

Review: Timothy Shanahan (2014), *Philosophy and Blade Runner*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 240pp.

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This is a very well written and well-organised book. Shanahan works on two levels. There is an in-depth discussion of the key philosophical issues raised by *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, USA/Hong Kong/UK, 1982), and there is also a(n often implicit) meta-philosophical ‘position’ framing this discussion.

Shanahan’s issues-based discussion starts at the very core of the film’s plot/themes, over what it is to be a person and what it is to be human, and how these might be related, before widening into a discussion of critically related topics: consciousness, freedom, morality, God and death. Each of the discussions ascribes to *Blade Runner* a sophisticated view, with Shanahan paying close attention to the script, dialogue and scenes throughout, in the various different manifestations of the film. We especially enjoyed his impressive discussion (in Chapter 7) of *Blade Runner* as a film that can be seen as investigating the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Fundamental to Shanahan’s project seems to be the belief that the film works best through a certain ambiguity: it does not argue plainly that replicants are just as good as human beings (whatever that means) but rather situates replicants in various different activities and forms of life, and allows the viewer to compare and contrast. We would suggest elaborating this further, as follows: *Blade Runner* ought to be seen, following the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, as *an object of comparison*, which sheds light through one’s ‘reflectively’ thinking *through* it (in something like the way one sees through stained glass, or through and by means of the surface of a lake) back to one’s actual condition, the world we live in. Learning from the differences as well as the similarities between the two, and learning to spot when these are *merely* deep or *profoundly* superficial. This is then an activity, a *reflective* and *refractive* activity, which viewers have to do for themselves. One can’t simply be told. One has, like Deckard, to allow oneself to be educated in a truer sense: one has to be willing to be logical. That means that one has to have the strength of will, even when it is uncomfortable, to let one’s emotions as well as one’s thoughts overcome one’s prejudices, whatever those are.

On perhaps the film’s central issue, of what it is to be human, or to be a person, Shanahan provides much helpful material. What he never quite comes to terms with is the way that the film not only stresses and explores the key criterion here of capacity for empathic acknowledgement, but also the way in which he stresses in particular the importance (as Stanley Cavell would

put it) of acknowledgement not only of others but of oneself (by others, as well as by oneself). In other words, the real tragedy of the world depicted in Ridley Scott's film is that the replicants are deprived of full personhood, deprived of being able to be as human as human, precisely by means of their being deprived of the acknowledgement of others, except for by each other (and, at the death, kinda too late, by Deckard). Being human, or being a person, is a work in progress always. It is a moral category. The replicants, being so young, are inevitably like children. They deserve our care. Because they don't get that, and because in fact they are hunted, they are often like children having tantrums, or worse. And that's dangerous, given that their bodies are so powerfully adult...

And what of the book's meta-framework? While Shanahan asks at various points 'what is a person?' and 'what is a human?', he never explicitly asks 'what is a film?' But it is clear that he is aware of this ontological question, a question that *Blade Runner* brings up more than most films. For it exists in several different theatrical (and other) versions (which number you arrive at depends on how exactly you distinguish versions; the anniversary box set contains five, although some reckon there to be seven). In addition, there are scripted moments and filmed scenes available which never made it into any of the theatrical versions (might we call these the director's 'first thoughts'?). Plus Shanahan also makes careful use of other material, of the comments and commentary made by various participants in the film's making, of the director's various statements, and, of course, of Philip K. Dick's original novel and Dick's insightful comments on an early version of the film. Indeed, Shanahan relates early in the book how Dick spotted with laser-like clarity the remarkable truth about the relation between the film and his *Do androids dream of electric sheep?*, namely that in some key respects they are *opposites*. The humans and replicants swap places between the two works, and the process that Deckard passes through goes from being dehumanising in the book to being rehumanising in the film (5-7). Plus, crucially, at a number of moments *Blade Runner* itself seems interested in the question 'what is a film?' This is fairly obvious from the very start: the unattributed eye looking out of the Tyrell building is looking out as if at a movie unfolding in front of it, and of which we then see the other side (this self-aware, self-reflexive film-opening is beautifully discussed in Stephen Mulhall's epochal 'Picturing the human (body and soul)' – see Mulhall, 1994)

So what, then, is the (meaning of the) film *Blade Runner*? Is this an unanswerable question; is *Blade Runner* all and none of the things that we've briefly laid out above? Or do we adopt the 'strict' attitude – the attitude sometimes adopted towards composers and their symphonies, for instance – that the creator knows best, that their final thoughts are the definitive ones, and that therefore the final 'director's cut' is *Blade Runner*?

