

Replicants R Us: The Crisis of Authenticity in *Blade Runner*

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Are you genuine? or only an actor? A representative? or that itself which is represented?—Finally you are no more than an imitation of an actor. . . .¹

In the manner of much speculative science fiction, the world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*² is both alienating and oddly familiar. The film lingers over flash technologies and jarring cultural encounters which establish the difference between its world and ours, and yet their continuity with our contemporary world is overwhelmingly compelling. Philip K. Dick, the author of the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* upon which the film was based,³ enthused about the aesthetic achievement of the film, saying that its milieu is 'like everything we have now only worse.'⁴ He

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, first published in German in 1889), p. 37.

² Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* Director's Cut (Warner Bros, 1992). Quotations and references herein refer to the 1992 Directors Cut, except where noted. The 1982 original cinematic release is denoted OCR; the 2007 Final Cut is tagged FC. The commencing running time of film citations is indicated in square brackets, in the format [h:mm:ss].

³ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: HarperCollins, 1993, originally published in 1968).

⁴ Dick, quoted in Gregg Rickman, *Philip K. Dick: In His Own Words*, 2nd ed. (Long Beach, CA: Fragments West/Valentine, 1988), p. 220.

intends this as compliment: the world of his novel is an environment of intense paranoia, oppressive conformity, hyper-simulation, urban chaos, massive ecological degradation, eerie depopulation, militaristic governmental regulation, and epistemological slippage.

The dystopia of the film is a close match to that of the book: a dark, post-apocalyptic world of advanced, unfettered capitalism; chaotic, high-density urbanisation; and a diminished yet authoritarian government. *Blade Runner* was produced in the early Reagan era, around the same time that theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Frederic Jameson were drawing attention to these same features of the contemporary 'postmodern condition'⁵. It is no coincidence that *Blade Runner* has since been hailed as an exemplar of postmodern imagination by a pantheon of cultural theorists,⁶ and has also served as one of the key inspirational texts for the influential cyberpunk movement.

This critical and creative attention is due, in part, to the film-makers' replication of Dick's method of extrapolating the conditions of today towards their asymptotes, a technique they called 'retrofitting'—the layering of imagined artefacts of the future (technology, in particular, but also cultural conditions) upon the fabric of lived reality today. This term, according to Syd Mead, the film's 'visual futurist' (or conceptual artist), 'simply means upgrading old machinery or structures by slapping new additions to them [sic].'⁷ Mead's modest account notwithstanding, the method resulted in a striking and convincing vision of the future that established *Blade Runner* as an aesthetic precursor to an entire generation of SF films. It imbued the movie with a bleak take on a future foreseeably extrapolated

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' *New Left Review* (July-August 1984), 146: 52-92. See also Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), which includes essays by Jameson, Jürgen Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, Edward Said and Gregory Ulmer.

⁶ Such as 'Guiliana Bruno, Andrew Ross, Kaja Silverman, Vivian Sobchack and Slavoj Žižek.' Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* BFI Modern Classics (London: British Film Institute, 1997), p. 36.

⁷ Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (London: Orion, 1996), p. 79.

from certain tendencies in the early 'eighties. Complete with near-total environmental degradation, marked social dysfunction and isolation, rampantly unethical corporate and state activities, the scene of *Blade Runner* became the perfect metaphor for the sequelae of contemporary cultural conditions of late capitalism.

This technique produces 'a combination of the new and the very, very used, just like the present.'⁸ But as cyberpunk novelist William Gibson notes, it is also about excess:

Scott understood the importance of information density to perceptual overload. When *Blade Runner* works best, it induces a lyrical sort of information sickness, that quintessentially modern cocktail of ecstasy and dread.⁹

Or, perhaps, quintessentially postmodern. Deckard's world is one of pervasive simulation and dissimulation. Furthermore, it is not just about the buildings, the institutions and the society: it is also about the humans. Nothing is exempt from the condition of generalised 'accelerated decrepitude,' Pris's gloss of J.F. Sebastian's physical condition [1:15:12]:

The psychopathology of J.F. Sebastian, the replicants, and the city is the psychopathology of the everyday postindustrial condition. The increased speed of development and process produces the diminishing of distances, of the space in between, of distinction.... The postindustrial city is a city in ruins.¹⁰

In the world of *Blade Runner*, all is decrepitude and ruination: all, that is, except for the replicants.

Technology has advanced to the point where the creation of bio-engineered adult human simulacra is possible: and since it serves both

⁸ Bukatman, p. 21.

⁹ Quoted in Michael Webb, 'Like Today, Only More So': The Credible Dystopia of *Blade Runner*' in Dietrich Neumann, ed., *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner* (Munich & New York: Prestel, 1996): 44-7, p. 45.

¹⁰ Giuliana Bruno, 'Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*,' *October* 41 (1987): 61-74, p. 65.

commercial and political purposes, this capability has been realised. It is a world of cold, clear-eyed pragmatism, which has re-embraced the slave-driven model of economic development. At the same time, it has refined its technological capability to the point where the differences between original and copy are not so much diminished as identifiably inverted: the original has become degraded while the copy has been perfected. Which is a bit of a problem for our eponymous protagonist, Rick Deckard.

