

Dissident Cyber-Galateas on Screen: A Posthumanist Analysis of *Blade Runner* and *Per Aspera Ad Astra*

Cyber-Galateas disidentes en pantalla: un análisis posthumanista de *Blade Runner* y *Per Aspera Ad Astra*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the different posthumanist interpretations of the myth of Galatea and Pygmalion in the films *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) y *Per Aspera Ad Astra* (Viktorov, 1981). The text applies Stacy Alaimo's (2010) sense of trans-corporeality to the myth in order to analyze the diverging dissenting approaches shown by the gynoid protagonists of both films and employs Rossi Braidotti's (2012) onto-ethical notion of the "posthuman" as a model to analyze the cyborg characters of the films. Through an exploration of the non-anthropocentric premises inherent to their performativity, nature and discourse, their rebellion's efficiency is problematized. Firstly, the text addresses the different outcomes of Scott's replicants, linking their tragic fate to the cultural ecology of the cyberpunk system that they are forced to inhabit. This perspective is put in contrast with Viktorov's depiction of Niia, who, sharing the cybernetic physiology and nature of *Blade Runner*'s replicants, manages to emancipate herself from the oppressive links that restrain her psyche. Therefore, the main objective of the article is to visualize the way in which these rewritings of the figure of Galatea show audiences a counter-hegemonic perspective of human/nature relationships in which the cyborg's dissident performativity is not conditioned by their own individual activity but by the context that upholds her.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Per Aspera Ad Astra, Blade Runner, Galatea and Pygmalion, Gynoid, Trans-corporeality.

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende examinar las diferentes reinterpretaciones posthumanistas del mito de Galatea y Pigmalión en los filmes *Blade Runner* (1982) y *Per Aspera Ad Astra* (1981). Así, se aplica la noción de transcorporealidad elaborada por Stacy Alaimo (2010) al mito para, posteriormente, comentar distintos enfoques disidentes mostrados por las ginoideas que protagonizan ambas cintas, usando, además, el concepto onto-ético de "posthumano" como modelo de análisis de los personajes ciborg de las cintas. A través de una profundización en las premisas no antropocéntricas inherentes a su performatividad, naturaleza y discurso, se problematiza la efectividad de su disidencia. En primer lugar, el texto aborda los diferentes resultados de las replicantes del film de Scott, ligando su trágico destino a la ecología cultural del sistema ciberpunk que estas están obligadas a habitar. Esta perspectiva contrasta con la representación de Niia en el metraje de Viktorov, quien, compartiendo naturaleza y fisiología con las replicantes de *Blade Runner*, consigue emanciparse de los vínculos de opresión que contienen a su psique. Así pues, el objetivo del texto es visualizar el modo en el que estas reescrituras "Galateanas" presentan una visión contrahegemonica de las relaciones entre humanos y naturaleza en la que la performatividad disidente del ciborg no está condicionada a su actividad individual sino al contexto que la sostiene.

Palabras clave: Posthumanismo, Per Aspera As Astra, Blade Runner, Galatea y Pygmalion, Ginoide, Transcorporealidad.

1. Introduction

Despite their different political, economic and philosophical characteristics, The United States and the Soviet Union shared a common interest and fascination for science fiction

narratives dealing with the existential challenges brought on by the inevitable technological development of their societies. Technology configures itself as a necessary tool in these narratives and the development of inorganic human beings (replicants, robots, cyborgs, etc.) an eldritch though desired frontier. This obsessiveness for creating new human beings resembling an idealized version of ourselves was, nonetheless, far from new in the 20th century. Prior to the emergence of sci-fi narratives addressing artificial intelligences and anthropomorphic bodies (and even prior to the emergence of classics dealing with this issue, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), Ancient Greek mythology had already imagined narrative articulations of stone or metal-based living humans —the cases of Talos and Pygmalion's Galatea being the most representative ones⁶⁵. Regarding this last figure, Galatea, her transformation from ivory sculpture to a highly normative (and so, obedient) woman has inspired contemporary feminist narratives and criticisms, reutilizing this figure as a cybernetic organism, part machine and part human, who establishes different relationships with their creators and the society that they inhabit. This is the case of two cinematic productions of the 1980s: the American *Blade Runner*⁶⁶ (Ridley Scott, 2007 [1982]) and the Soviet *Через тернии к звёздам* (*Per Aspera Ad Astra*)⁶⁷; Richard Viktorov, 1981). Not only both films were produced in a similar socio-political context, in the late stages of a Cold-War era characterized by a collective optimism in the possibilities of both power's technological progress, but, interestingly, they also feature female cyborgs, who, apart from sharing many of Galatea's characteristics, also develop direct links with the polluted environmental dynamics of their epoch. In this sense, they use these female subjects to transpose many of the ideals that have been lately configured by posthumanist currents of thought.

This article aims, therefore, to critically comment on the two aforementioned representations of the Galatean myth, focusing on the post-anthropocentric values inherent to the gynoids appearing on screen. In recreating the myth, both films provide different conceptions of a Galatea, who, in most cases, presents herself as a subversive subject aiming to escape the system's power dynamics. Through their process of rebellion, which sometimes fails to grant them any freedom, they embrace different ethical and ontological assumptions directly linked to both their condition as subjects and their intimate relationship with the polluted environment they are forced to ambulate. In this sense, approaching the myth of Pygmalion from the posthumanist perspective might indeed bring forward suggestive explorations of Galatea's identity, particularly when acknowledging its metaphorical function

⁶⁵ Although technically speaking the name Galatea is not present in Ovid's original myth and it was only used after the 18th century, in this text the statue/woman will be referred as Galatea, following mainstream conceptualizations of the myth.

