

**"A REQUIEM FOR THE BODY OR HOW WE'LL STOP WORRYING AND LOVE AI"  
BY ALESSANDRA CALANCHI**

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**Abstract:** In *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) Denis Villeneuve, a film director who has always been interested in identity and relational dynamics, addresses a crucial issue in contemporary debate, that is, the man-machine relationship in post-human society. By creating a respectful virtual dialogue with *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982), of which it is the sequel, and by implicitly collecting not only the legacy of Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (1968), but the atmospheres and the problems expressed by his various predecessors (from *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang 1927, up to *Ex Machina*, Alex Garland 2014), this film creates a shadow game in which the human being is (re)considered no longer in relationship to one, but to several types of "creature". Frankenstein and Jekyll had already challenged the concept of "individual", and Deckard had posed the existential drama of his own fragile identity; nonetheless, in this film the human (or presumed such) being must confront him/herself not only with androids or replicants, but also and above all with creatures that are, in fact, simple holographic softwares. The stakes are very high: our future as human beings in a world that will be increasingly inhabited by impalpable presences whose intelligence could – and will – go far beyond ours. The problematization of the concept of motherhood, the creation of extra-world colonies, the grafting of memories are all issues that today, differently from the 1980s, we feel as much closer to reality than to fiction. The aim of my paper is therefore to interpret the film in light of the ethical, scientific, and human disorientation that affects not only the spectator, but the citizen of our millennium as the planet slips towards an irreversible environmental and social crisis.

**Keywords:** *Blade Runner*, Philip K. Dick, Ridley Scott, AI, motherhood, extra-world colonies, grafting of memories

I have no release in another body,  
I have no need  
of shelter outside myself –

(Louise Glück, from "End of Summer")

## 1. DISPLACEMENT

Every time we are addressed by a fictional character, we experience a sort of displacement – a particular kind of uneasiness which can only be dispelled if we interrupt the so-called suspension of disbelief. It happens so when the protagonist of *Moby Dick* tells the reader(s) “Call me Ishmael”, or when, in *Blade Runner*, Roy Batty says: “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe”. We can close the book or switch the film off, but the question remains unsolved – who is the owner of that voice? Why is it – or he, or she – speaking to *me*? And is there a body behind them?

Dystopic narratives have explored these territories, ranging from simple Otherness to highly complicated Artificial Intelligence, and showing us projections of a future life, which is posthuman under many aspects. What interests me here, however, is the *plurality* of what we call post-humanity or post-humanism, the multi-layered identities which are just waiting to show up and interact with us. As Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, “Others will follow”. He had realized as early as 1886 that even a double (or split) personality disease is necessarily just the first step towards a much more complex fragmentation – or multiplication – of the self.

So, others *did* follow – not inside human beings, but around them. Automata, robots, androids, and men-like machines populate Science Fiction and dystopian tales, all of them soliciting the same question: *what is dystopian* about these creatures? Why is the human-machine divide so wide? My impression is that it is *our society* that is dystopian, a world where brand new creatures with no fault and with no original sin are simply coming to life and struggling for their own rights. So, the real question should be: are anthropomorphic features sufficient to think of a body as not inanimate? Or, what is (not) human? Mark Tegmark tried to answer such questions in his book entitled *Life 3.0: Being human in the age of Artificial Intelligence* (2017), but it is mainly thanks to the psychology of computation that we know that techno-humans (a term I prefer to post-humans or nonhumans) are part of our social and psychological lives. Being both an extension of the human self *and* part of the external world, they cannot but affect our awareness of ourselves and our relations with the world (Turkle 2011). Recent debate includes a reflection on the relationships between real and artificial bodies, fantasies associated with artificiality, practices of fetishism, and the conventions of representing mechanical people (Kakoudaki 2014). After all, “if the literary animation of objects occurs primarily in the imagination, our sense of the presence and meaning of objects structures everyday life [...] it is in modernity that animism is most pervasive” (Kakoudaki 2014: 23). These words are so convincing that to speak of “objects” – however *smart* they are – may sound out of place.

Science Fiction movies have often focused their attention on “the problematic nature of the human being and the difficult task of being human”, but the resulting anxieties about what we are, together with the condition of “thing-ness” we apply to the machines, were partially overcome thanks to computer science and bio-engineering, which started making machines more and more similar to men and women *in real life* (Telotte 1995: 1-2). Nonetheless, this very similarity created new problems, since “The computer offered the illusion of companionship without the demand of friendship” (Turkle 2021: 334 kindle). But was it just an illusion? In reality, if a machine addresses us in our own language, it is a communicative act. And communication is something specifically human, something that involves emotion. As Turkle continues, “Technology was not wise. It proposed one thing, but life taught another” (2021: 335 kindle).

