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THE “CUSP OF LIFE” IN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS: THE MEANING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE IN “BLADE RUNNER”

1. SCIENCE FICTION BECOMES ANTHROPOLOGICAL

Over the last few decades science fiction has turned into a genre of anthropological reflection. It has progressively shied away from lighter subgenres like *space opera* – space adventures in galactic settings, or *science fantasy* – mutations, nuclear threats etc. Instead, it has moved toward a decidedly humanist vision. Rather than simple story-telling, films from the last thirty years have frequently tried to delve into the profound reasonings of a human being – his identity, the authenticity of his emotions and the dangers of his rationality, his greatness and his misery, his contradictions and the ultimate meaning of human existence.

Science fiction has become a genre of *projection*. Supposedly furthest from our daily lives, in reality, it is closest to our present vision of man. In these films our current fears and our views on the life we live are *projected* onto the future – a future that is clearly portrayed as one with many comforts and tremendous scientific progress but also as a chaotic and manipulated society. These stories show great skepticism about the uncontrolled progress of science. In the future, reasoning without ethical judgment is described as disastrously inhumane. As a result, a sense of fear of future dehumanization, moral impoverishment and a complete loss of the joy of life often exists in these stories. Man is no longer happy. Ultimately, there is a fear that man can live much better but be much worse; a fear that our desire to dominate nature will lead us to kill or annihilate it¹.

One manifestation of this fear is the image of the future city: “The view that science fiction gives us of the city of tomorrow is a place where a totalitarian power is exercised, a place where conflicts, crises and holocausts materialize. It is the geographical space of the apocalypse, nuclear disaster, overpopulation, total war²”.

However, the fear that is most present in these films concerns the efforts of science in creating “human life” through genetic engineering or “almost human lives”, in androids that feel and think like humans. This excessive desire to dominate life is quite often presented with a bitter ending – since humanoid creatures end up rebelling against their creator and, frequently, taking his life. The film that best reflects this moral theme

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¹ About the dystopian societies in science fiction, vid.: R. Baccolini, T. Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

² C. de Miguel, *La ciencia ficción: un agujero negro en el cine de género*, Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 1988, 189.

and has therefore unveiled an important subgenre in science fiction is undoubtedly *Blade Runner* (1982).

In this article I want to analyze six aspects of this film: its relationship with cyberpunk science fiction, the origin and evolution of the script, the various versions of the film, the “cusp of life” as a moral dilemma for science, the search for identity among the androids and the absence of parenthood in manufactured humans.

2. “BLADE RUNNER” AND CYBERPUNK

As the name suggests, *cyberpunk* science fiction is characterized by two key factors:

a) the cybernetic organism (*cyber*), where implants, robotics, virtual reality, genetic engineering, computing and other forms of advanced technology serve to celebrate the skills and abilities of man (or lead him to destruction);

b) an unhinged society (*punk*) where urban violence, a devotion to depravity, pollution, tribalism, drugs and vicious selfishness, replace all forms of coexistence and solidarity. In films, the latter might also be reflected by slave or slave-like societies, thanks to the absolute dominion of a hyper-technological corporation.

The writers of *cyberpunk* were acknowledged in 1980. They called for a new approach to the genre. After the Golden Age of science fiction (1938-50, centering around the editor John W. Campbell and the magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*) and the prolific Silver Age (1950-65; Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Clifford D. Simak, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick and Ray Bradbury), the “New Wave” of the fantasy narrative (1965-73: Brian W. Aldiss, J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Samuel Ray Delany or Roger Zelazny) created a huge breeding ground for skepticism. In their narrative there was no great threat (aliens, giant animals, radioactive material etc.) that ought to be combated with the wisdom of those defending the system (scientists, soldiers etc.). In their stories we ourselves are the enemy: protagonists confronting the dark corners of their own personalities. This was in keeping with the “culture of protest” of the 60s and with a clear admiration for the Eastern world – karma, dream travel, pacifism or mystical discovery.

Emerging from this worldview and positioned in second-rate fantasy magazines, *cyberpunk* authors (William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Cadigan, Rudy Rucker and John Shirley) struggled to develop new stories with themes of human identity lost in the cybernetic organism and the threat of a chaotic society enslaved by large corporations. In addition, they had a unique aesthetic: the night, neon lights, a dense and tiresome atmosphere, black color, leather clothes, metal ornaments, split images, urban ruins and mirrored sunglasses. This iconography, which would later make the movie *Matrix* famous, was already present in the stories of these writers. But its first and most important appearance in our culture was in the film *Blade Runner* (1982). This was the film that made these themes and imagery known, presenting a story that was to kick-start *cyberpunk*.

