

Penny For Your Thoughts: Capitalist Exploitation of Memory in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982)

by TADD LEDOUX

In 1982, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* gripped audiences through its depiction of a world where the human experience and memory themselves have become replicable commodities. Scott's world has gained even more relevance since its release, however. Today, more and more modern corporations are expanding their services to offer small glimpses of that same technology. Now, many companies offer A.I. helpers to assist with online tasks that are too cumbersome for the user, or deep-learning algorithms that store user data long-term hoping to drive later engagement with personalized results. A re-examination, then, of the market application of memory in *Blade Runner* is in order. The role of memory within *Blade Runner* is not as a unique product of human experience but instead reduced to an exploitable yet fragile quality within consumer products. This film depicts that human quality of memory as inherently in conflict with its assigned capitalist role, and since the products the film explores this conflict from are not really products but characters, they themselves can articulate their own struggles against that assigned role. By assessing these various points of conflict through the characters it manifests in, it becomes clear that the film questions the compatibility of simulated and human memory and the capitalist desire for efficiency and innovation.

Keywords: Memory, *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, Artificial Intelligence, Capitalism, Technology

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is a film overtly about memory. From Deckard's initial statement "Memories. You're talking about Memories!" (23:00-23:10) to the "Tears in the Rain" speech (1:46:54-1:47:00), the film interrogates the role of memory in both its human and replicant characters. However, there is a complication to this position of the characters, less overt but equally rich in interpretive depth, in the relation of memory, as well as personhood and sentience more broadly, to capitalism. The characters in the film all exist relative to memory and markets: Dr. Tyrell as the architect of memory and pursuer of accumulation; Deckard as the destroyer of memory and servant to corporatocracy in how his hunting of replicants serves corporate interests; and Rachael, who exists as a market application of memory itself, etc. Through these characters and their relationships to memory and markets, *Blade Runner* encourages the viewer to confront how memory is fundamental to our identity and personhood by treating sentience and memory not as a personal privilege, but an exploitable feature for the sake of capitalist accumulation.

Duplicated Memory

In his famous 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin describes the change in

the value and role of art as its mass production and duplication becomes a new reality. One effect proposed by Benjamin is the loss of the role that unique works of art play within societal traditions and expectations. Benjamin writes, "The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition" (Benjamin, 24). Just as the uniqueness of art is identical to its traditional context, so too is the uniqueness of memory. Rachael exists as the living evidence of the death of unique memory, and assessing how other characters respond to this alteration in her allows the viewer to understand how this duplication clashes against the traditional role of memory. Deckard's statement mentioned earlier, appearing in a scene from 23:00-23:15, portrays Deckard as being astonished that Rachael has memories. Harrison Ford's performance of surprise in this scene further conveys the tremendous significance of this development even within the context of this advanced future. By duplicating memories, the line between product and person is blurred, as the unique individual sensation of memory has the traditional context of being a core aspect of personhood.

The pursuit of this personhood is exactly the desire Tyrell Corporation exhibits through implanting memory. Benjamin writes, "But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to

be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (Benjamin, 25). Just as eroding the authentic ritual value of art shifts its purpose to the political, by duplicating and marketing memory, its role is shifted not to serve individual development and experience, but rather to exist as a profitable replication of personhood. Describing the goal of the memory implant, Dr. Tyrell proclaims that “Commerce is our goal” and cites the company motto “More human than human” (22:40). This clearly illustrates Rachael’s role as an imitation of humanity. Providing this imitation of humanity does indeed fulfill a market desire, as do real imitations of humanity in real markets. On the role of artificial intelligence within today’s markets, S. Venus Jin writes in her essay titled, “To Comply or to React, that is the question: the roles of humanness versus eeriness of AI-powered virtual influencers, loneliness, and threats to human identities in AI-driven digital transformation”, that as of 2022, “35% of consumers had purchased products or services recommended by a virtual influencer” (Jin). The market efficiency of performed sentience is being proven even today. Although in *Blade Runner*, we see the market applications of this technology take many more forms than it does in real markets, the core aspect of capitalism that it speaks to is reflected through the roles taken by replicants in the film. What is common between product referral bots on Twitter and the function of replicants is that they are designed to remove the unstable human element characterized by experience and subjectivity. The utility of an artificial intelligence influencer that is automatically hard-coded to push certain brands and an artificial soldier who is programmed and conditioned to follow certain orders is the removal of the network of experiences that inform these decisions, replacing them with reliable constants.

