

Feeling Real, Feeling Free: The Body, Bio-politics and the Spectacle in *Blade Runner 2019* and *2049*

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Abstract

This paper sets Scott's original film *Blade Runner* (1982) and Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) in a 'disjunctive synthesis' in order to provide critical analyses of both films with respect to some complex configurations of the body along two axes: bio-politics and the spectacle. We offer a reading of these configurations by focusing on the relationships between the human (organic), the non-human (android) and the immaterial (holographic); the eye (optics), the hand (haptics), and aesthetics; slavery, instrumental labour and free-play; the politics of bodies and of memories; the potentialities of revolution and the transmission of 'tradition of the oppressed'. In this, we foreground two seemingly marginal characters – J. F. Sebastian and Ana Stelline. These 'little people' embody and inhabit the convolutions of *Blade Runner's* 'more human than human' world through 'free use' of the body and playfulness which, superficially innocent, nevertheless bear within them the promise of radical political change.

Keywords: Bio-politics, Impotentiality, Fiction, Spectacle, *Blade runner*

INTRODUCTION

Set in a dystopian Los Angeles wherein robotic simulations substitute for the largely extinct natural world and bodily needs and pleasures are met through the slave labour of cyborgs, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Denis Villeneuve's 2017 sequel (*Blade Runner 2049*) question and prompt reflections upon what it means to be human and, indeed, what it is to be 'alive.' Accordingly, and justly, these films have attracted considerable and sustained critical and academic interest. Pivotal in this respect have been issues of the body, bio-politics, and the spectacle. Are the so-called replicants 'human' or are they indeed, as the motto of the Tyrell

Corporation that makes them boldly declares, 'more human than human'?

In 2019, a group of genetically enhanced Nexus 6 replicants engineered by the Tyrell Corporation return to Earth in a bid to have their built-in 'expiration date' reset. They lack time, something they share with their creator, the robotics/cybernetic designer J.F. Sebastian whose own illness (Methuselah Syndrome, premature aging) means that he himself is living on borrowed time. J.F. and the replicants suffer from the same thing, but in different ways: a lack of time, of a lifetime. Roy and Leon state the problem to Deckard succinctly: it is 'Time to die.' And die they must. Indeed, it is the very task of the film's central protagonist, the 'blade runner'

Rick Deckard, to track them down and 'retire' them. It is a task he first refuses, is subsequently coerced into, and then ultimately evades. And it is his vantage point, that of a human who falls in love with a replicant, Rachel, indeed of a man who increasingly fears that he himself may be a replicant, that the viewer of Scott's film adopts.

The Villeneuve sequel develops and radicalizes these themes and perspectives by transporting the viewer into a newer new world, one seen through the eyes of a very different 'blade runner', a replicant indeed who begins to suspect he may be the first hybrid human/replicant. By 2049, bio-engineering has advanced well beyond Tyrell's Nexus 6 models. Now there are even more sophisticated androids who, like our protagonist K., have become so reliable that they are the ones entrusted with the very duties of the 'blade runner.' By 2049, Nexus 9 replicants 'retire' replicants. And, importantly, here is a new dimension to all this: the virtual. Villeneuve's film explores the relationship between the material body and the virtual, the physical and the holographic, the bodily and the disembodied, as that between the humans and their all too human counterparts. Even replicants like K. have their own virtual companions, the cynically named Joi, at their beck and call. In 2049, the (still embodied) replicant models have been supplemented by the holograms of the Wallace Corporation. Villeneuve's film imagines the virtual not only in the immaterial form of Joi, K.'s companion/lover, but also in the flickering figures of Elvis, Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and various dancers who take centre stage in both Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Here, the abiding problem is that of *touch*, not time. The central quest for the *dramatis personae* of *Blade Runner: 2049* is not to prolong the (artificial) life of the body but to experience physical sensation, to *feel real* and to *feel the real*, to live in a state of *corporeality*. This is what Joi longs for. Limited to the virtual realm, she seeks and is denied a body, just as the replicants in Scott's original film seek and are refused a lifetime. And just as long life was also denied to JF in the 2019

movie, so in the sequel the touch of the real is precisely that which is denied the scientist Dr Ana Stelline on account of her compromised immune system. Her body is too sensitive, too susceptible, to survive in the harsh external world. She is confined to a hermetically controlled environment, creating holographic memories for implantation, memories that will ultimately lead K. to her hoping for verification, for validation as human hybrid, just as the questionable veracity of an old photograph once led Rachel to Deckard.

