From Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, US, 1982)
Despite the vagaries of the film and its reception, within the university a consensus interpretation of Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, US, 1982) has largely developed out of a single essay, Giuliana Bruno’s “Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner.” In applying Fredric Jameson’s thoughts on the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” Bruno argued that the film could be seen as a metaphor of the postmodern condition, or of our—“our” insofar as we are postmodern subjects—schizophrenic relation to the Symbolic order. She suggests that while the replicants were initially “resistant” to the “social order,” to survive, “the signifiers of their existence had to be put in order.” This resulted in an “itinerary” she unequivocally describes as “an Oedipal journey”: the replicant Rachel (Sean Young) comes to accept her Oedipal submission to a man, and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), the leader of the replicants, commits the Oedipal crime in killing his “father.” Acknowledging his indebtedness to Bruno, David Harvey only slightly modifies the analysis in focusing on the film’s class politics, or lack thereof.
Beginning her own analysis by defining her position in relation to Bruno and Jameson, Kaja Silverman writes that while quotation is certainly a feature of the film’s design, “postmodernism is not in my view sufficient to account for [it].”5 Rightly noting that postmodern theory cannot contain the film, Silverman nonetheless also finds the replicants to be driven by Oedipal desire.

Common to the analyses of Bruno and Harvey, and to a lesser extent to that of Silverman, is the idea that the beginning of the film metaphorizes the instability of the contemporary condition and that the path of the film narrative becomes how the diegetic characters bring some sort of order to their world(s). This analysis is reflected in the very form of these essays, as, following Bruno, focus tends to be concentrated, first, on the confusing setting of the film, followed by an examination of how the characters accede to the Oedipal structure. This suggests that the film performs a safety-valve function for the contemporary viewing subject experiencing increased confusion as to his or her roles in society, for the subject increasingly confronted with a crisis in the Oedipal relation. However, it may be that the film is substantially more open to the fluctuations and even deconstructions of the Oedipal relation, working through it while never, in fact, buttressing it. Conversely, it may be that the scholarly literature on *Blade Runner* itself performs a safety-valve function when it insists that the replicants finally accede to the Oedipal order.

In this reassessment of *Blade Runner*, following and expanding on Silverman’s work, I propose a return to the texts—as we know there are several—of *Blade Runner* that have appeared during the quarter century since its first theatrical release. In doing so, I conjoin the work of Elizabeth Cowie and Joan Copjec to proffer an understanding of spectatorship appropriate not simply to the experience of *Blade Runner* but of cinema generally.6 Film texts provide (for) fantasy scenarios in which spectators are placed, however ambiguously, and through which they roam according to the idiosyncracies of their psychic histories. Some texts, moreover, work from within the construction, logic, and pleasures of such fantasy scenarios to unravel or traverse them, in this way leaving the spectator precariously placed against the Real. This dimension
Affects of the Gaze

can be discerned in the discussions of diverse audiences, from film reviewers to scholars to fans. Thus to the inevitable question, “why another essay on *Blade Runner*?” I would suggest that the existence of so much testimony regarding the experience of watching the film demands an analysis of the elements that give rise to such repeated engagement. When so many people return so consistently, if so confusedly, to a text, it is likely that it visibly indexes the Real that conditions it. If at the end of the analysis *Blade Runner* still deserves the qualifier *canonical*, it will have less to do with its ability to be explained through the artifact of postmodern theory than it will with the film’s serving as an index of the demise of Symbolic efficiency in the contemporary era.

As Slavoj Žižek observes, Symbolic efficiency refers to the guarantee that attaches itself to the enunciation of meaning, that, to put it simply, we trust—together—we are making sense. In every quotidian encounter we presuppose and address our discourses to a sort of ideal witness, or “big Other” (in the past this would have been more easily written as “God”), who makes ultimate sense of and guarantees what is communicated. Žižek often notes that “the big Other does not exist” and that we only believe it to through the trust we place in Symbolic efficiency. It is precisely this trust that is increasingly missing today, so that the big Other does not exist twice over, as it were (342). As Jodi Dean concisely states: “Although the symbolic order is always and necessarily lacking—ruptured—today this lack is directly assumed.”

*Blade Runner* presents the consequences of a failed Symbolic, of the lack of trust. This is achieved, aesthetically, by the descent of the Gaze into the field of the visible, the effect/affect of which is to produce a flat fantasy space in which it is difficult—and manifestly difficult—for the diegetic characters, and spectators, to find their place. Significantly, however, in Roy’s concluding testimony the film also offers a redemptive moment in which the Symbolic makes a fleeting appearance through the re-enablement of trust between the protagonists, Roy and Deckard (Harrison Ford), and the spectator. I argue it does so from a post-Oedipal position or, at the least, from the crossroads of the Oedipal relation and one beyond.
Affects of the Gaze
Contrary to common understanding, fantasy and reality are not opposed. In providing the coordinates of the subject’s desire, fantasy is precisely what allows one to maintain a sense of reality. In Lacanian terms, fantasy protects one against encountering the Real that forms the horizon of one’s reality; paradoxically, however, fantasy inevitably gestures toward this Real, ever threatening to unravel one’s sense of the real. Certain texts—and one should consider these better texts—can go further in employing fantasy scenarios that move the spectator toward the final traversal of the fantasy, placing him or her against the Real. These texts do not shy away from fantasy structures and their pleasures, as the avant-garde attempted to do, but rather work to unsettle them from within.12

Cowie writes that any given film engages in a “play of looks” to construct a filmic world, for both the protagonists and the spectators.13 When watching a film a viewer might align herself or himself with a protagonist and attempt, both literally and figuratively, to see the film through the latter’s eyes. However, the viewer is inevitably presented with a look that does not belong to the protagonist, or is given more information than is available to the latter (as in the enablement of suspense). Moreover, spectators cannot simply align themselves with the imaginary position of the director, since they do not know how the film will develop. Nor, it might be added, can they imaginarily identify with the camera or cinema institution itself, despite the speculations of varyingly called “1970s film theory,” “apparatus theory,” or “screen theory.”