In fact, the most important novels of this movement emerged after this film. Like 1984’s *Neuromancer*, the novel that experts herald as the beginning of the subgenre. Its author William Gibson later published *Count Zero* (1986) and then *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), creating the popular *cyberpunk* trilogy. Another important author, Bruce Sterling, published his novel *Schismatrix* in 1985 which was followed by his famous anthology of stories *Mirrorshades* (1986), bringing together all the writers of *cyberpunk*, and the well-known *Islands in the Net* (1988). Even the name, which had been invented by Bruce Bethke in his unpublished story *Cyberpunk* (1980), was not known

or accepted until *Blade Runner* – thanks to which, publishers were quick to print it, in 1983³. In short, we can say that Ridley Scott's film, though not the origin of *cyberpunk*, was indeed its greatest champion – as catalyst, disseminator and shaper of the emerging literary movement⁴.

In the film world, *Blade Runner* made an even more remarkable impression. Both its anthropological vision (the cybernetic organism and a dehumanized society) and its avant-garde aesthetics are present in one form or another in many films that followed: James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2* (1991); Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990); Geoff Murphy's *Freejack* (1992); Robert Longo's *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995); the Wachowski brothers' the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003 and 2003); Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and *Minority Report* (2002); Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005); Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006); Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010); Rian Johnson's *Looper* (2012) and Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013). All of them, in one way or another, are indebted to the genre introduced by *Blade Runner*⁵. Undoubtedly, this is the pathbreaking film that changed forever, the course of science fiction.

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE "BLADE RUNNER" SCRIPT

Ridley Scott's film originates from a short novel by Philip K. Dick titled *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). The story is set in a world covered with radioactive dust, after a nuclear war almost kills all the animals. People now have different electric animals as pets and continuously breathe in the dust. The protagonist is Rick Deckard, an ex-cop and bounty hunter (in the novel he is not called "Blade Runner". Fancher took this name from a French novel by Alan E. Nourse) who has to eliminate a group of state-of-the-art 'Nexus 6' androids, almost identical to humans. Due to the terrible conditions of life to which they were subjected⁶, they have fled a space colony and have come to Earth.

The novel was sent to Hollywood studios. In 1974 Herb Jaffe optioned the novel and put his son Robert in charge of writing the script. The result did not please Philip K. Dick at all, and the script was forgotten.

In 1977 Brian Kelly bought a second option on the novel and sent a copy to Hampton Fancher, a little-known scriptwriter. He was captivated by the novel and wrote a draft, titled "Dangerous Days", which Kelly passed on to an experienced producer, Michael Deeley. The latter was interested in the story and decided to join the project. In April of 1979, Deeley, already the film's producer, contacted Ridley Scott to direct the film. He

³ For a more complete expansion on cyberpunk, vid.: M. Featherstone, R. Burrows (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2000.

⁴ Cfr. W.A. Senior, "'Blade Runner'r' and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity", *Film Criticism*, 21, 1 (1996), 12 pages (UC users only). Available in: <http://es.scribd.com/doc/131506942/Blade-Runner-and-Cyberpunk-Visions-of-Humanity>.

⁵ Along with these films, usually humanist, there have appeared others than bring nothing new but a playful packaging of special effects: *Paycheck* (2003), by John Woo; *Next* (2007), by Lee Tamahori; or the remake of *Total Recall* (2012), by Len Wiseman. Nevertheless, these too are influenced by the themes and aesthetics of *Blade Runner*.

⁶ Cfr. J. Kerman (ed.), *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Madison (USA): The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

read the script, was convinced that the story had thematic and aesthetic potential and signed the contract as director in February 1980⁷.

Under Scott's tutelage, Fancher, as screenwriter, reworked the script. He wrote up to eight versions in seven months but even then the producer did not like the result. The producer then hired David Peoples to enrich the detective aspects of the story, in November of 1980. In addition to refining some characters, Peoples' great contribution was in renaming the androids to "replicants", giving an original touch to the concept of cybernetic organisms.