On this note, Shanahan rejects this 'auteurist' position from the outset. In the Introduction he takes on Scott's increasing claims over the years that the

film's central protagonist, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), is himself a replicant (and an unknowing replicant at that – until the final scene). Over the years since the original cinematic release and the later 'director's cut' version, what was originally a nice ambiguity has been firmed up, with Scott now saying quite bluntly in interviews: Deckard *is* a replicant. The director even goes so far as to say: 'If you don't get it, you're a moron' (17). How could a director be mistaken about his own film? But, Shanahan thoughtfully argues, we need not accept Scott's views on the matter as gospel. Not only does Deckard's portrayer, Harrison Ford, think otherwise, for example (18), but Shanahan also addresses the various points raised by those arguing for Deckard's replicant-hood, including the unicorn dream, the photographs, and so on. Shanahan's attempted rebuttal of the unicorn dream in combination with Gaff's unicorn model as evidence is weak; Shanahan reads much too much into Deckard's 'muted' (16) reaction to finding the model – isn't being 'muted' simply Deckard's *modus operandi*? Surely the cleanest reading of the final scene of the director's cut is at the least, among other things, that Deckard may well be a replicant. However, and more importantly, Shanahan goes on to argue powerfully and effectively that making Deckard 100% certainly a replicant *weakens* the dramatic and *philosophical* strength of the film (18-20). For part of the philosophical import of the film derives precisely from the ambiguous interplay of strength and weakness, knowledge and ignorance, emotion and coldness between the various characters, human and replicant, creating a serious challenge to any one-dimensional conception of 'humanity'. (So perhaps one's ultimate position ought to be that we don't/shouldn't *care* whether Deckard is a replicant or not. This is indeed the line that we are inclined to take – that the fixation of almost everyone on this issue itself represents a failure to learn the film's deepest lesson: that, as racism is wrong, so is *any* non 'colour-blind' analogue of it, e.g. when applied to 'other' beings.)

We think that Shanahan has helped underline that *Blade Runner* (whatever precisely that *is/refers to*) can have a (philosophical) voice of its own, a voice that cannot be reduced to any alleged human author any more than the replicants can be reduced to their human makers (and of course a film is in any case a *thoroughly* collaborative enterprise; this already should be enough radically to complicate any and all 'auteurism')... After all, it would be a peculiar and ironic failure to understand the film if one were to seek to eliminate its power to exceed its makers, for that is precisely what we come to see the replicants, including Roy (Rutger Hauer) and Rachael (Sean Young) and perhaps Deckard, learning to do...

These two questions of the ontological status of *Blade Runner* and the ownership of *Blade Runner's* voice are central to another question, one that Shanahan only addresses briefly in his concluding section and endnotes: what is the relationship between film and philosophy? Shanahan admits to a sympathy for the view expressed by, *inter alia*, Murray Smith and Thomas Wartenberg (2006), and ourselves before them (Read and Goodenough 2005): namely that film can actually *do/embody* (novel) philosophy. And

some of the positions he adopts in exploring *Blade Runner* would enable him to make a good case for this, addressing some of the problems raised by critics of film as philosophy like Paisley Livingston (2012). We would invite Shanahan to go further down this path – not merely using philosophy to explore *Blade Runner* (81), but truly and open-endedly using *Blade Runner* to explore philosophically.

Overall, this is a good book on a great subject, although Shanahan adds less to the existing ‘literature’ of *Blade Runner* than he would like his readers to believe. Nonetheless, it is splendid to see *Blade Runner* getting this kind of full-length, sensitive treatment. Shanahan, as one might risk putting it, has done a man’s job...

Bibliography

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