This entails that spectators are necessarily, unconsciously lost in their attempts to discern the “source of enunciation,” placed in a “position of knowledge [that] is multiple and contradictory” (66). In this confusing “play of looks” lies the potential for the intrusive affect of the Gaze, which, in the Lacanian understanding, both structures and threatens the field of visibility. The Gaze lurks beyond the imaginary walls of language and images and thus cannot be taken, as previous generations of film theorists thought, as a token of the spectator’s mastery over the image. The subject is not in possession of the Gaze; the Gaze possesses the subject, setting,
through the lack that it figures, the circuits of desire in motion. Copjec writes that with the Gaze a “terrifying alterity” haunts the image, as any presumed “‘belong to me’ aspect is suddenly drained from representation.”\textsuperscript{14} It is a particularly cinematic affect: literature precludes such a play of looks, while television’s commercial bent forecloses the sort of spectatorial investment that would place the spectator within the diegetic world deeply enough to subject him or her to the anxiety generated by such play.

Among others, cognitivist and cultural studies cinema scholars argue that one cannot locate the Gaze in cinema spectatorship, but that is precisely what is at stake: in looking back at one from a place one cannot perceive, the Gaze is precisely the point


From \textit{Psycho}

the subject cannot occupy. That is not to say, in an undifferentiated way, that the Gaze can be found everywhere, for it must be traced in its effects and affects. Given the nature of film editing, a sudden cut can, through a shift of perspective, reveal that what one had taken to be an objective shot was in fact that of a sinister character (or monster) threatening the world of the protagonists. Cowie gives an example from \textit{Coma} (dir. Michael Crichton, US, 1978), where an objective shot of the protagonist attempting to start her car is suddenly transubstantiated into that of a menacing character who we thereby come to suspect may be responsible for the car’s breakdown. Something of the affect of the Gaze is hereby produced, though it would be impossible to definitively locate it. Another example is that of the birds from the Alfred Hitchcock film of the same name (US, 1963) suddenly filling the frame of an extreme aerial long shot of Bodega Bay; what the spectator might have assumed to be an objective shot providing a view onto the
town is re-marked as the menacing subjectivity of the creatures, something the spectator had perhaps unconsciously suspected all along—that is, he or she may already have been watching in the trace of the Gaze. At the same time, filmed objects can take on the threatening affect of the Gaze by virtue of their screen presence. In a scene from another of Hitchcock’s horror films, *Psycho* (US, 1960), the Bates motel itself—that is, without anyone being visible in the windows—seems to stare back at Lila Crane: it is its very photogenic “heaviness” that seems to impress itself on the psyche of the protagonist and spectator, spooking him (or her). Knowing that Norman Bates is occupied in the motel office, it might be said that Lila and the spectator are expecting the look of Norman’s mother, whose eerie voice we have already heard; however, we do not come to see his mother at the window, and, moreover, we already suspect something to be not quite right with “her.” The affect produced is not simply that of wondering whether or not a flesh-and-blood human is meeting one’s gaze but that of being subject to the omniscient Gaze of the Other. This is far more unsettling, for it is a look that, ultimately, cannot be returned.

Thus, from either side of the classically opposed perspectives in cinema studies, formalism or montage, on the one, realism, or *photogénie*, on the other, cinema seems to have a peculiar relationship to the experience of the Gaze. It plays with it, is caught by it. Ultimately, as the photogenic shot of the Bates motel is partly enabled through repeated intercuts of Lila looking, marking its dependence on editing, so montage works through and with realistic shots of objects. (Even the avant-garde, in vociferously critiquing and avoiding cinema’s realistic mode, arguably operates within it: that it betrays such phobia toward the realistic image indexes its entrapment within its modality.) It is through both these features once deemed specific to cinema that the medium engages with the affect of the Gaze, setting the desire and fantasy scenarios of the narratives in motion. Typically, the Gaze structures the field of the visible while, except in horrors, thrillers, and pornography, rarely making itself felt as such. Rarer still does it collapse into the field of the visible, rendering everything uncertain, indeterminate, and void of desire, but this is precisely what happens in *Blade Runner.*
Blade Runner: The City and the Gaze

Scott apparently was concerned more with design—imaginative and obviously terribly costly sets and visual gimmicks—and allowed the script’s ideas to become as confused as the Babel-like world of polyglots who roam the streets.


Blade Runner, like its setting, is a beautiful, deadly organism that devours life, and [Harrison] Ford . . . allows his heroic stature to shrivel inside it.

