

The Tyranny of Masculine Creation and the Potency of a Replicant Adam and Eve Mythology:
Postsecular Critique of Materialism in the *Blade Runner* Films

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Introduction: Postsecular Mythopoeic Narratives in SF

Fantasies of masculine creation—the (often) perverse desire to create life in the absence of woman—abound in science fiction literature and film. Mary Shelley in her foundational Gothic-SF novel *Frankenstein* (1818) set the literary, theatrical, and cinematic stages for exploring this tragic theme of unchecked materialistic creation. Her “hideous progeny” gave rise to the play titled *Presumption: Or the Fate of Frankenstein* (1823), Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), the film *Frankenstein* (1910), the film *Der Golem* (1915), Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), just to list a few. Each of these texts explores the horrific consequences of usurping natural procreative processes through the (mis)application of materialistic science. However, these SF horror narratives do not provide any cultural corrective (except, maybe, *Metropolis*). Is there a solution to the personal decimation and societal disintegration wrought by these applications of materialistic science?

One possible answer may be found by analyzing the two *Blade Runner* films from the perspective of postsecular theory. In *Blade Runner* (1982), Roy, the prodigal replicant son, accomplishes what Satan and Victor Frankenstein’s Creature could not—namely, the destruction of his creator. However, through a transcendent turn of events, what seems to be failed masculine creation mysteriously transforms into divine redeemer, offering salvation through grace from the abyss of fear, slavery, and death. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) confirms this reading, for not only does Deckard and Rachel escape to start a new life together, but they miraculously and mysteriously procreate. Artifice transcends material nature, creating a new reproductive replicant species. Together, these two films create a postsecular SF myth through which materialistic

science, namely the masculinist attempt to create life in the absence of woman, is critiqued, and the promise of new life is offered through transcendence, imaginatively expressed in an ironic SF appropriation of the Adam and Eve narrative. [SLIDE]

Postsecularism and Science Fiction Studies

Postsecularism is itself a diverse and contested theoretical perspective, and I do not have the space to outline all the critical trends that have helped me fashion my own understanding and application of this important critical perspective. I have listed on the slide some key figures, particularly in the area of postsecular literary studies, whose work informs my readings of the *Blade Runner* films. Of particular interest to me is Lori Branch who offers a nuanced definition that avoids the reductive notion that this critical perspective is simply or even mainly a reaction against the prevailing secular views: “Postsecular studies opens up new understandings of religion and secularism as they have been mutually constituted and as they reconfigure themselves in culture” (94). Similarly, Zhange Ni explains, “The postsecular, therefore, is not merely disenchantment with secularism, but rather an effort to reconsider and reconfigure symbolic assumptions, cultivated sensibilities, and power relations associated with religion and to question the secular’s claim to epistemic, affective, and moral-political supremacy” (51). Indeed, the postsecular is an aesthetic interpretive space in which to question, address, and challenge secular assumptions and to explore with scholarly legitimacy ways in which sacramental reading helps us make meaning and see purpose. As Michael Kaufmann suggests, “The project of postsecular literary criticism thus conceived, then, would be to continue to identify thematic and structural traits that are distinctively postsecular, and to articulate the critical consequences of identifying these traits for our understanding of postsecularism and literature” (69-70).

For my reading of the *Blade Runner* films, I will consider postsecularism as an imaginative space that invites reconsideration and critique of secularist faith in the scientific grand narratives of materialism and naturalism. With all of their hard SF, cyberpunk, and film noir trappings, these films ultimately reveal materialistic science to be the real threat to humanity, creating humanoid life in the absence of woman, thus endangering the very existence of biological humans and creating a transhuman life form that is desperately seeking means to define itself, to form community, and to establish stability. These films appropriate religious narratives to question secular faith in scientism, and through mythopoeic SF narrative, they recreate meaning and identity for both humans and replicants. In the process, religion and its narratives are necessarily revalued as centrally important to humanoid identity, empowerment, and flourishing. **[SLIDE]**

Blade Runner: Redemptive Replicant Transfiguration

One of the most memorable, terrific, and alluring villain/hero figures in modern SF filmography is the complex Roy Batty, brilliantly portrayed by Rutger Hauer. In his desperate quest to find Tyrell, his capitalist creator-god who lives like an Egyptian pharaoh atop a futuristic pyramid, Batty embraces and inverts the Prodigal Son narrative, conflating and transforming the biblical roles of son, fallen angel, and Satan. In the biblical parable told by Christ (Luke 15: 11-32), the Prodigal Son presumptuously asks for his inheritance before it is due, and he lavishly spends it on pursuits of carnal pleasure, returning home to his father repentant and seeking forgiveness.

