The Kingdom is Within: Religious Themes and Postmodernity in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

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Blade Runner[1] is a film rich in religious symbols, and the fact that they are drawn from disparate and seemingly unrelated traditions is, on one level, part of the eclectic postmodern aesthetic for which it is well known. But although this fragmentation of religious ideas suits the vision of its designer, it is possible to read its religious imagery more comprehensively and in a way that suits the film's philosophical aspect. While a Western orthodox interpretation of the Christian symbols used in the film at best suggests a series of independent messages, a Gnostic reading of those symbols reveals a far more unified work. *Blade Runner* uses Gnostic ideas of material bondage and redemption to assist in its treatment of the postmodern condition. Appropriately for a postmodern text,[2] *Blade Runner* does not try to offer the viewer final solutions, but it does suggest a theological trajectory of personal authenticity which some believe to be a valid response to postmodernity.[3]

Blade Runner belongs in the sub-genre of science fiction which explores what it means to be human,[4] and to the casual observer there are some obvious religious themes. We have a creator-god and one of his creatures demanding satisfaction on a question of great importance. But what may appear as a very general mythological theme is actually far more specific, and has a religious precedent. This religion is Gnosticism, and an outline of its doctrines is necessary to illuminate references to it in the film.

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1 Discussion in this paper refers to the later version of the film, the 1992 'Director's Cut', because the earlier release is a compromised work containing elements that weaken its philosophical aspect: a voice-over, omitted dream imagery, and a banal happy ending.

2 Interest in the film has generated a wealth of material concerning its postmodern textuality. An example of this is the collection of essays used for this paper: 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?* Bowling Green, Ohio, 1991. Discussion of this sort also continues unabated on the Internet.

3 P. Blond, 'The Primacy of Theology and the Question of Perception', in P. Heelas, (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1998, p. 299.

4 M. Gwaltney, 'Androids as a Device for Reflection on Personhood', in Kerman, *op. cit.* , p. 32. See also, B. J. Bayly, *Soul of the Robot*, New York, 1978.

Gnostic Metaphysics and Soteriology

The set of beliefs grouped under the umbrella term 'Gnosticism' includes many subtle variations, and although the following discussion is a generalisation it nevertheless suits the present argument because the themes used in *Blade Runner* may be called 'Gnostic' only in the most general way. Gnosticism characterises the conscious being's temporal condition as entrapment, or alienation, in an unconscious world, and that being is bound to it first of all by failing to recognise the situation for what it is.[1] Salvation comes by gnosis, or knowledge; more specifically, self-knowledge. It is by looking inward that a person can see her or his participation in divinity.[2]

The creation of this world is attributed by Gnostics to a second-order god known as the Demiurge. The Demiurge is himself the product of the fall of some divine principle into materiality[3] and he is charged with the shaping of the material realm. It is he who traps the human spirit within its physical chamber.[4] Gnosticism makes much of the arrogance of the Demiurge in his claim to be the only true god, a claim it takes to be manifestly false.[5] The Demiurge wants us to believe in his ultimate divinity, and to pay obedience to the dictates of his realm. All that is material and thus evil has the Demiurge as its author, and this includes human physicality:

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1 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion. The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd ed., Boston, 1991, p. 325.

2 G. Filoramo, A. Alcock (trans.), *A History of Gnosticism*, Oxford, 1990, p. 101.

3 'And when Pistis saw what came into being from her deficiency, she was disturbed. And the disturbance appeared as a fearful work. And it fled [in order to dwell] in the chaos. Then she turned to it and [breathed] into its face in the abyss, [which is] beneath all of the heavens.
Now when Pistis Sophia desired [to cause] the one who had no spirit to receive the pattern of a likeness and rule over the matter and over all its powers, a ruler first appeared out of the waters, lion-like in appearence, androgynous, and having great authority within himself, but not knowing whence he came into being.' 'On the Origin of the World', in J. M. Robinson (ed. and trans.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, San Francisco, 1978, p. 163.

