

# **Roboethics in Film**

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**PISA**  
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PRESS

treated with respect. While the power to love is not enough for the robot to turn him into a mature human, the power to reason does make a robot equal to man. Both films however make it clear however that a robot – if he is capable of suffering - should not be hurt. Whether it is a concrete possibility that one day robots will be able to love and/or weigh reasons and act according to their own decisions is up to the future to show us.

## Meditations on Blade Runner

*Michael Martin*

The 1982 film, *Blade Runner*, presents many questions concerning the position and relevance of the human being in the postmodern epoch. The audience is confronted with androids, called replicants, incredibly handsome "beings" whose language rises at times to poetic beauty, while the humans in the film are embarrassing physical and moral examples of the species. With whom will the audience identify or sympathize, the human or the simulacrum? The film further complicates this issue by incorporating traditional Christian symbols and language in relation to the replicants. The film seems to suggest that consciousness is the defining characteristic of humanness, whether one speaks of an organic human being or a replicant. Current debate between scientists, philosophers, and theologians centers on the question of consciousness and its relationship to the brain and, for some, the soul. This essay addresses the dilemmas in the film, while keeping in mind the central question: What is a human being?

### 1. *Blade Runner*: The film

I first encountered the film, *Blade Runner*, as a young man in a matinee performance soon after the film was released in early summer of 1982. I liked the movie, but something disturbed me about it: something I could not quite identify at the time. Eighteen years later, I previewed the film in preparation for showing it to a college freshmen composition class. I was amazed at how well the film had held up after nearly twenty years; its special effects, for example, did not seem obvious as is often the case when seeing "state-of-the-art" long after

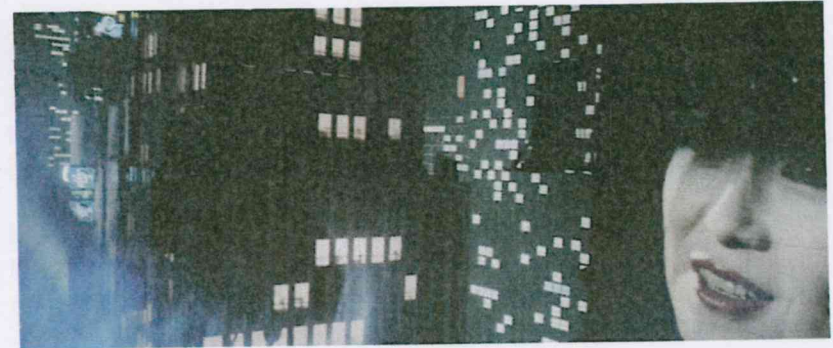


the fact. Other films, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), for instance, had not. But again, the film engendered within me the same feeling of unease, the same anxiety as it had in 1982. And many of my students, likewise, came away from the film with, as Roy Batty says to a bewildered genetic designer in the film, "Questions ... questions." This essay is about those questions. As the title suggests, what lie ahead are meditations on *Blade Runner*, the foci of which are aimed more at contemplation than exegesis.

*Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, starring Harrison Ford, Sean Young, and Rutger Hauer, and based on Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), is a parable that asks many questions concerning the position and relevance of the human being in the postmodern epoch. To many, in fact, it represents postmodernism itself. The film offers a nihilistic vision of a future Los Angeles: a city in virtual ruins, perpetually dark, rainy, and contaminated by nuclear fallout.

Style-wise, *Blade Runner* is a cinematic monster, an enigma-bearing sphinx composed of a Philip Marlowe-like voiceover and the stock characters and costumes of film noir complemented with Metropolis-inspired visuals. We see film noir's slow-moving fans and Venetian blinds; the requisite copious amounts of cigarette smoke and hard liquor; the femme fatale and the hard-boiled detective with a soft spot for a dame in trouble. We find these noir accoutrements, however, in a surreal city-scape of pyramid-like buildings, floating video billboards, and a populace of predominately Oriental lineage that speaks "citspeak... guttertalk," a language the film's protagonist describes as "a mishmash of Japanese, Spanish, German, what-have-you." Punk rockers and Hare Krishna devotees also inhabit this post-war society.

This is the world in which trench-coated bounty hunter Rick Deckard searches for fugitive Nexus 6 "Replicants," a sophisticated variety of android almost impossible to distinguish from humans without the help of the Voight-Kampf Test, a type of lie detector for replicants. Across the skyline of this dystopia, video billboards for corporate conglomerates drift hypnotically and feature the image of a digestive aid-hawking geisha (*image 1*) alternating with promises of "new



*Image 1 – The Geisha*

life and opportunity"<sup>1</sup> in the Off-World colonies. Part of *Blade Runner*'s power arises from its ability to captivate audiences with its pastiche of strangeness and familiarity.

When the film was released in the summer of 1982, *Newsweek*'s Jack Kroll described *Blade Runner* as a "High-Tech Horror Show," while admitting it was a "compelling addition"<sup>2</sup> to robot/human science fiction folklore. *Time*'s Richard Corliss praised the film's visuals, but felt the re-cutting, the disparity in effectiveness between the two main roles, and "a plot that proceeds by fits and starts,"<sup>3</sup> asked too much of the audience. Harrison Ford or no Harrison Ford, the film left theaters within weeks. It lost \$12 million in the process<sup>4</sup>.

