Blade Runner's Humanism: Cinema and Representation

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Abstract:

Many have pointed to *Blade Runner*'s humanization of its 'replicants' as a compelling statement against exploitation and domination. I argue, however, that the film has another kind of agenda: a Rousseauvian concern about the dangers of representation, about confusing the imitation with the real and confusing the consumption of images with political action. Rather than humanizing the other, *Blade Runner*'s central concern is to humanize our own social and political relationships, which are in danger of falling into the same trap Rousseau outlined in his *Letter to D'Alembert*. To do so, we must learn to appreciate the difference between mutual surveillance and mutual regard. To live freely in any regime, we must understand the dangers of representation, even if, in a large state, we must continue to make use of it.

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What, if anything, can the representation of humans in film tell us about the effects of representation in politics? The homology of aesthetic and political representation is an old subject (Plato 1968; Aristotle 1958; Ankersmit 1996). But much of the recent interest in film among political theorists has focused on the medium's material, as opposed to its representative, character. Thus William E. Connolly, in justifying the attention he pays to film in *Neuropolitics*, describes it as a site for exploring "the relationship between technique, feeling, perception, and thought" (Connolly, 2002, p. 12). And Davide Panagia, writing recently in these pages, emphasizes "the discontinuity felt in the experience of affronting the 'fountainlike spray of pictures' in film" (Panagia, 2013, pp. 2-3). Both of these descriptions emphasize the bodily reception of filmed images. They depict a material, or ontological, relation between a physical object (albeit an unusual one) and a perceiving body and brain, a relation that is, in principle, independent of the content on display. These two examples are, of course, just the political-theory tip of a larger materialist iceberg that has crashed into film studies and cultural studies more generally (see Barrett and Bolt eds., 2012, for a sampling).

But with the rare exception like *Koyaanisqatsi*, almost all of the popular film and television we consume continues to take a narrative and representative shape that we can recognize as continuous with the theatrical tradition, even when the material characteristics of film in no way require it. What shall we say about this? Earlier generations of film and political theorists gave an ideological account of this phenomenon. Critical authors often linked the continuation of traditional forms with the

domination of capitalism (Baudry 2004; Benjamin 1968). Feminist criticism developed a powerful account of the way in which mainstream filmic representation reinforced patriarchal hegemony (Mulvey 1975; de Lauretis 1984; see Erens 1990). Without diminishing these contributions, I want to reconsider the critique of film in the light of the recent work celebrating the medium's democratic potential. Both from the new materialist perspective cited above as well as the increasingly influential work of Stanley Cavell (1971, 1981), the claim has been revived that in film we can find educative experiences and models for political practice. In what follows, I express some doubts about this optimistic view by means of a political critique of film's representative character.

In order to see the problem I want to bring out, we need to understand not film in its materiality but the interaction between human beings and their filmic representations. We can observe human beings in a movie theatre, of course, but such observation cannot really tell us what we want to know, viz. what are the effects of film's representations once the audience leaves the theatre? How, if at all, do the images and stories live with us? How do we react to them and how do we react to one another in their presence? In fact the interaction between humans and their representations is not something we can normally 'see' any more than we can see the reaction to a book or a photograph.

Framing our political concerns this way makes it clear that a film like *Blade Runner* (1982), where humans are confronted with living simulacra of themselves so perfect as to make differentiation nearly impossible, is itself a kind of physical incarnation of the general cinematic situation.[1] The replicants are film itself come to (more perfect) life. As in a dream, but from a third-person perspective, a human interacts

with a human-appearing, human-generated image. The replicants challenge us to distinguish the real from the representative and they challenge the attempt to create any hierarchy of value, aesthetic or moral, between the two. Of course, every film and novel about robots or androids, from *Frankenstein* to *Westworld*, traffics in the uncanniness of the original and copy occupying the same space (See Francavilla, 1991). And films like *The Purple Rose of Cairo* have characters walk off the screen for comic effect. But *Blade Runner* is perhaps one of the most self-conscious films about this phenomenon as a cinematic event and about using this event to pose moral and political questions about the confrontation of the original and the copy. As Eric Wilson puts it: '*Blade Runner* self-consciously explores this affinity between the matter of the android and the subject of the cinema' (2005, p. 31).

Many have pointed to *Blade Runner*'s humanization of its 'replicants' as a compelling statement against exploitation and domination. Here, however, I argue that the film has another kind of agenda: a Rousseauvian concern about the dangers of representation, about confusing the imitation with the real and confusing the consumption of images with political action. Rather than humanizing the other, *Blade Runner*'s central concern is to humanize our own social and political relationships, which are in danger of falling into the same trap Rousseau outlined in his *Letter to D'Alembert*. To do so, we must learn to appreciate the difference between mutual surveillance and mutual regard. To live freely in any regime, we must understand the dangers of representation, even if, in a large state, we must continue to make use of it.

