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This is the premiere issue of *Reading Film*, a collection of outstanding essays on film written by students at UW-Whitewater. The Professional Writing and Publishing program collaborates with Film Studies to produce the journal.

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We Need Each Other: A Close Reading of *Metropolis*

Cass Aleatory

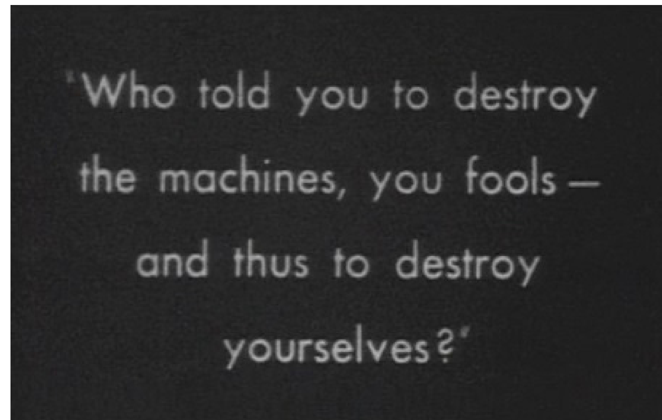
This essay analyzes a late sequence in the original release of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. A Marxist analysis of this sequence reveals a surprising codependency between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, represented by Johann Fredersen and the workers respectively. Marx himself may not agree with this portrayal, but Althusser's ideas concerning the lasting power and reproductive needs of a capitalist system bring the interclass relationships in *Metropolis* into focus.

This point in *Metropolis* finds us in the midst of the workers' revolution. While the workers have been destroying the machines, Maria, Freder Fredersen, and one of Freder's petit bourgeois allies have been saving their children. The sequence opens with a long shot of the children running up and embracing their three saviors. The main purpose of this shot is to show the compassion of Freder and Maria, as Lang is preparing Freder to assume the mantle of the mediator in a few short minutes.

However, this scene does something else important: after the shot ends, a dialogue intertitle quotes Freder telling Maria to get the children to safety while he notifies the workers that they are alright. This delegation of roles emphasizes the fact that Freder and Maria are a team—a member of the bourgeoisie and a member of the working class cooperating to accomplish a goal that benefits everyone (the revolution will be pacified), but especially the underprivileged proletariat (their mechanism of reproduction will be saved).

Evidence for these ideas can be found in the mise-en-scène. This sequence begins with the actors moving forward to occupy more of the visual space as the children rush towards them, until about 85% of the screen is filled with protagonists hugging children. The

resulting sense of intimacy and closeness with children paints them in a very flattering light evocative of Mother Mary and Jesus, who are commonly portrayed with children. Additionally, the emphasis on Freder and Maria's closeness with each other (note how Freder's bourgeois ally is almost cut out of the shot as Freder and Maria move forward) further celebrates their unification of purpose. Sound helps here, too; the orchestral score for this segment of the sequence is gentle and calm.



The remainder of this sequence focuses on the foreman—who himself is somewhere between the petite bourgeoisie and the proletariat—engaging in a dialogue with the workers. Once again, Lang leans on mise-en-scène, this time to create dramatic effect. When the foreman first gets up, there is a lot of visual space, and both the destroyed machines and celebrating workers fit easily into the shot. But as the foreman puts more and more effort into getting their attention, the arrangement of actors tightens up. By the time that the workers have assembled around the foreman, they fill the screen. The audience may then take notice of the editing and cinematography; the shot-reverse shot pattern typical of conversation scenes has begun between the foreman and the workers. These elements parallel the focusing of the workers' attention. The destruction (and revolution) have been pushed, visually and literally, from their minds as they focus on what the foreman has to say: "Where are your children?"

The workers' reaction to this is panic followed by despair. Not only do the workers care about their children as family, but a deeper meaning associated with Marxist thought can be attached here. In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser states that "every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce. It must therefore reproduce…the existing relations of production" (86). In other words, the workforce is itself a living entity with a need for reproduction—and the workers whom the foreman is addressing realize that their revolution, their attempt to destroy the influence of the bourgeoisie, has just led to the destruction of these means. Both their habitat and their offspring have now been eliminated as a direct result of their actions. The acting at this point is appropriately dramatic.

In fact, the workforce's means of reproduction has not been destroyed. Instead, it was saved by the combined efforts of members of the proletariat and bourgeoisie (as discussed in the analysis of the scene with the children). It is in this juxtaposition of the two parts of the sequence that the codependency between these two groups is revealed. If not for the assistance of two members of the bourgeoisie, the workforce would have been doomed, its future destroyed. Meanwhile, the very fact that the bourgeoisie helped save the workforce acts as an acknowledgement of its dependency on the proletariat. Additionally, previous sequences more clearly illustrate Freder's acquired appreciation for the working class.

