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Cyberpunk Redux: Dérives in the Rich Sight of Post-Anthropocentric Visuality

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Abstract: Our future effects on the earth, in light of the Anthropocene, are all dire expressions of a depleted world left in piles of detritus and toxic ruin—including the diminished human as an assemblage of impoverished existence, yet adumbrating that handicapped existence with an ersatz advanced technology. In the cyberpunk films, these expressions are primarily visual expressions—whether through written prose thick with densely dark adjectives describing the world of cyberpunk, or more widely known, the comic books and films of cyberpunk, whose representations have become classically understood as SF canon. The new films of the cyberpunk redux however, represent an evolution in cyberpunk visuality. Despite these debatable issues around this term, it will provide this paper with its primary object of visuality, that of the “rich sight”, a further term that arose from the allure created in the late 19th century development of department stores that innovated the display of the goods laid out in a spectacular view, presenting the shopper with a fantasy of wealth and fetishized objects which excited shoppers to purchase, but more paradoxically, creating the desire to see a fantasy that was at the same time also a reality. This particular and enframed view—so deeply embedded and beloved in our commodity-obsessed culture—is what I suggest so profoundly typifies the initial cyberpunk postmodern representation in the *Blade Runner* films, and its continuing popularity in the early part of the 21st century. Both films are influenced by Ridley Scott’s initial vision of the cinematic cyberpunk universe and organized as sequential narratives. Consequently, they serve as excellent examples of the evolution of this visual spectacular.

Keywords: visuality; “rich sight”; *Blade Runner*; animatism; cinematism; flattened screens; collage; proscenium views; layers; detritus

1. Introduction: Through the Lens of the Anthropocene

How urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes, when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of strange new hallucinatory exhilaration—these are some of the questions that confront us.

Frederic Jameson (1984)

“Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”

When Frederic Jameson asks how “urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes, when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of strange new hallucinatory exhilaration,” it provokes the two most ironic observations about the cyberpunk aesthetic, both now and in its initial flowering in the 1980s to 1990s. However, now we now must view these visions through the sobering lens of the *Anthropocene*, with its attendant immediacy transforming the natural world around us. In early cyberpunk, this “ending of the world” was presaged as visions of dire expressions of a depleted

world left in piles of abandoned and useless commodities now as detritus and toxic ruin—including the diminished human as an impoverished existence, despite the adumbration of that handicapped existence with an ersatz advanced technology. This was the view from many of the early cyberpunk representations, especially the first *Blade Runner* (1982)¹ film.

However, the Anthropocene, a term devised by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2002 (Crutzen 2002; Crutzen and Stoermer 2002). is generally understood as the contemporary period during which human activities have had a profoundly negative environmental impact on the Earth, so much so that it has constituted a distinct geological age. Still controversial in terms of its “origins” (the development of the steam engine, the myths of ancient Greece, the development of the human species, and even the first Copernican Revolution, etc.) (Ellis 2018, p. 1), and indeed, the very existence of an age where human activities and the proposed “end of the world,” the Anthropocene suggests is denied by many politicians and scientists. Timothy Morton, however, cites the emergence and nature of the Anthropocene:

“The actual earth”, as Thoreau puts it, now contains throughout its circumference a thin layer of radioactive materials, deposited since 1945. The deposition of this layer marks a decisive geological moment in the *Anthropocene*, a geological time marked by decisive human “terraforming” of earth as such. The first significant marks were laid down in 1784, when carbon from coal-fired industries began to be deposited world-wide . . . After 1945, there began *the Great Acceleration*, in which the geological transformation of Earth by humans increased by vivid orders of magnitude. (Morton 2013, pp. 4–5)

Science fiction (SF) has been steadily creating visions of such a world end since Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s *Le Dernier Homme*, considered to be the “first modern speculative fiction to depict the end of the world” (The Last Man 2003). Yet, it is in the SF emergence of the cyberpunk genre wherein these expressions become primarily visual expressions—whether in written prose thick with densely dark adjectives describing the world in cyberpunk novels, or more widely known, in the comic books and films of cyberpunk. What in the present moment we can readily identify as Anthropocenic visions as “the end of the world is correlated with the Anthropocene, is its global warming, and subsequent drastic climate change” (Morton 2013, p. 7). These visions are most profoundly discovered in the novel by William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984), Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982), and in both *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kôkaku Kidôtai*) manga by Shirow Masamune (serialized 1989), and the anime directed by Oshii Mamoru and animated by Production I.G. (1995).

However, the recent re-emergence of cyberpunk narratives has suggested an evolution² in its formal expressions and representations, and because of the radical departure of its style, a reconsideration of that future period as perhaps a *post-Anthropocene*. The most widely experienced redux can be found in two films released in 2017: a rather unfortunate live-action version of Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell*, and a new sequel film of the *Blade Runner* series, that narrates the events that happen to the characters in Scott’s *Blade Runner*, thirty years after the events in the original film, in *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve. It is in fact, the stylistic changes in the cyberpunk redux that has, through its very different qualities, which although different, still evidence not only a sense of an aftermath, but of the very transformative process created within its narrative appearances. These changes suggest what Morton refers to as the *Age of Asymmetry*, and he describes in no uncertain terms not only the stakes he envisions in this age, but the very description of the cyberpunk redux narrative:

¹ *Blade Runner* (Final Cut). Dir. By Ridley Scott (originally 1982; Warner Bros., Final Cut was issued in 2007, Amazon Prime). This version of the original *Blade Runner* films, of which there are many: the *Workprint*, the *U.S. Theatrical Cut*, the *International Cut*, the *Director’s Cut*, and the *Final Cut*; was chosen because it is the most recent version that Scott has released, and follows the logic that with time, he was able to achieve the effect he had wished for, and was not able to do in the previous versions.