—Richard Corliss, Time, 12 July 1982

As reviews of Blade Runner have made clear over the years, the initial, overdetermining spectatorial experience is that of the film’s setting, the dystopic city of Los Angeles in 2019. In the film’s first sequence, the camera makes a slow approach through its Los Angeles to the Tyrell corporation headquarters. Spectators do not know whose point of view they share, if anyone’s, although the scene does cut twice to a giant blue eye, which reflects the city back to the city itself. Finally it cuts twice from the outside of the Tyrell corporation to the inside, with a blade runner looking out the window. This eye is profoundly unsettling, looking out not only at the city but also at the spectator, catching him or her in the act of voyeurism. Or, it could even be seen as the spectator’s eye, insofar as the city was surely just reflected in his or her eye watching the film. It is an infinitely, disturbingly reversible situation, immediately setting up a paranoid structure to the film and city, which is only amplified by the fact that we never learn whose eye this is. Without being retroactively punctuated, the eye persists throughout the film as a floating signifier of anxiety. Silverman suggests that one important aspect of these shots is that in not knowing whose eye it is, the spectator also does not know if it is that of a human or of a replicant:

The two shots of the blue eye thus do not work to map out a spectatorial position for us on one side or other of the human/replicant divide, but to posit vision as the site of a certain collapse between those categories. However, if the opening shots work in an anticipatory way to break
down the dichotomy between replicants and humans by focusing on an eye which could represent either, it is because that organ represents precisely the site at which difference is ostensibly discernible within the world of *Blade Runner*.¹⁷

Going a little bit further along this path, in this ambiguity it is ultimately nobody’s eye, neither human nor replicant, but in some manner the Gaze of the Other, suffocating the cluttered city—and the spectator. In that sense it is rather the overbearing presence of the Gaze of the Other infiltrating and falling into the field of the visible that marks the site of the collapse between the replicant and the human.¹⁸ This overturns the notion—however often it is espoused—that the “eye” can be exchanged for the “I,” that through vision the protagonists achieve self-definition. The filmic focus on the eye suggests not the masterful equivalence of the “eye” and the “I” but, on the contrary, the self’s entrapment within the overproximate Gaze of the Other. In an article on the relation between the city and cinema, Robert Lapsley writes: “‘To whom,’ asks Susan Buck-Morss, ‘do the streets belong?’ The answer is the Other. To be a subject is to be trapped within a field of visibility, subjected to the pre-existing gaze of the Other. If the space of the city is defined by the gaze of the Other, in late modernity that gaze increasingly provokes anxiety.”¹⁹

*Blade Runner* extrapolates from the current situation, so that in its future dystopia the demise of Symbolic efficiency becomes the central focus of the film, which is achieved, aesthetically, through the descent of the Gaze into the field of the visible. In the words of the film’s special effects photographic supervisor, David Dryer, “the environment in the film is almost a protagonist. It’s an implied menace all the way through. One of the things I was constantly keeping in mind was that this city almost closes in on you everywhere you go.”²⁰ Meanwhile, screened characters exist, in violation of the rules of composition, at the edges of the frame, perennially off center in an off-centered world.²¹ When the Gaze descends in this way, the result can only be a deeply claustrophobic experience for the spectator, suffocating desire and the relations—and any potential relations—between diegetic characters; *Blade Runner*
presents a flat fantasy space in which it is difficult for the spectator to be placed, or to find his or her place.\textsuperscript{22}

The Gaze need not intervene by means of the visual. One of Jacques Lacan’s examples of the Gaze, taken from Jean-Paul Sartre, is that of a voyeur at a peephole hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, followed by ominous silence, catching him in the act and exposing him to shame before the Other.\textsuperscript{23} The Vangelis soundtrack seems at times diegetic, at others nondiegetic, and frequently, disturbingly both, and at all times “drowned” in reverb: “Heavy reverb, because it implies a huge, enclosed, hard-surfaced space, creates a mood of mystery and paranoia which would serve \textit{Blade Runner} well were it not so blatantly overdone that it becomes—like the mist—simply wearying after a while.”\textsuperscript{24} To serve the film well, the Gaze according to this critic should not suffocate, but as the Gaze collapses into the field of the visual, it falls into the field of the auditory. And as the director chose to shoot his characters on one side of the frame or the other, but rarely well composed, so the heavy reverb gives the impression of being off center, alone yet subject to an ever-present Gaze.

In short, if in most films the city serves as a backdrop for the narrative and its relations of desire, in this film the city, by seemingly foregrounding itself via the omnipresent Gaze, becomes not only a central component of the narrative but also the means by which the fantasy scenario and narrative are stifled. The question is whether Scott’s focus on setting was simply a mistake, a result of his artistic training drowning out other aspects of filmmaking. This was certainly the assumption many reviews made: precisely what critics love about the film—its setting in which they lose themselves—they also hate, insofar as they lose themselves in it and thereby fail to make out the relations between the characters.\textsuperscript{25} However, Scott has suggested that sometimes the setting is itself the statement—and yet the significance of this statement, to the extent that it exists, must immediately be placed under erasure.\textsuperscript{26} The point—perhaps better understood as a \textit{punctum}—is the failure of the Symbolic, but this can be neither explained nor suggested (namely, symbolically) through the development of a narrative.\textsuperscript{27} It can be affected, given body to, traversed, but not comprehended. From this (lack
of) perspective, the many mistakes—testified to by generations of fans and scholars—made in the screenwriting, production, and postproduction of the film are redeemable. As the protagonists and spectators find themselves lost in the world of the film, so did the creators. Even the recently released “final cut” announces its imperfection, its final surrender to the setting of the failure of the Symbolic. In other words, the only element missing from the above reviews and the many like them is the causative link between the overwhelming setting and the failure of the story, or Symbolic: the story seems flat because it is overwhelmed by the setting and its omnipresent Gaze. So while it is true to say that the film’s creators got blindsided by the setting, this blindness emerged through the failure of the Symbolic, and it was precisely this failure that served as the impetus, in the first place, for the work of art. While they got lost in it, that was the point, the punctum, a sort of degree zero of sublimation. The inability to apprehend this situation on the part of the reviewers is understandable given the context of their reception, having been inappropriately led to expect a futuristic vehicle for a celebrated action hero of the era. It is quite likely, however, that regardless of promotional materials many would have expressed disappointment, as the film is not easily deliverable to journalistic meaning; as reviewers cannot place themselves in the film’s fantasy scenario, they cannot master the text, and thus cannot rein master over their own texts.