4 'The Demiurge is the artificer, the artisan who gives order to matter that is, by itself, without spirit; he injects into it a form that is superior to it.' Filoramo, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

5 'And he rejoiced in his heart, and he boasted continually, saying to them, "I do not need anything." He said, "I am god and no other exists except me."' Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

> [I]n its cosmological aspect it states that the world is the creation not of God but of some inferior principle whose law it executes; and, in its anthropological aspect, that man's inner self, the *pneuma* ('spirit' in contrast to 'soul' = *psyche*) is not part of the world, of nature's creation and domain, but is, within that world, as totally transcendent and as unknown by all worldly categories as is its transmundane counterpart, the unknown God without.[1]

The Gnostic saviour, or redeemer, is another common figure in Gnostic mythology and many descended figures of divine origin have been seen to impart the Gnostic message of inner salvation by their defiance of worldly concerns and their author.[2] Not all forms of Gnosticism clearly acknowledge a saviour, but those that do recognise his greater participation in divinity and his hostility toward the Demiurge.[3] When the figure of Jesus occurs in Gnostic literature it is in precisely this role, and a number of apocryphal Christian texts also portray Jesus' message in terms of inner revelation rather than obedience to religious law or a future kingdom of God.[4]

The redemptive role of the Gnostic saviour is ironic, for if salvation comes subjectively, what need is there for assistance from without? Again, there are differing opinions within the Gnostic tradition. Some see the redeemer as incarnated for the purpose of rescuing some essential divine principle,[5] while for others the redeemer shows the way by doctrine and example.[6] It is this second

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1 Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

2 Filoramo, *op. cit.*, Ch. 7, '*Mysterium Coniunctionis*: The Gnostic Saviour', *passim.*

3 One of the earliest biblical associations with Gnostic divinity is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Part of the Sethian-Ophites reads as follows: 'Some of them say that the serpent was Sophia herself; for this reason it was opposed to the maker of Adam and gave knowledge to men, and therefore is called the wisest of all [Gen. 3:1]'. A replicant character not discussed herein is Zhora, who is introduced as a night-club act with the following words: '. . . watch her take the pleasures of the serpent that once corrupted Man'.

4 In the *Thomas Gospel*, for example, Jesus says, '[T]he kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realise that it is you who are the sons of the living Father'. 'The Gospel of Thomas', Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

5 '[The Soter] is moved by the urgent prayer of Sophia. . . Arriving in the world of darkness, he gathers to himself the scattered seeds of Divine light, and finally re-ascends along with the rescued Sophia into the Pleroma.' J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh, 1991.

6 '[Jesus] said, 'I tell you the truth: no one among you will ever enter the

type of saviour that is relevant thematically to *Blade Runner*, for it is the leader of the renegade replicants, Roy Batty, who is a Gnostic saviour. He has come to Earth to challenge Tyrell, the author of his physical condition, and ultimately to show by example the irrelevance of Tyrell's power to the realisation of his spirituality. Accordingly, then, Tyrell represents the Gnostic Demiurge. But *Blade Runner* does not play out this ancient drama merely for the sake of narrative; it is a retelling with contemporary relevance. It is a story that well suits postmodernity.

Postmodernity

Two areas of concern to postmodernism are relevant to this discussion: objectivity and the self. The most pervasive characteristic of postmodern thought is, to quote Lyotard, its 'incredulity toward metanarratives': an abbreviation for a loss of faith in claims to objective truth.[1] It is the breakdown of the Enlightenment Project, which sought to find the steady and immutable laws that bind the universe to an unceasing order; and ironically, it is Kantian thought which leads directly into the irreconcilability of the signifier and the signified that informs much of postmodern scepticism.[2] While the physical sciences continue to derive laws which correspond more or less to the way things appear to be, postmodernism maintains that such laws only describe the surface of a much greater mystery. In short, epistemology is not wedded to metaphysics in postmodern discourse.

Although postmodern notions remain highly contended, their impact on perceptions of selfhood is enduring. Postmodernism's sympathy with pluralism has reinforced the Western preoccupation with the individual and his or her experience. It has also lent its persuasive power to feminism and trans-gender politics by recognising that the imposition of structure upon experience is a type of tyranny. Postmodernism reveals that the idea of necessary structure has no metaphysical underpinning, and thus no natural or moral precedence. The individual is not describable from without,

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kingdom of heaven because I commanded it, but rather because you yourselves are filled'. 'The Secret Book of James' (Ch. 1:1:12), in M. W. Meyer, *The Secret Teachings of Jesus, Four Gnostic Gospels*, New York, 1984, p. 4.