Android and Replicant

The film, as anyone who has seen it will readily remember, is obsessed with eyes (Pope 2010). In the famous opening scene, after we are shown a post-apocalyptic 2019 Los Angeles, there is a cut to an unidentified, screen-filling eye that reflects the lights of the city back to the camera.[2] The film then cuts back to the city and then back to the eye – the classic shot-reverse-shot sequence that informs us of a silent conversation between characters. But in this case, it signals the conversation we the audience will have with a representation of ourselves, a conversation shown in miniature in the next scene when a blade runner interrogates, unknowingly, one of the replicants he is hunting, with disastrous results.[3]

The eye motif continues throughout the film: the Voight-Kampff test, used to identify the replicants, focuses on its subjects' eyes; the replicants hunting for a way into the Tyrell Corporation imprison and interrogate a genetic engineer who has made their eyes; and Roy Baty, the replicant leader, plays with fake eyes when befriending the human J.F. Sebastian and, more frighteningly, gouges out the eyes of his maker Tyrell when informed that his life cannot be extended. None of these scenes has any parallel in the novel from which the movie sprang (Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, originally published in 1968) but all make sense when we think of the film as an attempt to embody the confrontation between humans and their representation: we see ourselves seeing ourselves – the replicants are a kind of living mirror *and the film a picture of ourselves looking into it*. The eyes remind us that this is not some kind of mental or intellectual exercise but a real exchange of views between two live bodies - a point emphasized by Roy Baty: 'We're not computers, Sebastian. We're physical.' Even the choice of Los Angeles as the film's setting (the novel was set in San Francisco) might

be taken to indicate that the replication process that creates androids is being likened to the representation of humans on film.

A brief glance at Dick's 1968 novel confirms that such challenges, without the visual element, were indeed embedded in the narrative from the beginning. Though the protagonist, Rick Deckard, is clearly confirmed as a human in the end, he goes through a mind-bending episode of self-doubt (commentators have noted the similarity of his name to Rene Descartes', see Byron 2008) in which he suspects that both he and many others around him are actually androids (the term 'replicants' is distinct to the film) (Dick, 1996 [1968], chapters 10-11).

But rather than being obsessed with eyes and seeing, the novel has an entirely different side that has been largely excised from the film. All the characters in the book, and the book itself, are preoccupied with *animals*, both real and artificial. In Dick's narrative, humans are confronted, as it were, on both sides of the species barrier: on the one hand, with biological androids "more human than human" (as the film puts it) whose presence they fear, and on the other by a dwindling number of live animals, whose loss they mourn, and the animal robots they have built to replace them. The 'electric sheep' of the title are not just part of a rhetorical question. In the novel, Deckard himself owns an electric sheep that he would desperately like to upgrade to a 'real' one. For Dick, the question of human identity is raised by the simultaneous presence of copy-humans as well as real and copy-animals.

As Ridley Scott has edited and re-edited *Blade Runner* over the years since its original release in 1982, he has emphasized more and more something that was not at all clear in the original film, viz. that Deckard may himself be a replicant. And while this

view satisfies a desire we may have to view the story as a postmodern decentering of identity, it entirely eviscerates the sense, both in the novel and the original film, of a confrontation between two *different* beings and of the working out of a relationship or politics between originals and representatives or representations.[4] For it is here, I think, that the film might have something to teach us, both about the relation of humans to non-humans and about the relation of humans to film and other life-like representations. If Deckard is a replicant, there is no opposition of human and non-human and none of those meanings have any real purchase.[5]

Blade Runner is a hard film to study because it exists in so many different states. The 'final cut' box set contains five different versions of the film: an early work-print that was shown to test audiences and later leaked to the public; the original 1982 US release; the 1982 international release; the 'director's cut' released in 1992; and the 'final cut' released in 2007. Although the total differences among all these different versions probably amount to no more than 3% of the running time, the differences are at least arguably quite significant, especially the two endings. Since I am not interested here in the film's aesthetic value nor the intent of any one of its makers, I treat all the versions here as collaboratively-produced artifacts which we may examine for meaning without attributing that meaning to any single author. However, I shall focus mostly on the original release and the final cut.[6]

More instructive than the differences between the various film versions, I think, are the differences between the films and Dick's novel. Let me take a moment to outline the plots of the two before returning to some particular points. In broad outline, they are similar: in a post-apocalyptic world, Deckard is a member of a special squad that hunts

androids that have come to Earth illegally and tried to pass for human. In the novel, he is a for-profit bounty hunter; in the film a policeman with the same duties. In both movie and book, the Earth has been so poisoned by a preceding war ("World War Terminus" in the novel) that most of the healthy humans have left it.

More significantly, in the book, the animal population of the world has been decimated – some species have vanished entirely, others exist but are rare. The result is that animals have become both holy and valuable. They are prize possessions to be shown off – to the point that if one cannot afford a real one, one buys an electric animal. This is Deckard's situation at the beginning of the book, owning an imitation sheep (which he grazes on the roof of his apartment building alongside those of his neighbors) and hoping to upgrade it to a real one – that is his motivation for continuing as a bounty hunter. If he kills enough androids, he will earn enough to get a real animal.

