

Philosophy Through Ambiguity: Readings of *Blade Runner*

(Published in *Film and Philosophy* Volume 21)

The phrase “paradigmatic philosophy” is ambiguous.¹ Some ways of doing philosophy are *in fact* considered typical or exemplary for, among other things, historical, cultural, institutional, or even sexist and imperialist reasons. Some ways of doing philosophy *should* be taken as paragons. While some reasons certainly exist for thinking that philosophy ought to be linguistic (preferably written as opposed to spoken, contra Socrates) and clear, I speculate that this view of the proper way to philosophize is also partly a product of the business of academia. Philosophy should not be thought of as being *exclusively* within the purview of either writing or clarity. I contend instead that films can philosophize, and can do so by virtue of their ambiguity.

For a film that philosophizes, its philosophical content and artistic form should be an indissoluble whole. To ‘see’ the philosophy in a film will therefore inherently involve interpretive engagement with the film’s art. Such seeing will be the sort of aspect-seeing characterized by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and will entail the entire responsiveness of the viewer, including the full circumstances of what she says and does in relation to the work. A film can philosophize through ambiguity by engaging audience capacities for aspect-seeing, and by providing a structure for viewers to explore philosophical issues precisely through exploring the film’s artistic form. When successful, ambiguity works both to provoke profound questions of philosophical significance and to map out the logical space of a given philosophical topic. Ambiguity may also play a cognitive role in deepening and enlarging our philosophical understanding. In addition to shifting our perspectives or entrenched habits of thought, ambiguity may enable us to see various ideas and significances together in a synoptic vision of the whole. Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner, The Final Cut* (2007) is an example of a film that philosophizes through ambiguity, by supporting a number of contrasting responses to the philosophical question of what it is to be human.

What does it mean to say that film can do philosophy? Clearly, a mere recording of a philosophical lecture, such as the footage of Michael Sandel’s course on justice,² does not constitute a genuine instance of film doing philosophy. Here, it is the philosopher, Sandel, who is doing the philosophy and not the film itself. Offering a compelling explanation for *why* such cases do not count as instances of film *doing* philosophy is, however, more difficult. Paisley Livingston has suggested that film can properly contribute to philosophy only via *exclusively* cinematic

capacities—that is, via “an internally articulated, nonlinguistic, visual expression of content”—which rules out the linguistic representations of lecture videos.³

However, this “bold thesis,” as Livingston calls it, rests on a problematic assumption about medium-specificity in which the success of an artwork (here, its philosophical contribution) depends on how the unique capacities of its medium are employed. But the medium-specificity thesis is untenable, since films regularly achieve artistic ends by employing formal and expressive capacities shared with other art forms, such as photography (framing), theatre (acting), and literature (narrative). Moreover, as Noël Carroll points out, we evaluate the quality of artworks *all things considered*, and not just relative to how they exploit the features distinctive to their medium.⁴

The Oceana Roll sequence in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925) where the Tramp sticks forks into two bread rolls to mime dancing feet is more imaginative and original than the Keystone Kops comedy *Lizzies of the Field* (1924). This is so even though the latter employs cinematic editing of chase sequences and the former is arguably a mere recording of a stage pantomime.⁵ Therefore, Livingston’s exclusivity clause should be jettisoned, and film should be seen as contributing to philosophy when it does so by virtue of any of its artistic capacities.⁶

The philosophy embodied in a film’s artistic form should be understood as having an indissoluble form/content identity. Films can do philosophy through doing art, and vice-versa. The inability to divorce the philosophy in film from its formal workings explains why the mere recording of a philosophical lecture is excluded as a genuine instance of film doing philosophy. It does not matter so much that such ‘canned’ philosophy cases are *just* recordings or that they do not employ particularly cinematic camera techniques. After all, a mere recording can have an artistic point (consider Warhol’s *Empire* [1964]), and a slightly more cinematic recording of a philosophical lecture that maybe used close-ups to highlight the lecturer’s main points would also not count (or would only count negligibly) as film doing philosophy. Rather, the point is that the philosophy in a recording of a lecture is not expressed or represented through any of the film’s artistic elements.

If the philosophy done by a film is manifested in the film’s artistic form, then interpretation on the part of the audience will always be needed to understand the film’s artistic workings and hence its philosophical content. But then, one might wonder whether any philosophy is done by the film proper, or if instead it is always the interpretation that *imposes* philosophical content,

which is not otherwise present, onto the film. This imposition objection, as Thomas Wartenberg terms it,⁷ is behind the concerns of many who reject the very possibility that films can philosophize. Bruce Russell, for instance, argues that films alone cannot establish any general or probable philosophical claims because they provide only a limited number of examples (fictional at that) and give no explicit arguments.⁸ The underlying assumption is that if there are to be sufficient chains of justificatory reasoning to warrant the designation of philosophy, then audiences must supply these themselves.

