

David Goldblatt

Professor Wilhoit

English 109 H

15 October 2018

“More Human than Human”

In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Eldon Tyrell says to Deckard that the motto of the Tyrell Corporation, the sole reason why society has advanced to the point where it is at the present day during the film, is that they strive to make beings that are “more human than human” (00:22:06). Scott would go on to prove this motto true through the characters of the actual replicants who had escaped their servitude in an off-world colony. By looking at replicants as another race entirely, *Blade Runner* can be analyzed through Isaiah Lavender's work, *Race in American Science Fiction*. Through the lens of science fiction and by creating a story of racism, subjugation, and cruelty towards the replicants, Scott shows us our own fears and prejudices cannot escape us, and while oppression and subjugation will never truly leave our society, there is a possibility that it can be conquered.

The lens of sf simply means an author and/or director chooses to use sf to comment on social issues or to make comments on society as a whole. One such explanation of this can be found in Isaiah Lavender's *Race in American Science Fiction*. In this work, Lavender makes the case that Americans have used sf to talk about race and racism and its place in society (or lack thereof). He also notes that through the use of sf, Americans are able to paint stories of race, prejudice, subjugation and oppression without actually talking about race. Americans do this by creating characters who are supposed to represent racial stereotypes or minority groups- like, for example, the Autobot Jazz and the other two “Nigbots” in Michael Bay's *Transformers* franchise

representing gross misconceptions about African Americans (192, 193). As Lavender notes, “many of our attitudes and anxieties about race and ethnicity will be grafted on these new beings [the artificial others]” (190). Meaning, we construct these others to represent racism by grossly exaggerating their features, accents, attitudes and colors. Through our creations of fictional life, we can make aliens or cyborgs that can fit stereotypes surrounding ethnic or racial groups. Scott makes such an example in the beginning of the film.

The opening texts of the film reveal to the viewer that the Tyrell Corporation has been able to create non-human androids who are identical to humans in every way. These androids, known as replicants, have greater strength, agility, and have at least the same intelligence as the engineers who designed them (00:00:30). Yet, despite these facts, replicants are not seen as humans. In fact, they are viewed as less than human. At best, they are seen as merely machines made to do a specific purpose; at worst, they are seen as animals or objects to be hunted and used by their human creators. While talking to Rachael for the first time, Deckard comments that “replicants are like any other machine. They’re either beneficial or a hazard. If they’re a benefit, it’s not my problem” (00:17:39). The film also establishes that replicants are unable to control or understand their own emotional reactions to situations, which prompts police officers assigned to hunting and killing the Nexus 6’s to use an emotional-response test simply called the Voight-Kampff test, which can be seen as a form of racial profiling (00:13:00). The anxiety that people feel towards these machines is, as Lavender notes, rather normal for humans. As he contests “Any machine that demonstrates a sense of independent awareness, something that may be perceived as a nascent humanity, causes anxiety in most humans because it is an alien experience akin to the racial one...” (194). With this in mind, it’s no wonder that humanity has

decided to hunt and kill the replicants, which makes the narrative that Scott presents similar to a meta-slavery narrative.

Meta-slavery, as Lavender defines, is a narrative that through the distancing and analytical nature of sf is able to present a representation of slavery in the past, present, or future; meta-slavery narratives are therefore able to transcend merely talking about slavery and are able to allow readers to see first-hand how slavery and servitude rip apart the fabric of society (60). *Blade Runner* reflects this, in part, through the narratives surrounding the replicants who Deckard are ordered to hunt. As the opening text establishes, the primary and sole use society has for the replicants is that of slave labor on off-world colonies or on other dangerous missions. After a bloody uprising by a group of Nexus 6's however, they are deemed illegal and are to be 'retired' if seen (even by referring to the actual act of killing the replicants and 'retiring' them, Scott is able to further dehumanize and distance replicants from humans) (00:00:30). If *Blade Runner* is viewed then as a meta-slavery narrative than simply a neo-noir film, then I argue the film on a larger scale comments on our dehumanization of those we view as others and the journeys these 'others' will undergo to self-emancipate themselves from their servitude and subjugation.

This is seen most clearly through the character of Roy, who recognizes that his life is ultimately meaningless in the eyes of the society that he is currently in bondage to, and he and the other replicants are living the lives of slaves. Unlike the other replicants, Roy is incredibly intelligent and violent. Roy also shows clear contempt towards humankind, as seen when he emphasizes, with disgust, the word "men" when questioning Leon if police had investigated his hotel room (00:25:50). Furthermore, Roy does not refer to himself or the other replicants as

‘machines’, but instead calls them angels. Roy can then be seen as a commentary on how the subjugation of persons deemed unworthy of equity and equality by society affects people.