Animals are not simply valued for display, however. They also represent an attachment to the natural world that has been destroyed. Our empathic reaction to them, even the fake ones, is what makes the ownership of animals so valuable. Every human in the novel is deeply attached to his or her animals, real or not. But the characters, in their relations with other humans, are forever "dialing up" emotions on a machine that provides them with neural stimulants to create moods that they can no longer achieve naturally. Furthermore, they all participate in a strange religion called Mercerism which, again through a machine, allows them to merge empathically with a victimized man who constantly relives a scenario of upward struggle through suffering (a kind of Sisyphus-Christ). In sum, the near-destruction of the natural earth has deprived humans of their

ordinary contexts for *empathy* that they seek to replace with machine-religions, machine-emotions and machine-animals.

Perhaps surprisingly, the androids of Dick's novel play no part in this new emotional economy. Instead, they are distinguished from the humans by their *lack* of empathy, even for each other. Thus the Voight-Kampff test, which is part of the novel, tests the androids for their lack of empathy by asking them questions about animals that a human would answer with alacrity. While Dick has some sympathy for the androids and depicts their condition as one of slavery (a theme the movie continues), his novel overall betrays a great skepticism that machines of any kind can substitute for the empathic relation that organic beings, in his opinion, can have for one another. Rather, it is the selfishness of the androids that is ultimately their undoing as, the novel implies, it has already been for the humans. But the humans, at least, have some possibility of redeeming their damaged empathic capacities, as Deckard and his wife (in the novel, he is married) seem to do at the end of the story.

In both novel and film, Deckard meets an android named Rachel through her manufacturer and hunts for a series of other androids, ultimately killing them all (except Rachel) including the ringleader Roy Baty.[7] In the film, the replicants are the group with an emotional bond and Deckard, initially isolated, comes to grips with his own humanity by falling in love with Rachel. In the novel, by contrast, the androids lack empathy and Rachel sleeps with Deckard only for the cynical purpose of provoking his empathic emotional response, to protect herself (it works). Then Deckard kills the other replicants and returns home shaken, but changed mostly in his capacity for empathic connection

with his wife and other beings. In the film, by contrast, Deckard's growth is signaled by his love for Rachel (which is returned) and they end by running away together.

Dick's obsession with animals lingers in the film if one knows to look for it: the artificial owl owned by the Tyrell corporation that manufactures replicants; the animal market that Deckard walks through on his way to a bar; the fact that the Voight-Kampff test used to detect replicants (spelled 'Voigt-Kampff' in the book) is still largely composed of animal-questions. But the holiness of the animals (as well as the whole religion-of-empathy theme) is gone. The idea that our empathy is invoked by a near-human being has been transferred from the animals to the replicants who are now depicted as able to develop emotions just as humans do.

Dick's novel is extremely unwieldy and would have been hard to film as it was written. From that perspective, many of the changes between the two make a lot of cinematic sense.[8] However, the changes, while highlighting the confrontation between the original and the representations, partially obscure the theme of a confrontation of life-forms. If it is certain that Deckard is a replicant then the whole plot is really just a shaggy-dog story or a kind of absurdist (or formalist) joke and one that can really say very little either to or about human beings. So the interpretation I advance here does not take that view.

But if Deckard's portrayal as a replicant clashes with my sense of the film's best meaning, another element of Scott's vision does not. In the original film version, Deckard and Rachel flee Los Angeles and the viewer is treated to an idyllic vision of them driving happily through a verdant landscape (actually outtakes from *The Shining*). This so-called 'happy ending' was tacked onto the film at the insistence of the producers

(Turan 1992; Kolb 1991). In the original ending (restored in the later versions), we simply see an elevator door close on Deckard and Rachel as they leave Deckard's apartment. While we know they intend to leave Los Angeles and run, we have no idea where they will go or what luck they will have.

This is not a superior ending simply because it is bleaker or grittier. It is a superior end because – and here we are starting to get to the heart of the matter – it is a vital counter-point to the all-seeing eye with which the film begins. The slamming elevator door – reminiscent of the closing door at the end of *The Searchers* – indicates that our vision has ended. We will no longer be permitted to view the goings-on between Deckard and Rachel. But more, this appears not as a decision of the director but of the characters themselves – they are *withdrawing themselves* from our vision in order to have a relationship with one another that is none of our business. Their human lives together begin when they end their status as replicants and representatives.

In addition to the eyes that constantly appear in the film, other elements remind us that in this dystopian future, we are always under the gaze of another. The sky is filled with police vehicles and advertising drones which surveil the population. Even inside private homes there is a constant invasion by searchlights. The flight of Deckard and Rachel is not a demand for freedom in the form of political rights; it is rather an attempt to escape the all-seeing eyes of the state. But since the gaze of the state has been aligned, from the opening scene, with the eyes of the audience, we must ask whether this escape means to criticize, or even condemn, either the filmmaking process itself or the appetite of the audience for consuming it.

Acknowledgement, Community, Freedom

How can we answer this question? Let us begin with the relationship between the two principal characters. Rachel and Deckard each begin the film somewhat contemptuous of the other: Deckard because Rachel is a replicant ("how can it not know what it is?"); Rachel because Deckard is a killer ("have you ever 'retired' a human by mistake?"). In this they are typical of their type. Many of the other humans in the film show no affection for the replicants and on the replicants' side the feeling is mutual. But, as in other star-crossed-lovers narratives, they end up altering their initial judgments, defying both communities and running away together.

