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A Replicant Walks into the Desert of the Real and Tells Unfunny Jokes in the Flickering Lights of Neon-Gothic Fantasy

Abstract: This paper proposes a new concept, that of phosphorescent modernity, which is manifested in the cinematic aesthetics dominated by neon lights. The author claims that the constant revival of the Gothic, which produced many forms of specular imagination, has evolved into a version which can be defined as *Neon-Gothic*, identifiable as a sub-genre in several science fiction movies. Using as a case study the visuality of recent productions, such as *Blade Runner 2049*, the paper explains these transformations from the perspective of the evolution of lighting in Western civilization. The central argument is that an ever changing form of modernism was generated by various modes of lighting. This allows the author to distinguish between a limelight modernity and an incandescent modernity. The final stage of this evolution has reached the limits of its own artificiality and has accumulated into a grandiose form of flickering representations.

Keywords: Neon-Aesthetics; Neon-Gothic; Phosphorescent Modernity; Tech-Noir Cinema; Future-Noir Cinema; *Blade Runner 2049*.

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Considered one of the most influential films in contemporary popular culture, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) has become a classical reference for many filmmakers and an object of cult admiration for the spectators. Released in 2017, its long awaited sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, had to live up to the legacy of its forerunner. While many film critics dismissed the version created by Denis Villeneuve as "lacking substance"[1], the recent film integrated into the cult cinematic narrative, which has coalesced into a multifaceted cultural artifact, having a major impact on the aesthetics, narrative structures and ideas in numerous other productions. Based on a polymorphous vision about our future, fathered by the imagination of Philip K. Dick, we can trace the imprints of the visual universe built by Ridley Scott's *BR* in innumerable other cinema works. From *The Matrix* trilogy of the *Wachowski* brothers, to Spielberg's *A.I.*, or *The Terminator* franchise and even *RoboCop*, there are multiple connections between the dystopian universe populated by synthetic machines, co-existing with human beings, and the fascination for narratives about a post-industrial world.

However, when defining the qualities of the *BR* universe and describing the complex elements that generated such a profound influence in contemporary popular culture, there are manifold aspects that diverge when it comes to explaining its aesthetics. Quickly acclaimed as a *neo-noir* production, or catalogued as a *neo-Gothic* masterpiece, the aesthetic and narrative tropes used by Scott clearly belonged to an ample revival of the Gothic, more visible and more radical in this director's previous and outstanding science-fiction work, *Alien* (1979). While the dystopian future imagined by Scott displayed all the elements that allowed film critics to identify it as a precursor of the *future noir* sub-genre[2], its recycled visual and narrative components, which borrowed heavily from the classical genres of the dark detective films of the 40s also allowed others to describe it as the part of the *tech-noir* revival during the 80s[3]. Enthusiastically hailed as opening the way for a new cinematic sub-genre, the movie was considered an expression of postmodern hybrid genres, a fusion of dark human emotions, sci-fi locations, advanced technologies and noir cinematography[4].

Other authors, like Thomas Elsaesser[5] who critically analyzed the apparently innovative approach of Ridley Scott, considered it a manifestation of a "retrofitted techno-kitsch", while recognizing its relevance as the "Ur-text of cinematic postmodernity"[6]. This is where the film historian suggested that the movie was filled with "Neon-Gothic" decadence, anticipating many of our contemporary anxieties about consumerism, ecology and sexuality[7]. In the following interpretation I will further explore the concept that Elsaesser briefly mentioned, hopefully not by misspelling

the words, and re-consider this intuition into a fully fledged concept. Thus my first hypothesis is that a *Neon-Gothic* dimension is already manifested in Scott's early work, which is amplified in Villeneuve's *BR 2049*.

When trying to identify the characteristics of the *Neon-Gothic*, a couple of nuances are necessary. First the Gothic tropes, which are expressions of the resurgence in our contemporary imagination for the exceptional visions developed during early modernity, the fascination for monsters, plots and visual elements belonging to the Gothic "visual codes"[8], the conventional spaces made popular by Gothicized literature, the predisposition for unnatural situations and uncanny characters, defined as "Promethean monsters"[9], include *BR* and *BR 2049* into a larger phenomenon already described as Gothic cinema. It was argued that the contemporary *neo-Gothic* cinematic experiences were already generated when the modern "horror-Gothic" narratives ushered what David Jones identified as the Gothic visual machine[10]. This literary theorist links the Gothic renewal with the development of dioramas and daguerreotypes, as the spectacle of illusions made possible by the technological manipulation of lights induced the formation of Gothic narratives dominated by ghastly lights, shadowy buildings and plots. For Jones the spread of magic lanterns (or the lanterns of fear) and the subsequent development of phantasmagorias[11] has transformed literature. Also, the impact of these luminous shows induced the transformation of the cinematic machinery[12], in turn creating a genre that begins with Thomas Edison's 1910 *Frankenstein*, and reaches into the contemporary visceral cinema.

Two additional notions should be added in order to complete our understanding of what the Neon-Gothic imagination can include. The first derives from the *Neon Noir* formula employed by Woody Haut[13] (1999), who used it to describe how the new crime fiction writers in American literature rediscovered the artistic value of the detective storytelling by placed them in a pulp culture environment. The second notion has cultural value, and it is extrapolated from Jean Baudrillard's observations about the new modularities of urban artificiality, specially his notes about the casino-hotels in Las Vegas and their relationship with the desert[14]. My focus will be on discussing the resources of these ghostly sensations and the hallucinatory effect of a universe radiating with neon lights, populated by rubber mannequins and silicone beings, based on fiberglass and opaque windows.

Turning Off the Postmodern Lights, Turning on Phosphorescent Modernity

This is why my premise begins with the idea that we should interpret modernity from yet another perspective. Without being excessively deterministic, we cannot avoid observing how our relationship with artificial lights has changed in the age of electricity and that it changed our cultural experiences. The evolution of urban illumination and the development of industrial lighting technologies have roots in early modernity. Initially modern existence was dominated by gas lights, then the first electric arc bulbs influenced middle modernity and now we are in a late phase of modernity, when our civilization switched from incandescent bulbs to *LED lights*. Just as it was the case with other sources of artificial lights during human history, this had a major influence on significations, aesthetic manifestations and our imagination.