⁶⁶ There are different versions of the film; this article analyzes *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007), in which the unicorn dream is inserted, questioning Deckard's "human" identity. The reason that motivates the analysis of this cut (and not the original one) is that the original one was artificially manipulated by the producers, who forced Scott to erase his original ending and add an "absurdly cheery ending" ending to the film after the director exceeded the expected budget. (Wired, Q&A: Ridley Scott...). *The Final Cut*, therefore, was released as the actual envision of Scott's film.

⁶⁷ The English-language versions of the film differ in names (*The Humanoid Woman*, *From the Thorns to the Stars*, *Per Aspera Ad Astra*). I have decided to use the last of them, as it is the one that has been most extensively used. These officially translated versions, moreover, are also severely cut, as is another Russian version from 2001. For this article, I have used the original 1981 film in Russian.

as a “posthuman subject”. With regards to the methodology, this text firstly introduces the theoretical ideas upon which the ulterior analysis is based, focusing on the definition of the Galatean myth and the specific elements derived from contemporary posthumanist philosophy used in the study. This section is followed by an analysis of each film under a mythcritical and posthumanist lense, analyzing both visual and narrative elements inherent to both productions. The results of this dual study are later explored in a last section comparing the antithetic treatment of the female cybernetic organisms featuring the film. The purpose of this contrastive methodology is to uncover both US and Soviet coetaneous perspectives surrounding an incipient posthumanist thought, highlighting their cultural and ontological differences when rewriting cybernetic versions of Pygmalion’s myth.

2. The Posthuman Subject and the Myth of Pygmalion and Galatea

Prior to highlighting the relationships between myth and theory, nonetheless, a brief summary of how the posthuman subject is contemporarily observed is, in fact, required. The figure of the posthuman has been articulated in different ways by many scholars (Rossi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Serenella Iovino, Patricia Reed and Francesca Ferrando among many others); most of them, nonetheless, tend to agree on the importance of matter in the ontological construction of posthuman subjectivity. In this sense Stacey Alaimo’s (2010) notion of trans-corporeality is of great interest, since it configures the basis upon which the ontology of the contemporary “posthuman ethos” is constructed. Trans-corporeality is a perspective that observes human biology as “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underl[ining] the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (p. 2). Thus, Alaimo (2010) affirms that:

By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often-unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world [...] allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which “human” and “environment” can by no means be considered separate. (p. 2)

Alaimo’s trans-corporeality makes reference to the processes of Foucaultian power relationships through which different “matters” affect each other, pushing forwards the notion that a human ontology cannot be considered independent from its environmental context, and, more importantly, that inter-material relationships are not hierarchical, but rather, horizontal. Thus, human bodies (and the matter that composes their organs, muscles and bones) may be considered a part of a much wider network of material/cultural connections. She establishes that “the human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments, which may include industrial environments and their socio/economic forces” (Alaimo, 2010: 28). Alaimo’s attitude towards the body presents readers with a different ontological conception of “the human”. Rather than being a unique unit, the body is affected by the environmental relationships that affect it, and they operate in multiple, dynamic ways. Consequently, the “human” is not simply a singular construction

but a conjunction of organs, muscles, bones, cells, microplastics, toxic residues, mechanical and/or cybernetic technology engaging in different activities with the surrounding matter.

Working with Alaimo's conceptualization of matter as an agent, philosopher Rossi Braidotti's seminal book, *The Posthuman* (2013), proposes a new sense of ethics and ontology based on "experimenting with what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing" (2012: 61). This perspective expands previous onto-ethical feminist proposals – mainly those based on Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), a text in which she addresses issues on subaltern liminality and, ultimately, plants the idea of subversiveness through technology-driven epistemological alliances. Through the acknowledgment of material agency in their many forms and interactions with human bodies, Braidotti (2012) argues that a new paradigm of ethics must assume a zoocentric notion of the world — *Zoe* referring to the "dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself" (p. 60). Braidotti (2012) postulates that, to reach this post-anthropocentric ending, the posthuman subject must endure three decentralization phases: "becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine" (p. 66). The first one refers to the denial of the human as a singular entity above other non-human animals, and the destruction of the power relationships that human(ist) discourses have developed during the historical process — from consumerist relationships (Braidotti, 2012: 68) to their symbolic understanding (Braidotti, 2012: 70). The second one aims, first, to "develop a dynamic and sustainable notion of vitalist, self-organizing materiality; [and secondly] to enlarge the frame and scope of subjectivity along the transversal lines of post-anthropocentric relations" (Braidotti, 2012: 82). She understands the Earth as a Lovelockian Gaia, a living gigantic interconnected organism in which living beings operate as the cells of a bigger body, and so, points that Humanity must "return to holism and to the notion of the whole earth as a single, sacred organism" (Braidotti, 2012, p. 84) in order to decentralize itself even in material ways, acknowledging the necessity for an ethical relationship with non-organic beings. As a third stage, the "posthumanization" process finalizes whenever the human and the machine merge. Similarly to the way she observes human and non-human interactions, she argues that the human episteme must cease to conceive machines as tools or products to consume but rather observe them as independent ontological units upon which performing non-hierarchical relations of power "not based on functionalism" (Braidotti, 2012: 91).

The posthuman subject is, therefore, an amalgamation of organic and inorganic matter(s) capable of performing an ethical agency that may be employed to contest the hegemonic uneven relationships of power established by the system⁶⁸. The aim of this set of ideas is not to simply explore the necessity of balancing the rationalization of power between human and non-human beings, but, as Francesca Ferrando (2016) explains, to "stress[...] the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to *zoe* and being part of an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well" (p. 165). This change, therefore, catalyzes the philosophical background required to efficiently contest the dramatic

⁶⁸ This notion of "posthumanism" must not be linked to similarly named proposals by popular futurist philosopher Max More (among others). Their view of the posthuman, rather than understanding the human as part of a holistic system, aims to demote the notion of *homo sapiens* by approaching human-(cyber)technology relations as an evolutionary feature. This has also been called Transhumanism. More information about the differences between Posthumanism and Transhumanism can be found in Ferrando (2013).

consequences of contemporary environmental global problems, namely climate change, but also the massive extinction events derived from it.

