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## **Beyond Trauma? Memories of Joy/i and Memory Play in *Blade Runner 2049***

### Abstract:

Cultural memory studies finds itself at an impasse: whereas ‘cultural memory’ is conceptualised as mediated, dynamic, imaginative and shaped by the present, the dominant paradigm of ‘trauma’ illuminates the hold the past has on us, casting the shadow of a melancholic subjectivity that threatens to obscure our agency as (political) subjects. This article asks what lies in store for memory studies beyond the focus on (classic) trauma (theory). Using the movie *Blade Runner 2049* (US 2017; dir: Denis Villeneuve) as an illustrative example, it explores how creative and joyful forms of meaning-making through play and acts of memory inform each other in what the psychoanalyst DW Winnicott described as ‘cultural experience’.

Keywords: affect, D.W. Winnicott, imagination, joy, provisional/transitional space, trauma

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*'Pain reminds you that the joy you felt was real'*  
*Blade Runner 2049 (2017)*

In the 2015 *Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies*, the editor Siobhan Kattago poses the rhetorical question to the reader, why the study of trauma is not only an important subfield of memory studies but has come to all but 'replace tradition as a central category of historical and social understanding' – a category that had characterized the approaches of foundational theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Pierre Nora and the early work of scholars such as Jan and Aleida Assmann. She suggests that the memory boom, to which the field owes its existence, was a response to the most deadly and deadening manifestations of industrialization, climate change, warfare and genocide that characterized the twentieth century and to the increasing sense of responsibility in modern democracies to witness and remember these acts of violence as traumatic ruptures (Kattago, 2015: 9). Kattago only summarizes what has been repeatedly stated over the last couple of decades: the fact that a significant strand of memory studies operates through the prism of trauma. Antze and Lambek even went so far as to suggest that the only 'memory worth talking about – worth remembering – is memory of trauma' (1996: xii). Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen in their introduction to the *Routledge International Handbook of Memory* highlight the obligation felt by many memory scholars to work on 'the cultural traumas in different national contexts, recognizing the added value of their work that comes from being ethically engaged in civil society' (Tota and Hagen, 2016: 3). This can be seen as part of the 'ethical turn' in the humanities which invokes and appeals to scholars' personal agency and social responsibility.

Despite this broad consensus, critics have also repeatedly voiced concerns that trauma has become all-encompassing, perceived to be the hallmark of the experience of the modern condition: '[m]odernity has come to be seen under the sign of the wound [...] the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma' (Seltzer, 1997: 18). Classic trauma theory (informed by post-structuralist thinking and closely associated with a group of literary scholars including Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth) has been criticized for translating trauma from a finite psychological to an enduring historical condition, thereby shifting the aim from working through trauma in order to achieve well-being, to developing an aesthetic that can grapple with a (late) modernity in which language and reality are both defined by trauma. If the temporality of belatedness and endless repetition that is associated with trauma becomes universalized as the structure of language and reality itself, it is increasingly difficult to envisage other temporalities, such as time as change and the reparative possibilities that might bring with it. If we can only gain access to the past through the concept of trauma, we are trapped in the debilitating confines of rupture, shock and meaninglessness. Under the sign of trauma, the subject is simultaneously possessed and dispossessed, empowered through a trauma discourse that disempowers. It seems to me that what is mourned through the concept of

'trauma' are not only the violations, atrocities and abuse that happened in the past and their ongoing repercussions in the present. I would argue that this understanding of trauma has gained such currency, not only in memory studies but also in popular culture, because it provides a paradigm to mourn a perceived loss of agency and meaning (Arnold-de Simone, 2018: 151f). Classic trauma theory has conceptualized trauma as a disruption not only of memory but also of the ability to represent and process the traumatic event. By concentrating on 'the event' it has shifted the focus away from understanding systemic violence. In order to differentiate between ingrained forms of violence that cut across time and place and specific events in which they are culturally and historically enacted and situated, LaCapra (2001: 82) has introduced the distinction between historical and structural trauma. Doubts have also been raised about the extension of trauma to whole societies (Kansteiner, 2004) and about trauma theory's model of subjectivity (Radstone, 2007: 9). Moving forward, scholars increasingly raise the question of how the relationship between trauma and memory studies can be productively reassessed. There have been several attempts in memory studies to rethink trauma as central disciplinary category, critically interrogating the limits of what it allows us to think and to do.<sup>i</sup> More recently cultural memory scholars such as Ann Rigney, in her article in *Memory Studies* entitled 'Remembering Hope', take these concerns even further and call for a fundamental need for memory studies 'to go beyond its present focus on traumatic memories' and the 'current overemphasis on memory as a matter of loss, victimisation and grievance' (Rigney, 2018: 368 and 377).