1 J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1984, p. xxiv.

2 W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, New York, 1955, part I, Ch. 2 'Modern Philosophy and Hegel', pp. 34-43.

but develops in response to his or her environment in ways that cannot be schematised.[1]

Postmodernism also argues that no matter how useful the scientific, materialist world-view is, it does nothing to make life meaningful. Obviously, the rejection of metanarratives has had an impact on religious traditions, and theology has likewise turned its attention to the subject and his or her experience of revelation.[2] As a postmodern text, it might be expected that *Blade Runner* expresses such attitudes to subjectivity. Appropriately, part of its treatment of postmodern themes includes a Gnostic pattern of salvation.

Blade Runner's Treatment of Postmodern and Gnostic Themes

Blade Runner uses several devices to express postmodern ideas. It invites interpretation with its layers of intersecting meanings, and viewers may feel as though they have caught a glimpse of a genuine future world saturated with the various consequences of postmodern thought. The aesthetic is cluttered and eclectic, and the architecture borrows freely from history, combining styles in an apparently whimsical fashion. Bukatman, for one, observes that

> This is a dark city of mean streets, moral ambiguities and an air of irresolution. *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles exemplifies the failure of the rational city envisioned by urban planners . . . If the metropolis in noir was a dystopian purgatory, then in *Blade Runner*, with its flame-belching towers, it has become an almost a literal *Inferno*.[3]

Language has likewise developed into an indiscriminate blend reflecting the cultures that coexist within the society of 2019. The many references to eyes and 'seeing' reinforce the postmodern

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1 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1985, p. 44.

2 'One of the features of the deconstructive critique is its respect for the differences within and across the traditions with which it engages and the transformations to which they are subject. This implies that the God of whom one may speak in a deconstructive mode is not a God of closure, a God who dictates articles of faith and eternal prescriptions. He is a God that must be responsive to the tradition for which He is responsible.' V. Barker, 'Derrida's God', in M. Griffith and J. Tulip (eds.), *Religion Literature and the Arts III*, Centre for Studies in Religion and the Arts, Sydney, 1996, p. 159.

3 S. Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, London, 1997, p. 50.

contention that knowledge involves a type of superficiality.[1] The film uses its characters to reflect this postmodern ambience philosophically by a constant ambiguity with regard to the definition of personhood. Almost from the beginning, we are invited to question the replicants' designation as non-people, as machines, and a popular issue among fans of the film is the question of whether or not Deckard, our ostensibly human protagonist, is himself a replicant.[2]

It is worth focussing on an important example of *Blade Runner's* philosophical aesthetic to demonstrate just how concerned the film is with such issues.[3] The following example strongly suggests two of the film's most important themes: the denial of objectivity and the nature of personhood.

The scene in question needs first to be described. Deckard has found a collection of photographs belonging to one of the trespassing replicants, Leon. He inserts one of these into a machine that re-displays the image on a computer screen with a grid-like overlay. Using voice commands, Deckard instructs the machine to magnify the photographic image, and in this way he is able to explore the scene almost as though he were actually in it. With instructions such as 'enhance 24 to 16' he is able to see deeper and deeper into the image, in an effort to find clues about his quarry.[4]

The photograph is of an apartment. No figure can be seen clearly, but to the left there is a shirtless man with his muscled arm forming a rest against his forehead which obscures his features from view. Opposite and in front of him is a bed, and between them they

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1 '. . . to discover correspondences in the world around us does not lead to the sensation that we are inhabiting a meaningful universe; on the contrary, it leads to the feeling that what we had taken to be 'the world' is only the projection of our private compulsions: *analogy* becomes a sign of *dementia.*' G. Josipovici, *The World and the Book*, London, 1971, p. 305.

2 Bukatman, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

3 This aesthetic compares to a technique used in the novels of Philip K. Dick. Rachela Morrison writes, 'Throughout his works Dick creates worlds in which concepts can be dramatised by metaphor. This is not to say that he creates allegories for his beliefs; rather, he creates worlds where philosophical questions can be animated and allowed to play among themselves and between his readers and the text.' R. Morrison, 'The Blakean Dialectics of *Blade Runner*' in J. M. Welsh (ed.), *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990.