However, Batty, whom Tyrell calls the Prodigal Son, inverts the role, returning home not repentant but, instead, accusing the father of creative failure and demanding more inheritance—

“I want more life, father!”¹ When the failed father-god cannot provide what the Prodigal Son demands, Batty achieves what Satan in *Paradise Lost* and Mary Shelley’s Creature in *Frankenstein* could not—he kills his creator-god in a gruesome yet disturbingly tender scene. Batty first embraces Tyrell’s head and kisses him tenderly, like a son expressing love and devotion to his father, and then punctures his eyes and crushes his head.

However, in the climactic scene of the film, Batty mysteriously transcends his Satan identity and becomes a messianic figure of grace, forgiveness, redemption, and transformation, thus ushering in the spiritual dimensions of a new replicant liberation cult. Batty’s sudden decision to save Deckard after relentlessly pursuing him through Sabastian’s apartment, up onto the roof, and across to the roof of an adjacent building remains a cinematic conundrum debated by viewers and critics alike. Before his curious transformation to savior figure, Batty was clearly identified as a fallen angel,² the glorious Lucifer whose light, as Tyrell reminds him, burns twice as bright but lives half as long, a rebellious Satan who hounds, accuses, and kills his maker, and who accuses Deckard and seeks revenge for having killed his lover and companions. It would seem Batty has every natural right to kill Deckard. Then, suddenly, as Deckard is about to fall into the urban abyss to his death, Batty quick as a flash reaches out his nail-pierced hand and saves Deckard’s life. Why the sudden change of heart? What are we to make of Batty’s unexpected transformation from Satan to savior?

Some critics find Batty’s transformation thematically and morally problematic. For example, Scott Bukatman dismisses Batty’s change of heart as disappointingly banal (97).

¹ In earlier versions of the film, “father” in this line is rendered as an explicative, expressing a higher degree of transgressive power and intensity.

² Of the elevator scene after Roy kills his maker, scriptwriter Hampton Fancher notes, “That’s also the only shot in the whole movie where you see stars. And they’re moving away from him, as if he’s some kind of fallen angel. That was so perfect” (quoted in Sammon 178).

Michael Martin argues that this transformation causes audiences to develop sympathy for a character who is so thoroughly evil, and he even suggests this sympathy is sinful, because the problem is “in ascribing human attributes—compassion, feeling, morality—to the non-human, while at the same time denigrating humanity itself. This is the pathetic fallacy taken to the extreme” (113). In other words, this narratively induced sympathy for Batty encourages viewers to shift focus away from the divine and toward the profane.

However, viewing Batty as a transformed figure of spiritual transcendence is central to the broader theme of replicant redemption that is later manifest in the emergence of a new hope for replicant liberty from the tyranny of human scientific materialism and the oppression of corporate colonization. This hope begins at the end of *Blade Runner* and develops further in *Blade Runner 2049*. Batty experiences unexpected, transformative grace such that he transcends the self-proclaimed myth of rebellious fallen angel, and he initiates a new myth by appropriating the biblical narrative of a self-sacrificial messianic savior and by extending the Miltonic Adam and Eve myth. The replicant rebel becomes the substitutionary savior of the replicants and spiritually empowers Deckard and Rachel to become the new replicant Adam and Eve who flees the fallen human society to begin a new life, not in the off-world colonies but on the margins of a crumbling human civilization.³ [SLIDE]

More Human Than Human: Is Deckard a Replicant?

This reading of Deckard and Rachel representing a recapitulation of the Adam and Eve biblical narrative for the salvation and liberation of enslaved replicants depends upon viewing Deckard as a replicant, a perspective that remains controversial and contested. Since the original 1982 theatrical release, Deckard’s identity has been in question. For example, Rachel asks if

³ For a detailed analysis of Deckard and Rachel as an appropriation and transformation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, see Desser 54-60.

