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BLADE RUNNER 2049 (CASE STUDY)

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Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is perhaps *the* film, or at least one of the films, that firmly established and popularized cinematic cyberpunk; for example, Scott Bukatman remarks that "[c]yberpunk provided *the* image of the future in the 1980s" (58) and the "aesthetic of cyberpunk was almost defined by *Blade Runner*" (50). Among *Blade Runner*'s merits is its ability to speak to the early emergence of neoliberal capitalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s: The original *Blade Runner* registered our latent fears about the end of the welfare state, the deregulated plane of unfettered multinational capital, and the dystopia that was set to result in the soon-to-be *approaching* future. Released more than three decades after *Blade Runner*, Denis Villeneuve's much-anticipated sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) responds to our current awareness of dystopia already realized—this is now the world in which we *live*.

The new film is contextualized by our own experiences of the post-financial crisis period of neoliberal capitalism and marked by discourses of the biopolitical posthuman subject. Added to this, too, is the constantly looming threat of ecological catastrophe brought on by climate change and the ever-present sensation that there is no way out, no means of escape. Only twelve more years, we are told. Not much left to go on! The film addresses our awareness of the crises we face, including the post-2008 electronically automated-austericized haze-life that we experience only as the passing of pay-check to pay-check (the digital transfer of informational merits or credits from one account to another, proving still that we are, as Deleuze called us, informational "dividuals").

If the problem for Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in *Blade Runner* was that he did not know he was a replicant, then like K (Ryan Gosling), the replicant protagonist in *Blade Runner 2049*, we know that our condition is one of control and servitude, but we continue to submit. K's dilemma is that he knows full well about his status as replicant: He knows that his memories are implants designed to control his emotional responses, but nevertheless he continues to be compliant. Similarly, we are aware of the social, political, economic, and ecological problems that we face in our contemporary age and can avow this at a conscious level. Ideology, today, is no longer a matter of false consciousness. Instead, we know but nevertheless continue to act as if we didn't because there is apparently no alternative. It's in this way that *Blade Runner 2049* (*BR 2049*) maps our own ideological and historical setting.

Drawing on Fredric Jameson's claim in *The Seeds of Time* that "it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (xii), Mark Fisher defines "capitalist realism" as the cynical resignation and "deflationary perspective of the depressive" (*Capitalist Realism* 5) who becomes fully aware of the

crises—economic, political, ecological, social, and cultural—but cannot imagine life otherwise. We have come, Fisher argues, to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). There is no way out of the current system. In this regard, capitalist realism as a concept, and its context in the aftermath of the 2007/08 financial and economic crisis—i.e. a post-crisis capitalism—help us better understand *Blade Runner 2049.*

BR 2049 is set thirty years after *Blade Runner.* As the opening title sequence tells us, the Tyrell Corporation has gone bankrupt and has been bought out by billionaire Niander Wallace (Jared Leto) who made his fortune developing a new harvesting process for soy that helped to solve a famine that occurred in the timespan between the two films. After taking over Tyrell Corporation, Wallace developed a new line of NEXUS replicants, more compliant than their predecessor models. The new line of replicants is distinguished from the older models by the fact that they are fully aware that their memories are implanted. In the original film, the NEXUS-6 models are given artificial memories to help them deal with and learn how to better integrate emotional responses into their behavior. This is complicated, however, when it comes to Rachael (Sean Young), whose disruptive status as a replicant is a key narrative thread (particularly as she did not initially know that she was a replicant) and her memory-history—objectified in a series of photographs she has of what she believed was her childhood but is actually the childhood of Tyrell's niece—thematizes the postmodern troubling of objective history, a troubling that takes on deeper meaning when it comes to the questions surrounding Deckard's unresolved ontological status. In *BR 2049*, however, K, the central hero, is aware that his memories are fake. This awareness links the film to Fisher's conceptions of "ironic distance" toward ideological beliefs in *capitalist realism* that "immunize us" (5) against false consciousness: K knows that he is a replicant and that his existence is one of servitude to humans. But this fact is, nevertheless, disavowed as a condition of his compliance. In fact, the film's *MacGuffin* comes when K finds 'evidence' that he may not be a constructed replicant, but perhaps a child born of an unexpected mother: Rachael.

