ANDREW BENJAMIN

AT HOME WITH REPLICANTS

The Architecture of Blade Runner

Where is the future? How will it be built? One way of taking up these questions would be to follow the presentation of the architectural within films that seek to project the future. The co-presence of the two – the architectural within film – brings two interrelated constraints into play. The first pertains to film; to its being a medium of representation. In this instance it will be the medium itself that works to constrain. Secondly, there will be the constraint of function. Even though the architecture of the future may differ, it will have to function as architecture. Even allowing for changes within it, difference will still be mediated by the retention of function. While this is clear that function is more complex than any idealisation of its presence will allow, what is of overall significance here is that the copresence of these constraints marks the necessity of relation. In being necessary it will have to be thought. The primordality of relation means that what will remain as an ‘ineliminable’ part of any built future is its being architecture. Equally, taking film, at least initially, as a medium of representation will mean that the images presented within it will need to be located within a visual field. Allowing for the fact that the nature of the image may need to be reconsidered, if not reassessed, film will, nonetheless, always have to represent.

What has been identified here as constraints may seem trivial. All they are asserting is that architecture must retain its specificity and that film must work with – and within – representation. And yet despite the apparently obvious nature of these assertions their importance lies in what they identify. In the case of both, their possibility lies in the necessity of a connection to the present. As such, both bring with them the importance and centrality of time. In the case of architecture the difficulty of thinking its future does not lie in a lack of imagination or capacity for futural projection. It is rather that the future and therefore its being thought will always need to be undertaken in relation to the present and, furthermore, be seen as a condition of the present. Thus, the question of the future can always be reworked in terms of the possibility of another thinking. In the case of science fiction films, the challenge that arises with them is the extent to which what they are offering either in terms of film or, in this instance, of architecture amounts to that other possibility. Alterity here will always be different from projected utopias. On this account, the possibility of a pure utopia, a place outside of all relation, is an impossibility.

Before pursuing the interplay of film and architecture in *Blade Runner* – an interplay always conditioned by the work of constraint – a third element needs to be introduced. The presence of the body – the body within the architectural body as well as within the body of the film – will need to be taken up. Not only is the body implicated in the architectural by figuring, historically, as an important metaphor or analogy for the architectural, the move away from the physical human body towards the ‘replicant’, or more radically towards the cyborg, positions and holds the body in another form. It is reformed and maintained. The question hinges on what it is that is being maintained and how the analogy between architecture and body is structured by this change. It may be that other bodies will have been possible once the body – the possible other body – has to bear a relation to the present. Relation here is the site of critique; it is moreover critique’s condition of possibility.

Los Angeles, November 2019, is the announced setting of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. Here, the immediate problem is the presence on earth of Nexus 6 replicants. This advanced form of robot had been involved in mutinies in the ‘Off World’. As a consequence, all replicants that manage to get back to earth are to be hunted down and then ‘retired’. *Blade Runner* was the name given to those whose job it was to effect the retirement. The film’s chronological setting, its urban location and the presence of replicants brings history (here the future), architecture (Los Angeles and the urban environment) and the body (eg the necessity to distinguish between replicant and human) into connection. Rather than taking this film either as programmatic or as having an exemplary status here its importance is that what it allows is a way of tracing a specific formation of these three elements. The importance of that formation is that it provides a way of thinking about the opening questions. Where is the future? How will it be built?

As the replicant is more or less indistinguishable from the human, special tests are needed in order to establish their identity. In the case of
the Nexus 6, their capacity to develop more advanced emotional responses than the previous generation of replicants made their identification even more difficult and therefore correspondingly even more urgent. The test devised by Deckard involves observing pupil dilation during a detailed questioning. Replicants will in the end identify themselves by the inability to show the same level of immediate emotional response to certain questions. Within the structure of the film the presence of the replicant allows for a general questioning of the guarantees of identity. When Deckard and Rachael first meet, and before he is aware that she is a replicant, she asks Deckard whether he has 'ever retired a human by mistake?' At a later stage when she confronts him with her past - a past that in the process is truly identified as fiction - she pointedly inquires if he himself has taken his own test. In others words, the film by introducing and maintaining the possibility that Deckard may be a replicant heightens the already ambiguous replicant-human relation.

