

The Input of “Blade Runner” to Psychology

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Abstract

The year “Blade Runner” fictionally portraits is already here so on this occasion, the present paper proposes an analysis of the movie – this time from a psychological perspective. The intention is to remind about the essential themes that are played with in “Blade Runner” such as self-quest and individuality, parenthood - its alterations and their consequence, the life-essential need of accessing and expressing one’s emotions in order to fully develop as a human – as they all are significant parts of human development and psychotherapy. “Blade Runner” even shows how modern psychology can benefit from the Replicant metaphor in relating to specific types of psychological structures in order to minimize the damaging effects of rigid labeling and diagnosing. Also, we consider that in a way, the 2019 of “Blade Runner” is not so far from the emerging dystopia of today (considering social attitudes to expressing emotions, social roles opposing to personal identity, commercial invasion and nature’s rarity to extinction), making the movie even more relevant to who we are today.

Keywords: *Blade Runner, movie analysis, movies and psychology, archetypes, human nature, emotional development*

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I. INTRODUCTION

We may think of dystopia as a way-too-far kind of a universe, an exaggeration maybe, and someone's nightmares put into words and images we often interpret as warnings. Should we be concerned about them? We are too far from this, one lightly concludes, as the movie ends or the book closes. We hope maybe that our grand-grand children won't live that kind of life, but then again, who knows what will be. A few minutes of thought and we go on with our nine to five.

But here's another "What if". What if 2019, the year we are about to enter at the time this is written, is about the imminent danger of experiencing emotions, or about the struggle of finding out who you really are and fighting for your core identity, struggling to exit roles given to you by the self-proclaimed powerful ones? About realizing the need to eliminate authority so you can gain your own power and even wisdom? The nostalgia of the innate realization that motherly protection is not a life-time given and that essentially, we are all both and unavoidably good and evil at the same time. Not to mention – the context of an overcrowded environment where population is assaulted by invasive commercials and where nature is an expensive and unreachable luxury. As watched in the year this movie fantasized about, one cannot ignore that fact that psychologically speaking, it all looks a bit too familiar in what now we call "civilization".

This is about how "Blade Runner", 1982 Ridley Scott's cult movie is a mirror of what we essentially fear, desire, and turn out to be (Dienstag, 2015 has previously shown that the eye motif of the movie shows its intention of making us reflect about us). Here's how "Blade Runner's" imagined 2019 is a reminder of how each and every one of us – successfully or not – grasps the above mentioned themes in the never-ending quest of finding one's self and even a reminder of how we hunt down and eliminate the one who is different or simply feels in ways we can't contain. And perhaps – lightly-hearted I may add - about how mainstream psychology could use some inspiration from mainstream culture in order to re-digest its blind spots. After all, art is the ultimate expression of the human mind...

II. THE DREAD AND GIFT OF EXPERIENCING EMOTION

The plot of "Blade Runner" (as referred to the Final Cut version of the movie – Scott, 1991) is apparently simple but not void of substance. Humans have created replicants for labor and combat purposes; their lifespan cannot be longer than four years as after this period the danger arises that replicants will develop complex emotional reactions. In response replicants start a mutiny and are punished by death sentence. Four of them (Roy, Leon, Pris and Zhora)

return to Earth in order to meet Tyrell, their designer while blade runner Deckard is hired to hunt them down.

Now, let's return for a bit to the center of the plot: the issue is that experiencing emotion is perceived as danger. It is an issue that looks all too familiar to a cultural attitude toward what should and should not be experienced emotionally. Here we may find multiple everyday examples: stereotypes of what a man and a woman should feel and what emotions they should and should not express (this is long-time discussed – e.g. Bordy & Hall, 2008); motivational speakers telling practically (or at least intentionally) all of us what emotions are useful and which can sink us into unsuccessful lives (ever doubted yourself?); and, most similar to the plot of “Blade Runner”, let us think of the parent – child relationship. A parent who (no matter the own perceived intention) interferes with his child's genuine emotional reactions, gains control over the child, at least for a while until the child figures out he is his own person. Until then, the child's behavior will be easily predicted. He will not fight, because he is not allowed to feel anger (see Snyder, Stoolmiller, Wilson, Yamamoto, 2003; Oppenheim, 2006 on the subject).

