

The Search for a Way of Being (Nov. 2001)

Ridley Scott has recently told us that Decker, from *Blade Runner*, is in fact a replicant. There are several reasons why I think this a disservice to fans of the film. My primary concern is that it substantiates takings of it that focus primarily on the characters at the expense of, as a cover for, explorations of *our own* responses to Scott's ominous city-world and its subjected denizens. The choice to create a city-world so reminiscent of our own today was certainly not an arbitrary one. We have been offered a cold simulacrum—a *replication*—of our own cities, designed, surely, to bring to conscious awareness likely feelings of ambivalence many of us have towards them. I believe the reason we are interested in Decker (a response so natural to us that the camera's interest in him mimics our own: it becomes our own viewing eye) is that his movement, his explorations, seem like they might tend to our ambivalence. This is why we follow him, and why we pay close attention to what he (also Gaff—but Decker in particular) attends to. This search for our own identity, for a right way of being in this simulacrum of our own city-world, is well captured in this sequence through camera placement, camera movement (or lack there-of), and the mise-en-scene.

Certainly not all sequences in the film are well suited for self-reflection—there are ample sequences that are either tense (and thus encourage us to self-protect rather than explore) or exciting (where we mimic the mindset of the chaser or the chased)—but this one actually is. The opening shot helps us feel composed and relaxed—tranquil. Camera placement, lack of camera movement, and the particular nature of the mise-en-scene in this shot produce this effect. We are offered a level, extreme long-view shot of the environs, where we float above most of the city. The scene is near picturesque, with its mostly still field of black space, wherein we encounter a protagonist to key in on at a quieting remove from all other objects. The movement in the mise-en-scene is the predictable, slow, curving of the flying car as it moves away from us. Knowing the camera eye not fixed to the potentially unnerving proximity of the close-up, and knowing the action to be something *we* pursue (i.e., we are closing in on the car), the next shot—a following shot with low-angle framing, situated at a building across the street, several levels above street level but much closer to it than we were to the car—seems guided by our own interest. The probing,

inquisitive camera “eye” has become, for all intents and purposes, our own, and will remain so through the rest of the sequence.

After the second shot, where we look down on Decker and Gaff via high-angle framing, we cut to a shot where our interest is drawn upwards, via a low-angle framing shot, to a sign flashing YUKON on top of the building nearest them. It is almost as if we are presenting ourselves with a choice, the same choice we had in the first shot of the sequence: Should we direct our interest to the flashing neon-sign and the message it cannot help but present us with, or do we continue to attend to Decker and Gaff? The camera looks back to Decker and Gaff (switches to the previous high-angle frame), and follows its present course—anticipating their destination, it reappears in the replicant’s apartment—and here it surely reflects our own decision when confronted with a choice away from a giant flashing Coca-Cola sign that announces DRINK(!) while referring but to a simple beverage, and a YUKON sign so bespeaking of the artificial we have to fight to keep our known sense of the Yukon unadulterated upon sight of it. Surely what will interest us most will be something we must search for and find, not something openly presented to us within the city’s invasive skin.

With the next shot we are inside the replicant’s apartment, looking at Decker and Gaff from the apartment’s perimeter. We know the bright neon lights we briefly attended to failed to present us with “answers”—mightn’t Decker or Gaff come upon something more satisfying? We focus on the two, via a long shot that lasts until both Decker and Gaff have entered the apartment, as if considering for a brief moment our preferred candidate. We choose Decker, who in his movement across the room mimics the familiar, accustomed movement of the car in the opening shot. Obvious choice, really, for Gaff presents us, with his city-immigrant racial flavor and his Old South, bow-tied, country-gentleman attire, the same feeling of uncertainty, of incongruence—like we are all subjects to be played with—we felt upon sight of the YUKON sign. Moreover, Gaff in his stillness, with his dandyish attire and muted expressions, seems imperturbable, quite ready to mock anyone’s inconveniently experienced emotions—including, we intuit, our own, if they should ever somehow come into play. Though we will cut back to him while Decker is in the bathroom, Gaff, no doubt, is our *second* choice.