Like the original film, *BR 2049* takes up similar postmodern and cyberpunk themes, such as the troubling of ontological reality, history, and subjectivity. It also examines the technologized relationship between capital, the state, and an exploitation based on embodied difference (human/non-human). But more so than the original, *BR 2049* develops the spatial and geo-critical representation of the capitalist network that is only hinted at in *Blade Runner* by the pyramidal Tyrell headquarters that looms over an urban sprawl stretching into the visual horizon. *BR 2049*'s cognitive mapping extends well beyond the urban center, and although we do not go as far as seeing the off-world colonies, we do get a sense of the global network of centralized ownership and the peripheral (outsourced) production of multinational/globalized capital. For example, *BR 2049* portrays the networks of exploitation that go beyond the exploitation of replicant-machinic labor, such as when K visits an orphanage and child labor camp where technical components are being constructed and assembled. In addition, the ecological degradation outside fortress Los Angeles is given more attention, too, unlike in the original film where, at the end of the U.S. theatrical release, Deckard and Rachael escape north into a utopian wilderness, an ending that was famously tacked onto the theatrical release without Scott's permission and summarily stripped in later re-releases of the film (for a detailed account of the version history, see my *Postmodern Theory*). In *BR 2049,* K travels to a devastated Las Vegas, when he goes searching for Deckard, and we see that the city is awash in red fog and is unlivable due to poor air quality; similarly, the orphanage stands in an otherwise ruined San Diego that is little more than wasteland and garbage disposal site for Los Angeles. There is no restorative *nature* that exists outside urban dilapidation and pollution, perhaps a nod to the looming scarcity of nature for which we must begin to prepare.

The visual representation in the film marking the difference between the glitzy neon-drenched urban centrality of fortress L.A. and the foggy, cloudy periphery of ecological decay marks an added distinction to *BR 2049*. Much of the popularity and later resonance of the original film comes from its visual depiction of the electronic urban landscape. *Blade Runner* aestheticizes quite clearly the postmodern interest in space over time, as much of the film is spent traversing bright nighttime skylines populated by electronic advertisements. One of the most iconic images is that of the large video display screen that switches between a sushi advertisement and one for Coca-Cola. Not only do these images help to portray postmodern depictions of urbanism and electronic mediation, but they also represent the field of total (and invasive) commodification—that is, the colonization of the commodity that is so apparent in the postmodern cinema and cyberculture that followed. *BR 2049* goes even further. It builds heavily on the postmodern aesthetic of digital, electronic, and commodified space, while the enhanced digital cinematography takes us deeper inside the urban fabric to give us a much more high-definition visualization of the city.

BR 2049 still provides panoramic shots of the city, but when we move down to street-level, we are more capable of discerning the texture of the commodified culture of capitalist realism and its depressively hedonic characteristics, which, as Fisher (21–22) explains, refers to the fact that the more we are enjoined to enjoy in late capitalism, the more depressed we get from our inability to actually receive satisfaction. This, too, is portrayed through the pathetic fallacies in the film and the stark contrast between the electronic and commodified 'happy' city—where all of the holographic advertisements seem much happier and brighter than the people traversing the streets—and the dark, snowy, and cold atmosphere that now permeates this environment and is indicative of our actual sentiments toward this space. Commodities and advertisements enjoin us to enjoy, but instead we are left with the kind of "reflexive impotence"—the self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat—that Fisher ascribes to the cynicism of capitalist realism (21).

The contrast between the vibrancy of the city and peripheral decay is apparent in *BR 2049*'s opening shot, which mirrors the original. In both films, we first see an extreme close-up on an apparently human eye, although we are unsure if we are seeing a human eye or that of a replicant. The visual then cuts to a panoramic shot of the futuristic landscape. In the original film, a hover car flies out from behind the camera and toward the screen, tying our gaze into the highly technologized fabric of future Los Angeles. In *BR 2049*, similarly, K's hover car flies in from behind the camera to reveal the landscape; only here, it is not the futuristic L.A. but the vast fields of protein farms, likely outsourced by Wallace. This is where K finds Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista), an old NEXUS model that he has been sent out to retire. This stark contrast in the visual representation of center and periphery—i.e. futuristic landscape in *Blade Runner*; protein farms and outsourced labor in *BR 2049*—ties in well with the humanist and posthumanist themes of capitalist realism present in the film.

Blade Runner 2049 is bracketed by the twin dilemmas of contemporary capitalism: that of looming ecological catastrophe, and the other of enhanced digital automation. These two problems, according to Peter Frase, define the various dilemmas of our current age (1). The threat of climate change, he writes, is one of too little, of the depletion of the environment and resources (2), which the film addresses in the fortress-like imaginary of the caged-in cybernetic city, where wealth appears centralized, however still unevenly distributed. The threat of automation, on the other hand, is one of too much: too much production (overproduction), which is still centralized and concentrated into the hands of the very (corporate) few. It falls to the role of the state, then, to mitigate these contradictory forces, which is why in the film an antagonism brews between the interests of Wallace and those of Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright). Wallace becomes obsessed by the possibility that a replicant could birth a child. As a capitalist, he sees this as a way to significantly reduce his costs of production: Replicants can reproduce themselves, laboring bodies that can go into labor. For Joshi, though, this possibility creates a threat of potentially building and

exacerbating a political rift between the replicants and the humans, leading to war. She realizes, as did Marx and Engels, that capital itself produces that which can lead toward its destruction: the proletarian labor force. Joshi's concern is proven accurate later in the film when K is contacted by the underground replicant resistance and tasked with killing Deckard to stop him from leading the authorities to Rachael's true child. The replicants, therefore, represent both the machines *and* the conscious operators of the machinery (the workers), making them stand in for both the objective means of production *and* the exploited proletariat.[1] Finally, the question over automation is the one that plays into the current interest in Left accelerationism which champions the idea of a fully automated luxury communism, where the drudgery of work is replaced by a fully automated and roboticized society.[2]

