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1. Introduction

Reboots, sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and adaptations are staples of contemporary cinema. Emerging within this trend has been the rise of legacy sequels, beginning with the release of *Tron: Legacy* (2010) almost thirty years after the original *Tron* (1982). These sequels are released and set decades after the original films, feature a mix of new and returning characters, rely heavily on feelings of nostalgia toward the earlier films, and often tackle themes of aging, grappling with one's legacy, and adapting to a rapidly changing world. Some popular legacy sequels, like *Creed* (2015), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), faithfully replicate the narrative formula of their predecessors while others, such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), play with the familiarity and popularity of the earlier films to challenge, reconsider, and adapt their themes for a distinctly 21st-century audience, resulting in a thematic and tonal distancing from what came before. Shared amongst these films is how they re-open stories from the 20th century, encoding the newer films with themes and contexts from the past while also attempting to revitalize those older stories for the present day.

The critical and box office success of many legacy sequels reflects audiences' desires for an impossible return to a past that is immortalized and idealized in film. The high value of nostalgia within the film industry is evident in the prominence of legacy sequels, as previously closed stories become opportunities for never-ending franchises. By bringing these stories and characters – many of which played key roles in the cultural zeitgeist – into the present day, filmmakers retrofit contemporary sensibilities onto the cultural memory of the familiar yet distant older films. Re-engaging with stories beyond their original conclusion is a fundamental feature of legacy sequels. As such, the stability of endings, or lack thereof, as thematically consequential is implicit in the sequels and, retroactively, the preceding film(s).

Endings – on the level of narrative, setting, or character – serve as a productive framework within which films negotiate the potential for meaning-making. Frank Kermode, in his seminal *The Sense of an Ending* (2000), argues that the apocalypse embodies the ultimate ending across time, cultures, and religions because it is reliant on “a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain ‘in the midst’” (8). In other words, apocalyptic narratives demand both a retrospective and prospective gaze that not only allows for the possibility of making sense of the present but without which life in the present moment would be without sense altogether. An apocalyptic

end is, importantly, not limited to that of a global disaster. A narrative apocalypse can also refer to a type of personal ending, such as crisis, transformation, or death (Kermode 35).

It is no wonder, then, that so many legacy sequels feature plotlines about the deaths of beloved characters or are set against the backdrop of global or personal apocalyptic events. They simultaneously look backward, acknowledging the impact of the previous generation's legacy on the present day, and forward, centering a new story around a younger generation of characters and the possibilities for the future they carry. A more critical approach to the prevalence of legacy sequels would suggest that this nostalgia-driven gaze is emblematic of the postmodern fear that "[t]he world is over. History is a spectacle in reruns. We cannibalize the past but have no vision of the future" (Heffernan 11). As products of late capitalism, legacy sequels can be seen as cash grabs from Hollywood studios seeking to profit from nostalgia, thereby compensating for a lack of originality by 'cannibalizing' stories from the past. While it is easy to be cynical about the nature of sequels and the profit-above-all-else business model within the film industry, dismissing them all offhandedly as visionless reruns risks overlooking their potential as not simply reproductions of the past but rather stories that complicate our relationship with that past.

In this thesis, I focus on the case of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982/1992/2007) and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, which I argue does precisely that: complicate its predecessor's legacy. With their ambiguous, open-ended narratives, post-apocalyptic settings, and preoccupation with death, mortality, and the boundaries between the real and the artificial, the *Blade Runner* films are fascinated by the possibilities and limitations inherent in endings. However, whereas the earlier film regards the finality of 'the end' as something that limits or diminishes meaning, its sequel recenters endings as sites of potential meaning-making. By comparing the films' treatment of endings, I will trace a broader cultural shift that I argue is embodied by these films: from postmodernism to metamodernism.

As defined by Dutch cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, metamodernism builds on and challenges postmodern and modern sensibilities. Fundamental to metamodernism is an "oscilla[tion] between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes" 5). One such oscillation is between ends and beginnings, exemplified through the expression of returns. In particular, metamodernism responds to postmodernism's "senses of the end" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1), including Jean-François Lyotard's call for the death of grand narratives, Jean Baudrillard's questioning of the existence of the real, and Fredric Jameson's declaration of the disappearance of depth, affect, and history. A metamodern fascination with returns, then, acknowledges the actuality of an

ending while embracing the reemergence of what has passed to “resignify the present and reimagine a future” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Periodising” 10). Importantly, metamodernism is not an abandonment of all postmodern values but rather an evolution of them. Metamodernism marks the ‘end’ of postmodernism with a return of modern and postmodern sensibilities to new effect and with radical consequences on the potential for meaning-making in a 21st-century cultural context.

Metamodernism as a cultural theory remains at its most abstract and conceptual in the texts of Vermeulen and van den Akker. However, using their framework as a starting point, metamodernism as a productive theory is best shaped through close textual analysis. Still an emerging theory, it is part of a wave of post-postmodern theories that focus on various genres and media. However, a reinvestment in sincerity as well as a focus on the intensification of consumerism in the digital age connects many of them. In film, metamodernism has, up until now, primarily been associated with what critic James MacDowell terms “Quirky Cinema,” a 21st-century trend in film epitomized by the works of directors like Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, Miranda July, and Charlie Kaufman. For MacDowell, Quirky Cinema leans more hopeful in comparison to the postmodern films of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, which are steeped in ironic detachment (“Wes Anderson” 12). A defining characteristic of Quirky Cinema is the tension – or oscillation – between moments of mocking, self-aware comedy, and tender sincerity. Although *2049* could not be further in terms of aesthetics or tone from any ‘quirky’ Wes Anderson film, it finds a similar balance between indifferent artificiality and impassioned emotional engagement, as I argue in this thesis. Therefore, I will adopt metamodernism as theorized by Vermeulen and van den Akker as my central theoretical framework through which to approach my analysis of *2049* and compare it with its postmodern predecessor.

Initially met with mixed reviews by critics and considered a failure at the box office during its initial theatrical run in 1982, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*¹ later became a cult classic, and its grimy, neo-noir, cyberpunk aesthetic and interest in the impacts of technology on humanity have served as inspirations for science fiction narratives of the past forty years. As

¹ One difficulty that comes with discussing *Blade Runner* as a singular film is that there are several different versions released between 1982 and 2007, three of which I will refer to in this thesis: the original US theatrical release (1982), the Director’s Cut (1992), and the Final Cut (2007). The Final Cut (FC) is, for the most part, just a more visually polished version of the Director’s Cut and differs from the theatrical release in three significant ways: the removal of Deckard’s voiceover, the absence of Deckard and Rachael’s escape into a ‘happy ending,’ and the addition of Deckard’s unicorn dream. Although I will refer to the other two and consider some of the significant changes between them, my thesis will focus on the Final Cut, as it is, according to Scott, the most complete version of his vision for *Blade Runner* (Scott). From here on, all quotations and references to *Blade Runner* (BR) refer to the Final Cut unless stated otherwise. References to the 1982 original US theatrical release are noted as OTR and those to the 1992 Director’s Cut as DC.

Scott Bukatman declares, “[t]he aesthetic of cyberpunk was almost defined by *Blade Runner*” (41). Based on Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Blade Runner* is set against the backdrop of a dystopian Los Angeles in a (then) futuristic 2019, where war and ecocide have largely destroyed the planet and nearly all animals have gone extinct. Rick Deckard, a former bounty hunter – known as a blade runner – is hired to find and ‘retire’ four fugitive androids – genetically engineered humanoid beings called replicants – who have illegally returned to Earth. Built by the Tyrell Corporation to work on space colonies, replicants are designed to be “more human than human” (*BR* 0:22:01-02), and therefore superior to humans in every way, except for their (assumed) lack of emotions and limited four-year lifespans. With characters like Deckard, Rachael, and Roy Batty – one of the escaped replicants – exhibiting a mixture of human and inhuman qualities, the film explores the unknowability of identity and the blurring of distinctions between humans and non-humans. These are also themes that have been at the center of discourse surrounding the film since its release.

Along with this instability of identity, the film’s critique of capitalism and commodification, ambivalent protagonist and plot, and skepticism toward grand narratives and the existence of a singular truth contribute to *Blade Runner* being considered an exemplar of postmodern film by cultural theorists (see Bertek; Bruno; Bukatman; Doel and Clarke; Flisfeder; Senior). In her postmodern reading of the film, Giuliana Bruno argues that, due to their limited lifespans and their implanted memories, replicants are “condemned to a life composed only of a present tense” without genuine memories of the past or visions of the future (70). Therefore, the replicants mimic a postmodern condition: the loss of history and the desire for “an (impossible) return” to history turns it into a simulation that is absent of order and individuality (74).

Set thirty years after the events of the first film, *2049* follows a replicant blade runner, K, as he searches for the child of the replicant Rachael and Deckard. During the investigation, K convinces himself that he is the child; however, that proves not to be true. While *Blade Runner* is broadly considered postmodern, critics have not rushed to make that claim about its sequel, despite the initial thematic and aesthetic similarities between them. I argue that this is because *2049* has shifted away from a postmodern sensibility toward a metamodern one.² While

² In a recent 2025 publication, Alison Landsberg and Timotheus Vermeulen conceptualize metamodern memory and subjectivity through an analysis of *2049*, which they refer to as a “distinctly metamodern movie” (2). While I broadly align with their metamodern framing of the film, my reading of it diverges from theirs in the ways in which I interpret how the films’ metamodern qualities present themselves. Whereas they interpret the film as affirming a trend in 21st century cultural products which leans into more conservative notions of nostalgia and essentialism, I emphasize the film’s more constructive, utopian impulses.

both films ask the same questions about human subjectivity and identity, they offer different answers to those questions. In this way, *2049* does not simply replicate its predecessor, reincarnated with the fresh face of a new protagonist, nor does the sequel outright reject any connection to what came before. Instead, the later film – like what metamodernism does for postmodernism – builds on, plays with, and complicates the original’s themes and ethical considerations, especially in how it deconstructs the binary between real and artificial, negotiates the significance of endings, and explores the consequences of both on meaning-making.

Both *Blade Runner* and *2049* have already been heavily analyzed in relation to posthumanism (see Bertek; Borg; Senior; Žižek), race and postcolonialism (see Beal; Chan; Taşkale), and Marxist theory (see Flisfeder; McGowan; Žižek). More recently, discourse surrounding *2049* has focused on the agency and exploitation of its female characters (see Jang; Kunkle; Simmons; Vint) as well as ecological perspectives (see Bunce; Hamblin and O’Connell). As a post-apocalyptic film, *2049* takes the environmental disaster implied by the earlier film and foregrounds it in the sequel, making it not just a film set against an apocalyptic backdrop, but a film that explicitly confronts the end of humanity and questions what comes next. As a legacy sequel, *2049* has been criticized for leaning too heavily into nostalgia, getting lost in replicating the past, like many other legacy sequels, and lacking any radical ‘newness’ (see Gomel; Loofbourow). Elana Gomel writes that while the original film is “revolutionary,” *2049* is “reactionary” (4). However, as a sequel with a plot centered on memories, *2049* is a film about how our relationship to nostalgia and the past can be drawn from to imagine a new world and a new mode of being beyond the end.

Post-apocalyptic narratives question the state of the world after the end of everything, and I argue that this is the same question metamodernism poses after postmodernism declared the death of depth, affect, history, and utopia. Therefore, through a comparison of these films’ treatments of endings, I will trace how the postmodern nihilism of *Blade Runner* has evolved into a metamodern return of engaged sincerity in *2049*.

In Chapter 2, I explore theories of endings and how apocalypse and post-apocalypse narratives can be understood not only as stories of the end of the world but also as stories revolving around death, personal crisis, and revelation. In Chapter 3, I introduce the major theoretical frameworks. I examine how postmodernism, as a collection of endings as well as a movement said to be coming to an end, is simultaneously obsessed with and skeptical of the very concept of finality (3.1). I then sketch the movements that have been proposed as postmodernism’s successors (3.2) before outlining what I consider the most convincing and

relevant of these theories: metamodernism, which proposes a simultaneous return to and distancing from postmodern values (3.3). In Chapter 4, I apply the theory from earlier chapters to my analysis of *Blade Runner* and *2049*. I compare the films' treatment of endings from various levels, beginning more broadly with how they replicate or break away from patterns established through their constructions as versions and sequels of the same film, as well as how they play with the cyberpunk noir genre and other narrative expectations (4.1). Then, I move on to close readings of the films, examining how they navigate the end of certainty after the boundaries between human and non-human have collapsed (4.2) and the end of life, as characters risk their lives, embrace their mortality, and confront their deaths (4.3). Finally, I consider how the films' post-apocalyptic settings and final scenes set up their (dis)interest in the concept of utopia, which here is positioned as the movement toward a radically new future (4.4).

In this thesis, I examine how the end, and everything that follows, is depicted as a site where meaning fragments under postmodernism and culminates under metamodernism. While *2049* embraces some of *Blade Runner*'s ambiguity regarding the stability of identity and narratives, it ultimately rejects its predecessor's apathetic ambivalence in favor of valuing emotional sincerity, a relational existence, and a pursuit of real meaning in an artificial world.

2. On Narrative Closure, Crisis, and Continuation after the Apocalypse

At its simplest, a narrative ending is the final moment in a story: the last sentence on the last page of the book, the closing scene before the curtain falls, the final image or sound before the credits roll. Many critics regard endings, and specifically happy endings, as set resolutions to problems that appear throughout a plot, neatly tying up any and all loose ends (Levine 249). However, endings pose problems and complexities of their own, especially in the ways they shape narratives. While some offer closure and catharsis to characters and readers, others deny these, and instead lean into feelings of instability and discord. Critics continue to be fascinated by the many forms and functions of narrative endings. The discourse around the significance of endings is not limited to a narrative's literal conclusion, as different kinds of endings can occur at any point of a plot or even serve as the foundation of that plot, such as in stories about death, apocalypse, personal and global crises, or transitions between phases of life. One throughline amongst them is their acknowledgment of the power endings have to shape meaning throughout a work. According to Kermode, a prominent critic of fictions of the apocalypse, what is at stake in an ending is the possibility for meaning. The problem of endings in narratives, then, is inextricably linked to the "problem of making sense of the ways we make sense of the world" (Kermode 31). In this chapter, I work through key theories on narrative endings and how they enable or complicate meaning-making within a postmodern and metamodern framework.

Plots with beginnings, middles, and endings are constants across all types of narratives. For Peter Brooks, they are "structuring operation[s] elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time" (12). Based on this, the construction of meaning within a narrative might initially be interpreted as a dynamic process that builds in conjunction with a plot until it culminates at the story's close. Complicating this interpretation, however, Brooks goes on to argue that a narrative's meaning is only revealed at its endpoint: "[We] are able to read present moments—in literature and, by extension, in life—as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot" (94). A plot's build-up of meaning, then, is only possible because of the promise of an ending as an organizing force. This function of endings also implies that a conclusion may alter the meanings previously constructed for the plot, such as how plot twists retroactively impact the interpretation of earlier narrative beats. Thus, endings have the power to shape, or even reshape, entire narratives.

Extending the assessment of endings and their functions beyond the confines of their significance in narratives, Walter Benjamin concisely draws a connection between studies of narrative endings and discourses on mortality. He suggests that readers seek an understanding of their own mortality by vicariously confronting death through the deaths of characters and the ends of narratives (101). Benjamin considers death to have authority over the entirety of a narrative, and this authority is only borrowed by an author: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell” (94). Understood in this way, an ending does not simply contribute to meaning but is absolutely crucial for its existence. In effect, meaning arises *because* a narrative (and a life) must end. Benjamin’s writings align with those of other prominent theorists of his time, such as Martin Heidegger, who argues that the anticipation of death individualizes a life and enables an authentic *Dasein* (Being) (304–11). Importantly, as Ursula Heise points out, endings within a narrative offer a perspective otherwise inaccessible to people: “Through the experience of reading, the readers live through the one moment in time that they cannot experience in their own lives: the moment just beyond earth, which reveals life’s final pattern” (361). Reflecting on life beyond death is an opportunity unique to narratives. Rather than being optional creative decisions, endings are something without which a narrative – and life more generally – would be pointless.

In the context of how an ending enables meaning, both Brooks and Benjamin consider endings to have a revelatory power, which aligns with Kermode’s framing of the apocalypse as the ultimate narrative ending. Taken from the Greek word for ‘revelation,’ apocalypse promises an “unveiling of ultimate truths” about the world (Kaup 56). The revelation at the heart of fictions of apocalypse, according to Kermode, is one of meaning making: “[T]o make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle, we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning” (190). Apocalyptic narratives serve as an ordering force that merges an “imaginatively recorded past” with an “imaginatively predicted future” (Kermode 8). This dual gaze into past and future positions the apocalypse as a revelatory force that enables meaning-making across time. The representation of temporality in this way fulfills a need people have to relate themselves and the moment they live in to the larger context of history, which speaks to the popularity and longevity of depictions of the apocalypse in fiction and films.

Apocalyptic films are not limited to any single genre or theoretical framework; however, many released in the second half of the 20th century fit comfortably within a postmodern sensibility. Apocalyptic films such as *On the Beach* (1959), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Brazil* (1985), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Blade Runner* have been widely recognized as

postmodern for their non-linear timelines, ambiguous endings, self-reflexivity, parody, or fragmented subjectivity. The apocalypse is, in some ways, particularly suited to the theories that dominate postmodern thinking (see Rosen), especially because there is a particular problem that comes with depicting the end of the world: how to speculate about a possible future that is entirely unknowable and unfathomable. The challenge of the narrative apocalypse, as postmodern critic Brian McHale suggests, is mainly a representational one: “how do we go about representing what seems to lie beyond the scope of our forms of representation? How do we express the inexpressible?” (160). This is also a central issue across postmodern theory.

With his questions, McHale echoes Lyotard’s writings, especially his discussion of how postmodernism approaches the problem of presenting the unrepresentable. Differing from modernism, which “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” through form and nostalgia, postmodernism “denies itself the solace of good forms” in order to “impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard 81). In other words, the relentless experimentation in form and style that dominates postmodern works seeks to mimic the disorienting experience of confronting the inexpressible. The modern apocalypse imagines the unimaginable in such a way that remains recognizable by adhering to familiar conventions, ultimately still offering “the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (Lyotard 81). In contrast, the postmodern apocalypse, and subsequent post-apocalypse, are characterized by complete destabilization, both of the narrative and a reader’s or viewer’s experience.

Key to this disorder of the postmodern apocalypse is the growing skepticism surrounding the apocalypse as an ordering force, as Kermode regards it, that allows humanity to find closure and relate its present state on a grand timeline from the beginning to the end of everything. While the modernist apocalypse, according to Ruben Borg, embraces a serialized familiarity that “coincides with a desire to *revive* time, to reaffirm its reality and its power,” the postmodern apocalypse is associated with the “desire to destroy time” (76). Postmodernism’s proclamations of the end of history, depth, affect, and grand narratives suggest that time is an experience limited to a perpetual present.³ As a consequence, linear time is replaced with “circular or deconstructed time” in a “self-contained universe that has no beginning or end” (Burgess 405). The binary of past and future is disrupted, and any sense of the end as a signifying totality or source of meaning is dismantled. The absence of stable meaning that hung over postmodern discourse led to a subversion of the apocalypse’s promise of revelation and

³ See Chapter 3.1.

renewal at the end. The apocalypse became a cyclical, ever-looming event driven by a fear of death. Behind that fear is the postmodern threat that the revelation offered by the apocalypse is one of nothing at all: “There can be no unveiling because there is nothing under the surface” (Berger 9). Rather than enabling meaning, the postmodern apocalypse is a signifier for and of nothing.

Although the apocalypse refers to the moment of catastrophe, apocalyptic narratives typically have plots divided into two parts: the destruction of the world followed by its rebuilding. More recently, stories that focus primarily on the aftermath of an apocalypse have settled into their own sub-genre: the post-apocalypse. Some critics liken postmodernism’s skepticism regarding universal truths and linear temporality to how the post-apocalypse subverts any sense of order initially promised by the end by continuing despite that end (see Berger; Heffernan). According to Teresa Heffernan, the apocalypse’s promise of renewal, which is so central to religious or mythical stories of the end, has been displaced by the realization that a postmodern post-apocalypse offers neither redemption nor renewal: “Bereft of the idea of the end as direction, truth, and foundation, we have reached the end of the end” (11). Important, then, to the postmodern post-apocalypse is the shared sense that the apocalypse has already occurred and that we have already reached the end of everything and are now living in a post-history, post-truth, post-reality, post-modern world – as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson, Francis Fukuyama, and other postmodern theorists have written. In effect, the postmodern end evokes both a sense of mourning and celebration regarding that end.

