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# Picturing the Human (Body and Soul): A Reading of *Blade Runner*

Stephen Mulhall

## 1) Acknowledging Human Mortality

It would seem advisable to begin this interpretation of the film with an uncontroversial claim, so let us note at the outset that *Blade Runner* is explicitly concerned with the question of what it is to be a human being: indeed, since it ignores many of the expectations usually catered to by films in the genre of detective-thriller (eg complexities of plotting or concealment of the identities and purposes of the criminals) and of science fiction (eg focusing on technology rather than people, or employing exotic and alien backdrops) in order to allow its thematic questioning of humanity to dominate the sequence of events, it might be more accurate to describe the film as being obsessed with the matter — obsessed in the way the leader of the replicants is obsessed with his quest for life, for a life which is on a par with that of human beings. To show that Roy Baty misconceives this quest as one for *more* life — as if a replicant might become human by living longer — is the goal of the film.

In the course of this quest, many erroneous answers to the original question are canvassed and rejected. By endowing the replicants with intelligence levels and physical strength at least equal to that of any human being, it is made very clear from the beginning that the possession of such capacities goes no way towards settling the ontological status of their possessors; in fact, rather than confirming the replicants as candidates for humanity, the fine-honed perfection and virtuosity of their physical and mental skills tends to cast doubt upon their candidature — this, I take it, is why those scenes in which the replicants manifest their invulnerability to extremes of heat and cold (in the hygienic chill of the eye laboratory or the hot water in which J. F. Sebastian boils his egg) tend to alienate the viewer from Leon and Pris.

In this way, the film leads us to ask whether what the replicants lack is the frailty of human flesh and blood. The question becomes most insistent in the sequences dealing with J. F. Sebastian and his replicant visitors in the abandoned Bradbury buildings: the superhuman flawlessness of Roy and Pris stands out more strongly when contrasted with the physical decrepitude inflicted on Sebastian by a genetic flaw known as Methuselah Syndrome — accelerated aging. (Roy asks why Sebastian is staring at his visitors, and is told: "Because you're so different, you're so perfect.") Sebastian's physical inadequacies evoke sympathy — but not in Roy or Pris; the way in which they manipulate him as a means towards their goal of confronting Tyrell simultaneously confirms the humanity of their victim and the inhumanity of their attitude towards him — perfection seems to signify difference, as Sebastian implies.

This is not, however, the conclusion that the film determines us to draw; and to justify this claim we must turn to the thematic relevance of the violence which is present throughout the narrative. On a first viewing, the relentless emphasis upon bloodied bodies and brutal physical

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punishments which permeates the story and appears to encompass the spectrum of such possibilities — quite apart from the "retirement" of three replicants, we are forced to witness an attempted strangulation, savage beatings, an attack with an iron bar, deliberately broken fingers and a climax of concentrated physical suffering — can strike one as sadistic and verging upon the obscene. This impression can be altered, however, if one notes that the characters to whom violence is seen to be done are primarily Deckard and the replicants. (Tyrell is murdered in a context in which he has assumed divine rather than human status — of which more later — and we never see Sebastian's execution or his corpse.) We shall return to the significance of Deckard's role as victim later, when we examine the way in which *Blade Runner* might be seen as an account of Deckard's education, of the way in which the replicants (who alone are his victimizers) teach him a lesson; but if we set this aside for a moment, then we are required to account for the fact that the violence portrayed in the film is directed primarily against non-human characters — against those supposedly incapable of suffering and also lacking that human status which would make the infliction of pain upon them a moral crime.

What the scenes of violence succeed in eliciting is an instinctive response to this treatment of the replicants which matches our response to such treatment when directed against human beings; we see their behavior as the expression of pain and suffering rather than as an empty mechanical analogue of such things exhibited by an automaton. The slow-motion presentation of Zhora's final trajectory through the plate-glass shop-windows is justified by its achievement in making us accept Deckard's remorse at having to shoot a woman in the back rather than retiring a replicant; and by the time Deckard shoots Pris a second time in order to end the mechanical threshing of her limbs caused by his first shot, we need no dialogue to tell us that he is in fact putting someone out of her misery. As Roy puts it: "We're not computers, Sebastian — we're physical;" the violence inflicted upon the replicants drives home the fact that they are embodied, and thus capable of manifesting the range and complexity of behavior open to any human being. The empathic claim exerted upon us by those scenes in which that behavior becomes pain-behavior is what grounds the film's assumption that it is this aspect of the replicant's embodiment which is pertinent to their candidature for human status, and not the issue of whether anything *occupies* their bodies.

To put this last point more precisely: the way in which the embodied nature of the replicants is presented in *Blade Runner* reveals that one misunderstands the relation between mind and body if one views it from the Cartesian perspective of an immaterial substance contained within a material one; this suggests that the domain of the mental is hidden away behind, and entirely distinct from, that of the body. This film presents us with entities whose bodies resemble those of human beings in their form and flexibility, entities who manifest behavior of a complexity and range which matches that of a human being — and on this basis alone, the viewer is brought to apply to those entities all the psychological concepts which together constitute the logical space of the mental. *Blade Runner* thus makes explicit the fact that the criteria which justify our application of psychological concepts (our attribution of a mind) are to be found in behavior of a particular complexity — a complexity capable of bearing the logical multiplicity of those concepts. In the context of a philosophical seminar, the Cartesian might respond by claiming that such applications depend upon an argument by analogy and that a grasp of the meaning of such words

presupposes direct acquaintance with the introspectible private entities and processes which they name; someone impressed by Wittgenstein's work in this area might attempt to go through the private language argument in order to reveal the incoherences of private ostensive definition. Rather than argue towards the conclusions Wittgenstein draws, this film dramatizes them: it produces conviction in Wittgenstein's remark that "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" by picturing a body which resembles a human one in a form and flexibility and thereby eliciting from the viewer the attitude one adopts towards a human soul.