However, this codependency is itself only a part of the larger message of *Metropolis*. In a nutshell, this film is an exploration of extremes, from machines reminiscent of the old gods to revolutions that can destroy cities in just one day. But in a complication of traditional Marxist thought, both a bourgeois extreme and a proletariat extreme are portrayed as undesirable. Instead, the main message Lang wants to get across is the necessity of mediation, the avoidance of all extremes. The importance of the heart in mediating between the brain and the muscle is explicitly stated, and the bridging of divides is shown to be necessary for everyone's survival. This scene is a clear contributor to this message; it captures the moment when cooperation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat makes a real difference. The salvation of the children sets the stage for the last scene, when the bourgeoisie and proletariat will, due to their new understanding of their codependence, shake hands—thereby ushering in the potential for a true utopia, founded on the virtues of cooperation and mediation, to exist at last. ❦

Cass Aleatory majors in both Media Arts and Game Development and Professional Writing and Publishing and has a Film Studies minor at UW-Whitewater. This essay was completed for a Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts *course in the fall of 2018.*

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 85–126. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

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Ridley Scott's *Alien*: Mommy Issues in Space

Michael Carlson

It is difficult enough for women in the real world to negotiate the contradictory structures of phallic power that determine value and importance in society. In Ridley Scott's film, *Alien*, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) must negotiate these structures while fighting a seven-foot-tall alien that bleeds corrosive acid and assaults people with a vicious, toothy mouth-penis projected from a head that itself looks like a monstrous penis. The spaceship Nostromo, on which the film takes place, is referred to as "Mother" by its crew. Ripley eventually discovers that Mother was programmed to betray the safety of the crew to preserve the alien that symbolizes phallic power through violent superiority. Ripley's frustration with Mother is evocative of Gayle Rubin's description of a female, pre-Oedipal child, who "turns from the mother…in anger and disappointment, because the mother did not give her a 'penis' (phallus)."[1] Ripley pleads to Mother for assistance and understanding throughout the film and is denied on multiple occasions. In response, Ripley must acquire phallic power on her own to survive.

Before the sequence in the medical bay when we first see the creature attached to a crew-member's face, Ripley displays internal fortitude by denying Dallas entry onto the ship in the name of proper quarantine measures. In the medical bay sequence, however, Ripley clings helplessly to Dallas to seek refuge from the phallic object lying on the ground. Throughout the film, Ripley wavers between summoning power from her femininity or masculinity and seeking phallic power from Mother and her male crew members. Rubin writes of the female child, "when she 'recognizes her castration' she

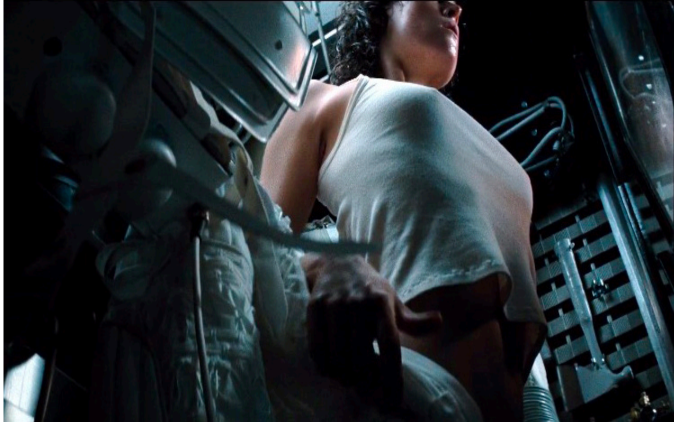
1 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 49.

accedes to the place of a woman in a phallic exchange network" (49). But Ripley cannot afford to accept castration; her life depends on obtaining phallic power in some way. Without a father present to transfer such power, Ripley receives instruction from her male crew members on how to embody the phallic power necessary to gain dominion over the alien.

After being protected and advised by Dallas (who performs a paternal role in relation to Ripley), she sets out on her own to gain control of her environment and power over the phallic creature. The composition of this shot is intentional; the film puts the power in Ripley's hands and positions the two male crew members in support of that power. It is no coincidence that Ripley, a female standing between two males, is the one holding the giant, penis-shaped cattle prod. While Ripley and her entourage fail to locate the alien, however, Dallas does not. Dallas is killed, and the crew reassembles to hash out a new plan. With the father figure who provided Ripley protection and guidance now dead, Ripley must take it upon herself to acquire the phallic power necessary to survive. Ripley consults with the only other parental figure present on the ship: Mother.

This shot captures Ripley's frustration once she discovers Mother has betrayed her to preserve the very thing that threatens Ripley's existence. Rubin writes, "the mother, a woman in a phallic culture, does not have the phallus to give away (having gone through the Oedipal crisis herself a generation earlier)" (49). This statement applies to Mother because she was programmed to follow certain orders, unable to freely choose. The phallic power that Ripley seeks cannot be given by Mother because the mother does not possess that power. Ripley's anguish represents the female child's tragic recognition of her own castration. Frustrated and alone, Ripley remains determined to kill the hairless, silver demon.

In the only scene in the movie that sexualizes her female body, Ripley strips down to a dainty white undershirt and a pair of underwear seemingly stolen from a toddler. The shot captures Ripley fearfully reacting to her recent discovery of the alien hiding in the



escape pod. Ironically, to defeat the alien, Ripley must put on a spacesuit that conceals those parts of her body that identifiably represent her as female. Exposed and elegantly presented as a woman, Ripley is frightened and threatened by the alien's phallic power. Thus, the film seems to confirm that Ripley's womanhood is insufficient to defeat the alien. She must find a way to transcend the limits that her female body threatens to impose and acquire male traits in order to prevail.