The final script is dated February 23, 1981⁸. The writers had very loosely followed the plot of the novel. Apart from secondary elements (the novel takes place in San Francisco in 1992, and the film in Los Angeles in 2019), the new story has two major differences. One is the setting: the radioactive dust that fills an empty and desert-like San Francisco, becomes acid rain falling incessantly on an overcrowded and very dark Los Angeles in the screenplay... the action taking place at night, in true *film noir* style, imprisoning a multicultural, uprooted and dehumanized population. The other is the lack of a moral dimension with respect to emotions; in the film, conscience is blurry, unclear. But in the novel Deckard's inner world is clear. Moreover, he has the courage to accept his emotions as a guarantee of his human condition, a key point in the moral dilemma about his identity. As indicated by Caprettini: "*Scott, necessariamente incline a sostituire il mondo interiore di Dick – la sua 'fantascienza' – con una visione filmica, finisce inevitabilmente per darci in forma di citazione cinematografica quello che Dick ci offriva come denuncia politica, con il risultato di attenuarne la forza polemica*"⁹.

Yet, they had incorporated two key aspects as well – the androids in search of their identity and a society dominated by a large technological corporation. Let us look at the summary of the plot.

4. PLOT SYNOPSIS AND FILM VERSIONS

In the year 2019, the upper classes have moved to space colonies where they live comfortably, served by *replicants* – androids made of human flesh, plastic and computer circuits. The Earth has become a "large garbage dump" where the continuous damaging rainfall and throngs of people of different ethnicities make life inhumane. Four Nexus 6 replicants, destined to slavery, run away and come to Earth seeking their creator. They want to live longer, but their genetic design allows them to live for only four years. One of them, Leon, kills a cop who is about to discover his identity. The Police Chief Bryant hands over the case to Rick Deckard, an expert and retired "Blade Runner" (replicant hunter). Rick holds a meeting with Tyrell, the engineer creator of the Nexus 6 and meets his secretary Rachael, who also happens to be a replicant. Rachael is unaware of this as memory implants make her believe she is human. Deckard checks out Leon's apartment and discovers a clue that leads him to Zhora, a dancer who is part of the group of escaped replicants. Before he can coax anything out of her, Zhora hits him and flees.

⁷ Information on the film's making is taken from P.M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, New York: Harper Prism, 1996.

⁸ H. Fancher, D. Peoples, *Screenplay of Blade Runner* (Final Draft), Los Angeles, February 23 of 1981, available at: <http://readwatchwrite.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/bladerunner.pdf>.

⁹ G.P. Caprettini, "Il sequestro dell'emozioni. Da Philip K. Dick a *Blade Runner*", in P. Bertetti, C. Scolari (a cura di), *Lo sguardo degli angeli: intorno e oltre Blade Runner*, Torino: Testo & Immagine, 2002, 98.

Rick chases her through the crowded streets till he catches up with her and guns her down. When he returns home he is surprised by Leon, who corners him and asks, "How long have I got?". Rick, on the verge of dying, is saved by Rachael who has seen everything. Rick shoots Leon, who is ultimately like Rachael, a replicant.

Meanwhile, Roy, the leader of the replicants, orders Pris (the fourth of the group) to seduce software designer Sebastian, so that he can lead them to Tyrell. When they finally meet, Tyrell tells him it is not possible to prolong his life: he is doomed to die. Angered, Roy crushes his head and flees. Rick goes to the Bradbury building (a tribute to the science fiction writer of the same name), where Roy and Pris have taken refuge. After a brief struggle with the athletic Pris, whom he kills with a well-aimed shot, Rick comes face to face with Roy. The replicant takes the lead at all times and Rick is forced to jump to another building, ending up hanging from a ledge. Just as he is about to fall off the edge, Roy saves him and delivers his famous speech... "I've seen things you people would not believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the darkness at Tan Hauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain". Roy dies and Deckard goes back in search of Rachael and, rather than eliminate her, escapes with her becoming a fugitive himself¹⁰.

Based on this plot, six different versions of the film were made. The differences in each of the versions are minor, but some have great significance. To understand the reason behind these versions, one would need to follow the process of its release in the US and worldwide.

The film was shot between March 9 and July 9, 1981. In January of 1982 the first version known as the "original workprint version" was ready. It was previewed by a test audience in Denver and Dallas (March 5 and 6). In both showings the public response was very negative: the story was not understood, the atmosphere was too depressing and the ending, with Rick and Rachael entering an elevator, was ambiguous. Shocked by this, Deeley and Scott took two drastic decisions: they included a narrative voiceover which placed the main scenes in context (it had been recorded, but at the last moment was excluded from the version) and added the happy ending with the couple fleeing the city in a ship, making it a romantic story.

