The Work of Art in the Age of Replicants:
Skepticism, Modernism, and *Blade Runner*

"I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."
Justice Potter Stewart
Concurring Opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184

Introduction:

"Just warming you up, that's all" –

Some Questions Concerning Film

What in the world is a film? Any number of definitions may jump to mind, varying from the material to the metaphysical, but none is wholly satisfactory. One may say that a film is the projection of light through a moving series of still photographs—this definition seems at one too broad and too limited, allowing for the inclusion of artifacts such as slideshows while excluding the digital projection technology increasingly prevalent in the exhibition of films. One could simply assert that a film is what one goes "to the movies" to see – this is hardly a definition, and is akin to claiming that "that thing that sleeps in a crib" is a sufficient definition of a baby. One could make recourse to a combination of material conditions and subjective response, but this brings us no closer to knowing the object, resting as it does on our own individual responses thereto. Or, one could simply resort to a definition reminiscent of Potter Stewart's famous claim about pornography: "I know it when I see it."

But do we? Our correct apprehension of an art-work depends on the health of a number of factors, from the tradition in which that work participates to our own faculties of perception, insofar as they apply to both the external world, and the internal workings of our individual minds. These conditions of uncertainty open the field in which *Blade Runner* operates, as it

dramatizes the moment of modernist crisis in film both formally and on the level of its diegesis; throughout its depiction of Rick Deckard's investigation into the nature of being human, the film itself relentlessly interrogates what it means to be a film. These processes necessarily entail an engagement with issues of subjectivity and skepticism, beginning with how one knows the world of objects, and culminating in a questioning of the nature and integrity of the self as perceiving subject and constructor of a "world picture." In so doing, it offers a vision and performance of film art in the age of replicants.

Part I:

"Are you for real?" –

Blade Runner and Skepticism

In his essay "More of the World Viewed," Stanley Cavell offers the following definition of "modernism": "I have used the term modernist, not originally, to name the work of an artist whose discoveries and declarations of his medium are to be understood as embodying his effort to maintain the continuity of his art with the past of his art, and to invite and bear comparison with the achievements of his past."[1] This is a dense definition, but not an impenetrable one; a modernist work pushes its medium in new directions (i.e. makes "discoveries") while directly engaging with the essence of that medium (i.e. makes "declarations"), in order to claim for itself, whose status as art-work has been called into question, the power of the tradition in which it participates. To understand how *Blade Runner* embodies Cavell's definition of modernism, it is thus necessary to show how it directly engages with his understanding of the ontology of film.

Although a full exploration of Cavell's writings on the subject falls outside the scope of

1 Cavell, Stanley. "More of the World Viewed" 618.

this paper, much of his thinking on film is distilled in his assertion that, in essence, "[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses of reality are satisfied while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes."[2] This declaration provides a direct point of connection with Blade Runner, a film that is overwhelmingly concerned with skepticism, and our relationship thereto. It is thus with skepticism that we shall begin.

The world of *Blade Runner* is a world in which skepticism, at least initially, takes the form of a crisis. The film's opening titles inform the viewer of the existence of "replicants," androids largely indistinguishable from human beings, who are used as slave-labor in off-world colonies. Occasionally, these replicants rebel and return to Earth; when they do, it is the job of a "blade runner" to hunt them down, identify them as replicants, and kill them. This is a difficult task, however, for as Harry Bryant explains to Rick Deckard near the beginning of the film, replicants "were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. The designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their own emotional responses. You know, hate, love, fear, envy. So they built in a fail-safe device … [a] four-year life-span." Alf Ewert, in his essay "Ewe, Robot," thus identifies the difference between humans and replicants as a literalization of "the so-called 'problem of other minds.' Because we can never experience the subjective states of other beings – instead only having access to their externally manifested appearances and behaviors – we can never be sure that these "others" have actual minds of their own."[3] Given that replicants "mimic all the outwardly observable functions of natural intelligence to the point of being indistinguishable from it,"[4] Ross Barham argues, an encounter

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2 *Ibid*. 594.
3 Seegert, Alf. "Ewe, Robot" 45.
4 Barham, Ross. "A Quintessence of Dust." 22.

with a replicant thus forces the "question as to the existence of their inner being."[5]

The entire human-robot hierarchy of *Blade Runner*, then, is premised on other-minds skepticism, and specifically, on its acceptance with regards to replicants. In order to justify the use of replicants for slave labor, their designers set out to engineer replicants to lack inner beings, and to self-terminate before they have the chance to develop them. Meanwhile, the job of the blade runner is to navigate this world, in which some humanoid entities possess inner lives while others ostensibly do not; in other words, to grapple, on a case-by-case basis, with the problem of other minds. The blade runner must, by definition, be skeptical of other minds, "never … quite sure if they are interacting with another human, or with a soulless and supposedly empathy-free android."[6]

Never sure, that is, until they apply the "Voight-Kampff test," the mechanism posed by the film as able to determine whether the "Other" has an inner being or not, is human or replicant. This identification is accomplished by measuring the ability to the subject to empathize, but this heuristic poses a contradiction. After all, "empathy is rooted primarily in a subject's ability to identify imaginatively with another being"[7]-- in other words, one's ability to *overcome* other-minds skepticism, and *assume* that the Other possesses and inner being identifiable with one's own, despite the fact that this identity cannot be conclusively known.

