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# Catching 'tears in the rain': Blade Runner and the archiving of memory and identity

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# Catching 'tears in the rain': Blade Runner and the archiving of memory and identity

## **Abstract**

Blade Runner presents the ultimate archival dilemma: to preserve or "retire" (dispose of) a sentient record. Beneath the Hollywood love story lays a dystopian view of the future wherein the line between human and humanoid is blurred through the existence of biorobotic androids known as replicants. Beyond this, new gadgets, systems and technologies dazzle in futuristic, though familiar, landscapes. And what do replicants, being human, EMP blackouts and origami have to do with archives? Answers reside in their present and possible relation to aspects of the world of the archivist in the modern era, as evidenced through technological innovation, the limitations and inherent fragility of electronic records, consideration of what is worth saving, and issues of identity. Beneath the perpetually drenched cityscape of Los Angeles 2019 and dust-bowl Las Vegas 2049, the Blade Runner concept reinforces the importance of the archival record and the archivist. Desktop and 3D technologies enable the transformation of archival items into digital files, and virtual reality (VR) provides the same opportunity for historical environments and objects. The rapid development of human-focused robotics and neurotechnologies present the archivist with unforeseen challenges, as exemplified by Blade Runner's fictional 2022 replicant revolt which sought to destroy all identifying records. In a world of artificial intelligence, Rick Deckard's "Memories, you're talking about memories" defines the archival mission in areas of preservation, disposal and access. This article analyses themes present in the Blade Runner universe and considers their reflection upon, and connection to, the evolving role of the archivist.

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# **Catching ‘tears in the rain’: Blade Runner and the archiving of memory and identity**

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## **Abstract**

*Blade Runner presents the ultimate archival dilemma: to preserve or 'retire' (dispose of) a sentient record. In this dystopian world the line between human and humanoid is blurred through the existence of biorobotic androids known as replicants. Their present and possible relation to aspects of the world of the archivist is evidenced through technological innovation, the limitations and inherent fragility of electronic records, consideration of what is worth saving, and issues of identity. The Blade Runner concept reinforces the importance of the archival record and the archivist. Desktop and 3D technologies enable the transformation of archival items into digital files, and virtual reality (VR) provides the same opportunity for historical environments and objects. The rapid development of human-focused robotics and neurotechnologies present the archivist with unforeseen challenges, as exemplified by Blade Runner's fictional 2022 replicant revolt which sought to destroy all identifying records. In a world of artificial intelligence Rick Deckard's 'Memories ... you're talking about memories' defines the archival mission in areas of preservation, disposal and access. This article analyses themes present in the Blade Runner universe and considers their reflection upon, and connection to, the evolving role of the archivist.*

## Archiving memory

As rogue replicant Roy Batty reflects on imminent death at the end of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, he expresses regret that his memories will be lost forever 'like tears in the rain'.<sup>1</sup> A connection between Batty's world and that of the archivist does not readily come to mind during this climactic encounter between Blade Runner Rick Deckard and the leader of a group of Nexus 6 biorobotic androids. Yet Roy's emotional soliloquy points to the important role of the archivist in the preservation of memory, and its place as a defining element of human identity.

But what does it mean to be human? How does one provide proof – with a test or series of tests, or perhaps through archived records of identity, be they analogue or digital? And what if such records do not exist, are lost or purposefully destroyed? The humanity of a human is supposedly inherent, not requiring proof. When a robot or mechanoid displays human characteristics and is promoted as 'more human than human' – what then? And what if an archival record stands in the way of an android proving its humanity? Or a child is born of android parents? Do so-called human rights apply? Do androids dream of electric sheep? And do humanoid robots, or replicants, ultimately comprise a threat to the very existence of the human race?