Turning to the myth of Pygmalion, the story may be observed as the basic narrative structure through which some ulterior posthumanist ideas have been formulated. Although posthumanism is articulated as an ethical proposal based on a shift in the way we look at human/non-human ontologies—one is not born posthuman, but becomes one after assimilating certain philosophical proposals—, the analysis of naturally hybrid characters like Galatea provides us with allegorical, accessible narrative methodologies through which this ethical proposal is represented. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion, a master sculptor rejecting contact with human women falls in love with his last piece of art, an ivory-sculpted woman embodying the Greek ideal of beauty. After an Olimpian festivity, Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, visits Pygmalion's workshop and is so amazed by the allure of his work that she decides to grant her life, so they both can live happy ever after (Ovid, 2004: 394-396). Focusing on Galatea's materiality, her hybrid trans-corporeality materializes in the most evident way. Material agency is assumed by Pygmalion, who humanizes her ivory creation and even falls so much in love with her that he prays to Aphrodite, asking her to transform the statue into a being of agency or "life" that he can rationalize. After he is granted this wish, the statue becomes an artificial human being perfectly capable of carrying out most biological activities associated to humans (from talking to bearing children). On a secondary level, the relationship between creator(s) and creation may also be observed as a metaphor of the system's ethical hegemony over a prospective non-binary sense of ontology (such as the one presented in posthumanist philosophy). Galatea, a liminal subject on the frontier between matter and human, in the end, performs an identity purposely conditioned by Pygmalion's masculinist and normative desires, whilst Aphrodite's arbitrary decision is based on a hegemonic sense of attractiveness. She is not only sculpted to physically please her male creator but eventually also accommodates to the socio-cultural norms of humans (she happily marries Pygmalion and spends the rest of her life bringing tributes to the goddess that granted life to her). Therefore, she adopts a normative human identity which ironically eclipses the external hybrid expression of her non-dualist material agency. Through a historicist perspective, in the end, the myth presents readers with an evident anthropomorphism of the posthuman organic/inorganic (or nature/human) *Dasein*, illustrating, synchronically, the power-related epistemologies that separate matter and humanity.

Narratively speaking, the myth of Pygmalion signifies specific non-hegemonic modes of understanding matter, assembling, at the same time, the epistemological basis for a posthuman political subversion. On the one hand, Galatea's allegory of materiality suggests the existence of a posthuman narrative on her own. If it is true that "making" Galatea a functional human may be interpreted as a metaphor of the dominion of the human over the material self, the direct representation of her as a hybrid subject may be read as subversive. According to Iovino and Opperman (2012), "the humanization of things, places, natural elements, nonhuman animals, [in narratives] is not necessarily the sign of an anthropocentric and hierarchical vision but can be a narrative expedient intended to stress the agentic power of matter and the horizontality of its elements" (p. 82). Thus, Galatea is inadvertently configured as a posthuman self who emphasizes the binary relations of power between human and non-human matter. In this sense, the gender proposal of the myth contributes to the development

of these ideas. Not only is Galatea a representation of agentic matter, but also, she has been defined as a woman by her creator, granting her a subaltern positionality in the complex, but patriarchal, set of gender relations of Ancient Greece. Both her othering natures, animated matter and femininity, put her in a position of subalternity, and so, of potential dissent, opening the question of why Galatea does not attempt to rebel against her creator. In the end, this myth narrates not only a story of matter being agent and holistic but also a tragedy of the subject that embodies this perspective, who is ultimately assimilated by a system that dilutes her potentiality for social transformation.

Given the story, origins and organic/inorganic configuration of Galatea, identifications with narrative representations of cyborgs, robots, replicants, androids and/or gynoids have been impossible to avoid in the history of film analysis. From Maria (Brigitte Helm) in Fritz Lang's classic expressionist film *Metropolis* (1927), to Ava (Alicia Vikander) in Alex Garland's *Ex-Machina* (2014) and Joi (Ana de Armas) in Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the depiction of Galatean-like characters has become a *tropos* in audiovisual science fiction. These cyborg gynoids tend to share many ontological elements. First, the biomorphology of these beings is based on mechanic or synthetic materials; they embody the ideal of female beauty; are created by a man; and develop subaltern relations of power with the creator-owner, usually portraying some sense of eroticism. Thus, as Maria Goicoechea states, "in what seems a rewriting of the Pygmalion myth, the figure of the cyborg metamorphoses itself in sexual fetish: man builds his perfect woman with the help of robotics" (2008: 6). Although, indeed, examples of cyborgs/robots/replicants are extensive in science fiction literature and film, female representations tend to follow the twisted Galatean model, illustrating many different outcomes for these subjects in terms of dissent against their masters (or the system that supports them). In this sense, it is important to remark that analyses of the figure of the Galatean gynoid traditionally tended to focus on US cinematography, avoiding transcultural comparative approaches to how posthumanist proposals, concerns and representations are (re)shaped when bringing futurist myths of Pygmalion to the screen. An exploration of the gynoid characters appearing in both the American *Blade Runner* and the Soviet *Через тернии к звездам* (*Per Aspera Ad Astra*) deciphers some suggesting understandings of the posthuman ethos and bring to light their contrasting conceptualizations of the gynoid protagonists' (im)possibility to efficiently rebel against the system.