Several marginal remarks made by Walter Benjamin are confirming the hypothesis I advance here. His conceptualizations, which were only implied, show that the cultural critical intended to write about different "modes of lighting"[15]. As a close observer of modernity, he was keen to notice that the transformation of objects and spaces in the modern city was induced by the new urban lights. While Benjamin did not fully develop his intuitions and notes about the various *modes of artificial illumination*, he clearly pointed out some important distinctions between the various nocturnal experiences of the city, concluding that Paris and its modern arcades were the result of the new gas lights[16]. Transitioning from a pre-modern existence, dominated by Chinese lamps and torchlights, Benjamin observed that the new gas lights created a different mood, which was in a dialectical relationship with the electric lights. In another memorable observation from the Arcades Project, Benjamin discusses the effect of gaslight illumination and decries the loss of its radiance once the streets and gangways were illuminated by electric lights[17].

His notes about the role of gas lights in the formation of modernity have not exhausted their relevance, as modern life is still dominated by falsifying colors and tones produced by the artificial transformation of reality. Just as daylight was replaced by the shimmering lights of candles, and gas light was abandoned for the benefits of incandescent bulbs, what appears to us as the same yellow glow of light, is not culturally

constant, nor its modifications inconsequential. Correspondingly, the fact that our social, political and aesthetic experiences today are dominated by neon lights, allow us to discuss their role in a new cultural "illumination". As we are no longer limited to perceiving reality in the floods of electric lights, a new type of phantasmagoric state of mind is induced by the new bioluminescent mirages, where the phosphorous translucent images generate a different form of uncanniness.

If the entire experience of modernity was made possible by technological lighting systems, we can identify at least three different moments in the formation of the modern modes of vision. The first period can be described as a *limelight modernity***,** slowly developed as urban life was shifting from lanterns and candle lights, to gas illuminated cities. After Paris introduced public street gas lighting in 1820, two decades later this technology was largely adopted in almost all European capitals, from Vienna, to London and St. Petersburg. This early modern visuality changed again after the invention and spreading of incandescent types of lighting, based on the technologies using carbon electric arcs, which made lights brighter and bulbs cheaper. Yet this also altered the visual standards of modernity, inducing an *incandescent modernity*. At the end of this period, another form of luminary altered our public and private spaces, largely made possible by the expansion of fluorescent and neon lights. First the neons, with their oversaturated abilities, then OLED technologies and other types of image processing, are based on phosphorescence. This comes with a particular ability to project light beyond the perceptive capacity of the human eye, offering us the possibility to see the world in an entirely different light. The experiments with phosphor coating have definitely created a new visuality, one that today is integrated in almost all computer monitors and TV screens we use. The various phosphors integrated in all our daily experience are mediating our reality. And since phosphors are not limited to the particular chemical element, but include any materials emitting light, we can delimitate an entire technological influence which forms a *phosphorescent modernism* (or phosphodernism).

Previous cultural interpretations of the impact produced by phosphor coated fluorescent tubes, in which ultraviolet light projects strange glows and color tones, were noted by Jean Baudrillard. The French philosopher considered Las Vegas as the ultimate expression of the excess of significations, specific to postmodernism. In the general "desertification" of signs and of human beings[18], the critic reads the excess of tubes and neon cityscapes, together with the phosphorescent reality radiating energy into the desert, as "a transparent form, a lightness near to complete disappearance"[19]. In his opinion the "era of the neons" was an integral part of postmodernism, and the phosphor coated technologies radiating a new type of energy were signs showing the end of a civilization replacing milk and honey with ketchup and plastic[20]. Another explanation is provided by Slavoj Žižek, who follows a similar trajectory in his interpretation of the post-911 society[21]. The Slovenian theorist equivocates a line used by Morpheus in *The Matrix* and the collapse of the twin towers in New York. Looking at the debris from the destroyed buildings falling over the city, covering everything with a fog of opaque dust, this state of reality seemed to be a proof for the "disintegration of the Real"[22].

In my own perspective the night lights in Las Vegas and the aftermath of the tragic scene in New York are more than just expressions of postmodern emptying of meanings, they are integral parts of contemporary *Neon-Gothic experience*. Paul Virilio identified these innovative ways in which the predominantly gaseous light sources define our social experience as the "Electronic Gothic Era"[23.] The visual culture theorist compared the sensations of a contemporary human in Times Square with those made possible by the medieval cathedrals, and I consider that this line of thought deserves a closer interpretation. However, the type of visuality dominating our existence today, which filters our reality through phosphorous glows, is creating phantasmic projections that are not only electronic. The resulting sensations of these emissions of dense luminous sources, generating scintillations of reverberating luminous projections, are like the opaque cloud covering the 9/11 drama, inducing a sensation unlike any other.

I also propose this concept as an alternative to what other authors described as "Gothic-postmodernism"[24], following the insights from Baudrillard's understanding of the "culture of death". In fact we need to completely abandon the notion of postmodernism and to search for newer terms that better contain the experiences of contemporary culture and society.

Flickering of the Neon-Gothic Aesthetics

This is why we need to better understand the relationship between the Gothic and the Neon-Gothic. And in order to do so, we must return to the experience created by medieval Gothic cathedrals.

These innovative forms of architecture created an entirely new way of seeing both the material and the spiritual worlds, induced by abrupt reflections of light, diverging into dark corners and angular shapes, populated by shadows and strange creatures. Contemporary Gothicism was inspired by this experience, but was also the result of our modern fascinations and anxieties, induced by the low key, directional lighting. Explicit in the Victorian novels, this continuation of the Gothic is best visible in the cinematic productions creating the so-called "gothic atmosphere". Explicit in the early cinematic horrors, dominated by atmospheric darkness, a new style of lighting had as a result the development of the expressionist films. This particular sub-genre appeared when authors like Robert Wiene reconstructed and explored the Gothic visual experience with the help of the new powerful directional spotlights.