Such questions have been posed within the realm of science fiction since the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the onset of mechanisation, industrialisation and philosophies such as scientific management raised the spectre of dehumanisation and replacement of sentient beings by mechanical or biological machines.<sup>2</sup> The introduction of monstrous metalliferous tanks on the battlefields of

Europe during the latter stages of World War I, and the international proliferation of semi-automated production lines during the 1920s, were visible manifestations of the threat of human redundancy. As populations exploded during the early twentieth century, cities such as New York, London and Berlin expanded both laterally and vertically to accommodate a new reality which promised progress for the many, though not for all. From H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, with its class stratification between the machine-reliant Morlocks and the nature-loving Eloi, through to George Orwell's dystopian *1984* and the novels of Philip K. Dick during the 1960s, the public has been presented with a future in which machines and the fate of humanity are intertwined.<sup>3</sup> In many instances, but not all, this is ultimately to the latter's detriment. Filmic presentations of robots behaving badly have been common, from *Metropolis* in 1927 to the more recent *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Westworld*, *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *Transformers* and *Battlestar Gallactica*.<sup>4</sup> Books, films, art and performance have all expressed fear and favour at the possibilities of a fantastical future in which androids play a part, ranging from utopia to dystopia. Ongoing advances in robotics and neurotechnologies bring such scenarios closer to reality in both industrial and domestic environments.

The 1982 Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* and Denis Villeneuve's 2017 sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, along with its three associated featurettes, present an updated version of Fritz Lang's reflection on life in a modern metropolis, based on Weimar Berlin and Roaring Twenties New York.<sup>5</sup> *Metropolis* presented a dehumanised workplace overseen by a profit-driven Henry Ford-like figure, amid the decadent lifestyle of the idle rich within the rising skyscrapers of an unnamed city.<sup>6</sup> The *Blade Runner* films bring this forward to a post-apocalyptic world of Los Angeles in 2019

and beyond, with the revolutionary backdrop of early twentieth century Europe replaced by a homage to the mid-century film noir genre.<sup>7</sup> Within both cinematic dystopias, a machine woman and replicants are seen to be, or presented as, a threat to humankind, driven by the powerful and dominating figures of John Masterman (Joh Fredersen), Eldon Tyrell and Niander Wallace. All three seek to facilitate progress of their personal (commercially driven) vision for the human race, both on- and off-world, through the creation of humanoid robot slaves to fill the role of worker, warrior, lover and - most controversially - mother. Associated with this endeavour, detailed technical and biometric records are generated to both enhance development of, and maintain control over, the replicants.

Within these architecturally spectacular and challenging environments the three directors - Fritz Lang, Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve – present a traditional love story: Freder and Maria / Deckard and Rachael / Officer K and Joi. In the background is a simmering revolution on the part of the workers in Lang's black and white silent feature, and of the replicants in Scott and Villeneuve's futuristic America. The roles of the female leads are flipped, with the human becoming a robot in Lang's film, and the replicants and hologram becoming more human in *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*. The male leads are figures of some authority in a class-based society - Freder is the privileged son of John Masterman, whilst the police officer / detective / Blade Runner Rick Deckard is comfortably semi-retired, until told emphatically by his senior officer "*If you are not police you are little people*". His later equivalent, the replicant Officer K, is of somewhat less status in 2049 and routinely denigrated by colleagues as a 'skin job'. In contrast, the female leads come from the lowest classes of society – one poor (Maria), another a

favoured assistant, though a replicant (Rachael), and the third a hologram (Joi). All ultimately prove powerful in the display of a profound humanity, beyond their initial status as objects of pleasure. Despite this, the love stories are not the primary drivers of the films, though they do humanise otherwise often brutal narratives. As director Villeneuve noted in an interview at the time of the release of *Blade Runner 2049*, his film is “... *not really a film about technology, but rather philosophy, consciousness, empathy and mortality*”.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, both *Blade Runner* films provide an opportunity for reflection upon the deeper meaning of life and of humanoid rights, amidst a cacophony of light, sound, architecture and technology.

In the case of the earlier *Metropolis* we are presented with the sugary, though sage-like theme of ‘*Between the head and hands must be the heart*’ as a first cut at the dehumanising effect of technology and humankind’s inhumanity towards fellow human beings; whilst the *Blade Runner* films revolve around the core issues of: *What is human, and what is worth keeping?* It is this latter question which resonates with archivists as it encompasses their core mission of preservation, disposal and access. Yet there is a catch, for the primary problematic archival object in the *Blade Runner* world – the record, the digital artefact, the database of information - is the replicant, and it is both humanoid and humane. The hologram Joi can also be included in this, though to a lesser degree as she is not organic, does not have a physical presence, and could therefore be considered ephemeral in comparison with the similarly programmed Wallace Corporation replicants.