The first thing anybody knew about Deckard came from his own admission at the start of the original cinematic release in 1982: he is a civil service hit-man, 'ex-cop, ex-blade runner, ex-killer' [OCR 0:08:29]. The tone and content of his voice-over establishes from the outset his cynicism, his self-loathing and his unemployed status. He follows up with the observation, 'Sushi, that's what my wife called me—cold fish' [OCR 0:09:07]. These short sentences immediately place Deckard in familiar cinematic territory, particularly when delivered with a flattened retrospective voice-over. He is the jaded ex-gumshoe of film noir: phlegmatic, emotionally detached (but probably secretly vulnerable), lonely, callous, tough on the world and tougher on himself, a survivor with bad habits and bad friends, if he has any friends at all. As the film progresses, we are confirmed in our initial broad assumptions: Deckard lives alone in a tolerably ordered but under-maintained apartment; he drinks too much, especially after a traumatic 'retirement'; his seduction style is characterised by violence when tenderness fails; he is pettily corrupt; he is intellectually uncomplicated but philosophically inclined, in a slightly awkward, street-wise way. The experienced cinema audience knows Deckard well enough from the opening lines and the topoi that follow, as an early 21st century version of the familiar, deeply ambivalent hardboiled film noir detective, walking the line between the mutually dependent worlds of crime and the law.

True to the genre, Deckard is engaged as much in the discovery of himself as in the investigation of a case. Notwithstanding the image of the tough, self-denying, aggressively outward-looking man of action, the archetype is always engaged in a search for identity, a deepening of the sense of self even if only through the confirmation that the world is a rotten place, and the only person in it that can be depended on is oneself. While the noir world is one where moral ambiguity pervades the action, where dubious methods are required to achieve imperfect results, the struggle is to

maintain 'the weary integrity of the private eye.'¹¹ Deckard fits this mould perfectly.

Despite being under constant attack as the action develops—ethically, professionally, physically, ontologically—and displaying a distinct lack of authority in any of these respects, Deckard somehow remains at the centre of the film's concerns. Indeed, it is perhaps his manifest mediocrity, in so many respects, that is the key to the film's almost morbid interest in scrutinising this hapless everyman in unflatteringly well-lit close-up.

Of particular interest is Deckard's emotional unresponsiveness. His lack of inflection bespeaks an incapacity for feeling: a question perhaps not richly explored in action SF cinema, but one that is developed throughout *Blade Runner*. The question is essential to the unfolding story, since the capacity for empathy is the one thing that sets humanity apart from its uncanny simulation. The importance of this categorical marker to the blade runners is clear enough, since they are tasked with identifying replicants by testing them for empathy: and then destroying them. The execution of these beings, who in every other respect appear human, requires the suppression or neutralisation of their own capacity for empathy. It is therefore essential that the blade runner forms a view of replicants that focuses solely upon their constructed nature, enabling him to objectify them to the point where he does not conceive of them as alive. This is not a new strategy for agents of the state involved in combat or conflict:

Moral distance involves legitimizing oneself and one's cause. It can generally be divided into two components. The first component usually is the determination or condemnation of the enemy's guilt, which, of course, must be punished or avenged. The other is an affirmation of the legality and legitimacy of one's own cause.¹²

¹¹ Lee Horsley, 'The Development of Post-war Literary and Cinematic Noir,' *Film Noir*, <http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Film%20Noir.html>, accessed 13 October 2008.

¹² Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1995), p. 164.

Deckard must first privilege empathy in order to 'diagnose' the replicants and place them outside the category of being, so that he is then exempted from the any requirement for empathy while executing them. However the exercise of this capability renders him vulnerable to the awareness that he—like many cops in many other movies—is differentiated from his quarry by little more than a star made of tin. The significance of this awareness lies in the fact that the opposing categories in this film run much deeper than just criminal and detective: they are human being and organic machine, and the loss of essential difference between these conditions of existence is at the core of Deckard's growing crisis.

With all of this going on—his disgust at himself, his loneliness, his reluctant return to a job he reviles, his powerlessness before the ruthless state, his realisation that little of substance separates him from his nonhuman prey—Deckard is ripe for an ontological crisis. As Scott Bukatman has it, '[h]is status as a human—physically, psychically, morally—is increasingly in doubt. He is, quite simply, out of control.'¹³ All he needs is one little thing to push him over the edge.

Deckard finds his tipping point when he goes to Tyrell's headquarters to trial the Voight-Kampff procedure on a new model of replicant. Tyrell asks to see it work on a human first: 'I want to see a negative before I provide you with a positive' [0:18:17]. While Deckard is not convinced of the point of this, he agrees to Tyrell's whim. It is clear that Deckard does not suspect anything at all, and yet by the time he has finished the test he has arrived at the remarkable conclusion that Rachael is actually a replicant who thinks she is a human.

After Rachael leaves the two men alone, the detective challenges the technocrat to explain the seemingly impossible:

DECKARD: She doesn't know.

TYRELL: She's beginning to suspect, I think.

