



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Blade Runner* and the Right to Life

Eli Park Sorensen

Trans-Humanities Journal, Volume 8, Number 3, October 2015, pp. 111-129  
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/trh.2015.0012>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/635253/summary>

---

# *Blade Runner* and the Right to Life

---

Eli Park SORENSEN (Seoul National University)

## I. Introduction

One of the most debated issues in connection with Ridley Scott's sci-fi masterpiece *Blade Runner* (1982) is whether Deckard—the protagonist, played by Harrison Ford—is a replicant or not. Allegedly, Ford was strongly opposed to Scott's decision to include the famous unicorn scene in the film, which apparently confirms that Deckard—like Rachael—possesses “implants,” synthetic memories; a scene anticipating the film's ending, during which Deckard finds an origami unicorn left by detective Gaff, who thus reveals that he knows about Deckard's real identity—that he is in fact a replicant (Sammon 362).

In this article, I suggest that although much of the scholarship and criticism on *Blade Runner* tends to focus on this particular issue, it nonetheless remains one of the least interesting aspects of the film. Or, to put it differently, whether Deckard is a replicant is a question whose real purpose rather seems to be covering a far more traumatic issue, which Michel Foucault in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* addresses thus: “The ‘right’ to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfactions of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be” (145).

The struggle for this right takes place in a strangely somber, majestically gloomy universe, intent on conspiring against life itself. The film's ill-boding opening scrawl introduces the concept of the replicant, and more specifically the Nexus-6 battle model—as well as its “negation,” the blade runner agents. Their job description goes like this: “This was not called execution. It was called retirement.” Already here one starts wondering what kind of monstrous being lurks underneath the term “replicant”—a monstrosity apparently in need of three negative words (not, execution, and retirement) to verbally contain or

neutralize it.

Initially, the reason why the replicants inspire so much fear is because of a bloody mutiny in the off-world colonies initiated by the Nexus-6 battle model, as the opening scrawl informs us. After this mutiny, all replicants have been banned from earth, while those violating this injunction becoming *homo sacer*. Upon reflection, however, the question emerges as to why the replicants in fact are outlawed from earth. Throughout the film, we get the impression that anyone capable of leaving the earth has already done so; and that those left are there more or less against their will, a disparate lumpenproletariat of impoverished people, punks, perverts, and religious fanatics—and, of course, J. F. Sebastian, who did not pass “the medical test” due to his health condition.<sup>1</sup> One reason behind the ban may be the fact that the Tyrell Company—led by the “God of Biomechanics,” Dr. Tyrell—still resides on earth. Indeed, the Tyrell Company is the reason why the Nexus-6 replicants return to earth; they want more life, and Eldon Tyrell, their maker, is probably the only one who can possibly grant their wish.<sup>2</sup>

One of the premises viewers easily accept is that these replicants are inherently dangerous. Initially, this seems easy to confirm: in the first scene of the film, the replicant Leon brutally assassinates blade runner Holden, after which the semi-retired Deckard is summoned back. On closer inspection, however, the replicants seem neither particularly dangerous nor murderous—that is to say, not more dangerous than any human being would have been in similar situations. The replicants easily blend into the heterogeneous crowd; i.e. they *pass* as humans, as Alan Turing would have argued (448).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the police ironically needs a *machine*—the so-called Voight-Kampff—to distinguish

- 
1. J. F. Sebastian suffers from the Methuselah Syndrome (accelerating ageing), which makes him *look* a lot older than he actually is.
  2. Somewhat strangely, however, the replicants’ motives initially confuse the police. Thus, in the beginning of the film Deckard asks Captain Bryant: “Why did they come down here?”—to which Captain Bryant responds: “You tell me pal, that’s what you’re here for.”
  3. In the 1950-paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” Turing argued that if a machine can have a conversation with a person, without this person realizing it is a machine, the machine has passed the test of thinking. For an extended discussion of artificial intelligence and *Blade Runner*, see: Littmann, Greg. “What’s Wrong with Building Replicants? Artificial Intelligence in *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, and *Prometheus*.” *The Culture and Philosophy of Ridley Scott*. Ed. Adam Barkman, Ashley Barkman, and Nancy Kang. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. 133–44.
-

them from humans. Dangerous they become, of course, when chased by people with murderous intent—e.g. Leon in the interrogation room, Zhora in the night club, and Pris and Roy in J. F. Sebastian’s apartment complex. In all these cases, the replicants’—undoubtedly violent—reactions seem hard to distinguish from those of humans. So why is it absolutely crucial to hunt down and kill these beings, who after all soon will die, in fact throughout the entire film are in the process of dying, and in the end actually die on the roof of the Bradbury Building, as “naturally” as it may seem possible for a replicant?<sup>4</sup>

