

scrutiny, uncertainty and a tangible and all too-real dread of insubstantiality. Schiele studied his own body in his studio reflected in two mirrors, exploring the ephemeral state of body/mind produced by acrobatic stretches. Visitors take snapshots with their phones for ornamental posts on social media; Schiele's body is multiplied by a hundred virtual mirrors.

Right here lies another forgotten existential lesson: the importance, conveyed by Schiele, of undoing the self – the lonely, separate insubstantial self – before joining the recitation of uplifting homilies on relatedness.

His 1913's *Erlosung* (Redemption) made me think of Sartre: putting on a thick greenish/grey/reddish coat, the protagonist steps into the new day. He constructs his self anew for the day ahead – the bittersweet adventure of everyday life.

Stepping outside, I notice the tired vendors of Klimt/Schiele artefacts under the luminous ceiling on the RA's top floor; they look visibly bored as the cylindrical lift parcels out new visitors at regular intervals onto the mock-neoclassical corridor. Among the Klimt/Schiele souvenirs, there is a copy of Arthur Schnitzler's *Dream Story*, the Viennese novel that inspired Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. Just when I am about to bore my artist friend with unwanted comments on the preposterousness of the movie, something else catches my eye. It is a Penguin copy of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. The cover shows one of Schiele's haunting, peerless self-portraits. I feel placated, happy even.

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Blade Runner

Dir. Ridley Scott (1982)

Blade Runner 2049

Dir. Denis Villeneuve (2017)

When considering both *Blade Runner* films from the perspective of existentialism, it is useful, even essential, to bear in mind that the definition extends beyond lack of morality to incorporate faith, identity and purpose. The replicants that we encounter in the first *Blade Runner* film are self-aware and seek age-old answers to the problems of identity and purpose despite the fact that they are born of technology, artificial. They question themselves and seek truth and reassurance. The humans on the other hand, have little time for reflection and emotion; they seem to get on with life, which has been reduced to a series of tasks. In many ways, the replicants appear more human than the humans, who in turn appear more dehumanized

than the replicants. The latter also provoke greater sympathy and interest, while the humans perform functions and almost appear robotic. I am reminded of Heidegger's mode of being in the 'inauthentic' and Kierkegaard's observation of the 'herd'!

Deckard is a Blade Runner tasked with the 'retirement' of those replicants that have come to Earth from the out-world colonies seeking answers from their maker, Tyrell. They wish to extend their short lives and naturally enough they expect their maker to help fulfil their wishes. It is a commonly held view that meeting one's maker will help us to make sense of life and thus each one of us will finally come to understand where we fit in the grand scheme of things.

These replicants are no different; they have spirit, passion and a thirst for knowledge. Unfortunately, Roy, a replicant, is disappointed in his meeting with Tyrell, who offers no solutions and even rather patronisingly suggests that Roy should appreciate the life he has lived up until now. In despair and anger, Roy crushes Tyrell's skull. We are left with the feeling that the 'creation' is greater than the 'creator' thus leaving the 'creation' with a feeling of emptiness and pointlessness. Man, on the other hand, appears disillusioned, as he has long since learned to live with the emptiness of his existence; he lacks spirit, drive and direction. In contrast, the replicants appear more alive to existence but also more tragic. Is it better to travel in hope than to arrive and be met with disappointment?

Man's descent into disillusion has cost him his humanity. Perhaps Nietzsche was right when said that ... 'God is Dead...and we have killed him' (2018), and when he predicted the fall of humanity. When Man becomes the creator of replicants, he becomes God-like in the creative sense. Man is no God, however, just a finite creator. But just as Man slipped into chaos and disillusion, so too might the replicants as they discover their potential and ambition.

In the final scenes of *Blade Runner*, Roy not only spares Deckard's life but also saves him in the moments before Roy reaches his expiry time. Is it because Roy has learned to appreciate the value of life as he faces his own realization of death? Has he perhaps grasped a greater understanding of the human condition than his creators? Life on Earth appears cheap, self-centred and devalued. Yet in Roy's final moments of existence, he talks poetically of the tragedy of death and the loss to humanity of his experience and all the knowledge of wisdom he has gained. As he calmly surrenders to his death, it brings to life Camus' quintessential 'absurd hero'. It is an act of revolt against the irreconcilable clash between the silence of the universe and his profound desire to seek meaning from it. In that moment, Roy appears superior to the humans in much the same way that Nietzsche envisaged in the *Übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. As witness to these profoundly final scenes I wonder exactly who is the real replicant...

