More Human than Human: The Romantic Self, Film Noir and Science Fiction in *Blade Runner*

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like… tears in rain. Time to die." At the close of his life, Roy Batty, *Blade Runner's* villain-turned-hero, delivers this soulful soliloquy after he saves Rick Deckard, the film's protagonist, from falling to his death. The scene is vivid: while Deckard slumps, beaten, Batty radiates a sense of internal peace. Smiling in the jaws of death, Batty's last words echo those of Manfred, the Byronic hero in Lord Byron's *Manfred*, who proclaims: "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die". Viewed in this light, *Blade Runner's* romantic undercurrents, possibly overlooked in the face of its more obvious postmodern theme, (Bruno, Doel & Clarke, McCaffery, McNamara) become visible. In my essay, I posit that the romantic self lies at the heart of *Blade Runner's* film noir, first born through the film's dystopia, then evinced by the juxtaposition of differing selfhoods through character development, and finally immortalised in the dramatic confrontation between Batty and Deckard.

Blade Runner's dystopia, created through the film's postmodern aspects and externalised through film noir, allows romanticism to take root. "Held up as perhaps the exemplary mirror of the postmodern," (Doel & Clarke 143) *Blade Runner* not only blends science fiction with film noir, (Desser, Dempsey, Armstrong) but also contains numerous elements of romanticism. (Lussier & Gowan) Marcus Doel and David Clarke encapsulate *Blade Runner's* "parable of the postmodern condition" (McNamara 4) in a nutshell:

> … its status as a postmodern classic cannot be accounted for by its cinematic qualities alone. Thus, in addition to the film's hybrid genre and the double coding of its

cinematography, *Blade Runner's* many commentators have remarked upon: its fractal geography; the interruption of temporality; the triumph of flexible accumulation within the hollow husks of global corporations; the fusion of the mechanisms of capital accumulation and governance; the adsorption of referentiality and representation through a proliferation of simulacra and simulations; the lack of authenticity and the indeterminacy of identity; the shortcircuiting of memory, genealogy, and history; the omnipresence of the Fourth World; the slow motion catastrophe of space-time decomposition; and the banality and fatality of living on in the hereafter. (142)

In essence, *Blade Runner's* postmodernism depicts Earth as a "festering hell-hole of technological overkill," (Williams 384) a dystopia "that those who can do so readily abandon" (Telotte 48).

If postmodernism shapes *Blade Runner's* underlying dystopic nature, then film noir is the outward projection of the film's dystopia. Through its selective use of mise-en-scene, various soundtracks linked to the film noir era, and narrative, the film's "shadowy visual style, along with its classic private-detective-murder-mystery plot line place in the film noir tradition" (Boşnak 12). Moreover, Jay Telotte, a specialist in film genres and history, notes that "the futuristic environment that the film describes seems perpetually dark and rainy, as gloomy as that of film noir – the conventions of which *Blade Runner* does in fact draw on" (48). It is "in this bleak atmosphere [that] we can see mirrored an interior darkness that afflicts the characters here," (Telotte 48) of which Deckard most accurately delineates. For now, I postpone discussions of Deckard's noir selfhood in favour of how dystopia breathes life into *Blade Runner's* romantic self.

According to David Desser, *Blade Runner's* "characteristics of film noir – the alienated hero in the alienating city, the femme fatale, … – create an environment of distrust, ambiguity and separation," (175) evident in the film's characters. By employing a literary device known as the foil, which Peter Auger defines as "a character whose qualities emphasise another's … by providing a sharp contrast," (114) *Blade Runner* juxtaposes creators with created, and pits the romantic against the noir. These foils perform their roles seamlessly, constructing situations which foreground the romantic self in its struggles to prevail over its contrasting selfhoods.