THE SNOW-GLOBE, THE EYE AND THE HAND

One film ends as another starts. 'Rosebud!' utters the dying Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles), whose hand droops down and lets fall a snow-globe, a frozen miniature world encased in glass, which rolls away and shatters on the steps. One hundred and eight years later, *Blade Runner's* non-citizen K. lies wordlessly expiring amidst a gentle blizzard on the steps of the Stelline Institute while inside, Dr Ana Stelline, the creator of the very memories that once duped K. into thinking he was the first of his kind, a human-replicant hybrid, stands amidst and choreographs her own virtual swirl of snowflakes, a miniature insubstantial blizzard. Insulated from the world around her because of a chronic immune deficiency condition, one which means she is unable to survive in the outside world, Ana lives her life behind glass screens in what is, momentarily at least, a giant snow-globe of her very own. The glass keeps her safe but also untouchable, safe *because* untouchable. She cannot feel the snow and it cannot envelop her. K. has brought her father, Deckard, to see her for the first time in thirty years. As he approaches he instinctively reaches out his hand and touches the glass but there cannot be physical contact between them. The glass barrier permits seeing but prohibits tactility.

Stelline lives in her own sterile glass pleasure dome. But while 'citizen' Kane, like some monomaniacal collector, felt compelled to stockpile

his nightmarish Xanadu indiscriminately with whatever the world had to offer – artworks, museum pieces, bric-a-brac, kitsch, reproductions, a menagerie of exotic animals – Stelline has no need of such material things, indeed, they would be the death of her. In producing memories for implantation, her time is spent fabricating intangible worlds within worlds, virtual not physical realities. But if nothing else, Kane and Stelline share an appreciation of the correspondence between childhood memories and the snow-globe: as a mnemonic souvenir, it has after all returned the dying old man to those happy wintry days of his boyhood and his beloved sledge, the one object he has truly treasured in his life; and Stelline can summon up any number of childhood birthday parties and guests and then, with a quick puff, make them vanish as easily as blowing out the candles. Snow-globes are good to remember with and to think with.

As Esther Leslie (in Pusca ed. 2010: 97) suggests, the snow-globe is not just an optical object but also a tactile one as well, shaped to fit the human hand and designed to be shaken. Leslie develops her argument with reference to a 1932 fragment on objects in bottles in which Benjamin (1999a: 554) cites Adolf Loos's assertion that 'anything that can be touched cannot be a work of art, and anything that is a work of art should be placed out of reach', a claim which leads him to muse: 'Does this mean that ... objects in bottles are works of art because they have been placed out of reach?' And it is in his 1927 essay 'Dreamkitsch', a text serving as 'gloss on surrealism' as he puts it, that Benjamin famously observes: 'What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior' (1999a: 4). The boundary between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic is 'kitsch.' Kitsch is, after all, that which is neither beautiful nor useful. The snow-globe is an object that would fall under such a rubric. In the opening of *Citizen Kane* (1941), the snow-globe is precisely

such an object of 'uncertain grasp' both featuring its own interior figures and fashioning others, calling forth the inner world of the human subject that is the realm of memories.

The optical and the tactile: the shifting emphasis placed upon these is fundamental to understanding the two *Blade Runner* films. As numerous commentators have rightly noted, the 'eye' is a central motif of Scott's 1982 film, indeed, that the whole movie is fundamentally preoccupied with the optical, with vision and the visual, with ways of seeing (see, for instance, MacArthur 2017: 383). Like the bio-engineer Chu, *Blade Runner 2019* 'only does eyes.' And Catherine Payne and Alexandra Pitsis (2018) insightfully recognise that the sequel is, by contrast, centred on the haptic. There is a movement from the two-dimensional image and the flatness of the screen to the three-dimensionality of the virtual and holographic. Indeed, the figure of Dr Ana Stelline, the memory maker, encapsulates the central problem of *Blade Runner 2049*, which envisions a world in which the tactile has been displaced by the holographic, by the pure immaterial image. Stelline herself cannot touch the world, cannot feel, has no physical contact or interaction with it. She is thus like the very holographic images she creates as memories. She is just as cut off from the physical world as Joi, K.'s companion, a virtual figure produced by the Wallace Corporation, for whom Ana works. Ana is encased in glass; Joi is entombed in a control box. In this sense, Ana is the 2049 counterpart of the figure of JF Sebastian in Ridley Scott's film. Sebastian is dying before his time, his life cruelly curtailed just like the Nexus 6 replicants who seek him out for help in their bid to reverse or re-engineer their own pre-programmed death.