We do not exactly *follow* Decker—that is, we do not trail behind him, looking over his shoulder. Instead, seeing in the previous shot that he was heading into a

chamber (a bathroom), anticipating his destination, we cut to a shot where we are inside the chamber, looking at him from the same vantage point we assumed in the previous shot. However, we will follow him, the camera *will* come to situate itself just over his shoulder, as he spots and finds something that captures his interest. The movement reflects our eagerness: What has he found? Is it fit for our consideration, too? We, the camera, now cut to an extreme close-up of his hand cussing a scale he has placed in a small plastic bag. The scale, in conjunction with the hand that holds it, are key components of the mise-en-scene: one of three groupings we will be presented with in this sequence *through* the explorations (with Decker) or manipulations (by Gaff) of two people who, through their actions and their interests, are showing us how they themselves exist within this world. *This is our own keenest interest*—how to involve ourselves in this world?, what to make of this world?; and we show this in our switch to extreme close-ups when we spot objects like the scale that may afford more self-understanding than could possibly come from commandant neon signs.

The scale, though, in the same way as the *Blade Runner* city-world is and is not a city of our own experience, is and is not “us,” is a jostling reacquaintance with part of our own selves. Though neither we nor Decker have scales, bathrooms, via the tub, sink, or toilet, have traces of our body surface that are as disturbing to our sense of what it means to be human as are the skins of our cities, and involve us in uncomfortable self-questioning. Is the body just enfleshment? Mightn’t it be (or somehow come to be) beyond simply necessary, itself *possesses*, rather than just carry, essence, anima—soul? This a consideration we are more likely to make in regards to humans than with replicants, not because they are obviously all function down to their densely wired core, but because our souls have winnowed to the point where the most banal, brutal, dispensable—*dead*—aspects of our bodies seem to occasion the truest account of who we now are.

Troubling... so we switch to Gaff, who, for a moment at least, actually seems the more appealing of the pair. We cut to an extreme close-up of his hand putting down something he was making—an origami stickman—on a table. Momentarily, this feels reassuring. He is not *finding* anything; rather, he is exerting himself, making a comment on, we think, the current behavior of Decker. Gaff, through this simple, confident action, provides visual evidence that one *can* avoid being self-implicated, adversely affected by one’s actions, if one places oneself along the perimeter, making

comments about someone more directly involved and exposed. Gaff might be making an honest appraisal of Decker, but not one likely shorn of irony or irreverence (we notice the stickman's erection). This brings to mind a dissonance-incurring question: If like Gaff we are mostly uninvolved, for the most part extraneous to a world we count ourselves still part of, to what extent can we fairly be said to be *living* our lives—to what extent, even, are we *alive*? Unlike us, Gaff has a hand, and what a hand represents—an embodied existence in the film world. But *through* the action of his hand we understand he really exists more like a removed, disembodied eye—that is, *like us*—than one enfleshed. Thus reminded of a way of being similar to our own which was unsubstantial, unsatisfying enough to motivate our search for a more satisfying way of being in the first place, we choose to once again follow Decker, hoping he might find us something just as interesting but more satisfying to contemplate.

We are not disappointed. Decker's subsequent exploration leads to an object which, though it will likely bring to Decker's mind questions pertaining to his own identity (notably, is he a replicant?), suggests for us and potentially for him a way of being through a choice of what and what not to value which makes these questions, if not moot, potentially nowhere near as vital for our self-understanding. Decker does not fear being a replicant because this would make him one of the hunted; he fears it because it makes his experiences, his own treasured memories, an implantation from some disinterested other person—because it would make him more someone else's personal agenda than himself a person ensouled. But what cannot be an implantation is his experience of the here and now, and his choice whether *to make for himself* the kind of experiences worthy of photos *is* under his control, subject, only, to his decision on how to relate to the people he meets, objects he finds, the environments he finds himself within.

The third prop we will focus on, then, are the replicant's photos, hidden under several layers of shirts and sweaters. Unlike with the tub, wherein Decker found evidence in minuscule form but bared to view, the photos are not found in the empty first drawer we focus on: they are instead concealed in the second drawer. Scott, in choosing to place this prop under shirts and sweaters, offers us an encounter with a replicant's home life which actually suggests a human(e), warm persona. The replicant is protecting, insulating, his photos, keeping them at a distance from casual observance—what you are supposed to do with intimate treasures. But this isn't all he

is up to. Here is someone who is not so sensitized to and determined by the threatening environment so to feel the need to take it into consideration in his every judgment. The placement is appropriate for someone who values an object enough to hide it. But by hiding it in a dresser under shirts and sweaters—a place so suggestive of human warmth and closeness—he is in fact revealing much about himself. The nature of their placement amounts to him telling himself, telling anyone who happens upon them: “The experiences these photos embody matter to me; they are the very core of my being. Therefore to be placed in the most homey compartment of my living quarters.” (Shortly following this sequence we will hear Batty teasingly ask Leon, “Did you get your *precious* photos?”: Leon had obviously been harping on the importance of retrieving them.)