Blade Runner thus pictures a world in which the reality of other minds is constantly being called into question, but the essence of being human is identified with the ability to assume that the Other has a mind comparable to one's own. Against this backdrop, it narrates the parallel progression of Roy Batty, the leader of the replicants, and Rick Deckard from a state of self-involvement to one of empathy, and thus humanity.

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5 *Ibid.* 23.
6 Seegert 40.
7 *Ibid.*

This progression is easier to see in the case of Batty. At the beginning of the film, Deckard (and the viewer) is told that Batty "slaughtered twenty-three people" during his escape to Earth; he is thus quite clearly shown to lack empathy, and to insufficiently acknowledge the reality or moral worth of other beings. Deckard soon learns that Batty has returned to Earth in an attempt to extend his life-span beyond the allotted four years; his quest takes him to the heart of the Tyrell Corporation, where he confronts the man who designed him and demands more life. After being told that this is impossible, he kills Tyrell (as well as J.F. Sebastian, who also played a role in his design). Shortly after this, during his final confrontation with Deckard, his body begins to shut down; his last act before dying is to catch Deckard as he is falling of the roof where they have been fighting, and pull him to safety.

John Sullins convincingly frames this final act: "Roy Batty shows compassion and empathy, he sees himself in the frantic terrified eyes of his own sworn enemy; he gives as he wishes to receive – he gives life."[8] It is difficult to argue that this is, in fact, the significance of Batty's final act, but what has happened to enable this egoistic denier of the inner lives of others to feel empathy? Paradoxically, the answer is found in his murder of Tyrell. Prior to killing Tyrell, Batty is able to live in denial of his own mortality – although he is obsessed with extending his life, this obsession entails a refusal to accept the inevitability of his dying. Thus, despite the fact that mortality limits Batty to a much shorter life than most humans, he experiences this limitation to a much lesser extent. After killing Tyrell, however, Batty is forced to recognize that his death is inevitable. It is this realization that enables him to save Deckard, in two ways. Literally, accepting that he is about to die "naturally" means that Batty's decision to save Deckard does not come at the cost of his own life, as it otherwise might; figuratively, his full assumption of the generalized human condition of consciousness of one's mortality

8 Sullins, John. "Replicating Morality" 203.

strengthens his identity with humanity, and thus enables him to form an empathetic relation with them. Batty is able to identify his being with Deckard's because their beings are, in fact, common – in those last moments, both are intensely conscious of their own impending deaths, and both want nothing more than to remain alive.

Deckard's development of empathy is substantially more complicated. At the beginning of the film, he is shown to be emotionally withdrawn and affectively flat – one recalls his initial cruelty to Rachel as he insists on the falseness of her memories, his alcoholism, and, in the voiceover present in the "Theatrical Cut" of the film, his comment that his ex-wife used to call him "sushi … cold fish." His empathetic deficiency is inseparable from his job as a blade runner; as J.P. Telotte writes in *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*, Deckard "must put aside any *human* compunction, and on order automatically and mechanically kill these beings, practically indistinguishable from the human, whose chief crime is to have asserted their humanity; in effect, he must act not humanely but robotically – that is, mechanically and unfeelingly."[9] This irony is further reinforced by Deckard's comment that "[r]eplicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade runners." At the start of the film, Deckard's inner life is not substantially different from that a replicant – he is no more able to empathize than they are, and no more willing to grant the reality of their inner lives than they are, his.

The first crucial turning point in Deckard's development of empathy comes in the sequence in which he kills Zhora, the first of the replicants that he encounters during the film. After she flees from the interview Deckard is conducting with her in her dressing room, Deckard chases Zhora through the city. The iconography of the scene is striking: a woman, afraid for her life (her vulnerability is emphasized by the transparent raincoat she wears over an outfit which leaves much of her exposed), is chased through an urban environment by a man with a gun,

9 Telotte, J.P. *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film* 152.

intent on doing her harm. When Deckard finally does shoot Zhora, in the back, she tumbles in slow motion through a series of panes of glass. The sequence is shot head-on, so that she is running straight towards the camera; as the bullets enter her body, she and the audience are locked in a direct face-to-face relation, a grotesque instantiation of the encounter through which Levinas says we come to know the Other, and identify its being with our own. As Zhora breaks through pane after pane of glass, it is as if she is breaking through the boundary of the screen, out of the moral logic the film has thus far proposed, and into the affective space of the audience.