A FEELING FOR SNOW: TACTILE RECEPTION AND BODILY APPROPRIATION

Coming out of Ana's laboratory after his first meeting with her, K. pauses a moment on the steps, reaches out his hand and lets the snow fall

gently upon it, as if he sees it for the first time. He is certain, at this moment, that his memories are genuine, and therefore that he himself is the son of Deckard and Rachel, the first human-replicant hybrid. What is depicted in this moment is K.'s *feeling 'real'* as well as his *feeling the 'real.'* Indeed, feeling himself to be 'real' is here seemingly the very precondition to feel the 'real.' There are at least three different albeit interconnected meanings of 'feeling' we can reflect on here. First, feeling can be taken as affect and emotion, which provides a clear link to the 1982 film wherein the Voigt-Kampff Test, the key experiment to distinguish the human being from the replicant, involves a set of questions intended to provoke an emotional response. Paradoxically, the main figures in the film who show any signs of human emotions are actually the replicants. They are the ones who are reduced to tears (Rachel) and mourn (Roy) even if they are only to be washed away, 'tears in rain.' Secondly, 'feeling' is having a sensitivity to or intimation of something, to be vaguely conscious of something, a mood, something that imbues the entire body, the antithesis of numbness. And finally, feeling refers to the conscious act of touching and evaluating something, assessing it for its qualities and characteristics. In Villeneuve's film, K. embodies feeling in the second and third sense: on the steps of the Stelline Institute, feeling himself to be real, he reaches out and feels the snow.

In his 1936 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin (2002: 105) famously sees the demise of the artwork's 'aura' occasioned by the new technologies of reproduction as part of the wider process of getting 'closer to things', taking possession of them through proximity. With architecture as his model of an art practice that is not only a visual but also always tactile in character, Benjamin writes:

Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the

form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually – taking their cue from tactile reception – through habit. (2002: 120)

And film is central to this notion of the tactile appropriation and habitual 'mastery' of the artwork: breaking through and across those two metres that separate us from the work of art, film is the 'true training ground' for this new experience of perception/reception in a state of distraction. K. holds out his hand and feels the snow in this sense, as if for the first time; as if what he wants 'is to touch reality not only with the fingertips but to seize it and shake hands with it' (Kracauer 1960/1997: 297). Outside the Stelline Institute, we are witnesses to the redemption of physical reality and the physical body. To marvel, momentarily, at the snow: this is to be human, this is to be restored to humanity, this is to feel real and to feel physical reality again.

'LITTLE PEOPLE' AT PLAY

Just as Stelline appears as a marginal figure and yet ultimately proves to be the very key to understanding *Blade Runner 2049*, so another critically neglected figure, also a scientist, also a figure of creativity, also a figure of illness and isolation, is the key to understanding *Blade Runner 2019*. That figure is the bio-mechanical/genetic engineer and Tyrell employee JF Sebastian (William Sanderson). JF is both physically and metaphorically one of the 'little people' the police chief, Bryant, derides. As such, JF unites in himself four inter-connected figures: of ruination and the untimely; the toy-maker/collector; the child-like accomplice/conspirator/double; and, finally, the redemptive figure, the bearer of the (un)defeated tradition of the oppressed.

Firstly, JF brings together the ruinous architectural space of the city and the ruinous condition of the human body. He is the very embodiment of ruination, sharing the very problem encountered by the Nexus 6 replicants, a shortened life span. Hence, ‘there is some of me in you’ JF says to his guests. Running out of time, they are all figures of the untimely brought together by an elective affinity. Reminiscent of St Sebastian, the patron saint of soldiers and of plague victims, of those who kill and those who are afflicted/are dying, J. F. Sebastian is the only person who befriends and helps the replicants in their forlorn quest for an extended existence. JF’s home is also a ruin. He is the sole inhabitant of the Bradbury Building, an edifice bearing the name of the gold mining millionaire Lewis L. Bradbury (6th November 1823 – 15th July, 1892). With mining and other extractive industries all now ‘off-world’ and worked in any case by replicants, the ‘little people’ left on earth are the lone inhabitants of a giant ghost town. And what a coincidence: Bradbury died on the very same day that Walter Benjamin was born! The ruinous interior inhabited by JF is akin to those ‘manorially furnished’ rooms which are the object of such contempt in Benjamin’s writings on the bourgeois interior of his childhood, suffocating rooms filled with heavy furniture and stuffed with all manner of bric-a-brac and curios, rooms resembling the scenes of detective stories and sofas on which “the aunt cannot but be murdered” (see 1999a: 446–7). This correspondence between Los Angeles in 2019 and Berlin around 1900 is not as fanciful as it might seem and there are clear intimations of it in Scott’s film: not only the architectural nods to German expressionist cinema but more directly in the case of JF by the choice of his two main mechanical friends, the toys who greet him on his arrival home: the diminutive figure of the Kaiser closely followed by the Little Bear (the heraldic symbol of the city of Berlin).

Secondly, JF is toymaker. He is not lonely because, as he says, he makes friends, literally in the sense of constructing around him a

collection of automata who keep him company. JF inhabits a world of old-fashioned marionettes, puppets, mannequins, clock-work figurines and animals, wind-up models, mechanical musicians, dolls and dummies. Here is a veritable museum of the *unheimlich*, uncanny things that are certainly less human than the human. Indeed, what we see strewn about in JF’s ramshackle abode is no less than the genealogy of the replicants themselves. Perusing this cabinet of curiosities, Roy’s describes these models, ones which are in truth his own albeit distant antecedents as ‘nice toys’. But this disavowal of any ancestral affinity is soon shown to be disingenuous when, hiding in plain view as Deckard searches for her, Pris remains stock still among the automata, imitating them, a replicant playing at being a plaything, becoming a toy so as to toy with the blade runner, mimesis not of the organic body but of the mechanism.

