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Object Oriented Subjectivity: Capitalism and Desire in *Blade Runner 2049*

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Like the original *Blade Runner*, *2049* is a visually stunning depiction of our potential dystopian future; one that if we read it in its historical context provides a detailed cognitive mapping of the continued decline of unfettered multinational capitalism. Also, like the original, the new film provides a surface level portrayal of the world that, if read in spatial terms, maps for us many of the contours of the rhizomatic networks of contemporary capital; however, it also makes plain, thematically, deeper questions about ideology, neoliberal and capitalist subjectivity, dynamics of race and gender, and of course poses questions for us about our new age of automation, global computation, ecological degradation, and provides a glimpse into the vastly developing cleavages between central enclosures and peripheral slums.

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The film's plot is not overly impressive, nor does it really hit the ball straight out-of-the-park. It is fairly typical in its Oedipal and Christological rendering of its central character, K; and, while the hot takes on the film that have popped up in my social media newsfeed seem to want to stress this avenue of critique, I for one think that there is more to it than simply that, and I have little interest in pursuing this thread. As a product of reboot culture—that ever-increasing number of remakes, sequels, and alternate version storytelling that has become a staple of twenty-first century culture industry—*Blade Runner 2049* was sure to find an audience that would seem to know it all in advance. However, it's my opinion that if we remain focussed on this aspect of the film, then we may end up missing the forest for the anamorphic trees. The film is rich and evocative, not unlike the original; and if I cannot adequately address it all it is only for the better, since *Blade Runner 2049* is much denser than it may first appear. In this regard, here I tease out some of the ways in which *Blade Runner 2049* allows us to reflect upon and register elements of our historical present.

What I find most fascinating about *2049* is its capacity to challenge, not unlike the original film, our notions of human subjecthood. It is by questioning the corporeal and cognitive dimensions of human subjectivity, measuring these against new and contemporary technological developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, and algorithmic new media, that the film brings to the surface aspects of the present that are cause for reflection and speculation. The film asks us to consider these questions in the context of twenty-first century capitalism; and it does this, as well, by making matters of enjoyment, fantasy, and desire central to our experiences of contemporary selfhood. Or, more specifically, it figures matters of enjoyment, fantasy, and desire as being tied to the “passionate attachments” that constitute us as subjects. In fact, it is when K receives cause to question the presupposition that he is a mere machine that the film provides for us a kind of cognitive mapping of sorts for the cleavages of the contemporary ideology. With K as a model, then, my objective here is to look at the film as a text dealing with questions about subjectivity and desire in the context of the capitalist society. My approach is materialist in the Lacanian-Žižekian sense of positing the subject as the very gap in the Symbolic order, the lack in reality,

that opens up the space for an ethical act. *2049* speaks loudly about the differences between bodies and minds of subjects in the world; but as I draw out here, it is by positing the misrecognition of the subject as a gap in reality that we can retroactively conceive the human dimension of *jouissance*, and in this way the film speaks of an “object oriented subject,” as opposed to the new materialism of an “objet oriented ontology.” But before delving further into the portrayal of the latter in *2049*, please, allow me first...

...A Brief Detour Through *Star Trek*: Does Data Desire?

There is an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* called “The Measure of a Man,” in which the agency of Android Lt. Commander Data (Brent Spiner) is put to question. A cyberneticist, Lt. Commander Maddox (Brian Brophy), wishes to take Data apart in order to discover precisely what makes Data “tick”—that is, how he functions so that more Androids can be built to better serve Starfleet. Data refuses the procedure and the issue is then presented: is Data property, or does he have sentience—does he have the “right to choose”? As Captain Picard (Patrick Stewart) is in the process of considering the best defense for Mr. Data, the always wise (and sapient) bartender, Guinan (Whoopi Goldberg), directs him to what’s really at stake in this matter: building new Datas is akin to building a new race of beings; and, will not the legal decision about how he is defined—property or free person—come later to affect the treatment of this entirely new race of beings? The question, in other words, pertains to the relationship of master and slave, and the way that this relationship is couched in the legalistic discourses of property vs. personhood; or, perhaps more appropriately, this is a matter that pertains to the cleavage between the object and the subject—between objectivity and subjectivity. Is Data a mere machine, a mere object? Or does he have subjectivity?