The continuity of the Gothic visuality, as translated by Abbot Suger of St. Denis, perhaps one of the witnesses and participants in the creation of this radical transformation of Western world, is provided by its "anagogical vision". For the Medieval abbot, who was also the designer of one of the first new Gothic cathedrals, this form of visuality allowed an ecstatic and mystical experience, taking the believers to higher levels of spirituality. He described this mode of seeing as a transformational capacity of the Gothic lights, considering that their visual effect was to turn the material into the spiritual[25]. It is obvious that the great cathedrals built in Western Europe as early as the twelfth century were creating an unprecedented visual regime, one that was not only specific to its architecture, but expanded into many other ways of artistic

expression. The fascination for the powerful fascicules of lights beaming down from the sky or simply emanating a strange radiance was accentuated by the multi-colored luminescence refracted from stained-glass windows. The combined effect of the "Rayonnant" style, of the shadows projected by the pointed arches, throwing ample dark lines, together with creatures like gargoyles, imps and various other demons, accumulated into a Gothic fantasy. It included not only heavenly experiences, but also dark representations, so we can ascertain the "Gothic aesthetic experience" as a sensibility for both the grotesque and sublime.

As Heidi Kaye advocated[26], the Gothic imageries never left the Western imagination. We can still identify a wide range of influences in various narratives, art objects and, more recently, film genres. For our current discussion, the most important elements is the direct connection between the Victorian Gothic and the development of the noir imagination, then the development of the horror Gothic genre and the neo-Gothic science-fictions. While we are no longer dominated by the vertical lines of the Gothic cathedrals, we are in fact experiencing a "globalgothic" expansion[27]. We are still fascinated by the renewed forms of Gothic aesthetics, and, as these connections are indisputable, their manifestations are manifold. One element is recurrent, as noted previously by Eisner[28], the Gothic arch and its acute angles remain some of the most important visual reference for understanding the modern search for visual expressions that are uncanny and strange, best illustrated by the heritage of cinematic expressionism.

Without contesting the validity of the arguments supporting that a global expansion of Gothic tropes and the revival of the Gothic was made possible by the Victorian literature, my argument here is that this particular manifestation of the modern Gothic has another recent version, the *Neon-Gothic*. This variation of the Gothic aesthetic has multiple cinematic dimensions, but all are generated by a particular mode of using resorbing lights, identifiable as phosphorescent. Anticipated by several movies, the phosphorescent visuality was particularly close to the German Expressionists and *Metropolis* (1927) deserves here a closer attention. Although the new luminous experience dominated by neons was not fully developed, it appears very suggestively in an important scene from Fritz Lang's film. As the robot Maria is activated, several pulsating circles of neon lights surround her, generating a strange glow around this wondrous machine. The neons give the mechanical device an almost divine function and provide the spectators with an anagogical understanding of the story.

As observed by Rudi Stern, the "neon guru" of contemporary art, these apparently simple visual devices and even the advertising signs, can project an added "transcendent" meaning[29]. While Stern and other artists explored the resources of commercial neon tubes in a new art form, believing that gas filled lights offered a different mode of reality, the way in which we process images daily is re-invested meanings. Nevertheless, the *neon-aesthetic* means more than using commercial signs in art environments. Reframing Benjamin's concept of aura, in terms of public and private spatiality, we can say that our entire aural experience of has been transformed by these lighting technologies. From the

earliest phases when simple tubes impressed modern "*flâneurs*", to this recent phase of the era of mechanical multiplication of meanings, these technologies of phosphorescent representation have influenced the aura of cultural objects. In fact the aura is shape-shifting and transforming, as in Benjamin's own perspective there is no state of decay, only modalities of aural recovery. In the *phosphorescent modernity*, while cultural objects appear to be depleted of solidity, they are instead infused with another aural value, one diffusely spread, offering a new form of spill-over quality for the visual objects. It was Benjamin who anticipated this ideal of "profane illumination", which for him was the illustrated by the quality generated by the surrealist experience, a dreamlike state, sometimes related to drug induced states of mind, nevertheless a new mood of the images, perpetuated by their diffuse aura.

The formation of this *neon-aesthetics* can be explained by two technical developments. As pointed out before, one component was made embedded in the new "gaseous" lighting devices available in cinema. If cinema is "painting with light", as John Alton[30], one of the most important cinematographers of the noir genre has famously put it, then this particular technological component is determinant for the qualities of "motion pictures". A neon cinematic aesthetic was generated, which is explicit not only in the visual style of films, changing with the transformations of our lighting technology. Our changed visual experiences are reflected in this type of cinema works. The Wachowski Brothers' classical movie, *The Matrix*, provides an exemplary showcase for how the *neon cinematic* functions. The movie is divided into

separate imaginary and real spaces, each with its own identity, and each shot in a way reproducing a particular neon induced state of mind and a corresponding social reality. The green tints dominating the apparently real world of Neon are opposed to the blue tones of the artificial intelligence, then the yellow-sepia glows characterize the authentic life in Zion. These experiences are different because they replicate the true colors of our daily existence, where the lights are different because the gases are different. Our spaces can be dominated either by helium induced yellows, or filled with mercury blue tints, and this transforms our perception on reality.

The other component has to do with the lights incorporated inside our visual devices. Since other authors already overviewed the "genealogy of visual technologies"[31], this approach is useful when the historical description of how our visual media today have transformed provides an insight on how cultural behaviors are changing. Sean Cubitt, who methodically described the evolution of lighting technologies, remarked that the dominant aesthetic is established by the help of visual technologies[32]. My own concern is how the light-emitting diodes (LED), based on fluorescent lights emitted by phosphor-coated cells which are filled with various noble gases, are now transforming our vision.

Everything Will Be "Gothified", Anything Can Be "Noirified"

Certainly the German Expressionism must be evaluated as another version of modern Gothic, but also part of a larger aesthetic reaction to industrial modernity. This an inherent discontent towards

modernity, already analyzed by many film critics, is followed by another relevant dimension, related to lighting technologies, which we must discuss. The earliest forms of the *neon-aesthetic* which can be identified in many German Expressionist movies can also be explained as a consequence of introducing yellow glowing tungsten lights by the Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA) studios in Berlin. Many elements of cinematography developed at that time, later recuperated in the neo-noir experiments, continue to influence cinema productions today.