Drawing a parallel to Mary Shelley's romantic novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Dr. Eldon Tyrell exists as a foil to the renegade Replicants who return to "their creator to petition for intervention to improve their existential state" (Lussier & Gowan 165). Tyrell, the Victor Frankenstein of *Blade Runner,* creates the Replicants as "figures mirroring his own desire for perfection, beauty and transcendence of mechanical limitations" (Telotte 48). A godlike character that heads the Tyrell Corporation, Tyrell wields immense power and is seen as a tyrannical oppressor who decrees that Replicants can only possess four-year lifespans. In contrast, these Replicants, much like the Frankenstein creature, are pitiful victims of Tyrell's creation and embody the romantic self as they embark "on a Promethean search of sorts, seeking the archetypal fire of life itself" (Telotte 48). Throughout the film, viewers are privy to the desperation faced by the Replicants in lengthening their lifespans and recognise in them a burning will to live that drives their actions, which is a trait that falls under Charles Taylor's concept of hypergoods. A linchpin of the romantic self, a hypergood is a "commitment to certain "higher", or more basic, goods [that] provides us with the capacity to locate ourselves, to establish an identity, and to determine the significance of various events or things" (Calhoun 234). Thus, the Replicants, struggling against the might of

their oppressor, band together to express a collective consciousness that is deeply embedded within their will to survive.

The Replicants' quest against Tyrell frames Roy Batty, the group's leader, as a romantic hero, which was a distinctive aspect of the Romantic Movement. (Thorslev 185) While it may seem confusing to label Batty, the ostensible villain of the film, as a romantic hero, there are solid grounds for doing so. (Desser 176) Since it is not until the film's climax that Batty's heroism becomes indubitable, it is sufficient, for now, to contend that Batty possesses multiple traits of the Byronic Hero, which "shows the elements of every major type of Romantic hero" (Thorslev 4). In this section, Peter Thorslev's notable analysis of the Byronic Hero forms the basis of my argument. "Fiery the angels fell, deep thunder rolled around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc." Batty utilises dramatic monologue, a romantic expression, during his introductory appearance. A misquote of lines from William Blake's *America – A Prophecy*, which is "a powerful poem to democracy suggesting divine displeasure with tyranny," (Slade 15) it "tells us that Roy is one of the colonised who is rebelling against his tyrannical master" (Wheale 303). Cast in this light, Batty starts off as a villain who coerces and kills those who stand in his way, demonstrating that "his moral values are also his own; he chooses his values in open defiance of the codes of society" (Thorslev 164). As the film progresses, viewers recognise that Batty represents "a rebellion which asserted the independence of the individual and the primacy of his values," (qtd. in Stein 2) which is a telling characteristic of the Byronic Hero. At the core of his character, Batty "carries about with him like the brand of Cain a deep sense of guilt" (Thorslev 8). Visibly upset when he confronts Tyrell, Batty hangs his head and confesses: "I've done questionable things."

Enshrouded in *Blade Runner's* distinctive film noir style, Deckard, the protagonist of the film, highlights how the romantic self presents itself within film noir on two accounts.

The first is unmistakable – acting as a foil to Batty, Deckard, as an archetype of the film noir antihero, reaffirms Batty's status as romantic hero through juxtaposition and exhibits a noir selfhood that matches Foster Hirsch's descriptions of a noir character, which possesses traits such as having "dry, tight voices, monotonous in rhythm and intonation", "lacking the strength and force of character", and being "utterly deadpan" (chapter 6). Throughout the film, Deckard's expressionless voiceover, the most distinctive film noir technique employed in *Blade Runner*, does an excellent job in accentuating his anti-hero tendencies. A direct contrast with Batty's powerful character, Deckard comes across as a disgruntled and cynical "ex-cop, ex-blade-runner, ex-killer" who "would rather be a killer than a victim." Motivated by his superior's threat – "if you are not a cop, you are little people" – Deckard, "thinking that if [he] couldn't take it [he] would split later," once again rejoins the blade runner unit in pursuit of the renegade Replicants. While it is clear how the film contrasts the noir antihero with the Byronic Hero to highlight the latter's manifestation in film noir, it is less apparent how the noir character transforms to express empathy for the romantic self. As Jay Telotte muses, "fed up with his work as a bounty killer, meanwhile, Deckard meditates on the nature of his quarry and, in turn, begins to wonder about his own place in this confusing welter of being" (49). Deckard's budding romance with the Replicant Rachael and his progressively evocative executions of the renegade Replicants deepen his introspection; unpacking the details would require a lengthy discussion. Suffice it to say, both events fuel Deckard's developing empathy for the romantic Replicant group.

