# Metafiction and *Pale Fire* in *Blade Runner 2049*

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*Editor's Note: This is a paper I published in a peer-reviewed online film studies journal in 2019. The journal has since gone dark. I want to preserve the paper and cite it in future research, so I'm taking advantage of my position as editor here to reproduce it.*

Near the end of the first act of *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), the hologram girlfriend Joi (Ana de Armas) of the protagonist K (Ryan Gosling) expresses the desire to cheer him up after a hard day. K is a Replicant, a vatgrown human gengineered for strength, reflexes, perception and, as the film's opening crawl states, obedience. The crawl also describes K's job: a Blade Runner is a police officer whose primary job is to "retire" renegade Replicants by killing them. K's hard day has included killing another person for the crime of unauthorized existence; he also undergoes what the overlay text tells us is a "post-traumatic baseline test". In this test, he repeats back to an unseen interviewer words from seemingly arbitrary phrases as a demonstration that he remains obedient. Joi pulls from a book on the table an image of that book; viewers see her from K's perspective holding up the book; its title and author, *Pale Fire* (1962) by Vladimir Nabokov, are clearly visible, framed by her hands near the center of the screen.




"Let's read", she says, to which he responds, "You hate that book". She shrugs, tosses the image to the side, changes her outfit in the blink of an eye and asks him to dance. The presence of Pale Fire is a brief illusion in the film, perhaps something intended to provide *Blade Runner 2049* (*BR49*) with reflected depth or glory, in the manner that *BR49* takes from the original *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and the title of Nabokov's novel and the poem within the novel take from Shakespeare's Timon of Athens. Yet the arbitrary phrases K repeats in his test of obedience are in fact lines from the same poem: Joi may discard the image of Pale Fire, but the deliberate framing of the book encourages viewers to investigate how it might reflect upon the film.

This essay will argue that the presence of *Pale Fire* in *BR49* repositions the film as metafictional science fiction: the film demands to be watched and re-watched in conjunction with other texts it references, including *Pale Fire*, in much the same manner as Nabokov's novel demands to be read and re-read. The disjunctions and misdirections in the novel, centered on whether and to what extent its narrator can be trusted, enable us to view the film's implied successful revolution by Replicants against their masters as an appealing but ultimately false narrative. The film places viewers in a position structurally equivalent to readers of *Pale Fire* and to K inside *BR49*'s story: we are led to jump to an attractive conclusion even though we are shown evidence that the conclusion is unjustified. The film uses a particular visual motif of focusing on holographic illusion as illusion, especially around Joi, in order to both distract from and draw attention to the misdirection. Both *Blade Runner* films are science fiction (SF): if we read them through the understanding of SF literature as estranging conditions in our own world as a means of reflecting upon those conditions, we can understand that both films estrange the growing dominance of corporate power in their respective eras. The first film shows that this dominance can be slowed, arrested or even reversed, if only through violence. *BR49* appears to make the same point, but attention to *Pale Fire* and to the visual motif of illusion enables a reading of the film as much bleaker, where opportunities to challenge corporate power are always already foreclosed.

For those who have seen *Blade Runner* (*BR82*) but not *BR49*, the sequel presumes that Deckard (Harrison Ford) and Rachael (Sean Young) are indeed able to live outside the reach of corporate power, if only for a couple of years. The protagonist of *BR49* is K, a Replicant who serves as a Blade Runner in the collapsed ecosystem of midcentury Los Angeles. After "retiring" a Replicant, he discovers traces on what prove to be the bones of Rachael that she, also a Replicant, gave birth. This promises to upend the society of *BR49*, in that the difference between Replicants and born humans is no longer empathy (as in the first film) but rather the capacity to reproduce. There is a rebel Replicant underground, who believe the child will lead them to a successful revolution against their corporate and human oppressors. Joi helps K convince himself that he is the now-grown child; he tracks down Deckard, who is the only one who knows that the child is in fact Ana Stelline (Carla Juri), a designer of implanted memories sequestered in her lab on the pretext that she has an autoimmune condition. When the Wallace Corporation, the successor to the first film's Tyrell Corporation, captures Deckard in order to extract the secret from him, K intervenes. He kills Wallace's (Jared Leto) Replicant enforcer Luv (Sylvia Hoeks) and frames Deckard as dead so that Deckard might reunite with his daughter without fear of Wallace tracking them down. K dies as a result.

**Blade Runner and SF**

Both *Blade Runner* films are SF: they were conceived and marketed as such, and designated as such in major databases such as IMDB and Box Office Mojo. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* calls the original *Blade Runner* "the most influential SF film". (Clute and Nicholls, 224) For how we might analyze SF films, Annette Kuhn established five categories, one of which is reflection, where a film embodies real-world sociocultural issues, such as the perception of 1950s SF film as Cold War paranoia. (Kuhn, 16) In this essay, I will focus on the parallel trope

in criticism of SF literature, cognitive estrangement. The term comes from the work of SF critic Darko Suvin; he took "estrangement" from the works of playwright Bertolt Brecht, who defined it as "a representation [that] allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar". (Willett, 192) This is often phrased as "a reflection in a distorting mirror". For Suvin, the alternative imaginative framework of an SF text contains a novum or new thing. Suvin borrows the term "novum" from another of his chief influences, Ernst Bloch, defining it as a "totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality". The novum is plausible as an extrapolation from currently-understood science or as a rewrite of history based on the appearance of the novum before the time in which a work is set, hence "cognitive". The work of SF uses the consequences of the novum's presence to reflect upon or question the current conditions in the author's society. (Suvin, 10) In both films, the novum is Replicants, cognitive in that in 1982 it was a plausible future extrapolation to 2019 and cognitive in 2017 as an extrapolation from the first film. SF and metafiction are of course not mutually exclusive: SF grandmaster Robert A. Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast* (1980) has its characters jumping between his own and others' fictional worlds, while much of Philip K. Dick's work has metafictional elements.