In this final scene, Ripley shoots a penis-shaped grappling hook at the alien while her female features are fully concealed. The film's presentation of this final blow to the alien suggests that Ripley must overcome the limitations of her female biology to express the phallic power needed to conquer the threat. This presents a pandering and binary interpretation of female and male behavior. Had Ripley been wearing only the undershirt and underwear while killing the alien, the film would have endorsed the notion of either female wit or female masculinity. The requirement that Ripley put on the suit to kill the alien suggests that her female biology, along with her feminine attributes, must be supplemented to wield the phallic power required to destroy the enemy. This repression and recognition of female limitations accords with Rubin's observation, "when she 'recognizes her castration' she accedes to the place of woman in a phallic exchange network" (49). In *Alien*, the phallic exchange network is represented as a contest for dominance through violence.

Although Ripley is a fully mature woman, the principles of Rubin's essay still apply. The entire film shadows Ripley's search for authority in decision making and violence. This search for authority is the direct result of a situation that Ripley inherited, just as the pre-Oedipal, bisexual child inherits and must come to terms with a system of predetermined values and identity structures. Had Mother not betrayed Ripley and aided the alien's boarding of the ship, Ripley would not be forced to acquire the phallic power needed to survive. Similarly, a pre-Oedipal bisexual child inherits a system of values and identities that have been shaped by the supremacy of phallic power. Without the

acquisition of phallic power, social and physical subordination ensues. In *Alien*, Ripley is confronted with accepting a physical subordination that would mean her death. Frightened in her feminine underwear yet empowered by the penis-shaped object in her hands, it appears that Ripley must conform to the guidelines of a phallic exchange network to survive. ❦

Michael Carlson is an English Literature major and History minor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He wrote this essay for a Gender and Film *course in the spring of 2020.*

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda Nicholson, 27–62. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Scott, Ridley, dir. *Alien*. 1979; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2014. DVD.

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The Ambivalent Nostalgia of *Carol*

Nicole Chernohorsky

Young people sometimes like to say “I was born in the wrong decade” or that they want to go back to the times of poodle skirts, sock hops, and drive-in movie theatres. Little do they realize that the era they are so lovingly romanticizing was one of discrimination, oppression, and prejudice against anyone who wasn’t cisgender, heterosexual, white, male, and rich—especially so for anyone who tried to claim an identity outside what was considered the norm. The movie *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, is set in the 1950s and follows Carol, a housewife, through her affair with Therese Belivet. Early in the film, the two meet in the store where Therese works, and the next two hours unravel Carol’s past with another lover named Abby, her divorce and custody battle with her husband, and, most importantly, the love story between Therese and Carol. Several scenes in this film show us the intimacy between the two forbidden lovers, but some of the most revealing ones take place while they are sitting across from each other in a restaurant.

Restaurants are symbolic. They’re often places for gathering, celebration, and intimacy. Among the most well-known of restaurant scenarios is the date. This can be anything from a bad first date to the blossoming of a strong, deep, and intimate romantic relationship. Even once a romantic relationship is formed, less mysterious dates in restaurants often fortify it.

In *Carol*’s first restaurant scene, Carol and Therese face each other in a booth. The room seems very dark, as though it is late evening, though the characters are actually meeting for lunch. It’s as if the light is used to conceal the behavior and interaction between the two women. Further, the room is filled with small lamps that evoke the same feeling that candles do during a romantic dinner. The décor is all red, and Carol—who is

often seen wearing red—wears a bright red blouse and lipstick to match. The red coloring helps amp up the sexual tension between the two characters, but even on a more subdued level, red is often used to represent love. However, there is a white cloth laid over the table that separates Therese and Carol. One could say that the stark whiteness of that cloth represents the purity that society is trying to uphold—the only thing that physically and symbolically stands between the two forbidden lovers.

The intimacy begins with the lighting of a cigarette. Therese, who is more than capable of lighting her own, leans in slowly and Carol lights one for her. There is something very intimate about the way the two sit holding their cigarettes and how Carol slowly inhales, as if she's trying to seduce Therese. At the same time, this scene sets up a power imbalance between Therese and Carol. Their interactions show clearly that Carol is the alpha in this relationship. This starts as early as Carol confidently ordering her meal and drink, and Therese hesitantly ordering the same. It doesn't appear that her hesitation is about the meal; instead she seems to be so intimidated or nervous that she cannot focus on making decisions in that moment. Carol also cuts Therese off several times mid-sentence, and Therese lets this happen.

We see more intimacy as the two sip martinis. During this sequence, the main focus of the camera is on Therese and her facial expressions throughout. This clip also represents the power imbalance between the two characters. The direction of Therese's eyes can be read several ways. One possible interpretation is that Therese is looking up and down at Carol, possibly even staring at her chest. Another is that she is unable to make eye contact with Carol for longer than a few seconds due to intimidation. This impression is furthered by the fact that when the two are clinking their glasses together, Therese is worried about spilling hers and making a mess. While we cannot see what Carol's face looks like during this specific interaction, we can easily assume that she is being as seductive and smooth as she has been in the scene thus far. Even after the glass clink, there are several other instances when we see Therese essentially tracing Carol's body as she talks. But Haynes reminds us that the scene is still framed by the heteronormativity of this time period when Therese mentions that she assumes Carol thought a man sent back her gloves.