In Andrew Norris's excellent reading of the film, the problem the characters face appears (at first) to be akin to the classic philosophical 'problem of other minds' – that is, how do I know that the human beings around me have consciousness as I do and are not (as Descartes feared) phantasms or automatons sent to delude me? But, Norris argues, the response of the police in the film (attempting to certify humanity via the Voight-Kampff test) is itself part of the problem. The better approach, he proposes, following some arguments of Cavell and Wittgenstein, is to dissolve the (misconceived) problem by recognizing that we *never achieve* certainty about other minds. The demand for it is itself a mistake of modern philosophy, a mistake with dehumanizing tendencies for modern politics.

In fact we recognize one another as valuable beings by a process of acknowledgment that is open to replicants as well as humans – we recognize the suffering and autonomy of other beings as we recognize it in ourselves. To deny it via a demand for certainty is itself a moment of inhumanity (Norris, 2013, p. 23). This is what Deckard

comes to recognize by putting aside his mechanical test and trusting his own authentic response to Rachel. Stephen Mulhall makes a similar argument: "[the replicants] accession to human status involves their being acknowledged as human by others" (Mulhall, 1994, p. 90).

This interpretation clearly captures something important and, as Norris argues, it leads to Deckard's recognition of the replicants as beings like himself that should not be enslaved. But it does not resolve the question of what the relation of original to copy ought to be, except perhaps to suggest that there is no meaningful difference between the two. This suggestion is implausible, however, and certainly inapplicable once we move beyond the relation of human and replicant. Nor does it provide an answer to some important political questions.

Is it wrong to enslave the replicants simply because they are largely indistinguishable from humans? This begs the question of why it is wrong to enslave humans in the first place. At the end of the film, Roy says, "Quite a thing to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it's like to be a slave", an echo of something that Leon, one of the other replicants, had said earlier. But this cannot mean that the enslavement of the replicants would be acceptable if they could be programmed (as they certainly could) to never fear.[9] Also, would we be free to enslave any being we do not recognize as human, a replicated Neanderthal perhaps?

What is striking about the replicants is not only their near-human status, but also their liminal condition, part subject and part object. As objects, they are subordinated to our will as well as to our whims. In this they are no different from any tool or material good, the use of which gives us pleasure or serves some other human purpose.[10] And yet

they are like no other tool in that they appear to respond to us as fellow beings, to interact and to behave independently. This is the source of their superiority as tools. Thus Roy Baty, as a replicant soldier, is superior to any mechanized gun or tank because he can respond to orders creatively and expansively. But it is also the case that Pris, a "pleasure model", is superior to an inflatable-doll sex toy because she too can respond creatively and independently.

Indeed, the simple fact that Pris can *respond* at all makes her a sex toy of an entirely different nature – more different, in fact, than Roy's difference from a computerized gun. Sex is an intimate act because it requires intimacy with another being whose living response is a part of the pleasure – the pleasure of acknowledgment we could say – that is fundamental to the enterprise. Even in solitary or selfish sex acts, the other is usually there, if only in imagination. If the pleasures of sex were really fully available in solitary fashion and only involved the friction of sex organs, then surely masturbation would have become the only sex act in the first generation – every other is more complicated, fraught and expensive. This also explains why the human imagination, as fertile as it is, is capable of being supplemented in sex by other, more life-like substitutes: pornography, dolls, prostitutes, replicants. And yet all of these are conceded by most humans (not all I suppose) as an inferior substitute for a willing human partner.

So the replicant, like the prostitute, is most valuable in its capacity to provide the experience of intimacy, the experience of being in communion with another subject, one like ourselves. As near-human biological beings, the replicants have no real parallel in our world today (think how differently the phrase 'human rights' would sound if we still

shared the world with Neanderthals). But as liminal subject-objects, the replicants are very much like film itself. In experiencing a narrative film we enjoy, we do not experience that film simply as a material object, but as something which contains a subject, or a series of subjects, with whom we identify and relate. If we do not actually interact with them, we may have an experience nearly indistinguishable (for those in its grips) from an interaction. It may be pleasurable or not, but it may even be more intense than our daily interactions with other people, "more human than human".[11]

But is the experience a genuine one? The optimistic Cavellian approach says, in effect, that there is no point in asking the question once we can no longer tell the difference. The answer may seem plausible in the context of the replicant but would we apply it to other realms? Would we say of a politician or a romantic partner who feigned respect or intimacy for some other purpose that they did not cheat the other in any way, so long as the feigning went undetected? More importantly, would we say of someone who fell in love with some other sort of human representation – a live actor, say, or a filmed one – that there was no reason to distinguish between that kind of relationship and one between genuinely willing beings?

This is the sort of question that Rousseau raises in the *Letter to D'Alembert* and it is important, in this context, that the example he uses there is that of the 'honest actor' (Rousseau 1960, pp. 79 ff). Rousseau's honest actor is someone who deceives by profession but not for any ulterior motive. The actor does not cheat us or defraud us; s/he benefits only from a salary or a ticket price that we have willingly paid in advance. Yet an actor is like a replicant in being in the same liminal position between subject and object. We pay for the experience and, in some sense, command its appearance. The

experience is one of contact with another conscious being. If we forget our role in creating the experience and suspend disbelief, are we then in the same relation with the actor that we are with a partner or a fellow citizen if we have an experience of love or passion (or hatred or anger)?