This encounter has an impact on Deckard; he has begun to feel for Zhora, although these feelings have not yet reached the level of empathy. That Deckard is a changed man after killing Zhora can be seen in his encounter, with Leon, another replicant, shortly after. Leon appears suddenly and beats Deckard badly; indeed, he comes within moments of killing him before being shot by Rachel. The encounter with Leon marks the first time in the film that Deckard gets meaningfully hurt, or has his life seriously threatened. Although Zhora violently attacks him before attempting to flee, Deckard bears these wounds in typical action-hero fashion; his life is not endangered, and Zhora's blows leave no lasting damage. On the basis of his emotional response to killing Zhora, however, Deckard becomes increasingly humanized; his new status as a “feeling thing” carries with it it the possibility of being hurt, and in a scene shortly thereafter, we see Deckard washing the blood out of his mouth, dealing with real wounds in a way that few action-heroes ever have.

Despite this change, Deckard's treatment of Rachel immediately before they sleep together makes clear that he has has not yet fully overcome his skepticism with regards to replicants and allowed the possibility of their possessing an inner being analogous to his own.

Jason P. Vest calls this scene “one of the strangest seduction scenes ever filmed,”[10] while Nick Lacey more directly admits that what Deckard does to Rachel “borders on rape.”[11] In the scene, Deckard kisses Rachel, and when she gets up to leave, violently blocks her from exiting his apartment. He backs her against the wall, and commands her: “Say 'kiss me.' Say 'I want you.'” George Teschner and Patrick Grace get directly to the heart of this uncomfortable scene with their suggestion that Deckard's actions suggest “the programming of a machine”[12]; indeed, Deckard's actions only make sense if he sees Rachel as a machine for his pleasure, rather than another being with a mind and emotions.

And yet, by the end of the film, Deckard *has* come to experience genuine empathy for the replicants; as evinced by the direct contrast drawn between the “seduction” scene and the dialogue that takes place between him and Rachel upon his return to the apartment following Batty's death. Finding Rachel sleeping, he gently kisses her, causing her to awaken; when she does, he asks: “Do you love me? … Do you trust me?” She answers each with a simple affirmation (“I love you...I trust you”), the content of which affirms her feelings for Deckard, and the form of which – in contrast to a simple “yes” – reaffirms that these feelings are rooted in a subjectivity that belongs to nobody but her. Between these two interactions, one sees Deckard's relation to Rachel shift from one in which he denies her inner being, “programming” her like a machine, to one in which he accepts and embraces her as having a mind comparable to his, asking her about her feelings about him and accepting the autonomy of her responses from his perceptions of himself. Indeed, the shift from the imperative to the interrogative in the character of Deckard's relation to Rachel between these two scenes figures in microcosm the triumph of empathy over other-minds skepticism in *Blade Runner*.

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10 Vest, Jason P. *Future Imperfect* 19.
11 Lacey, Nick. *York Film Notes: Blade Runner* 33.
12 Grace, Patrick and George Teschner. "Human or Machine, Does it Mind or Matter?" 89.

But again, one must ask exactly how this transition has occurred. It is due to a combination of factors, including Deckard's intimacy with Rachel, but is caused most directly by Batty's decision to save his life. Prior to this moment, Deckard does not directly empathize with the replicants, When Rachel asks him if he will follow her and kill her, he says that he will not, but only because "owes … [her] one" for saving him from Leon; in the scene immediately prior to their sleeping together, Deckard expresses no love for Rachel, and instead only orders her to express desire for him. Even after they become intimate, Deckard continues to pursue the remaining replicants. It is only after Batty saves his life that Deckard is able to truly empathize with a replicant.

Why? Partially for the same reasons *that* Batty is able to empathize with him, but more significantly, *because* Batty is able to empathize with him. Because Batty has developed the capacity for empathy, he is able to identify his inner being with Deckard's; because he is able to identify his inner being with Deckard's, Deckard is finally able to identify the inner beings of replicants with his own. The Voight-Kampff test, in other words, would presumably not have been able to distinguish between Batty and a human, by the end of his life. Through his recognition that replicants can develop empathy, the defining feature of the human, Deckard is able to identify his inner being with theirs, and is thus able to develop empathy and humanity, himself. Deckard and Batty's ultimate rejections of other-minds skepticism in favor of empathy are thus mutually interdependent, as the self recognizes itself in the Other, and the Other in itself.

With this in mind, let us return to Cavell's assertion that "[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses of reality are satisfied while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist,

because viewing it is all it takes."[13] As has been discussed, skepticism forms the backbone of *Blade Runner*'s story. Both Deckard and Batty can be seen as moving images of skepticism; Deckard because his job – and life – initially depend on his ability to distinguish the between replicants and humans, who appear identical to unassisted human perception, Batty because he satisfies "our normal senses of reality … while reality does not exist," until the advent of his empathy at the end of the film effaces this contradiction.