When the evil, vampish, black-eyed and robotic Maria burns on the funeral pyre at the end of *Metropolis* her glowing mechanical structure is revealed. When the

similarly black-eyed replicant Pris lies on the floor of J.F. Sebastian's apartment, dying from Deckard's bullets, she convulses and bleeds. The mechanoid is now organic flesh and bone. The process of creation in *Metropolis* was alchemical, through the wizardry of the Merlin-like Rotwang. A mix of the electro-mechanical and the magical was presented by the German director, revealing to audiences the spectacular process of inserting the spark of life into his robotic creation. Scott and Villeneuve shy away from such a display. The petri-dish birth of replicants is not elaborated upon by Tyrell within *Blade Runner* and is only partially revealed through the operations of the blind Niander Wallace in *Blade Runner 2049*. This occurs when a new, adult female model is disgorged from a plastic bag, only to be brutally rejected by its creator when it proves sterile. His aprosodic ramblings and callous, vindictive slicing open of his newest angel's abdominal area serve to mock the fact that it's contents would have been forever, in his view, "that barren pasture... empty and salted; the 'dead' place between the stars". The evolutionary procession of the Nexus from mindless robot to the humane Roy Batty – the prodigal son who shone brightly – then on to the child-bearing Rachael, and finally the stoic Officer K and his hologrammatic partner, remains, in part, a mystery to its human creators.

What then is the role of Rick Deckard and Officer K - to dispose of replicants and the offspring as per orders? Or, in a God-like act, to grant life as much as they are able? If replicants were mere objects, the Blade Runners, like archivists, would be simply bound by the disposal schedule nature of those orders. However, the analogy no longer applies as the Nexus 6 replicants, bearing the generic memories newly given them by Tyrell, seek to express their humanity.<sup>9</sup> With memories for the first time providing them with a sense of identity, they now desire a life beyond their

inbuilt 4 year use-by date. In addition, Tyrell's experimentation gives rise to the Nexus 7 – Rachael and Deckard(?) – who are able to procreate and live a normal lifespan, but are not made aware of their android origins.

***“Memories .... You're talking about memories”***

**(Rick Deckard to Eldon Tyrell)**

*Blade Runner* is about evidence, proof, defining identity and making decisions as to whether preservation is warranted, or, in the language of the film, whether Deckard and Officer K will 'retire' the rogue replicants in their sights, including one that Deckard happens to fall in love with. Initially the latter's decisions are automatic – he must follow the orders given him by police commander Bryant. The rules have been set in place. Those orders include killing the slavish replicants who have escaped confinement off-world and returned to earth to meet their maker Eldon Tyrell. *'No choice, pal!'* blasts Bryant to Deckard with a wicked, knowing grin. Similarly, Officer K is told to go beyond the mere retiring of replicants and to destroy all evidence of the birth of a replicant child. This includes retiring the child who has been born and, supposedly, possesses a soul. Like Deckard before him, this causes an emotional crisis in the formerly unquestioning K and deviation from his baseline programming. Similarly, for the archivist the disposal schedule, once implemented, sets in train the action required to be taken. However, as every archivist knows, there are often exceptions. Deckard and K face these – to retire, or not, a loved one (Rachael) and a human being (Rachael's child). For the archivist it is usually application of an exemption to an archival object identified with value beyond the norm - a uniqueness or something special. The decision is not a matter

of life or death. Retire, kill, dispose of, destroy – all terms referring to the same thing, though each loaded with emotional baggage and moral dimensions dependent on its deemed or inherent value. This is obviously more significant for a humanoid, though it is also usually a case of relativity in regard to any assessment criteria, sentient being or not. For K, the question arises: is the child of replicant parents, or of a replicant and a human, in turn a human? If so, an existential crisis exists as he must break his Wallace Corporation programming which does not permit the killing of humans. The latter is graphically presented in the *2036: Nexus Dawn* featurette, wherein Neander Wallace orders a replicant to kill itself rather than harm him.<sup>10</sup>

