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## *Allegory and Symbol in Blade Runner 2049*

It is axiomatic in the scholarship and reception of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) that the film uses replicants and artificial sentience as staging grounds for questions about subjectivity under (late) capital rather than as avenues of futurist inquiry.<sup>1</sup> As such, it shares in the broad category of allegory. The film is also recognised, however, as a text saturated with imagism and often haunted by the more numinous mimetic category of symbolism. It has been said that the argument about the humanity of the protagonist—the “Deck-A-Rep” debate—is symptomatic of a more “elemental duality at the film’s core,”<sup>2</sup> and indicates a conceptual rather than a thematic tension. In contrast, Denis Villeneuve’s sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) has been described as, and criticised for, resolving and foreclosing such productive uncertainties. While this may be true of the film at the shallowest level of its plot, this article argues that at a subtler level it is more invested in an unresolved dialectic between symbol and allegory as forms of representation and modes of philosophical experience.

Symbol and allegory are old, multivalent categories, and they require a pragmatic measure of unpacking. In *Allegory and Ideology* (2019) Jameson draws on Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer to align symbolic representations of subjectivity with a theological, pre-modern concept of the unified self.<sup>3</sup> The nostalgia for this psychological episteme can be situated as a marker of what these Marxist theorists have variously described as a crisis of experience synonymous with modernity, more often associated with allegorical representation. Andrew McCann pithily summarizes the distinction:

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory C. Flemming, “From Questioning to Answering: The Paranoid Dialectics of P. K. Dick,” *Rethinking Marxism* 31.4 (2019): 519-31 (p. 524).

<sup>2</sup> Varun Begley, “*Blade Runner* and the Postmodern: A Reconsideration,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 32.3 (2004): 186-92 (p. 186).

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 48.

Simply put, the symbol incarnates an idea and as such belongs in the very cosmology it evokes. It thus partakes of the timeless and the metaphysical. An allegory, by contrast, is a representation of an idea, and as such is subject to the mutability and arbitrariness of signification. A symbol is a sign taken as a wonder. An allegory is merely a sign, though one that alludes to a lost horizon of symbolic significance.<sup>4</sup>

So, where the symbol seeks to incarnate an idea, the allegory foregrounds its own inadequacy to do so. According to Fitterman and Place, these forms may also interact differently with the temporality of plot, the symbol deriving from an idea and gathering images about itself, where allegory builds towards a gesture while jettisoning images.<sup>5</sup> In essence the symbol is static and transcendent, the allegory temporal and historical.

Writing of the original *Blade Runner*, John Frow argues that Scott's film "relentlessly thematizes" the connection between vision and identity,<sup>6</sup> through its conspicuous use of the human eye and its prostheses as motifs inviting an interrogation of perception as a regulator of selfhood. *2049* shares this concern and, like its predecessor, opens with an extreme close-up of a luminous green eye. In the earlier film the iris—often construed as belonging to Holden or Roy Batty—is striated by the reflected flames of Los Angeles's pandemonic skyline. In the sequel, however, the eye is entirely without reflection and fades into a panning aerial of a dystopian agricultural landscape marked by stark concentric industrial circles. While agriculture has always been a form of industry, this sequence signifies an acceleration of its relationship with more conventionally urban modes of industry, and it indicates the completeness of capital's destruction, and recreation, of ecology. The sequence foregrounds the perennial concern of its franchise, the symmetry between the scientific overdetermination of the replicant and the ideological overdetermination of the subject. Within the semiotics of the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew McCann, "Patrick White's Late Style," in Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang, eds, *Patrick White Beyond the Grave: New Critical Perspectives* (London: Anthem Press, 2015), pp. 117-28 (p. 121).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, "Notes on Conceptualisms," in Andrea Andersson, ed., *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 108-116 (p. 108).

<sup>6</sup> John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 293.

eye in mind, this transition works on both symbolic and allegorical levels. As an icon of consciousness, the original iris shot through with petrochemical stack-flames almost nakedly invokes the transformation of the modern subject. In *2049*, however, the introductory iris is not static, but restlessly searching, and it seems depthless, without reflection. The sequence in the newer film, and its connection to subsequent shots of the sleeping protagonist K, invite more allegorical interpretation. It is diegetically unclear to whom the eye belongs, and the subsequent answers which the film provides undermine and interrupt the representational authority with which its plot might be construed to offer closure.