This first restaurant scene between Carol and Therese isn't the only one that speaks to what it means to be a queer woman in the United States during the 1950s. About an hour into the film, we find Carol and Therese at yet another restaurant at the same time of day, yet the setting is vastly different. This time, the women are going out on an excursion together, and it's a lot less of a secret to their family members, as suggested by the

fact that the restaurant is significantly brighter than the one in the earlier scene. It's also possible that this represents the waning of mystery in the more developed relationship between Therese and Carol. While the restaurant in the initial scene was glamourous, dark, and mysterious, the one in the second scene is a diner that looks like it belongs in a small town. Instead of sipping martinis after fancy meals, the pair sip coffee over soup. Tinsel-lined wooden boards along the wall make this restaurant much more familiar and informal, which also mirrors their evolving relationship. Notably, the forbidden lovers are again sitting in a red booth, which seems to be a consistent pattern for these two. This time, however, Therese is wearing red, and Carol is in a calmer, more soothing green. It's possible that this shows the morphing of the pair's relationship into something more nuanced than Carol being the intense alpha female and Therese the submissive follower.

Even the conversation between the two has a largely different tone than the first one. This conversation is much more lighthearted, and the two characters seem less guarded and more playful in tone, word choice, and body language. Therese hands Carol a gift: a record that plays a song that Therese had played for Carol during an earlier part of the film, showing how well thought out this gift was. Often when a gift with this much thought is given to an individual, a hug or kiss is exchanged. However, in the historical context of the film, this isn't something that is possible for these two lovers. Carol is touched by the gift, and we then see Therese pull out a camera to commemorate the moment. This moment also nuances Carol's character. Instead of looking into the camera with her normal mystery, confidence, and seduction, Carol seems to be uncomfortable at the prospect of having her photograph taken. This also signifies the fact that Carol has taken some of her emotional walls down with Therese. She feels that she can be herself, and doesn't have to hide behind her usually stoic demeanor. It is also telling of how much Therese adores Carol. People often take photographs of something beautiful or important or something they want to remember. For Therese, Carol clearly ticks all of these boxes in her brain. Therefore, her taking a photograph of Carol from across the booth is the one act of intimacy she can display in such a public location. After some hesitation, Carol eventually calms down and allows Therese to take her photo. Dialogue then turns to whether Therese misses home and her boyfriend at all, to which Therese replies "no" and that she hasn't thought of either all day. Therese is consistently caught up in the moment when she is around and interacting with Carol. The two have such a comfortable, intimate, and romantic relationship that they are able to be their true selves together, judgement free. The only shame is the fact that this is something, even in private, that is thought to be shameful. ❦

Nicole Chernohorsky graduated from UW-Whitewater in May 2020 with majors in Psychology and Spanish and a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. This essay was completed for a Queer Cinema *course in the spring of 2020.*

Haynes, Todd, dir. *Carol*. 2015. Santa Monica, CA: Artisan / Lionsgate, 2016. DVD.

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Blade Runner: Negotiations of Self and Other

Amanda Douglass

Through the lens of psychoanalytic deconstruction, the final chase scene of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* can be easily interpreted as a *mirror stage* moment for both Deckard and Roy. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes the function of the mirror stage as "the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality."[1] By deconstructing the binaries of good and evil as well as self and other, Deckard and Roy are revealed to be mirror images of each other, aiding each other in their separate journeys to self-identification. For Deckard, this moment of primary identification projects him into an awareness of his place in time as an android. Although Clifford Hallam argues against the theory that Deckard is an android, I will use key points of his argument to suggest otherwise.[2] Scott's use of walls and separation, doorways and framing, and reflective materials in the mise-en-scène functions as a mirror motif to support this idea. Although Deckard and Roy are at different stages of identification—primary and secondary—this encounter is a foundational moment for both of their identities.

To begin, I will analyze how this sequence works as Deckard's primary mirror stage moment. For the sequence to function as Deckard's mirror moment and realization of self as android, we must first understand that he begins the chase under the illusion that he's human. Hallam argues that Deckard is not an android because "existence, unless it's their own, has little meaning for [androids]: thus, Roy and his mutinous crew torture and murder at will" (120). But is this not Deckard's job description as a blade runner? Has he not already murdered other androids and tortured Rachael with sexual assault? Initially, Deckard is portrayed as human; he is the good cop, an authority figure tasked with protecting humans from the threat of androids and delivering justice. Hallam suggests that

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 78.

2. Clifford Hallam, "The Indeterminate Sign in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner, Director's Cut*," *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, vol. 54 (2011).

“in *Blade Runner*, an ordinary man is juxtaposed with an extraordinary android” (120). However, the opposition established between Deckard and Roy is not exaggerated to separate them as either human or android, but to balance their relationship as grounds for a negotiation between self and other in a quest for identity formation. Roy functions in the space between self and other, where Deckard uses their relationship to realize his own identity as an android. They are mirror images, or complements, of each other. Good doesn’t exist without evil. As the mirror stage progresses, the line between their oppositions blurs and they transition from other to self in the formation of identity.

We begin the sequence experiencing etra-diegetic music that sounds like glassy chimes. Roy’s dialogue echoes over shots of Deckard. It seems as if Roy is everywhere at once, as if he’s inside Deckard’s head, as if their thoughts are one. Roy’s dialogue easily fits into Deckard’s inner thought process as self-criticism: “I thought you were supposed to be good. Aren’t you the good man?”