And yet, there might be another danger (as perceived by an authoritarian figure way too attached to their position): it consists on the overlaps between emotion and identity. Access to emotions grants access to the self (e.g. Grof, 1988) by revealing what is disgusting or appealing to the one experiencing them – along with what is desirable, attractive or frightening, dangerous. No figure of authority can allow the possibility of self-exploration as an authentic self will be harder, even impossible to control than one who looks away from what they truly feel about the situation they are placed in. Simple to observe that this is practically the premise of the dystopian arrangement – social functioning which cannot allow thinking and looking at yourself.

III. ARCHETYPES AND PROTOTYPES

It is always interesting to take a look at the archetypes imprinted in a movie with such a persistent impact as Blade Runner. The archetype is a concept introduced by Jung and summed up by Jaffe (1975) as representing specific human patterns. Jung used the concept from the beginning of his publishing and relied on archetypes in order to interpret the human mind; the archetype, in his vision, transcended generations as part of a collective unconscious. One of the methods he used in order to explain archetypes was looking into products of man (found in myths, fairytales, and religious writings) – see Jung (2014) for further reading.

We'll further look at the cinema product which is analyzed in the present paper as a modern way of storytelling, thus replacing the fairytale and assume that the more impact a movie has, the more deeply deals with important archetypes and therefore makes it easier for us to emotionally and morally engage. Although in Blade Runner many symbols (the owl, the pigeon,

the snake and how they are placed in man's relation to nature) and social roles – which implicitly are associated with symbols themselves (e.g. the prostitute) are found, we will elaborate a bit on three archetypes which are more or less subtly placed on the background of Blade Runner's story: the Father, the Mother, and the Shadow.

The Mother and Father archetypes actually refer to how human mind introjects the images of the mother and father and interact with the Animus and Anima (male and female archetypes – see Jung, 2014). It is presumed that the way the child introjects the parental images will influence his or her interaction to the world. In Blade Runner, creation is a lifeless process and only treated from the replicant's perspective. Consequently, all (presumed) human characters are cold and lonely at the start point of the story, including Deckard (as also noticed by others such as Barad, 2007).

The Father is present through Tyrell (the creator of the replicants – who states that “Commerce is his purpose” as Deckard is affronted that Rachel does not initially know what she is – or “it” is, that point). Along with Tyrell other two genetic designers complete the Father figure, though with the obvious artificial and cold intent: J.F. Sebastian (“I make friends. They're toys. My friends are toys”) and Chew, the eye-maker. What the three “fathers” have in common is an extremely isolated existence and a seemingly mix of fear and fascination they experience towards the replicants. Replicants (their children, in a way) have introjected a self-proclaimed supreme figure of the father and now have come to the point of confronting this figure, showing their own power and wit and claiming their own lives and identities.

The replicants are not only as intelligent as Tyrell is, they also mirror parts of his personality (lack of empathy is a part of him – again referring to his declaration that he is interested in commerce not in what his creations experience; commerce and lack of emotion are also usually associated with prostitution and some of the replicants such as Pris are created with this purpose; on the other hand, we may presume that he has succeeded in creating Rachel, the most emotionally complex replicant, at an age of maturity). There might be a kind of continuity between the genetic engineers, which complete the image of the father archetype in this universe. Roy meaningfully tells Chew “If you could see what I've seen with your eyes”.

It is a strong statement which partly represents a reference to reflecting each other (the replicants and their creators) and also indicates the replicant's individual rise. He has received the lens to see the world through but has overcome the human's limited view of the world. He has evolved at a point where he has understood more than the now isolated and experientially-blocked human can contain. Roy later kills Tyrell (and implicitly eliminates the introjected power of the father) by gauging his eyes. He no longer can make use of the eyes of “man” who is so limited and yet so superior in attitude as Tyrell was. In psychoanalysis and philosophy we find

many references to the idea that once the father is dead, a new sense of freedom is experienced by the son (e.g. Žižek, 2006) – we will later return to what this event has brought Roy.

Some authors interested in Scott's movies noticed that *Blade Runner* and *Alien* (another important movie he directed (1979) might have one thing in common: they are both placed in motherless universes (see Dolle, n.d.). In “*Blade Runner*” we have two types of characters: the replicants who are only created by the father himself and the humans (I would rather say non-replicants as they are all initially introduced as devoid of humanity) – who are so “cold” that we may presume that they haven't experienced much of the nurturing motherly care. Both chromatics (see the cold blue filter of most of the movie and how it is at times switched to warmer colors) and soundtrack kind of point to nostalgia and depression (Americans have the expression of “feeling blue” referring to feeling sad). Again we may return to psychoanalysis where realizing that motherly protection is not a long-life given is one of the worst wounds we experience, thus related to depression (see Blatt, 1974).

