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Power and Perception in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

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In its plot, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* recalls elements of "The Sandman," the story that grounds Freud's analysis of the uncanny. Its eerie atmosphere is created by the premise that automaton "replicants" are visually indistinguishable from humans, while replicant Roy Batty overthrows his human "father," Eldon Tyrell, by gouging out his eyes in what Freud would identify as a symbolic castration. But the film's complex use of the motif of the eye takes its exploration of the uncanny beyond individual psychology into social critique. By its conclusion, the film suggests that one's ability and willingness to perceive systemic social inequality is the true measure of humanity. *Blade Runner* trains us into awareness of flawed social hierarchies by repeatedly emphasizing eyes and connecting them with perception beyond the physical.

The film integrates Freud's definition of the uncanny in unexpected ways to point out the fundamental flaws of its society as a whole. Freud defines the uncanny as "something repressed which recurs" (241). He states that this strange feeling stems not from fear of the unknown, but from "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). The main uncanny feature of *Blade Runner* at first appears to be the very thing that human characters struggle with throughout the film: the inability to distinguish replicants from humans. However, what they've truly repressed is their awareness of the damage caused by their hierarchical society, driven by Tyrell's distorted vision of progress. When the replicants themselves start resisting this system, its flaws resurface, eventually shifting Deckard's perception of reality. We as viewers are trained through the repeated eye motif to perceive this social uncanny, which is upheld through the characters' unquestioning adherence to a destructive social system.

Images of eyes frequently dominate *Blade Runner*'s mise-en-scène, drawing attention to how the film's fictional world is perceived by those within it. One of the first shots we see is an extreme close-up of an eye reflecting the dystopian urban wasteland of Los Angeles, immediately followed by a shot of a futuristic ziggurat on its skyline—an obvious symbol of the class hierarchy that was inherent in the civilization that built it. The shot then cuts back to the eye, this time with an explosion from the smokestacks reflected in it. This opening sequence sets the stage for a world where industry has run rampant, but the pollution and destruction are still structured within a

class pyramid. However, the cuts to these extreme close-ups of an eye show us that the eye's owner is aware of the destructive nature of this system. The strategic use of the eye reflecting the setting informs us within the first minute that there is likely a class structure, that it is destructive, and that there are those who see it for what it is.



While the eye in the opening sequence invites us into a critical perspective on the story's society, the scene immediately following it establishes the eye's role within that society: that is, as an indicator of either naturalness or artificiality, an attempted ward against the uncanny. The camera zooms into the ziggurat skyscraper, where a man named Leon is undergoing a "Voight Kampff" test: a test that examines pupil dilation in response to questions that should provoke an emotional response, thereby proving the test subject's humanity. We see multiple close-ups of Leon's eyes through the examiner's camera, as well as a flash of light in his pupils as the intensity of the scene builds. We as the audience thus start trying to discern whether Leon is human or replicant, likely overlooking the artificiality of the humans' constructs and even the artificial nature of the test itself. Since Leon kills the examiner, the test is not completed, but we can assume he is a replicant. We cannot, however, assume that he doesn't have the capacity for human emotion; his killing of the examiner was likely an act of desperation, perhaps an even more human emotional response to extreme stress than passing the test would have shown. The juxtaposition of eyes in these two sequences indicates that in this society, being able to perceive what is real and what is fabricated is a matter of importance, yet the social structure itself can be seen as a fabrication in which the humans are playing an even more mechanical role than the replicants.



The connection between eyes and perception of the uncanniness of the power structure is developed further when Roy Batty kills his "father," Eldon Tyrell, by gouging out his eyes. The use of this classic reference to the uncanny tells us that his limited perception of humanity is the root

of his society's ills. His greed makes him blind to the fact that he is manufacturing slaves who are sentient beings capable of human emotion and intelligence. Despite having the genius to design artificial intelligence, his perception is so deeply ingrained in normalized social hierarchies that he is unable to see all the damage he is causing, most of all to his own creations. Tyrell's death—in his home at the top of the pyramid—metaphorically emphasizes his lack of true perspective for all his vision. This is reinforced by the way Scott presents the characters' eyes, suggesting a dichotomy between Batty's and Tyrell's perception. Close-ups of Batty's face show orange light reflecting in his pupils during his conversation with Tyrell and even while he's gouging Tyrell's eyes. This



same light reflects in the pupils of Tyrell's owl, close-ups of which frame Batty's entrance into and exit from Tyrell's room. The parallel drawn between Batty's eyes and those of an animal known for having incredible vision in the dark suggests that Batty perceives the world as it is, despite the constructs that obscure that truth from others. In contrast, Tyrell literally has poor vision, wearing thick glasses that often obscure his eyes. Given the film's connection between physical eyes and social perception, this is clearly symbolic of Tyrell's ignorance; there is an artificial barrier between him and the rest of the world. Even the camera is out of focus as Tyrell looks at his chessboard



before allowing Batty to enter the room, pointing further toward the blurry hierarchical lens through which he views the world. In failing to see anything but a narrow vision of progress, Tyrell precipitates his own demise. In ignoring the social uncanny that he is largely responsible for, he falls victim to it.

The film's use of eyes to symbolize perception of resurfaced social issues also extends to its dialogue. The dialogue repeatedly brings attention to physical eyes and then shifts our focus to perception through Roy Batty's lines, showing that it's actually the replicants who perceive the truth of their society's uncanny nature despite being manufactured themselves. While searching for answers to extend his lifespan, Batty questions Tyrell Corporation employee Hannibal Chew. Chew answers, "I don't know such stuff. I just do eyes. Just eyes—genetic design—just eyes. You Nexus, huh? I design your eyes." Batty then says, "Chew, if only you could see what I've seen with your eyes." In this reversal, Batty shifts the focus from the physical eyes to the idea of perception by implying that Chew would think differently if he had experienced the world through Batty's point of view. This is further clarified by Batty's dialogue with Deckard later in the film. Before saving Deckard's life, Batty says, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a

slave.” Batty has been at the very lowest rung of society and poses a threat to the status quo when he refuses to be exploited any longer. As a blade runner, Deckard represents the cultural controls that keep the existing order in place—an order established by fear. Yet at this key moment when even the contrasting low and high camera angles show that Batty finally has power over Deckard, he saves Deckard’s life, showing him that replicants have the capacity for empathy and, in fact, teaching Deckard what empathy is. As Batty is dying, he again brings attention to the things he’s seen. Describing moments of awe in outer space, he says, “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe” and laments that “all those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.” Because of the incredible phenomena he has seen, he perceives the transience of life with greater clarity. His enlarged perspective allows him to see the senselessness of a society that privileges progress at whatever cost. Given Deckard’s teary eyes in response to Roy’s death, and his subsequent flight from the authorities with a replicant, the film suggests that Batty’s mercy changes his perspective on both replicants and the system he has played a role in upholding. He is finally able to see the corruption of the social structure through the eyes of those who are most exploited by it.

While eyes are associated with the uncanny, the uncanniness that pervades the film is itself used to bring awareness to the fact that something is off with society’s vision of reality. *Blade Runner* shows the importance of this awareness by repeatedly emphasizing eyes and connecting them with perception beyond the physical. Through changes in perspective, characters come to see through the fear and ideology they are conditioned to accept to keep the power structures in place. They’re able to spot the difference between authentic and artificial, finding that humans are often more artificial than the replicants they manufacture. Perhaps due to humanity’s blindness to the destruction its societal structures have caused, the Tyrell Corporation may be accurate in saying that replicants really are “more human than human.” ☹

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