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The meaningful art of one of the "worst movies of all time": Phil Tucker's *Robot Monster* (1953) as an existentialist critique of American modernity

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses one of the "worst movies ever made", Robot Monster *(Tucker, 1953), demonstrating how the text, through weirdness, pulpy absurdity, and cinematic ineptitude, examines and mediates on the existential anxieties of modern America during the Cold War. Through the strange language of gorilla-robots and alien invasion, the text articulates those existential anxieties that arise from our awareness of freedom versus the need to be contingent under increasingly interconnected societal conditions. As such,* Robot Monster *is also posited as a contribution with contemporary intellectual currents of the 1950s. This article will investigate the sense in which the key aspects of the film: Ro-Man society as mass society; Ro-Man as conflicted between 'must' and 'cannot'; Ro-Man as a gorilla-robot; and the* *perspective of Johnny's dream, articulate and mediate on those anxieties. An examination of* Robot Monster *allows us to appreciate the ways in which "bad" cinema creates alternative ways of seeing the problems and existential anxieties of contemporary American modernity.*

1950s American SF/horror cinema is usually read in terms of Cold War anxiety and paranoia. The consensus being, among academic and non-academic literature alike, that such films essentially reproduce contemporary Cold War anxieties. For Andrew Tudor, such films cinematically reproduce the 'collective concerns with invasion, communism and the atomic bomb' and for Paul Meehand, 'the techno-angst of the period engendered by nuclear weapons, the Cold War and the curious phenomenon of flying saucers' (Tudor 1989: 47; Meehand 2011: 145). Read as such, these films become merely symptomatic of contemporary Cold War concerns.

Mark Jancovich and Cyndy Hendershot, however, take fifties SF cinema as products of Cold War intellectual culture; that is, these texts are not passive vehicles through which contemporary anxieties are merely symbolized. Rather, they examine contemporary society through cinematic discourse, contributing an alternative mediation of contemporary concerns to Cold War discourse (Jancovich 1992; Jancovich 1996; Hendershot 1999; Hendershot 2001). The approach of this present article draws upon Jancovich and Hendershot, by analysing a particular fifties SF/horror text, *Robot Monster* (Tucker, 1953), as a mediation of existential anxieties about modernity in the post-war years. "Existential anxiety" refers to a concern with existence that results from a dual awareness of our ultimate freedom and ultimate finitude. The influential theological-existentialist Paul Tillich argued existential anxiety was the fundamental concern of contemporary sociological and cultural criticism in the 1950s (Tillich 2000: 35). There is precedent for this kind of argument: one rather absurd SF/horror film released in the same decade, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold, 1957) is often read as an existentialist examination of meaning and purpose in contemporary fifties suburban life (Bakewell 2016: 78, 284). The difference being that the latter is a quality picture that is admired critically and academically; *Robot Monster* is neither of these things, and yet it (among others) is engaged in a similar project.

Robot Monster is culturally cemented as a “bad” film (see: Runestad 2014; Telotte 2015; Collier 2016). This is, in part, a result of the fact that the film was produced in a few days on a tiny exploitation budget. From the script to the direction, the film displays a level of cinematic ineptitude which generates a profound absurdity. Resultantly, Robot Monster has been labelled one of the “worst movies of all time" by film critics, such as Harry Medved and Tim Healy. Such a reputation has ultimately challenged the possibility of any legitimate analysis of *Robot Monster* as a meaningful work. Films labelled as “bad” are more often than not dismissed as unworthy of analysis (Medved 1980: 193–200; Healy 1986: 60–63). According to Chris Dumas: ‘*Robot Monster* remains indigestible to film studies as it is currently constituted’, suggesting a need for a revision of distinctions between the intellectual capacities of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” forms of cinema (Dumas 2012: 39). The weird and absurd content of “bad” films can and should be considered an alternate form of social and philosophical discourse, as a unique means of articulation and mediation. In this article, I will challenge the dismissal of “bad” cinema as incapable of meaning and significance. The bizarre weirdness of a film like *Robot Monster* in fact allows it to mediate on contemporary anxieties in a unique way – a way which is distinct from more conventional cinematic/literary systems of critical and philosophical analysis of modernity.

It is frequently over-looked that *Robot Monster*, like many SF films of the period, is clearly aware of its own status as a piece of pulp SF/horror intended for the “monster kids” of the 1950s; children who eagerly devoured SF literature and horror comics. SF cinema was, in the early American 1950s, a relatively new invention. The break-up of the studio system in

1948 led to a decline in the number of cinematic products, and subsequently created a demand from theatres for cheaper independent pictures. Furthermore, the popularity of television increasingly deprived cinema of audiences. The SF film was, in the early fifties, a means of countering these developments, selling themselves – through bombastic trailers and posters – on the promise of spectacle and excitement that was unavailable on television. Such productions were attractive to theatre owners who were keen to attract a SF-hungry youth audience.

