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Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982). © 1982 The Ladd Company

Blade Runner's Moving Still

Elissa Marder

In the decade that has elapsed since *Blade Runner's* first commercial release, Ridley Scott's 1982 science-fiction film has been retroactively hailed as one of the most powerful and influential examples of cinematic postmodernism.¹ Despite the fact that *Blade Runner* has achieved almost canonical status in the annals of film theory,² the discomfort displayed by its earliest critics serves as a telling index of the film's subversive depiction of a posthuman condition. Released in the shadow of the cozy humanism of *E.T.*, which treated the alterity of the extra-terrestrial with the familiarity of a domesticated pet, *Blade Runner* alienated its original audiences. Most of the reviews were not overly empathetic. Critics were more or less in agreement with Pauline Kael who wrote:

Blade Runner has nothing to give the audience. . . . It hasn't been thought out in human terms. . . .³

Time reviewer Richard Corliss's rendition of Kael's lament describes the film in truly monstrous terms:

Blade Runner, like its setting, is a beautiful, deadly organism that devours life.⁴

Rolling Stone's Michael Scragow adds to the chorus with the remark that

Scott both overdoses on atmosphere and deliberately underdevelops the emotional tension. . . . His method alienates rather than entrances, completely undercutting his drama. When signs of humanity are so fleeting in both humans and replicants, the audience has no stake in their life or death.⁵

The persistent echo from all three reviewers revolves around one common complaint—*Blade Runner* simply isn't "human" enough. Somehow more or less "human" than a human film, *Blade Runner* flunks the cultural empathy test. In *Blade Runner's* terminology, this film is a "replicant."

And yet, these critical judgments rely on the assumptions and distinctions that the film so radically puts into question. The film posits a world in which humans are indistinguishable from androids to the

naked “human” eye, in which the terms life and death are irrevocably confounded, and where a visual technological apparatus, called the “empathy test,” is used to determine who can be called “human.” By searching for traces of humanity in this film, the critics must blind themselves to the way in which they are implicated in the film’s reflection on the difference between humans and androids. *Blade Runner* explicitly interrogates what we mean when we speak of a “human film.” What, after all, about film is “human?” Can we unproblematically wish to identify those celluloid figures that are mechanically animated in and by film as “humans?” The critics’ desire to witness “humanity” perfectly doubled through filmic representation is a symptomatic misrecognition—and one which *Blade Runner* explicitly exposes. The filmic metaphor of the “empathy test” frames the question of the relationship between “human” subjects and the moving pictures that purport to reproduce and represent them so faithfully.

It is therefore utterly appropriate that the (“empathy test”) in *Blade Runner* is, in fact, an elaborate (eye examination.) Because the “humans” in the film cannot identify androids as androids with the naked human eye, the bounty hunter, or blade runner, must use the empathy test as a prosthesis. The blade runner looks into a video screen that projects an image of the suspected replicant’s eye. The alleged replicant is given a series of questions to answer which are designed to produce an emotional response. But the blade runner does not heed the verbal response—the true test occurs in the dilation of the replicant’s pupil. The replicant’s eye is thereby stripped of its power to look and the eye becomes a magnified object of the blade runner’s mechanically amplified gaze. In the logic of this film, the (emotional nerve) is directly linked to the (optic nerve) and emotional response can only be read by calibrating quantitative movements in the optic nerve.

Although, in the empathy test, the emotional nerve is linked to the optic nerve, the relationship between verbal and visual registers is not purely mimetic. According to the implicit logic of the film, a replicant might presumably be able to pass the verbal component of the test by providing correct answers to the narrative questions while failing the quantitative component on the basis of insufficient dilation of the pupil. Correct verbal responses do not necessarily translate into the minute involuntary reflexes of the eye that become the fragile arbiter of human emotional response. The structure of the empathy test, which stages a relationship between (narrative and visual) constructions of meaning, underscores the fact that these two registers of meaning cannot be collapsed. The visual components of a film cannot simply be reduced to the perfectly analogous visual expression of the film’s thematics. The difference between the rhetorical and visual levels of the empathy

test compels us to think how verbal and visual representation are articulated in relation to each other in film. To efface or elide this difference is to refuse to read films as films.

The questions asked by the blade runner are a set of hypothetical moral dilemmas to which the replicant must supply the correct “human” answer. Most of the questions that presume to determine humanity are framed by references to an endangered, if not extinct, animal world. The inherent irony of the empathy test is clear—humans can only determine their difference from the species that they have created (androids) by invoking their nostalgic empathy for the species that they have presumably already destroyed (animals). In the first scenario, Deckard says, “It’s your birthday, some one gives you a calf-skin wallet. . . .” Rachel interrupts him by quickly responding “I wouldn’t accept it. Also, I’d report the person who gave it to me to the police.” But where this first question seems to establish that humanity is confirmed by concern for animal welfare, the cultural, legal and political parameters through which such concern should properly be demonstrated is left disturbingly ambiguous. For example, the final scenario that Deckard invokes, “You’re watching a stage play. A banquet is in progress. The guests are enjoying appetizers of raw oysters. The entree consists of boiled dog” is left unanswered and leaves the film’s spectator at a loss to know what, precisely, the desired response ought to have been. The example of a “stage play” places Rachel in the position of spectator and stages an overdetermined relationship between what is figured as tasteless and barbaric consumption (eating boiled dog) and the representation of such an act.