As Deckard’s direct opposite, Roy Batty is portrayed as evil. He is intelligent, violent, and threateningly inhuman. We can attribute Roy’s initial mirror moment to his prior encounter with his maker, Eldon Tyrell. If we consider Roy as already having had his primary mirror moment, we can understand his agency in this final sequence. When I refer to Roy’s agency, I’m referring to the way he drives the chase and his conscious reversal of the hunter and hunted binary. He physically breaks barriers, driven to continue his self-identification through identification with the other—Deckard. Roy’s awareness of time is another characteristic that suggests secondary identification. Because secondary identification is contingent on awareness of self as an entity in time, we know Roy has already had his primary mirror moment. His agency in this sequence is driven by his desire to beat the clock, fearing his inevitable death. Characteristic of Lacan’s mirror stage, Roy has already experienced “a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual’s formation into history” (78). Ironically, he succumbs to time entirely at the end of the film. Deckard, having yet to experience primary identification, lacks agency in this sequence. Only through his mirror image of Roy will Deckard be able to continue the identification process. From the beginning of the chase, Roy is established as the other with whom Deckard will initiate his primary identification. Deckard is established as the other with whom Roy will continue his secondary identification. Together, they perpetuate the cyclical nature of identity formation as a process of constant negotiation with self and other.

To render this Lacanian sequence visually, Scott uses many mirror motifs in the mise-en-scène to underscore the characters’ identification processes. Throughout the sequence,

Roy is placed before Deckard and framed in doorways and windows as if he is Deckard's direct reflection. Near the beginning of the chase, Scott places Deckard and Roy on either side of a wall, showing their opposition as they have yet to physically confront each other face to face in a mirror image. However, this is where Roy's agency comes into play. Roy, driven by desire to continue his own negotiation of identity, bursts his hand through the wall, attempting to pull Deckard into awareness. The wall is no longer a separation, but a line over which to reflect a mirror image of the two characters. They are visually presented in a way that invites us to compare them, pointing out their uncanny similarities.

Scott's use of chiaroscuro works in conjunction with his framing techniques to continue the mirror motif. As Roy chases Deckard, each room fluctuates between light and dark, creating a reflective effect that resembles light bouncing off water or glass. At one instance, depicted below, Deckard attempts to flee the building through a boarded-up window that's illuminated with back lighting. He approaches the window as one would approach a mirror but is unable to see his reflection. Moments later, Roy appears outside the window

acting as Deckard's reflection in an attempt to initiate Deckard's mirror stage moment, shouting "I can see you!" However, Deckard runs away. He begins to climb upward, sending shards of glass to shatter on the floor. Here, the broken glass is yet another mirror motif used to symbolize Deckard's reluctance to confront his identity as android.

In addition to mirror motifs in the audio, mise-en-scène, and lighting, Scott uses mirroring techniques in the direct action to signify Deckard's identification with Roy. Separated by another partition, Roy and Deckard both take a moment to collect themselves. For

Deckard, this is a moment to breathe after having his fingers broken. For Roy, it is a moment to prolong his inevitable death. For both characters, it involves self-induced agony. In a sequence of shots, we see Deckard realign his broken fingers as Roy drives a rusty nail through his palm. As their actions align, we are finally brought to the mirror moment.

Deckard finds himself in a miror-less bathroom. One wall is tiled with black and white diamonds, which comments on the oppositional struggle present throughout the sequence. A shot of Roy in a room with the same wall shows that he is once again on the other side of the partition, mirroring Deckard's action. In his final drive to initiate Deckard's mirror moment, Roy bursts his head through the shared wall, shattering the fine line between self and other. In the mirror-less bathroom, Roy creates a mirror (pictured), forcing Deckard into a moment of primary identification where he begins the perpetual negotiation between self and other. Hallum suggests that "although Deckard clearly functions as the protagonist, the character with whom we identify, the actual hero, the character essential to the central plot and theme in *Blade Runner*, is not the hunter, but the hunted" (119). This is true for us as viewers and for Deckard as he confronts Roy, acting as his own reflection. Deckard can now begin to understand himself as an android in time.

When we deconstruct binaries like good and evil, self and other, we can't help but understand them as entirely interconnected. We can't define one without the other. This realization is essential to the foundation of identity. Scott strategically creates a prolonged mirror moment with the use of echoing audio, visual framing techniques, and reflective lighting to show Deckard's transcendence into a new type of awareness. His process of identification happens as a negotiation within the binary of self and other. Hallum interprets the film's ending sequences to suggest that "Deckard's mastery as a compassionate human being" (120). However, when considering Lacan's theories of identity formation, a "mastery" of identification, be it human or android, is impossible. Lacan describes the result of this primary identification process as a "finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark [the subject's] entire mental development with its rigid structure" (78). The final chase scene in *Blade Runner* is unique in its ability to exemplify this point, showing two characters who use each other to continue their constant renegotiation of identity. ❦

Amanda Douglass is a Professional Writing and Publishing major with a minor in Literature and a certificate in Film Studies. This essay was written for a Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts *course, and it has won awards at both the department and university levels.*

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Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psycho-analytic Experience." *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton (1996): 75–81.

