

Terminal City:

The disintegration of memory in *Blade Runner*

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“Time is speeding up. And to what end? Maybe we were told that two thousand years ago. Or maybe it wasn't really that long ago; maybe it is a delusion that so much time has passed. Maybe it was a week ago, or even earlier today. Perhaps time is not only speeding up; perhaps, in addition, it is going to end.”

Philip K. Dick ⁽¹⁾

‘Memories, you’re talking about memories.’

Los Angeles. November, 2019. Industrial smokestacks belch fire into a polluted atmosphere and aircraft glide through the haze. Architectural curiosities of the city, the Bradbury Building of 1893 and the Ennis-Brown house of 1924, are engulfed by megalithic 21st century structures. Rising from the generic mass of this megalopolis, the twin pyramids of the Tyrell Corporation emulate the pyramids of ancient Egypt. There are Arabian bazaars and Mayan interiors decorated with Bonsai trees, while the populace wear twentieth-century fashions. This civilisation is obsessed with the past. Like the buildings devoured by corrosive rain or obliterated by retrofitting, reality is collapsing as geography and history are swallowed up by the cultural schizophrenia. The presence of energy cannot hide the entropy: bright lights burn in an eternal night. This is a dreamscape where everything is ending and the spectacle of disintegration is rendered in intricate detail. The world is at once realistic and unreal in *Blade Runner*.

The Nexus-6 Replicants are the human embodiment of this terminal condition: biological high technology that is dying by design, they are without a past or a future. Replicants are simulated humans, stronger and at least as intelligent as their creators, a copy so perfect it is superior to the original – evolution, a copy without an original. Eldon Tyrell declares his creations to be ‘more human than human’, but the perfect simulacra are not without imperfections. Lacking the memories that are so necessary for the construction of self, the Nexus-6 Replicants are afflicted by an identity crisis. This crisis has been resolved in Rachel by simulating history, implanting memories to fabricate a past for her. The Tyrell Corporation has constructed her identity as it has engineered her body. Tyrell describes the process as gifting the past, unaware of the implications for humanity: Rachel is a simulation so perfect that it has made suspect the reality it simulates. At the core of the film is this identity crisis – this reality crisis.

Blade Runner is about the discovery of truth and the disintegration of memory in a *hyperreal* ⁽²⁾ future society of failing signs and signifiers. From the beginning the Vangelis score that accompanies the opening credits speaks the language of memory: beautiful and perilous and unbearably fragile. An atmosphere of doubt and paranoia pervades the film, personified by Deckard, the detective-assassin who searches for the truth in the shifting sands of this landscape, uncertain of his actions at every moment. Bryant orders him to the Tyrell Corporation to try the Voight-Kampf test on Rachel. ‘And if the machine doesn’t work?’ asks Deckard, knowing Bryant has no answer. Rachel questions Deckard’s ethics, asking if he has ever retired a human by mistake. He says no. ‘But in your position that is a risk?’ she asks. It is not his righteousness, but his rightness that is in question. How can he *know* he has never retired a human?

The question of doubt Rachel raised on the micro scale is soon raised on the macro scale. Tyrell explains why Rachel is so difficult to detect and the implications of her implanted memories are obvious to Deckard. ‘How can it not know what it is?’ he asks incredulously. ‘How can I know what I am?’ is the question he means to ask. The ability to fabricate memories and construct identities has made all knowledge a source of doubt and it forces Deckard to question the authenticity of his own reality. Just as Deckard has the Voight-Kampf test to assure him that he is retiring Replicants, Rachel has a photograph to provide the physical evidence of her fabricated childhood. ‘Photographs are essentially history’ ⁽³⁾, Ridley Scott has argued, but the photographs he imagines in *Blade Runner* – like the history they represent – are not to be trusted.

