

Masculinity Representation in *The Searchers* and *RoboCop*

Zihan Yu

Department of Communication Studies, Northeastern University

MSCR 2336: American Film and Culture

Dr. Nathan Blake

April 16, 2023

Masculinity Representation in *The Searchers* and *RoboCop*

Masculinity in film can be regarded as performative and persistently denaturalized. Film can and has on occasion had an impact on societal culture. In essence, the viewer's perception of the world is altered and the distinction between cinematic reality and social reality is blurred when various masculinities are portrayed schematically. Men include both realistic and unrealistic fantasies of what it means to be a man through representations of violence, the family, femininity, sexuality, and self-seeking in the two most common types of hypermasculinity in movie: the Western and the Hardbody genre.

Embodying a socio-economic and technological value, the Western is predicted to follow the progressive development of American culture in the commercial film industry. In the film *The Searchers*, as a balance between the American founding rituals and the Western genre, the frontier myth is presented as a structured image of the country's endless possibilities. *The Searchers* tells the story of Ethan, an obsessed, wandering hero whose only law is his own. With Ethan's return, his failure to pledge allegiance to the Rangers symbolizes his rejection of the civilized system, which further prevents him from fully integrating into the culture of his white family. Martin represents the antithesis of the Enlightenment hero, committed to rural and family values, and his heretical nature does not pyramidalis and fuel hatred with vengeance. Because of this, even though Ethan brings Debbie back into society, his eventual decision to leave society and family emphasizes the special status of the lone hero as they "turn their backs on white and Indian culture and cross the desert into oblivion" (Schatz 74).

The hard-body genre, which includes Hollywood action films created mostly in the 1980s and early 1990s, is distinguished by a concentration on the masculine hero as the single protagonist responsible for saving the world. This wave of movies focuses on the masculine

hero's body, which is enthralled by its firm, chiseled muscles, athletic prowess, and physicality. The hard-body genre has frequently been used to investigate gender issues, particularly masculinity and the depiction of the male hero, and how these representations meet the "crisis of masculinity" in current American culture. *RoboCop* places a larger emphasis on the hero's body and the hero's physical skills on display as well portray the story of a hard-bodied hero begins as a relatively untrained and "soft" individual who must be shaped to fulfill his hard-bodied destiny. The narrative framework of *RoboCop* is reflected in its blend of recognized genres: anti-utopian science fiction and 1980s action films. The plot revolves around Detroit cop Alex Murphy, who dies after being viciously knocked out by a group of criminals. His body is later discovered to be a cyborg "super cop" designed to uphold justice. The world of Robocop is inadvertently realized by OCP, a sizable company that inherited the fledgling police force of the bankrupt city and effectively privatized the department. As violence in "Old Detroit" increased, OCP was inspired to blithely create an alternative: an affluent community known as "Darrow City," a corporate-run society that would be free of urban crime. To achieve this goal, the ED-209 robot and the eventual creation of Robocop were envisioned as crime-elimination insurance devices to safeguard OCP's anticipated middle-class interests.

This paper examines the similarities and differences between *The Searchers* and *RoboCop*'s depictions of masculinity, as well as how they reinforced or idealized the image of masculinity through their depictions of violence, family, sexual attraction, femininity, and self-seeking. The similarity will be expanded based on three stages of Murphy's self-awakening to study three masculinities identity it represents, and therefore to further discuss its association with social integration. The distinction will center on the two different representations of civilization seeking: Women and family as a symbol of civilization drives the as Romantic

Machismo like Ethan to civilization seeking through family and femininity, whereas the search for patriarchy and man identity as a symbol of civilization drives the Hypermasculinity Robocop Murphy to restore his humanity. The paper concludes by questioning the nature motive for masculinity seeking in both Western and hard body films. Underneath the heroic end, the fear of social alienation and replace by female empowerment are evident reason for creating a lone silent hero to satisfy the ultimate illusion.

