

Blade Runner and Slavery in the 21st Century

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Abstract : This paper looks to set Ridley Scott's original film Blade Runner (1982) and Denis Villeneuve's Blade Runner 2049 (2017) in order to provide an analysis of both films with respect to the new configurations of slavery in the 21st century. Both Blade Runner films present a de-politicized society that oscillates between two extremes: the spectral (the eye, optics, digital communications) and the biopolitical (the body, haptics). On the one hand, recognizing the subject only as a sign, the society of the spectacle registers, identifies, produces and reproduces the subject as a code. At the same time, though, the subject is constantly reduced to a naked body, to bare life, for biometric technologies to scan it as a biological body or body parts. Being simultaneously a pure code (word without body) and an instrument slave (body without word), the replicants are thus the paradigmatic subjects of this society. The paper focuses first on the similarity: both films depict a relationship between masters and slaves, that is, a despotic relationship. The master uses the (body of the) slave as an instrument, as an extension of his own body. Blade Runner 2019 frames the despotic relation in this classical way through its triangulation with the economy (the Tyrell Corporation) and the slave-replicants' dissent (rejecting their reduction to mere instruments). In a counter-classical approach, in Blade Runner 2049, the focus shifts to another triangulation: despotism, economy (the Wallace Corporation) and consent (of replicants who no longer perceive themselves as slaves).

Keywords : Blade Runner, the spectacle, bio-politics, slavery, instrumentalisation

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