3. The Fallen Cyber-Galateas of *Blade Runner*

Blade Runner has become, by far, one of the most extensively explored cultural products in the academic history of science fiction, particularly because of its complex depiction of android and gynoid organisms. The film, based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)⁶⁹, shows audiences the story of Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), an undercover police agent who works "retiring" rebellious replicants in Los Angeles in the year 2019. As part of his job, he is asked to hunt down some Nexus 6 models (identical to humans but stronger, with artificial memories implanted and apparently lacking any emotional reactions). Deckard, who does not show any empathy towards them at the beginning of the

⁶⁹ In this sense, Philip K. Dick's book, along with Denis Villeneuve's sequel may potentially be analyzed through the same posthumanist/mythcritical perspective.

film, eventually falls in love with Rachael (Sean Young), a new Nexus 7 prototype model belonging to the owner of the replicant manufacturer company, Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel). After he kills his first targets, the two remaining replicants manage to kill Tyrell. Later, nonetheless, they both will be executed by Deckard. This outcome brings the supposedly human protagonist the possibility of happily escaping with Rachael —the Director’s Cut, nonetheless, erases this very last part, providing audiences with an ambiguous ending—. In any case and as Méras (2014) and Abalia Marijuan (2018) establish, the film presents a clearly Galatean perspective regarding the meaning of the female replicants Rachael, Pris (Daryl Hannah) and Zhora (Joana Cassidy). The three of them are artificially created, thus presenting inorganic components (which simulate human-organic shapes) and agency, and are influenced by the trans-corporeality of their own bodies, since they are artificially programmed to die in the very same year that the film takes place in. Additionally, they, follow the ideal of feminine beauty of their creators, as their primary programming involves satisfying sexually, but also emotionally, their male masters/customers/owners.

In Scott’s film, nonetheless, the myth of Pygmalion is partially emulated. On the one hand, Rachael operates as a submissive Galatea, who, after discovering her true, artificial origin, does not empathize with the oppression of her kind, and rather decides to associate with Deckard, with whom she can revive the fantasy of being considered an absolute human (Pedraza, 1998: 247-248). According to Merás (2014), this presumption of purely human identity, despite her artificial origin and biology, “might be interpreted as an act of reconciliation between nature and technology thanks to Rachael’s hybrid genesis. However, this pastoral runaway is far from constituting an alliance between humans and machines” since, in the end, the filmic Deckard (who has not shown any moral objection in killing replicants for the whole film) gets a romantic and sexual companion (p. 13, *my translation*). Thus, although potentially subversive, Rachael replicates Galatea’s human self-identification, unwilling to support the fight of her also liminal brothers and sisters. On the other hand, Zhora and Pris’ performances materialize two faces of a rebellious Galatea. In the case of Zhora, she attempts to evade her chase by impersonating an exotic dancer in a club whilst Pris decides to stay with Roy Batty, the leader of the unsubordinated group of replicants, in order to force Tyrell to lengthen their lifespan and so, be capable of overcoming the artificially toxic trans-corporeality of her body. These two perspectives summarize two old theoretical solutions to escape the system’s violence in any methodological field (from postcolonialism, to queer theory, to feminism, etc.). Either the subaltern subjects dilute themselves in the mass in an attempt to escape their oppressors, or they engage them in order to change the way their power operates. In *Blade Runner*, none of these understandings come to good terms, since Deckard ultimately executes both gynoids. As Merás (2014) rightly states: “either they please their male owners or they risk being eliminated” (p. 14).

The figures of Zhora and Pris show audiences a visual representation of a fallen, though genuine, posthuman ethos. Zhora, on the one hand, embodies Braidotti’s zoecentric identity. Apart from the evident cyborg identity also shared by her replicant companions, she seems to have developed a symbiotic connection with yet another “posthuman” being, a replicant snake, who always accompanies her.⁷⁰ This relationship has even transformed her original appearance and so, she decorates her body with shining scales, mixing her body’s performativity with

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The use of “who” instead of “which” is deliberate.

that of the snake (fig. 1, De Lauzirika, Prischman & Scott, 2007, 00:52:47). Allegorically and visually, Zhora starts to enact both processes of becoming-animal and becoming-machine by establishing a horizontal relationship with her replicant-animal companion that is not based on mere functionalism —the snake is not simply a tool, but a being that even defines her physical trans-corporeality—. Priso, in a different line, shows a similar mimetic connection with the urban anthropocenic landscape of Los Angeles. More specifically, in the scene in which Priso waits for J.F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), the engineer who created the Nexus 6 models, Priso appears to merge herself into the garbage-covered street, camouflaging herself into the surrounding matter (fig. 2, De Lauzirika, Prischman & Scott, 2007, 00:37:31). This dissolving technique will be replicated a few minutes later in Sebastian's apartment, where she would disguise herself as one of his low-tech android toys before ambushing Deckard. Thus, rather than becoming animal, Priso's search for freedom leads her to a state visually and allegorically comparable with Braidotti's "becoming-Earth." In these scenes, her body is redistributed into the chaotic materiality that surrounds her, highlighting both the horizontal, yet still symbiotic, links between her (apparently) organic, human body and the material elements (garbage, toys, urban landscape, air toxicity) that she is connected with. In the end, nonetheless, the ontological and moral transformations of these two disaffected Galateas are unable to match Deckard's acuity and brute force, making audiences reflect on and question the possibility of dissent through these means. The only replicant who manages to survive is, ultimately, the one who, as the Greek Galatea, submits to a man (firstly Tyrell and, later, Deckard).