Similar Masculinity Representation

In *RoboCop*, Alex Murphy's representation of masculinity is comprised of three distinct identities: human Murphy, Robocop, and Robocop Murphy (restore humanity). These three unique identities serve as the best representations of the three societal expectations of masculinity that are depicted in *The Searchers* as having similar characteristics: weak and feminine featured masculinity (represented by Martin), silence hero (represented by Ethan), and self-seeking journey (represented by Martin and Ethan's search Debbie). These representations ultimately lead to the idealization of masculinity.

First Identity: Weak and Feminine Masculinity

Murphy is a police officer, and at the start of the film *RoboCop*, Murphy's police precinct is on the verge of going on strike owing to dangerous working conditions. The officers are visibly terrified on the job, and their sergeant questions their masculinity and bravery as police officers, remarking that they are "cops, not plumbers" (Verhoeven) and associating their fear with frailty. As a result, Murphy is distinctly feminine in the role of the police officer, and he and the other officers in his precinct are not your usual 1980s action heroes. Murphy's personality and family life simultaneously influenced how he connected with contemporary masculine heroes.

In contrast to a man as untidy as Ethan, Murphy wears a nice, patterned shirt in his first scene, and his home life exemplifies his restrained masculinity. The way Murphy imitates the gun-twirling prowess of the television detective his son admires highlights his dedication to his family. When Murphy confronts the criminals in the following scene, these softer qualities contrast negatively with his abilities as a crime fighter. Members of the criminal group attack and undermine Murphy's manhood. Being surrounded by violent male characters and insulted by the saying "your ass is mine" (Verhoeven) could be signs that Murphy is becoming more feminine and is in a situation that resembles a rape. Murphy appears slightly frightened as he aims his gun at the criminals, his body is easily destroyed by their bullets and his armor is ineffective against their assaults. Murphy's armor apparent masculinity serves solely to conceal his ineptitude as a crime fighter and a man.

Furthermore, Martin is depicted similarly in *The Searcher*. Martin characterized in a far different way than Ethan is, and he is right away seen as an amiable, innocent figure. Although he also arrives on horseback, he chuckles and leaps off the horse's back. Also, after Ethan is being unpleasant to him, he still treats him with politeness—qualities that are ideal representations of the stereotypical feminine. The Comanche leader Scar specifically refers to Marty as "the one who follows" and Ethan as "the broad-shouldered one" (Ford), this implies that Ethan is more masculine than Marty, whilst Martin is more feminine. For instance, Laurie enters the bathroom while Martin is taking a shower. He is immediately ashamed that Laurie saw him in his underwear. This scene demonstrates how shy he is and how simple women can see him through. At the same time, Martin's dissuasion of Ethan from killing Debbie, as well as his incapacity to shoot, mirror Murphy's weak character depiction.

Murphy and Martin represent the soft man stereotype that emerged in the late 1980s during the Regan-era Cyborgs, a more subdued movement in male fashion and gender expression where soft-hued clothing and emotional engagement with oneself were significant elements. These personalities, though, are frequently portrayed negatively and demand for subsequent transformation.

Second Identity: Silent Hero and Hyper Masculinity

When Murphy loses his humanity and reincarnates as a hyper-masculine being, he is defeminized. As Robocop, Murphy personifies all the typical traits of the ideal man in a patriarchal society: he is extremely violent and hyper-masculine, as seen by his lack of empathy in every killing and the ardent adoration of the public, the media, and many women for him (sexual attraction). "For example. Robocop rarely moves and talks at the same time, hence his speech and movement are typically separated. Robocop exhibits a pretty literal image of a Cartesian-like head/body dichotomy in his sparse language, which is mostly delivered in monotone" (Cornea 127). In this example, the outward display of armored strength was intended to make Robocop the representation and upholder of male law, and his isolation from the natural masculine body provides a powerful protection to reinforce his harshness and brutality.