In the years since *Blade Runner*'s theatrical release, the film has grown in popularity; and, to some, it is an icon of postmodernism. David Harvey believes that the film can "hold up to us, as in a mirror, many of the essential features of the condition of postmodernity"<sup>5</sup> Jack Boozer, Jr., suggests that *Blade Runner* "interrogates identity and exposes antiquated assumptions to illuminate a crisis of identity formation—based on postmodernist concerns of hypermediation and

<sup>1</sup> J. 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, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1991), 155 f.

<sup>2</sup> J. Kroll, 'The Pleasures of Texture', in (1982) *Newsweek*: 72f.

<sup>3</sup> R. Corliss, 'High-Tech Horror Show', in (1982) *Time*: 68f.

<sup>4</sup> See J. B. Kerman (fn 1), 132f.

<sup>5</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 323f.



simulation"<sup>6</sup> Radical feminist, Marxist, and materialist Donna Haraway sees the film's character Rachael as a manifestation of "cyborg culture's fear, love, and confusion".<sup>7</sup> Haraway further sees the cyborg itself as symbolic of a radical feminist vision of a "'post-gender' world".<sup>8</sup> However, Jenna Tiitsman describes the film's "chaotic confusion of boundaries" as "monstrous"<sup>9</sup>. She has a point.

Blade Runner is often included in the canon of literary and cinematic dystopias. It stands alongside literary works such as Karel Capek's *RUR* (1920), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's masterpiece, *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). In the world of film, *Blade Runner* is in the tradition of celluloid dystopias such as *Metropolis* (Lang, 1922), *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985), *12 Monkeys* (Gilliam, 1995), and *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999), in showing a world of scientific and economic madness, where every reality is virtual. But where *Blade Runner* differs from these other works is in the way it treats with utter ambivalence what I would like to call "the tragic situation" found in its dystopia.

The tragic aspect in much of the literature of dystopia is a situation in which we find a protagonist confronted with a society complacently cooperating with evil. The protagonist knows the situation is wrong, and the drama of the story examines the ways in which he or she confronts this evil. This is the situation Winston Smith finds himself in 1984 and that John Savage is up against in *Brave New World*. The tragic situation shows us where the possibility for redemption lies—in the protagonist's search for authenticity, meaning—though these scenarios are usually left unredeemed. We do not want Winston to love Big Brother, and we do not want the Savage to commit suicide. They do, and so arrive at their tragic conclusions. *Blade Runner* begins with Rick Deckard as the protagonist, an enigmatic figure in a tragic situation. However, our allegiance is altered through the film, and we come to sympathize with Roy Batty, the replicant, who appropriates the

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Kerman (fn 1), 216f.

<sup>7</sup> D. J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 178f.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150f.

<sup>9</sup> J. Tiitsman, 'If Only You Could See What I've Seen With Your Eyes: Destabilized Spectatorship and Creation's Chaos in *Blade Runner*', in (2004) 54 (1) *Cross Currents*: 33f.

role of protagonist. But this may say more about the dystopia in which we live than the one we behold on the screen.

## 2. The problem with Roy

Roy Batty, played by Rutger Hauer, is perhaps the most compelling character of *Blade Runner*. Roy is the leader of the replicants, the fugitive androids Deckard is hunting. Roy possesses an Apollonian physical beauty of a distinctly Aryan cast. He is powerful, blue-eyed, and has white-blond hair: the kind of Teutonic demigod with which Hitler wanted to establish the Third Reich. He is perfect; or, at least, he seems to be. And Roy's perfection is not confined to his outward appearance. He even betrays qualities of obvious cultural and intellectual superiority. In one of our first encounters with Roy, we see him utter some particularly poignant verse. "Fiery the angels fell," he says. "Deep thunder rolled around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc." This is a subtle modification of two lines from William Blake's *America: A Prophecy*: "Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc".<sup>10</sup>

Rather an ironic twist. By changing the verb to "fell," Roy compares his situation to that of the biblical Lucifer. Roy and his fellow replicants ambushed a ship in the Off-World colonies (Mars in the book) and have returned to earth, effectively "falling from heaven." In this scene, then again as he taunts Deckard during the climax of the film, and finally in his death scene, Roy speaks like a poet. Roy is easily the most cultured character in *Blade Runner*. None of the allegedly human characters recite any poetry; none employ language as beautiful as Roy's.