Because the film’s spectator is ultimately unable to determine, with precision, the difference between a “correct” and “incorrect” answer, the scenarios presented by the empathy test displace the film’s spectator more than they situate for us who is human and who is not. Morality becomes reduced to (*mores*) and customs that are culturally determined become, in this context, culturally indeterminable. Rather than interrogating the morality of the replicant, these rhetorical questions interrogate the status of morality as such. They undermine the spectator’s ability to establish a discrete identification with the “human” figures *in* the film, while simultaneously obliging the spectator to question the assumed essential nature of his or her moral categories. The film’s spectator, who is unable to distinguish humans from androids either visually or rhetorically, must repeat and mime the confusion about these categories that the film explores. In the act of watching the *mise-en-scène* of the empathy test scenario, the film’s spectator is compelled to see himself or herself as the static, silent, passive agent of a gaze that is manipulated and controlled by a prosthetic mechanical eye—

the eye of the camera. Unable simply to identify with either androids or humans in the film while being compelled to remember that he or she has relinquished a nonmediated "human" gaze, the spectator is placed in a precarious position. The questions asked through the metaphor of the empathy test (who is human? What does it mean to be human? And how do we know?) are addressed to the film's spectator as well. As a metaphor for the film, the model of the empathy test is a medium through which *Blade Runner* links the problem of androids and humans to questions of filmic representation.

The Empathy Test and the "Primal Scene"

Blade Runner begins with a series of nonnarrative shots that depict the city: aircars, gigantic pyramids and grotesque images of eyes in flames. The camera floats through this cityscape until it enters a room in a gigantic building that we later discover to be the Tyrell corporation—the corporation that fabricates and markets "replicants" to be exported to "Off-World" colonies. Two men sit in a room, separated by a machine that appears to be a medical device. One of the men asks the other man to respond to a series of questions. At this early juncture in the film, the first time we see the "empathy test," we don't understand what it is, or even what is going on. But as film spectators, as soon as we see "human" figures, we assume that the narrative of the film has begun. But this initial sequence does not mark the beginning of the film's narrative. Instead, it operates like a traumatic "primal scene" that the film replays and repeats in significant ways.⁶

Because the Freudian term "primal scene" refers to a traumatic psychic event (either real or imagined) that can neither be remembered nor represented, the reality and meaning of that event must be reconstructed retroactively (*nachträglich*) through the traces of its effects. In his case study of the Wolf Man, Freud contends that his patient witnessed a scene of coitus between his parents when he was one and a half-years-old. Freud insists, however, that if this primal event can never be "remembered," it is *not* because it was "forgotten," but rather because it occurred before the child had developed the subjective apparatus required for either comprehension or memory. One might imagine that the one and a half-year-old infant occupies a position approximately analogous to that of a video recording machine capable of recording images but bereft of the psychic technology (the unconscious) required to play them. These recorded images, while meaningless in themselves, were presumably instrumental in developing the psychic machinery that would allow them to emerge two and a half

years later in the distorted form of a dream about wolves. The dream at the age of four is not so much a representation of the primal scene, but rather a reconstruction of it. For Freud, the wolf dream proves that the child has witnessed, assimilated and understood both the fact of sexual difference as well as its consequences—the threat of castration. It is important to this analysis, however, to note that the child's fantasmatic representation of his assimilation of *sexual* difference can only be represented by the substitution of nonhuman figures for human ones. Or, to put it another way, the Wolf Man's dream about wolves marks the moment where he acquires, psychoanalytically speaking, the status of a "human" subject.

This first sequence of *Blade Runner* operates like a primal scene because it does not assume meaning or significance until it is repeated. Furthermore, through the repetition of this sequence and the meaning it retroactively claims, we are exposed to the terms through which human subjectivity is ostensibly defined throughout the film. The scene unfolds as follows: the man we later learn to be the blade runner (Holden) performs what we later learn to be an empathy test on the suspected replicant (Leon). Holden sits across from Leon, asking him preparatory questions, then the test begins. After one or two questions, Holden demands: "Tell me about your mother, only the good things you remember." In response to this question, Leon pulls out a gun and shoots Holden. The blast from Leon's gun propels Holden, not only through the wall of the room, but also out of the film's frame. Because he is unable to produce a narrative of memory traces about a mother he never had, Leon's violent response retroactively identifies him as a replicant. *Blade Runner's* narrative begins after this moment, as if the film itself is engendered by Leon's inability to respond to the question "Tell me about your mother." After Holden is blown away, the camera floats once again through the cityscape until it descends into the street where it closes in on a man reading a newspaper in front of a television store. The film supplies us with the images and sound cues that mark the beginning of the film's narrative: an image of and voice-over by the protagonist, Deckard (Harrison Ford), who claims to have quit his job as a "blade runner." Deckard's voice-over announces the real beginning of the film which proceeds, at least initially, in more or less classical narrative form, until this "primal sequence" is repeated.