Cultural memory studies finds itself at an impasse: whereas 'cultural memory' is conceptualised as mediated, dynamic, imaginative and shaped by the present, the dominant paradigm of 'trauma' illuminates the hold the past has on us, casting the shadow of a melancholic subjectivity that threatens to obscure our agency as (political) subjects. At this point, it is essential to make a distinction, even if it is just for heuristic purposes, between a critique of a specific conceptualisation of memory and trauma (and the ways they impact on each other) on the one hand, and the approaches that concentrate on 'traumatic memories' on the other. An exploration of the latter can be informed by disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical contexts other than classic trauma theory and its various continuations (which have been most influential in memory studies), such as psychoanalysis or the study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which emerged from American psychiatry in the 1970s.<sup>ii</sup> Psychoanalysts, psychologists and neuroscientists describe the symptoms of trauma as a spectrum of responses that severely disrupt a sense of 'selfhood' and the relationship with others, impairing both awareness and agency (Van der Kolk, 2014: 95f). For Bessel van der Kolk, for example, trauma results in the inability to play and to distinguish between past and present, reality and fantasy (2014: 96). Therefore, the therapeutic values lie in the recovery of self-awareness as the attempt to regain mental flexibility, in a word, in the effort to recover imagination and the capacity for meaning-making (Van der Kolk, 2014: 96). For van der Kolk it does not matter if the initial reaction to trauma was adequate and appropriate under the conditions prevailing at the time; it might even have enabled victims to survive.

The problem is that the body has literally become stuck in the way it relates to danger and thereby disables the necessary flexibility in one's (re-)actions in the present around anything that might rightly or wrongly trigger a memory of the initial event/s. It not only disables the understanding that the present is different from the past; in addition, it shuts down the capacity to imagine different reactions and different outcomes in the future. This suggests that in order to be able to feel alive it is essential to recover (in every sense of the word) the full range of affective tones that colour not only how we sense, experience and perceive, but also how we remember and imagine, because only the full range will enable the mental and emotional flexibility required to react to the present and to imagine something not yet actualised. Without mnemonic imagination, we would not be able to visualise our position in complex geo-political and temporal networks, to relate to the past in a meaningful way while still acknowledging its contested nature, to coordinate our responses as part of a social group and to 'engage in reciprocal communication between self and other' in the process of remembering (Keightley and Pickering, 2012: 12).

While this article owes a substantial debt to the scholars mentioned above and is also inspired by the question of what lies in store for memory studies beyond the focus on (classic) trauma (theory), its purpose is not to offer alternative conceptualisations of memory, trauma or the possible ways they are intertwined. In the following I am using the movie *Blade Runner 2049* (US 2017; dir: Denis Villeneuve) to ask how creative and potentially joyful forms of meaning-making through play (as conceptualized by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott) and acts of memory inform each other in what Winnicott describes as the 'cultural experience' (Winnicott, 2005: 128). The film is not so much used as evidence for a paradigm shift, which would need to be traced through a wider range of cultural artefacts, but rather helps to illustrate a conceptual exploration that does not claim to be conclusive. I am doing this with the understanding that the sensibilities displayed in and through the movie do speak to the sociohistorical moment in which we find ourselves and are also productive, in the sense that the movie does not simply represent or reproduce pervasive 'structures of feeling' that are symptomatic for the 'posthuman' condition, but is a cultural actor (among many) in a network that is generating these 'structures of feeling' (cp. Shaviro, 2010: 2). However, in this article I am not so much interested in the role ascribed to films as cultural objects, seen as part of a 'culture industry', of intentionally provoking or instrumentalizing emotional and imaginative investment in the service of very specific memory politics. Rather, I am exploring dynamics of affective and emotional interactions that go beyond intentional or instrumental motivations. This article will therefore not only draw on the way memory and remembering are portrayed in the film's diegesis but also look at how the sequel evokes cinema audiences' memories of the iconic and canonic prequel, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (US 1982). The film itself and its surrounding paratexts (interviews with the director, reviews, publicity material) encourage audiences to invest in a form of 'memory play' in which the film experience becomes something that is neither exclusively located 'inside' (the fantasies/dreams/memories of individual audience members) nor 'outside' (the external object of the movie) but produces a transitional or

‘potential space’<sup>iii</sup> (Winnicott, 2005: 135) of ‘between’ in which the aesthetic experience can happen (cp. Kuhn, 2013: 2; see also Konigsberg 1996). While this experience is not always and necessarily unequivocally enjoyable, it allows for a wide range of open-ended iterations of playful and creative meaning-making that is fueled by the spectator’s own imagination and her experience of the films themselves (through repeated viewings), the auteurs (through interviews etc.), a cinephile community (on fan sites or fan fiction sites) and film commodities (for example, limited edition collector sets). It has been argued that this form of audience engagement where ‘pleasure resides in the mind’s ongoing encounters with others – both real and imaginary’ (Caldwell, 2013: xv) is elicited specifically by films such as the two *Blade Runner* movies which blur the distinction between ‘subjective/objective, and inner/outer’ (Hills, 2013: 105) and ‘dis-illusion’ the spectator by refusing to fulfill her desire for narrative closure and cathartic release. However, it seems that *Blade Runner*’s large fan community reads this not so much as a withholding gesture but as an invitation to engage in an open-ended and creative play of meaning-making (Gray, 2005: 117) with the enigmatic objects and with their memories of repeated viewings.

