

Pale Fire: Human Image and Post-human Desire in *Blade Runner 2049*

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Abstract: In *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), humans live surrounded by artificial versions of the human: holograms, digital AIs, android replicants, and others. Embedded within the film are references to the novel *Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov, which decodes these variant images by tying their proliferation to the experience of traumatic loss. In replicant form, human simulacra supplement a decimated human population, but they also master the human image so completely that they make both the image and the original unnecessary. Ironically, they also preserve a desire for humanity that “real” humans may have lost. Recognizing this condition, *Pale Fire* supplies the film’s strategies for retrieving human meaning in the midst of technological replication. The central character, K, keeps a copy of *Pale Fire* in his apartment. Although the police use extracts from the book to keep K in subjugation, K’s private reading of *Pale Fire* empowers his trajectory in the film, an arc that parallels his changing relation to Rick Deckard.

Keywords: *Blade Runner 2049*, *Blade Runner*, *Pale Fire*, Philip K. Dick, simulacra, identity

Blade Runner 2049 (2017) is often described as a visually stunning film. Its cinematography, art design, and visual effects have won major awards, and the bleak world it portrays is defined by its technological mastery of the image. The film even opens with a close-up of an eye. Yet, this highly visual cinematic work patterns itself on a literary text—*Pale Fire* (1962) by Vladimir Nabokov.¹ The novel makes a literal appearance in one scene of *Blade Runner 2049*, when a character named Joi holds an old copy up to view. Its influence, however, pervades the film: in haunting poetry, unreliable clues, and questions of identity and being. *Pale Fire* shapes the film’s enigmatic perspective and provides its strategies for retrieving human meaning in the midst of technological replication. Ultimately, the post-human images of *Blade Runner 2049* serve to incite desire for the human while imagining its near extinction.

Blade Runner 2049 returns to the world of the classic *Blade Runner* (1982), thirty years after the events of that film. In the original, Rick Deckard must track and kill android replicants in Los Angeles. They are illegal on Earth after a violent revolt, but are still used heavily for off-world labor. Nearly indistinguishable from humans, the replicants can have capabilities in excess of the human—greater strength, intelligence, or beauty, depend-

ing on the purpose of their manufacture. Deckard falls in love with an unusual replicant named Rachael, one who is created with real human memories and an undetermined life span. The film ends as the two run away together. In *Blade Runner 2049*, a new model of replicant, programmed to submit to humans, lives legally on Earth. The story begins with the discovery of Rachael’s remains—and evidence that she died in childbirth.

The central character, police officer K, is both a new-model replicant (serial number KD6-3.7) and a blade runner, retiring (that is, killing) old models still considered a threat. After making a kill, K undergoes a post-traumatic “baseline test” at the police station, reciting poetry while a machine gauges his vital signs. K’s baseline recitation comes from *Pale Fire*:

And blood-black nothingness began to spin
A system of cells interlinked within
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.
(Nabokov, 1989, p.59; Fancher & Green, n.d., pp. 9-10)

An interrogator asks emotion-provoking questions like, “When you are not performing your duties do they keep you in a little box?” (Fancher &

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Green, n.d., p.10); or “What’s it like to hold the hand of someone you love?” (p.10). The correct answer to these questions is not a yes or no, but “cells” or “interlinked.” When the examiner asks, “Do you feel like there is a part of you that is missing?” (p.10), K responds, “Interlinked” (p.10). The content of the answer is not as important as K’s emotional stability while answering. The test diagnoses whether K has strayed from factory settings and determines if he can still be trusted as a replicant.

The film’s inclusion of *Pale Fire* is deliberate. K keeps a well-read copy in his apartment, which his girlfriend, Joi, suggests they read together. The film’s script describes the book as “beloved” (p. 40) to K and originally gave it a more conspicuous role in the film, including the final words of K’s final scene: “...A tall white fountain played...” (Fancher & Green, p.108; see also pp. 16; 40; 81). Like Joi, the book is a part of K’s home life, set apart from the realities of his brutal job. The police use extracts from *Pale Fire* to keep K subjugated, an odious co-optation of poetry for totalitarian control. Yet K’s private, personal reading of the novel restores the poetry to its literary context and takes it in directions unintended by the police.

Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* presents a long poem called “Pale Fire,” composed by fictional poet John Shade, with a preface, commentary, and index written by Charles Kinbote, a fictional scholar and “friend” to the poet. Kinbote has prepared the manuscript for publication after an escaped inmate, who mistakes Shade for the judge that sentenced him, fatally shoots him. The novel unfolds in the ironic interaction between the scholarly apparatus and the poem, which Shade composes after the loss of his only child—Hazel. One winter’s night, Shade’s daughter walks out onto thin ice and drowns. Her death appears at line 500 (Boyd, 1999, p. 33), the mid-point and the heart of the poem.

Pale Fire is thus an artistic proliferation that has

at its heart a profound devastation. The 999 lines of Shade’s poem emerge in the midst of the father’s grief over his daughter, while the elaborate scholarly text is Charles Kinbote’s response to the death of the poet. In particular, both the “Pale Fire” poem and the *Pale Fire* novel present the replication of images as the response to loss. This multiplication both reveals and produces an evacuation of the self, as seen in the opening lines:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.
And from the inside, too, I’d duplicate
Myself... (Nabokov, 1989, p. 33)

The poem opens with the replication of loss. Fooled by the reflected sky, a bird slams into a closed window, doubling or splitting into a slain self and its shadow. The poet takes the latter figure for himself—not the waxwing, but the shadow of the waxwing. What lives on is the stunned and immaterial version of itself—the bird after impact, the poet after his daughter’s death. Shade repeats this concept in lines 5-6 of the poem: standing inside his room, he duplicates himself in the windowpane, positioning his reflection in the glass so that his image appears standing outside on the lawn. This visual game manifests his awareness that he exists in the world as a projected shade/ Shade, visible to others but hollowed of substance. He is no stranger to this game of multiplied shades. As a child, he responds to the death of his parents by imagining a “thousand parents” (p.35) in place of the ones he had lost.

This situation is not unlike the one presented in *Blade Runner 2049*, in which extinction-level disaster underlies the proliferation of images. The luminous array of holographs, simulations, and replicants exists because of the decimation of the human population, following an ecological collapse. Each image thus figures a human loss and compen-

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sates for it. The character of Dr. Ana Stelline may illustrate this correlation more fully. As a response to living in medically-sealed isolation, Stelline specializes in memory-making, crafting beautiful images of a world she has lost and experiences she can no longer have. In some cases, her images compensate for a larger loss, not just her personal isolation, but also extinction outside her walls. When she first appears in the film, for example, she is at work in a forest of green, sunlit trees, which have been produced digitally in her studio. Because much of the biosphere has been destroyed in *Blade Runner 2049*, such trees only exist in digital form, with no extant reality apart from their artificial image. Only one real tree appears in the film, at the farm where Rachael is buried, and it is dead, propped up by wires. With the natural world similarly grey and barren, intense color arrives through artifice: the green forest, the vivid reds and blues of neon ads, and the yellow plumes of a holographic showgirl.

Among the images that supplement loss in the film, one type becomes particularly threatening, following patterns theorized by Jean Baudrillard as “simulacra.” Simulacra are powerful because they produce genuine symptoms of the real: not just an appearance that resembles the real, but the actual presence of traits associated with the real. For instance, a man simulating sickness will not merely look sick; he will have a fever or discolored phlegm, even though he is not genuinely ill (Baudrillard, 2001, p.171). Because of those “real” symptoms, simulacra call into question all authentic signs of the real, because they show that such signs, the signs by which people recognize the real, can be simulated apart from their initially intended cause or significance. High-order simulacra are especially threatening because they reduce the real to a network of signs, which either murders the real or exposes the real as already lost.² In its supreme version, the simulacrum makes the distinction between real and simulation irrelevant; simulacra then become the “hyperreal”—both more real than the real and destroying categories like “real” by exceeding their capacity to delimit.