The episode mirrors one from the original *Star Trek* series, “Court Martial,” in which Captain Kirk (William Shatner) is put on trial for potentially (and intentionally) killing a member of his crew during a

dangerous mission. The scenario centres on Kirk's actions and decisions as Captain, and whether or not the accident that supposedly caused the death of a crew member occurred by accident within the context of procedure, or if Kirk failed to follow procedure and is directly at fault. According to his own word, Kirk followed procedure and the death was accidental; however, the computer (machinic) record differs and shows that Kirk *failed* to follow procedure. The episode thus treats the question of human versus machine sentience and the issue of machinic logic, reliability, and objectivity. Liberal society seems to favour what is objective as more truthful or neutral. It's only when we enter the realm of human subjectivity that we discover the existence of a "bias." Like the typical depiction of the surveillance camera, the machine is deemed to show the truth, itself more reliable than the memory of the human subject. But in the episode, the question becomes whether or not a machine can have sentience, consciousness, or if this is a capacity limited to human personhood and subjectivity. Or, since machines do not have sentience, are they not truly objective? Is it human subjectivity that in fact trumps the clout of the machine, or is bias an inherent property of subjectivity? In "Court Martial," sympathies fall towards Kirk and the fallibility of the machine.

Star Trek: The Next Generation further troubles this question, and deals with it in other interesting ways, not least of which is the episode, "Elementary Dear Data," in which Data and Geordi enact a Sherlock Holmes mystery on the Holodeck, where they accidentally create a holographic rendering of Professor Moriarty (Daniel Davis) who develops conscious self-awareness. Although he is but a mere holographic projection, and thus his embodiment is limited to the confines of the Holodeck, the episode takes to task the Cartesian definition of subjecthood, *cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am. Moriarty relates to Data in the sense that he possesses conscious self-awareness and intelligence, but is himself substanceless; Data, conversely has substance but is a product of cybernetics. Thus, in "The Measure of a Man," the question turns towards Data, asking if he, in fact, has a "soul"? But perhaps, the better question to ask is whether or not Data desires.

Star Trek typically draws from and responds to these questions from a particularly liberal humanist perspective of the dualism between mind and body, and attends to them generally in Western legalese. One

question that seems to be left unattended when the series questions personhood is the one about desire. Does Data desire? Does he “dream of electric sheep,” so to speak? Does he, in other words, have an *unconscious*? In its modern liberal humanist approach to questions of subjectivity and humanity, *Star Trek* takes a more classical stance in placing the conscious self-centred subject as typical. The franchise, however, fails to consider what is perhaps at a deeper level the difference between human and machine: the capacity of human desire and enjoyment, or *jouissance*. My point, in other words, is that the true marker of human subjectivity is less its conscious self-awareness, and more the agency it has in its unawareness or *unconscious* with regards to its own enjoyment. Subjectivity, in other words, emerges, not by directly recognizing and *knowing* what we desire. Subjectivity emerges only after an initial failure—a failure to obtain the object that we *believe* we desire. It is our *unawareness*—our misrecognition—of the fact that we are following a different path than the one that we assume that accounts for the agency of the subject. Recognition is merely a *lure* that leads us in the direction of our actual (unconscious) enjoyment. Here, *Blade Runner* is more precise.

Substanceless Subjectivity: Are We Human? Or Are We Denser?