The particular elements of this type of cinema, that some identified as "street films"[33], developed into an easily recognizable visual style, where placed in nighttime urban environments, claustrophobic contexts, with rain filled public scenes. More importantly the high contrasting lighting schemes generated an overall "gothic sensation" amplifying the constant sensation of anxiety induced by these movies. The new architectures of rapidly urbanized communities and the terror of urban existence, coupled with the strange city lights and the illumination of home interiors accumulated into a new imaginary. A comparison between *Metropolis*, the first Blade Runner created by Scott and *BR 2049* can pinpoint the evolution of this imaginary, as the trope of the menacing city, initially connected to the expressionist anxiety, was transformed later into the stranger forms of anti-modern expression. These transformations are profoundly influenced by the technologies of lighting.

Some of the elements of the *noir* aesthetics, often identified as the stylistics developed by the early German directors, are explained with non-cinematic devices.

One of the best illustrations remains Fritz Lang's masterpieces *Metropolis* (1927) and *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931). The director, who later emigrated to the United States, where he created dozens of noirs, coalesced in these early works a remarkable visuality. His expressionist variations, coupled with the detective and crime storytelling and the dark social and psychological dimensions were exported in the classical films noir, produced during the 40s and the 50s. The legacy of Lang maintained its relevance in the futuristic noirs of the 80s. This inner coherence of such productions was connected by many critics with the fact that an entire generation of filmmakers, part of the German emigration during WWII, was responsible for the development of the American film noir. It is undisputed that some of the most important cinema-makers working at UFA, already receiving global recognition during the 20s and 30s, were coerced to leave their country. As explained by Vincent Brook, the "Jewish émigré" hypothesis also connects the expansion of the expressionist aesthetics of the film noir with the paranoid, ambivalent identities, fears and anxieties of these Jewish artists[34].

Whether or not this sociological hypothesis can be confirmed, we cannot understand the stylistic devices of *film noir*, specially the lighting techniques extensively used by the classical noirs, without the technological developments of the German Expressionism. This cinematic canon, based on filming techniques like chiaroscuro lighting, and unbalanced compositions with foregrounded elements and angular lines accentuated the disquieting dimension of city existence. The shadows created by cinematic instruments were combined

with deeply troubled characters and unstable human relationships, also illustrating the alienating nature of modernity. Returning to Rudolf Kurz and his study on these issues published in 1926, we have a first definition of the Expressionist films as transmitting the "mood" of their time[35]. They are considered to be productions designed to manifest an "existential feeling", which the French film theorists Henri Langlois later described as "Caligarisme"[36].

Another explanation is that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), directed by Robert Wiene, showcases the importance of replacing the carbon arc light and subsequent exploration of the resources of the mercury gas discharge vapor lamp. This technological device permitted a new type of lighting emission, and simultaneously made possible a new mode of artistic expression. The directional lightning, as used in Wiene work, together with his ability to practice the controlled functions of the new lighting technologies, represented a turning point. While very similar with the contemporary stage lights, casting dramatic shadows and using illumination for their melodramatic effect, we must understand behind it the transformative power of two remarkable innovations of the first decades of modernity, the tungsten revolution and the gas lamp.

While some authors prefer to use the term "caligarisme" (the French for caligarism) in order to separate the classical Expressionism from the practices in other early Weimar cinema, Wiene's aesthetic based on the distorted and angular rays of light, remains fundamental for the evolution of contemporary cinema. Described by the traditional film studies as melodramatic lighting or effect lighting, in order

to oppose this technique from the bright lights of classical studio productions, was not necessarily specific to the German Expressionism. As Patrick Keating explained it[37], there was a larger processes, a gradual introduction of melodramatic lighting. The argument is that this technology already existed and was integrated in several Hollywood movies, even before the German Expressionists. Thus it would be erroneous to claim that every shadowy setting has to be connected exclusively with this genre. The theatrical and shadowy stylistics cannot be limited to a group of filmmakers.

Instead I would suggest that this approach to cinema was simultaneously made possible by the transformations permitted by the bulb invented by *Sándor* Just and Franjo Hanaman. Their invention, patented in Austro-Hungary in 1904, changed the essence of our vision and the overall cinematic spatiality. My argument is that the so-called "tungsten revolution" must be linked with the expansion the previously defined *phosphorescent aesthetics*. The technology of filling the bulbs with inert gases (most often argon) not only made the filaments last longer, it also changed the quality of lights[38]. While Edison's arc lamps were based on the technology of the carbon (or mercury) arcs, which provided bright lights, heftily illuminating the entire scene, the new technology competed with the floodlighting practices so common in canonical cinema. The new era of expressionist moviemaking was made possible by the replacement of traditional arc lamps and the incandescent bulbs of the classical backlights, with new units that allowed the frontal position of the source of light. Highlighting the faces of actors and amplifying the shadows of distorted spaces,

these innovative lights created not only an entire cinematic genre, they were essential for the development of a new cultural mind-frame.

Frances Guerin extensively documented this consequential connection between the technological revolution in lighting and the development of the German Expressionist aesthetic[39]. And although Guerin describes the development of a specific German "culture of light" during the 20s, the arguments about the links between the development of industrial electrical lights and the creation of a "technologized" mode of seeing are important[40]. However, I consider that the quality of these lights needs and extensive interpretation. While Guerin provides a coherent interpretation of the modalities of lighting in German cinema and society, I must disagree with the conclusions presented in this book. Moving from analyzing the connections between cinema and technology to ideology, the author places the Nazi spectacularity in the continuation of the aesthetics of the electric lights. In fact a qualitative understanding of the features of the lighting types used by the IIIrd Reich would show that the expressionists belonged to a radically different imagination. Hitler's ideology was amplified by the great displays of torches and bond fires, which made an appeal to a pre-modern imagination. The night-time rallies and the deployment of a particular Gothic dimension of the Nazi regime are at the opposite end of the modernity displayed in the German expressionist films and the in the noir genre.