There are at least as many readings of *BR82* through cognitive estrangement as there are cuts of the film; Replicants as slaves is one of the more common approaches. Judith B. Kerman argues that Replicants are lower than slaves:

> Although Mosaic law allowed slavery, the slaves of the Israelites had clear legal rights, based specifically on empathy, the memory that the Israelites had been slaves and strangers in a strange land (Exodus 22:20). It is obvious that the replicants have no such protection, and they are even, by definition, excluded from empathy (their own, and human empathy toward them). (Kernan 2005, 36)

Yet slavery is the reflection in the distorting mirror: *BR82* discusses it openly, most notably in the climactic scene on the rooftop. I believe the mirror reflects the real-world effect of the growth of corporate power in the years leading up to 1982. Government that represents the interests of citizens has been reduced to violence in the service of unelected oligarchs such as Tyrell; people live in darkness lit by enormous advertisements, while the CEO lives like a pharaoh. Humans, born or Replicant, have little to no say in the direction or structure of their society. *BR49* maintains essentially the same paradigm, with Tyrell replaced by Wallace and rain by snow. The ads are holographic now, but Replicants remain slaves.

### ***Pale Fire* and *Blade Runner 2049***

Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is a work of problematic, very funny and often absurd literary analysis; it is also a moving meditation on death and grief. The poem "Pale Fire", written by recently-deceased American poet-professor John Shade, is presented with foreword, annotation and index by Charles Kinbote, a professor from the possibly fictional Baltic country of Zembla. In the poem, Shade muses on his life, most notably the death by drowning of his teenaged daughter Hazel. This appears quite straightforward and often trite, though in fact it is self-reflective and complex. The

poem's primary theme is of Shade overcoming his grief through his faith that the patterns he sees in the world are indicative of a life beyond his. Kinbote, who may or may not be the exiled king of Zembla, argues that the poem is about his own life as king, the overthrow of his regime, and his subsequent escape and flight to America. He backs up his claim through highly improbable and discursive readings of the poem and the unsupported assertion that he convinced Shade to write his story in the guise of the poet's own. The novel culminates with the reveal that Shade was murdered just after he finished the poem. Kinbote claims the killer is an assassin sent by the new Zemblan regime to assassinate him; the man is likely a local criminal who mistakes Shade for Kinbote's landlord, the judge who sentenced him to prison. Kinbote takes advantage of Shade's widow's grief to make off with the index cards upon which the sole copy of the poem is written, then presents to us the poem and his preposterous reading thereof. We have no guarantee the poem is as Shade wrote it; we have no guarantee Shade even wrote the poem; the lack of guarantee is in many aspects precisely the point of Pale Fire. Kinbote himself may or may not be a figment of Shade's imagination (or vice versa); he also may be V. Botkin, a paranoid and delusional visiting professor.

The indeterminacy of *Pale Fire* makes it as studied and argued-over a text in literary criticism as *BR82* is in criticism of SF cinema. The novel addresses the interplay between authors and readers as much as the stories of Shade's or Kinbote's lives. Many of the earliest critiques framed the novel as a "puzzle box" or "jewel box", both in admiration of its construction and to imply that a sufficiently careful reading could tease out the answer to the puzzle. (McCarthy) For a generation, critics argued enthusiastically for different and often mutually exclusive positions on the roles of poet Shade and commentator Kinbote, (Maddox, 15-18) or Kinbote's "real" identity as V. Botkin. (Alexandrov, 374-375) Pale Fire is "a text of absolute uncertainty". (McHale, 18) Many critics address Nabokov's long interest in the writing of chess puzzles in between writing critically-acclaimed bestsellers[1] in his adopted language and curating the *Lepidoptera* collection at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. (Boyd 1999, 9) Chess puzzles typically only admit one solution, hence the hypothesis that *Pale Fire* also does. Thomas Karshan argues that the entire text is a game, and we need to read it "playfully", without regard for definite truth, because to solve the puzzle would be to end it, and the novel "equates ending with death". For Karshan, the desire to find the solution is what drives readers to perform the difficult work of decoding that "initiate[s] us in the play of thought" and transforms readers into writers. (Karshan, 205-206) For Maurice Couturier, the search for the solution to the puzzle is always already doomed to fail because of "various elements of overdetermination" within the text. (Couturier, 56-62)

In the poem, Shade, in search of solace for his grief, succumbs to one of the fits to which he is sometimes subject:

> And blood-black nothingness began to spin
> A system of cells interlinked within
> Cells interlinked within cells interlinked
> Within one stem. And dreadfully distinct
> Against the dark, a tall white fountain played. [703-707] (Nabokov, 59)