DECKARD: Suspect! How can it not know what it is?

TYRELL: Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell. 'More Human than Human' is our motto. Rachael is an experiment: nothing more. We began to recognise in them a strange obsession. After all,

¹³ Bukatman, p. 81, emphasis original.

they are emotionally inexperienced with only a few years in which to store up the experiences which you and I take for granted. If we gift them with a past, we create a cushion or a pillow for their emotions, and consequently we can control them better.

DECKARD: Memories. You're talking about memories! [0:21:35]

Deckard has clearly had no inkling of this possibility, as his previous experiences with replicants under V-K testing are presumably similar to those of his colleague Holden with Leon at the beginning of the film: a replicant masquerading as a human, aware that he is about to be exposed. This new situation seems impossible to him, yet he maintains his professional demeanour throughout the test and pushes forward to an outcome, despite his failure to understand the results. His confusion is manifest in his alternation of pronoun choice when referring to Rachael: 'She doesn't know' is followed immediately by, 'How can it not know what it is?' Throughout the film, Deckard reveals his fundamental categorical orientation towards the replicants, through his choice of pronoun.¹⁴ At this point, Deckard reveals his deep uncertainty even though he knows that Rachael is a replicant. His ambivalence also manifests increasingly in his behaviour, particularly towards Rachael but also, to some extent, towards Roy. Most significantly, however, his confusion before the indeterminacy of the replicants' status doubles back and begins to prey upon his own conception of who—of what—he is himself.

'Memories. You're talking about memories!' This is a moment of truth for Deckard, as he realises that no one is safe from doubt about his or her ontological status. While Deckard takes some time to absorb the full import of the possibility of memory implants, the seed is clearly sown in this scene. All of his other dilemmas—his awareness of the moral similarity between himself and his quarry, his uncertainty about the ontological status of the replicants—come home to him once this final foundation of self-confidence (literally, confidence in the self) is undermined. For if machines can be implanted with memories and be unaware that they are not their own,

¹⁴ For example, his voice-over in the death scene refers to Roy as 'he' [OCR 1:43:06]—a point at which Deckard, like many of the critics, has apparently decided that Roy transcended his debased condition and earned human status. More on this below.

then an apparent sense of self is no evidence of the reality of the self at all. For any person this would be a frightening, vertiginous realisation, but for someone who thinks about these matters constantly, and who acts upon the distinction between human and replicant with lethal violence, the implications are, if possible, even more dire.

Am I me? Am I human? Am I real?—these are not questions that any person ever expects to confront, but Deckard is drawn unavoidably to the precipice by the casual fact of the possibility of memory implants. Deckard's problem is not merely one of not knowing, of the fact that nobody can know any more. From this point forward, clues abound to support the possibility that he is in fact a replicant—clues that are insufficiently persuasive to bring him to the conclusion that he is one, but that are frequent and suggestive enough to keep the idea alive as a very real prospect rather than a mere abstract possibility.

Scott Bukatman wrote in 1997 that, 'sometimes it seems that the question, 'Is Deckard a replicant?' has generated more discussion on the Internet than the existence of God.'¹⁵ The status of Neo in the Matrix trilogy probably holds the record these days, but it is a good line. The question is almost ubiquitous in digital resources devoted to the film and is present in a good deal of the 'analogue' writing on the film as well. However Bukatman makes the perceptive point 'that asking the question is more important than determining the answer (and further, it's not about Deckard, it's about us).'¹⁶

Deckard's dubious ontological status is gradually opened up against the unsettling background of the pervasive hyper-simulation of his world. His dawning reflection on what it is to be human inevitably take place in the context of his thinking about the difference between human and replicant—his ethical stance with regard to his job of retiring replicants ineluctably implicates his ontological self-awareness, particularly since the dominant indicator of replicant status is the absence of empathy. However the catalyst for his slide into ontological dissonance is his nascent understanding that all of the artefacts of memory—photographs, learned behaviours and skills, and even intimate recollections—are worthless as guarantors of selfhood.

¹⁵ Bukatman, p. 80.

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The problem is not whether or not another subject is a replicant: the problem is that a subject cannot know for sure that she is herself human.

The most commonly cited signifier of replicant status in *Blade Runner* is the presence of red eyes, a device that the attentive audience will have observed early in the film in Tyrell's artificial owl, and repeatedly (although not unfailingly) in Rachael. The other replicants also show flashes of red on occasion although it is not ubiquitous (their status having been established early, perhaps it was not deemed necessary). Deckard's eyes appear red in the scene with Rachael after she has saved his life by shooting Leon [1:02:58], although it must be said his eyes do not reflect red elsewhere in the film. This signification of replicant status is strictly a cinematic device, designed as 'a tip off for the audience,' according to Ridley Scott.¹⁷ As an item of the film's vocabulary, it is understood to be external to the narrative frame and thus unavailable to Deckard as a diagnostic tool. It certainly gives the punters plenty to think (and write) about, however, when Deckard's slightly out of focus eyes glow red when Rachael asks whether he'd hunt her down if she fled: 'No I wouldn't. I owe you one. But someone would.' The audience is already alerted to the red-eye clue at this moment by Rachael's eyes, which are virtually at their most reflective just before Deckard's eyes come into view. It is also probably not insignificant that this key sign is shown us in a scene where they are discussing the niceties of the hunting down of replicants. The idea that there is a serried army of blade runners all waiting to go out into the field adds both to the sensation that blade runners are not so dissimilar to the armies of replicants, and to the speculation that this particular blade runner is just another replicant manufactured to do dirty and dangerous work.