In several scenes, we encounter the following questions: When will I die? How old am I? Have you seen my classified file? That these files actually do exist is visually illustrated during the scene in Captain Bryant’s office. The files, one may assume, contain the data of the replicants’ life expectancy, and thus reveal the fact that all of them are facing imminent extinction; a few days, a couple of years, no more. Leon, for example, was “born” on April 10, 2017, which means that his “death,” or date of expiration, would be around April 10, 2021, i.e. one and a half years later.<sup>5</sup> But even if Leon may live a bit longer than someone like Roy Batty (who only seems to have a few days left when Deckard starts searching for him), it nonetheless remains an indisputable fact that *his* moment of death has also been determined in advance.

Thus, there is a sense in which it seems entirely superfluous to send out a group of professional killers, whose only purpose is to eliminate the escaped replicants, when these beings already have a “fail safe device” built into their operative systems, the four-year life span.<sup>6</sup> Detective Gaff’s last words (repeated in Deckard’s thoughts when he finds the origami unicorn in the last scene) are: “Too bad she won’t live—but then again, who does?” Initially, Gaff’s comment seems to suggest that Rachael, qua replicant, will eventually “expire” due to the

---

4. This is of course the main reason why they return to earth, the desperate desire for more life and the *avoidance* of death.

5. As the opening scrawl points out, the film takes place in November, 2019.

6. Strangely, Deckard does not seem to know anything about this four-year life span when Captain Bryant tells him—strange, taking into account that Deckard is an experienced blade runner. One must assume that the previous, less sophisticated, models (e.g. Nexus-5 and so on) had no “fail safe device.” The “fail safe device” was created to prevent the replicants from developing real emotions, and subsequently self-consciousness, free will, and autonomy. It is thus a counter-measure to the “implants,” memories, which originally were a counter-measure to what Dr. Tyrell observes as the replicants’ “strange obsession” with their emotions (“a cushion or pillow for their emotions”).

---

in-built “fail safe device.” The comment may also indicate that Deckard is a replicant as well, and thus likewise lives on borrowed time.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Gaff’s comment might be understood in a more sinister way, that is, as a threat; that Rachael, qua replicant, sooner or later will be hunted down and killed by the blade runners (or in the language of the film, “retired”).

The *raison d’être* of the blade runners is the enforcement of the death penalty; however, given the fact that the enforcers of this death penalty *know* that these replicants will die a “natural” death within a foreseeable future, one of the riddles this film presents is that the *enforcement* of this violent law seems far more important—than the simple fact of death. So, to repeat the question: Why is it so important to liquidate these beings, when in fact they will die very soon anyway? Since the photo ID of the escaped replicants actually exist in the files, and furthermore since the police eventually discover that the replicants have returned to earth to prolong their lives—why not simply increase security measures around the Tyrell company (which seems strangely vulnerable and open), and wait until the replicants expire? In Roy Batty’s case, the expiration date almost coincides with the moment of his possible liquidation; Deckard could not possibly have reached him any time sooner. In any case, in their desperate pursuit after more life the replicants are hard pressed for time, as Roy mentions to Sebastian in an attempt to persuade the latter to introduce them to Tyrell. More specifically, the in-built four-year life span seems in itself to constitute a brutal death penalty, one that ought to have made the blade runner squad superfluous—at least as a *death squad*.<sup>8</sup> One might have imagined a security force, perhaps an anti-terror corps; but a professional team of executioners seems like a sinister redundancy, which—taking into account the critical reception of the film—has gone strangely unnoticed. I argue, however, that it is precisely this redundancy that constitutes the ideological blind spot of *Blade Runner*; the legitimization and activation of the death penalty as a response to a situation in which a certain kind of life is perceived as a biological danger to others.

---

7. At one point, Gaff tells Deckard that “You’ve done a man’s job,” indicating, possibly, that the latter is not a real human being.