Despite reaching ‘the end of the end,’ as suggested by postmodern theorists, the world has continued in a way that invites speculation regarding what comes after the apocalypse – and postmodernism. As part of the wave of contemporary discourse that considers post-postmodern theories, Caren Irr and Monika Kaup both observe a rising degree of optimism associated with contemporary 21st-century post-apocalyptic stories. Some apocalyptic yet hopeful films include *WALL-E* (2008), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *A Quiet Place* (2018), and *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (2022). Compared to the more dystopian apocalyptic narratives of the 20th century, these films maintain a more potent desire for renewal. Since, per definition, post-apocalyptic films take place after the world is destroyed, they are more invested, as Irr writes, in the “slow crawl out of the wreckage and towards signs of other survivors,” which makes them “oddly hopeful works” (170). Likewise, Kaup argues that in comparison to the apocalypse, which “insists that there is no future,” the post-apocalypse “speculates about new tomorrows after the end” (52-53). Both Irr and Kaup remark on a cultural shift from postmodernism’s skepticism and pessimism regarding the end and toward

an unexpected optimism imbued within post-apocalyptic works of the last few decades, which I link to the post-postmodern theory of metamodernism.

As a still emerging movement, existing literature that adopts the metamodern framework for cinema or literature analyses is relatively minimal, with even less to be found on the concept of a metamodern (post-)apocalypse. By positioning 21st-century post-apocalyptic theories, such as those proposed by Kaup and Irr, within the characterization of metamodernism as a series of ‘returns,’ a productive framework emerges through which to approach the broader movement from postmodern skepticism to metamodern sincerity. Metamodernism is dominated by a sense of oscillation between postmodern and modern sensibilities, such as between cynicism and optimism, which ultimately culminates in a “kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 5). In response to the postmodern apocalypse, the metamodern apocalypse can be broadly understood as a more hopeful one that invests in the possibility of returns (of civilization, life, and meaning) without losing the productive skepticism learned from postmodernism.⁴

While metamodernism retains some of the thematic and aesthetic features of postmodernism, such as non-linear time and drawing attention to the constructedness of a work, its approach to endings suggests a desire for a return to the potential for meaning in endings. Take, for example, the ‘happy ending’ referenced earlier in this chapter. Postmodern works are often resistant or even irreverent toward the concept, as it presents an overly simplistic resolution to all of the contradictions and complications of a narrative. Any comfort that this kind of closure seems to offer is superficial and must be questioned and subverted, according to postmodernism. Caroline Levine pushes back against the cynical view of happy endings, arguing that such endings are needed today and should even be considered radical in response to the pervasive ambiguity popularized by postmodernism. For Levine, an embrace of happy endings in the 21st century represents a revaluation of stability in the face of ongoing catastrophes because they have the “potential to offer not only false or illusory resolutions, but also the necessity and desirability of reliable ongoing material conditions” (254). Levine’s reassessment of happy endings aligns with how metamodernism frames closure not as a fixed point of catharsis, but rather a continuous process that can only be set in motion by an ending.

The meaning created by a narrative ending is further complicated when that story is continued or restarted, such as in a sequel or adaptation. For postmodern critics such as Jameson and Baudrillard, a sequel would be an example of pastiche and the endless recycling

⁴ I define metamodernism and its key distinctions from postmodernism more in Chapter 3.3.

of the same story. Jameson writes, “[I]n a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 7). A sequel, then, can be read as a shallow imitation of the original, driven by consumerism and nostalgia and wholly lacking even the potential for originality. Sequels are part of an endless closed loop, eventually turning into a parody without origin and becoming, as Baudrillard says, a simulation of the real, or “an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (6). A sequel might tell an audience more about a character, story, or world, but, for Baudrillard, an excess of information does not lead to an increase in meaning but rather a collapse of it: “We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (79). As parodies of information without substance, sequels are not producing but “reflecting meaning, like a mirror, without absorbing it” (Baudrillard 86). Adding more for the sake of quantity over depth threatens to reduce both the newer and original stories to lifeless pastiche.

While sequels and adaptations can be viewed as examples of cultural stagnation, a return to a narrative can also productively build on its meaning. For postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon, an adaptation or sequel neither reduces nor merely copies what came before. Instead, it plays a role in the construction and continuation of meaning. Although her theory of adaptation is situated within a postmodern context, I would argue that Hutcheon anticipates what metamodern theory would later articulate more fully. Unlike other postmodern critics, she reads adaptations as interpretive, dialogic acts, or in other terms, as constructive in their intertextuality rather than strictly deconstructive (*A Theory of Adaptation* 7–8). In her writing, Hutcheon draws out the characteristics of postmodernism that have carried over and been expanded on in metamodern theory, specifically the tensions between depth and surface, originality and replication, and irony and sincerity – all of which are also at stake in discussions of adaptations and sequels and their potential to (de)construct meaning. Hutcheon writes, “An adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (*A Theory of Adaptation* 176). A story’s continuation after its original end, though inherently self-referential, breathes new life into a work, adds depth, and opens the story up to new interpretations. Sequels, created and set after the original’s end, offer a perspective that was impossible before the original’s completion. Just as a narrative is a “means of bestowing meaning on one’s life because it provides the possibility of looking back at life from beyond the ending” (Heise 361), so too does a sequel provide the opportunity to look back and make sense of what came before. That is not to say,

of course, that a work is without meaning if there is no sequel, but also that a sequel's existence does not innately diminish meaning from the original. Rather, from a metamodern perspective, the return to a story after its end recontextualizes and potentially adds depth and new meaning onto an earlier work by developing a story further.

Shared between apocalypse and narrative is their teleological sense – that of an approaching end – and the imposition of order based on their ending. Therefore, the most obvious narrative ending – that of the story itself coming to a close – is a site of revelation after a crisis, like the apocalypse. Just as narratives have boundaries between stories – where one ends and a sequel begins – they also contain boundaries within their plots in the form of crises. As Kermode writes, “[T]he moments we call crises are ends and beginnings” (96). A character's personal crisis might be one of identity (how someone defines themselves), of reality (how someone can know what is real), or of transition between phases of life (how someone moves into a new stage of life and leaves the past behind). All of these moments can also be viewed as types of narrative apocalypse, which “refer not to a common End but to a personal death or to crisis” (Kermode 35). From the end of the world to the end of a narrative and the ends within a narrative, apocalypse narratives present an opportunity to locate and define the self within a grander timeline, and also depict crisis as a site of closure and continuation. All of this is destabilized under postmodernism and rebuilt under metamodernism.

The significance of endings is an ever-evolving concept. While postmodernism abandons Kermode's and Benjamin's framing of endings as enablers of retrospective meaning, metamodernism proposes a return to them, suggesting that the potential for meaning is inextricably linked to them. From a metamodern perspective, the apocalypse is a site of renewed revelation again, and the post-apocalypse that follows is not indicative of ‘the end of the end’ so much as a new beginning. Metamodernism thus adopts a balance between acknowledging that an end has taken place and finding meaning beyond its limits, despite that.

3. Post/Modernism Rebooted: Postmodern Ends meet Metamodern Returns

From a postmodern perspective, apocalypse loomed over the late 20th century. Its declarations about the ends of history, depth, affect, and ultimate truth all contributed to a “great sense of summing-up,” which made it “tempting to believe that some kind of conclusion had been reached, that the essential patterns had been set [...] and all that was left was to retrace them” (Mayshark 3–4). The threat of the end of the world thus turned into a parody of itself – a “spectacle on replay” – or perhaps more fittingly, a perpetual apocalypse of one catastrophe after another (Heffernan). Since postmodernism apocalyptically declared the end of everything, including the potential for anything new, the question becomes what comes after the apocalypse. As postmodernism has “exhausted its capacities to express the world now coming into being” (Lipovetsky 157), there is a need to articulate the qualities of a new cultural moment that seeks to break from the cycle of endless apocalyptic irony. In this chapter, I begin with a retrospective on postmodernism, charting its key characteristics of depthlessness, ahistoricity, superficiality, and cynicism, as well as suggesting the waning dominance of postmodern irony. In the wake of postmodernism’s displacement from the dominant cultural theory, there have been ongoing speculations as to what has replaced it. I introduce some of these emerging post-postmodern theories before defining metamodernism, which I consider the most productive and all-encompassing of these movements, as a series of returns of what postmodernism had lost and a construction of something new.

3.1. A Postmodern Retrospective

From Linda Hutcheon famously declaring that the “postmodern moment has passed” in 2002 (*Politics* 181) to Ihab Hassan speculating on what “lies beyond postmodernism” in 2003 (“Beyond Postmodernism” 3) to Steven Connor in 2004 remarking that postmodernism “must be nearly at an end” (1) to David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis in 2015 likening postmodernism to a once overflowing river that has now dried up (xi), contemporary discourse on postmodernism increasingly regards it as a thing of the past. As prominent postmodern scholars and artists have begun to consider its end as an observable fact rather than a radical argument, writings on it have become more retrospective, with discussions on legacy and placing boundaries – temporal and thematic – on a movement that famously rejects such rigidity. At

the same time, theorists have turned their gaze forward to what has replaced postmodernism as the “cultural dominant” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 4). In considering postmodernism’s postmortem legacy, Hutcheon writes that “postmodernism is finished [...] it’s over,” but it also still “live[s] on” through the persistent relevance of its “discursive strategies” and “ideological critique” (*Politics* 166, 181). I argue that metamodernism has emerged as the cultural dominant of the 21st century, and while it calls for the return of what postmodernism claimed had disappeared, it does so without “forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism” (L. Turner), including carrying on the necessity for critique that Hutcheon suggests. To understand metamodernism as a departure from and development of postmodernism, first requires a “look back” at its origins “in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 12). What can be said to have been ‘lost’ under postmodernism are those concepts it declared the end of, namely metanarratives, history, depth, affect, and a utopian impulse.

Fittingly for such a self-contradictory movement, a prominent characteristic of postmodern theory and works is their skepticism toward endings as meaningful ordering forces, as I discussed in Chapter 2. At the same time, however, postmodern critics are obsessed with endings. In response to modernism’s “premonitions of the future,” postmodernism is dominated by “senses of the end of this or that” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1). Among varied and sometimes contradictory theories, a loose, connective thread appears between theorists’ fascination with closure and their fondness for declaring something’s death. For Lyotard, it is the decline of grand narratives; for Baudrillard, the collapse of the real and the state of the world after total liberation; for Michel Foucault, the end of philosophy and “the disappearance of man” as an object of knowledge (420–21); for Roland Barthes, the death of the author; for Jacques Derrida, the end of representation; for Hassan, the sense of “indeterminance” that implicates a tendency toward and desire for “unmaking” (*Dismemberment of Orpheus* 269); for Fukuyama, the end of history; for Jameson, the loss of historicity, affect, depth, and the utopian impulse. The key to understanding postmodernism, as I apply it in this thesis, lies in this tension: postmodernism is a series of endings, yet it also remains skeptical toward endings as stable or meaningful.

One reason for postmodernism’s resistance to endings is that they are regarded as types of grand narratives that promise some ‘ultimate truth.’ According to Lyotard, postmodernism can be defined, at its simplest, as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). In other words, the authority of accepted hierarchies and universalisms must be challenged. These grand narratives encompass overarching stories propagated by modernism, including Enlightenment

values of reason, truth, trust, freedom, and progress, as well as themes of death, apocalypse, and utopia. For Lyotard, the postmodern condition rejects metanarratives because they reinforce cultural homogeneity, inevitably resulting in oppression and abuses of power over those deemed different. The demise of universal stories necessarily leads to the rise of “little narratives” as the “quintessential form of imaginative inventions” (Lyotard 60). The negation of universalism in favor of individualism also echoes Barthes’ assertion that the “death of the author” is necessary for the “birth of the reader” (148). The hierarchy of influence is thus dismantled, as fractured and heterogeneous perspectives become sources of limitless meanings. Endings or anything treated as definitive, final, or singularly revelatory are dismissed as ways in which meaning is limited, not constructed, under postmodernism. The ‘births’ of the reader and the little narrative are not necessarily beginnings or renewals in a temporal sense, but in the sense that the relegation of the universal leaves room for the entrance of new, diverse, and subjective narratives.

Alongside the distrust of metanarratives, my reading of *Blade Runner* as postmodern is built on the consequences of the loss of histor(icit)y, affect, and depth, as outlined by Jameson, as well as the collapse of the real into simulation proposed by Baudrillard. The postmodern rejection of grand narratives ties directly to what scholars, including Jameson and Fukuyama, term the ‘end of history.’ In his infamous 1989 essay “The End of History?” Fukuyama writes:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (4)

Of course, by ‘the end of history,’ Fukuyama does not suggest that nothing of significance would ever occur again or that the world would be free from conflict, but that the goal of history – liberal democracy with a free market economy – has been revealed, indicating that humanity’s ideological evolution has concluded. In declaring its end, Fukuyama does not imply the disappearance of history, but rather its purpose fulfilled.⁵ Taken at its most radical, reducing history to an ideology condemns “any generalized version of the past [to be] both irretrievable and irredeemable as humanistic science” (McHale and Platt 3). Fukuyama considers a fully realized history not something to be celebrated but rather mourned. Reaching a consensus that

⁵ The inclusion of Fukuyama’s theory on the ‘end of history’ in this thesis is not an argument for its veracity – though, as Robin van den Akker notes, Fukuyama’s “thesis nicely encapsulated the euphoria of the neoconservative right and the defeatism of the progressive left under postmodernism” (21) – but rather for its ideological impact and contribution to the overarching sense of endings within postmodernism, whose ahistorical presentism led to, as Jameson consistently argues, an alarming inability to imagine a time before or after capitalism (“Future City” 76).

accepts liberal democracy as the ideal removes the need for “ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism,” resulting in a “post-historical period” in which there is no art, just “economic calculations” (Fukuyama, “End of History?” 18). This ‘post-historical’ era is one of artistic stagnation and boredom, in which nothing new can be created and no futures can be imagined, which leads to “a powerful nostalgia for a time when history existed” (Fukuyama, “End of History?” 18). For Jameson, the postmodern “weakening of historicity” is understood as the growing disconnect between past, present, and future, with the postmodern period being one reduced into a perpetual present, or a fragmented “series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 6, 27). As history is no longer actively engaged with, it becomes endlessly recycled as pastiche that “endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” (*Postmodernism* 21). Nostalgia for an impossible past, therefore, obscures the reality of the present and condemns the future to being just a continuation of that perceived present, which gives rise to postmodern pastiche.

If the end of history suggests an inability to imagine anything new, then the postmodern present can be characterized as a fragmented series of repetitions and parodies of the past. The ironic replication of the past, often driven by nostalgia, is neither transformative nor critical but rather a superficial “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17). With nothing beyond what is visible on the surface, postmodern parody indicates a “waning of affect” and the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (*Postmodernism* 10, 9). Jameson is not suggesting that the postmodern moment is entirely absent of feeling or affect, but rather that the commodification of art has created an ironic distancing between subject and viewer that does not allow for any authentic emotional connection or engagement with a work. This loss of genuine emotion gives way to postmodern superficiality, in which emotions are flattened into pastiche and thus are indicative of nothing beyond what can be plainly seen.

Connecting the loss of depth to the collapse of the real as a stable, or even accessible, truth, is Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacra. He outlines the progressive stages of postmodernism’s loss of depth and how the image (simulation) is related to reality:

[I]t is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

In the first stage, the image accurately depicts reality. In the second, the image has a destructive quality that obscures the truth. In the third, the image suggests a reality that does not actually exist. This stage represents a marked shift, as reality can no longer be genuinely represented: it can only be disguised or simulated. In the fourth stage, image and reality have become so disconnected that images are just a succession of replications without origin. For Baudrillard, this final stage marks the beginning of the postmodern era as a period of surface and pastiche, where nothing is concealed behind a simulation except for more copies of copies, until “[r]eality is eclipsed by hyperreality” (Toth and Brooks 265). Reality becomes a superficial parody of itself, thereby becoming a depthless, meaningless concept, as there remains only the replica without any connection to reality behind it.

Trapped in a state of endlessly parodying the past, the postmodern present is one closed off to imagining a different future, which materializes in the cynicism and nihilism often associated with postmodern film. In their book *A World in Chaos* (2003), Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard argue that postmodern films break with modernist Enlightenment ideologies in favor of aggressive cynicism. They explain that postmodern films frequently challenge modernist myths of “individual heroism, worship of technology, democratic citizenship, and national redemption” by portraying “rampant egoism, pessimism, or nihilism” (29). In contrast to the tendency of modernist films to evoke emotions based on a sense of collective purpose and historical meanings, postmodern films typically rely on fleeting intensities that are heavily mediated and commodified. This approach ultimately undermines an audience’s ability to genuinely engage with the story, its characters, or the context behind it all (Boggs and Pollard 29–30). The rise of postmodern cinema reflects a rejection of Hollywood’s formulaic, profit-driven studio films in favor of subverting and parodying genre expectations and narrative tropes. Interested in destabilizing expectations regarding films’ form and content, postmodern cinema plays with “chaotic juxtapositions, discontinuity, fragmentation, and highly distorted images” and experimental editing that “calls attention to the filmmaking process itself, that embellishes a certain self-consciousness, and that often celebrates a world of fragmentation and nonlinearity” (Boggs and Pollard 203–04). Thus, postmodern films maintain a tension between seeking to defamiliarize the world while doing so through the imitation and parody of earlier works. Originality as the goal of aesthetic and narrative experimentation becomes secondary to superficial facsimile and parody, as can be seen in films often considered exemplary of postmodern cinema, such as Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* (1983), Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Fargo* (1996) and *O*

Brother, Where Art Thou (2000), Lana and Lilly Wachowski's original *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), and *Blade Runner*.

Jameson suggests that the most devastating consequence of the loss of history, affect, and depth is the diminished impulse toward utopia, which is reflected in many of these postmodern films. This period of cinema in the late 20th century not only saw the rise of parodic, genre-resisting films, such as those by Tarantino or the Coen brothers, but also an influx of cynical, apocalyptic, and dystopian films, including *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* trilogy. Jameson attributes this trend to the way postmodern thinking makes the end of the world more accessible than the concept of utopia: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination" (*The Seeds of Time* xii). Narratives like those of *Do Androids Dream* and its film adaptation, *Blade Runner*, depict a version of the future that is less futuristic and more an exaggeration of the present that has been devastated by capitalism at its most coercive and dystopian. For this reason, cyberpunk, according to Jameson, can be considered "the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (*Postmodernism* 418, note 1). When imagining how the extremes of technology can be integrated into a specific, decaying version of contemporary reality, cyberpunk films like *Blade Runner* bring Baudrillard's theory of the simulacra into the mainstream. They make central to their narratives the disintegration of any distinction between simulation and reality. In doing so, they disrupt stable constructions of identity and reality, thereby popularizing postmodern distrust and cynicism toward any sense of finality or certainty.

Postmodern distrust, as a reaction to modernist conceptions of the world and their perceived failures, initially offers a consequential and productive framework through which to challenge the world and its assumptions, break down artificial binaries and hierarchies of power, and critique everything. The consequences of that endless deconstruction, however, are that the theory calls for the negation of everything without "specifying what was becoming of us as a result" (Lipovetsky 157). As David Foster Wallace explains in an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, the postmodern rhetoric of irony and cynicism in films and literature, which effectively called out the hypocrisies of the mid-20th-century, post-war United States, inevitably devolved into ridiculing everything for its own sake. Postmodern irony effectively transformed into an empty pastiche of its formerly productive function, which conservative movements have since weaponized as "hip cynicism, a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it's just kidding" (McCaffery 48). Indeed, postmodernism's rhetorical strategies and

ahistorical apathy toward alternative futures have been adopted – to great success – by populist, right-wing politicians, suggesting that an urgent movement away from postmodernism, and toward something more constructive, is necessary (Toth 42).

The calls for the end of postmodernism that I opened this chapter with come as a reaction to this. There is a consensus that a cultural shift accelerated by rapid developments in communication technology, climate change, and globalization has occurred, for which postmodern thinking needs to be broadened, reinvented, or left behind altogether. For Jameson, postmodernism's deconstructive tendencies make progress impossible:

I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it again begins to transmit feeble signs of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings. ("Future City" 76)

With all the discourse surrounding postmodernism's presumed, though still uncertain, end, there is increasing doubt that the possibility of 'jumpstarting' history and 'locating radical difference' can still be found within the boundaries of postmodern thought. In order to reengage with the past, reopen possibilities for developing the future, and rediscover signs of utopia, postmodernism and its perpetual present must move into the past. That is not to say that postmodernism should be entirely forgotten, nor should its lasting impact on contemporary culture be so casually cast aside. However, to acknowledge its dominance in retrospect is to break away from the postmodern present and imagine something beyond its limitations, and in doing so, seek not just a temporal but also a theoretical departure.