² Suggested by Damon Stanek, 25 July 2018.

... an *Age of Asymmetry* in which our cognitive powers become self-defeating. The more we know about radiation, global warming, and the other massive objects that show upon our radar, the more enmeshed in them we realize we are. Knowledge is no longer able to achieve escape velocity from Earth, or ... the surging, "towering" reality of things. We are no longer poised on the edge of the abyss ... Instead ... we are already falling inside ... It is now the uncanny time of zombies after the end of the world, a time of hypocrisy where every decision is wrong. (Morton 2013, p. 160)

The new films of the cyberpunk redux represent this evolution most succinctly as an evolution in cyberpunk visuality. Despite the debatable issues around this term, *visuality* in art historical terms has come to mean a visual perspective through a rigid culturally formulated lens from which viewers are restricted to view images and their meanings and associations in intensely specific ways; as Foucault has pronounced it: the visual perspective controls what is "seeable and sayable". Mirzoeff further focuses the lens of visuality on its functions "to be a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and the means for the mediation of those subjects to that authority" (Mirzoeff 2011, p. xv). To consider how to answer Jameson's questions of how urban squalor can delight the eyes, as an alienation from daily life, and as an escape from the realities of quotidian existence; an examination of two different, but related works of the cyberpunk film series: that of *Blade Runner (Final Cut)* (from now on *Blade Runner*) and *Blade Runner 2049* will reveal through two considerations of visual perspective how possible outcomes of both the Anthropocene and the Age of Asymmetry might emerge. In a sense, these films address the authority of our own greed and profoundly ever-continuing complicity in the termination of all life on Earth, and yet how in each film, a visual richness might allow for a certain mediation of that acknowledgment through the potential insights displayed by both films.

2. Dérive One: The Anthropocenic "Rich Sight"

The aesthetic of "rich sight" erased that delicate link between cause and symptom.

Laura Mulvey (1996a)

Primarily, how does such the specific dire visuality created by both films, create such exquisite pleasure in looking that even the original *Blade Runner* film remains popular viewing thirty-five years later, and gave rise to the creation of a sequel. One possible concept arises in a re-imagining of an old term, that of the "rich sight". This term developed from the allure created in the late 19th century development of department stores that innovated the display of the goods laid out in a spectacular view, presenting the shopper with a fantasy of wealth and a plentitude of fetishized objects which excited shoppers to purchase, but more paradoxically, creating the desire to *see* a fantasy that was at the same time also a reality. This particular and politically enframed view, so deeply embedded and beloved in our commodity-obsessed capitalist cultural hegemony, is transformed when viewing through the cyberpunk lens, a dying world detritus, when "richness" becomes a horror. The "rich sight" of the Anthropocene is one of death, but on a massive and almost inclusive scale. The only living things left are humans who were in some way deficient or disabled, scampering around the junk piles, jacking auto parts from the cop cars, and skittering away like insects or rodents. What we view in both *Blade Runner* films is the dead flesh of the monster we made, and the monster that killed us, also laid low and rusting, soon to be made into dust itself. Yet we are fascinated and thrilled by the mere power of the plentitude of death positioned and literally framing each view of particularly the original *Blade Runner* world. Yet, what is this mechanism that allows for this mediation in which the transformation of a vision of horror becomes an enriching intense fascination?

Laura Mulvey has discussed this phenomenon in detail and calls out the resulting commodity fetishism that has, since the mid-twentieth century's increasing hyper-capitalism, produced "shopping" as a *spectacular* event. In addition, Benjamin's insight into this affect as the key to his "new urban phantasmagoria", meant that it was not so much the objects themselves, as it was the

“commodity-on-display” (Mulvey 1996b, p. 4), the “rich sight” of all those bright and shiny new things one could *potentially* possess. As Dana Polan suggests:

Mass culture becomes a kind of postmodern culture, the stability of social sense dissolved (without becoming any less ideological) into one vast spectacular show, a dissociation of cause and effect, a concentration on allure of means and concomitant disinterest in meaningful ends. Such spectacle creates the promise of a rich sight: not the sight of particular fetishized objects, but sight itself as richness, as the ground for extensive experience.³

“But sight itself as richness”; the point here is that it is not the individual objects under this enriching gaze of allure, but the *sight* itself, as a panoramic, a totalizing view, a *mis en scène*. It is the lush experience and a sense of visual plenty, of a visual phantasmagoria of multitudes of objects in a single view—so utterly tied to the fetishization of commodities in late capitalism, as discussed by many critics and scholars. As Mulvey recognizes, “The present transcendence of the “rich sight” aesthetic has developed out of the structures of disavowal at work in mass culture. Disavowal maintains, after all, only a tenuous link between cause and effect while its investment in visual excess and displacement of signifiers produces a very strong texture that can come to conceal *the need to conceal the relation between cause and effect*” (Mulvey 1996a, pp. 15–16). This easily reveals the *jouissance* experience involved in the apprehension of the “rich sight”, and its implications with an aesthetic of the complexity of the collaged or bricolaged scenic design, so prevalent in the cyberpunk works, especially film. When the experience is heavy in its effect, but its cause is ambiguous, or as in the *Blade Runner* films, displaced onto a large-scaled, historical, or ideological frame, the effect of the display is one of wonder and, as Mulvey addressed as well, one of curiosity.