Robot Monster was a relatively early attempt at cashing in on the early fifties pulp-SF boom. *Robot Monster* utilized the motifs and symbols of SF as a means of mediating and articulating specific contemporary post-war anxieties. Fellow SF films of the early fifties were similarly engaged in conversations about contemporary anxieties. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Lourié, 1953), and *Them!* (Douglas, 1954) explicitly mediated the dangers of science and the existential threat of the atomic bomb. Additionally, *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby, 1951) and *Invaders from Mars* (Menzies, 1953) are both moderately xenophobic articulations of anti-communist attitudes. *Invaders from Mars*, like *Robot Monster*, is also framed as a child's dream. These are more famous, and accepted examples of the critical SF films of the fifties. A reading which positions *Robot Monster* within this broader genre reveals that the pulpy-SF "badness" of *Robot Monster* was part of general critical trend in SF cinema. SF provided the bizarre codes and absurd language with which to mediate a new way of seeing contemporary anxiety. It is the extent of *Robot Monster*'s ridiculousness and the lengths to which it goes to evoke the strangeness of pulp American SF, which makes it an interesting text to analyse.

Fifties American SF and horror films like *Robot Monster*, are not unlike more respected (highbrow) forms of socially/philosophically inclined art. Certainly, the surreal and nightmarish images which Jean-Paul Sartre employed in his existentialist fiction to characterize contemporary anxiety is not so alien to fifties American SF/horror content. Avant-garde authors like Franz Kafka and Sartre used strange and absurdist techniques because they were appropriately weird and horrific in an age which seemed rife with horror and anxiety. For Sartre, such imagery was certainly useful in capturing the existential turmoil in the years surrounding the war (Kafka [1925] 2014: 459–511; Sartre 1939: 27–58; Sartre 1946: 1–48; Sartre 1938). It is taken for granted that Kafka's giant bugs or Sartre's bought of dreamlike disorientation are meaningful. Yet, around the time of Sartre, pulpy-SF and horror films like *Robot Monster* were using similar techniques. Those absurd aspects of "bad" SF/horror films which draw criticism and ridicule can in fact be read as meaningful and alternate ways of mediating on contemporary modernity and the philosophical anxieties within it.

Robot Monster centres on the post-apocalyptic dream of the comic book obsessed Johnny (Gregory Moffett). Whilst on a picnic in Bronson Canyon with his sisters, the older Alice (Claudia Barrett), the younger Clara, and mother (Selena Royle), Johnny dreams that the alien robot, Extension Ro-Man XJ2 (George Barrows and John Brown) has invaded and wiped out almost all life on Earth. Right away, positioning the main narrative within a what Andres Runestad called a 'strange and surreal dream world' explains the absurdity of *Robot Monster* and makes the cinematic incompetence seem more appropriate (Runestad: 383). The narrative of *Robot Monster* is framed explicitly as a weird dream. The present article shall argue that *Robot Monster* functions as an alternative mode of social/philosophical discourse concerned with mediating the existential anxieties inherent within contemporary Cold War America. Each section will deal with a particular aspect of the film and how that aspect participates in the exploration of modern existential anxieties: the Ro-Men as a mass society – which also contextualizes *Robot Monster* within the wider fifties sociological/philosophical criticism of "mass society"; Ro-Man's existential choice between 'must' and 'cannot'; the cosmic gorilla-robot as code for dual anxieties about past and present; and finally, the framing of the narrative as young Johnny's comic-induced dream.

MASS (RO-)MAN

The section examines the ways in which *Robot Monster* mediates the existential anxieties associated with "mass society" through the character of Ro-Man. It is through the infamous and absurd image of the "gorilla in a diving helmet" that *Robot Monster* functions as a unique form of mass culture criticism.

"Mass society" was a prominent concern among contemporary Cold War intellectuals who lamented an increasingly interconnected society in which institutions and technology – controlled by corporate leaders and the State – eroded the liberal and creative underpinnings of American society. Social-democratic intellectuals, like C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, and Dwight MacDonald, thought that America workers and citizens were becoming deindividualized through absorption into homogenized mass society. Mills charged such a mass and interconnected society with having absolved humankind of its independent and autonomous ability to use their own reason (Mills 1951: xviii). Bell (1959) argued that work/employment within mass society had become increasingly rationalized; it was more planned and calculated with the aim of converting the worker into an efficient but dehumanized 'drone' (Bell, quoted in Pells 1985: 192–193).