Similarly, Livingston has objected that the philosophy in a film must be capable of being paraphrased, otherwise it is doubtful whether any philosophy is present. However, if the philosophy can or must be paraphrased, then the philosophy is not carried out by means exclusive to the cinematic medium, since it can be completely articulated linguistically.⁹ Although we have already rejected Livingston's presumption of medium-specificity, the worry nonetheless remains that it is the paraphrase that does the philosophical work, and not the art of film. How much of the philosophical thought needs to be completed by the viewer before she is responsible for the philosophy and not the film?

The first point to note is that even for conventional ways of doing philosophy, audiences may contribute something to the philosophical work being done. Carroll observes, for example, that thought experiments might be presented so deftly that informed listeners are able to draw out the relevant philosophical conclusions on their own.¹⁰ More generally, for any sort of communication and understanding to be possible, there needs to be a shared background of knowledge already in place. One does not enter philosophical dialogues as a blank slate but rather always brings one's prior cognitive schema to bear when encountering new ideas. Doing philosophy thus invariably depends on the work of one's interlocutors.

Secondly, when it comes to our responses to any form of art, interpretation is crucial to understanding what is present in a work. As Arnold Isenberg has pointed out, a critical interpretation of a work "gives us directions for perceiving... which narrows down the field of possible visual orientations and guides us in the discrimination of details, the organization of parts, the grouping of discrete objects into patterns" in order to "*get us to see*" how exactly certain formal elements accomplish a particular artistic end.¹¹ If the philosophy done in a film is manifested through the film's artistic capacities, then 'seeing' the philosophy will take place precisely through

such elucidations, drawing our attention to particularly relevant features, showing us how different elements hang together as a whole, etc.

Similarly, with regard to Livingston's paraphrase objection, even if the philosophical content of a film can be paraphrased, it is the philosophical content *as it is disclosed through the film's artistic workings* that constitutes the film's philosophizing. As Peter Kivy notes, "a paraphrase... is not meant to be a substitute" for an artwork itself.¹² If the content of artworks were so easily replaceable, then there would be no reason to watch a film once one had read a critic's review; hence, the standard injunction to see the film for oneself, to read the original book, to view the actual painting—a recommendation that generally applies for philosophy as well. Reading an encyclopedia entry on Sartrean existentialism does not replace perusing *Being and Nothingness* for oneself. Perfect paraphrase is an oxymoron. The real test of whether philosophy is *in* a film will be to go and view the work, to follow the directions of a critical philosophical interpretation, and to see if a "sameness of vision" is achieved.¹³

Even if the linguistic medium was used in a film to convey philosophical content, it is important to account for *how* that language was employed (e.g., in the famous classroom sequence about Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* [1970]). A film's use of language will often be enmeshed with other formal expressive capacities (in this case, the play of light and shadow in the classroom). Dialogue often takes place alongside the employment of such devices as editing, lighting, and camera movements, all of which have an impact on its meaning.¹⁴

To say that work is needed to 'see' the philosophy in a film is rather metaphorical, but can be further cashed out through Wittgenstein's notion of aspect-seeing. Wittgenstein distinguishes between two sorts of seeing: the first is when one reports having a visual experience ("I see *this*") and the second is when one declares a 'likeness' between two objects, the latter of which he designates as noticing an aspect.¹⁵ The difference between the two cases of seeing is shown by what one does in order to demonstrate what it is that one sees. Consider the phenomenon of seeing a duck-rabbit figure. I can draw an exact replica of the duck-rabbit figure to show that *this* is the figure I see. However, to show that I see the figure *as* a rabbit, I cannot just draw or point to the figure since it is the exact same figure, the same lines and colors, that can be seen under *multiple* aspects—both as a duck and a rabbit.¹⁶ Instead, I must point to *other* figures of rabbits to show what I see the duck-rabbit figure *as like*.¹⁷ "Seeing as' is not part of perception. And for that

reason it is like seeing and again not like.”¹⁸ Seeing-as involves more than just perceiving the physical properties of a figure, even though it is also true that the duck or rabbit aspects that I see are called forth by the duck-rabbit figure itself.

Norton Batkin points out that this sort of aspect-seeing is exactly what is going on when one is interpreting the formal workings of an artwork.¹⁹ To see an artwork as having a certain form entails more than noticing certain material constituents of the work, even as the form is not separable from how the work handles its medium. Seeing an object *as* something, and offering an interpretation of it, is not merely a matter of reporting a visual impression, but involves a way of regarding that object, of holding an attitude or stance toward it. For someone to say of a picture, “I see the face as beguiling,” as opposed to smiling, is *itself* part of her treating the picture in a certain way, of expressing her response to it.²⁰ “Her remark draws our attention to her circumstances, those in which she now finds herself speaking (and so acting, responding), and gives salience to particular features of those circumstances (features of her position and of the picture).”²¹ Following a critic’s directions to ‘get us to see’ what she sees and to reach a ‘sameness of vision’ will entail appreciating the full scope of her responsiveness to the work including the nuances of her behavior, attitudes, and circumstances.