However, Rachael’s design deliberately runs counter to this, a replicant fully informed by memory and experience. Rachael herself is not a product like the other replicants, although her creation was informed by the goal of “commerce” as previously stated. Dr. Tyrell describes her not as a product but as an “experiment” (22:43), designed to provide an “emotional

cushion” in order to avoid the obsessions that plagued earlier models and make them easier to control (23:05). Trevor F. Anthony, in his essay, “More Human Than Human: The Exile in *Blade Runner*,” characterizes Rachael as a “boundary-crosser”, writing “As her tears fall, Rachael becomes a boundary-crossing figure, an artificial creation and yet more human than any other character we have seen in the film” (Anthony 25). Anthony’s understanding of Rachael as a boundary-crosser from replicant to person can be understood through the perspective of replicants as market objects; by becoming “More human than human,” Rachael crosses the boundary of product to person. Although Dr. Tyrell theorizes that memory will make Rachael a more docile subject, the film proves this to be untrue, not only through its portrayal of Rachael, but also through the replicants who escape. Although the initial reasoning for their escape is to preserve their lifespan, Roy’s final speech prioritizes what he was living for: preservation of the memories that defined him.

“Authentic” Memory in the Market Product

A close analysis of the scene in which Roy rescues Deckard and delivers his “Tears in the Rain” speech (1:45:00) illuminates how he also crosses the same boundary Rachael does through experience, not implanted memory. While Deckard hangs from the steel girder, the film cuts between a shot and counter shot of Deckard and Roy. Roy looms over the weak, hanging Deckard, and the shots of him focus on his unexpressive face while Deckard clings to the girder in anguish (Figures 2 and 3). Right as Deckard falls, a smirk comes across Roy’s face before he rescues him, shouting “kinship”. This act alone represents the ultimate betrayal of his market role, as a “combat model.” Roy is now saving the lives of those who seek to kill him. Roy’s role as a combat model is important to understanding this scene fully, as once he rescues Deckard he tells him the unbelievable memories he experienced through this role. As Roy is dying, the thing he wishes to immortalize, the thing that illustrates his divergence from a product to a person, is memory. By portraying Roy as fully human, and able to go against his assigned market role through experience and memory, the film

portrays memory as the core backing of human emotion and agency. In her essay, “(Re)/(Dis) Embodying Love: The Cyborg in Metropolis and Blade Runner,” Mary Anne Potter analyzes these final moments: “Through witnessing his experiences, Roy’s final words affirm the replicant’s capacity to remember and feel: qualities we would deem essentially human” (Potter, 9). While Dr. Tyrell posits at the beginning of the film that memory makes the replicants easier to control, we see both Rachael, who is created with memory, and Roy, who gains memory through experience, both defect from Tyrell.

Similar to how the replicants perform their assigned roles and defect to unique identities through memory and experience, Deckard too begins the film assigned a role involuntarily and chooses to abandon it by the end. While not overtly stated, Deckard’s possible status as a replicant is alluded to within the film, specifically through memory. Deckard is shown dreaming of a white unicorn, only to find the origami unicorn, presumably placed by Gaff. This is a parallel to the scene in which Deckard tells Rachael her own private memories to show that they are not hers, implying Deckard’s memories are as unreliable as hers. Deckard’s unclear role blurs the line between replicant and human by showing that even a character who is convincingly human from the beginning can have potentially unreliable or implanted memories, it shows that the authenticity of memory is not what informs humanity.

In her book, “Prosthetic Memory,” Alison Landsberg explores the storage and transfer of memory as a centuries-old human phenomenon, and Blade Runner even implements examples of a real-world memory prosthesis. When Rachael seeks to prove that her memories are real, she shows Deckard photographs of her as a child. However, Landsberg argues that the authenticity of memories stored or transferred through prosthesis is not the important aspect of memory. Landsberg writes:

But the fact remains that Rachel’s photograph does correspond to the memories she has. And those memories are what allow her to go forward and exist as she does. We could say that even though the photograph has no relationship to her ‘real’ past, it does help her produce her own narrative, construct the contours

of her existence. While it fails to authenticate her past, it does authenticate her present. (Landsberg 40)

While Rachael’s memories are not authentic, they define her personhood in a way indistinguishable from authentic memory. While the authenticity of memory, as previously stated, alters its role in a traditional context, we see through Deckard and Rachael for the holder of the memories, this authenticity does not prohibit the construction of human identity around memory.