Scott, Ridley, dir. *Blade Runner*. 1982. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1997. DVD

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The Odyssey of Fellini

Kayla Knuth

Making raw cinematic artistry work on the big screen can be extremely challenging, and directors such as Federico Fellini meet that challenge by giving us unique films, each with a clear vision. There are many masterful auteurs within the film industry, but there is something about Fellini's good-natured style that truly engages me, along with how he incorporates elements of both reality and fantasy in iconic films such as *La Strada* (1953), *La Dolce Vita* (1961), and *8 ½* (1963). Not everyone is capable of digging deeper into what the artist is actually saying, and many are too quick to make harsh judgements about what they see rather than what they interpret. This is another reason why his film work interests me. I enjoy the "chase" that helps me provide a deeper analysis of what certain scenes in his films actually symbolize. This makes me pay closer attention to the films, and I find myself rewinding scenes, taking a step back to investigate the meaning of what I'm seeing.

Almost all of Fellini's films feature a dominant protagonist character with qualities to which the audience can at least secretly relate. Some of Fellini's most striking cinematic moments are memorable because of characters that tend to stick with you even when the films become unclear at times. In addition, the artistry, passion, zest for life, and inventiveness on display in his filmmaking help us appreciate a wide range of possibilities for cinematic representation. Aesthetically, Fellini's films reach for what I will call "ugliness within beauty." His films seem to ask: is there beauty to be found within ugliness? Or is there ugliness lurking within the beautiful? Fellini attempts to ask these questions through both his striking visuals and sympathetic characters.

When analyzing Fellini's work, audiences are well served to start from the beginning. If one were to just watch his film *8 ½*, for instance, it may not mean much standing on its own. Simply noting the artistic journey of a filmmaker can be beautiful in itself, and *La Strada*, one of Fellini's first films, can be said to mark the birth of his creativity. *La Strada* (which translates to "the road") speaks for itself; it is a road picture, a journey. The power, poetry, and warmth of the film allows us to vicariously embark on Fellini's odyssey through his own eyes. Even more appealing are the mythic magnitude of *La Strada*'s characters, the abstract encounters, and the hidden symbols liberally sprinkled throughout the journey

happening on screen. The characters in the film resemble heightened versions of either ourselves or those we know. The mix of both fantasy and reality helps viewers feel compassion for characters who, despite moving from place to place, seem stuck in their existential traps. As the film wraps up, the wintry truth becomes clear: the world will not end or even pause to notice the death of a hapless fool.

One particular scene towards the end of the film truly displays the broken relationship between the two lead characters, Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina), a saintly but mentally challenged young woman, and Zampanò (Anthony Quinn), a belligerent circus strongman. The scene happens when Zampanò abandons Gelsomina in the cold, desolate mountains, leaving her destitute and alone next to a dwindling fire with just her trumpet. The camera cuts to a striking shot of Zampanò looking back as he pushes his truck down the road, eventually hopping in to drive it off into the distance as the shot fades to black. This beautifully crafted, crucial sequence represents the struggle Zampanò faces after killing Il Matto, the fool (Richard Basehart). Gelsomina, broken by the murder of the fool and the awareness that her companion is the murderer, descends into a kind of madness, endlessly repeating phrases like "Il Matto sta male" ("The fool is hurt"). Zampanò, unable to deal with either Gelsomina's madness or his own guilt, abandons her on the side of the road, and in so doing abandons part of himself. Zampanò will now have to take the dark road himself with no one to save him. Perhaps Zampanò is actually the "fool" of the story. All of his bad qualities—brutality, amorality, opportunism, indeterminate lust, drunkenness, and so on—are ugly, yet they serve as a contrast to Gelsomina's character. Ironically, Zampanò's ugliness highlights Gelsomina's beautiful innocence, purity, and vulnerability.

The stark juxtaposition of the film's opening and closing scenes underscore that contrast. In the beginning sequence, we see Gelsomina's character full of life, hope, and joy beside the sea. At the end the film, Zampanò is also seen beside the sea, but he is desperately

gripping onto sand that slips through his fingers—a defeated man who has taken the wrong road in life. A. h. Weiler writes of *La Strada* in the *New York Times*, Fellini uses "his small cast, and, equally important, his camera, with the unmistakable touch of an artist. His vignettes fill his movie with beauty, sadness, humor, and understanding." This crafting of personable, compelling, and symbolically resonant characters lives on and progresses even further as Fellini expands his repertoire.

At the height of his career, Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita* truly captures his artistic values as he elaborates on a subject matter and lifestyle that filmmakers had seldom approached before. From the very first image of a statue of Jesus flying over the city, the viewer realizes that this film has strong symbolism relating to both the religious and the secular lives of its characters. The film consists of a series of episodes revolving around Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni), a reporter caught in a life of endless, empty nights and lonely dawns in the streets of Rome. He falls for a woman named Sylvia, an American actress who represents a Marilyn Monroe-like, untouchable sex object. The film follows the Italian neorealist movement, focusing on the shallow materialistic lifestyle of the bourgeoisie and using visual metaphors that suggest a godless society turning into a sort of hellish hierarchy of celebrities. Fellini was truly ahead of his time with his portrayal of the discontents of postmodern society and the rise of the obsession over celebrity culture.