Our conceptual problems come from the fact that the *noir imagination* can be extremely expansive and inclusive. The "noir" concept can engulf almost everything, from the 1923 *King Kong* to Kubrick's *2001: Space Odyssey*[41]. Authors who share this broader view, traced the long history and recurrence of the elements of the noir films suggesting that the interwar German Expressionism, the western noirs or neo-noir productions such as *Sin City,* can share the same principles[42]. William Park points out the hybridity of all these definitions and dismisses the "essentialist" definitions of film noir[43], and his arguments confirm the fact that the influence of the genre moved beyond the "classical" productions. There are several sub-genres, from the neo-noir, to post-noir or tech-noir, that exploit the major characteristics of this style, yet cannot be included in the same aesthetics. While keeping the morally defective protagonists, some of the chiaroscuro lighting strategies, or the unsettlingly strange urban environments[44], all tropes that can "noirify" any movie, they are different.

The question here is if the expansion of the "expressionist" label on all movies with a "noir mood", as decried by authors like Scheunemann[45], can be better explained. As noted before, my own suggestion links the differences with technological developments. The easy labeling of every cinematic production that uses distorted perspectives and contrasting lighting as "noirs" needs to be abandoned. While some critics propose a revision of the entire "expressionist stylistics"[46], together with a consequential reinterpretation of future noir films and tech-noirs, the tendency to "noirify" cinema is explicit. The fact that we have newer versions of the noir, like the "historical noir" or the "zombie noir", that almost each national cinema has its own "noirs", from the French to the Japanese cinemas,

indicates that these mechanisms continue to produce effects.

The brief overviewing of these debates is useful since it provides a better understanding for how we can deal with the broad concept of *Gothic-noir*. From the classical work of the French film critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton[47], who created the conventional framework of describing the "noir" as a distinct genre based on a certain "malaise"[48], the search for explanations was always diverse. Looking for the sources of the "noir atmosphere", Borde and Chaumenton suggested that the French realism as practiced by Renoir and Carné, with its respective influences from the surrealist painters and, of course, the German Expressionism are the main ingredients[49]. A couple of major "attributes" of the noirs can be contained by the formula "shadows, sexuality and strangeness". The Hollywood noir films, having roots in the American painting traditions, linked to artists like Demuth or Sheeler, and the pulp detective novels, generated an entire new mode of making movies. Despite all the negative observations, the German Expressionist experiments naturally blended into the American noir cinematic and, while the conceptual controversies about the aesthetic dimensions of these films and their belonging to a category or another can produce multiple definitions technology they are inextricably linked.

The use of spotlights to create long shafts of illumination in foggy backdrops, the improvement of the chiaroscuro lighting technique, were made possible by another major invention. During the 50s the first xenon lamps were successfully experimented and then commercially introduced by the German company Osram, as early as 1952. Following the structuralist interpretation proposed by Mike Cormak[50], who analyzed the noir lighting using four different codes of lighting – exposure (light/ dark), intensity (soft/ hard); direction (diffuse-precise), shadows (present or absent) – there is an ideological function in cinematic illumination. This author exposes the differences between the scheme of lights in *Wuthering Heights* and *Dead End*, for example, yet in fact it does not account for the ideological dimensions of the technology. A cinematic image is determined not only by the function lights, which would explain how low key lights or use of shadows might carry social references, such as reflecting the Depression era, but also the type of illumination. This aesthetic was anticipated by many other movies and is explicit in the famous scene from *Psycho* (1960), when Marion approaches the Bates hotel in the atmospheric oddity created by the neon lights mixed with the rain, specific marginal spaces. Described as a neo-noir melodrama, another film directed by the Coen Brothers, *Blood Simple* (1984), also displays the power of the "neon effect".

Glimmers of the Neon-Aesthetic

Yet the best illustration for the connection between ideology, aesthetics and lighting technology is provided, once more, by Ridley Scott's *BR*. Searching for an unconventional look, the director and his team created what we know today as the "Blade Runner look"[51]. With the help of Jordan Cronenweth, the cinematographer of *Blade Runner*, they experimented with the newly available xenon lights, which were functioning based on gas discharge arcs. The technology, at that time

extremely innovative, allowed a type of scene illumination soon integrated into the mainstream cinematic language. Practically this approach to lighting became part of the "atmospheric cannon", emulated by many directors. A remarkable example for the use of urban neon lighting and the exploration of xenon lights effects is *The Dark Knight* (2008). The traditional "expressionistic" experience is replaced by a now sensation, generated by LED panels, today extensively applied in cinema scene lighting. These cinematic practices, together with the wide-spreading of neon induced lights in our daily life, must be connected with the development of another aesthetic.

As the tech-noir genre combined neo-noir elements and science-fiction tropes, it also refused the logic of intense arc lights. The early technologies were replaced in the 70s by HMI technologies, in turn used as the main sources of illumination, producing a bright light similar to that of the sun. Instead of the floodlights and the clear illumination, the authors belonging to this genre were choosing a softness specific to neon luminaries, which now come in hundreds of colors and in multiple gaseous combinations. They have replaced the modernist feel of the tungsten, replacing it with a new mood, based on the atomic number 10. With a special glow of their own, these lights are now offering a more impalpable conduit and make possible the contemporary *phosphorescent aesthetic*, of which the *Neon-Gothic representations* are an integral part.

Although some critics rejected the argument that *BR* displayed the qualities of a "Gothic science-fiction"[52], the storytelling in Ridley Scott's *BR* corresponds with the Gothic imagination. From the attraction of

the "abject Other"[53], to the "urban Gothic" feeling which brings to this movie, like in *Alien*, an overwhelming fear from non-human monstrosity[54], at the narrative level *BR* also shares many characteristics of the noir detective films. Rick Deckard acts like a futuristic inspector, saving a robotic damsel in distress and solving a crime mystery in dark contexts. Together with the ample and angular compositions, the "Caravaggio style" of lighting, with abrupt contrasts of lights and shades, or the shadowy settings, these techniques make Ridley Scott's movie a *Gothic-noir* production. Since the elements explaining the Gothic dimensions of *BR* were thoroughly analyzed and are self-evident, my own interpretation is focusing on the spectral dimension of this Gothic expressionism developed by Ridley Scott. Its aesthetic components, that anticipate the contemporary *Neon-Gothic*, are most relevant.

