



Humanism in *Blade Runner*: A study on Film and Representation in Sci-fi

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Can human depiction in film teach us about the political repercussions of representation? The question of aesthetic and political representational homology is not new. However, much of the contemporary interest in film among political theorists has been on the medium's material, rather than representative, nature. In justifying his attention to film in *Neuropolitics*, William E. Connolly describes it as a site for exploring "the relationship between technique, feeling, perception, and thought," and in a recent article in these pages, he emphasises "the discontinuity felt in the experience of confronting the 'fountainlike spray of pictures' in film" (pp. 2–3). Both of these descriptions place a strong emphasis on how video visuals are received by the body. They portray a tangible, or ontological, relationship between a physical item (although an atypical one) and a perceiving body and brain, a relationship that is independent of the content on display in principle. Of course, these two instances are merely the political theory tip of a bigger materialist iceberg that has slammed into film studies and culture studies in general.

However, with the exception of films like *Koyaanisqatsi*, practically all of the popular cinema and television we watch retains a narrative and representative shape that we can recognise as continuing the theatrical tradition, even when the material features of film do not necessitate it. What are our options here? Earlier generations of film and political scholars assigned this phenomenon an ideological explanation. The persistence of traditional forms was frequently attributed by critical authors to capitalism's dominance. Feminist criticism created a convincing explanation of how patriarchal hegemony was reinforced by mainstream filmic representation. Without undermining these achievements, I'd like to rethink cinema criticism in light of current work that celebrates the medium's democratic possibilities. The argument that we can find educational experiences and models for political practise in film has been revitalised, thanks to both the new materialist perspective stated above and Cavell's increasingly powerful work. Through a political assessment of the film's representative character, I convey some reservations about this hopeful viewpoint. We need to grasp not film in its materiality, but the interaction between human beings and their filmic representations in order to see the dilemma I'm bringing up. Of course, we may study people in a movie theatre, but that observation will not tell us what we want to know, namely, what impacts the film's representations have once the audience has left the theatre. How do the visuals and stories stay with us, if at all? How do we react to them, and how do we react to each other while they're around? In truth, we can't normally 'see' the interaction between humans and their representations any more than we can see the reaction to a book or a photograph.

By framing our political problems in this way, it becomes evident that a picture like *Blade Runner* (1982), in which humans are confronted with living simulacra so perfect that difference is practically impossible, is a physical embodiment of the general cinematic predicament. The replicants are a (more perfect) version of the film. A human interacts with a human-appearing, human-generated image, much like in a dream, but from a third-person perspective. The replicants challenge us to discern between the real and the representational, as well as any attempt to build a value hierarchy between the two, whether aesthetic or moral. Of course, every film and story about robots or androids, from *Frankenstein* to *Westworld*, deals with the unpredictability of the original and copy coexisting. Characters in films like *The Purple Rose of Cairo* walk off the screen for comic effect. However, *Blade Runner* is one of the most self-aware films about this phenomena as a cinematic event, and about exploiting it to raise moral and political issues concerning the clash between the original and the replica. As Wilson (2005) puts it, 'Blade Runner self-consciously explores this affinity between the matter of the android and the subject of the cinema' (p. 31).

Blade Runner's humanization of its replicants' has been cited by many as a powerful statement against exploitation and dominance. However, I contend that the film has a different agenda: a Rousseauvian concern about the perils of representation, about conflating imitation with reality, and conflating image consumption with political action. Rather than humanising the other, the major aim of *Blade Runner* is to humanise our own social and political ties, which are in risk of falling into the same trap that Rousseau warned about in his Letter to D'Alembert. To do so, we must understand the distinction between mutual surveillance and mutual respect. To live freely under any government, we must recognise the hazards of representation, even if we must continue to utilise it in a huge state.

Anyone who has seen the film will recall that it is fascinated with eyeballs. After seeing a post-apocalyptic 2019 Los Angeles, the famous opening scene cuts to an unnamed, screen-filling eye that reflects the city's lights back to the camera. The film then cuts back to the city, then back to the eye – a famous shot-reverse-shot pattern that tells us of a character's silent conversation. However, in this case, it foreshadows a conversation that we, the audience, will have with a representation of ourselves, a conversation that will be depicted in miniature in the following scene, when a blade runner unknowingly interrogates one of the replicants he is hunting, with disastrous results.

