

Student Podcast Transcript

Los Angeles: On Film and On Record digital exhibit

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Podcast transcription: Living in Fear: A Lesson on Humanity Through Slavery in the 1982 Film

*Blade Runner*

**LL:** Hi everyone, my name is Leah Espanola. I am a graduating senior here at CSUN. I am doing this podcast as part of my final project for professor Colleen Tripp's English 492 class as well as the Oviatt Library's Los Angeles in Film exhibit.

The title of my podcast is Living in Fear: A Lesson on Humanity Through Slavery in the 1982 Film *Blade Runner*. Obviously, the focal point of this podcast will be on the film *Blade Runner*, but I am going to be answering two initial questions throughout the podcast. The first question is: *How does the film Blade Runner in conversation with Blade Runner 2049 depict African American slavery?* The second question is: *How do both films provide a lesson on morality and what it means to be human?*

So, before I get started, I just wanted to give a small plot summary of the film as well as present my thesis.

Based on the revolutionary science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, is set in a dystopian Los Angeles of 2019. In an age of advanced technological breakthroughs, humans have created artificial intelligent robots, known as replicants, that are indistinguishable from the humans themselves. Built to serve humans as replacements for manual labor and individualist pleasures, the replicants revolt against their creators and are banned from Earth. Those employed to "retire" or kill the replicants found on Earth are known as Blade Runners. Despite the exact likeness of their creators, replicants are seen as property and are inferior to humans. The only difference between the two is in their creation. Humans are biologically born; replicants are artificially made. The treatment and complex relationship between humans and replicants are an allusion to historic acts African American slavery and discrimination. The film uses a dark overcast of a futuristic Los Angeles to represent a reminiscent history of a dark past that depicts slavery in a new form, which, in turn, provides a lesson on morality and what it means to be human in a world perpetuated by darkness.

So again, that was just my thesis and a small plot summary of the film. But since the main point of the Oviatt Library's exhibit is to present how Los Angeles is represented in films, I think it is important to highlight some of the ways Los Angeles is depicted in *Blade Runner*.

Since part of the focus of this podcast and exhibit is the representation and depiction of Los Angeles *Blade Runner* is a classic noir film depicting Los Angeles under constant darkness and

relentless rain. The dark overcast of the film situated in a technologically advanced world paradoxically highlights dark practices of America's past such as slavery, discrimination, and violence. African American slavery is presented as the dark entity embedded within the replicants' creation. Los Angeles provides a backdrop for the discrimination and ultimate elimination of replicants. They are seen as part of an alienated species inferior to humans. The looming police presence is indicative of the alienation as well. Searchlights continuously roam the streets, implying the notion that someone or something does not belong. Like the first film, *Blade Runner 2049* casts a dark, noir-ish background filled with electricity, orientalism, and a constant cover of dark skies. There is not much of a police presence in the second film, like the first, but there is still an unwelcoming feeling that protrudes off of the almost abandoned looking buildings and squalor streets. This unwelcome feeling perpetuates in both films to emphasize the targeting of replicants that do not belong.

Historically, humans have exploited other human beings against rational and moral codes. Because of their skin color, African Americans were bought, sold, enslaved, and had to endure centuries of oppression. Such concepts of African American slavery are striking similar to the treatment and depiction of the replicants in *Blade Runner*. The film's opening scene describes replicants as bioengineered humans for off-world use and ideal slave labor. The off-world colonies that enslave the replicants are symbolic representations of the plantations that forced labor upon and imprisoned African American slaves. In the past, if a slave attempted to escape the plantation, they were almost always killed—the same concept is illustrated in the film when a replicant escapes the off-world colonies and returns to Earth. The film's protagonist and

blade runner, Rick Deckard, embodies a slave-trader and plantation master: he deals with the runaway “slaves” or (replicants) as an executor and lacks a sense of morality.

The symbolic representation and connection of replicants to African American slaves begins with Rachel, a replicant that is unaware of her design and believes she is a human. Her character is representative of the loss of identity embedded within the concept of slavery. Rachel tries to justify her biological status by her mother and childhood memories—but they are only implanted in her from the Tyrell Company and not her own. In times of slavery, African American families were separated and torn apart. Children grew up as orphans and often had no sense of identity other than being a slave. Rachel is an artificial type of orphan herself, she has no family, and she loses the identity she thought she had. Again, Rachel furthers the connection of artificial intelligence (AI) slavery within the film and African Americans after becoming a known and targeted replicant. Seeking help from Deckard, Rachel asks, ““what if I go north””? (*Blade Runner*). Her comment explicitly relates to the northern states in the 15th-19th century that African American slaves ran to or escaped to for freedom. Still, Deckard replies someone would come after her, implying the notion of fugitive slave hunters that made freedom virtually unattainable for slaves.