The first repetition of the "primal sequence" occurs when Deckard goes back to the police headquarters, run by Bryant, where he used to work as a blade runner. Bryant wants Deckard to take over Holden's job—to identify and eliminate five replicants that are loose in the streets of Los Angeles.⁷ The film's spectator watches Bryant and Deckard

sitting in a dark room, in front of a “movie” screen, watching the scene between Leon and Holden that we took for the first narrative moment of the film. At this point, however, we remember that first scene with a difference. Because we watch Deckard and Bryant watching a “movie” of the scene we just witnessed moments before, the spectator is forced to remember that primal sequence as part of a film rather than as an event that we actually “witnessed.” Where film narratives often rely upon creating the illusion that the spectator has direct and unmediated access to action as it unfolds, (indeed, one thinks of the desire named by the generic category of “action film”), this sequence reminds us that what we saw “happening,” did not actually “happen” in our presence, but rather that it was reconstructed for our viewing pleasure. This moment provokes the spectator to remember, however fleetingly, that we are not present to the action that appears to unfold before our eyes. In the shock of the moment that reminds us of our position as spectators, we arrest the fictional continuity of the film’s narrative. In short, the “filmic” situation of the second scene disrupts the illusion of narrative purity (presence) that we may have wanted to accord the first scene. The first repetition of the “primal scene” makes us aware that the first scene was also necessarily the second one—already a replication, reproduction, replicant repetition. The dismemberment of the film into a unit that is consistently broken down and repeated disturbs the illusion of narrative continuity on which fiction films generally depend.

After the first traumatic repetition of the primal sequence (which initially disrupts the continuity of the narrative), subsequent repetitions of this scene function as a kind of filmic punctuation mark that establishes and underscores the difference between androids and humans. The primal sequence now serves as a narrative cutting device or, more precisely, as splicing device. All of the initial “human” sequences are prefaced and framed by quotations of the primal sequence whereas android sequences unfold with no contextualizing markers. For example, before Deckard and Gaff visit the hotel room that Leon had given as his address, we see Deckard flying in his aircar listening to the soundtrack of Leon’s first responses to Holden from the primal sequence. After the human scene between Deckard and Gaff, the android narrative begins with Roy’s and Leon’s visit to Chew’s eye factory. But while Deckard’s actions appear to respond to elements in the primal sequence (that is, Leon’s voice giving his address to Holden directs Deckard to Leon’s hotel), the first android sequence is introduced by a disturbing close-up of Roy Batty’s clenched fist. After the android sequence at the eye factory, Deckard’s reappearance is glossed by a playback of Leon’s parting words to Holden: “Let me tell you

about my mother.” Deckard then returns to his apartment where he finds Rachel, a suspected replicant, waiting in his elevator to tell him about her mother. Although the narrative has begun to put the difference between humans and androids into question, the filmic structures at this point in the film work in the opposite way—they establish and maintain this difference through the alternating sequences on either side of the “repeated” preface.

This structure changes at a crucial moment in *Blade Runner*, at which point another kind of primal, traumatic image is substituted for the filmic preface—a (photograph). It is around this photograph, a snapshot of the replicant Rachel with her mother, that the oppositional economy that this film has established between humans and replicants trembles and falters. This photograph is central to the film’s treatment of the difference between humans and replicants and, in some sense, articulates the film’s ambiguous response to the question that explodes the primal sequence: “Tell me about your mother. . . .” To read the central importance that this image has for the film, we are going to take a detour through a brief analysis of the relationship between photographs and films. By using photographs—“still images”—both thematically and structurally, *Blade Runner* analyzes the medium of film through a systematic dismemberment of its constitutive elements.

Humans and Androids: Photographs and Films

Although both photographs and films are mechanically reproduced images, they are often perceived as having entirely different functions. We consider photographs to be agents of memory while we tend to view fiction films as pretexts for oblivion. Roland Barthes’s work on the distinction between photography and film enables us to begin to address the ways in which this distinction is both engaged and questioned by *Blade Runner*. In “The Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes argues that “the distinction between film and photograph is not a simple difference of degree but a radical opposition.”⁸ If photographs are “radically opposed” to films, it is because they do not occupy the same grammatical tense. While photographs always speak the undeniable reality of the “past perfect” (they bear witness to what Barthes calls the “having-been-there” of the referent), film destroys the photograph’s link to the referent (hence the past) by binding images to other images in the construction of a fictional present tense (what he calls a “being-there”) of the thing. It is important to note, however, that the temporal disjunction that separates film from photography relies entirely upon the question of movement. In order for photog-

raphy to bear witness to the pastness of the past, the referent must be preserved and embalmed through the stasis of the photographic image. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes contends that the frozen image actually bears a material memory trace of the body of the referent. Because the referent (“adheres”) to the photographic image, Barthes insists that photography is fundamentally different from all other forms of representation. He writes:

I had to conceive . . . how Photography’s referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call “photographic referent” not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras.” Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. (76)

Following Barthes, we can say that photographs serve as absolute testimonies both to the pastness of an event and to its reality. They purport to frame a moment of time and a subject in a past forever frozen. We think of them as receptacles for time. We accord them the status of hyperreality; these mechanically reproduced images are perceived to be perfect “replicas” of what must have been there, if the photographic trace exists to “prove” it.