Figure 1. De Lauzirika, Prischman & Scott (2007), 00:52:47



Figure 2. De Lauzirika, Prischman & Scott (2007), 00:37:31

Although the film's main protagonist is the one who finally frustrates these two gynoids' desire for freedom, the cultural, ecological, societal and scientific dynamics implicit in the film anticipate the tragic ending of these characters. Even though the Tyrell/Sebastian tandem operates as a Pygmalion, impressing an idealized sense of beauty in their female creations, it is the neoliberal, Orwellian ideological hegemony that defines their lifespans and sole functionality. The system is the necessary Aphrodite for these Galateas to exist in their cultural environment and so, it constitutes the verticality of the relationships of power that they are subjected to. Consequently, audiences may read the representation of Scott's Los Angeles hyperurbanized landscape as a visualization of the absolute dominion of capitalism (and neoliberal logics, epistemology and ethics) over the planet, a notion that has also been named "Capitalocene"⁷¹. As Fernando Vizcarra (2013) so poetically defines it:

Los Ángeles del 2019 se ha convertido en una megalópolis congestionada y oscurecida por la contaminación. Es un firmamento parduzco, opresivo, invadido por chimeneas industriales que emanan fuego. Ciudad sobrecargada, desbordada, a la deriva, envuelta por un manto permanente de lluvia ácida. Un caudal de vehículos aéreos circula por angostos pasajes, esquivando la saturación de rascacielos y pantallas publicitarias donde una asiática, con atuendo tradicional, anuncia una especie de gragea o tableta mentolada. El ojo refleja un horizonte avasallado de infinitos puntos luminosos. [...] Territorios de agobio y soledad, las vialidades pasan del tumulto, de la intensidad, del movimiento febril, de la procesión desordenada de paraguas resplandecientes, al abandono y la desolación, calles despobladas, oscuras e inhóspitas, apenas surcadas por algún vehículo, donde la inseguridad se acrecienta y hace que los sujetos giren en grupos (indigentes, asaltantes, pandilleros enanos, ciclistas) bajo la vigilancia orwelliana de patrullas aéreas. La policía está en todas partes, es el sistema objetivado. (Blade Runner: Una estética del desencanto section, para 1.)

After this description and assuming capitalism as the main catalyzer of the human/nature binaries which posthumanist performativity opposes to, the visual representation of the city suggests the impossibility of subversion for any posthuman allegory. There is no actual place where Pris, Zhora (or, in fact, any other replicant) can escape to in order to liberate themselves from (post)capitalist persecution, not even the extraterrestrial planetary colonies from where they fled in the first place. In the end, Pris and Zhora's main goal could have never been accomplished, since the eco-cultural environment they inhabit is too alienated (and too extended) to allow any trace of dissent or liberation from the system.

4. The Soviet Posthuman Cyborg of *Per Aspera Ad Astra*

Turning to Soviet perspectives, Richard Viktorov's *Per Aspera Ad Astra* recreation of Pygmalion's myth suggests productive comparative links with Blade Runner's portrayal of the posthuman *ethos*. The original film, written between Viktorov and famous Russian science fiction author Kir Bulychev, is a 148-minute-long tape divided in two parts: "Нийя — искусственный человек" (Niia, The Artificial Woman) and Ангелы космоса (Cosmos'

⁷¹ "Capitalocene" is a term coined by Andreas Malm in 2009 (Moore, 2016: XI; Haraway 2015: 163) that situates the contemporary, dominant socio-economic system as the demiurgic enactor of the planetary climatic/geophysical disruption. It is a modern conceptualization of the definition of the Anthropocene, which situates the human race (and not the dominant global socio-economical system) as a geophysical force capable of altering the planet's geochemical and so, environmental dynamics (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000: 17).

Angels). In the first part, a scientific expedition of cosmonauts from planet Earth finds the debris of a destroyed space station orbiting Dessa, a planet consumed by anthropogenic pollution and contamination. The inhabitants of the station appear to be dead but one of the cosmonauts finds one survivor, Niia (Elena Metelkina), a synthetic humanoid being (similar in nature to *Blade Runner*'s replicants), who is incapable of remembering what happened to her and the rest of the people in the station. Soon, the scientists discover Niia's superpowers, which go from superhuman force to telekinesis and teleportation. Additionally, she shows a very sensitive and empathic mentality and behavior, which allows her to establish a symbiotic communion with the surrounding plants and other non-human animals. After her rescue, the expedition comes back to a globally communist and utopian Earth, and Niia is taken in by the family of one of her rescuers, Lebedev (Uldis Lieldidzh), who attempts to teach her their moral paradigms. Niia's body is, nonetheless, studied and analyzed by the soviet scientists, who reverse-engineer the neural configuration of her brain and manage to figure out how to take control of her, consequently instigating a new sense of threat in the protagonist. The first part finishes showing Niia, who, in an attempt of investigating the reasons why she ended up in the destroyed vessel, infiltrates a soviet expedition sent to Dessa in an environmental-restoration mission. In the second part, audiences get to know the origins of Niia, who was created by a Dessan male scientist with the intention of developing a race of superhumans capable of living in harmony with their planet and who could take over the capitalist government that oppresses the population still living there. Although the narrative shows the expedition having some success in restoring Dessa's climate, soon the capital city's local government attacks them, managing to remote-control Niia and eventually decimating the cleaning team. However, the capitalist elites ultimately self-destroy themselves by accidentally liberating a toxic biomass over the city, which is later dissolved by Niia's telekinetic powers. In the end, she decides to remain on the planet to restore the planet and make it inhabitable again.

As in *Blade Runner*, the Galatean genesis is replicated in the story of Niia. Again, the female hybrid being is created by a man, Glan (Gleb Strizhenov), one of the greatest scientific and moral minds in Dessa, and her biology presents organic/inorganic components. Niia's physiognomy, moreover, reflects a normative model of beauty⁷²: she is young, slim and attractive, despite her asexual personality. She also has a cybernetic device incorporated in her brain that makes her capable of communicating with her "father," thus materializing Pygmalion and Galatea's intimate connection based on their creator/creature roles. This relationship is, nonetheless, uneven, since, even though both can read each other's thoughts, only the creator can take control of Niia's body through a specifically designed machine⁷³. As with the Greek Galatea or even *Blade Runner*'s female replicants, she is conceived to fulfill the ambitions of her master, in this case, political ones, ultimately being unable to reject her innate impulses of coming back to Dessa to "save the day."