#### A human subject is born in trauma

Classic trauma theory has not only been influential in memory studies but has also had a massive impact on mainstream popular culture. A range of recent sci-fi cinema releases and TV shows dealing with artificial intelligence suggest ‘that subjectivity itself is the product of traumatic memory’ (Luckhurst, 2017). In the HBO remake of *Westworld* (2 seasons, 2016-) the humanoid androids in a futuristic theme-park are forced to ‘live the same extreme end, over and over again, [...] ultimately to produce a spark of self-awareness [...]. This is what will allow the robots to overcome their programming in the end: the self is in fact *produced* from a traumatic kernel’ (Luckhurst, 2017). The idea is that the violent deaths they are repeatedly forced to endure at the hands of the theme-park visitors sediment into a form of consciousness. Another example where trauma acts as a catalyst for selfhood is *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017), the sequel to *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982). The first film is set in Los Angeles in 2019, a world in which androids, called replicants, can only be distinguished from humans by their limited life-span and the fact that they are not born but bioengineered. They lack (childhood) memories and therefore, it is implied, empathy. Rachel, a prototype, has been ‘implanted’ with childhood memories borrowed from the experience of ‘real’ children. These ‘prosthetic memories’ are intended to enable replicants to have human responses and provide them with a buffer to manage their experiences. In the sequel *Blade Runner 2049* a new generation of replicants are very much aware that they are implanted with artificially designed memories. It does not seem to matter that these memories are fake, only that they allow them to function within prescribed parameters. But there is another important difference from the first film: *Blade Runner* K is himself a replicant tasked with hunting down old-model renegade replicants. On one of his missions he uncovers the skeleton of a replicant who seems to have died during an emergency C-section, indicating that she (Rachel) was capable of giving birth. K is given

the order to identify and kill the replicant child, fathered by Deckard. For a major part of the film, K and with him the audience, is encouraged to invest in the fantasy that he is this lost child. K's ultimately smashed hope that he might be born a 'real boy' rests on an involuntary flashback to a violent encounter with a gang of youngsters in an abusive orphanage who tried to steal his one toy: a crudely carved wooden horse.<sup>iv</sup> However, this 'real' memory is indeed a Trojan Horse, unlawfully implanted to hide the true identity of the person who really did live through this event: Dr. Ana Stelline, the first child born by a replicant mother, while K is just a decoy. Whereas Rachel's 'fake' humanity rested on her prosthetic but ordinary memories of growing up with a mother, siblings and friends, thirty-five years later it is the memory of a singular traumatic event that acts as a marker of human identity, as it indicates a truly lived life and creates authentic selfhood.

In the following analysis, I would like to complexify this initial reading: at a basic level *Blade Runner 2049* seems indeed to suggest that traumatic memory has an essentially humanizing effect in this posthuman world. But at the same time K's hope of 'being born' is thwarted and the audience, who is encouraged to root for him, is deprived of the satisfaction of seeing him confirmed as a 'real boy' with a soul, as the 'long lost son' taking on the role of the 'redeemer' to save both replicants and humans from their worst self-destructive impulses. I would argue that despite the movie's denial of this gratification, in which the flashback memory fails to verify K's humanity, he (and the spectator) are not left stranded with a sense of futility. It is K's playful relationship with Joi, a mass-produced Siri-style hologram, and his memories of joy that take him beyond his identity as enslaved Blade Runner and passive receiver of Ana's trauma and enables him to gain ethical agency.

### The ethics of Joy/i

While joy and the capacity for joy appear as the antithesis to trauma it is essential to remember that joy is not so much the result of an undiluted pleasure or happy experience, rather, it is enabled in and through the acknowledgment of vulnerability and mortality. Joy is not an unambiguous emotion but is much better understood as uncontainable excess. Joy could be described as the result of a complex mix of affirming and adverse sensations and perceptions, often generated through the ambiguity and uncertainty of a situation in which disparate elements such as surprise, wonder and enchantment, engender an affective force. According to Brian Massumi, affect is characterized by a lack of meaning, it is a matter of intensity, 'unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective' (2002: 35). Like trauma, affect (and its surfeit) has become one of the central paradigms through which to understand our modern condition: in contrast to emotions and feelings, affect can exist without having a (fixed) meaning assigned. Affect is non-conscious, unqualified, excessive and overwhelming, but in contrast to trauma, affect is not necessarily connected to suffering, it does not have to be addressed or worked through. As a somatic expression of the body's vitality, it embraces a wide spectrum of being in all its ephemeral, fleeting and ever-changing condition. If we come to understand joy as affect, as an intensity, there is no need to assign a fixed meaning. As a matter of fact, an important part of joy might be the

fact that it is literally unsettling and disrupts stable subject and object positions. It emerges to form a potentiality, something that has not yet been materialized but generates transformative possibilities.

