

# A Critical Study of Blade Runner from A Posthumanism Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Posthumanism is the theory concerned with how the developments in technology and science has challenged our conception of what it means to be human. It looks for representations of a posthuman condition within literature, mostly in science fiction texts. The theory mapping the development of humanism into the present day and its relationship with technology and devoting in looking at the distinction between humans and animals and/or humans and machines. As one of the most notable artworks in the film industry, the Blade Runner is always regarded as a representative research object of posthumanism theory. This paper would mainly focus on the analysis of Blade Runner, to see how posthumanism is performed and distilled in this classical film.*

**Keywords:** Posthumanism; Blade Runner; Cyborg; Literary Theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The film Blade Runner sets the story in a dystopian future in 2019's Los Angeles. The Tyrell Cooperation advanced robot evolution into the Nexus phase. A new being which has the same appearance like human, is known as the Replicant. Replicants are used Off-world as slave labor in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets. After a bloody mutiny by a Nexus 6 combat team in an Off-world colony, Replicants are declared illegal on earth under penalty of death. Special police squad blade runner units have been ordered to kill any trespassing Replicant. When a group of Replicants led by Roy Batty escape back to earth, a retired blade runner Rick Deckard was called back to hunt them down. During the period, Rick questions about the humanity of Replicants through his relationship with a model named Rachel.

Posthumanism is a term concerned with how developments in technology and science has challenged the conception of what it means to be human. Posthumanism includes at least seven definitions: Antihumanism; Cultural posthumanism; Philosophical posthumanism; Posthuman condition; Transhumanism; AI take over and Voluntary human extinction. Posthumanism usually focuses on the development of humanism in present day and its relationship with technology. The key note of posthumanism usually focuses on distinctions between humans and animals or humans and machines. As an important constituent part of posthumanism, transhumanism mainly focuses on the evolution of human minds and body through advances of technology. The key note of transhumanism usually focuses on to what extent human can transcend beyond the state.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The film Blade Runner is a science fiction movie adapted from Philip K. Dick's science fiction novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Most posthuman conditions in literature are carried by science fiction texts because these texts construct a world in the future and discussing about varieties kinds of possibilities or developments of human being. Some representing works of these science fiction texts are William Gibson's Neuromancer and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

In 1991, Donna Haraway introduces the concept of the cyborg in her essay Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. She described it as a figure that challenges traditional boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture. She also explores how technologies and biotechnologies shape our understanding of identity, embodiment, and agency. In 1999, Katherine Hayles traces the historical development of cybernetics and information theory and examines their influence on literature and culture in her book How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. She argues that the shift from a modern to a posthumanist understanding of the self is shaped by the rise of digital technologies. In 2013, Rosi Braidotti provides a comprehensive overview of posthumanism, examining its philosophical, cultural, and ethical implications in her book The Posthuman. She discusses how posthumanism critiques anthropocentrism and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of the human as interconnected with non-human entities.

According to Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborg*, she supposed the questions brought in the relationship between humans, animals and machines. Haraway mentioned that "late twentieth century machine have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and external-designed" (Haraway). Haraway suggests that advancements in late twentieth-century technologies have fundamentally transformed our understanding of fundamental concepts such as nature, consciousness, and agency. These technologies have ushered in an era where traditional binaries no longer hold, giving rise to new ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of being and the boundaries of humanity. And in Katherine Hayes opinion, "when the test puts you into a cybernetic circuit that splits your will, desire, and perception into a distributed cognitive system in which represented bodies are joined with enacted bodies through mutating and flexible machine interfaces...no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman" (Hayes).

Hayes suggests that regardless of how one identifies the entities within the cybernetic circuit (whether as human, machine, or a hybrid), the very act of engaging with such a system constitutes a form of posthuman experience. Posthumanism, in this way, involves recognizing and navigating the complexities of hybridized, technologically mediated subjectivities.

Up to now, scholars' attitudes about posthumanism are often in an uncertain or not so positive attitudes, because it is hard to foresee the result of breakthrough in technology in real life will bring to human.

### **3. THE ANALYSIS OF BLADE RUNNER FROM A POSTHUMANISM PERSPECTIVE**

#### **3.1 The Empathy Test**

The thinking and debating about humanity permeate the entire film. On one hand, humans are trying to eliminate the Replicants created by humans but stronger than humans. On the other hand, Replicants, who have emotions and awaken to humanity, are in conflict with humans, striving for rights to survive, forcing people to introspect through the fate of Replicants. In the film, there is a test called "Empathy Test" to judge whether the subject is a Replicant or not. By observing reactions such as breath, facial expressions, heart rate, and pupil dilation to external stimuli, one can judge whether an object has the ability to empathize, or in another word, whether they have the humanity. This test is very likely the polygraph. It is fabricated by the author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Philip K. Dick, according to the principle of Turing Test. The principle of Turing Test is, when an interrogator comes out a series of questions to two objects cannot seen: a human and a machine. If the interrogator cannot make any concrete difference between two objects, the machine is considered to have human "intelligence".

In the film, these questions are given in the empathy test:

"It's your birthday. Someone gives you a calfskin wallet. How do you react?"

You've got a little boy. He shows you his butterfly collection plus the killing jar. What do you do?"

You're watching television. Suddenly you realize there's a wasp crawling on your arm.

