

**Worldspace in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*:
From Romantic Nature to Artificiality**

The language and style of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are both deeply rooted in the literary traditions of the Romantic period, and yet Victor Frankenstein's scientific experimentation, and eventual success in creating life from inanimate matter, certainly makes *Frankenstein* an early forerunner of the science fiction genre. However, it is important to point out that Mary Shelley's novel is primarily concerned with critiquing the science of the early 19th century, whereby the *worldspace* of *Frankenstein*, that is to say, the physical surround the characters of the text inhabit, remains highly structured around Nature, which is used to elucidate their lived experiences. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982; rev. 1992), in stark contrast, positions the viewer from the very opening sequence of the film within a hauntingly mechanized and non-natural future—the hellish worldspace of Los Angeles in the year 2019. The aim of this essay will be to explore parallels between *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* in order to illuminate key differences between their respective worldspaces, and examine how character experiences, regardless of their humanness, are articulated through language, imagery and visuals within these spaces.

The parallels between the Creature in *Frankenstein*, and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), the poetic leader of the fugitive replicants in *Blade Runner*, are obvious. Both are living creations of unchecked scientific endeavors, thereby raising many of the same philosophical, moral and ethical concerns. Similarly, both are regarded as Other, that is, distinct from humans, though the distinction is blurred more in the case of replicants, as

they are genetically engineered to simulate humans in everything but emotional response. By comparing Roy's lived experiences with those of both Frankenstein and his Creature, while keeping in mind the imagery and visuals which define the spaces they respectively inhabit, it becomes clear that they exist within two diametrically opposed worldspaces. Jay Clayton has argued that *Blade Runner* draws on an undercurrent in the *Frankenstein* myth, namely, sympathy for the Creature, and he very successfully maps how the film similarly elicits our sympathy for the replicants (88-91)—like Frankenstein's Creature, Roy possesses an eloquence which is undeniably compelling. Even so, Clayton tends towards examining these characters in isolation, paying scant attention to the spaces they occupy. Despite all of the sympathy conjured up for the replicants, the parallels drawn between humans and replicants, and Clayton's contention that the "artificial creatures end up seeming more 'human' than the people who stalk them," there seems to be a decidedly different message stemming from the surrounding worldspace, and the ways in which the replicants relate to it (85). While we may at once feel sympathy for the replicants (made easier by the fact that they *visually* appear human-like, unlike Frankenstein's Creature), we simultaneously recoil from the world presented to us.

By closely analyzing two scenes in *Blade Runner* that exhibit striking similarities to moments in *Frankenstein*, it becomes clear that, regardless of sympathy for the replicants, this non-natural, mechanical, and by extension, non-living world, is a space representative of a grim future which has its origins in the very same all-penetrating and monomaniacal scientific hubris Mary Shelley indicted almost two centuries ago. The haunting futurity of *Blade Runner*, inscribed by the total absence of Nature, makes the warning against science run amok exponentially more profound.

The Tyrell Corporation, residence and business place of Eldon Tyrell, the God-like scientific “genius” behind the creation of the replicants, occupies a space central to *Blade Runner’s* narrative as well as this analysis. From the very outset of the film, in which we see an extreme long shot overlooking the futuristic cityscape of Los Angeles—defined by massive techno-towers and near perpetual twilight, interrupted only by violent lightening strikes and fiery explosions resulting in stunning plumes of flame—the camera visually guides us towards the grandiose Mayan-style pyramid structures that are the headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation. The slow-moving journey over the cityscape is never comfortable, and the ominous non-diegetic music makes matters all the more disconcerting. Throughout the movement, there are several cuts to an extreme close up of an eye, in which we see the fireballs of this horrific worldspace vividly reflected in the iris. The flames become the sensorial experience through which the eye relates to its physical environment, and because the eye is never associated with a specific character, it easily becomes our eye. Experience becomes something which must be negotiated via a non-natural, technologically overdetermined worldspace, whereby we are alienated by the extreme lack of anything familiar. The characters in *Frankenstein* are able to articulate their experience through the spatial surround of Nature, whereas *Blade Runner* is completely devoid of Nature.