8. Cf. Captain Bryant’s comment after Deckard’s assassination of Zhora: “[H]e’s a goddam one man slaughterhouse!”

---

## II. Biopower

“For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death” (135), writes Foucault in *History of Sexuality*, a text outlining the emergence of a new form of power—one that articulates itself in two forms related to the body: discipline and biopower. This power is, if not opposed, at least different from the previous kind of power embodied by the sovereign, whose power in the end, writes Foucault, “was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it” (136). The sovereign’s power is according to Foucault basically the right to demand the subject’s life insofar as the sovereign’s power is threatened, internally or externally.

This right to take life and let live gradually changes during the 17<sup>th</sup> century to “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138). Foucault describes this change that occurs in the power structure as “nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques” (141–42). What power “demanded and what served as an objective was life, understood as the basic needs, man’s concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plenitude of the possible” (145). On the one hand, a disciplining of life,

centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*. (139)

On the other hand, a biopolitics aimed at the population: “the species of the body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (139). What is at stake here is a relatively new dynamic of power in history, according to Foucault, which basically involves a redefinition of the subject:

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an accessible substrate

---

that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life. (143)

To Foucault, this new form of power, and the inscription of life itself into history, represents a provisional culmination: "The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process; the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence" (137). A little later, he writes:

But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question. This transformation had considerable consequences. (143)

*Blade Runner* is in many ways a film that envisions the furthest consequences of this transformation. The film is in other words an articulation of the atomic situation that Foucault describes—in its most fatal extremity.<sup>9</sup> *Blade Runner's* apocalyptic universe thus contains the story of life after bio-history has come to a culminating end point, at which the replicant embodies the most pregnant expression of biopower's subject, its most passionate dream.<sup>10</sup> As Dr. Eldon Tyrell tells Roy Batty, the leader of the escaped Nexus-6 replicants, "You were

---

9. To paraphrase Rachael's words: Life is not "*in* the business, I *am* the business."

10. Cf. Tyrell's comment about Roy Batty: "You're quite a prize!"

---

made as well as we could make you ... you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy.”

### III. The Sovereign and the Death Penalty

Foucault’s genealogy of power is not a chronological-linear process; that is, the sovereign society is not chronologically replaced with the disciplinary society, which subsequently is replaced by the governmental society. Rather, the elements of all three forms of power are present simultaneously, although increasingly dominated by the two latter.<sup>11</sup> However, in the symbolically overcharged scene during which the “prodigal son” — Roy Batty — returns to the father, Tyrell, we see a remarkable celebration of the old sovereign. It is true that Tyrell at one point says that death is “a little out of my jurisdiction,” although this is in fact the only thing of which he is a master in this particular context—more life, as we know, he cannot give Roy. Quite the contrary, Tyrell seems surrounded by death: as the “maker” of the replicants, he is the one who implanted the “fail safe device” (the four-year life span), and furthermore—one may assume—is responsible for the excommunication of the escaped replicants, and thus ultimately responsible for the blade runner death squad. In other words, Tyrell here embodies the sovereignty of biopolitics: the one who can issue the death penalty over those challenging his power, the survival of his sovereignty.

However, why do we find a passionate celebration of the sovereign, these multiple references to this particular kind of power, one that Foucault clearly *dissociates* from the intensification of biopolitics?<sup>12</sup> Why does the figure of the sovereign emerge at this point? Initially, one could argue that the film ironically plays on the enlightenment theme of man’s rebellion against the Creator<sup>13</sup> —or,

---

11. On this issue, see: Lazzarato, Maurizio. “From Biopower to Biopolitics.” *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2002): 112–25.

12. The film conjures up an aura of sovereignty not only in this specific scene, but throughout its universe, e.g. the solemn, temple-like pyramid, the chess game, the numerous appearances of semi-religious rituals, and the general atmosphere of a state of nature.

13. For a reading along these lines, see: Desser, David. “The New Eve: The Influence of *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* on *Blade Runner*.” *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Ed.

---



as quite a number of critics have done, read the film in terms of an Oedipal dynamic, with Roy Batty committing patricide.<sup>14</sup> In a biopolitical reading of *Blade Runner*, however, the film seems to indicate that when biopower reaches its purest expression in the form of life as replicant, an ironic reversal occurs, after which life itself becomes a monstrosity, something uncontrollable—that which threatens power, and which subsequently must be eliminated.