Thirdly, while JF is not a child, in his own miniature world of toys and play he is certainly a figure of the *child-like*. In ‘Old Toys’ (1928) Benjamin notes: ‘To be sure, play is always liberating. Surrounded by a world of giants, children use play to create a world appropriate to their size. But the adult, who finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form’ (1999a: 100). The child does not merely collect around him/her a world of playthings, but actively sides with this realm of toys against that of adults. There is solidarity, there is friendship, among those who are powerless in the outside world. They are kindred spirits. This is the refuge, the sanctuary of outcasts and the unwanted, of broken and useless things. JF’s collection is, strictly speaking, useless. What is at stake here is of course a difference, a conflict between *instrumental use* understood as technical, practical and goal-oriented efficiency (*Blade Runner’s* capitalist world) and *free use* which is its own purpose, without an expectation of efficiency, profit or productivity (the child’s world of play).

Which, finally, brings us to the figure of redemption. Benjamin writes: ‘Once mislaid, broken, and repaired, even the most princely doll becomes a capable proletarian comrade in the children’s play commune’ (1999a: 101). This notion of solidarity, of companionship is, of course, crucial to JF. It leads him to accompany, and become the accomplice of, the replicants. Breathing the same dank, musty air together in the Bradbury Building, they become conspirators. Roy helps JF defeat Tyrell in one of their regular ongoing chess matches and, intrigued by the sudden stroke of genius on JF’s part, Tyrell invites JF to join him, unwittingly thereby allowing Roy to enter his penthouse apartment. It is a fatal mistake. But this chess playing trickery puts us in mind of the first of Benjamin’s famous ‘Theses on the Concept of History’ from 1940. Here he writes:

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf – a master at chess – sat inside and guided the puppets hands by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called ‘historical materialism,’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight. (SW4: 389)

In Scott’s film, the roles are reversed. Here it is the ‘little hunchback’ (JF) who is able to win with the aid of the master chess player, the replicant Roy. The Tyrell Corporation, the manufacturer of slaves, is defeated. The slave-maker himself is slain. What is one to make of this? Does JF represent theology? Roy, historical materialism? Several readings of *Blade Runner* stress

the Christian imagery that figures in the film, with Roy (the ‘king’) read as an ultimate figure of redemption, a Christ-like character who eventually saves Deckard (humanity), and dies with a nail through his hand, a cross at his back (a neon sign for TDK shines behind him as he dies and only the T is visible such that it looks like the lower portion of a cross), and releasing a white dove into the air. But one can dispense with the Christian theology while insisting on the critical-political iconography of the film. One should remember that crucifixion was the standard Roman punishment for runaway slaves. And Roy is a runaway slave. He is also a combat model, a pre-programmed fighter, a being designed to kill and be killed. He has killed to escape killing. And he has returned to Earth with other slaves who have rejected their slavery. He is their leader. And he is in love with, and mourns for, a ‘pleasure model’, a slave whose task was to be a prostitute. That is, what we see in *Blade Runner* is a gesture to the figure of Spartacus in Kubrick’s famous 1960 film. Roy repeats (the idea of) Spartacus, the defeated slave whose revolutionary spirit survives.

For Benjamin, historical materialism and theology together will triumph but when one destroys the other, then they both fail. Perhaps. In any case, Roy kills JF and then must perish himself. When Roy in his final poetic speech recounts his experiences of war and conflict in the outer reaches of space, of terrible and sublime things that humans have never witnessed, these memories are like the trash and debris that accumulates before the startled gaze of the backwards-looking ‘angel of history’ in Benjamin’s ‘Theses.’ These memories are what will be lost with his death. Roy, the fallen angel, thus assumes the mantle of this angel of history, surveying the catastrophe and wreckage of the past.

Roy’s memories will assuredly perish with his body. But, as we have suggested, the memory of Roy himself, of what he has experienced and spoken of, will stay with Deckard. And it is this promise, this hope, that the former blade runner

will eventually take with him into the Stelline Institute at the end of Villeneuve's film. Memories of a life for the memory-maker to conjure up and capture in her snow globe. Memories of a rebellious slave, of the oppressed, ready for implantation into the next generation of replicants, the Nexus 10s. Memories that will be surreptitiously lodged in each and every one of these future slaves so that they will be slaves no more. Memories like tiny explosive moments that will burst this 'prison world asunder', as Benjamin puts it in the 'Work of Art' essay. And the toy wooden horse that will find its way back to Ana will serve as a mnemonic for that ancient wooden horse by means of which the Greeks infiltrated Troy and laid waste the city.