What truly stands out in this film, however, is the meticulous analysis of characters who live valueless lifestyles. There are party sequences, for instance, where high class characters babble about high-minded, artsy nonsense and pursue spectacles without meaning. Here we see how something like celebrity culture and a new aristocracy of artists can seem beautiful from the outside, but is actually vacuous and grotesque on closer view, representing the ugliness hidden under the surface of something society portrays as exquisite. This film also tests the Church in numerous ways, and it is clear, from the opening sequence of *La Dolce Vita* (the flight of Jesus over Rome) to the religious themes in *La Strada*, that Fellini

has his own struggle with religion, and Catholicism in particular. In *La Strada*, Gelsomina symbolizes the mother Mary because of her pure and saintly qualities, and in *La Dolce Vita* we have Marcello running up the stairs of the church, embodying the spiritual quest to find faith in the house of God. Fellini also establishes water motifs in most of his films, which plays to the idea of purification and the characters' desires to be baptized or wash away their sins. In the ending scene of *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini pictures a group of upper class socialites making conversation on a beach with a dead fish in front of them. In the eyes of the church, a fish symbolizes Christ as savior. Since the fish is lying lifeless on the beach, Fellini may have wanted the image to portray Jesus as forgotten by those who only focus on materialism and bourgeois values. Marcello is not a part of the conversation about the

dead fish, which could indicate that his character is turning toward the path of God and away from the fake, carnivalesque lifestyle. Once again, Marcello depicts an individual almost anyone can relate to (especially with knowledge of the current events happening in Italy at the time), which generates an outstandingly memorable character.

8 ½ took Fellini's career to an astonishing new level. Much like many other Fellini films, the story weaves in and out of fantasy and reality, and catches the main character, Guido (also played by Marcello Mastroianni), in the midst of exhaustion from his own lies, sensual appetites, and inability to love. *8 ½* reflects Fellini's own life in numerous ways, and one can only conclude that Guido directly represents Fellini. In the plot, Guido is a film director running out of new ideas, yet the film itself is brimming with them, securing Fellini's place as an international auteur of the highest caliber. Bondanella suggests that in conjunction with *La Dolce Vita*, *8 ½* "resulted in the virtual canonization of Fellini as the archetypal genius, the auteur of auteurs, the undisputed king of what is today, in retrospect, referred to as the European 'art' film" (26). *8 ½* is somewhat different from Fellini's previous films in that it deploys a straightforward narrative that viewers can easily understand. In an interview, Fellini stated that *8 ½* "is extremely simple: it puts forth nothing

that needs to be understood or interpreted."[1] Bondanella explains, "what Fellini means by his claim is that experiencing 8 ½ requires no philosophical, aesthetic, or ideological exegesis" (99). Fellini believed that the emotional impact of a film should be fairly simple and easily perceived. Bondanella continues, "while feeling an aesthetic experience is relatively simple, given the proper conditions and the disposition of a willing spectator, describing or analyzing such a privileged moment is complex, a rational operation requiring a reliance upon words and concepts that can never quite measure up to the emotional impact of the work of art itself. For Fellini, the cinema is primarily a visual medium whose emotive power moves through light, not words" (100). The film in itself is a visualization of the creative process, and the images on the screen are beautifully and carefully put together to create a breathtaking puzzle. Guido is yet another character who is exhausted by own ugliness—his lies, appetites, and evasions. He is perhaps at his ugliest when he imagines or pursues other women besides his wife, but the visuals and the way Fellini lovingly constructs those scenes are among the most beautiful in the film. Fellini makes possible the seemingly impossible: he takes viscerally ugly human impulses and turns them into beautiful visual art. ❦

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1. Quoted in Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 99.

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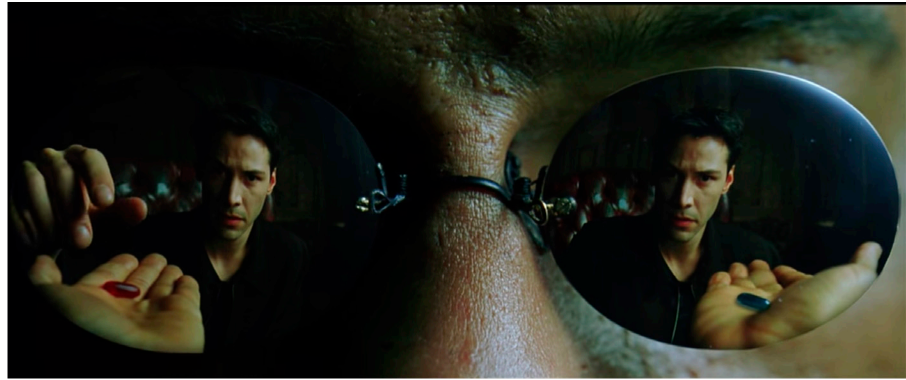
Belief: A Critical Analysis of *The Matrix* Trilogy

Shannan Lojeski

Some people use the word "belief" to defend why they hope; others resist believing to maintain their free will and control their future. Regardless, beliefs are evident in every circumstance and govern every individual's choices. What do you believe? What do you believe *in*? These are questions that inevitably dictate the order of life and the ideologies that maintain it. In his essay, "The Mirror Stage," Jacques Lacan explains the human psychological experience through three orders: the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary. Through application of these three orders, the Wachowskis' film trilogy—comprised of *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)—uses Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explore the concept of belief.