Much has already been said or written about the question of Deckard's (Harrison Ford) personhood.¹ When, at the end of the original film—or more adequately in the 1992 Director's Cut and the 2007 Final Cut of the film—Deckard finds the origami unicorn left by Gaff (Edward James Olmos), he gets an indication that he too is a Replicant. The paper unicorn mirrors the image of the unicorn that we see in Deckard's dream sequence inserted into the film in the Director's Cut at about the midway point. Throughout the film, both Deckard and the audience are meant to be misled about his status as human. He is apparently a human blade runner, whose job it is to hunt down and “retire,” or kill rogue Replicants deemed illegal on Earth following a mutiny of the Replicants on one of the Off-World Colonies, and the mass murder of the human “masters”

living there. As the original film explains, affect became a factor in losing the ability to control the Replicants. The NEXUS 6 model Replicants started to feel their own emotional responses, and in order to help tame these responses the manufacturing Tyrell Corporation opted to give the Replicants implanted memories that could help them to better assimilate affect into their cognitive relationship to reality. Affect and memory make the Replicants, like Rachael (Sean Young) and Deckard (hypothetically NEXUS 7 models), “more human than human,” as the motto goes for the Tyrell Corp. Ultimately, it is the inscription of fantasy, and not simply memory, that tricks the NEXUS Replicants. It is their relationship to a fundamental fantasy that humanizes them, by providing for them a relationship to their enjoyment. But this is where the new sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* complicates matters even further.

The new film takes place thirty years after the story in the original. The opening to *Blade Runner 2049*, and subsequent expository details brought out through dialogue between the characters, explains that things have changed since the time of the original film. This background is further developed in a series of three short films produced as side promotional projects for the new film: *Black Out 2022* (Dir. Shinchiro Watanabe 2017), *2036: Nexus Dawn* (Dir. Luke Scott 2017), and *2048: Nowhere to Run* (Dir. Luke Scott 2017). *Black Out 2022* explains that as the NEXUS 6 inventory expired, the Tyrell Corp. produced NEXUS 8 models that were purpose-built and with natural lifespans. The NEXUS 8 models were integrated into human society on Earth. However, disdain towards the Replicants persisted resulting in the rise of “Human Supremacy Movements,” which used Tyrell’s Replicant records to track down and kill them. In retaliation, a Replicant liberation movement destroyed all of the datacenters housing the records, causing a black out that swept across the world.

The blackout is referenced several times throughout *Blade Runner 2049*. It led, afterwards, to the prohibition of Replicant production, which forced Tyrell out of business. However, the second short promotional feature, *2036: Nexus Dawn*, depicts how fourteen years after the black out, and the prohibition of Replicant production, the new tech mogul, Niander Wallace (Jared Leto)—who the opening scroll sequence at the beginning of *Blade Runner 2049* explains built his fortune by

inventing a new protein harvesting technology to stave off the erosion of the food supply and the hunger that followed the blackout—has bought out the Tyrell Corp. and has begun to again produce new Replicants, which he has now made to directly obey the human masters. It's this fact that allows Wallace to force the future government to rescind the prohibition and the new mass production of Replicants.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, unlike the original, Replicants are now allowed to roam the streets freely. They are permitted because of the failsafe of obedience. The film's hero, K, is a new generation NEXUS. Like Rachel (and Deckard), K's memories have been implanted. But unlike her, K is made fully aware that he is a Replicant and that his memories are fake. In the original film, Deckard tells Rachel that she is a Replicant. Rachel responds by showing him photographs—"objective evidence"—of her childhood, of her childhood memories. These photographs represent elements of her personhood measured in memories; but they are memories in object form. Deckard tells her that these memories are in fact fake, that they are images of Tyrell's niece. Rachel's memories, that element of herself that made her "human," actually belong to someone else. It's this fact that subtracts for her the essence of her personhood; afterwards she devolves into a kind of substanceless subjectivity. It's this fact that, in a sense, drags her down from the highest to the lowest; it is her process of proletarianization, so to speak. Her photographs, on the one hand serve as objectal correlates to the fundamental fantasy that supports her existence as human. But, on the other hand, the film shows that even the objective evidence of her personhood is without guarantee. It is not the object, but her experience as substanceless that transforms her into a subject. She is "hystericized" (in the Lacanian sense) at the moment of the failure of her fundamental fantasy, forcing her into a position of questioning her identity in the eyes of the big Other.