The opening sequence of *2049* resonates with its predecessor's crooked staging of different conventional relationships between sense experience and personhood as such, and Villeneuve extends this project, ironizing a number of the conventions of identity. Scott's film introduced the Voight-Kampff test, which separates human from replicant by measuring pupil dilation against a series of hypothetical but emotionally suggestive questions. Both films artfully explore the hybridity of their medium through this device, where, as Frow notes, an amalgam of real people and fictional characters is foregrounded as an ontological test. In addition to visual perception and facial recognition, Scott problematizes the role of memory as a fixture of identity through the character of Rachel, whose memories, and hence her own self-awareness, are an implanted fiction. Frow argues that this is one of the ways in which the premise of the replicant "undermines the grounding of all human identity either in memory or in the indexical link between representation and the body."<sup>7</sup> The hybridity emphasized by this reading supports Varun Begley's subsequent description of Scott's film as "an opaque and resistant pastiche" rather than a coherent aesthetic structure inviting stable interpretations.<sup>8</sup> However, critics differ on Villeneuve's approach to similar territory. Žižek criticizes it on Marxist grounds for endorsing something like a "conservative-humanist" judgement of the prospect of replicant revolution and for ostensibly reifying the biological family as a domain exempt from ideology.<sup>9</sup> Kim makes this

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<sup>7</sup> Frow, *Character and Person*, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Begley, "Blade Runner and the Postmodern," p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Blade Runner 2049: A View of Posthuman Capitalism," *The Philosophical Salon* (30 October 2017): <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/blade-runner-2049-a-view-of-post-human-capitalism/>.

point in more conciliatory terms, arguing that the film recovers a fugitive or spectral humanism from a post-human world.<sup>10</sup> A final preference for reconciliatory answers is also the spur for Gregory Flemming's criticism of the film as vitiating its forbear's provocations with neoliberal platitudes and a vaguely Christic ambience.<sup>11</sup> As I mentioned above, Zizek's and Flemming's criticisms are accurate with regard to the film's content *per se*, but Villeneuve's engagement with the epistemology of his form is more ambivalent than they allow, particularly where it resumes Scott's dramatization of the uncertain link between narrative, representation, and memory.

Where Rachael's memories are fictions disguised as truths in the original film, the newer model of replicants are aware of their artificiality, and K's predicament is the obverse of hers. Despite their condition these implanted memories pacify and regulate their hosts, providing a more stable body of replicant labour. So where—according to one side of the debate—Deckard is a replicant who retires other replicants under a pretence of humanity, K does so openly. This is one of the shifts Villeneuve's film observes in its franchise's world, away from the satanic romantic of Roy Batty's rebellion and towards a seamlessly overdetermined despair more reminiscent of Mark Fisher's capitalist realism. Where the thrust of the earlier film investigates Deckard's unresolved humanity, K moves in the opposite direction, questioning his own status as a replicant and suspecting himself to be Rachael's and Deckard's missing hybrid child. His quest is overdetermined, and in investing determinist ontology in birth and biology it does indeed seem to foreclose Scott's interesting uncertainties.

However, this reading is itself predicated upon a degree of essentialist nostalgia; even in negating K's humanity, memory is imbued with a symbolic power of instantiation tantamount to ontology. According to this model, K is definitionally a replicant, and therefore verifiably non-human, owing to a falsifiable relationship between memory, biology, and truth. Villeneuve's text does invite this reading, but like Scott's it also contains other tensions and dualities, which allow for the interpretation of memory not as a symbol denoting a unified person, but as a

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<sup>10</sup> Sharon Kim, "Pale Fire: Human Image and Post-human Desire in Blade Runner 2049," *Journal of Science Fiction* 3.3 (November 2019): 8-19 (p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> Flemming, "From Questioning to Answering," p. 525.

fragmented allegory of complex historical experience. Drawing on Deckard's unicorn dream-sequence, K's childhood memory contains a wooden horse inscribed with the date of the replicant-messiah's birth, which becomes the linchpin of his human-theory. This memory first suggests and then disqualifies his status as the missing child, and so it marks him as non-human in a final sense. But this implanted memory, and by extension others, does partake indirectly of the real; its engineer Stelline confirms that it was lived, simply not by K. Artificial memory is readable as the film's thesis of art: palliative and pacific, heartening in a heartless world. To borrow Jameson's classic formulation from *The Political Unconscious* (1981), artificial memory seems to serve as an aesthetic resolution of social contradiction. It is also, however, positioned as a potential vehicle of sublime but false symbolic meaning. Sapper Morton tells K that the latter only accepts his subservient role as a blade runner because he has never witnessed a miracle, referring to the "replicant birth," but, ironically, K's error is to mistake a sign for a wonder.