*Blade Runner*’s city cannot, then, be subsumed into mere modernist anxiety toward the city. *Blade Runner* is not, as many have argued, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* redux, as the aesthetic power of *Blade Runner*’s city is derived less from its enabling a space for the projection of our fears of the Other than from its emerging as a realization of the failure of the Symbolic. This involves a far more profound, depressing anxiety. Significantly—insofar as it marks the demise of significance—we are never given the context of the dystopic situation, of why the city seems forever drowned in acid rain and dark of night. The source text of the film, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, suggests it to be the result of atomic war, but in deciding to omit this context, Scott turns the setting into something altogether Other. Another element of Dick’s
novel that does not appear in the film is the book’s centralizing of power in the figure of Tyrell. In *Blade Runner*, the murder of Tyrell has no direct consequence for the film’s narrative space, which it surely would have had were things operating according to “normal” Symbolic law. Even with the police, who seem to be everywhere, “the feeling,” one commentator notes, “is not so much that of a police state as it is of passive and constant surveillance.”

Thus this is not merely a schizophrenic space as many following Bruno have suggested, or at least it is not the sort of schizophrenic space typically theorized in discourses of postmodernism. Clinical schizophrenia is an immensely debilitating condition, suffered by few subjects relative to the “cultural schizophrenia” celebrated in some writings on postmodernism. In this latter mode the schizophrenic condition is fantasized as some sort of resistance to order, to the Symbolic, and to the Name of the Father. Yet insofar as it is merely “resistant” (and not revolutionary), it ultimately confirms and reinforces that which is resisted. Thus Bruno argues that the “schizophrenic temporality of the replicants is a resistance to enter the social order, to function according to its modes,” while going on to explicate the ways in which the replicants finally seek the comfort of the Oedipal relation. The failure of the Symbolic in *Blade Runner*, I would argue, indexes something beyond this fantasy of schizophrenia: “Not ideology run amuck,” William Timberman writes, “but the implosion of ideology.” In this sense, Yves Chevrier’s critique of *Blade Runner*, that “the film falters, almost fatally, when it comes to dealing with the political dimension of its vision of society,” is displaced: the film presents the absence of politics as such, and there is something fatal about that. In the implosion of ideology, politics, and desire, the spectator and the protagonists are left in a stupor, and in the same way that this state of stupidity cannot be termed resistance, there is no guarantee of final accession to the Oedipal order.

We are still lost in this city: to this day the setting of *Blade Runner* is regarded as the most influential, poignant, and revelatory view onto our future ever presented on film. Many are or have become seduced by this vision, perhaps finally eliding the force of its *punctum* through a second-order fetishization of its images.
others, the continued anxiety affected by the Gaze disrupts any such attempt at fetishization, once again rendering the space of the film enigmatic. Insofar as the Symbolic continues to suffer its demise in the contemporary era, the film does seem increasingly prescient. That is, the film does not so much become more current through the devolution of US cities as it does through the increased failure of the Symbolic, on account of (and through) which the diegetic setting of the film was first realized. In like manner, what impresses itself on one’s psyche driving through a city like Detroit, where the windshield doubles as a screen (in every sense of the word), is less the brutal, simple facts of what one sees—abandoned art deco skyscrapers, urban prairies, one-stop armored “loan/lotto/liquor” shops—than what led and continues to lead to these irrepressible facts. In Detroit, the retro-futurist city closest to *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles, one can almost sense through the setting the demise of Symbolic efficiency and its preconditions: race riots, global capital gradually eliminating the middle class, and abandonment by every level of government. There is a way in which Detroit has become our uncanny object, where, every time we reference it, we threaten to recognize the truth about ourselves—the demise of Symbolic efficiency—and the death such recognition portends.

**Failures of Identification**

It might be said that, hot on the heels of Ford’s performance as Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Steven Spielberg, US, 1981), the spectator of 1982 might have deigned to place his or her trust in the character of Deckard; in the absence of a coherent fantasy scenario, or Symbolic, a narcissistic identification with this character might have initially seemed available. As it happens in the film, however, Ford does not so much act as he is acted on, making him entirely unsuitable for this purpose. In not appearing to inhabit his character in any meaningful way, Ford’s performance would seem almost the precise opposite of the good, believable performance that anchors the actor’s self and, by extension, the very possibility of a self in late or postmodernity. Many reviewers noted Ford’s dispassion without apprehending that this may have formed part of the film’s strategy. As Elissa Marder notes,
the critical judgments complaining of the film’s lack of humanity employ the humanist assumptions and distinctions the film works to deconstruct.\footnote{Affects of the Gaze - 81}