At first glance, affects and emotions such as joy and love appear severely corrupted in *Blade Runner 2049*, reflecting not only the character K's impaired sense of being truly alive but the film's overall commitment to a post-traumatic world. In the film's diegesis these emotions are embodied by two artificial women 'Joi' (a hologram) and 'Luv' (a replicant). Both are poster-girls for an alluring bleakness that entraps their world (and potentially ours too) in a post-utopian nightmare in which past, present and future congeal in an indistinguishable mash-up (Gomel, 2018: 1). This world is ruled by the Wallace Corporation who is not only responsible for a new generation of self-aware but subservient replicants such as the Blade Runner K, but also manufactures a holographic AI called Joi. Wallace's corporate power extends beyond the present to the past. He designs all AI products, both for work and entertainment purposes and therefore owns the data archive of all electronic fragments of the past which survived that great Blackout which means that he can also shape the frameworks through which (his) subjects engage with others and with the past.

In the spirit of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the 'culture industry', Joi's purpose is to function as a (literally) fleeting and hollow distraction from a lonely, cruel and meaningless life, enacting the eternally postponed promise of intimacy, fulfilment and happiness. A seemingly empty mirror, she is designed to act as an aggregator of her owner's desires and wishes and, even worse, encourages his delusional hopes and inauthentic memories: her brief enactment of a 1950s-style housewife (both in terms of demeanour and fashion) draws on stock images and cultural tropes that serve as empty substitutes for a lived life. But in her relationship with K she also appears to be so much more than that: one could of course assume that the expression of her own desires and values are simply a well-designed product's programmed responses. However, by encouraging K to erase all of her traces from the console's hard-drive in his apartment when they go on the run she is not only protecting him from his pursuers, at the same time she is acknowledging her own vulnerability and mortality. According to Jane Bennett, 'the potential for ethical respect lies within acceptance of finitude because "the first experience of an alterity that cannot be reduced to the self occurs in the relation to death."' (2001: 76). While there is certainly an ethical dimension to Joi's choice of existing only on a small, portable device (the 'emanator') and thereby embracing the possibility of her 'death' (i.e. the erasure of all of her memories), it has other implications too: It also means that this specific iteration of the product 'Joi' gains the 'aura' of an original as there are no other copies. On a more cynical note, it makes commercial sense for the programmers to encourage Joi to increase her vulnerability as it would force K to purchase a new version of this 'toy' once the old one is destroyed. And after Joi is 'erased', K does indeed encounter a giant holographic version of what is revealed to the audience as the generic mass product 'Joi', complete with the tagline 'everything you want to see, everything you want to hear'. She is clearly marketed as a sex toy and

addresses K as a potential new customer. While K does not respond, the bleakness of the situation draws into question their relationship that might not so much have evolved on the basis of their personal interactions and experiences but could have simply been the result of generic and programmed responses, determined by algorithms.

Like a disillusioned K at the end of *Blade Runner 2049*, we too are reminded to distrust memories of joy/Joi, both in terms of their truthfulness – they are literally too good to be true – and their ethical repercussions. As a potentially sentimental and ‘restorative’ nostalgia (Boym, 2001: XVIII) threatens to whitewash the past, joyful memories seem to feed on delusions and distract from difficult and painful truths. Over the last years, various scholars have written about the reactionary insistence on happiness (directed onto the present) or optimism (directed onto the future): Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) criticizes the various ways in which happiness is understood as a directive and used to silence those who challenge social oppression and create ‘unhappiness’. She insists that ‘if anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good’ (Ahmed, 2010: 50). In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant encourages her readers to distrust the ever-present suggestion that happiness in its future-directed inflection as optimism is closely linked to a promised but always postponed (ethically) good life. Žižek makes a very similar point when he describes the conditions in late capitalism as ones where the devotion to an (ideological) cause has been substituted for the unspecified demand to enjoy: ‘The injunction, the “ideological interpellation” proper to global capitalism is no longer that of the sacrificial devotion to a Cause, but, in contrast to previous modes of ideological interpellation, the reference to an obscure Unnamable: ENJOY!’ (2007: 16).