⁷² In fact, this is Metelkina's first film. Prior to it, she had only worked in the high-end fashion field, an activity that continued doing during her whole working life.

⁷³ Also, professor Nadezhna Ivanovna (Nadhezna Sementsova) manages to figure out a way to control her (Viktorov, 1981, 00:38:42-00:41:40). This, however, may be inspired by cosmist anthropocentric and pre-accelerationist ideas about technological progress and humanity's capabilities, in which humans can easily develop any technology to cover whatever new need they face. This tone is also present in the whole film.

Analyzing Niia from a posthuman perspective, she seems to allegorically incarnate both Alaimo's sense of trans-corporeality and Braidotti's moral proposals. On the one hand, audiences observe how her organism mingles with the surrounding environmental factors. Her abilities of teleporting and telekinesis blur the hegemonic conceptualization of the human body, forcing the questions of whether the objects that she controls are an extension of herself and whether the material air that she is transforming/exchanging for her body during a teleporting event can also be considered part of her bodily corporeality. Additionally, audiences observe the dramatic changes in her external biology in different moments of the film. In polluted or inorganic areas such as the space, inside or out of a vessel, or in the highly contaminated Dessa, her body starts to consume itself, adopting a skeletal, pale appearance, whereas in the environmentally utopic Earth, her health status seems radiant and healthy (fig. 3 Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov, 1981, 01:04:07; 00:23:16). Similar changes occur depending on whether she is being remotely controlled or not. Niia's material reality cannot be separated from the surrounding agency, as her emotions, thoughts and actions or any other productive activity seem to rely on the invisible power relationships and matter exchanges between her "formal" bodily composition and the external agentic dynamics.



Figure 3. Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov (1981), 01:04:07; 00:23:16

Apart from the evident depiction of the notion of trans-corporeality, the figure of Niia also embraces Braidotti's zoocentric non-binary moral paradigm and transmogrifies it into an identity perspective. There are several scenes in which she empathically interacts with animals and that illustrate her connection with non-human beings. Audiences may first see an example of this attitude just as she is about to enter Lebedev's house for the first time, when she starts hovering over the grass just to avoid crushing a beetle with her feet (Kazachkov &

Obukhov & Viktorov, 1981, 00:13:23). This connection is not unidirectional, nonetheless. In the last scene, for example, the cat that had accompanied the cleaning expedition's spaceship during the whole journey decides to stay by Niia's side and so to remain with her in Dessa (Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov, 1981, 02:18:20). This sense of empathy and interspecies connection is not only articulated through human/non-human animal relationships but also in terms of body dynamism. Whenever she takes any action, Niia's movements are agile, silent and acrobatic, mimicking a feline behavior rather than normative human ways of motion. In this sense, not only she recognizes non-human animals as beings worthy of an empathic, respectful and equal understanding but she also integrates their non-human performativity into her own. A similar attitude is represented in her relationship with the Earth/Dessa. On Earth, interactions with plants (or even, the water) allow her to decipher the blanks in her memory, reviving the traumatic experiences that led to her rescue at the beginning of the film. She is connected to the environment she coexists with and so, it allows her to psychologically prepare herself to come back to Dessa and liberate it from the voracious capitalist logics that plague it. This healing relationship is reversed as she arrives in Dessa. Even though the first cleaning efforts are brought out by the environmentally responsible communist scientists, the last scenes in the film depict Niia psionically terraforming the devastated landscape of her home planet into a green Eden. This corporeal synthesis is accentuated in terms of costume design, adopting a more chameleonic tan outfit (a few minutes earlier, her clothes were orange) and so, demonstrating the holistic nature of her healing enterprise (fig. 4, Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov, 1981, 02:19:37).



Figure 4. Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov (1981), 02:19:37

If the first two Braidottian aspects, becoming-Earth and becoming-Animal, can be easily be discerned in the filmic narrative, the third one, "becoming machine," is perhaps more multifarious and problematic than the rest. Theoretically speaking, Niia's symbiotic communion with her cyborg body could be taken for granted, since, all in all, her hybrid nature is an example of organic/machine cooperation. She depends on her cybernetical nervous system to survive, and, at the same time, their machine parts are the ones allowing her to use their superpowers. There is one deliberately-created negative aspect to this relationship

that may imply a criticism towards an accelerationist sense of technological progress. Her mechanical nature has been configured to be vulnerable to external evil menaces that may force her to lose full control of her body and so, to act against her own interests, as it is seen in the first part of the film, when envious professor Ivanovna manages to “hack” her system and purposely lead her to an almost suicidal jump from a cliff. This is more predominantly observed in the second part, when Dessa’s malicious leader Turanchoks (Vladimir Federov) uses a machine to reprogram and transform her into a suicidal bomb determined to annihilate everyone inside the Soviet climate-restoration spaceship. As Åsne Ø. Høgetveit (2018) states: “Through Niia the potential threat of technology is introduced. [...] [However,] the threat remains that advanced technology in the wrong hands can be used against the common good, but there is no motif that the technology can go haywire by itself” (p. 56). The narrative therefore shows that her problematic relationship with “the machine” and so, with her body, is based on the fact that humans will eventually utilize it to maintain their dominion over her.