Because they prove the reality of the past, we use photographs as agents of memory. These flat, material traces serve as evidence of a “having-been-there” that can only be subjectively presumed. By remembering for us, the photograph remembers us: it remembers what we cannot, or might not, down to all of the insignificant details which, because forgotten, are further testimony to the reality of the scene exposed. An artificial eye enables us to see ourselves—and our loved ones—as real. By positioning ourselves in relation to these photographic images, we posit ourselves in space and time. We regard these photographic images as the proof or arbiter of our existence across the passage of time. As prosthetic memories, photographs transform the reality of time and existence into tangible objects. In *Blade Runner*, these flat objects become the dead proof that their bearer is still living. They are the replicants or doubles through whose lifelessness we constitute our own sense of identity, place and time. But—and this is the question that the film *Blade Runner* poses so radically—do we confer our humanity onto them or are they somehow the necessary supplements through which ours is constituted? In the film’s terms, why do androids or humans *need* photographs?

For, in a sense, the photograph is the true “subject” of *Blade Runner*. This “it” that is the photograph is the site of humanity and the locus of the film’s quest for origins. *Blade Runner* poses the question “where do we come from?” in every possible way. From the film’s origin about origins—the primal sequence—through the detoured literalizations of this question in the father/son scene between Roy Batty (the replicant leader) and Tyrell, this question is formulated and reformulated. The question of origins is coupled with the other fundamental question posed by *Blade Runner*: “why do humans or androids need photographs?” These two questions become the same question when asked by or about the film itself. For the film, as a film, is in some sense in search of its origin through the exposure of and insistence on the photographic image. The photograph appears to be the smallest essential unit through which a film’s materiality is constructed—its DNA, to paraphrase the dialogue between Roy Batty and Tyrell. But what is the relationship between this film and its photos? For a film, as material trace, is a collection of still photographs arranged in sequence. When they are put into a projector these dead stills appear to assume life—they move and speak. From *replicas* they become *replicants* thereby echoing from the latin the present active participle *ans*. However, it is the very “reality” we accord these past dead images that allows us to invest in the fictionality of the fiction film. Once these images are put into time we attempt to constitute a “present” through them. In order to follow the narrative parade of images that make up the fiction film, we must forget any other past or present in a desperate attempt to race after the “presentness” that appears to be unfolding before our eyes.

In order for this structure to constitute us unproblematically, these images must be empty receptacles—forms into which we bury and perfectly fit images of ourselves. It is this structure that *Blade Runner* puts so radically into question. Its reflection of and on the photograph necessarily alters the way in which we look both at the film and at ourselves. *Blade Runner* likens (androids) to (photographs) because they function as nonhuman receptacles for human image and memory. They are designed to reflect the human figure perfectly—to cast back an image of humanity in order to confirm our own. We look at them, as our (doubles,) and see our humanity refracted through our difference from them. Like photographs, replicants are mechanically reproduced and, like photographs, their likeness to us is the measure and proof of a humanity that once was, and is no longer. This humanity is no longer in the sense that androids are more physically perfect than any of their human counterparts. Doubles of life which, in their doubling and their difference from it, carve out an image of “humanity” through

which humans attempt to see themselves as human. Like photographs, replicants both testify to the real existence of the past category “human” and confirm a self-image that is no longer “present” but presumed.

The Moving Still

As I stated earlier, the primal scene or preface which splices the narrative in the first half of the film, gives way to another pivotal moment in *Blade Runner*. In a way, this moment is a literal response to the sequence that culminated in the question “tell me about your mother.” At this point, however, instead of providing us with a narrative which would tell about the mother, the film responds to this question through a single image—the image of a mother and daughter. Rachel, who has begun to suspect that she might be a replicant, goes to Deckard’s apartment to prove to him that she is human by showing him a photograph of her with her mother. To understand the weight of this image, however, we must return to the earlier moment when Deckard first goes to the Tyrell corporation. Tyrell asks Deckard to test the empathy test device on his assistant Rachel. Rachel is subjected to the test and then asked to leave the room while Deckard and Tyrell discuss the results. The test reveals that Rachel, who thinks that she is human, is, in fact, a replicant. When Deckard discovers that Rachel is not human, he asks: “how can it not know what it is?” By referring to Rachel as “it” (rather than “she”) Deckard neuters Rachel in an attempt to establish a greater difference between them than that of sexual difference. But Deckard’s question about an “it” itself interrogates the status of the human subject: one cannot ask “how can it not know what it is?” without implicitly asking “how can I know that I am I?” As the film progresses, it becomes more and more clear that Deckard’s question (which he believes to be addressed to an other) is very much self-addressed. When Deckard asks “how can it not know what it is” in reference to Rachel, he does not see that he is asking the question of his own autobiography. The problem of whether any subject—any purported “I” is or can be a personal, individual or locatable entity is what is at stake in this scene.

Although Deckard attempts to establish a radical difference between himself (as “I”) and Rachel (as “it”), the very fact that Rachel can misrecognize herself as human forces Deckard to examine the fragility of his own subjective position. When Rachel appears at Deckard’s apartment with her photograph, Deckard is confronted with the impossibility of sustaining a difference between himself and “it.” Deckard

lets Rachel into the apartment. She holds a snapshot in her hands and says, "You think I'm a replicant, don't you?" He refuses to look at her photo. Instead, he launches into an interrogation of Rachel that closely parallels the structure of the empathy test. He asks her a series of questions designed to test her memory, presumably to prove to her that her memory is not her own. But the ambiguity surrounding both the questions and the responses raises questions about whose memories are being invoked and questioned in this scene.