3. Dérive Two: The “Picturesque”

The two opposite qualities of roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque.

Sir Uvedale Price (1810)

“Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful: And, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape,” Vol. 1.

And yet, is there not more to the mere “rich sight” that incites such wonder and memorable images in this peculiar phenomenon? An odd, even older concept seems informative in this regard, that of the picturesque, though not in the contemporary understanding of the term, but in an earlier sense, in which the nature of “beauty” was much discussed and debated. Sir Uvedale Price, writing in 1794 to 1798 on the design of gardens, discusses how the picturesque differs from the contemporary notion of the “beautiful”: “Should we wish to give it a picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps . . . make it rough and you make it also picturesque” (Pevsner 2010, p. 132). This amusing and rather pertinent description was part of an argument around architectural visual planning also in a mid-twentieth century modernist climate.

Nikolaus Pevsner understood the picturesque to be “a visual formalism in which objects and their relations are subsumed into relations of pictorial composition from particular points of view” (Pevsner 2010, p. 15). This is to say, that just as these “particular points of view” frame and contextualize the “rich sight”, and the visual perspective, so too do cultural confines also frame the picturesque. For these modernist designers, the desire for a pictorial unity was supreme, in that “visual planning was meant to make a pictorial unity out of disparate elements, particularly modern,

³ (Polan 1987–1988). In (Mulvey 1996a).

historic, and vernacular buildings that were . . . aesthetically disjunct and ideologically antagonistic” (Pevsner 2010, p. 15). The distinction for Pevsner and his contemporaries in terms of this formalist method was that rather than a unity of the *subject*, they necessarily opted for one modeled on collage. Further, that the picturesque principles that Pevsner recognized as the results of this method, those of “intricacy, surprise, impropriety, variety, contrast, piquancy, incongruity, roughness, sudden variation, and irregularity” (Pevsner 2010, p. 22), all of which can be responses particularly of the visual planning styles of collage and bricolage (that of “construction (as of a sculpture or a structure of ideas) achieved by using whatever comes to hand”⁴).

In the cyberpunk aesthetic, the visual planning of the scenes was considered much like the visual planning of cities and towns; they required a visual composition to draw the viewer into a specific scene, which is “dressed” in the proper cultural arraignment that signifies the desired effect. For the cyberpunk, Pevsner’s principles worked to deliver the desired “punk” effect alongside the “end of the world” junkyard. Collage and bricolage were used particularly in the initial *Blade Runner* and has established for most audiences, the formal qualities of the cyberpunk style of the postmodern 1980s to 1990s, and which from much of the scholarship of recent years, seems to exist for many scholars as the reigning representation of the cyberpunk aesthetic. The first *Blade Runner* was indeed an innovation in “rich sights”, and a spectacular landmark of cinematic picturesque design, particularly of futurity, until the present day. Its primary mode of visuality followed an assemblage of objects—that of “an artistic composition made from scraps, junk, and odds and ends”⁵—that refer to death, ruin, and decay, yet also to a triumph of DIY innovation, and a gothic “picturesque”, “rich sight within a noir narrative.

Finally, the early theorists of the picturesque, recognized that this aspect of the aesthetic “belongs exclusively to the sense of vision” (Pevsner 2010, p. 132), and further, that the density of the profusion of objects required by the picturesque, and its “intricacy in landscape might be defined, that disposition of objects, which by a partial and uncertain concealment, excites and nourishes curiosity”⁶. It is here with the effect of “curiosity”, as Mulvey asserts, caused by the visual apprehension of the intensely dense display of objects in the picturesque, that we find a clue to the enduring fascination of the cyberpunk aesthetic. Curiosity is a state which when activated, and especially when visual, it tends to remain open; remain unformed as a conclusion or authority. The mind plays with this apprehension, attempts to contextualize it, to categorize it, or discover its cause; but particularly when confronted with the complexity of collaged or bricolaged visual scenes, a totality cannot often be arrived at with any surety, and remains provocative. In addition, when presented with a “rich sight”, a plentitude of objects lain out for display, composed to create a fantasy that denies limitation or confines; there is a linkage to the imagination. The viewer is bedazzled by the spectacle and can seek a way through it, by repetition of the experience through various methods: fandom, sequels, or cross-platform versions. As Mulvey admits: “The cinema is, therefore, phantasmagoria, illusion and a symptom of the social unconscious. It is precisely these elements that are fun to decipher for any audience.” (Mulvey 1996a, p. xxvii).

4. Dérive Three: *Blade Runner* (Final Cut)

The city, not cyberspace, is the soul of cyberpunk.

Stephan Joyce (2018)

“Playing for Virtually Real: Cyberpunk Aesthetics and Ethics in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*”

The visual aspects of the city in the initial *Blade Runner* film have been excessively examined and discussed by many excellent scholars since the 1980s; such as Tatsumi Takayuki, who describes the

⁴ “bricolage.” Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bricolage>.