The essence of Batty's Byronic Heroism and the zenith of Deckard's introspection are demonstrated when the characters clash during the film's climax, setting the stage for catharsis at the film's ending. Batty gives chase to Deckard after he sees Pris, his Replicant lover, dead by Deckard's hand. The pursuit terminates when Deckard slips and dangles from the edge of the building. Having cornered his prey, Batty proceeds to surprise by

unexpectedly rescuing his would-be killer from certain death. This "act of radical empathy for the blade runner strongly suggest [sic] that [Batty] has progressed beyond any test of essential humanity" (Lussier & Gowan 171). "Roy's dying speech, … one of the most moving in modern cinema," (Armstrong 121) follows and captures the essence of Batty's romantic self – Rutger Hauer, who acted as Batty, recalls in an interview that these lines reveal "Batty's concern to "make his mark on existence"" (qtd. in Raw 159). Batty then dies, releasing a dove that symbolises that he is at peace with his death. Contrary to the typical relief experienced when a villain perishes, Batty's death instead evokes a powerful catharsis as viewers come to sympathise with the Replicant, thus washing away all doubts about his Byronic Heroism – Batty has made the transition from villain to Romantic hero by enlisting "at least a portion of our sympathies in his rebellion against society" (Thorslev 57). Deckard's internal thoughts, conveyed through his voiceover, reaffirm this and reflect a deep sense of loss and helplessness:

> I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life. Anybody's life. My life … All I could do was sit there and watch him die.

Batty's death in turn "discloses such freedom and transfers it, at the moment of death, to Deckard, whose freedom, from a slavish dependency on "physical necessity" can be realized" (Lussier & Gowan 171) when Deckard returns to rescue Rachael and flees with her "beyond a world of mechanized desire into an uncertain future" (Lussier & Gowan 171). Through Deckard's renouncement of his position in society for a chance at happiness and his newfound sympathy for the Replicants, Batty's rebellion lives on and displays the full might of the romantic self; the romantic self gains ascendancy over the noir self.

The powerful romantic self in *Blade Runner* reifies Tyrell Corporation's motto, "more human than human," which serves as a central theme in *Blade Runner* and echoes throughout the film's narrative. Viewers are left to ponder the Replicants' innate humanity: Batty, in spite of his artificiality, comes across as more human than Deckard. In doing so, *Blade Runner* depicts "the problematic nature of the human being and the difficult task of being human," (qtd. in Desser 172) which are phenomena that manifest in today's culture; science fiction's predictions have materialised. Released in 1982, *Blade Runner's* dystopic society is a futuristic concoction of that time and mirrors today's globalised world where commercialisation and globalisation have engendered a postmodern hodgepodge of cultures and "reproductive technologies and breakthroughs in genetic engineering… are well on the way to dismantling familiar ideas about what it means to be human" (Hollinger & Gordon 2). Within this chaotic confusion, Deckard's noir selfhood manifests in a large majority of present-day individuals who are disenchanted and disgruntled with the status quo; the noir selfhood shields them from the perennially mutable present. Batty's martyrdom then presents a bold alternative to the situation: humanity possesses the ability to become "more human than human," if only they seek to discover their romantic selves. Viewed in this light, *Blade Runner* "live[s] up to [science fiction's] reputation as a literature of change" (Hollinger & Gordon 2) and becomes living proof of Scott Bukatman's words:

> There is simply no overstating the importance of science fiction to the present cultural moment, a moment that sees itself as science fiction: … "We live science fiction"; "We have annexed the future into our own present"; "We are already living out the existences predicted by earlier generations of SF authors"; "the future was now." (6)

Such is the power of science fiction.

(2197 words, excluding title)

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