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The Authenticity of the Replica: A Post-Human Reading of Blade Runner

Abstract

In this paper I look at the sci-fi film Blade Runner and the ways in which it tackles the question of defining the human and posthuman. The film examines the ability of technology to change our understanding of what is specifically "human" and raises some important bioethical, biopolitical, and epistemological issues pertaining to the accelerating development of technology and its imbrication in the medico-juridical system. I argue that "humanness" in the film is defined through the conceptual and spatial exclusion of replicants, who are not deemed worthy of ethical consideration and are thus not seen as subjects in the proper sense. However, the film ultimately subverts this distinction by showing not only that the other is produced in order to define the self, but also that the self qua human is not as authentic as one might think.

Keywords: posthumanism, film, subjectivity, performativity, authenticity

In this paper I look at the sci-fi film Blade Runner, directed by Ridley Scott, and the ways in which it tackles the issue of defining the human vs. posthuman. I am interested in how technology is changing our understanding of what it is that makes us "human" and what criteria might be used in drawing the borders between ourselves and others, who, since not human, are considered disposable and unworthy. I find the notion of the posthuman relevant for my analysis because it questions "the implicit assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the knowing subject" (Braidotti 143). As a generative tool, writes Rosi Braidotti, posthumanism is critical towards "the Humanistic ideal" (which draws on the Enlightenment idea of the rational subject and its perfectability) as "a hegemonic cultural model" that relies on a "universalistic

posture and its binary logic" (15). Building on Michel Foucault, Cary Wolfe argues that "the point is not to reject humanism tout court – indeed, there are many values and aspirations to admire in humanism – but rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them" (xvi).

Even though the first version of the film (1982)[1] is now more than 30 years old, I believe it has not lost its significance; on the contrary, today with the advance of synthetic biology and developments in the human genome project we might be facing a crisis in the distinction between the living and non-living, between organisms and machines, and Blade Runner definitely takes up some of these issues and presents some of the challenges we might be facing in the future. After all, to ignore the influence of technology on our lives would be to deny "the reality of a world in which we are advancingly imbricated in a mechanical presence" (Galvan 414).

Movements that predict the advent of superintelligence (for example, the singularity theory) speak to an anxiety over the exponential growth in various technologies and the uncertain future of the human race. Some even claim that "the future evolution of man can no longer be restricted to the domain of biology" and "that a new and potent species may soon be born and enter the evolutionary race" (McLaughlin 277). "Dramatic advances in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering," explains Jacqueline Kirely, "have increased the lack of certainty about what is human" (285).

In 2002, Francis Fukuyama published a book on the possibility that biomedical advances will alter human nature beyond recognition and thereby move us into a "posthuman" stage of history (7). He is worried about the political consequences of the biotech revolution (18) and the possibility that human nature (or "essence"), and consequently human rights and freedoms, will deteriorate as biotechnology advances. Blade Runner provides a challenge to Fukuyama's belief in the existence of human nature by asking whether it is truly a meaningful concept and how its supposed stability is grounded on the radical exclusion of certain 'others'. The film also tackles some big ethical questions such as who controls the definition of life and who authors or authorizes creation (Battaglia 494) as well as "who and what can count as a subject of ethical address" (Wolfe 49), providing an implicit criticism of class relations and colonization which lie at the heart of the film's representation of androids as slaves.

One of the uses of popular cinema is to occupy a “place of honor in bioethical rhetoric and popular debate about genetically engineered entities” (Battaglia 495), and the genre of science fiction helps us examine “the binary oppositions of real and imaginary, human and artificial, and self and other” and comment “on the direction in which our world is moving” (Kirely 285). As Elaine L. Graham argues, fictional worlds can be “just as revealing, in their own way, of the ethical and political dimensions of the digital and biotechnological age as are the material artefacts of humanity's technological endeavours” (1).

Even though the first version of Blade Runner was released in 1982, the version I am going to focus on is the Final Cut from 2007. The history of the various versions of the film is rather interesting in itself; however, it is too complicated to go into in detail here and I will just briefly explicate my choice. The Final Cut is basically a polished up version of the Director’s Cut (1992) which differs from the 1982 version in several respects, three of which are the most important: First, there is no happy ending (Deckard and Rachael do not escape into “nature”), but instead an ambiguous one (they just leave Deckard’s apartment and enter the elevator). Second, Deckard’s overly explanatory voice-over is omitted. Third, Deckard’s unicorn dream is included. These changes are significant because they open up the possibility of Deckard being a replicant, which is crucial to the film’s analysis of the human/non-human boundary.