Rousseau certainly thought this was not the case – and it was to warn us of making this mistake that he suggested we eschew the theatre if we want to be fully capable citizens of a republic. But what is the nature of the mistake and why is this, for Rousseau, a burning political issue, as opposed to a personal or even existential one? After all, the live actor, unlike the replicant, *undoubtedly is* another human being with whom we are having some kind of emotional encounter. And it is unclear why our relation with the actor, even if flawed, has a direct political implication.

If *Blade Runner* is right about anything, it is certainly right that no answer will be found by drawing some sort of biological distinction between the actor and the replicant. The essence of the human, to adapt a phrase, will never be anything biological. Or rather, while we may find biological markers to distinguish ourselves from other species, from machines, or from engineered biological replicas, we will not find in such distinctions a reason not to exploit these others or to be dissatisfied with a relation of domination.

Rousseau says that the theatre is dangerous because it creates a relationship that is innocent only within the theatre but bad everywhere outside it: ‘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.’ (Rousseau, 1960, p. 81). The relation that he has in mind is exactly the

domination and submission of subject/objects that the audience has with the actors. It is and must be, he thinks, a lesson in inequality – and thus inimical to freedom, which inequality must inhibit. Each party uses the other; more precisely, *each party uses the subjectivity of the other as an object*. This may not feel like inequality in the moment of its exercise, yet it is an exercise of power: it produces an illusion of freedom that is seductive and pleasurable. This pleasure must be refused if we want to live freely. The illusory nature of the relationship – its hidden inequality and exploitation that runs in both directions – is not something that can be purged from the institution of theatre or film. It is of its very essence. So long as the actor remains on stage, or in a film, we cannot have a relationship with him or her that is truly one of *mutual regard*, however much we might be lulled into believing it were so. For the actor as a person, this situation might be remedied (she could leave the stage and join the audience), but for film itself, it cannot be.

Representative Slavery

Why is it wrong to enslave the replicants? Surely not simply because they feel fear, pain or any other emotion. Animals feel all these things – or at least, we have the same 'evidence' for these feelings that we do for any other human – and yet for most of human history we have not hesitated to dominate them when it was useful to us. While there are those, like Peter Singer, who believe that our recognition of pain and suffering on the part of the animals ought to be enough to persuade us to abandon our traditional practices, these arguments have not proved persuasive to many (Singer 1975, chapter 1). In fact, those they have persuaded are usually those who have the least direct contact with

animals themselves. If the observation of pain and suffering really produced a necessary response in us, one would expect farmers everywhere to liberate their livestock.

Is it right to say that we *enslave* the animals because we treat them as objects even though they are sentient? Why does this argument not convince everyone instantaneously? Because slavery, I would venture, as awful a relation as it is, is a relation we can only consider having with another human. As Cavell rightly said in another context, one who "wants to be served at table by a black hand … would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw" (Cavell, 1979, p. 377; c.f. Hegel 1977, p. 111ff.). We must recognize the subjectivity, and not just the sentience, of another being before we consider our domination of them to amount to slavery.

Norris is quite right that we cannot devise some kind of mechanical test for this kind of subjectivity, for this is not the kind of test that we apply to ourselves or to other humans. This lack of testing shows that we are not looking for the kind of certainty that a test would (or would not) supply. As the instances of the actor and the prostitute show however (Rousseau likens them to one another), it seems far-fetched to simply trust our own responses and make them the currency of the real, as if we could not make a mistake or be deceived (or deceive ourselves) about the subjectivity of other beings. Such deception is also what Dick had in mind when he had his character Rachel sleep with Deckard as a consciously composed yet unemotional ploy to elicit Deckard's empathy.

Rachel, in the novel, is so confident in her gambit that she is happy to reveal it to Deckard when the sex is over – though she does deceive him, the effect does not depend on his continuing to be deceived. She is sure that his empathy, once engaged, cannot be undone by conscious knowledge – like an actor who is quite sure that the audience will

continue to love him after she leaves the stage. In Dick's story, this turns out to be true, though it does not protect Rachel's fellow replicants as she hopes. Instead, Rachel's dishonest acting has the opposite effect – it liberates Deckard from his doubts by confirming the cynical character of android intelligence. Although he cannot kill Rachel, he does kill the other androids and returns to his wife ready to renew their relationship, a relationship that is genuine if imperfect.

The Mutuality of Acknowledgement

This is the place for us reflect a little more on the novel's concern with animals. For all of its characters' concern and reverence toward animals, Dick never once suggests that anyone in the story is a vegetarian. Nor do the animals elicit empathy from humans because they produce an experience of subjectivity. Likewise, Rachel does not elicit empathy from Deckard by convincing him of her subjectivity but by having sex with him.