The leader of the rebellious replicant group, Roy, represents the fundamental concept of slaves as nonhuman. During the film's final moments, Roy turns into a wild, savage-like creature of himself, mimicking an animal. The scene reflects slaves' position as property and slave owners' actions selling them off, like animals. Roy provides a connection to Ytasha Womack's view of slavery and discrimination in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy*

*Culture* that “as a nonhuman, your life is not valued. You are an ‘alien,’ ‘foreign,’ ‘exotic,’ ‘savage’—a wild one to be conquered, a nuisance to be destroyed. Your bodies are not your own” (32). The fail-safe component installed in the replicants that only give them four years of life further presents them as property and takes the authority over their bodies away from themselves.

Arguably the most pivotal scene in the film is when Roy saves Deckard’s life. As he hangs from a building, Roy remarks, “‘quite an experience to live in fear isn’t it? That’s what it means to be a slave’” (*Blade Runner*). The inclusion of this quote and Roy’s evident sentiments to life as a slave perpetuate the film’s indirect connection to the treatment and feelings of African American slaves living among those who threaten their right to live. Through Roy, Deckard is made aware of his inhumanity and wrongful persecution of those who wish to attain a fearless life. At the end of the scene, as Roy dies, Deckard finally realizes that all the replicants want are “the same answers all of us want. Where do we come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?” (*Blade Runner*). The exact likeness of replicants to humans is highly suggestive of this idea. Deckard, the executioner of the replicants, sees this in Roy’s death—all they want is to be human, like him.

The film focuses on how the replicants depict a broader sense of humanity and morality than their human counterparts, which historically, and in the film’s context, have lacked. Replicants are not meant to have any emotions, yet they are the only ones in the film that do. There are four replicants in the film: Roy, Pris, Zhora, and Leon that all show signs of a greater understanding of what it means to be human as they fight for each other and a way to continue to

live. Emotions are what makes them more human than the humans in the film. For example, Deckard is introduced devoid of emotion as he repeatedly kills the replicants one by one. Until the end of the film, he is depicted as incapable of showing compassion for living things and represents the history of dehumanization.

On the other hand, the replicants are presented as compassionate and emotional beings from their first introduction. The two replicants, Roy and Pris, are obviously in love. Their feelings for each other are a part of the reason they choose to come back to Earth and figure out a way to live longer. Pris's death creates a wave of deep anger and sadness in Roy that initiates the ending fight scene between him and Deckard. Leon portrays an intense desire for revenge after he sees Deckard kill Zhora. These intense reactions can only be made if there is a real source of emotion. "[T]hey demonstrate a number of positive human qualities that we are all familiar with, they come to represent the potential of what happens when machine and human come together in unison" (Redmond 41). The film creates a juxtaposition between the humans that lack emotion and artificial intelligence that have emotions. Essentially, the idea becomes clear that replicants and slaves' express emotions that the humans that control them fail to understand or attain.

Even more so, on the topic of what it means to be human, is the 2017 sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*. Staying on the same track as the first film, *Blade Runner 2049* begins with the same exact message at the beginning of the film: that replicants were created as slaves for off-world colonies and blade runners are employed killers that "retire" them. The 2017 film is set in the same dystopian Los Angeles, just about thirty years later. Replacing the Tyrell Corporation, the original replicant manufacture, and producing more advanced and obedient Nexus-9

replicants, is the Wallace Corporation. The entire film centers on the “miracle” of a child born from a replicant (Rachel) and human (Deckard). A feat previously thought impossible, the search for this miracle child begins with Nexus-9 replicant and protagonist K who is in turn followed by the Wallace Corporation. More importantly, the message and essential meaning of the film is what makes humans human. Memories, connections, emotion, sacrifice, are combined and represented through different characters throughout the film to illustrate this message.