Cavell goes on to note that "the silver screen...screens me from the world it holds – that is, it makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me … the depth of the automatism of photography is to be read not alone in its mechanical production of an image of reality, but in its mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality."[14] Again, the film's treatment of empathy and skepticism comes into play – the lack of an empathetic response can easily be figured as a version of the relation to reality given by film, in which reality is present to us, but we are not present to it. Such a formulation again describes both Deckard's initial relation to replicants and Batty's initial relation to humans; in both cases, the reality of the Other is present to the man in question, as evidenced by the fact that he can do violence against it, but it is not present to him, insofar as he cannot manifest an empathetic response to it (although Cavell's insistence on the "mechanical" automatism of these processes does suggest that this remark applies more neatly to Batty than to Deckard – unless Deckard is a replicant, as some versions of the film suggest).

In a sense, then, it is possible to view the central characters of Blade Runner as manifestations, or "declarations," of the essence of cinema, as Cavell understands it. This, however, poses a problem, as it abuts Cavell's insistence that a film manufactures "an image of

13 Cavell, "More of the World Viewed" 594.
14 Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* 24-25

the world,"[15] which is "an image of reality." The reality of *Blade Runner* is emphatically not that of "the reality of a photograph … a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity) … a world past"[16] – most pressingly, because our world is requires us to deny of other-minds skepticism, while the world in which *Blade Runner* begins is premised on its embrace.

As the characters in *Blade Runner* reject other-minds skepticism and embrace empathy over the course of its diegesis, they give up their identity with the Cavellian definition of films, which is coextensive with the film's understanding of machines – "a succession of automatic world projections"[17] present to the perceiver, but to which the perceiver is not present. In so doing, they restore the film's status as a film, as the world it depicts has been reconfigured such that it can be seen as "a world past." Despite being set in the future, the reality of the film is now recognizably a picture of "reality," populated by humans rather than "moving images of skepticism." As such, the narrative resolution of the film also resolves its meta-filmic element, brings it back into alignment with the ontology of film.

The operation of skepticism in *Blade Runner* thus situates the film within Cavell's definition of modernism. Cavell writes: "*Reproducing the world is the only thing a film does automatically.* I do not say that art cannot be made without this power, merely that movies cannot be made without it … the lapse of conviction in its traditional uses of its automatism forces it into modernism; its potentiality for acknowledging that lapse in ways that will redeem its power makes modernism an option for it."[18] The film dramatizes this condition, presenting the viewer with a world in which technology has complicated the role of skepticism in our lives, and

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15 Ibid. 20.
16 Ibid. 23.
17 Ibid. 72.
*18 Ibid.*103.

thus troubled the condition of possibility in which film operates; the world viewed at the beginning of *Blade Runner* cannot be the grounding for a filmic "picture of reality," because the distorted realizations of skepticism brought about within its diegesis by the existence of replicants precludes the film's own operation as a "moving image of skepticism" that makes reality present to us, while holding us apart from it. The drama of *Blade Runner* is thus also a working-out of its own status as a film; a defining trait of the modernist work. *Blade Runner*'s modernism, however, extends beyond its treatment of skepticism.

Part II:

"Show me what you're made of" –

***Blade Runner* and Modernism**

For Cavell, "the task of the modern artist … [is] the task of establishing a new automatism."[19] While this comment can be applied to the replicants, "new automatisms" that initially disrupt the world of the film, but whose resumption of the tradition of empathy carries the film across its moment of modernist crisis and establishes it as continuous with the tradition of film art, it can also be applied to the film's relationship with genre.

In her article " Self-Consciousness and Intertextuality in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*," María del Mar Asensio Aróstegui writes that "the meaning of generic intertextuality in the film" is related "not to a nostalgic look back on the past, but to a critical revisiting of it."[20] Aróstegui asserts that the replicants lack identity because they lack history, represented in the film by the photographic image; a lack which against which she counterposes the fact that "it is commonly

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19 Ibid. 104.

20 Aróstegui, Maria del Mar Asensio. "Self-Consciousness and Intertextuality in Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" 27.

acknowledged that *Blade Runner* is a pastiche of previous films and a blending of different cinematic genres, namely, science fiction and *film noir*" (and, as she mentions in a footnote, German Expressionism).[21] Aróstegui proceeds to discuss the manifold ways that the film inherits and intermingles the conventions of these genres, and asserts that *Blade Runner* is best understood as an example of "generic mixture," rather than as a "multigeneric" film whose generic codes "'subvert'" each other's "'signification processes.'"[22]

While Aróstegui's firm commitment to "analyze *Blade Runner* descriptively as a film which can be characterized as postmodernist"[23] leads her only to the unsatisfying deeply conclusion that as "[a] postmodern film, *Blade Runner* must remain ambiguous and paradoxical. Hence, although it self-consciously explores the mechanisms of cinema and questions generic conventions, it cannot offer a monolithic or single answer,"[24] reading her more substantive claims against some of Cavell's comments on cinematic modernism proves fertile ground.