In the absence of a functioning Symbolic, one cannot rely on one’s narcissistic, imaginary fixations to sustain one’s sense of reality; falling into the Real, these fixations will suddenly appear monstrous. “There is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared relationship between humans),” Žižek writes, “without the impersonal symbolic order.”\footnote{In Blade Runner, the nonfunctioning Symbolic gives rise to confused identifications and to the singular inability to latch onto the action hero protagonist. In other words, the film is not primarily about whether or not Deckard is a replicant. He comes to seem like one through his position in the failure of the Symbolic, a failure that is given body through the setting of a city that increasingly seems to overwhelm him. This is another way of saying that it is the Symbolic, with its prerequisites of trust and relations of desire, that ultimately marks the human—something Roy realizes in his final, fatal testimony.}

Oedipal Irony

Several commentators, including Bruno and Silverman, have noted the strong Oedipal themes in the film, made bizarre by the fact they are brought forth by replicants whose only memories of mommy and daddy are false. Silverman rightly notes that the film thus highlights the extent to which “radically falsified ‘recollec-
tions’ may be the only ones to which we have access.”\footnote{The self is a fiction. However, neither Bruno nor Silverman go far enough in noting the profound ambiguity of these Oedipal referents, as both seem to accept that the two main replicants, Rachel and Roy, are constituted by their implanted Oedipal memories and that they largely retain them throughout the film. This involves an assumption not necessarily confirmed by the text; although the film is absolutely clear that Rachel has been implanted with false memories, it is never directly stated that the other replicants have been as well. On the one hand, Tyrell’s suggestion that Rachel is the latest model, “an experiment,” suggests that she is the only replicant with such memories. On the other hand, the attempt}

\footnote{[265x580]Affects of the Gaze - 81}
of another replicant, Leon (Brion James), to retrieve his photos, some of which are deemed “family photos” in Deckard’s voice-over narration of the theatrical release, infers that all the replicants (including Deckard?) have false memory implants. That they also seem to show emotional states similar to Rachel’s further contradicts Tyrell’s claim. In the end, we just do not know—though I will argue that this confusion is mobilized by the film to question the very status of memory.

**Rachel, Asking If Love Is Necessarily Oedipal**

Silverman writes that Rachel’s implanted memories and photographs provide her with “an entire whole Oedipal history” (120). One would be remiss to deny that the photo of her and her mother, the one story about a spider giving birth to babies that proceeded to devour her, and the other about a game of “show me yours and I’ll show you mine” are through and through Oedipal in substance and structure. However, Silverman’s own reading of the “rape” scene seems to suggest a pathway beyond Oedipus (128–29). In this scene, which follows Rachel playing the piano after letting her hair down in the likeness of Deckard’s photos, Deckard prevents Rachel from leaving his apartment and forces her to express her desire for him.

**DECKARD:** Say “kiss me.”
**RACHEL:** I can’t rely on—
**DECKARD:** Say “kiss me.”
**RACHEL:** Kiss me.
**DECKARD:** I want you.
**RACHEL:** I want you.
**DECKARD:** Again.
**RACHEL:** I want you. Put your hands on me.47

Silverman writes of Rachel’s interrupted, ambiguous “I can’t rely on—”:

She is in effect telling Deckard that she can’t rely upon the desire she is beginning to feel for him—desire which she clearly manifests when she
loosens her hair—because it, too, may come to her from someone else. Deckard responds by seemingly putting words in Rachel’s mouth. . . . By inducing Rachel to articulate the desire which she has already manifested, Deckard proves to her that it is no less urgent or psychically real because it comes to her from the larger symbolic order.48

Though it commendably notes the nuances of the sequence itself, the problem with Silverman’s analysis is that it seems to presume an effectively functioning Symbolic that Deckard unproblematically embodies and makes present through force. I would argue that Deckard’s desire is itself deeply confused, if not nonexistent, as one cannot get the sense he knows what he is after; if anything, his act might come less from his desire for Rachel as a woman than from his feeling threatened or in some way emasculated by a replicant turning him down. This is yet another confused situation. While Rachel’s “I can’t rely on—” is, most likely, her attempt to express confusion as to the status of her desire, wherein Deckard’s actions do help her to realize that simply because her structuring memories are false, her feelings are still valid, this does not suggest that Deckard is at all aware of his own desire, or of his place within the Symbolic. They are still both completely lost, groping in the dark as to the status of their fantasy and relations to each other and to the Other. From this angle one is able to acknowledge the other obvious possible ending to Rachel’s sentence: “I can’t rely on you,” an indication that she cannot rely on Deckard’s obviously fragile self. Perhaps, in her (and the camera’s) lingering over Deckard’s own family photos, Rachel has begun to suspect that he is himself a replicant. Earlier in this same sequence, in fact, she had asked Deckard if he had ever taken the “Voight-Kampff” test.

It could be conjectured that Rachel is on an itinerary beyond Oedipus. In her well-known “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway advocates thinking “in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end”; the “cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history.”49 The peculiar thing about this manifesto is that while it looks forward to a time when cyborgs rule the
earth, it also suggests that we are all already cyborgs given our current reliance on technology. The argument thus looks forward to a time outside salvation history, while implying that we are already there. Given such confusion, it is not surprising that in this account of the image of the cyborg, seen in the mirror and in one’s utopian imaginings, Haraway finds herself referencing *Blade Runner*: “The replicant Rachel . . . stands as the image of a cyborg culture’s fear, love and confusion” (313). Haraway’s turn to Rachel indicates that the Oedipal structure cannot simply be dispensed with in the manner she desires, yet that Haraway can even think of using Rachel as her cyborg exemplar highlights how Rachel is not as wed to the complex as previously surmised. Rachel learns to accept her feelings even while they more than likely emerge from a false structure, and though she takes up sexual relations with a man (or a “masculine-identified” replicant), this does not obviate the fact she knows her (and, potentially, Deckard’s) memories—and Oedipal structuring—to be false. Indeed, this awareness—shared by the spectator—means that the film does not simply demonstrate how our Oedipal memories, while false, are necessary. It seems, rather, to point to a kind of subjectivity beyond them.