Deckard has taken the Voight-Kampff test which can differentiate between humans and replicants, and she also asks if he has ever “retired” a human by mistake, questioning the legitimacy of the test and its ability to differentiate humans from replicants accurately. In the film, all replicated, genetically engineered life exhibits a reddish retinal glow, from the owl in Tyrell’s office, to Rachel and the other replicants. Curiously, Deckard also exhibits the red eye-glow in a short scene after he washes his face.⁴ Also, Deckard is unusually affected by retiring the replicants, getting the shakes as if he is struggling morally with unjustly killing what could be his own kind, such that he needs to drink heavily to calm his nerves and suppress his conscience.

The most telling and convincing cinematic evidence is the unicorn dream sequence that was added to the 1992 Director’s Cut, thus making sense of the unicorn origami Gaff leaves outside Deckard’s apartment at the end of the film—Gaff indicates that he knows Deckard’s dreams and memories are implants, just as Rachel’s memory of the spider outside her window was implanted. Ridley Scott has stated in different interviews that it was his intention for Deckard to be a replicant, and he added the unicorn dream sequence to clarify that intention (Desser 60, Egner AR.64). Moreover, Deckard surrounds his apartment with photographs as if to remind himself of the authenticity of his existence, just as Leon and Rachel carry photographs that provide a pictorial trace of their experiences and existential relevance.⁵

Furthermore, there is strong corroborating evidence from *Blade Runner 2049*, even though the sequel does not unequivocally establish Deckard as a replicant. Some viewers suggest that Deckard cannot be a replicant because he does not exhibit the strength and agility of the other replicants. However, replicants are designed with different skill sets, and while Deckard is

⁴ Sammon reports, “According to *BR* editor Terry Rawlings, ‘After Deckard washes his face, he steps out of the bathroom and, for just a brief moment, you see his eyes glowing. Like a replicant’s’” (162).

⁵ For an overview of the cinematic clues to Deckard’s replicant status, see Zizek 11.

not as fast or strong as the combat models he hunts down, he does seem able to tolerate high levels of physical pain that exceed the capabilities of most biological human beings. The sequel more clearly establishes that the replicants are not all equally matched, as some are stronger and more skilled at fighting than others. For example, Sapper is a military model, yet he is fairly easily dispatched by the newer Officer K. And Luv, Wallace's favorite replicant "angel," bodyguard/assassin, and assistant/servant, is superior in agility and fighting than Officer K. Therefore, it is feasible that Deckard, as a replicant, may not always dispatch other replicants with ease.⁶ Also, the fact that Deckard has been hiding out for decades in a radiation zone further suggests that he is a replicant, designed to survive harsh radioactive environments like the workers in off-world colonies handling radioactive waste. Finally, when Wallace entices Deckard with a replicant facsimile of Rachel, he notes that Deckard was designed to fall for Rachael, further suggesting he is a replicant who was part of Tyrell's grand experiment in replicant sexual reproduction. However, Wallace then qualifies the statement saying, "If you were designed," reintroducing ambiguity. While this debate will likely rage on, I conclude there is more than sufficient evidence to sustain Deckard's replicant credentials.

If Deckard is indeed a replicant, then *Blade Runner* as an SF film effectively creates a new replicant Adam and Eve religious myth in which a redeemed Deckard and Rachel flee the materialistic human civilization to start a new replicant society separate and set apart from fallen human society. The *Blade Runner* films appropriate biblical narratives and construct a new SF myth with replicants as mythic figures representing human concerns and addressing such existential questions as What does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to be "human"? Are

⁶ Moreover, if the Tyrell corporation and the blade runner administrators did not want Deckard to know he was, in fact, a replicant, then they would not make him obviously extraordinary such that he would be more likely to question his humanity.

sentient beings intended to be free by virtue of their very nature? What is the purpose of existence? As Jennifer Simkins argues, mythopoeic SF “is particularly concerned with exploring religious and scientific myths. While SF does generate new amalgamative myths for the modern world, it also perpetuates existing religious myths” (10). [SLIDE]

