

The Nineteenth-Century Romantics' Influence on the Future of Civilization in *Blade Runner*

At the end of the film *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, the protagonist makes a radical move to run away with the female android outside the bounds of the city, presumably to start a new life. The city is a science experiment gone wrong. He leaves behind a constraining modern technological society for a life rooted in nature, where humans can be free. The idea of the film is that the control of man's future by science is dangerous to humanity. This idea is not new but comes from the nineteenth-century Romantic movement's struggle against the domination of science and reason over imagination. The film's interpretation of its fictive future of civilization is a coherent vision dominated by the ideas of nineteenth-century Romantics, which have become ubiquitous to such an extent that the ideas have come to be taken for granted.

When closely analyzed, the film is a close translation of radical ideas about liberty in the literature of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement to a fictive version of the modern technological society. The control of reality by science, William Blake thinks, is "the Tree of Death" (408) for humanity because human liberty is not rooted in science but in nature and the human imagination; an awakened imagination, not science and reason, allows interpretation of the world into a vision of liberty and creates a free world for man. Although the film has been criticized for the simplicity of its story, most people miss the film's radical Romantic perspectives on human liberty, passivity, imagination, and the future of civilization, which offer an alternative way to live to that given to us by science and reason.

William Wordsworth perceived that humans' liberty was threatened by passive human adjustment to their social and cultural environment and decried uncritical submission to the values of their society or deference to social convention; such submission is to something not a

part of nature but a false and spurious interpretation of society and reality. He writes that we “half create” (“Tintern Abbey” 109) our perceptions with our imaginations and thus can go beyond our perceived, factual realities. To a Romantic, we should not passively obey society by accepting its rules as objective reality. Society’s beliefs are interpretations projected onto things as they are. The notion that our choices are necessarily connected with objective reality is an illusion of habit. Romance deals with the mastery of factual reality by imagination and the creation of literature that awakens imagination by restoring human emotion. Romance activates our imagination and allows it to see the reality we desire. Imagination swallows everything in the material world to half-create man’s own vision. The notion of Wordsworth’s speaker in “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” that we “half create” (109) our perceptions with our imaginations and thus can go beyond our present, material realities helps heal the speaker, who is weary with the corrupt city and the ways of fallen men, by reconnecting him with nature and reawakening his imagination through the eyes of his innocent little sister, Dorothy.

The Romantics used imagination to link our reality to imaginative scenarios beyond our context in time and space but similar to ours, in which passivity is dominant. Following Coleridge’s idea, which he explained in *Biographia Literaria*, for an “awakening” from the “lethargy of custom” (192), the Romantics wrote for the imagination, promoting freedom by infusing their readers trapped in similarly constrained situations with imaginative and emotional energy. The film’s striking fictive setting seamlessly links our imagination to the film’s imaginative scenario of man’s future passivity and confinement. In the opening scene of the film, we are introduced to a technological cityscape through the eyes of an unseen character. The cityscape is intercut with the images of an eyeball that is reflecting the scene back out to the viewer. The eye doesn’t simply take in what it sees but also projects one’s vision and

interpretation back out. This opening scene suggests that we are active participants in our reality and thus able to affect it. The film portrays a dialectic between science, represented by Tyrell, a genetic engineer whose singular vision controls the city, and the free human imagination, represented by the protagonists (some of whom are androids), including Deckard, a policeman who is assigned to kill androids but realizes he has been doing wrong the whole time. Yet, despite the suggestion of the opening scenes of our agency in creating our reality, in the film, the people in the modern technological society have given up their freedom to a singular interpretation of the world that rejects human liberty.

The film's approach toward freedom in many ways runs parallel to Blake's attitudes towards the restrictive and at times enslaving qualities of rules and charters, which were intensified in the nineteenth-century city by what Blake saw as passivity. Everywhere there are people in the manacles of conventional thinking, rules, and charters. In the film, this process of enslavement through ownership has encompassed all of human life to the point that Tyrell owns the very physical bodies of the androids. In the film, scenes of bureaucratizing, filing, testing, and reporting of human beings are repeated to show the domination and degradation of innocent human beings in this society. Similarly, Blake suggests authorities exclude others in the city with charters. In the idea of the charter, a license to own and control an area, Blake suggests humans create enslavement for those confined by these charters. Blake's poem "London," for example, speaks of "charter'd" streets (1) to show that human freedom for innocents is radically circumscribed in the city. The film's fictive scenario of enslavement extends nineteenth-century trends like wealth inequality, dispossession, and diminishing opportunities into a modern technological society. The "off-worlds" on other planets have become chartered by Tyrell in the

fictional scenario and only selected people can move off-world. In the film, the city is teeming with impoverished people who are excluded and are unable to move “off-world” to a better life.