With these tweaks they did a test preview in San Diego (May 8) and this time, the movie was indeed, liked. With a few changes, this second version was released on June 25, 1982 in 1,295 US theaters. It is known as the "original cut" or the "domestic cut".

A month later, a third version was ready for the international market which was more accepting of scenes with graphic violence. Three details that had been cut out for the US market were included – when Roy kills Tyrell, he plunges his fingers into the engineer's eyes; after being shot by Rick, Pris' agony lasts longer; when he feels his hand stiffening, Roy thrusts a nail through his hand to revive it. In total, about 20 seconds were added to the film. This version, known as the "international cut", was released in Japan (July 3), Argentina (July 15) and Spain (August 21), prior to its release in other countries in the month of September.

Despite the positive reaction in San Diego, the film was received rather coldly,

¹⁰ Movie Credits: *Title: Blade Runner* (USA 1982). *Director:* Ridley Scott. *Producer:* Michael Deeley. *Screenwriters:* Hampton Fancher, David Webb Peoples. *Composer:* Vangelis. *Cinematographer:* Jordan S. Cronenweth. *Film editors:* Terry Rawlings, Marsha Nakashima. *Production Designer:* Lawrence G. Paull. *Art Director:* David L. Snyder. *Costume Designer:* Michael Kaplan, Charles Knode. *Running time:* 117 min. *Cast:* Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, Edward James Olmos, M. Emmet Walsh, Daryl Hannah, William Sanderson, Brion James, Joe Turkel, Joanna Cassidy, James Hong, Morgan Paull, Kevin Thompson, John Edward Allen, Hy Pyke, Kimiko Hiroshige, Bob Okazaki, Carolyn De Mirjian, Ben Astar.

partly because the public was not ready for an aesthetic and thematic innovation as radical as that proposed by Ridley Scott. The film reviews were harsh too. Forgotten too soon, the film however resurfaced a few years later in science fiction forums, film screening forums and enthusiastic film fan groups. With this budding revival of the film, a fourth version was made for its television debut on CBS in 1986, which only eliminated the three violent scenes. There, it gained more followers and, above all, became extremely popular.

Between May of 1990 and September of 1991, the original workprint version was screened at several cinemas in California and presented as the “director’s cut”, but it did not have Scott’s approval. The positive response from the public led the production company to re-release it. In 1992, coinciding with its tenth anniversary, a fifth version called the “director’s cut”, which Ridley Scott had wanted at the beginning, was released. Three changes were introduced. First, the voiceover was removed, making Deckard a more ambiguous character and making the film visually more intense - the viewer was now transfixed by the magnificent setting, without the voiceover distracting from the impact. Second, a dream of Deckard’s was incorporated, in which there was a unicorn (probably a scene that was not used in the film *Legend*). This change is very important as in the last scene Gaff leaves an origami unicorn at Deckard’s apartment door. What was just an indication that Gaff had been there and had forgiven Rachael in the 1982 versions, now also meant that Gaff knew about his dream, something that was only possible if the dream was implanted, making Deckard a replicant. Thirdly, the ‘happy ending’ was removed, with Rachael and Deckard finally escaping and entering the elevator¹¹.

Finally, in 2007 a sixth version, known as the “final cut” was released. But this did not have significant changes. Basically, this is the director’s 1992 version, inclusive of violent scenes that were added to the 1982 international version.

Thus we can speak of three main versions (original cut, international cut and director’s cut) and three secondary ones (workprint version, TV version and final cut)¹². For the following analysis, we have viewed and analysed the six versions, but we mainly refer to the 1982 “international cut” since it is the best known and most comprehensive one: it adds 3 scenes of violence and above all, includes a wealth of content in the voiceover.

5. TRANSCENDING THE CUSP

Blade Runner lends itself to multiple readings or rather, several thematic approaches¹³. Perhaps the most obvious and the one relating most to the storyline is man’s desire to unlock the mystery of life – to create life without technical limitations or ethical questions.

This is one step beyond the aspirations of robotic engineering, because it is no longer about creating androids very similar to us who mechanically act “as if they were

¹¹ A detailed study of the six versions in: S. Redmond, *Studying Blade Runner*, Leighton Buzzard (UK): Auteur Publishing, 2008, 81-94.

¹² All versions can be seen in the complete edition: R. Scott, *Blade Runner (Five-Disc Ultimate Collector’s Edition)*, Warner Bros. Digital, 2007. It also includes extra scenes and the director’s commentary.