Like the hyperreal, “More human than human” is the motto of the Tyrell Corporation, the manufacturer of replicants in *Blade Runner* (Deeley & Scott, 1982). Similarly, the replicants of *Blade Runner 2049* claim to be “more human than the humans” (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.98). As fulfillments of the hyperreal, the replicants justify the references to Baudrillard’s simulacra in various studies of *Blade Runner*.³ The connection is apt, and even anticipated by Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Simulacra* (1964), which he published a few years before *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Blade Runner*’s source. Yet when it comes to *Blade Runner*, the discussion of simulacra is more about theory than reality. Replicants exist, but they are illegal on Earth and thus are very few in number there; only five are known to the authorities, and four of them are dead by the end of the film. In *Blade Runner 2049*, however, the numbers are reversed. There are only around five human characters with names, and they live enveloped in simulacra: virtual environments, intelligent holographs, and replicants who so closely reproduce the human in appearance, aspiration, and mentality that they threaten the value of human existence. What need is there for a real human, when the replicant is virtually identical and in many cases better?

In terms of screen presence in *Blade Runner 2049*, human simulacra far outnumber the humans. In several scenes, the people are dwarfed by giant holographs. Other scenes contain no human characters at all—only replicants or digital AIs—which ultimately obviates the need for human presence, including the human image itself. In one scene, Officer K visits the Wallace Corporation to obtain information for his investigation. A representative named Luv meets him to answer his questions. Because both are replicants, the information exchange could take place between two computers, or two smart phones. There is no need for a ruggedly good-looking male figure or the immaculately dressed female form; no need for the formalities of polite speech or other face-to-face human dynamics, such as the mild sexual advance from

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Luv and its polite but definite refusal from K. This scene, which takes place in a windowless hall with only artificial lighting, blocks out the natural world and similarly short-circuits the human out of reality except in its simulated form. Like the preservation tanks housing specimens of past replicant-models, it virtually places the human within such a position—obsolete, defunct, sealed off from the living world.

In another scene, Joi, K's holographic girlfriend, synchronizes her program with the body of a replicant prostitute, so that she and K can make love. The film depicts all of the human characters as essentially alone, living without spouses, families, or lovers in the present day. In the world of *Blade Runner 2049*, such intimacy only appears between a replicant and a holographic AI synced with a replicant body. As K and Joi slowly embrace in mutual giving, desire, and love, the scene ironically cuts to a giant ad for Joi, the digital program that promises to be "*Whatever you want to see. Whatever you want to hear*" (Fancher & Green, n.d., p. 22). This juxtaposition prevents the easy acceptance of Joi's and K's simulated love as love, although it bears the signs of the real and is taken as such by the parties involved. Like the trees that only exist as artificial images, human love and joy seem to have vanished, leaving only the replicant Luv and the digital Joi, whose names alter, replace, and perhaps parody what they resemble.

The simulacra of *Blade Runner 2049*, while standing for the absence of their originals, yet perform the work of inciting desire for the human real. K's longing to be a human—"born[,] not made," as Joi puts it (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.56)—is one of the core drives in the film. It is repeated by Joi's desire to be real, and the underground replicant leader Freysa's statement that they all wish they were Rachael's child. The real human is no longer necessary, yet the post-human successors still desire it, modeling themselves on the human image by choice even after they become self-aware beyond their manufacture. The most intense desire for the human comes from the artificial images

that construct it, suggesting that the real humans no longer understand or respect what it means to be human, or otherwise require artificial stimuli to remember. Revealing this condition, *Blade Runner 2049* searches for what remains of the human, retrieving it from its submergence in simulacra through methods derived from *Pale Fire*.

Nabokov's novel foregrounds the problem of the simulacrum, since it begins and ends with a fatal inability to distinguish image from reality. However, the poetry of "Pale Fire," which K recites in his baseline test, presents an image beyond artifice: the mysterious white fountain. Not made by any human or machine, it is "Not of our atoms" (Nabokov, 1989, p.59) and thus represents a transcendent reality: not loss, absence, or illusory "sham" like the other images in the poem (p.59), but an evocation of life, refreshment, and pleasure as it "played" (p.59). Shade sees it one evening during a heart attack. His body technically dies, but his consciousness perceives the blood-black darkness spinning into cells interlinked within cells interlinked, and the white fountain. Shade is later revived. Prior to this point, without religious faith or even faith in ghosts, Shade was struggling to come to terms with his daughter's death. His vision, however, convinces him that something lives on past the material body. Soon after, Shade reads in a magazine that a woman saw a white fountain during her own near-death experience. He is excited: two witnesses both saw the white fountain—meaning that it must be real! Later, however, the magazine writer reveals there was a misprint of "mountain" as "fountain," destroying the poet's proof of eternal life.