The film, like the Romantics, posits the modern city as a technological place of confinement and corruption for innocents. The binary in a city between innocents and the experienced who enslave or corrupt them in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* is repeated in Romantic poetry about the city. So, too, William Wordsworth’s poem “Michael” portrays the city as a “dissolute” place (452) where an innocent young man goes to seek his future and save his rural family and is ruined by it. The factories are what Blake calls “dark Satanic mills” (295), a phrase referring to industrial factories. In the film, the shots of the cityscape show factory stacks as tall as skyscrapers shooting flames many stories high into the air. Lightning, which symbolizes the city’s fallen status, strikes the city from a polluted, unnaturally colored sky, as if from an angry god.

The film’s protagonist, Deckard, is a man turned into an emotionless machine in the process of hunting and killing androids for the bureaucracy. The Romantics believe that emotion, not merely the ability to reason, makes us human. As a machine, Deckard has lost his humanity and become a fallen man. He begins the film as an emotionally detached watcher who surveils life as an obedient policeman (and is himself surveilled) and has mentally withdrawn from society and the world. Deckard’s job destroying androids requires him to handcuff his active, critical mind. Deckard begins the film already fallen in the decayed social environment, emotionally cold and totally withdrawn from society and the world. The film’s rainy setting forms a psychological prison, an oppressive, lonely, desperate, melancholy state reflecting the fallen state and social isolation of people in the city. The rain is cold, black, acidic, a polluted form of nature like the characters.

In a famous scene, Deckard uses a scientific test to detect androids. The fictive Voight-Kampff test differentiates androids from humans by their emotional response to hypothetical situations that call for an emotional response. The androids are less emotional and fail to pass the test because they have less of an emotional connection to animals and nature and human beings than do humans. Yet there is an implicit irony to the scene, for even some of the humans have lost the capacity to feel emotions. Even though he is the one giving the test, Deckard finds himself locked in mental manacles; Deckard's job destroying androids requires him to suppress his strong emotions, thus negating his ability to use imagination in an empowering way.

In the film, the city is full of fallen men like Deckard. Deckard's job shows that the city's corrupting influence does not constitute the only danger to the individual's simplicity and innocence; humans falling due to violent impulses unrestrained by feeling are another threat to the Romantic goal of individual liberty. In Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage," a rustic man joins the army and goes off to war and, in leaving, ruins his innocent wife and child. Similarly, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," an innocent albatross is killed for no reason by the mariner. The ancient mariner grapples with guilt over his treatment of innocents. Similarly, the speaker in Wordsworth's poem "Nutting" falls due to his violent despoiling of an innocent nut tree's branches and boughs. The "Nutting" speaker develops a "sense of pain" (51) at the "voluptuous," (23) "tall and erect" (19) branch and bough having been "dragg'd to earth" (43). What is dragged to earth is not just the branch and bough but himself. He ends with a warning to respect the spirit in the woods and to beware our own violence. Although the speaker's initial purpose in "Nutting" is to harvest nuts from trees, the speaker's despair after despoiling a nut tree is similar to Deckard's guilt after killing a beautiful android, and both discover a nobler purpose. When Deckard realizes that he has been doing wrong the entire time

by killing innocent androids and feels melancholy about his job for the first time, he decides to change.

The film's protagonists progress from passive acceptance of reality and society to active questioning and participation. In the film, the android Rachel saves Deckard's life, destroying one of her fellow kind to save him, a human, and demonstrating that Tyrell cannot own their wills because the androids eventually develop desires for freedom. This rebellious act transforms her from an innocent android designed to be obedient to Tyrell into an individual who can choose to disobey authority. Tyrell, who created the androids, is similar to William Blake's Urizen, a godlike figure in many of his poems representing the embodiment of authority. Urizen is the personification of Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" ("London" 8), his term in the poem "London" for unimaginative thought that shackles the individual's freedom and liberty. The manacles in William Blake's poem "London" are an allusion to the Prometheus myth, which Lord Byron also interpreted in his poem "Prometheus." Prometheus, manacled by the gods for freeing mankind from their own manacles, is the prototypical Romantic hero because he feels strong emotions of pity for the innocent, suffering humans and disobeys against unjust authority. This model appears also in *Blade Runner*: In the film, Rachel's killing a fellow android to save Deckard leads to a progressive explosion of mental and social manacles. Helping to free Deckard as well as herself from authority, she has become her own mistress, her mind free from the manacles of Tyrell's rules. She transcends the designs of her creator, Tyrell, to become an individual. Disobeying Tyrell to move out of the city to free themselves, the protagonists risk punishment, even death, just as Prometheus risked punishment to free others, and the film encourages admiration of such defiance, as do Blake, Byron, and other Romantics.