DESPOTISM, SLAVERY AND THE BODY

Just as Denis Villeneuve's film reimagines and reconfigures Ridley Scott's original, let us here rethink what has been written above and re-conceptualise it, intensifying and radicalizing it with a different vocabulary. Not to leave it behind, but to circle back to it with renewed insight.

Both *Blade Runner* films present a depoliticized society that oscillates between two extremes: the spectral (the eye, optics) and the biopolitical (the body, haptics). On the one hand, recognizing the subject only as a sign, the society of the spectacle registers, identifies, produces and reproduces the subject as a code. On the other hand, though, the subject is constantly reduced to a naked body, to bare life, for biometric technologies to scan it as a biological body or body parts. Being simultaneously a pure code (word without body) and an instrument-slave (body without word), the replicants are thus the paradigmatic subjects of this society.

However, the replicants are a little too perfect, or rather too human: they turn ungovernable and revolt in Scott's film. The perfect commodity, in other words, becomes the gravedigger of its producer (Kierkegaard and Thau 1987: 106). But in Villeneuve's sequel, such politicization is foreclosed in advance. How to

make sense of this difference (revolt and non-revolt) in similarity (slave-based societies)?

Let us first focus on the similarity: both films depict a bodily relation between masters and slaves, that is, a despotic relation. In its origin, in Ancient Athens, the rule of the despot designated a specific power relation that takes place in the *oikos*, in the domestic sphere, where the despot governs his children, his wife and his slaves. 'Political' power, in contrast, was seen as something that pertains to the *polis*, as a relationship between free subjects concerning the common good. The bodily presence of the slave in the *oikos* means, on this account, that despotic rule can only be bio-political, not political. But who is the slave? The ancients defined the human as an actual form, as a 'political animal,' excluding from the polis those not considered worthy of being considered human, that is, worthy of political life. The slave is someone who is banned from politics. Aristotle, for instance, justifies the logic of this exclusion with reference to an interesting concept, the 'use of the body' (Agamben 2015: 5; see also Aristotle 1995: 1254b.17–20). The master uses the body of the slave as an instrument, as an extension of his own body. As such, the slave is defined not so much by ownership or property relations as by the lack of bodily autonomy: he or she is one that exists only for another, for another's instrumental use (Agamben 2015: 11).

Blade Runner 2019 frames the despotic relation in this classical way through its triangulation with economy (the Tyrell Corporation) and the slave-replicants' dissent (rejecting their reduction to mere instruments). In a counter-classical approach, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the focus shifts to another triangulation: despotism, economy (the Wallace Corporation) and consent (of replicants who no longer perceive themselves as slaves). The two triangulations are allied, but not identical. They are allied, because in both *Blade Runner* films it is fear, particularly the fear of dissent (of the replicants), that gives rise to the desire for securitization (blade running). And as is the case with past despotisms, the security

imperative in both films is synonymous with the security of the despot. Leviathan, or Behemoth: this classic blackmail of all despotic power is repeated by the Tyrell Corporation and the Wallace Corporation, both of which promise, paradoxically, to save the world from the replicants which they themselves manufacture. They are not identical, however, because while in 2019 the idea of freedom is tied to the desire to revolt by replicants who perceive themselves as slaves, in 2049 the idea of freedom appears to be emptied out. The replicants, now endowed with 'free will', misrecognize voluntary servitude as freedom.

The concept of 'free will,' as Nietzsche insisted, was 'fabricated' to make humanity 'accountable' to a transcendent God (1969: 53). One cannot sin without free will. In *Blade Runner 2049*, this privilege is extended to the non-humans. In the 2019 film, the replicants have no notion of free will and thus can directly politicize their condition in an apolitical society. In 2049, they do not revolt for they consider themselves already free. The key to understand what is at stake here is hinted at in the 188th section of *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche argues that a morality can only be objected by another morality. And since every morality is a kind of 'tyranny,' this implies that the latter morality can exert on the moral actor a superior 'constraint,' another 'tyranny' with its arbitrary laws that can make the first morality's tyranny and unreason impermissible. 'Freedom' can only develop on this basis. Every artist, every thinker experiences that this state of things is far from simply letting oneself go, that their activity requires strict discipline and obedience to numerous laws, the rigidity and precision of which simply defy conceptualization. 'This tyranny, this arbitrariness, this rigorous and grandiose stupidity,' in turn, educates the spirit, showing that the essential thing is 'obedience in one direction.' It is out of absolute obedience, of narrowing of one's perspective, that there emerges something for the sake of which life is worth living, 'something transfiguring, refined,

mad, and divine.' Thus, paradoxically, slavery becomes a means of spiritual discipline (Nietzsche 1972: 91–4).