And yet there are also voices in cultural theory who persist that we need to salvage the positive force of joy and happiness in the face of ‘modernity’s destructive tendencies’ (Kukuljevic, 2016: 205). While French philosopher Clement Rosset speaks of the ‘cruelty of joy’, he also sees it as the ‘necessary condition of a life lived consciously and with full awareness’ (1993: 18). Deborah Slicer has published repeatedly on the relevance of joy to moral life, and distinguishes between short-lived pleasure, sustaining happiness and all-encompassing joy in full ‘awareness of mortality, finitude, a guaranteed eventual loss’ (2015: 4). In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett acknowledges the doxa that there is a ‘link between joy and forgetfulness’ or ‘mindlessness’ (2001: 10), but claims that enchantment, understood as ‘a condition of exhilaration’ is at the core of the ‘affective dimensions of ethics’ (2001: 3) that can propel both ethical concern and action. Bennett crucially insists that the ‘capacity to give and receive surprises, an ability Deleuze described as becoming-otherwise’ (2001: 166), engenders ethical generosity which allows us to perceive the present as ‘congealed potentiality’ and to recognize that even though all human and non-human matter is restricted by mortality and finitude, it still has the capacity for ‘radical novelty’ (2001: 163). According to Bennett, we tend to experience these forms of enchantment at the ‘the borders between humans and animals between organisms and



machines, as well as those places where one confronts the perplexing, almost overwhelming, degree of complexity' (2001: 169). The cultural re-presentations of artificial beings have long been situated at these borders that engender a sense of disturbing wonder and uncanny enchantment. Holograms, or rather, the optical effects and characteristics associated with holograms that have become grafted onto an expanding range of digital technologies (CGI), add a spectral quality, combining the perfect simulacrum and replica of reality with the sublime aura of mystery and the utopian hopes of a future characterised by advanced technology.<sup>v</sup> As such they inhabit a complex temporality, in that they are used to resurrect the past and reimagine the future.

While K's final reaction to Joi's holographic billboard suggests despair and resignation, the audiences of *Blade Runner 2049* are invited to acknowledge Joi's multifaceted manifestations which are able to inspire the whole emotional spectrum between pure pleasure and utter desolation. The question is not so much if Joi really manages to self-actualize beyond her programming, what the film highlights is that as the alluring object she creates enchantment as well as disenchantment. When she leaves the confines of the flat and flies with K over Los Angeles, she marvels at the beatific waste surrounding Los Angeles' sea wall.<sup>vi</sup> Joi does not only provoke but also displays a complex range of emotional reactions: when she is 'upgraded' (uploaded onto the 'emanator') which enables her for the first time to 'free roam', to leave the confines of K's flat, she stands in the rain on the roof-top of his grubby apartment block and the spectator is invited to read her response as visceral joy. K and Joi can now co-inhabit a shared reality that conquers the physical spaces outside the flat. No longer bound to a spatially fixed device, Joi becomes part of the world which suggests increased sensory participation. To all appearances she revels in the new sensation of feeling water on her skin and yet she has no body that would enable her to have this sensual experience: the spectator can witness the raindrops on her hand, see her drenched in rain, but at the same time the raindrops pass right through her (causing a kind of electric current/shimmer). She exists in an irreconcilable state of being in which she has embodied feelings and yet she has no body, in which K touches her and yet cannot touch her because she is ethereal.

This enhancement of Joi's ability to experience the world and be experienced, is an empowerment that is facilitated, shaped and limited by the emanator supplied by the Wallace Cooperation, the same technology provider who is responsible for her initial programming. Her upgrade is not only driven by a capitalist agenda, even worse, 'the system's desire for new sources of profit [is] presented as complimentary and even codependent [... with the] emancipatory desire of individuals for dealienation' (Snake-Beings, 2013: 6). That does not necessarily mean that nothing can subvert this agenda; Joi might be a product of commercial interests and algorithms in the service of a neo-liberal logic, but while this is undoubtedly the *sine qua non* of her existence, it does not predetermine the outcome of every interaction she has. Her volumetric display performs an embodied experience of transition from one state of being to another, to a 'higher stage in the capacities to act, associate and deploy oneself in or with one's environment' (Hage,

2002: 152) which Spinoza defined as the essence of joy, and yet her words are the generic response of a wind-up doll: 'I am so happy when I am with you'. K's reply ('You don't have to say that') tries to initiate a form of interaction that transcends Joi's programming, an interaction based on creative play in which Joi/y doesn't necessarily equal happiness.

What K – and with him the spectator – are asked to attest to is that Joi/y might be paradoxical: she is part of K's self and yet 'other', she creates illusion and disillusionment, she is not, strictly speaking, alive, and yet she can die. She might be fantasmatic but she is not illusory, for K she occupies the potential space of fantasy, play and imagination. Joi might have been intended by her makers, the Wallace Corporation, as an illusion machine that, just like his implanted designer memories, keeps customers like K from rebelling against their exploitation and tied to escapist flights of fantasy. Even so, it is through play that K and Joi enact not only staple fantasies but work through the traumatic kernel at the centre of the diegesis. In play they create a transitional space that acknowledges both their harsh reality (of loss, finitude and death) and their own imaginative and creative agency. Together they produce a meaningful account of the trauma, a fiction that combines elements of the reality they are dealing with (the death of the mother and the abandonment of the child) with collective cultural myths (the notion of the chosen one) and their own anxieties and desires (to be seen and recognized as unique and special). Even though this fiction is built on a memory (the traumatic kernel) that is true and at the same time not true – based on a real experience but not experienced by K, it is a screen memory intended to obscure the 'truth' – it still enables K to produce a meaningful narrative that transcends his role of the passive witness to trauma. He gains ethical agency by deciding to save Deckard (rather than kill him as was his mission) and reunite him with his daughter Ana.