Cavell writes that "[m]odernism signifies not that the powers of the arts are exhausted, but on the contrary that it has become the immediate task of the artist to achieve in his art the muse of the art itself … One might say that the task is no longer to produce another instance of that art, but a new medium within in. (Here is the relevance of … cycles in movies)."[25] Coupled with his earlier claim that "a cycle is a genre … and a genre is a medium,"[26] it begins to seem as if Aróstegui's identification of *Blade Runner*'s interrogation and intermingling of generic codes situates it firmly within the Cavellian understanding of cinematic modernism; as the film works through prior instances of the tradition whose power it seeks for itself, it asserting its continuity

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21 *Ibid.* 30.
22 *Ibid.* 31.
23 *Ibid.* 22
24 *Ibid.* 36.
25 Cavell, *The World Viewed* 103.
26 *Ibid.* 36.

with that tradition by creating a new medium within it while self-consciously working through its past. Indeed, this idea could be extended beyond just film, and made to encompass *Blade Runner*'s bevy of allusions. The film's citations of Blake, Oedipus, Christ, and other landmarks of the Western canon thus participate in the broader project of asserting the film's continuity with an artistic tradition whose power it seeks to carry across the crisis of automatism it performs and resolves.

This reading, however, is threatened by Cavell's later claim that "[i]n insisting on its specific mode of existence, a modernist art seems to break down the concept of genre altogether … In a modernist art, to which the concepts of style and genre lack clear application, the concept of medium loses touch with ideas of manner and ordonnance, and seems to separate out for denotation the physical materials of the art as such."[27] And indeed, *Blade Runner* does explicitly engage with many of the physical materials of film.

Foremost among these is the photograph. In "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*," Giuliana Bruno argues that "[if] the replicants are to survive, the signifiers of their existence have to be put in order. Some semblance of a symbolic dimension has to be put together to release them from the trap of the present. Their assurance of the future relies on the possibility of acquiring a past,"[28] thus placing replicants themselves in a position reminiscent of that in which Cavell situates modernist art. She then quotes Barthes' "Camera Lucinda" to make the case that "a theoretical link is established in *Blade Runner* between photography, mother, and history"[29]: "'In photography, I can never deny that 'the thing has been there.' There is a superimposition here of reality and the past.' Photography is perceived as the medium in which the signifier and the referent have been collapsed onto each other. Photographs assert the referent,

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27 Ibid. 106.
28 Bruno, Giuliana. "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*" 70.
29 Ibid. 71.

its reality, in that they assert its existence at the (past) moment when the person, the thing, was in front of the camera. If a replicant is in a photograph, he or she is thus real."[30] She goes on to argue that "replicants rely on photography for" what Barthes called its "'...perverse confusion between two subjects: the Real and the Live. By attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously introduces the belief that it is alive...'"[31] Throughout *Blade Runner*, the photographic image itself is used by replicants to ground their existence. Of course, everything in the film, real and unreal, is captured in photographs; presence in a photograph therefore *is* constitutive of any given entity's reality within the film-world. Yet, within the film's diegesis, this element of the power of photographs is called into question – both Rachel and Leon have photographs of lives that they did not lead; thus, a wedge is driven between the ontology *of* the film-world*,* which remains determined, in accordance with Cavell, by the reality of the photograph, and the ontological status of an entity *within* the film, of which photographic reality is shown time and again to be an unreliable indicator.

Perhaps the most widely-discussed sequence in *Blade Runner* is the "Esper Sequence," in which Deckard examines one of Leon's photographs using computer technology. In *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman identifies this sequence as "the most hypnotic demonstration of cinematic suture and control in contemporary cinema. Deckard inserts a photograph into his electronic enhancer … Issuing verbal commands reminiscent of film direction … [he thus] temporalizes the frozen moment of the photograph, and a classic scene, the search of the room for clues, is played out."[32] For Bukatman, this sequence is emblematic of *Blade Runner*'s discovery of "a new fractal dimension … somewhere between the two-dimensionality of the photograph and the three-dimensionality of experiential reality. We might in fact label this

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30 Ibid. 73.
31 Ibid. 72-73.
32 Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity*. 136.

dimension the *cinematic*, for the cinema has always participated in this ambiguous and shifting dimensionality, this magnification of sight which produces new dimensions."[33]

If Bukatman finds in the interrogation of the photographic image performed in the "Esper Sequence" a metaphor for *Blade Runner*'s mode of constructing the cinematic, Vernon Shetley and Alyssa Ferguson discover something else entirely. In their essay "Reflections in a Silver Eye: Mirror and Lens in Blade Runner," they note that Deckard's search Leon's photograph culminates with his discovery of a "convex mirror near the center of the snapshot, in which he discovers a clue which allows him to track down a member of the replicant band."[34] They identify the mirror as a direct allusion to Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait.* This allusion packed full of significance – they cite the mirror's frequent function in painting as "a *mise-en-abîme*, a reflection on the nature of painting,"[35] remark on how it dramatizes the translation of the three-dimensional world of reality onto the flat canvas, note that the fact that it's convexity "allows the painter to perform the paradoxical feat of including the observer and the observed together in the painting,"[36] and finally argue that the visual rhyme existing between the mirror's convexity and the pregnant woman it reflects in the original painting establishes "an analogy between pictorial representation and procreation, another kind of reproduction … Similarly, the convex mirror in *Blade Runner* may be read as a kind of womb in which Zhora's image is contained, thus recalling perhaps the new form of reproduction embodied by the replicants. In this reading of the scene, artistic reproduction and bodily reproduction have been joined, in Blade Runner's imagined future, by the process of artificial reproduction that yields the replicants."[37]