Similarly, Ethan appears to be quite strong on the physical level—riding alone in from the open hills, his perspiration in the sun, and his browned complexion all indicating independence and determination. When Ethan returns home, his family is heard enthusiastically crying out his name and praising his achievement as soldier, which establishes him as a figure of considerable prestige and importance among society and family. At the same time, Ethan and Martha, his brother's wife, have a romantic-like relationship, which demonstrating that Ethan is a powerful figure deserving of female admiration. Schatz states in *The Westerns* that "the thematic

core of *The Searcher* revolves around a series of male/female relationship involving sexual union, sexual taboo, and sexual violation” (74). In this instance, Ethan's absolute, unyielding, and obsessive personality originates from his sexual attraction. In addition, Ethan's ruggedness and ruthlessness are reinforced by his military experiences, as he has just returned from fighting for the Confederacy on the losing side of the American Civil War.

Both Murphy Robocop and Ethan, in general, carry guns, which is a defining characteristic of a masculinity hero. Furthermore, Murphy's hydraulic sound, followed by his movement effect, emphasizes the character's connection with constructing and machinery, which is the depiction of absolute power and dominance in hard-body genre films. While riding and controlling the horse, Ethan's gun, and the exaggerated effects (flying sand, horses' hooves in the distance) are also seen as representations of Ethan's overwhelming power in Western genre films.

Third Identity: Self-Awareness Journey—Accept the Dual Identity

Lastly, Murphy's desire for identity propels him to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Murphy begins to battle the hypermasculine system which demonstrating his human nature, and he starts demonstrating the integration of his doubled identity (human and robot) by rejecting the metal mask and the computer that controls him. In the final sequence of the *RoboCop*, Murphy announces his surname "Murphy" as his new cyborg identity.

Martin eventually kills Scar in *The Searchers* as a self-defense move, showing his transformation into a macho man; he is no longer cowardly and sweet, but a strong man today. "And this enabled him to return to Laurie in Texas and commit himself to rural and domestic values, which Ethan had been unable to do a year earlier with Martha" (Schatz 75). Martin's integration into the community is a result of his acceptance of his dual personalities and his

ability to balance his masculine and feminine expressions at the conclusion (kill the scar, protect the family, fulfill domestic values, and accept that he lives in his wife's family).

On the other hand, Ethan's decision in the final scene—not kill Debbie, illustrate the acceptance of what Debbie represent, “both family (English) and Indian, both civilized and savage, both loved and hated” (Schatz 75). Ethan accepts his identity as both English and Comanche. However, Ethan's manic quest for revenge highlight the nature of Western lone hero—inability to commit live to Women and Family due to unforgivable hatred. Ethan's independence and fortitude, as well as his decision to be a Lone Hero despite everything that has transpired, are further evidence of machismo as the societal ideal.

The transformations of Murphy, Martin, and Ethan depict the society's three typical masculinity model. As a result, Robocop Murphy, and lone hero Ethan each symbolize the ideal image and depiction of hyper-masculinity, while Martin remains a practical and realistic example to imitate. Although Martin represents the most practical and only way for hyper masculinity to assimilate into society, it is unfavorable because it requires a level of sacrifice and the adoption of feminine responsibilities.

Different Representation of Civilization Seeking

Due to different film genre under different historical background, both Murphy and Ethan's representation the hyper-masculinity nature are different. First, under the Western movies represent by *The Searchers*, “the status of women in the Western remained somewhat conventional and secondary...women represented the forces of civilization; they embody the values of family, community, education, domestication, and cultivation that informed the male hero's transformation” (Belton 237).