¹³ “Blade Runner offers an interesting reflection on the origin of humans and their destiny, the risks of genetic manipulation, the brevity of life or the desire for immortality” (cfr. J.J. Muñoz, *Blade Runner: “Más humanos que los humanos”*, Madrid: Ed. Rialp, 2008, 13).

men” but are not; something more is wanted now – to go beyond the cusp of life and design ‘human beings’ who think, feel and love like authentic men.

This point has been addressed in numerous science fiction films on two fronts: the cloning of human beings and the creation of biotechnological androids. In the first case, the films have always shown a clear rejection of the possibility of cloning human lives, both for therapeutic as well as research purposes. In *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, petty officer Ellen Ripley is cloned from a blood sample so that scientists can investigate the strange alien that once resided in her body. When she discovers seven large containers with deformed human remains from previous failed clonings (they are all her, but deformed and lifeless), Ripley, and with her the spectator, is left completely horrified. The human clones in *The Island* (2005) by Michael Bay, experience something similar, here a large international corporation performs serial cloning for therapeutic purposes – every human being has a clone in an underground prison to enable the removal of vital organs if needed. When the clones discover this they are horrified that humans have been dehumanized to such an extreme.

In the second case – biotechnological androids with mechanical prostheses and the occasional psychic implants that simulate feelings or memories¹⁴ – these movies have been better received, in spite of stressing the dangers of creating mixed beings: part human part computer. Apart from the philosophical problems (how does one create the souls of these beings?), the films also point towards an imminent danger to humanity because these beings eventually end up rebelling and destroying us – their technological evolution is beyond our control. Films like *Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Freejack*, *I, Robot* or *Eyeborgs* have given new life to the Frankenstein myth: man once again is the mad scientist who wants to create human life and his creature angrily turns on him.

The same theme appears in several scenes of *Blade Runner*. Undoubtedly, the most important one is Roy’s meeting with Tyrell. Right from the beginning the conversation revolves around the android’s creation (BR-S, 86)¹⁵:

- Tyrell: I’m surprised you didn’t come here sooner.
- Roy: It’s not an easy thing to meet your Maker.
- Tyrell: And what can He do for you?
- Roy: Can the Maker repair what He makes?
- Tyrell: Would you like to be modified?
- Roy: Had in mind something a little more radical.
- Tyrell: What’s the problem?
- Roy: Death.
- Tyrell: I’m afraid that’s a little out of my...
- Roy: I want more life, father.

Roy calls him father – he had earlier called him Maker – because he knows he owes him his origin and despite his android nature he senses that this “filial relationship” is not merely incidental, but essential and definitive. Along with spousal commitment, it is the most important relationship a human can have in life. As a result – Roy thinks – his life can’t be the result of a whim or of scientific curiosity. It must be the fruit of love, just

¹⁴ About this matter, vid.: A. Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*”, in Featherstone, Burrows (eds.), *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*, 175-190.

¹⁵ The quotes from the movie refer to *Blade Runner - Screenplay* (BR-S, p. page) or, when it has been modified, the transcript of the movie: *Blade Runner - Film* (BR-F, minute’).

as it is among humans. A new life has been created, a life that requires care, one that demands affection, and has established a radical and mutual dependence between them.

But to Roy's surprise, his "father" is not interested in him. The one who is actually human ought to have shown more sensitivity but remains totally insensitive in the scene. Creating "life" artificially has turned him into a kind of emotionless monster, indifferent to human life. Even more so to the lives that he has created. It is the same indifference that surprises Ellen Ripley in *Alien: Resurrection*. This makes Tyrell appear much more terrible and odious than the replicants themselves. From there emerges the motto that presides over all activity at Tyrell Corporation: androids are "more human than human". Actually, they do indeed, display aspects of humanity – they show solidarity for one another, and feel appreciation for life. But man, in his quest to create "life" at all costs, seems to have completely lost his humanity.

As noted by Juan José Muñoz: "In the empire created by Tyrell based on biotechnological power, there is only room for the worst hell. [...] There, words signifying relationships like family, father and mother are considered *obscene*, since in those universes a person is not a product of love but one of the biotechnology industry"¹⁶.

The scene continues with vague references to God the Creator, suggesting that life –like death – is actually under His control. In this way, after several explanations by Tyrell for the inevitable time limit that has been imposed on Roy, we come to this conversation (BR-S, 87):

- *Tyrell*: You are made as well as we could make you.
- *Roy*: But not to last.
- *Tyrell*: The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy. [...] We're proud of our prodigal son... glad you've returned. You're quite a prize.
- *Roy*: I've done questionable things.