3.2. A Post-postmodern Perspective

In the same epilogue in which she remarks on the passing of the postmodern moment, Hutcheon wonders if the effects of technology and globalization on how we speak of and interact with the world are among "the first signs of what will come *after* the postmodern" (*Politics* 181). She then issues a call to action for her readers to create a more fitting "heuristic label" for this post-postmodern moment (*Politics* 181). Even before Hutcheon's call, Tom Turner, in his 1996 discussion of architecture, argues that the disappearance of modernist reasoning and a growing disinterest in postmodernist skepticism have necessitated a post-postmodern period, defined

primarily by a reengagement with faith. He quips, “Let us embrace post-postmodernism – and pray for a better name” (10). There have been many responses to Hutcheon’s and Turner’s pleas for a new name since then. Across the variety of their approaches and focuses – including art, literature, film, philosophy, politics, and socioeconomics – these movements expose an ongoing effort to define the period in the wake of postmodernism’s proclaimed end. As part of an attempt to more cohesively characterize this period, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that post-postmodern theories, such as the ones I will outline in this chapter, can – and indeed should – be considered part of the metamodern cultural logic (“Periodising” 18). In discussing these theories, all of which Vermeulen and van den Akker draw from in their conceptualization of the metamodern moment, I situate metamodernism within a broader trend away from postmodernism, and, in doing so, historicize and contextualize it and its influences.

Up until now, critics have often referred to these movements after postmodernism collectively as ‘post-postmodern’ (see Bolaño Quintero; Eshelman, “Performatism”; Rudrum and Stavris); however, that name is as imprecise as it is an “ugly word” (Nealon ix). Nathan Brown argues that periodizing the present as post-postmodern ignores Jameson’s warnings about de-historicization, since the “redoubled application of a prefix [...] perpetuate[s] a narrative of sequential succession that reduces the past to a terminological prop for the indeterminacy of the present” (12). Adopting the term post-postmodern comes at the risk of repeating postmodernism’s flattening of the present into a parody of the past. The name also fails to indicate a clear position in relation to postmodernism, as it could imply a rejection or an expansion of it.⁶ Despite its nondescript name, the term post-postmodernism is still useful for the purposes of this thesis as a general term for the emergence of 21st-century neologisms, including those referenced here. However, in doing so, I am not using ‘post-postmodern’ as a term that signifies any kind of unified theoretical framework so much as the temporal period that has directly followed postmodernism. Instead of post-postmodernism, I consider metamodernism to be the most fitting term under which diverging theories on the contemporary moment can be unified and a cohesive cultural logic for the 21st century moment can be theorized.⁷

⁶ Adding to the confusion with the loose use of ‘post-postmodernism’ is that some critics have adopted and developed the term into different own narrowly-focused theories for which other, more precise names have been proposed. Jeffrey T. Nealon conceptualizes ‘post-postmodernism’ as an intensification of capitalism and postmodernism, which aligns closely with hypermodernism, and George Kowalik considers it as the intersection of Rachael Greenwald Smith’s “Affective Turn” and literature, which is also the foundation for New Sincerity.

⁷ See Chapter 3.3.

In response to postmodernism's de-historicizing tendencies, Vermeulen and van den Akker stress the necessity of historicizing the 2000s in order to understand the conditions under which postmodernism can no longer be considered the cultural dominant. While there is no singular moment at which it was supplanted, critics point to the late 1990s and early 2000s as a period of transition, particularly because of the rise of globalism and the rapid advancement of technology (see Bargár; Kelly; Kirby; Toth and Brooks; Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Periodising"). The turn of the millennium was comprised of a confluence of crises that set the stage for a cultural shift, including 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks around the world, the rise of right-wing populism, wars in the Middle East, devastating financial crises, genocides, epidemics, a resurgence of neoliberalism, and increasingly frequent ecological disasters. Altogether, these recent crises have "shaken the stronghold of postmodernity, its antianthropomorphism, its cool detachment" (Gibbons 130). In other words, the learned defeatism instilled by unchecked capitalism and infused into cynical postmodern works reached a breaking point at the onset of the century.

Each of the movements outlined in this chapter is a reaction to that cynicism and to the crises of the 21st century. These movements push back against the nihilistic undertones of postmodernism's relativized presentism in favor of a multi-temporal, hopeful understanding of the present. This can be seen in how they consider the present moment to be a space of renewal and opportunity, informed by the past and striving toward a future despite simultaneously acknowledging the unfeasibility of change. Although there is no single unifying characteristic between all of these emergent cultural and aesthetic movements, there are some shared tendencies, including hypermodernism's and digimodernism's interest in the intensification of consumerism and capitalism in an age of globalization and computerization, as well as performatism's and New Sincerity's renewed investment in sincerity.⁸

Whereas Jameson's postmodern logic of the late 20th century is defined by fragmentation and late capitalism, the contemporary era, as characterized by Jeffrey T. Nealon, is one of "intensification and mutation" amidst "media-saturated globalized capitalism" (ix, 37). Gilles Lipovetsky, who coins the term hypermodernism, considers the present to be a

⁸ This is, of course, not a comprehensive list of all of the trends and movements that have been argued to succeed postmodernism. There have been only a few attempts to anthologize the movements interested in succeeding postmodernism (see Rudrum and Stavris; Eshelman, "Annotated Bibliography"; Coffman and Savvas). Any attempt to list every emerging contemporary trend across different media would be impossible, but some of the other movements not discussed here include: altermodernism, automodernism, cosmodernism, critical modernism, critical realism, cyberculturalism, Freak Folk, hyperhybridism, New Aesthetic, New Mannerism, new punk cinema, New Romanticism, New/Speculative Realism, Nu-Folk or the New Weird Generation, post pop cinema, post-irony, reconstructivism, remodernism, renewalism, Stuckism, and trans-postmodernism.

symptom of modernity's and capitalism's ceaseless escalation: "Hypercapitalism, hyperclass, hyperpower, hyperterrorism, hyperindividualism, hypermarket, hypertext – is there anything that isn't 'hyper'? Is there anything now that does not reveal a modernity raised to the *n*th power?" (157). Lipovetsky speculates on what fundamental desires drive the hypermodern consumer who exists within a society dominated by excess, exaggeration, and acceleration. He draws a key distinction between the postmodern and hypermodern subjects and their relationship to time. In comparison to the "absolute present" of postmodernism that celebrated everything in the 'here-and-now' at the expense of memories and history, hypermodernity is structured by a "*paradoxical present*" in which the present is constantly renewed through remembering the past (165). The hypermodern subject relies on their memories of the past and hopes for the future in order to seek out limitless possibilities for the present: "We need to think of hyperconsumption as an emotional rejuvenating experience, one that can start all over again an indefinite number of times" (Lipovetsky 164). In comparison to the sense of decay associated with late 20th-century capitalism, hypermodernism characterizes the beginning of the 21st century as a moment that is overwhelmed by a prevailing addiction to commodification, yet simultaneously liberated by the ability to remake the self endlessly.

Intertwined with the acceleration of capitalism is the rapid advancement of globalization, commercialization, and digitalization. Just as advancing technology has social and economic impacts, it also transforms how cultural texts are produced and engaged with. Alan Kirby's digimodernism addresses this intersection of narrative and technology. He focuses on how digitalization shapes the relationship between texts and their readers or viewers, particularly in terms of authorship, agency in meaning-making, and narrative continuation. According to Kirby, a digimodernist text is characterized by multiple authorship and endless construction in the digitalized world, since audiences can actively participate in the creation and interpretation of texts. Without a definitive end, a digimodernist text is one in constant development and, like the hypermodern subject, is always being remade. Kirby is, however, also suspicious of the kind of liberation offered by multiple and continuous authorship in an era of unchecked consumerism. For him, this limitlessness offers readers (assuming co-author roles) agency that "feels like freedom" but "may also feel like futility" since the responsibility over a text rests simultaneously on everyone and no one (53). While this framing of digimodernist texts risks mimicking postmodernism's endless ends, it also taps into a longing for shared affective engagement and active participation in meaning-making. It is this co-existence between 'freedom' and 'futility' that characterizes the period after

postmodernism, in which there is a desire to move beyond postmodern cynicism without abandoning its critical potential.

A similar balance is explored further in New Sincerity literature and Raoul Eshelman's performatism, which both reinvest in sincere affect in reaction to postmodern irony. Adam Kelly, who helped popularize the name New Sincerity, defines its works by how they invite an "affective response" from readers that is driven by their conversational nature and the ultimate goal of enabling both "reader and writer [to] feel less lonely in the face of the contemporary world" ("New Sincerity" 200). This sense of connection through affect is, however, also acknowledged as something mediated. It is, therefore, to some degree artificially constructed, since authors and readers cannot know for sure if the emotions evoked from a work are sincerely or commercially motivated (Kelly, "Jennifer Egan" 162; Kowalik 4). Eshelman describes this as a performatist tension in which readers are encouraged to "identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame – to *believe* in spite of yourself" and at the same time recognize the "coercive force causing this identification to take place" ("Performatism" 118). A modernist sense of authenticity is thus distinguished from a performatist one, since performatist works acknowledge that feelings of sincerity are mediated and manipulated yet accept them despite that. This determination to believe 'in spite of' is fundamental to balancing the tension between freedom and futility in these post-postmodern neologisms. The revaluation of sincerity is not, therefore, naively driven, but rather reflects a turn toward an informed desire for authenticity that remains critical of the world and its assumptions.

Kelly traces the emergence of New Sincerity back to David Foster Wallace and his publication of the collection of short stories *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) and the essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) ("Jennifer Egan" 156). As a movement with its foundations in Wallace's writing, New Sincerity literature centers around a critique and renegotiation of postmodern irony. In his essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace argues that "irony tyrannizes us" (183). He then issues a call to action for a generation of "anti-rebels" who will "back away from ironic watching," have "the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values," and risk seeming "[t]oo sincere" (192–93). Once used as a form of radical critique, irony became universalized, so that it no longer subverted but fulfilled expectations, and then it was commodified to the point of losing its potential for meaning-making. In the wake of irony's waning potency, a willingness to engage in emotional authenticity becomes subversive, risky, and, in some ways, even utopian. However, New Sincerity does not propose a total abandonment of postmodern irony as authors associated with New Sincerity – including

Wallace, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Johnathan Franzen, and Zadie Smith – express interest toward modern universalities, such as truth and sincerity, while still maintaining a sense of irony in their works, which typically comes from narrative self-reflexivity. Thus, New Sincerity retains a critical gaze and an awareness of a work’s constructedness while also encouraging genuine emotional investments in those works.

Separately, these post-postmodern movements pick up on disparate facets of the current cultural moment, whether in the arts or socioeconomic structures, which are only loosely connected by the time in which they emerge. Taken together, however, they start to reveal a pattern. The cultural response to the digital transformations and crises-driven anxieties of the 21st century is one that has rejected “postmodern irony and cynicism [as] a default setting,” and instead “yearn[s] for meaning – for sincere constructive progression and expression” (L. Turner). As I apply it in this thesis, metamodernism offers the connective thread that ties these strands of concepts together. The balance of irony and authenticity of New Sincerity and performatism, the ever-renewable subject of hypermodernism, and the tension between freedom and futility within digimodernism should all be understood as characteristics of – rather than alternatives to – metamodernism.

3.3. A Metamodern Prospective

Although not the first to use the term,⁹ Vermeulen and van den Akker’s conceptualization of metamodernism in a 21st-century context – beginning with the publication of their influential “Notes on Metamodernism” (2010) – is largely treated as its theoretical foundation. According to them, metamodernism is not any singular idea so much as a ‘structure of feeling,’ as Raymond Williams uses the phrase, that informs political, socioeconomic, and cultural tendencies, and is as discursively, variably, and sometimes contradictorily constructed as

⁹ Seth Abramson, in his article “Metamodern Literature and the Metaverse” (2015), traces the origins and uses of the term ‘metamodernism’ from metafiction to concepts of the metaverse as tied to imagining the future of the internet. Abramson identifies the first appearance of metamodernism in Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s essay “The Apocalyptic Fact and the Eclipse of Fiction in Recent American Prose Narratives” (1975). Zavarzadeh argues that the rise of a technology-centric culture has resulted in experimental, post-absurd fiction that depicts a world that is neither meaningful nor meaningless. Instead, authors accept and write about the world “as-it-is, free from any imposed scheme of meaning or extracted pattern of significance” (69). Zavarzadeh’s conceptualization of metamodern fiction as “enactments of a refusal to reduce the puzzling multiplicity of the contemporary experience into a monolithic fictive construct” (83), however, fits better alongside contemporary definitions of postmodernism and its rejection of universalisms in favor of relativism than as a predecessor to Vermeulen and van den Akker’s metamodernism.

postmodernism. They understand Williams' 'structure of feeling' to mean "a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down" but can still be "traced in art, which has the capability to express a common experience of a time and place" ("Periodising" 8). In other words, structures of feeling are shared sentiments among people in a specific time or place that can be felt in every aspect of contemporary society, including politics and economics but are perhaps best expressed and understood through artistic and cultural productions.¹⁰ The post-postmodern theories outlined previously all begin to articulate different components of the metamodern structure of feeling across various media. What is then teased out through metamodern theory is a collective attempt to fill the gaps left in postmodernism's wake, such as through the return of history, affect, depth, and grand narratives. Without abandoning the gravity of postmodern endings, metamodernism advances a continuation beyond them. A return, after all, is dependent first on an acknowledgement of an end. As such, endings become necessary for the development and continuation of meaning in a metamodern context, not for the deconstruction of it. Whereas a sense of loss contributed to the postmodern structure of feeling, which is defined as cynical and ironic, a sense of return under metamodernism is driven by a shared longing for hope and earnestness in the midst of present crises.

Already from its prefix 'post-', it is clear that postmodernism is preoccupied by ideas of the end, particularly the end of modernist values. Likewise, the prefix 'meta-', taken from the Greek *metaxy*, indicates the ways in which metamodernism relates to and distinguishes itself from modernism and postmodernism, specifically 'between' and 'with or among' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Periodising" 8). Vermeulen and van den Akker stress metamodernism's "both-neither" tension – in comparison to postmodernism's "neither-nor" – as a "movement between (opposite) poles: not a binary so much as a continuum that stretches from one to the other" ("Notes" 5–6; "Periodising" 11). The most prominent movement of metamodernism is its "oscillat[ion] between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony,

¹⁰ It is important to note here that metamodernism is, just as postmodernism and modernism were, based heavily on a Western perspective and predominantly focuses on the US, UK, and Europe. For a critique of the limitations of postmodernism's Eurocentrism and a discussion of non-western theories of identity construction, see Jing Yin's "Beyond Postmodernism: A Non-Western Perspective on Identity" (2018). There are also, increasingly, critics drawing attention to the Eurocentric and white bias of current metamodern theory as well as contributing to metamodern theory through analyses of contemporary African and Black American art, literature, and music (see Michael D. Harris, *Transatlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art in and Out of Africa* (1999); James Brunton, "Whose (Meta)modernism?: Metamodernism, Race and the Politics of Failure" (2018); Brent Cooper, "Black Metamodernism: The Metapolitics of Economic Justice and Racial Equality" (2019); and Moyo Okediji (ed.), *Methodology, Ideology and Pedagogy of African Art: Primitive to Metamodern* (2024)).

between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (“Notes” 5–6). Although this definition comes at the risk of over-simplifying modernism and postmodernism, it demonstrates the both-neither dynamic inherent to metamodern works. Importantly, this co-existence of modern and postmodern tendencies is not an even mixture but a relentless movement between them. Another difficulty with Vermeulen and van den Akker’s characterization of metamodernism as a pendulum swinging between two poles is the necessity of rigidly defining those poles, which is not only reductive but also impossible when it comes to movements as self-contradictory as postmodernism and modernism. Because of this, metamodernism needs to be understood not as swinging between stable definitions, but as something that moves between – and beyond – *senses* of modernism and postmodernism, which are ever-shifting and ever subject(ive) to change in order to articulate the sensibilities of the contemporary moment.

By using the phrase ‘with or among,’ Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest that metamodernism is a historicized structure of feeling that remains in conversation with earlier structures of feeling, such as those of modernism and postmodernism. This results in a metamodern tendency to recall earlier periods. According to David James and Urmila Seshagiri, metamodern writing is heavily indebted to and influenced by modernism “as both a moment and a movement [...] with which [metamodern writers] imaginatively reconnect and as an ethos that they formally refine” (93). In considering it to be a revitalization of modernism, James and Seshagiri’s concept of metamodernism is slightly at odds with Vermeulen and van den Akker’s. They consider modernism to be an ongoing project of which the contemporary moment is a revitalized phase. However, metamodernism cannot be extricated from its postmodern influences. It does not posit a naïve return to modernist values, nor does it regard postmodernism as a distraction from modernist goals. Rather, it reflects a constant negotiation of modernist yearnings and postmodernist skepticism that has been carried into the 21st century.

One key element of this emergent metamodern condition is its sense of return, particularly in terms of historicity, depth, and affect. As the cultural logic of capitalism, postmodernism’s preoccupation with endings, and specifically the end of history, is directly related to the postmodern inability to imagine any point before or after capitalism; the present is thus positioned as the be-all and end-all for all time. However, history has continued despite its supposed end, as Fukuyama admits in his 2012 article “The Future of History,” in which he argues that there is a need for the middle class to create a new ideological master narrative (60–61). With its goals unattained and uncertain, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that “history

has been rebooted by recent world historical crises of an ecological, economic or (geo-)political nature” (“Periodising” 2). This return of history is not to suggest the end of capitalism or its imaginative limitations, but instead its advancement into a new stage of global capitalism. The reboot of history is also not just a rethinking of its ultimate objective. While Vermeulen and van den Akker concede that history is incapable of fulfilling any singular, set purpose, this differs from postmodernism’s defeat of it: “[History] nevertheless takes toward [a purpose] *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” (“Notes” 5). Taking inspiration from Eshelman’s performatism, one of the central characteristics of metamodernism, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker, is its drive forward *as if* there were some attainable goal at the end, or, in other words, a determined movement *in spite of* knowing the futility of that effort.

In the wake of an air of defeatism surrounding the possibility of escaping present capitalist limitations, there is a longing to re-historicize the individual through a sense of the collective, to reconnect to the past, and to move forward into something beyond the postmodern condition. Therefore, as much as metamodernism represents an effort to move beyond postmodernism’s “stalled present” (Connor 11), that forward momentum is built on a gaze that is still in part directed backward toward familiar modernist and postmodernist tropes. Thus, in comparison to the futurism of modernism and the presentism of postmodernism, metamodernism can be understood as “multi-tensed” (van den Akker 22). The metamodern present, however, is not simply Janus-faced but one that “harks back to its past futures to make the present into the future’s past” (van den Akker 23). As such, the metamodern condition emerges from constantly historicizing past presents, the momentary present, and future presents to come.

Just as the end of history can be tied to the waning of affect and depth, so too can the reboot of history be linked to their re-emergence. Importantly, the concept of instable subjectivity is not entirely abandoned in metamodernism, but the individual is more firmly situated in the context of a collective. Along with being multi-tensed, metamodernism embraces the concept of multi-subjectivity. Contributing to the ‘with or among’ significance of its prefix, metamodernism breaks away from radical relativism and fragmentation to acknowledge the individual as possessing multiple subjectivities, or “situated subjectivity” (Gibbons 120), that connect them to varied but overlapping communities throughout time and around the world. This multi-subjectivity invites “collaboration over contestation, dialogue over dialects, and juxtaposition over polarization” (Abramson, “Metamodern Literature”). As

such, the metamodernist sensibility is one that is critical of the trappings of individualism and ahistoricism, while also being reliant on an awareness of its own context and influences.

In comparison to postmodernism's isolated subjectivity, which has been criticized for apathetically distancing the individual from moral responsibility (see Gibbons; Jameson; Timmer; Toth), metamodernism's situational subjectivity relies on contextualization and maintains a sense of the collective, without relieving the individual of all responsibility. Alison Gibbons attributes the sense of instability caused by the wave of crises of the 21st century to individuals being "driven by a desire for attachment to others and to their surroundings" (130). The metamodern affective turn, then, can be attributed to the need to situate the fragmented self amidst the volatility of the contemporary moment. As Nicoline Timmer notes, "Feelings, however vague and diffuse, can thus function as orienting markers that situate a person in relation to other persons" (114). The potential for meaning-making is no longer solely located in the individual but rather can – or perhaps must – be found within the individual's relation to a sense of the collective.