Only when this threat is over a positive reconciliation with her cyborg nature is possible. In this sense, the film provides an interesting articulation of rebellion against artificially-induced control over cyborg bodies. Niia has been coded to inevitably follow her master’s commands (whoever has access to its neurological system), and, although she acts in any way she wants most of the time, there is no material way to prevent any external synaptic intromission into her performativity. In the last part of the narrative, nonetheless, she figures out how to reclaim control of her body. Although possessed by Turanchoks, she suddenly regains controls of herself after witnessing the death of her now friend professor Ivanovna (Kazachkov & Obukhov & Viktorov, 1981, 02:13:03-02:15:01). The cosmist trauma of death awakes a spiritual component of her psyche, magically allowing her to sever third-party links between her body and whatever mischievous mind. Niia’s organic/inorganic power exchanges at a corporal level had never been equal up to that point in the narrative, since, although both flesh and machine needed to cooperate in order to functionally and biologically survive, the machine parts always held the high ground by potentially being capable of dominating her completely. Although scientifically unexplained in the film, her willingness ultimately blends the frontiers between machine and human self and as a result, she finally becomes one independent operating system. The destruction of unequal dominion relationships is what, in the end, allows Niia to come into terms with her hybrid body and what makes her fully “become machine” in the way Braidotti proposes it.

5. Where Cyborgs Collide

All in all, the three potentially subversive Galateas analyzed in this text (Pris, Zhora and Niia) display a similar posthuman “source code” and function: they can potentially become one with the surrounding environment but their own anthropogenic and anthropocentric design prevents them from substantiate their antihumanist subversion. One may wonder why only Niia, the Soviet counterpart, manages to overcome the system’s alienation and violence over their onto-epistemological assumptions. An analysis of the socio-economical dynamics that they are forced to walk through and transgress might elucidate a cause. One of the most striking aspects of the cyborgs (female and male) shown in both films is the sense of empathy they perform to their non-human kin (either in the shape of non-human animals, cybernetic

organisms or, even, aliens). In *Blade Runner*, human/non-human relationships are highly polarized and inevitably conflicting, if we see that replicants tend to take care of themselves (particularly in the case of Pris and Roy, who always travel together), this empathic connection is severed when observing relationships with other human beings. In the case of Pris, she does not hesitate in manipulating J. F. Sebastian in order to access Elon Tyrell, the more masculine cyborgs (Leon and Roy) not even hesitating in killing and torturing other human beings with no other purpose than sadism⁷⁴. The human counterpart has no different feelings about them: Deckard (who thinks of himself as a human), as well as the rest of purely human beings in the film, show no remorse in retiring and killing any replicant in cold blood. The existence of the Blade Runner division in the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) is a perfect reflection of the institutionalization of violence against them. On the other hand, Niia's contacts with human beings are by far more empathetic and reciprocal. Not only the people surrounding her tends to be agreeable and kind to her, but also, she receives them in a highly positive way, initially frightened as a scared animal, but ultimately generating care connections with most of the Soviet human characters present in the film. In *Blade Runner*, the human and the Other are depicted as natural enemies, whereas in *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, the othering, although subordinated to the will of humankind, can potentially create empathic posthuman networks with them.

One of the reasons that may motivate the empathic/antipathic relationships in both films has its origins in the capability of the cyborg subjects of constructing her identity through memory. Niia, although traumatized, eventually remembers her origins and childhood in Dessa and her purpose as a "superhuman" (or, rather "superdessan") in establishing connections with animals, the territory or her machinic nature. However, this is not the case of Pris and Zhora, like the mythical Galatea, can only remember their short lifespan and, thus, their ability to deal with their emotions is deformed, lacking a past to root in. This is different with Rachael who is granted specific memories that make her malleable to her master's desires. As Tyrell comments, "if we give them past, a cushion for their emotions, we can control them better" (De Lauzirika. & Prischman & Scott, 2007, 00:22:24). Although Pris and Zhora naturally create or visualize their communion with their nature and environment, the capitalist/humanist power has imposed a void in their human-like sense of identity, and thus, they have no reason to develop any positive link with organic human beings. Once this uneven balance of power has been established (and seeing that the system, through the official police system, is now trying to exterminate them), the audience may understand their uninterest in attempting to empathically connect with their creators in any way.

In this sense, there is one last element that conditions the ultimate fate of these Cyber-Galateas: the setting. The connotations inherent to the locations shown in the film are critical to elucidate what motivates the cyborgs' ending, since both films' settings reveal a critical attitude towards the ecological consequences developed during Cold War's communist and capitalist industrial revolution. Although in both films we observe an eco-political dystopia, there is a relevant fact that distinguishes both productions. In *Blade Runner*, the dystopia is set on Earth and audiences are not shown any potential escaping route to a better or uncorrupted world. Capitalism's industrial (and so, toxic and polluting) urbanization has

⁷⁴ Hanibbal Chew (James Hong), an engineer that created the replicants' eyes is frozen to death after he gives up the name of Sebastian, and the very Sebastian is pointlessly killed by Roy once he gets into Tyrell's office.

completely colonized the planet suggesting the idea that liberation from the system cannot be even possible. This pessimistic tone is far more relaxed in *Per Astra Ad Aspera*. Dessa, although still a capitalist dystopia, is catalogued as an external place. The Earth is presented as an apparently perfect, green and communist utopia, a there is no reference to any process of ecological disaster. The communist episteme, where Niiia learns how to behave in “human” ways, is shown as coercive and even alienating but also as a highly positive experience in ideological terms that ultimately inspires her decision to travel to Dessa.