⁵ “assemblage.” Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assemblage>.

⁶ (Price 1810). In (Pevsner 2010, p. 132).

cityscape as a “chaotic and chimeric fusion”, and a “post-apocalyptic junkyard” (Tatsumi 2006, p. 14), creating a “cultural vertigo” (Tatsumi 2006, p. xi). And Scott Bukatmann—who has also written much on this topic—described the Los Angeles of the future as a “dispersed, boundless, heterogeneous” (Bukatmann 1997, p. 59) city with a “cacophony of signs . . . an empty space of burst pipes, decay and deterioration . . . made hallucinatory by the searchlights that constantly sweep past its windows” (Bukatmann 1997, p. 60). All of the early cyberpunk discourse was brought into being with the emergence of the Internet and the digital technologies, and the distinct sense of an urban-like reality beyond the screen, described accurately in William Gibson seminal work, *Neuromancer*:

Cyberspace: A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation . . . A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (Gibson 1984)

And what they and so many others describe is a bricolage of the detritus of the industrial to the technological age, all piled high into the urban landscape. Trash and commodity, no longer separate entities, have become one in the merger of a DIY innovation and creativity, fulfilling a nostalgic and redemptive impulse within an impossible infrastructure and a fascistic police state. These constructions represent a process of a “cut-and-paste” collage of the leftovers from the late capitalist piles of used commodities and technologies pasted together to form new technologies to, in particular, replicate extinct life forms and spare body parts, such as the snake vendor, or the eyeball maker. The city of Los Angeles itself becomes part of a DIY development of the *sprawl*—William Gibson’s word for the amalgamation of American and Japanese cities that have lost their cultural distinctions, to house those not fit for the tidy and entitled (and no doubt white) off-world populations of humans.

The implications in the visuality of the 1980s postmodern cyberpunk age was not entirely dire however, as they were saved by an aesthetic that developed in the fashion and music world at the same time as did the cyber technologies—that of *punk*, whose visual language was also that of bricolage. Punk, as with other “street subcultures”, use the tactic recalled and defined in “Hebdige’s discussion of bricolage—the resignification of a patchwork of symbols, given new meanings in new contexts—remains important in showing us how subcultures adopt, transform and rework that which already exists—as William Gibson put it, ‘the street finds its own uses for things’” (Bell 2001). Punk also meant, for example, the cleverness of the *Blade Runner* mechanisms.

At the same time, as the viewer recognized the collaged, Do-It-Yourself poverty implied in the commodities of this world, they *also* recognized its creativity and reveled in the “rich sight” of their compelling potential. Further, the viewer was assured that the characteristic creativity of the human will not be lost at the “end of the world” but adapted and reinvigorated by the new humans—and thus part of the enduring appeal of the cyberpunk aesthetic. It is in this gap in the dialectic between the use of the cut-up-and-reassembled method of the collage that, Barash argues: “collage techniques allowed artists to uncover meaning within a readymade consumer culture . . . and find ways to evade, negotiate, reflect, or sometimes undo the reification of commodity culture.” (Poyner and Barash 2013). Yet, it seems that at the same time as we acknowledge the failure of the modernist consumer ideology and fetishization of objects, we also experience the enjoyment of the new postmodern DIY-vintage world—cheap and with a “utopian total availability” (Poyner and Barash 2013)—that we have simply re-organized the structure of our desires to a channel our nostalgic desire for the old modes of production, now made cheap, quaint, and picturesque—and therefore “punk”—and therefore cool.

As Tatsumi Takayuki has acknowledged; “As soon as the existing standard of aesthetics has collapsed, the hyper-capitalist imperative incorporates the weirdest into the most marketable, the most *avant garde*, and the most beautiful” (Tatsumi 2006, p. 156). The past is now as much a fiction as the future has become. In addition, it is this past vision of the modernist ultra-high-tech minimalist culture—which in cyberpunk continues to be represented as the off-world elite—that in its decay and

ruin, also creates a present moment in which *Blade Runner* has supplied for the last thirty or so years, a panoramic “rich sight” of vast layers of “dark, claustrophobic, polluted and dirty [stuff] . . . in its crumbling buildings and rotting cars . . . [a] junkyard futurism”⁷ marvelously appealing.

This junkyard “rich sight” of the cyberpunk future, which has stood for the ultimate cultural vision of late capitalism and the hegemony of the “rich sight” of a picturesque commodity display, was delivered through the production designs of Syd Mead, the special effects of Douglas Trumball, and the deft camerawork of Jordan Cronenweth, who, together, created the unique, bricolaged *mise en scènes* to create a visuality and an aesthetic. Of course, the most oft-repeated scene from the various versions of the initial *Blade Runner*, is Deckerd’s astounding ride toward the Tyrell Corporation, as we slide through their game-like panorama—that is, a shallow blue-black atmospheric stage set suggestive of a massively-scaled, awe-inspiring totalizing view of the upper city, arranged with blocks of flat, distant, monolithic corporations rife with thousands of dots of lights that edge slowly backward as Deckerd’s car approaches. The car passes the immense advertisement—worthy of the Times Square—of a geisha staring slyly from a side view, and as she takes a dainty bite, her shiny, red lips smile condescendingly at the viewer as the scene ends.