In the confluence of two readings of the "Esper Sequence" one finds a surfeit of evidence

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33 Ibid. 137.
34 Ferguson, Alisa and Vernon Shetley. "Reflections in a Silver Eye: Lens and Mirror in Blade Runner" 67
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid. 68.
37 Ibid.

for *Blade Runner*'s Cavellian modernism. The film interrogates the photograph, a major constituent of the physical basis of its medium, and finds, simultaneously, the essence of the filmic and a 15th Century painting, the subject matter of which is artistic creation itself. This painting occupies an analogous position as *mise-en-abîme* within the two works; this analogy simultaneously asserts the replicants as figures of a new mode of art and establishes a continuity between this new mode and an artistic tradition the stretching back far before the advent of film. Indeed, this moment alone embodies essentially Cavell's entire definition of a modernist work.

Shetley and Ferguson go on to argue that the space created by the "Esper Sequence" is that "of a particular kind of cinema, the cinema of montage...The eye of the montage filmmaker dominates the world it surveys, rearranging it according to the dictates of its own vision."[38] This points to another locus at which *Blade Runner* interrogates the material basis and processes of film; the film can be read as allegorizing the incorrectness of the mistaken belief that montage is sufficient to qualify a work as film (a claim rejected by Cavell), as the "blade runner" – a name that better describes a film editor than a bounty hunter – is tasked with restoring the reality of the film-world by excising the replicants from it; in other words, by "cutting" them from the picture. This is the hope expressed by Bryant when he tells Deckard: "I need the old blade runner. I need your magic." Bryant, however, is expressing a mistaken view of the nature of the "magic" of film. According to Cavell,

> [t]he idea of and wish for the world re-created in its own image was satisfied *at last* by cinema … automatically, we said. But what does this mean – mean mythically, as it were? It means satisfying it without *my* having to do anything, satisfying it *by* wishing. In a word, magically. I have found myself asking: How could film be art, since all the major arts arise in some way out of religion? Now I can answer: Because movies arise out of magic...movies reproduce the world magically … [n]ot by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view the world unseen … It is as though the world's projection explains the forms of our unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed

38 Ibid. 70.

distance; it makes displacement appear our natural condition.[39]

The magic of film ultimately resides in its ability to creation of "a moving picture of skepticism" and thus make "displacement appear our natural condition." Thus, killing the replicants does not reassert the film's accordance with the ontology of the film, for Deckard, in so doing, does not develop into an empathetic subject, and the role of skepticism in the world viewed by the film remains out of sync with that of our own. Indeed, only the characters' overcoming of other-minds skepticism through the development of empathy allows *Blade Runner* to assert that it is "a picture of a reality," and thus lay claim to the status of film art.

The final element of the material basis of film that *Blade Runner* holds up for questioning is the screen. Aróstegui argues that *Blade Runner* "self-consciously explores the nature of the look in the cinema. The representations of eyes, screens, pseudo-cameras, and related gadgetry in the film accentuates such self-conscious exploration...the narrative space is completely crammed with … screens,"[40] which serve to highlight the film's self-reflexivity.

The most significant and direct modernist interrogation of the screen in *Blade Runner* comes in two sequences. In the first, Bryant briefs Deckard with the details of his assignment at the police station, while the two watch the film of Holden's encounter with Leon. As Aróstegui notes, this is "our second viewing and Deckard's first" of these images – indeed, what Deckard is watching are excerpts from the opening minutes of the film. Thus, this moment can be seen as a dramatization of Deckard's entrance into the world of the fictional world existing within the film, represented by the film itself, and defined by its absolute predication on the embrace of the other-minds skepticism; in other words, into the un-reality that the film must resolve in order to claim continuity with the filmic tradition. This reading is reinforced by the fact that the images of

39 Cavell, *The World Viewed* 39-41.
40 Aróstegui 23-4

the film are overwritten by Bryant's texts, and its audio is drowned out by Bryant's commentary, which is meant to be that of the stereotypical prejudiced policeman.