Although K is aware that his memories are implanted and that he is a Replicant, his process of proletarianization occurs somewhat differently. Like the original film, *Blade Runner 2049* maintains a focus on questioning liberal conceptions of humanism. And similar, as well, to the original film, the new one hinges its conception of humanity on the difference between conscious self-awareness and misrecognition, unawareness (of what we really are), and an "unconscious" of sorts.

Whereas Rachel believed herself to be human, only to discover that she is actually a Replicant, K's mystery begins when it appears as though he might not in fact be a Replicant but human—or, at least, human-like. K and Rachel are different from a character like *Star Trek's* Commander Data for the fact that their subjectivity is defined, not by conscious self-awareness, but by conscious misrecognition—the misidentifying, mis-interpellation, of the core of their subjecthood. This possibility presents itself to K in the process of investigating a Rogue NEXUS 8, Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista).

Blade Runner 2049 begins as K tracks down and “retires” Sapper—in scenes that mimic the aesthetic and the staging of Deckard's fight with Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) in the Bradbury building at the end of the original film. Afterwards, while investigating deeper into Sapper's protein farm, K discovers a box buried beneath a tree, which has carved into it the numbers “6 10 21.” Upon seeing these numbers, a memory sequence is flashed of a small child holding a small wooden toy horse, standing in front of a fire—K's fundamental fantasy. The sequence is flashed quickly and becomes the film's McGuffin (of course, the toy horse replicates the origami unicorn left by Gaff in the original film). It's later revealed that the contents of the box are Rachel's remains. It's discovered that she died not long after giving birth to a child delivered through c-section. This astounding revelation is the political linchpin of the film.

Thought to be impossible, the fact that Rachel was able to give birth to a child raises concern for K's superior, Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright). She is concerned that if the Replicant resistance movement discovers that a Replicant gave birth to a child then there would be a new war, a new battle cry for the Replicant resistance. She orders K to find and kill (“retire”) the child. But K still has an odd connection to the site from which Rachel's remains were discovered: the memory that was triggered by the numbers carved on the tree trunk. What is his connection?

The numbers carved out on the tree give material substance—not unlike the origami unicorn—to his memory. It objectifies, in a way, a memory that he had until then believed was implanted. Although K knows that he is a Replicant, and knows that his memories are implants, the material manifestation of this memory troubles his established subjecthood—perhaps he is not just a mere Replicant. Perhaps he

is actually Rachel's child. Is *he* the child that Joshi has ordered him to kill? If a child is born from a Replicant mother (or parents), does he remain a Replicant? If he has produced his own memories, is he still a Replicant? What is now the dividing line between humans and Replicants if the latter can self-reproduce? What marks our humanity?

The fact that K is also aware of his existence as a Replicant (unlike Rachel and Deckard), and that he knows that his memories have been implanted, presents an intriguing update to *Blade Runner's* universe of ideology critique. In contrast to an older notion of ideology as false consciousness, K operates less through the mechanism of mystification, and more through that of disavowal as in the psychoanalytic statement, "I know very well, but nevertheless..." His obedience is predicated upon a certain disavowed knowledge, where in the place of this knowledge he is allowed to enjoy. Are things really so different for the way that we humans in the real world contend with our everyday existence, given the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, of which we are constantly made fully aware? Or is subjecthood in contemporary capitalism not also predicated on the same kind of disavowed knowledge. What then happens when the *misrecognition* central to our conscious subjecthood is brought into question?

