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Blade Runner: Negotiations of Self and Other

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Through the lens of psychoanalytic deconstruction, the final chase scene of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* can be easily interpreted as a *mirror stage* moment for both Deckard and Roy. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes the function of the mirror stage as "the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality."¹ By deconstructing the binaries of good and evil as well as self and other, Deckard and Roy are revealed to be mirror images of each other, aiding each other in their separate journeys to self-identification. For Deckard, this moment of primary identification projects him into an awareness of his place in time as an android. Although Clifford Hallam argues against the theory that Deckard is an android, I will use key points of his argument to suggest otherwise.² Scott's use of walls and separation, doorways and framing, and reflective materials in the *mise-en-scène* functions as a mirror motif to support this idea. Although Deckard and Roy are at different stages of identification—primary and secondary—this encounter is a foundational moment for both of their identities.

To begin, I will analyze how this sequence works as Deckard's primary mirror stage moment. For the sequence to function as Deckard's mirror moment and realization of self as android, we must first understand that he begins the chase under the illusion that he's human. Hallam argues that Deckard is not an android because "existence, unless it's their own, has little meaning for [androids]: thus, Roy and his mutinous crew torture and murder at will" (120). But is this not Deckard's job description as a blade runner? Has he not already murdered other androids and tortured Rachael with sexual assault? Initially, Deckard is portrayed as human; he is the good cop, an authority figure tasked with protecting humans from the threat of androids and delivering justice. Hallam suggests that

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 78.

2. Clifford Hallam, "The Indeterminate Sign in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner, Director's Cut*," *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, vol. 54 (2011).

“in *Blade Runner*, an ordinary man is juxtaposed with an extraordinary android” (120). However, the opposition established between Deckard and Roy is not exaggerated to separate them as either human or android, but to balance their relationship as grounds for a negotiation between self and other in a quest for identity formation. Roy functions in the space between self and other, where Deckard uses their relationship to realize his own identity as an android. They are mirror images, or complements, of each other. Good doesn’t exist without evil. As the mirror stage progresses, the line between their oppositions blurs and they transition from other to self in the formation of identity.

We begin the sequence experiencing extra-diegetic music that sounds like glassy chimes. Roy’s dialogue echoes over shots of Deckard. It seems as if Roy is everywhere at once, as if he’s inside Deckard’s head, as if their thoughts are one. Roy’s dialogue easily fits into Deckard’s inner thought process as self-criticism: “I thought you were supposed to be good. Aren’t you the good man?”



As Deckard’s direct opposite, Roy Batty is portrayed as evil. He is intelligent, violent, and threateningly inhuman. We can attribute Roy’s initial mirror moment to his prior encounter with his maker, Eldon Tyrell. If we consider Roy as already having had his primary mirror moment, we can understand his agency in this final sequence. When I refer to Roy’s agency, I’m referring to the way he drives the chase and his conscious reversal of the hunter and hunted binary. He physically breaks barriers, driven to continue his self-identification through identification with the other—Deckard. Roy’s awareness of time is another characteristic that suggests secondary identification. Because secondary identification is contingent on awareness of self as an entity in time, we know Roy has already had his primary mirror moment. His agency in this sequence is driven by his desire to beat the clock, fearing his inevitable death. Characteristic of Lacan’s mirror stage, Roy has already experienced “a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual’s formation into history” (78). Ironically, he succumbs to time entirely at the end of the film. Deckard, having yet to experience primary identification, lacks agency in this sequence. Only through his mirror image of Roy will Deckard be able to continue the identification process. From the beginning of the chase, Roy is established as the other with whom Deckard will initiate his primary identification. Deckard is established as the other with whom Roy will continue his secondary identification. Together, they perpetuate the cyclical nature of identity formation as a process of constant negotiation with self and other.

To render this Lacanian sequence visually, Scott uses many mirror motifs in the mise-en-scène to underscore the characters’ identification processes. Throughout the sequence,



Roy is placed before Deckard and framed in doorways and windows as if he is Deckard's direct reflection. Near the beginning of the chase, Scott places Deckard and Roy on either side of a wall, showing their opposition as they have yet to physically confront each other face to face in a mirror image. However, this is where Roy's agency comes into play. Roy, driven by desire to continue his own negotiation of identity, bursts his hand through the wall, attempting to pull Deckard into

awareness. The wall is no longer a separation, but a line over which to reflect a mirror image of the two characters. They are visually presented in a way that invites us to compare them, pointing out their uncanny similarities.

Scott's use of chiaroscuro works in conjunction with his framing techniques to continue the mirror motif. As Roy chases Deckard, each room fluctuates between light and dark, creating a reflective effect that resembles light bouncing off water or glass. At one instance, depicted below, Deckard attempts to flee the building through a boarded-up window that's illuminated with back lighting. He approaches the window as one would approach a mirror but is unable to see his reflection. Moments later, Roy appears outside the window



acting as Deckard's reflection in an attempt to initiate Deckard's mirror stage moment, shouting "I can see you!" However, Deckard runs away. He begins to climb upward, sending shards of glass to shatter on the floor. Here, the broken glass is yet another mirror motif used to symbolize Deckard's reluctance to confront his identity as android.

In addition to mirror motifs in the audio, mise-en-scène, and lighting, Scott uses mirroring techniques in the direct action to signify Deckard's identification with Roy. Separated by another partition, Roy and Deckard both take a moment to collect themselves. For

Deckard, this is a moment to breathe after having his fingers broken. For Roy, it is a moment to prolong his inevitable death. For both characters, it involves self-induced agony. In a sequence of shots, we see Deckard realign his broken fingers as Roy drives a rusty nail through his palm. As their actions align, we are finally brought to the mirror moment.

Deckard finds himself in a mirror-less bathroom. One wall is tiled with black and white diamonds, which comments on the oppositional struggle present throughout the sequence. A shot of Roy in a room with the same wall shows that he is once again on the other side of the partition, mirror-

ing Deckard's action. In his final drive to initiate Deckard's mirror moment, Roy bursts his head through the shared wall, shattering the fine line between self and other. In the mirror-less bathroom, Roy creates a mirror (pictured), forcing Deckard into a moment of primary identification where he begins the perpetual negotiation between self



and other. Hallum suggests that “although Deckard clearly functions as the protagonist, the character with whom we identify, the actual hero, the character essential to the central plot and theme in *Blade Runner*, is not the hunter, but the hunted” (119). This is true for us as viewers and for Deckard as he confronts Roy, acting as his own reflection. Deckard can now begin to understand himself as an android in time.

When we deconstruct binaries like good and evil, self and other, we can't help but understand them as entirely interconnected. We can't define one without the other. This realization is essential to the foundation of identity. Scott strategically creates a prolonged mirror moment with the use of echoing audio, visual framing techniques, and reflective lighting to show Deckard's transcendence into a new type of awareness. His process of identification happens as a negotiation within the binary of self and other. Hallum interprets the film's ending sequences to suggest that “Deckard's mastery as a compassionate human being” (120). However, when considering Lacan's theories of identity formation, a “mastery” of identification, be it human or android, is impossible. Lacan describes the result of this primary identification process as a “finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark [the subject's] entire mental development with its rigid structure” (78). The final chase scene in *Blade Runner* is unique in its ability to exemplify this point, showing two characters who use each other to continue their constant renegotiation of identity. ☹

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Hallam, Clifford. "The Indeterminate Sign in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner, Director's Cut*." *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, vol. 54 (2011): 119–125.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton (1996): 75–81.

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