In “*Blade Runner*” motherly care which should help the future man fully develop emotionally is introduced by Rachel, who is not a mother but a female being capable of loving. The moment Deckard meets her is the only scene in “*Blade Runner*” when we see the sun, nature's most essential element of existence and survival, and in this context, an obvious messenger of (emotional) warmth.

The latter archetype we should discuss is the Shadow, with which, visually, Ridley Scott plays a lot during “*Blade Runner*”. Simply put, the Shadow, in Jungian terms, is a difficultly accessed part of the unconscious mind which usually contains aspects greatly unpleasant to the self but which needs to be accessed in order to fully develop as an individual (e.g. Moore, 1984). I will only refer to one essential moment in which this view is consistent with “*Blade Runner's*” storytelling. In the final scene between Roy and Deckard (I will briefly return to it later), Roy fully accesses moral wisdom and empathy, saves Deckard so the human is reminded about the essence of humanity while Deckard himself lies in a half-shadow, half-light angle.

The replicant's (previously considered a less-than-human being) action leaves Deckard to face his own limitations and lack of empathy (the shadow) but the thought that he could develop himself is only emerging. Thus, he only begins to look and his own shadow and realizes the need of working with it – as we can presume based on the new motivation for closeness he experiences with Rachel.

“The Final Cut” (Scott, 1991) version of the movie implies that Deckard himself is a replicant but at this point, the answer is no longer relevant as neither is the view that replicants and humans are all different from each other.

IV. DIAGNOSIS AND FEAR

“I am the business” says Rachel when realizing she is a replicant. The pain she experiences with this insight is obvious. Rachel is presented as the ultimate, most complex model of a replicant so from some point we might expect her to analyze her own existence with more depth than her presumed peers.

But not all replicants are as gentle as she is. The first interaction we encounter in the movie is between Leon and an officer assigned to spot his nature (to detect whether he is human or not). For this purpose the officer applies the Voight-Kamp (V-K) test – presented as an objective measure of emotional responses; the premise is that replicants lack empathy which is assessed through situational questions and monitoring physiological indicators. During the interview we observe that the evaluator exposes a superior and arrogant attitude towards Leon, is indifferent to the high discomfort and fear that Leon shows during the interview. Sure, Leon knows his life is threatened by the result of the test but somehow even the process of being evaluated seems to be a source of emotional discomfort itself. The power dynamics is quickly shifted though as Leon kills his opponent once he is asked to talk about pleasant memories of his mother.

I propose to leave aside the fictional and extreme violent aspects of the scene and focus on the relationship between the two characters: the subject and the evaluator, and look at the scene metaphorically. From a psychological diagnosis point of view, considering the character structure, we may observe an overlap between the replicants and psychopathic patients. One of the main invoked criteria in identifying a psychopath consists in the lack of empathy (Mullins-Nelson, Salekin & Leistico, 2006) just as the case of spotting replicants.

Also the power dynamics between psychopaths and clinicians or psychiatrists who assist or assess them is also invoked (if we observe the interaction from an outside look we will notice that the psychopath will feel threatened to lose his power in the context of being observed and thus “discovered” so tries to dominate his “interrogator”; if not well trained, the clinician will lose the “battle” – as the subject will abruptly leave the treatment, leaving no chance of recovery (Meloy, & Yakeley, 2011; Conradi, Boertien, Cavus, & Verschuere, 2016).

But what if clinicians treated assumed psychopaths with the same care and concern as any other patient? Considering the natural discomfort of being observed and assessed; considering that at some point they might have experienced emotion but in a rather different way than the “average Joe”, perhaps once battling with extreme emotional pain (psychopathy and relational trauma is starting to get attention – e.g. Craparo, Schimmenti & Caretti, 2013), would the results be different? Some representatives of the field are optimistic and show that by proper training, the therapeutic alliance wouldn’t be so abruptly disrupted as pathology and symptom –

focused schools of psychology have accustomed us (for further reading: Berg et al., 2013; Harris & Rice, 2006; Salekin, 2002).