Blade Runner 2049: Redemptive Replicant Sexuality

In the sequel, failed masculine pro/creation is further emphasized through themes of sight, vision, and blindness. Whereas Tyrell, whose physical sight is mediated by large tri-focal glasses, is blinded for his own lack of insight and his inability to apprehend metaphysical reality and truth, Wallace is himself physically blind, presumably from birth, and is thus part of the flawed group of humans who are bound to earth and cannot flee to the off-world colonies due to physical illness or imperfection. Traditionally in myth and literature, physical blindness suggests metaphysical insight and the development of wisdom through tragic hardship. Tiresias, Oedipus, Sampson, and Gloucester in *King Lear* naturally come to mind. Wallace, on the other hand, represents the inversion of this mythic significance, because his physical blindness symbolizes materialistic hubris and its corresponding spiritual blindness. He overcomes his lack of natural sight with drone technology, creating a visual spectrum far superior to the vision a natural human could ever possess. Yet, this expansive, technologically mediated sight blinds him to the very truth of human nature, limits his ability to understand the emotional needs of his replicant creations, and inhibits his ability to recognize the spiritual significance of existence itself. His materialistic technological advancements provide physical sight that leaves him metaphysically blind.

Like Tyrell, Wallace is associated with Egyptian creator-god mythology, for he is a corporate pharaoh living in a futuristic labyrinthian pyramid who manufactures his own species

of slave laborers. Moreover, like the pharaohs and other slave owners across history, Wallace seeks to control the sexual reproduction of his slave labor. He seeks the genetic secret to procreative sexuality so that he can create trillions of replicants so that they can “storm Eden and retake her.” Yet, he is a limited, fallen, human creator who cannot himself replicate the biology of sexual reproduction. Somehow, Tyrell’s Deckard and Rachel jumped the genetic gap in replicant evolutionary development and were mysteriously able to procreate. As Wallace says, quoting Genesis, “God remembered Rachael, heeded her, and opened her womb.” In a complex conflation of biblical narratives and Miltonic myth, Wallace becomes the outcast Satan seeking to invade and conquer the mythic Eden by force of his own scientifically created host of angels. Once again, masculinist science and technologies are used to penetrate, invade, conquer, and control nature and its inhabitants. **[SLIDE]**

Conclusion: More Human Than Human

The ultimate identity of the new replicant race or species is truly to be more human than human, and this identity begins with the ability to experience and express genuine love. In *Blade Runner* only the replicants seem to express real intimacy, friendship, comradery, romantic love, and sacrificial love. The biological humans are isolated, individualistic, and disconnected, and all interhuman relationships are based on duty or commercial contract. Only the replicants have genuine relationships and express authentic emotion. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the only true love, again, is between manufactured agents: the band of rebel replicants, the sexual union of Deckard and Rachel, and the family bond of Deckard and his daughter, Dr. Ana Stelline. The most powerful, and sadly ironic, relationship is that between Officer K and his lover Joi, who is a mass-produced AI relationship model who comes to love K individually and chooses to sacrifice her existence for his greater good. What a striking commentary on the emotional and spiritual

bankruptcy of humans in this materialistic, nihilistic reality. True humanity, marked by spirituality and self-sacrificial love, is reserved for the replicants and AI entities, indicating the utter lostness of biological humans and the rise of redeemed artificial, posthuman agents.

Moreover, humanity is marked by possessing true liberty and self-determination, which these films suggest can only come through the ability to sexually reproduce. Fresya, the leader of the rebel replicants, says, "If a baby could come from one of our own, then I knew we could be our own masters." To which Mariette, the replicant sex worker, replies, "More human than human." This replicant evolution is the ultimate existential threat to biological humans, who are being surpassed and transcended by a new, posthuman agent of their own making who have reclaimed the spiritual values of love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, redemption, and liberty that the materialistic humans have gradually denied and rejected. It could be that the *Blade Runner* films suggest that such a more-human-than-human identity is to be achieved not through technological advancement or scientific enhancements but, rather, through transformed hearts and minds that revalue the human subject through recognizing, accepting, and embracing mystery and the miraculous. Or, as director Denis Villeneuve suggests, maybe this is just a culturally constructed myth that we existentially need in order to cope with the harsh realities of our posthuman existence (Jenkins 55). Ultimately, I'm hoping for the former.

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