The replicants hunting for a way into the Tyrell Corporation imprison and interrogate a genetic engineer who made their eyes; and Roy Baty, the replicant leader, plays with fake eyes when befriendng the human J.F. Sebastian and, more terrifyingly, gouges out the eyes of his maker Tyrell when informed that his life cannot be extended. None of these scenes are found in the novel from which the film was adapted, but they all make sense when we consider the film as an attempt to encapsulate the conflict between humans and their representation: we see ourselves seeing ourselves –

the replicants are a kind of living mirror, and the film is a picture of ourselves looking into it. The eyes remind us that this is not a conceptual or intellectual exercise, but a genuine exchange of perspectives between two living beings, as Roy Baty emphasises: 'We're not computers, Sebastian.' 'We're a physical bunch.' Even the choice of Los Angeles as the film's setting (the novel was set in San Francisco) could be interpreted as a comparison between the replicating process that makes androids and the depiction of humans on film.

Blade Runner is a difficult film to analyse since it appears in so many forms. The 'final cut' box set includes five separate versions of the film: an early work-print that was shown to test audiences and eventually leaked to the public; the original 1982 US release; the 1982 international release; the 1992 'director's cut'; and the 2007 'final edit.' Although the total variances between all of these alternative versions are probably less than 3% of the entire running time, the differences are potentially rather important, particularly the two endings. I approach all of the versions here as jointly produced artefacts that we may study for meaning without attributing that meaning to any single author, because I'm not concerned in the film's aesthetic merit or the aim of any of its authors. But I'm going to concentrate on the initial release and the final cut.

More importantly, the world's animal population has been ravaged in the novel – some species have perished totally, while others persist but are rare. As a result, animals have become sacred as well as valuable. They are prized things to be flaunted — to the point where, if a real one is out of reach, an electric animal is purchased. Deckard's condition at the start of the novel is similar: he owns an imitation sheep (which he grazes on the top of his apartment complex alongside his neighbours) and hopes to improve it to a genuine one — this is his motive for continuing as a bounty hunter. He'll be able to get a real animal if he kills sufficient androids.

Animals, on the other hand, are prized for more than just their appearance. They also symbolise an attachment to the natural world that has been lost. It is our emotional response to them, even the phoney ones, that makes animal ownership so meaningful. Every character in the tale has a strong bond with his or her animal companions, whether they are real or not. However, the protagonists are constantly 'dialling up' emotions on a machine that gives them with cerebral stimulants to create moods that they can no longer attain organically in their interactions with other humans. Furthermore, they are all members of a bizarre religion known as Mercerism, which permits them to empathise with a victimised guy who is continually reliving a scenario of upward struggle through suffering, once again with the use of a machine (a kind of Sisyphus-Christ). To summarise, the near-destruction of the natural Earth has robbed people of their usual contexts for empathy, which they attempt to substitute with machine-religions, machine-emotions, and machine-animals.

Other features, in addition to the eyes that occur throughout the film, remind us that we are always under the sight of another in this dystopian future. The sky is littered with police cars and advertising drones that monitor the public. There is a constant invasion of searchlights even inside private dwellings. Deckard and Rachel's journey is not a call for freedom in the sense of political rights; rather, it is an attempt to flee the state's all-seeing eye. However, because the state's gaze has been linked with the eyes of the audience since the first scene, we must consider whether this escape meant to criticise, or even condemn, either the filmmaking process itself or the audience's thirst for consuming it.

The dilemma the characters encounter (at first) looks to be similar to the traditional philosophical 'problem of other minds,' that is, how can I know that the human beings around me have awareness as I do and are not (as Descartes feared) phantasms or automatons designed to deceive me? However, Norris contends that the police response in the film (attempting to verify humanity through the Voight-Kampff exam) is part of the problem. Following Cavell and Wittgenstein's ideas, he recommends that the (misconceived) problem be solved by acknowledging that we can never be definite about other people's minds. The need for it is a modern philosophical blunder, as well as a modern political blunder with dehumanising tendencies. In truth, we recognise one another as valued creatures through a process of recognition that is open to replicants and humans alike — we notice the suffering and autonomy of other beings in the same way that we recognise it in ourselves. "To deny it via a demand for certainty is itself a moment of inhumanity" (Norris, 23).

This view obviously captures something significant, and it leads to Deckard's understanding of the replicants as sentient beings who should not be enslaved, as Norris contends. However, it does not answer the question of what the proper relationship between original and copy should be, other than to imply that there is no meaningful distinction between the two. However, this suggestion is improbable, and it is surely inapplicable once we get beyond the human-replicant relationship. It also doesn't provide an answer to a few key political questions.