**Roy Batty, Ironizing the Oedipal Relation**

Silverman suggests that “Batty’s behaviour toward Tyrell is also manifestly driven by an Oedipal imperative,” and on the surface this seems nearly inarguable. The scene is that of Roy meeting his maker, Tyrell, nominating him the “God of biomechanics,” and Tyrell referring to Roy as the “prodigal son.” It is at once familial and religious, with Roy making repeated references to his sins and Tyrell acting like a proud father and priest promising absolution. Tyrell wears a papal gown (modeled after that of Pope John Paul II), and the room is lit by ceremonial candles. However, most Oedipal encounters do not resolve themselves through patricide. Silverman writes: “Batty again makes clear that implanted fantasies may often have unpredictable consequences, and that Tyrell’s dream of controlling the replicants through their memories is profoundly misbegotten. Leon reacts in similarly unpredictable ways when being interrogated earlier in the film about his mother” (121).
This suggests a failure of the Oedipal relation, not its success, and the overwrought way in which the scene unfolds in fact indicates not simply failure but parody. Roy—like the director—seems to be playing with the ways in which this scene mimics the father-son moment, for instance when he smirks while delivering lines like “nothing the God of biomechanics wouldn’t let you in heaven for.” In this sense, he is driven less by an Oedipal imperative than by post-Oedipal desire, or to the extent one accepts he has false memory implants and cannot simply do away with them, he is somewhere in between.

I want to highlight Roy’s singular ability or desire to move beyond any memory implants and the Oedipal relation, inasmuch as it has been underplayed or ignored altogether in the literature. Unlike Deckard, Rachel, and Leon, Roy does not collect photos by way of securing his identity. Not only do we not see him with any pictures of his own, but he also seems to treat the photo collecting of others with ironic irreverence. For instance, after Leon is prevented from retrieving his photos from his apartment, Roy affects a certain hostility in asking him, “Did you get your precious photos?” As the leader of the replicants, Roy is scolding Leon for remaining caught up in what they clearly know—on a conscious level, at least—to be forgeries. This ironic quality of Roy’s should be radically differentiated from the way in which irony is most commonly employed in contemporary culture, as a means of presuming some sort of real (Oedipally-constituted) self away and apart from one’s ironizing. Roy is not supposing that there is such a thing as a real self (or a real me), even relishing the fact of its absence. There is, furthermore, a meditation here on the nature of the photographic and cinematic image. While Leon and Rachel are (at least initially) overtly melancholic and photographic, paralyzed by a static “having-been-there” of the object, Roy is mournful and cinematic, open to the potentialities of the object’s “being-there.” He encourages Leon (and the spectator) to lessen his (or her) faith in the evidentiary truth of the photographic image, with its supposed link to one’s own history. Memories, and the technical exteriorizations on which they depend and/or are produced by, he seems to be more keenly aware, may be fraudulent, as the famous scene of Deckard turning a two-dimensional photograph into a three-dimensional
space with the aid of his Esper machine later appears to confirm. And in this sense, Roy seems cognizant not only of the impasses of the photographic image but also of the ontological pitfalls, indeed pratfalls, of the digital universe.

It is Roy who provides a final glimpse of humanity, and the genius of the film is that he does so from a post-Oedipal position, or at least at the crossroads of an Oedipal and post-Oedipal structure. Of course, no artist or spectator could possibly imagine what a post-Oedipal structure might look like, insofar as they would be hypothesizing from an at least partially Oedipal structure. What must be added is that to insist on the Oedipal relation is not simply to miss this other dimension, harmlessly as it were, but to effectively prop it up and thus to operate at the same level as the false memory implants themselves—which, in the case of Roy at least, might not actually exist in the real. It is to miss the sci-fi extrapolation of the present (and past) crisis in the Oedipal relation forward to the point of its being surpassed. It is no coincidence, then, that we never see the presumed source of all these memories, Tyrell’s niece (and some commentators have found it odd that we do not see her), because we are these memories. Watching from the present day, we, the spectators, are the Oedipal memory that Roy works to undermine. As critics we only then need to let this dimension come to be or pass—rather than elide it through appeals to Oedipal meaning.