There are other clues laced throughout the film that function clearly enough for us, but are for the most part unavailable to Deckard. They include:

the narrative doubling of Deckard and Roy;¹⁸

¹⁷ Sammon, p. 383.

¹⁸ Joseph Francavilla, 'The Android as Doppelgänger,' in Judith B. Kerman, ed., *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* 2nd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997): 4-15, p. 12.

- the muted interpolation during Rachael's V-K test of Deckard's words from a subsequent scene when he proves to Rachael her status ('... bush outside your window ... orange body, green legs ...' [0:20:26]);
- the laden significance of Rachael's enquiry of Deckard about whether he has ever undergone the V-K test [1:04:39];
- the physiognomic resemblance between Deckard and Holden ('are they the same model of [replicant] blade runner?'¹⁹); and
- the architectural similarity of the Tyrell building and Deckard's apartment, both of which are Mayan inspired.²⁰

Additionally, the theory that Deckard is a replicant has been reinforced by published accounts of the film-makers' intention to create the suggestion, if not the firm conviction, of Deckard's replicant status in the viewer's mind.²¹

The film also contains narrative elements that offer clues to the thoughtful audience, while contributing to Deckard's own growing sense of disquiet. After Deckard callously dismisses Rachael's photographs and memories as evidence of her human status (and after she has fled in anguish), he sits down to his piano and looks over his own photographs [0:39:55] before succumbing to reverie. Both of these events are recalled later in the film: Rachael plays the piano in a subsequent visit to Deckard's home, musing about the source of her ability to play (whether the skill is hers or Tyrell's niece's); and the unicorn dream becomes relevant in the final scene. While this juxtaposition is ironic from the audience's point of view, it is also likely to be suggestive to Deckard.

The unicorn dream is already functioning to support the collapse of the distinction between Deckard and the replicant even before the appearance of the origami unicorn in the film's closing scene: while the concept of replicant dream is not explored in the film, the title of the novel—*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—is gently insistent on this point. Deckard's dream takes place at a stage when it has become reasonable to suppose that replicants, too, may dream, as the gulf between the two

¹⁹ Bukatman, p. 81.

²⁰ Dietrich Neumann, 'Blade Runner Film Synopsis,' in Dietrich Neumann, ed.: 148-52, p. 152.

²¹ See, for instance, remarks made by Ridley Scott and members of the crew in Sammon, pp. 359-64 and 390-92.

categories of being diminishes. Additionally, the grammar of popular cinema provides that dream may be understood to function like memory and is somehow linked to it, the one often being mistaken for the other in narrative set pieces. Accordingly, Deckard's dream may be written down as the equivalent of the replicant memory experience, with the same effect of adding to the ledger of experiences common to both replicant and human that had been regarded previously as the exclusive preserve of humanity.

More generally, dream and remembering are taken to be quintessentially human characteristics, proof of a dynamic psychical life. Similarly, the capacity to play the piano, to make music—like Roy's capacity to speak poetically at the end of his time—savours of those things that we hold to be essential about our humanity. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent to the audience that these phenomena may no longer be employed as markers of humanity. This loss of signification takes place equally inside the frame of this film: as Deckard sits dreaming, tinkering on his piano, he realises that he too can no longer have recourse to these phenomena as evidence of his humanity. Equally, it dawns on him that his whole life prior to the start of the action may be a fabrication: for all he knows, he may have been freshly commissioned, complete with teeming memory implants and family photographs, specially to do this job. Like Rachael, he can no longer rely on the truth of anything, not even his most personal possession: his own life story.

On close inspection, the film begins to offer plenty of evidence—particularly in the dialogue's word-choice—to support ontological slippage once the possibility has been firmly established of the unknowability of identity (recalling that Deckard has not just heard about the memory implants, he has verified their effect in Rachael). Most of these hints are ambiguous, their double meaning possibly only intended for the entertainment or provocation of the audience, and it is quite consistent to read these titbits as merely ironic, rather than inferential, as 'joking and suggestive, rather than definitive.'²² Nonetheless, Deckard is gripped by a 'panic in the face of the superhuman Nexus 6 replicants [which] is a logical extension of the anxiety that now marks his character throughout'.²³ he is

²² Bukatman, p. 81.

²³ Bukatman, p. 81.

looking for signs, and the possibly innocent turns of phrase adopt an ominous alternative meaning for someone looking for clues about his own condition. Their sheer frequency, too, could be expected to offset the innocent interpretation that could account for them individually.