That scene switches dramatically down to an abstract bricolage viewed from the grubby street below. Looking upward toward the upper world of the corporate authorities, which are represented as an impossible collision of flat geometric shapes covered with dots of light and arranged akimbo at all angles. In addition, through this expressionistic stage set, behind and overhead, a massive piece of machinery that blocks our view slowly glides as an ad-covered incomprehensible, lumbering vehicle overhead, as a squeaky voice intones the taglines of the off-world promises to the oppressed grime and rain-covered masses below. Lamarre explains the editing tactic of this *animetistic* style: “As they enhance speed and movement through the use of rapid cuts in conjunction with flattened and dehierarchized fields of distributed information, structures of exploded projection emerge to place a material limit on dispersion and flatness, generating temporary fields of potential depth associated with lines of sight.” (Lamarre 2009, Loc. 3072). This describes precisely the way each of the city scenes have been paradoxically introduced as a “rich sight”, accentuating the phantasmagoric, yet as a dying world pulling the viewer through the world of the *Blade Runner*. As Vivian Sobchack explains:

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the cinematic response to these questions has been cities imagined spatially (and tonally) in an urban experience of going “over the top” or plunging “over the edge”. That is, although manifest in two quite different modes, the current science fiction film city has been figured as *groundless*, lacking both logically secure and spatially stable premisses [sic] for its—and our—existence. This is a city virtually “bottomed out” and literally fathomless: its inhabitants suffer from giddiness or vertigo and, rootless, they “free fall” in both space and time. (Sobchack 1999, p. 138)

At that urban bottom, rootless and in the constant sense of a “free fall”, are those beings living at the dark, dank street level of the city. Represented in the action shots; that were usually framed at the edges of the screen by the dark, wet, groundless bottom, and at the sides by clever close-ups brought to the very edge of the screen, are the silhouetted assemblages of ruined machinery and car parts. Surrounded by a backdrop of a constantly moving barrage of drenched umbrellas held by the marginalized population of leftover “other” people: the punks, dwarfs, and the seemingly criminal DIY entrepreneurs; densely layered against a background of absolute blackness. These *mise en scènes* present a shallow but highly fragmented, and bricolaged composition of layers of reflecting prismatic glass and a tangle of blinking neon signage, creating a sort of analytical cubist mid-ground, and occasionally within which, the actions in the city are displayed. Creating a labyrinthine passage

⁷ Cumbow, Robert. “Survivors: The Day after Doomsday.” In (Sobchack 1999, p. 134).

of detritus, the stage is set in which the vision of commodity greed becomes indeed mediated as a deliciously picturesque “rich sight”.

The scale and dimensions of the interior rooms of stores, apartments, and even Tyrell’s office are implied, but never fully realizable, as architectural elements are positioned as *objects* in the field of vision, rather than as part of an organized sense of enclosure. This continues not only the “rich sight” of this world, but the sense of *assemblage*, a work of art made by grouping together found or unrelated objects; that is, a dense collection of disparate objects ordinarily unrelated to each other, but within the same structure of feeling—or as Lamarre refers to it, as a: “distributive field in which movement into depth is replaced by density of information” (Lamarre 2009, p. 133), which together creates a sense of a plethora of de-territorialized ruin which was thus transformed into a plentitude of potential objects. Cleverly reassembled or re-territorialized, this field of transformed innovations, occupying their own separate positions within the field, not only provide an acknowledgment of the end of the capitalist era of modernity’s worship of the “new” commodity, but also the thrill of creativity in the face of ruin, and thus a sense of the animated play and the nostalgic satisfaction that it engenders.

5. Dérive Four: Blade Runner 2049

The ideal city contains no citizens whatever . . .

Philip Strick (1984)

“Metropolis Wars: The City as Character in Science Fiction Films”

Blade Runner 2049 is the continuation of the *Blade Runner* narrative thirty years later; it was released thirty-five years after the first film, in 2017. From the very first credits, we enter a *mise en abîme* where we are both immediately aware of the relationship to the first *Blade Runner* film as a film and are also aware of a blatant difference. As the producers of the film’s logos are shown, they are faded and in black and white denoting a somber and menacing tone, but with the occasional blip of video spikes and slight broadcast interruptions, we become aware that even within our viewing, this film is *within and of* this new *Blade Runner* reality. The Columbia Productions logo of the woman (Liberty) is suddenly silhouetted by explosive white clouds behind her, symbolizing—as we later understand—the “Blackout of 2020”. Then we are shown the screen-filled blue eye of the original film, but instead of being clouded by reflections of constant explosions in the city of the original *Blade Runner*; this eye is clear. From that eye, is a quick shot to the iris-matching aerial view of the desert ground of the new panorama of Los Angeles; a vast multitude of sepia-toned, circular eye-shaped protein farms, lain out over an expansive desert emptiness. These farms are austere, mechanistic, rationally designed, and without any evidence of life, except for the assumed protein worms within the farms, although they as well, might be replicants. The didactic for the film appears in tiny digital read-out script, inferring that the film itself is an artifact of the film’s future reality, and that the Blackout of 2020 was also the “collapse of the ecosphere”. All this, we suddenly realize, is because *Blade Runner 2049* is now in the time of a Post-Anthropocene; and consequently, everything that was, or could be “born”, is now gone.