In the film, the awakened Deckard frees the android Rachel from the city because outside the city, surrounded by nature, they can escape the corruption and constraints of the city. By the end, the protagonist Deckard is a man who has developed a critical self-consciousness to detach himself from the moral and social standards of his particular time and place. He makes progress into becoming the archetype of the awakened romantic individual who recasts his reality into an imaginative form, thus recovering life from mental and social manacles. He breaks the mentally and socially conditioned manacles that handcuff him to his former reality of enslavement.

Some viewers attacked the film's happy ending with Deckard escaping with Rachel into the unknown, but the ending is emotionally complex. There are melancholy undertones in the happy ending, also, due to Rachel's unknown time to live and Deckard's active acceptance of this reality. This complexity is a translation of the notion from the Romantics that there is melancholy in joy. John Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" suggests that becoming passive to avoid melancholy in ourselves is wrong and misguided. This passive avoidance of melancholy prevents us from achieving joy. Keats urges us to "glut" our "sorrow" with joy instead (15). Romantic literature shows a way towards joy through acceptance of melancholy.

Although the literal story is simple, the message about the imagination in the film is what is important. Romantic literature about the escape from an unfree society to freedom is the literal situation, like in the film and in many Romantic poems. For example, in John Keats's poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," the innocent captive is a woman trapped by her family and corrupt society and locked away in a castle. On the Eve of St. Agnes, she allows herself to imagine a new life of freedom. A knight is the one who shows a way out for her by entering through her imagination on this magical feast day. The knight represents freedom, and the woman represents imagination

because of the way in which he enters her dream about her ideal man and doing so allows them both to escape their corrupt environment.

The basic conflict and resolution of the story in the film reflect a Romantic analysis of the modern man's situation of recovering humanity from conventional rules in a modern technological society. The solution the Romantics offer is to recover one's freedom from man-made laws and conventional thinking and social myths. Romantic literature, unconstrained by society, frees the individual's mind and imagination even without changing all of society. Using the analogy of the west wind as "preserver" and "destroyer" (14) of realities, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" dramatizes how individuals as creators change reality from "winter" to "spring" (70). A single individual can free others not just only in the traditional, physical way but also, as the wind carries seeds, by spreading their unconventional, nonconformist ideas and interpretations of reality. Individuals can become equal to authority by creating their own interpretations of reality that empower them.

Due to the ubiquity of nineteenth-century Romantic ideas' influence on artistic and social culture, the source of these ideas is often not clear to most viewers today, and the essentially radical move of the film's protagonists' solution is seen as routine by some in its audience, particularly critics who called the story clichéd. However, the nineteenth-century Romantic ideas the film plays with offer a radical approach to human freedom and an alternative way to live to that given to us by conventional rules. In this way, the film extends the ideas of the Romantics.

The Romantics continue to hold interest in this moment, influencing future movements. A Romantic poet, even if dead, is still fighting for something he believed in. Romanticism's ideas live because the movement was not tied to a set of people but was meant to be a universal set of ideas. We have never outgrown the Romantic intellectual moment in our history because

authorities still pose radical threats to humans and people still are handcuffed in “mind-forg’d manacles.” The more shackled a society or individual is, the more relevant the ideas of the Romantics are. So, the movement's influence survives. Innumerable movements and individuals of the future will benefit from the Romantic moment so long as man’s struggle with authority still exists. Many people assume that technology and freedom are radically opposed. They see the film as a warning about technology. But Romantic ideas expose that binary as simplistic and fallacious. The goal of the Romantics was not to end technology but to make people more aware of technology’s effects on human ideals and thus more active. By applying Romantic ideas to raise consciousness and avoid passivity, humans can remain free while living alongside man-made technology.

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