The level of genes technology that produced the 'skin jobs' is not just used with humans it is also deployed in the recreation of other animals. A trip through a market reveals snakes and ostriches among others. The owl at Tyrell headquarters is a replicant. There is an important level of instability that is introduced and reintroduced by the presence of these animals. It is interesting to note that this is brought about not through the use of hard technology but through work with genes. DNA manipulation has enabled the replicant to be produced. Here, the prosthetic is for the most part absent. Moreover, the use of drugs and virtual reality that complicates the constructed space in which, for example, Marva the main character in Pat Cadigan's Pools finds herself, is also absent. With this work the question of subjectivity is played out in terms of the human and the human's own creation. What is absent is the possible reworking and reposition of subject positions. It is this precise sense that the replicant can be distinguished from the cyborg. Donna Haraway's own description of the cyborg is worth recalling.

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological politics based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture can no longer be the resources for appropriation or incorporation by the other.

What does the cyborg offer? The answer to this question lies in the reference to the "household". The question is what force can the evocation of such a household? Its place will be problematic.

The architecture as well as interior design within Blade Runner is more straightforward. The police station to which Deckard is taken has an entrance area reminiscent of large rail stations - places in the American context which are already marked by a certain redundancy - while within the office the filing cabinets are wooden. The desk is conventional. The presence of fans indicates the absence or failure of air conditioning. Here, technology is only partly at work. The office indicates a continuity with a certain image of the present. On the other hand, the cars used by the police do not maintain the same level of continuity. They are technology at a very sophisticated level, or rather they are machines at a very sophisticated level. Technology is always used as a servant for the human. The potentially interactive space of man and machine only exists within a genetic context. Moreover, it is because the relationship between human and machine is located in opposition that the replicant is able to pose such a threat and more significantly why the architecture within the film has to enact a series of almost predictable conventions. What marks out the future dimensions of the buildings?

Deckard's apartment is standard. It is not as though it enacts a yet-to-be determined structure of domesticity. It would be a perfect home for Rachael were she not a replicant. On one level what makes it seem unfair that they have to flee is that as a domestic setting it is ideal. And yet another it could not be ideal as it is an architecture that could not house the consequences of her having been accepted. Accepting the replicant may demand another architecture. As a work of architecture, his apartment's only concession to the future - and here would be a putative concession - is the voice activated lift and the location of his apartment on the 97th floor. Although it introduces a further element of instability into the film there is the strong suggestion that the majority of the population have left and now inhabit the 'Off World'. Immigrant communities, corporate headquarters, elements of government and those who work within them seem to be all that has remained. And yet why this works to open up the question of the architecture of the other world (in the end this question is otiose) is because there is no need to think that the relationship between human and technology - be that technology machine or gene based - would be any different.

The Tyrell headquarters seems to be modelled on a Mayan temple. Internally, its architecture and design is eclectic. A visionary future is held at bay by size. As with the elevation of Deckard's apartment, here the only concession to the future - albeit an imagined future - is enormity. Conversely, other architectural possibilities are provided by the transformation
of the given; however, the transformation in question is decay. What comes to be juxtaposed within the cosmopolitan urban fabric is decay – the continuity rather than the teleology of decay – and the modern vast. The replicant is seen as a threat within this context. It is at this point that the constraint governing both architecture and film needs to be re-introduced.

What characterises the replicant is its filmic possibility. Rachael, Pris, Zhora are ostensibly human. They are not stylised machines. In the case of Roy, his poignant claim that he has seen and experienced more than any human almost makes him more human than the humans. It is as though he has lived at the very edge of human existence. Indeed, his death – he dies by simply running out of life – seems the most quintessentially human aspiration for death. Neither killed nor fatally ill his life just runs out at the appointed time. At that moment he shows himself to be what the replicant had always been, namely another who was never absolutely other. Robots, androids, the dolls populating JF Skinner’s apartment – even the machine with skin – would always be purely other. Acts of differentiation would be straightforward. Differences would proliferate and insist. The body of the replicant does not allow for complete differentiation. They are both part of the set-up while not being part of it. They become, therefore, a mediating moment. Their filmed presence allows them to be the same but only in the moment of their differentiation. Equally that presence allows them to be different by presenting them as the same. As body and as the analogue for architecture they are both at home and not at home.

The replicant works through the opposition of same and other by turning that opposition into an identity by incorporating it. As such, the architectural aesthetic within Blade Runner that posits an otherness that is only explicable in terms of decay and size has done no more than heighten possibilities already present in contemporary urban life. The disruptive possibility of a relation with a replicant arises because of the recognition of the actuality of alterity. This can be worked through both in relation to the replicant itself or in terms of a necessary concession about the already divided nature of self. The architecture of the film cannot provide an architecture for replicants. A refusal – articulated within a banalised conception of architectural otherness – leaves open the question of what it would mean to be at home with replicants. Answering it must work through the analogy between architecture and body; this time, however, taking the replicant’s body as the point of departure. Only by starting with replicants will it be possible to house cyborgs.