After Tyrell’s murder and Roy’s ironizing over its Oedipal relevance, a sort of redemption of the Symbolic, now post-Oedipal, makes a fleeting appearance in Roy’s testimony to Deckard on his death. When Roy testifies that “all these moments will be lost in time . . . like tears in rain,” he alludes to the fact that in the absence of a functioning Symbolic, his life’s memories will be lost. Put another way, this once again suggests that it is the failure of the Symbolic that accounts for the suffocating state of the environment and the city—a failure that forecloses the possibility of his memories being accredited and deposited. Nonetheless, through this metaphor Roy is effectively taking control of his environment, which is the same thing, at this moment, as saying that he re-enables the Symbolic through testimony. He asks Deckard—and
the spectator—to accept and accredit his testimony, without any guarantee that it will be done. On Roy’s death, the (obviously symbolic) dove he was holding is released into an improbably blue sky, while the sound effects that accompanied the beginning sequence of the film, of the introduction to the city, are repeated for the first time: his words, and the trust they both enable and demand, have literally transformed the environment and the space of the film.\textsuperscript{55} The surfeit of testimony offered on the experience of watching \textit{Blade Runner} reflects that of Roy’s at his death. As Roy, the replicant, realizes and articulates the selfless essence of humanity in and through the event of testimony, the writing of spectatorship countersigns his testimony in its own testimonial act.\textsuperscript{56} Ultimately, it is the testimony itself, about the city, about Deckard’s status, about our relation both to him and to Roy, and about the difference between the human and the nonhuman, that marks the basis of humanity, whether engaged in by fans, scholars, or replicants. Realizing the inhumanity that results from the demise of Symbolic efficiency, \textit{Blade Runner} also teaches us how, beyond the confines of humanism, we might refind the “human.”

\textbf{Notes}


11. Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 40. What effectuates the demise of Symbolic efficiency, the demise of trust? One should “index”—understanding, in appropriating the semiotic terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce, that the index gestures toward a Real incapable of Symbolic digestion or articulation—the psychic consequences of World War II (Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Dresden: the wholesale destruction of populations qua populations) and of capitalism increasingly determining sociopolitical and cultural life. The result was the explicit failure of language, the lack of language directly assumed. Put otherwise: no poetry—or prose—after Auschwitz. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 4.

12. No one has expressed this view better, of course, than Laura Mulvey: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article.” Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18. Obviously I consider *Blade Runner* one of these texts. Some of Hitchcock’s texts would certainly qualify (e.g., *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, or *Rear Window*), as would the cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-theory* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 181.


16. Since cinema’s birth, films have often focused on the experience of the city. Most typically the filmic city is presented as a decadent, dangerous place, neatly set in opposition to the innocent purity and good-naturedness of the rural community and of nature itself. F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (Germany, 1927) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (Germany, 1927), for instance, give the spectator the means by which to project onto the filmed city his or her fears of modern life. Films and television shows as varied as *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorcese, US, 1976), *Kids* (dir. Larry Clark, US, 1995), and the *CSI* franchise also operate according to this fantasy. While less common, the reverse situation of the city being celebrated as such has a history of its own, from all the odes to Paris and the odd one to Manhattan (e.g., Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*, US, 1979) through to such shows as *Sex and the City* and *Friends*. In a show like *Sex and the City*, both the city and the lover of the moment are fetishized, or rather what is ultimately fetishized is a certain view of the city guaranteed by a certain kind of—narcissistic—relationship; a view that does not, or tries not to, open onto the Real. While the fear of the modern metropolis ultimately elides the Real through safely negotiating or uncovering it (in *CSI* at a DNA level), the celebration of the city succeeds to the extent that it has purged the Real. Finally, there are many films that straddle both sides, for instance those that depict the city—often New York—as a rough and dangerous yet lovable place, a setting worth exploring and in which one strives to seek narcissistic (mis)recognition. *Blade Runner* sidesteps these categories, despite the many attempts to place it in the first.


18. Silverman herself notes, in the very next paragraph, that the eye color of the replicants changes when displayed on the screen of the Voight-Kampff test. Thus while vision seems to be the site at which difference can be discerned, it is perhaps the very focus on it that indicates it cannot be trusted. The Gaze is overproximate.


21. It is worth remarking in this context that the film was to be initially set in the year 2020, but this was changed at the last moment for fear of resonating with 20/20 vision; vision, in this film, is far from perfect. Another interesting note concerns a scene that was shot and fully intended to make it into the movie but was dropped due to the negative being accidentally exposed. During the fight sequence between Deckard and Leon, a Japanese woman on one of the film’s iconic billboards was to “look” at the characters “as if,” Dryer reports, “she was watching a televised fight. That bit was supposed to give this feeling of oppression, that these billboards are watching everyone everywhere we go. . . . it would have been the capper for the movie, actually.” See Paul Sammon, Future Noir: The Making of “Blade Runner” (New York: Harper, 1996), 73, 161.


Affects of the Gaze

which precede and follow them only by art direction. Ambiance and décor are enhanced at the expense of comprehension. We’re left with the feeling we’re on tour in a big museum and become separated from our guide,” was the verdict of Jeff Millar, “Blade Runner,” Houston Chronicle, 25 June 1982.


27. In Camera Lucida, Barthes tries to account for the peculiar and powerful effects on him of certain photographs. In contrast to the studium, or basic cultural and educational value of the photograph, he locates the force of these photographs in what he terms the punctum: “sting, speck, cut, little hole — and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

28. The faults of the film cannot simply be ascribed to the fact that it went over budget, with the producers stepping in and relieving the director of his duties, adding a voice-over narration and final scene. They cannot even be chalked up to the fact that Scott and his associates eliminated certain explanatory scenes in anticipation of going over budget. Some mistakes could have been eliminated simply with proper sound mixing, but this was not accomplished for the theatrical release or the 1992 director’s cut and the recently released “final cut.” Although this latter version does improve on some of the errors of the director’s cut, it leaves many — curiously — in place.