The dialogue brings up two Christian references. On one hand, the Gospel parable of the prodigal son: because Roy is the son who, after living in space and escaping a fate of slavery, returns to his father's house to apologise and live with him. On the other, the reference to Confession: evident in the Roy's act of acknowledging all the mistakes¹⁷ he has committed to his "father".

However, Tyrell does not express his willingness to be a father to him. He does not appreciate life, not even that of his creature. And Roy succumbs to bitter rage. He approaches Tyrell, kisses his face (an allusion to the Judas kiss) and crushes his skull with his own hands, the brain that created him. It is, in short, a symbol of eternal rebellion of man against his Creator; the replicants do only that which they have learned from humans themselves.

Although terrible, the scene does not surprise the viewer, as the script has been planting this lack of sensitivity for human life in men and corporations throughout the plot. In this future society, in which everyone lives indifferent to others isolated in a huge crowded city, "human" life is created (androids with feelings and reasoning) in order to have an army of slaves, stronger and more agile than us, to carry out the least

¹⁶ Muñoz, *Blade Runner*. "Más humanos que los humanos", 52.

¹⁷ As Marzal and Rubio point out, "It looks like Roy claims for himself the ability to sin, something genuinely human, but unthinkable in a machine" (cfr. J.J. Marzal, S. Rubio, *Guía para ver Blade Runner (1982)*, Barcelona: Ed. Octaedro, 1999, 47).

pleasant of tasks... something that, paradoxically, has already been brought up by a few scientists in our civilization¹⁸.

6. THE SEARCH FOR SELF-IDENTITY

Transcending the cusp (of life) in the film entails the destruction of identity. Near the end of the film, during the fight between Roy and Deckard, the replicant changes his mind and saves the cop's life. When he sits and dies, we hear Deckard's reflection in the voiceover: "I do not know why he saved my life. [...] All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?" (BR-F, 103').

These questions, which refer to the deepest part of one's identity (who has given us life, what awaits us after death, how long am I going to live) are the issues that very clearly accentuate the behavior of the replicants in this story.

It is something that arises in the story's approach: members of Nexus 6 have come to Earth to meet their creator and try to find these answers. That same demand – "Answers!" – is on Roy's lips when he talks to Chew, the eye maker who works in a laboratory at temperatures below zero. "Morphology, longevity, use life" Roy wants to know how long he is going to live. But Chew clearly tells him: "I do not know the answers" (BR-S, 31-32).

Later, when Leon traps Rick who has just shot Zhora, his first words are about the same thing: "My birthday is April 10, 2017. How long do I live?" (BR-S, 59). He does not criticize his behaviour, neither does he threaten him with death nor express hostility for chasing him. All he'd wanted were the same answers: the ones Roy poses at the end of his life, the ones we humans ask ourselves during our existence.

This curiosity about the Beyond establishes an unexpected parallel between replicants and humans. But, unlike the replicants, we humans seem to have lost the joy of living: we wander around a sick world without even a hope of happiness. "It's too bad she won't live. – Says Gaff skeptically - But then again, who does?" (BR-F, 105'). Compared with this disillusioned attitude, the replicants' passion for life shines brightly; as demonstrated by Roy when he saves Deckard: "Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life – anybody's life; my life" (BR-F, 103')¹⁹. Thus, Roy ends up being a tragic character who shows the detective the value of each human life.

In contrast, this passion for life is also depicted by their fear of death... something that certainly makes them human. At the end of the day, we too have "expiry dates" and often live obsessed with the fear of death. "Painful to live in fear, isn't it?" (BR-S, 60), says Leon when he has Deckard trapped by the lapels. The same thing Roy would say later on the roof: "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave" (BR-F, 101'). We too are slaves because we live in fear of death. Yes, we also

¹⁸ Cfr. J. Rifkin, "A Change of Heart About Animals", *Los Angeles Times*, September 01, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/sep/01/opinion/oe-rifkin1>; E. Martínez, "La ciencia ya experimenta con híbridos que son mitad hombres, mitad animales", *Tendencias 21*, May 05, 2005, http://www.tendencias21.net/La-ciencia-ya-experimenta-con-hibridos-que-son-mitad-hombres-mitad-animales_a625.html.