To even see something *as* a work of art rather than an ordinary object is itself an act of aspect-seeing. As Batkin expresses it: “We respond to what we see, we speak or write, inscribing ourselves into the artist’s work. His gesture, his attitude of inscribing, must be met by ours. ... Without our acts of judgment and criticism, without declaring our position or stance, his work will remain ordinary for us, will fail to yield its significance as *art*.”²²

Artworks such as Marcel Duchamp’s readymades or John Cage’s *4’33”* perhaps play most dramatically on our capacity for aspect-seeing. By inviting us to see otherwise commonplace objects or sounds as having artistic significance, and to interrogate the very limits of this possibility, Duchamp and Cage brought into stark relief the circumstances in which we interpret their works as *artworks*.

So, to object to the possibility of a film doing philosophy by saying that the philosophy is in our response and not the work is to misleadingly bifurcate the issue. The philosophy in a film will not be another material property of the work, or some isolatable content that one can straightforwardly extract. Instead, seeing the philosophy will be a matter of following the film’s formal workings, where this will be bound up with the entire range of one’s responsiveness and

attitudes toward the artwork. Of course, some philosophical work might be done on our end as viewers. Interpreting a film as philosophical, drawing out the philosophical significance *in this way* or *that* will just be part and parcel of our engagement with it as a work of art. As Wittgenstein put it, “So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it.”²³ Carroll draws a useful analogy to the historian of philosophy who in her exegesis of a philosophical text might supply an omitted premise, clarify an ambiguous concept, or tease out certain implications. In both cases, philosophical thoughts may be completed, clarified, or expanded upon in order to make sense out of the work of another artist or author.²⁴

Drawing attention to our attitudes and stances toward artworks does not entail that philosophical interpretations will just be a matter of subjective projection and divorceable from the artwork itself.²⁵ Philosophical interpretations, while requiring audiences to complete certain thoughts, are nevertheless tied to the artwork itself and explained through the exploration of its form. There may be no operational rules for adjudicating when an interpretation is no longer faithful to a work. The mere possibility of imposition, however, does not guarantee it. It is the whole complex of artwork/response that allows us to make sense of what is properly philosophical *in* a work—that is, what the work is and how it worked on us.

The elaboration of our engagement with art through aspect-seeing helps to explain how artistic ambiguity can be a means by which film philosophizes. Murray Smith has notably objected to the whole notion of film doing philosophy through ambiguity by arguing that ambiguity, while at times an artistic virtue, nonetheless comes with the philosophical cost of sacrificing clarity. For Smith, film and philosophy have disparate goals (the first is artistic while the latter is epistemic) that may come into conflict even if they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.²⁶ In response to Smith, Carroll notes that, at best, the relations between ambiguity to artistic virtue and to philosophical vice track tendencies, not necessities. Consider exemplary cases of ambiguous philosophy in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna, or Zhuangzi, where it is through being intentionally equivocal that these thinkers convey their ideas. Ambiguity is not necessarily a muddiness of thinking, just as transparency does not always entail perspicacity. Artistic purposes can sometimes be equally, if not better, served by being especially clear (as the novels of George Orwell demonstrate), and sometimes not.²⁷ For films that in fact do philosophy, these twin purposes (artistic and epistemic) will be mutually reinforcing and achieved via each other.

Artistically successful ambiguity should hence be distinguished from ambiguity as such. All art is ambiguous to an extent, since artworks underdetermine the various interpretations that can be brought to bear on them. Call this the indeterminacy of art. If the claim that film can do philosophy through ambiguity referred to indeterminacy, then the claim would be rather vacuous. To say that films *can* philosophize through ambiguity is not to say that ambiguity is the *only* artistic means by which they can do so, nor that films that philosophize are necessarily better (qua philosophy or qua art) the more ambiguous they are.

Cleanth Brooks helps to illuminate the contours of successful ambiguity in his discussion of poetry as paradigmatically employing the language of paradox to work through contrasting and contradictory meanings. Rather than being simply unintelligible, poetic paradoxicality, for Brooks, involves “a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings.”²⁸ This harmonizing formal structure is neither “the arrangement of various elements into homogenous groupings, pairing like with like” nor the combination of unlike with like via “the simple process of allowing one connotation to cancel out another.”²⁹ Instead, “it is a positive unity, not a negative; it represents not a residue but an achieved harmony.”³⁰ Perhaps Brooks overly emphasizes harmony in his description of poetic paradoxicality, since ruptures and dissonances can also bring about densities of meaning. Nonetheless, what Brooks is working toward here is what I take to be the key to achieving successful ambiguity: a fullness of meaning, a balance-intension of various juxtaposed attitudes and significances, which may reach a depth inaccessible to mundane language.

Films can philosophize through artistically successful ambiguity precisely by engaging audience capacities for aspect-seeing. Such a work will serve as a site for imaginative apprehension in which multiple attitudes and stances can be adopted in relation to it. The artwork will not just elicit various, even contradictory, interpretations and significances, but will also sustain them together through its artistic form. A film can philosophize through ambiguity by inviting viewers to explore philosophical issues via exploring various interpretations of its formal workings, thus engaging our imagination at once artistically and intellectually. This can take place in at least two ways.