It is important to recognize that nothing said so far entails that *Blade Runner* is committed to a behavioristic conception of psychological phenomena: in denying a specific interpretation of the inner world of human beings, one need not collapse the inner into the outer or reduce the one to the other. The claim is rather that psychological concepts cannot be distinguished from purely behavioral ones by arguing that they relate only indirectly to human behavior and refer to hidden ethereal processes; both sets of concepts relate to the same evidential base (as it were) — namely, the behavior of human beings — but they organize that base in significantly different ways and thereby alter what we see when our perception of things is informed by either set. The nature of that difference is made clear by the contrast between Captain Bryant's view of the replicants and the developing perceptions of Deckard as he approaches his confrontation with Roy: entities perceived as "skinjobs" can yet attain the status of human beings.

A nagging question remains, however, which might be put in the following way: which of the two, Deckard and Bryant, is right? How can we know whether any one of these entities can correctly be regarded as human? The misleading nature of such questioning is rooted in the way it takes for granted the concepts of correctness and knowledge. The evidence of the film shows that it is "correct" to apply psychological concepts to the replicants in the sense that their behavior satisfies the criteria governing those concepts; to assume that some further notion of correctness has yet to be settled presupposes that we might apply those concepts in cases where our applications are completely justified and yet still be wrong — as if someone could satisfy all our criteria for personhood and yet not be one. This worry is groundless because incapable of giving any content to the notion of *what it is* that this entity has failed to be, given that our criteria for personhood exhaust what it is to be a person, and that this entity fulfills all those criteria. One might say that we know all that there is to know about the replicants which is relevant to their claim for human status; there is no further fact of the matter being kept from us. Nothing counts *against* their being treated as human.

Nothing — except the unwillingness or refusal of other human beings to do so. No accumulation of facts or evidence can *force* someone to acknowledge behavior which fulfills all the criteria of pain-behavior as being the genuine expression of another human being's pain. Captain Bryant is not ignorant of "the truth" about the replicants — he can see everything that we and Deckard can see; rather, he denies or fails to acknowledge that truth. Here, however, we should pause to register the inaccuracies of our talk of truth, for truth relates to concepts of evidence and fact; the truth is that replicant behavior fulfills all the criteria for *eg* pain-behavior, anger-behavior, *etc*, but that truth does not entail that someone who fails to acknowledge such behavior as genuinely expressive of a heart and mind is denying any of those facts — he is rather adopting one possible attitude towards the facts. Bryant and Deckard take up opposing attitudes

to the facts with which they are presented; and neither can be said to be right or wrong in the sense of corresponding or failing to correspond to those facts. What this entails, however, is that the humanity of the replicants — or indeed of all human beings — is in the hands of their fellows; their accession to human status involves their being acknowledged as human by others. They can fulfill all the criteria, but they cannot force an acknowledgement from those around them; and if their humanity is denied, it withers. As Stanley Cavell would put it, we do not know that any given entity is a human being; rather, we acknowledge or deny their humanity in the attitude we adopt towards them<sup>1</sup>.

It is this theme which the film explores in more detail through the relationship between Deckard and Rachel. Their first meeting takes place across a Voight-Kampff machine, the equipment used by blade runners to assess a subject's capillary dilation, blush response, fluctuation of the pupil and other physiological registers of emotional response — the theory being that replicants lack any empathic attunement with others and thereby betray their difference from human beings. As Tyrell points out to Deckard, however, this lack of empathy and the correlative emotional immaturity evinced by the replicants is purely a function of the decision by their human makers to restrict their life-span and correspondingly constrain the range of their memories and experience; Rachel has been "gifted with a past," a gift which it is hoped will "create a cushion or pillow for the emotions" but which also entails that Rachel does not "know" that she is a replicant. For Deckard, Rachel's failure to pass the V-K test is a simple proof of her non-humanity; he fails to see that his difficulty in detecting the usual emotional absence in her suggest that this lack is both contingent and a matter of degree, *ie* that he might regard the replicants as being children in an emotional sense through no fault of their own, and thus as being capable of maturity. He also fails to note that Captain Bryant — the sort of lawman who called black men "niggers" — offers standing proof that human beings can lack empathic attunement with others whilst retaining human status.

We know that Deckard will deny Rachel's humanity — that his relationship towards her will begin by being death-dealing — because of the scene in his apartment block in which she startles him in the elevator: at the first indication of her presence, he turns his gun on her instinctively. It becomes clear that this gesture signifies more than the reflexes of a trained blade runner when she follows him into his apartment in search of comfort and reassurance against the shock of discovering her status as a replicant; for Deckard proceeds to take up an attitude towards her which is as deadly as any gun-shot. He wrenches away from her the pillow of her past, the experiences transmuted by memory with which Tyrell has gifted her, by reciting intimate recollections to her face (violating and expropriating her privacy, her inner life) and informing her that they belong to Tyrell's niece (alienating her from that which gives a person any sense of continuity over time — a point Locke emphasizes); his clumsy attempt to back away from the suffering he thereby causes only makes matters worse by manifesting his inability to care about Rachel enough to perform this task of reparation with tact and delicacy. In the end, he wants her to leave his apartment; and Rachel does as he desires.

Their next encounter in the flesh comes after Zhora's death, when Rachel saves Deckard from Leon's murderous attack. Back in his apartment, Deckard acknowledges his own feelings to the extent of assuring Rachel — who is now on the run from the authorities — that he would never

hunt her down and kill her; but the reason he gives for this decision — that he owes her one — reveals the limited nature of that acknowledgement. They are equals in the way a debtor and his creditor are equals; saving lives is no more than a business deal, nothing personal is permitted to intrude. This mercenary implication, together with Deckard's unthinking reference to nerves as part of the blade runner business when his rescuer is herself not only part of the business but its essence and victim (retirement is a little more discomfoting than "the shakes"), gives Rachel the anger necessary to reject the interpretation of their relationship which Deckard is offering; but her inquiry as to whether Deckard has ever taken the V-K test himself falls on deaf ears. For the viewer, however, this question hangs together with the accumulating evidence that the blade runner business and its barter of life-taking for a living wage is dehumanizing; and we begin to see the way in which a refusal to acknowledge another's humanity constitutes a denial of the humanity in oneself.

