, as the emotional involvement of the two Quaid demonstrate. This body perfection is opposed not only to the other female Quaid does not remember being attached to, Melina, but also to the rest of the bodies presented in the two movies.

The two Loris' bodily perfection, then, positions them closer to the Synthetics. Moreover, their lack of emotional traits in their pursuit of their supposed husbands make them closer to that absence of human feelings the Synthetics exhibit as well. It is interesting then to bring here Ferrando's analysis of the witch hunt as an "almost" human instance. According to her,

The witch hunt proved superstition as one of the hidden forces behind law-making apparatuses, next to biological determinism, scientific racism, and ethnocentrism, proving another discontinuity within the human frame: not only the lives of those humans considered inferior should be taken, but also the ones of those who were believed to have supernatural powers shall be sacrificed, in order to keep the human realm safe. (2019: 80)

Witches, *femme fatales*, monsters, the popular imaginary is full of images of women with supernatural abilities to control men and, once the control is broken, their stubbornness as 'machines'

that search to destroy. This traditional categorization of the female villains in both movies (surprisingly enough Wiseman continued this trend in his 2012 version) spanning more than thirty years draws attention not only to their commodification as sexual partners in their professionalization as agents but also to their monstrous nature as killing machines. Against the Melinas (Rachel Ticotin/Jessica Biel) and the nonhuman population of the films, the Loris project male fears of female castration, as it has been widely discussed elsewhere. However, their perfected bodies resemble those created in the assembly line and position them as mere instruments. The films prove, as Ferrando states, that "the establishment of a discourse of perversion [...] and the consequent practices of normalization of the perverse [...] are embedded to its genealogy, in a recurring paradigm of human abjection" (2019: 81). The sexy but lethal female body of the Loris symbolizes the monstrous within the feminine that can only be tamed by the heterosexual affection of both Quaid and of the resistance leaders, as the Melinas in the films reveal. Once their monstrosity is exposed, their destruction is as desirable as the destruction of the synthetic bodies of the police force in Wiseman's version. The dehumanization of the female body places them outside the human paradigm and closer to the inhuman one in that their lack of 'human' feelings create the monsters that have to be destroyed. Finally, as their brutal deaths mirror the one the synthetic bodies endure, it is worth noting how the female agents of both Coahaagens are ultimately positioned as nothing more than useful instruments which are endowed with superhuman endurance in their inhuman imperfection:



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While the monster and the supernatural stand as social and mythical archetypes delimiting the domain of the comprehensible body, it can be argued that the “human” project has formed, historically and theoretically, through the construction of the “Other”: animals, automata, children, women, freaks, people of color other than white, queers, and so on marking the shifting borders of what would become “the human” through processes of performative rejections. (Ferrando, 2019: 81)

This “symbolic dehumanization” does not only point out to the marginalized inhabitants of Venusville and the Colony, but also to the distorted image of autonomous femininity that the films encode as monstrosity.

### 4. Conclusions

It has been argued that *Total Recall* presents the audience with a complex interplay between dreams and reality, and that the issues raised in the movie are not really resolved in the end. In fact, the two versions of the story present stagnant constructions of a world which has not evolved since the twentieth century. Even though the 1990 film was celebrated, as Tybjerg analysed, for its playfulness with the concept of (prosthetic) memory—see his critique of Landsberg's celebratory theory about Quaid's choice to stay as Quaid (2016: 5)—, the 2012 version, having little else to add, just abuses the fear of technology by presenting the Synthetic robotic police force. It is true that the two versions play with audiences' expectations by presenting the same elements throughout the plot, regardless of their position before or after the protagonists' visit to

Rekall, trying to create an ambivalence and complexity which is completely at odds with the stereotypical characters and the extreme violence which accompanies them. In all, as Rutsky exposes, “the post-humans that they envision are merely enhanced or augmented human subjects, humans with added ‘superpowers’” which offer little to the average (non)human apart from a mortal threat (2016: 191). Furthermore, the presentation of the mutants and the Colony's inhabitants as “waste populations” which can be exploited and disposed of does little to transform the traditional viewpoints about a technological future in which humans have to accommodate existing life forms with their own fantastic creations.

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