The oscillating status of the white fountain—as a mere mental image or as a real perception of eternity—resembles the uncertain status of K's childhood memory, his recollection of a toy horse carved from wood, which is his only possession. In this memory, when a group of boys want to take the horse from him, he hides it and refuses to tell where it is, even as the boys beat him up for it. The status of the memory—as a genuinely lived experience, or as

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a fictional, artificial implant—is deeply linked to the question of K’s identity. Is he a born human? Or is he a manufactured replicant? Does he have a soul (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.22)? In “Pale Fire,” the fountain confirms the existence of a soul for Shade and has a similar meaning for K. When K finds proof that his memory is real, he believes that he is a human, and his emotions diverge dangerously from baseline. When the police detect the anomalies in K, they single out the fountain in his recitation because it is “dreadfully distinct,” in contrast to the cells that are “interlinked within one stem” (Fancher & Green, n.d., pp.64-65). K’s belief that he has a soul makes him both distinct and dangerous to the social order. For K, however, the white fountain is distinctively “against the dark” (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.65), because it is his resistance to the technological system that has produced him. Like Shade’s vision, K’s subversive view of the fountain disintegrates and is reconstituted in different terms. He realizes that he is not a human, but according to the script, his thoughts return to the white fountain as he dies (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.108).

Similarly, when Shade learns of the misprint of “mountain” as “fountain,” it does not destroy his hope but rather shifts it away from the image and toward language:

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

(Nabakov, pp.62-63)

While the misprint might suggest the radical unreliability of texts, the poet finds comfort in the “web of sense” spun in the free-play of language, connecting, for example, the word “link” with the etymolog-

ically and conceptually unrelated “bobolink.” This “game” (p.63) fulfills the ludic nature of the fountain that “played” (p.59), sublimating Shade’s quest for the eternal in words, texts, and authors interlinked. Such correlated patterns, a distant relative of the argument by design, restore to the poet a “Faint hope” (p.63). The poet realizes the diminished nature of this hope: “some kind of link,” “some kind of correlated pattern,” “something of the same/ Pleasure,” close but not quite (p.63). Yet it satisfies him, and it recollects one of Shade’s fondest memories: his daughter reading poetry in her room, calling out to her mother across the house and asking the meaning of various words like “grimpen,” or “chthonic.” The father, working in a third room, overhears them with pleasure, and when the mother hesitates over the word “sempiternal,” he calls the definition out to them (p.46). The family thus connects across their spatial divides through words, through poetry, manifest in texts but not reduced to them.

In a comparable move in *Blade Runner 2049*, when K finds Deckard in an abandoned city, their first contact occurs through a literary text, *Treasure Island* (1882). Emerging from a dark corridor, Deckard is heard before he is seen, speaking in words from the 19th-century novel, and K recognizes the allusion. The shared familiarity with the book creates the first tentative link between them, like a strand of Shade’s web. Yet, *Blade Runner 2049* evokes a wider literary network. The letter K as a name evokes the K of Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), in addition to the K that abbreviates Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Similarly, K also recalls the character Ka of the novel *Snow* (2002), by Orhan Pamuk, which adds another dimension to the ending of the film, in which K lies down to his final rest under a softly falling snow.

Such a web of interconnections can expand indefinitely, not least because *Blade Runner 2049* is a sequel to a film based on a book, automatically positioning it within an intertextual (and also peri-/para-/hyper-/and hypo-textual) web. Its allusiveness is integral to its way of generating meaning,

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which perhaps attempts to recreate the nature of its predecessors. There are, for example, whole books devoted to tracing the web of links in *Pale Fire*, just as there are whole scholarly books on *Blade Runner*.⁴ Both the novel and the film ignite an unusual level of interpretive fire: an endless desire to read and re-read, and to examine and speculate on each detail, akin to the inexhaustible capacity of fans to watch and re-watch *Blade Runner* with abundant commentary and debate. The enthusiasts of *Pale Fire* do not simply analyze or dissect; they experience sheer “joy” (Boyd, 1999, p.5) akin to the “great deal of unalloyed pleasure” (Bukatman, 2012, p.8) among *Blade Runner* fans.