Roy is not only a poet; he is also something of a philosopher, an intellectual. We first see evidence of this in the scene in which Roy and Leon, another replicant, visit the lab of genetic eye designer Chu in their quest for information about their own "morphology... longevity... incept dates." Though he cannot answer their requests, Chu immediately recognizes that Roy and Leon are Nexus 6 generation

<sup>10</sup> W. Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (rev. ed.), in D. V. Erdman (ed.) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 11:1-2 ff. (emphasis added).



replicants. "I design your eyes," he tells them. "If only you could see," replies Roy, "what I have seen with your eyes." The ambiguity over even the proper way to ascribe ownership of Roy's eyes, and the use of double-meaning, reveal Roy's sense for philosophical irony. Roy gets all the good lines in *Blade Runner*. In another scene, J.F. Sebastian, the genetic designer who befriends Roy and fellow fugitive Pris, figures out that the two are replicants. "Show me something," says Sebastian. That is: do something humans cannot do, something marvellous. "We're not computers, Sebastian," replies Roy. "We're physical." Pris follows Roy's argument with an appropriation of René Descartes's dictum: "I think, Sebastian; therefore, I am." As with poetry, no humans reference philosophers in the film. In his response to Sebastian, Roy tries to justify his existence as "other than machine." However, computers are physical, at least in a material sense. Roy is, in fact, referring to consciousness, which renders Pris's argument the stronger, since this is a case of ontological contingency. As for tricks, one trick that Roy does perform, though it is on his own terms and serves his own purposes, is in playing mental chess with Tyrell through the persona of Sebastian. Responding to Roy's directives, Sebastian tells Tyrell, "Bishop to King 7. Checkmate (I think)." It is. This act is the key that gains Roy access to Tyrell's inner sanctum.

Roy changes through the course of the film far more than the ostensible protagonist, Deckard. Certainly, Roy has his problems. A big one is that he kills those who obstruct his way to increasing his lifespan. This includes the man who designed Roy, genetic industrialist Eldon Tyrell, who cannot help Roy realize his desire. Roy becomes a trifle annoyed at Tyrell's inability to help; as a result, he crushes his creator's skull with his bare hands, gouging out Tyrell's eyes in the process. But Roy changes. When, toward the end of the film, he has the opportunity of watching Deckard fall to his death, Roy instead saves the bounty his life. Deckard watches in awe as the replicant makes his last confession:

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 at the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die.

This is an incredibly moving scene, poetic in every detail, from the words themselves to the camera's Hitchcock-esque slip into slow motion the moment Roy expires. Indeed, to even write these lines as prose seems to be something of an injustice; these words should be



*Image 2 – The Holy Father*

broken into verse. With this utterance, Roy "dies," releasing a dove into an uncharacteristic light above the dark city. This is indeed a tender moment, one in which our burgeoning empathy for Roy becomes fully manifest. In this moment, we love Roy; at the very least, we forgive him for his crimes. In fact, we have been falling in love with Roy for a while. His obvious beauty and his poetry set him apart from the humans in the film (except Deckard who in all probability is a replicant himself). The other humans are all unattractive, coarse-spoken representatives of the species, several afflicted with physical ailments such as partial blindness, lameness, and disease. They are an unpleasant lot.

Roy, as we have seen, is almost heroic in his attributes; he is also the film's quasi-religious figure. Scott and writers Hampton Fancher and David Peoples take great pains to illustrate this. First, they associate Roy with the fallen angels in the misquote from Blake. Even the film's setting, Los Angeles, "the City of Angels," speaks to this (Dick's setting, on the other hand, is San Francisco). But, Roy is not only the Lucifer of *Blade Runner*, he also becomes its Christ.

When Roy goes to Tyrell seeking longer life, Tyrell is dressed in a white robe, his room illuminated by white candles (*image 2*). His bed (modelled, incidentally, after the bed of Pope John Paul II) is likewise





Image 3 – Roy and the Dove

resplendent in white<sup>11</sup>. Tyrell is, quite literally, the replicant's "creator." Upon meeting Roy, Tyrell says, "Look at you. You're the prodigal son," an obvious allusion to the story found in Luke's gospel. Roy confesses to Tyrell that he has "done questionable things," which Tyrell ameliorates with: "But also extraordinary things. Revel in your time." Roy wonders whether or not his misdeeds are forgivable. "Nothing that the god of bio-mechanics wouldn't let you into heaven for?" he asks. Furthermore, in the final battle between Roy and Deckard, as Roy's life signs begin to wane, Roy pulls a nail out of the concrete and thrusts it through his palm, an obvious association with Christ's Crucifixion. Then, just before Roy expires, he saves Deckard's life, literally becoming Deckard's "savior." As he dies, he releases a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, and Blade Runner's ironic image of the Trinity is complete (*image 3*).

Roy is without doubt a great literary/cinematic character, a postmodern variation on Milton's Satan. He possesses virtues of literary greatness: complexity of character, heroic aspirations, and a capacity for redemption. But what made me feel somehow unsettled in 1982, an emotion I was not quite able to articulate at the time, and both fascinates and repulses me now, is the fact that Roy is not human. He is not even an animal. Roy is a machine. Why is this a problem? This is a good question, because for many it may not be a problem.

<sup>11</sup> See J. B. Kerman, (fn 1), 166f.

Haraway, though being ironic (I think), describes differentiating between human and machine as a "leaky distinction," since "late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed"<sup>12</sup>. The problem in *Blade Runner* is that Roy and, in fact, all the replicants are depicted as better than human; while the humans in the film, reprobates all, are obviously less than human. Indeed, the motto of the Tyrell Corporation is "More human than human." A frightening proposition.