¹⁹ As Marzal and Rubio point out: "In light of these words, the difference between humans and replicants is called into question, and the confrontation between Roy and Deckard is, in fact, the confirmation of this unity" (cfr. Marzal, Rubio, *Guía para ver Blade Runner (1982)*, 30).

experience fear. In this we are equal. And we are as enslaved – our freedom is dead – as the replicants themselves.

Precisely because of this parallel between them and us, Rick's problem is distinguishing exactly who is a replicant and who is a human²⁰. Yet again, identity is the problem. And in this there exist paradoxical situations... Rachael looks human, but is a replicant... Rick, who believes he is the guardian of men, discovers at the end that he is a replicant (in the 1992 director's cut). And Tyrell, who acts like a soulless being, is the only human.

The question remains: how does one distinguish a human from a replicant? In the film, the difference lies in emotion (something that shows conscience and reasoning in a poor light); it is assumed that our emotions are "sincere", while those of the replicants are "implanted". As Bryant notes in the scene at the police station: "They were designed to copy human beings in every way, except their emotions" (BR-F, 14'). Hence, the Voight-Kampff Test the police use to detect replicants is simply "an empathy test", with questions focused on reactions to animals; ironically, that reaction is the essential indicator of one's "humanity".

On several occasions, Deckard is surprised that the replicants collect photographs; memories that can arouse emotions. Recalling Rachael's tears he says in the voiceover: "Tyrell really did a job on Rachael. Right down to a snapshot of a mother she never had, a daughter she never was. Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings... (Suddenly, this identity confusion turns against itself)... Neither were blade runners. What the hell was happening to me?" (BR-F, 35').

7. THE ABSENCE OF PARENTHOOD AMONG ANDROIDS

The search for identity among the androids, in turn, results in the absence of parenthood as a reference for their lives. Early in the film, in the first dialogue sequence, we witness Leon's interrogation. After several questions about an animal (a tortoise on its back), Holden asks (BR-F, 6'):

- *Holden*: Describe in single words, only the good things that come in to your mind about your mother.
- *Leon*: My mother?
- *Holden*: Yeah.
- *Leon*: Let me tell you about my mother. (Leon shoots the cop).

Leon's response surprises the viewer. It appears that the question is not accusatory and is also less embarrassing than the earlier ones about the tortoise. But as the story progresses, we gradually discover the existential drama of the androids and understand the reason for such a violent act. The officer's question was too painful: Leon has no mother. The first gift that every human being receives at the time of conception is a mother who feeds him, gives birth to him and cares for him during his childhood. It is the most important gift of our lives. But Leon has no mother... he has been manufactured. All his frustration, anguish and helplessness are all expressed in this act of destroying the one who asks about her. All the senselessness of a life of reason but without a mother

²⁰ An interesting study on the identity of replicants can be seen in: J. Alonso, "Replicantes y hombres: identidad y diferencia", in *Blade Runner. Lo que Deckard no sabía*, Madrid: Akal/Cine, 2011, 61-80.

– whom he should have had and was denied – explodes inside him and we can almost sympathize with him when he riddles Holden's body with bullets. We accept it, especially when Deckard searches his apartment and finds a collection of family photos. The cop's voiceover shows his surprise for the first time: "And family photos? Replicants didn't have families either" (BR-F, 24').

The same thing happens to Rachael. Convinced that Deckard is wrong to put her to the test, she goes to his apartment to prove to him that she's human. Her only proof is a photograph which she shows him: "Look, it's me, with my mother" (BR-F, 33'). That reference to a mother is the anchor of her memories, the link to the human race and the irrefutable explanation for her identity. The cop, however, makes her see that these are false, implanted memories. And her reaction is to look at her mother's photo and cry. She doesn't have a mother either. She has no meaning to her life nor a reason to preserve memories. The next time she visits his apartment, while Deckard lies in bed, she looks back wistfully at the cop's pictures. She suddenly finds one in which he appears with his mother and can't contain her emotions. She caresses the photo and from then on, leaves her hair loose to look like her as far as possible.

For his part, Roy also goes looking for his creator when he fixes a meeting with Tyrell. The engineer receives Roy in his own room, rising from a large double bed, symbolic of the origin of people: they are the result of an act of love, and not of experimentation or a whim. As we have seen, Roy calls him father in a desperate attempt to arouse fatherly emotions of understanding and closeness. But he receives no answer. And like Leon, his reaction is to kill. He can't bear this lack of parenthood that is like a wound on his soul.