Automation, Replication, and Enslavement

The political economic context of *2049* is also brought into focus through the contradictory perspectives of two secondary characters. Whereas Lt. Joshi fears the possible repercussions of the discovery that Rachel, a Replicant, gave birth to a child—that if discovered, this might cause a new war—Wallace is oddly excited. From his perspective, as a capitalist and owner of a megacorporation, the self-reproduction of Replicants might actually help to solve a problem of production—that is, the speed with which he is capable of turning out new models to satisfy demand from the Off-World colonies. While the state political-legal position of the LAPD is one of potential conflict, Wallace sees only the revolutionary productive potentials of self-reproducing Replicants,

which he hopes could give him a leg up in his business. His perspective is one of the market; and it is worth looking at these contradictory perspectives of Joshi and Wallace, for it is indicative of the contradictions that do exist between the political and the economic; or, put differently, it oddly indicates the intersection of the class state mechanism and the tensions in the economic mode of production.²

Wallace, a capitalist, is continuously interested in driving further the revolutionizing of the means of production. If we read this from a traditional historical materialist perspective, we might be able to register this drive as one that amounts to escaping or overcoming the contradictions inherent to the mode of the production. What are Replicants if not the means of production outgrowing the relations of production? They are both the conscious operators of production *and* the means of production—all of the forces of production congealed into themselves. They are akin to the drive to automate the production process so that capital can retain more profit that does not have to be distributed in the form of wages to human labour. Wallace is (literally, in the film) blinded to this as he strives to further advance processes of automation located in the Replicants themselves, as productive technology. They are from the perspective of the Corporation (both Tyrell and Wallace) non-human labouring machines, or forms of labour-saving technology; machines that take on the appearance—they look like—human slaves. So what happens when the slave-machines begin to recognize themselves as sentient beings of rights? This is the question of race and slavery that Guinan posed in *Star Trek*.

One of the contemporary trends in philosophy is the so-called New Materialism, or Object Oriented Ontology. In a recent article that is well worth some reflection, W. Oliver Baker makes the claim that interest in the New Materialisms is very much a particular reaction to the current moment of capitalist development (Baker, 2016). Within the history of colonialism, Baker notes that colonized peoples were not in fact viewed as human, but as non-human objects. Slaves, for instance, are considered to be productive *property*, means of production that are more like machinery than people. Contemporary neoliberal capitalism has radicalized this situation somewhat; that is, if we go to the end in considering the effects of the neoliberal rhetoric of entrepreneurialism.

For the neoliberal ideology, democratic citizenship has been replaced by entrepreneurship. We are now all “entrepreneurs-of-the-self.” This has emerged in material practice as the austerity logic of neoliberalism has torn down the social safety net, making the market the ideal space from which access to needs is provided at a cost. Sure, we are all free to access our needs in the market, but rising costs of real needs effect an imbalance that reproduces inequality. At the same time, just-in-time models of production, and an increase in precarious labour, enforce new *regimes* of labour where every entrepreneur-of-the-self is constantly in the process of both producing and reproducing selfhood (what Foucault calls “biopower”) at the same time that they are also producing value-bearing commodities. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri read this process as one of “subjects producing subjects;” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 32) but as I have argued previously, this is a process not of subjects producing subjects, but of subjects actively involved in the deepening processes of reification that now occupy the entirety of life (Flisfeder, 2015). This is true of Foucault, as well, who, as I’ve put it, “represents the individual caught in ideology insofar as it misrecognizes its objectivization as a condition of its subjectivization” (ibid.: 568). In other words, instead of producing new subjectivities, my claim is that neoliberalism is a term that helps to justify contemporary processes of deepening reification; and, back to the New Materialisms that Baker addresses, it seems as though something like Object Oriented Ontology begins to factor in at the moment when the colonialist human begins descend into the sphere of the objectified non-human commodity. More than just relations between objects replacing relations between subjects—or, in terms of commodity fetishism, where a political relationship between people is masked by a social relationship between things—now we begin to conceive a horizontal network of objects that includes human actors that are somewhat akin to non-human agents. But only at this moment of total reification, does something like Object Oriented Ontology, as Baker argues, seem to gain traction. So, back to *Blade Runner 2049*: what happens when the objects, the machines, begin to gain sentience, when the machine-objects are subjectivized?