First, an ambiguous film can provoke numerous and particularly profound questions from viewers as they attempt to interpret and make sense of the work. Questions after all may be just

as, if not more, important to philosophy than answers. A successfully ambiguous film that incites rich and deep questions may illuminatingly call forth the philosophical curiosity and wonder of its viewers. Furthermore, evoking the right questions may change the conceptual frame ordinarily taken for granted on an issue or suggest connections between various concepts that were otherwise unnoticed.

Second, successfully ambiguous films can philosophize by mapping out the logical space of a particular topic in ways that draw out the implications of the relevant alternatives. Here certain philosophical issues may be taken as focal points and a film may be unambiguously *about* some theme. Nonetheless, the *treatment* of a central philosophical issue may be successfully ambiguous such that it explores the various nuances and possible solutions to a given question. Each of these candidate positions may be coherent when taken on their own even though they might contradict each other in their presentation together. Although a film may not necessarily endorse a single positive position, it may guide or nudge our thinking in certain directions. It is no secret that doing philosophy requires not just a fine critical edge nor a boldness to declare found solutions, but also the imaginative and synoptic vision to see the different stances that are at stake on a given philosophical issue. Of course, these two ways of philosophizing through artistic ambiguity are neither analytically distinct nor mutually exclusive. Perhaps the one emphasizes more the deepness of philosophy while the other its breadth. Nonetheless, both characterize how a successfully ambiguous film might provide a structure for philosophical reflection through its artistic form.

Films that philosophize through ambiguity are not, as it were, simply more philosophy such that their artistic ambiguity is merely accidental to the philosophy being done. Rather, ambiguity, when successful, serves a cognitive function and can enlarge or deepen our understanding in ways that other means of presenting philosophical material may not. Ambiguity does not just help to map out multiple ideas, but can enable us to see vast swathes of logical space all at once in a single act of synoptic judgment. By holding a plethora of stances together (along with what makes each persuasive and have a justificatory pull even as they diverge or conflict) through its artistic form, ambiguity can offer us a kind of comprehensive and total understanding.³¹ In contrast, while a list of propositions detailing various positions or arguments may excel at conveying content explicitly and precisely, it may present the numerous facets of an issue merely as disparate pieces.

The sort of understanding ambiguity might afford is something like what a philosophy professor teaching a survey course seeks to impart to her students (even though she likely does not

employ ambiguity to accomplish this). When showing students the philosophical lay of the land on a given topic and the motivations behind different possible views, the professor may seek to nudge students toward her own favored position without dogmatically pushing her own intellectual agenda or predilections. Whether her students gain the kind of understanding in question will be shown by what they do in various circumstances including how they respond to sundry queries or objections—in short, whether they come to deftly navigate the philosophical terrain for themselves and not simply ape their professor's views or responses.

By leveraging our capacities for aspect-seeing, artistic ambiguity also plays an important cognitive role in leading us to shift our perspectives and alter our habits of thoughts. Aspect-seeing, as Kirk Pillow elaborates, does not simply make present what is absent and so is not mere fantasy.³² Instead, imaginative seeing-as is epistemically valuable because it works to clothe the world with new significances.

Seeing-as serves an educative and reflective function in between the involuntary observational content of perception and the voluntary production of images, precisely because when seeing-as layers images onto the perceived world, it accomplishes an investment of meanings into the world. It transforms worldly things at the level of their significance for us.³³

Unlike perceptual seeing, which is involuntary, imaginative seeing-as depends on the voluntary attention of the viewer. Therefore, artistically ambiguous films can legitimately do philosophy precisely by inviting and engaging our imaginative apprehension, even as such philosophizing must be met halfway, so to speak, with the attentive interpretations of viewers. In fact, a mark of a successfully ambiguous film is one that withstands repeated, even indefinite, attentive viewings precisely because it sustains audience capacities for aspect-seeing.

The knowledge that artistic ambiguity affords may not, as Catherine Wilson observes, be explicitly expressible or otherwise lead to “an increased disposition to utter factually correct statements or to display technical prowess.”³⁴ Nonetheless, it may involve a change in one's concepts that will be shown by what one says or does under certain circumstances, or by shifts in how one perceives certain phenomena. It will be like the practical wisdom of a young man who learns kindness from his aunt, which is demonstrated by the change in how he starts to regard his aunt and others even if such behavioral changes may not be able to be wholly described in so many words.³⁵ Wittgenstein speaks of the experience of an artwork “clicking,” “fitting,” or suddenly hanging together in the right way, such as when Klopstock's poetry finally made sense to him after

he realized its meter was meant to be stressed abnormally.³⁶ Martha Nussbaum likewise talks of “getting the tip” or coming to understand a hint about how to see in a particular way.³⁷ The dawning of an aspect that Wittgenstein and Nussbaum are characterizing here involves a shift in one’s stance (perhaps an unsettling of a sedimented perspective) toward both the artwork and the world at large, and thus a reorientation of one’s cognitive attitudes.

Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner, The Final Cut* (2007) is a prime candidate for a film that philosophizes through artistic ambiguity. Set in dystopian L.A., this work of science fiction noir follows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a Blade Runner detective, on his assignment of ‘retiring’ or killing replicant (android) fugitives who have escaped to Earth from off-world colonies. A survey of the immense critical literature on *Blade Runner* already indicates numerous philosophical issues that the film engenders surrounding humanity, agency, memory, emotions, race, gender, class, postmodernism, capitalism, cities, religion, etc.³⁸ Scott’s process of “layering,” or his “self-described technique of building up a dense, kaleidoscopic accretion of detail within every frame and set of a film,” also helps contribute to the accumulation of meaning and artistic ambiguity in *Blade Runner*.³⁹

I will focus on the philosophical questions raised by *Blade Runner* regarding what it is to be human, and whether replicants are (in a relevant sense) human. Strictly speaking of course, replicants are not human. They are made, not born; they possess physical gifts surpassing human limits; they supposedly have a limited repertoire of emotional responses; and they are built with only a four-year lifespan. We, as the audience, are called upon to judge whether any of these differences are in fact morally significant, and in judging the humanity of replicants—whether they are in fact beings *like us*—we are made to consider in turn the nature of own humanity. As the film progresses, more profound questions are increasingly raised and unpacked as to whether replicants are human in an *evaluative* (rather than biological) sense, and what that sense might involve.⁴⁰

These issues come to a head in the film’s climactic scene, which culminates in the death of the replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer). As he approaches the end of his life, Batty chases Deckard through the Bradbury Building, terrorizing and toying with him. In his attempt to escape, Deckard ends up hanging precariously on a steel rail jutting out from the rooftop. Standing over Deckard and watching him struggle for his life, Batty muses, “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.” Then just as Deckard loses his grip, Batty seizes him and lifts him

back onto the rooftop, saving his life. Batty sits down next to the dumbfounded Deckard and gives the following soliloquy, right before dying:

I've... seen things you people wouldn't believe...
Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark
near the Tannhäuser Gate.⁴¹
All those... moments will be lost... in time... like [coughs] tears... in rain.
Time... to die.

One possible interpretation of this scene suggests that replicants are indeed relevantly human because they, like us, are beings for whom death is an issue. In Heideggerian terms, replicants live as Being-toward-death.⁴² It is not just that replicants die, but rather that they too *know* that they will die, and can choose to face their own death authentically or not. Death is significant, according to Heidegger, because in confronting death as an omnipresent possibility, we are thrown back into life and made to recognize its value.⁴³ Batty's elegy represents an exemplar of responding courageously and unflinchingly to one's own mortality. His words express neither a quiet resignation nor a fervid anxiousness, but instead achieve an at-homeness with his own transience. As Batty avers the singularity of his experiences (the things he's seen that others wouldn't believe) and mourns the ephemeral nature of "all those moments [...] lost in time, like tears in rain," his words give a sense of closure to *his* life and testify to the only life he has to call his own. The moment of Batty's death as his head falls slack onto his chest is shown in slow motion as if to draw our attention to the *sui generis* nature of both his death and the entirety of his life. This scene works to shift the conceptual frame concerning the humanity of replicants away from questions about whether they are biologically human to questions about whether they share in the constitutive feature of our existence as Being-toward-death.

Another possible interpretation is that Batty lives a (more than) fully human life because he exemplifies Nietzsche's overman, "the noble, self-reliant re-evaluator of all values."⁴⁴ Dr. Tyrell's injunction to "Revel in your time" and Batty's toying with Deckard can be seen as evidence for Batty taking on Nietzschean notions of play.⁴⁵ In addition to chastising Deckard for lacking sportsmanship, Batty hauntingly quips, "You'd better get it up, or I'm going to have to kill you. Unless you're alive, you can't play, and if you can't play..." The Christian symbols that gather around Batty (the nail in his palm, the white dove) are freely available for him to employ or reject as he so deems, which indicates he has gone beyond the need for such Christian values.⁴⁶

Furthermore, Batty murders his God and creator in Dr. Tyrell, thus removing any external guarantor of values and making possible a genuinely self-authenticating life.⁴⁷

However, we can just as easily read Batty's relation to the surrounding Christian imagery not as one of rejection, ironic play, or transcendence, but reappropriation. Batty does not move beyond Christ, but rather becomes him. By piercing a nail into his own hand (putatively to delay his death), Batty crucifies himself. While on the rooftop, Batty is shown in a low angle shot surrounded by auras of light as if it were his transfiguration. Like Christ who forgives the ones that wronged him and so saves them, Batty forgives Deckard by saving him and so saves himself.⁴⁸ Previously, Batty is aligned with Satan in his deliberate misquoting of William Blake ("Fiery the angels fell / deep thunder rolled around their shores / burning with the fires of Orc.") and his plummet from the stars in the elevator after murdering Dr. Tyrell and Sebastian. Yet after all his cruelty against others, Batty's final act of forgiving the very man most undeserving of his mercy works to achieve his redemption. The flight of the dove after Batty's death reads as the ascension of his soul or a symbol of liberation.