Robot Monster mediates similar anxieties about mass society through the figure of Ro-Man. Ro-Man belongs to the robotic race known as the Ro-Men from the planet Ro-Man, under the directorship of the Great Guidance Ro-Man. As is clear from the prior sentence, Ro-Man society is interconnected, standardized, and homogeneous. The film follows Ro-Man as he comes to terms with the consequences of his deindividuated status as a Mass (Ro-)Man, where he has become deprived of the means of determining his own existence and meaning. Paul

Tillich defined this anxiety as ‘the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness’ which was ‘dominant’ in contemporary society (Tillich: 61–63, 35). The figure of Ro-Man indicates that mass society prompts a crisis of authenticity and meaning. This is represented by the fact that Ro-Men are products in a long line of standardized models, merely cogs in the interconnected Plan. Ro-Man’s official name, Extension Ro-Man XJ2, designates his status as merely an extension of the Ro-Men and their leader, Great Guidance. Ro-Man operates likewise, obeying the directions of Great Guidance as opposed to pursuing his own initiative. Ro-Man is alienated from constituting his own meanings by the controlling and interconnected society to which he belongs (and conforms). The artificiality of Ro-Man’s robotic being (and the general artifice of Ro-Man as a man in a costume) captures the artificiality of his existence. That Ro-Man is very obviously a man in a gorilla-robot suit works to the film’s advantage in this respect. It lends some conceivability to the idea that the diegetic Ro-Man was made/constructed – further explicating his lack of self-determination.

This is further entrenched by the method of communication between Ro-Man and Great Guidance, which is mediated through a television. Through the discourse between Ro-Man and the television, *Robot Monster* examines our harmful relationship to technology. Technology becomes another factor of modernity which denies authenticity. According to *Robot Monster*, we are enslaved by the media technology – systems of control and guidance which removes individual autonomy and capacities for self-determination. Media-induced estrangement is articulated through the relationship that Ro-Man has to the television set in *Robot Monster*. In SF cinema, the ability to screen the “future” enabled films like *Robot Monster* to visualize a future in which TV became the primary mode of control communication. From a production standpoint, low budgets meant that corners needed cutting. Communication through TV provided the most efficient means of allowing distant characters to converse. The television screen as a mode of communication is a prevalent motif within SF, both literary and cinematic.

Robot Monster is fully aware of this trope, which makes sense in the context of the dream framing narrative. The familiar TV-communicator trope is used well within the film's critical project. Indeed, the usage of television in a negative sense could be a critique of the power of television over contemporary Americans. Symbolically, Guidance Ro-Man and the television screen become one and the same; they are combined in the *mise-en-scène* of the film; *Robot Monster* unifies the dictator with television (recalling George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). *Television is Guidance*.

Television fosters two forms of estrangement and alienation for Ro-Man: firstly, he is estranged from participation in his own existential possibilities; secondly, he is alienated from others, including the family he is tasked to destroy. This is because the television denies the intimacy of physical contact with others. Both TV, and the impersonal "Calcinator Ray" that Ro-Man uses to kill, distance Ro-Man from the objects of his work. Yet, Ro-Man requires television, because he requires Guidance. In one scene, when Ro-Man has kidnapped Alice, a call starts to come through the television; Ro-Man becomes visibly distressed as he is caught between his lust for Alice and his need for televisual guidance. Ro-Man is contingent upon television for his sources of meaning and purpose. Anxieties of contingency – awareness of 'our being contingent in every respect, of having no ultimate necessity' – is mediated through Ro-Man's relationship to television and Guidance (Tillich: 44). This means that we are anxious not because we are contingent on things and as such deprived of autonomy; rather, anxiety stems from the possibility of *nothingness* and meaninglessness should we lose our contingency. Therefore, contingency ensures self-meaning. Ro-Man needs television because the sources of his self-meaning are contingent upon it.

Robot Monster mediates anxieties about our contingency on mass society. Ro-Man belongs to a mass interconnected species and unable to break from the guidance of the Plan. Indeed, the low-budget for the film required the same suit (albeit with altered helmets) to be used, such that the narrative homogeneity of the Ro-Men is a product of the lack of resources available to the filmmakers. In this respect, Ro-Man's lack of individuality is more conceivable. Through the strange and absurd images of multiple identical looking gorilla-robot monsters talking to each other through TV – an image that is distinctly and recognisably SF – *Robot Monster* discloses the multifaceted anxiety of contingency as the core of many contemporary critiques of technology and mass society in the 1950s. In short, Ro-Man laments his own self-alienation, his inability to determine his own meaning – however, without the Plan, the risk is that his life would have no meaning at all.

'I CANNOT, YET I MUST!'

Robot Monster is infamous for the strange dialogue ('Calculate your chances of survival: negative, negative, negative') scripted by Wyott Ordung with uncredited tampering by producer, Al Zimbalist. Yet it is through the dialogue that *Robot Monster* examines the existential confusion and crisis generated by mass society. As argued, Ro-Man is caught in an existential crisis of choice between conformity to the 'Law of Plans' or being 'like the Hu-Man' through a marriage to Alice; 'I cannot, yet I must! How do you calculate that? At what point on the graph do "must" and "cannot" meet? Yet I must, but I cannot!'. This iconic and rightly infamous line captures the weight of our existential decisions.