As this complex scene continues, we are offered some indication that Deckard's failings are redeemable; for when he wakes to find Rachel playing the piano and discovers that she did so in order to test the legitimacy of a memory of piano lessons ("I remember lessons — I don't know if it's me or Tyrell's niece"), his response ("You play beautifully") manifests precisely the tact and delicacy needed to undo the damage of his brutal mishandling of this topic earlier. The situation seems ripe for a full acknowledgement of their feelings for one another, but Rachel takes fright and is only prevented from leaving the apartment by Deckard slamming the door. He pushes her against the wall, and initiates the following dialogue as he advances on her:

Deckard: "You kiss me."

Rachel: "I can't rely on -"

Deckard: "Say 'Kiss me'."

Rachel: "Kiss me."

Deckard: "I want you."

Rachel: "I want you."

Deckard: "Again."

Rachel: "I want you. Put your arms around me..."

This sequence, with its lushly romantic soundtrack, hits a very false note: Deckard seems to be extracting an acknowledgement by force and thus not extracting an acknowledgement at all, and the threatening structure of the scene carries overtones of rape, of a male unable to take no for an answer. The reality is more complex. We have some grounds for thinking that at this stage Rachel is indeed denying her true feelings for Deckard; her problem is not just that she cannot rely on Deckard's feelings, but also that she feels incapable of staking her life on her own emotions — the revelations about a transplanted personality make her unsure of the reality of the emotions she feels in a way which is precisely analogous to her doubts about her capacity to play the piano. To this degree, she needs help in surmounting this anxiety, and Deckard is the appropriate person to provide this help; indeed, this is clearly what he takes himself to be doing in the dialogue quoted above — allowing her to acknowledge without fear the reality of her feelings. The difficulties arise because Deckard *forces* the right words into her mouth and thereby violates her autonomy; Rachel is given a lesson in how to express her inner life, and by the end of the scene she does

learn how to go on and find the appropriate words unprompted ("Put your hands on me..."), but this learning process occurs within an overall context of teacher and pupil *ie* of a power-relationship which fails to allow for the equality of participants. The way in which Deckard and Rachel here acknowledge their feelings for one another inevitably prevents a full acknowledgement of Rachel's humanity; and since it was Deckard who set the terms of this encounter — who failed to find a way of educating Rachel which acknowledged her autonomy — the responsibility for Rachel's failure to be fully respectful of her own humanity is his.

What is needed is a further and fateful step in Deckard's own education — a lesson which Roy Baty undertakes to deliver in the Bradbury buildings. We will return to this climactic sequence to trace its contours in some detail, but for now we should complete our account of the theme of acknowledgement by considering the alteration in Deckard's relationship with Rachel which is manifest when he returns to her after Roy's death. His apartment is quiet, disturbed only by the flicker of a video screen, and he finds Rachel on a couch completely covered in a sheet; the identification of this sheet with a shroud is immediate, and when Deckard removes it he seems to be revealing a corpse. At this point, however, Deckard discovers a way of addressing Rachel which brings her fully (back) to life — one which contrasts with their previous confrontation beside the closed door of the apartment. In that encounter they faced one another standing, thus forming a strong vertical patterning on the screen which emphasized Deckard's superior height and aggression and reinforced the sense of his domination; in this scene, he leans over her face from the head of the couch, creating an equally strong horizontal patterning to their encounter — one which does away with his superiority of height and build and confers a sense of their profiles being essentially complementary rather than competitive. The ensuing dialogue matches this sense of achieved equality:

Deckard: "Do you love me?"

Rachel: "I love you."

Deckard: "Do you trust me?"

Rachel: "I trust you."

Rather than forcing words into her mouth by rote, Deckard asks questions and Rachel is free to choose her answers — more precisely, she freely chooses to acknowledge her love for Deckard, and by creating a conversation in which Rachel could do this in a way which respects her own autonomy, Deckard comes to share in the responsibility for their achievement of equality and the full mutual acknowledgement it permits. These two have earned their escape from the nightmarish city-scape in which everyone's humanity is at risk.

Acknowledgement has thus emerged as a central aspect of what might be termed human flourishing; the possession of human form and behavior of the requisite complexity can make an entity eligible for treatment as a human (*ie* it is a necessary condition for being so treated), but such entities can only develop in their personhood — can only become fully human — if their humanity is acknowledged rather than denied. *Blade Runner* adds a further twist to this claim by revealing in Deckard the crippling consequences for one's own humanity of the failure to acknowledge the humanity of others; to deny it in others is to deny it in oneself. In tracing out this theme we have shown how several alternative criteria for humanity — specific levels of

intelligence, physical virtuosity, emotional empathy — reveal their irrelevance; and the problems which might have been raised by robots rather than by replicants (by mechanical entities rather than organisms cloned from genetic material) are simply by-passed. There remains, however, one other element of being human with which both the film and the leader of the replicants are obsessed, an element which must be fitted into our thinking about this film — that of mortality. Part of being human is being mortal; and *Blade Runner* attempts to explore the significance of human mortality in complex ways.

What does it mean to claim that human beings are mortal? If we were to answer this by means of a contrast with the notion of immortality, then it would seem that mortality consists in the fact that one does not live forever — that a mortal life must end at some point. This contrast encourages the view that human beings are mortal because their lives occupy a finite quantity of time, because their days are numbered and destined to run out soon after three-score years and ten. Such a view is clearly the one taken by the replicants in general and Roy Baty in particular; their dangerous trip back to Earth is motivated by the desire for more life — the desire to extend their allotted span of days until it matches that of a human being and allows them to go on prosecuting their projects, loves and interests. Are we to accept the assumption that the replicants are less than human because their death comes more swiftly and with complete certainty?

It is made very clear in *Blade Runner* that such an assumption embodies crucial misunderstandings of the specifically human relation to death; and these misunderstandings are disinterred and undermined with dizzying speed in the course of one brief scene. After Deckard has shot Zhora and is wandering through crowded streets looking for Rachel, he is accosted by Leon — who observed Deckard's execution of his lover — and dragged into an alley, where Leon proceeds to administer a savage beating to the blade runner. It is, however, the dialogue in this scene which is of most importance:

Leon: "How old am I?"