Farmers and ranchers often show great concern for the health, welfare and even the life-experience of the animals they raise – all without doubting that these animals will eventually be killed and eaten, perhaps by the farmers themselves. Likewise the animals in Dick's novel generate empathy not by their mere existence but by their *proximity* to their human owners. The owners are attached, or seek attachment, to a particular animal in their care and only through that relationship do they acquire a larger concern for all animals.

What all these examples indicate is not simply that empathy is something generated by shared experience but that *empathy and acknowledgement of subjectivity are very different things* – a difference that a theatrical or replicated experience might

dangerously tempt us to overlook. So long as we share the earth with animals and experience that sharing, we are likely to treat them with some care as to the circumstances of their life and death. Dick's post-apocalyptic scenario only gives us an exaggerated version of our current condition where, uniquely in human history, most humans no longer have regular contact with many other animal species beyond pets, except in a zoo or on some other excursion. Moreover, as Dick suggests, this deprivation may lead to a general impairment of our capacity for empathy, even in relations with other humans.

But to earn our respect, it is *not* enough, from Dick's perspective, that we merely have an experience of empathy or that it is immaterial if the other party's presence is genuine or feigned. What is appealing about animals, in Dick's novel, is not that they are biologically genuine, but that *they lack the capacity for deception* – they cannot be actors. Whatever interaction we have with them is, from their perspective, the only one they could have. They cannot pretend to love us or hate us – and thus whether we love or hate them, we have much less doubt about that experience.

In the film, the replicants exploit J.F. Sebastian, a diseased human who is starved for affection. The corresponding character in the novel, named J.R. Isidore, is not physically, but rather mentally impaired. Dick depicts him as a naïf, lonely certainly, but mostly distinctive in being unable to deceive or to recognize deception and as naturally empathic, even with insects. The androids manipulation of him is thus depicted as all the more despicable. Deckard, at least, can grasp the deception and reject it. But Isidore lacks that capacity and is thus bereft when the androids abandon him (and when they dissect animals, indifferent to their pain). Isidore, in other words, is unable to distinguish

an animal, which gives an honest experience of empathy, from an android that feigns it (and is animal-like himself in his inability to deceive).

This sort of idiocy or aspect-blindness is exactly the sort that theatre, according to Rousseau, promotes. It is not that we forget that the actor is an actor while in the theatre (though we may). Rather, by acclimatizing ourselves to a one-sided experience of emotion, we degrade our capacity for the two-sided experience that is the genuinely human one. In facing a replication of the human, we can behave as we do with animals, suspending disbelief, not just epistemologically, but emotively and morally. This is a pleasurable experience but it is not yet a human one. To be human, it must be genuinely mutual.

The shortcoming of the Cavellian approach to the film, and to the political problem of acknowledgement, is that it still thinks of it as the problem facing a single mind, in this case Deckard's. But recognition of others is not something that *can* happen to a subject but rather *must* happen for subjectivity to really exist in the first place. From Rousseau's perspective, subjectivity is something we experience together equally – or not at all. Thus the danger of the theatre is not to citizens conceived as isolated minds who might make misjudgments – the danger is social and political first and foremost. It is our mutual sustaining of one another in the human condition that is in danger.

What is significant about Deckard's relationship with Rachel in the film then is not that he takes her to be a subject by recognizing her intelligence or autonomy (the novel's Rachel has both of these already), but that *both parties* overcome their initial skepticism about the other's emotions (in part by inspiring emotion in the other). Though

intelligent, neither of them is fully human apart; together both are human for the first time.

In the novel, animals are sentience without subjectivity while androids are the reverse – neither is thus a true candidate for a human relationship. In the film, which merges the animals and the androids into the replicants, sentience and subjectivity are both present. And yet, even here, it is only when two such beings recognize one another that they begin to acquire true human status. It is not enough to possess such capacities – they must be *exercised* in a social relation to acquire existential and moral significance.

The Sociality of Citizenship

Rousseau likens the theatrical experience to one of slavery, but certainly NOT because it lacks emotional depth or intensity. Indeed, it has an excess of these. Nor is it right to say that the emotions are not real or not authentic. Insofar as we can introspect about these things, we cannot normally tell the difference. If we ever doubt the emotion that we experience with replicants, it is only because it may feel more intense than normal, more human than human. But the theatrical experience is not mutual – it is not shared – and not because the actor is a robot, or on a screen or a liar. It is simply that the actors do not engage in the honest reciprocity that they would need to in order for your experience to be one of genuine intimacy.

When we translate the problem of mutuality to the political level it is even more pronounced. In Rousseau's theory, public life is a *res publica*, a public thing. But it is not a thing that exists physically, though it might have physical symbols. It does not even exist linguistically – no set of words or laws, even foundational ones, constitute a

republic. Rather, a republic exists when a group of people shares a commitment to one another and shares it genuinely. Their individual level of commitment might vary, of course, but as Rousseau was fond of saying, when the general will vanishes the republic vanishes also. It cannot be preserved by laws or armies, though these might force people to keep up appearances. Nor can a person be in a republic of one. One *can* be deceived by others and when this is the case, one is not, and cannot be, in a relationship by oneself. It is not enough to have certain values, beliefs or even practices. If these are not shared with others, there is no public life.