In contrast, the human characters in the film are solitary, lacking a home and family. In none of them do we perceive a preoccupation with a father or mother figure, because perhaps love is absent from their lives. J.F. Sebastian, who is – despite everything – the most sensitive character, lives alone in a huge building and makes talking dolls that substitute the affection of a family. When Pris says that that must feel very lonely, he replies: "Mmm ... Not really. I make friends. They're toys. My friends are toys. I make them. It's a hobby" (BR-F, 39'). Tyrell is even more alone, surrounded by wealth and luxury, manifesting an absence of affection in his life. He doesn't have family or friends; he has servants. Bryant is another solitary being living miserably without joy or hope, taking refuge in skepticism and in drink, it would appear. Gaff is the quiet man, the clearest example of isolation. And Deckard, the divorced cop without a family, is also a failure in all respects as he himself admits the first time we hear his voice: "That was my profession. Ex-cop, ex-blade runner, ex-killer" (BR-F, 8').

The androids in this film are definitely "more human than human". And the consequences of creating human beings without parents (by cloning or by biotechnological design) are terrifying: they are "humans" without identity, without an origin or a destiny, without an emotional relationship with parents, without the love and care that every human needs. Hence, they always appear eager for the affection they never had. To transcend the cusp of life is, in *Blade Runner*, to start a culture of meaninglessness and death.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, science fiction has become anthropological: it projects on to the future our vision of man and our moral judgment about the world we live in. In these stories there exists a latent fear of uncontrolled scientific progress foretelling an ominous fu-

ture in which man's ambition to create life results in the breeding of monsters that turn against us.

Blade Runner is the film that anticipated this concern. Promoting *cyberpunk*, it reflects the dual theme of this subgenre of science fiction: the dangers of an uncontrolled cybernetic organism (cyber) and the anguish of a chaotic society controlled by large corporations (punk). With it there began in cinema a new way to understand science fiction, influencing the themes and aesthetics of subsequent films.

The *Blade Runner* script is loosely based on a novel by Philip K. Dick. It talks about two key issues (androids in search of their identity, and a society dominated by a technological corporation) and also the cyberpunk setting that the film widely developed: the night, the neon lights, the dense and tiresome atmosphere, the black color, the urban ruins and the mirrored sunglasses, etc. This iconography, like its theme, has powerfully influenced subsequent films: *Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, *Freejack*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *the Matrix trilogy*, *Artificial Intelligence*, *Minority Report* etc.

The six versions of the film raise the question of film authorship. Of the 4 main versions, two follow production criteria (domestic and international cut) and two are based on the director's discretion (director's cut and final's cut). Even with slight changes in the story, both perspectives represent very different approaches to what is relevant: the clarity of the plot and the happy ending (the producers' perspective), the visual impact of the images and the ambiguity about Deckard and the story (the director's perspective).

In *Blade Runner*, one senses that to transcend the cusp of life, hoping to create human life with feelings and reason, turns into a madness of apocalyptic proportions; without ethical criteria to guide it, science becomes an instrument of control and dehumanization. Thus, the creator of the replicants seems less human than the androids and hence is insensitive to their existential questions: Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long do I have?

Lacking any relationship with their creator, the androids wander in search of identity. They cling to pictures, because they hope to find in them some reference to an origin, a family. In short, to a father or a mother who can offer them love and give meaning to their existence. But there is no such father or mother. Leon shoots the cop when he asks about his mother. Rachael cries inconsolably when she learns that the memory of her mother was implanted in her mind. Yet, this lack of parenthood is projected onto a future where the concept of a family is on a marked decline: all humans are homeless beings. Indeed, the manipulation of life does make the men of the future less human than their pseudo-human creations.

SUMMARY

The film *Blade Runner* raises issues of great anthropological value. This article explores the idea "cusp of life" as an ethical crossroads for the characters and the story by studying three key strands of the film's narrative: the creation of human life as a moral dilemma for scientific progress, the search for identity among androids and the absence of parenthood (*parenting*) in manufactured human beings. Two strictly cinematic aspects are examined as a basis for its analysis. The first is genre-specific – studying the progressive anthropological predilection of science fiction (their films project our contemporary fears and opinions of humanity into the future) and the development of the subgenre 'cyberpunk' (movies outlining two themes: the cybernetic organism and a chaotic society or one controlled by large corporations). The second centers on the story of *Blade Runner* – demonstrating its influence on later science fiction films, analysing its plot development (adaptation from book to film) and assessing the meaning of its six film versions.