While postmodernism fronts superficiality and depthlessness by discouraging audiences from seeking to connect, emotionally or contextually, to a work, metamodernism reflects audiences' desire to relate to a work, the author behind it, and the world around them. From this appears what Vermeulen terms a "new depthiness," which acknowledges "the epistemological reality of depthlessness" while also "restor[ing] the possibility of depth as a viable modality for meaning making" (Vermeulen 41). In other words, even in maintaining a postmodern skepticism toward the potential for genuine depth, metamodern works engage in a performance of depth as if it were possible. Through its enactment, it becomes real (Vermeulen 41). Renewed engagement, beginning with an emotional investment, is integral to the revival of affect and depth, and therefore becomes central to meaning-making within a metamodern context.

A similar logic applies to metamodernism's conception of utopia as something futile yet nonetheless worth striving toward. The metamodern movement should be understood as one that balances the "project of *construction* from modernism and that of *deconstruction* from postmodernism," and in doing so, becomes a project of "*reconstruction*" (Bargár 5). In constantly reconstructing utopia, metamodernism accepts its non-existence and yet still holds onto a desire for it and a determination to work toward it. Utopia, like metamodernism, is presented as an on-going project and at the same time is a project defined by continuous construction. For Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism "moves for the sake of moving, making attempts in spite of their inevitable failure; it forever seeks a truth that it never

expects to find” (“Utopia” 66). Metamodern utopia is therefore repositioned as a process or action rather than a place. Since Jameson argues that the impossibility of imagining utopia traps us within postmodernism’s perpetual present, the return of a utopian impulse implies a renewed forward momentum.

Since it speaks to an apparent collective turn away from postmodern nihilism and toward the possibility of utopia in response to 21st-century crises, some theorists have begun to regard metamodernism, somewhat reductively, to be a “romantic response to crisis” (Abramson, “Metamodernism 101”). In other words, it offers a more optimistic philosophical outlook in the face of looming disasters. Crucially, however, metamodernism is not intended to be a solution to any of these crises, nor is it an ethical improvement over postmodernism and modernism, nor does it selectively take only the ‘best’ parts from either discourse (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Periodising” 11). Instead of advocating a moral philosophy to live by, metamodernism is a “name for all those practices, the good, the bad and the ugly, which try to imagine what lies around it, the historicity which is sought to provide meaning and direction to the precarious present” (Vermeulen and Wilkins 118). And while postmodernism may be attributed to rhetorical strategies of right-wing groups, so too can metamodernism be tied to the rise of populism across the political spectrum, enabling “Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn to evoke the longevity of their principles” and at the same time “Donald Trump and Geert Wilders to shift daily between ideological positions while getting away with it” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Periodising” 11). As I discuss throughout this thesis, there is a renewed sense of engagement, a reimagined idea of utopia, and a longing for positive change encapsulated within the metamodern logic, which serves as a direct response to postmodern cynicism. At the same time, however, to avoid reducing the broader stakes of metamodernism as a structure of feeling requires a recognition that metamodernism is not simply an uncritical reaction to crises, but rather part of the cultural, political, and economic conditions that also contribute to them.

What makes metamodernism the most convincing concept to come out of the rush to rename the ‘post-postmodern’ is that, in contrast to some of the other post-postmodern movements, Vermeulen and van den Akker do not present metamodernism as a replacement for postmodernism or modernism but rather as a movement that is inextricably, eternally in conversation with both of them, as well as with their presumed endings and proposed returns. Adopting Vermeulen and van den Akker’s perspective on history, metamodernism can be understood as a kind of reboot of modernism and postmodernism for the contemporary moment. As much as it articulates emerging cultural developments and trends, it is also heavily

reliant on and referential toward what came before it. Martin Paul Eve heavily criticizes metamodernism's failure to adequately differentiate itself from its predecessor and questions if its combination of modernist and postmodernism sensibilities makes it a category that is "too broad so as to exclude virtually no work" and is thus unproductive (22); however, there is a distinct cultural movement away from and beyond postmodernism that metamodernism articulates. Although it takes inspiration from older movements, its project of reconstructing a "regulative utopianism," as Eve admits, warrants a distinct name that opens space for a revived discussion of contemporary cultural products through its fresh framework (8). Criticisms like Eve's are necessary in the development of metamodernism as a productive discourse rather than a stagnant philosophy. As a movement still being defined *within* a 21st-century context rather than in retrospect, metamodernism is also continually defined *by* the present moment. As such, metamodernism as a productive theory continues to be refined through its application in cultural analyses, such as in film.

Although the tension between irony and sincerity is not new in cinema, upon examining their juxtaposition within 21st-century films, distinct features of a metamodern logic begin to emerge. The characteristics of New Sincerity literature previously outlined are also fundamental to metamodern films, and nowhere is that clearer than in these films' renewed investments in the aesthetics of earnestness, while maintaining an air of artificiality and ironic self-consciousness. James MacDowell finds this balance in film trends that he reads as fitting under a metamodern logic, including what he calls Quirky Cinema. As defined by MacDowell, Quirky Cinema is best associated with the films of Wes Anderson, which are characterized by their dry, almost melodramatic humor and borderline surrealist qualities ("Wes Anderson" 13–14). Anderson's films simultaneously maintain an ironic distance through their blatant artificiality, which calls attention to their own constructedness while also invoking a high degree of genuine emotional engagement with the characters.

Of course, metamodern films are not limited to this quirky style, as MacDowell addresses with his discussion of other filmic metamodern sensibilities, including queer utopianism and neo-romanticism. Although their approaches and themes are distinct, MacDowell argues that they all represent expressions of metamodernism that can be related in how they feature an "attitude of emotional and intellectual commitment (or affirmation, hopefulness, sentiment) in the face of a nonetheless-present potential for skepticism (or irony, consciousness of absurdity, affected distance)" ("Metamodern" 34). Metamodernism has also been increasingly adopted as a term beyond academia, as filmmakers have begun to use it to describe their own films. For instance, directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert referenced

their 2022 film, *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, as metamodern. According to Kwan, one metamodern quality of their film is its many allusions that stem from a desire to incorporate their personal love for cinema into the film as well as to “acknowledge that weird thing that’s happening right now, where we are at peak media saturation, peak story saturation. And we didn’t want to ignore the fact that we know this audience doesn’t exist in a historic vacuum” (qtd. in Puchko). ‘Meta’ references, allusions, pastiche, and irony are, from a metamodern perspective, not an isolating technique but rather one used to connect the audience, the work, and the context in which they all exist, which distinguishes it from postmodern irony. *Everything, Everywhere* includes qualities that can be related to MacDowell’s Quirky Cinema and queer utopianism, but it is also emblematic of broader elements of metamodernism that expand beyond aesthetics or tone, including its investment in locating the self within a sense of the collective and informed optimism.

To avoid being limited by superficial aesthetics, the application of metamodernism in film criticism needs to expand beyond specific moods, such as the quirky. As I will explore in the following chapter, metamodernism in film is not a style so much as an expression of pervasive cultural sentiments that, as Williams suggests about structures of feeling, are best located and expressed through cultural and artistic productions. The dominating sentiment of the metamodern moment is a longing for purpose and progress to be found – even, or perhaps especially – in the midst of crisis. In directing its gaze forward to reconstruction rather than just backward at postmodern deconstruction, metamodernism captures a desire to restore and reimagine what had been lost: for affect to break through the mask of postmodern irony, for depth to replace surface, for a connection to history to be restored, and for meaning to be once again found – and created – within metanarratives like utopia and stories of the end.

4. Ends Interlinked: From Fragmentation to Formation

The questions that hang over the *Blade Runner* films are all about confronting ‘the end’: What are the boundaries of our humanity? How do we face our own mortality? What meaning is there to be found at and beyond the end of the world or of ourselves? In this chapter, I explore the different types of endings that comprise the narrative and thematic cores of the *Blade Runner* films, focusing on their more formal constructions, characters’ confrontations with the collapse of stable identity, depictions of death, and the re-emergence of utopian impulses. Aligning with the metamodern turn, *2049* responds to many of the losses that contribute to the decaying and dystopian tone of *Blade Runner*, specifically the characters’ detachment from history, identity, and the future, and then begins to restore them. As seen through their different treatments of endings, the two films embody a broader shift from postmodern skepticism, which treats meaning as fragmented in the face of finality and the deconstruction of reality, and toward a metamodern reconceptualization of endings as sites at which meaning is formed and the concept of the ‘real’ is reimagined.

4.1. Everything New is Old Again: The Many Replications of *Blade Runner*

Within and beyond the confines of its narrative, *Blade Runner* is obsessed with and skeptical of the very concept of finality. Re-edited and re-released multiple times over nearly three decades, *Blade Runner* has resisted its own end as much as its characters have sought to delay theirs. With the release of its sequel, the world and narrative of *Blade Runner* are once again re-entered. As a legacy sequel, *2049* risked becoming a product of uncritical nostalgia, copying its predecessor’s genre-defining aesthetics and now-classic narrative beats without offering anything new. In Jameson’s terms, it could have fallen into blank pastiche, an “imitation of peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” or a “statue with blind eyeballs” (*Postmodernism* 17). Rather than simply donning the aesthetic mask of the original and replaying the same story, however, *2049* maintains a distinct critical gaze and continues the story into a newly imagined future. Inhabiting a perspective only achievable from a temporal point beyond the end (of the narrative and of the release) of *Blade Runner*, *2049* reflects on, reevaluates, and reimagines many of the narrative ambiguities and genre conventions of the original. Instead of collapsing into postmodern

recursion like its predecessor, *2049* attempts to move beyond it aesthetically, narratively, and thematically. In that forward momentum built from a reengagement with the past lies the core of *2049*'s metamodern sensibility. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which these films replicate and diverge from one another, particularly in terms of their engagement with narrative ambiguities and genre expectations.

Blade Runner is widely regarded as exemplary of the postmodern condition in film, in large part due to its hybrid of genres, hyper-capitalist setting, blend of temporalities with noir aesthetics and futuristic elements, interest in simulations of reality, and deconstruction of identity. Meta-textually, the existence of seven distinct cuts of the same film contributes to its postmodern characterization. Just as the films are about the replications of humans, so too is the film a series of replications of itself, with each attempt seeking to be 'more real' than the previous. This constant reworking of the film enables it to have continued relevance and meaning. Any attempt to definitively end or stop working on the film, then, would limit its interpretations. As a result, however, the endless process of remaking itself positions the film within an infinite, irreconcilable identity crisis in which it resists simple definition, classification, or closure. Although there is a consensus today that *Blade Runner* fits neatly within the postmodern aesthetic, some critics argue that the original US theatrical cut could, or possibly should, be more accurately considered as an example of high modernism (Begley 186-87; Bukatman 60; Flisfeder 93-94). The later releases, which lean into the postmodern culture of late capitalism, pastiche, and ambiguity, might then act as "a kind of postmodernist reading of the 'original,' one that likewise suppresses narrative cues and utopian imitations" (Begley 186). Take, for example, the absence of the hopeful ending in which Deckard and Rachael drive away from the suffocating city into a beautiful, pollution-less landscape. Without that ending, the film leans into its ambiguity by concluding abruptly and leaving the audience uncertain about the fates of the characters, who may never escape.

On an intertextual level, the existence of different versions mirrors how the film itself challenges a stable conception of 'true' or 'original.' Although Ridley Scott has stated his preference for the Final Cut, any version of the film available to the public could be considered the 'definitive' one. With how readily available many of the cuts still are today, it is left up to the viewer to decide which is the real film. As a result, *Blade Runner* is a highly subjective experience in which the authority over the authenticity of any version is placed onto individual viewers, ultimately making all of them – and none of them – the 'true' version.

Following the release of the sequel, the phrase 'original *Blade Runner*' might now refer collectively to all versions of Scott's film – as I do in this thesis – but settling on the 'original'

between those versions is a more difficult task. Despite the original *Blade Runner* typically referring to the initial US theatrical release, that cut was not the earliest to be released,¹¹ nor is it the most popular, nor is there any ‘original’ film at all, considering *Blade Runner* is an adaptation, though an admittedly loose one, of Dick’s *Do Androids Dream*.¹² Scott has also made comments about how the Director’s Cut – and later the Final Cut – was “so much closer to its creator’s original intent” since he had the final say in the edit and no longer had to conform to the producers’ or studio’s wishes for the film (Sammon 387). If the Final Cut is the version that most closely resembles the director’s original vision for the film, then even the earlier versions could be read (paradoxically) as retroactive imitations or adaptations of that final version. This ambivalence toward the notion of an origin(al) lends itself to viewing the film – like the replicants in it – as a copy without origin. Beginning even on the level of form, *Blade Runner* presents itself as an embodiment of Baudrillard’s simulacra, in which through endless replications, the concept of an ‘original’ is deconstructed until it is just a series of parodies.

As a sequel, *2049* has no claim to being an original, but it also does not fold into a parody of its predecessor, either. Hutcheon says of adaptations that “we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change” (*A Theory of Adaptation* 9). The same can be said of *2049* as a sequel, which looks backwards as much as it seeks to build on, rather than just copy, earlier themes. On its surface, *2049* presents itself as a near-perfect replication of its predecessor: the same eye motif opening both films, the first scenes featuring a blade runner retiring a replicant, the emotionless protagonists, the shared musical motifs, and the importance of memories, to name a few. *2049* is also a Hollywood science fiction sequel to a beloved film, meaning it also contends with another set of expectations. The most relevant of these are an over-reliance on nostalgia and a plot revolving around a protagonist who, as the ‘chosen one,’ is predestined to save the world due to their relationship to the earlier film’s protagonist. While *2049* initially plays into the ‘chosen one’ narrative with K as the human-born replicant child of Deckard who will one day lead the replicants to liberation, the film subverts that expectation, and K ends the film as neither the special child nor the leader of the rebellion. When viewed in its entirety, the cracks in the mold begin to appear as *2049* narratively departs from expectations of Hollywood

¹¹The Workprint and San Diego Screening cuts were shown to audiences a few months prior to the OTR’s official theatrical release in June 1982 and were changed enough to be considered distinct versions, including the addition or removal of scenes. Concurrently with the OTR screenings in the US was the International Cut (1982), which included a few extended scenes of graphic violence and was only played in theaters outside of the US. For a detailed retelling of the production history of *Blade Runner* and a deep dive into its many versions, see Paul M. Sammon’s *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (2017).

¹² Even the title ‘*Blade Runner*’ is not original to the film, having been taken from William S. Burroughs’ unrelated novella *Blade Runner: A Movie* (1979), which was itself a film treatment adaptation for *The Bladerunner* (1974) by Alan E. Nourse.

sequels and thematically diverges from its predecessor. Shared amongst many of Villeneuve's films is their interest in breaking cycles: "Are we bound to repeat ourselves as societies and as individuals? How can we evolve and become free? How can you break those patterns?" (Villeneuve qtd. in McGurk). It is fitting, then, for Villeneuve to helm the sequel to a film lost in a sea of its own iterations, and find ways to break away from the pattern. While *2049* could have leaned into nostalgia and embraced an identity as a replication of a popular film, it instead stands as a film that creates something new by looking back without copying.

Among the most defining elements of *Blade Runner* that reappear in *2049* are its blend of cyberpunk and neo-noir aesthetics as well as the ambiguity surrounding Deckard's identity. Looking first at its play with genre styles, there is a fitting irony in how *Blade Runner*'s futuristic cyberpunk aesthetic, which has since redefined the visual language associated with sci-fi films, was curated from fashions of the past: Batty and the other fugitive replicants don costumes designed after the rock punk scene of the 1970s, Deckard and Rachael wear clothes pulled from the 1920s and 1940s, and the city hosts a combination of gothic-, art deco-, and Mayan-inspired architecture. The film's most notable visual and narrative influences are American film noir from the 1940s to 1950s.¹³ Like classic noir, *Blade Runner* features a lonely, stoic anti-hero in a trench coat, a seductive femme fatale, a city riddled with crime, chiaroscuro lighting, and voiceover narration.¹⁴ An emphasis on locality is another key characteristic of American noir, as both Matthew Flisfeder and Steve Carper point out. The noir city – often Los Angeles – becomes a character of its own with the ability to "shap[e] the lives, dreams, desire, and ultimately the deaths of the characters" (Carper 185). The Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, and its seemingly eternal rain, grimy city streets, and towering digital advertisements, certainly contributes to *Blade Runner*'s mood as a place that, like its inhabitants, is eroding into a "cluttered spectacle of consumer society" (Flisfeder 93). With these noir influences, *Blade Runner* finds its place within the conventions of American genre fiction while simultaneously acting as a pastiche of them. As such, the film retrofits all of its out-of-time influences into a world of retro-futuristic cyberpunk, one where the advanced technology is not shiny and new, but grimy and worn and the vision of the future eerily reminiscent of the past. This is the postmodern present, a present in which the end of history has been reached and there is no capacity for anything new. Everything, even the future, has already been invented.

¹³ Adding another layer to the film's series of replications and imitations of the past is how the aesthetics of American film noir were heavily inspired by German Expressionism from the late 1910s to 1930s.

¹⁴ Deckard's voiceover narration is only included in the OTR.

Pulling back the layers of its noir references and tracing how it has influenced sci-fi films since its release reveals *Blade Runner* to be a series of endless copies in both directions. One example of its influence on the future is, of course, its sequel. Carried through to 2049 is the classic mystery plot, the seemingly emotionless detective in a long coat, and the grimy aesthetics of the city. However, gone are the voiceover, the high contrast lighting, the morally ambiguous protagonist, and the 1940s fashion. While not fitting as neatly within the noir genre, *2049* still pays obvious stylistic homage to *Blade Runner*. It even maintains a similar merging of past and future, with costumes inspired by different periods, ranging from the 1960s to the 21st century. *2049* did not entirely reject the style of *Blade Runner*, but pieces of it have been modernized, such as the updated costuming, the more advanced technology, the replacement of the Voight-Kampff test, the production of new replicant models, and the dissolution of the Tyrell Corporation. The world of *2049* looks and feels different from *Blade Runner*'s vision of 2019 because it has finally broken through the curse of the former's perpetual present and moved forward in time. The consistency of the cyberpunk aesthetic, then, does not depict a mimicry of the past so much as a representation of the natural progression of time.

If the cyberpunk aesthetic of *Blade Runner* can be described as one in which endless recycling has led to a condition of "wearing out, waste" (Bruno 65), then *2049* picks up in a tired world that is already worn out and left to question if the present can ever be more than a replay of what it has already been. In making reference to the earlier film, *2049* draws attention to the limitations of the past in a metamodern process of "reappropriat[ing] conventions associated with postmodernism, yet redirect[ing] and resignif[y]ing them towards new horizons" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Utopia" 60). It is not a coincidence that K's journey into the past of his memories is what leads him to explore the world beyond the city limits. The ecological destruction of the world is evident as the land outside of the city is overrun with waste and pollution, yet the vibrancy of its colors – which stand in stark contrast to the grays and blues of the city – and the scattered signs of life represent a lingering hope that something beautiful can be found in a world still capable of being built anew.

Just as *2049* simultaneously inherits and transforms the earlier film's genre conventions, it also engages with *Blade Runner*'s thematic tendency toward ambiguity, particularly in the mystery of the protagonists' identities. One of the most debated aspects of the film is Deckard's identity as either human or replicant. No version of the original film provides a definitive answer, and subsequent cuts only add to that ambiguity. At the end of the film, Deckard finds a small origami unicorn made by Gaff left at the door of his apartment,

which implies that Gaff knew about Deckard's unicorn dream.¹⁵ That dream would only be accessible to Gaff if it were implanted, like the memories of other replicants, which is the argument for why Deckard is a replicant. This is only one interpretation, and as Bukatman puts it, the question of Deckard's identity has seemingly "generated more discussion on the Internet than the existence of God" (80). Although not explicitly addressed within the film, visual cues like the unicorn subtly cast doubt on Deckard's humanity, both for the audience and for Deckard himself. This uncertainty around his identity epitomizes the film's broader ambivalence toward stable, knowable identities. Arriving at a definitive answer would actually risk undermining the film's central conceit: in a postmodern world, where the line between a 'real' and 'synthetic' human has disappeared, the concept of what is 'real' has lost meaning altogether.