In Dick's book, the replicants, called "andys," are not of such an exalted, daemonic nature. In fact, they are self-centered, cruel beings, treating everything and everyone—even each other—with contempt. As the book's Rachael confesses of her "twin" Pris, "androids have no loyalty to one another and I know that goddamn Pris Stratton will destroy me and occupy my place"<sup>13</sup>. Ultimately, the andys are only interested in self-preservation. In addition, andys are intellectual megalomaniacs. In an argument over what mistakes the androids are making, Irmgard Batty (Roy's "wife") says, "I'll tell you what fouls us up, Roy; it's our goddamn superior intelligence!"<sup>14</sup> They treat religion—the Mercerism of the novel—likewise, as a childish and deplorable hoax. Indeed, a subplot of the novel is concerned with the androids' attempt to expose Mercerism as a fraud. Though Mercerism, indeed, proves a fraud, the exposé does not work. Humans continue to believe.

One of the main themes through the novel is that what makes a human human is the ability to empathize, with animals as well as with other human beings. Ridiculing empathy, Irmgard says, "Isn't it a way of proving that humans can do something we can't do? ... we just have your word that you feel this empathy business, this shared, group thing"<sup>15</sup>. A thoroughly postmodern sensibility. While the replicants' inability to empathize is touched on in the film—the VK Test, for instance—this idea is not consistently followed. Rather, it is the opposite; the movie's replicants (and Deckard) appear to have a greater capacity for empathy than the humans.

The book's andys may not think much of empathy, but they are surely adept at manipulating human capacities for it. The andys make a

<sup>12</sup> D. J. Haraway, (fn 7), 152f.

<sup>13</sup> P. K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Del Ray, 1996), 191f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-67ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10ff.



right sap out of "chickenhead" J.R. Isidore, taking advantage of his kindness and thirst for contact with, quite literally in this case, "others." One trap into which the Deckard of the novel falls is to develop feelings for an android, Rachael. Rachael capitalizes on Deckard's human "weakness" (unlike in the film, Deckard seems to be obviously human in the novel) in order to take advantage of him, saving her own life (and hopefully that of her android twin) before killing Deckard's pet goat in revenge, or spite. By contrast, the Deckard/Rachael romance in the film is of a pretty typical Hollywood variety: boy meets replicant; boy loses replicant, etc. They even ride off into the wild blue yonder together at the film's close, an incongruous (if Hollywood) ending.

As Rachael manipulates Deckard's empathetic nature in the book, so Scott similarly capitalizes on his audience's human weakness for empathy to make us sympathize with Roy. Indeed, the film's masterly and provocative use of manipulation is at once the Scott's greatest triumph and gravest deception, a startling application of irony. That Scott does this by appropriating the very core idea of Christianity—the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—only serves to make his ruse all the more compelling.

This ruse is exaggerated by our own postmodern ennui, the affectation in which we regard everything as relative. We relegate everything, from religion to food, to the most absurd reduction of the concept of "democracy." According to this mode of thinking, for instance, humans are no more valuable than animals, since "nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal"<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, according to this paradigm, animals are seen as victims of "human hegemony and arrogance within the framework of the natural world"<sup>17</sup>—a statement, indeed, that fairly drips with arrogance. This mode of thinking is radically anti-hierarchical, anti-human and, because it is these, obviously anti-Christian, and especially anti-Catholic. Some aspects of postmodernism, especially those stemming from Jacques Derrida's and Richard Rorty's ideas, are considered by some as an extreme variety of nominalism, a throwback to the nominalist/realist debates of the Middle Ages—which makes postmodernism not very

<sup>16</sup> D. J. Haraway (fn 7), 151-52ff.

<sup>17</sup> J. Sposito, 'Medical School Classes Go to the Dogs', in (2003) *The UCSD Guardian*, 4f and 7f.

modern at all<sup>18</sup>. It is further intriguing that postmodernism is the philosophy de rigueur of academia, the last bastion (outside of the church) of hierarchical structures. Postmoderns love irony.

In *Blade Runner* Scott lulls us into thinking Roy is the good guy, when in actuality he is just a machine, or at best a simulacrum of a human being. He may not consider himself as such, or, rather, it may not consider itself as such; but this denial cannot alter the fact. This is not *My Mother the Car*.

As Deckard says early in the film, "Replicants are like any other machines: they're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, it's not my problem." Roy is a problem. He is not only Deckard's problem; he is everyone's problem. He is our problem.

Jacques Maritain once warned literary artists about the dangers of making immorality glamorous, appealing. "In making out of your sin beauty," he wrote, "you send it like an angel among your brothers. It kills them without a sound"<sup>19</sup>. This is our experience of Roy. We empathize with his plight because it is our own. After Roy expires, Deckard says, "All it wanted was the same answers the rest of us want: Where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?" Surely, these are our questions. But, as we condescend to accept Roy's ersatz humanity, we compromise the value of our own. The problem here, what Maritain might call the sin, is in ascribing human attributes—compassion, feeling, morality—to the non-human, while at the same time denigrating humanity itself. This is the pathetic fallacy taken to the extreme.

