

### A Lesson in Death: « Apocalypse Now » and « Blade Runner »

In « Apocalypse Now », following the narrative of the Conrad novel, « Heart of Darkness », Willard sails up the river in search for Kurtz, brilliant Colonel who's become the omnipotent leader of a rogue army, pursuing a savage war according to his own rules. In « Blade Runner », Deckard hunts down four runaway replicants, genetically engineered in the image of man, and for that very reason, outlawed on Earth. Both films tell the story of a solitary, alcoholic anti-hero, haunted by a past the audience won't know much about, put in charge by the authorities to chase and kill a charismatic and mysterious renegade, who acts outside the world of men, ruling as a living semi-god over a handful of souls. Willard will face Colonel Walter Kurtz, Deckard will face replicant Roy Batty.



#### Life on the Outside: Willard and Deckard

Coppola's movie begins with Willard, whom we discover in a Saigon hotel room facing his demons, lying despondently on an unmade bed, his eyes lost towards the ceiling. Dancing visions of napalm before him, long trails of fire over a dark jungle. Willard is a loner. When a mission is finally given to him, he complains having to share the trip: « *I needed the air and the time. Only problem was, I wouldn't be alone* ». Deckard too is solitary man, in life and in work. Retired from the blade runner business, he first declines the mission, but is soon called back to the stark facts of life in future Los Angeles: « *If you're not cop, you're little people* ». Afterwards, this blade runner looks oddly remote from his social function, delivering morally neutral sentences such as: « *Replicants are like any other machine. They're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, it's not my problem* ». Willard and Deckard first appear to be disconnected from society, then, as the movie goes on, disconnected from mankind. Like Willard facing his superiors, Deckard acts as an automaton. Only existing through his function in society, he superficially plays the game, with no personal involvement. To the replicant Rachel, he administers the Voight Kampff test that is supposed to discriminate man from its imitation. He speaks in a bored monotone, devoid of positive or negative emotion. The same way, Willard admits his inability to lead a normal civil life, but don't seem to fit either with his fellow bandmen. He's no longer part of the living. He already belongs to the Heart of Darkness, Kurtz's kingdom, that is the kingdom of Death.

The break-up between Willard and the world isn't merely of a social nature; it is existential. True, prisoner of his hotel room, Willard blames his disarray on the boredom of a soldier deprived of a mission. In a fit of self-destructive rage, he violently hits his reflection in the mirror, then contemplates with mute astonishment the blood dripping from his hand. This reminds us of the way the same Willard will later describe Kurtz: « *He broke from them, and then he broke from himself* », first indication that hero and villain are one and the same. Yet, Willard's pain can't be explained away

by boredom. It is existential suffering. His act is an expression of despair, as pure and primitive than Batty's wolf-like cry when Pris dies. Like Deckard, he only exist through his mission, which, like the vain eradication of « more human than human » replicants, is a chimera: « *You understand, Captain, that this mission does not exist, nor will it ever exist* ». Several times, Willard will point at the senselessness of his mission: in the middle of a surrealistic massacre, facing a thousand deaths, going up the river to kill a soldier accused of murder. His doubts echo Kurtz's words at the beginning of the movie, fragments of monologues on damaged audio tape: « *They call me an assassin. What do you call it, when the assassins accuse the assassin?* » If Willard and Deckard, unlike Kurtz and Batty, do share a social function, this function is a veil of illusion, hiding an existential void. Without a mission to justify his presence to the world, staring into his reflection, Willard sees himself for what he really is: a nothingness, the Hollow Man from T.S. Eliot's poem, as quoted by Kurtz at the end of the movie.

When the other characters express doubt about Willard and Deckard's work, their alienation from the world is complete. Rachel asks Deckard if he ever «retired » a human being by mistake, if himself has ever passed the Voight Kampff test, if he actually would hunt her down if she were to run away. To Kurtz, Willard is neither killer nor soldier: « *You're an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks, to collect a bill* ». Kurtz's derisive reference to Willard's superiors as petty salesmen is reminiscent of the mercenary attitude found in Batty's creator: « *Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell* ». However, Kurtz's sarcasm is misplaced. Willard, at this point, is no longer a soldier, nor is he a puppet at the hands of his superiors. He is an abstraction, a Beckett character, a man who fell down the world of men, the same way Deckard, finding the unicorn's origami on the floor, realizes that his last thread to mankind has been cut. Willard and Deckard are existential outcasts.