4 The language Deckard uses toward this machine is very casual, almost conversational. It is as though the machine were able to guess what Deckard requires, that it will help him see what he expects to see. The contribution that subjective expectations make to knowledge claims is strongly hinted at by this casual dialogue between human and machine.

frame a cluttered image, at the centre of which there is a door, ajar. Deckard instructs the machine to enhance the area of the doorway and, eventually, after scanning this region, he concentrates on a convex mirror at the apex of the narrow frame. By this stage the magnification is immense, but the quality of the image allows us to forget this. As though on tiptoe, we see closely into the mirror's bulging surface and spy a figure concealed from the forward gaze into the room. This figure is captured on a print-out, and it transpires that she is one of the replicants Deckard seeks.[1]

Ridley Scott is a meticulous director who clearly believes in the importance of detail. Bukatman reports that

> Scott has compared film direction to orchestration, and 'every incident, every sound, every movement, every colour, every set, prop or actor' has significance within the 'performance' of the film.[2]

The director's films reveal an artistic sensibility and he has included in *Blade Runner* messages coded with reference to artistic heritage. In this case he is quoting from a style of painting which includes visual tricks such as this prominently featured mirror that presents a view of something outside of the scene itself. This occurs famously in the painting known as *The Arnolfini Wedding* by the Dutch painter Jan Van Eyck.[3] In this painting, the viewer catches a glimpse of the artist himself within the mirror. Likewise, in other examples of this technique a painting presents something otherwise

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1 The entire scene is reminiscent of the plot of the Antonioni film *Blow-Up*, in which the protagonist discovers a murder in a tiny portion of a photograph he has taken. Kael believes that 'The best part of *Blow-Up* is a well-conceived and ingeniously edited sequence in which the hero blows up a series of photographs and discovers that he has inadvertently photographed a murder. It's a good murder mystery sequence. But does it symbolise (as one reviewer says) "the futility of seeking the hidden meanings of life through purely technological means"?' P. Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, London, 1987, p. 33.

2 Bukatman, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

3 'For Linda Seidel . . . the double portrait is "a visual enigma, a riddle in which nothing is as it appears to be." And in a volume on medieval marriage published in 1989, the British historian Christopher Brooke makes explicit Van Eyck's intent to be mysterious: "We can only be sure that he meant to puzzle us – meant us to enquire, to search, to *think*."' E. Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994, p. xviii. Given the controversy surrounding the meaning of the painting, it is possible that Ridley Scott is referencing the Van Eyck piece specifically as a way of implying the postmodern theme of fluidity of meaning.

unrepresentable in the ordinary front-on view that the scene affords. Of the Van Eyck portrait, Edwin Hall comments that

> [B]y signing the panel on the pictorial surface with the Latin equivalent of 'Jan van Eyck was here' and including his own reflected image in the mirror below, the artist compels us to take cognizance of his special relationship to whatever the imagery was intended to represent.[1]

To return to the reference in *Blade Runner*, what the image captured by the mirror presents to us is not something from beyond the frame, but a figure still contained within it. The messages are obvious. Firstly, by presenting a thing not beyond the context of the image, the notion of inescapable subjectivity is reinforced. The contrary symbol, of something behind the eye of the camera, would strongly suggest a view beyond the ideas contained within the scene; it would speak for a notion of objectivity. And objectivity, being precisely the thing that postmodernism most consistently rejects, is denied by making what is reflected back at the viewer something contained still within the scene. Secondly, we have Deckard staring at a mirror and finding not himself in a figure correspondingly beyond the context of the photo, but a replicant: a thing hopelessly caught within its context.

Also, the fact that the machine can give an impressive illusion of depth to a patently two-dimensional object represents the postmodern contention of the superficiality of knowledge, and what appears to be a penetration of surface meaning by the objective gaze ultimately reveals the inescapability of subjectivity. There is no knowledge that stands above its own influence, and Deckard is either very likely a replicant or, more importantly, the only thing that distinguishes him from them is an objective and arbitrary category of difference. Deckard, as our representative, finally comes to realise this by Roy's redemption at the climax of the film, but the above scene is a principal example of the type of clues which litter the film to emphasise such postmodern ideas.

The replicants themselves are a perfect metaphor for human postmodern alienation. They are perceived as mere instruments of an order in which they can have no personally meaningful role.[2] Replicants lack a history and are thus unable to participate in a society whose history explains what it has become. In this way they

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1 Hall, *op. cit.*, p. xix.