Some may think that considering Scott's depiction of Roy as a sin is a bit much. We are, after all, speaking of a fictional character here. And fictional characters, human or not, are no more real than—or just as real as—any other sign. But to hide moral contingencies behind the pretensions of relativistic semiotics is a copout. It is no better, really, than arguing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. And that is not very modern, either.

Still, we may consider that the replicants in *Blade Runner* are human signifiers as Stephen Neale suggests, a fascinating notion<sup>20</sup>. Certainly,

<sup>18</sup> S. J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism. Grand Rapids*, (MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 154f.

<sup>19</sup> J. Maritain, *Art and Poetry* (trans.: Elva de P. Matthews) (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943/1982), 51f.

<sup>20</sup> S. Neale, 'Issues of Difference: Alien and *Blade Runner*', in D. James (ed.) *Fantasy and Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 222f.



they are "more human than human," as the Tyrell Corporation promises. Though it might be more appropriate to deem the humans in the film "less human than human," a point Scott seems intent on driving home. Yet, allowing the replicants to stand for the human is exactly what is so unnerving about the film. I may look like the image in the mirror, but it is not I. As Neale puts it, "although particular categories can sometimes function metaphorically as symptomatic signs of other categories, they are nonetheless irreducible to one another"<sup>21</sup>.

What is interesting in *Blade Runner* is seeing what it does with our human abilities to empathize, not in recasting the very ideas that make the film so interesting in the gray hues of semiotic democracy. The replicants become more empathetic as the film progresses, and we become more empathetic toward the replicants. It is easy for us to fall into the mistake of thinking the replicants are the good guys, while the humans are the bad guys. Indeed, Roy, as he taunts Deckard in their rooftop encounter, says, "Aren't you supposed to be the good man?" But to see *Blade Runner* as a postmodern parable of the inhumanity of man is too simplistic. And boring.

I am not suggesting that Scott is trying to express despair, disappointment, or even disgust over the state of human beings, and placing his hope in machines instead. In his film, *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), for instance, Scott returns to many of the same themes he treats in *Blade Runner*—slavery, identity, "strength and honor." However, in *Gladiator*, he paints a much more positive picture of what it means to be human, even though there are some entirely repugnant humans in the film. What I am saying is that in *Blade Runner* Scott manipulates us into sympathizing with Roy. It is as if he sets up an experiment to see what we will do: he sends an "angel" among us. We take the bait. We sin. If we apply Maritain's metaphor, we might say that Scott has made something beautiful of our sin. Roy is not Scott's problem. Roy is our problem. And what is our sin? Faithlessness. We betray the human. Of course, Scott does not exactly give us any humans to hope in—unless Deckard is one. But that is beside the point: the world is full of sinners.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines sin as "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity"<sup>22</sup>. We compromise our dearest possession, our humanity, in letting ourselves be lured into Roy's trap. We know he is a killer as well as a machine, but our sympathies are entirely with him as he expires. We have developed a perverse attachment to him. Scott may be teaching us a valuable lesson with this fallen angel. A lesson, alas, we mistake entirely.

### 3. *Blade Runner* and the Fall

When Roy compares himself to a fallen angel, we can interpret this as suggesting that the basic condition of life—any kind of life, even artificial life—is of living in a fallen world. The evidence in the film is intriguing. Consider: Roy wrestles with what Tradition describes as the repercussions of the Fall—suffering, concupiscence, and, even more obviously, death<sup>23</sup>. He agonizes over the deaths of his comrades Leon, Zhora, and Pris. His sorrow over Pris is particularly moving. His body shows signs of wear and impending demise. He commits murder and theft, though he admits that he has "done questionable things." He seeks a way, if not to avoid death, then at least to prolong his life. He is a fallen being in a fallen world.

And themes related to the Fall are not limited to Roy. Zhora is also associated with images derived from Genesis. Though designed for a "kick murder squad" Off-World, Zhora's earthly occupation is more, shall we say, "pleasure-oriented." She's a stripper working in a combination sex club/opium den, The Snake Pit. When Deckard's investigation leads him to the club, he is greeted coolly by the owner, Taffy Lewis, who offers Deckard a worm-laden cocktail "on the house." While Deckard waits for an opportunity to encounter Zhora, he hears the club's emcee announce her performance: "Taffy Lewis presents Miss Salome and the snake. Watch her take the pleasure from the serpent that once corrupted man." As the performance begins, Deckard turns his head away in shame, or perhaps embarrassment, an almost archetypal allusion to the Fall—"Who told you that you were

<sup>22</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1994), 453.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 322f.



naked?" Besides her consorting with the snake, Zhora also has a serpent tattoo on her cheek, further signifying her connection to the story found in Genesis.

Furthermore, the end of the original version of *Blade Runner* alludes to the Genesis story when Deckard and Rachael fly off into a landscape replete with sunshine, mountains, and trees—a host of images entirely inconsistent with the rest of the film. In voiceover Deckard discloses that Rachael has no termination date. We can imagine them living, quite literally, "happily ever after." Like the surviving robots in Capek's *RUR*, Deckard and Rachael become a nightmarish parody of Adam and Eve.