Rachel goes to Deckard with the photograph that she claims is of her mother and her as a child, but he knows her implanted childhood memories and he knows the photograph is no guarantor. Deckard confronts her with his destructive knowledge. Rachel cries and he is suddenly ashamed of his cruelty. He offers her a drink, but she leaves while he is getting it. When Deckard returns he looks at her discarded proof, the photographic trace of a remembered past now revealed to be the record of a false memory. It is an image of any mother and child. As he looks at the photograph he realizes that his attack on Rachel was self-harm: his collection of old photographs are the proof of a history before he was born, from a mythical past he never experienced. Deckard knows ultimately he can give himself no assurance that *he* is not a Replicant.

While he is inspecting Rachel's photograph, the still image moves and Deckard fleetingly relives the remembered sights and sounds of that moment from the past. The moving still ⁽⁴⁾ is an expression of the nature of photographs for the Replicants. Rachel's photograph is not a signifier of memory, but the memory itself encapsulated in physical form – she put her faith in this image and remembered the past through it. Leon's abandoned photographs are so important to him that he tries to recover them before Deckard can find them. Perhaps it is appropriate that they appear to have no subject: Leon has no implanted memories to resolve his lack and no photograph of a mother to put his faith in ('Let me tell you about my mother...' he says in his fury). Leon's snapshots are so important because they are the only history he will ever have.

Blade Runner consistently uses the device of photography to express the idea that memory is a fiction. Deckard inserts one of the snapshots into his Esper machine and it transforms the two-dimensional photograph into a three-dimensional space he can search. The Esper machine achieves the impossible because it is not remaking the space, but the memory of that space – remembered by Leon through the photograph. The fantasy of the Esper and the discontinuity of the images it produces soon form a critical mass of unreality. The woman Deckard finds in the snapshot and the woman in the hardcopy he prints are visibly not the same woman, and neither one resembles the Replicant woman he eventually retires. This memory is decaying before our eyes.

In the snapshot is another coded reference to artificial or constructed memory. Marshall Deutelbaum has noted the intentional resemblance between the snapshot and "The Arnolfini Marriage" by Jan van Eyck ⁽⁵⁾. The painting was made as a document attesting to the exchange of marriage vows between the depicted couple and the artist has added the reflection in a convex mirror of two men witnessing the event from the perspective of the viewer. When we look at the painting we are seeing the event from a subjective position, assuming the gaze of the two witnesses reflected in the mirror. The introduction of this simulated reflection reminds us that there is no position from which objective truth can be observed because perception and experience are always subjective. When Deckard looks at the snapshot he is actually looking at the decaying memory of a personal experience, not the evidence of an irrefutable truth. In the first instance the Esper produces imperfect images because Leon remembered imperfectly.

Subsequent detection scenes are haunted by visual and verbal discontinuities, as if the disintegration of memory is causing the disintegration of reality for Deckard. He replays the recording of Leon taking the Voight-Kampf test and the climactic line ‘Let me tell you about my mother...’ now becomes ‘I’ll tell you about my mother...’ When he has the snake scale examined the old woman quotes a serial number that is different from the number seen on the monitor. The Esper is fantastic but unreliable. Devices intended to assist his search for the truth in fact make it more difficult for him to distinguish perception from reality. It is appropriate that *Blade Runner* is set in the year 2019: for all its imaging technologies this place has less than 20-20 vision⁽⁶⁾. The sense of paranoia is fostered by the giant advertising blimps that loom overhead and offer Deckard the chance to forget the past: ‘The chance to begin a new life...’

Deckard is understandably reluctant to admit his reality crisis – he is a detective and the truth is his business – but the Replicants have to confront their identity crisis. Their leader, Roy Batty, is the most willing to embrace his lack of history and seize the freedom to construct his own identity. Roy’s personality adapts and evolves as he struggles like a child to articulate the emotions he is feeling. While Leon is searching for the comfort of memory to resolve his lack, Roy is forging his identity in the fire of experience. *Blade Runner* speaks the language of memory while we are with Deckard and Rachel, but whenever we are with Roy the film speaks the language of sensation: ‘If you could see what I have seen with your eyes.’ Roy is defined by his capacity for autonomous thought and action, not his capacity for memory. When Sebastian asks him to show his prowess he replies ‘We’re no computers, Sebastian. We’re physical.’