Ro-Man is reliant upon the 'Plan' and efficient calculation for meaning and purpose. This contingency comes in exchange for Ro-Man's individual autonomy, whereby he is discouraged from calculating for himself. As contemporary American philosopher, Eric Hoffer, argued: in a mass society the 'facts upon which the true believer bases his conclusions must not be derived from his experience or observation but from holy writ' (Hoffer 1951: 79). Ro-Man's inability to calculate accurately for himself reveals his existential dependence upon the Plan. The 'Law of Plans' provides a safety net for Ro-Man. In conforming to the Plan, Ro-Man is unburdened by the existential responsibility of independence. Life outside of the plan reveals the existential insecurity of independence, the anxiety of freedom. In Existentialist philosophy, anxiety (or 'anguish', for Sartre) arises when the freedom to determine ourselves is revealed to us (Sartre 1946: 25–27). Once Ro-Man breaks from the Law of Plans, he is faced with the responsibility for his own existence. In affluent post-war capitalism, quality of life became more determined by conformity and secure middle-class white-collar employment, as opposed to individual self-determination. Individualism and self-determination became more financially, socially, and existentially risky. The sacrifice of self for the mass was the price for inclusion. Interconnectedness filled the void of rootlessness and lack of individual direction. Furthermore, the possibilities for individual determination became more difficult as they were devalued by expanding structures of control and organisation (within sectors such as corporate and the State). Likewise, modernity, in *Robot Monster,* is conceived of as a conflict of choice between safe conformity and dangerous autonomous individuality. While the Plan gives Ro-Man's life a sense of meaning and purpose, it simultaneously deprives him of the ability to individually give his own life meaning. Without the Plan, Ro-Man is directionless and deprived of the guidance that gives life purpose. It is the awareness of the dangers of individualism – the risk or 'er-or' – that motivates Ro-Man's need for the Plan, for guidance. Yet, his need for contingency to the Plan conflicts with his 'Hu-Man' desires; love, lust, and independence. To indulge in these is to 'violate the Law of Plans', according to Great Guidance, which organize and provide meaning for the Ro-Men.

Existential anxieties about meaning and purpose fundamentally lay at the heart of fifties America. Society presented a choice between the safety of self-sacrifice and the danger of individual autonomy. However, *Robot Monster* shows that this is not a simple choice between one way of being or another. Rather, Ro-Man's initial choice to conform is essentially motivated by fear of death. Ro-Man is reluctant to 'be like the Hu-Man', not only because of his anxiety over contingency, but his fear of punishment for being different. The death sentence that Ro-Man is threatened with reflects the general death sentence imposed upon Johnny's family. The family is sentenced to death precisely because, as 'Hu-Man', they cannot conform to the Ro-Man way of life. One may sense in this an implicit critique of the imperialism of scientifically advanced societies – a theme frequently and self-consciously encoded within SF cinema and literature. Ro-Man tries to reconcile his commitment to the Plan with his budding emotions towards Alice through an alteration to the Plan that factors Alice in. Ro-Man essentially attempts to reconcile his work life with his private, emotional life. But Great Guidance repudiates this:

> Great Guidance: Earth Ro-Man, you violate the Laws of Plan. To think for yourself is to be like the Hu-Man!
>
> Ro-Man: Yes! To be like the Hu-Man! To laugh! Feel! Want! Why are these things not in the plan?
>
> Great Guidance: You are an extension of the Ro-Man and a Ro-Man you will remain. Now, I set you into motion: One: destroy the girl; Two: Destroy the family. Fail, and I will destroy you!

Independent calculation is deterred. For Great Guidance, 'to be like the Hu-Man' is to 'die a Hu-Man'. Essentially: conform or die. Consequently, conformity is motivated by fear of negation, the fear of existential risk. Additionally, note the xenophobia of Ro-Man towards the humans; especially when Ro-Man labels the humans as savage barbarians. There are clear undertones of racism and colonialism here, themes which are also evoked early in the film. Johnny, while playing "spaceman" comes across the foreign archaeologist (the actor, John Mylong, was Austrian). Johnny's xenophobia – 'Spacemen – you must die!' – is echoed in Ro-Man; Johnny's suspicion of foreigners is exposed when he says 'I still need to find out what they're doing here'.