If this is accepted, than the shooting of Zhora takes on new significance; the panes of glass she breaks are not only those screening her from our empathy, but also the "screen," until now co-extensive with ours, on which the film's "unreality" had been displayed, since Deckard began to view it in Bryant's office and was thus drawn back into blade-running and the other-minds skepticism it requires. The shattering of the screen thus figures the breakdown of the unreality that *Blade Runner* begins by representing; paradoxically, Zhora breaking the screens of glass mark the beginning of the process by *Blade Runner* becomes a "picture of reality." In his essay "Trauma of the Real," Paul M. Livingston argues that *Blade Runner* can be understood as dramatizing a Lacanian "experience of the real, when the orders of the Symbolic and the Imaginary suddenly break down, when the stable and regular order of 'reality' that they ordinarily produce suddenly and disconcertingly falls apart."[41] While Livingston wants to argue for Deckard's "realization" that he is a replicant as this moment of systemic breakdown, this has little support within the text of the film; in those versions in which Deckard does "realize" he is a replicant, he simply smiles, and the film ends seconds later. If there is a Lacanian "breakthrough to the real,"[42] it comes instead as Zhora literally breaks through the screen of the film, and in so doing lays bare the illusions, unreality, and symbolic constructions which had until that point informed the "picture of unreality" presented by *Blade Runner*. This, again, is a performance of the film's status as Cavellian modernism, as it holds film itself up to the light to establish its continuity with its tradition by virtue of its autonomy as a work. And indeed, Leon's battering of Deckard immediately after Zhora "breaks the screen" could be seen as a moment of filmic

41 Livingston, Paul M. "Trauma of the Real." 158.
42 Ibid. 154.

modernism analogous to the scene in which Jack Nicholson is beaten and defaced in Chinatown, insofar as it likewise (though to a lesser degree) enacts the breakdown of standard codes operative in film; this moment is referenced again in a shot added to the "International Theatrical Cut" of the film (and retained in all subsequent versions), in which Pris put her fingers in Deckard's nostrils and pulls out, threatening to tear his nostrils open like those of Jake Gittes.

The modernism of *Blade Runner* thus extends far beyond its treatment of skepticism, and can be found also throughout the film's treatment of genre, as well as numerous points at which it takes up and interrogates the material basis of film as part of a process of asserting its status as art. Through its treatment of the epistemological and ontological crises raised by technologies – both those of film in a world of massive technological change, and those precipitated by the existence of replicants – is negotiates the crisis of modernism as posed by Cavell, namely "that we do not know, *a priori*, what … [art] has to do or be faithful to in order to remain …[art]."[43] Just as the existence of replicants forces a re-evaluation of "what one has to do, or be faithful to" in order to remain human, an answer which *Blade Runner* locates in the overcoming of other-minds skepticism via the development of empathy, so to does *Blade Runner* itself actively engage in a consideration of what determines its status as a film, or "picture of reality."

Conclusion:

"If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes" –

Own-Mind Skepticism, or Skepticism *as* Modernism

These two strands of thought find their synthesis in a final variety of skepticism, not yet discussed, which for the purposes of this paper, will be called "own-mind skepticism."

43 Cavell, *The World Viewed* 106.

Livingston frames the its central questions as such: “How can *I* be sure that *I* am not a fake, that my life and my world as I have experienced it is real, that my memories are of things that have really happened to me?”[44]; Jesse Butler, in “Scan Thyself,” puts them more concisely, asking: “How do you know that you're not an android?”[45] Butler goes on to discuss Descartes, who's *cogito* is quoted by Pris in the film, and – as Lacey points out – “whose name is echoed in Deckard's.”[46]

The versions of *Blade Runner* engage with these questions in two distinct ways. For the purposes of this paper, the numerous versions of *Blade Runner* will be represented by the original “Theatrical Cut,” and 2007's “Final Cut”; although these two versions of the film do not account for the significant minor changes made in the versions produced between them, they provide the clearest picture of the different visions of own-mind skepticism given by *Blade Runner*. The most significant changes are found the “Final Cut's” elimination of Deckard's voice-over narration and the “happy ending” found in the “Theatrical Cut,” and in its addition of Deckard's “Unicorn Dream Sequence.”

The “Final Cut” raises the issue of own-mind skepticism through its suggestions that Deckard, himself, may be a replicant; the film thus poses the problem of own-mind skepticism explicitly in Butler's formulation – “How do I know I'm not an android?” The insertion of the “Unicorn Dream Sequence” gives new meaning to the unicorn left by Gaff outside of Deckard's apartment at the end of the film. Rather than simply serving as an indicator that Gaff has been present and chosen to spare Rachel's life, as it does in the “Theatrical Cut,” the unicorn now signifies that Gaff knows the content of Deckard's dreams; something that is only possible if Deckard is himself a replicant. Furthermore, the elimination of the voice-over makes opaque to

44 Livingston 155.
45 Butler, Jesse. "Scan Thyself" 78.
46 Lacey 35.

the viewer the operation of Deckard's mind; the viewer has no privileged access to his subjectivity, and can thus more readily doubt the nature of his mind.