Despite society’s view, Roy sees himself and his fellow replicants as just as good as, if not better than, ‘regular’ humans. Roy takes the concept of otherness he is given by his creators and interprets it as replicants being the superior race. After meeting J.F. Sebastian for the first time, who declares “You’re [Roy and Pris] just so perfect”, Roy responds arrogantly, “Yes”. This exchange reveals two things. The first is, even though he recognizes they’re perfect in design, Sebastian still does not see the replicants as ‘real’ or anything more than machines. The second is Roy believes all of the replicants are perfect, and, in turn, humanity is imperfect. After being asked to demonstrate his perfection by Sebastian, Roy responds by saying, “We’re no computers Sebastian. We’re physical.” (01:17:12-01:17:40). Roy’s clear disgust at his human creators can be felt very clearly in this scene and his arrogance over his creator’s fear towards his kind can be felt as well.

Roy, then, is similar to the example Lavender talks about: Robert Moore Williams’ “Robot’s Return”. In this story, three robots with distinct personalities come upon Earth and discover their creators were, in fact, biological creatures. One of the robots, Seven, displays disgust at the revelation. Another, named Nine, wonders if their creators feared robots as they had used them to explore the stars to escape a virus but gave no control to the robots themselves. The final robot, Eight, surmises the creation of the robots was the dream of man, and notes even though an individual or group can die, dreams can achieve immortality. Similar to Roy, these robots are superior to their creators, but are unable to escape from their “humanlike bigotry” (197-199). Roy reflects all three robots then. Like Seven, he displays clear disgust towards his creators, who he views as inferior. Like Nine, Roy recognizes his kind is feared by its creator (as

replicants only have a three-year life-span). Finally, like Eight, Roy recognizes he, and all replicants, will eventually die; but the actions and the messages they leave behind will gain immortality.

This immortality is achieved in the final scene of the movie. Roy, after killing both Tyrell and J.F. Sebastian (01:26:12-01:27:12) returns to Sebastian's home to find Deckard has killed Pris. Roy, fed up with being hunted, mockingly asks Deckard "Aren't you supposed to be the good man?" (01:35:45). Roy then breaks two of Deckard's fingers and gives him time to flee from the area before he reverses the roles of the two and becomes the hunter (01:36:40). Deckard, while running, attempts to jump to another building, but the jump is short, and he finds himself dangling over the edge high above the city streets below. Roy, however, is able to clear the jump easily and looks down upon Deckard. He then cruelly sneers down at Deckard, "Quite the experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave." (01:45:21). Deckard then falls, but Roy, surprisingly (both to Deckard and the audience) saves his life and pulls him to the roof with one hand. He then confesses to Deckard, as though he has finally realized the error of his ways and has come to grips with his mortality, that "[he has] seen things [that you] wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. [He] watched C-beams glitter in the darkness at Tanhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die." (01:46:43-01:47:18). Deckard watches in shock as Roy simply dies in front of him, kneeling in the rain.

This scene is the culmination of Scott's argument. Roy, despite his hatred for humans and despite society's blatant hatred for his kind, willingly saves the life of Deckard, even though he knows Deckard is the reason his fellow replicants are dead and the person who was hunting him like an animal until a few moments before his death. In this moment of the film, Ridley Scott

shows the viewer the true meaning of the motto of the Tyrell Corporation. Roy, in an act of selflessness, proves he, as he has always believed, is more human than the humans. Despite the hate running rampant through the future version of Los Angeles, Roy rises above those misconceptions and proves being a replicant is more than simply being a machine built and designed for one purpose; it's proving humanity can evolve past itself and society's prejudice. While the audience is left shocked at Roy's sacrifice, the film continues to show Deckard fleeing Los Angeles with Rachael. I argue Roy's death marks the end of the narrative. With Roy's death, Scott shows the selflessness we should all show our enemies, even in the face of hatred and prejudice; Roy's death shocks the audience and Deckard alike who, following his opponent's defeat, seems to finally understand the struggle of being looked upon as something less than human; Roy's death helped Deckard to understand how someone could be a slave throughout their existence, find hatred, and then overcome hatred and find forgiveness. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* showed the viewers through a lens of sf and a meta-slavery narrative that the blatant and offensive prejudices towards those we deem as others may never truly leave our society, but they can be overcome.

Works Cited

Lavender, Isaiah. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*. Warner Bros., 2007.