These are of course the very words K and the interviewer exchange in the baseline test in *BR49*. Viewers may not recognize them as lines from the poem, but after seeing Joi present the book, and hearing the words again later in the film when K botches the test, they may look up the words and find their origin in the novel. Readers who scan the section of the poem surrounding these lines will find that the "tall white fountain" is a nebulous representation of proof of an afterlife. Shade reads a newspaper story about a woman who after a near-death experience also recounts seeing a tall white fountain. When Shade seeks out the source, he finds that the article contains a misprint: the woman saw a mountain, not a fountain. [747-802] (Nabokov, 60-62) It's a curious choice for a test of obedience: to repeat the tall white fountain is in fact to misspeak, to misinterpret. K may have read or even reread *Pale Fire*; he may have started it but stopped reading because Joi "hates that book"; he certainly learns to misspeak and thus to disobey over the course of the film.

I will undertake a critical reading of *BR49* through the 1999 monograph on *Pale Fire* written by Brian Boyd, also a biographer of Nabokov. Boyd writes about the experience of multiple readings of the novel, especially insofar as this replicates the process of scientific discovery. (Boyd 1999, 3-4) In the first of Boyd's three approaches to the text, he begins with the foreword before moving to the poem and thence the commentary and index. From the second paragraph of the foreword, it's evident that Kinbote interjects more of himself into the commentary than is proper for an academic editor. For Boyd, this leads to a fork in the path at the end of the fifth paragraph, where Kinbote urges readers to see his note on line 991. (Nabokov, 15) Readers who turn to the note will be able to follow a trail of cross-references leading to the revelation that Kinbote (believes he) is the exiled king of Zembla. Readers who turn to the notes will then frame the poem in a rather different manner than does the linear reading Boyd believes readers will follow once they have dismissed Kinbote as unreliable. The remainder of the foreword, for linear readers, gives no further cross-references, but ample evidence to question Kinbote's competence, his custody of the poem, his relationship to Shade, his personality, sexuality and sanity. Shade's poem, then, becomes for linear readers the "true" story, especially given its humility and lack of bombast, and Kinbote an intruder trying to hijack it for his own ends. (Boyd 1999, 15-24)

In *BR49*, K does not enter the story with the preconceived idea that he's the chosen one or "specimen",[2] nor is he played as a comic figure or unreliable narrator, but he's still clearly framed as the protagonist of the film. Once he finds the wooden horse, even though he knows full well he's a Replicant with implanted memories, he's smitten with the idea that he's the specimen—the protagonist of his own story. Ana Stelline, the real specimen, tells him "someone lived" his memory of the horse. K's reaction to this is extreme emotion; first-time viewers accustomed to the tropes of film understand he believes himself to be the "someone". He ignores or transcends his own programming, learns to lie and exhibits a considerably broader range of emotion. In this reading, *BR49* is rather more subtle than *Pale Fire*: whereas the novel foregrounds Kinbote's unreliability, the film encourages viewing Ana not as the specimen—though she lives in a specimen jar—but as a tertiary character. To the extent that *BR49* gives us the story of the real specimen, it only takes place in one long sequence at the precise midpoint of the film and in a very

brief penultimate scene. Most of what viewers see in the film is K's story. In this reading, having Joi hold up an image of *Pale Fire* reads as something of a wink and a nod to the sort of clever people who know their modern literary classics, much as the references to Shakespeare, Swift, Pope, Eliot and others in the poem, especially those that Kinbote ignores or misinterprets in the commentary, are clues laid for readers by Nabokov the chess puzzle designer. The presence of *Pale Fire* is a clue to first-time viewers that they ought not to be nearly as shocked or crushed as K himself is when the narrative of him as the specimen turns out to be false.

Boyd's second approach to *Pale Fire* imagines readers giving the novel a rereading, forearmed with the knowledge that Shade is dead and Kinbote an egoist or madman. Careful examination of all four sections of the text leads readers to visiting Russian professor V. Botkin. The stress caused by Botkin's exile compels him to reimagine himself first as Kinbote, then as the king of Zembla. Boyd finds much support in the text for this reading, where Botkin, desperately in need of affirmation or distraction from suicidal ideation, imposes upon Shade's tolerance and gentle nature to try to induce Shade to write about the delusional Zemblan narrative, which Botkin constructs from their mutual colleagues and the objects and books in his landlord's home. (Boyd 1999, 91-106) This makes of Kinbote a tragic figure rather than a buffoon or villain.

Viewers who rewatch *BR49*, forearmed with the knowledge that Ana is the specimen, may find that it adds nuance but relatively little in the way of structural difference. While a second viewing can bring additional pathos to K's role in creating his own delusion,[3] it doesn't refocus the film. Nevertheless, this rewatching does draw attention to the sheer emptiness of K's physical and emotional life in the film's first act. Gosling plays his movements in the initial scenes as jerky and robotic, his face a mask. K knows what he is: a created being, a mostly inhuman killer of humans who are trying to be human. He's aware that his "childhood" in the orphanage with the toy horse is a set of implanted memories, designed to create emotional responses that mimic those of a human and thereby make him more obedient to his masters. Yet he warms as he begins to believe he might be a born creature, one with a soul, as he puts it to Joshi. His face softens and grows more expressive and his movements looser. A rewatching with the knowledge that he's delusional underscores his alienation and provokes sympathy, in a manner analogous to how rereaders of *Pale Fire* might sympathize more with Kinbote/Botkin and his need to do anything to make himself feel that he matters. K knows that if he's the specimen, Wallace is going to try to vivisect him, but that's only in one respect worse than another night eating grubs after another day killing his own kind, with his only company a hologram girlfriend.

