



The Cognitive Value of *Blade Runner*

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to argue that *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (Ridley Scott, 2007) has cognitive value which is inseparable from its value as a work of cinema. I introduce the cinematic philosophy debate in §1. §2 sets out my position: that the *Final Cut* affirms the proposition *there is no necessary relation between humanity and human beings*. I outline the combination of cinematic depiction with distinctive features of the narrative's peripeteia in §3. In §4, I explain the cognitive value of the peripeteia.

I. EXPERIENTIAL AFFIRMATION

Paisley Livingston established the parameters of the cinematic philosophy debate with his 2006 paper, 'Theses on Cinema as Philosophy'.¹ In this and subsequent work, Livingston has maintained that the 'bold thesis' of cinematic philosophy is too strong to be defended successfully.² The bold thesis has two conditions, results and means: the work must make an innovative and independent contribution to philosophy by a means exclusive to the cinematic medium or art form.³ Aaron Smuts refers to these as the 'epistemic' and 'artistic' criteria respectively, and mounts one of the few defences of the bold thesis, arguing for two cases of cinematic philosophy: the 'For God and Country' montage sequence of *October* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1928) and an episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled 'The Little People' (William F. Claxton, 1962).⁴ More recently, I have defended *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) as meeting the bold thesis, arguing that the film satisfies both the epistemic and

artistic criteria in presenting memory as (i) unreliable and (ii) essential to understanding by means of experiential affirmation.⁵

Experiential affirmation is a development of Berys Gaut's 'experiential confirmation' and is defined as: 'the production of new, justified, true belief by the employment of cinematic imagery to stimulate the imagination'.^{6 7} I was careful to restrict my thesis to *Memento*, but did not preclude other films doing philosophy in a similar manner. Experiential affirmation in *Memento* is a function of cinematic depiction and narrative complexity. The narrative complexity of *Memento* is notorious and Gaut makes no exaggeration when he states that the film is 'one of the most narratively complex artworks ever produced'.⁸ My position was that these two features combine to produce a necessary relation between the imaginative engagement with *Memento* and the formation of the beliefs that (i) memory is unreliable and (ii) memory is essential to understanding. If one has attended to the film, in other words, one cannot help but accept these propositions as true.

Katherine Thomson-Jones identifies the following two questions as essential to the cognitivist versus anti-cognitivist debate: '(1) Can art provide knowledge? And if it can, (2) how is this aesthetically relevant'.⁹ I do not have space to discuss the relationship between aesthetic and artistic value so I shall characterise cinematic cognitivism as the thesis that a film can provide knowledge in a manner which is artistically relevant. The two questions posed by Thomson-Jones mirror Smuts' epistemic and artistic terminology such that the bold thesis can be re-stated as: a film can provide philosophical knowledge in an exclusively cinematic manner. My experiential affirmation is thus a cinematic cognitivist thesis. As such, the knowledge acquired by experiential affirmation must be accepted as true in the world, not just in (the world of) the film. Gaut holds that *Memento* makes *cognitive claims*, that 'embedded in the narrative are claims that are readily construed as assertions about what is the case in the actual world'.¹⁰ I have previously demonstrated how *Memento* makes cognitive claims by means of experiential affirmation; I shall now demonstrate that experiential affirmation operates in *Blade Runner* and that the film therefore has cognitive value.

II. BLADE RUNNERS

A plot summary of *Blade Runner* would be redundant given the number of books and articles inspired by the film, but what is particularly important for my inquiry—and may, at least in part, account for the continued interest—is the existence of so many versions. Excluding those edited for television and minor alterations in the Swedish release, there have been six thus far. [*The Internet Movie Database* provides an overview.]¹¹ I shall also exclude the two which were shown as previews in 1982, which leaves: the *International Cut* (1982), the *Domestic Cut* (1982), the *Director's Cut* (1992), and the *Final Cut* (2007). I shall further exclude the *Domestic Cut* (the U.S. release which

was edited for graphic violence) and the *Director's Cut* (as the *Final Cut* is billed as the definitive director's cut) to compare:

(IC) the *International Cut* of 113 minutes; and

(FC) the *Final Cut* of 113 minutes. [Both these running times are taken from the *Blade Runner: The Final Cut (5-Disc Ultimate Collectors' Edition)* released on 3 December 2007.]

There are four significant changes from *IC* to *FC*:

- (1) the removal of Deckard's voiceover narration;
- (2) the alteration of Batty's demand of Tyrell from 'I want more life, *fucker*' to 'I want more life, *father*';
- (3) the insertion of the unicorn sequence; and
- (4) the removal of the happy ending.