Blade Runner is based on Philip K. Dick’s novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968) and depicts a dystopian Los Angeles in the year 2019. Animal life appears to be extinct and most humans have gone to live on off-world colonies. Those who are left are either poor or failed to pass a medical examination. One of the exceptions is Eldon Tyrell, the director of the powerful Tyrell Corporation that produces genetically engineered robots called replicants to work as slaves on the colonies. As Ian Barns points out, “[R]eplicants are the ultimate result of the commodification of not only human experience but also of human life, the logical outcome of perfectly designed humans that exist solely as objects for affluent consumers” (122). Replicants are advertised as “more human than human” – they are superior to humans in strength, dexterity, and at least equal in intelligence, but they (supposedly) lack emotions. In order to prevent them from developing emotions, Tyrell programs them to “expire” after four years. It is illegal for replicants to return to Earth, so there are special police officers called blade runners whose job is to “retire” (i.e., kill) the

rogue androids. When a group of the superior Nexus 6 series replicants escape their job posts, kill a number of humans, and return to Earth to (literally) meet their maker in order to have their life span extended, a semi-retired blade runner, Rick Deckard, is asked by his boss to get rid of the "skin jobs", as he calls them. His use of this derogatory term indicates that he does not think that the lives of replicants matter or that they are living beings in the "proper" sense at all.

The city's bleak urban identity reveals a deeply classed and racialized society. Those who remain on Earth, being already deemed unfit to move to "a golden land of opportunity and adventure" (as one of the advertisements says), are further divided into what Deckard's boss calls "the little people," some kind of lumpenproletariat, and the superbly rich, such as Tyrell who lives on the top floor of a luxurious Mayan-style building. The lower class mostly consists of non-white citizens, which can be read as a realization of the paranoia about overpopulation and rampant immigration, or more precisely, about Japanese capitalism "taking over" the U.S., as Kellner, Leibowitz, and Ryan have pointed out. However, as they argue, in Ridley Scott's vision of L.A. the hegemony of U.S. capitalism seems to have incorporated its rivals into its structure because foreignness here does not represent a threat but is rather a sign of powerlessness (the inability to leave Earth).

It is a faceless mass of people who live in a world that is completely dominated by big corporations, but also defined by clear spatial boundaries. Just like the poor do not occupy the upper parts of the city, the replicants are not allowed to come to Earth at all, so the role of blade runners is "to police the boundaries of difference" (McNamara 431), that is, to "retire" (a term which implies the purpose of their lives is labor) the replicants – not so much because they are dangerous (although they are), but because their presence undermines the neatly set spatial-class boundaries that determine who belongs where. What is at stake is an "imaginative geography" that serves to position "them" relative to "us" in a way that links a conceptual "othering" to a geographical one (Philo and Wilbert 10).[2] By coming back, the replicants transgress their designated conceptual and material space and assert their agency by resisting human placements of them (13), which upsets the power relations that define them as disposable slaves deprived of privileges associated with being human. One could even say that "the demonization of androids deflects mass attention from the real threat to freedom posed by an economy that thrives on the manufacture of products that

threaten society in ways that justify the creation of a repressive apparatus," as Kevin McNamara suggests (432).

In any case, since these "artificial humans" are so sophisticated in design, it is impossible to tell them apart from "real humans" except with the help of the Voight-Kampff test that measures emphatic response by looking at capillary dilation, fluctuation of the pupil, and involuntary dilation of the iris:[3] It is important to note here that "the test does not measure feelings; it detects only physical manifestations from which emotion may be inferred" (McNamara 440). Ironically, the main tool for distinguishing between humans and androids is also a machine. The trustworthiness of the device stems from the reliance on mechanical objectivity and disregard of its ideological function: the Voight-Kampff test is not repositioned as a manifestation of a particular set of ideas or desires on the part of its makers and users, but is taken at face value (Drayson n. pag.). That is why neither Deckard nor his boss know what they would do if the machine turned out to be unable to detect a Nexus 6 – they certainly "do not entertain the possibility that a successful performance by a Replicant would show that he or she was empathetic enough to be considered a kind of human being" (Norris 24). The point is that the working of the device needs to be predictable and the desired results determined in advance because it is according to them that the human/non-human boundary is maintained.