The "symbolic order," as explained by Lacan, is a dimension in which elements have no absolute existence but are constituted by their mutual differences. In the first *Matrix* film, Neo's "normal" life is turned upside down when he learns that the life he and those around him have come to accept as real is only a representation of the symbolic order created by the Matrix—a lie that enslaves humans in its system and deprives them of the knowledge of its existence. In her article "*The Matrix* and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real," Dana L. Cloud mentions Lacan's theory and recognizes its effects in the first film. "The film also invokes a Lacanian Real, in which the psychic residue of the lack of wholeness in the Symbolic and the experience of trauma leave persons/subjects uneasy. In the first film, for example, Neo experiences vague unease with his daily life in the Matrix and begins to 'hack' into the computer-driven system," Cloud writes. "While he remains in the symbolic world of the Matrix, he is incapable of fighting it in a systemic way, because his suspicions are quite literally groundless until he is unplugged from ideology" (330–31). Neo is given the choice in the first film to be told the truth about the Matrix and reveal the enslavement he's been under when Morpheus offers him the red and blue pills. With one pill in each hand, Morpheus symbolically presents Neo freedom in his right hand (with the red pill) and enslavement in his left hand (with the blue pill). As Morpheus says, "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Even in this statement, Morpheus linguistically uses the symbol of the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* to explain the journey into truth that he would take Neo through if he chooses to take the red pill. Neither freedom through truth nor enslavement in the Matrix can be given an absolute existence in this sense, but can be constituted based on the clear difference between them. The symbolic order of lived experienced is presented here as a choice. Through representation of the Lacanian theory of the order of the symbolic, Neo is prompted to choose what he believes, which sets up the theme of belief that the rest of the trilogy's narrative will develop.



As an exterior to the Lacanian concept of the symbolic, the real can be considered an ontological absolution. While the symbolic can be described in oppositions, there are no oppositions when it comes to the real. While it may appear so, Lacan does not equate the real with reality but instead considers it a resistance to symbolization. In the second installment of the Wachowskis' trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded*, Neo learns and unlearns what is real and what is a symbolic representation of lived experience. This is complicated when Neo meets the Architect, whom he hadn't known to be real even though he suspected the Matrix must have a creator. Thrown into what seems to be space but resolves into a circular room with banks of television screens for walls, Neo meets the Architect, who explains the formation of the Matrix as the balancing of a mathematical equation. The Architect explains Neo's existence to him this way: "Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. You are the eventuality of an anomaly which despite my sincerest efforts I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision." In complete contrast to what the Oracle represents, an individual's own free will and choice, the Architect believes only in one choice which will produce one solution to what he considers the real to be. According to the Architect, there is nothing left unaccounted for among the possible sums, probabilities, and factors that play into the order of the Matrix.

Lacan's third order in his psychoanalytic theory, the imaginary, appears most prominently in *The Matrix* trilogy through other characters' belief in "The One." Many times throughout the films, characters display their belief in Neo and the prophecy of the Oracle. The concept of belief is, at its core, imaginary. When an individual believes something or

believes in something, their belief in that thing does not depend on whether it is physically real or not. Considering the materiality of an object of belief engages the expectation that the object be visible in nature and strips away the very essence of the imaginary that makes it an object of belief. In the second film, the Oracle explains to Neo our inherent belief in an overarching power that governs the order of life without us having to see it. She states, "At some point, a program was written to watch over the trees and the wind, the sunrise and the sunset. There are programs running all over the place. The ones doing their job, doing what they were meant to do, are invisible." The Oracle is pointing out the imaginary, what we don't question because we believe in its function and purpose. As The One, Neo fulfills his purpose in *The Matrix Revolutions* by sacrificing himself to the machine mainframe, stopping Agent Smith, and saving Zion. Up to this point, Neo has constant supporters—including Trinity, the Oracle, and Morpheus—willing to defend Neo and stand up for their belief in him. An example of this is in *The Matrix Reloaded* when Morpheus is speaking to the Commander about the defense systems and the next move against the approaching machines. This is part of the conversation from the second film:

MORPHEUS. Commander, we need a presence inside the Matrix to await contact from the Oracle.
COMMANDER. I don't want to hear that shit! I don't care about oracles or prophecies or messiahs! I care about one thing: stopping that army from destroying this city. And to do that I need soldiers to obey my orders.
MORPHEUS. With all due respect Commander, there is only one way to save our city.
COMMANDER. How?
MORPHEUS. Neo.
COMMANDER. Goddmamn it, Morpheus. Not everyone believes what you believe.
MORPHEUS. My beliefs do not require them to.

The belief that Morpheus has in Neo is imaginary. His belief relies on the prophecy of "The One" and the ideology of a system where a broken society needs a savior. It is this belief, the imaginary, that drives Neo to sacrifice himself to save the people of Zion and the future of humanity from total destruction.

Through the concept of belief and instances of believing, the directors of *The Matrix* films exhibit each of what Lacan argues to be the three orders of the human psychological experience: the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary. Through the very literal symbol of a pill, Neo is given a choice between freedom and enslavement in the first installment of the films. When meeting the Architect, Neo learns what the Architect believes to be the real,

which provides him the strength to make his own choice. Lastly, the constant belief and support from others in the film push Neo toward a belief in himself as the One that will make his ultimate sacrifice possible in the third film, *The Matrix Revolutions*. Holistically, the concept of belief provides a foundation for each of these three orders. To see ideologies, situations, or things as representative of the symbolic, you have to believe that symbols are representations of real things. In order to understand the real, you have to believe that there are no oppositions to the real. In order to even have a belief, you have to believe in the imaginary, in things you can't necessarily see. While not always easy to analyze or point out, each of Lacan's three orders of the human psychological experience—the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary—are displayed in the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* trilogy. ❦

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