Deckard: "I don't know."

Leon: "My birthday is April 10th, 2017. How long do I live?"

Deckard: "Four years."

Leon: "More than you. Painful to live in fear, isn't it? Nothing is worse than having an itch you can't scratch."

Deckard: "I agree."

Leon: "Wake up — time to die."

By this stage in the film, our sympathies have been directed towards the replicants and their desire for a longer life-span; we feel sorry for them because, unlike us, their genetically-engineered constitution embodies an ineradicable four-year limit to their existence, and they know from the moment of their inception the precise date of their death. Barring accidents, we think, any human being can rely on living far longer than any replicant. It is precisely this assumption which Leon puts into question in his interrogation of Deckard, for Leon's ability to kill the blade runner negates any illusion that a normal human life-span trumps one with replicant limitations — death cannot be kept at a Biblical arms-length. Indeed, Leon begins to emerge as a figure of real power as he names the moment of Deckard's death; it seems that the replicants' certainty about the date

of their own end allows them to master and dismiss any fears about dying, since that fatal possibility is tied down to a specific day — whereas frail human beings, as Deckard is discovering, can never be sure when their end will come. At this point, however, our impression of replicant superiority is in turn shown to be an illusion, for Rachel saves Deckard from execution by shooting Leon in the head — thus proving that knowing the date at which one's death is inevitable is not the same as knowing when one will die.

The lesson of this scene is clear: mortal finitude should not be understood as the simple fact that human beings have a necessarily finite life-span, that all human lives will come to an end at some point. Rather, to describe human beings as mortal is to point out that every moment of human life contains the threat of the end of that life: every mortal moment is necessarily riven with the possibility of its own non-existence. Death is not an abstract or distant limit to life, an indeterminate but inevitable boundary to the succession of days, but rather a presence in every present moment of our existence. This is an interpretation of the human relationship to death which Heidegger captures in his notion of human existence as Being-towards-death; and in the context of this film, its emergence reveals the ultimate irrelevance of any distinction between human beings and replicants which is couched in terms of the length of their respective life spans or the degree of certainty with which each can predict an end to their lives on a particular date. Both are alive, and both possess consciousness: it follows that both will die, and that both are conscious of that fact. Whether either will attain a grasp of the full significance of their mortality and be capable of responding authentically to that significance is another matter; but it is an issue which is as pertinent to replicants as it is to human beings — which is simply another way of saying that replicants stand in a human relationship towards death.

Thus, whilst Deckard explores the significance and reflexivity of acknowledgement, Roy engages in a quest for a correct understanding of mortality. Since, as we have already noted, he interprets mortality as the condition of having a finite life-span, and since he interprets that finitude as a constraint (a very human reaction), he concludes that the only way to master or transcend his mortality is to master or transcend its limits by altering or extending the span of his life; and it is this conclusion which leads him to Tyrell. We can see in advance that such a response to human mortality constitutes a denial rather than an acknowledgement of it; for the logical conclusion to which Roy's response points is the removal of any temporal limit to one's life-span — *ie* the attainment of immortality — and that condition is precisely the one *in contrast to which* this interpretation of mortality is initially understood. It is only through his encounter with Tyrell — with his Maker — that Roy comes to see the inadequacy of his response, and to glimpse the possibility of a more authentic attitude to his own mortality.

It becomes clear at once to Tyrell that Roy is misconceiving this critical issue when his creation demands more life and asks if the Maker can repair what he made — as if the finitude of his life-span constituted essential damage to his life. Tyrell engages in a brief discussion of the bio-mechanical limitations on extending that life-span — in just the way a doctor might discuss the everyday human aging process — but then dismisses the whole topic ("All of this is academic.") and introduces the two central notions this film will advance as ingredients of an authentic attitude towards human mortality:

Tyrell: "He who burns twice as brightly burns half as long. And you have burned so very very brightly, Roy... Revel in your time."

Roy: "I've done things — questionable things."

Tyrell: "Nothing the God of bio-mechanics would not let you in heaven for."

The metaphor of burning, by emphasizing brightness rather than duration, encapsulates the idea that it is not the length but the quality of a life that determines its value or worth; and here, quality of life relates not to creature comforts but to the intensity with which one experiences each moment of life as it occurs. This intensity is a function of the way in which the relevant person recognizes the nature of time — a recognition which Heidegger embedded in his concept of authentic Being-towards-Death; the transitory nature of the present is not taken to show its insignificance or to lead to a form of life in which one ignores the present in favor of living in the future or dwelling upon the past, for such attitudes ignore the point that all experience is present experience and have the consequence that the person involved fails entirely to engage with his life as he lives it. Rather, the present moment is to be acknowledged as a gift from the future and as destined to fade into the past — facets of the structure of time which serve to define the nature of the present, but which should lead to a valuing of each present moment as it passes rather than to its devaluation. Authentic human existence involves living in the present and for the present without forgetting the way in which the present is related to past and future; to live one's life as it should be lived is to let every moment burn brightly and yet still acknowledge that each moment will pass.

Tyrell goes on in the dialogue quoted above to advise Roy to revel in his time. The Nietzschean connotations of the concept of revelry or play should be evident here, particularly with the ensuing death of Roy's God: Zarathustra speaks constantly of the overman as one who dances through life, whose life is a dance and is invested with lightness and grace. I take this scene to be positing a connection here between Nietzsche's vision and the Heideggerian concept of the authentic Being-towards-Death: the man who revels in life revels in each present moment, living it to the full whilst respecting its essential nature as one transitory element in the ineluctable stream of time. It is a notion which Roy is already dimly aware of: in the immediately preceding scene, with Pris in J. F. Sebastian's apartment, he responds to Pris' recitation of the Cartesian dictum "I think therefore I am" by saying: "Very good, Pris — now show him why" — and Pris performs a cartwheel, immediately followed by plucking an egg from boiling water bare-handed. Roy knows, in other words, that the mere fact of existence is not enough; fully living one's life involves revelling in the possibilities of act and performance that the fact of embodied existence makes possible.