Later in the film we return to the Tyrell Corporation, this time in the scene where J.F. Sebastian, a Tyrell employed genetic designer, escorts Roy to meet his “maker.” Just as the Creature confronts his maker, Victor Frankenstein, to demand a companion, here Roy seeks to demand that Eldon extend his life; as a “fail-safe” measure replicants are programmed to live only four years. This scene is particularly illustrative of the

differences between the worldspaces of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*. The scene begins with an extreme long shot to establish the location as the exterior of the massive, *mountainous* Tyrell Corporation (see Fig. 1). The mountain metaphor is purposeful, as the gigantic pyramid-like structure we are confronted with draws a clear parallel with

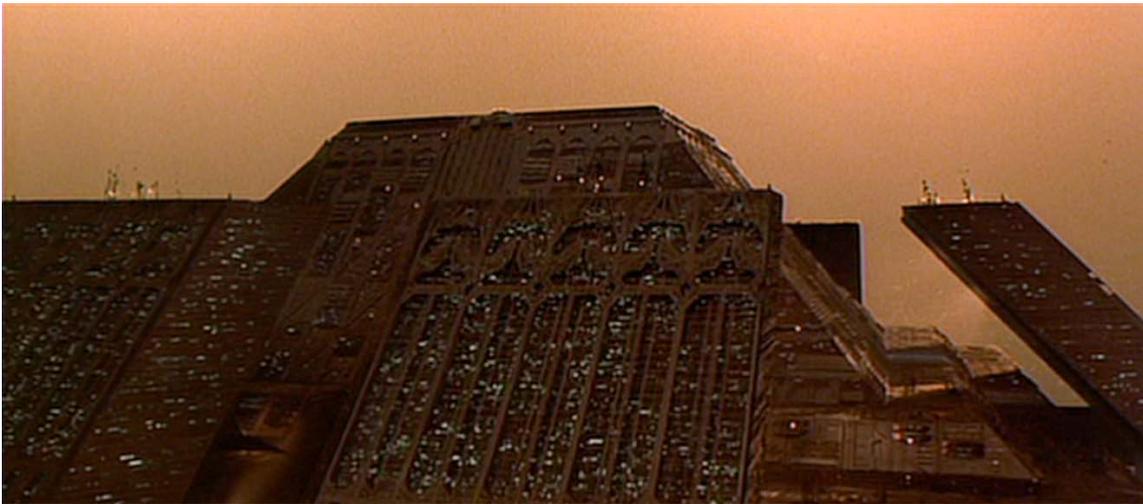


Figure 1: *Blade Runner's* Mont Blanc, the Tyrell Corporation (Ridley Scott, 1982; rev. 1992)

Mont Blanc, below which the Creature and Victor Frankenstein meet for the first time since their initial post-creation encounters in Ingolstadt (Shelley, 92-93). A cut to a closer though still distant exterior shot, relocates us from daytime to nighttime, and again we hear foreboding non-diegetic music; the coupling of the darkness and the music magnifies not only the suspense we feel with respect to the pending confrontation between Roy and Eldon, but also our alienation from the unfamiliar worldspace. In the case of *Frankenstein*, we are alienated only by the abhorrent visage of the Creature, not the surround itself. Returning to the scene, we find the camera tracking a transportation elevator moving upwards along the outside of the building towards the summit. Cutting to the interior of the elevator we see a close up of J.F. Sebastian, followed by a cut to a close up of Roy. Although, the roles are somewhat reversed in *Blade Runner*—as it is

Roy who is ascending to confront his creator, whereas in *Frankenstein* it is Victor who makes his way up the mountain only to be confronted by the Creature—the similarities between the two are unavoidable.

What is especially interesting here are the noticeable differences between the two mountains, that is, Mont Blanc and the Tyrell Corporation. In *Frankenstein*, Victor reaches the village of Chamounix and later wanders the valley below Mont Blanc, and states that these “sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving.” He elaborates further, saying: “They congregated round me; the unstained snowy mountain-top, the glittering pinnacle, the pine woods, and ragged bare ravine; the eagle soaring amidst the clouds—they all gathered round me, and bade me be at peace” (Shelley, 91-92). Any such peace, articulated through Romantic language evoking Nature is simply not possible in *Blade Runner*. Unlike Mont Blanc, and the valley below it, the Tyrell Corporation does not exhibit the illusive, indefinable beauty of sublime Nature, but rather embodies a synthetic artificiality—it is a structure which is both mathematically and mechanically defined because it is, like almost everything else in *Blade Runner*, a manmade creation.