The Fall is most assuredly not a topic for postmodern literature, though the high moderns most certainly utilized the symbolic apparatus of the Fall. T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* (1922), James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Graham Greene in most of his work, and Anthony Burgess, especially in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1962), explore the Fall and its repercussions—and this is by no means an exhaustive list, not even a preliminary one. But even the moderns voiced a certain ambivalence about the Fall as an idea. As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his son, "they've sort of tucked Genesis into the lumber-room of their mind as not very fashionable furniture, a bit ashamed to have it about the house, don't you know, when the bright clever young people called"<sup>24</sup>.

In that it treats the Fall as a theme, *Blade Runner* may not necessarily be the postmodern manifesto it is so often made out to be. Rather, it becomes a sort of cyberpunk *Paradise Lost*. We might, of course, be tempted to think this theme in *Blade Runner* is meant to be ironic. But our resultant sympathy for Roy, the "human signifier," suggests this is not the case. We empathize with Roy because his predicament is our own, not because he represents an alternative to humanness. Could it be that, by treating the Fall as one of its themes, *Blade Runner* deconstructs postmodernism and even itself?

<sup>24</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, 'The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien', in C. Humphrey, C. Tolkien (eds.) (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 109f.

#### 4. The future of the soul

Prior to World War II, the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev saw the waning stature of humanity as a waxing problem. "Is that being," he wrote, "to whom the future belongs to be called man, or something other?"<sup>25</sup>. Of course, he was not the first to ask this question. Capek did in *RUR*, the very source of the modern concept of the robot. In the film, *Metropolis*, another of *Blade Runner*'s forebears, Fritz Lang treats this topic in the characters of Maria and her robot doppelgänger. Prior to all these, Friedrich Nietzsche, in the apex of his ironic scorn, held that mankind was a tremendous disappointment, and offered the idea of the *Übermensch* as an alternative. "I teach you the Superman," he wrote in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. "Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass him?"<sup>26</sup>. Nietzsche, like so many of his postmodern progeny, looked forward to a "posthuman" epoch.

Indeed, Francis Fukuyama believes this posthuman future may be upon us. In *Our Posthuman Future*, Fukuyama argues that although advances in science and technology bring obvious benefits to us, they also "represent our civilization's key vulnerabilities"<sup>27</sup>. He calls into question our society's addiction to neuro-pharmacology—Prozac, Ritalin, and the like—comparing their use and continued refinement to the use of "soma" in Huxley's *Brave New World*<sup>28</sup>. A gram, Fukuyama implies, is not worth a damn. His main concern, though, is with the area of eugenics, a term he would prefer to replace with the word "breeding"<sup>29</sup>.

*Blade Runner* may be interpreted as emblematic of this posthuman future. The replicants have been genetically designed, not constructed. They possess beauty, reveal evidence of intelligent design, and are conscious, self-reflective beings. Though marketed as "more human

<sup>25</sup> N. Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (trans.: D. Lowrie, A. Arbor), (MI: University of Michigan Press [1935], 1961), 25f.

<sup>26</sup> F. Nietzsche, 'Thus Spake Zarathustra' (trans.: T. Common) in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. (New York: Modern Library [1883], 1954), 4f.

<sup>27</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Bio-Technology Revolution*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2002), xii.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 46f.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 88f.



than human," nevertheless they are not human. Or are they? In brief, Blade Runner asks us to define—or redefine—what it is to be human.

This, really, is the oldest of questions, which, again, is not very modern, let alone postmodern. It is the theme of one of our earliest literary documents, The Epic of Gilgamesh (3000 BC). It is a theme of the great religious texts. "What is man," wrote the Psalmist, "that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Ps 8:4). But Blade Runner does not give us a recommendation; it merely obfuscates the distinctions between human and non-human. In another film, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Branagh, 1994), the Creature asks a particularly poignant question of its maker. "You speak of the soul," it says to Victor Frankenstein. "Do I have one?" Blade Runner begs this question, and begs it on behalf of all its characters, human as well as non-human.

This is the central question in current debates among neuroscientists, philosophers, and theologians. Many scientists, not interested in leaving questions of the soul to philosophers and theologians, try to show that human beings do not possess a metaphysical reality in addition to the physical. This is a clear example of what Oskar Gruenwald observes: that while the Medieval Church was mistaken to subordinate science under theology, "the error of modern Gnosticism... is to subsume theology and faith under science"<sup>30</sup>.

The current field of debate lies primarily in discussions on the origins and sources of consciousness. "If anything is equivalent to what theologians call the soul," writes Richard J. Goss, "it is what psychologists call self-awareness"<sup>31</sup>. Paul Bloom believes that "the qualities of mental life that we associate with souls are purely corporeal; they emerge from biochemical processes in the brain"<sup>32</sup>. Nobel laureate Gerald Edelman seeks to go further, wishing to "disenthrall those who believe consciousness is metaphysical"<sup>33</sup>.

Not all scientists agree, of course. Sir John Eccles relates: "We have to recognize that the unique selfhood is the result of a supernatural

<sup>30</sup> O. Gruenwald, 'Philosophy as Creative Discovery: Science, Ethics and Faith', in (2004) *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* XI (1/2), 159f.