Deckard begins the interrogation by conjuring up a childhood scene of sexual exploration. He says, "Remember when you were six, you and your brother snuck into an open window of an empty basement. You wanted to play doctor. He showed you his, but when it came to your turn, you chickened and ran. Do you remember that? Ever tell anyone that?" Deckard's invocation of this singularly private moment is designed to probe the limits of Rachel's memory implants. He believes that Rachel could never be able to remember this moment (or one like it) because it never would have been told. This is why he repeatedly asks, "Do you remember that? Ever tell anyone that?" Because this memory would not have been narrated it could not have been appropriated by the collective memory banks out of which Rachel's "implants" were taken. But if Deckard's exemplary "private" memory does not belong to the collective memory banks, then where does it come from? One can only assume that Deckard's "example" comes from his own, personal memory banks and that when he says "you" he means "I." Deckard has sacrificed the specificity of his "private" memory by recasting his autobiography into the rhetorical structure of the empathy test. The very gesture that is designed to establish his difference from her results in a linguistic confusion between "I" and "you," between his memories and hers. Furthermore, it is significant that Deckard's example of a "primal human memory" (a memory too private to be told) involves a demonstration of sexual difference through the showing of private parts. Deckard insists upon invoking the childhood scene through which children show sexual difference to one another as a means to construct a difference between himself (as human) and Rachel (as android).

Deckard then begins a second narrative about a mother spider who sits with her bag of eggs in a corner of the room. This is the first mention (aside from the moment in which Rachel presents the photo) of the word "mother" since the traumatic question which inaugurates the film. Deckard's recollection of a "mother" recalls Holden's inaugural imperative "tell me about your mother." Instead of telling about his mother, Deckard recounts a nostalgic memory about watching a mother spider brooding over her eggs. Rachel interrupts Deck-

ard's narration and perfectly completes "his" memory, adding the end: "And then the eggs hatched and hundreds of little spiders came out, and they ate her." If this memory once "belonged" to Deckard, once Rachel tells it, Deckard's private memory no longer belongs to him. It is no longer "his" in the sense that this memory no longer uniquely remembers him—his memories no longer unite discrete bits of a private, personal past into a unified entity, an "I" named Deckard. As Rachel remembers this past for him—she dismembers him and dispossess him of his "I." In addition, within this shared memory is told the tale of the death of a mother. This mother spider is consumed by her children, a horde of replicant spiders, who bury her by ingesting her, incorporating her, making her part of themselves. This figure of an inhuman mother who engenders a multitude of murderous offspring foreshadows the figure of the photograph of Rachel's mother that emerges at the end of this sequence.

Deckard stops the verbal empathy test and says, "they're not your memories, they're somebody else's, Tyrell's niece's. Implants." Then he goes into the kitchen to prepare drinks. Rachel drops the photo and leaves. The photograph lies between them. Deckard returns to the place she has left and picks up the photograph. The camera does not move at this point, but rather remains still, motionless, miming the stillness of the photo. It is Deckard's hand, holding the photo, that moves the "still" closer to the camera so that the filmic frame perfectly encases the frame of the photographic image. And then, for a split second, as the film lens is framed around the photo, the "still" itself appears to move. Both mother and daughter appear to move from within the frame. This "moving still"—the split second during which the mark between photo and film is blurred disrupts all of the film's oppositions, and puts into motion an entirely different sort of economy. Furthermore, this particular image is particularly disturbing because it is no longer particular, no longer a unique image of one person's mother. Ostensibly, this is Rachel's mechanically reproduced proof that she was naturally born of a mother. But Rachel can only attempt to establish her humanity, beyond the shadow of a doubt, by offering up the image of a mother whom one must suppose to be dead or at least irretrievably absent. Rachel attempts to prove her humanity with a photo that would claim to successfully encase, frame and contain her mother in the square space of a snapshot. But this mother is not easily buried. She, or "it," refuses to lie motionless in the frame that has been constructed to contain her. The mother, in *Blade Runner* is no more Rachel's mother than she is anyone else's. Yet this image, this "it," disrupts and violates the boundaries of the photographic frame. It is this mother that marks the irrevocable distance between

ourselves and “it” that motivates the remainder of the film. This photograph, which Rachel offers as evidence of her “human” origin, is a moving form which cannot be contained by a word, a proper name or a picture frame.⁹ 1

Leon’s Pictures: The Doubled Photograph

The image of the “moving still” motivates the remaining segments of the film. After Rachel leaves Deckard with the photo of the mother, we see him sitting at his piano, which is littered with an enormous collection of photographs. We must assume that Deckard has retrieved his “personal” collection of family photographs. Whatever Deckard saw when he looked at the image of “Rachel’s mother” provokes him to look for “his” photographic memories. But from the fragmented unrelated images that lie on the piano in front of him, we understand that Deckard’s family photographs no more belong to him than Rachel’s photo belonged to her. Many of the photos that Deckard retrieves appear to date from the nineteenth century—a time that he could never remember personally—a time that was never his—photos of people he never knew. These photos are memory implants for him as well.