K's disillusionment, and the empirical distinction between the begotten and the made which the foreclusive readings of Žižek, Kim, and Flemming make of it, does not nullify the sign's capacity to signify. Instead, it merely returns that function to history and locates it in a secular order of representation. K's memory can only be ontologically true or ontologically false if memory itself is a symbolic instantiation of the unified subject who is contiguous through time. However, if memory is itself a more allegorical representation of a wayward and mutable temporal experience, then K's memory, like Roy Batty's death, is an authentic experience of history. Moreover, when pursued to its logical conclusion the premise of artificial memory, like that of the replicant itself, ironizes or suspends the distinction between "real" and artificial memory in general, particularly as it is represented in film. The viewer processes the false or misallocated memories with the same instruments as those they use to process other scenes in the film, and the viewer invests these memories with the same authority. Indeed, the verifiably artificial memories, which the viewer witnesses Stelline creating out of nothingness, are more "real" than other scenes in *2049* in a number of ways. In particular, they reflect a world nearer our own, with living plants and animals.

Villeneuve plays with and agitates the distinction between ontological and non-ontological memory—or symbolic and allegorical representation—in two other

key respects: Deckard's relationship with the nominally true past signified by Rachel, and K's relationship with the definitionally artificial present signified by his holographic lover Joi. Where the earlier film's messianic iconography primarily attends Roy Batty, the theological lustre of the symbol is most blatant in the presence of the newer film's antagonist Niander Wallace, whose obsession with a new creation is punctuated by ziggurats, guttural chant, and an aisle of replicant prototypes suspended like statues of saints. The *Blade Runner* world is among other things a consistent exploration of filmic hybridity, and Villeneuve notably furthers this exploration through Wallace's offer to Deckard of a recreated Rachael. The uncannily perfect resurrection of Sean Young's image from the iconic 1982 scene in which the two protagonists first meet signals an inversion of Scott's distribution of motifs. Recalling the Christic images which punctuate Roy Batty's through-line, this sequence in *2049* emphatically aligns the power of the numinous symbolic with the industrial sublime of an accelerated dystopia, and a far more terrifying godhead. Wallace's progeny have, after all, peopled many more worlds than those of Yahweh. Deckard's ambivalent rejection of the reborn bride—"her eyes were green"—marks the shrunken dimensions of possible rebellion in this new dispensation, and it aligns that autonomy with the flawed and mutable condition of allegorical memory. Sean Young, of course, has brown eyes and is shown to have them playing Rachael throughout the original film, with the exception of a single close-up shot of the Voight-Kampff scanner when Rachael is initially tested by Deckard. Eloquently enough, some viewers construe this shot to be a continuity error. Positioned within a dialectic between symbolic and allegorical tendencies, this sequence can be read as an ambivalent abjuration of the former and a complex mediation on film's uniquely uncanny temporality. As critics have noted, a key strand of *2049*'s plot is structured by a theological narrative with symbolic motifs and ontological claims. The film's narrative, however, is luxuriantly dilatory like its predecessor's, and this quest-structure is inflected by such concentrated degrees of irony and nuance that its biological implications cannot be treated as thetic.

Other than a handful of elliptical conversations with Deckard, K only interacts substantially with the holographic companion Joi, played by Ana de Armas, who like him exercises an indeterminate degree of compromised autonomy. Despite being a designed and marketed mechanism of wish-fulfilment, she seems to possess agency, and their relationship appears both affective and personal. The

ambiguity and hybridity of their condition, and the many obstacles it seems to raise for the binary implications of the film's primary quest, are most evident during the sequence where Joi employs a replicant sex worker, with whom she merges to an uncertain degree, to engage in physical sex with K. Similarly, earlier in the text K buys her an "emanator" with the bonus he receives for "retiring" Morton. This furnishes Joi with the ability to leave K's apartment and to experience something like physical sensation, which she exercises by going out into the acidic rain on the building's rooftop. Žižek's argument that *2049*'s humanist gestures attempt to exempt "the family from key social conflict" cannot be applied to the posthuman case of K and Joi, and complicates its application elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> The scene discussed above lingers on Joi's simultaneous agency and sensation, but it is nonetheless deliberately interrupted by a message from K's employer, which overrides her like an app on a phone. This notwithstanding, it can be argued that Joi's involvement in and support of K's human thesis—encapsulated in an obscure belief in his special providence and designated by the pet name "Joe," inferring the rather clumsy allusion, Joseph K—renders their relationship yet another palliating illusion, a pretence of humanity like the others, which in its negation merely reinscribes the ontic biological category of the human. However, this position collapses the text's intricate and considerable engagement with the replicant relationship in deference to an idealised human connection entirely absent from it. Rather, the philosophical condition of their experience is more usefully positioned as hybrid and unresolved, overdetermined by their conditioning and function under capital, but nonetheless a limited form of autonomy and experience allegorical of others.