These hints start modestly with Tyrell's smile in response to Deckard's amazement that replicants can be 'gifted' with pasts [0:22:10]. While this might be an inventor's satisfaction at Deckard's astonishment, or a slightly more sadistic pleasure at a human's dawning awareness that looking inward is no longer a gauge of subjectivity, it is also plausibly read as smug amusement at yet another replicant who is 'beginning to suspect.' Later, when Deckard invents an improbable story about being a union official from the American Federation of Variety Artists' Confidential Committee on Moral Abuses in order to get close to Zhora, she laughs and asks him, 'Are you for real?' [0:50:18]—a common enough turn of phrase, and understandable in light of the nerdy persona he adopts, but an apposite enough one too.

These linguistic tics may be just coincidence or a bit of fun, up to a point, but they become more meaning-laden once Roy Batty confronts Deckard in the Bradbury Building in the film's final act. Roy, the leader of the rebel replicants who 'even inexplicably knows Deckard's name,'²⁴ increases the ironic weight of his remarks until it seems he is labouring a point—probably, that he knows Deckard is having ontological doubts: or perhaps, that he knows that Deckard is not human. When Roy enters the apartment, Deckard shoots at him and misses: Roy calls out,

Not very sporting to fire on an unarmed opponent. I thought you were supposed to be good. Aren't you the 'Good Man'? Come on, Deckard: show me what you're made of. [1:31:28]

This short piece of dialogue plays upon several aspects of Deckard's uncertain status at once, and with a dense ambiguity at play in each line. In the first sentence, the propriety of his actions is called into question: alternatively Roy is making fun of the romantic, humanist notion of sportsmanship, a notion that ill suits the life-and-death contest. In the second, Deckard's virtue is cast in doubt; or perhaps again it is the idea of

²⁴ Francavilla, p. 10.

virtue that is being ridiculed. Then again, the remark is also loaded with a critique of his skill, in which case the scorn is for having missed. In the third sentence Roy adopts a highly mocking tone on the phrase 'Good Man,' his delivery preceded by a pause to emphasise the contested status of the appellation: while he does not utter the words 'so-called,' this is clearly Roy's meaning, noting that the 'Good Man' is a part to be played, a character, a type (the spectre of the production-line haunting his meaning). Is Deckard just a replicant cut from a mould to perform the tasks of the 'Good Man'? This sentence also serves as a bridge to the next: the line that teases Deckard about his composition, his essence, his subjectivity: 'Come on, Deckard: show me what you're made of.'

Roy develops this idea as the chase continues throughout the Bradbury Building. When he catches hold of Deckard, he scornfully asks, 'Proud of yourself, little man?' which recalls Bryant's threat to Deckard at the outset: 'If you're not cop, you're little people' [0:12:42]. He harks back to the slight on Deckard's skill in the double meaning above with his next line, 'Come on Deckard, I'm right here, but you've got to shoot straight.' Deckard shoots and misses again. Roy responds with, 'Straight doesn't seem to be good enough,' a line that carries a modicum of sexual mockery to it: perhaps it is a slight on Deckard's performance; perhaps it presages Roy's homoerotic libidinal extravagance to come.²⁵ Whichever his meaning, the innuendo leads in the next sentence to a linking of Deckard's combat skill with his sexual prowess: 'You better get it up, or I'm gonna have to kill you! Unless you're alive, you can't play, and if you don't play—.' The slight to Deckard's virility suggests the question, 'What kind of man are you?', a question with a rather more complex meaning in this context than a simple sexual taunt. The line then trails into nonsense, but in dwelling on the state of being alive, Roy is taunting Deckard about his own status: human or replicant? real or artificial? alive or dead?

The chase concludes with Roy saving Deckard and then sitting down to die. Gaff, the annoying familiar of the police chief, is quickly on the scene (again), announcing his presence with a statement that leans more heavily on the implications for Deckard's subjectivity than even those that

²⁵ The culmination of 'Rutger Hauer's fabulously campy performance' in which Roy becomes 'a kind of homophobic nightmare' to Deckard, according to Bukatman, pp. 84-85.

precede it: 'You've done a man's job, sir,' he calls out to the exhausted blade runner [1:43:48]. Like the rest of these lines, it can be read innocently enough: in this case, it could be simply a slightly mannered acknowledgement of a job well done, if a little condescending. But it comes across as a quite peculiar formulation. Particularly with the weight of Roy's taunts right behind it, it bears the possibility that Gaff knows, or thinks he knows, that Deckard is a replicant.²⁶

Throughout all this narrative progression, the original cinematic release's voice-over offers some insight into Deckard's state of mind. It returns constantly to the theme of the contradictions in the replicants' humanistic practices, contradictions that are resolved if the distinction between replicant and human is obliterated. As the action progresses he begins to draw parallels between his own life and the replicant experience. Yet despite the OCR's more direct access to Deckard's awareness of the parallels between human and replicant, the sensation of his escalating ontological paranoia is more directly felt once the safety of the guiding voice-over is out of the way. The standard formulation is that in the original release, Deckard might be a replicant: in the Director's Cut, he is one.²⁷ The clincher is supposed to be the unicorn dream [0:40:55], and its correlation with Gaff's silver-paper unicorn that he has left outside Deckard's apartment [1:47:10].