This sequence begins as the film camera moves first to the photographs on the piano, and then to Deckard’s face. The “shot-counter-shot” structure posits Deckard posterior to and in function of, the images of the photographs. In this way, the camera “defines” Deckard as dependent on the photographic images, and not vice-versa. This structure, which is established after the sequence of the “moving still” acquires even greater force and strangeness in the subsequent shots of this sequence. From amid the collection of photos on the piano which are supposedly “his,” Deckard picks one which is explicitly not “his” and which has already been shown in the film. It is the photograph that Deckard had found in his visit to Leon’s apartment. This photograph initially appeared to be entirely meaningless. The snapshot shows a curved elbow on one side of the frame in an otherwise empty room. Upon finding the photograph Deckard had fleetingly mused, “family photos? Replicants don’t have families. Why would replicants need photographs?” At that earlier moment of the film, this bizarre photograph seemed to function as yet another mark of the difference between replicants and humans. To the naked human eye, the image appeared to make no sense: why would anyone *want* a photograph of an elbow in an empty hotel room? When we first see this photograph, the difference between humans and replicants is seemingly represented by the absence of a recognizable “human” subject. When Deckard

102 returns to this photograph, in the sequence that follows that of the “moving still,” he now assumes that the photo might have a meaning. He examines the snapshot in order to find what he now believes *must* be there to be seen: a “human” subject. Deckard eventually discovers the figure of a human subject buried in the photo—but the way that he “finds” “it” renders both him and “it” suspect.

Deckard inserts this seemingly meaningless image into another prosthetic visual aid device; an incredible machine which is able to dismember the photographic image from all angles and blow up, in focus, any part of the dissected image. This machine apparently has the capacity to reenter the photographic frame, fragment the image, alter the perspective and then to restore the new “blow up” to full plenitude. In other words, the technological apparatus which allows Deckard to change the perspective of a flat, photographic image and to find a figure hidden in a corner of the frame is literally unthinkable, even in a technological paradise. For a flat “dead” photograph—a trace of and testament to a past event—cannot shift perspectives *after the fact*, and remain what we call a photograph. The machine disrupts the temporal and spatial boundaries of the photographic object. With the aid of this apparatus, the photograph ceases to be a photograph—the past image is supplemented by a present images enhanced by movement and refined perspective. Using this machine, Deckard finally “finds” an image of a woman’s face, framed in an oval mirror like a portrait locket. He takes a new photo of the face and prints a copy of the photo in the photo.

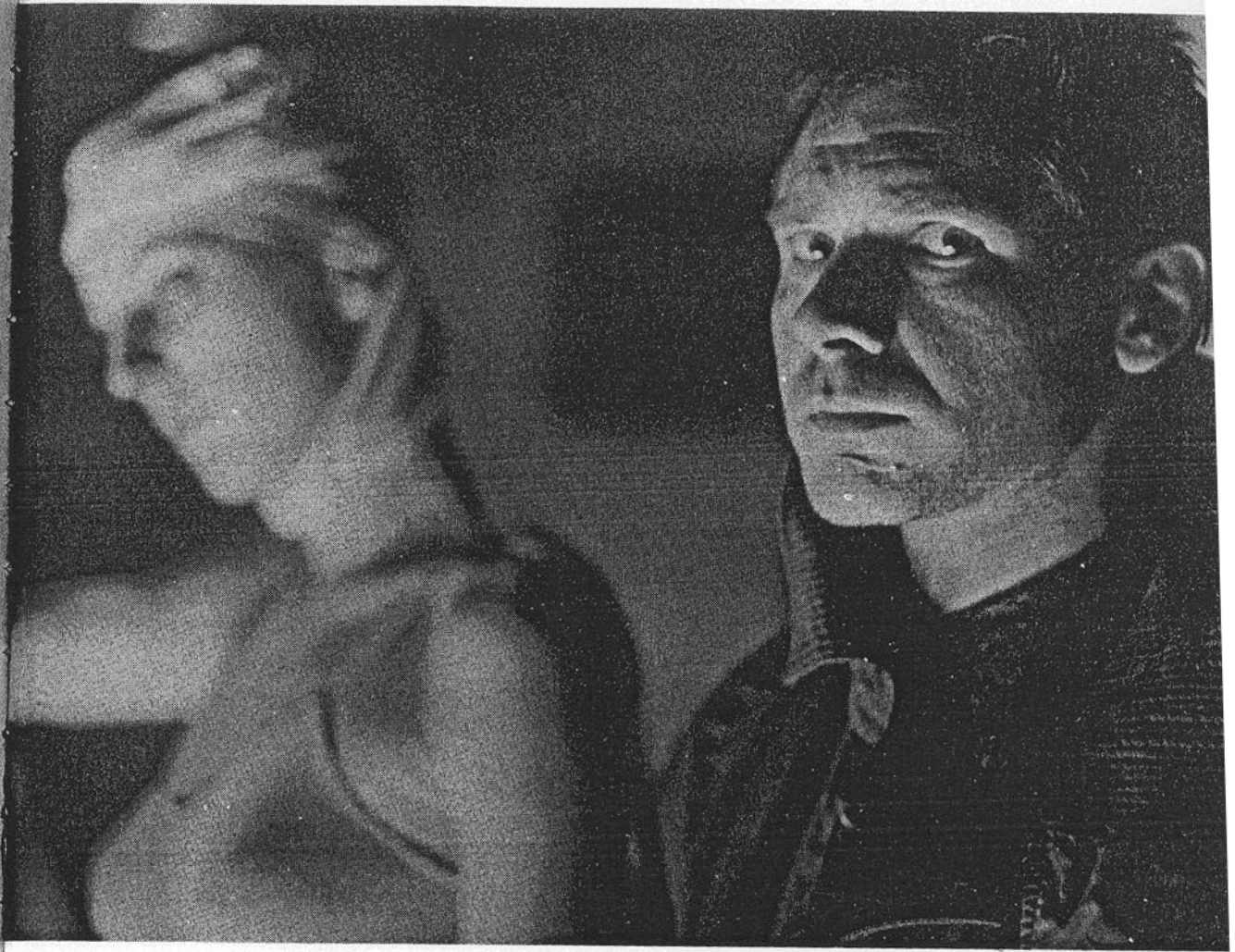
But the hard copy of the image that Deckard finds imbedded in the original photograph *could never* have emerged from it. The copy could not possibly be a copy of the original. Deckard was desperately looking for a “human” face, and he has made one—projected one—onto a space where it seems no “replicant” was figured. However, in so doing, the photo becomes another sort of “moving still,” an impossible, artificial “mother” which engenders a new and disturbing image of a “subject.” Deckard is able to find the image of the subject in the photo because he has, in a literal sense, put it there. Deckard has conferred or projected his image of subjectivity onto the replicants. He is both obliged and able to do this only to the degree to which his own “self-image” has been disrupted by his encounter with Rachel around the image of the mother. The image of the woman’s face that Deckard finds is no longer a trace from the past—but an impossible animation that bears witness to the present—his present as well as “its” present. At the moment in which Deckard personally reconstructs or “remembers” the image of a face he has never seen, this woman’s face, framed in the mirror, also becomes a mirror for him.