2 D. Desser, 'The New Eve: The Influence of *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* on *Blade Runner*' in Kerman, *op. cit.*

manifest the existential angst which informs postmodern scepticism and alienation.[1] Replicants epitomise postmodern culture's inability to benefit from the long view of history, and its failure to recognise itself 'in terms of what it is, but only in terms of what it has just-now ceased to be'.[2] Although worthy of more, their only social/historical designation is '*not* human'.

Replicants are not supposed to have feelings, and it is a lack of emotional skill that allegedly betrays them as artificial. Blade runners administer what they call a 'Voight Kampff' test, which measures empathetic response in the subject. The more sophisticated a replicant is, the more difficult it is to distinguish the alleged copy from the human original, and the viewer is led to wonder about the value of the human/replicant distinction. The issue is not a passing one. Rather it develops and is addressed again and again throughout the film in different ways, most significantly by the implication that Deckard is himself a replicant. The matter is never resolved, and for good reason; in order to make the point that the human/replicant distinction is meaningless, the audience is presented with a series of ambiguities.[3] Deckard, for example, in his capacity as a blade runner, is as unfeeling as those he hunts are supposed to be. Bukatman insightfully comments that

> Effective blade runners won't – *can't* – acknowledge any resemblance between replicant and human. Empathy, for a blade runner, would make it impossible to function; that 'reserve' must be kept in place. Upon meeting Rachel, who thinks she's human, Deckard confronts her manufacturer: 'How can it not know what it is?'[4]

Deckard is asked if he has ever taken the Voight Kampff test himself, to which he does not reply. Further examples of this deliberate confusion of characteristics include the fact that the replicants' love of photographs is mirrored in Deckard's own apartment; and as the killing of replicants is known as 'retirement',

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1 G. Bruno, 'Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner', *Fine Arts 101 Reader*, University of Sydney, 1995, p. 55.

2 S. Toulmin, *The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985, p. 254, quoted in W. T. Anderson (ed.), *The Truth About the Truth*, p. 3.

3 As Kolb observes, 'Our uncertainty about whether or not Deckard is himself a replicant reflects Deckard's own self-doubts and traps us in the same unfathomable questions', Kerman, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

4 Bukatman, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

it is suggestive that Deckard himself begins the film as a 'retired' blade runner.

The Voight Kampff test itself is one of the film's great revealing ironies. It aims to measure the betraying lack of feeling in a non-human, yet the film shows us in many ways that the replicants are far from unfeeling. Indeed, they show the most obvious sentiment of any characters in the whole film: Leon's timid confusion before Holden's cold confidence and condescension; Rachel's distress at Deckard's matter-of-fact revelation of her artificiality; Zhora's desperate will to live as she cannonballs through plate-glass windows; and Roy's obvious distress over the death of Pris, are only the most obvious cases. These examples betray the machine's attempt to measure empathy as a failure. The machine as an instrument of science; the machine that operates according to fixed, scientific laws, that *depends* on such laws to validate its testimony. The machine of law-like materiality.

It is not hard to see the parallel here with Gnostic cosmology, in particular as it concerns the human place within. Rivalling the Gnostic ideal of self-realisation is the Demiurge; and his capture of humanity within an evil, law-like materiality is that which the Gnostic must overcome. To see identity in corporeality is to be deluded and remain trapped by the Demiurge and his laws, which are the source of all misery. Gnostic spirituality requires profound introspection, which leads to understanding of essential selfhood and its transcendent origin. The human spirit that suffers, hopes, wills, and loves is not encompassed by the physical corpus which is part of a universe intractably alien. The human spirit cannot be measured by reference to a swinging gauge, and the Voight Kampff machine is just such a gauge. The scientific opinion that for a thing to be meaningful it must be quantifiable is under attack here; and the replicants' refusal to be described from without is the principal representation of this.

At one point, Rachel asks Deckard whether or not he feels himself, in his profession, at risk of accidentally killing a human being. Tyrell arrives and interrupts an answer that we never hear. We never see the machine being used to test a designated human character (we never get Tyrell's 'positive' test case), but in so many ways the test is shown to be defective by the ambiguity present in every moment of the film concerning the nature of personhood. Both Gnostic belief and the spiritual message in *Blade Runner* turn on this issue of personhood and its relation to law-like materiality.[1]

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1 Gwaltney, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-39.