Another way of expanding this claim about play or revelry in time would be to say that the significance or meaning of the moments which go to make one's life should be generated from within that life rather than from a reliance upon external guarantors. The life of the overman, for Zarathustra, was to be authenticated by means of the doctrine of eternal recurrence: one had achieved a fully human life only if, when faced with the chance to have one's life over again, one could sincerely desire that not a single moment within it should be changed. Such a vision clearly presupposes that one's life be a wholly integral unity, its parts hanging together in a self-sufficient

pattern from which nothing could be dislodged; and such a self-sufficient life could have no need for sources of value or worth external to itself — it would be self-authenticating. To posit such a life as fully human is thus to reject any necessity to refer to the Christian God in its usual and essential role as guarantor of human values; indeed, insofar as the presence of this God tempts and permits men to think that they may refer the worth of their lives to Him, it becomes essential for the attainment of a fully human life that God's presence be removed from the scene. In narrating this removal as the murder of God by men, Nietzsche is emphasizing in as graphic a way as possible the need for men to accept full responsibility for their lives and for the significance of those lives; and by inscribing himself into this narrative — by enacting the murder of his Creator in a way which brings an anguished "Oh, my God!" from J. F. Sebastian — Roy is assuming the mantle of the overman. He has learnt his lesson, and he proves it by enacting the most central of its corollaries — the murder of his teacher.

Naturally enough, he wishes to pass on his discovery to the last remaining replicant — his lover, Pris. Deckard, however, gets there first and thus (unwittingly) ensures that Roy will impart his good news in the form of a final, practical lesson through which Deckard will acquire the capacity to acknowledge the full humanity in Rachel and in himself. If, that is, he survives the lesson.

On the one level, it seems that Roy's pursuit of Deckard through the decaying building is motivated purely by revenge — revenge not only for the execution of Pris but also for the death of the other replicants: Deckard carries their memory with him during his agonized feats of endurance in the pain of broken fingers. Many other themes are woven together in this climactic hunt, however; to begin with, Roy's role as overman is repeatedly emphasized by the various ways in which he is presented as having gone beyond good and evil — not in the sense of having transcended all notions of morality, but in the Nietzschean sense of having escaped from the specifically Christian ethical code which is based upon a contrast of good with evil rather than with bad. Roy draws attention to this aspect of his role by characterizing Deckard as the representative of good ("I thought you were supposed to be good — aren't you the good man.") and then hunting him down until he has experienced to the full "... what it is to be a slave," *ie* what Roy conceives to be the essence of a life dominated by Christian slave-morality. The Christian imagery which gradually collects around Roy in this sequence — the nail through the palm, the frieze of cruciform ventilation units on the roof-top, the dove of peace — should thus be seen in part as a means of revealing the distance Roy has moved beyond the morality expressed in such symbols: they are available for him to use or discard as he sees fit, as tools for his own personal purposes (he crucifies himself with the nail in order to delay the decay of his body), and his use of them in the task of inculcating a very non-Christian set of values in his pupil stakes a claim that his message is at least as important for humanity as was Christ's. The hubris of this last claim, the depths of self-assurance it requires, place Roy firmly in the role of the noble, self-reliant re-evaluator of all values.

The concept of slavery acquires a further level of significance in this sense, however: for — at the end of Deckard's ordeal, after Roy's unexpected rescue of him — Roy offers his pupil the following description of his experience: "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is, to be a slave." The deliberate echoing of a phrase Leon chose to describe the state of

mind he was attempting to create in Deckard through a savage beating makes it clear that the replicants have experienced their own existence as one of living in fear — an existence they define as slavery. If we remember that replicants were specifically created to serve as expendable substitutes for human beings in dangerous or dirty situations off-world, and recall the time-honored view that slavery — by annihilating the autonomy of an individual — destroys one's humanity, then it becomes obvious that the human race as a whole is here indicted for the crime of denying the humanity of its replicant servants. Deckard's ordeal places him on the edge of existence and reduces him to an animal desire to survive; but this minutes-long experience is merely a sample of the texture of which all replicant life consists — and the responsibility for that lies with every human being.

Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that the central theme of this sequence is death — or, more precisely, the threat of death. Roy manipulates the situation in such a way that Deckard comes to feel that every moment may be his last, and Deckard's response to this is to flee from the threat. Until the final confrontation with Roy, who assumes the status of the Angel of Death for the blade runner, Deckard functions at the level of an injured animal, incapable of anything more than an unthinking attempt to avoid the threat of extinction by refusing to face it, by running away from it. In this respect, he differs completely from his pursuer, who — it is important to remember — is equally close to the edge of his own existence; Roy knows — and his malfunctioning hand confirms — that his time is almost up, and he is also aware that Deckard (when armed with gun or crowbar) is perfectly capable of killing or seriously injuring him. The replicant's response to this threat, however, is not to run from it but to run towards it: in toying with Deckard, he also toys with the threat of extinction which paralyzes Deckard's own capacity to transcend animal fear.

We are thus presented with two opposing ways of responding to a threat of death; and, given the already-established Heideggerian and Nietzschean background, we are justified in reading this sequence as a contrast between authentic and unauthentic ways of living a human life — for the defining feature of human mortality is that every moment of existence is riven with the necessary possibility of its non-existence; the threat these men symbolize to one another is one which all human beings have woven into the fabric of their everyday lives, and which they must acknowledge or deny in some particular way. Deckard's response is unauthentic because it is an attempt to deny the ubiquity of this threat; his flight from Roy implies that if he can escape from this avenging replicant he will be safe, he can escape from the threat of death — an implication which constitutes a denial of his own mortality. Roy's response, on the other hand, is authentic, for he treats these matters of death and the death of love (Pris) playfully. His cry of mourning over Pris is translated into a mock wolf-howl, an imitation of the huntsman's pack which signals that the game (of life and death) is afoot, and from that moment, his words and behavior are shot through with the imagery of sport and play. He points out that firing upon an unarmed man is not very sporting, and chides Deckard for unsportsmanlike attacks with an iron bar; his response to one such attack, indeed, is to cry "That's the spirit!" — as if his protagonist is at last beginning to play the game properly. The most important stretch of dialogue, however, is the following one:

Roy: "You'd better get it up, or I'm going to have to kill you. Unless you're alive, you can't play, and if you can't play..."