Boyd's third reading, or "re-rereading", centers upon putting in abeyance the conflict between text and commentary in favor of tracing the paths that do exist. He begins his re-rereading by identifying the central question posed by the poem: whether there is an afterlife and whether something of Shade's daughter Hazel survived her death. While Shade explicitly dismisses her "survival as conventional ghost, phantom, shade", he ends the poem believing that his sense of order within chaos implies that she is in some way still alive. Through close re-rereading of the poem and commentary, and of the apparent gibberish of the message Kinbote says Shade and his wife and daughter received in a purportedly haunted barn, Boyd grounds an argument that Hazel

or her spirit is alive within the poem, but that Shade is unable to perceive this. Boyd interlinks the names of butterflies, one of Kinbote's many missed cues, and one of Nabokov's other works of fiction to scaffold a more general argument that in the text and world of Pale Fire, the dead send messages to the living, who can perceive the messages as phenomena but not as carriers of meaning. The message in the barn is not gibberish but a warning from Shade's Aunt Maud; the Red Admirable butterfly mentioned near the end of the poem is Hazel-as-Psyche. Both try to deter Shade from walking to Kinbote's house, where he will be killed, but Shade cannot understand their efforts as messages, much less decode them. (Boyd 1999, 131-144) Participation in the quest for meaning both leads readers to the hidden presence of the dead yet alive and transforms *Pale Fire* into a metafictional text: readers become aware that the text foregrounds its own construction and exhibits slippage among levels of narrative.

*BR49* presents two messages from the dead to the living: the scalpel marks on Rachael's pelvis and the Joi advertisement near the end.



The advertisement is much simpler to decode, in that Joi, here still played by de Armas, serves as inspiration for K to emerge from his existential crisis and decide to rescue Deckard. Gosling gives enough nuance to K's reaction to the giant, bare-breasted hologram crouching down and telling him he looks like a good joe that it's evident that K knows that this is manipulation—and yet, it motivates him.

In the scene where Rachael's bones are examined, the characters in the room, human and Replicant, immediately understand that the scalpel marks are a message and that their meaning is clear. Joshi states in the subsequent scene that "the world is built on a wall" that separates kind, and that without that wall there will be war, or slaughter. The marks on Rachael's pelvis break down that wall. Joshi engages in a debate with K over what it means to be born, a question that comes up multiple times in the film: K says, "to be born is to have a soul, I guess." Later, Joi will link this to "being wanted": this appears to be a facet of underground Replicant culture.

The dependence of status upon the biological, however, is by the standards of real-world 2017 problematic: no serious scholar would try to argue that only those who can bear biological children are truly human. Many critical responses to *BR49* take issue with the implications of the

consistent focus on reproduction. To take one of many examples on the internet, Emma Louise Backe argues that:

> …the central conceit of the movie—that replicants have the capacity to reproduce and therefore ascend from their status as sub-human citizens—the promise of transformation through child-bearing is a tired trope of science fiction, one that reinforces, rather than subverts, the future of the female. (Backe)

She's not wrong about the tiredness of the trope, but I'd like to propose that one use of *Pale Fire* in the film is to induce viewers to wonder how accurate the commentary is—not Backe's, but rather Joshi's and K's when they talk about walls and souls. To rewatch the film shows that K sees his own "birthday" when he kneels down in front of the dead tree; to re-rewatch the film reminds us that K knows well that his memories are implanted and that he is to some extent aware that he's jumping to a conclusion belied by evidence.He talks himself into believing that he's the specimen, but some part of his mind immediately understands the truth that he's a secondary character in another's story. I believe it's more productive to read Joshi's description of the wall as misdirection, or perhaps propaganda. There is indeed a wall in *BR49*, and it's not just the enormous one that separates the risen sea from the city. Yet nor does it separate humans and Replicants insofar as they are fertile and infertile. The wall in the film separates kind, but those kinds are free and slave, not human and Replicant. The existence of a child born from two Replicants only threatens war or slaughter insofar as it's the final foreclosure upon the hopes of Replicants that they might one day be free. The film doesn't state whether the child of a slave is itself a slave, as in the antebellum USA, but Niander Wallace, the CEO in *BR49*, thinks he could have the numbers he wants if Replicants could reproduce.

Reading the first film through the lens of cognitive estrangement allows us to see slavery as a distorted reflection of the dominance of corporate power. Wallace clearly imagines the children of Replicants as his own children. He treats them as his slaves, though he estranges this through his soaring rhetoric about angels. Viewers may think that Wallace believes he's trying to help humanity, even though he has just stated that "every leap of civilization was built off the back of a disposable workforce". In *BR82*, Tyrell gives Replicants a four-year lifespan; it's said that this is in order to prevent them from developing attachments that might lead to rebellion, but it's also a means of protecting the Tyrell Corporation's profits. As Kerman points out, "As in the case of any slave, the design flaw is not so much the short life as the development of control problems which make a short life convenient." (Kerman 1991, 21) In *BR49*, the open-ended lifespan of Replicants is a problem for Wallace: they go underground and farm grubs, or pluck out their right eyeballs and form a rag-tag *Résistance*, or just move to Vegas and keep bees and drink—but they all stop working for the Wallace Corporation. Yet if Replicants can have children, this protects Wallace's profits.