In tackling conformity and choice, *Robot Monster* examines a child's relationship to freedom. The film is, after all, a child's dream. A rebellious child is often deterred by the threat of punishment; essentially, it is the freedom of childhood that is under threat in the post-apocalyptic world of *Robot Monster*. Johnny is among the last two children alive on planet Earth, and the authoritarian Ro-Man intends to eradicate them. Discipline is the negation or "death" of childhood freedom. *Robot Monster* was released in 1953, among increasing furore about the content of E.C. horror comics and attempts by the self-proclaimed authoritarian moral guardians to censor them; those very comics which inspired the film. As primarily a children's film, *Robot Monster* encodes certain childhood anxieties concerning an adult assault on the freedom of childhood. This dream aspect of the film will be returned to closer to the end of this article.

Ultimately, Ro-Man is presented with an existential choice: to continue to exist in conformance to the Plan, or to risk his existence through the dangerous freedom. Ro-Man is confronted with the choice to 'be like the Hu-Man', or to continue to function as a de-individuated and predictable extension Ro-Man. This conflict is evoked in Ro-Man's 'I cannot, yet I must!' moment. Ro-Man is caught between the anxiety of freedom – the knowledge that he *can* participate in his own creative meanings – and the anxiety of contingency which is concerned with the desire to maintain the existential safety of necessity.

THE APE FIGURE AND EVOLUTIONARY ANXIETIES

Ro-Man – the "gorilla in a diving helmet" – is an infamous and iconic symbol of "bad" fifties cinema. Tucker and Zimbalist wanted a robot antagonist, but the limited budget required compromise. George Barrows, owner of his own gorilla suit, was hired and outfitted with a robot helmet. This absurd construction grants Ro-Man greater conceptual meaning than many of his contemporary cinematic robots. The half-ape, half-robot design links the longer symbolic history of the literary/cinematic ape to more modern anxieties about technology and mass society.

For Jessica Metzler, fictional apes '[served] as a figure or reference point for enduring discourses about racial Others and horror' (Metzler 2012: 31). The cinematic/literary ape was often utilized as a device to encode racial and evolutionary anxieties. This symbol dates to Edgar Allan Poe's orang-utan killer in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (Poe [1841] 1998: 92–123). The ape was considered lower in the evolutionary hierarchy. Through the ape, the primitive past was equated with degenerate barbarism, uncontrolled sexual lust, and intellectual immaturity. These were characteristics which "civilized" modern society had repressed, but which continued to pose an existential danger. In Paramount's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Mamoulian, 1931), "civilized" Jekyll regresses to a distinctly simian Hyde who embodies carnal sexuality and irrational violence. This repressed doppelgänger format is repeated in films like *Captive Wild Women* (Dmytryk, 1943), *The Ape Man* (Beaudine, 1943), *Bride of the Gorilla* (Siodmak, 1951), and in non-gorilla pictures such as *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942) and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Fowler Jr., 1958). In such films, the ape frequently harboured sexual desires for (white) women. This is most famously presented in *King Kong* (Cooper, 1933). Interspecies romance raised anxieties about "miscegenation" – interracial interbreeding – the depiction of which was prohibited in the Hays Code (Hays 1930: 593–597). Ape figures mediated the potential threat posed to civilized modern society by invoking dual anxieties about racial "Otherness" and the return of the repressed primitive degenerate animalism. The ape concept not only pointed up the primitivism and racial deficiencies of others, but also figured them within contemporary society. The ape character mediates those existential anxieties about possibilities of negation; that is, fundamental in our genealogy is this repressed ape which threatens to undo the "progress" of civilized modernity. Intellectual discourse in the 1950s often reflected upon the threat of primitivism to civilization and civilized American society – particularly within the context of the rise of mass movements. Disgust at the totalitarian Soviet

Union was frequently mediated through primitivist and barbaric images in Cold War propaganda (see Pells: 83–120; Hendershot, 2001: 75–89).

Ro-Man figures within the existential evolutionary/primitivist anxieties that the ape embodied in cinema and literature. But Ro-Man goes further, developing the ape-character as a mediation on mass modernity. Runestad argued that Ro-Man (and the nonsensical inclusion of dinosaur stock footage from *One Million B.C.* (Roach, 1940)) was inspired by the successful 1952 re-release of *King Kong*: 'With *King Kong* a hot-property, it is clear why Tucker used a robot-gorilla' (Runestad: 138). *Robot Monster* mirrored the Ann-Kong "romance" with the relationship between Ro-Man and Alice. Though, unlike Kong, Ro-Man desired existential recognition of himself as an individual ('If I were a Hu-Man, would you treat me like a man?'). As a gorilla, Ro-Man trades in the anxieties about the threat posed by the irrational primitive animalism of the past. Ro-Man is a violent, physical threat; despite being a technologically advanced robot, Ro-Man displays the barbarity associated with apes. Moreover, Ro-Man is prone to irrational emotions and violence. He strangles the young Clara to death, and murders Roy in a fit of sexual jealousy; the struggle between the two functions as a struggle between two alpha males. Furthermore, his sexual lust is uncontrolled, violent, and irrational. In one scene, Ro-Man ties Alice up and also punches her – recalling the ape killer's misreading of social cues in Poe's aforementioned tale. Like an animal, Ro-Man is devoid of individuality and responsibility for himself. He obeys his master (Great Guidance), as a robot and a pet, and his calculating way can be read as instinct. The film's title is appropriate in this sense; Ro-Man is both a *Robot*, and a traditional ape *Monster*. Moreover, taken as a dream, Ro-Man's ape appearance as disclosive of Johnny's essentially xenophobic outlook on Otherness. Johnny's anxieties about miscegenation are encoded in the robot, considering Ro-Man desires for interspecies sex with Johnny's older sister.