Willard and Deckard are metaphysical misfits: on the fringe of society, but more importantly on the fringe of being, trying to decipher an arcane universe. Willard's look upon the other characters is one of disbelief, the look of a XIXth century explorer confronting the incomprehensible customs of an unknown tribe. He's part of their world but can't understand the motive of their actions. Deckard, on the other hand, has gone beyond Willard's constant amazement and obviously gave up on figuring out how people like Bryant and Gaff, perfectly fit to their social environment, manage to function. The blade runner displays a disillusioned passivity that goes well beyond the usual Film Noir ironic distance. Neither Willard nor Deckard can communicate with their fellowmen. Both face a wall: the chaos of the world, and what parades as « order » inside the chaos. To the soldier, an apocalyptic war and the absurd care for military hierarchy in the confines of Hell. To the blade runner, the urban nightmare that is the futuristic Babel of Los Angeles, infinite maze of titan buildings and foreign cultures, and, at the centre of this Bosch-like mayhem, the caste system based on the arbitrary distinction between humans and replicants.



## Life on the Outside: Batty and Kurtz

Society has rendered the same verdict on both Batty and Kurtz: two deviant individuals, parodies of mankind that must be destroyed (regarding the replicants, « *This was not called execution. It was called retirement* »; regarding Kurtz, « *Terminate with extreme prejudice* »). Kurtz and Batty, self-ordained divinities, speak in riddles and look upon the mass with an absolute sense of superiority. At the same time, this superiority is the root cause of their downfall. The leader of the replicants is a nietszcheean figure, beyond mankind, doomed to fiercely burn and suddenly disappear. Batty must die because he is merely an imitation, a « skin job », a façade designed to perfectly imitate his creator. A slave, his freedom is the evil that Deckard must cleanse society of. Batty has been judged to be intrinsically foreign to mankind. Kurtz, on the other hand, must die because his actions have banned him from the world of men, because he has surrendered to the dark side of the soul, to a murderous madness that is tantamount to the primitive spirit of the jungle, according to the western General who briefs Willard : « *Every man has got a breaking point. You have and I have one. Walter Kurtz has reached his. And, very obviously, he has gone insane. He's out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct* ». The General is right: every man has got a breaking point. To this protector of order and social rationality, beyond the breaking point lies insanity.

At first glance, Batty and Kurtz do seem deranged. Batty's emotions are subject to violent changes, he drools and cries like a wolf, and maniacally chases Deckard. Kurtz in his kingdom at the Heart of Darkness has abandoned all common rationality and detached from himself. « *And what would his people back home want, if they ever learned just how far from them he'd really gone. He broke from them, and then he broke from himself* ». He wanders in a labyrinth of ancient stone, reading aloud T.S. Eliot and rambling on. His only western companions are an ex-Marine with a vacant look and a brain-damaged hippie journalist. That said, Batty's seemingly insane behavior is but the result of an existential quest that the replicant follows with an intensity of purpose that is forever alien to the common man. Bryant and the General can't handle such purity (« *Because there's nothing I detest more than the stench of lies* », Kurtz). Batty only obeys to his own logic and the oddities of his behavior stem from the very conditions of his creation: a warrior with fake memories, condemned by his creator to master a lifetime's experiences in the span of four years. Kurtz talks at length about his breaking point. He tells Willard about how the Vietcong, after American troops provided vaccine to the children of a village, gave orders to cut off every single arm. He recalls the event with admiration and repulsion, stunned by this extraordinary display of will. At this point, Kurtz understood the superior strength of his enemy, the all-consuming drive to vanquish, unaltered by moral considerations. Then only did Kurtz become the ultimate product of the Vietnam War that Willard meets in the deep of the jungle, an individual who's become over-adapted to his environment, a soldier who totally identified with his enemy to overcome him. There's no turning back from this transformation (« *To make an alteration in the evolvement of an organic life system is fatal* », Tyrell). Kurtz, and Batty, to some extent, are sane individuals dealing with an insane society. Such people cannot be allowed to prosper.