In a cold, threatening world this kind of ostensibly trivial, what we would normally think of as *generic* self-exposure, proves astonishing. In the close-up of Decker leafing through the photos (where we see, and Decker will focus on, a house interior we later recognize in Rachael’s treasured photos), we have moved from a state of safe remove (in the initial long shot) to situating ourselves in near proximity to precious vulnerability. But unlike with the scales, whose discovery is threatening to us because they involve us in an act of self-definition which makes us seem more denatured and cold than human, the photos are threatening because they are disorienting, way out of place. They are evidence that we truly *can*, whether the memories they are supposed to represent are real or not, value the intimate human world they represent. To know that someone thinks like this, could value being open and vulnerable over sure protection, is itself a source of strength. It presents an option, a way of being, so ludicrous to not be possible yet so wonderfully *is*! Within a drawer of folded clothes, within an apartment, within a building, within a city of endless numbers of buildings, we have found something powerful enough to suggest an eventual unfolding of a macrocosm of a different kind: a humane world of intimate proximity and touch, that could well matter to us, and that may just be within reach.

This is a find well worthy of our search. It is a critical placement in the mise-en-scene of a prop so significant we replicate the actions of the replicant and protect our experience, secure it for future consideration. Thus, as would be the natural reaction to a discovery of something so surprisingly, so suggestive of warmth in a world where we possibly accepted it as something on every wall advertised but nowhere really to

be found, we cut to a shot where we are no longer in the apartment. We cut to a shot similar enough to the opening shot of the sequence to suggest—like Decker’s exploration of the drawers—an opening and sealing-off of a discovery. The camera is still; we have a view of the city-environment; and there is a vehicle moving in the frame. However, this time, not tranquil, the scene is instead very tense: We find ourselves in the path of a police vehicle advancing ever larger, ever larger, ever larger *towards us!*

Perhaps surprisingly, this last shot also feels as if in response to our own will. We use our freedom of movement to place ourselves in view of the most threatening image we could imagine and know to provide a good sense of what it can feel like to exist in this city. Unlike in the first shot, we choose to be grounded at street level, and engage in a long-shot of the environment rather than an extreme long-shot. After asking ourselves, “Can we explore our human need for a warm community, or will this make us feel all too intolerably vulnerable to the dangers in this world?” we cut to a danger, and see. We ask ourselves, before this menacing encounter, “Will we learn that faith in privacy and self, home, family and friends, is a source of strength to resist the most fear-inspiring experiences we might encounter in this world?”

These are questions that are not settled or answered for us (or for Decker) at film’s end. They are questions that should not ever be quietened by us lest we ignore their importance and relevance in our own post 9 /11 world. We have seen and explored how Decker, Gaff, and the replicants exist in their world, and imagined how we might too: Now how do we choose to exist in our own world? What assumptions do we make of *its* nature? Is our world an inevitably hostile one of hunters and hunted? Or is it something that can be re-made, and thus, potentially, peaceful and humane? What are the consequences of this decision for our own behavior? Do we arm ourselves and hunt, though this means encountering life with the mind-forg’d manacles of polarized thinking? Do we protect ourselves and avoid whatever could make us feel vulnerable, though it would surely also mean narrowing our life experience? Or do we involve ourselves as warm-hearted neighbors, and *help* rather than hunt, *reach out* rather than isolate, even if this puts us in harm’s way? These are explorations we involve ourselves with in our encounter with Scott’s creation, and should continue doing long afterwards.

Ridley Scott makes a mistake in telling us that Decker is a replicant because he thereby privileges the certainty of conclusions over the uncertainty in loose inquiry.

In a sense, he is mimicking the too knowing Gaff, not inquisitive Decker. Yet *Blade Runner* surely represents the creation of a questing and questioning soul, born of an impulse to reject the kind of closure urged on us by impossible-to-ignore neon signs, in favor of a more open project. Reflected in, and produced by, its choice of camera placement and movement, and in its offering, through close-ups, of three key props for our consideration, the film involves us in a search which presents us with choices, not necessarily with answers. *Blade Runner* really is an existential film; its glory is its uncertainty. Scott rightly eliminated the rosy ending of the initial release from his editor's cut. He should have remained mute as to whether or not Decker is a replicant.

Work Cited

Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young. 1982. DVD.