In *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) things are more complicated, in comparison with both real life and the original movie *Blade Runner* (1982), because here there are more levels of techno-humans. On the one side, we have the same Nexus-series replicants as in Ridley Scott’s film (called “androids” in the original story by Philip K. Dick). They are young, beautiful, sexy, and smart. Even though these techno-humans are perceived, after all, as fake humans, they are almost *undistinguishable* from them. On the other side, we find another type of artificial creatures, that is, softwares; they, despite their assumed intelligence, do not have a body. Now, if a replicant is “virtually *identical* to a human”, how can a software be accepted as identical, or even similar, to humans? Moreover, if

robots “embody ethnic and racial otherness despite their nonhumanity” – and even represent modern forms of enslavement – what about softwares? (Kakoudaki 2014: 117) Since “the techno-body is desirable”, as we see in *Ex Machina* (Devlin and Delton 2021: 372), will the “poetics of skin” be sufficient to give an “illusion of authenticity” (Kakoudaki 2014: 175)?

What film director Villeneuve focuses on is the question of what “human” is and means in a society that has already disposed of human-likeness and learnt how to do without the body but is not able to cope with this condition yet. In other words, the notion of *identity* (a word which has the same root as *identical*) reveals a strong bias, being more easily perceived as related to the visible and touchable physical body frame than to more ethereal intelligence or emotions (or soul). As a consequence, we have to consider such bodiless intelligences as our true, and radical, *Other*.

## 2. CONSCIOUSNESS

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a social, ethical, and political issue. The term dates back to 1956 (when it was used by computer scientist John McCarthy in a paper he co-authored) and has greatly developed since then. In 1991 Daniel Dennett described consciousness as an environmental effect of biochemical processes, thus opening the way to the possibility of a conscious cyborg. And in the same year Donna Haraway wrote in *A Cyborg Manifesto*: “The machine is us” (1991: 180). In 1994 Marvin Minsky welcomed machines as *new emerging identities* in an evolutionary process which was not concluded with man as one thought. In 1999, Ray Kurzweil calculated that between 2020 and 2030 computers would reach the complexity of the human brain, and at the end of the 21st century machines and human beings would be *undistinguishable* one from the other.

A few years later, Bernie C. Byrnes added an element to the matter – gender – when she wrote about the “dilemma created by the failure to integrate masculine and feminine consciousness” in Ian McEwan’s books (2004: 43). Quite interestingly, McEwan seems to respond precisely to this in his later novel *Machines Like Me* (2019), where sophisticated robots called Adams and Eves coexist with humans, and the male protagonist admits – speaking of his female human partner, his robot Adam, and himself – “What we were separately would be merged in him” (McEwan 2019: 2 kindle). The fact that these Adams and Eves are fundamentally designed to assist and serve humans reveals a lot about the dynamics of power embedded in AI, following a path that goes from Isaac Asimov’s “The Bicentennial Man” –Andrew being “a valet, a butler, a lady’s maid” (1976: 137) to the “synths” in the British tv series *Humans* (2015-2019).

Apart from gender and class relationships, and despite their being regularly controlled and checked, these robots do develop a consciousness, something that has not happened so far in real life. As Sidney Perkowitz argued, “Intelligence isn’t the same as consciousness [...] Although there’s no sign of consciousness or emotion in real robots and computers, films directly or implicitly give artificial minds these qualities” (2007: 162). In fact, several films, among which *Her* (Spike Jonze 2013) and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland 2014), “approach the subject from the assumption that the artificial intelligence already possesses consciousness” (Brown 2005). Something which, according to Ray Kurzweil (2012, 2017) is not that far from happening.

As underlined in a recent article, however, one ought not to forget that AI has many layers and in particular there are a few crucial steps between *logical* AI and *self-conscious* AI, and these steps include moral knowledge, decision-taking, and emotions (Ezpeleta, Segarra 2017: 64-68). I think this is crucial if we want to follow and understand the whole process of “humanization” we may expect from machines and softwares.