Memories are the one of the key elements in the film that emphasize humanity. In the first scene of the film, K is deployed to kill replicant, Sapper Morton. During the end of their epic fighting scene, Morton asks K how it feels to kill his own kind. K responds that he does not kill his own kind because essentially, they do what they are told. Morton’s response sets the mood for the rest of the film: “you’ve never seen a miracle.” The miracle is obviously the witnessing or knowledge of Rachel and Deckard’s child. Morton is regarded as a rouge replicant, yet he lives his days as a simple farmer. He understands the complexity of his state of being, but also the miracles of life that hold much more value than simple things like old or new versions of his kind. Replicants, in the context of both films, supposedly have no soul or emotion. However, like the first film, the replicants show much more emotion and will to live than their human counterparts.

The use of memories to trigger a moral message on humanity is illustrated again in the middle of the film as K begins to suspect he is the miracle child. Replicant’s memories in both films are artificial, but the lines between real or implanted, and replicant or human, become blurred as K recognizes a date carved into a tree trunk above Rachel’s bones that match a

memory of his as a child. Connecting the two, K is convinced his is in fact the child born from a replicant and human thus, beginning his search for the one and only Deckard. Although, it is revealed shortly later, that K is not the child, but the daunting effect of hope leaves a mark impression on K. Like Deckard in the first film, K realizes that although he was designed to be soulless, that does not mean he does not have the compacity to obtain one or express care and hope for others. At the end of the film, K does against everything he was designed to do. He risks his own life and ends up dying for a greater cause than himself. The compacity to feel something as sentimental and unselfish as that, is part of the lesson on humanity and morality. K did what he felt was the right thing to do despite the purpose of his existence being the exact opposite.

A major plot and connection between both films is the representation of artificial intelligence, specifically women, as slaves. Even more specifically is their connection to African American slavery. As I mentioned before, Rachel embodies many of the characteristics of a slave; starting with her loss of identity, status as an orphan, and her want of freedom. On the other hand, in the second film, Joi, a completely computerized hologram, takes on the similar role of a representing the tropes of slavery. The sole purpose of her creation is to become whatever her owner wants and needs. Like an African American slave, her entire being is in the hands of whoever has the power to control her. She provides moral support for K, trusts he is the miracle child, and even gives him a real name, Joe. But like slaves in the 15<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, she has no control over her own body. Like Rachel, she yearns for freedom. And similar again, her freedom is limited to the confinements of her technological existence.



Most importantly, both films center on what it means to be human. Like the first film, it seems that the replicants—which are created without emotion—are the ones that portray any real emotion in the first place. For example, Morton was simply living his life peacefully as a farmer, not doing any harm, but by orders of humans, he was sentenced to death. K, more than anyone in the film, displays a greater want for real emotion and connection than anyone. Once he is convinced, he is the miracle child, it becomes obvious that he releases himself from the restraints of his technological existence. He accepts the real name Joi gives him and irrevocably rethinks his entire existence. He yearns for real love even though he knows Joi is a computer, it is obvious his feelings for her are true. Even more so the evidence for his humanity over actual humans is his sacrifice at the end of the novel. He chooses to risk his life so that Deckard can meet his daughter for the first time and not risk either of their lives.

Still, both films use artificial technology as slave labor, which in turn, homes in on the practices of the past that continue to haunt the future. Just about thirty years pass in the context of both films, and the only difference is that their form of slavery only advanced. In the real world, humans continue to search for innovative ways to do menial labor. Artificial intelligence is slowly becoming more of a reality as we continue our advance in a completely computerized-based world. Films like *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* show how little human's morality has advanced despite our technological advancements. Slavery has not completely vanished from American history it merely takes on a new face. *Blade Runner* is a representational piece on what it means to be human. The future of humanity, despite significant technological achievement, is rooted in a dark past. A new form of slavery that mimics that of African Americans is created and reinvented through artificial intelligence. Despite the means to move

forward towards a more advanced world, *Blade Runner* is indicative of the dark past that still lingers within humanity. Humans have a history and darkness to them. Regardless of moral rights and the fundamental understanding of equality, some will progress backward. The film provides a lesson on what it means to be human and the hope to attain universal equality moving forward, expressing the idea that “we don’t give a great deal of thought to being human, although history is marred with theories about and battles over human rights [...] Life, liberty, as well as the belief that we’re all ‘born free’” (Womack 30).

Thank you.

[END TRANSCRIPTION]

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