SEEING FRANKENSTEIN AND BLADE RUNNER THOUGH DIFFERENT EYES
by Mel Dixon, Resources Officer, ETA

Central to any understanding of the two texts *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* is a Cartesian philosophical approach that offers a sympathetic reading of the role of the monster and replicant. If we accept Descartes’ proposition that it is thought that distinguishes humanity then we have to accept that these creatures are ‘more human than human’, even the earlier model of Frankenstein’s monster because the creations from both epochs display a strong ability to think. But against this philosophical position lies a Biblical allusion that becomes a more powerful way of understanding the rejection of the ‘monsters’. Both texts deal with what it means to be an authentic human, and connect this to the spiritual in the references to eyes – windows to the soul. The composers, Ridley Scott and Mary Shelley show how, despite their ability to think, those who are created by technology will always be regarded as outsiders and central to their isolation is the belief in the ‘soul’ captured through the repeated motifs of eyes in both texts.

When Scott’s replicant Roy Batty says ‘I think therefore I am’ Scott is expressing an explicit connection between the replicant and the nature of humanity. Deckard, the blade runner whose job is to hunt down Batty holds a name that is phonetically close to Descartes, implying his ability to think. Given that he is later shown to be a replicant, Scott is making clear the development of the replicant as a thinking being. The initial stimulus for Deckard’s search for the replicants is a moment of rebellion. No longer accepting the master-slave relationship that has been imposed on them and realising that there is more to life, the replicants rise against their masters. This action which is explained in the introductory screen does two things. On the surface it shows us that these manufactured creatures are dangerous and untrustworthy but it also shows us that they have a capacity for thought and for questioning their existence. Roy’s capacity for thought is linked to revolution when he misquotes *(fell not rose)* the revolutionary words of William Blake’s *America: A Prophecy*:

Fiery the angels fell.
Deep thunder rolled around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc.

The American revolution which influenced this poem also provided an impetus for the French revolution that was part of Shelley’s context and supported by the Romantics.

Shelley’s monster rebels in the same way, not accepting the emptiness of existence that is the legacy of Frankenstein’s desertion of his creation. Like Roy Batty, he demonstrates an ability to think, fuelled by his reading in the cottage where he hides. He starts as a tabula rasa, a blank slate, which his life experiences change and form into the ‘malignant devil’ that he becomes. Mary Shelley’s father, Godwin, was a great proponent of this Aristotelean idea, writing widely of the impact of a bad upbringing, believing that criminals were often created by a lack of love. He believed that ‘man is in truth a miracle’ and ‘a rational
being’ who ‘is eminently distinguished from the brute creation’ because ‘he collects premises and deduces conclusions’. He believed, however, in the importance of nurture over nature and that ‘the actions and dispositions of mankind are the offspring of circumstances and events’. Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, also wrote about the importance of education and parental guidance in leading people out of ignorance, stating that ‘mutual care produces a new mutual sympathy’. In the treatment of the monster we see these ideas personified. Frankenstein fails to accept responsibility for his creation and this rejection leads to experiences that create a ‘malign devil’. The monster’s plaintive call ‘where were my parents’ is a reminder of the importance of a guiding hand in a child’s developmental stages. Shelley is therefore offering an excuse for the monster’s attack on humanity and his consequent inability to represent humanity because of unacceptable violence against humans.

The initial rejection of the monster is not however because of his behaviour but because of his appearance. Frankenstein’s monster has yellow skin and ‘watery eyes’ – even the monster later acknowledges his grotesque appearance. In contrast the replicants are striking magnificent specimens of humanity, in their Aryan splendour – they are Frankenstein’s ‘futurity’, what was to come. The fact that the monster has ‘watery eyes’ immediately alienates him from having a soul. As he looks upon what he has made, Frankenstein recoils to see that ‘these luxuriances (the yellow skin, black hair and pearly white teeth) only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set’. The monster then faces him and ‘his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me’, as if in accusation. Frankenstein himself had felt ‘my eye balls were starting from their sockets’ in the act of creating. At a time when physiognomy was regarded as an important way of determining the character of a man, this comment implied a lot more to Shelley’s audience than just being a physical description.

The connection of the eyes to the soul has become a commonplace, a dominant belief in Western discourse so eyes carry with them a great deal of cultural meaning in written and visual texts. In Letter 3 to his sister, Walton begins the narration of his first meeting with Frankenstein, a ‘man in so wretched a condition’ that it takes two days of care before he is able to speak. Walton observes to his sister:

*I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness, but there are moments when, if any one performs an act of kindness towards him or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up*

Frankenstein’s eyes immediately betray him (just as the replicants’ eyes do in the Voigt-Kampf test). He cannot hide the pain that he is feeling as he unfolds the horror of his actions. Before meeting Frankenstein Walton has longed for someone ‘whose eyes would reply to mine’ and as he becomes closer to Frankenstein and reveals his obsessive dreams of discovering new frontiers, Frankenstein reacts: ‘he placed his hands before his eyes, saying “Unhappy man! Do you share my madness?”’ Frankenstein has become the one whose eyes reply to Walton’s but it is not what Walton expected as Frankenstein’s tale becomes a warning rather than a shared joy.