29. Scott reports that “the nightmare in my mind was that this look would merely become an intelligent speculation concerning a city forty years in the future, and nothing more.” The “city we present is overkill. But I always get the impression of New York as being overkill. . . . So we took that idea and projected it forty years into the future and came up with a megalopolis.” Interestingly Scott also suggests that Edward Hopper’s stark and empty Nighthawks served as motivation for the design of the setting, entailing that the design emerged from the seemingly paradoxical affects of an overly bustling city and being alone in it — that is, a failed society in which one is alone amongst others before the overproximate Gaze. This surrender before the failure of the Symbolic — which was itself the raison d’être of the film — resulted in not everything being planned out
along the lines of “intelligent speculation”; the film’s makeup artist, for instance, reports that “a lot of things we did on Blade Runner were ‘possibly it’s this’ or ‘possibly it’s that.’” Hampton Fancher, one of the writers, attributes this to the “dream logic operating” in the film, what I am writing as the failure of the Symbolic. The first screening of the film for the director was an “unnerving” one, as Terry Rawlings, the supervising editor, attests: “The entire time, we never said a word. Then, when the film finished and the lights came up, Ridley turned to me and said, ‘God, it’s marvelous. What the fuck does it all mean?’” Sammon, Future Noir, 73, 75, 133, 169, 268.

30. After all, most reviewers would have known that Scott was taken off the picture, that there had been multiple scripts and scriptwriters, and so on; in short, they should have been skeptical of the producers’ statements and marketing.


32. Philip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). In her influential essay on the film, Bruno writes: “The result of this architectural pastiche [of the film’s setting] is an excess of scenography. Every relation in the narrative space produces an exhibitionism rather than an aesthetics of the visual. The excess of violence is such an exhibition. The iconography of death as well is scenographic. The ‘scene’ of death becomes a sort of ‘obscenity,’ the site of total, transparent visibility.” Bruno, “Ramble City,” 187. Bruno is right to point to the excess of scenography in the film, but it is the nature of this excess that is in question. Where in applying Jameson’s remarks on architectural postmodernism, she sees it as pastiche, I am suggesting that it marks the collapse of the gaze into the field of the visible, and while Bruno accurately records the “obscenity” of death in the film, I argue that such death is obscene to the extent that it cannot be mourned; unable to be deposited in any Symbolic, it sticks out in the field of visibility. Only Roy seems to mourn, however minimally, the deaths of others, until his own death, where, in keeping death watch, Deckard—and the spectator—mourns Roy.

34. Kolb, “Blade Runner Film Notes,” 163.


40. This explains the absence in the film of class politics, which Harvey inappropriately laments. To the extent that there is no center of power, there can be no organized resistance (making the film somewhat prescient in an era of mass protests against indeterminate, global forces, in which activists often seem increasingly—and logically—confused as to who or what they are protesting).

41. On the relation of stupidity or stupor to the act of writing and thought, see Avital Ronell, Stupidity (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).


43. This route was certainly promoted in the film’s marketing campaign (by anxious producers who had already cottoned on to the film’s difficulties), which placed Ford front and center in posters with his gun drawn and raised, poised for his next kill.


47. The writer of this scene, Hampton Fancher, reports that he wrote these lines under duress, not wanting to write a love scene
between the characters: “I detest that kind of shit.” But as the producer and director kept insisting, he mockingly came up with the lines during one of their meetings, even acting them out. That what was intended as an ironic affront became part of the film highlights how these lines are the basic, zero degree of sexuality, which in fact fits the scene of one or two replicants coming to know desire. Sammon, *Future Noir*, 167.


51. It has already been noted how Silverman’s assumption that Batty and Leon also have implanted memories is not necessarily confirmed by the text.


53. While it may be argued that such technology may one day exist, and that once we grant this we must come to accept that Deckard does track down Zhora through finding her in the photograph, it should be noted (as fans have noticed) that it is not Zhora in the photo, or rather: it is not Joanna Cassidy. The actress in the still photo has noticeably different facial features than Cassidy. Cassidy reports that this infuriated her: “I would have come down to do that [the photo shoot] even if it’d been shot two years after I was done working on the picture.” Thus the “error” must be seen as at least partly intentional; it is certainly discernible in spectatorship. Furthermore, the “hard copy” photograph is different than the close-up photo on the Esper machine, from which the hard copy was supposedly derived. Rutger Hauer calls the photo a lie: “So that whole Esper sequence shows how you can play with images and tell a story and, at the same time, completely bullshit someone. Which is just like making a motion picture, come to think of it. But the truth of that photo — there is no truth.” Sammon, *Future Noir*, 146.

54. One can imagine, for instance, that had Steven Spielberg been the film’s director, the niece would have become a central character.
55. It may be argued that the blueness of the sky goes overboard. In the final cut, the shot has been digitally altered to include clouds and a more believable cityscape. Nevertheless, the sun peeks through these clouds, and the release of the symbolic dove still engenders the affect of redemption.

56. It is also worth noting that during the rain scenes “Scott had slow, eerie music fed through overhead loudspeakers to help pull his cast and crew into the moody atmosphere he’d had so painstakingly constructed. A melancholy ambiance which perfectly transferred from Ridleyville to Blade Runner itself.” When Rutger Hauer gave his final lines (which Hauer wrote himself at the last moment), “All these moments will be lost in time . . . like tears in rain,” the art director reports that the cast and crew broke into tears: “I mean, I can hardly talk about it now, almost twelve years later. It was the combined effect of his words and the strain and struggle of working on this masterpiece.” As the spectators were lost in the world of the film, a world to be minimally redeemed through the event of Roy’s testimony, the creators went through a similar experience themselves. Sammon, Future Noir, 195.

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From Blade Runner