While this web thus energizes a type of vitality, *Pale Fire* admits the sometimes-parasitic nature of secondary scholarship, which adds yet another dynamic to *Blade Runner 2049*. Kinbote’s labor as scholar perpetuates the memory of John Shade, giving the poet a literary afterlife. However, Kinbote’s commentary also multiplies unnecessary material that serves Kinbote’s personal agenda more than it provides helpful insight on “Pale Fire.”⁵ Shade’s poem, the human core of the novel, thus threatens to be lost in the commentary, especially as Kinbote advises the reader to read his notes first before reading the poem (p.28). Kinbote even advises a second and third reading of his notes, stating that without them, Shade’s poem has “no human reality at all” (p.28). The commentary thus supplants what it claims to support, like the hyperreal supplanting the real. Kinbote’s work thus presents a challenge: the reader of “Pale Fire” must read the poem within, despite, and in conjunction with the unreliable meta-text of its presentation. Indeed, the design of *Pale Fire* is uniquely crafted to intensify the desire to read the poem, encased as it is within a discursive apparatus that far exceeds “Pale Fire” in bulk or mass. The more prolix and suspect the commentary, the more acute the desire to recuperate the poem within it.

Blade Runner 2049 exhibits a similar strategy,

creating a yearning for the human through its depiction of a world in which the real human has become scarce and even unnecessary, lost in artificial versions of itself. Yet the search for human authenticity is not as simple as the rejection of replicants or technological imaging, just as the solution to reading “Pale Fire” is not as easy as reading the poem and ignoring the frame. Kinbote’s notes cannot be discarded wholesale because they contain information necessary to the novel’s narrative, along with some illuminating context for “Pale Fire”; but those elements must be sifted through several hermeneutic layers and pieced together.

K’s relationship to Deckard demonstrates an analogous process: literal detective work unearthing clues, discarding false leads, and slowly tracing a lost blade runner in hiding. For much of the film, K’s quest to find Deckard parallels his own quest to be human, since the search for Deckard is part of the search for Rachael’s child, who K believes to be his own origin and identity. To find Deckard, in that sense, is to become human. Yet after K realizes that Deckard is not his father, his strongest aim is to make sure that Deckard survives. His arc in the film is transformed, no longer about becoming human, but about the difficult task of finding the fugitive, endangered human.

Although his status as human or replicant is hotly contested, Deckard stands for what remains of the human in the world of *Blade Runner 2049*. As screenwriter Hampton Fancher has commented, “No matter how automated things become, the part that’s human, the part that remains, is stubbornness. Life is stubborn. Deckard has that quality. He is stubborn. He’s a cowboy. And he’s wild” (qtd. in Lapointe, 2017, p.190). As portrayed in the film, he is also vulnerable, worn-out, dependent on technology, and at the mercy of technological forces. Deckard owes his life to replicants, having been saved by Rachael, then later Roy Batty, in the original film; by the end of *Blade Runner 2049*, he will once again owe his life to the replicant K. Still in love with Rachael, Deckard is flesh and blood deeply impli-

Pale Fire, continued

cated in replicant technology, to the point that his own humanity is ceaselessly called into question.⁶ In this light, what has been criticized as a flaw of *Blade Runner 2049*—the underutilization of Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard (see, for example, Zacharek, 2017)—is part of its significance. The human is weak and somewhat disappointing compared to the replicant: less powerful, less clever, less heroic. But Deckard is (in the context of the film) a real human, and significantly, played by the real Harrison Ford, not a CGI Ford or other substitute, reprising his role as Deckard. The movie affirms that the human, though compromised, is worth fighting for, even dying for, as both Deckard and K resolve to do if necessary.

The turning point of the film comes when Deckard is captured and taken to the Wallace Corporation. Unable to make him reveal information about his child, Wallace offers Deckard an incentive: a replicant Rachael, perfectly recreated. Made with Rachael's DNA, speaking with Rachael's voice and touching his face, she is, as the script explains, "Authentic. Inauthentic" (p.95), and "utterly real and convincing" (p.95). Seeing her, "Deckard strains against [the] pain of loss. Strains not to lose himself in a memory of lost joy... We fear he is tempted, when—He tears his face from her hand. Rejecting the simulacrum" (p.95).