<sup>31</sup> R. J. Goss, 'Biology of the Soul', in (1994) *The Humanist* 54, 23f.

<sup>32</sup> P. Bloom, 'The Duel between Body and Soul', in (2004) *New York Times*: A25f.

<sup>33</sup> G. Edelman, 'Neural Darwinism: An Interview with Gerald Edelman', in (2004) *New Perspectives Quarterly* 21 (3): 63f.

creation of what in the religious sense is called a soul"<sup>34</sup>. Eccles bases this assumption on "the commonsense view... that we are a combination of two things or entities: our brains on the one hand; and our conscious selves on the other"<sup>35</sup>. From the standpoint of a biologist, Thomas R. Cech sees evidence of intelligence in creation itself. He proposes that "life originated with impressive creativity, and it does not seem to me that possibilities floated in from nowhere; they were already present, intrinsic to the chemical materials"<sup>36</sup>.

David Bohm and Basil Hiley conjecture in *The Undivided Universe* that there is "no real division between mind and matter, psyche and soma"<sup>37</sup>. Their view, in a way, supports the Aristotelian<sup>38</sup> and Christian<sup>39</sup> assumptions that the human is not a dualistic being, composed of spirit (or soul) and matter, but rather that the two natures reveal an integral whole, a single nature; Furthermore, Bohm and Hiley explain their theory of "implicate order" in a way that proposes human beings, by their very existence, participate in and with the world, society, and "beyond." In their summary:

We see that each human being similarly participates in an inseparable way in society and in the planet as a whole. What may be suggested further is that such participation goes on to a greater collective mind, and perhaps ultimately to some yet more comprehensive mind in principle capable of going indefinitely beyond even the human species as a whole<sup>40</sup>

This type of pantheism seems, to me, not incompatible with Christianity. Indeed, their description could almost be construed as a scientific foundation for exploring what Christians call the Mystical Body of Christ. John Polkinghorne, for one, believes that the theory

<sup>34</sup> Sir J. Eccles, *Mind and Brain: The Many-Faceted Problems* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 101f.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 92f.

<sup>36</sup> T. R. Cech, 'The Origin of Life and the Value of Life', in R. Holmes (ed.) *Biology, Ethics, and the Origins of Life*, III. (Boston, MA: Jones & Bartlett, 1994), 33f.

<sup>37</sup> D. Bohm, B. J. Hiley, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993), 386f.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle. 'On the Soul'. (trans: D. W. Hamlyn), in J. L. Ackrill (ed.) *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 165-67ff.

<sup>39</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1994), 93f.

<sup>40</sup> D. Bohm, B. J. Hiley, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory*. (London: Routledge, 1993), 386f.



may perhaps prove valuable in rendering the theological application of process thinking "scientifically more persuasive"<sup>41</sup>.

Ethicist John F. Kavanaugh goes so far as to suggest that mental states do not prove humanity. "We are not our mental states, performances, activities or achievements," he writes. "These are splendid actions, great fulfilments, but they are only possible because there is a kind of being in the world called human".<sup>42</sup> I would go further. I would suggest that a human being is a being created out of love, a being at once both physical and metaphysical, composed of a unity of body and soul, who participates in and with both natural and supernatural orders of being. Most scientists, however, insist that those who believe in an immortal soul "bear the burden of proofs to its provenance and prospects, its relationship to human ontogeny and phylogeny, and how it may be bound up with other difficult-to-understand concepts such as consciousness and free will"<sup>43</sup>. But to whose standards of proof should we defer when speaking of the soul?

John D. Sommer intimates that the proof of the soul's existence is found explicitly in the strivings of both faith and science. He recalls that "both require us to seek truth beyond the limits of our perception and the interests of our culture .... When faith seems incompatible with science, we have mistaken its object for a temporary belief, and our correction comes in a moment of soul"<sup>44</sup>. This "moment of soul" Sommer describes as an experience of the other, and that soul is "the comprehensive principle of life, known in moments of our perfection, when we discover mind, self, honor, and faith through personal attraction"<sup>45</sup>. God is also "Other" for us; and the relationship with and experience of God manifests itself as faith.

Sommer's words remind me of an illustration found in Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica*,

<sup>41</sup> J. Polkinghorne, 'Natural Science, Temporality, and Divine Action', in (1998) *Theology Today*, 329-43ff.

<sup>42</sup> J. F. Kavanaugh, 'Being Human', in (1997) *America*, 26f.

<sup>43</sup> R. J. Goss, 'Biology of the Soul', in (1994) *The Humanist* 54, 21f.

<sup>44</sup> John D. Sommer, *Moments of Soul: An Inquiry into Personal Attraction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 147f.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 18f.