It is in this light that one should understand the death penalty, which the film latently and manifestly struggles to legitimize; the legitimization of excommunicating a life that must be liquidated, gotten rid of, at any cost. As Foucault writes, the death penalty, characteristic of the sovereign's power, does not disappear entirely within the new forms of power. Since the sovereign's power gradually changes to a dynamic that increasingly aims toward the optimization and complete administration of life, the death penalty becomes more difficult to legitimize. Foucault writes: "How could power exercise its highest prerogatives by putting people to death, when its main role was to ensure, sustain and multiply life, to put this life in order?" (*History* 138) Within the new forms of power, death becomes a kind of scandal, a contradiction, the most radical expression of power's limit (138). Thus, the death penalty is only enforced in those cases where the issue is less related to the monstrosity of the crime, but more to "the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society" (138).

In *Blade Runner*, this monstrous criminal arrives in the shape of the replicant, which at the same time epitomizes the culmination of the biopolitical life. The replicant is less excommunicated because of a monstrous act, but more because its very *being* is monstrous; the replicant is at one and the same time the most perfect,<sup>15</sup> and the most perverse human;<sup>16</sup> it is on the basis of its extreme being that the replicant is outlawed and sentenced to death.

---

Judith B. Kerman. *Wisconsin: The U of Wisconsin P*, 1997. 53–65.

14. For discussions of *Blade Runner* in terms of the Oedipal Complex, see: Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990; Silverman, Kaja. "Back to the Future." *Camera Obscura* 9 (1991): 108–32; and Pope, Richard. "Affects of the Gaze: Post-Oedipal Desire and the Traversal of Fantasy in *Blade Runner*." *Camera Obscura* 73.25 (2010): 69–95.

15. Cf. Tyrell's comment to Roy Batty: "You were made as well as we could make you."

16. Cf. Roy's response to Tyrell: "I've done questionable things"—after which Roy kills him, with his bare hands, in a gesture that could almost be described as tender and affectionate.

---

Never before, writes Foucault, have so many wars been fought “in order to go on living” (137)—wars fought

on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. (137)

It is against this background that murder on a collective level finds its most concrete expression: “One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others” (138). However, the ironic reversal that takes place in *Blade Runner* is that it is *not* the replicants who constitute an immediate biological danger within a biopolitical perspective—it is, quite the contrary, the imperfect human beings. The film explores the irony of the moment when The Tyrell Company’s motto, “More Human Than Human,” literally becomes true—that is, the creation of a *perfect* human being, without flaws, imperfections (i.e. all that which, in a sense, makes human beings *human*); a stronger, more intelligent, noble, beautiful, even—ironically—more passionate, and emotional creature. By contrast, the humans in *Blade Runner* are portrayed as clearly inferior, suffering from all kinds of maladies and defects, such as alcoholism (Deckard), ageing (J. F. Sebastian), poor eyesight (Tyrell), decadence (Taffey Lewis), and lack of emotions.<sup>17</sup> Even the world they inhabit seems to be in a state of shut-down—as if having survived a major climate catastrophe; a postmodern world no longer *progressing* but *deteriorating*.<sup>18</sup>

---

17. This is characteristic of almost everyone in the film, in particular Deckard (until he falls in love with Rachael), whose ex-wife called him “a cold fish.” Ironically, the exceptions are the replicants, as well as J. F. Sebastian—surrounded by all his cute, mechanical friends, as he welcomes strangers into his house. J. F. Sebastian suffers from accelerating ageing, and thus, in a sense, shares the same fate (of imminent death) as the replicants.

18. Inspired by Fredric Jameson, Giuliana Bruno’s analysis of *Blade Runner* (as an archetypical postmodern film) remains one of the most dominant readings of the film: Bruno, Giuliana. “Ramble City: Postmodernism and ‘Blade Runner’.” *October* 41 (Summer 1987): 61–74. At the same time, one could argue that the tendency to read the film as an archetypical postmodern film (partly inevitable, given the stunning visual spectacles) has marginalized a more latent issue in the film, namely the legitimization of the death penalty.

---

The paradox of this motto—“More Human Than Human”—becoming literally true constitutes the entire *raison d'être* of the blade runner squad, the sovereign's sword; indeed, one could argue, the *re-emergence* of the sovereign.