Even as the film pulls us in the direction of seeing replicants as evaluatively human (whether as a Being-toward-death, the overman, a figure of redemption, or all the above), this movement is also not inexorable. Instead, the film succeeds artistically and philosophically precisely because it maintains in juxtaposed harmony, even in this climactic scene, Batty's humanity with his *inhuman* qualities: his superhuman strength, his sadistic cruelty, and his emotional stuntedness. After all, Rutger Hauer himself thought that Batty's actions of saving Deckard was not a moral choice, but "purely a reflex."⁴⁹ This certainly would serve to explain Batty's sudden change of heart to save Deckard's life after tormenting him so viciously. Did Batty show himself to be fully human, capable of autonomous moral choice? Or was he in the end just a machine (albeit a biologically engineered one), merely reacting to the situation as he was programmed to? Perhaps despite their veneer, Batty's moments prior to his imminent death were not an authentic human response but rather a reflex—a flinch.

On the other hand, if Batty was just as human as us all along, then we are also just as human as him. Batty's capacities for such atrocities and inhumanities parallel those same capacities within us, along with our prospects for either redemption or condemnation. Batty is not just an exemplar for being more fully human and responding authentically to life and death, but he also reveals to us the dark side of human nature, its wickedness and depravity. As a pre-eminently ambiguous

character, Batty spans the full scope of human possibility: he is at once loving and ruthless, eloquent and childish, playful and grave.

The film's carefully worked ambiguity underlies the very undecidability of the question as to whether replicants are human or, rather, the fact that the answer to such a question will always be a *decision*, that is to say, an ethical judgment.⁵⁰ Viewers are called upon to wrestle with the issue of what makes an entity evaluatively human; we are called upon to *make a decision*, and to recognize the fact that it *is* a decision. There is no scientific test such as the one administered by the Voight-Kampff empathy machine that can definitively settle the matter one way or another, and so relieve us of the burden to decide. Is the Voight-Kampff device even reliable? Does it ever produce false positives ("Have you ever retired a human by mistake?" asks Rachael)? Perhaps the Voight-Kampff machine just measures the physiological correlates of empathy in human bodies, leaving it open that replicants, though not biologically human, can exhibit empathy as well.⁵¹ Like Captain Bryant's racist epithet for replicants ("skin jobs") or the euphemism for their murders ("retirement"), the Voight-Kampff test may just instantiate another deflection of the claims that replicants make on us—a refusal to acknowledge their humanity, which also dehumanizes ourselves.⁵²

One's humanity, the film suggests, depends on being acknowledged by, and acknowledging others as, humans.⁵³ Empathy, or imaginatively placing oneself in another's position, itself constitutes just such an act of acknowledgment. When Batty taunts Deckard, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it?" (echoing Leon's words earlier, "Painful to live in fear, isn't it?"), Batty is (at first) vengefully forcing Deckard to feel the fear that he has felt himself. But as he watches Deckard on the brink of death, perhaps Batty himself begins to empathize with Deckard in their shared encounter with death and so saves Deckard out of this empathy. As a constitutive feature of being human, death is both universal and singular for we all die and we all must confront our ownmost possibility.⁵⁴ Perhaps, too, we all need someone to watch us die. Death, as Berys Gaut notes, evokes "an urgent psychological need to share emotionally one last time, to empathise with another creature, to pass on something of one's emotional life to someone else, however temporarily and imperfectly."⁵⁵ Hence, Batty's elegy of the things he's seen and all his moments.

The witnessing of another's death as his or her own is also the acknowledgment *par excellence* of another's humanity.⁵⁶ As Batty decides to bring Deckard back from the brink, the mutuality between the two is strongly reinforced through camera angles. The shots of Deckard hanging by

his fingers cut with shots of Batty standing over him are filmed from a high-angle and low-angle respectively. However, once Batty rescues Deckard, the angle shifts to a neutral shot, moving from one of domination and power to one of equality. Such careful camera work prepares the scene for the possibility of reciprocal acknowledgment: Batty's recognition of Deckard as someone to whom he can speak and Deckard's recognition of Batty as one whose death deserves his response. After Batty dies, Deckard blinks long and hard as if he is seeing Batty for the first time, that is, as a human anyway. Here, the shot dissolves from Deckard's face to Roy's (whereas before there were only cuts) so as to overlay and hold their shared humanity and the mutuality that has now been reached between them. "You've done a man's job, sir," interjects Gaff, since the acknowledgment of another (as) human is a task befitting only a fellow human. Having Batty reach out to him in death paves the way for Deckard to love Rachael on equal terms and to acknowledge her fully. The reciprocity of their final conversation "Do you love me? / I love you. / Do you trust me? / I trust you." is a far cry from the earlier forced "Say, 'Kiss me' / Kiss me. / I want you. / I want you. / Again." in an ambiguous scene interlacing rape and romance.⁵⁷

So is Deckard himself a replicant? Ridley Scott certainly thought so.⁵⁸ Besides ancillary pieces of evidence linking Deckard with replicants (such as his occasionally glowing eyes, or obsession with photographs), the insertion of Deckard's unicorn reverie in the *Director's Cut* (1992) and the *Final Cut* (which was not present in the *Original Theatrical Cut* [1982]) is supposedly damning. The silver paper unicorn that Gaff leaves Deckard at the end of the film now signals that Gaff knows about Deckard's inner mental life, because Deckard's dream is an implant (just like Rachael's memories). Scott claims that he "Can't be any clearer than that. You don't get it, you're a moron."⁵⁹