Because of this purposeful ambiguity, one issue that accompanies the arrival of the sequel is which version of the film – and of Deckard – it chooses to continue. By having the power to resolve the mysteries of the original, *2049* could retroactively influence how *Blade Runner* is interpreted. While *2049* does answer the question of what happens to Deckard and Rachael, it leaves the question of Deckard's identity open, choosing instead to lean into that uncertainty. More than that, it takes the problem of the protagonist's unknowable state – only implied and largely ignored until the final moments of *Blade Runner* – and makes it the central mystery of *2049*. Unlike Deckard, however, K's replicant status is eventually confirmed. By featuring both Deckard (whose identity is unclear) and K (whose identity is resolved) in one narrative, *2049* presents a metamodern tension between unknowability and belief, as well as between inherent and constructed identities.¹⁶ This dynamic could initially be read through a postmodern perspective in which all identity is self-constructed performance, but *2049* goes a step further: whether or not identity can be known for certain is less important than someone's belief in who they are, and this belief and emotional investment have the power to authenticate, rather than deconstruct, identity.

By engaging with *Blade Runner*'s core thematic, genre, and narrative concerns, *2049* puts itself in conversation with the earlier film. As such, its metamodern sensibilities emerge not in an attempt to detach itself from its postmodern predecessor but rather through its evolution into something at once familiar and new. The mere existence of the sequel acknowledges that *Blade Runner*, despite its resistance to the idea, finally has an ending. In doing so, *2049* challenges the notion that an ending closes off the potential for continued

¹⁵ Deckard's unicorn dream was only added in the DC and then extended in the FC.

¹⁶ See Chapter 4.3, where I discuss K's identity as multi-subjective.

meaning, and instead repositions endings as sites of closure, introspection, and opportunities to “look back [...] to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 12). From its position somewhere beyond that end, *2049* offers an opportunity to reflect, reengage, and move forward toward something more than had been previously imagined.

4.2. “I know it’s real”: Memory as an Act of (In)Authenticity

The narratives of *Blade Runner* and *2049* are haunted by crises of identity, specifically centered on the growing disconnect between knowing and being. In reference to postmodernism’s fragmentation of time, Catherine Burgass explains that “linear time is no longer tenable because of its reliance on binary oppositions” (400). The same can be said about ontological categories. Stable definitions of identity rely on binary oppositions – on defining something by what it is and what it is not. As fixed ontological categories – human and non-human – become increasingly difficult to distinguish, characters are forced to confront the unknowability of the self. In these films, eyes and memories function as motifs for identity, but when the reliability of these markers in signifying what is real comes into question, so too does the certainty in one’s identity collapse. In *Blade Runner*, this postmodern destabilization leads to the end of authenticity, meaning that the world is one in which objective reality and identity can no longer be found but only simulated through performance. In *2049*’s metamodern turn, the indistinguishability between the real and its imitation remains; however, authentic selfhood is reframed as achievable through affective, or emotional, engagement. Performance founded on the affective truth of memories becomes an act of (re)constructing the real, rather than replacing it. In this chapter, I examine eyes and memories as sites of identity crises in order to trace the subtle shift from postmodern deconstruction of the self to metamodern reconstruction. More specifically, I focus on how performance and authenticity relate to the formation of the real after the end of certainty.

Among the first images that appear in *Blade Runner* and *2049* are close-ups of blue-green eyes, which immediately establish sight as a recurring motif, unite the films’ thematic interests in identity, and also set up an early point of divergence between the films (*BR* 0:03:49;

2049 0:02:07).¹⁷ In *Blade Runner*, the eye appears after a sweeping aerial shot over a heavily industrialized Los Angeles. The futuristic dystopian atmosphere of the city is established immediately as we see the occasional flying car passing over buildings and between columns of flames from factories. Set against the seemingly perpetually dark skies is the darkened city filled with countless lights from buildings spread out like mechanical stars. From this first moment, it is clear that there is nothing ‘natural’ in the city. Within that human – or replicant – eye, we see a reflection of lights from this “cybernetic city,” capturing a sense of entanglement of “the human with the robotic” (Flisfeder 121). This eye disrupts binaries between the organic and the synthetic as well as between the roles of the subject and object, or the observer and the observed. Borg argues that the eye represents “both a mirror and a reflected object” in that “[w]e can see what it sees (the cityscape reflected in the iris), but most of all we see *it*, an object looking back at us” (56). Disembodied, the eye occupies contradictory positions as an omniscient viewer, an individualized subjective perspective, and a dehumanized mirror of a decaying, capitalist world. In contrast, the opening eye of *2049* offers no reflection. It maintains tension as both a subject that can see and an object that can be seen; however, what can be seen on – and learned from – that eye is more limited. The absence of anything visible on the eye’s surface implies interiority, inviting the viewer to search for any meaning hidden within it and suggesting that a sense of self is not so easily reproduced. Instead of a mirror of the external world, this eye functions as an opaque window into the self, and as such sets up the film’s desire for depth, self-knowledge, and access to the real.

The *Blade Runner* films’ fascination with eyes continues in how they are used to identify replicants, for both the audience and the characters. Bukatman argues that vision “both makes and unmakes the self in the film, creating a dynamic between a centred and autonomous subjectivity (eye/I) and the self as a manufactured, commodified object” (7). The replicants’ iconic glowing retinas – a non-diegetic aesthetic – expose their manufactured quality and prevent them from ever being fully seen as, or even mistaken for, human. Intra-diegetically, eyes also function as signifiers of superficial identity. Used by blade runners to detect replicants, the Voight-Kampff measures ocular responses to questions designed to cause empathetic reactions. The absence of any subconscious emotional responses is taken as proof

¹⁷ The significance of eyes in *Blade Runner* has been explored heavily by critics (see Bertek; Borg; Bukatman; Shadbolt and Smart; Shetley and Ferguson) and the depiction of eyes in *2049* is deserving of a more in-depth analysis, but it is nonetheless worth discussing briefly here in how eyes are connected to memory and identity construction.

that someone is a replicant and must be retired.¹⁸ In the sequel, replicants are still identified by their eyes – now imprinted with their serial numbers – but gone are the reflective glow¹⁹ and the Voight-Kampff test. Instead, replicants like K take a baseline test. Similar to the older test, the baseline is designed to provoke an emotional response by asking the subject emotionally charged questions. For example, “What’s it like to hold the hand of someone you love?,” to which K responds with pieces of the phrase “within cells interlinked” (2049 0:14:44-47, 0:14:19-20). The baseline measures emotional responses through both internal and verbal reactions, rather than just eyes. Instead of being used to spot replicants hiding among humans, like the Voight-Kampff test, the baseline tests indicate that replicants have not developed any emotions that would make them ‘too human’ and therefore uncontrollable. In both tests, replicants’ bodies are objects seen and evaluated by the police in order to punish their disobedience. The police maintain a clear boundary between human and non-human by disguising subjective markers (emotions) as absolute truths that can be proven through something visible, such as eyes. Thus, identity being tied to eyes limits replicants’ agency in both films, as their attempts at humanity would be inevitably unmasked or ‘unmade.’

While systems of power uphold boundaries between humans and replicants to prevent replicants from successfully assimilating with humans, systems of wealth – like the Tyrell Corporation – are financially invested in blurring those boundaries. Eldon Tyrell, the creator of replicants, explains to Deckard that replicants’ emotions have become integral to their design:

TYRELL: We began to recognize in them a strange obsession. After all, they are emotionally inexperienced, with only a few years in which to store up the experiences which you and I take for granted. If we gift them with a

¹⁸ The assumption necessary to the success of the Voight-Kampff test is that “all humans have at least some empathic response to others’ suffering, and that all replicants necessarily lack one” (Shanahan 20). However, this logic is constantly challenged in the original film, since the human characters are amongst the coldest and most uncaring and the replicants demonstrate a full spectrum of emotions, including empathy. Take, for example, Captain Bryant’s callous nature, Gaff’s unreadable expressions, and Deckard’s emotionally distant noir characterization. In comparison, Rachael expresses emotional vulnerability when Deckard tells her that her memories are implanted and Batty shows tenderness when caring for the other replicants and mercy in saving Deckard on the rooftop.

¹⁹ While there is a hint of a glow in the eyes of Sapper Morton, a nexus-8 replicant retired by K in the first scene of 2049, they lack the clearly identifiable unnatural haze from the original (2049 0:06:24). A viewer of the film who is familiar with the logic of the original film is left to search for any visible signs that might give replicants away, but any definitive visual markers are absent, putting the viewer in a position of uncertainty alongside the characters. Additionally, Niander Wallace – although implied to be human – has grayed eyes that are reminiscent of the replicants’ eyes from *Blade Runner*. Replacing Tyrell as a creator of replicants, Wallace seeks to make his creations even more human than Tyrell’s were while also making humans more machine-like. Since he is blind, he uses small drones to see, which is yet another merging of human and machine through the eyes. The matte-gray of his eyes suggests his identity to be something reduced to surface. There is nothing reflected in them but there is also nothing to be found within them, so fittingly, as the head of a technological empire with a god-complex, his character conforms to villain stereotypes. Nigel Shadbolt and Paul Smart explore the significance of Wallace’s eyes more in-depth, focusing on the issues of post-human transformation, surveillance, and the manipulability of information in their book chapter “The Eyes of God” (2020).

past, we create a cushion or a pillow for their emotions, then consequently we can control them better.

DECKARD: Memories. You're talking about memories! (BR 00:22:07-30)

To better control them, replicants need memories that give their emotions a foundation necessary for “maintain[ing] a stable product” as the memory maker Ana Stelline tells K in 2049 (1:18:58-19:01). In his quest to create more marketable replicants, Tyrell seeks to design a copy that imitates humanity so convincingly as to be considered “[m]ore human than human” (BR 0:22:01-02). Tyrell’s replicants are born out of his attempt to construct and commodify his own version of reality. In considering how capitalism thrives on the erosion of the real into its simulation, it is useful to refer back to Baudrillard, who writes, “[I]t was capital that first fed on the destruction of every referential, of every human objective, that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power” (22). Ultimately, lived and implanted memories are made equal through the ‘iron law’ of capitalism, devaluing both as nothing more than empty pastiche of each other. With the ability to create something ‘more human than human,’ the most wealthy and powerful in the world of *Blade Runner* have effectively turned humanity into a commodity that can be bought and sold.

According to the Voight-Kampff test, the presence of emotions is *the* signifier of personhood, but if emotions – through the implant of memories – can be manufactured, then so too can any person. This leads to the crisis of self-knowledge. The only Voight-Kampff test completed in the film is done on Rachael, and instead of the usual twenty to thirty questions, Deckard asks more than a hundred before concluding that she is a replicant. This not only represents the limitations of the machine in the face of newer technology but also shows Rachael’s design to be nearly identical to a natural-born human. What ultimately gives her away is not her design but her growing doubt. Prior to the test, Rachael had believed herself to be human, so it is not until the test goes on for longer than normal that doubt seeps in, and by the end of it, “[s]he’s beginning to suspect” her replicant identity for herself (BR 0:22:53-54). Her belief in her identity enables her emotional capabilities and directly impacts the supposedly objective test. At the same time, her emotional responses incite the realization that her humanity has been nothing more than a performance. In this moment, Rachael experiences a death of certainty as her understanding of the world and her own identity becomes wholly unknowable. The Voight-Kampff test is therefore not so much a test of someone’s innate humanity but their ability to perform that humanity. These films demand viewers “to rethink our assumptions about perception by reminding us that, like memory, vision is more than a given, ‘natural’

process. There *is* no nature in *Blade Runner*” (Bukatman 11). With its replicated humans, synthetic animals, hyperreal screens and holograms, implanted memories, and manipulated photographs, the world of *Blade Runner* is one of endless visual simulations, which no one can – nor perhaps wants to – discern from the ‘real.’ Nor is identity something naturally found, as seen by the dependence on machines like the Voight-Kampff test. If nothing can be proven as natural, then the very conditions by which reality is measured collapse, and what remains is imitation.

Rachael’s crisis further manifests in how the postmodern subject is isolated from history, as seen in replicants’ attachments to symbols and material objects linked to the past, like the figure of the mother. We first see Rachael’s emotional crisis not during the test but when she learns that the photographs and memories of her mother are fabricated. Basing her reading of *Blade Runner* on how Jameson posits the postmodern subject to be a product of fragmented time, Bruno argues that memory is essential to one’s ability to locate themselves in history, so replicants without childhood memories or photographs are “condemned to a life composed only of a present tense; they have neither past nor memory. There is for them no conceivable future” (70). An unstable, temporary identity is a direct consequence of the loss of history, and replicants’ short lifespans are thus inevitable consequences of their loss of both past and future. This loss prompts some replicants to embark on a retrospective search for their origins, symbolized by the mother figure (Bruno 71). For Rachael and Leon, it is notably the invocation of their mothers that evokes “particularly intense feeling[s]” (Shetley and Ferguson 69). Leon’s violent outburst when asked about his mother and Rachael’s tears upon learning that her memories of her mother actually belong to Tyrell’s niece are both examples of them grieving their inability to “name their ‘I’ as an existence over time” (Bruno 70). They are trapped within a fragmented present.

Although Rachael’s memories may not connect her to any past, they do impact her present. This is evident in how Rachael uses her memories to play the piano. While playing, she tells Deckard, “I didn’t know if I could play. I remember lessons. I don’t know if it’s me or Tyrell’s niece” (*BR* 1:10:19-31). Her use of these memories and disregard for their origins reflect how there is “no hierarchy of memory” in *Blade Runner*, meaning that the origin or authenticity of a memory becomes irrelevant in comparison to “*how* memories are used and toward what ends” (Landsberg and Vermeulen 6). In other words, the use of memories – even implanted memories – is a performance of the real. In a world where the distinction between a replicant with implanted memories and a human with authentically-lived memories collapses, the “simulacrum is, effectively, the real,” and authenticity becomes a meaningless descriptor

(Byron 61-62). What ends here is the assurance that memory can confirm personhood, that identity can be inherent, and that humanity is anything more than a performance. Rather than performance enacting the real – as I will argue happens in *2049* – performance replaces it in *Blade Runner*. Rachael’s embrace of memory and identity as surface-level performance, rather than as a key to some ultimate intrinsic truth, allows her, and later Deckard, to use their memories without concern for their origins or futures, and live in the present.

While the movement outwards and away from the self is seemingly rewarded in the film with Deckard and Rachael’s escape, replicants who are obsessed with connecting to their pasts die. Unlike Rachael, Batty maintains that “acquiring a past” is necessary for the “assurance of a future” and “a temporally persistent identity” (Bruno 70–71). However, the only past he has access to as a replicant is a fabricated one, so his quest is doomed from the start. His insistence on looking backwards also means that his gaze is directed inwards with the ultimate goal of remaking himself. Unfortunately for Batty, *Blade Runner* was made within the context of American noir²⁰ and still adheres to the “tenet in American genre fiction that escape can only be outward,” which means his inward search inevitably leads to his death (Carper 192). Born as an adult with only a few years to live, Batty is introduced at the end of his life, searching for his origins – his father/creator Tyrell – to extend his life. He mockingly tells Tyrell, “I want more life, father” (*BR* 1:23:43-46). Undercutting any possibility for a sincere connection between them, Tyrell first calls Batty “the prodigal son” before objectifying him as “quite a prize” (*BR* 1:25:12-17). Like Tyrell says about Rachael, Batty serves no use to him beyond being one failed “experiment, nothing more” on his journey to create the perfect synthetic human (*BR* 0:22:03-06). Reciprocally, Tyrell is no longer useful to Batty as soon as he admits there is nothing he can do to change Batty’s pre-determined lifespan. So, Batty kills Tyrell by gouging out his eyes. In destroying his eyes, Batty removes any signifier of Tyrell’s humanity and deprives him of the power to see, and therefore define or control Batty. When Batty calls Tyrell ‘father,’ he claims an origin for himself. When Batty kills his father, he disconnects himself from that origin.

Crucially, Batty’s interest in his creation extends only as far as it brings him closer to his goal of delaying his own death. Once that proves impossible, he murders his ‘father.’ Tihana Bertek suggests that in killing this symbol of his past, Batty “becomes unhinged from history, an ultimately free subject, a copy without original” (8). However, I would argue that Batty, as an embodiment of the postmodern subject, is not just detaching himself from his origin by

²⁰ See Chapter 4.1.

killing Tyrell but realizing that he never had one. Replicants' lack of history is apparent in the case of Rachael, who only has fabricated memories and photographs, but it also reveals itself in Batty's confrontation with Tyrell. Tyrell is a businessman playing God, who manufactured life only to exploit it. He is a father only in the broadest sense as 'creator,' so he is as much an imitation of a father as Batty is of a son. In killing Tyrell, Batty not only disconnects himself from a sense of linear time but also the illusion of linear time. He becomes a tragic figure in that he liberates himself from the constraints of the system that created him, but this leaves him without an origin or a future.

Batty's goal before death then shifts from wanting to extend his life to trying to make meaning of his existence. In his final moments on the roof, during his famous monologue, Batty recounts the memories he made during his short life while also mourning their loss:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die. (*BR* 1:46:22-47:11)

Here, Batty attempts to "claim ownership of his own memories by testifying to the *uniqueness* of what he has seen" (Borg 57). He and his eyes may be manufactured, but he hints at a longing to escape that objectification and become more than what he was designed to be. In discussing the postmodern skepticism toward stable meaning found at the end, Bukatman writes, "Death disappears in post-modern aesthetics, and with it goes history, psychology and individuality: what remains is a cacophony of signs" (60). No longer treated as a meaningful point of closure, Batty's death signifies nothing beyond a superficial recalling of past events.²¹ Those moments that could have been his connection to something greater than himself and enable him to locate himself (and find purpose) on a grander scale, are instead reduced to nothing but a collection of fragmentary moments without origin or longevity. As Borg notes, "[I]t is apparent that the replicant's bid for authenticity is nothing more than an impossible yearning" (57). Batty's identity is staked on memories that will disappear with his death, and so, without a connection to history or legacy, his humanity, his memories, and his body are confined only to a single moment in time.

2049's response to *Blade Runner's* loss of history is twofold: it mourns that loss and longs for its return. One figure that represents this tension is Rachael, who dies in childbirth between films. In *Blade Runner*, Rachael was a replicant grieving the loss any connection to her origins – in the form of the fabricated memories and photos of her mother – but by 2049 she a mother, *the* symbol of history. Whereas Rachael in *Blade Runner* was only capable of

²¹ I discuss Batty's death more in Chapter 4.3.

using her memories to imitate the real, *2049* suggests that a performance of humanity has the power to make something presented as biologically impossible – replicant reproduction – a reality. At the same time, Rachael's death stands in contrast to the other replicants' deaths in *2049*. Those deaths, I argue, humanize replicants, whereas Rachael, as a dead mother without any physical presence in the film, remains reduced to a symbol. She thus represents an origin for a child but is not granted access to her own history or future. Consistent with a sense of metamodern oscillation, Rachael's death signifies both the ongoing problematic consequences of *Blade Runner*'s loss of history and, at the same time, the desire to reconnect to it, as seen through K's journey to learn more about Rachael and her child.

History as existent and yet inaccessible is one of the metamodern tensions expressed early in the film. A file clerk at the Wallace Corporation tells K that a ten-day blackout wiped out all digital records, including those of earlier models like Rachael:

Every machine stopped cold. When the lights came back, we were wiped clean. Photos, files, every bit of data... Ffft! Gone. Bank, records too. Didn't mind that. It's funny it's only paper that lasted. I mean, we had everything on drives. Everything, everything, everything! My mom still cries over the lost baby pictures. (*2049* 0:31:23-44)

Since the post-blackout world is one that is almost entirely detached from collective and individual history, humans, ironically, now share in replicants' ahistorical condition. The clerk leads K through the archives, taking him to the surviving data on Rachael. The replicants documented in these archives are placed within a sense of collective history from which they were previously excluded. At the same time, however, the archives are largely empty because of the blackout, so the endless rows of identical cabinets stand like a hollow monument to the loss of that history. The erasure of all digitized memories clearly impacted every facet of life in the hyper-digitalized world of the film, but the more devastating losses, as the clerk implies somewhat jokingly, were emotional ones, like the baby photos. Thus, the desire for history is accompanied by a return of affect, and as is then seen in K's journey of self-discovery, affect is tied to authenticity.