Such moral and ethical conundrums have faced humanity through the ages. For example, when the Nazis burned books during World War II, the world was outraged, as the act represented not only the destruction of records but also a rejection of the truth of history, of the role of memory, and of the value of storytelling. Beyond this, mistreatment of animals and other sentient beings has become an international issue following on centuries of misuse and abuse. In a similar vein, progression towards humanoid robots and replicants with feelings and consciousness is a reality the *Blade Runner* world has yet to come to terms with, or provide a compassionate solution to. Rogue replicants Roy, Pris, Zhora and Leon are merely viewed as rebels and renegades on the run; mindless criminals; a danger to society; slave-like commodities that have outlived their usefulness; humanoid but not human. They are easy targets for the LAPD and Deckard killing machine. Leon, for example, is presented to the viewer at the beginning of *Blade Runner* as a simpleton and mindless killer. We are more sympathetic when the

child-like, though similarly dangerous, Pris is retired by Deckard, following on the earlier brutal murder of exotic dancer Zhora as she is shot in the back. However, the death of Roy - who in fact saves the life of the Blade Runner - is the ultimate conscience tug, opening a new chapter in replicant humanity. We feel for his passing and the loss of his spirit. Arising out of this, we are sympathetic towards the later model replicant Sapper Morton who is brutally retired by K at the beginning of *Blade Runner 2049*. The destruction of the hologrammatic Joi is also an event of some emotion, both for K and the audience.

Rachael is outside of the rebellious and dangerous Nexus 6 context – she is soft, sensuous and reflects the realities of any human existence in that rules cannot always be applied and circumstances change, evolve, and call for new actions and behaviours. Deckard tells her at the outset that ‘*Replicants are like any other machine – they’re either a benefit or a hazard.*’ Yet he soon comes to realise that they are not mere machines and not all equal. His relationship with Rachael is beneficial to him, in the most intimate way. His colleague Gaff reaches the same conclusion and points out to Deckard that she will eventually die or be killed, perhaps beyond the hitherto normal fate of a replicant. Whatever the circumstances, it will come to pass. *Blade Runner 2049* reveals the reality of that premonition, with Rachael and Deckard escaping and parenting a child, though Rachael dies during childbirth and Deckard remains detached and in hiding until K brings the father and daughter together at the end of the film. It is also revealed that the rebel Blade Runner has lived on beyond the 4 year fail-safe lifespan of the Nexus 6. But is Deckard a replicant or not? We do not know for sure. Ridley Scott says he is; Harrison Ford played him as human. Ultimately it does not matter, for he has

survived, fathered a child, loved another, and lived a humane existence. He can be a replicant, but he is also human.

***“How can it not know who it is?”***

**(Rick Deckard to Eldon Tyrell)**

When Deckard puts this question to Tyrell upon finding out that Rachael is a replicant, he is raising the important issue of identity. Ironically, he is astounded that a seemingly conscious entity should not know who or what it is. In the modern, post 9/11 era, identity is fluid. Proof of identity is becoming increasingly important and moving beyond the mere provision of paper-based records such as passports with 2D photographs, or old-fashioned ink-based fingerprints for those with criminal records. The new age of digital identity includes electronic passports, CCTV and 3D facial scan identification, plus the use of biometric data such as embedded chips and DNA profiling.<sup>11</sup> With this emphasis on the electronic record or artefact, comes the reality of identity theft and, in extreme cases, complete digital identity deletion. Drivers for such action can include financial gain, reputational manipulation and covert political intelligence interference, all of which highlight inherent dangers in regards to manipulation of identity records. The 2018 example of bureaucratic removal of the deemed offensive term ‘Aboriginal’ from birth certificates in Western Australia is a case in point.<sup>12</sup>

The *Blade Runner* scenario of a humanoid created and then not knowing who or what it is, remains science fiction. However, elements of it are contemporary, as machine-based artificial intelligence evolves alongside brain-replicating and

interacting neurotechnologies. Deckard's question to Tyrell goes to the heart of what it means to be a conscious being, as does the comment by Pris to Roy and J. F. Sebastian: *I think ... therefore I am*. This is a reiteration of Descartes' (aka. Deckard's) basic philosophical statement around the understanding of existence, which is perhaps more appropriately translated as '*I am thinking, therefore I exist*'.<sup>13</sup> The replicants in this instance believe they are human and deserve all the implied rights and privileges. They are flesh and blood, possessing memories and emotions, including compassion. The Nexus 6 group on earth will therefore not accept anything less than recognition of their right to live. And such recognition will ultimately be reliant on documentary evidence.