Yet other interpretations of Gaff's unicorn are available that do not read it as clinching evidence for Deckard's replicant status. The unicorn might symbolize Rachael: a fragile, beautiful thing made by humans and perceived as waste,⁶⁰ or the girl who is different from other horses,⁶¹ or a chimera that won't last.⁶² The unicorn could also represent Deckard: the wild and fierce beast who, upon falling in love with a fair maiden, is finally tamed and captured.⁶³ The ambiguity of Deckard's replicant nature reflects the blurring of the categories: replicant and human. What matters is not whether Deckard is biologically replicant or human, but whether he (or Batty or any of us) is human in the evaluative sense. Seeing someone *as* human is itself precisely an act of aspect-seeing and a judgment that requires us to decide what attitude to adopt toward another.

The *Original Theatrical Cut* is thus less successful philosophically and artistically, because Deckard's voice-over narration in this cut disambiguates the issue of Batty's humanity and thus closes off the possibility of just such a judgment: "I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life. My life. All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want: Where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die." As we, the audience, come to interpret Batty's death through Deckard's thoughts, we no longer bear the responsibility of acknowledgment ourselves. The issue has been more or less settled: Batty is as human as we are, because he asks many of the same questions we do. The voice-over is unidirectional in its consideration of how much replicants are like us. But the *Final Cut*, in its ambiguity, causes us to further question how much *we* are like replicants. Its ambiguity continues to mobilize our capacities for aspect-seeing, and to call on us to take a stance—artistically, philosophically, and ethically.

To summarize, then, what I hope to have shown is how *Blade Runner, The Final Cut* philosophizes through artistic ambiguity, by disclosing different dimensions to the issue of what it is to be human, and does so more successfully than the *Original Theatrical Cut*, which disambiguates its central issue. By provoking profound questions about (among other things) mortality, authenticity, human emotions, and redemption, the *Final Cut* works to shift the conceptual frame surrounding the definition of humanity away from issues of biology. Besides establishing important connections between acknowledgment, empathy, death, and love, the film continues to sustain a variety of collaborative and competing accounts of Batty's humanity—grounded in notions of Being-toward-death, the overman, the figure of redemption, the exemplification of our *inhumanity*, or all of the above. Furthermore, it is through the whole array of the film's artistic capacities, such as narrative, symbolism, camera angles, framing, editing, music, and lighting, that *Blade Runner* works to accomplish its philosophical task.

By inviting and sustaining multiple interpretations, the film's artistic ambiguity mirrors the constitutive undecidability of our own humanity, calling on us to make that judgment for ourselves and to take responsibility for doing so. The ambiguity of *Blade Runner, The Final Cut* creates deep densities of meaning that engage our capacities for aspect-seeing in an ongoing fashion, and the conversation continues about how the philosophical issues present are explored through the formal workings of the film. Such interpretive engagement does not sabotage the presence of philosophy

in the film, but rather constitutes the very condition for seeing it to be there at all. If we have encountered philosophical ideas about the meaning of human existence before (as most of us have), the film's artistic ambiguity can unsettle us from previously sedimented habits of thought, and enable us to see a plethora of significances anew in a single act of synoptic understanding. Therein lies the cognitive achievement of *Blade Runner's* artistic form. Philosophy is done here, and by the art of film no less.

Jonathan Kwan

Notes

¹ Many thanks to Noël Carroll, Richard Eldridge, John Carvalho, Dan Shaw, Ian Schnee, my anonymous reviewers, and audience members at the 2016 ASA Annual Meeting and the 2016 ASA Graduate Conference for their advice and feedback on this paper.

² Michael Sandel, *Justice with Michael Sandel* (Harvard University, 2011), video, <http://www.justiceharvard.org>.

³ Paisley Livingston, "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (2006): 12, doi:10.1111/j.0021-8529.2006.00225.x.

⁴ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44–5; see also Noël Carroll, "Forget the Medium!," in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–9.

⁶ For a similar rejection of medium-specificity and Livingston's exclusivity condition, see Aaron Smuts, "Film as Philosophy: In Defense of a Bold Thesis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 4 (2009): 410, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6245.2009.01370.x.

⁷ Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 25.

⁸ Bruce Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 89–90.

⁹ Livingston, "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy," 12.

¹⁰ Noël Carroll, "Memento and the Phenomenology of Comprehending Motion Picture Narration," in *Memento*, ed. Andrew Kania (New York: Routledge, 2009), 131.

¹¹ Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," *The Philosophical Review* 58, no. 4 (July 1949): 336, doi:10.2307/2182081.

¹² Peter Kivy, *Once-Told Tales: An Essay in Literary Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 168.

¹³ Isenberg, "Critical Communication," 336.

¹⁴ For a rejection of the paraphrase dilemma along these same lines, see Smuts, "Film as Philosophy," 416–7.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 165e.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168e.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Norton Batkin, "Aesthetic Analogies," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32–4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33–4.