The image of the woman's face in the mirror is doubly impossible. For even if this image could have been reconstructed from Leon's photograph, the face reflected in the mirror raises another set of problems. The photographic image depicts only the *reflection* of the face, without the back of the head that should have cast this reflection. In other words, like the doubled photograph itself, this image is yet another copy bereft of its original. In some sense, in the face that gazes back at him from the photograph, Deckard sees his own reflection. Cast across the chasm of the mechanical apparatus that separates these two faces, that separates humans and replicants, that separates "him" from "it," past from present, his gaze meets hers, framed by a mirror. In the space that is constructed between Deckard's gaze and the face in this doubled photograph—he is impossibly doubled. The difference between "him" and "it" on which Deckard's self-image had been predicated has been radically effaced. This space marks *Blade Runner's* remodeled version of subjectivity—one that is no longer essentially "human," no longer viewed as the property of one particular "subject" but simultaneously his, her's and "its."

On one level, the sequence in which Deckard "blows up" Leon's photograph and uncovers the image of the woman's face is an obvious quotation of Antonioni's film *Blow Up*. However, the ways in which *Blade Runner's* "blow up" sequence diverges from the analogous moment in Antonioni's film emphasize both the "impossibility" and implicit violence of this scene in *Blade Runner*. In *Blow Up*, the photographer discovers that he had been the unwitting witness to a murder when he enlarges a photo he had taken in the park. By examining the grainy "blow up" of his photograph, which serves as proof that the crime actually "happened," the photographer isolates an image of the murder weapon. The enlarged photograph incites the photographer to return to the scene of the crime and touch the body of the corpse. The power of this sequence in *Blow Up* depends entirely on the conventional definition of the photograph—that it is a reliable and inherently accurate witness to a past event. Thus, while *Blow Up* explores the relation between photographs and responsibility, it in no way puts the notion of what a photograph is, and how it functions, into question. In *Blade Runner*, however, the unthinkable apparatus that alters the photograph's initial perspective provokes us to alter our understanding of what a photograph is. Whereas in *Blow Up* the original photograph is merely enlarged, in *Blade Runner* the original photograph is more literally "blown up"—exploded. Furthermore, in *Blow Up*, the photograph functions as a "memory" trace of a murder that has already taken place, whereas, in *Blade Runner*, the photograph functions as the "memory" of a murder that has yet to occur.

Deckard undergoes the “blow up” sequence—in which he both projects and constructs the image of the woman’s face—in order to be able to kill her. On the basis of the photograph that Deckard reconstructs, he identifies the woman as Zhora, one of the replicants he is instructed to eliminate. He uses this photograph to track her down and, when he does, he kills her. Zhora’s murder, which is inextricably bound up with the problem of the doubled photograph, is the first “murder” depicted in the film. This graphic act of violence initiates the cycle of violence which doesn’t end until all of the replicants are “dead” and the film ends. However, this explicit representation of the annihilation of “subjects” is predicated upon the implicit violence to the very notion of the “subject” that emerges through an analysis of the doubled photograph and was introduced by the primal image of the “moving still.”