Gaff's silver-paper unicorn has been read to indicate that Gaff has the same access to Deckard's memories or dreamscape as the latter does to Rachael's. Graeme Basset has suggested that this would support the theory that Gaff is himself a replicant, as he knowingly references Deckard's 'private' narrative.²⁸ However the theory seems unlikely and unnecessarily complex. It is sufficient that Gaff is simply the real blade runner of human agency, who is using Deckard as his weapon or tool: there is no need to

²⁶ Incidentally, Edward James Olmos, who played Gaff in *Blade Runner*, provides an intriguing link to the new version of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-), the most thoroughgoing exploration of the unaware replicant scenario since Scott's film. Olmos plays the pivotal character of Commander (later Admiral) Adama of the Galactica. See www.imdb.com/title/tt0407362, accessed 13 October 2008.

²⁷ See for instance Sammon, pp. 364 and 377.

²⁸ Graeme Basset, *Starburst* (53) January 1983, p.5, quoted in William M. Kolb, 'Blade Runner Film Notes,' in Kerman, ed.: 154-77, p. 177n.

posit an infinite regression of replicant-controlled replicants (even Tyrell does not survive this move!). At any rate, Gaff has an uncanny habit of materialising at key moments throughout the film, such as the retirement of Zhora [0:57:37] and the death of Roy [1:44:04]. When he returns Deckard's gun to him just after Roy expires, it is apparent that Gaff had not only been observing the chase (in order to know where the gun fell when Deckard had dropped the weapon while scaling a wall [1:34:52]), but that he had been close enough to hand to retrieve the weapon while the chase was still underway.

Gaff's parting shot—'It's too bad she won't live. Then again, who does?' [1:44:24]—is perhaps an observation about the fleeting nature of human existence, or it could be a remark about the replicants' foreshortened allotment. Whatever the truth of the actual status of the enigmatic Gaff (and his own understanding of it), his access to Deckard's inner life is a provocative note to the film, and a deeply troubling consideration for Deckard. In particular, the unicorn figure is clearly intended to demonstrate that Gaff has a power over Deckard—and possibly always has had—that transgresses the screen of privacy that individual identity affords. If Rick Deckard feels manipulated, he is entitled to feel that it may be due to something more than a callous police state exploiting a citizen for its own ends. His ontological slippage incorporates and extends the sensation that he is merely an instrument of the state, in a more literal sense than he had previously suspected.

While Gaff may be either an unpleasant rival or some kind of puppet-master, Deckard's nemesis, in the end, is the last surviving and most formidable of his prey, Roy Batty. Despite the views of the big box office star, who argued that 'the audience needed somebody to cheer for'²⁹ in the person of Rick Deckard, it is Roy Batty who ultimately assumes the subjective centre stage. Deckard's ontological confusion never really resolves itself, resulting instead in a kind of resignation, and the playing out of the discovery of subjective substance is transferred onto the figure of Roy as the film advances. Deckard is decreasingly able to adopt the stance of human agency, retreating to the reactions and reflexes of the brainstem. Instead, it is Roy who expands into the territory of the human, demonstrating an extraordinary facility for all of the rational, philosophical

²⁹ Sammon, p. 362.

and creative pre-cortical functions, in combination with a brimming, unbridled essence.

The fear of substitution, already rampant in the film as the fundamental drive motivating the humans' abhorrence of the replicant, drives a maniacal panic in Deckard as battle is closed. The contest for the domestication of Roy's exorbitant libidinal energy is played out in the film's climactic chase scene [1:30:02 - 1:41:48], in which Roy turns the order on its head and pursues his pursuer, Deckard. As they weave through the Bradbury building, Roy ruptures the fabric of urban space in the same way that Deckard's Esper machine ruptures the plane of the photograph earlier in the film [0:41:47]. Roy's mythicity is most evident in this sequence: the laws of physics seem not to apply to him (apart, that is, from the inexorable progress of time).

But the fun is gone from the chase for Roy once Deckard attempts his desperate leap from the roof of the Bradbury onto a neighbouring building. Deckard dangles high above the streets, barely gasping onto a girder in an iconic scene of human fragility. Roy, in contrast, stands contemplatively, holding a dove in his crossed arms, before leaping proficiently across the chasm. His mood serious now, Roy stands above Deckard, taking a measure of grim satisfaction from his mortal panic, along with a sort of anthropological curiosity: 'Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave.' Without signalling his intention at all, when Deckard finally loses his grip many stories above street-level, Roy catches him by the arm with his punctured hand, and dumps him unceremoniously on the rooftop. It is his last vital motion.

When Roy sits down to die, the film employs a dense series of mechanisms to inscribe Roy's membership of the order of humanity. His quixotic preservation of Deckard's life, his graceful acknowledgment that the game is up for him, and his contemplative, regretful tone as he utters his last words, all contribute to the late reinvention of this charming villain as one of the genuine 'good guys': as one of us. His poignant last speech—effectively a self-narrated eulogy—is an act of literary seduction that is intended to demonstrate to the audience our affinity for this unfortunate being in his extremity. It is a beautiful moment that is designed to anthropomorphise Roy: poetry, like playing the piano, must surely be the mark of humanity (and certainly not of a machine).

