



Blade Runner—replicants are good to think with, while thinking about ancient Greek heroes

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Blade Runner—replicants are good to think with, while thinking about ancient Greek heroes

August 29, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

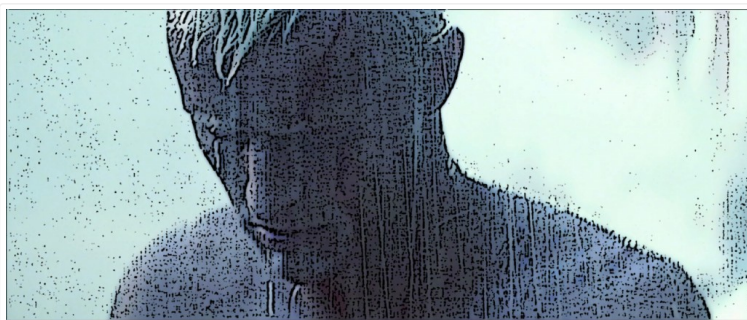
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2018.08.29 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. For studying the ancient Greek hero, I think that the kinds of things we see in the storytelling of films and other such contemporary media can be “good to think with.” The expression I have just used here derives from a commonly-used paraphrase of wording once used by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book *Le Totémisme aujourd’hui* (1962). He was referring to the many different espèces or ‘species’ of animals in our world as *bonnes à penser*. His point was, animals are “good to think with” in mythmaking. I apply here this same expression to the “replicants” that populate the story being told in the film *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982; there was also a sequel in 2017, *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve). These replicants, as we will see, are comparable to the heroes that populate the myths that were being told and retold in ancient Greek civilization.

“Clips Notes” Hour 1: comments on audio-video segments (“clips”) relevant to Hour 1 of *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*

§1. Unseasonality is an essential characteristic of ancient Greek heroes. Similarly unseasonal are characters in the film *Blade Runner* who are known as replicants. That is why, I think, these replicants are so good to think with in Hour 1. Just as the many different kinds of animals in the world, according to Lévi-Strauss, are good to think with in the process of mythmaking, so too are replicants in the story of *Blade Runner*. In this story, the word replicant refers to animals or humans that are “man-made,” as it were. And, because they are man-made, they are unseasonal. A prime example of such unseasonality, as we will now see, is a replicant by the name of Roy.



After *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982): Roy, the replicant.

§2. In the story of *Blade Runner*, all animals in the world are on the verge of extinction. To compensate, scientists have created artificial animals. Their word for such an artificial form of life is replicant. And the technology of creating replicant animals then gets extended, perversely, to the creation of replicant humans. An obvious motive for creating replicant humans is the utilitarianism of creating slave labor. This idea makes me think further: just as the hero is an exaggerated human in terms of ancient Greek poetry, the human replicant is an exaggerated form of humanity in terms of modern science fiction. As an artificial creation, a human replicant—even an animal replicant—could be expected to be exempt from death. In other words, a human replicant could be expected to be “immortal.” This further idea, that whatever is artificial does not need to die, helps us appreciate the anguish of a replicant named Roy, who is an artificial human. Because he is artificial, made by scientists, Roy could have been made to last indefinitely. He could have been made “immortal.” And, as we can see if we view the entire film *Blade Runner*, such immortal replicants do exist—at least, in the studio version, if not in the Director’s Cut version. But Roy, by contrast, was in any case deliberately made “not to last” by his creator, who is a scientist by the name of Tyrell. At the moment when Roy was given an incept date, that is, at the moment when he started to exist, he was also programmed, from the start, to have a termination date. Even worse, his artificial termination date is abnormal in comparison to the natural termination date of the average “real” human. This seasonal

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abnormality makes it possible for him to become a supreme warrior, a superman. The shorter his life-span, the more intense his life becomes. In what follows, I will quote in context what is said about Roy's intensity: **"The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long."**

§3. Clip 1: **"What seems to be the problem?—death"** and **"I've done ... questionable things."**

When Roy confronts his maker, the scientist Tyrell, he experiences a variety of emotions in learning the facts of his unseasonality, which his maker cynically describes as the "facts of life." The scene of confrontation between Roy and Tyrell is what I show here. The replicant is feeling fear, anger, sadness—even hate and love together. I now quote the dialogue between the replicant and his "maker," who is also his "father."