This emphasis upon sport is not (only) a sign of mania or psychological imbalance, but rather a conjuration of the Nietzschean vision of revelry or play as the authentic mode of mortal existence: like Zarathustra's disciples, Roy is dancing on the edge of the abyss. It recalls Pris' demonstration to J. F. Sebastian of the point of being alive by performing a cartwheel. To play is to be fully alive, and part of investing one's life with such lightness and grace is the capacity to look at death, and the death of love, without fear or hysteria. Roy's way of conducting his life-and-death duel with Deckard confirms his achievement of the status of overman.

He wants to do more than achieve this status for himself, however — he wants to teach Deckard how to achieve it as well. If Deckard fails to absorb the lesson, he loses his chance to flourish as a human being: for if to play is to be fully alive, not to play is to fail to live fully — one's humanity withers; and in such circumstances, with Deckard remaining in his unauthentic form of life, Roy's threat to execute him would function as little more than the public confirmation of a self-inflicted extinction of what was human in him. If you can't play, you might as well be dead.

Deckard allows his suddenly-heightened awareness of the omnipresent possibility of death to paralyze his life and reduce that life to animal instincts; this response is unauthentic because, in effect, it transforms a possibility into an actuality — it permits that possibility to extinguish life by voiding it of what is distinctively human, of an active embodied existence which transcends the animal. Roy has the task of teaching Deckard the difference between possibility and actuality; he does so by allowing him to spend long minutes on the edge of his existence, by pushing him to the edge of the abyss, by making death seem unavoidable — and then rescuing him. Rather than permitting death to swallow up and dominate one's life, an authentic acknowledgement of one's Being-towards-death involves treating death playfully — for that is a way of acknowledging its omnipresent threat, of showing that since the possibility of death is a defining characteristic of human mortality (of what it means to be human) it is not something one can or should avoid or deny.

Authenticity in this respect involves revelling or play in time, *ie* revelling in each present moment, living it to the full whilst respecting its essential nature as one transitory element in the ineluctable stream of time. This is the insight Roy bequeaths to Deckard in the last moments of the replicant's life, as they sit at the edge of their abyss:

Roy: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe ... All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."  
"Time to die."

Roy expresses the most seductive reason for wishing to postpone, avoid or deny one's death — the fact that rare and precious human experiences are irrevocably lost with the death of the person who experienced them. The loss is undeniable: and the film is surely right in the elegiac note it strives for at this point; but the irrevocability of that loss is equally undeniable. It would clearly count as a radical failure of acknowledgement of the nature of human experience to

avoid the truth that every present moment will and must become a memory; the present can only be lived to the full by respecting both its reality and its transitory nature. It would, however, count as a further and more profound failure to wish to bequeath one's own experience and memories to others — as if one could outlive oneself, as if one's moments of consciousness were alienable or transferable, as if one's mortality could be denied. This point, too, achieves its clearest articulation with respect to our relation to the moment of our death; as Heidegger puts it, our death is inalienable — no one can experience another person's death for him, just as no one can die our death for us. Authentic Being-towards-death thus involves a capacity to acknowledge and accept the moment of our death, when it comes, as the own-most possibility of our Being; Roy's calm and moving last words manifest just this authenticity, and they cry out for acknowledgement as such.

It is Deckard — as Roy's only companion — upon whom that responsibility falls, the obligation not merely to acknowledge the significance of those last words but also to acknowledge them *as last words*, *ie* as part of Roy's last moments. Deckard blinks, as if to clear his vision, and then provides Roy with an epitaph:

Deckard: "Maybe he loved life more than he ever had before. All he wanted were the same answers any of us want ... All I could do was sit there and watch him die."

As an expression of acknowledgement of Roy as a fully human being, these words could not be bettered. Deckard sees that his opponent's nature is riven with precisely the same doubts and worries, loves and mysteries, as his own; but in particular he sees that it is his task to sit there and watch Roy die, *ie* that Roy is fully subject to the constraints of human mortality, that his death is his own, and that the only — and the best — way in which another human being can acknowledge Roy's humanity in those moments is not to try hysterically to postpone his death, or to try incoherently to take Roy's death upon himself, but rather to watch that death and to watch it as the death of another human being. To acknowledge someone's death is to acknowledge them as an entity whose essence is Being-towards-death, but to acknowledge it in a way which recognizes that each person's death is his own reveals insight and authenticity in the beholder: Deckard has learned his lesson, about acknowledging others *and* about mortality, by acknowledging another's death. As Inspector Gaff puts it, he has done a man's job, the task of a human being, and Roy's bequest to Deckard culminates in the resurrection of Rachel. It's a pity she won't live — but then again, who does?

## 2) What Becomes of People On Film?

The physical and spiritual landscape of *Blade Runner* is that of the age of technology: those remnants of humanity left behind by the off-world pioneers and settlers find themselves in a world with no sunlight, surrounded by mechanisms — huge, soulless buildings, police vehicles observing their deeds from the air, flying advertisement hoardings with probing searchlights, and obscurely purposeful but aberrantly shaped monoliths dividing up the pavements and roadways. In every case, the scale of the machines dwarfs that of their human creators, a diminution which is only restored by the numbers of human beings who populate the city — the ebb and flow of crowds is alone capable of making it seem that Los Angeles is *inhabited* by its people; but even

within those crowds, it seems clear that technology threatens its human creators in some intimate way.