Lacking confirmation about the authenticity of his own past, K seeks out his (possible) origin as the child of Rachael and Deckard. Despite replicants being easier than ever to identify with serial numbers not just imprinted on their bones – as we see on Rachael's skeleton (*2049* 0:26:45) – but on their eyeballs, the central mystery of *2049* centers around K not knowing who or what he is. Carried over from the original film, then, is the sense that objective signifiers for identity are not trusted. As he begins to find physical referents for memories that were supposed to be fake, K spirals into a crisis of identity. At Sapper Morton's house, K finds a

photograph of Freysa, the leader of the replicant resistance, with Rachael's child in front of Morton's tree, which leads him to discover a date carved into the tree. This date matches the one on the wooden horse from her dreams. In this moment, K's sense of self is defamiliarized. No longer certain of who or what he is, he has to look to the past to make sense of himself in a now destabilized present. Every time K revisits his memory of the orphanage, he does so with a different understanding of his identity. Early in the film, K recounts it as an implanted memory, then he sees it as a genuinely lived memory connected to objects in the real world, and by the end, it is revealed to be Stelline's memory shared with K. He goes from seeing himself as something built to something born and back again, beginning a cycle that continues through to his death. K's ever-shifting understanding of himself reflects how the metamodern present is "paradoxical" in how it "ceaselessly exhumes and 'rediscovers' the past" (Lipovetsky 165). This relationship to the past might be considered parody in a postmodern context, but through the film's metamodern framework – which here takes inspiration from hypermodernism – the uncovering of truths about the past opens the possibility for "perpetual self-renewal" in the present (Lipovetsky 164). Because identity can be reinterpreted, it can also be remade. His repeated return to and recontextualization of a past memory eventually inspires K to act in the present for the betterment of the future, suggesting that rediscovery and reconstruction of the self is a constant conversation between past, present, and future.

When he first starts to doubt the inauthenticity of his memories, K seeks out the person associated with their origins. Joi asks K, "Who makes the memories?" (2049 1:15:58-59), and the film immediately cuts to Stelline working in her lab. A double meaning of 'memory maker' emerges, implying both the person who designs memories for replicants and the person who actually lived the moment in the memory. In this case, the answer proves to be the same person. As a memory maker in both senses of the phrase and a human born from a replicant, Stelline exists as a site of unification between the real and the artificial. In her conversation with K, she expresses how sincerity should be associated with implanted memories:

- K: Why are you so good? What makes your memories so authentic?
- STELLINE: Well, there's a bit of every artist in their work. But I was locked in a sterile chamber at eight. So, if I wanted to see the world, I had to imagine it. Got very good at imagining. Wallace needs my talent to maintain a stable product. I think it's only kind. Replicants live such hard lives, made to do what we'd rather not. I can't help your future, but I can give you good memories to think back on and smile.
- K: It's nice.
- STELLINE: It's better than nice. It feels authentic. And if you have authentic memories, you have real human responses. Wouldn't you agree?

- K: Are they all constructed, or do you ever use ones that are real?
- STELLINE: It's illegal to use real memories, officer.
- K: How can you tell the difference? Can you tell if something really happened?
- STELLINE: They all think it's about more detail. But that's not how memory works. We recall with our feelings. Anything real should be a mess. (2049 01:18:33-01:20:14)

She has lived most of her life isolated from everything, so the memories Stelline designs are not based on her own lived experiences but rather what she can imagine, making them true imitations without origin. Since replicants then use these imaginary memories to ground their emotions and make sense of their existence, they are not just “imitat[ing], duplicat[ing], nor even parody[ing]” but actually “substituting the signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard 2). And yet, in spite of a clear awareness of memory's and, therefore, reality's constructed natures, Stelline insists on their truthfulness. As she tells K, “We recall with our feelings” and authentically felt memories lead to “real human responses.” This conviction in the possibility of the real in a postmodern world, in which simulation has replaced (and thus devalued) the real, is a distinctly metamodern one. Metamodernism depicts authenticity as “the goal of the affective process of acting sincerely” (Kowalik 2). Thus, for Stelline, the ‘realness’ of a memory has more to do with sincere emotional engagement with and investment in it rather than its origin as something genuinely lived or not.

For Stelline, the source of a memory is not found in a unique experience but in emotions, and while all emotions might be constructed, that does not necessarily make them less real. While talking with K, Stelline digitally designs a birthday party. At first, she focuses on the memory's aesthetics, carefully choosing the candles on the cake and the children sitting around it, but the motivation behind the warm lighting and the children's expressions is to capture a feeling. The memory of a birthday party is charged with nostalgia and joy. Like a photograph, she captures a singular moment in time, but unlike a photograph, Stelline does not simply observe the moment from an external, removed position; instead, she places herself within the memory as a participant. In effect, through her performance of this moment, Stelline does not parody or imitate a memory, but instead creates one that feels, and therefore is, authentic. More than that, Stelline's assertion that “there's a bit of every artist in their work” means that she imbues every artificial memory with a piece of her own humanity. As first introduced here and then further developed with K and Joi,²² the metamodern subject is

²² See Chapter 4.3.

depicted as one constructed in relation to others, thereby balancing a sense of “individual and collective authenticity, which can be achieved via affect” (Kowalik 2). When she blows out the candles alongside the children, she breathes (her own) life into the memory (2049 1:19:32-36). Rather than creating a purely visual duplication of a possible memory, Stelline actively partakes in its creation. By designing memories in this way, Stelline redefines what should be considered true and meaningful to be something felt and shared.

While in *Blade Runner*, the concept of ‘real’ collapses altogether, it expands in 2049. As a consequence, replicants, like memories, are made real through affect. After Stelline confirms that “someone lived” his memory, K repeatedly says, “I know it’s real” (1:22:02-17). During this scene, K undergoes a dramatic emotional shift. He had been cold and dispassionate prior to this moment, but here his emotions build until he screams. Upon being convinced of his human status, he immediately sheds his passive replicant façade and adopts an emotional persona. This is not just a performance of humanity but a demonstration of how affect can alter reality. Directly after his conversation with Stelline convinces him that he was born and not built, K fails his baseline test: “Scan said you didn’t look like you on the inside” (2049 1:24:26-28). K is not actually the natural-born child, but his belief in that idea results in a genuine physical transformation. Nothing about his appearance changes, but his subconscious emotional transformation is physically detectable by the machine. K’s baseline test echoes Rachael’s Voight-Kampff test, but whereas the earlier film focuses on how identity is deconstructed by doubt, 2049 suggests that affect and belief construct it. At this moment, K’s life as an obedient replicant ends, and his life as a being with free will begins. Even after he learns the truth, K’s emotional awakening has proven his capacity for authentic emotions and humanity; therefore, he cannot revert to a state of ignorance – or, in this case, inauthenticity. It is then K’s choice whether or not to ignore that humanity.

While Stelline signifies a reinvestment in authenticity regardless of origin, K – as both a copy and an inverse of her²³ – represents the contradictory consequences of a longing for the real. On one hand, K appears to reinforce conservative essentialism. Alison Landsberg and Timotheus Vermeulen argue that K’s obsession with the real leads him into the past in such a way that depicts metamodern memory as facilitating the “conservative, nationalist, contemporary public discourse that mobilizes memory as an antidote to the present” (17). For

²³ During Stelline and K’s conversation at the lab, their images are not just reflected on the glass wall that divides them but superimposed over each other. Visually, K is more than a copy of Stelline but part of her. They inhabit a shared space, possess the same memories, have the same genetics, and yet live two different realities – one living as a human but confined to a single room, the other living as a replicant but free to move about the world.

them, the metamodern subject is one obsessed with origins and disinterested in futures. When K hands over the wooden horse to Deckard and tells him, “All the best memories were hers” (2049 2:29:14-16), he is not only “returning the ‘orphanage memory’ to its rightful owner, Ana Stelline, but he is simultaneously devaluing the memories produced by *his* lived experience as K, on the grounds that he is not authentic, a mere replicant” (Landsberg and Vermeulen 13). K’s obsession with discovering his past and uncovering his ‘realness’ signals a renewed value placed on the tangible and historical real, even in a postmodern world where the ‘real’ has lost its meaning. Landsberg and Vermeulen suggest that in placing this value on the material real, the film suggests that ‘feeling real’ is once again tied to objective measures of reality. And so, K, having learned that his orphanage memories are not his, does not believe himself to be real, cannot use his memories, can no longer exist in reality, and must die (Landsberg and Vermeulen 13). Their implementation of metamodern theory is considerably more conservative and less optimistic than others, but I argue that Landsberg and Vermeulen are picking up on only one half of the metamodern oscillation between cynicism and sincerity. While K can be read as having lost one kind of ‘realness’ – that of the objective reality – he also achieves another through his assertion of agency and affective connection to Deckard and Stelline.

Landsberg and Vermeulen suggest that memories in *2049*, unlike those in *Blade Runner*, cannot be used once proven false; however, K does draw from his memories and uses them to make his decision to save Deckard. Richard Heersmink and Christopher Jude McCarroll refer to K’s memory as a “true but false” one that “helps K make decisions about his future and to forge his own identity” (104). When K he tells the story of keeping the wooden horse away from bullies at the orphanage to the police captain Joshi, she remarks, “Little K, fighting for what’s his” (2049 0:53:35-37). At the end, this is exactly what he does. He fights against the bullies – Luv, Wallace, and to some extent Freysa – to defend the people he feels most connected to: Deckard and Stelline. He only feels connected to them because of his memories and the emotions he felt within them, which prompt his actions. K’s journey begins in search of uncovering facts about his past, but as his identity is revealed to be one thing (human) and then its opposite (replicant) in quick succession, K starts to stray from looking to facts for personal meaning. Instead, he begins to align with Stelline’s insistence on authenticity existing as something felt. This enables him to perform and construct his own sense of self, which is separate, but not less meaningful, from his inherent replicant identity. This is a powerful expression of agency, characterized by control not only in terms of autonomy in decision-making but also in self-definition. Through his final sacrifice, K enacts a transformative display

of empathy by reuniting Deckard with his daughter. In acting as if he were human, K becomes human.

Deckard's identity, in contrast to K's, is not central to the plot; however, the lingering ambiguity around it mirrors the film's re-negotiation of how identity and memories are regarded and constructed. At the end of the film, Deckard, like K, is forced to confront his past and commit to defining what is real to him. After kidnapping him, Wallace poses questions to provoke doubt in Deckard's memories of Rachael. He asks, "Did it never occur to you that's why you were summoned in the first place? Designed to do nothing short of fall for her right then and there. All to make that single perfect specimen. That is, if you were designed. Love or mathematical precision?" (2049 2:12:13-45). Wallace dehumanizes Deckard into a tool used by Tyrell to complete his experiment with Rachael, effectively denying the existence of any free will. Deckard's simple response directly echoes what K says earlier to Stelline: "I know what's real" (2049 2:12:57-59). Since, in just the scene prior, K finds out he is not the child and his certainty in what he knows to be true has just collapsed, that uncertainty carries over into Deckard's scene, thereby casting the same doubt onto Deckard's conviction. Yet despite that, Deckard's sincere commitment to Rachael and belief in the significance of the time they spent together make up the only reality that exists or matters to him. After all, authentic memories, according to Stelline, are based on emotions, not exact details. Likewise, K's sacrifice for Deckard and Stelline reveals the reality and future K chooses to invest in, namely one in which K is more than an obedient 'inhuman' replicant and has the power to affect real change. Paradoxically, their uncertainty around their memories (and identities) makes them more human, not less. As Stelline tells K in their earlier scene together, "Anything real should be a mess." Maintaining a tension between doubt and certainty, phrases like 'I know what's real' exist in a both-neither metamodern space, one in which K and Deckard simultaneously know and do not know what is real.

To further challenge Deckard's grasp on reality, Wallace presents him with a copy of Rachael that is visually identical to how she looked when they first met. As a replication of a replicant, this new Rachael seems to complete Baudrillard's precession of simulacra in that the image no longer "has any relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (6). As she appears here, Rachael is both the original and copy. Upon seeing her, however, all Deckard can say is, "Her eyes were green" (2049 2:16:21-22). The actual color of Rachael eyes is inconsistent in *Blade Runner* – brown most of the time, but green when viewed through the Voight-Kampff test – but their 'true' color is irrelevant. Deckard, once again assessing Rachael through her eyes, has to look beyond their outward appearance. The two Rachael's eyes might

be visually identical, but it is obvious to Deckard that this copy lacks Rachael's soul. For Deckard, Rachael's green eyes are unique to her because Rachael herself is unique to him, and therefore neither could ever be convincingly copied. It is here that *2049* moves a step beyond Baudrillard's simulacra by presenting a replicant who has become an original incapable of being copied. Crucially, Deckard relies on his memory of Rachael to identify this version as a copy. As in *Blade Runner*, the use of a memory in *2049* becomes more important than its origins or accuracy, but there is a key metamodern difference. Whereas in *Blade Runner*, Rachael's use of her memories, despite their inauthenticity, contributes to the deconstruction of the concept of identity into superficial performance, Deckard's use of his memories here suggests that there is some ultimate, intrinsic truth to be found. He 'proves' that this is a copy of Rachael only because he chooses to believe in the validity of his memories. Thus, though memory and identity remain subjective, they are also authenticated through affective truth.

In both films, eyes and memories function as central signifiers of identity, but their relation to the concept of the real signals a thematic departure. In *Blade Runner*, these motifs expose the unstable, commodified, and performative nature of the self. Eyes reflect a simulated world, and fabricated memories prevent an individual from locating themselves within a personal or shared history. Identity, and with it, a stable sense of the real, are deconstructed under postmodernism to the point that authenticity no longer exists in any meaningful capacity. *2049* inherits its predecessor's tendency toward ambiguity, but rather than resolving it, reorients it. Authenticity is no longer tied to origins but constructed through affective truth, belief, and emotional connections. As such, memories and eyes are no longer markers of objective reality. They are symbols of renewed depth and affect that position identity as something that can, and is, constructed through connection, sincerity, and affective belief. Ultimately, K's backward gaze into his memories becomes a necessary step on his journey not just toward self-discovery but also self-construction. It is in K's final decision to save Deckard and Stelline that he does not lose his humanity but reconstructs it.

4.3. Dying to be Human: Isolated and Relational Mortality

Replicants' obsessions with origins and memories reflect their desire to feel – if not fully be – human. If memories connect someone to their past, then death enables a revaluation of that past. However, in *Blade Runner*, just as (implanted) memories cannot be relied on as markers

of real history, so too are characters' deaths as sites of revelation destabilized. Kermode argues that meaning depends on the ability to structure time into a coherent sequence culminating in death, but "[i]f time cannot be felt as successive, this end ceases to have effect; without the sense of passing time one is virtually ceasing to live, one loses 'contact with reality'" (160). Since death is treated with the same skepticism as grand narratives under postmodernism, the deaths of replicants in *Blade Runner* do not connect them but isolate them from time, humanity, and ultimately, meaning. Severed from both beginnings and endings, replicants are thus excluded from the 'real.' Expressing the metamodern turn that calls for the return of grand narratives and affective truth, *2049* restores death as a site of meaning, connection to the world and other people, and the culmination of characters' longings to be more than their programmed identities. This reinstatement of meaning is embodied in the evolving motif of hands, which are symbols tied to one's ability to interact and locate themselves in the world, as well as in key scenes where characters confront their mortality and humanity.

One clear way that replicants are initially set apart from humans is the terminology used around them, specifically with how blade runners do not kill replicants but 'retire' them. The term defines replicants as products whose only purpose in life is labor (Bertek 4). As soon as their job comes to an end, their value is nullified, and they are not executed so much as taken out of commission. Even if blade runners do not kill them, replicants' lifespans are artificially restricted to four years, like the planned obsolescence of a piece of technology in a capitalist society. Treated like a tool or product, they are ultimately denied "autonomy and the right to self-definition" (Bertek 6). The process of 'retirement' is systematic, impersonal, and devoid of empathy, which distances the concept of death from replicants. Theorists such as Benjamin and Heidegger consider death to be essential for the existence of meaning in a life.²⁴ Understood in this way, a denial of death is a denial of meaning. Because they cannot 'die' and can only be retired, replicants are prevented from ever transcending their status as superficial copies of 'real' humans whose lives end with death.

The treatment of replicants' deaths reestablishes how the boundaries between humans and non-humans are tied to systems of control, as I introduced in the previous chapter. Maintaining that binary is necessary for industries to continue to profit from replicants as a product and labor force. As Wallace says, "We lost our stomach for slaves, unless engineered" (*2049* 0:41:16-21). By being denied autonomy in terms of how they appear and behave as well as where they are allowed to exist, replicants are dehumanized, which, for humans, cognitively

²⁴ See Chapter 2.

justifies the violence directed at them. Replicants are also banned on Earth, so when Batty, Leon, Pris, and Salome illegally travel to the planet, they are immediately marked as threats to be eliminated “not so much because they are dangerous (although they are), but because their presence undermines the neatly set spatial-class boundaries that undermine who belongs there” (Bertek 4). The fugitive replicants risk an early death out of a desire for longevity and control over their lives. Because death objectifies them, replicants seek out longer lives, which will make them ‘more real’ and ‘more human.’

Even looking past the use of ‘retirement’ in place of ‘death,’ murdered replicants in *Blade Runner* are still denied any retroactive meaning enabled by death. Rejecting Heidegger’s proposition that the anticipation of one’s own death allows for the “possibility of *authentic existence*,” or what he calls being-toward-death (307), the postmodern *Blade Runner* presents a world in which death does not authenticate a life, especially not for replicants. Instead, it nullifies everything that precedes it. The deaths of replicants like Leon and Salome, for example, do not humanize them; they remain symbols for others’ emotional development rather than fully realized individuals. After killing Salome, Deckard thinks, “The report would be routine retirement of a replicant, which didn’t make me feel any better about shooting a woman in the back. There it was again – feeling. In myself for her. For Rachael” (OTR 0:58:55-59:14). While he acknowledges both Salome and Rachael’s human-ness by referring to them as “woman” and “her” rather than “it” – which Deckard had previously used in reference to replicants – any empathy or emotion Deckard expresses after killing Salome is directed onto Rachael. For Salome, even after death, there is no escape from her replicant status, and she remains an imitation, in this case, a stand-in for Rachael.

Likewise, Leon’s death marks a turning point, not for Leon, but for Deckard and Rachael. Her emotional response after killing Leon forces Deckard to confront the reality that replicants are capable of empathy and that he – a blade runner who is not supposed to sympathize with the replicants he hunts – is also becoming emotionally affected. In response to Deckard telling her that killing replicants is just “part of the business,” Rachael says, “I’m not in the business. I am the business” (BR 1:03:45-1:04:12). This is a moment of acceptance of her identity but also one of despair as that identity means she will be hunted, too. With that understanding, Rachael sees herself in Leon’s position, so when she shoots him, it is as though Rachael is imagining how a blade runner will kill her in the future. Like with Salome, Leon functions as a kind of mirrored image of Rachael, and in shooting Leon, she is actually shooting a version of herself. The revelation that comes with Salome’s and Leon’s deaths is not about

their (lack of) humanity but Rachael's. These deaths force Rachael, and to some extent Deckard, to confront their disposability and insignificance.

Because death in a postmodern context offers no potential for meaning, *Blade Runner* considers only the possibility of continuation, or resistance to death, as meaningful. Gaff's final words to Deckard about Rachael – "It's too bad she won't live, but then again, who does?" (*BR* 1:48:54-59) – appear to suggest a late embrace of Heidegger's being-toward-death by implying that Deckard and Rachael's awareness of their limited time alive allows for them to live more fully (and authentically) in the present. However, unbeknownst to Gaff, Rachael and Deckard have open-ended lifespans, meaning that an authentic, freely lived existence is still not found in the anticipation of their deaths but in the promise of longevity: "Four years, he figured. He was wrong. Tyrell had told me Rachael was special. No termination date" (*OTR* 1:52:36-46). The film ends at a point that offers a narrative continuation, rather than a conclusive end – whether by showing Deckard and Rachael leaving the city together (*OTR*) or cutting to black just as they leave the apartment into an uncertain future (*DC/FC*). While the boundary between replicant and human becomes irrelevant to Deckard and Rachael, who are able to escape together and live on, that potential for freedom only comes after the fugitive replicants are cast aside as victims of a system that explicitly profits from their continued dehumanization.

In contrast to the other fugitive replicants, Batty is the only one who is not killed but dies a 'natural' death, though his life is still one designed only to span four years. Yet, as a victim of the same system, Batty can approach but never achieve the condition of being human. As a sign that his programmed lifespan is coming to an end, Batty's hand freezes and curls up. Earlier in the film, hands had been shown in connection to replicants' superhuman abilities – Leon puts his hand in liquid nitrogen and Pris picks up an egg out of a boiling pot of water (*BR* 0:27:50, 1:18:10) – but in this later scene, Batty's malfunctioning hand betrays his vulnerability and mortality. In an attempt to stay in control of his life and hold off death just a little longer, he stabs a nail through his palm. The physical pain is enough to keep him alive and serves as a tether to the 'real' since he not only can still feel his surroundings, but a piece of it is stuck inside him. With that same hand, Batty then saves Deckard, making it a final humanizing moment completed with the hand he used to hold onto life just a bit longer.