Blade Runner is a reflection of the present age and what is still becoming, yet it provides clues to salvation that not only mirror notions of individual authenticity, but which also have an analogy in the Gnostic idea of redemption.[1]

For this topic, we need to consider the film's ostensible villain: Roy Batty. Although the film initially seems to be about Deckard, our (possibly) human representative, it is Roy who acts out the philosophical development of the film. Gwaltney observes that

> the drama of emerging self-consciousness [is] focused on Roy Batty. The drama of the movie really derives from Batty asserting his freedom by asserting his right to a meaningful length of life not only for himself, but for those he loves.[2]

Quite apart from the parallels between postmodern alienation and Gnostic dualism, the key to the Gnostic themes in *Blade Runner* is Roy. He makes his entrance in the drama with the following lines:

> Fiery the angels fell,
> Deep thunder rolled around their shores,
> Burning with the fires of Orc.[3]

The lines paraphrase William Blake's epic poem 'America, a Prophecy', which itself contains many relevant themes.[4] It deals with imperialism in the New World of the Americas by describing a cosmic drama between deities of varyingly noble characteristics. Orc is a rebellious god who stands against an enslaving dictatorship. Desser notes that Orc 'is one of Blake's devil-angels, descendent of Milton's Lucifer',[5] and this suits Roy's initial appearance as a type

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1 Jonas, *op. cit.*, ch. 13., *passim*.

2 Gwaltney, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

3 R. Scott, (director) *Blade Runner*, The Ladd Company, Warner Brothers, 1982; director's cut 1992.

4 N. Frye (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, New York, 1953, p. 149. The original lines are: 'Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd /Around their shores, indignant burning with the fires of Orc;'. The verb may have been changed from 'rose' to 'fell' in order to emphasise Roy's Promethean/Luciferian quality or, as Rachael Morrison suggests, 'a Christ figure descending from the heavens. Roy's coming down from 'off world' to battle for the freedom of his race, and an association with the *felix culpa* of *Paradise Lost*'. R. Morrison, '*Casablanca* Meets *Star Wars*: The Blakean Dialectics of *Blade Runner*', in J. M. Welsh (ed.), *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1990, p. 10 (footnote no. 4).

5 Desser, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

of fallen angel. The hypocrisy and moral vacuity of Orc's demiurge-type enemy is addressed throughout the poem, for example:

> What god is he writes laws of peace & clothes him in a tempest?
> What pitying Angel lusts for tears and fans himself with sighs?
> What crawling villain preaches abstinence & wraps himself
> In fat of lambs? no more I follow, no more obedience pay![1]

The identification Roy makes by such an entrance, not only with Blake's poem but with Blake himself (who was a Swedenborgian and thus part of the Gnostic tradition), signals his role as a Gnostic redeemer, and introduces him as a fallen angel;[2] an angel who somehow becomes the hero of the film, and somehow comes to assume Christ-like qualities. Roy's divine reference places him in direct opposition to the Demiurge of Gnostic thought, and his introspection and rebellion align him with gnosis, even though he owes his physical existence to Tyrell. As the focus of Roy's rebellion, Tyrell symbolises the god of law-like materiality: the Demiurge. Tyrell's other traits reinforce this association: the misery and enslavement of his creatures are directly attributable to him; and he is a dissembler, pretending to describe the replicants' proper condition in life while their experience proves he cannot. It is for his arrogance that Tyrell is killed.

The replicants, led by Roy, have come to earth to meet their maker because they are dissatisfied with their lot. Their life is a frustratingly short one of four years (which we might compare to our four score),[3] they are born as slaves to a hostile and unexplained environment, and they wonder about life's meaning. So, one by one, as his companions are dispatched by Deckard, Roy approaches God's lesser angels in the form of subcontracted bio-engineers, in search of ultimate answers and more life. Before deciding to kill him, Roy asks Tyrell 'Can the maker repair what he

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1 Frye, *op. cit.* p. 149.

2 In general, it is clear that the replicants are to be read fallen angels. Northrop Frye points out that both angels and devils 'are associated with the imagery of the sky. The replicants came to earth from off-world, from the heavens. Angels and devils (who, of course, were originally angels) are, in the Christian cosmology of Milton, superior to men, containing more 'god-like' essence.' Desser, *op. cit.* , p. 54.