This extensive exposition provided the necessary framework for a broader understanding of the position occupied by the two *Blade Runner* installments in the history of cinema. Often compared to movies like *Metropolis* (1926) or *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), which are easily identifiable as "modern" productions, *BR* was in turn defined as a "quintessential" manifestation of "postmodern pastiche"[55]. This apparently reasonable and unavoidable conclusion has to be disputed, mostly when it comes to labeling *BR 2049* as "postmodern". Many interpreters used the postmodern formula when trying to evaluate the importance and the qualities of *BR* and this cultural cliché became a standard reference in contemporary cinema theories. As Matt Hills overviewed the multiple readings assembled by many different

authors, the postmodern interpretation became a "cult discourse" for numerous film critics and academics[56]. Mark Bould, for example, described *BR* as representative for the typical postmodern aesthetics due to the intertextual nature of its storytelling[57]. This opinion is consistent with previous assessments, such as Giuliana Bruno's observations[58] that *BR* was following the logic of postmodernism, crossing the boundaries of aesthetic representations and coalescing variegate styles and genres. This appraisal was further argued by Matthew Flisfeder[59] who used *BR* as a "cognitive map" of postmodern philosophy, interpreting the movie as an expression of many if not all postmodern theories. Based on Fredric Jameson's concepts, the main premise of this author is that Scott's production illustrates the logic of late capitalism, displaying several contradictions of "postindustrial" society and generally showcasing the aesthetics of the postmodern.

Undoubtedly, at this level we can identify many elements apparently confirming the label of "postmodern movie", mostly because of the eclectic combinations of styles. The resulting aesthetic pastiche, the ironic combinations of visual elements from previous works, resulting in a revision of genres and tropes could confirm all these assessments. Nevertheless, we must also go beyond these interpretations that make *Blade Runner* a postmodern critique of modern tropes. To simply describe this mixture of sci-fi codes with the rules of the noir, to expose the "palimpsest" nature of these influences based on forms of representation which are driven by the aesthetic of populism[60] is a limited understanding of the mechanics of the film. Its aesthetic, linked with the cyberpunk visuality[61], must

be connected with the imagination of the French artist 'Moebius' (Jean Giraud) and the comic books called *Métal Hurlant*. As Ridley Scott used the imagination of H. R. Giger for creating the dark atmosphere in *Alien*, *BR* is also influenced by the bizarre worlds invented by Moebius, who integrated innumerable Gothic elements in his 1975 "*bandes dessinées*".

Another mandatory reference when trying to explain the aesthetic of *BR* is the influence of Edward Hopper and his diffuse urban lights and settings. The so-called "Hopper effect", is explicit throughout *BR*, as it has influenced many other noir movies[62]. Developed in the strange feeling of nighttime city life, generated by the diffuse and warm lights of urban luminaries, filtered through thick glass and broken into dark corners, this American painter is one of the masters of the neon tube effect. Displayed masterfully in Hopper's *Nighthawks*, together with the less known nocturnal sketches of this remarkable American painter, the "Night Shadow" series, this is a visual tone often used in several memorable scenes in *BR*. This alone would make the movie aesthetically consistent with what I described previously as *phosphorescent modernism*. The exaggerated shadows, together with the crepuscular projections which are reverberating the electric lights, have set up a painterly mood that was no longer dominated by the "chiaroscuro". As acknowledged by Scott, the visuality of Hopper was consequential for his own vision. And, although not fully developed in the first Blade Runner film, the hallucinatory presence of the neon lights, illuminating the scenes without making anything clear and representing without completely disclosing, make Ridley Scott a precursor

of the *Neon-Gothic*. If the *Gothic noir* maintained its obscene dimensions, provided by the accentuated lights and the uncertainty of vision, the opaque light of the neons and the flickering sensations providing a meaningful lack any substance have a unique softness. In the scene in which Deckard hunts Zhora, with her plastic raincoat and the neon lights of the rain filled L.A. interacting, the spectacular ending of this scene provides one of the best illustrations for the *Neon-Gothic effect*. With the slow motion amplifying the result, the ambiguity of lights and shapes, the red-blue flickers and the opaque transparency of the coat filtering the fluorescent lights, everything accumulates into a form of radiance that is worthy of a closer attention.

While many retro-noir movies, such as *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) or *Road to Perdition* (2002) continued to re-use the resources of the classical noirs, the tendency to develop a *neon-noir aesthetics* continued. The process is explicit *Sin City* (2005), especially in the chapter entitled 'That Yellow Bastard'. In fact the opposition between the "regular noir" and the smog covered L.A. in *BR*, where the lights of the city are creating an atmospheric urban existence, is clear *The Neon Demon* (2016). This horror movie, directed by Danish filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn, also exploits the pulsating nocturnal visuality, with scenes filled by strange urban illumination and shimmering interior luminaries. Neon tubes filled with either one of the "noble gases" are providing a profoundly subconscious experience, one that can be linked to surrealism, albeit Neon Gothic is the most transparent stage of the classical Gothic. All the surfaces lose their material stability

and the noise of stroboscopic lights creates an artificial sensation. The overall effect is close to what Baudrillard described as the "desertification of signs"[63].

In *BR 2049* the main plot discloses a more profound link with the "deserts of significations". As the story begins with the implied event of the great Black Out of 2022, with more details provided by the short animated film released before the official presentation of the sequel, there was a catastrophic nuclear event the destroyed the city. The new Nexus 8 replicants, having human-like traits, destroyed the Tyrell Corporation database of registered replicants, and started a revolutionary movement. While Norman Denzin famously claimed that *BR* was an illustration of all of Baudrillard's works on simulacra and that Deckard was a projection of the French philosopher himself[64], *BR 2049* is a more representative case for the ambiguity of the Neon-Gothic. Although this could appear as a "postmodern" manifestation, it generates a different visual and cultural experience. The excess of meanings displayed by the Neon-Gothic productions coalesces into a re-filled reality, even if this reality is one of self-conscious simulacra. While night-time Los Angeles remains the perfect location for such narratives, an out-of-world environment brings more support for the idea of a *Neon-aesthetic*.

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and the neon nights on planet Pandora is another relevant example for this visuality filled with a new type of diffuse energy. Cameron reconstructs in his block-buster fantasy film an entire world where bioluminescence replaces electrical lights. There a species of humanoid beings roam through forests emitting phosphor-coated

radiations, and have glowing dots on their skins. This plasticity of the artificial lights coupled with the iridescent dimension of nature give the movies a deep *Neon-Gothic* dimension.