The transport elevator eventually comes to an abrupt stop, as Tyrell’s inner sanctum is only accessible with permission. The camera cuts next not to Tyrell, but first to an owl, which we encountered earlier in the film when Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), the blade runner responsible for hunting down the fugitive replicants, and Rachael (Sean Young), Tyrell’s latest and most advanced Nexus 6 replicant, first met. Rachael had asked Deckard, “Do you like our owl?” to which Deckard quickly responded with his own question: “Is it artificial?” Rachael then states rather nonchalantly: “Of course it is,”

implying that Deckard should have known the answer to such a question—after all, almost everything else Deckard comes across in the film, though appearing real at first, ends up being artificial. (The final scene of the film suggests, rather unequivocally, that Deckard himself is a replicant.) By cutting to the artificial owl, rather than Eldon, we are reminded that the business of the Tyrell Corporation is “commerce,” and the replicants, including Roy, are equally entrenched within this commercial system. Everything in this workspace is commodified, including biological life through genetic manipulation. The mountains and owls of *Blade Runner*, unlike *Frankenstein’s* snowy mountain-top and soaring eagle, are manmade objects, no longer understood as sublime and capable of offering conciliatory peace, but rather they have been transformed into commodified Nature, produced through programmatic and manipulative scientific endeavor.

Another scene in *Blade Runner* which directly parallels *Frankenstein* are Roy’s final moments before his death at the close of his violent confrontation with Deckard. Throughout the film, the replicants, especially Roy, employ poetic and philosophical language to elicit our understanding of their plight. Earlier Roy references, with only minor changes, two lines from William Blake’s *America: A Prophecy*, saying: “Fiery the angels fell. Deep thunder rolled around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc.”¹ In similar fashion, Roy’s partner Pris (Daryl Hannah) calls forth René Descartes, telling J.F. Sebastian, “I think, Sebastian; therefore, I am.” In each instance well-known and canonized poetry/philosophy is used to elicit our sympathy for the replicants and their cause to obtain longer life spans—Roy is comparing himself and the other replicants to angels after all, fallen to this fiery world. At the same time however, the language,

¹ The actual text from Blake reads: “Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll’d / Around their shores; indignant burning with the fires of Orc” (Martin, 108).

particularly in the case of the Blake, problematizes the sympathy we may feel for the replicants in terms of how the language relates to the workspace. Romantic language, such as Blake's, seems to have great difficulty grounding itself in the mechanized milieu of *Blade Runner*. Unlike *Frankenstein's* workspace, which is full of rich metaphorical language articulating lived experience through the spatial surround of Nature, here we find ourselves in an environment which effectively resists notions of the irrational and spiritual.

This particular scene begins with an upward looking close up of Roy's face from Deckard's point of view; Deckard is hanging precariously from a steel beam after a less than successful attempt to escape Roy by jumping from the roof of one building to another. One of the key differences in the close up of Roy here is that he no longer appears "perfect,"² as he did throughout much of the film. Prior to this moment, his visual verisimilitude of humanness made it more difficult for the viewer to think of him as Other, where as in *Frankenstein*, the Creature is readily identifiable as outwardly distinct from humans. Walton, upon seeing the Creature over the deceased Frankenstein, relates: "Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome yet appalling hideousness" (Shelley, 186). The Creature's appearance is monstrous, Roy's is not, at least until the film's denouement. Roy's face is now scarred, bloodied, and he is missing most of his right ear. Despite his unflattering appearance, we still muster sympathy for him, as we become aware that he is approaching the end of his four year lifespan. After he lifts Deckard to safety, the camera cuts from upward looking, to what at first appears to be an eye-level shot wherein Deckard, on the ground, occupies the

² At various points of the film, whether through Deckard, Tyrell, or J.F. Sebastian, Roy's "perfect," or even angelic-like appearance is touched upon; here his physical appearance has changed rather dramatically.

foreground, Roy occupies the mid-ground, and a large, bright neon sign advertising TDK (an actual electronics brand) takes up much of the background, thereby making it the dominant element of the shot. What is subtle, and may go unnoticed at first glance, is that Roy's head is outside of the frame in this shot. In removing his face, and allowing us to only see his body, which carries no emotional information with it, we begin to understand the equivalency between the TDK brand of electronics and the Tyrell brand of Nexus 6 replicants. We are compelled to reject this technological space where everything has become commodity, including life.