When Backe argues that transformation through childbearing is an SF cliché, she's half right: it is a sexist cliché, but BR49 does not present childbearing as ascension from sub-human status. Rather, childbearing is the final barring of humanity to Replicants. If knowledge of the existence

of the specimen will bring war, it's not because the knowledge means Replicants will be free, but rather that they will be forever slaves. Guided by the shade of *Pale Fire*, we can understand that the Replicants are behaving like Kinbote: they grasp at scraps of narrative in order to construct a meaningful story in which they are the protagonists rather than the preterite. Out of a desperate need to patch his suicidal alienation, Botkin/Kinbote assembles—in Boyd's re-rereading, Hazel inspires him to assemble—from his colleagues and his landlord's house a story in which he is king. Out of a similar need, K uses memories he knows are implants in order to assemble a story in which he is the wanted child. The renegade Replicants cast themselves as rebels who would overthrow an interstellar empire.

**Holographic Illusion in *Blade Runner 2049***

Yet *BR49* is not a work of print literature: a full "reading" of the film will encompass whether and how its visuals dovetail with the effects of *Pale Fire*. I believe that the film uses a visual motif to estrange the dramatic increase in corporate dominance of Western society from 1982 to 2017; this same motif also reinforces skepticism toward the narratives of K as the specimen and the Replicant underground as having a fighting chance. There is a particular sort of holographic illusion in the film, especially in the presence of Joi, where our attention is drawn to the fact that it's an illusion. Joi inspires K throughout the film, even beyond her death; her desire to be "real" mirrors the desire of Replicants in *BR82* to be human and to have more life; in discussions of *BR49*, most viewers find it tragic that Luv kills her by stomping on the emanator just as Joi says "I love you". We want her to be human, especially since the first film encourages us to expand our definition of humanity. Yet *BR49*'s focus on the evident illusion of Joi's presence signals that underneath her apparent autonomy and humanity, she's another product of the same corporation that creates K and sends him off to kill the specimen.

Just before we see the image of *Pale Fire*, the projector in the apartment articulates in order to manifest hologram Joi, dressed as a waitress. She carries a hologram of a plate of food, which she places over the bowl of grubs K has prepared for dinner:



We can see what's on the plate, but at no point does the image of the meal fully cover the bowl of grubs; thirty seconds later, the image is gone and the grubs are still there. The illusion

creates a simulacrum of a better or more appealing reality: this screenshot is the point at which the illusion most clearly overlays the reality, but even here, it's still obviously an illusion. Joi lights his cigarette; K then clearly, deliberately, blows smoke through her, but immediately follows this up by moving his feet so that she can sit down. Once she sits, we see the bowl of grubs, naked of illusion, between them. This first encounter with Joi takes this particular, ambivalent form as a means of drawing the attention of careful viewers—the sort who might follow Kinbote's direction and turn to the commentary on "Pale Fire" before reading the poem—to the sleight of hand involved in its presentation of Joi as human. The overlay on the bowl of grubs, its incomplete coverage and its subsequent disappearance, all within the space of a few lines of dialogue, serve as a key to inform careful viewers of what Joi is and is not. K interacts with her as if she's human, making space for her to sit down, asking her how her day was, telling her not to fuss—but all of this is itself a game of pretend, that she is a real person who cares for him and he is a real person who is cared for. How ludic the game is for K, especially at first, is difficult to gauge: he genuinely seems to care, but he also blows smoke at and through her.

The original *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) draws our attention to Jean Baudrillard's work on simulations and simulacra in the same manner that *BR49* does with *Pale Fire*, leaving viewers who follow that path to a deeper understanding of how the hyperreality of the matrix almost demands Cypher's betrayal of the crew. (Baudrillard, 174-175) When Joi, herself an illusion, holds up Nabokov's text, it's an invitation to explore how the novel might affect our understanding of the film; yet the illusions surrounding Joi and her (self-)presentation are partly concealed by her apparent humanity.

As the film progresses, Joi explores her growing humanity, or rather appears to explore what appears to be her growing humanity. Because the first film encourages an expansive definition of humanity, we're inclined to sympathize with her, but to read the film metafictionally is to understand that it's as easy for us to jump to conclusions as it is for K. He sees the (planted) evidence and thinks himself the chosen one; we see Joi inspiring K and slot it into a trope to which we've been sensitized. The resistance Replicants have evidently watched a lot of movies, too, because they slot themselves into the *Star Wars* narrative, and don't the rag-tag rebels led by a princess always end up defeating the totalitarians? Yet K knows his memories are implanted; the resistance is up against insurmountable odds.