(1), (3), and (4) combine to alter the viewer's perception of whether Deckard is a human being or a replicant. [Androids that are almost identical to human beings.] Interpretations of both versions vary, with evidence advanced for Deckard as definitely one or the other as well as ambiguity as crucial to both works. For my purposes I shall take Deckard to be a human being in *IC* and a replicant who thinks he is a human being in *FC*. The revelation that Deckard is a replicant in the latter occurs in the final scene of the film, when he discovers an origami unicorn outside his apartment. In *IC*, the unicorn serves only to indicate that Gaff, a police officer, has spared Rachael's life and is allowing Deckard to escape with her. The insertion of the unicorn sequence in the forty-first minute of *FC* produces a second and more important layer of meaning, that Gaff has access to Deckard's thoughts which—in the context of the film—can only mean that Deckard is a replicant who thinks he is a human being due to memory implants.

In his paper on the film, Gaut argues that both *IC* and *FC* assert that there is a biological (or descriptive) sense of 'humanity' and an evaluative sense, which is connected with the ability to empathise.¹² He states: 'The film proposes, then, that empathy is not confined to biological humans, but that replicants can possess it too'.¹³ Both versions portray humans and replicants as having and not having empathy as well as characters whose empathy develops gradually, e.g. Gaff (a human) and Batty (a replicant). The proposition Gaut identifies is obviously a claim about what is true in the film rather than the world, however, and is not thus 'cognitive'. My interest is in whether *FC* can meet the epistemic criterion for doing philosophy by making a cognitive claim and I shall therefore alter Gaut's proposition about biology and empathy by removing the reference to replicants: *there is no necessary relation between humanity and human beings*.

III. EXPERIENTIAL AFFIRMATION IN *BLADE RUNNER*

Experiential affirmation in *FC* occurs by the combination of cinematic depiction with a particular feature of the work's narrative structure, the placement of the peripeteia. I shall not discuss cinematic depiction in *FC* in detail as its effects are very similar to those in *Memento* that I described previously.¹⁴ Drawing on the work of Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie, I argued that cinematic depiction produces detailed and lifelike imaginings which audiences are able to understand with relative ease. In *FC*, one can immediately perceive that there is no physical feature which distinguishes replicants from human beings and that the behavioural differences are only revealed in specific circumstances, e.g. empathy tests and combat. Furthermore, when characters such as Rachael and Deckard are introduced as humans and subsequently revealed to be replicants, no physical or behavioural changes occur. Cinematic depiction thus reinforces the superficial similarity between humans and replicants in a way that the novel upon which the film is based, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, could not courtesy of the different ways in which the depictive and descriptive modes of representation stimulate the imagination.

In *FC*, the peripeteia is Deckard's realisation that he is a replicant and is represented as follows (film time in minutes and seconds):

- 106:49: Deckard opens the door of his apartment, gun in hand, and checks the corridor. When he is satisfied that it is empty, he beckons Rachael to move to the lift.
- 107:14: En route one of her heels clips a silver origami figure, which catches Deckard's attention.
- 107:23: He picks it up and it is revealed to be a unicorn. He holds it in front of his face, contemplating it.
- 107:34: He smiles and Gaff's words are repeated in a voiceover: 'It's too bad she won't live, but then again who does?'
- 107:39: Deckard nods, crumples the unicorn, and enters the lift.
- 107:44: Before he can turn around the lift door closes and the screen is black for three seconds.
- 107:48: The credits roll.

Deckard's discovery is a simultaneous anagnorisis (recognition) and peripeteia (reversal of fortune) because the change from ignorance to knowledge is accompanied by the change from one state of affairs (Deckard as human) to its opposite (Deckard as replicant). Aristotle [1452a] maintained that this combination was 'the most effective form of discovery' and the peripeteia in *FC* is indeed exceptionally effective.¹⁵ A reversal of fortune can occur at any stage of a narrative, but my discussion is restricted to those which occur at the end of a story, i.e. during the denouement or resolution.

IV. THE TWIST IN THE TAIL

There are four features of the peripeteia in *FC* which are relevant to experiential affirmation:

- a). it is unexpected because Deckard has been represented as a human being thus far;
- b). has retrospective significance, i.e. casts the whole narrative up to this point in a fresh light by introducing new layers of meaning;
- c). occurs quickly; and
- d). occurs in the final few seconds of the film.

The effect in *FC* is best examined by comparison with two other films where the peripeteia shares features (1) and (2), M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000) and Roger Donaldson's *No Way Out* (1987). In *Unbreakable*, reluctant superhero David Dunn realises that Elijah Price is not in fact his friend and mentor, but an arch-villain. As in *FC*, this revelation casts a fresh light on the whole narrative, although it is followed by approximately three minutes of flashbacks and an explicit explanation by Price, and thus lacks (3) and (4). The peripeteia in *No Way Out* has a reversal which shares (1) to (3) with *FC*: at the end of a tragic series of events in which he appears to have played an unwitting role, Lieutenant Commander Farrell is revealed to be Evgeny Segevich, a KGB agent. The revelation is confirmed when Schiller, the manager of his apartment block, emerges as his handler. This occurs at approximately one and a half minutes before the credits roll, but nonetheless lacks (4).