Although the "Theatrical Cut," with the voice-over included and lacking the "unicorn dream sequence", would seem to avoid these questions, they are instead raised by the very things excised in the later cut. In *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, Paul Sammon gives an exhaustive account of the divergences between the "Theatrical Cut" and director Ridley Scott's vision for the film; indeed, the voice-over, the removal of the "unicorn dream sequence," and the addition of the "happy ending" are all due, ultimately, to dictates made by the studio after poor audience reaction to *Blade Runner* in preview screenings.[47] In his introduction to the "Theatrical Version" contained in the *Blade Runner* boxed set, director Ridley Scott calls the "happy ending" "improbable," suggesting that it is discontinuous with the world of the film as he envisioned it; moreover, it contains footage originally shot for another film – Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. More importantly, the voice-over is not continuous with the character of Deckard as rendered by the rest of the film – it is instead an interpolation from the *film noir* tradition. In all of these cases, then, the "picture of reality" created by the "Theatrical Cut" of *Blade Runner* is perceptibly not an unmediated product of Scott's own mind.

Cavell's asserts that "our way of establishing our connection with the world … [is] through viewing it, or having views of it"[48] – indeed, the title of his book is a rough translation of *Weltanschaung*, and he acknowledges his debt to "an essay of Heidegger's called 'The Age of the World View,'"[49] in which Heidegger argues that the modern subject is defined by its double position as composer and beholder of a "world-view," or image of reality. Through interrogating both Deckard's and Scott's ability to construct world-views, *Blade Runner* thus brings its

47 Sammon, Paul M. *Future Noir* 291-311.
48 Cavell*, The World Viewed 102*.
49 Ibid. xiii.

modernism full-circle; one can think of modernism as the own-mind skepticism of the artwork (or artist) as it (or he or she) asks: how do I know that I am really (or really making) art, and not just a soulless replication of its forms? The own-mind skepticism in *Blade Runner* is thus the most stark figure for its identity as a work of modernism, as the film answers the question "are you for real?" by way of telling itself to "show me what you're made of."

But what does the treatment of own-mind skepticism in *Blade Runner* say? The two versions of Blade Runner both perform an engagement with own-mind skepticism – the "Final Cut" by calling the integrity of Deckard's mind into into question, while the "Theatrical Cut" by doubting, one might say, its own. In both cases, the coherence of the self-as-picturing-subject and constructor of a "world-view" is challenged; both Deckard (in the "Final Cut") and the film itself (in the "Theatrical Cut") are "programmed" with experiences, memories, and histories not their own, and that distort the picture of the world they create. In the "Final Cut" these come in the form of Deckard's "memory implants"; In the "Theatrical Cut," these memory implants come by way of "Classical Hollywood," with its generic traditions, powerful and profit-hungry studios, and expectations of a "happy ending."

The "Final Cut," however, appears to pose a deep threat to the reading of other-minds skepticism in *Blade Runner* advanced throughout this paper: If Deckard is a replicant, it appears that no figure in the film exhibits empathy across the human-replicant divide. The film establishes that replicants can feel empathy for each other as Batty kisses Pris after she has been killed; if Deckard is a replicant, neither Batty's decision to save his life, nor Deckard's own love for Rachel, can be taken as instances of a human assuming the reality of the inner being of a replicant, or a replicant doing the same with regards to a human.

This would seem to negate the much of the film's treatment of skepticism, were it not for

Gaff's final remark, which, in the absence of the voice-over, is the concluding piece of dialogue in the film. “It's to bad she won't live. But then again, who does?” he says to Deckard of Rachel. With these words, he explicitly draws an identity between the human condition and the experience of replicants, and his decision to spare Rachel is accordingly recast as the product of his resultant feeling of empathy towards her. This reading center's the drama of the film around Gaff's development of empathy; as Gaff is, in many ways, the representative of the audience within the world of the film – the observer, always present just beyond the frame, whose empathy is expanded and humanity thereby reaffirmed by witnessing the events of Blade Runner. Indeed, if Deckard is a replicant, than we the audience have ourselves performed the empathetic process that at the heart of the film – we have reaffirmed our humanity by empathetic identification with a being about whose worthiness of that identification we are ultimately uncertain.

Thus, both versions of the film present visions of own-mind skepticism which do not threaten the film's insistence on empathy; regardless of the reality of our inner being, the film asserts, one must assume the reality of the inner being of the Other. In so doing, *Blade Runner* once again insists on its status as a film, giving us a world viewed – a world which is recognizably ours, for which we must feel even if it does not feel for us. Through this insistence, it establishes its continuity not with the essence of film, but with the deepest essence of art – art as the best proof in our world of the existence of other minds; our own personal Voight-Kampff test, enabling us to feel the reality of minds not our own. It thus succeeds as a work of modernism, proving that by making declarations and discoveries of its medium, and locating itself within (and against) the tradition in which it participates, film in the age of replicants can still be art, and we are thus still human.*

*(... even if *Blade Runner* is itself nothing more than a kind of "memory implant," conditioning our emotional responses by simulating an encounter with people we have never met, stimulating us to feel empathy, and forcing us to acknowledge that that other minds must, somehow, be like our own).

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