Roy announces:

"It's not an easy thing to meet your maker."

In these ambiguous words, we can find implications of Roy's fear. Ordinarily, the expression "to meet your maker" means "to die and then meet God." By implication, Tyrell is Roy's "god."

Roy's next question reveals his anxiety about his defectiveness:

"Can the maker repair what he makes?"

Tyrell responds by asking Roy:

"What seems to be the problem?"

Roy answers: **"death."**

Tyrell responds by asking Roy: **"Would you like to be modified?"**

Roy answers:

"I had in mind something a little more ... radical."

Such "radical" modification is "beyond my jurisdiction," responds Tyrell. After a frantic series of further questions and answers, Roy reaches the painful conclusion that there is no hope left for him: he cannot be made immortal, once he has been created mortal. Tyrell tries to console him: **"A light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very very brightly, Roy! Look at you! You are the prodigal son. You're quite a prize."** Roy knows the negative side: **"I've done ... questionable things..."**, he reflects sadly. **"And extraordinary things,"** Tyrell interrupts. The creator continues to try to console the creation by urging Roy to rejoice in the intensity of his short life: **"Revel in your time!"** But by now Roy cannot put the brakes on his obsession with the negative side, with those "questionable things." The replicant's concluding words link these "questionable things" with his being unqualified—disqualified—for immortalization:

His words are ironic and ominous: **"Nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn't let you into heaven for!"**

§4. Roy speaks here like some "fallen angel," and his words seem to become poetry. At an earlier point, not shown in any of my clips, he announces himself by "quoting" poetry:

"Fiery the angel fell..."

We may compare William Blake, *America, A Prophecy*, Plate 13:

"Fiery the Angels rose, and as they rose deep thunder roll'd
Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc..."

"All of this is ... academic" (—Tyrell's words to Roy).

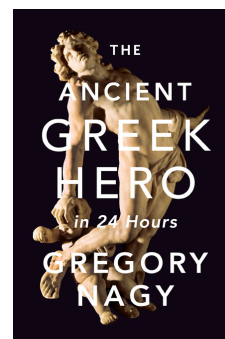
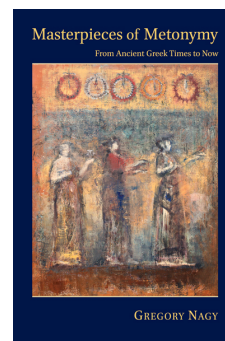
§5. Unintentionally, the character of Roy in *Blade Runner* matches the three characteristics of the ancient hero as I analyze them in H24H [1§50](#):

A) Roy is unseasonal. His abnormally short lifespan, set by an abnormal "termination date" that is linked with his "incept date," makes it possible for him to have an abnormally intense life. **"A light that burns twice as bright burns half as long."**

B) Roy is extreme, mostly in a positive way but also in some negative ways. "I've done ... questionable things ...," says the replicant. His creator interrupts: "... and also extraordinary things! Look at you, Roy. You are the prodigal son. You're quite a prize! Revel in your time!"

C) Roy is antagonistic toward the "god of biomechanics" who created him, the scientist Tyrell. He is also fatally attracted to him. When the replicant encounters his creator, he recognizes himself. The creation recognizes that the creator has modeled him in his own idealized image, and he recognizes that his creator is the closest thing he has to a father that he can love and hate viscerally, all at the same time.