The replicants are notable not only for their near-human status, but also for their liminal state as half subject and part object. They are objects, and as such, they are subject to both our will and our whims. They are no different in this regard from any tool or material good whose use provides us with joy or serves some other human function. Despite this, they appear to respond to us as fellow creatures, to engage, and to behave independently, unlike any other tool. This is where their tool excellence comes from. As a result, Roy Baty is superior to any mechanised cannon or tank as a replicant soldier since he can respond to orders creatively and expansively. However, because Pris, a 'pleasure model,' can respond creatively and autonomously, she is superior to an inflatable-doll sex toy.

If there's one thing *Blade Runner* is correct about, it's that no answer can be discovered by creating a biological divide between the actor and the replicant. To borrow a term, the essence of the human will never be biological. Or, to put it another way, while we may identify biological markers to distinguish ourselves from other species, machines, and engineered biological copies, we will not find a motive to exploit these others or be dissatisfied with a dominance relationship in such distinctions.

The theatre, according to Rousseau (1960), is hazardous because it establishes a relationship that is good exclusively within the theatre but bad everywhere else: "An actor on the stage, displaying other sentiments than his own, saying only what he is made to say, often representing a chimerical being, annihilates himself, as it were, and is lost in his hero. And in this forgetting of the man, if something remains of him, it is used as the plaything of the spectators" (p. 81). The domination and subjection of subject/objects that the audience has with the actors is exactly what he had in mind. He believes it is and must be a lesson in inequality — and so antithetical to freedom, which inequality must stifle. Each side makes use of the other; more accurately, each party makes use of the other's subjectivity as an object. Although it may not feel like inequality at the time, it is an act of power since it creates a seductive and delightful appearance of freedom. If we wish to live freely, we must renounce this pleasure. The relationship's deceptive nature - its hidden unfairness and exploitation in both directions - cannot be eradicated from the institutions of theatre and film. It's what it's all about. We can't have a true mutual respect relationship with an actor as long as he or she is on stage or in a film, no matter how much we may be fooled into believing such. This dilemma may be addressed for the actor as a person (she could leave the stage and join the crowd), but not for the film.

These dangers are genuine, but there is one that is notably political above and beyond them. This is a two-fold threat. First, our relationship with a representation has the potential to dehumanise us by robbing us of the mutuality of experience that is the hallmark of genuine social intimacy and political ties. Our emotional attachment to a movie depiction is not invalidated by the fact that it is unreal or that the object of our adoration is made of celluloid or luminous material. Replacing the filmed image with a live actor does not fix the problem. The issue is that the interaction is not mutual in the sense of being reciprocal, even with a real actor who breathes and feels. Although the actor may respond to and care about the audience in a professional manner, this is not the type of reciprocity that is required in a democratic political situation. Similarly, an elected official may cynically respond to and care for his or her constituents without having an equivalent or reciprocal commitment with fellow citizens. The second aspect of the threat is one of power – but not just the 'power of the image' to lure or deceive us (which is real enough, but manageable). We should think of it as the institution's authority to keep us under surveillance even when we view individual images on the screen, which we assume we have control over. We are held in place as we watch our representatives and replications by the supposition that is, in the end, our own reflected observation, much as we feel we are acting throughout our dreams (while we are chemically prohibited from moving). We are not incarcerated in a movie theatre, but we may end up as content slaves. We will not recognise this power unless we probe its representative character if we focus on the material basis of our relationship with film. At the very least, a pessimistic assessment of film's potential benefits should be matched with a pessimistic account of its hazards, perils that are analogous to those of our other representational institutions.

It is not enough to give the audience more rights or powers to shatter the institutions' grip. It is also insufficient to warn citizens of the deceptive nature of what they see. Rather, they must be shielded from the all-seeing eye, or they must shield themselves from the all-seeing eye. They must transform their mutual observation into mutual respect. This cannot be done 'in private,' that is, by oneself, but it also cannot be done in a public setting. Whether we close the theatres or just leave them, we can only be totally human by closing the camera's eye and staring straight into the eye of the other in an unmediated fashion, as *Blade Runner* teaches us in its final irony. In terms of politics, this means that whatever representative institutions we endure for practical reasons must be surrounded by a warm sea of mutual respect at the very least. If democracy is exclusively based on representation, it runs the risk of being dehumanised, similar to the first set of interactions in *Blade Runner*.

Life teaches us not to want it, according to Schopenhauer. The best movies may educate us not to want them as well. This in no way implies that its creators are self-hating or cynical. It simply implies that they are aware of the distinction between what they do for a living and who they are as people and citizens. Leaving the movie theatre house does not ensure our freedom, but staying there simply reinforces our slavery.

Works Cited.

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