The Anthropocene was the time of the original *Blade Runner*, when the ruinous fate was only in-progress and not a *fait accompli*, and there was still hope through a “new urban exoticism” (Sobchack 1999, p. 135) that provided a way out through creativity by way of a new sort perverse consumerism via the DIY entrepreneurs: “The city is thus re-energized—finding a new function and a new aesthetic” (Ibid), and the concomitant picturesque “rich sight” as both its most profound expression and its most powerful incentive. But *Blade Runner 2049* is a Post-Anthropocene future. In the very beginning, the disembodied eye we beheld in *Blade Runner* which “holds the infernal city reflected in its gaze” (Bukatman 1999), is now a clear eye reflecting nothing; meaning that there is no more “infernal city” to reflect, or even that there are no “real” humans left that are capable of “reflection”. However, there seems to be no “rich sight” left to reflect; that is, nothing valued is left in

the same sense of value that was placed in the “rich sight” of the visions of the previous era, composed of a picturesque dense detritus.

Mulvey asserts: “There is a logic to harnessing the overinscribed signifier to the unscribed. The sheer force of the “rich sight”, of the spectacle, creates a diversion away from inquiry or curiosity.” (Mulvey 1996b, p. 14). Even as the picturesque, with its dazzling “mutilated members around in heaps” was said to encourage curiosity, Mulvey rejects this notion that such an array encourages speculation, wonder, and the usual effects of the spectacle. Curiosity calls for action; to detect and discover beyond the logic of the image, but Mulvey is positioning the viewer as a consumer, one who consumes, who enters into a negotiation with the producer to acquire those objects. However, what is the negotiation in the passive sense of the observer? The “rich sight” of the Post-Anthropocene becomes a stark minimalism, redolent with the death of the field of objects; from the destroyed richness of the picturesque to a scorched Earth where only monochromatic shells of objects are slowly being blown away by relentless winds of abandonment. The “rich sight” is one of the severely rational mode of modernist minimalism. The viewer observes the tight, instrumental, yet sculptural structures of the protein farms in their vast scale and clean lines. Viewers are not curious because this is death, this is final, this is the end of the world, no actions are indicated.

The way in which the approach to LA was shot in the original *Blade Runner*, utilized an *animetistic* style, described by Lamarre as an anime approach to a visuality. As such, it is a device in which the scene sets are separated into overlapping layers of what might be compared to theatrical “flats”. We can substitute for discussion’s sake, the theatrical set as a model for the framed world of the film screen. In this model, the architectural elements generated a downstage (or at the very front boundary of the stage “world”), a mid-stage layer (stage right and stage left, providing boundaries on the sides), and the upstage area (at the very back of the stage “world”), creating Lamarre’s notion of a multiplanar or “diorama effect”, which being film—and neither theater nor animation—creates a rather peculiar sense of massive scale, but a paradoxically shallow, stage-like sense of depth. In the approach to the Tyrell building, the buildings slide backward—much as in multiplanar animation. Much of the original *Blade Runner* seems influenced by anime, but we also might infer that cinematism and animetism are both potential tendencies of the moving image, whether in animation or in cinema.

However, in *Blade Runner 2049*, we return to a clearly cinematic style. Instead of a distributive field of objects that occupy changeable hierarchies and identities of animatism, views in *Blade Runner 2049* are—both in interior and exterior shots—in a rigid one-point perspective, accentuating and stabilizing in time and space both hierarchies and identities. Most establishing shots are long shots, placing the actors as small active positions in massive, and still-in-time historical proscenium. The weight and wonder of each shot comes from the paradoxical awe of the “rich sight” of the dusty and dilapidated ruined grand interiors of our own present officialdom with its contrary sense of anticipated emptiness, death, and decay.

The scale of these ruins is magnified to diminish the profile of the scale of the replicant human within the tremendous power and magnitude of the now-absent human age. Even in the shots of KD6’s apartment, we tend to see him within a shot which has centered him in front of his picture window, looking outward into the city. His “chair” is positioned to face out in his dead-stare, the dead city at the center of the window, as if aligned with a singular vanishing point, that lies out in the vast dead city to some infiniteness. He sits and stares outward, and viewers are also positioned to be focused toward that vanishing point that is hidden from our view—and the view of KD6—by a flat stage-painting of the city confronting him.

These long perspectival shots are accompanied by long shots that are cut off visually from the vanishing point in a similar way, with shallow flattened backgrounds; in the air, in the view of massive dark and dead buildings, in the flat, yellow screens of the desert sand storms, and in the rising wave of the sea in Luv’s death scene. However, this is also present in interior shots, particularly in the huge, modernist, architectural forms of Wallace’s corporate complex—which we never see in entirety suggesting his hegemonic hold over all of the diminished earthly existence. In it, we are

confronted with massive minimalist blank walls, lit frequently with the Wallace corporation logo detail of reflected waves of water. Despite their closed access to any sense of the totality of the building, these interiors, and indeed the corporate exteriors as well, become in their flattened state, abstract expressions of the corporate power that *is* the world. Their dark sarcophagi—menacing, misty magnitudes of presence—loom in every long shot, of which there are many, but this time with no dots of light to be found; and they stabilize in both time and space, memories of a bleak future of death.