## 3. BODILESSNESS

The body is a crucial issue in the representation(s) of artificial people: “when it is possible to imagine any type of being or type of body, then the beings and bodies imagined express a range of cultural expectations, projections, and desires” (Kakoudaki 2014: 4). Nonetheless, things get worse

when we come across a techno-human who does *not* have a body. French philosopher J. F. Lyotard's reflections about the postmodern body have fostered the debate (Lindsay 1991) and even opened the path to the awareness that the body might be optional – just like it is in fiction. Nonetheless, are we ready for this? Are we ready for a digital friend or partner? Is gender necessarily involved? What is more dystopic – a robot who wants to be human, or a software that tries to get free from the limitation of a body?

The cases of *Her* (Spike Jonze 2013), where Samantha is an Operating System (OS) endowed with consciousness, and *Blade Runner 2049*, where Joi is a purchasable holographic companion capable of machine learning, are quite revealing. Both of them – Samantha and Joi – have the same purpose: to serve “male masters” (Chambers 2018). Chambers also specifies that male voices exist, but they are less common and somehow reminiscent of malevolent Hal-9000 in *2001 A Space Odyssey*. As Irena Hayter puts it, “it is perfectly possible to construct embodied AIs that are not humanoid and gendered. So why female androids – and why now?” (Hayter 2017). She also recollects that “the idea of the machine-woman first acquired a particular force in the 1920s and 30s, which saw a proliferation of cultural images of robots, from the invention of the term by the Czech writer Karel Čapek in 1921 to the iconic female android in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* in 1927” (Hayter 2017). Her conclusion is quite obvious: “The images of submissive artificial women in art and science fiction betray a male cultural desire to symbolically control these new female subjectivities” (Hayter 2017).

Apart from gender issues, it is clear that these “creatures” are perfectly capable of working without a physical body. Nonetheless, they have been programmed as *females* and this leads them to wish for a real experience as *women*: “gender, we might argue, like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behavior that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural”; the fact that virtual assistants are often voiced by a woman obviously “reinforces gender stereotypes, expectations, and assumptions about the future of artificial intelligence” (Halberstam 1991: 443).

Also, female identities are shifting, but not confined to a binary vision – male-female, straight-gay, etc. (Brown 2015: 29). In film *Ex Machina* (2014), we can see the infinite nature of sexuality, which allows female android Ava to manipulate men and get in touch with other softwares, one might think that the message we're left with at the end of the movie “is still that the best way for a miraculously intelligent creature to get what she wants is to flirt manipulatively” (Watercutter 2015); on the contrary, it could be argued that “Ava is depicted as using misogynistic frameworks to her advantage” (Seaman-Grant 2017: 52). Whatever our interpretation may be, the fact remains that Ava has a body, though an artificial one. Coming back to *Her*, at the end of the film Samantha chooses to remain “free” from the weight of the body and from the restrictions of human language. As for *Blade Runner 2049*, Joi dies saying: “I love you”. The nations are destroyed, the ecosystems are wrecked, all is lost, but gender patterns are the same as ever – the female character either leaves the male hero alone, or she dies. As in David Miller's movie (1962), *Lonely are the brave*.

#### 4. THE TRAP OF GENDER

Donna Haraway convinced us that the cyborg could lead humans out of the trap of gender, being “a creature in a post-gender world” (1991: 150). And yet, Villeneuve's female characters – both Rachel and Joi – seem to bring us back to a gendered, patriarchal world. Not only does the former experience the “miracle” of being pregnant, but she is punished by dying in childbirth. As for the latter, she only exists when she's switched on by her master. Kate Devlin and Olivia Belton show how AIs' gender identities are often reinforced in stereotypical ways, and how AIs (both embodied and disembodied AIs, or, respectively, sex robots on the one hand and disembodied love robots or “phantom” sexual presences on the other hand) remain highly sexualized (2021: 367).

Gender and patriarchy play, of course, a primary role in our analysis. From *Frankenstein* on, and even before – from the Bible as a matter of fact – we have been taught that procreation is female, while creation is male – fictional examples include Ippolito Nievo's “homunculus” (*La storia filosofica dei secoli futuri*, 1860), Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883), the Creature in *The Rocky*



*Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman 1975), and even the protagonist's son in Salman Rushdie's *Quichote* (2019). Which means women are chained to biology, while men can freely play with chemistry, informatics, engineering, and whatsoever – to the extent that we even find “distorted view that men, rather than women, are the disadvantaged losers in the ‘new’ postfeminist gender order” (Rumens 2016: 249).