In the spirit of *joie de vivre* Roy goes to meet his maker and demand more life. ‘You were made as well as we could make you’ he is told by Tyrell, ‘But not to last’ he protests. But, of course, accelerated decrepitude afflicts every aspect of this place and the Nexus-6 Replicants are merely its most technologically advanced expression. Tyrell envisions Roy as the perfect subject to inhabit the terminal city: his amorphous personality thriving in the cultural schizophrenia, his death reflecting the decay of this civilisation. ‘Revel in your time’ Tyrell exhorts. In reply, Roy passionately kisses his creator and then murders him in rage, but he remembers the words. As he descends to earth he glares defiantly at the heavens, revelling in the magnificence of his existence.

When this fallen angel faces the assassin in the final conflict, the atmosphere of anxiety and paranoia transforms into terror and anger. As the pair ascends through the rain soaked ruins of the Bradbury, the prey stalks the assassin and the assassin learns how it feels to fight for his life. On the roof of the building, Deckard leaps a chasm to freedom, but he barely reaches the other side. Roy leaps across in pursuit and stands over him while he clings to the ledge. 'Quite a thing to live in fear, isn't it?' asks Roy. Then at the very moment Deckard is about to fall to his death, Roy grabs him and lifts him to safety. The pair sits face to face, Deckard exhausted and trying to comprehend, Roy waiting to die. With the last of his life, Roy communicates his lesson to Deckard:

'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain.'

To live in fear is to live in the moment. To live in fear is to live *for* the moment. Roy's brief violent existence has been experienced with the heightened senses of an animal acting on instinct and fighting for survival. His struggle for life and liberty has taught him to appreciate every moment of life, that the past must first be lived if it is to be remembered, that it is not futile to hunger for sensations and gather experiences even if perception is imperfect and even if the memories will disintegrate with time. What is important is not to have seen the truth but *to have seen*. Deckard absorbs the revelation, still in shock at being alive as he watches Roy die serenely in front of him. The lesson is restated explicitly by Gaff when he arrives at the scene to congratulate Deckard. 'It's a shame she won't live,' he says of Rachel, 'but then again, who does?' In 4 years the Nexus-6 Replicants have lived more than most humans do in a lifetime.

Deckard goes home, fearful that someone has been sent to retire Rachel. He has realised that what he is afraid of losing most is not his human status or his memories, but the Replicant woman he has fallen in love with. Like the dove Roy Batty releases into an azure sky, Deckard seizes the chance to escape and to make a life with Rachel. In a film that imagines a civilisation obsessed with the past (history, memory, culture) the final subject is not one of origins, but one of destinations. 'Where are you going?' Roy asked of Deckard, and now we see the answer: somewhere, anywhere, the future.

Notes

1. Philip K. Dick, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later', 1978, published by www.brmovie.com, 2003, <http://www.brmovie.com/Analysis/HtBaU-10.htm>.
2. "A real without origin or reality: a hyperreal"; Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, The University of Michigan Press, U.S.A., 1994, p. 1.
3. Interviewed in Future Noir: The Making of *Blade Runner*, Paul M. Sammon, Orion Media, London, 1996, p. 376.
4. The source of this term is the article by Elissa Marder, '*Blade Runner*'s Moving Still' in Camera Obscura, issue 27, 1991, pp. 89-107.
5. Marshall Deutelbaum, 'Memory/Visual Design: The Remembered Sights of *Blade Runner*' in Literature / Film Quarterly, issue 17, number 1, 1989, pp. 66-72.
6. *Blade Runner* was initially set in the year 2020, but the date triggered associations with the term '20-20 vision' and so the setting was changed to the year 2019; Sammon, 1996, p. 73.