It is through the visuals of the hands that Batty is simultaneously connected to and juxtaposed against Deckard, as they are visually and thematically mirrored through their hand injuries. Just before his hand stiffens, Batty breaks Deckard's fingers to prevent him from shooting his gun. It is an act of self-defense, but also one that, in conjunction with Batty leaving Deckard dangling on the roof for a few seconds longer, simulates in Deckard a feeling of

helplessness. Batty says to Deckard before pulling him up, “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave” (*BR* 1:45:15-22). Deprived of the use of his hands, Deckard cannot act freely or save himself, and so his life, like those of the replicants he had made a career out of hunting, is left entirely in the hands of another. Many critics rightly point to Batty pulling Deckard up to safety as the moment when Batty becomes more human through an act of mercy (see Begley; Bertek; Doel and Clarke; Spinrad). By choosing to not only spare but actively save Deckard, Batty “abolish[es] the boundary between human and non-human” and thus overcomes his replicant status (Bertek 9). Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke even argue that it is Batty, not Deckard, who should be considered the film’s utopian protagonist, as he rejects the limitations on his life as a slave and “*lets himself die* as something more than a (hu)man” (162). I argue, however, that through Batty forcing Deckard to experience the fear of total powerlessness both Batty *and* Deckard reach a state of empathy and humanity. As shown by the replicant Batty attaining the status of ‘human’ before his death, replicant and human are revealed to be traversable ethical categories predicated solely on the presence of empathy, so that “by achieving empathy, a manufactured creature can gain its humanity, just as by losing it, a natural man can become a human android” (Spinrad 89). Consequently, Deckard’s innate identity as a replicant or human is wholly irrelevant, as until his encounters with Rachael and Batty, Deckard had been emotionally more replicant than human. Only in the scene on the roof do both Deckard and Batty become more human than they were before.

Despite almost becoming a utopian figure, able to redefine himself as human through empathy and assert his memories as part of history, Batty’s death maintains an air of tragedy in that he cannot escape the film’s postmodern irony. The stylized imagery of the scene, including the slow-motion, the rain, and the dove ascending to the heavens, renders Batty’s death an aesthetic spectacle. His humanity, though briefly realized, is not long-lived, as through his death Batty is once again reduced to a hollow symbol: a Christ-figure,²⁵ a mirror of Deckard, an embodiment of ethical humanity. While he is not denied a proper ‘death,’ and instead dies a more ‘natural’ death in comparison to the other retired replicants, Batty’s death ultimately reaffirms the postmodern treatment of death as a grand narrative. As such, it cannot be a site of revelation or a culmination of a meaningful life. Without the promise of continuation, endings result in a dispersal or even total erasure of meaning. He, like his memories, is nothing but a

²⁵ The Christian iconography surrounding Batty’s death – for example, Tyrell calling him the “prodigal son” (*BR* 1:25:12-14), the nail in his hand, and the ascension of the white dove after his death – all frame Batty as a Christ-figure (see Begley; Doel and Clarke). Juxtaposed against Christ’s death as revelation and new beginnings, Batty’s marks a final end without the possibility of resurrection, continuation, or hope.

“cacophony of signs” (Bukatman 60). His moment of affect and depth is thus flattened, and while Deckard continues on a changed (hu)man, Batty disappears entirely.

Whereas Batty’s death marks a loss of history and self that closes off potential meaning, the replicant Sapper Morton’s death in *2049* is meaningfully situated within a narrative of resistance. *2049* inherits its predecessor’s legacy of policing identity, but now replicants are legal on Earth, and some blade runners, like K, are openly replicants themselves. A divide now exists between older and newer models of replicants, which is evident in K’s interaction with Morton. When Morton asks, “How’s it feel killing your own kind?” K responds, “I don’t retire my own kind because we don’t run. Only older models do” (*2049* 0:09:25-38). Obedience to the system and acceptance of the boundary between human and non-human has been deliberately, biologically programmed into replicants (*2049* 0:01:49), with newer models contributing to the system that oppresses other replicants and passively accepting their own retirement. Despite sharing a similar fate to Salome and Leon, Morton is not a character reduced or dismissed by his ‘retirement’ but rather one whose life continues to be revisited and revalued. In contrast to how the *act* of killing Salome and Leon incites Deckard and Rachael’s ethical reckoning, it is K’s *conversation* with Morton that impacts him. In other words, Morton, although ‘retired’ in the same way as the others, is valued as an individual. Like with the fugitive replicants in the original film, Morton’s death pushes the protagonist along his journey; however, it is not only K’s life that takes on new meaning but also Morton’s as he is consistently referenced and his final moments recontextualized: K returns to the farm to investigate further and finds evidence of a child hidden and protected by Morton, Freysa remarks on their time fighting together on Calantha and building the replicant resistance, and K only fully understands the significance of Morton’s final words by the end of the film. Just before being shot, Morton tells K, “[Y]ou new models are happy scraping the shit because you’ve never seen a miracle” (*2049* 0:09:38-50). The miracle he refers to is the birth of Rachael’s child, which implies that if replicants are capable of giving birth, then the previously understood biological differences between replicants and humans are as tenuous as the supposed emotional boundaries. Moreover, the new replicants’ ‘biological programming’ is revealed to be something conditioned rather than inherently designed.

When K reconsiders Morton’s words and then decides to rescue Deckard, Morton’s miracle becomes not only a reference to the existence of the child but also the knowledge that a replicant can be in control of their own fate. This is a revelation that leads Morton, and then K, to be willing to sacrifice themselves for a future (and for the people who will inhabit that future) that they will not live to see. As later revealed by Freysa, Morton knew that K was

coming for him and chose to sacrifice himself anyway in order to prevent the child from being discovered. This suggests a key departure from the replicants in the earlier film. While they had sought out continuation and longevity because death dehumanized them and closed off meaning, Morton is more interested in preserving a collective future – the eventual freedom of replicants represented by Rachael’s child – than his own life. Thus, despite K ‘retiring’ him, Morton claims his death as a purposeful sacrifice, which not only humanizes him but signals the culmination, not dismissal, of his life’s purpose. At the end of the film, K makes a similar sacrifice. In this way, *2049* marks a return of death as enabling rather than deconstructing meaning.

Before turning to K’s death, the relationship between K and his holographic girlfriend, Joi, in conjunction with Joi’s sacrifice, need to be discussed. These two characters in particular embody the changing definitions of the ontological real in *2049*, as well as its continued investment in the affective real. The image of a hand, so prominent in Batty’s final scene as a symbol of his tenuous connection to the ‘real,’ is carried into the sequel as a recurring visual that accompanies moments of characters’ changing relations to the world. K and Joi both have key scenes of ‘feeling’ precipitation on their hands, which indicate shifts in their relationships to themselves and the world around them. After K gifts Joi an emulator, which allows her to leave the apartment and “go anywhere [she] want[s] in the world” (*2049* 0:20:26-28), he brings her up to the rooftop. As she moves out into the rain, she experiences the world beyond the apartment for the first time. Her programming adjusts so that her skin and hair appear to react to the rain, yet we can also still see the rain passing right through her. She holds out her hands as if she can feel the rain on them, and she moves K’s hands to her face as if she can feel them there. The childlike wonder in her expression as she experiences rain for the first time appears convincingly genuine, yet K remains fully aware that it is all a pre-designed simulation. In response to Joi telling K, “I’m so happy when I’m with you,” he says, “You don’t have to say that” (*2049* 22:46-22:50). K’s investment in the relationship and simultaneous cognizance of its constructedness is a tension that persists for the entirety of the film, and reflects the performatist aspect of metamodernism: “the willful self-deceit to believe in – or identity with, or solve – something in spite of itself” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 6). K’s small smile as he watches Joi in the rain gives away that longing. He knows she is programmed, but he still wants to believe in their connection and her authenticity in spite of that. In a later scene that visually echoes Joi in the rain, K stops to look at snow falling into his hand after his conversation with Stelline (*2049* 1:22:48). Convinced that he was born and not manufactured, and therefore a “real boy now” as Joi says (*2049* 1:15:17-19), K sees himself as human, and

more real. Just as Joi's world expanded through the emulator, allowing her to go out into the rain for the first time, K experiences the world almost as a new (hu)man. Despite always having had a physical body, K feels the snow for the first time, as if it had only ever passed right through him before that moment.

In both of these scenes, there is an emphasis placed on the ability to physically interact with the world as a gauge of one's 'realness,' which must be contextualized within the film's updated hierarchy of identities. The binary between human and non-human (replicant) established in *Blade Runner* has been reworked to include AI holograms in *2049*. Embodied replicants now exist somewhere on the spectrum between the human and the virtual. When the Wallace jingle gives K's possession of a digital companion away, Mariette – another replicant – scoffs at him, "Oh! You don't like real girls" (*2049* 0:46:06-07). Although replicants are still derogatorily called 'skinjobs' by humans, they are still deemed at least a subset of the 'real' because they exist corporeally, unlike virtual beings.²⁶ If someone's 'realness' is linked to their materiality, then as a 'human' K is able to interact with the world in a way that had been inaccessible to him when he was 'just a replicant.' Yet, the film goes on to further challenge that hierarchy. Since K was never actually the child and was always a replicant, the only thing that changed was how he saw himself. As Landsberg and Vermeulen write, "[T]o *feel* real in a world where reality proper has long ago ceased to exist, a performative, affective real – as opposed to an epistemically accessible, empirically verifiable reality – is the fundamental aspiration in metamodernism" (12). Importantly, his ability to connect with the world is one entirely dependent on belief – predicated on a desire to feel, and therefore be, 'real' – rather than some set ontological category. Much like Stelline's view that 'authentic' memories are more about emotions than physicality, so too are 'realness' and even 'touch' almost entirely dependent on authenticity grounded in affect.

The film's disruption of this hierarchy of authenticity extends into Joi's arc. Throughout the film, she expresses a longing to be more corporeally real, beginning with her scene in the rain and continuing with her decision to escape the city with K. While some of her final decisions can be explained as part of her programming and as a product designed to serve and please K (such as having a positive reaction to K's emulator gift and hiring Mariette to act as her physical form so that Joi and K can 'touch'), others leading up to her death seem to defy

²⁶ This expanded definition of what is understood as 'real' can also be seen when K brings the wooden toy horse to be examined by Doc Badger, who tells him "I can get you a real horse. You want a real horse? [...] I can get you one. Like Wallace stuff" (*2049* 1:34:51-35:01). Since naturally occurring animals have become extremely rare, if not completely extinct, the concept of a 'real animal' now includes synthetic, but still physical and living, animals.

commercial incentives. As K prepares to escape the city, Joi makes three requests: to accompany him, to have him delete her memory from the main console, and to disable the tracking antenna on the emulator. Crucially, it is Joi, not K, who initiates these actions, hinting at her capacity for agency. A more cynical interpretation of these requests would be that without backups K is incentivized to buy another 'Joi' after his breaks; however, they can also be read as expressions of her free will and control over her own destiny, especially considering that they go against the interests of the Wallace Corporation by preventing Luv from tracking K. These requests also explicitly ask K to do things he does not want to do. When she asks to be deleted from the console, K tells her, "I can't do that," which implies she is contradicting her product's tagline to be "[e]verything you want to hear, everything you want to see" (2049 1:33:21-22, 2:18:02-08). K is reluctant to delete her memories from the console because even if he were able to physically replace her with another Joi model, her memories, or what makes her unique to K, would be gone forever. Joi embraces this new state of being since carrying the certainty and threat of death is a condition of being human that makes her more "[l]ike a real girl" (2049 1:33:34-36). Her decision also echoes the fugitive replicants' choice to come to Earth in *Blade Runner* in that she risks death for autonomy over her movements. By having her entire existence tied to the emulator, Joi also achieves a new level of corporeality. She can now be physically destroyed, which means that she is more than just a digital program; she is materially connected to the world. When she is destroyed by Luv crushing her emulator, K mourns her *as if* she were real.

Made clear after her death, their relationship is one that constantly oscillates between sincerity and irony, never fully committing to one or the other. Explaining this metamodern dynamic, Vermeulen and van den Akker write, "Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" ("Notes" 6). Consider again the scene of Joi in the rain, in which K and Joi almost share a virtual 'kiss' only for Joi to become frozen by an incoming call. Another example is K's realization that what he thought was unique between him and his Joi – her encouraging him to embrace his newfound 'humanness' by giving him a name, "Joe" – was just part of her programming when the giant, generic ad version of her also calls K "a good Joe" (2049 1:15:26, 2:17:39-42). In almost every one of their interactions, K and Joi share moments of genuine care for each other, while also being immediately reminded that Joi is a hologram designed to please K. Their relationship is depicted neither fully apathetically nor as wholly authentic but as both-neither. Metamodern belief does not eliminate ambiguity; instead, it embraces it and acts through it. While the film refuses to settle on either

side of this oscillation, one thing becomes clear in Joi and K's relationship: K mourns her absence, which implies she had a spatial presence. Though her body never achieves the status of 'physically real,' their relationship complicates the dominance of the physical in the film's hierarchy of identities as K's love for her acknowledges that she had an emotional realness that transcends her disembodiment. Like a 'real girl,' the Joi that K knows cannot be replicated or resurrected, so she does not die as a holographic mirage of a woman, but as an original Joi.

Joi's deletion sets the scene for K's final reckoning with his identity. K's reminder of Joi's programming from the ad coincides with Freysa telling him that he is not Rachael's child. Together, these scenes are a simultaneously devastating and liberating reveal, as Keren Omry argues, that K "never did know what was real," which leads him to "move past the mode of determination and 'non-choice', the blind obedience programmed into the Nexus-9 models" and instead "enact his own mode of obligation and care" (111). K's crisis of self-knowledge is a familiar one that the original film also wrestles with. With fabricated memories and synthetic humans that almost perfectly mimic the 'real,' individuals are left to question whether or not they can be sure of who or what they are, meaning that in *Blade Runner* an "apparent sense of self is no evidence of the reality of the self at all" (Byron 48). However, *2049* flips this logic. K's subjective sense of self, although built on false memories and influenced by an artificial girlfriend, is enough to prove the 'reality' of himself. As becomes clear in his actions leading up to his death, K's identity is not defined entirely by his origins or memories, but by what he chooses to believe in and how he decides to act. What connects Joi and K, as Silke Arnold-de Simine writes, is how they "both navigate the limitations of their realities and the constraints of their existence and they both strive, each in their own way, to overcome them by becoming truly alive" (69). In this way, *2049* begins to embrace metamodern multi-subjectivity, in which K's identity is neither singular nor stable but relational to others and capable of balancing multiple truths simultaneously: he is both artificial and real, he is not the 'chosen one' but still has the power to shape the future, and he dies alone but also connected to Deckard and Stelline.

To discuss K's death requires first a brief return to Batty's. There are a number of visual and thematic parallels between his death and K's: they both have injured right hands, the same musical motif plays, Batty dies in the rain and K dies in the snow, and both save Deckard as their final acts. Aligning with the notion that metamodernism is not an abandonment of postmodernism but an evolution, Batty's and K's mirrored deaths create a sense of thematic continuity between the films, while also marking a key, though subtle, point of departure. As I have previously discussed, there is a consensus amongst critics that Batty is raised to human status (even if only temporarily) because he performs an act of empathy toward Deckard. Yet,

the *why* behind Batty's decision remains purposefully ambiguous because the act itself is all that matters. While Batty might have saved any blade runner that happened to be hunting him that night, K chooses to specifically save Deckard because of their connection through Stelline, built from their shared memories. Understanding K's sacrifice and the meaning found through his death demands not only examining the actions he takes but also the beliefs that guided those decisions, which are made clear through K thinking back on what Freysa and Morton told him, as well as the memories he shares with Stelline. K's intentions are tied to his beliefs and emotional investment, not only in himself but in those whom he risks himself to save.

K's decision to save Deckard can be read as simultaneously an action taken despite knowing his memories are false, but also as a purposeful decision guided by the affective realness of those memories and how they connect him to Deckard. Landsberg and Vermeulen argue that once K knows for certain that his memories are implanted, he can no longer use them to guide his decisions or construct his identity. So, he has no choice but to become less than human again, and return the memories to Stelline, their "rightful owner": "His memory no longer *feels* real and so he can no longer be [real]" (12–13). However, if K no longer *feels* real and therefore returns to the former version of himself – an obedient replicant without agency – it would be logical for him to carry out Joshi's orders to kill the child or to return to the police station and accept his 'retirement' like Nexus-9 models are biologically programmed to do. Alternatively, K might blindly follow Freysa's order to kill Deckard and protect Stelline and the replicant resistance movement. K does none of these. Instead, he imagines and then freely acts out another possibility, one that disrupts the maintenance of the status quo – preventing Stelline from being discovered by the rest of the world – and one that is only made possible through their shared memories. K draws from the past, not to replicate it but to enact a radically new future, which contributes to the film's utopian impulses.²⁷

Like Morton, who knew K would retire him, K chooses to go back for Deckard knowing that he would likely die from his injuries in the process. Freysa tells him, "Dying for the right cause is the most human thing we can do" (2049 2:06:35-40). This is exactly what K does. His death does not signal a passive concession that K, without unique childhood memories or parents, can no longer continue to exist meaningfully, or at all, in the world. Rather, his death is a result of K's belief in his emotional authenticity of his memories, and though they do not belong uniquely to him, they are still important. There is a duality of identity depicted in K's death, one in which both inherent and constructed identities can both be true, simultaneously.

²⁷ See Chapter 4.4 for a discussion of utopia in 2049.

K is a replicant, but it is his belief in his humanity that enables his ethics, his empathy, and his sacrifice, and not, as it is with Batty, his empathy that makes possible his humanity. He is synthetic, yet still physically and emotionally connected to the world, and as such, he has the power to influence the future – in this case, by saving Deckard. Rather than his death being a devaluation of his newly found humanity and his memories reduced to fragmented moments that will disappear with him, K's death is a culmination of a meaningful life and a final commitment to a cause he considers worth dying for. Ultimately, that is what makes him 'more human than human.' At the end of K's journey toward personhood, he achieves authentic humanity despite his synthetic origins. After all, he underwent a physical transformation identified by the baseline test. So, his death is a final enactment of the humanity he was always capable of. Without this ever-possible humanity, he would never have been able to overcome his existence as a passive, subservient tool.

Although his actions do not align completely with the replicant resistance, they are motivated by a similar desire for replicants to be accepted as humans; therefore, they share an investment in Stelline as a symbol of a liberated future. Though K dies alone in the snow, having led Deckard back to his daughter, his death is not an isolating one, nor is it one in which K's humanity dies with him. Gibbons proposes that the metamodern subject seeks "to situate or ground their self corporeally in the world, including in relation to others," meaning that identity is constructed in relation to others (120). Shared between K, Joi, and Morton is how they are all driven by a "desire to go beyond what has been anticipated by their creators" which ultimately "turns them into relational beings and connects them to somebody else" (Arnold-de Simine 69), allowing K and Joi to believe in their relationship and for Morton to find purpose in a cause bigger than himself. In the case of K and Morton, they are connected by and to Rachael's child, the symbol of a hopeful, liberated future for replicants. So, the deaths of K and Morton, in contrast to the isolated postmodern deaths of *Blade Runner's* fugitive replicants, situate them within a larger collective, whether that be the replicant resistance or Deckard and Stelline.

In contrast to *Blade Runner's* nihilistic approach to death, *2049* treats it as central to the formation of an authentic life. The plot of *Blade Runner* revolves around Deckard hunting a group of replicants who are desperate to extend their lives and evade their 'retirement.' It is a film in which mortality erodes meaning, and the only hope for continued meaning lies in continued existence. In contrast, death in *2049* is not a concession of one's inauthenticity but a meaningful culmination of a life. Its characters purposefully risk their mortality in pursuit of authenticity, agency, and an emotional connection to the world, the future, and the people they

care about: Joi makes herself vulnerable by existing only on the emulator to protect K, Morton waits to be ‘retired’ by K to keep Stelline hidden, K chooses to risk his life for Deckard. Whereas death in *Blade Runner* leaves characters isolated and disconnected from a sense of history, legacy, and one another, death in *2049* affirms not only a character’s meaningful existence in the world but also their affective realness. Thus, in this metamodern reframing, death is not the end of meaning but a final enactment of it.