§6. Clip 2: **"Time to die."**



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The main theme in this scene is death—as a real experience, as an experience that makes it possible to understand life as a real experience instead of an artificial one. The key to this experience is victory over the fear of death. The first thing we will hear is the speaker saying: **“Quite an experience, isn’t it, to live in fear! That’s what it is to be a slave.”** Ironically, the speaker of these words is a replicant, an artificial human who was created by a scientist. This replicant, Roy, is programmed to be a warrior, and he is in general purposed to serve the needs of real humans. He is therefore their “slave.” At the beginning of the scene, Roy is about save from destruction a character who seems to be a “real” human, the “blade runner” Deckard. Roy has just recognized the fear of death that Deckard is experiencing. By saving Deckard’s life, Roy will prove to himself that the cynical “human” is the real slave. That is because, at this moment, it is Deckard and not Roy who fears death.

§7. Ironically, we see this artificial human undergo the “real” experience of death, not some artificial experience. What makes Roy’s experience real is that he has developed emotions like fear and anger and sadness. In earlier moments of *Blade Runner*, we can see Roy getting afraid and angry and sad about his approaching death, which he knows is catching up with him at abnormal speed because he was **“built not to last.”** When the time comes for Roy to die, everything comes together for him. He experiences the only perfect moment of his would-be life.

§8. In this one perfect final moment of death, the replicant becomes poetic. If I may put it in ancient Greek terms, he sings his swan song. I quote his dying words:

“I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder [variant: shores] of Orion. I watched sea beams [variant: C-beams] glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.”

§9. Roy’s swan song, as he speaks of battleships ablaze on the shores of Orion, and so on, ends with the words **“...like tears, in rain.”** Closure comes with the picturing of a white dove fluttering out of his grasp at the moment of death. We see here a borrowing of a film-making trope that stems from early 20th-century Russian film conventions, where a powerful hero counterintuitively releases rather than crushes the bird held in his dying grip.

§10. As a point of comparison, I call attention to a moment in *Iliad* 2.484–493. Here the Narrator is invoking the Muses to tell him what they saw and heard; he does not have it in him to tell it by himself, since he has not lived the experience. Analysis in H24H [2§§15–20](#).

§11. Here is another point of comparison. It happens in *Iliad* 16.855–857, where the *psukhē* of Patroklos flutters away to Hades at the moment of his death-agony; similarly at *Iliad* 22.344–375, the *psukhē* of Hector flutters away (verses 361–363). I highlight here the fact that Achilles kills Hector after he notices a detail about his mortal enemy, producing a “flashback” (*Iliad* 22.311–336).

§12. By contrast, I point to the “flashback” experienced by Roy just before he says his swansong (“I’ve seen things...”).

§13. Clip 3: **“this is just a test...”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ic0PuvJbdu0>

A replicant named Leon is being interrogated by an official who is testing him to determine whether Leon is or is not a replicant. Leon is being tested for empathy. Does he feel empathy for various kinds of agony experienced by animals? But what kind of question is this, if in the world of *Blade Runner* all real animals are on the verge of extinction? Leon is getting more and more agitated as the interrogator, with his deadpan persistence, asks questions that get more and more intrusive. The rapidly increasing heartbeat of the replicant, the insistently thumping sound of which becomes ever more rapid and oppressive for us the audience, matches the increasing agony of the animal being described by the interrogator in his “test” question; and it corresponds to a strange sort of ascending scale of affection that identifies both the replicant and the tormentor of replicants (tormentor also of real animals?). The interrogator’s test for Leon climaxes with a question about Leon’s mother. Leon replies to the tormenting question: “I’ll tell you about my mother!” And then, almost instantly, Leon kills his tormentor. I compare the moment in *Iliad* 9.574–596, analyzed in H24H [2§§44–45](#), where the hero Meleagros inadvertently experiences his very own ascending scale of affection, climaxing in the song of lament that is sung by his very own wife Kleopatra—a song that prophesies the imminent agony and holocaust of a whole community.

Tags: [Achilles](#), [Blade Runner](#), [god-hero antagonism](#), [H24H](#), [Hour 1](#), [Iliad](#), [life and death](#), [Patroklos](#), [Roy Batty](#), [William Blake](#)

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