Scale is perhaps the most dynamic tactic of the filmmakers, and their clever use of scale has created some of the most affecting aspects of the film. In the Las Vegas scenes at the end of the film, Vegas—as the most dangerously radiated area—is shot through a saturated acrid yellow filter creating a duotone world of extreme light and dark. Within the intense, empty sandstorm, KD6 (now “Joe”), walks through a landscape of what becomes massive fragments of clearly cheap, and commercial sculptures of women, the detritus of the Vegas nightclub masculinist culture, where women were but part of the consumables available in the modernist, hyper-capitalist, hyper-cool “rat pack” culture. It is a horrifying “rich sight”: the scale of misogyny becomes acutely visual as monuments of disgust and hate—and fear—in a toxic, “uninhabitable” landscape where there is only ruin and death. It is the very edge of the dead culture in what is already a disappearing world.

Once inside the dark and dusty mausoleum that was once the night club “Treasure Island”, women, and Elvis, appear once again as digital vocaloids in varying scales of size or distance as they blip on and off—sound on and off—in the absolute black timeless-and-spaceless-ness and stillness of the theater of the club. The black eliminates any scale and allows for the blips to become technicolored memories of the consumable display of women who all are the same, non-individual constructs within the consciousness of a dead masculinist ideality. They appear as the conscious background to this last outpost of the modern male, and the actions of the two protagonist men—one real, one replicant—both of whom are pivoting around a woman who is the lynchpin of their lives, their cultures, and their immediate future, which we know is death.

To explain this, the filmmakers seem to use a rather strict cinematism, as Paul Virilio has referred to it, and as Lamarre explains:

For Virilio, cinematism is part of a more general optical logistics that ultimately serves to align our eyes with weapons of mass destruction, with the bomb’s-eye view. The eye becomes one with the bomb, and everywhere in the world becomes a target. The essence of cinematism lies in the use of mobile apparatuses of perception, which serve (1) to give the viewer a sense of standing over and above the world and thus controlling it, and (2) to collapse the distance between viewer and target, in the manner of the ballistic logic of instant strike or instant hit. (Lamarre 2009, Loc. 653)

This “bomb-sight” cinematic view is consistent with the one-point perspective that is part of the totalizing view of *Blade Runner 2049*’s masculinist visuality and positions the contemporary viewer in the position of looking at a view of the future through the lens of our modernist masculinist past. It suggests an alignment with Timothy Morton’s warning that the end of the world has already happened, and its falling death is in slow-motion around us. This bomb-sight tactic then pulls us toward a single vanishing point—a fate that has two potential meanings; first that we are fated to live out a world that is already dead, and hence, we cannot look askance to avoid this reality. However, it also might give us a choice to either adapt to the dead world, as is suggested in *Blade Runner 2049*, with the beginning of a new race of beings—or to become extinct with grace. However, a single vanishing point is also the point made by Morton; that an end is *absolutely inevitable*. A “rich insight” indeed.

6. A Final Dérive

The ecological thought understands that there never was an authentic world.

Timothy Morton (2012)

Yet perhaps there is another way to approach this film. Despite the dire warnings and a bleak visuality of a dead world, there is also another way to look at this: as a utopian/dystopian allegory. Of course, cyberpunk has always been allegorical, but usually utopian via a dystopian visuality, in that despite the negatively cast junkyard aesthetic of *Blade Runner*, its ultimate effect on viewers is a future in a positive sense of a redemptive creative coolness. This has been the key reason that cyberpunk can still resonate with contemporary audiences after some 35 years. This is precisely how allegory works: “In allegorical structure, then, one text is *read through* another, however *fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic* their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus palimpsest. (Owens 1980, p. 69).” This palimpsest works on two layers in cyberpunk: it is, of course, the story of our present represented as past that is read through our projection of a future; but it is also a utopia read through a dystopian projection of the present. As a utopian narrative, it is constituted through a critique of the present that is solved or answered through a projection into a future of either a corrective new world (utopian), or as the dire condition of those critiqued aspects projected as punishment for those dire results (dystopian). The *Blade Runner* films seem to be visually cast as a critique of late capitalist self-consuming greed and its disastrous effect on the global ecosystems—and it is indeed true for both films. However, there appears in *Blade Runner 2049* to be yet another critique that appears through its visual stratagem; that of a feminist critique.

In the original *Blade Runner*, the only women were replicants; the powerful Zhora and Pris—who die violently by Deckard’s hand—and Rachael, who is first set up as a test “doll”, and as part of that test, becomes attached to Deckard. Both Zhora and Pris are visually presented as punks and sexually provocative, especially Pris, who is referred to as a “standard pleasure model”. Whereas Rachael is presented in a 1940s business suit and hairstyle, consequently as a pre-second stage feminist, a cold, and rational model to test her viability and to *pass* as a “respectable”, “real” woman. In a scene that was for many female viewers a surprisingly brutal love scene, Deckard, in his initial sexual approach to Rachael, shoves her violently onto a wall and forces a deep kiss on her—to which she infuriatingly relinquishes. She completely defers to Deckard and his wishes throughout the balance of the film. He supposedly falls in love with her, which is not surprising as men in patriarchal cultures are routinely attracted to submissive women. In the last scene, we see him remember Gaff’s lines to him “It’s too bad she won’t live. But then again who does?”—which is paradoxical, since Deckard himself had “dispatched” both her replicant sisters earlier in the film.