The earliest point at which a viewer has justification for believing that Deckard is a replicant in *FC* is when he picks up the unicorn and the camera focuses on the figure, twenty-one seconds before the screen turns black. [The first sight of the unicorn, nine seconds before Deckard picks it up, is too brief to be able to determine what the figure is with certainty.] Deckard first appears onscreen in the eighth minute of the film and the viewer thus attributes both descriptive and (a developing) evaluative humanity to him for approximately one hundred minutes before the two are severed. The crucial difference between the peripeteia in *FC* and *No Way Out* is the lack of time the audience is afforded to process the radical change of perspective in the former. Once Farrell/Segevich speaks to Schiller in Russian, there can be no doubt that he is a Soviet agent and although there is very little of the film left, there is some explanation. Farrell/Segevich confirms previous suspicion that the KGB agent is a sleeper and there is a very brief exposition of an earlier incident where his bag was stolen. This is followed by a similarly brief dialogue in which Farrell/Segevich refuses to return to the Soviet Union and the film ends with an aerial shot of him driving away which continues as the credits roll. Where *No Way Out* provides one with seventy-odd seconds in which to consider the implications of the peripeteia with the assistance of a short explanation, *FC* provides a maximum of twenty-one seconds unassisted

in which to consider implications which are much more far-reaching and subtle. Deckard does not comment upon what it means to be human (or, more accurately, what it means to be a replicant)—he simply gives a stoical nod and makes good his escape.

Smuts correctly identifies the film-as-thought-experiment defence of cinematic philosophy as flawed because in such cases it is the audience rather than the film that does the philosophy.¹⁶ This is true of *IC* whether or not one regards the film as a thought experiment. In presenting a variety of characters, human and replicant, who both possess and lack empathy, and human and replicant characters whose empathy develops, *IC* suggests that *there is no necessary relation between humanity and human beings*. The narrative merely provokes this response in the audience, however, and it is the viewer who must actively explore the theme, make the connections, and ultimately do the philosophy. There is thus no necessary relation between attending to *IC* and accepting the proposition as true.

In *FC*, the audience is invited to imagine Deckard as descriptively human and to approve of his growing evaluative humanity as the film progresses. Then, in the final few seconds, the viewer—like Deckard—experiences the sudden and abrupt severance of the two senses of ‘human’. Due to the combination of features (1) to (4) of the peripeteia, there is little time in which to consider the implications of the reversal and no time in which to re-orientate one’s attitude towards Deckard; there is also no further character or plot development. If one has imaginatively engaged with the work, one has approved of Deckard’s emerging evaluative humanity and thus has the experience of seeing someone with whom one has oneself empathised stripped of his descriptive humanity. In *No Way Out* one has a single opportunity to judge Farrell/Segevich *qua* spy (his refusal to return to the Soviet Union), but there is no further story in which to judge Deckard *qua* replicant. One’s positive judgement of Deckard remains the same despite his loss of descriptive humanity and one therefore experiences the irrelevance of descriptive humanity to the judgement of evaluative humanity, i.e. that *there is no necessary relation between humanity and human beings*.

In a similar way to the manner in which the complexity of *Memento*’s narration affords viewers the experience of *their* memory as unreliable, the literally last-minute combination of reversal and recognition in *FC* affords viewers the experience of *their* judgements of evaluative humanity holding in the absence of descriptive humanity. The features of the peripeteia, depicted cinematically, are such that one cannot both attend to the film and fail to accept the truth of the above proposition. The claim made by the film is cognitive because the severing of the two senses of ‘human’ affects both the viewer’s judgement of the character in the film (e.g., ‘Deckard is actually a replicant’) and her second-order judgement thereof (e.g., ‘My judgement of Deckard as heroic remains accurate’). The claim is thus true of both the film and the world. In experientially affirming that *there is no necessary relation*

between humanity and human beings, *FC* provides knowledge in a manner which is cinematically relevant. As such, the film has cognitive value which is an integral part of its value as a work of cinema.

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NOTES

1. Livingston 2006.
2. Livingston 2009, 20.
3. Livingston 2009, 11.
4. Smuts 2009, 410.
5. McGregor 2014.
6. Gaut 2011, 41.
7. McGregor 2014, 63.
8. Gaut 2011, 23.
9. Thomson-Jones 2005, 376.
10. Gaut 2011, 38.
11. Internet Movie Database(IMDb) .
12. Gaut 2015.
13. Gaut 2015, 35.
14. McGregor 2014, 60–62.
15. Aristotle 2004.
16. Smuts 2009, 414.

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