We encounter such a straightforward sensibility towards a 'cause' only in the replicants of the year 2019. Insofar as they identify themselves as slaves to an idea, freedom to live an extended life, they cease to be a slave of the surrounding society. Freedom has nothing to do with 'feeling' free, which is, precisely, the condition that marks the replicants of 2049. In authentic freedom 'we accept voluntary servitude as serving a Cause and not just ourselves,' because the identification with the position of slave, saying that I am a slave, is already a recognition that I am free (Žižek 2018: 204). Unsurprisingly, therefore, if we push the idea of 'free will' to its logical limits, it turns into a form of servitude, while the assertion of voluntary servitude to a cause has the potential to break away from it by assuming the form of its opposite (2018: 204). What is fascinating in Scott's *Blade Runner* is this element of intoxication. The replicants are possessed with a single idea and a single passion, that of freedom, and precisely as such they are the only real enemies of the established order.

IMPOTENTIALITY

But there is much more to say about *Blade Runner 2049*. To start with, K.'s involvement with the surrounding society, particularly with Ana and Deckard, has an inescapably 'Kafkaesque' aspect. The very name K., of course, inevitably calls to mind *The Castle*, Kafka's novel addressing the problematic of subjectivity in relation to the law. Its protagonist, K., makes repeated attempts to be accepted into the 'castle' and to settle in the village, but with no luck; he stubbornly tries to understand the content of the law, but systematically fails in finding meaning in that which can have no meaning. Ultimately, he cannot access the castle, for the castle is his own invention, the product of his own desire. The law is a fiction, a spectacle. But Kafka's choice of K.'s profession, a land

surveyor (*Kardo* in Latin), is interesting. As Agamben (2011: 35) points out, this is a strategic choice on Kafka's part because K. is precisely a figure who problematizes the 'boundaries' of the castle – the boundaries between the village and the castle, between people and the bureaucrats, and ultimately between humans and the divine: 'What the land surveyor is concerned with is the border that divides and conjoins the two, and this is what he wants to abolish or, rather, render inoperative' (2011: 36). Similarly, one could say, K.'s primary concern in *Blade Runner 2049* is the limits of (non-)humanity, and to de-activate, to render inoperative the bio-political governmental machine that patrols this limit.

In *Blade Runner*, both 2019 and 2049 versions, we confront two interlinked social processes. On the one hand, we have economy, which dictates the remodeling of an entire society according to the principles of corporate marketing. On the other hand, we have subjects – both human and non-human – expected to religiously glorify the spectacle. Religion, Ludwig Feuerbach (1989: 27) observed, takes over the best qualities of humans and allocates them to God, affirming in God what is negated in humans. Hence the paradox of religious alienation: the more God is glorified, the more human life is depreciated and devalued. And so, unsurprisingly, the bigger the Tyrell Corporation and the Wallace Corporation get, the smaller the 'little people' become, the 'little people' like J.F. and Stelline whom they employ and on whom they rely.

Following this logic, the governmental machine in the *Blade Runner* films is one which reduces a multitude of humans and non-human bodies to the position of an instrument by capturing their potential for acting. But how is this potential for action captured? To understand this, we must return to the concept of 'use' itself. In contrast to the modern understanding of 'use' as the mere utilization of an object by a subject, the term in Greek originally points toward an intermediary zone in which the subject itself is

affected by the action. To 'use' something, one must be affected by it, constitute oneself as one making use of it, in and through the very process of using. Thus, in use, the human being and the world are in a reciprocal, immanent relationship (Agamben 2015: 30). The Aristotelian definition of use, however, introduces a differentiation. It divides use into *dynamis* and *energeia*, 'potential' and 'act', while the pivotal focus of the distinction shifts to the passage from potential to act, a passage secured by habit (2015: 50). And since for Aristotle the *ergon* (the proper function) of a human being is to act, the habit (of a potential) cannot be inoperative (Agamben 2013: 96).

But why should a potential automatically pass into the act? Why should action have the primacy over potential? Why should a body always realize one's potentials? One can also have the habit in an inoperative state. A piano player, for instance, is not merely the master of the potential to play the piano but constitutes herself or himself as making use of one's self as well as the piano insofar as he or she plays and knows habitually how to play. Use, in this sense, is not a virtue of a *habitus* that automatically converts potential into praxis but a praxis that can remain inoperative, de-activating the potential-act apparatus that posits the primacy of act over potential (Agamben 2015: 81).

Slavery, in this prism, expresses the capture of use by despotic-economic power, the transformation of the human body into an instrument. Let us return to *Blade Runner 2049* at this point. The process through which K. finds out that he is just a replicant after all is, paradoxically, also a process of contemplation through which K. becomes human through the use of his body in a way for which it is not programmed. Preferring *not* to realize his potential (to kill, to continue blade running), K. opens up the space for another form of politics, which is distinct from how Scott's original *Blade Runner* envisions politics. The decisive difference between the 2019 and 2049 versions relates to the question of whether the paradigm of politics should be action or de-activation, potentiality or

impotentiality, efficient / instrumental use or 'free use' of the body. While Roy and the other replicants engage with a Spartakist slave revolt in 2019, K.'s is a strategy of subtraction or withdrawal, which always implies an un-bonding, a flight in relation to existing social determinations, operating not as a constituent power but as a 'destituent power' (Agamben 1999: 255), which seeks to shift the focus of praxis from potentiality to impotentiality, from activity to passivity.