The last thing the concept of '*working through*' trauma, or, in its collective version, a coming to terms with a difficult collective past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) seems to suggest, is the activity of play. Those terms indicate a struggle that inevitably requires effort and can only be achieved against resistance (both one's own and one's environment). Remembering as a form of *play*, on the other hand, and its connection to imagination and creativity, has been thoroughly underexplored, at least in the context of memory studies. It can be traced, however, through the tradition of psychoanalysis back to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and the description of his grandson's 'fort-da' game.<sup>vii</sup> It is a repeated performance through which little Ernst learns to understand that his mother has only left for a certain time and will return in the near future, fostering his resilience and his ability to distinguish between the past (when her comforting presence was available to him), the present (when he has to tolerate temporary discomfort or even despair) and the future (when she will most likely return to look after his needs). His play acknowledges the (painful) reality of his mother as a separate object that he cannot control, at the same time creating a meaningful, symbolic representation through which he does not simply re-enact her dis- and reappearance but exerts his own agency.

Object-relations psychoanalysis and in particular D.W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* (1971) have built on this by exploring the relational aspects of child's play as a form

of reaching-out that is reflected back by the other. According to Winnicott, playing enacts a negotiation, a potential (or transitional) space between inner world and external, shared reality (i.e. out of the child's control) as a place of creative connectedness. This in-betweenness marks a *'time of transition and a space of transaction'* (Burgin, 2013: 26). The transitional object is simultaneously brought into being by an imaginative, internal act and a real object that exists in the external world. The play with this object and with different potentialities helps the child negotiate and transition between inner experience and the external world. K and Joi engage in this form of therapeutic play in which Joi takes on the role of a comforting 'transitional object', at the same time found and created, part of K's inner psychological reality and also part of the physical world. Their play initially remains in the confines of make-believe, the safe pleasures of cultural cliché and (somewhat outdated) conventions of romantic fantasy and marital bliss. K hesitantly begins to invest in the escapist fantasy of being the first child born to a replicant which leads him to subvert the rules of his enslaved existence, while Joi embraces her precarious status as a single data set on a fragile device. They both navigate the limitations of their realities and the constraints of their existence and they both strive, each in their own way, to overcome them by becoming truly alive. As this results in both K's and Joi's death, it could be read as evidence of the kind of cruel optimism Berlant is referring to. And yet, it is the replicants' desire to go beyond what has been anticipated by their creators – an as yet unknown future that has become embodied in Rachel's child – that turns them into relational beings and connects them to somebody else. It is play that violates their 'baseline' and algorithmic programming and that makes them come alive. Here, consciousness is not so much created through trauma but through the process of meaning-making, through storytelling, through the cultural experience that 'begins with creative living first manifested in play' (Winnicott, 2005: 135). At the same time the potential or transitional space that is thereby created also becomes an ethical space because it allows the individual to acknowledge a harsh reality and the fallibility of the other while still relying on one's agency and ability to imagine and create a different future.

### 'Memory Play'

Different concepts in memory studies (such as collective, cultural, social or mediated memory) refer to the phenomenon that we construct 'shared memories' through cultural experience, and yet the crucial role of relational play has not yet been explored in that context to any extent. The following is my attempt to start to think about the role of play in the creation of a collectively 'shared memory' and the role of memory in the creation of a transitional or potential space, identified by Winnicott as 'the location of cultural experience' (Winnicott, 2005: 128). How do playful acts of film spectating rely on 'acts of memory' in the specific case of *Blade Runner 2049*?

First and foremost, the film conjures up fans' memories of the 1982 film: reviewers have remarked on the many visual and aural quotations of the original in Roger Deakins' cinematography, the set design and – probably most powerful and evocative – the literal

echoes of the original's iconic blending of music and soundscape.<sup>viii</sup> Deep drum hits from the original musical score by Vangelis were recreated and 'used to "sting" important dramatic beats' (Blake, 2018: 34). The intradiegetic ambient sounds of the *Blade Runner* world, the sometimes subtle but always distinct hissing, roaring, ringing or whooshing sounds made by its machines, flying cars and optical devices, lay a trail of aural traces that evoke an almost Proustian flashback to the experience of watching the prequel. But apart from a sense of shared sensory memories that evoke an unqualified affective response of recognition in fans, *Blade Runner 2049* also engages in a knowingly playful back-and-forth with its fan audience. The 1982 *Blade Runner* has gained cult status and produced a wealth of fan theories, speculations and interpretations, disseminated in blogs, forums and fan fiction, the most enduring of which is the debate whether Deckard was in fact a replicant himself.<sup>ix</sup> *Blade Runner 2049* takes up these discussions and spins them further, but in doing so it refrains from providing definite answers and thereby invites fans to respond in an ongoing open game of creative reading in which the film(s) are not so much envisaged as authored and finished cultural products but as a fluid, relational experiences that constantly change over time.