The script underscores this point: Deckard rejects the simulacrum. Focused on Deckard's face, the camera reveals the tremendous difficulty of this rejection, but it also contrasts the markedly aged Deckard with the young Rachael before him. He is no longer the young blade runner, just as this clone is not the lost Rachael. Rejecting this simulacrum means accepting the "pain of loss," seeing revived the beauty of what has died (not just Rachael herself but who he used to be in relation to her), and recognizing that it is all gone, vanished into an increasingly distant past. Deckard chooses the real Rachael, even though it means permanent loss and unfathomable pain. He refuses to obscure the presence of that loss in a simulacrum.

K's transformation takes place immediately after

this scene, in a parallel version of Deckard's trial with the seemingly resurrected Rachael. Walking down an empty street, K, beaten and bereft, sees a giant holographic ad for Joi (the digital program), after Luv has destroyed his own companion, Joi. The ad beckons to him. Neon and naked, she flirts with him in lines that Joi once used with K, exposing the pre-programmed nature of her speech—even the name Joe, which Joi suggests for K when they believe that he is human and thus deserving of a real name. What had seemed most deeply personal, private, and original to K thus unravels as simulation, artifice, and programming.

K should not be surprised to see Joi exposed in this way. As a customer, he chose to buy a product advertised as "*Whatever you want to see. Whatever you want to hear. Joi*" (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.22). Set up from the beginning in narcissistic terms, this relationship could not help but be a simulated intimacy. K gets what he pays for. It might even be said that he gets what he deserves for developing his emotional life in relation to a digital product. Yet when Luv destroys the device that houses Joi's memories, thus killing the unique version created through K, the loss to K is palpable and moving.

As K silently faces the holo ad, the words spoken earlier in the film by two replicants—Freysa and Sapper—echo in his mind, but he does not act as they would have wished. Freysa presents K with the possibility that if he joins her, he could become more human than the humans. Along those lines, and to protect herself, she asks K to kill Deckard. Freysa thus follows the predicted telos of the simulacrum, murdering and replacing the real. But instead, K resolves to protect Deckard. Recognizing what is unreal in Joi, and in himself, precipitates K's commitment to Deckard, to the real human and not to the replicant cause. In choosing to protect Deckard, K both fulfills and reverses the narrative of *Pale Fire*. He stages the ostensible drowning of the father, instead of the daughter, then restores to the father the child he had lost. In accepting that he is not a human, K ceases to be like Kinbote, who

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tries to make Shade's poem about himself and his lost Zembla, rather than about Shade and his family. Instead of trying to be Rachael's child, K reconnects Deckard to the one who is: Dr. Ana Stelline.

K acts for the restoration of the human, even though the vision of *Blade Runner 2049* is fundamentally post-human, recognizing that the technological and social conditions already exist for a world that has no need for humans. To this end, Ana's existence is the crux of *Blade Runner 2049*. Lt. Joshi orders K to track down and kill the child, because it dissolves the already tenuous distinction between human and replicant. Joshi's visceral reaction against the replicant birth may have grasped a more devastating implication. Stelline can pass as a human and in fact, seems to be a real human. Her existence therefore proves that a female replicant can give birth to a human, thus making human women entirely unnecessary for the reproduction of life. If the technology lost with Rachael can be reconstructed, men will no longer need real human women, not even for the continuation of the species. Those who don't like "real girls" (Fancher & Green, n.d., p.31), as Mariette observes ironically of K, can replicate women like Joi, who becomes whatever her owners want to see and hear.

For this reason, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the dividing line between human and android is the female role in procreation. That line has already fleetingly been crossed by Rachael. Nonetheless, to be born instead of manufactured comes to define the human, marking the difference between a clever machine and a living soul. Since Niander Wallace makes no attempt to dissect Deckard when he captures him, the male role of insemination does not seem important for him to understand. Instead, he is obsessed with figuring out how Tyrell re-created the female reproductive capacity in Rachael.⁷ For similar reasons, the replicants who witnessed the birth of her child revere the moment as a miracle. They derive hope from it and belief in themselves as something more than mechanical slaves. As Freysa declares in the film, "If a baby can come from one of us... we are our own masters" (Kosove et al & Villeneuve, 2017). The script is

more detailed: "That baby meant we was more than creations. We was creation. More than just slaves" (p.98).