Indeed, the doubled photograph is the film’s visual response to the questions, “how can *it* not know what it is?” and “How can I know that I am I?” When Deckard “reconstructs” and “remembers” Zhora’s face from a photograph of an empty room, he can no longer distance himself from the image he creates or from the “it” that is the missing referent for the photograph. The photograph is no longer a sealed receptacle of a past event that assures its bearer that he is still living. All of the differentiating marks that would draw a clear line between subject and “thing,” human and replicant, photograph and film, have been effaced. And yet, it is as if the absence of such differentiating marks is precisely what propels Deckard (as the “human” representative) to annihilate his replicant doubles. Because he can no longer establish what the difference is or where it lies, he must effectively remove all material trace of the “double” that puts his identity into question. This is what is at stake in the murder of Zhora. Rachel, the replicant-that-doesn’t-know-what-it-is, symbolically acquires “human” status, not through the photograph of the mother, but rather by the fact that she kills another android—Leon. After Deckard kills Zhora, Leon, whom we assume had been her lover, attacks Deckard. Rachel, who witnesses the scene, expresses her love for Deckard and consummates her “humanity” by killing Leon. Thus Deckard and Rachel are joined as a couple only after they have annihilated their unbearable replicant counterparts—Leon and Zhora. *Blade Runner*’s moving still exposes as fiction the notion that “humanity” and “identity” can be possessed in the form of personal property. The violence that finally explodes between so-called subjects merely acts out the violence of and to the “subject” that this film exposes. The visual representation of this violence, which begins in the “moving still” sequence and is developed in the doubled photograph sequence, is this



film's response to the shattering utterance which inaugurates *Blade Runner*: "Tell me about your mother." Perhaps this question is itself unutterably violent. In *Blade Runner*, the figure of the mother refuses to guarantee that one is born, and not made, human. And what more calls the human subject into question than the responsibility of understanding that humanity cannot be conferred by a petrified image in a picture frame? For the mother, the irretrievable site from whom we have all presumably sprung, can best be figured as a "moving still," a mobile empty vessel, a thing that no word or picture could ever adequately fill.

NOTES

1. See Guiliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*" (*October* 41, summer 1987): 61–74, and David Harvey, "Time and Space in the Postmodern Cinema" in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford:

Basil Blackwell, 1989) 308–323 for their discussions of *Blade Runner* as an example of cinematic postmodernism. While I treat much of the same textual material as Bruno and Harvey, my reading emphasizes *Blade Runner*'s cinematic critique of the status of the human subject. Along different lines, see Constance Penley's discussion of *Blade Runner* as an example of a "critical dystopia" in "Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia (On *The Terminator* and *La Jetée*)" in *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 121–139.

2. In a recent paper entitled "Film Aesthetics, Film History and the Idea of a Film Canon," (delivered to the Columbia Film Seminar on September 26, 1991) Peter Wollen cited *Blade Runner* as the only current example of a canonical film from the 1980s.
3. Pauline Kael, "Baby, the Rain Must Fall," *The New Yorker*, 12 July 1982: 85.
4. Richard Corliss, "The Pleasures of Texture," *Time*, 12 July 1982: 68.
5. Michael Scragow, "*Blade Runner*: Stalking the Alienated Android," *Rolling Stone*, no. 375, 5 August 1982.
6. Strictly speaking, the Freudian term "primal scene" cannot be used to describe any filmic representation because a primal scene is an event that, by definition, can never be represented. But because Freud's account of the Wolf Man's case history provides a model for the human subject that is constituted as a knot of memory, sexual difference and fantasmatic identification with nonhuman figures, the notion of the primal scene enables us to interrogate *Blade Runner*'s treatment of the relationship between primal memories and human subjectivity. For Freud's most complete account of the primal scene, see "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" in *Three Case Histories* (New York: Collier Books, 1963) 187–316.
7. Although I do not want to trivialize the complexity and the specificity of issues that surround the Rodney King verdict and its traumatic aftermath, I would like to point out that *Blade Runner* asks to be read (at least in part) as an allegory of race relations in the U.S. Set in a future Los Angeles, the film explicitly refers to the blade runner unit as an elite branch of the L.A.P.D. The police chief's use of the term "skin jobs" (a slang term for replicants) is likened to that of the term "niggers." In the context of this analysis of the "empathy test," it is chilling to note that the defense lawyers in the King trial established a discourse of "inhumanity" (defense lawyers depicted King rhetorically as an "animal" and as having super-human strength) that relied on temporal manipulations of the video tape (defense lawyers played the tape repeatedly in slow motion to diminish the sense of reality of the photographic image) to prove (simultaneously) that King was "in complete control" and that the tape was not an accurate witness to the event.

8. "The Rhetoric of the Image" in *Image, Music, Text* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 45. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes glosses the difference between the photography and film as follows: ". . . in the cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favor of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me: it is not a *specter*," trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1981) 89. All further references to *Camera Lucida* refer to this edition. Page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis following the reference. 1

9. As any reader of *Camera Lucida* knows, Roland Barthes's reflections of the ontology of photography ultimately take the form of an autobiographical elegy to his dead mother. *Camera Lucida* is not only about the missing photograph of the deceased mother, but also, more radically, about photography as prosthetic mother. The text stages a convergence between photography and the mother by conceiving of photography as a mechanical mother that mimes, distorts and usurps the maternal function. I have explored some of these issues in a paper entitled "The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" which was presented at the Twentieth Century French Studies Conference (University of Pennsylvania, March 12, 1992).