The Searchers Romantic Machismo: Women and Family as Civilizational Symbol

Ethan's only connections to his hometown, and the reason he returns three years later, are his affection for Martha. When Ethan sees the burning house, his fear of losing the last vestige of civilization drives his hatred for the Indians and drives him to keep looking for Debbie. In addition, Scar's sexual assault on Martha and her daughters, as well as Ethan's resolve to avenge this transgression by murdering the Indians and Debbie, demonstrate an overwhelming identification with the female civilization. Furthermore, "women in Western did not always symbolize eastern values...they symbolized the West itself and functioned as contested sites for the playing out of struggle between the forces of East and West or of old West and new West" (Belton 238). In *The Searchers*, Ethan's inability to commit to Martha and his ultimate departure indicate that he is unable to conform to either the East (integrate into Martha's family) or the West (integrate into Scar and Comanche culture). In this example, once Ethan realizes his incapacity to fit into civilization, his withdrawal from community, family, and job can be seen as a romantic machismo exercise. However, while Ethan's fate appears to meet the ideological romantic macho of "wander forever between the winds, endless traversing the mythic expanse of Monument Valley" (Schatz 76), it is not an optimistic machismo since its liberation from men's laws and women's embraces. Despite Ethan's longing for a woman's attention, which stands in for his desire to embrace civilization, this desire is not satiated. The unacknowledged longing glance he and Martha must settle for, as well as the figurative fondling of outer clothing in the backroom, represent Ethan's rejection of family and eventually lead to Ethan's departure. In the film, a man's existence is repetitive, exhausting, and frequently pointless without women and a family; only the pursuit of women gives hero civilization.

RoboCop Hypermasculinity: Search for Patriarchy and Male identity as Civilizational Symbol

In the pursuit of the unbreakable robot body, hard body films show a lost, retrograde yearning for patriarchy, which stands in for the crises and fear associated with the loss of a masculine identity and a patriarchal future. Human Murphy and Robocop Murphy are not distinct individuals; the merging of man and machine restores male identity, indicating a patriarchal reunion. What sets Robocop apart from being "just" a robot, considering that the reassembled Robocop can still locate his humanity? First, there is the lingering notion of "father's power" in Robocop. Robocop's gun, which he keeps in a compartment on his lap, is undoubtedly a representation of both his parenthood and his masculinity. Murphy is originally regarded as a brave cop by his kid due to his ability to handle his rifle in the same manner as the characters on the TV show. Robocop spins his pistol on his finger after every gunfight, hence this hand movement is a quasi-conditional reflex for him. So it is the memory of fatherhood that reminds Robocop of his social standing. In his quest to revive mankind, Robocop seeks patriarchy and dominance. The T.J. Laser "gun twirling" display suggests that, beyond the armor plating, the spirit of the human Murphy is still active (Telotte 172). In this instance, the predominance of paternity within the family is a manifestation of a masculinity constructed in accordance with codes and conventions.

Robocop and Murphy's belief in absolute justice is a further manifestation of authoritarianism. Despite their physical strength, Murphy and Robocop share a same trait in their quest of justice as cops, indicating a common and fixed patriarchal convention—justice spirit. It is evident that Robocop has little to no conflict between his interior self and "coded" self, which may be indicative of his affirmation of absolute masculinity. It further demonstrates that in a patriarchal society, characterized by an aggressive and militaristic hard body with a strong and protective father figure, new technologies that seek to regulate behavior and suppress impulses

by compelling men to adopt more feminine characteristics are unnecessary. However, their use of the weapon is purely destructive and seems to illustrate the male desire for absolute power, further illuminating the film's endorsement of strict adherence to traditional male coding. For example, the film's criminals engage in a weapons race and eventually try to kill Robocop with a bazooka. Robocop's physically unbeatable and Murphy's eventual recovery of human memory also denotes his re-entry into human civilization, suggesting that a man's life can only become civilized through strength and fatherhood.

Nature of Masculinity Seeking Desire and Motivation

In general, both *The Searchers* and *RoboCop* challenge the gender binary by exposing the limits of male desire as well as the inadequacies of the feminine ideal it seeks. *The Searchers*, begins with a male chorus singing a succession of questions: "What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? What makes a man leave bed and board and turn his back on home?" (Ford). Ethan Edwards is the guy in question, and the solution to these nebulous concerns will be just as elusive as Ethan's own sinister motivations for pursuing his niece, Debbie. The movie's opening seems to foreshadow Ethan's tragedy. When his nephew Ben inquiries about the war, Aaron informs him that it ended three years ago, prompting Ben to turn to Ethan and ask, "So why didn't you come home before this?" (Ford) Ethan refuses to take the oath, which suggests that he might be wanted, and he is carrying a bag of recently minted American dollar. The medal he presents Little Debbie shows that he served as a mercenary in Mexico. In this instance, Ethan could have spent five years searching for Debbie, underscoring his inability to find a suitable job. Ethan Edwards is an outsider in his family, society, and culture, and in the iconic opening and ending moments of the movie, the staged shots that depict Ethan's identity, his personal flaws as lone hero prevent him from passing the threshold.