Ro-Man develops the symbol of the ape through the absurd juxtaposition of the ape body with the robotic helmet. This relates evolutionary anxieties to the technologically advanced future. The robot-dystopia aspect of *Robot Monster* capitalized on current trends in SF – particularly pulp literature and comics. SF literature and novels during the forties and fifties evoked similar anxieties about evolution as we see in the ape figure of horror. These anxieties were more often projected forward into the future and concerned with evolution yet to come. Future evolution raised the possibility of negating humankind as a physical and ideological constant. Additionally, post-war SF literature was often concerned with scientific dystopia brought on as a result of humankinds own technological advances, in which humanity is replaced by something more evolved (Tymn 1985: 46). For instance, Robert Neville finds himself the ebb of the tide of evolution in his fight with the new vampire civilisation in *I Am Legend*, and Ray Bradbury's protagonists frequently encounter new forms of evolved life in *The Illustrated Man* (Matheson 1954; Bradbury 1951; Jancovich 2019). *Robot Monster* capitalizes on the popular theme of dystopia as a means of problematising "progress" and encoding anxieties about human (de)volution through the joining of ape with robot.

In *Robot Monster,* the racially-coded ape is modernized and reframed within the context of American existential anxieties about the impact of technological advancement on modernity. Ro-Man is a primitive ape wearing a robotic space helmet. Moreover, Ro-Man has a skull face in the theatrical posters, potentially suggesting the deindividuating/dehumanising effects of technology on features that distinguish individuals. The blend between a gorilla and dehumanized, deindividuated technology provides an interesting way of conceptualising anxiety about the interrelatedness of the primitive past and the advanced future. *Robot Monster* critiques technological progress in modern society. Jancovich argued similarly of *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958), that 'the story questions the distinction between "primitive" and "advanced" cultures' (Jancovich 2019; 273). Ro-Man problematizes the notion that herd-like primitivism is confined to the past. Herd-primitivism is reconfigured within the context of technological-scientific advances by casting the familiar gorilla ancestor as an obedient slave robot.

According to Tillich, modern technologically advanced and mass-organized societies, such as the Soviet Union, '[show] many traits of primitive collectivism' (Tillich: 97). Moreover, the 'liberation of autonomous reason' in such societies is enacted through 'scientific and technical achievements' (Tillich: 97). Individuals within these societies are deprived of the means of self-authorship due to the scientific-rational organisation of society. Something akin to Tillich's advanced neocollectivist society is mediated through Ro-Man society, in which autonomous self-creation and independent thought is displaced by machines and individuals become extensions of a single 'Plan'. Ro-Man's helmet captures those existential anxieties about a scientifically advanced future. Technology alienates us from ourselves, relating those anxieties back to the animalistic lack of existential autonomy; modern mass scientific society makes self-*less* animals of us. The ridiculous robot-gorilla hybrid of *Robot Monster* functions as a mediation of the dual anxieties concerning an increasingly interconnected society. This is a society that both fetishizes scientific advancement and evokes the primitivism of the animalistic past. The future is positioned as an evolutionary regression that has ultimately fostered an alienation and de-individuation. In the future, we may all become Ro-Men.

The negative meanings attached to the robot half of Ro-Man generally reflects *Robot Monster*'s overall outlook on the role of science in modern society. *Robot Monster* is critical of the encroach of unimpeded scientific rationalism on our humanistic ways of relating to the world. The character of Ro-Man evoked this overtly-rational outlook: 'I was built to have no emotions'. The Ro-Men are rigidly analytical and mathematical, motivated by precision and efficient calculation. For instance, Ro-Man's murder of Clara via strangulation is calculated, exact, and efficient. It is notable, though, that his use of physical means indicates the failure of the impersonal, technologically advanced "Calcinator Ray". The cool scientific-rationalism of