This process of subjectivization is more complicated than in the older Althusserian sense of ideological interpellation, which the Slovenian school of Lacanian scholarship has troubled for years. Whereas for Althusser, the subject is a product of ideology, according to Mladen-Dolar, the subject is what emerges where ideology fails (Dolar, 1993). This makes subject, then, not a category of ideology, but one of emancipatory agency, and demonstrates effectively where a reified consciousness differs from that of the proletariat. This, we might say, is what happens to K upon questioning the possibility of his status as Replicant. It's when he begins to doubt his existence as a normal Replicant that he becomes an hysterical subject in the Lacanian sense of demanding from the big Other: *Que vuoi?*—What do you want from me?

Jo(u)i-ssance

The object quality of Replicant subjecthood is further taken to task in *2049* through the character of K's holographic girlfriend, Joi (Ana de Armas). Joi, too, is a product of the Wallace Corporation, but unlike the *embodied* Replicants, she is a hologram. Of course, her depiction in the film abounds in not so subtle references to recent and past depictions of "robot" girlfriends, from 80s films like Steve De Jarnatt's *Cherry 2000* (1987), or even Michael Gottlieb's *Mannequin* (1987), to more recent versions in films like Alex Garland's *Ex-Machina* (2014) and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), and TV shows like *Westworld* (HBO 2016–). Joi is bound to her holographic projection unit built into K's apartment and therefore unable to be truly mobile. She only becomes mobile when K buys her a "gift," a portable holographic projection device that allows her to be transported to other environments, outside of K's apartment. Although it seems to give her freedom, we see throughout the film that she can only go as far as K, which is to say that her "freedom" is still tethered to K's mobility and not her own.

Joi serves somewhat as K's counterpart, an artificial lifeform whose sentience is continually put into question. More so, in some ways, than even K since as his stereotypically domesticated "housewife," her portrayal raises questions about the gender dynamics and politics internal

to the identity of the Replicants. Because she is without material substance, it is depicted in the film that Joi and K are unable to engage in physical acts of love (kissing, holding hands, and having sex). This impasse allows us to reflect upon the depiction of some of the other female characters in the film.

Mariette (Mackenzie Davis) is a prostitute who, at an earlier point in the film, is told by Freysa (Hiam Abbass), a leader in the Replicant resistance, to attempt to seduce K—likely to bring him to the resistance. Later on, Mariette arrives at K's apartment at Joi's request. Since Joi and K are unable to have physical sex, Mariette is brought to serve as Joi's surrogate, replicating a popular scene from Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), in which the Operating System (OS), Samantha, with whom the film's hero, Theo, has fallen in love, invites a human "surrogate," Isabella, to act as a material stand-in for them to have sex.³ The scene in *2049* has Joi's holographic image overlaid and synced with Mariette's body, which can be used to satisfy K's pleasure, while continuing to fantasize about having sex with Joi directly. Both Joi and Mariette (whom we also later find out is a Replicant, part of the resistance), then, here appear to serve as objects—in both physical and virtual form—for K's enjoyment. They serve as the props of his masculine sexuation, his identification as a masculine subject, in the way described by Lacan in his logics of sexuation (Lacan, 1999). We might even say that Joi serves as the fantasmatic, sexualized counterpart to the memory of the horse toy that plagues K from the beginning.