Scott takes Shelley’s ideas and develops them more explicitly. Technology can improve the outward appearance of artificial creations to the extent that they are ‘more human than human’ but they are still not accepted as human. There is always an anxiety about the authenticity of the ‘other’. Scott implicitly acknowledges the Biblical reference to eyes in his film but he also extends the motif to include modern understanding of visual technology. The importance of eyes in the film is foregrounded in the opening of the film. Our first view of the action is through the iris of an eye in which there are reflections of the fires of the urban landscape. We move from the scene of the street to an interior where a replicant, Leon, takes the Voigt-Kampf test, designed to register replicants through eye movements – in other words, look for the soul through the eyes.

The scene is hazy from smoke, with dull lighting penetrating down through a fan, signifying the difficulty in seeing the truth. Ironically, considering Leon’s entrapment by an eye test, it is through an eye that we first view the action of the film. The eye becomes an opening lens through which we, the audience, see the story. It therefore suggests the existence of a mechanical eye, the camera lens, through which the action is mediated and through which we participate in the film. Our gaze can penetrate the scene because of the eye in the film and the camera in reality. We become the “prosthetic gods” that Freud describes in *Civilisation and its Discontent* when he refers to men as prosthetic gods who see through and become dependent on
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mechanical lenses. Both humans and replicants depend on technology and even an advanced engineer like the eyemaker Chew depends on his outer garments to keep warm, screaming when Roy pulls out the tubes that warm him. Chew looks in admiration at the eyes he created, claiming Roy’s eyes as his own but Roy reminds him that the business of seeing was Roy’s: ‘if only you could see what I’ve seen with your eyes. Questions.’ Here we see the central dilemma of the film – the replicants need human engineering but they go beyond humans in the way they see the world. They start to question and not to accept: they become sentient thinking beings while the humans who created them remain without answers.

Rachel exemplifies the closeness replicants have to being human. She embodies a sensitivity and innocence that are not present in any of the humans – with the exception perhaps of Sebastian the Toymaker. The female characters in Frankenstein may not be creations but they share the same gentle demeanor of Rachel. Elizabeth has ‘cloudless’ blue eyes and Frankenstein is stirred by the ‘sweet glance of her celestial eyes.’ When his mother dies ‘the brightness of a beloved eye can have been extinguished.’ Similarly, after his death, the memory that prevails of dear sweet William is his ‘sweet laughing blue eyes.’ It is no accident that these characters are described through their eyes. Eyes became the gauge of goodness and of innocence. The blue of Williams’ eyes reminds us of the heavens as much as the direct reference to the celestial in the description of Elizabeth’s eyes which are also ‘cloudless,’ metaphorically without sin and, like the sky, without the blemish of the clouds.

Just as sight is a common element in both texts Frankenstein and Blade Runner so is blindness. Blindness exists in a literal and metaphorical sense. Frankenstein’s childhood education was not controlled and he was ‘left to struggle with a child’s blindness, added to a student’s twist for knowledge’ (reminiscent of Mary Godwin Shelley’s own childhood education). His ‘blind’ search for knowledge can be seen as an excuse for the direction in which his studies take him. It also marks him as one who is not able to perceive the right way.

His monstrous creation finds comfort in the blindness of the man in the cottage, De Lacey, as he cannot be seen. His first positive contact with a human is with the old man in the cottage. When he hides himself near a cottage, he looks through a ‘small and imperceptible chink through which the eye could just penetrate’ and gazes on family; he sees the way others live. He notices the young man whose ‘eyes and attitude expressed the utmost sadness and despondency.’ And then he realises that the old man is blind. Blindness enables the old man to go beyond the physical and to appreciate the conversation of the monster. He admits

I am blind, and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in or words which persuades me that you are sincere.

While in the cottage where no one can see him, the monster shows his ability to think and grow into a thinking being. He develops his mind by reading Milton, Goethe and Plutarch. Through these books he gained ‘an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me to the lowest dejection.’ Werter makes him think of his own condition and his physical appearance as ‘hideous’ and ‘gigantic’; Plutarch elevates him ‘above the wretched sphere of his existence’ and Milton’s Paradise Lost made him realise that, like Adam, he was ‘apparently united by no other link to any other human being in existence.’ He learns about politics and lessons of ‘all the various relationships that bind one human being to another in mutual bonds.’ He also develops the
capacity to speak and does so with great eloquence, superior to Frankenstein lexically. Like Roy Batty he is an example of Descartes’ famous edict about the relationship of thinking and being human.