Ro-Man is contrasted with the humanism of the surviving family. Despite their hopeless situation, the family staves off despair. They attempt to indulge in those aspects of life that are intimately human, such as love, marriage, and religion. Religion is important in *Robot Monster* – and generally within fifties SF/horror cinema and literature (for instance, see Bradbury). God is often sought as a means of salvation and affirmation in such films amuck with mad scientists and soulless alien/robot terrors. In the same year that the Ro-Men replaced God with 'the Plan', God himself would intervene and defeat the advanced Martian invaders in *The War of the Worlds* (Haskin, 1953). The 1950s saw a revived interest in religion. The war had brought destruction and spiritual devastation, and the present was threatened by an increasingly positivistic and scientifically organized society. Now more than ever, moral and spiritual assurances were sought by contemporary individuals and intellectuals (Ratner-Rosenhagen 2019: 146). Fifties SF/horror films investigated why we need God, why we need commitment to faith and values. For these films, it is God that grants meaning to the core values that make us human, such as love and friendship. In seeking and affirming God, the importance of these values is affirmed. As such we affirm what it truly means to be human – a belief in God is a belief in humanity.

The family in *Robot Monster* affirm their human quality through the marriage of Roy and Alice, a wedding which transforms into a sermon. The Professor is figured as the best median for humankind. He affirms the positive humanitarian usage of science (he creates a cure for all illness) and does not worship the efficiency of reason at the expense of God and humanity, as the analytic Ro-Men do. As with many pictures of the period, *Robot Monster* is not critical of science in and of itself. Rather, it criticizes the scientific mentality as devaluing humanist ways of seeing. The invasion of the Ro-Men symbolizes this encroachment upon the realms of God and humanity by technological advancement and mass interconnected society. Reason should be the means to a humanitarian end and reason should not prompt a loss of humanity and of God. A similar figure to the Professor and Ro-Man is presented in another “bad” robot film: *The Colossus of New York* (Lourié, 1958). In the film, Dr Jerry Spensser, a humanitarian scientist working on curing world hunger, is killed in a car crash, but his brain is preserved in a robot. Spensser is reduced to a dehumanized reasoning machine which decides that exterminating starving people would be an efficient solution to world hunger. He becomes the antithesis of the Professor in *Robot Monster*; like Ro-Man, obsession with reason causes him to devalue humanity.

JOHNNY’S DREAM

An essential factor to consider when reading *Robot Monster* is the fact that the central narrative, and antagonist, is dreamed by Johnny. This means that the events and characters of the film precisely function in order to represent Johnny’s anxious relationship with the modern world he inhabits.

The brilliance of *Robot Monster* is that it can be believably read as a dream with its own internal logic. Johnny’s existential anxieties concerning freedom and negation in the adult world are expressed within this dream. As discussed, *Robot Monster* is clearly aware of itself as a piece of pulp SF. The obvious self-awareness and indulgence in popular SF motifs actually enhances the meaning of the subtext as it would relate to a child who consumes pulp SF. This awareness of pulp SF and lurid horror comics is indicated through the pallet of SF/horror comic covers over which the opening and closing credits roll. Johnny also roleplays pulp SF through his spaceman game at the beginning of the film. The subtext of *Robot Monster*, discussed above, is presented through the pulpy images that a fifties “monster kid” would dream about. It is through such media that existential anxieties concerning his sense of the world are disclosed.

Historically, there was concern in among adults in forties and fifties America that increased access to media, mainly television, was undermining the sociological construction of what it meant to be a child (Spigel 1998: 110–135). As well as television, the lurid horror comics from publishers such as E.C. Comics and pulp SF literature were feared to be among the mass media that were ‘giving children equal access to the ideas and values circulated in the adult culture’ (Spigel: 119–120). Concepts such as sex, violence, and war, undermined the innocence and purity that supposedly defined the ideological construction of the child. This media did not shy away from critical depictions of the adult world framed in the lens of SF/horror. E.C. Comics, for instance, regularly traded in political commentary and progressive themes (Duin 2019). When read as a dream influenced by popular SF/horror fiction, the pulpy post-apocalyptic narrative of *Robot Monster* becomes a process of mediation for Johnny. His own existential anxieties about the modern world are relayed to him through Ro-Man. It has already been noted that (sociologically constructed) definitions of adulthood are a potential existential negation of definitions of childhood – literalized in Ro-Man’s attempts to kill the fun-loving Johnny. The Ro-Men can be thus taken as dream code for the restrictive and ultimately homogenized adult world – framed as a totalitarian, robotic society enslaved by a machine-like world-view.