Later in the scene, K fetches the package containing the emanator and tells Joi it's their anniversary. She says "It is?"; he answers, "Let's just say that it is", further illustrating the issue at hand here. As she gushes over the emanator, he reboots the system, freezing her in place



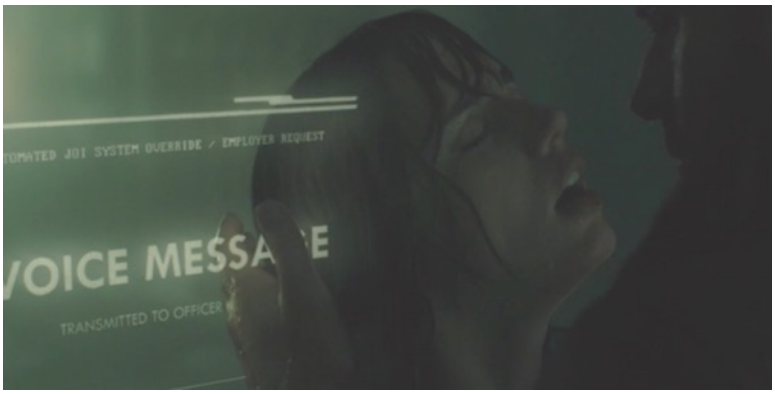

The film gives three images and a sound: the Wallace logo, her customization menu, the update window and the Joi music, the first six notes of Peter's theme from *Peter and the Wolf*. In just a few seconds, we're shown that Joi is a product of the same corporation that creates and enslaves flesh-and-blood humans. She looks the way she does because K has chosen that appearance. She can be updated, implying that developers have control over her personality. There's even a tune that reminds K, and us, that all these features that distinguish Joi from a "real" human exist. Joi is a work of fiction explicitly designed to mitigate the lack of connection that characterizes this estrangement of our world—"everything you want to hear", says the advertisement K walks by just before he enters the building.

Yet even in a rewatching, or a re-rewatching à la Boyd, it's difficult not to fall for the illusion and to think that Joi is in some way meaningfully human. Joi says she has "cabin fever", and then an illusion is placed before us, and we're told and shown it's an illusion. Like K, however, we want to believe, even though "cabin fever" makes it clear that Joi, a product of the Wallace Corporation, is programmed to make K, also a product of the Wallace Corporation, want to spend his hard-earned murder bonus on yet another product of the Wallace Corporation. She's there to manipulate; her motives are not to teach K to embrace life except insofar as this drives him to act in Wallace's interests. The theme from *Peter and the Wolf* is well-chosen, because while the symphony's narrative is that of a child who ignores the patriarch's command, goes over the wall and saves the day, the purpose of Prokofiev's piece is to teach children how to "read" a symphony by recognizing the themes played by different instruments. (Morrison, 51) Like *Pale Fire* and *BR49*, it's metafictional.

In the very next scene, K leads Joi to the roof, where he walks out into the rain, buttoning up his coat and collar against the cold. We see a long shot of her left hand, as she stabilizes the hologram so that (it appears that) the raindrops land on her skin instead of passing through:



She looks up into the rain; now, the illusion is nearly perfect. He even sort of smiles, but she, in her flimsy dress that were she real wouldn't be appropriate in this weather, is weeping, evidently overcome by emotion. The illusion is broken when a floodlight renders her translucent, but the emotion continues. She comes in for a kiss, which seems very real, until she glitches; he has six seconds of befuddlement until the Automated Joi System Override window comes up. He walks by her while she's still frozen, and only then remembers to take out the emanator and turn her off.




It's both easy to recognize and difficult to remember that the illusion is only an overlay, not real. She only looks solid in the absence of direct, bright light, but her feelings seem real—certainly realer than his—and what real human wouldn't want that kiss to be real? He's freeing her from "cabin fever"; she's freeing him from existential loneliness. Joi, however, is a work of fiction: the raindrops on her hand aren't any more real than the hand itself. Joi is a(n instance of a) computer program, a very sophisticated one to be sure, but not an autonomous intelligence with real feelings. Watching the film for the first time, she seems very human; rewatching the film, she seems like something a very lonely human might bond with; even re-rewatching the film, it's difficult to keep in mind that K's feelings have also been programmed. Luv tells him "I see you're

also a customer", which in context is two Replicants pointing out each other's artificiality, or perhaps flirting. It also serves as another indication that Joi is a corporate product—and that the Wallace Corporation knows it can use Joi to manipulate K.

Half an hour later in the film, K brings the emanator to the DNA viewing room. Throughout the scene, Joi keeps moving her head back and forth, sometimes directly occupying the space of K's head, sometimes moving just to one side. Her first comment is "Mere data makes a man", then says that he's made up of an alphabet of four letters, while she only has ones and zeroes.



Those who have seen *BR82* may see her as akin to a Replicant and thus able to become human through empathy. Yet the film keeps showing the illusion, so upon re-rewatching we ought to question whether this isn't a narrative we're being encouraged to embrace. When K discovers the existence of twins, Joi says, "I always knew you were special", which seems like the sort of thing a caring girlfriend would say, but is also quite plausible from a program acting in the overriding interest of the Wallace Corporation. K knows his memories aren't his own, but she whispers lovingly "to be born, to be wanted". The temptation is great enough to send him on a quest for what he might think is himself. He takes Joi in the car with him, until it's shorted out, whereupon she begins to flicker in and out of existence; we can hear the *Peter and the Wolf* theme, the aural cue that Joi is an instrument, not a human. After the car crash-lands, she manifests outside the door and calls out to awaken him.