One of the fundamental goals of the Western is to idealize a hero by assigning him an unfortunate fate and building a mythology that is based on their actions of abandonment (Belton 239). In other words, there is an underlying rejection of feminine civilization in favor of reuniting with untamed nature. Ethan is too primordial, dependent on violence, and fundamentally isolated to fit into any scheme of social duty. In the opening moments of *The Searchers*, there is a stunning, desolate desert landscape through an open door, while a figure approaches us. The door closes abruptly, and the same man, Ethan Edwards, disappears into the distance. Ethan is left wandering like his savage foe Scar, whom he resembles so closely but also being excluded by Comanche community.

The similarity crisis of being rejected by civilization world, inability to conform a family, and fulfill social duty represent the deeper fear of masculine aptitude. In *RoboCop*, the search for patriarchy generates danger, loneliness, chaos, and a human mass overflowing with industrial devastation and rage. The *RoboCop* protagonist, an outcast whose brutality and indestructible body finally prevent him from being assimilated into the civilized world. In any situation, some type of "male crisis" can be identified, eventually forcing men to find idealized or heroize their inability to find a sense of belonging and identity. Returning to the first line of *The Searchers'* opening song, "What makes a man wander?" (Ford). This emphasizes the central theme of heroic film—idealized hero who alienated from the civilization. Through further seek journey to the nature of family through vision of women or men, the underlining the inner desire of comprehend oneself: "What makes a man?"

Ethan and Murphy will try to find a solution by pursuing the nature of family (represented by women). Their desire for attractive women is a sign of compliance to norms and standards, which still have a very traditional paradigm of womanhood—the naive young woman (Debbie)

and the traditional wife and mother (Martha and Murphy's wife). By identifying these women, Ethan and Murphy will discover their masculinity; consequently, these women will serve as mirrors reflecting the masculine image. Finding Debbie entails discovering Ethan's masculinity because she represents both Ethan's conventional aspirations and family. For Murphy, if he can reclaim his family's memory, he may return to a civilized world of family unity—a world where a strong man like him helps the vulnerable. Thus, despite their shady history, the hero is a noble individual, and their wonder of family and women is an essential element of becoming a hero.

Nonetheless, as the title of *The Searchers* suggests, the hero is a searcher on a journey. The heroic character-driven films demonstrate a discontent with the traditional masculinity model and a desire for something different, such as romanticized romantic machismo in *Searcher* and a return to patriarchal society in *RoboCop*. The amazement of the question "What is a man?" also seemed to allude to the isolation of the developed world, as implied in both films. Perhaps beneath the surface of violence and hypermasculinity is the fundamental self-confusion that humans must experience, but because of the fear of acceptance, hypermasculinity hero movies emerged, and they transformed from Western movies to hard body moves with the same core representation of masculinity—an idealized and unrealistic hero.

Bibliography

- Belton, John. Chapter 11 in “American Cinema / American Culture”. *The Making of the West*, 5th Edition. McGraw Hill Education, New York, 2018, pp. 228-255.
- Cornea, Cristine. Chapter 4 in “Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality”. *The Masculine Subject of Science Fiction in the 1980s Blockbuster Era*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2007, pp. 120–143.
- Ford, John, director. *The Searchers*. Warner Brother, 1956.
- Schatz, T. (1981). Chapter 3 in “Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System”. *The Western*. McGraw-Hill, Boston, MA, pp. 45-80.
- Telotte, J.P. Chapter 6 in “Science Fiction Film”. *The Science Fiction Film as Uncanny Text: RoboCop*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, and New York, 2001, pp 161-179.
- Verhoeven, Paul, director. *RoboCop*. Orion Picture, 1987.