

AN ANALYSIS OF BLADE RUNNER USING SARTREAN CONCEPTS OF BEING-IN-ITSELF AND BEING-FOR-ITSELF

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Being-in-itself (L'entre-en-soi) may be distinguished from being-for-itself (L'être pour soi) in its being a static state of existence as its definition lies in a concrete and eternal, invariable essence, it possesses no potentiality for negating itself and projecting future possibilities for action or conceiving an alternate definition for itself as it is full positivity, being-in-itself *is* what it *is*, it is totally self-contained. Being-for-itself by contrast is a dynamic process of *becoming*, its existence precedes its essence, in that its essence lies in its freedom, potentiality and capacity for the nihilation of a current state of being of facticity at any point in time so it *becomes* what it will *be* through transcending the in-itself of extant ego and situation, it is characterized chiefly by its fluidity and lack of a rigidified essence and hence its nothingness. This trait of introducing non-being, negativity and negation into the world is peculiar to human consciousness, in Sartre's terms "The being by which Nothing comes into the world must be its own Nothingness". It projects itself into the future through envisaging a spectrum of possibilities, which it is *not yet*, and negating competing possibilities through choice and action. The nothingness or lack that lies at the heart of being creates a yearning for fulfilment, and drives the human to seek to define is thus the sole agent responsible for his definition and being. Being-for-itself possesses the capacity to transcend its facticity at any given point in time because of its capability to reconstitute itself and its situation, it thus *is what it is not and is not what it is* owing to its ever-present capacity for flux, re-invention, transformation and evolution, as it is 'condemned to freedom and choice'.

In *Blade Runner* the distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself is problematized and ambiguated through the enigmatic and ambivalent phenomena of the Replicant, which lies somewhere between the category of man and machine, or subject and object, especially with the development of the Nexus-Six prototype with its capacity to develop more advanced emotional responses than previous generations of replicants. They are programmed by the Tyrell corporation to 'be more human than human' as they possess a sentience sufficiently advanced and sophisticated for them to attain a poignant awareness of the circumscribed limits that bind them to a constricted mode of being. This takes the form of secondary and subjugated conditions as slaves to human beings as they perform menial and unpleasant tasks such as mining and prostitution in off-world colonies; as well as four-year mortalities which terminate them at the precise point at which they acquire sufficient experience to develop emotional faculties no different from those of human beings. The possession of intellect and emotional capacities that parallel the human condition leads them to agonize over their plight as they live tremulously in constant fear of death, which leads them to rebel against their brute facticities by staging mutinies in the Off-World, and to seek to prolong their transitory

existences by confronting their creator, Dr Tyrell, in order to demand an antidote for their mortality.

The replicant exemplifies being-in-itself insofar as it possesses a pre-determined and concretized essence that lies in form of the programming that conditions its intellect, function and capacity for emotional response. The Voight Kamff test which serves to identify replicants and distinguish them from human beings operates on observing the ability of replicants to display adequate and appropriate emotional reflexes on disturbing questions, in particular questions which are supposed to prompt human empathy. The androids lack this particular feature because of a main trait that distinguishes them from human beings, that is, absence of memories, a significant past and a childhood. In the opening scene for instance, Leon reacts in violence and agitation (he kills the blade runner with a gun) to a question concerning his mother, an obvious non-experience for him as an engineered machine with the pre-defined essence of emotional stultification because of the void of a past. Each replicant is programmed for a specific purpose (and in this sense is determined in-itself functionally and conceptually as a being prior to its existence): Roy Batty for instance, is a combat prototype, Pris is a leisure prototype, and so on. After a certain period of existence and accumulated experience which enables the replicants to acquire memories over a short life span that develop their emotional faculties and capacities for sufficient self-reflexivity to question their condition however, the replicants increasingly resemble being-for-itself or intentional consciousness as they experience a nothingness, a lack and a dissatisfaction with their rigidly delineated conditions and subjection to causal laws as unfree being-in-itself, such as formal laws prohibiting their presence on earth, the programming of fixed capacities as slaves, and an inescapable termination date. This leads them to aspire for better conditions through rebelling against the strong necessity that determines them, which finds expression in their quest to escape and transcend their facticities that come in the form of their brief mortalities and objectified functions and roles as slave-labourers in off-world colonies, as they struggle for self-determination and freedom in their flight to Los Angeles. This also signifies a desperate bid for moral autonomy (or a struggle to realize ‘good faith’) on their part as they rebel against the arbitrary and euphemized practice of ‘retirement’ for replicants which attempt to challenge their limitations by protesting their pre-determined fleeting mortalities and fleeing to earth.