These ambivalent and imperfect portraits of partial and uncertain agency form stark contrasts with Wallace's vatic proclamations of destined galactic imperium, and indeed, with Roy Batty's quest and apotheosis in Scott's film. The irresolution and unease of this contrast is deliberate and effective, exemplified by the irony of Deckard's response to the questionable reality of his dog: "ask him". To clarify my departure from the text's other critics: the contradictions of (artificial) subjectivity under late capital, what Jameson calls the "struggle between personification and a certain modernity,"<sup>13</sup> are not symbolically resolved,

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek, "Blade Runner 2049."

<sup>13</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 346.

transcended, or answered, but rather dramatized in sharp relation. Similarly, at the level of form the unresolved tension between symbol and allegory expands meaning and resists interpretive closure. In manifesting the unity of material and transcendental objects, the symbol depends upon a stable and linear temporal field, but according to Jameson the structure of allegory sharpens historical contradictions and in so doing fractures the illusion of continuum.<sup>14</sup> The hermeneutic effects of this process are dramatically demonstrated during the closing scenes of Villeneuve's film. In her sterile chamber Stelline is observed to manipulate light, motion, and sound to create memory, but she is also multiply seen to manipulate memory's timescale, pausing, accelerating, and rewinding visual structures analogous to film. When a mortally wounded K delivers Deckard to Stelline—the source of the memory and apparently the “true” replicant-human messiah—his dying body is gradually obscured by descending snow. This forms a visual allusion to Rutger Hauer's “tears in rain” soliloquy, and the musical motif from that scene plays. However, when the gaze follows Deckard into the building the viewer sees Stelline alone in the dark weaving a current of snow, manipulating or constructing the scene the viewer has just witnessed. With compelling concision, this sequence unmoors the text's internal order; the film's time-scale circles back on itself to form a helix, leaving the viewer with no means of anchoring the filmic present in time or fixing the epistemological condition of anything they have witnessed within the all-ironizing premise of representation as memory. While it does contain a Hollywood quest with symbolic nostalgias and closed symbolic answers among its panoply of resources, *2049* is a decidedly and artfully open text.

To argue that Villeneuve's *Blade Runner* is structured by a formal dialectic between symbol and allegory—and a concomitant philosophical dialectic between theological nostalgia and posthuman transformation—is to consider it finally as allegorical, in the rarefied sense of the term used by Jameson in *Allegory and Ideology*. Here allegorical interpretation emphasizes the conflictual, particoloured, impure, and inadequate condition of ideology:

Allegory raises its head as a solution when beneath this or that seemingly stable or unified reality the tectonic plates of deeper contradictory levels of

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 34.

the Real shift and grate ominously against one another and demand a representation [...] Allegory does not reunify those incommensurable forces, but it sets them in relationship with one another in a way which, as with all art, all aesthetic experience, can lead alternately to ideological comfort or the restless anxieties of a more expansive knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

This condition of anxious relation, which Jameson also calls the “interechoing of narratives,”<sup>16</sup> is an astute description of *Blade Runner 2049*’s internal structural epistemology: the film thematizes the ineluctable hybridity of the subject and foregrounds the problematic role of memory, and memory’s precarious temporality, within that condition. It does not contain or imply an Archimedean vantage from which one could demonstrate that its narrative is not a story Stelline tells herself in a darkened room to explain or to allegorize her own experience. In its final shot Deckard places his hand on the glass barrier of her sealed studio, which in turn synchronizes with the filmic lens. The effect of this gesture is significantly negative, reinscribing the abyssal edges and limits of representation, and beyond them what Adorno calls in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) the Ur-history of subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> Its second movement, however, is a form of consolation or affirmation within that negation. Adorno argues in the same work that the expression or communication of the work of art is more accurately described as the affect generated by the *impression* of failed, impossible expression. This concluding sequence is a lyrical dénouement for a film which thematizes the intractable contradictions of subjectivity, and one which resonates with Jameson’s point that, given that consciousness cannot be conceptualised or adequately represented, the “self is thus an allegorical structure in its own right.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology*, p. 54.