de Armas plays it well, as if she really were a girlfriend in every way except the tangible, such that it's easy to forget that to whatever extent she's human, she's a slave to Wallace. It's implausible that the emanator and the Joi code are not in some way being monitored; sure enough, the moment there's real danger, missiles start falling and the perspective cuts to Luv. But of course this isn't because Luv cares for K,[4] but rather because he can find something the corporation desperately wants. "Get up and do your fuckin' *job*", Luv murmurs as if to K while she casually slaughters dozens of born humans from a drone as another slave works on her fingernails. The humans are dismembered, but this isn't an illusion; rather, the illusion lies in to whatever extent K believes the *ignis ex machina* reifies his Joi-inspired belief that he's special. He's a product of the Wallace Corporation, inspired by another product of the same corporation, monitored and rescued (and later beaten up and left for dead) by a third product of that corporation. The illusions are beautiful, however, and the narratives attractive, so a watcher or even a rewatcher can be excused for thinking him the hero with subjectivity and her a proto- or quasi-human who cares for him.

K returns home, to Joi saying "I want to be real for you" and the entrance of the Replicant "doxie" or sex worker, Mariette. Joi overlays herself on Mariette's body, then they embrace K together. It seems to fall into familiar tropes: spirit possesses body, two become one. Joi tells Mariette to hold still so she can "sync" with her. It's the film's most tender scene, as well, but the direction goes to great lengths to foreground how much of it is an illusion clearly visible to all three parties.



Here is the same view of Joi and Mariette together, a few seconds before:



Viewers may frame this as Joi doing her best to be real, to come as close as she can to giving K the physical connection he desperately seeks; they may reframe it as yet another example of the tired and sexist trope of a woman only existing in order to inspire a man. But it's also possible to re-reframe it as an exchange: Mariette gets money for her (human, if Replicant) body, K gains an inspirational catharsis, Joi-the-program gains more control over K in furtherance of the mission to find and capture the specimen. All three are Wallace Corporation products.

In the morning, Joi wants to be deleted from the console. This seems to make her more human, because now she can die; when she does die, it's more poignant. Yet her stated reason for deletion from the console, "They can download my memories", is clearly nonsense: of course the console backs (this instance of) her up on a cloud, and it's only barely less implausible that the emanator doesn't do the same. She dies because her mission is over, just like K's, which is why he's left for dead, as well. The illusion is that K is special, wanted, like a born human, when in fact he's a slave being manipulated by the corporation that made him. Yet the hyperreality of Joi's presentation can misdirect viewers just as it misdirects him. Even though the film repeatedly tells and shows us that she's a piece of commercial software, Joi's arc is compelling: viewers may believe that she's on some meaningful level human, or growing into humanity, especially given that both Blade Runner films foreground the question of what makes a person human.

**Pseudo-Rachael**

The only iteration in the film of this sort of deliberate illusion outside Joi's presence takes place when Wallace brings out pseudo-Rachael as a potential reward for Deckard's cooperation. The film has already made repeated, and significant, metafictional references to the first *Blade Runner*, but it is at this point that these metafictional references become especially significant:



Deckard, however, is no K. After thirty years, his memories are far more his own than whatever might have been implanted, and he knows full well that Rachael is dead and that he must also die if he's to protect their child. She says "I love you", but he accepted reality long ago; he dismisses the illusion after one long look. Her death seems gratuitous, but is also foreordained, in that once she's dismissed as a work of fiction, she's no longer valuable to Wallace.

Yet pseudo-Rachael is also illusion on another axis, that of the creation of the film and its position as a sequel. K and Luv hear clips from the original film in Wallace's data archive; Deckard gets to see clips from *BR82*, featuring the original Rachael and the younger Ford as young Deckard. These scenes make use of well-established means to lend weight to a sequel by including iconic images and dialogue from its predecessor. Pseudo-Rachael, however, is a new thing, a reincarnation much simpler within the film than without. Wallace can clone her from DNA and train the clone to look and move and talk like young Rachael; this is elementary, given his other powers. But to bring back the younger Young in the film is only just now possible in the real world; it could not have happened absent a staggering technical and human cost. In BR49, actor Loren Peta was dressed in the 1982 film's Rachael makeup, clothes and hair; she worked onstage with the other actors during principal photography. Later, both Peta and Young used motion-capture equipment while reading pseudo-Rachael's lines; then, digital artists built a simulacrum of the younger Young's face atop Peta's.



The two-minute scene took a full year for visual effects supervisor John Nelson to complete. (Vilkomerson) Why go to such lengths, other than for the love of a challenge, especially when Deckard isn't fooled at all by the illusion? I submit that the presence of pseudo-Rachael is directed at viewers passionate about the original film. Its purpose is to overlay this different take on Replicants, what it means to be human and the increasing dominance of corporations in real-world 2017, in order both to authenticate it as a sequel and to cloak this much bleaker film in the comparative optimism of its predecessor. The overall visual aesthetic of the film, including the many specific visuals such as the Pan Am logo, links *BR49* to the original. So do the noir plot, the music, the focus on the barriers or continuum between human and Replicant, the casting of Ford and of (pseudo-)Young. The films are clearly discontinuous, however: the opening crawl talks of the collapse of the old order; the Blackout is shoehorned in; Wallace is not Tyrell, despite his megalomania, his love of profit from slavery and his weird eyes. On a metafictional level, the Los Angeles of the original film's 2019 did not come to pass: while some of the first film's power lay in its plausibility as a future extrapolated from the real Los Angeles of 1982, the sequel cannot directly lay claim to that sort of authority. Yet bringing pseudo-Rachael into the film, especially so close to the end, tangibly (re-)relinks *BR49* to the original. We've seen and heard clips of her, but now she's *present*: it evokes nostalgia for the first film, which for all its murder has a fundamentally optimistic and inclusive definition of humanity and ends with Rachael and Deckard both free. Though pseudo-Rachael is obviously a simulacrum both to Deckard and to viewers, her presence colors our experience of the film, even if *BR49* puts the original Rachael's bones in a box and brutally kills her replacement after two minutes on screen.