You're in a desert walking along in the sand when all of the sudden you look down, and you see a tortoise, it's crawling toward you. You reach down, you flip the tortoise over on its back. The tortoise lays on its back, its belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs trying to turn itself over, but it can't, not without your help. But you're not helping. Why is that?" (Scott)

The purpose of these questions is to testing the natural born emotions of human: like and dislike; sympathy and cruel; jealous and tolerant. Replicants are designed to have only four years life so they could not make the immediate reaction to all the stimuli with their limited emotions, so it will expose the fact that they are not human.

This test devotes more on humanity more than intelligence, so it is more likely to fits the Moravec Test. Moravec Test is the logical successor to the Turing Test, because human identity is essentially an informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction. The erasure of embodiment is performed so that "intelligence" becomes a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than enaction in the human lifeworld. As Hayles suggests,

“the Moravec test was designed to show that machines can become the repository of human consciousness – that machines can, for all practical purposes, become human beings” (Hayles).

### 3.2 The Memory

When a Replicant can make a proper respond to questions about humanity and emotion in the empathy test, the upcoming questions would lay particular emphasis to the question about memory and past experiences. In this way, a Replicant will expose some unnatural actions.

In the film, Deckard claims that he needs twenty to thirty questions to judge Replicants through the Test, but it took more than a hundred questions on Rachael. The proof is when Tyrell finds out the Nexus 6s would gradually have emotions after their experiences and this would lead the puzzles in their emotions and then become the rebellion thoughts in their minds. As these Nexus 6s coming to earth and knowing the death of other Replicants, their reaction and mind has changed: instead of keeping hiding from being executed, they choose to take revenge to their creator.

Then Tyrell made an experiment to give Replicants memory of human, to create a cushion or a pillow to Replicants for their emotions and make them believe they are “human” to prevent the expansion of puzzle and rebel. In this way, human could control Replicants easier. Rachael, Tyrell’s secretary, is the experimental project. Rachael was filled with Tyrell’s niece’s memory. When Rachael confirms she is the girl in the photo, she could past the Test, but when she doubts if she is a Replicant, she would act not like a human. This is the disjunction brought by the test between enacted and represented bodies. It is “mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject” (Hayles).

In this logic, it can be supposed that Deckard is a Replicant and here are the reasons:

Old photos on the piano keeps on reminds him of his memory, to engrave himself the identity of “human”.

The expression when he kills Replicants. Deckard’s identity is a retired and experienced blade runner. He should have much experiences and be calmed when retiring Replicants. But when he shot the Replicants in the film, he was confused and frightened. This kind of reaction should not line with his identity image. There is a way to explain is that the blade runner is a memory planted in his brain. Solely the reaction when he shot Replicants is his real reaction.

The unicorn. In Deckard’s dream, he dreams of unicorn. At the end of the film, he found a paper-fold unicorn outside his room. The only one who made paper-fold in the film is Gaff. He folded a chicken when Deckard was called back in the police station. He folded a unicorn outside Deckard’s room means that he knew Deckard’s dream which means he knew Deckard’s memory. Deckard is a Replicant.

### 3.3 The Replicants

When Replicants have emotions of human, they did a thing of human did: to request for life from the God who create them. When Batty finally met his creator, his father, his God, Tyrell, he asked for more life. As Tyrell said to him: “The light that burns twice as bright, burns half as long” (Scott). Batty had brilliant life. But the life is still filled with slavery. He wants to live an ordinary life like human with love. But his request was rejected. He came with hope but reply was desperate. And this desperate lead him destroy his creator. After repent to his “God”, he said: “Nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn't let you in heaven for” (Scott) and killed his creator, his father, his God—Tyrell.

When facing their lover’s death, every human might want to kill the murderer to ask blood for blood. But the Replicant Batty acts more than an ordinary human: He fights with blade runner Deckard in fair play and even saves him when Deckard falling down. Batty is not human. He is too mercy and respect the life. He is lack of humanity. He is lack of cruel, lack of destroy. When the rain falls down on his pure and noble face, Deckard watched him with confused and shock. Batty holds a pigeon and speak out the last poem in his life: “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 darkness at Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time... to die” (Scott).

This is definitely an anti-climax ending, and everyone might have same puzzles like Deckard. In fact, according to Philip K. Dick's interview, he said that in his opinion, the theme of the film *Blade Runner* is when Deckard is losing the humanity in the process of retiring Replicants, Replicants however, owns more and more humanity. At this time, Batty is more than a human. He is transhuman. After Deckard was saved by Batty, Deckard must ask himself: What am I doing? What is the concrete difference between I and them? If there is no difference, who am I? This is a question that puzzles human for centuries, but also puzzles for every Replicant.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Blade Runner* is a film talked about humanity and humanism. It is the background settings make the film emphasis more on posthumanism, while its characterization emphasis more on transhumanism. Transhumanism "have also been characterized as a "complacent" or "apocalyptic" variant of posthumanism and contrasted with "cultural posthumanism" in humanities" (Badmington). This would offer resources of rethinking the relationship between human and rapid developing artificial intelligence and also the connection between posthumanism and transhumanism. It is not that transhumanism abandons the outmoded concepts of posthumanism, but to expand the prerogative into the realms of posthumanism. Transhumanism can be seen as a continuation of humanism. The part of posthumanism discusses more about the future and development might be and the relationship between human and technology. The part of transhumanism discusses about the human itself. What is the future of human will be? Will human become less humanity in the future, and in some day, when new species have more humanity in human's standard than human, shall human could be called as human anymore?

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