²² *Ibid.*, 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, 165e.

²⁴ Noël Carroll, "Philosophizing through the Moving Image: The Case of 'Serene Velocity,'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (2006): 182–3, doi:10.1111/j.0021-8529.2006.00239.x.

²⁵ I would like to stay neutral here on the issue of whether filmmakers (whether auteurs, directors, or other artistic collaborators as well like actors and editors) must *intend* to do philosophy for philosophy to be present in a film. If intentionalism is true, then films will do philosophy so long as filmmakers intend to do philosophy and successfully carry out this intention through the formal workings of their film. If intentionalism is false, artworks can still have meanings determined by their content and form and it can be asked whether works with such meanings do philosophy. Thus, regardless of the truth of intentionalism, the question can still be posed whether films through their art can philosophize.

²⁶ Murray Smith, "Film Art, Argument, and Ambiguity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 1 (2006): 39–40, doi:10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00227.x.

²⁷ Carroll, "Memento," 131.

²⁸ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1960), 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ I lift the notion and description of seeing through a single act of synoptic judgment directly from Louis Mink, although he employs it in the context of historical understanding. "The distinctive characteristic of historical

understanding consists of comprehending a complex event by ‘seeing things together’ in a total and synoptic judgment which cannot be replaced by any analytic technique.” “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 1 (1966): 42, doi:10.2307/2504434.

³² Kirk Pillow, “Imagination,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 361.

³³ *Ibid.*, 356.

³⁴ Catherine Wilson, “Literature and Knowledge,” *Philosophy* 58, no. 226 (October 1983): 495, doi:10.1017/S003181910006664X.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 495–6.

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 19, 4–5.

³⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, New York), 160.

³⁸ See Judith B. Kerman, ed., *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Phillip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991); Will Brooker, ed., *The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005); Amy Coplan and David Davies, eds., *Blade Runner* (London: Routledge, 2015).

³⁹ Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (New York: It Books, 1996), 47.

⁴⁰ For the distinction between human in the biological versus evaluative sense, see Berys Gaut, “Elegy in LA: *Blade Runner*, Empathy and Death,” in Coplan and Davies, *Blade Runner*, 35.

⁴¹ This is presumably an allusion to Richard Wagner’s opera, *Tannhäuser*, concerning a minstrel-knight who like Batty is redeemed upon the moment of his death.

⁴² For such Heideggerian readings, see Stephen Mulhall, “Picturing the Human (body and Soul): A Reading of *Blade Runner*,” *Film and Philosophy* 1 (1994): 94; Andrew Norris, “‘How Can It Not Know What It Is?’: Self and Other in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*,” *Film-Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013): 43; Peter Atherton, “‘More Human than Human’: *Blade Runner* and Being-Toward-Death,” in Coplan and Davies, *Blade Runner*, 47–50.

⁴³ Atherton, “More Human than Human,” 48.

⁴⁴ Mulhall, “Picturing the Human,” 96; see also Atherton for this interpretation of Batty as Nietzsche’s overman, “More Human than Human,” 51.

⁴⁵ Mulhall, “Picturing the Human,” 95–6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Mulhall and Atherton would most likely read this act not as forgiveness but as overcoming resentment.

⁴⁹ Sammon, *Future Noir*, 194. Hauer is recalling here something Scott told him, with which he agrees.

⁵⁰ See David Davies following Hilary Putnam, “*Blade Runner* and the Cognitive Values of Cinema,” in Coplan and Davies, *Blade Runner*, 149–50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵² Norris, “‘How Can It Not Know What It Is?’,” 33.

⁵³ Mulhall, “Picturing the Human,” 90–1.

⁵⁴ Atherton, “More Human than Human,” 63.

⁵⁵ Gaut, “Elegy in LA,” 40.

⁵⁶ Mulhall, “Picturing the Human,” 99.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 90–2; see also Deborah Jermyn, “The Rachel Papers: In Search of *Blade Runner*’s Femme Fatale,” in Brooker, *The Blade Runner Experience*, 166–7.

⁵⁸ But Scott was reticent about Deckard’s replicant status for decades, which means that he helped preserve the ambiguity of that issue. Scott’s disdain for the voice-over inserted at the insistence of the studio into the *Original Theatrical Cut*, however, was clear from day one, both because it said what the scene meant rather than showing it in cinematic terms and because it disambiguated the issue of Batty’s “humanity.”

⁵⁹ Interview in “Deck-a-Rep: The True Nature of Rick Deckard” in DVD 4 of the Complete Collector’s Edition of *Blade Runner* (Warner Bros and the Blade Runner Partnership, 2007).

⁶⁰ Rachel Warner, “A Silver-Paper Unicorn,” in Kerman, *Retrofitting Blade Runner*, 179.

⁶¹ Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 82.

⁶² William M. Kolb, “*Blade Runner* Film Notes,” in Kerman, *Retrofitting Blade Runner*, 177.

⁶³ C. D. C. Reeve, “Replicant Love: *Blade Runner* Voight-Kampffed,” in Coplan and Davies, *Blade Runner*, 83.