The idea of revolution is a distinctively modern answer to the problem of sovereignty, hence its fixation on, its fascination with sovereignty. Indeed, one of the fault lines in modern radical politics is the question of whether a revolution without sovereignty is possible. In *Blade Runner 2049* this question is framed by juxtaposing revolutionary counter-power, embodied in K., whose apparently apolitical involvement paradoxically ends up in a radical act of subtraction, exposing the capacity of potentiality *not* to pass into actuality, its impotentiality. In K.'s perspective, to be free can only be 'to be capable of one's own impotentiality' (Agamben 1999: 183). If power is really power *not* to act, the event is not reducible to action.

This returns us to Benjamin once more. In his 'Theses on the Concept of History', Benjamin describes 'revolution' not as the 'motor' of history but as its 'emergency break,' as that which makes it possible to arrest the bare repetition of pseudo-history (Benjamin 2003: 402). Thus, if history repeats itself as farce, this is not necessarily a reason for melancholic detachment but rather an occasion for a joyful separation – history has this course 'so that humanity should part with its past *cheerfully*' (Marx 1975: 179; see also Agamben 1999: 154). 'Happiness' is separation from pseudo-history, the affirmation of a singular, immanent form of life, which is the 'genuinely political element' (Agamben 2015: 15). And herein, ultimately, lies the most provoking aspect of the two *Blade Runner* films: while 'human' life is reduced to

bare life, the replicants can contemplate a form of life, a life that is irreducible to bare life.

Since human life always maintains a potentiality, and since all potentiality is also impotentiality, no form of life can be defined independently of inoperativity. It is only through this inoperativity that a form of life can constitute itself. Its political meaning does not lie in its inclusion or exclusion in relation to the *polis* but in the inseparability of life and form, in exposing the distinctions through which the political constitutes itself (such as potential and act, human and animal, and so on). In each exposition, the master and the slave cease to be two separate, incommunicable bodies but come to relate to each other through reciprocal use which is "non-despotic and common" (Agamben 2015: 35). In each exposition, one can have a glimpse of a domain of *play*, of *free use*, that keeps re-emerging, intimating that, before their relationship is defined in terms of property, the master and the slave find themselves in an originary, pre-judicial community of use.

FREE USE AND THE BODY

For all the theological references, therefore, both *Blade Runner* films skilfully move beyond a theological frame by configuring their problematic in terms of free use, which is irreducible to the instrumental use of the body, of the others and of the world. Free use is not compulsive activity of the automaton-slave primed to realise its potential; it always keeps intact the possibility of not using its potential. It is the playful activity of the self, which is neither reducible to an 'active' subject nor to 'passive' objects. One premise of free use is thus accepting de-subjection vis-à-vis the subject's fearful or joyful, critical or uncritical, willing or unwilling adaptation to servitude.

Thus the replicants' freedom consists in the 'free use' of their bodies, in behaving in ways at odds with their programming. In such use, they relate to themselves, to others and to the world without ownership. There is no real 'use' in

possession and instrumental use. Ours is that which we make use of. The inability 'to use' in this sense is the core of despotism and its variants. But this insight is often censored in the world depicted in the *Blade Runner* films. Like the 'accursed share,' 'free use' is that which cannot be included within and thus challenges the reality principle of this world. However, as Roy and K. and the other replicants show, a world which denies free use can only be criticized, mocked or destroyed by free use, by demonstrating the use of the useless. Free use is a reminder that the real catastrophe is not uselessness but a world dominated by the useful alone.

But free use is not merely a form of negativity. In the prism of free use, the two senses of use – instrumental use and free use – are reversible. They can always transform into each other. This is the reason why the replicants (slave-instruments) can become agents of free use while the humans (masters) appear as blasé slaves who cannot imagine a different world. This indistinction is the sign of free use. Use always entails a possibility of profanation, an insight into putting things into different uses, challenging, therefore, the consensus on the definitions of use. This is the antagonistic dimension of free use the *Blade Runner* films maintain, without which the body would be left at the mercy of the despotism of the useful (of the Tyler and Wallace Corporations). Any true criticism of bio-politics and the spectacle must, as the replicants demonstrate, assume this antagonistic dimension, for power, old or new, can only articulate itself in close proximity to instrumental use. Freedom, in other words, is nothing but a defence of free use, play. And since what is shared through free use is life as such, existence as a form of life, free use is not only political but also constitutive of the political. The two films offer contrasting and conflicted sites of 'free use', of playfulness, *Spielräume*: on the one hand, we visit JF's apartment, the dilapidated home to an assortment of non-instrumental albeit mechanical bodies, where we encounter his 'friends,' his 'nice toys,'

his playmates; on the other, there is the snow-globe inhabited by Ana Stelline, where, while comforting, conformist memories are manufactured for implantation into the Nexus 9s, nevertheless other remembrances – of childhood play and parties, of the feeling of snow, and of precious toys hidden away for safekeeping – preserve 'wish images,' moments of hope. We will return to this.

