

Film *Blade Runner*: A Lacanian Textbook Case

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The religious doxa: God created man in his own image has inspired man to envy God and (by taking his position) creates just like God and in his own image. Such a fantasy reached its culmination in Western imagination when Mary Shelly reproduced its literary equivalent by writing her novel, *Frankenstein* during the romantic period of English literature. The most recent version of this old dream was constructed by Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982)—a free adaptation of Philip K Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of an Electric Sheep* (1968). As its primary idiosyncrasy, the *Blade Runner* is a masterful blending of the human with machine (bio-robotic android). The second and the most interesting peculiarity of the film is its Lacanian psychoanalytic background and its breakthroughs. This makes the film as a remarkable model for Lacan's three key theoretical conceptions, namely, the mirror stage, the gaze, and a trade-off between Other and the other.

There are five crucial points in Lacan's whole infantile drama of the mirror stage, (first) a search for identification of the *I*, which is determined by a specular and exterior image that is preordained. (second) The mirror stage is the space for the subject to find a solution to the problem of a discordance between the *I* and the virtual reality of the infantile fragmented body or to put it more precisely the difference "between an organism and its reality—"or, as they say between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" [German words meaning, the inner world and its surrounding] (Ibid, 78). (third) This overbearing exterior imagined image is according to Lacan "the threshold of the visible world" (Ibid, 77) for the subject. The driving force behind the subject's endless search for his own identity triggers a struggle between 'insufficiency' and 'anticipation'. The driving force is the gap between the identity and the reality of this identity. In the other words, the perpetual infantile struggle "proceeds from a fragmented image of the body to what I call an "orthopaedic" form of the totality," (Ibid, 78). (fourth) The mirror stage a stage in which "the specular *I* turns into the social *I*," (Ibid) while this identification retains at its heart a psychic economy that is entrenched by misrecognition, misunderstanding, jealousy, aggressivity, alienation, etc. (fifth) The formation of the self-knowledge of the subject's identity in the mirror stage is based on misrecognition and misunderstanding that is implied in the French term, *méconnaissance*.

Much of the *Blade Runner* is devoted to resolve questions arising from the above five points in the mirror stage. In his essay, "Image is everything: Lacan and *Blade Runner*," Victor Gischler emphasizes that the film *Blade Runner* deals with two issues: reality and what is identity or what are a real human and not human. Caught between these questions, the androids or replicants are predestined by the will of their makers to live only four years. So, in search of their identity, they develop a desire for extension of their life-span and return from the space colonies to earth to meet their creators. They do everything they can in order

to cover their lack of humanness by acquiring human qualities such as feeling and memory of the past. For the longevity of the humans and their quality of life are the major source of their envy. Every replicant wants to know what is that to be a human? And what makes a replicant human? For this reason, the replicant-producing company Tyrell designed a polygraph-like machine, Voight-Kampff to find out whether one is replicant or an authentic human, mainly by identifying emotional and bodily responses, such as respiration, blushing, changes in heart-rate, and so on. This test is used by the blade runners who work for Tyrell Corporation. The discordance between reality and the identity is unbearable for the replicants as the subject shows in the Lacanian mirror stage. For example, when a blade runner, Holden asks the replicant Leon to recall the memories of his mother, he shoots Holden. As an android, Leon doesn't have a mother. This envy stems from anything that questions the humanness (the misunderstood identity of the replicants) of Leon. In a desperate attempt, Leon and other replicant Roy try to contact Cho, who designs for Tyrell, the eyes of replicants in order to resolve their lack—a long life like humans. Then Leon forces the Tyrell to think about ways to extend replicants' life-span. The Company refuses to do so and brutally gouges Leon's eyes instead.

The protagonist of the film, Rick Deckard, is the master blade runner, an interesting case in point, who is assigned to destroy all rogue replicants who escaped to earth from their off-world colonies. When the beautiful replicant, Rachel arrives at Deckard's penthouse, she brings a picture (an image) in order to prove her authentic humanity. The picture shows Rachel with her mother, which is a fake one. She persuasively follows Deckard to learn how to unknow the known—unknow one's known identity. This is largely to veil her identity and conceal her lack in the eyes of Deckard. But Deckard instantly falls in love with the replicant and tries to make advances when he invites her to his apartment. As pointed out earlier, this process of unknowing the known is the central theme of the mirror stage too. At the end of the film, we are left with an open-ended question, whether Deckard is a replicant or an authentic human. The doubt is reinforced in the film, when Rachel says to Deckard if he himself undergone the test. This is the open-ended question about the ambiguity of the subject's identity that Lacan wants to place in the centre of his theory of the mirror stage. The realness or the imagined external image as the determiner of the identity of the *I* mark the Gordian knot in the mirror stage, which is rendered to the audience. Like Lacan's subject, both Deckard and Rachel reveal their paranoia of lack.

For Lacan the gaze was an object *a* in the field of visibility for the subject's desire. Lacan locates the gaze not within the subject but in the field of the Other. As such, this modifies *I see* in the field of visibility into *I desire to be seen*. Thus, desire is not centred on what *I see* but *I want to be seen*. What I see is a trap and a lure in the field of the Other. The gaze of the subject is superimposed by the gaze of the Other that often exposes a lack. The eye is separated from the body and gaze is independent of the eye. What I see is in fact what I desire to see, and the object of my desire is located in the gaze of the Other. In *Blade Runner*, the eye has a continuous presence. The large eyes of an owl mirror Tyrell's symbol in a large glass. The replicants want to find an eye-maker in order to extend their lives. The eye who is capable of seeing with emotion is missing in them, so they want to recover it from the gaze of the Other—the Tyrell Corporation. The replicants find the lack of their humanness in the gaze of the blade runners who are humans and in the Deckard's case, we have the impression that he is seeing his own lack in the gaze of the replicant Rachel.

Lacan in his *Seminar XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre (From an Other to the other)* 1968-1969, which is not explored much in English language speaks about a playful drama between Other

and the other. The relationship between the ego and the other as Lacan's *L* diagram shows intervened by the third party, the Other, which in its part, proliferates narcissistic ties between the ego and the other. Existence of the other in Other is explained in Lacan's formula "after going from *a* to A (the small other is in big Other," (Marini, Marcelle, 1992, 216). Such an exchange of position happens (in multiple-level) in *Blade Runner* frequently. How Rachell become the object *a* and in the meantime other to Deckard. When Deckard finds Rachel first as his other and in a way Other, for he was human, the creator of replicants, a transference occurs. Rachel takes the position of the object *a* for Deckard. Lacan clarifies this transference as common occurrence in the economy of desire, "this other, this little other, with its famous "the," was what at this level, which is the level of algebra, of signifying structure, we designate as the object *a*." (Lacan, 2007, 14). Similarly, the earth is the other of the off-world colonies, the underground setting of the film is the other of the surface middle-class Los Angeles.

We will further discuss this topic in the seminar.

Notes:

Marini, Marcelle, (1992), *Jacques Lacan: the French Context*, trans. Anne Tomiche, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

Lacan, Jacques, (2006), *Écrits*, (Complete version), trans. Bruce Fink, W W Norton & Company, New York.

—*Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, W W Norton & Company, New York, 2007