In order to test a Nexus 6, Deckard comes to Tyrell's office where he poses a series of questions to a woman called Rachael who seems to be unaware of her non-human status. After more than a hundred questions (as opposed to the usual twenty or thirty), Deckard concludes she is indeed a replicant. "How can it not know what it is?" he wonders, immediately replacing the pronoun 'she' with 'it', thereby stripping Rachael of humanness. Tyrell replies that "commerce is our goal" and "more human than human is our motto." In order to produce this type of self-unaware replicant, he explains, they had to implant memories in them, as "a cushion or pillow for their emotions" so "consequently we can control them better." The construction of replicants as things, as nothing more than human-produced machines (or, to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben, as "bare non-life"),[4] enables blade runners to legitimize their cause, evade the question of ethics, and kill without remorse. "Replicants are like any other machine," Deckard tells Rachael, "they're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, it's not my problem." As long as the machine does what it is supposed

to do, what its makers programmed it to do, there is no need for intervention. But any form of deviation or agency is immediately sanctioned and suppressed.

By reducing the essence of these machines to their utility to humans, Deckard denies them autonomy and the right to self-definition. If we define androids as "automatons resembling human beings,[5] we will realize that the superior Nexus 6 androids do not really fit this description: they are not (mere) human tools, but intelligent, sentient creatures who do not seem to accept the position of the slave/machine quite so easily. Unlike a machine, explains Andrew Norris, "which is tended and guided by [the human hand], the Replicants have no need for intelligent (human) direction. They are themselves self-directing, minded agents, with physical and, in time, emotional responses of their own" (20). They can also be seen as "living machines" – robots that are considered alive because they are driven by their own interests and not by a human determined program (Deplazes & Huppenbauer n.pag.).

In her seminal text "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway argues that the late 20th century machines have blurred the division between natural and artificial. Moreover, a kind of reversal has taken place: "[O]ur machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (194). This is certainly true of Deckard, whose emotional distance is conspicuous in the film, especially when compared to the anger, passion, playfulness and affection lead replicant Roy shows towards his fellow creatures and his lover Pris. Emphatic response as the main criterion for determining who is human and the reliability of the Voight-Kampff test are also questioned by Rachael when she asks Deckard if he has ever taken the test himself, and he does not answer. There are a number of other hints that Deckard might be a replicant himself. For example, he keeps old family photos at his desk (like Rachael, whose photos endow her with a false past); his eyes reveal a red glimmer just like Rachael's; and the mysterious police officer Gaff leaves a unicorn origami in front of Deckard's apartment, recalling Deckard's unicorn dream (which implies that Gaff is familiar with Deckard's implanted memories just like Deckard is with Rachael's). The undecided ontological position of Deckard in the Final Cut version of the film frames the narrative in such a way that it shows that "there is no way of knowing whether one is, in fact, a replicant implanted with memories, or an 'authentic' human," and consequently the difference between human and replicant is effectively collapsed (Byron 61).

The issue of authenticity also emerges when Rachael realizes she is not human – her memories turn out to belong to someone else, and consequently her sense of self is shattered. However, "her past endures, in a mythic form, and it continues to ground her independent identity" (Norris 22); for example, in spite of her memories being "inauthentic", she still remembers how to play the piano. The lesson here is that if something (or someone) is "inauthentic," that does not make it/them any less "real": Rachael's memories can serve as a basis for her identity even though they do not originally belong to her. According to Charles Lindholm, "authentic things are original, real, and pure. They are what they purport to be" (363). In that sense, it would appear that since replicants merely purport to be human, they are inauthentic. But the radical point of Blade Runner is that human authenticity should not be taken for granted as something given and unconstructed: both replicants and humans perform the idea of humanness and are thus equally (in)authentic. As Scott Bukatman observes, "as synthetic humans, replicants inherently challenge essentialist notions of identity. Identity stands revealed as a construction, the result of conscious or unconscious social and physical engineering." The film thus invites us to "confront our own constructedness" (80).

Slavoj Žižek, who insists on the reading of Deckard as a replicant, makes a similar point by completely reversing the human/replicant distinction. Due to the "nonsubstantial status of the subject" as such, he argues, every human being is nothing but a replicant; or, "man is a replicant who does not know it" (40-41). What is at stake here is the problem of self-knowledge: "not whether or not another subject is a replicant," but whether the subject her/himself can know for sure that s/he is indeed human (Byron 49). A similar point can be made if we interpret replicants as simulacra. By virtue of being "the negation of both original and copy", the simulacrum embodies the ontological inconsequence of authenticity; there is no longer any "difference between 'false' and 'true', 'real' and 'imaginary'" (Bruno 68).