### Room of Mirrors: Deckard versus Batty, Willard versus Kurtz

Willard and Deckard are morally ambiguous, and so are their opponents. After he coolly ends the life of an unjustly wounded Vietnamese girl, Willard remarks that, from now on, his companions wouldn't look at him the same way. Neither will the viewer. This is Willard's first killing on screen, who until then was a passive spectator of the war. Remarkably enough, this act is directed upon a civilian. Like Kurtz, Willard isn't just prone to violence, he is wholly possessed by the spirit of war, breathing through a combat that he knows is meaningless. War, to Willard, is a drug. The opening scene is a withdrawal scene. Only this way can we understand the attraction/repulsion that Willard feels towards the fight. In this again, Willard and Kurtz are one. The Colonel, a force of nature who surrendered to the soul of war, then to the soul of the jungle, must die, because Death only can liberate him from addiction. War as a drug is a pervasive metaphor: see the psychedelic atmosphere of the movie's last part, the hallucinated motions of Lance as the ship goes deeper into the jungle, the hypnotic, oriental melody of the Doors... Deckard too is ambiguous, who hunts down and kills sentient creatures we can't tell from human beings (Tyrell mockingly quotes the parameters of the Voight Kampff test: « *Capillary dilation of the so-called blush response? Fluctuation of the pupil? Involuntary dilation of the iris* », technical attributes that are supposed to distinguish man and machine). His relationship with Rachel is tinted with violence and domination. Is there a difference between Deckard's and Batty's executions? Deckard shoots down an unarmed Zhora in the back. A melancholy Batty confesses to his Creator, Tyrell: « *I've done questionable things* ». Indeed, his attitude towards violence is complex, as is Kurtz's. Both individuals are warriors at heart – Batty, by design of his Creator, Kurtz, by vocation – but both painfully feel the proximity of death. Proof of this, the way Batty breaks the bad news about Leon's demise, then his reaction when discovering the inert body of Pris, finally the tears shed while murdering Tyrell. Proof of this, the crack-up inside Kurtz, which reflects Willard's inner torment, both soldiers doomed to live and relive "the horror".

The superficial opposition between Deckard and Batty is the mirror image of Willard and Kurtz's. Batty, as a lesson on human condition, turns Deckard into his double, a slave on the run: « *Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave* ». Replicants and soldiers learn to live in fear. Kurtz begs Willard to put an end to his existence and tell the world what he tried to accomplish. On the surface, Willard is a tool of society. In a more metaphysical sense, Kurtz drew his doppelgänger Willard closer and closer to him, like a magnet, like the backward surge of an infinite wave. Kurtz turned Willard into the means of his own deliverance. Willard indeed sees himself as the hand of fate: « *Everybody wanted me to do it. Him most of all. I felt like he was up there, waiting for me to take his pain away. Even the jungle wanted him dead. And that's who he really who he took his orders from, anyway* ». When he emerges from the Colonel's lair, his machete covered in blood, stared at by the primitive cohorts, Willard is Kurtz. The replicant leader and the colonel have staged

their death before a witness of their choosing: as soon as the « hero » meets his opponent, he's fallen under his total control. All the time, Batty is able to kill Deckard. Kurtz strikingly worries about the way his story will be told back in America. Not a single second does he envision killing Willard and going back home. Kurtz burned all this bridges down. Beyond the breaking point, up the river, there is no return. The Colonel wrote his own dark legend and hopes Willard, his alter-ego, will bring his lesson back to the civilized world. Willard embarks the ship, Deckard runs away with Rachel, but it's doubtful either one really escaped their opponent's inner world. Willard and Deckard aren't seen as enemies by their adversaries, but the witnesses to their rise and fall, to whom an existential lesson is delivered. Deckard is drawn to Batty, just like the river ineluctably leads Willard to Kurtz: « *Weeks away and hundreds of miles up river that snaked through the war like a circuit cable...plugged straight into Kurtz* ».