This threat is bodied forth and stalks the streets in the form of the replicants: they are seen by the Tyrell Corporation as the pinnacle of human scientific achievement, and presented in the film as manifesting a self-reliance which requires none of the technological crutches with which the "real" human beings surround themselves; and the possibility that any of these slaves might be loose on Earth calls forth an extremity of response from their masters that transforms the replicants into the stuff of nightmare. The police department, the blade runner units, the cumbersome Voight-Kampff procedure — all are brought into the campaign to keep the planet unpolluted, as if the real but limited threat posed by malfunctioning machines were in reality the first signs of a contagious disease, of a plague. As figures in the psychic life of the humans stranded in Los Angeles, the replicants are not a threat solely because of their martial skills or physical perfections; as emblems of the technological carapace with which human life is protected and mummified, they signify a threat to the spiritual integrity — the humanity — of these remnants of the human race. The future that they fear is evident in their offspring: in the low hiss of wheels as a swarm of children glide by on their bikes, in the jabbering city-speak arguments they have over machinery stolen from stationary vehicles, in the distorting layers of material wrapped around their small heads and bodies, these gangs of street-urchins embody the dehumanized future of mankind on its machine-ridden planet.

The question of whether human flourishing is possible in such an age is one which this film insistently poses, but it does so in a very specific way. To understand this, we need to remember that, of all art forms, that of film-making is the most inherently dependent upon technology. The material basis of film is the recording capacity of the camera, *ie* the automatic production of an image of the world which is exhibited before the camera lens, and the consequent reproduction and projection of that image onto a cinema screen. One might say that the camera seems to satisfy one of mankind's perennial fantasies — that of recording the way the world is without the mediation or distortion consequent upon the interposition of human subjectivity into the recording process<sup>2</sup>. One could then go on to say that the attempt to make a film — to utilize the camera for artistic purposes — constitutes an attempt to find a possibility of human flourishing within the heart of the humanly threatening age of technology, to subvert that threat from the inside. Certainly, *Blade Runner* takes the question of whether human flourishing is possible in such an age to be answered by answering the question of whether a film (more specifically the film *Blade Runner*) can be a work of art.

As it stands, however, this question is both unmotivated (why should any open-minded person doubt that a film-maker can create a work of art?) and excessively general (what criteria should we use to test whether any given film is a work of art?). We require a further pointer concerning the nature of technology and of its era if we are to grasp the reasons for this cinematic self-doubt (as it were); and once again Heidegger can be of some use here. In an essay entitled "The Age of Technology,"<sup>3</sup> he identified the *Zeitgeist* of our age as the tendency to treat the natural world as a store of resources and raw materials for human purposes — to regard rivers as hydro-electric power sources, forests as a standing reserve of paper, the winds as currents of potential energy; this attitude he contrasted with that of acknowledging and respecting nature as

a field of objects, forces and living beings each with their own specific essence or Being — a being which humans alone were capable of coming to understand and thereby coming to fulfill more fully their own Being (namely Dasein — that being for which an understanding of Being is an issue). This analysis might lead any film-maker to doubt the purity of film as an art-form — a mode of human flourishing — because Heidegger's chosen label for the fatefully destructive attitude of treating nature as a standing reserve is "enframing;" and this phraseology recalls that earlier description of the process of automatically producing, reproducing and projecting an image of the world which we have already utilized as a means of characterizing the operations of the camera. For Heidegger, the fate of mankind and the essence of humanity hang on the task of transcending the attitude of enframing; for a film-maker, confronted with the knowledge that his role is precisely to take responsibility for enframing the world, for meaning the composition and exclusion constituted by each frame in his film, that task of transcendence is logically excluded — and he is left with the awareness that the means he wishes to employ in preserving humanity and human flourishing may be essentially self-defeating.

Once the possibility of the inherent dehumanizing potential of film is raised, however, the subject-matter by means of which one might most clearly test that possibility becomes clear; for if the camera's enframing of the natural world constitutes a denial of the essence of that world and thus a denial of the viewer's essentially human capacity to acknowledge that essence, then this dehumanizing threat would surely become most potent and most evident when the camera turns to frame human beings on film. In such circumstances, where humanity is precisely what is being put before the camera, the possibility of framing that humanity without loss *and* our capacity as viewers to perceive that humanity in the frames of the film would receive their most fundamental test. Of course, the successful framing of humanity on film could not *guarantee* that this humanity be acknowledged by the viewer, for in one respect our position as viewers resembles that of Deckard in the specific film we are discussing: just as Deckard is able to see that in every relevant way the replicants are suitable candidates for personhood but must still make the leap of acknowledgement, so any film viewer is presented with a world which may confirm in every possible way that the objects of his vision include human beings but which cannot *force* him to acknowledge their humanity. The major difference from Deckard lies in the fact that the blade runner cannot off-load any of his responsibility onto a director whose enframing decisions create the world he sees.

Success in filming such subject-matter (*ie* the creation of a filmed world which was such that any failure to acknowledge the humanity of the filmed characters would be the responsibility of the viewer) would then constitute an artistic proof that the age of technology is incapable of completely obliterating human flourishing — or, more precisely, that it is humanly possible to produce a film that is a work of art. The question *Blade Runner* therefore takes it upon itself to answer is: what becomes of people on film?

Let us now try to assemble some of the evidence suggesting that *Blade Runner* is indeed a film about film (making). The theme is announced in its opening sequence, in which the gradual approach of the camera towards the Tyrell building and the room in which Leon is being interrogated is inter-cut with close-ups of an unblinking eye, one in which the venting flames of the city-scape surrounding the Tyrell buildings wash in reflection across the pupil and iris; this all-

seeing, unblinking eye seems to me to be an obvious image for the camera which is directing and focusing our gaze as viewers. The film never identifies it as belonging to any of the characters in the story, and the incident upon which this sequence eventually focuses — Leon's interrogation by and execution of a blade runner — is presented to those characters in the form of a video or film recording. Since we are presented with this incident at first hand (as it were), the later representations of it in the form of a film serve only to emphasize further the presence of the camera as mediator between the viewer and the events viewed.

The character who is presented as obsessively viewing and reviewing this film-within-the-film is Deckard; and when this fact is taken together with the early scene in which (alongside Bryant) he sits in a darkened room or theater observing photographs of the replicants projected on a screen before him — as if viewing the rushes of a film or considering editing options — then the film's posited identification of Deckard with a director (more specifically with the director of a film about replicants) begins to emerge. This identification is confirmed by two central features of his job as a blade runner or detective: first, his use of the Voight-Kampff machine, a construction which involves his looking at people through a view finder and controlling the focus of the machine's gaze on their faces; and secondly, his use of the televisual unit in his apartment to unearth evidence of Zhora in Leon's life — this feat of detection involves analysis of a photograph, but more precisely it involves directing the focus of analysis within the photograph, calling for close-ups and tracking shots within the photographed room as if it were a film set.