The scene is unambiguous in its depiction of the heterosexual male fantasy, but I would also argue that because this is so overt it is meant to trouble even the continued existence of sexism in contemporary capitalism. The film appears to be quite self-conscious of this fact as the villainous Replicant, Luv (Sylvia Hoeks)—Wallace's assistant and henchwoman—twice asks K how he likes their "product." This ironic and doubly-coded depiction of sexist gender dynamics is also evinced in the way that Joi insists on giving K the name "Joe." K confides in Joi that he believes himself to be Rachel's child, to which she responds by telling him that she's always felt that he was special, insisting that instead of his Replicant name, K (a shortened version of his serial number), he

uses the human name to identify his unique qualities amongst the Replicants. Only, later on in the film, K wanders through the L.A. streets and comes upon an interactive pornographic advert for the Joi product, which towers over him, leaning in to him saying: “You look like a ‘good Joe.’” It is clear in this instance that the amorous feelings that Joi seemed to be projecting onto K were still part of her programming. It also becomes clear at this point, through this realization, that K has in some ways traversed the fundamental fantasy that was his tether to his own social being.

The female Replicants still carry with them the object-qualities addressed above in relation to the question of non-human slaves; and even Joi’s immobility is an indication of this, comparable to the position of the memory designer, Dr. Ana Stelline (Carla Juri). K seeks out Stelline to discover whether or not his memory of the child is real or an implant. She is, herself, confined to a cage-like environment, quarantined due to a rare illness that she has acquired. She tells K that it is illegal to give Replicants human memories, which we can deduce has changed since Rachel as a model 7 NEXUS. Stelline reads K’s memory and tells him that the memory was in fact lived by a person, which makes K believe finally that he *is* Rachel’s child. When we later discover that Stelline and not K is Rachel’s child, this further complicates the ethical position of the film. The memory of the horse toy belongs to Stelline. It was implanted into K’s memory. Although this reconfirms his status as a Replicant, the process of searching out the object still helps to place him in the position of the ethical subject, not unlike the process of the analytic treatment. After going through the process, after searching out the object and ending up still with nothing—he is not Rachel’s child, he is still formally, technically, the same as he was before—the process still allows K to return to his previous objective position, but now with a newly formed subjective perspective on his ethical position. He has lost Joi (joy/pleasure), but he has traversed the fantasy that positioned him within the existing relations of power. He, in other words, did not give way to his desire, and ended up following this path long enough to reconceive his relationship to his en-joi-meant.

Putting this last point aside for now, it is worth comparing Dr. Stelline’s and Joi’s entrapment and confinement to their respective camps

since what the film also provides for us is cogent investigation of the politics of space and how this represents key elements of the world that the film draws out. It creates for us, in a sense, a spatial representation of the rhizomatic architectures of internalization and externalization that are part of global late capitalism, but which are also indicative of the wide array of global spatial conundrums and contexts that we now face, from ecological catastrophe to the networked aspects of global production and to the totalization of global computation that is now a part of our everyday experiences of reality.

The Camp or the Bunker

Another way that *2049* differs from *Blade Runner* is in its depiction of the world outside of the dystopian Los Angeles. The original 1982 theatrical release of *Blade Runner* gives us a small utopian glimpse at the world beyond the dark L.A. borders, when Deckard and Rachel escape up north. This ending is of course removed in the Director's and subsequent cuts of the film, leaving us only with the claustrophobic space of dystopian L.A. The only indication of a place beyond comes from the overhead floating adverts for the Off-World Colonies. But in *2049*, we do get to see a broader scope of the planet.

The film opens, even, with the scene at Sapper's protein farm, which appears dusty, barren, and cold. K later goes off to find Deckard who is hiding in a destroyed Las Vegas, which has been polluted by radiation, making it impossible for any humans to live there (since both Deckard and K are able to withstand the radiation, we can assume that this is a subtle indication that they truly are both Replicants). Such depictions thus force us to consider L.A. as a space of both enclosure and respite. In *Blade Runner*, the constant adverts for the Off-World Colonies make it seem as though the inability to escape Earth is a fate left to the unfortunate lower classes. In *2049*, the extreme ecological degradation in the various other parts of Earth present Los Angeles less as a camp than as a bunker, a space of protection from the dangerous world beyond its borders. But the city as centre also depicts for us in another way that key element of disavowal that is a component part of contemporary ideology.