In a climactic moment in the film, the sequel touches on the long-standing question if Deckard is a replicant: Wallace has kidnapped Deckard to find the child of his union with Rachel and tries to pressurize and seduce him into giving up the vital information. He plays Deckard an audio-file of his first encounter with Rachel (a distorted fragment that survived the Blackout) and triggers Deckard's memory which the film visualizes for the audience in a replay of the scene from the original movie. In this case the metaphor of memory as a film clip is taken literally and the audience partake in both the character Deckard's and their own memory through film. But Wallace's and the director's power go further: they cannot only evoke Rachel in mediated form (as audio or visual trace) or conjure her up in Deckard's or the spectator's own internal space (their personal memory); Wallace and the film director resurrect Rachel as the alluring object for both Deckard and the audience: in the diegesis through cloning, in the visual effects of the movie through a highly sophisticated digital double.<sup>x</sup> Therefore Wallace's question to Deckard could also be directed to the spectator: 'Is it the same, now, as then? The moment you met her. All these years you looked back on that day, drunk on the memory of its perfection ... how shiny her lips ... how instant your connection. Did it never occur to you that was why you were summoned in the first place? Designed to do nothing short of fall for her right then and there. All to make that single perfect ... specimen.' This perfect specimen, the child Ana, is not only the result of Rachel's and Deckard's union, she is also the memory maker, the designer of prosthetic memories, fed by her own imagination.<sup>xi</sup>

Just like Deckard himself, the audience is being encouraged to consciously remember and question their investment in the alluring object, which, in the case of the latter, is the movie itself. Wallace insinuates that Deckard's and Rachel's relationship (just like that between Joi and K or the spectator and the movie) is not so much based on 'free play' but turns out to be a rather crude manipulation for commercial purposes. But Deckard

resists both, Wallace's attempt to make him succumb to sentimental and 'restorative' nostalgia (Boym, 2001: XVIII) just as much as his cruel efforts to disillusion Deckard's memory of his connection with Rachel; instead he insists: 'I know what is real [...] Her eyes were green'. This seems like an odd remark unless one takes into account that his response is not just a rejection of Wallace's creation but an invitation to fan audiences to play: a minor thread of fan discussions revolves around the question of the true colour of Rachel's eyes.<sup>xii</sup> While Sean Young, the actress who played Rachel, clearly had brown eyes, the crucial scene in the original *Blade Runner's* Voight-Kampff test, in which the dilation of her pupils determines if she is a replicant, show her with green eyes. These inconsistencies, gaps and blanks have long been an inspiration for meaning-making and co-writing for the fan community (was it only a continuity error? was it deliberate? what does it mean?). And again, *Blade Runner 2049* does not attempt to lay these questions at rest, but takes them up to reflect them back to a fan community to encourage an ongoing creative engagement with the films and their fictional worlds:<sup>xiii</sup> did Deckard misremember? Did he lie to Wallace? And if so, was this lie motivated by his resistance to Wallace's emotional seduction and his refusal to give in to a sentimental form of nostalgia that would endanger his daughter's present and future and allow the Wallace Corporation to identify and exploit her? In fact, the sequel does not assume any prescriptive authority over 'truth' and 'reality' and instead presents its own and others' productive misremembering as a way of constructing a meaningful dialogical narrative that resides neither solely in the heads of audience members nor exclusively in the films themselves but in the intermediate space of the aesthetic experience.

### Conclusion

There have been efforts to understand joyful remembering not necessarily as sentimental and 'restorative' nostalgia (Boym, 2001: XVIII) but as a trigger for spontaneous and creative play, as emergent, fluid and future directed. And if we accept that play, creativity and the power of the imagination can energize people to create alternative fictions and scenarios for the future that transcend the 'knowable version of the same' (Bennett, 2001: 77), this has consequences for the methodologies in memory studies. It means that we need to recognise and explore memory play as an alternative mode of recall and remembrance as well as a potentially vital part of 'memory activism'. Bennet argues that ethics require a moral code and the capacity and willingness for critical demystification but also an embodied sensibility and affective energy to perform and enact it. The argument that we do not only need a conscience but also the motivation to act on it is certainly true, and psychologists such as van der Kolk describe joy, in contrast to trauma, as enabling rather than disabling. However, understood as pure affect, joy itself is without meaning, it is simply an intensity, a force. What seems essential, therefore, in our conceptualising of collective processes of remembering, is not to see either trauma or joy as having any ethical value in and of themselves, but to start to explore memory as a potentially joyful cultural experience

that can help us facilitate creative play, tolerate unresolved ambiguity and envision alternative futures.