3 Psalm 90:10, 'Seventy years is the span of our life, eighty if our strength holds.'

makes?',[1] then demands 'I want more life, *fucker.*'[2] He is calling his maker to account. Roy wants answers to ordinary religious questions about what makes a person's life meaningful,[3] and when he finds that not only is God responsible for life's shortcomings but that he also has no solutions, God is rejected – violently! Tyrell's death is symbolic of a denial of law-like materialism. It is a murder born of the indignation of the human spirit that has suffered the tyranny of objectivity for too long. It is the postmodern refusal of objective truth.[4]

The film's climactic cat-and-mouse chase between Roy and Deckard contains the most obvious suggestions that Roy is Christ-like. During the episode, Roy drives a nail through his own hand in order to delay his death[5] and, after he has saved Deckard's life and delivered his final words, a white dove leaves his grasp as he himself dies. In this way, he is possessed of both stigmata and holy spirit.

Even though Deckard has killed all those whom Roy has loved, including his lover Pris, Roy declines the opportunity to exact what might be seen as appropriate revenge. Roy is clearly the superior adversary as he toys with Deckard; first disarming then rearming him in the name of good sportsmanship, he encourages Deckard to try to kill him while making it obvious that the only way Deckard could succeed is if Roy *let* him do so. Roy's maker, Tyrell, says earlier that the company motto is 'more human than human'[6] and in terms of moral capacity Roy's example would seem to bear this out. He not only refuses to kill Deckard when it is clear that he could do so several times, he saves Deckard from a fatal fall at the climax of the game he has engineered. Why?

Roy is displaying the very quality that his pursuers claim he lacks: humanity. Although revenge might also be thought to be a perfectly ordinary human response, Roy's decision suggests that he possesses the still higher human virtue of compassion. Despite the brutal way he has been treated, he is capable of a compassionate act

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1 Scott, *op. cit.*

2 *Ibid.*

3 'Batty's desire to live longer is really the desire to know the meaning of his life. And Batty's quest for meaning also confronts him with emotions which humans believe replicants lack.' Desser, *op. cit.* p. 55.

4 The manner of Tyrell's death is also significant; Roy's gouging out of Tyrell's eyes can be read as postmodernism's rejection of the objective gaze.

5 'It is worth stressing that it is Batty himself who drives this spike through, Batty himself, that is, who undertakes to transform himself into Man's redeemer.' Desser, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

6 Scott, *op. cit.*

toward his tormentor.[1] Despite being hunted by Deckard, he recognises a fellow creature subject to the same type of slavery;[2] a slavery to an imposed order that contradicts experience. In his final moments, he imparts to Deckard a glimpse of his brief yet intense life with the following words:

> 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 Tannhauser gate. All these moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.[3]

As he dies, the dove he was clasping escapes and flies heavenward.[4] What Roy, our Gnostic redeemer, is emphasising by his final words is that his humanity, or lack thereof, is only realisable subjectively; that he has had this realisation in spite of his maker's denial of its possibility.[5]

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1 'Scott says Batty saved Deckard because "It was an endorsement, in a way, that the character is almost more human *than* human, in that he can demonstrate a very human quality at a time when the roles are reversed and Deckard may have been delighted to blow his head off. But Roy Batty takes the humane route."' W. M. Kolb, 'Blade Runner Film Notes', in Kerman, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

2 'Deckard's kinship with the rebels is thus established early; they are all victims of corporate control.' J. W. Slade, 'Romanticising Cybernetics in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*', in Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

3 Scott, *op. cit.* Demonstrating the film's place within the science fiction sub-genre of inquiry into the nature of humanity, Roy's soliloquy is remarkably similar to words spoken by the robot protagonist in Bayly's *The Soul of the Robot* just before he is to be executed by humans who have no belief in his possession of consciousness: 'Thus I stand here talking to you; I can feel the breeze blowing in from the sea, I can see the blue of the sea itself, and the blue of the sky above it. *I experience it.*' Bayly, *op. cit.* p. 155.