In effect the attempt of the Replicants to authenticate themselves by breaking free of their socially prescribed roles and pre-determined mortalities by the Tyrell Corporation represents an experience of anguish that follows the realization and acknowledgement of the nothingness that lies ‘coiled at the heart of being’; that is a reflective recognition of the radical freedom of consciousness arising from its spontaneous capacity to reconstitute its world or situation through supplying an alternate meaning or interpretation; as well as to negate, or nihilate the objectified roles and essences assigned to them in order to *become* something other and beyond present being. Being-for-itself is characterized by a lack of self or essence, its reality is tangibly delineated by a transcendence toward what it lacks. To quote Sartre, the self surpasses itself towards the world conceived of as the ‘totality of beings within the compass of the circuit of selfness’¹. This leads to an affirmation of choice and potentiality in being-for-itself as the replicants seek to project an alternate possibility for themselves into the future, which takes the form of emancipation from bondage to slave-roles and quest for lengthened lives. This follows from the recognition of responsibility and accountability for one’s actions and futurity that flows

¹ Sartre, J.P. *Being and Nothingness* p 148

from the experience of anguish. It also signifies a commitment against ‘bad faith’ in their rejection of the pre-determined course set for them by the Tyrell Corporation through biological programming and the enforcement of laws such as ‘retirement’ against them by blade runners; once they attain sufficient sentience and emotional sophistication to realize that they are objectified and trapped in arbitrary and unfair bondage to beings hardly different from themselves, the only distinction being their natural, rather than artificial origin. This finds poignant expression in the question posed by the Replicant Rachel to Deckard if he has ‘ever retired a human by mistake’ and if he has ever taken the Voight Kamff test himself. Indeed, the tenacity with which the replicants cling to their lives and the intensity of consciousness they possess of their own condition, which actually mirrors that of the humans (who are no less mortal) in a magnified form because of their short life-spans qualify them as likelier candidates for the classification of being-for-itself, as they seek constantly to *become* something greater than their facticities (that is, their determined incept and death dates as well as their assigned roles and functions); in contrast to many of their human counterparts in the film who unreflectively and languidly accept the roles assigned to them by society, without questioning the moral implications, purpose or legitimacy of their actions. They show no sign of the intense existential angst evinced by the replicants who unceasingly engage actively in the project of survival, as they constantly constitute and evaluate their own situation, apprehend possibilities, and undertake authenticating action for self-preservation. Instances of such semi-conscious human beings are the world-weary Deckard (initially) and his smug superior Bryant who refers to the replicants derisively as ‘skin-jobs’. He never challenges the legitimacy of his position or acknowledges the existential plight of the replicants and thoughtlessly allows his essence to be determined by the dictates of organizational duty. He is thus, ironically, a human who more closely resembles being-in-itself than the ostensible objects and machines, the replicants.

Rachael, the most advanced prototype of the Nexus-Six replicants, comes closer to resembling human being because she, unlike the other replicants, possesses a past in the form of memories originally belonging to Dr Tyrell’s niece that have been implanted in her. This enables her to endure the Voight-Kamff test without being exposed as a replicant for a much longer period than the others – it takes over a hundred questions to confirm her status where normal replicants take twenty. Ironically it is precisely her close resemblance to humanity in her possession of a past that initially leads her to display characteristics more in-itself than for-itself – she grounds her identity in the facticity and historicity that is constituted by the memories and false past she has internalized. She seeks refuge in objectifying her identity in childhood photographs and memories (or defining herself in terms of a factual essence) to assure herself and demonstrate to others (she presents these to Deckard) her authenticity as a human being. Paradoxically it is the realization, through Deckard, of her true status as a replicant that initiates a painful self-awareness of her over-determined condition, that leads her to experience anguish, and to seek to transcend and nihilate that condition through increased exercises of volition and acknowledgement of her responsibility got self-definition as she autonomously develops a purpose in escaping the Tyrell Corporation and gradually learning to emote through the blossoming of a relationship with Deckard. She thus transcends mere being into a mode of existing through her recognition of choice and possibility, as she exercises will to authenticate herself and carve out an original identity and essence in order to *become* other than what she was programmed to *be* through validating action; this new effort for self-determination is seen in her decision to save Deckard’s life by shooting the replicant Leon dead as he is on the verge of killing Deckard, and in her final acquiescence to escape the other Blade-Runners as they elope.