We may, before re-rewatching, think of the ending of *BR49* as positive: K has become human by dying for his beliefs and Deckard and Ana are now safe, as all connection between them and Wallace is cut off. Ana the specimen, the Replicant who was born and thereby wanted, can become the leader, or symbol, of the coming revolution. These are tropes we're inclined to follow unless and until we learn to (re-)reread with skepticism toward narratives. When we do, and we follow not where illusion wants to lead us but rather the facts and logic, we don't arrive at revolution, but a much bleaker world where born but unwanted humans harpoon flying cars from trash piles, and a Replicant revolution will be put down quickly and brutally. We've been putting microchips in our cats and dogs since before the millennium: is it really plausible that the Wallace Corporation can't track all the Replicants, even those who have plucked out their right eyes? How likely is it that Replicants don't have remotely-activated devices that can drop them unconscious or kill them instantly? The film *seems* to end well, but that's because its use of illusion distracts us from thinking about metafiction in the way that Pale Fire demands. There's no way Deckard is going to take Ana on a swooping air-car ride into a green wilderness, and not only because the only green wilderness left is the illusory one she turns off to reveal her specimen jar upon K's entry. The future is (fore)closed, not open: *BR49* only seems optimistic because of its familiar tropes and because it borrows some of its predecessor's aura through Rachael's iconic look.

**Estrangement in *Blade Runner 2049***

In the original *Blade Runner*, the presence of Replicant slaves can be read in SF terms as an estrangement of the growth in corporate power in the decades before 1982. Yet a sufficiently committed revolutionary can make a major change. Roy Batty kills Tyrell and JF Sebastian, the overseer of the genetic control mechanisms that keep Replicants slaves. The first film implies, or at least proposes, that absent the capitalist the proletariat might be free—to use terms dated even in 1982, yet somehow still relevant today. With respect to *BR49*, watchers or even rewatchers might well think its ending as or more optimistic than that of *BR82*; we might well imagine the *Résistance* storming Wallace's pyramid. But this is illusion: the presence of *Pale Fire* can inspire us to re-rewatch and wonder whether, like K, we're imagining something that isn't shown on screen because it's not possible. The illusion around Joi draws attention to how we might wish to be skeptical about narratives presented to us as natural just because they're appealing.

The estrangement in *BR49* is of our own society of 2017, where corporate power has only continued to grow, to the point where it's insurmountable. In the world of the film, it's nothing but Wallace Corporation slaves all the way down: even Joshi, the sole born human and the representative of public authority, works for them, and she's murdered the moment she tries to resist. Surveillance and other technologies have increased with economic inequality to the point where revolution or even major change is a pipe dream. Even a heroic sacrifice will at best kill only a replaceable minion. The CEO can escape ecological disaster, but the slaves remain slaves: like medieval serfs, they're owned by the lord, and their purpose is to breed, toil and die. The parallels to our own world are too evident, and too dreary, to enumerate. *BR49* is much, much bleaker than its predecessor, but it's draped in just enough illusion to make a false narrative of hope seem appealing. Its pessimism about our own world is remarkable, for a mainstream Hollywood film. Because it's SF cinema, however, some might focus on the set design, costumes, special effects, etc., all of which are first-rate but also distract from the social criticism at its heart.

Yet if we use Pale Fire as the key to unlocking a metafictional reading of the film, we can understand how and why BR49 subverts the conventions of mainstream SF cinema in a way that the original film, with its optimistic ending and use of romantic love as a driver of the plot, does not. We cannot, however, simply end here. The constant presence of metafiction in the film problematizes the very notion of its having an ending, positive or no. We may be better served by examining the ambiguity of both films' endings as constitutive of their familial relation and also of an examination of, and demand for, the persistence of humanity in a world dominated by technology and corporate power. Much ink, real and virtual, has been spilled over the question of whether Deckard in the first film is or is not a Replicant; much of the metafictionality of BR82 lies in this question. The second film answers it definitively, but also poses many more questions that it refuses to answer. In (re-)rewatching both films, we can see that the power of metafictional SF lies in the complications and ambiguities with which it reflects our own world.

## Notes

1. Both *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* (1955) are in the Modern Library's 100 Best Novels (in English) for the twentieth century. *Lolita* was a runaway bestseller; *Pale Fire*, a superficially more difficult text, was somewhat less successful.

2. This is the name Wallace gives the then still hypothetical child of Replicants. No other name beyond "the child" is provided.

3. Notably, that his reaction when he learns that "someone lived this [memory]" is rage rather than elation.

4. Though she does say to him "It is invigorating, being asked personal questions. Makes one feel… desired".

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