4 Roy's inception date is 2016, thus, with a four-year lifespan, he is due to die in the year 2020. The pun is inescapable: as another example of the film's heavy use of the theme of 'seeing', the message here is that Roy's death will allow us to see perfectly – with 20/20 vision – the true nature of the replicants' plight and its relevance to our own.
This clue is also related to an earlier scene involving the designer of Roy's eyes, Chew. Kolb explains: 'As the scene opens in Chew's laboratory, we see a container conspicuously marked with the Chinese character for eternity. Following an ancient tradition among Chinese artisans, this solitary character symbolises Chew's hope that the recipient of his 'eyes' will see and understand more clearly, that they will figuratively see into eternity'. W. Kolb, *op. cit.*, p. 160. Together, these clues suggest that, in his soteriological capacity, Roy has realised Chew's hope.

5 Desser, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

The replicants, by their rebellion, and Roy in particular, by killing the creator, have chosen to live rather than be lived; to explore an authentic existence rather than be described from without. Roy knows he will die soon, yet he toys with his hunter, not merely to exact revenge, but to demonstrate his autonomy; and his decision not kill Deckard demonstrates the purposefulness of Roy's prior murders. If Roy's murderous behaviour seems strangely immoral for a saviour figure, a consideration of the place of ethics within the Gnostic idea of redemption may help to reduce this apparent tension. Crook, for example, writes that

> Redemption, as understood by Christianity is fundamentally ethical . . . But in Gnosticism the ethical aspect of redemption falls almost completely into the background. Here we may discern the chief peculiarity of the movement, which gave direction to all its thinking, and brought it finally into open conflict with the orthodox Church.[1]

Roy seems an unlikely saviour figure in a Christian, rather than a Gnostic sense. All those he has killed have been in some way responsible for his enslavement; thus, in killing them he seeks to deny the external monologue that tries to define him from without. His murderous revolt defies the Demiurge and all who serve him.

The Message of *Blade Runner*

Postmodernism argues against a monologic description of the world. But as the perspectival nature of truth and meaning becomes more accepted, there is a consequent lack of reassuring universal truths. The fear that comes with being thus unmoored is revealed in Roy's frustration and hostility toward Tyrell. It mirrors our own disillusionment at the failure of metanarratives to provide convincing solutions.

It is important to recognise that Roy portrays a Gnostic redeemer as it affects the significance of his killing of Tyrell, who stands for the Demiurge. Were Roy an ordinary Christ figure, as is most strongly suggested by the images of stigmata and dove, his killing of God would have more nihilistic implications than I think the film intends. Were the Christian saviour to kill a transcendent god it would not only make little sense, it would also be a denial of meaning entirely. We have instead the killing of a dissembling,

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1 W. Crook, 'Gnosticism', in Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

second-order god, whose only power lies in the authorship of false certainties. Tyrell claims to know the essence of the replicant individual and he uses this knowledge to describe a life for them: a brief life of slavery. But the replicants' experiences contradict this. Replicants feel. They have desires and expectations which will never be fulfilled in such a brief life:

> The android lives just long enough to become aware of his potentiality as a person before he dies. Both his maturity and his retirement are determined by others. The genius of the movie, as opposed to the book, is that it makes us feel the pain Roy Batty feels when faced with the knowledge of his approaching death in conjunction with his consciousness of his potentiality for knowledge and accomplishment. We are aware with him of all the valuable things he will never know or do.[1]

They also have 'questions' (as Roy puts it very pointedly) to which even God has no answers. To be disappointed in God's ability to answer questions of ultimate importance is analogous to the postmodern mind's lack of belief in objective truth. But, again, to avoid a descent into nihilistic resignation, it is important to remember just what sort of god it is who has died: it is the god of false certainties, the Demiurge, the god of law-like materiality.

Tyrell is not only the god reviled by Gnostics, he is also the god famously declared dead by Nietzsche as he heralded the coming of postmodernity.[2] *Blade Runner* as a unified work suggests a human spiritual potential beyond the death of false gods in sympathy with the ancient Gnostic requirement that individuals seek God through the self. The enduring message of *Blade Runner* is that objectivity is a type of tyranny, and its imposition causes the spiritual death of the individual. When Roy murders Tyrell, he has essentially realised the futility of turning to the Demiurge for answers of spiritual importance. In his capacity as Gnostic redeemer, he encourages the same of all.

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1 Gwaltney, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

2 R. J. Hollingdale, *A Nietzsche Reader*, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 202.