The human condition is existentially unique, its uniqueness consisting precisely in Man's capacity of time-consciousness. In this sense, self-consciousness is time-consciousness. The sentiment, of the constant presence of death in our lives, is not to acknowledge death that must necessarily lead to inactivity or helplessness. To say that our lives are always on the way to death is not at all to say that they are pointless but simply to set out the parameters of possibility for our existence and the choices and meaning we give to it. It is an acknowledgment of our limitations, fragility and humanity.

For Schopenhauer, all human striving is, in some sense, futile. Whatever one sets as one's goal in life, even if achieved, it will disappear the moment it arrives. Nothing is permanent and we suffer most from this lack of permanence. Indeed, the more we care, the more we suffer as Roy so lucidly shows in his actions. Replicants, like humans, lose whatever they possess every moment. Nevertheless, it is only humans that feel the pain of that loss, since only human consciousness retains a sense of these things as past. In the movie it becomes clear that Roy the replicant is also endowed with time awareness and as a result he feels the same sense of suffering as humans do when their hopes end in disappointment.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, we fast forward to California in 2049, a world where the ecosystems have collapsed and green fields have turned to dirt, metal and plastic. Trees are now but a distant memory. This is a world where, a long time ago, humans lost their spiritual connection to nature in the pursuit of technological comforts. This is strangely reminiscent of Heidegger, who in his late writings drew our attention to the danger that technology bring about a decline in experiencing things as they are, and to mankind's view of nature and human beings as objects for technical operations.

Blade Runner 2049 is everything a sequel should be. It continues to embroider on the themes found in the original, all the while introducing new ideas. It both stands on its own and enhances the previous film. Much like its predecessor, this sequel stays with the theme of what it means to be human and, to a greater extent, what it means to have humanity. The theme explored is one about how experience shapes who we are. Agent K (the replicant tasked to find and retire his own kind) finds himself searching for a meaning to his life that is more than what he was created for. He has a desire to transcend his programming as Nietzsche adopted in his work in *The Will to Power*.

When we meet Agent K, we see a man that lacks our romanticism towards the natural world, who seems to have embraced artificiality around him and within himself. He knows he is engineered, knows his memories are implants and knows his girlfriend (Joi) is a consumer product. His job is to retire all the model replicants that became prohibited following a series of violent rebellions. He does not question his work, as he believes that replicants are not born – they do not have a soul.

The question of the 'soul' remains one of the great mysteries of the universe. An apparent dualism of nature between matter and that which moves it, the material and the immaterial, the physical and the meta-physical. Ernest Becker wrote about the soul that 'man discovered and elaborated it because of his self-reflexivity, the real and apparent contradiction between the inside of his body – his thoughts and feelings, and the outside' (1971).

Perhaps even more interesting than the nature of the soul is the question of why we seem so intent on claiming it? For outside of the soul often lies the subjugation of all that is perceived to be without it, nature... animals... and replicants. It makes me wonder if all humanity is but a product of grandiosity, an excuse for our self-proclaimed superiority? Here the problem of the soul becomes a relational issue. What does the creation of one's symbolic-self mean to our social world? How do we relate to others, join with them or against them? In K's world without nature and where only the created self remains, we find a microcosm of this distinctive problem of humankind and the evolution of the symbolic self. The replicants are a mirror to our own humanity, asking of us not only what can be found but also who is looking and why? As Becker goes on to say:

We are in reality somewhere split in two, the self and the body; the one hidden, the other open. The child learns very quickly to cultivate this private self because it puts a barrier between him and the demands of the world. He learns he can keep secrets.

(ibid)

Yet Agent K begins to find himself conflicted between his programming to treat other replicants as things without a 'soul', and his felt sense of those who have souls to be treated as ends in themselves. His realisation comes to fruition when he begins to fail the 'base line test', an indication that his conflict is overcoming his programming. Up until then he had always passed the test. He is still the same replicant. So what has changed?

It is his perception of self. Over the course of the film, we begin to see an ambivalent and emotionless replicant turn into a being with true emotion, anger and hopelessness. In going against his programming, he starts the process of transcendence and, by choice, he begins to live the life that he wants to live. The selfless act of sacrificing himself so others may live in hope is his greatest demonstration of humanity. As Frankl writes so beautifully when he says:

I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic 'the self-transcendence of human existence'. It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something or

someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualises himself.

(2004)

So, what are the existential messages in both *Blade Runner* films? It does not matter where we come from or who we are, all that matters are the decisions we make and the way we choose to live our lives. We are shaped by our experiences. The people we meet, the things we care about, and the causes we deem worthy, ultimately define our personal construction of meaning. In the end, all souls are entirely distinct and perish in clashing dreams of being interlinked. As existential therapists, should we be courageous enough to ask ourselves these questions and the same of those we encounter in the therapy room? Perhaps it is in these questions that we can find our humanity?

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