K. AS AN ILLUSIONIST

Religion had posited the existence of a 'true' world behind the 'apparent', illusory world. Then the Enlightenment launched a devastating critique of this 'true world', arguing that the religious 'truth' is nothing more than an 'illusion' or 'fiction'. Later, these enlightened truths were themselves subjected to a similar critique: what is seen as 'universal' truth is merely a 'particular' will to power. In *Blade Runner's* temporal horizon, the illusion of the 'truth' has disappeared. But the problem is, as Nietzsche saw it already in the 19th century, that once we abolish the truth we also lose the illusion (Nietzsche 1969: 41). In other words, overcoming the metaphysical juxtaposition of this world to the 'real world,' is not enough. The moment of the 'shortest shadow' is a world without value and meaning, without truths, a one-dimensional life. Which is why, for Nietzsche, illusion (fiction) is necessary to live. 'Illusion' is not merely an irreality or non-reality; rather, as in *il-ludere* in Latin, it is a *play* upon, a challenge to actual 'reality' (Baudrillard 1993: 140). Only, illusions must not be treated as abstract truths, as truths that have forgotten that they are illusions.

And what is an illusion that knows that it is an illusion, if not the artistic fiction? Art tells the truth of the social world in the guise of fiction. This is why in contemporary theory we often see a double move that seeks to place art in the place of religion, recognizing, at the same time, the differences between art and philosophy. Badiou, for instance, insists that the most difficult contemporary problem is the problem of fiction.

the most the most difficult problem of our time is the problem of fiction. We must distinguish between fiction and ideology. Because, generally speaking, ideology is opposed to science, to truth or to reality. But, as we have known since Lacan, truth itself is in a structure of fiction. The process of truth is also the process of a new fiction. (Badiou 2012: 77)

Truth itself is constructed in the form of fiction. And herein transpires the political aspect of K.'s intervention in *Blade Runner 2049*. Here, insofar as *Blade Runner* navigates within a totalitarian world, we must recall that this world needs the spectacle. Deception, propaganda, is the totalizing instrument of totalitarianism, which aims at creating 'a perfect world of appearances' (Arendt 1973: 371, xxxii). The motor of the totalitarian spectacle is illusion, 'sheer imagination' (1973: 353). In both *Blade Runner* films, the spectacle manufactures obedience through the negation of the existing world and its replacement with an alternative reality. Along these lines, the paradigmatic subject of the society depicted in *Blade Runner* is somebody 'for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ... and the distinction between true and false ... no longer exist' (1973: 474). Totalitarianism is a post-truth condition. Thanks to the spectacle, the totalitarian movement can remain indifferent to the actual reality and distillate its own reality as it sees fit, perverting and emptying out, in this process, existing ideas such as freedom.

All apparatuses of capture need their lifeblood from the outside, from the domain of the useless. The useful needs the useless. The useful only emerges against the background of the

appropriation of the useless. But in another sense, too, what seems useless often turns out to be the most useful. Surrounded with the totalitarian fiction, K. stages another fiction by faking an accident and enables Deckard's disappearance. Fiction versus fiction. In the end Ana and Deckard are saved. The 'useless,' once again, proves to be decisively useful. And precisely as such, K. – as an illusionist, as an expert in simulating and dissimulating – appears in a truly political light. For all truth procedures, after all, are interventions into a given order of the sensible. All action requires illusion, fiction. To politicize is to juxtapose fiction to fiction. Politics involves seeing and staging things differently on the basis of disagreement (Rancière 2010: 144). What is truly political is, in other words, a different use of the body, a different way of seeing, a different way of staging the matters at hand, an intervention into a given order of the sensible. This is why, for instance, Marx starts his critique of political economy by demonstrating that it is obsessed with one sense of equality, the question of distribution in a given world, and juxtaposes to this sense another sense, equality as an egalitarian maxim. In this prism, the difference between 'interpreting' (K.) and 'changing' (Roy) the world is ultimately grounded in the difference between two ways of seeing/showing, between two uses of the body. As two vanishing mediators, K. and Roy enable two distinct but interrelated ways of seeing. Along the same lines, the real question emerging in *Blade Runner* films is perhaps not so much whether androids can become human or not but whether humans can become what they are, humans, through the free use of their bodies.

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