***“Morphology? Longevity? Incept date?”***

**(Roy Batty to Hannibal Chew)**

Roy wants to own his identity. He seeks from Tyrell information and access to the records of his creation and life experience. He is a family historian; an adopted child; a member of the Stolen Generation; a refugee; a researcher; a user of archival records. Like all modern societies, Los Angeles 2019 through to 2049 relies on information and records, whether it be in the example of Roy's search for identity or Deckard and K's forensic investigations in hunting down rogue replicants. It is a world that cannot exist without records - digital and analogue. In *Blade Runner 2049* we see examples of the latter, in the form of banks of card catalogues, an antiquated microfilm reader, and identification stamped bones and eyeballs. But as Tyrell points out, the Nexus 6 are the ultimate machines – living, breathing, organic databases programmed with the knowledge of a human. Capable of independent

thought and action, they are nevertheless considered slaves and less than human. Roy proclaims to one of his creators: *We're not computers ... we're physical*. To this there is no response, for amidst all the technological advancement, basic moral, ethical and practical issues arise which are outside the solutions provided by the technology. Deckard's world in 2019 has not liberated the replicants, nor considered such a course. As a result, we see on screen their abuse, mistreatment and denigration through the use of terms such as 'skin job' and 'skinner', along with their brutal, inhumane murder at the hands of at least three distinct groups - the Blade Runners, the creators, and the common people in the form of angry mobs.

In contrast, our own world is aware of some of the evolving issues around the present and likely future place of androids in society. For example, in 2017 the journal *Nature* published an article on ethical priorities related to neurotechnologies and artificial intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Therein guidelines were proposed for human : machine interactions and protection of both in the process. They build upon the work of the American Society of Aesthetics and the Asilomar Principles of 2017 which identified the risks involved in the unrestrained development of artificial intelligence and its use in the control of human activities.<sup>15</sup> Clause 22 notes:

*AI [artificial intelligence] systems designed to recursively self-improve or self-replicate in a manner that could lead to rapidly increasing quality or quantity must be subject to strict safety and control measures.*

With neurotechnologies having the potential to corrupt an individual's sense of identity, 'neuro-rights' are seen to require similar protections to those applied to

other basic human rights. Companies engaged in this work have gone so far as to call on the United Nations to protect humans from killer robots, whilst computer experts have also called for lawmakers to proactively guard against the potential risks that robotics and AI technologies pose, before they can be realised.<sup>16</sup> A variety of issues raised in the *Blade Runner* films and Philip K. Dick's original fiction are approaching reality. For example, during 2017 it was reported that a Japanese man was publically cohabiting with a female pleasure robot, much to the horror of his wife and daughter.<sup>17</sup> Further to this was the release during that year of the robot Erica who, it was claimed, possessed a soul and could tell jokes.<sup>18</sup>

The role of the archivist in assisting with the management of related ethical and identity issues is one which has been neglected to date. Scientists, academics and public and private funders lead innovation, implementation and related discussions. Those ultimately responsible for the protocols and procedures which will ensure the necessary oversight and implementation of neuro-rights warrant inclusion.

Archivists and records managers can be included in this latter group, to ensure clarity in dealing with any issues arising and to manage the related records and artefacts. The implications of such omissions can be seen in the *Blade Runner* world post 2019.

***“The explosion will generate an EMP, shutting everything down” (Iggly to Trixie, 2022)***

The electromagnetic pulse (EMP) event of 2022 was referred to in *Blade Runner 2049* and outlined in detail within the associated anime feature *Blackout 2022*,

directed by Shinichiro Watanabe.<sup>19</sup> It highlights the current ambiguity around the fate of humanoid androids in society. Therein a united replicant action of vested revenge forced society to go back to, and rely upon, analogue technology, whilst continuing to advance in digital directions. This is, of course, relevant to the role of archives in a digital environment, as it raises core issues around redundancy, security, disposal and access. For example, we can have a situation where a reel of vintage nitrate film is digitised and the original is subsequently disposed of. What happens if the digital file is lost through an EMP event, unanticipated corruption, or purposefully deleted? Or a run of newspapers is copied onto black and white microfilm, as was common from the 1950s through to the turn of the century. The original newspapers were then disposed of due to their deteriorating fragility or redundancy. The microfilm is subsequently digitised, however this proves to be of such low quality that it is necessary to source original copies for higher resolution scanning. Society bemoans the loss of the original. More recently, in February 2018 a government computer malfunction wiped out a collection of digital records relating to foster children in New South Wales.<sup>20</sup> What should we do? What have we learnt? Who is responsible? In the case of *Blade Runner* is it Tyrell, Wallace Corporation or the LAPD? Government or business? Community or the individual? Though obvious to many, but not all, it can be seen that archives and archivists, with their emphasis on secure, long-term preservation and access, are necessary for the orderly operation of society.