Freysa's declaration links procreation with the ability to create more broadly, once again recalling *Pale Fire*. The title comes from Shakespeare's lines on the moon, whose borrowed light shows a failure to generate her own: "the moon's an arrant thief, / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun" (*Timon of Athens*, IV.iii, lines 2150-51). Yet as Timon goes on to point out, the sun itself is a thief, stealing from the sea, who in turn has stolen from the moon. Everyone is a thief. Since the hunt for the original fire turns out to be a circular quest, what is really at stake is not true ownership or originality but the capacity to transmute borrowed matter into a distinctly new form. In lifting "pale fire" from Shakespeare, Shade offers a meditation on poetic creation, intertwined with thoughts of his wife, through whom "old things" he once wrote are made "new" (p.68). Shade's ability to write beautiful poetry stands in contrast to the parasitic scholar. Unable to write his own poems, Kinbote, who is also childless, must appropriate Shade's. As Kinbote himself admits, "I have reread, not without pleasure, my comments to his lines, and in many cases have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb, and unconsciously aping the prose style of his own critical essays" (p.81). In *Blade Runner 2049*, Rachael's child means that a replicant can be more than a product of others' originality and craft. Instead of remaining the pale fire of the human image, they themselves can create, originating a new line of life.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, however, Rachael has been lost. The abilities to create and to procreate belong uniquely to the human, although in dwindling supply. Only human characters engage in creative acts: Deckard, who carves wooden animals for his child (real animals only, no unicorns); Gaff, who folds an origami sheep; and Ana Stelline, creating memories for replicants. These arts, however, are retrospective, not innovative. They look backward, like Stelline's memories, or go backward to the handmade,

Pale Fire, continued

to the technologically primitive, and to the traditional art form like the origami sheep, which itself alludes backward to *Blade Runner* as well as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Despite its emphasis on creation, the world of *Blade Runner 2049* is far less creative, as well as less diverse and multi-faceted, than the world of the original *Blade Runner*. It offers no equivalent to the Esper device, which shattered visual convention by reading two-dimensional photographs in three-dimensional terms. It presents no character like Sebastian, who builds his own robotic companions with cleverly repurposed materials. It contains no Eldon Tyrell, innovating the unforeseen, like androids with childhood memories and the capacity to reproduce sexually. Tyrell's successor in *Blade Runner 2049*, Niander Wallace, is literally blind and "sees" through technology. His vision and creativity are correspondingly reduced, even though he can look with astonishing power into the minds of those around him. He sees, for example, Luv's desire to be the best replicant, and Deckard's sacred memory of Rachael. This technologically-driven insight does not lead to empathy, however, but instead, to a means of control over others, reflecting a failed creator lapsing into brute technological power. The film imagines a dim future: the extreme mastery of replication paired with the loss of creation.

Perhaps ironically, this diminished creativity makes *Blade Runner 2049* a more faithful adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* than *Blade Runner*. Philip K. Dick had intended *Do Androids?* to be a warning about humans becoming too much like the machines on which they depend. In the novel, Deckard's decision to have sex with Rachel is the sign of his dehumanization. By sleeping with her, he also falls for a trick devised by the androids, playing into their hands. In *Blade Runner*, however, Deckard's love for Rachael, along with his wonder at Roy Batty, mark the expansion of his humanity, not the loss of it. When Dick learned of Ridley Scott's intent to portray the replicant sympathetically as a superior human, he expressed shock at how far their ideas diverged (Dick, qtd. in Sammon, 1987, p.262). *Blade Runner*

2049, however, returns to Dick's vision. While not withdrawing sympathy from Rachael or K, it draws attention to the precarity of human survival, in terms similar to the novel, linking dehumanization with infertility and the loss of the natural world. The novel's Deckard wears a protective codpiece against post-nuclear radiation, yet he and his wife have no children. They rely upon a programmable mood machine to mediate their relationship and only experience their own emotional intimacy when they look at a real goat together. The symbiosis of the ecological, interpersonal, and reproductive dimensions of Dick's novel, downplayed in *Blade Runner*, becomes a noticeable element of *Blade Runner 2049*. Real humans, like real trees and animals, are scarce. They seem unable to reproduce themselves or build meaningful relationships apart from technological aids. Deckard's hand-carved animals in the film also recall a motif in Dick's oeuvre: "the championing of creative people, especially men, who work with their hands, often within a specific craft tradition..." (LaFarge, 2017, p.28). This ability to make things by hand stands in counterpoint to the advanced technology portrayed in the film, a point of difference as rare in that world as the real wood of the toy horse.