Nonetheless, I believe we are dealing with something more than gender issues. I find the discourse about the body much more interesting and revealing. The body is the arena where a dystopic narrative of the future and a sublime vision of technology clash and sometimes coexist. The fact that Villeneuve problematizes but not questions the assumption that “Only people are capable of creativity — AI is mechanical” is due precisely to a difficulty in recognizing the possibility of a real interface between humans and computers, though “Recent examples have shown computers have started to become active participants in creative work such as the field of design, collaborating with humans to shape the objects and experiences that fill our daily lives. Moreover, there is a long history around computation and creativity that needs to be addressed” (Ratto 2017).

So, what is dystopic and what is sublime in this possible cooperation – inside and outside Villeneuve's film? Actually, the two notions are not contradictory. E. Couchot showed the wonders of the technological sublime, when he wrote that the machine – the robot, the android – solicits the rise of a sentiment of the sublime (1988). Comolli also describes the seductive power of machines in cinema very well (2020). However, softwares take us to a further level of the sublime. We admire rapidity, efficiency, but also immateriality, evanescence; what we feel is true awe (a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear or wonder). Fear is inescapable. If dystopia lies in our fears that the machine – the software – will finally dominate us, the reason is because we are obstinate with the desire to give them a body, not in order to make them similar to us, but in order to be able to see them, touch them, and control them.

To better understand this point I shall refer to Ted Chiang's latest book, *Exhalation*, a collection of short stories (2019). In one of them, entitled “The Lifecycle of Software Objects”, we find a particular kind of machine called “digients”, digital (and conscious) humanoid organisms that can move from “Data Earth” (where they live) to the real world, and vice versa. They long for a body, but when they “wear” one as they have to in real life, they soon realize it is just a burden for them, a constriction, in comparison with the freedom they enjoy in the digital world. This is something which reminded me of a metaphor used by American poet Delmore Schwartz. In his poem entitled “The Heavy Bear Who Goes with Me” (1967) he dealt precisely with what he called “the witness of the body”, something seen as an obstacle to reach real knowledge, freedom, and the spiritual world:

[...]  
That inescapable animal walks with me,  
Has followed me since the black womb held,  
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,  
A caricature, a swollen shadow,  
A stupid clown of the spirit's motive,  
[...]

## 5. MEMORIES

If the body is an arena where to struggle for identity, there is a last component which is worth analyzing: memory and memories. They play a leading role in Science Fiction and in Villeneuve's film as well, providing the durable link that can unite the past with the present and the future: identity, after all, can do without a body but not without memories. That is why androids have memories implanted: in order to make them believe they are human, even though they do not have the capacity to understand if such memories are real or not, theirs or somebody else's. They simply *have to react as humans* – “If you have real memories you can have human responses”: this

is what Rachel's daughter tells agent K. So fake memories are used to deceive androids and render them more obedient and easier to control.

What happens with softwares, on the other hand, is totally different. Softwares are filled with huge archives of data (memory files) not to be allowed to consider themselves as human beings, but just in order to be more performative, efficient, and swift. The fact that Joi has a consciousness does not mean she thinks she is human – maybe she would like to be, but she knows perfectly well she is not.

So again, where does dystopia lie? I think it lies precisely in the human incapacity to get rid of that *heavy bear*, and to accept a genderless society, a non-biological evolution of the species, and a coexistence with new invisible, bodiless form of life that add to the many literary and filmic creations we have met in the course of time without learning to get along (Calanchi 1999). The miracle of maternity performed by replicant Rachel is at the core of the film, and yet it is not so surprising, since we already know that female cyborgs are often “culturally coded as emotional, sexual, and often, naturally maternal” (Balsamo 2000: 151). Deckard's quest for his lost daughter is not surprising either, since the theme of the father-child recognition is a very old one. And agent K's wish to discover he is a human being is deeply touching, but nevertheless trite. So, is there anything new with respect to dozens of other stories and films?

The real original element I do find here is in the subplot – in Joi's coming to life and dying. This is dystopian. This is disturbing. This solicits a new, and radical, form of compassion on our side. In conclusion, I think we should try and answer these questions implicitly posed us by Villeneuve and other film directors. First, are we really concerned with the future of humanity – Or just with the fantasies of male consumers? Second, can consciousness and identity arise solely from the body? And third: Are we ready to accept a bodiless, genderless “Other”? This is precisely what we have to reason on, both as regards cinema and in the real world.

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