#### IV. Replicant and Sex

“Perhaps one day people will wonder at this,” Foucault writes in *History of Sexuality*: “They will not be able to understand how a civilization so intent on developing enormous instruments of production and destruction found the time and the infinite patience to inquire so anxiously concerning the actual state of sex” (157–58). Foucault's argument is that sex, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, becomes a crucial tool in the creation and understanding of what it means to be a subject. Far from being a concept in response to which power exerts prohibitive measures, sex is the history of a creative, productive force, a crucial part of power's operative dynamic. Foucault writes:

[T]he notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (154)

As a pivotal component of biopolitical power, the concept of sex replaces the metaphysics of the soul; it becomes the *essence* of what makes up personal identity—“all that we are”:

[T]he notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate; thus the idea of ‘sex’ makes it possible to evade what gives ‘power’ its power; it enables one to conceive power solely as law and taboo. Sex—that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are, that point which entralls us through the power it manifests and the meaning

---

it conceals, and which we ask to reveal what we are and to free us from what defines us—is doubtless but an ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation. We must not make the mistake of thinking that sex is an autonomous agency which secondarily produces manifold effects of sexuality over the entire length of its surface of contact with power. On the contrary, sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures. (155)

What Foucault emphasizes here is that “sex” constitutes an important tool for power, whose efficiency consists in the dynamic by which the subject is induced to manifest its “sex” in an attempt to *avoid* power, understood here as a discourse of denial or prohibition, in order to reach itself, the innermost secret of one’s self; “It is through sex—in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality—that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility [...] to the whole of his body [...] to his identity” (155–56).

In the perspective evolving around *Blade Runner*, what Foucault outlines in the paragraph above is that elusive category of “human being”—the being capable of feeling and recalling authentic memories; that is to say, the being that according to the Voight-Kampff test should be distinguished from the replicant. It is the Cartesian cogito—as the name “Deckard” possibly refers to—which stands sharply demarcated from the mechanical clockwork of the animal’s inner life.<sup>19</sup> The story of the film (as well as the critical discussion of the film) seems at times to deteriorate into an ideological debate whether Deckard really is a replicant; whether he himself has ever taken the Voight-Kampff test;<sup>20</sup> why his eyes gleam strangely (which apparently only the replicants’ eyes do) (Sammon 362). In other words, the story of the film persistently pursues the idea of difference (which, at the same time, it attempts to undermine). If

---

19. René Descartes writes: “[Animals] are not rational, and ... nature makes them behave as they do according to the disposition of their organs; just as a clock, composed only of wheels and weights and springs, can count the hours and measure the time more accurately than we can with all our intelligence.” *Discourse on Method*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960. 43.

20. When Rachael directly asks Deckard whether he has ever taken the test himself, he dodges the question.

---

one replaces the word “sex” with “human” in the above quotes by Foucault, it becomes clear why this issue is so problematic.

The film as a whole is, however, one long movement towards the effacement of differences: the radical collapse of time, distinct places, histories, ethnicities, styles, languages, sounds, and light. *Blade Runner* envisions a universe in the process of an acute melt-down, a gigantic, compelling black hole that erases and devours differences, contrasts, dualisms—between the self and the other; culture and nature; meaning and meaninglessness; the masculine and the feminine; the civilized and the primitive; the cooked and the raw; the real and the unreal; and the total and the particular. Photos have no real references, and yet contain bottomless worlds;<sup>21</sup> as an instrument of the law, the Voight-Kampff machine creates more terror than restoring order;<sup>22</sup> the files are misleading, classified, or contain information not used; all the animals are artificial, dead and yet alive like never before;<sup>23</sup> Pris is recognized by Deckard among the mechanical dolls ironically because she looks too human (at one point she even says to Sebastian: “I think, therefore I am,” *cogito ergo sum*—which Rachael, in her dialogue with Deckard, inverts: “You think I am a replicant”); one is never quite sure whether it is night or day; the authority acts immorally, unsportsmanlike (e.g. when Deckard fires upon the unarmed Roy Batty); the criminal shows magnanimity (e.g. when Roy Batty saves Deckard on the roof of the Bradbury Building); the machines have warm feelings; the humans are cold, heartless; young people look old, and vice versa;<sup>24</sup> even the film(s many versions) seems to be in radical disagreement with itself.<sup>25</sup>

---

21. Rachael’s personal photos are fake; Deckard displays his family photos on the piano, but nothing in the film indicates he actually has any family (thus perhaps suggesting that his portraits have no real references, like Rachael’s photos); when Deckard investigates Leon’s photos while using the Esper Machine, he discovers a three-dimensional world hidden below the photo’s surface.

22. The machine is used in the first scene, when Leon kills blade runner Holden; the second time occurs when Deckard exposes Rachael as a replicant, after which she runs away, deeply depressed upon discovering that her treasured childhood memories are in fact those of Tyrell’s niece.