4.4. Do Androids Dream of Utopia?

In the preceding chapters, I explored different types of endings that narratively and thematically guide the *Blade Runner* films, with particular emphasis on how endings in *Blade Runner* result in the fragmentation of meaning, whereas endings in *2049* offer a culmination and reconstruction of it. As with the movement from apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic, the next logical question becomes, what happens *after* the end? In the case of the *Blade Runner* films, they play with the potential emergence of utopia in a post-apocalyptic, post-human world. Postmodernism regards the concept of utopia suspiciously, suggesting that attempts at it frequently “[morph] into its generic ‘dystopian’ cousin (in cyberpunk, for instance)” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia” 57). Consequently, the figure of utopia all but disappeared. Under metamodernism, a utopian impulse resurfaces as a renewed desire for change grown out of a sense of disappointment in how postmodernism, through all of its deconstruction, made grand promises but did not lead to anything better. There remains, however, an important distinction between utopia as naïve hope and the utopian impulse picked up by metamodernism. Just as how metamodernism cannot be solely defined as a “romantic response to crisis,” the metamodern utopia is one that balances a “pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will” (Abramson, “Metamodernism 101”; Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Utopia” 58). It is in this tension that the utopian impulses of *2049* exists, particularly through its depiction of a world in which new life is possible after ecological destruction and the hope for future liberation embodied by the child who merges replicant and human. Whereas *Blade Runner* presents utopia as an ironic impossibility, *2049* reframes utopia as an affective longing to be ‘more real’ and a commitment to progress, despite the fear of inevitable failure.

Preceding the events of *Blade Runner* are a global environmental disaster and nuclear war that have devastated nature. These have led to the extinction of nearly all natural plants

and animals and left the world in a largely uninhabitable state. Still-inhabited cities, like Los Angeles, are overcrowded with people and overrun with poverty and crime. Because of the devastation of the world, most people have fled to off-world colonies in search of “a new life” and a “chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure” (*BR* 0:07:35-40). The world of *Blade Runner* is thus introduced as a post-apocalyptic dystopia: a wasteland inhabited only by those who remain. Most of the people who still live in Los Angeles are either too poor or unable to pass the required medical examination to leave, so access to this apparent utopia is commodified under the logic of capitalism. At the same time, this utopia is depicted as a pastiche, as it is not only inaccessible but also imaginary. In stark contrast to the ads selling a ‘golden land of opportunity’ are the lived experiences of off-world replicants, who are used for “slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets” (*BR* 0:02:28). There are also references to wars in which replicants fight as soldiers: Batty, in his famous speech, talks of warships, and K says Morton and Freysa’s time in the war on Calantha “must’ve been brutal” (*2049* 0:07:29-31). Seeking an escape from the horrors of life in that advertised ‘utopia,’ Batty and the other fugitive replicants return to Earth. Replicants’ desire for utopia is closely tied to their longing to be more than replicants: to have longer, better lives and achieve a state of being ‘more human.’ Yet, as seen by the irony of humans seeking to leave the planet in search of something better and replicants seeking to return for the same reason, utopia remains nothing more than an impossible longing.

The original theatrical ending of *Blade Runner* offers some hope of escape from dystopia. Deckard and Rachael are the only ones able to flee the confines of the city into a verdant landscape seemingly unaffected by environmental collapse. Added in response to audiences reacting negatively to the moody, cynical tone in a test screening,²⁸ this ‘happy ending’ lacks any ambiguity in how it presents utopia as reachable only through the abandonment of the past. By physically leaving Deckard’s apartment with all of the photographs and material referents tied to fabricated memories, the pair also leave behind any interest in knowing their pasts or their identities. All that matters is their continued existence together. Even so, this ‘happy ending’ meta-textually reinforces the postmodern idea that utopia is bound to parody, unoriginality, and cinematic recycling since the scene is composed of footage taken from the outtakes of another film.²⁹ The lush forests and expansive landscapes

²⁸ See Sammon 346-51.

²⁹ The outtakes are from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). See Sammon for a discussion of the process of creating *Blade Runner*’s original ‘happy ending’ (148-49, 348-50, 513-14).

are in such contrast to the dark, grimy, and claustrophobic noir aesthetic of the rest of the film that it feels as if (and actually is the case that) another film had been jarringly grafted onto the end, ultimately undermining the carefully constructed nihilism of the rest of the film. In the Director's and Final Cuts, the film once again ends abruptly when Deckard and Rachael step into the elevator to leave the apartment building, leaving their fates open-ended. This ending leans into feelings of unease and uncertainty, capturing a sense of determination to escape without any reassurance that that escape is possible. A deferred utopian impulse is implied but treated with suspicion, since in these versions of the film, the world is relentlessly dystopian without any indication that a better place exists, on Earth or elsewhere.

Apart from the original theatrical release, the events of *Blade Runner* remain purposefully confined within the limits of Los Angeles, but in *2049*, K leaves the city repeatedly to solve the mystery of his past. There, the devastation of the world is found in a landscape of endless waste and abandoned cities. The period between the events of *Blade Runner* and *2049* is revealed to be one of varied upheavals and apocalypses in the latter's opening exposition text: since 2019, there have been "a series of violent rebellions" that bankrupted Tyrell Corp and made replicants illegal followed by a "collapse of ecosystems" that gave way to the rise of Wallace Corp, synthetic farming, and new, more obedient replicants (*2049* 0:01:49). Additionally, there was an extended blackout that erased all digital records. As I suggest in Chapter 4.2, this digital apocalypse can be understood as a culmination of the earlier film's loss of history. Likewise, the other apocalyptic events are also a consequence of *Blade Runner*'s stalled present, in which the only response to the planet's devastation was to leave for the off-world colonies or accept the present condition as the only one imaginable. The preamble to *2049* suggests one possible future to be an endless recycling of apocalypses, giving in to the postmodern idea that "bereft of the idea of the end as direction, truth, and foundation, we have reached the end of the end" (Heffernan 11). The events of the film, and specifically K's exploration of the world beyond the city, offer another possibility: new life after the end. Despite being a wasteland, the land outside signals a visual departure from the city. While the city is characterized by its neon signs and endless nights, the wasteland is depicted in daylight without any electronic glow. The whites and yellows of this environment, though cloudy and polluted, suggest a world not yet healed but also one not limited to darkness. The wasteland and farmlands outside of the city are also where hopeful signs of new and returning life are most prominent: a natural tree grows outside of Morton's home, Morton grows garlic, K encounters scavengers and orphans living in the wasteland, he finds bees, and, of course, he learns about the birth of Rachael's child.

Although Stelline remains peripheral to the main narrative until the reveal at the end, the mystery of Rachael's child is the film's emotional and narrative core. I argue that Stelline, as Rachael's child, symbolizes the future and embodies the film's most sincere utopian impulses, including, as previously discussed, the conviction that affect constructs reality. Her status as a symbol of the future is established through how she is consistently referred to as 'the child,' Freysa's perception of her as the future leader of the replicant resistance, and her unique identity. Explaining the threat posed by the existence of Rachael's child, Joshi tells K, "The world is built on a wall. It separates kind. Tell either side there's no wall, you bought a war. Or a slaughter" (2049 0:27:09-21). Without the purposeful maintenance and construction of supposedly objective boundaries between human and non-human, the violence, abuse, and exploitation of replicants becomes impossible to justify, and revolution becomes inevitable. The ability for replicants to give birth – something thought impossible – is one such boundary that is now blurred. As Freysa tells K, "I knew that baby meant we are more than just slaves. If a baby can come from one of us, we are our own masters" (2049 2:05:46-57). To create a new life is to be an original, a status replicants have longed for throughout the films. Just as Stelline stands for how fabricated memories can generate authentic emotions, so too does her existence prove that the synthetic can produce the real. The copy can create an original. It is not only that a replicant gave birth that destabilizes previously constructed binaries of the real, but also that Stelline, as a child born from a replicant, is not easily defined within those categories. The film never attempts to label her, and therefore she is at once a replicant born from another replicant, a human child born from a replicant, and, depending on how Deckard's identity is interpreted, the product of both a replicant and a human. The future she represents hints at utopia because of her unique identity. Jameson writes, "[T]he question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all" (*Postmodernism* xvi). As both-neither replicant and human, she represents a future without precedent. In other words, the future she implies is not one that can be explained by or copied from the past; it is a future that must be imagined anew.

While she symbolizes a future for the replicant resistance, Stelline, as she is first introduced in the film, is disconnected from her own history, thus making a future inaccessible to her. Maintained throughout both films is the idea that in order for someone to "survive, the signifiers of their existence have to be put in order," or in other words, the "assurance of a future relies on the possibility of acquiring a past" (Bruno 70). When we meet Stelline, she is trapped and lonely in a room, having been given a "life of freedom so long as its behind glass" (2049 1:17:05-07). Not only is Stelline confined to a single room, unable to experience the

world, reminiscent of Joi, but she also lacks access to her past, like other replicants. She makes mention of parents who could not take her off-world because she has a compromised immune system, but how much of that is based in truth or fabricated as part of a cover story to protect her is unclear. There are also no indications that Stelline even knows who her parents are or what her role in the replicant resistance is destined to be. Without knowledge of her past or identity, Stelline is also without agency.

For the past thirty years, Stelline has been a stagnant symbol used by the replicant resistance to make promises about a future that is never actually imagined or worked toward. As Vermeulen and van den Akker argue, the metamodern utopia is not a destination but a direction, and so is something “we should always strive to move into but never get to” (“Utopia” 64). While the replicant resistance movement remains passive, K’s final decision exemplifies a movement toward utopia. What happens after the film is uncertain, but in saving Deckard and bringing him to Stelline, K performs an act that disrupts the present stagnation of the replicant resistance. By reuniting her with her father – a symbol of her origins – K effectively restores Stelline’s past to her, allowing her to learn the truths about her identity. In doing so, K gifts her the ability to enact her own future. In other words, having gained knowledge of her past, she now has agency over her life and what happens next. While implanted memories in *Blade Runner* meant a replicant was forever deprived of a past, the re-inscription of the real into both fabricated and genuinely lived memories in *2049* means that even K’s implanted memories are useful in his construction of his humanity. As I argue about K, his ability to learn truths about himself, his past, and his memories – despite them being implanted – has a transformative effect that enables his agency to save Deckard. By ‘returning’ Stelline’s memories and bringing Deckard to her, K offers Stelline a similar opportunity for self-liberation.

Importantly, the future promised by the existence of Stelline is not yet fully realized nor guaranteed. K’s sacrifice is one act of utopia, but everything beyond that is left only as an implication. This is not to undermine the film’s utopian impulse but reorient it as the movement toward a future without the certainty that it will ever be reached, which is the “‘destiny’ of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 12). The final scene between Deckard and Stelline carries a similar tension between hopeful determination and uncertainty as the Director’s and Final Cut endings of *Blade Runner* do. Underneath Deckard and Stelline’s emotional reunion is a sense of doubt. Their future, the future of the replicant resistance, the future of the world after the apocalypse

are all as uncertain and unknowable as the radically destabilizing future Joshi fears the existence of a replicant child will bring.

In spite of this uncertain ending, there is also a sense of finality to it that is absent from *Blade Runner*. In contrast to *Blade Runner*'s postmodern ending, which is characterized entirely by ambiguity, fragmentation, and the deferral of meaning, *2049* offers a metamodern ending grounded in emotional sincerity, relationality, and affective closure. In the closing scene of *Blade Runner*, Deckard and Rachael physically escape the apartment or the city into an unknown future. *Blade Runner* ends on a departure, but *2049* ends with an arrival. The culmination of *2049*'s plot is not found in K escaping, or Stelline joining the resistance, or Deckard leaving the lab with Stelline; instead, the film ends on the emotional and personal moment of Deckard and Stelline's reunification. Despite an ambiguous future, this is a final expression of how emotional authenticity is all that truly matters. Like she was to the replicant resistance, Stelline had previously been to Deckard just a symbol: the future of the world. She finally becomes 'real' to him when he meets her. With Deckard's final expression being one filled with emotion, he too becomes real – and human – again. *2049* opens with eyes and ends with hands reaching out for connection, representing a shift from passive observation to action, with the power to effect change, interact with the world, and connect with others. The film closes with the image of that hand, emphasizing the ability to *feel* (what is) real rather than just see it. This ending does not destabilize or threaten the potential for meaning, but reconnects meaning to a sense of finality. And in this ending, *2049* offers a glimpse into another kind of utopia: one defined entirely by personal closure through affect and connection.

In a final visual mirroring that connects K and Stelline, and the conclusion to the hand-in-rain motif, the film cuts from an image of the replicant K lying in real snow to the natural-born Stelline holding her hands out to feel virtual snowflakes (*2049* 2:32:07-16). Not only does this signal a kind of legacy for K beyond his death, as Stelline carries on their shared memories, but it also emphasizes the film's ultimate theme: the interrelatedness of what is natural and what is made. In the synthetic world of *2049*, no one is purely 'real' or 'artificial.' Rather, what constructs and connects one to the 'real' is sincere belief. In this way, the film does not signal the end of meaning but its reimaging. As the convergence of all the different ways in which *2049*'s metamodernism departs from the postmodern *Blade Runner*, Stelline becomes the film's utopian hope for what follows the end. As 'new life' after the apocalypse, she carries hope for rebuilding the world. As human-replicant, she embodies the potential for radically new modes of being beyond previous definitions of what it means to be human. As memory-maker, she constructs the real out of the artificial and insists on the transformative power of affect and

sincerity. As the child of the previous film's protagonists, she reunifies past and future into a coherent timeline, and as such, offers the potential for a future built on knowledge of the past – a future that is not a copy but an evolution of what came before.

5. Conclusion

There is a fitting irony in how *2049*, a sequel to a film that has endlessly replicated itself and is about human replicants, commits to the potential for something authentic and new to be imagined out of the artificial and old. In the same way, metamodernism functions as a kind of sequel to postmodernism. It draws inspiration from the past, acknowledging what came before, while also looking forward in an attempt to overcome the limitations of that past. With the instability and uncertainty that hangs over the 21st century, there is a sense that postmodern cynicism has lost its productive potential and its place as the cultural dominant. The emergence of post-postmodern movements indicates a collective and continuous effort to define this contemporary moment of hypercapitalism, digitalization, crisis, and renewed sincerity. Unifying these theories under one framework is metamodernism, which proposes that the postmodern sensibility has been replaced with an attitude of “informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 5). Metamodernism thus maintains postmodernism’s critical gaze and awareness of the artificial, constructed nature of the world and its hierarchies, while also reflecting a desire to reassemble and pursue authentic meaning in the world. A metamodern project of reconstruction has succeeded the postmodern project of deconstruction.

Metamodernism finds its foundations in the very losses that postmodernism proclaimed – those of history, affect, depth, utopia, and the real – and builds itself through the process of their restoration. In order to break through the postmodern present and its many endings, Jameson suggests the necessity of writing the future into existence:

[A] breaking of the sound barrier of History is to be achieved in a situation in which the historical imagination is paralysed and cocooned, as though by a predator’s sting: no way to burst through into the future, to reconquer distance, let alone Utopia, except by writing yourself into it, but without turning back. (“Future City” 77)

As a theory still being written, metamodernism exists as part of this ongoing effort to restart history and reengage with a utopian impulse. Part of what makes metamodernism an exciting framework through which to approach the 21st-century moment is how, as Hanzi Freinacht suggests, it “accepts progress, hierarchy, sincerity, spirituality, development, grand narratives, party politics, both-and thinking and much else. It puts forward dreams and makes suggestions. And it is still being born” (375). As a theory forming alongside the production of contemporary works, metamodernism’s definition is as much in progress as it is that very progress itself. As such, it remains a theory that needs to be further developed, explored across different media, and applied to other films that extend beyond MacDowell’s Quirky Cinema. This thesis

represents one small part of an on-going project to uncover how the metamodern structure of feeling is expressed through cultural and artistic products. Metamodern theory and works, like *2049*, are one step in the process of writing ourselves into the future.

Close readings of *2049* and *Blade Runner* reveal how the metamodern sensibility renegotiates postmodern skepticism toward various types of endings, from narrative conclusions to the collapse of certainty and identity, to deaths, and the possibility of utopia beyond an apocalypse. In its destabilization of endings, *Blade Runner* exemplifies the loss of history, depth, affect, and utopia, and thus in resignifying endings, *2049* posits their return. Beginning on the level of form, *Blade Runner* fronts a postmodern hesitancy towards finality through its many variations, its pastiche of older styles into a retrofuturism, and its commitment to narrative ambiguities. *2049*, on the other hand, is conscious of its existence as a sequel, but rather than mimicking it, *2049* disrupts the pattern in order to imagine a new future. As the boundaries between human and non-human blur and memories and eyes as signifiers for reality and identity become unreliable, *Blade Runner* suggests that performance imitates the real convincingly enough to make the category of the 'real' insignificant altogether. In the wake of this new artificial reality, characters in *2049* like Stelline and K represent how belief in the affective real reframes performance not as pastiche of the real but an active construction that defines what is real. This is a metamodern logic that extends to characters confronting their deaths. While replicants seek continuation because death negates the possibility of humanizing or locating meaning in *Blade Runner*, in *2049*, the promise of mortality authenticates characters' humanity and emotionally and materially connects them to the world and others, making their deaths a culmination of their autonomy and a final enactment of meaning. Finally, given the post-apocalyptic settings of these films, the question of what comes after an end underlines their narratives. The utopia of *Blade Runner* is perpetually deferred, thus existing only as a commodified illusion or an impossible escape. *2049* accepts that utopia can never be fully realized, but then reinterprets it as a consistent movement toward change rather than a place.

While *2049* does not entirely abandon the themes, narratives, and aesthetics of *Blade Runner*, it depicts an evolution of them under a metamodern context. *2049* rejects its predecessor's indeterminacy and cynicism about what happens at the end and embraces the value to be found in emotional sincerity, a sense of connection to the world and others, and the ability to not just uncover but construct new meaning out of the artificial and the old. Thus, *2049* articulates the metamodern beliefs that repetition has the capacity to transform, not just copy or parody; affect can authenticate the artificial; death is a culmination, not a fracturing,

of meaning; utopia is an illusory place but at the same time achieved in every step of progress made. What connects them all is a renewed conviction that meaning can be found in spite of, or perhaps because of, an ending.

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7. Appendix

English Abstract

In this thesis, I situate Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) within the discourse of metamodernism, an emerging cultural theory. Metamodernism assumes some conventions of modernism and postmodernism while moving beyond them to offer a new framework through which to approach contemporary 21st-century cultural products of a digitalized, global capitalist, and existentially anxious society. Through a narrative analysis of *2049* from the lens of metamodernism and a comparison with the postmodern *Blade Runner* (1982/1992/2007), I trace the films' diverging approaches to the problem of endings – from the end of the world to the end of narrative to the end of the stable self. Although set in the same world with familiar characters, aesthetics, and themes, the two films' distinct narratives and visual languages offer differing depictions of the boundaries between human and non-human, the role of memory, how characters reconcile with death, and the possibility of utopia. These differences reveal an evolution of the conceptualization of human subjectivity that mirrors the metamodern movement between and beyond the cynicism of postmodernism and toward renewed sincerity. I argue that *2049* embraces some of its predecessor's ambiguity regarding the stability of identity and narrative but ultimately rejects its apathetic ambivalence in favor of emotional authenticity and the potential for individual meaning in an artificial world.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

In dieser Masterarbeit befasste ich mich mit Denis Villeneuves *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) im Kontext des Metamodernismus, einer neuen kulturellen Theorie. Der Metamodernismus übernimmt einige Konventionen des Modernismus und Postmodernismus, entwickelt diese jedoch weiter und bietet einen neuen Rahmen, um zeitgenössische Kulturprodukte des 21. Jahrhunderts in einer digitalisierten, global kapitalistischen und existenziell verunsicherten Gesellschaft zu untersuchen. Anhand einer narrativen Analyse von *2049* aus der Perspektive des Metamodernismus und eines Vergleichs mit dem postmodernen *Blade Runner* (1982/1992/2007) zeige ich die unterschiedlichen Herangehensweisen der Filme an das Problem des Endes auf – vom Ende der Welt zum Ende der Erzählung bis zum Ende des stabilen Selbst. Obwohl beide Filme in derselben Welt mit denselben bekannten Figuren, derselben Ästhetik und denselben Themen spielen, bieten ihre unterschiedlichen Erzählungen und Bildsprachen verschiedene Darstellungen der Grenzen zwischen menschlich und nicht-menschlich, der Rolle der Erinnerung, der Art und Weise, wie sich die Figuren mit dem Tod versöhnen, und der Möglichkeit einer Utopie. Diese Unterschiede offenbaren eine Entwicklung in der Konzeptualisierung der menschlichen Subjektivität, die die metamoderne Bewegung zwischen und jenseits des Zynismus der Postmoderne hin zu einer erneuerten Aufrichtigkeit widerspiegelt. Ich argumentiere, dass *2049* einige der Ambiguitäten seines Vorgängers bezüglich der Stabilität von Identität und Erzählung übernimmt, aber letztendlich dessen apathische Ambivalenz zugunsten emotionaler Authentizität und des Potenzials für individuelle Bedeutung in einer künstlichen Welt ablehnt.