The aforementioned examples are reflected in Rachael's question to Deckard in the original film: *Have you ever killed a human by mistake?* Whilst this would obviously arise due to misinformation - or in the later case of Officer K as a result of direct

orders - the above scenarios reflect a lack of foresight and the taking of action without due consideration of long-term consequences. And it is here where the archivist has a role to play. The *Blade Runner* world is therefore a familiar one, resonating with a mixture of reality and science fiction possibility. It is a very physical world, where people – human and replicant – run, fight, eat, make love and kill. Cars fly but guns have bullets; the rain falls and dust blows, yet off-world offers a utopian alternative. Blade Runners bleed and suffer. The humanity of the situation is heightened when Rachael asks Deckard: *Have you ever taken that test yourself?* In other words, how do you know whether you are human or not, and therefore worthy of the decision to retire – take the life of – a replicant? The blurring of the line between human and humanoid is obvious and challenging. Deckard is seemingly only made aware of his possible replicant origins at the end of the film when a dream memory of a white unicorn is mimicked in origami form by Gaff. If Gaff is aware of Deckard's replicant status and has read his memory file to find out about the unicorn dream, or it is part of his own memories, it is therefore clear he placed the silver, origami unicorn before the Blade Runner to let him know as much. A crisis of identity then arises: Deckard is a replicant and seemingly oblivious to the fact, though his detailed knowledge of Rachael's memories would suggest otherwise. It may seem best, in the *Blade Runner* world, not to know who you are in the case of a replicant. Yet, like the adopted child scenario, the quest for identity is a noble one and commonly unavoidable. Rachael travels down this path, with Deckard by her side. The scenario is flipped for the replicant Officer K who is likewise seeking to discover his own true identity, beyond the memories allocated him by the daughter of Rachael and Deckard. He is pushed along this path by a

developing emotional attachment to his hologrammatic girlfriend Joi, and the conflict arising out of his orders to kill the born child and destroy all record of its existence.

Despite the action and romance, *Blade Runner* is all about memories: the creation of fake memories as reality, the inevitable forgetfulness of their source, and the assumption of their infallibility to give existence meaning. Archives, by their very definition, are the antithesis of this process but, are they exempt from it? Today, fake news is touted as the norm by the actors who control the world but it is often their 'truth' that is fake. We lose far more information than we preserve, so how hard would it be to rewrite history? It has never been hard before as it has always been recorded by the victors. Who keeps them in check? Who has more time or resources than the most powerful people in the world? Seemingly no one. How can the common people fight against a fake history that they may believe is truth? How would they even know what is truth and what is fake and do they even care? So many people believe it is acceptable for all their information to be online and shareable because they 'have nothing to hide'. But the question remains, is this how the world of *Blade Runner* formed, through the giving up of civil liberties and digital privacy, or are we heading down a darker path? One closer to the dystopian realities of *The Terminator* or *The Matrix* as artificial intelligence evolves exponentially within its own version of Moore's Law to deem humankind redundant meat bags to be replaced by 'skin jobs' before the end of a new century?