In terms of creative power, *Blade Runner 2049* is a pale fire to its predecessor. However, its insight into the contemporary human condition is more piercing. Power, vitality, and proliferation belong to the artificial image: digital environments, constructed pasts, projections of the human as replicant, holograph, or AI. These lambent simulacra supplement the decimated human, numbing the sense of loss and fulfilling communal needs that humans no longer seem able to provide for one another. Reliance on these supplements, however, seems to evacuate the human of meaning. The more that the artificial human image proliferates, the more that its necessity recedes. Baudrillard's theory suggests that when nostalgia appears, it signifies the death of the real, a post-mortem desire for something already extinguished by the simulacrum. Perhaps along these lines, Slavoj Žižek (2017) criticizes the

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film's humanism as an aspect of its "falsity." Yet the movie's retrospective longing for the Blade Runner past, and for the genuine human, is nonetheless underwritten by hope, the "puzzle of fractured hope" (Green, 2018) that screenwriter Michael Green sees in *Pale Fire* and inscribes into the film.

As seen in the aging Deckard, *Blade Runner 2049* maintains the belief that somewhere in hiding, even if it is enfeebled, receding, and always in doubt, the human has survived and must be recovered. Like *Pale Fire*, *Blade Runner 2049* incites desire for this recuperation of the human. The film also offers a second, interconnected hope, figured in the lost Rachael, who somehow gave birth to the human real in Ana Stelline. All members of contemporary society have their humanity mediated and constructed, to varying degrees, through the pale fire of artificial images. Ana Stelline represents the possibility that instead of being lost in variant images, an authentic human can emerge from engagement with them. This result, as it is in the film, may be rare, and even miraculous.

Notes:

¹ Several online commentaries note the presence of *Pale Fire* in the film, the most substantive by Maria Bustillo (2017), who views the novel as the film's "touchstone." While agreeing with Bustillo, this essay differs from current commentaries in analyzing the film's intertextual relation to *Pale Fire*, reading it as the recuperation of the human. See also Vishnevetsky (2017), Page (2017), Lawson (n.d.), Hagood (2017), Lane (2017).

² For the murder of the real, see Baudrillard, 2000, pp. 59-83. For the theory of simulacra, Baudrillard, 2001, pp.169-187.

³ Bruno, 1990, pp. 183-195. Bukatman, 2012, p. 76. Flisfeder, 2017, pp. 75-78; 118-121.

⁴ See Boyd (1999); Meyer (1988); Davies (2011) for *Pale Fire*, and Bukatman (2012); Flisfeder (2017); Brooker (2005); Kernan (1991) for *Blade Runner*.

⁵ While supplying many pages on the history of Zembla (Kinbote's native land), Kinbote leaves only a brief comment on the poem's account of Hazel's death, which he criticizes as "too labored and long," a "theme" (p.196). Blind to the poet's deep pain, and his love for both daughter and wife, Kinbote is also unable to see the source of the poem's title (p. 80; p.285). His scholarly notes can be similarly unhelpful: "Line 384: book on Pope[.] The title of this work which can be found in any college library is Supremely Blest, a phrase borrowed from a Popian line, which I remember but can-not quote exactly" (p.195). Kinbote's own suffering and struggles should not be dismissed, but the commentary on "Pale Fire" is not the place to express them.

⁶ The infamous 'Deck-a-rep' debate—the question of whether Deckard is a human or a replicant—has generated much discussion. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Deckard is definitely a human. *Blade Runner*, however, exists in about eight different versions, and Ridley Scott altered later iterations to suggest that Deckard is a replicant. Harrison Ford, however, insists that Deckard is a human and plays the character as such. Similarly, Hampton Fancher, who worked on both movie scripts, wrote with the assumption that Deckard is human, although he respects the ambiguity of keeping the question in play. (Weintraub, 2017).

⁷ The stated rationale for Wallace's obsession—the need for replicants to multiply more quickly than he can manufacture, for interplanetary colonization—is absurd. However long it takes to manufacture a replicant, the time is almost certainly shorter than forty weeks and far less risky, given the host of problems that can affect a human embryo during gestation and birth, not to mention the long, complicated process of nurturing an infant into an adult. Replicants can also be programmed to build their own factories off-world and oversee their own production.

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