The pivotal instance in which she emerges from mere being-in-itself to being-for-itself would have to be the scene of intimacy in Deckard's apartment as she requests Deckard to put his arms around her in a first exercise of will and alterity after he has attempted to humanize her by prompting her with instructions to request being kissed and held.

The figure of Deckard is also seen to evince a growth from the in-itself to the for-itself. The society at large in the film is one that has been dehumanized in the dystopian surroundings of futuristic Los Angeles (a quintessential post-modern society) where technology has infiltrated almost every aspect of existence and the population in general is seen to lead more or less mechanical and unreflective lives, blending in perfectly with the impersonal backdrop of machinery and technology. There is an overwhelming sense of stasis, inertia and unquestioning compliance on the part of society in most of the scenes, where the crowds seem undifferentiated, aimless and either resigned to the dreariness and drudgery of the status quo, blindly conforming or engaged in mindless hedonism in club scenes; a scenario which is likely to invoke 'nausea' on the part of any Satrean existentialist protagonist. Deckard may be seen to exemplify his lifeless surroundings in the blasé and resigned attitude which he takes towards his life, occupation and duty initially, if 'bad faith' may be seen to be the modality of existence in his society as most people are passive cogs in the machinery of a clockwork society, and unaware and indifferent to their condition (e.g. Chew, the eye-manufacturer for instance is solely occupied with his function, i.e. producing artificial eyes and ignorant of the larger project of creating Replicants); Deckard doubtlessly falls into this category as well initially. The whole of Los Angeles society it seems, has been reduced to a state of being rather than existing with the malaise of a widespread vapidness and absence of values and self-reflexivity or consciousness that has accompanied the invasion of technology and capitalism. It is ironically Deckard's encounter with the replicants that raises his awareness of the human condition, he is alerted to the transience of life and mortality's fleeting nature in the scene where he terminates Zhorra and shows signs of feeling sorry for her, and then confronted by Leon who thrashes him and informs him that it is 'painful to live in fear'; here he learns of the anguish that accompanies the awareness of leading an over-determined existence where once has the capacity to surpass and nihilate that empty role. It is also the realization of his relationship with Rachael as well as the ironic rescue of his life by an expiring Roy Batty that leads Deckard to question the moral legitimacy and meaning of his role as he identifies and empathizes with the humanity and love of life that impels the replicants to rebel against the harsh reality of their determined condition or facticity. By the film's end we find him abdicating the meaningless, savage and ethically obscure role of blade runner which has defined him, as he realizes the sterility and empty nature of that socially tailored in-itself role, and rejects the hollow and unjust system of values in his society. Thus in good faith, he flees the inner disintegration of his being prompted by this new awareness towards the in-itself (or ideal as the lover of Rachael) which he should be (since it fulfils and authenticates him) and is not. He thereby initiates a new project for his existence by creating a new world for himself, imbuing fresh meaning on his situation by centering it around his genuine feelings for Rachael as he apprehends the multiplicity of possibilities and the transcendent projection of will and passion that he may seek as being-for-itself. He redefines his life by negating the static facticity and actuality of his past and transcends it towards self-conceptualized *possibility* in the form of a newly constituted telos, in order to realize the fulfilment in 'becoming' or assuming the mode of being/ self-definition that is now more meaningful for him, that of a lover. One must note however, that his essence as being-for-itself is constituted in his freedom and capacity for choice and change, he is not merely the being or role of lover towards which he now flees, should his

love wither he may create a new identity or choose a new authenticating roles as consciousness in its nothingness and capacity for negation is dynamic and renders being-for-itself fluid. Deckard is not his past, ego or emotions as the crevasse of nothingness in being-for-itself separates him from these objects of consciousness and enables him to transcend them through nihilation and the exercise of volition.

In *Blade Runner* thus, being-for-itself is presented as a condition not intrinsic to human existence but a description that pertains to any self-reflexive consciousness (be it man or machine) that has apprehended its nothingness or capacity for freedom and choice and hence its responsibility for self-definition through the nihilation of any role, duty or identity which no longer authenticates the will, aspirations, desires and passions of that particular being. The irony of this is that it is primarily the replicants rather than the human beings who exemplify this dynamic state of becoming and not merely being may be at attempt by Ridley Scott to demonstrate the pervasive nature of bad faith on the part of the masses in society; true *existing* over mere *being* is thus shown to require higher order consciousness that questions self-imposed identity in order to escape being objectified into a static or in-itself state of existence that fails to correspond with one's true conception of selfhood at any particular moment in time.

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