*Physica Atque Technica Historia* (1617)<sup>46</sup>. The picture shows a man in profile, surrounded by diagrams of different "worlds" (*image 4*), an illustration not too dissimilar from Popper's three-world conception. Fludd's worlds include the Sensible World (*Mundus Sensibilis*), the World of Imagination (*Mundus Imaginabilis*), and the Intellectual World (*Mundus Intellectualis*). These three worlds project rays into the brain of the man where they manifest in contraries of sense and imagination (*sensitiua* and *imaginatiua*), knowing and guessing (*cogitiua* and *estimatiua*), memory and emotion (*memoratiua* and *motiua*). Written in the vesica piscis created by the interlacing circles of contraries are these words: "hic anima est." Here is the soul. The relationships between these contraries manifest as the soul; or, rather, the soul manifests in the relation of the contraries. In *Blade Runner*, these contraries are in evidence, especially the last, memory and emotion.

The replicants in *Blade Runner* have implanted memories. They recall mothers, siblings, and even ex-wives they never had. But these are not "real" memories; they are artificial, images or concepts stored in the "brains" of the replicants. How often do we speak of computer "memory," meaning the storage of information? Is that what memory is, storage? In contemporary society, we often use technological metaphors to describe the workings of human physiology, much to humanity's degradation. This is a bad habit. These metaphors change as society changes. Using his most up-to-the-moment metaphor, neuroscientist Arthur Toga describes the brain and memory this way: "In the old days, people said the brain is like a computer .... I'd say no. Images get decomposed and then recomposed. It's very distributed, closer to the Internet"<sup>47</sup>. To this, I would say no. I would say that memory, human memory—even from Toga's description—is more analogous to a resurrection from the dead. But each to his own metaphor.

<sup>46</sup> R. Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia* (trans.: *On the Greater and Lesser Worlds: Metaphysics, Physics and Technical History*). Openhemii, Germaniae: Johan-Theodori de Bry, 1617.

<sup>47</sup> J. Shreeve, 'Beyond the Brain', in (2005) *National Geographic*, 4f.



While *Blade Runner* raises many questions about the position of the human being in the postmodern epoch, it—frighteningly—also invites speculation upon a posthuman epoch. But the film does so while appropriating some of humanity's most basic questions and conflicts. Confronting sinfulness, death, and the apparent meaninglessness of

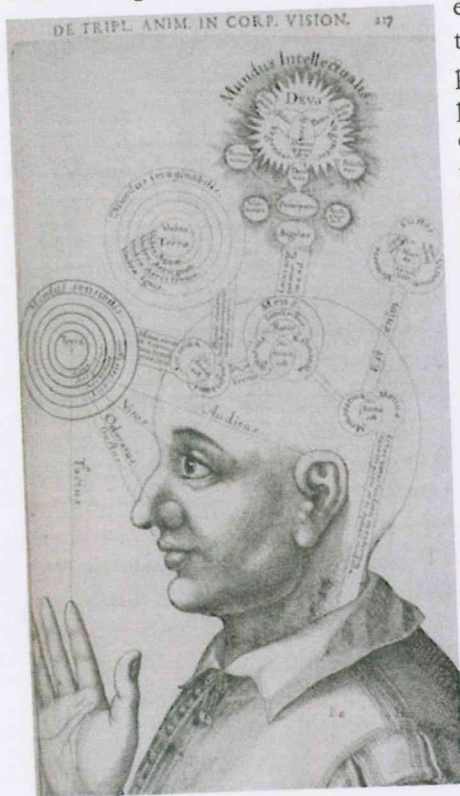


Image 4 – *The Workings of the Soul*

existence, the replicants reflect to us not, in David Harvey's phrase, "the condition of postmodernity"<sup>48</sup> but our own condition. It is in the context of the questions raised that *Blade Runner* is important. And the human being is the context. *Blade Runner* gives us no answers. It invites us to consider the potential benefits and dangers of science and, through its appropriation of traditional Christian symbolism, is never far from questions of faith. It neither subsumes theology under science, nor science under theology. It combines the two, distorting both in the broken looking glass of its tragic dystopia—and our own.

<sup>48</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 323f.

## Who's afraid of robots? Fear of automation and the ideal of direct control

*Ezio Di Nucci & Filippo Santoni de Sio*

We argue that lack of direct and conscious control is not, in principle, a reason to be afraid of machines in general and robots in particular: in order to articulate the ethical and political risks of increasing automation one must, therefore, tackle the difficult task of precisely delineating the theoretical and practical limits of sustainable delegation to robots.

### 1. The good HAL and the bad HAL

Movies provide a good exemplification of a deep-rooted ambivalence in western culture towards task delegation to machines and robots. On the one hand, we recognize the opportunities opened by robotics technology and are fascinated by the idea of automation and delegation to robots; on the other hand we also fear the idea of delegation to machines. Movies have often presented both utopian scenarios with robots becoming the best partners of mankind and dystopian scenarios in which robots rebel, take over, or become in other ways a dreadful threat to humanity. One outstanding cinematographical exemplification of this ambivalence is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In his adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's novel *The Sentinel* Kubrick tells of a space (and time) adventure. One of the main characters is a futuristic computer: HAL 9000. Clarke's and Kubrick's HAL 9000 is a perfect exemplification of the above mentioned ambivalent attitude towards technological delegation. In the first part of the movie HAL embodies all the features of the perfect work partner. He performs all the required tasks much more quickly and efficiently than his human counterparts, so relieving humans from