If this interpretative claim is correct, then it is already clear that this film shows itself to be aware of the destructive potential inherent in framing humanity on film, for the choice of a blade runner as directorial surrogate brings into the foreground precisely this dehumanizing potential — it is one aspect of Deckard's business to elucidate signs of non-humanity from the people upon whom his attention focuses, and if he performs his job correctly his attention focuses on replicants and results in their execution. This sense of the death — dealing potential of film is further emphasized by the film's identification of the camera with a gun: since Deckard fulfills the role of director, his progress throughout the film behind an advancing gun — and, in particular, his progress through the Bradbury building in search of Pris and Roy, during which he rigidly holds his weapon in front of him as if it were mediating his vision of the environment as a whole — manifests a claim that the director's professional equipment is a potentially lethal weapon.

As we have already had cause to emphasize, however, potentiality and actuality are two very different things, particularly when it is death that is at stake; after all, Deckard doesn't actually execute Rachel in the elevator when she surprises him there at the beginning of the film. To put this more precisely: *Blade Runner* offers more than one surrogate for the camera, since another piece of equipment which plays a key role in Deckard's job and through which he tends to focus upon people he encounters is the Voight-Kampff machine which we have already mentioned. This piece of technology can, of course, help to issue a sentence of death, but its primary function is not to dehumanize whatever is placed in front of it but rather to assess the humanity of those subject to its gaze — its purpose is to bring out or elucidate any humanity which might be there, as well as revealing inhumanity if it is present. If we identify the camera with such a machine, then we must read the film as claiming that the camera's capacity to destroy the human in what it captures is matched by a capacity to preserve that same quality.

If these remarks suffice to establish the claim that the question of what becomes of (the humanity of) people on film is an explicit concern of this film, then what answer can we regard it as returning to its own question? This answer is manifest in the scene after Roy's death when Deckard returns to his apartment and to Rachel. Once again, Deckard's entrance involves viewing the world along the barrel of his gun, and when the camera reveals Rachel under a sheet/shroud, it seems clear that the death-dealing properties of the director's art have won out. Such is not the case, however: for Deckard removes the shroud *with his gun* and Rachel comes back from the dead. The point, I think, is this: although the camera (like a gun) has an inherent death-dealing capacity (guns are after all made for killing), its dehumanizing tendency *can* be subverted and the life of its human subjects preserved, but this possibility of subversion depends upon the *manner* in which the camera is used. As we noted earlier, the camera can be seen as a means of recording the way the world is without the interposition of human subjectivity into the recording process; but one of the central claims of our particular film is that the flourishing of any person's humanity requires its acknowledgement by those who observe (or otherwise interact with) him — and this entails that human subjectivity must be interposed, must play a role, if humanity is to be preserved on film. The goal of preserving this humanity thus involves working against the grain of the process of filming, which is why the camera is in the end identified with a gun rather than with the inherently neutral Voight-Kampff machine; but the resurrection of Rachel also records this director's conviction that the grain of film can indeed be opposed and worked against.

What this means is that it is not just the fact of enframing but also the way that enframing is done which determines what becomes of the human on film. To put it another way: the responsibility for preserving or destroying the humanity of the camera's subjects rests with the particular director; if he abdicates from his responsibility to recognize and elicit the humanity of filmed people, then the camera will transform those subjects into objects (into replicants), but if he exercises that responsibility adequately, then he retains the power to vivify their subjectivity (as Deckard learns to do with Rachel). It follows that, just as an individual's achievement of humanity in this respect cannot be evaluated apart from the nature of his relationships with particular people and their development over time, so how any director exercises his responsibilities and what he achieves by means of their exercise cannot be predicted in advance of an assessment of each particular film he makes. A gun can be used to kill or to remove a shroud; the choice and the responsibility rest with the person holding the gun, and are manifest in each particular thing he does with it.

*Blade Runner* does, however, offer a certain set of suggestions about how a director must exercise his responsibilities if he is to preserve rather than destroy the humanity of his filmed subjects: for Deckard's capacity to use his gun/camera to resurrect Rachel is entirely due to the lesson Roy teaches him. This lesson begins with Deckard losing his gun, his badge of director's rank — as if losing the symbol of his distinction from the rest of humanity, as if part of his lesson is that being a good director involves no more (and no less) than permitting his definitively human capacities to flourish and be expressed. This interpretation is confirmed by the lesson Roy goes on to teach, for — as we have seen — Deckard is taught to acknowledge the humanity of others, understood as an acknowledgement of their mortality and finitude; and he learns in addition that a failure to acknowledge the humanity of others is a way of crippling one's own humanity, of

creating a spiritual blankness. *Blade Runner* therefore claims two things about the task of directing: first, that to preserve the humanity of the camera's subjects is an achievement of human flourishing in itself; and secondly, that a failure to do so — a failure to make a film which is a work of art — is a failure of humanity in the director.

Film-making thus presents itself as no more (and no less) than a specific way in which one human being can acknowledge or fail to acknowledge the humanity of others — a challenge which faces us all in every moment of our lives. The camera's potential for dehumanizing its subjects can be matched by its capacity to translate them into screened images with their humanity preserved, and so it cannot provide the director with a scapegoat upon which to load the responsibility for a failure of acknowledgement or with a crutch which makes authentic acknowledgement any easier to achieve. This truth about the responsibilities of the director does not, however, remove the responsibilities of the viewer. The camera — if responsibly utilized by the director — may show us all the evidence, all the facts of the matter, everything that is the case and that may be relevant to evaluating the humanity of its subjects, but it cannot acknowledge their humanity for us. That remains the task of the viewer.

#### Notes

1. Cf the detailed treatment of these themes in his book *The Claim of Reason* (OUP, Oxford: 1979).
2. For more detail on this issue, cf Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA: 1971).
3. Collected in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper and Row, New York: 1971), trans. A. Hofstadter.