***"All records on the ground will be erased"***

***(Iggy to Trixie, 2022)***

The 2019 rebellion of the small Roy Batty led group of replicants culminates in the planet-wide uprising of 2022, spurred on by anti-replicant, human supremacy movement riots aimed at the normal lifespan, off-world and earth-employed Wallace Corporation Nexus 8 model. Seen as a threat to the livelihood of the working classes, they are hunted down and killed with the aid of the Replicant Register database and associated archival records. It is to these digital records that the replicants focus their attention in the 2022 uprising and associated 10 day EMP blackout event. One of the leaders – Iggy – explains their plan to a female colleague Trixie as a rocket in the sky above them is set to explode with the EMP device:

*The explosion will generate an EMP, shutting everything down – a darkness that the humans have never known.... Our job is to destroy old magnetic backups in the archives. Other cells will start the fireworks at the remaining data centres. All records on the ground will be erased.*<sup>21</sup>

The EMP event aims to erase records used to easily identify replicants. The destruction of these records frees the surviving replicants from the imminent threat of retirement / execution and facilitates their desire to live normal lives as human, as was the case with Sapper Morton. Their only fear remains the presence of a unique number on the lower edge of their right eye which identifies them as replicants post-2022. However, as *Blade Runner 2049* reveals, some of the records survive in Tyrell company offices, beyond the destroyed archives and data centres. Officer K is a replicant who replicates the investigative processes of Deckard during the original film. When K goes in search of information on the body under the tree – Rachael’s - he ends up at the Wallace Corporation archives. Therein a hair sample

is used to identify the deceased replicant and the attendant archivist / records manager notes that it is:

*'.... An old one, pre-blackout. That's going to be tough. Not much from then .... We were wiped clean – photos, files, every bit of data – gone! ... It's funny – it's only paper that lasted. I mean, we had everything on drives. Everything.'*

Following this encounter, K goes in search of Rachael's child and makes use of the LAPD DNA Archive, noting that when the computer therein is unable to carry out the search, he is forced, as he says, to *'Make it raw'* and use microfilm records. Ridley Scott had noted during the production of *Blade Runner* that he felt the future would be a mixture of the new and the old, both in regards to architecture and technology.<sup>22</sup> The archival elements of the cinematic world he created reflect this with their presence in both analogue and digital form.

The enduring evocative power and physical durability - given the appropriate preservation environment - of certain analogue records is further demonstrated in the survival of an outwardly insignificant child's toy horse, wrapped in rags and long hidden in a derelict part of an old orphanage. This single small wooden artefact offers enough tangible evidence for K to realise that 'his' childhood memories are based in fact. The value for a searcher in being able to recognise likely provenance traits in order to help match estrays with their related record series is highlighted later in the film when K spots two sets of similarly carved small wooden animals displayed alongside Rachael's photograph in amongst the eclectic surroundings of Deckard's frozen in time Las Vegas hotel residence. The image of the wooden

horse - a Trojan horse perhaps, carrying the memory that will ultimately turn out to betray him by belonging to another? - also echoes back to the imagery of the small unicorn origami figure of the first film.

### **Archivists as Blade Runners**

Archivists are scavengers; the vultures of human history - they are like Blade Runners gathering information and objects, picking and choosing, scraping, throwing away, retiring, deciphering and digesting, storing for future use and reuse. Both bring their individual identity to the task of filtering, preserving and destroying, and exposing. Their persona is professional but personal; a superficial, bureaucratic blandness hiding a seething evangelistic desire to serve humankind by protecting 'things' and collections that reflect the story of humanity and all its shadings. But how does one decide what will stay and what will go; what will live and what will die; what will be archived? This has never been, and never will be, a simple task. Nor will it be entirely up to the archivist or, for that matter, the Blade Runner. David Foster Wallace in a 2007 essay used the phrase "total noise" to refer to this seemingly impossible God-like task when he said:

*Nonfiction's abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc.*<sup>23</sup>

It is a phrase that has become more common in light of a range of events and the great emanations of real and fake information. Wallace also discusses the role of the “decider” and the activity of “decidering”. He further noted:

*... the general point is that professional filtering / winnowing ... is a type of service that we citizens and consumers now depend on more and more, and in ever-increasing ways, as the quantity of available information and products and art and opinions and choices and all the complications and ramifications thereof expands at roughly the rate of Moore's Law.*

We therefore have these choices, of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of our collections and then, in the fullness of time, what we surface from those collections that inexorably lead to subsequent decisions and beliefs and an understanding of the world. Yet in the era of “noise”, even if only “partial noise”, what do we anchor our deciderization to? Wallace concludes that the answer lies in the acceptance of our ignorance “not just the intelligence to discern one’s own error or stupidity, but the humility to address it, absorb it, and move on and out there from, bravely, toward the next revealed error”.