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. — Time to die. [1:41:59]

Roy offers a rueful smile, and bows his head to die, the overcranked camera capturing the moment of expiration in voyeuristic slow-motion.

And still this is not all. As Roy's life-force departs him, the dove is released into the Director's Cut's only depiction of blue sky.³⁰ It is difficult to disagree with Bukatman's assessment that this is 'easily the most banal image in the film.'³¹ This scene reprises the Christ imagery already introduced when Roy pierced his hand with a nail to stimulate his failing body during the chase. The imagery clearly suggests redemption and transcendence after an exhausting trial. Leaving nothing to hermeneutic chance, the original cinematic release makes the case in Deckard's voice-over (which had been silent for over 46 minutes of film):

I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life; anybody's life. My life. All it wanted was the same answers the rest of us wanted: where do I come from? where am I going? how long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die. [OCR 1:43:02]

A significant majority of the *Blade Runner* criticism regards this scene as a Damascene conversion for Roy, as though he has entered into some kind of state of grace: specifically, a sublime state of humanity. Joseph Francavilla argues that 'in saving Deckard, he understands he is saving until the last

³⁰ Mercifully edited out in the 2007 FC. The 1982 OCR includes a sequence at the very end showing Deckard and Rachael driving through the green countryside under a blue sky after fleeing the city. Its temporal proximity to the blue sky in Roy's death scene retrospectively diminishes the effect of the death scene somewhat, so its corniness only came into stark relief in the 1992 DC.

³¹ Bukatman, p. 85. Not that the FC is free of banality: in the enthralling meeting between Roy and his maker, Eldon Tyrell, the FC substitutes the menacing 'I want more life, fucker' of the earlier versions with the anodyne, for-TV bowdlerisation, 'I want more life, father' [1:20:18].

minute that part of himself which is truly human.³² Ridley Scott considers that Roy's actions are 'an endorsement in a way, that the character is more human than human, in that he can demonstrate a very human quality.'³³ Charles Lippincott feels that the ending is saying, 'Look at how human the replicants are.'³⁴ Norman Spinrad, Dick's long-time friend, in discussing the translation of the book to the screen, claims that

when the dying replicant Roy Batty, who moments before was relishing the slow, sadistic death he had been inflicting on Deckard in vengeance for Deckard's cold extermination of his comrades, reaches out his hand and saves Deckard's life after visible consideration at death's door, *Blade Runner* achieves the ultimate in true faithfulness to the novel.

In a scene that was not in the book, it poignantly and forcefully manifests Dick's true meaning in entirely cinematic terms, that 'human' and 'android' are moral and spiritual definitions and not a matter of protoplasm. That, by achieving empathy, a manufactured creature can gain its humanity, just as by losing it, a natural man can become a human android.³⁵

Later in his book, Spinrad sums up the pro-transubstantiation position, when he argues that 'What raises the android [sic] Roy Batty to human status in *Blade Runner* is that, on the brink of his own death, he is able to empathize with Deckard.'³⁶

Critics do not determine a film's meaning, however, and it would be a simple enough move simply to quarantine the reading of *Blade Runner* from the views of its critics, were it not for the fact that the film provides a substantial (if not unambiguous) basis for the criticism's humanist-patriotic fervour. The film bends its own rules in a quite deliberate attempt at seduction: it is not enough that Deckard survives and Roy dies: it is crucial

³² Francavilla, p. 11.

³³ Ridley Scott, quoted in Sammon, p. 193.

³⁴ Charles Lippincott, quoted in Sammon, p. 195.

³⁵ Norman Spinrad, *Science Fiction in the Real World* (Carbondale & Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1990), p. 89.

³⁶ Spinrad, p. 210.

that Deckard survives because Roy dies. Not only that, but Roy has to die in a state of acute existential awareness. That is why it is important to the film's logic that Deckard's deliverance comes courtesy of Roy's unexplained early obsolescence. The replicant has been cheated of 2 months from his 4-year allotment, the equivalent of shortening a human male's lifespan by $3\frac{1}{4}$ years.³⁷ This truncation of his lifespan adds a heightened sense of panic and compression to the action, as Roy senses that not even the appalling conditions of slavery are to be applied fairly. His persistence is a matter of pure will, ensuring that the timing of his death is a question of consciousness and not coincidence. Had Roy simply happened to expire at the moment he had Deckard's life in his hands, his behaviour would have been less attributable to an internal state than to an almost reflexive response to the shutdown protocols. And of course, had Roy still two more months to live and therefore not been confronting death in the very fibres of his being, his sudden access of mercy towards Deckard would have been implausible, in light of the fate of his other victims (such as Chew, Tyrell and even the unfortunate Sebastian). As it is, with his life bleeding away before his time, and his endurance entirely a function of his mind, Roy's attitudes and actions at his moment of grace are clearly intentional, in both the common and philosophical senses. The rather convenient device—of having Roy hold onto his foreshortened life by sheer effort of will, until he has Deckard within his power—enables the film not only to negate the threat to the human order constituted by the clearly superior replicant, but also to completely neutralise that threat through a kind of deathbed conversion by proxy. With Deckard an ontological lost cause, the film attempts a recovery of its equilibrium on the question of the threatened categorical integrity of humanity by the means of Roy's assumption to human status. It is not enough for the replicant to be beaten: he must first be made an honorary human, to remove the category of the alternative. The film is ambivalent on this score, performing this sleight of hand while simultaneously sustaining interest in Deckard as a more humble, complex and divided being who denies the logic of opposition and reclaims his right to choose how to live. The critics are not ambivalent at all: the conservative impetus expressed in Roy's death scene is enthusiastically endorsed by most of the commentariat.