A Replicant Walks into the Desert of Diffuse Luminaries

There are several symbolic deserts in the visual stylistics developed by Denis Villeneuve. For this argument we simplify the artistic vision of this director to the remarkable results produced by the dialectic antagonism between two spaces and two distinct image modes. The first is provided by the blue toned world of Los Angeles, contrasting with Las Vegas, filled with yellow lights. The opposition between the cold and warm luminaries appears often in cinema. However, while the *Neon-Gothic* mood in *BR* was limited to contrastive lights and mostly connected with the urban fluorescent luminaries, *Blade Runner 2049* is illustrating a major turn in the aesthetic of phosphorescent and diffuse lights.

The sequel directed by Villeneuve takes place thirty years after the first story ended, and the foggy and rainy streets and buildings of Los Angeles are totally redesigned as the neofuturist artist, Syd Mead, brings to *BR 2049* a truly Neon-Gothic dimension. The urban landscapes have their signifiers amplified by more powerful neons, which provides innovative functions for the immense public displays of advertising. Gleaming into the darkness of significations the screens projecting fascinating images are opposed to the "real" visible field, often obscured by snow and dust. Reflected by various diffuse surfaces, the two different qualities of lights can also

be observed in the interactions between characters.

The attributes the first type of lighting are provided by the properties of blue toned neons. This is most visible in the apartment where agent K lives together with his avatar lover/girlfriend/companion, Joi. Another visually provocative example from the 2017 sequel is the spasmodic sensation of the neon lights, overwhelming in the love scene between Agent K and Joi. A replicant and his virtual entity meet on top of a building, while rain pours on both of them, causing a shadowy complexion specific for this type of luminous experience. When Agent K interrogates Sapper Morton or when interacting with his Police Chief, the same the desert of reality, of an existence that is repetitive and empty, is amplified by the xenon lamps.

The opposing experience is provided by the Las Vegas desert and its abandoned casinos, with the sand covered buildings and the unsubstantial nature of its architectural features. These sensations, induced by the obscuring dust, are allegorically coupled with the orange-yellow tint. This coloring and the sandy texture give a granulation to the scenes which makes the pictures look like an old film, but also convey a surreal sensation. Amplified by the fact that the sandstorm covered erotic statues, which create a typical Gestalt contrast between the small background figure of K and the two oversized women figures in the foreground, these objectified female body parts render a surrealist state of mind, with references to Salvador Dali's "Metamorphosis". An ironic insinuation about the grandiose displays of modern advertising, where gigantic naked women promote various commodities, the glow of

these scenes also mirrors a particular type of neon light, similar to those emitted by sodium vapor lamps. The eerie sensation of K going through a CG landscape populated with exaggerated female representations in Las Vegas, is contrasted by the opposite experience of urban Los Angeles, where blueish displays give another tone to his vision. The fact that Villeneuve substitutes the effect of the rain, dominating in *BR*, with the opaque nature of snow and sand, provides more important suggestions. These two materials, coupled with the two different light-emitting sources, induce distinct crepuscular moods.

The third dimension of this experience belongs to the mixture of these two powerful "neon modes". The combination of different neon lights is illustrated by the Las Vegas nightclub fight scene between Agent K and Deckart. Here a stroboscopic filled space shows how the dichotomy of the chiaroscuro from the first *BR* is substituted replaces by the utter uncertainty of neon phosphorescence.

Seen from the perspective of the luminous transformation discussed here, the nature of the characters is also changing under the different tones of light. While apparently the new blade runner (played by Ryan Gosling) goes through the same inner conflict as Deckard, since both Deckard and Agent K experience an "existential crisis", they are not the same. While many other characters in Villeneuve's movie are troubled by their own impossible subjectivity, the previously explained existentialist dimension of *BR*[65], linking Ridley Scott's movie with the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, indicates the differences between *BR* and *BR 2049*. They are explicit at the metaphysical level, but also in terms

of illumination. If Deckard shares the same troubled interior and split of conscience similar with *The Maltese Falcon* style of detective (helped by the Humphrey Bogart allure of Harrison Ford), Agent K displays a more diffuse moral conscience. The ethic of Agent K is not populated by nightmares and altered fantasies, instead he is displaying a more opaque and confused subjectivity. This lack of emotional clarity is supported by the confusion of relationships and meanings, coupled with the negative dialectics of the artistic representations, all granulated towards fading. The contrastive shadows and lights belonging to the neo-noir vision are now turned into *Neon-Gothic* flickering, projecting a reality impossible to discern because of the neon screens that surround us. In the ending scene of *BR 2049*, Deckard meets his replicant daughter, created from the union between him and Rachael, the almost human creation of Tyrell. Ana Stelline is the mysterious creator of replicant dreams, and she is forced to stay in a glass dome, surrounded by artificial lights, in order to survive. Allegorically, our entire Neon-Gothic existence is a result of similar artificial memories, created by algorithms and projected by phosphor-coated lights.

The fact that the experience and visuality of the two Blade Runner movies are different, allows us to distinguish between two dimensions of the neo-Gothic. These distinctions are intentional and the opening scenes of both movies are illustrative, as they place the action into two different atmospheres. While Scott's ziggurat had a powerful modernist aura, with the entire urban cityscape emanating the vulnerability of humanity dominated by an architecture illuminated by incandescent lights,

BR 2049 opens with an image displaying large surfaces reflecting light, emitting a glow that is no longer linked with the dichotomous modernist anxieties about city existence. The aesthetic of *BR* was linked with the grotesque urban spaces mode possible by the Schüfftan effect (named after German cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan), extensively used in *Metropolis*. This effect, later fully integrated into the CGI techniques, allows the composition of even more complex dynamic between objects in the visual field. As noted by Peter Brooker, *BR* used the industrial locations, with their dehumanization effect on human beings, to provide a "post-metropolis experience"[66]. The motif of the "Dark City", the oppressive presence of a modern urbanity, was explicitly referring to the city of workers in *Metropolis*, which mimicked the abrupt lines of a Gothic cathedral.