### The Art of Death

The worlds depicted in « Blade Runner » and « Apocalypse Now » fall under the jurisdiction of Death. The latter, in the most obvious way: the Vietnam War is but the last avatar of a certain idea of warfare as the total annihilation of the Enemy (« *We must incinerate them. Pig after pig. Cow after cow. Village after village. Army after army* », Kurtz). Another subtler version of Death is at work in « Blade Runner »: a decadent Los Angeles, populated with artificial things, make-believe animals (the owl, the serpent) and androids that the viewer can't discriminate from the dehumanized citizens of the future. J.F. Sebastian, plagued with degenerative disease, lives among his manufactured friends: « *My friends are toys. I make them* ». In this regard, both films are Gnostic allegories: characters imprisoned in an inferior world ruled by Death. Batty is a fallen angel, as he himself suggests: « *Fiery the angels fell. Deep thunder rode around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc* ». The dialog between Pris and Sebastian is explicitly Gnostic: « Pris: *What's your problem?* Sebastian: *Methuselah syndrome.* Pris: *What's that?* Sebastian: *My glands. They grow old too fast.* Pris: *Is that why you're still on earth?* ». Sebastian, like the replicants, like Deckard, has been sentenced to live on Earth, the inferior world, subject to entropy and decay. Life is elsewhere, in the heavens: « *A new life awaits you in the Off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure* ». Willard and Deckard are trapped in this mock reality: « *When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there... all I could think of was getting back into the jungle* ». Similarly, Kurtz's first words are a nostalgic evocation of the lost paradise: « *I went down that river once when I was a kid. There's a place in the river, I can't remember...must have been a gardenia plantation, or a flower plantation at one time. It's all wild and overgrown now. But for about five miles, you'd think that heaven just fell on the earth, in the form of gardenias* ». Willard sails up the river, traveling back in time towards the primordial horror that Kurtz is the center of. The Colonel's memories sail down the river, from the abomination of the present to the fantasy realm of golden youth.



The Colonel and the replicant deliver their own eulogy. Here only do they somehow part company. Kurtz has fallen to pieces: « *I'd never seen a man so broken up and ripped apart* ». He who explored the depths of reality only wishes Death's release: « *The horror... the horror* »... partly a reflection on war, for sure, but the line is directly drawn from the novel and most certainly deals with the primordial terror Kurtz experiences at the hands of his demons, in the deep of the jungle. Speculating is meaningless. Whatever Kurtz saw remains an enigma, just like Batty (« *if only you could see what I've seen with your eyes* »). What matters is that Kurtz has glimpsed into the Heart of Darkness. « *Horror has a face. And you must make a friend of horror. Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not, then they are enemies to be feared* ». Kurtz is a man in ruins, torn apart by his obsessions, like Macbeth after the crime. Batty on the other hand, the fallen angel brought back to Earth to catch a supplement of life, believes that the brevity of his existence is a technical defect. Replicants only live four years. He meets his God, his Creator, the genius Tyrell (« *He knows everything* », says the Chinese engineer ; « *It's not an easy thing to meet your maker* », says Batty). Tyrell asks the prodigal son what seems to be the problem. *Death* is the problem. The Creator admits his own limitations in this matter: « *Well, I'm afraid that's a little out of my jurisdiction* ». Tyrell explains that Batty has been designed as well as he could be. The finite character of existence isn't open to negotiation (« *You don't ask Death for its credentials* », W.S. Burroughs). Gaff, later on, will remind Deckard that Rachel too must be retired: « *It's too bad she won't live. But then again, who does?* » Batty, by getting extra life, won't become any more human. Knowing that his existence is finite is actually what defines him as Human. « *The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very very brightly, Roy* ». He is lucky in having a Creator to bring his grievances to. The almighty Tyrell, recluse in his golden tower on top of the city, is a tangible reality. Sole among the mass, Batty gets to receive an answer from his Creator. His mortality accepted, with a melancholy at odds with Kurtz's shocked horror, he acknowledges the end of all things: « *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 Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die* ». Thus, at the end of their journey, Kurtz and Batty appear to be polar opposites. Batty is frantically looking for longer life, whereas an existential disgust colors each and every one of Kurtz's words: « *I watched a small snail, crawling on the edge of a straight razor. That's my dream. It's my nightmare. Crawling, slithering, along the edge of a straight razor, and surviving* ». Death to Kurtz is deliverance from a never ending nightmare (« *After such knowledge, what forgiveness* », T.S. Eliot). Kurtz is the true Hero of this Odyssey. His survival in the presence of the « horror » shows where his superiority truly lies. His relentlessness to live despite a debilitating clarity of mind is of a mythical order. He is Prometheus, punished for his human condition, enlightened in a world of blind men. Kurtz, more so than the incontrollable Batty, perceives the vacuity of being: « *We are the hollow men... We are the stuffed men... Leaning together... Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! Our dried voices, when we whisper together are quiet and meaningless... As wind in dry grass or rats' feet over broken glass in our dry cellar* ». In the end however both men share the same intimate experience of the impermanence of things. To Batty, this is an epiphany, borne of his confrontation with Tyrell: « *Revel in your time* ». In true nietszcheean fashion, Batty puts his Creator to death, thus getting full responsibility for his existence. In his final moments, the former slave acknowledges the rise and decline of all things.

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