The original *Blade Runner* thematizes the postmodern breakdown of the signifying chain and puts to question reality and ontology at a *subjective* level. Contemporary theory, however, is preoccupied with the question of our *object* status, and this is a narrative thread that underwrites *Blade Runner 2049.* For example, one of the ethical imperatives of new materialism is to turn away from too-easy dualisms and displace the centrality of the human subject. This, we might assume, is understandable given our present anxieties about climate change and the Anthropocenic deterioration of our planet. The human footprint, so it has been observed, has had a deleterious effect upon all life on Earth. The basic premise, then, of the various new materialisms (such as speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, vitalist materialism, actor-network theory, and so forth) is the need to dissolve the hierarchical relationship between humans and the rest of the planet—that is, between the human and the *non*-human. Object-oriented ontology theorist Levi Bryant, for instance, draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to propose that instead of distinguishing the human and the machinic, we see all objects (both non-human *and* human) as various different *types* of machines. Humans, after all, are machinic in the way that our biology is composed. All exist, he explains, as a network—a mapping—of the various relationships between machines of different sorts. But given the harmful impacts of human machines, some new materialists, such as Steven Shaviro, argue for an ethical and strategic anthropo*morphism* to move past a dominating anthropo*centrism*. That is, he claims, there is a need to ascribe to the non-human the qualities of the human as an exercise in ethical thinking, so that we might consider better taking care of and nurturing the non-human (61). Anthropomorphism therefore can be an act of displacing anthropocentrism. Similarly, critical posthumanist and vitalist materialist thinkers, such as Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett, argue in favor of *extending* the category of subject beyond the human to encompass all, both human and non-human. As these theories would have it, there is a need to dissolve the human/non-human binary, whether in the form of extending subjectivity beyond the human, or through the displacement of the category of the subject all together, making us all machines of different types.

Object-oriented ontologies, new materialisms, and posthumanisms are historicized within the context of late, post-crisis neoliberal capitalism. They are a reaction to the crises of neoliberal capitalism, and to the twinning impacts of climate change and automation. They are, in fact, a by-product of the objectified status, that deeper reification and objectification—the downward mobility—of the neoliberal middle classes.

The primary basis of neoliberalism, beyond its apparent penchant toward deregulation and non-interference, is its fundamentalist ethics toward markets and entrepreneurialization. In contrast to the classical liberal view with regard to the equality of agents in the market, neoliberalism views us all as individual entrepreneurs (businesses of one) in competition with each other for access to scarce resources. Buying access to resources (skills, education, cosmetics, networks, information communication technologies, etc.) means we are investing in ourselves, in our human capital—in ourselves as values, as objects, that can procure potentially more wealth, more capital. In the process, we continue to self-objectify.

It is in this context that the materialism of object-oriented ontology and posthumanist ethics begins to make sense. We are encouraged to displace the hierarchy and the dualism of the human/ non-human relationship when the white middle classes are beginning to feel their presence *as* objects, as machines. It's in this sense that new materialisms and posthumanisms are historical symptoms of the latent effects of post-crisis neoliberal capitalism. And here we can come back to the ethical significance of cyberpunk and *BR 2049* in the context of late postmodern culture.

As a political film, then, *BR 2049* represents a dialectical mediation between the ethical dilemma of how precisely to act when the human no longer figures in its centrality and memory-laden machines are seemingly ubiquitous. Here, a number of overlapping representations intersect to ask how precisely we should proceed politically and ethically when, on the one hand, human agency is radically decentered, and on the other, when it is precisely human action that is deemed to be at the root of our environmental and technological dilemmas, if not outright failures. These questions are taken up by some of the ancillary characters in the film.