Villeneuve creates a new experience for the Los Angeles of 2049, dominated by diffuse urban lights. Agent K's metropolitan existence no longer follows the visual logic developed in Ridley Scott's movie, based on contrasting illumination and aggressive contradictions between light and darkness. The scenery developed by Villeneuve in the Hungarian Korda and Origo studios conveys another prevailing tone, that of a diffuse and non-transparent reality. After "retiring" the Nexus 8 model replicant, K returns to L.A., and oversees the city covered in fog, which emanates a translucent impression, emphasized by the diffusion of lights. The Gothic style building where K lives (an actual site in Budapest), Chinatown and its hyper-real advertising boards, the multiple surfaces filtering reality used in each sequence, are all designed to amplify this neon-sensation. Another movie

belonging to the *Neon-Aesthetic*, *TRON: Legacy* (2010), displays similar types of experiences. Here the link with a game-like atmosphere is not aleatory, since this version of reality, populated with artificial lights and governed by LED screens and signs is specific to our own phosphorescent modernity.

But the truest manifestation of the *Neon-Gothic* is Niander Wallace. The blind and evil genius in *BR 2049*, now owner of the former Tyrell Corporation, has created of a different type of replicants, labeled Nexus 9. In fact Agent K is supposed to be part of this more obedient category of androids, obviously lacking the paranoia and even madness of the Nexus 8 models in *BR*. Yet the most impressive transformation is made visible by contrasting the interior of the Tyrell company, developed in the first Blade Runner, which was a mixture of Egyptian and Mayan spaces, with Niander's environments. Here the phosphoric yellow darkness surrounding the new evil genius industrialist must be linked with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and its distorted geometric shapes. The elements of the Neon aesthetic anticipated by this masterpiece of German cinematic expressionism, are most visible in the restored versions. Colorized in yellow and blue, it provides the overall mood that can be coupled with the experience Agent K has when he enters the headquarters of Wallace. Our own perception is influenced by these changes of luminosity. Moving from cold and blue tints into the yellow glowing spaces where the archives are kept, then seeing the wave-like reflections onto the walls of Luv's office, then the long and warm lights, everything induces the uncanny sensation of an extravagant

materiality. The most powerful reference to *Dr. Caligari* is also explicit in *BR 2049* when Agent K passes from by the main hall and approaches Wallace's private office. The mise-en-scène depicts a long and deep corridor, showcasing on each side of the walls several glass cases holding dead replicants, kept as museum objects. This visual oddity can be linked to the "cabinets of curiosities", extremely popular in Gothic novels, and with the overall fascination of the Gothicists for the unnatural. Nevertheless, it also creates a powerful sensation with the help of long yellow-sepia beams of light. Last but not least, the most impressive is the office of the "mad creator", where water reflects the illuminated space and generates an overall surreal feeling. We are no longer in the classical Gothic visuality, nor in the logic of the Gothic cinematic spaces, populated with twisted and deviant objects and scenes. This particular state of mind projected by the new luminaries is made possible by the transformative power of the new technologies of light.

While the character of Niander Wallace is extremely complex, we can understand it better by using the negative comparison with Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* (1922). Like other strange madmen in science fiction, having hypnotic power over their follower, Niander suffers from a "God complex". His objective is to gain access to the discoveries made by Tyrell, and to engender himself a new species of replicants, who can reproduce themselves. Here the link with the first Blade Runner is explicit. Niander's blindness is a recourse to the scene in *BR*, when Batty gouged the eyes of Tyrell, his own "Maker". Nevertheless, while Rutger Hauer's character was a true Golem, an anti-human creature produced

by science out of control (linked directly with "Der Golem" 1920, by Paul Wegener), *BR 2049* takes technophobia to another level. The deeply modern anxiety against "living machines", manifested by the robot Maria in *Metropolis*, is transformed in *BR 2049* into the coexistence of creatures who are "more real than the real". These new synthetic beings, created by Niander Wallace and his company, are more that innovative versions of androids. Neither is the trope of the crazy scientist who brings life into the inanimate metal and objects, or the kabbalist who wants to give life to matter, linked with the authoritarian regimes of early modernity.

Synthetic Lights for a Synthetic Existence

Although there are many narrative tropes and visual motifs linking the German expressionist cinema, *BR*, and *BR 2049* we finally need to ask if they convey the same subjective dimensions of human emotions and of the human psyche overall. Following the line of arguments proposed by Siegfried Kracauer, who observed the links between the macabre dimensions of the German cinematic expressionist experiments and the Nazi ascent to power, we need to address the issues of how these new movies are explorations of our subconscious. As Kracauer indicated, movies are aesthetic mechanisms which show "the soul at work", and the theme of the tyrannical ruler was present in the irrational projection of the Weimar cinema anticipating the coming of Hitler and of the Nazi regime[67]. This hypothesis was developed by Lotte Eisner in her 1952 effort explain the functions of the German Expressionism,

and she came to the conclusion that many of these movies were part of the "*écran demoniaque*", the evil screen[68]. In turn Ridley Scott's masterpiece was interpreted as a display of an important dimension of modern monstrosity which was, as the director himself called his movie, "a paranoid" dimension[69].

If applying this "Expressionist dogma" on *BR 2049*, that is accepting the argument that artistic forms are carriers of psychological functions, then the uncertain geometries and the spatial incertitude generates another irrational reality. Just as Langlois refused to use the term Expressionism, and replaced it with "calgarisme", which he described as the specific aesthetic practice that illustrated the exaggerated anxieties of modernity, I suggest using the notion of *Neon-Gothic* to explain these recent manifestations. While the French critic underlined these relationships between visual shapes, plastic representations and the subconscious projections, my contention is that *BR 2049* illustrates that the changes of illumination are indicative for more profound changes in our imagination. Just as the high contrasting German films cultivated the *light-dark* conflicts, the Neon-aesthetic is no longer searching for the excess of expressivity.

In *BR 2049* the fear of synthetic life is replaced by the desire for synthetic co-existence. This existential transformation of cinema, expressed by the type illumination practiced in the movies discussed, in turn mirrors our own experience with reality. The Neon aesthetics and the neon lights are gradually projecting our identity as Neon Gothic creatures.

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