The construction of this identity through memory is shown via how memory frees each of the characters from their market roles. Deckard not only resembles the replicants in his memory but also in his societal and labor role. Just as the replicants are assigned roles they are forced to perform off world, Deckard too is given “no choice” (13:30-13:36) in hunting replicants. Deckard, like Rachael and Roy before him, eventually defects from this role he was assigned due to the experiences he has. Similarly to how Roy was able to spare Deckard despite being designed for violence, Deckard attempts to run away with Rachael despite his role being to destroy replicants. In to “Prosthetic Memory,” Alison Landsberg proposes, “Empathy, the film concludes, is not an inherently human trait, and it comes naturally to no one. Empathy is learned and acquired through work and knowledge” (Landsberg 47). This development of empathy through memory motivates the replicants, and Deckard, to abandon their assigned roles, even if the memories are false. If Deckard’s development of empathy causes him to abandon his market role, what does that say about the market itself?

Conflict Between Market and Human Desires

When both the replicants and the humans find that their experiences lead them away from the roles assigned to them, it shows that the role of memory within replicants and humans runs fundamentally counter to the expectations of them from the market perspective. While the A.I. Influencers mentioned earlier parallel Blade Runner in how they perform personhood for the goal of profit, they differ from the mimicked personhood of Blade Runner in how the pursuit of what is “more human than human” has led

replicants to clash with the forces of capitalism in the same way humans do. The most direct representation of these market forces within the film is shown via the Tyrell Corporation. The namesake of the Tyrell Corporation, Dr. Tyrell, is not shown as a businessman but rather a designer, the architect of the replicants. However, this only more directly ties him to his role in the market. If the Tyrell Corporation exists to provide a more controlled laborer, depicting the namesake as the designer provides a more intimate look into the perspective of that market desire.

To observe how Dr. Tyrell embodies these desires, see the scene in which Roy finally confronts his creator (1:25:25-1:26:30). When Roy expresses remorse at what he has done as a combat model, saying, "I have done questionable things," Dr. Tyrell has an illuminating response: "Also extraordinary things. Revel in your time!" This response demonstrates the fundamental misunderstanding within the owning class, that the individual role of the laborer can be understood from the perspective of the owning class's desires they represent. While Dr. Tyrell views the combat units as profitable, innovative, and efficient, the lived experience of Roy has caused him to have different priorities. Tyrell's instruction to "Revel in your time" signifies this most blatantly, asking Roy to remember the horrors he committed from the perspective of those who profit from them. To exist within the capitalist system depicted in *Blade Runner*, development must be eschewed in favor of dedication to a societal role. As previously mentioned, both Deckard and Roy abandon their assigned position as perpetrators of violence, but an important additional facet to this shift turns them into fugitives. In their growth, they are forced to be at odds with the society they exist in.

Blade Runner depicts a society in which memory is no longer a unique aspect of the individual, or even a cultural tradition to be transferred through prosthesis, but as a feature of market objects in the replicants. In the goal of selling the experience of personhood, the Tyrell Corporation unintentionally demonstrated how personhood and experience cannot exist as market objects. Roy's memory-oriented development is shown through gaining memory via experience, leading him to abandon his role as a combat model to attempt to preserve that

experience. Rachael develops through implanted memories, showing that even inauthentic memories designed specifically for capitalist exploitation fail to result in a docile subject. Finally, through Deckard, we see that memory is what defines personhood. In depicting an unclear identity of machine or man, the binary itself is questioned. Deckard's growth, as well as that of the other replicants in the film shows that what defines someone's personhood is not the authenticity of their experience, but the identity constructed from experience. The existence of this development of identity makes it impossible for Tyrell Corporation to create memory within laborers they desire, instead creating the people they intended to replace.

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