23. When Deckard sees Tyrell’s owl, he does not know whether it is real; the same goes for Zhora’s snake—yet they *look* real; similarly, Rachael genuinely *remembers* the spiders hatching the egg, just as Deckard *remembers* a unicorn running through a forest.

24. Due to his illness, J. F. Sebastian *looks* a lot older than he is, whereas Deckard—as a semi-retired police officer—*looks* younger than he probably is.

25. The “Director’s Cut” was released in 1992 and a “Final Cut” in 2007 (as the two

---

## V. The Confession

But even if the dominant formal figure of the film seems to be that of effacement, one should distinguish *Blade Runner*'s main concern—the radical question it poses—from the Cyborg thesis, outlined by Donna Haraway in the “Cyborg Manifesto,” which basically argues that the sharp border between the human and the artificial now has been erased, while exploring the consequences of such an erasure. In her discussion of the cyborg, Haraway even refers to *Blade Runner*, arguing that Rachael represents “the image of a cyborg culture’s fear, love and confusion” (313). The problem with Haraway’s argument in this particular context is the underlying premise that the essential issue refers to the relation between human and replicant, that is, difference or the dissolution of difference.

From the biopolitical perspective, the present and future potential of human being is simply everything that goes into—and which is absorbed by—the concept of the replicant. Replicant as a theoretical concept is the culmination of biopower, its deepest consequences, its most distant border, its final ecstasy. It is in this way that the actual question of the film refers to quite a different aspect regarding the Voight-Kampff machine; not the question of who is human and who is replicant, or whether it is possible to find any essential difference at all—but rather the question why the Voight-Kampff machine in *certain suspicious* situations is used to legitimize and activate the death penalty, the right to kill. The access to this right—the right to power, to kill, and in a further sense the right to meaning, identity, humanity, sexuality, moral, and one’s self—is here reduced to an arbitrary technological instrument of confession, a kind of perverse Turing test. Whereas in the Turing test, humans are the ones deciding who should pass as humans, in *Blade Runner* only a machine is—ironically—capable of making such a judgment.

In the article “About the Concept of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry,” Foucault tells the following anecdote: “I would like to begin by relating a brief exchange which took place the other day in the Paris criminal courts. A man who was accused of five rapes and

---

most important edited versions, among several, since the film’s release in 1982). The 1992-version along with the 2007-version in particular seem to indicate that Deckard is a replicant. See Sammon for a detailed history of the many rewrites of the film manuscript, 51–70.

---

six attempted rapes, between February and June 1975, was being tried. The accused hardly spoke at all.” Foucault continues:

“Questions from the presiding judge”:

“Have you tried to reflect upon your case?”

–Silence

“Why, at twenty-two years of age, do such violent urges overtake you?

You must make an effort to analyze yourself. You are the one who has the keys to your own actions. Explain yourself.”

–Silence

“Why would you do it again?”

–Silence

Then a juror took over and cried out, “For heaven’s sake, defend yourself!”

(176)

Foucault comments:

It happens that the machinery jams, the gears seize up. Why? Because the accused remains silent. Remains silent about what? About the facts? About circumstances? About the way in which they occurred? About the immediate cause of the events? Not at all. The accused evades a question which is essential in the eyes of a modern tribunal, but which would have had a strange ring to it 150 years ago: ‘Who are you?’ (176)

Foucault’s point is that it is not enough to merely confess that one has committed a certain act; one must also explain why, so that power may examine, control, evaluate, and ultimately sentence the subject within its own frames. Power must know who you are—according to its own norms, terms, and parameters; and power knows who you are insofar as you answer its questions, which already contain their own answers. The man before the court is the subject that escapes power’s mechanisms; and thus becomes *particularly suspicious*. Or, in *Blade Runner*, the subject put in front of the Voight-Kampff machine—whose real function is less about the registration of feelings (or other arbitrarily chosen humanistic concepts)<sup>26</sup> in order to determine whether one really is a human,

---

26. Ironically, Deckard must suppress his feelings in order to kill (this is probably why he is so good at it—as Captain Bryant points out); when he starts to develop feelings, he is

---

but more about the simple fact that the person is now placed there, in front of the machine, forced to confess: Who are you? If one already is placed before the machine, one is already sentenced (no one in the film passes the Voight-Kampff test as a human).