Elsewhere in the film numerous signs of commerce dominate, including brands such as Coca-Cola, RCA, Pan Am and Atari, among others, implying that the dominance of the TDK sign in this scene is not accidental. The futuristic worldspace of *Blade Runner*, is defined by an electronic, technological commerce, displayed on highly invasive, hovering and talking billboards. As Roy sits down, with his energy to sustain life waning, we notice that in the next shot his head strikingly overlays the negative space subtended by the outline of letter D of the sign (see Fig. 2). This visual equivalency



Figure 2: Roy Batty, living being as sign of commerce (Ridley Scott, 1982; rev. 1992)

between the literal sign and the replicant, condenses Roy into a similar sign representational of this commerce. While we feel sympathy for the exploitation of the replicants, we also identify them, and their world, as products of a manufacturing process, that is, distinct from a natural process. This is not to say that sympathy is unfounded, just that it may be a different kind of sympathy, or more precisely, pity. These replicants, and the non-natural, and by extension, non-living worldspace they inhabit should never have been pursued as an endpoint in the first place. The technological commodification of virtually everything, living and non-living alike, visually presented in *Blade Runner's* worldspace, is a hypothetical future worth avoiding at all costs.

The *Frankenstein* myth is again touched upon when Roy eloquently utters his final words. Despite similarities between the tremendous sense of loss felt by both the Creature and Roy—the Creature's maker has perished and his miseries of loneliness, isolation, as well as memories of his horrific deeds will haunt him for the rest of his days, and Roy, who is soon to reach the end of his brief preprogrammed days, finds himself unable to experience a long life, unenslaved and unhunted—our ability to relate to Roy's experiences is complicated by the unfamiliarity of the world he resides within. He attempts to articulate his emotions through Romantic-like language which evokes his worldspace and his experiences within it, resounding: "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. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in the rain. Time to die." Ironically, Deckard himself is a replicant, whereby any notion of "you people," that is, actual humans, seems largely irrelevant in a world where

the push seems to be towards a complete mechanization and commodification of life. Regardless of any compassion we have for Roy and his circumstances, we likewise find ourselves compelled to reject the semantics of his elegiac speech because Romanticism is ultimately incapable of making the transition to this brutal new future—Romanticism and Nature are inseparable. The worldspace of Roy, Deckard, and others (whether human or not), is not at all one of sublime Nature, like that through which even the Creature once found peace, but a technological non-Nature defined by violent imagery of attack ships on fire, c-beams and space gates. At the conclusion of *Frankenstein*, the Creature similarly articulates his experiences, but because his world is still defined by a living, breathing Nature, and not artificiality, it becomes all the more poignant when he juxtaposes his pleasant memories with his feelings of misery and remorse. We understand what has been lost for the Creature. Gone is any hope of regaining that initial natural paradise, wherein he “felt the cheering warmth of summer, and the rustling of the leaves and the warbling of birds...” (Shelley 186). Lost too is the company he once shared with the cottagers—Felix, Agatha, the old man and Safie—albeit at a distance, which he deeply loved and cherished. Finally, with the death of his father/creator Victor Frankenstein, any hope of companionship and love has similarly passed away. As for Roy, there was no paradise to lose, and thus we have trouble understanding his experiences as anything more than a mirror which reflects the hostility of his worldspace. Much more problematic here is what is lost for humanity as a whole through the disappearance of Nature and the dominance of the artificial in *Blade Runner's* future.

Concerns over humanness, humanity, or simply put, what it means to be human, have been avoided in this analysis, as it is both an argument based in perceptions, as well

as one which has been treated at length by various critics and scholars (McNamara, 1997; Martin, 2005). The central focus of this paper has instead been to look at interrelations between characters and their respective worldspaces, and moreover to consider how we come to understand both the characters and the spaces they inhabit on the basis of these relationships. By closely examining parallel moments in *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*, it becomes clear that the two worldspaces are drastically different from one another, as are the ways in which characters are perceived within these spaces. Grounded in a realm where processes, whether biological or not, occur naturally, *Frankenstein* operates in conjunction with an irrational, spiritual and sublime Nature—the only non-natural processes of the novel occur in Victor’s laboratory, and this of course is where Shelley fronts her assault on unchecked science. Noticeably dissimilar is *Blade Runner’s* worldspace, which is structured around a grossly expanded version of the God-like scientific hubris espoused first by Victor Frankenstein, and then taken to the extreme by Eldon Tyrell. The visuals and articulation of experiences associated with the replicant Roy, show us a future given over to the scientific manipulation of everything, both living and non-living, so that it might be algorithmically understood, perfected, and ultimately commodified. Unlike the physical surround of Mary Shelley’s novel, which is based in Romantic conceptions of Nature, we cannot help but turn away in horror from *Blade Runner’s* dystopian worldspace of branded artificiality.

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