In the framework of performativity theory, the idea of authenticity is closely related to the notion of masquerade, or acting that you are someone you are not, hiding your true self.[6] "Capable of masquerading as non-android," writes Jill Galvan, the replicant "blends in with mainstream society, infringing upon the boundaries of the human collective" (413). What the human collective is endangered by, however, as I already pointed out, is not the possibility of machine masquerading as human, but the deep-seated anxiety about human masquerading as human – of human nature

being unmasked as (self-)delusion. Drawing on Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Charles Taylor argues that "an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others" (36). In the absence of an other against which to define oneself, the ground for identity is lost and so is ontological security. "For if machines can be implanted with memories and be unaware that they are not their own, then an apparent sense of self is no evidence of the reality of the self at all" (Byron 47-48).

The character Roy Batty, leader of the replicant rebellion, can be interpreted as a queer figure that performs or even mocks the Cogito as the fundamental principle underlying modern human subjectivity. Roy resists classification as he stands on the border between dangerous and playful, beauty and terminability, masculine and transvestite, machine and agency. "The performative side of Roy Batty breaks down traditionally drawn distinctions between the authentic and the artificial, or theatrical" as he "slide[s] from one persona to another" in a "performance of self that becomes an implicit challenge to Deckard's stoic desire to preserve the 'real'" (Bukatman 85). Roy purses his lips, taunts, teases, confesses remorse, paints his face with his lover's blood, and in general eroticizes the world (85). He also appropriates and parodies humanness and knowledge: he misquotes William Blake, informs Tyrell's genetic designer Sebastian that "we're not computers, Sebastian, we're physical," and then commends Pris for citing Descartes. There are two pivotal scenes for Roy in the film: first, when he meets and kills Tyrell, and second, when he saves Deckard's life. Roy seeks out his creator with the desire to have his life extended, but their meeting turns into a Frankensteinian parody of fatherhood in which Tyrell calls Roy "a prodigal son" and "quite a prize," and, after learning that the maker cannot repair what he makes,[7] Roy in turn gauges his eyes out. By killing his creator, Roy becomes unhinged from history, an ultimately free subject, a copy without original – a copy that has, by virtue of its "emotional response," become more authentic than the original, or "more human than human."

During their final confrontation, when Deckard is hanging from the side of a building, Roy gives him a lesson in humanity, saying, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave." He then goes on to recite a short poetic speech and, as he "expires," releases a white dove as a poignant metaphor for the soul, which can be said to signify his "assumption to human status" (Byron 59). Starting out as a "poet-warrior," Roy-the-machine eventually "renounces his program

as a ruthless killer and instead chooses pity and compassion" (Kellner, Leibowitz, and Ryan). Faced with the realization of his imminent death, Roy chooses to spare Deckard, abolishing the boundary between human and non-human by acting on sympathy – the lack of which is the only thing that is supposed to mark his inferiority.

The film thus raises some important ethical, bioethical, biopolitical, and epistemological issues that we might be soon facing in reality as well because of the accelerating development of technology and the ongoing "apotheosis of [the] medico-administrative edifice and its dense imbrication in contemporary apparatuses and institutions of state and economic power" (Wolfe 53). Simply put, the management and control over life (and death) has become inextricably "linked to the reproduction of both the state and capitalist relations" (Foucault, qtd. in Wolfe 52). Wolfe warns that bioethics "in its dominant institutionalized form" continues to be based upon a specific notion of humanness despite the fact that it ought to be concerned precisely with the questioning of the shifting boundary between the human and nonhuman as a result of biotechnical and scientific developments. Consequently, the definition of the human is not only a philosophical, but an administrative issue, shaped by "the complex interrelations between those who theorize the rules and norms and those who legislate and enforce them" (51). Unfortunately, Fukuyama's wish for state regulation of biotechnology is probably more likely to come true than Haraway's dream of the emancipatory and transgressive potentiality of the cyborg.

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[1] I explain the different versions of the film on the next page.

[2] In their text Philo and Wilbert talk about animal vs. human spaces; however, I believe their distinction can also be applied to human vs. non-human (in this case, replicant) spaces more generally because it likewise implies a fundamental spatial and symbolic gap between the two.

[3] The origin of the idea of empathy as the key element of human nature can be located in the 18th century moral sentiment theory, particularly in David Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature (1738) and Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759).

[4] The concept of "bare non-life" is defined in Agamben's Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995).

[5] The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) Vol. 1, 76.

[6] See in particular Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre (1758).

[7] Roy: It's not an easy thing to meet your maker. / Tyrell: And what can he do for you? / Roy: Can the maker repair what he makes? (Blade Runner, dir. Ridley Scott, 2007).

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