We do not, of course, live in a small republic like Rousseau's eighteenth-century Geneva. But his critique of the theatre was intended as much for cosmopolitan, imperial Paris as it was for his hometown. Every kind of political order is diminished to the degree that it cannot sustain the mutuality of citizenship that the inequality of surveillance retards. *Every* kind of political order, he argued in *On the Social Contract*, relies on a general will to animate its citizens' participation in whatever form it is needed (Rousseau, 1968, 149).

Recent defenses of plebiscitary or audience democracy (Green, 2010; Manin, 1997) ignore this dimension of political life at their peril. Resigned to the limitations of modern gargantuan states, they make a virtue of necessity by attempting to reconceive democratic political power in the form of surveillance. But they can only do so by ignoring the dimensions of political life whereby citizens relate to one another directly, in countless ways. It is these interactions that sustain, or fail to sustain, the human character of representative political systems and which counteract the objectification of both actors and audiences to which they are exceptionally prone.[12]

The maintenance of the human character of our political culture cannot be taken for granted. Rachel and Deckard each initially believe the other to be heartless. Both are right in one sense, wrong in another. They are each right to believe that, initially, neither loves anything. But both are wrong to believe that it is not *possible* for them to do so. It is only when both of them come to know that they are wrong that their human relationship can begin. Because it is the other that each comes to love, the film is a love story (as the novel is not). If there existed a law or a place that they could love as well, perhaps it could be something more. But post-apocalyptic Los Angeles has neither.

Blade Runner's Los Angeles is not just an empty space. It is actively hostile to their relationship and, therefore, to any kind of human politics. It is hostile for the same reason that Rousseau thought Paris was a bankrupt locale for a republic. It is a city of replicants – a cinematic space where the people all constantly watch one another, even outside of the theatre. The pair's new relationship, if it is to be genuine, is not something to be displayed. Our time with them ends when their time for each other begins. Up to this point, each has tolerated the surveillance of the all-seeing eye. And in truth, as isolated individuals, they had little to hide.

In a sense, the door-closing end of the movie is a poke in the audience's eye. We are denied the usual cinematic pleasure of enjoying the passion or success of the couple's relationship. We do not see a wedding or a family or a house to symbolize its consummation. We only know that it might exist. In order for the conversation between Deckard and Rachel to begin, the conversation between the audience and the film that the opening shots suggested must end.

The exit of the two characters from our vision might be taken to mean that the film idealizes a private, non-political space, or that politics must be based in love. I believe it is only meant to signal that the fantastic world of 'Los Angeles 2019' has passed some point of no return and can no longer serve as a forum for real human relationships, personal or political. But since we do not (yet) live there, I think there is some space for us to imagine that the relationship of reciprocity that Rachel and Deckard model is still capable of being replicated in a more general, less intimate, political form as Rousseau hoped. Call it Philadelphia.

***Blade Runner*'s Humanism**

What political lessons should we draw from *Blade Runner*? Many have suggested that in humanizing the replicants and making their enslavement the key evil of a future Los Angeles, the film points toward our own failure to fully recognize the humanity of others.[13] This much is obvious and true. But our discussion points towards a larger question, viz. apart from what the film depicts, is the very act of replicating humans – biologically or filmicly - compatible with democratic politics? Or rather, what should our attitude be towards, and what kind of relationship can we have with, the replication of humanity that exists in the medium of film itself?

Humans have always had images of themselves to interact with, first paintings and stories, then theatre, novels and opera. With film, that representation of humans is perhaps further perfected – although not nearly as perfected as in the vision of the future represented in *Blade Runner*. And at least since the Greek myth of Narcissus, the question has been raised about the folly of falling in love with an image.

This danger is often presented as if it is aesthetic or epistemological. The aesthetic danger is that we will fall in love with an image that is as beautiful, or more beautiful, then the world it represents. The epistemological danger is that we will be fooled by a representation that appears more real than it is.

These dangers may be real enough, but above and beyond them is another that is particularly political. This danger is two-fold. On the one hand, our relation to a representation has the potential to dehumanize us insofar as it deprives us of the mutuality of experience that is the token of real social intimacy and real political bonds. Our emotional connection to a filmed representation is not wrong because it is unreal or because the object of our affection is celluloid or luminous. The fault is not cured by replacing the filmed image with a live actor. The problem is rather that, even with a live actor who breathes and feels, *the relationship is not mutual in the sense of being reciprocal.* Though the actor may respond to and care about the audience in a professional way, that is not the kind of reciprocity that a democratic political setting requires. Likewise, an elected representative might cynically respond to and care for his or her audience without sharing with fellow citizens an equal or reciprocal commitment.

The second part of the danger is therefore one of power – but not simply the 'power of the image' to seduce or fool us (which is real enough, but manageable). We should think of it more as the power of the institution that we believe we control to hold us under surveillance even as we watch individual images on the screen. Just as we believe ourselves to be acting throughout our dreams (while in fact we are chemically inhibited from moving) so too, as we watch our representatives and replications are we held in place by the speculation that is, in the end, our own reflected observation. We are

not prisoners in a movie theatre but we may, in the end, be happy slaves. So long as we focus on the material nature of our relation to film, we will not notice this power, which only appears when we interrogate its representative character. The optimistic account of film's potential benefits needs, at the very least, to be supplemented by a pessimistic account of its dangers, dangers that liken it to our other representative institutions.