First, K's holographic girlfriend Joi (Ana de Armas) is exemplary in this regard. It is clear from the beginning of the film that she remains spatially confined and limited since as a hologram she is without corporeal substance, not counting the hardware that is responsible for projecting her: She remains largely immobile and tethered to K's movement. While she may depict a high point in artificial intelligence, she seems to lack the very will or agency that we tend to deem as typical of the human. Throughout the film, her affection for K appears genuine and authentic, culminating in a heartbreaking scene when she is destroyed and ostensibly dies; however, near the end of the film, K encounters a large holographic advertisement for the Joi product (a striking visual image in the trailers that is key to marketing and promoting the film) that suggests her affection was just another component of the simulation. The hologram Joi ironically embodies the affective (unpaid) labor of social reproduction, condensed into artificial intelligence, and which corresponds with the other female characters in the film.

Consider the decidedly corporeal Mariette (Mackenzie Davis), a member of the resistance who is tasked with recruiting K by its leader, Freysa (Hiam Abbass). To carry out her mission, however, Mariette must first use seduction to attract his attention. Visually, and as a replicant, Mariette is reminiscent of Pris, the pleasure model from *Blade Runner*: She is a sex worker who initially meets K by trying to proposition him as a potential client. Later, we learn that Joi has hired Mariette to act as a surrogate body for them to have sex, emulating a similar scene in Spike Jonze's film, *Her* (2013).[3]

Yet another female character whose agency is brought into question is that of Wallace's aid, Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), who seems to obey every order she is given to violently acquire the means to best secure his financial interests: locating Deckard and finding out about the replicant child. Given these representations, the question needs to be asked: what separates Luv from Mariette, both of whom assist without question their leaders in the class struggle between the capitalist forces (Wallace) and the proletarian resistance (Freysa)? It is perhaps worth noting, too, that the two female characters who appear to be free to act of their own agency are Lieutenant Joshi and Freysa. They appear to express and embody most clearly the political class struggle. After all, Wallace seems to have very little regard for how his own actions and interests can negatively affect his class status—a true sign of the ruling class—while it is Joshi who remains concerned about staving off the replicant revolution. But as a representative of the state, we might contest that Joshi's ethics pertain more so to the interests of capital, and hence she remains unfree, just another cog in the machine.

There is, of course, the final relationship between K and Dr. Ana Stelline (Carla Juri), the designer of the replicant memories. Stelline, too, remains trapped—she is confined to a sterile room in her company's headquarters due to a childhood immune deficiency. She is very much like the other female characters in the film: She remains limited and restricted. However, she and K are bound in the way that they share the particular memory that leads K on his quest to uncover the

truth about his own status as subject: the memory that he has of his childhood that leads him to believe that he is Rachael's child. We learn through Freysa that Stelline is in fact Rachael's child, not K. Against common standards in replicant production, Stelline used her own memory, which was implanted into K's mind. Until he learned this truth, though, K was led to act, driven by his quest to uncover the truth.

As noted earlier, a key difference between K and Rachael is that K knew that his memories were implants. It was only when he was lured by the possibility that his memory was real that he became subjectivized through a process of misrecognition. Common among cyberpunk protagonists is the suggestion that true humanity factors not as a matter of self-consciousness or self-awareness. It is the product of an unconscious—what the machinic lacks is not consciousness but an unconscious. More specifically, *BR 2049* suggests that humanity and human ethics are not to be defined by a will, but by a drive enacted by trauma. K is subjectivized by the trauma of his memory, the loss of his experience as a replicant, and subsequently by the loss of the authenticity of his memory that was given to him at the beginning.

This might, in fact, be the ethical lesson of the film: that it is only through an initial misrecognition that we are humanized, driven by a singular desire to act in accordance with that misrecognition. It is by following this misrecognition to the end and discovering that one is delivered back to what they already knew that they were, but now from a new perspective. K misrecognizes himself as potentially human, and that is what makes him an ethical subject—a human-centered subject. For what the film proposes is that we are activated as subjects, not by the conscious self-recognition of what we are, but by an unconscious misrecognition that drives us to act. The ethical and political lesson of the film is that in the face of the potential reduction to our mere object status, what makes us human is our continued evasion of this fact in the misrecognition of our (cyber-)essence. When we place this lesson in the context of the present, in our own historical conditions, faced with the neoliberal capitalist reduction of our being into mere object status (whether as biological machines, reducible data, or even human capital), the aim is toward (de-)subjectivization. *BR 2049* therefore continues to demonstrate why cyberpunk is an ethical mode.

Notes

1 Since it appears that K is a paid laborer—he earns an income which he uses to pay rent and buy his own technological goods, such as his electronic girlfriend, Joi—he too is exploited labor in the traditional marxist sense of wage labor as the source of capitalist surplus value.

2 This also leads to contemporary questions around the distinction between human and machinic labor, the difference between what Deleuze and Guattari (see also Lazzarato) refer to as machinic enslavement and social subjection, the various new materialisms and object-oriented ontologies, and contemporary posthumanist theory.

3 For a further exploration of Spike Jonze's *Her*, please see Flisfeder and Burnham.

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