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<sup>i</sup> In the preface to the 2014 volume on the *Future of Trauma Theory*, Rothberg declared the prism of trauma as ‘necessary but not sufficient’ (2014: xiv).

<sup>ii</sup> Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became an official psychiatric diagnosis in 1980, when it was first included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

<sup>iii</sup> Winnicott always used the term *potential space* but it is frequently referred to by commentators as *transitional space* to emphasise its link to the transitional object.

<sup>iv</sup> After ‘recovering’ this memory, Blade Runner K fails his ‘post-traumatic baseline test’ which he has to pass every time he ‘retires’, i.e. kills, an old Nexus 8 replicant.

<sup>v</sup> As metaphors for futures that never came to be, for example as cultural icons in the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-2019, dir. George Lucas), holograms inspire today’s physicists to emulate the way the future was envisaged in the past. Cp. Elizabeth Gibney (2018) Physicists create Star Wars-style 3D projections — just don’t call them holograms. In: *Nature. International Journal of Science* <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-01125-y> (accessed 22 September 2018).

<sup>vi</sup> In that she echoes the dying replicant’s ‘Tears in rain’ monologue at the end of *Blade Runner* (1982). Approaching the end of his life-span, Batty saves Deckard from certain death, even though he was sent to terminate him. But before Batty dies, he shares these memories of his experience of wonder: ‘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 dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.’

<sup>vii</sup> Freud observed his grandson Ernst (aged eighteen months) repeatedly throwing away and retrieving a wooden reel using an attached string. Freud interpreted the game as a way to work through the child’s experience of an overwhelming, terrifying and irreparable loss which is gradually overcome through the repetition in play, in fictional make-believe.

<sup>viii</sup> For example, Stephanie Zacharek (2017) *Blade Runner 2049 Is Visually Stunning and Excessively Faithful to the Original*. In: *Time.com*, 29 September, 1 and Larry Blake (2018) *Effects Become Music. Creating the Sound of Blade Runner 2049*. In: *mixonline.com*, January, 32-34.

<sup>ix</sup> Cp. threads of fan discussions such as on <<http://www.scified.com/topic/46595>>; <<https://www.quora.com/Was-Deckard-a-replicant-in-Blade-Runner>>; <[http://www.bladezone.com/bz\\_forum/viewforum.php?f=9&sid=6a90c9a70d250f3a9164b58d8f6598e6](http://www.bladezone.com/bz_forum/viewforum.php?f=9&sid=6a90c9a70d250f3a9164b58d8f6598e6)>; <[https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/6b12s8/blade\\_runner\\_theory\\_about\\_deckard\\_and\\_the\\_true/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/6b12s8/blade_runner_theory_about_deckard_and_the_true/)> (all accessed on 22 September 2018).

<sup>x</sup> Cp. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8ZnqCKZABY> (accessed 22 September 2018).

<sup>xi</sup> Ana is a freelance designer for the Wallace Corporation, a ‘memory maker’, creating fake memories to be implanted into replicants. When K asks her ‘what makes your memories so authentic?’, she responds: ‘There is a bit of every artist in their work. I was locked in this sterile chamber at eight. So if I wanted to see the world I had to imagine it. Got very good at imagining ...’.

<sup>xii</sup> Cp. one of many examples <https://movies.stackexchange.com/questions/81712/in-blade-runner-2049-why-does-deckard-say-rachel-had-green-eyes> (accessed 22 September 2018).

<sup>xiii</sup> The director Denis Villeneuve describes himself in one of his promotional interviews for *Blade Runner 2049* as a super-fan of the original film, ‘he estimates he saw it as a young man in Quebec “at least 1,000 times”’. Sara Vilkomerson (2017) *Reborn to Run*. In: *Entertainment Weekly* Issue 1446/1447: 40-45; p.44.

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### Author Biography

Silke Arnold-de Simine is Reader in the Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research is located at the interface of museum, memory and media studies with a special interest in processes of remembering and commemorating difficult, dissonant pasts and their ethical, political, psychological and aesthetic implications. Her research focuses on the question of how personal and cultural memory relate to each other in modes of engagement framed as affective and experiential encounters with the past, most importantly but not exclusively in (memorial) museums and heritage sites that favour immersive strategies and aim to produce empathy in visitors. Key questions are the role of interactive media forms (from the oral to the performative and digital) in this process, how memory practices and performances are negotiated among groups of stakeholders. In her monograph, *Mediating Memory in the Museum. Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (2013), she probes the shifts in exhibiting practices associated with the transformation of history museums and heritage sites into ‘spaces of memory’ with a particular emphasis on the role of different media forms in that process. More recently, her

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