In the end, the replicant chooses irreconcilability rather than confession. “I have seen things you people wouldn’t believe,” —says Roy Batty during the last moments of his life, which ends with the words: “Time to die.” Death itself constitutes the limit of power, as Foucault writes (*History* 138); whereas suicide was a crime during the rule of the sovereign, it now becomes an individual and private right:

This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant in its manifestations, and consequently so difficult to explain as being due to particular circumstances or individual accidents, was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life. (139)

The individual right to die, this strange determination to command one’s own death constitutes one of the few moments during which life’s autonomy may manifest itself, where it may escape, momentarily, the smothering hands of power. We experience a glimpse of this freedom through Roy Batty’s kitschy-poetic soliloquy of the things only he has seen; “attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate” —strange, alluring memories of sublime moments, with no references attached, freed from time, places and persons; floating, briefly, before disappearing forever, “like tears in the rain” —along with Roy himself, as he *chooses* to die. This is less a *confession* than a defiant expression of life manifesting itself in its most potent, intense—and momentary—being; a *right* to live beyond the narrow confines and regulations of power.

## VI. Conclusion

One could argue that *Blade Runner* as a sci-fi film is one long journey towards the end of the night, the moment when Deckard becomes a witness to

---

no longer capable of killing.

---



the future itself, Roy Batty who has seen things no one else has seen; a future mirror image of himself (and, literally, Deckard is excommunicated when he escapes with Rachael at the end of the film). In this mirror image of the future, which *Blade Runner* visually explores, we see the culmination of biopower in a being whose absolute perfection at the same time is an expression of absolute monstrosity, a being which is so infinitely far from life itself, and yet so close that they become indistinguishable.

Here, in this world of indistinguishable shapes and things, where everything seems to collapse in a crucible of fire, rain, dust, fog, and darkness—the basic elements—we constantly return to the question: What legitimizes the reappearance of the sovereign and his sword, the death penalty, enforced by the blade runner squad? One is tempted here to paraphrase Foucault: It happens that the machinery jams, the gears seize up. Why? Because the accused remain silent. Remains silent about what? About tortoisés lying on their back? About their mother? About crawling wasps? Not at all. The subject refuses to give an affirmative response to power; and through the silence, the violence, the alienation, defiantly expressing the “‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, and to the satisfactions of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be” (Foucault, *History* 145).

## Works Cited

- Blade Runner*. Dir. Scott Ridely. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, and Edward James Olmos. Warner Bros, 1982. Film.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry." *Power*. Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: New Press, 2000. 176–200. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *The Cybercultures Reader*. Ed. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy. London: Routledge, 2000. 291–324. Print.
- Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. New York: Harper, 1996. Print.
- Turing, Alan. "Computing Machinery and Intelligence." *The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life: Plus the Secrets of Enigma*. Ed. Jack Copeland. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 441–64. Print.

## Abstract

This article takes a closer look at the notions of “human” and “rights” in connection with a discussion of the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, and the film *Blade Runner*. Foucault develops a series of arguments about what he describes as “The ‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfactions of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be.” This right to life is likewise one of the main themes in Ridley Scott’s sci-fi classic *Blade Runner*, which tells the story of a group of replicants—or human-like robots—returning to earth in search of more life. On earth, however, they are outlawed, and most of the film’s plot essentially consists of Deckard, the main character, hunting down and killing the replicants. In my article, I argue that *Blade Runner* is a film that explores what one could call the culmination of biopower, the imagination of a life whose absolute perfection at the same time becomes the expression of absolute monstrosity, i.e. a threat to life that legitimizes the death penalty. Questioning and discussing the notions of “human” and “rights” in a sci-fi context, *Blade Runner* develops some of the implications of Foucault’s ideas about “an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”

**Keywords:** Foucault, Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, biopolitics, replicant, death penalty

**Eli Park SORENSEN** is Associate Professor in the College of Liberal Studies at Seoul National University, South Korea. He specializes in comparative literature, postcolonial thought, literary theory, and cultural studies. He is the author of *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* (2010) and has published in journals such as *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* (2008), *Journal of Narrative Theory* (2009), *Paragraph* (2007 & 2014), *Modern Drama* (2012), *Research in African Literatures* (2010), *Partial Answers* (2014), and *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (2013).  
eps7257@snu.ac.kr

Received: 15 August 2015  
Reviewed: 17 September 2015  
Accepted: 17 September 2015