³⁷ Calculation based on ABS life expectancy estimates for an Australian male born 2002-4 of 78.1 years. Dennis Trewin, *Year Book Australia 2007* [Number 89] (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007), pp. 129-30.

The only problem is that this move does not really work.

Roy constitutes a threat to the order because the sole mark of his difference to the human is his perfection. The situation is, in one sense, too much for the text to handle. *Blade Runner's* deployment of his superiority is ambivalent, even cautious, although the film draws a good portion of narrative energy from Roy's paradoxical relation to humanity, particularly in the final acts. Whatever his contribution, the film is ultimately unable to tolerate the categorical offence to the human order that his existence constitutes, even as it celebrates his singularity. It is as though Roy is truly monstrous, his exorbitance frighteningly out of the control of the cinematic directive once it has been unleashed, and so the closure of his 'story' is constructed to contain the assault on subjective propriety which he constitutes. Whereas Deckard is ostensibly the figure of identification in the film, Roy is unstable, a mythical creature, a threat to the order which must be checked, contained, harnessed or, failing that, destroyed. Deckard's dilemma threatens his own reliance upon the ontological order (his ontological paranoia pulling the rug out from under himself), but Roy threatens it from the outside, with audacity and impunity. Deckard is mired in the same ontological mess as the rest of us, with a savage twist, but Roy is unfettered by these complexities: he is free to self-create, to 'revel in his time,' in the words of his creator [1:22:02]. Roy deconstructs the meaning of what it is to be a human being: not giving a damn for the 'human,' and recognising that the valid category is being. The film's commitments to the Cartesian order will not allow such a violation of the rules of engagement to stand unchallenged.

On the other hand, Deckard himself represents the possibility of the detachment of the individual from the order of the human, where membership of that tribe demands submission to the logic that ordains the annihilation of the other—in this case, the replicant. The moral logic of the film opposes that order as well, and Deckard's ontological and ethical struggle is an instance of the obligation of the individual to live ethically, and to pursue self-awareness regardless of the pressure to submit. In leaving with Rachael, Deckard is ultimately joining Roy in his refusal to submit to the order and his determination to make his own play. Roy's mode of exuberant being has offered Deckard a glimpse of life unconstrained by 'humanness.' Like Roy, Deckard only truly becomes a subject when he

makes this leap of faith in himself. It is a long way from a happy-ever-after ending but, along with hope and some small measure of time, it offers dignity and a kind of integrity.

On this reading, it is not important to resolve the question of whether Deckard is a replicant: it is not even important to Deckard himself, although he would be likely to differ on this point. But the categorical distinction between the nature of human existence and the replicant condition collapses, as the contingency and constructedness of consciousness puts us all in the same boat. We see that Deckard's question to Tyrell about Rachael—'How can it not know what it is?' [0:21:40]—was always its inverse, applied to himself: 'How can I know what I am?' Deckard is in a position to realise, finally, that the question does not demand an answer, because it can no longer have an answer. The challenge for the *Blade Runner* viewer, of course, is to empathise with Deckard, to put ourselves in his shoes, and to ask: How can any of us know what we are?

'The Deckard question' does not go far enough, then, in one sense, and is ultimately irrelevant in another. On the one hand, the discussion tends to be absorbed in questions of evidence, ignoring the further implications of a positive answer: what does it mean for a man to discover that he is in fact a machine? On the other hand, and more to the point, it overlooks the possibility that *Blade Runner* presents us with a situation where all ontological certainty is erased, in a more practical and fundamental way than the incomplete scepticism of the Cartesian Cogito.³⁸ Deckard/Descartes is racked with doubt, only without the possibility of a retreat to theology to re-establish the foundations of his system of selfhood.³⁹ When there is no way of knowing whether one is, in fact, a replicant implanted with memories, or an 'authentic' human possessed of one's 'own' memories, the point is that the difference is effectively collapsed. It is no longer an epistemological question of whether one can know one's status: it is a post-

³⁸ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 1637: and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641. Reprinted in English in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny (Cambridge: CUP, 1984–91), vols. 1 & 2 respectively.

³⁹ Philip Dick's homophone was spotted by Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993), p. 12.

ontological question of the ruin of the distinction upon which such knowledge is founded. The simulacrum is, effectively, the real, and therefore the category of 'the authentic' has disintegrated under the pressure of the challenge to its hegemony, and is itself rendered meaningless.

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