One significant way in which Johnny’s dream mediates on the adult world as robotic and mechanically routine is through the unscripted performance of George Barrows as Ro-Man. This is brilliantly conveyed when, Sisyphus-like, Ro-Man slowly makes his way up and down the hills of Bronson Canyon; Ro-Man is ostensibly on the commute to his murderous day-job. As director Larry Blamire observed: ‘The way [Ro-Man] walks, it’s just so everyday, it’s like a guy going to work… He’s the working stiff alien’ (Blamire, 2010). Similarly, in another scene, Ro-Man struggles through some bushes, angrily swatting away the branches. While the dialogue suggests Ro-Man as some unstoppable, remorseless extra-terrestrial monster, the deficient direction and Barrows irritable performance gives us a disgruntled commuter. This indirectly mocks the irritable monotony and purgatorial nature of the commute to work. The scenes of Ro-Man going about his business are completely absurd and hypnotic. Ro-Man is often filmed in a long shot when scaling hills (with evident difficulty) and crossing the dry, empty surface of Bronson Canyon. Ro-Man is tiny against the natural background. In some home releases of the film he becomes genuinely difficult to see, which is in-itself indirectly symbolic of Ro-Man's decentralisation in the world. Essentially, these factors of the dream humanize the robotic Ro-Man, creating the impression that a machine is essentially indistinguishable from everyday human beings; Ro-Man's life is as banal as every other adult's. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these scenes with Elmer Bernstein's epic soundtrack is utterly ridiculous and draws attention to the banality of most of Ro-Man's scenes.

For Johnny, a kid whose mind is set on the stars above, the modern world of conventional adult life may seem painfully boring. This attitude shown in his repudiation of Clara's desire to occupy the role of husband/father in the game of "house". For Johnny, everydayness and adult life resembles the monotonous, yet totalitarian and life-negating nature of the robots of his pulp magazines. These magazines articulate his fundamental anxiety about the negation of the freedom and authenticity of his childhood. After Johnny's dream is concluded, he agrees to play "house" with his little sister while Roy and the Professor come to join the rest of the family for dinner at their home. The ideological construct of the family is affirmed and normality is reasserted. Moreover, the potential for romance is indicated between Alice and the younger of the archaeologists. Johnny's anxieties are dismissed by the adults. When Johnny says that he has to keep an eye out for Ro-Man (suggesting the continued resonance of the dream for him), Alice replies: 'you're over doing this spaceman act; there really aren't any such things'. As the family departs, Bernstein's children-motif is disrupted by the sudden appearance of three super-imposed Great Guidance Ro-Men emerging from

Bronson Cave. For Dumas, the 'ontological leakage [suggests] that the everyday problems that appear in the child's dream have either been conclusively solved by the dream or hopelessly magnified by it: since the dream is coterminous with "real" life, it cannot end' (Dumas: 40). The ending may figure the dream as prophecy (as is the case in *Invaders from Mars*), but it also affirms the verisimilitude of the metaphorical subtext of Johnny's anxiety-riddled dream. These anxieties linger long after the nightmare is concluded.

CONCLUSION

The present article set out to display the sense in which a film as derided and ridiculed as *Robot Monster* can produce a unique way of mediating contemporary existential anxieties concerning modernity. Importantly, this is achieved through the absurd dreamlike quality enabled by *Robot Monster*'s ineptitude as a cinematic product, as well as its self-aware indulgence in pulp SF motifs. Analysis shows that *Robot Monster* primarily achieves this through the dreamed figure of the gorilla-robot, Ro-Man. Ro-Man mediates existential anxieties concerning contingency, alienation, and de-individuation as a result of modernity.

This reading of *Robot Monster* has been undertaken with a general view to treating film, particularly of the critically maligned "bad" SF/horror films of the 1950s, as a serious player within contemporaneous cultural and philosophical discourse. While the majority of studies of 1950s American cinema (both directly and indirectly) treated these films as representatives of Cold War anxiety and hysteria, this present essay, drawing upon the work of Jancovich and Hendershot, takes such films as deliberate and self-conscious means of mediating similar anxieties through the alternative language of low-budget, lowbrow SF/horror cinema. Future research into the contribution of "bad" films to social and philosophical discourse would be fruitful, because of the alternate ways of seeing that these films disclose. This analysis of *Robot Monster* has ultimately focused upon challenging notions that lowbrow "bad" SF/horror cinema is incapable of philosophical meaning and contemporary critical relevance in ways which are taken for granted in highbrow art. The absurdity and self-conscious ridiculousness of films such as *Robot Monster* and perhaps its 'closest relative', the Al Zimbalist-produced *Cat-Women of the Moon* (Hilton, 1953) is appropriate for mediating these anxieties (Runsetad: 396). Such anxieties were amorphous and more often than not defied clear conceptualization in writing. However, a film like *Robot Monster,* with clear dreamlike absurdity, adequately captures the experience of alienation and anxiety. A broadening of our critical appreciation of how meaning is conveyed and mediated that encompasses previously dismissed, "lowbrow" or "meaningless" works of art may lead to a re-discovery of more diverse and unique ways in which contemporary artists understood and mediated the anxieties of modernity – especially in the form of exploitation SF-horror cinema. Moreover, films like *Robot Monster* could be considered within the wider intellectual history of pop existential thinking in America – indicative of a more general American tradition of existential philosophising through absurd SF/horror cinema.

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