We see in the process of K's investigation, when he attempts to track down the origins of his memory of the child with the small wooden toy horse standing in front of the fire, the existence of non-machine labour. That is, we are given here a scene depicting the production of the machinic through child slave labour, which we can clearly recognize as akin to modern day sweatshops, often set on the periphery of the capitalist global north—which is to say in the impoverished developing locales of the global south, officially condemned by liberal capitalism, but still an elementary part of the capitalist pursuit of increasingly cheaper labour. For all of the glitzy glossy neon and spectacle of the big city, it's very construction is still reliant upon various forms of racialized, gendered, and child exploitation. Fortress L.A. is the very shield, the bunker that protects us from the hard reality of the world beyond.

But we know this already. Who doesn't know about the existence of global ecological degradation? Who of us remains unaware of continued existence of racialized and gendered practices of exploitation—in both the developed and developing worlds; or of the continued existence of child exploitation in sweatshops. We know, but nevertheless... In this way, we are all a bit like K, consciously misrecognizing our own subjective position in the world; and, in this way, too, *Blade Runner 2049* reflects perfectly the now.

Just as K's initial misrecognition leads him towards an emancipatory logic, so too does the narrative of the film express this possibility for us under the present conditions of contemporary capitalist ideology. Like K, we—in twenty-first century, postmodern and neoliberal capitalism—relate to the present ideology through a form of misrecognition and disavowal. K begins by *knowing*—that is, by “recognizing”—the fact of his existence as a Replicant. He is able to consciously acknowledge that he is a Replicant with implanted memories. But he disavows this fact as part of his daily existence. Today, we all know the fact of capitalist exploitation, we are able to avow this as a recognized fact; nevertheless we act as if this was not the case. K begins his emancipatory journey when, for an instant, driven by the logic of his desire, he begins to *doubt* his existence as a Replicant. Driven by this possibility he seeks out the truth. He misrecognizes the logic of his desire, but it is only through such a misrecognition that he ultimately becomes subject. In the end, he

returns to his initial position of existence as a Replicant, but now with a new understanding as to his *conditions* of existence and possibility.

As the logic of the film suggests, we become politicized, “not out of some neutral concern for larger political questions or some universal desire to eliminate injustice but because of a singular desire that bears only on one’s own subjectivity” (McGowan, 2011: 115). This is the lesson of the film: human subjectivity bears upon our relationship to our desire, and the political ethics of the subject are the same as the ethics of psychoanalysis: do not give way with regards to your desire, even if, in the end, we gain nothing but a new perspective on the very position from which we began. In *Black Out 2022*, the timid Replicant character, Trixie, asks her savior, Iggy: “if we die, we go to heaven?” He responds: “no heaven or hell for us; this world is all we’ve got;”⁴ and, perhaps, in the face of all of the various conflicts and struggles that we anticipate facing in the progression of twenty-first century capitalism, of which we are already fully aware, this is, ultimately, the materialist point of *Blade Runner 2049*.

Notes

1. For more on this, see Matthew Flisfeder, *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 121–135.
2. This, still, was present in the original film; as Ian Buchanan indicates, what *Blade Runner* stages “is a confrontation in which the ingenuity of capital... is pitted against the vigilance of the State.” *Deleuze: A Metacommentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 132.
3. On this, see Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham, “Love and Sex in the Age of Capitalist Realism: On Spike Jonze’s *Her*.” *Cinema Journal* 57.1 (2017): 25–45.
4. Which I’d like to contrast with Father John Misty’s point at the end of his song, “Pure Comedy:” “I hate to say it, but each other’s all we’ve got.”

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