To break the hold of those institutions, it is not enough to grant the audience more rights or more powers. Nor is it enough to remind citizens of the illusory character of what they witness. Rather, they must be protected, or must protect themselves, from the all-seeing eye. *They must turn their mutual surveillance into mutual regard*. It cannot be done 'privately', i.e. alone – but neither can it be done in a space that has become a spectacle. Whether or not we shutter the theatres or simply leave them, we can only be fully human, as *Blade Runner* shows us in its final irony, by closing the eye of the camera and looking directly into eye of the other in an unmediated way. In political terms, this means that whatever representative institutions we tolerate for practical reasons must be, at the very least, surrounded by a warm sea of mutual regard. If democracy relies solely on representation it risks becoming dehumanized, like the initial set of relationships in *Blade Runner*.

Schopenhauer said that what life teaches us is not to want it. Perhaps the best films teach us not to want them either. This does not make their authors self-loathing or cynical. It merely means that they know the difference between what they do for a living and what they might be as humans and citizens. Leaving the movie house hardly guarantees our freedom; but staying there only reenforces our servitude.

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Notes

1I am grateful to Lisa Disch, Davide Panagia and Giulia Sissa for their comments on this paper as well as the referees and editors of *Contemporary Political Theory*.

There is an enormous literature on *Blade Runner* and it has certainly touched on this idea, although not from the particular perspective of this paper. Some of the works I have found most helpful are: Marder 1991, Mulhall 1994, Shetley and Ferguson 2001.

2 The original storyboards depict the eye as that of the blade runner Holden, looking out on the city as he waits for his interview subject to arrive. But director Ridley Scott has said that he purposefully de-personalized the eye so that it is unclear to whom it belongs. This prompted speculation that it belonged to any number of characters. Kolb 1991. Or see the actual storyboards at: http://www.ridleyville.com/#/FX%20Storyboards.

3 Marder's intelligent analysis (1991) makes this interrogation the 'primal scene' of the film, one that is repeated, in some sense, over and over – but this neglects the characterless shots of the city and the eye that precede it. Thus she makes the human/replicant binary into the film's primary structure rather than the human/representation binary that, in fact, comes prior logically and in the order of the film itself.

4 The reading of *Blade Runner* as an exemplar of postmodernism was given an influential early exposition by Giuliana Bruno who is explicit in applying Frederic Jameson's theories and terminology to the film (Bruno 1987).

5 Accounts of the production indicate that the different views of the Deckard character were there from the beginning. The authors of the screenplay, in line with the book, always took Deckard to be human, as did actor Harrison Ford, who felt that the audience would not relate to his character as a non-human. Whether Scott originally was certain that Deckard was a replicant or only wanted to leave the audience in doubt is not clear. In any case, the producers of the original film removed the ambiguity that Scott wanted to create (Deckard's unicorn daydream). When Scott got control of the film for the subsequent releases, he reintroduced the cut footage and became more vocal about insisting that Deckard clearly was a replicant and always had been. See Turan 1992 and Sammon 1996.

6 The 'international' version of 1982 differs only from the US release in having a few seconds of additional violence – this became the original VHS version (and so the best-known version in the period between 1982-92). The workprint was unfinished and has many minor differences from the original release. The 'director's cut' restores some lost footage and disposes of most of voice-over as well as the closing shots of Deckard and Rachel escaping the city. The final cut has the same basic structure as the director's cut but includes some reshot and reedited materials that 'fix' various continuity and editing problems in the earlier versions.

7 "Rachael" originally means 'ewe' in Hebrew. The name "Roy Baty" is probably derived from Robot (Ro-Bot = Roy Baty) though others have speculated that it means, e.g. "crazy king".

8 Dick himself hated some early versions of the script but was apparently won over by some working footage of the movie he was shown. He died months before the film's release and never saw a full cut. See Rickman 1991.

9 An early reviewer actually pointed out that, since Roy himself seems particularly fearless, the line in this context doesn't make much sense. (Blank, 1982, p. A14).

10 This is how Deckard first describes them, both in the book and the movie. Film: “Replicants are like any other machine. They’re either a benefit or a hazard. If they’re a benefit, it’s not my problem.” Book: “A humanoid robot is like any other machine; it can fluctuate between being a benefit and a hazard very rapidly. As a benefit it’s not our problem.” Dick 1996 [1968], p. 40.

11 I am not saying, of course, that the experience of encountering subjectivity is or could be the *only* pleasure of cinema. However, I would claim that it is the principal one as evidenced by the dearth of commercial films that lack relatable central characters. I do not have space here to consider the case of television but I think my point could be reinforced from that perspective: although there is much more non-narrative television than film, most of it contains a different kind of encounter of subjectivity.

12 See Urbinati 2006 and Landemore 2008. I thank Lisa Disch for calling my attention to the issues discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

13 In addition to Mulhall 1994 and Norris 2013, see Desser 1997 as well as essays by Marilyn Gwaltney and Aaron Barlow in the same volume; Alessio 2005; Barringer 1997.