It is in fact, the violent deaths of Zhora and Pris that provide two of the most provocative “rich sights” of the film. Zhora is chased through a bricolage of rain-drenched umbrellas, various punks, freaks, and other “Others”, to an interior of a confusing multitude of layers of shattering glass, neon, and naked female mannequins—we presume a store or place of clothing manufacture, consistent with the cultural associations of females and fashion—where there is a *dénouement*. Chased through the shimmering layers of glass and neon, which shatters spectacularly into flying shards in all directions, Zhora is shot by Deckard and lands in a nest of blood, mannequins, neon, and glass. Reminiscent of Gutai artist Murakami Saburo’s “Laceration of Paper” (1955), the effect of crashing through the layers of planes of glass, seen from a forward position to the layers, presents a perspectival progression of a spectacular splintering of blood and glass that builds in anticipation and horror, but also in the pleasure and the profound desire to *see* it; much as motorists who slow to see the horror of auto accidents. Despite our fear, we are eager for the sight of a spectacular violent death and dismemberment.

Pris’s death, seen later in the *Blade Runner* film, makes for an even more visually spectacular and bizarre death. Deep in the ruined mansion of J. F. Sebastian, among his creepy dolls and androids, Deckard and Pris fight as Roy approaches. Pris has mounted Deckard in a grip with her thighs wrapped tightly around Deckard’s head and is squeezing his neck tightly—in a rather compelling metaphor for the sex act—his head as the “little head” of the penis, being metaphorically castrated by Pris’s scissor-like hold. He breaks free and sends her body flying away from him allowing him to shoot her multiple times. Her body lands on her back with legs bent and, in this position, she begins

a rapid-fire bouncing violently in reaction to the shots. Making a horrible and loud mechanical sound of pain, her body convulses like a broken engine whirling and bouncing in the air and crashing back and forth against the wall. It is one of the most memorable sights in the film. It radically seizes her “humanity” from her and reveals her as a broken machine. She is objectified in the most denigrating, violent, and horrific—but “rich sight”—imaginable.

Blade Runner’s women are display objects that are in play for the benefit of the males in the film. They are literally the playthings—the dolls—made for the use of the real men in the film: Tyrell, Sebastian, and as we learn later in *Blade Runner 2049*, perhaps Deckard (himself real? Ridley Scott says he was Nexus 6) as well. All the females die early, and in the association with the machinations of the males in the larger story, including Roy Batty, the leader of the replicant revolt. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the film seemingly begins with the same position for females as objects for consumption by males. In the landscape of the now darkened city of LA, lit by various massive female vocaloids in various sexually explicit identities that appear all over the decrepit city, creating a memorable “rich sight”. We might assume the city is run or at least influenced by male creators. However, two powerful and unfortunately masculinized females appear: KD6’s boss, Lt. Joshi, and Niander Wallace’s assistant, Luv. Both are driven to conserve the masculinized “law”—Joshi as a dedicated police person, and Luv as a dedicated assistant to Wallace. The two key males in this story are Deckard and KD6, and their lives have been involved with women who have “loved” and supported them: the replicant Rachael for Deckard and the AI Joi for KD6. These females orbit their existence, but by the end of the story, all these females are dead—but one.

The center of the story slowly emerges around the mysterious Dr. Ana Stelline, a designer of memories, not as code, but as *sight*. Living under a glass dome—as the exceptional specimen and object of the story—she creates memories through manipulating sight, images she imagines and can adjust through a visual interface. She is seemingly about the work of creating “rich sights” for replicants, but in her ability to remember things no one in this population of replicants or real humans could ever have seen—green forests and insects—she becomes something of a messianic being. Though gendered as female, a suggestion presented as the evidence supposedly created by Deckard and the rebellious Freysa to protect her, in a record of her as a set of two identical DNA of both female and male, gives rise to the potential for Ana to be gendered as both or neither gender, and in her messianic position, presenting a potential of a genderless new world. This, of course, suggests Donna Haraway’s solution in her *Cyborg Manifesto* as movement away from gender entirely, feminism, and politics, toward a genderless posthuman solution. She, as her gender is “pictured”, alone survives.

Ana’s family name of “Stelline” reflects the actual meaning in Italian for an orphanage in Milan, developed around 1500s, when orphans were called “stars” after the nuns who cared for them, and it remained an orphanage until 1971. This romantic association accentuates her position as an “orphan star” beyond real family and replicant manufacture—to a posthuman and even cosmic messianic force as a new being dissociated from the warring factions. It will, as Lt. Joshi insists, “break the world”, and move life on earth toward a new and different mode, including a new visuality and aesthetic. It is not a new notion, but compelling as an allegory for a Post-Anthropocene future. Futures are necessarily “envisioned” by those in a present position. That *Blade Runner 2049* is a redux of a highly influential SF film suggests that something can be *read through* those narratives and those “rich sights” that brought us a potential to reflect upon as redemption for our ecosystem and gender sins, on a planet that *will* lose all its resources, and *will* die as a life-giving planet, since we do not have the will or the *sight to see* and comprehend our fate. There is but one possibility—one star in a firmament of potential stars, that might deliver us from our dire fate. What are the chances we will be able to see it?

“Oh, my God! My attempt to escape the web of fate was the web of fate.”

Timothy Morton (2017)

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