The Voight-Kamp (V-K) test, from a clinical practitioner's view, can be seen as a caricature of how psychological tests are applied in a manner that can easily harm the respondent. Critical psychology supports this view. Fox, Prilleltensky and Austin (2009) suggest that mainstream psychology (the one which is usually taught in school and practiced by most of psychologists, they say) declares to use objective measures in order to explain human behavior but is losing sight of the fact that its approach is a limited one and tends to focus on narrow views that may have harmful effects upon the „beneficiaries” of psychological services. It is as if over-focusing on objective methods restrains one's ability to see beyond their own actions and see how for instance, classical approaches may lead to making some groups more vulnerable than they already are (see discussions regarding diagnosis as labeling and its negative consequences – e.g. Pasmán, 2011). Critical psychology is not trying to „attack” mainstream psychology but alerts on the need that psychologists themselves should be also be researched (and not only the “patients”), along with their actions and consequences; on how no model can actually „explain” a person and that we tend to forget to let the person we work with express themselves and our methods are a circular justification for a paved path of applying standard, highly promoted instruments and interventions even if they block our understanding of the other (Parker, 1999).

Of course we do not use tests to “hunt” subjects down but if not applied carefully, the abrupt communication of a diagnosis, for instance, can be very hurtful for the one who receives it. Rachel points this out in her reaction to Deckard's insensitive remarks of her being a replicant (similar to telling somebody “see, this is the symptom, so this is your diagnosis”). She has a rather human reaction to it and fortunately Deckard is open enough to soften his tone towards her. Roy complements her input during his final speech to Deckard with his “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it?”. It's that the realization of the replicant's nature made them face fear of extinction could make us reflect that maybe diagnosing, labeling, rigidly assessing people we encounter in clinical work – no matter their assumed structure could frighten them and make them more aggressively separate themselves from the “functionally adapted”, “empathetic”, “normal” ones. Protecting themselves from rejection, they exclude themselves from the setting organized by the majority. It is a reaction as violent as the replicant's mutiny.

Rachel and Roy are valuable encounters to Deckard, though obviously on different layers – whether intimately (Rachel) or morally (Roy). As Dienstag (2015) shows, Deckard turns to his authentic response to Rachel and puts the objective test aside. The main result, besides that the two will soon become a couple, is that from now on, Deckard will slowly experience his own (seemingly long-lost) humanity.

V. EMOTIONAL MATURITY

Roy and Deckard aren't necessarily opposites although they are placed as protagonist and antagonist. In fact, as the events progress, they seem to accomplish basically the same type of out-growth through intimate contact with another being they care about. One develops enough empathy to spare the life of the other (here referring to Roy; in 2007 Barad also thought of how empathy develops in Roy as a mature emotional function). Speaking of Roy's emotional development and the eye motif, if the viewer pays close attention to the character, one may observe that Roy's eyes constantly give clues about his insights as he interacts with people - his mimic and glimpses speak for themselves.

On the other hand, Deckard takes upon duality of life itself (the detective's voiceover reminds him of the risk of losing Rachel but also that loss is part of existence itself, part of nature; therefore he is enforced to take the risk of running away with Rachel and protecting their relationship). This insight is similar to the process of gaining emotional growth and maturity by accepting duality and the unavoidable (the coexisting good and evil, life and death in this case), further getting able to access one's own resources to change and take meaningful risks.

The two couples (Roy and Pris, Deckard and Rachel) are portraits of how nurture given by loving contact makes all more bearable and deepens one's perspective. It widens the vision about one's self.

We might say that the ground they develop on is different. Roy accelerates his emotional development from the point he eliminates the "father" Tyrell, therefore putting himself in the privileged position of acting and sensing genuinely and independently, while Deckard develops as a response to Rachel's reactions and the magnitude of Roy's transformation.

Roy is different from Deckard as he is shown from the beginning as caring to his peers – he appears to be a rather protective leader of the replicants and is very close to Pris, his lover. On the other hand, Deckard enters the scene as a rather bored, isolated and indifferent character who later accesses his emotional side as a response to Rachel's displays of being hurt.

"More human than human is our motto", says Tyrell while Rachel and Roy confirms his success in reaching this goal. They are necessary factors so that the numb human (Deckard) starts looking inwards instead of results of a test (Dienstag, 2015) in order to emotionally evolve raise above his cynical job as a blade runner and developing his own empathy. His emotional maturity though is only emerging. At the moment he is only capable of asking Rachel for love and trust but is discreet in expressing his own, cannot verbalize them yet. It is enough of a breakthrough to stay in a relationship for now.

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