Paradoxically, then, it is those who physically see who are blind to truth, conveying the message is that we need to see in a different way to accept otherness. Scott reinforces this disconnection of knowledge and sight in the character of Tyrell whose myopic vision, made obvious with his thick glasses, is a clear reference to his lack of understanding. His creations, the replicants, are not an abomination physically but, in his mind, what he has made are still machines as his goal in creating his replicants is ‘commerce’. In this way he is blind to the possibilities of the life he has created.

In contrast, both the replicant Roy and Frankenstein’s monster see possibilities. The climax of both texts is the moving orations from these two flawed characters. Roy’s sees mortality as the loss of visual experiences which he shares in a dark scene, rain falling on his out of focus face, soft bells in the background:

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 Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time... like tears in rain... Time to die.

For him, death is the loss of eyesight but that sight though delivered lyrically and sensitively was of war and devastation because the postmodern world of humans is no longer a natural world. Frankenstein’s monster similarly focuses on sight as affording him a pleasure that will be lost but it is images of Romantic nature that have left their mark on him and heightened his other senses:

I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the winds play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition must I find my happiness. Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer, and heard the rustling of the leaves and the warbling of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?

The linguistic closeness of the word ‘eye’ to the pronoun ‘I’ used buy both replicant, Roy, and the monster leads to a philosophical discourse on the nature of the self that is just as relevant to Frankenstein as to the film Blade Runner. French critic C. Gauthier’s discussion of this connection in the film, is as relevant to Frankenstein as it is to Blade Runner. He writes:

Throughout the movie, the ‘eye’ is a perfect reminder of the ‘I’...This is the condition to the making of identity ... Replicants in Blade Runner are already burdened with the heaviness of their self. Their eyes in the movie are constantly reminiscent of their proper ‘I’.

In both texts, therefore, it is the struggle to assert the self – the ‘I’ – of the creations as thinking beings with souls that is central.

Both texts are about the struggle to assert the self as an authentic human – in other words to define what is humanity. Despite the absence of physical beauty, particularly the ‘eyes’, Frankenstein’s monster transforms himself into a thinking, reasoning being who is able to articulate a sensitive and heartfelt perspective of his existence. So, even though Frankenstein and those who meet the monster, react to the outward appearance, Mary Shelley is able to reject physiognomy and suggest that the inner being can reflect a humanity or a ‘soul’. The text can therefore be seen as a critique of the blindness of mankind about the ‘other’, that is, those who exhibit difference. This ‘blindness’ becomes manifested in a much more obvious and physical way in the film Blade Runner, through the myopic Elden Tyrell and through the conscious display of the medium of film. The tools available to the filmmaker, Scott, allow us to “see with clarity” what the characters in the film fail to see. Ultimately humanity – the soul – becomes centred not in the physical manifestation of the eyes but in the ability to think and act.

Exercise

Trace the motif of eyes through these references, and add any other references you find

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### Seeing Frankenstein and Blade Runner Though Different Eyes

#### Eye maker Chew

**Chew**: I just do eyes. Just eyes. Just genetic design – just eyes. You Nexus, huh. I design your eyes

**Roy**: If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes. Questions

#### The blindness of the De Lacey in the cottage

#### Deckard uses technology to zoom in and out of Leon’s photos so he can “see” the truth

#### The monster comments on what he has seen

#### Roy places toy eyes in his eye sockets and teases Sebastian

#### Tyrell’s thick glasses

#### Roy gouges out his Father’s eyes

Consider the paternal/filial relationship and blindness in *King Lear* and *Oedipus* in your discussion of this section

#### Roy comments on what he has seen

#### Any other references?

### Bibliography

- Godwin W. 1831, ‘Essay V: Of the rebelliousness of man’ in *Thoughts on Man. his nature, productions and discoveries* – http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/godwin/thoughts/TMNPDfrontpiece.html

### Endnotes

1. Godwin William 1831 ‘Essay V: Of the rebelliousness of man’ in *Thoughts on Man. his nature, productions and discoveries* – http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/godwin/thoughts/TMNPDfrontpiece.html
5. Freud writes: Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. ... Future ages will bring with them new and possibly unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization and will increase man’s likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our present investigation, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his God-like character (1931) – http://www2.winchester.ac.uk/edstudies/courses/level%20two%20sem%20two/Freud-Civil-Disc.pdf

### Can we draw any conclusions about the relationship between the two texts using the motif of eyes?

- Consider how context affects the way the motif functions in each text.