*Blade Runner* is that error. It is also a riddle, full of unanswered questions and what-if scenarios. Many of these have direct relevance to everyday life and the role of archives in society. They include such diverse topics as the preservation of records and objects; decisions around disposal; definitions of what is and what is not; identity and proof thereof; artefact security; and, at the end of the day, what is worth keeping. The archivist is Tyrell and Deckard, Wallace and K, but, also, Roy and

Rachael – more human than human; required to understand the record life cycle and go beyond that in determining retirement or preservation. Could an archivist be replaced by a replicant? The question should be, rather: When an archivist is replaced by a replicant, will the electric sheep live or die?

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Camden House, New York, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, William Heinemann, London, 1895; George Orwell, 1984, Secker & Warburg, London, 1949; Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Doubleday, New York, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> William Daley, 'Mitigating potential hazards to humans from the development of intelligent machines', *Synesis – A Journal of Science, Technology and Ethics Policy*, 2011, pp. 44-50.

<sup>5</sup> Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, UFA, 1927. Duration: 148 minutes; Luke Scott (a), *Blade Runner - 2036: Nexus Dawn*, Warner Brothers Pictures, 2017. Duration: 6.31 minutes; (b), *Blade Runner - 2048: Nowhere to Run*, Warner Brothers Pictures, 2017. Duration: 5.48 minutes; Denis Villeneuve (a), *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017, duration: 164 minutes; Shinichiro Watanabe, *Blade Runner: Black Out 2022* [Anime], Alcon Entertainment, 2017. Duration: 15.45 minutes.

<sup>6</sup> John Coulthart, 'Blade Runner vs. Metropolis', *Feuilleton* [blog], 13 April 2015. Available at <http://www.johncoulthart.com>, accessed 10 February 2018.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Sammon, *Future noir: the making of Blade Runner*, Orion, London, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Villeneuve (b), 'Denis Villeneuve: Blade Runner 2049 – Talks at Google', *YouTube*, 29 September 2017. Duration: 23.04 minutes. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPn-xuifKfg>, accessed 12 February 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Barad, 'Blade Runner and Sartre', in Conrad, Mark T. (ed.), *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, University Press of Kentucky, 2007, pp. 21-34; Daniel Shaw, 'Being-Towards-Death in *Blade Runner*: Angst, Authenticity and Care', in *Movies with Meaning: Existentialism through Film*, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 85-99.

<sup>10</sup> Scott 2017a.

<sup>11</sup> Katina Michael, 'Mental Health, Implantables, and Side Effects', *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 34(2), 2015, pp. 5-7, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Calla Wahlquist, 'WA removed racial references, including the word 'Aboriginal', from birth certificates', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*, Leiden, 1637.

<sup>14</sup> Rafael Yuste and Sara Goering, 'Four ethical priorities for neurotechnologies and AI [artificial intelligence]', *Nature (Comment)*, 551, 8 November 2017, pp. 159-163.

<sup>15</sup> American Society of Aesthetics, *Asilomar AI Principles*, Future of Life Institute, 2017. Available URL: <http://futureoflife.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Andie Noonan and David Sparkes, 'Computer companies call on the United Nations to protect humans from killer robots', *ABC Radio*, 21 August 2017. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-21/killer-robots-artificial-intelligence-tech-leaders-un-letter/8825906>, accessed 10 February 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Dean Cornish, 'Love, intimacy and companionship: a tale of robots in Japan', *SBS Dateline*, 11 April 2017. Available at

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<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/article/2017/04/11/love-intimacy-and-companionship-tale-robots-japan>, accessed 1 February 2018.

<sup>18</sup> George Harrison and Ben Graham, 'Soul Mate – Erica the Japanese robot is so lifelike she 'has a soul' and can tell jokes .... although they aren't very funny', *The Sun*, 2 December 2017. Available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/5050946/erica-robot-lifelike-soul-jokes/>, accessed 10 February 2018.

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Silmalis, 'Wiped Out: Computer meltdown deletes foster children's records', *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 February 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Watanabe 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ridley Scott (b), Interview, 1982. On-set interview, released on the Director's Cut DVD, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> David Forster Wallace, 'Deciderization – A Special Report', in *The Best American Essays 2007*, Houghton Mifflin, 2007.