Therefore, if the environment inhabited by Zhora and Pris portrays an endless hyperurbanized, neoliberal Capitalocene strangely incapable of collapsing despite its tremendous unsustainable dynamics, in the second part of Niiia’s film, Dessa is displayed as a different type of capitalist dystopia. Dessa is shown as a subterranean, post-industrial labyrinth in which a mutant population struggle to survive starvation and lack of water. Dessa constructs a post-climate apocalypse and pseudo-primitivist scenario in which a decimated society attempts to still operate under the same neoliberal moral, economic and social norms that initiated its own destruction. *Blade Runner*, thus, acknowledges the impossibility of overcoming capitalism whereas in Dessa, we observe that the neoliberal system is absolutely incapable of reproducing itself anymore and is therefore doomed to a slow, human-extermimating collapse. Both Los Angeles and Dessa are aesthetical dystopias dependent on an environmental collapse. However, if *Blade Runner* portrays the capitalist sphere as omnipotent and omniscient, a God-system that controls even the most menial aspect of its subject’s lives, *Per Astra Ad Aspera* reveals the imminent self-destruction of the system due to its toxic environmental dynamics. Dessa’s systemic logics could also be read in mythcritical terms, by observing the powers-that-be as a decadent, collective incarnation of an Aphrodite incapable of convincing anyone (but the Dessa elite) to be praised. Unlike Zhora and Pris, Niiia seems to be privileged enough to travel to a place where she can shred her ties from any systemic dominion. Even taking into account the imposed propagandist discourse of the Soviet Film Institute in which communism is idealized and capitalism is consequently depreciated, Niiia, in the end, does not choose to come back to the Soviet utopia presented in the film, as she believes that she belongs to her devastated, though now healing planet. The environment, following a higher, more abstract, sense of trans-corporeality, defines the ulterior possibility of articulating an efficient notion of dissent. Zhora and Pris, on the other hand, were always doomed to fail, since the system they flow in cannot fall.

The contrasting perspectives observed in the analyzed works by Scott and Viktorov, in the end, present the radically opposing (and at the same time, so similar) *Weltanschauungs* inherent to the cultural superpowers that uphold them (the US and the Soviet Union). The American film, on the one hand, presents us a world dominated by an accelerated industrial tecnocapitalism incapable of dying, presenting a dystopic future that, nonetheless, acknowledges the immortality of the system despite any ecological crisis and regardless of any dissent the othered subjects might perform. In contrast, *Per Aspera Ad Astra* provides a different form of criticism. Although the communist episteme remains pristine, the industrial logics that undoubtedly allowed Soviet science and technological progress ideology to exist are problematized. Dessa’s contaminated wastelands are no different from the polluted and desertified territories created by the USSR during its industrial development. However, differing from the pessimist capitalist psyche of *Blade Runner*, the Soviet production ultimately

defends that there is still room for healing in the hands of the most liminal beings, those who, like Niia, are situated in the margins of the hegemonic ontology. Niia, as a female, alien and cyborg (in the end, as a posthuman), is a representation of an identity that allegorically repairs the earthly, self-sustainable networks acting over the ecosphere of her home planet. Where the neoliberal psyche could not see a future beyond capital, the Soviet imagination saw a potential for an eco-friendly postcapitalist (or, rather, postindustrial) utopia led by beings that managed to liberate themselves from human society's vices.

6. Conclusion

The narrative elements inherent to the Ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea have exerted an enormous influence in sci-fi cinematic narratives dealing with posthuman cyborg subjectivities. The analyzed cases, *Blade Runner* and *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, examples of a long tradition of the myth's adaptations, present viewers with a recreation of a physical and allegorical Galatea, who shares a material hybridity, origin and power relationality with the original myth. *Blade Runner*'s Rachael, Zhora and Pris and *Per Aspera ad Astra*'s Niia are formed as synthetic beings created by powerful, rational men who plan to use them for their own economic, affective or political purposes. The ways in which any of them articulate the relationships with their masters (and the system that upholds them) are, nonetheless, highly diverse. In *Blade Runner*, Rachael decides to remain with Deckard, and to be assimilated into the phantasy of (human) normativity that his love affair provides her. Her cyborg sisters, however, decide to develop a conflictive approach to the oppressive reality that surrounds them, failing in their attempt to escape the anthropocentric dominion of their lives and fates. Analyzing the Soviet cyborg counterpart of the time, Niia, audiences may observe the same liberating aim that characterizes the psychologies of Zhora and Pris, albeit developing a more successful outcome. Triumphant or not, a posthumanist reading of the rebellious cyborgs of Scott and Viktorov's films provide a renovated adaptation of an old myth, trying to highlight the power relationships between creature and master.

The most critically productive aspect of these characters' subversion is the *ethos* that configures their inner and political resistance. Either visually or narratively, the films show a perspective towards the role of matter that trespasses anthropocentric, hyperrationalized conceptions of the human body. In different ways, these *Überfrauen* manage to visualize Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality, demonstrating the complex agentic processes between body and environment, ultimately questioning the hegemonic idea of "the body" as a singular performative entity. Their posthuman subversion drives them further, adopting, partially or completely, Rossi Braidotti's zoocentric onto-ethical paradigm. They offer viewers different performances and attitudes towards human/non-human relations confirming their posthuman status and highlighting the system's (in)capability to erase dissenting approaches towards humanist and capitalist philosophical hegemony. In the end, *Blade Runner*'s subjects are doomed by a perpetual and infinite system that prevents them from exercising their posthuman subversion, while *Per Aspera*'s Niia remains as the only example of non-anthropocentric subjectivity capable of inspiring a vitalist outcome for Braidotti's ideas. The results of the analysis of both films are, therefore, clear. On the one hand, based on the employed comparative methodology (the analysis of narrative and visual elements in both

films), although both films portray a similar rewriting of the character of Galatea (in the shape of network-creating, antihumanist female cyborgs) and criticize the potential incoming ecological issues originated by their nations' hyperindustrialization projects, the directors' national context defined the different outcomes of their films. *Blade Runner*, produced under capitalism, cannot imagine a positive future inside the system, nor its destruction. Viktorov's film, on the other hand, suggests the possibility of escaping the industrial dynamics required for capitalism to exist, and rather than glorifying the Soviet ideal, he argues in favor of a reconnection with the Outside (anything non-human) in order to solve his society's eco-social problems. The different filmic experiences of these sometimes similar, sometimes different Galateas grant posthumanist critics (and audiences in general) the possibility of reflecting on the divergent approaches that the two leading science-fiction cultures during the Cold War, USA and the Soviet Union, developed towards the industrialized, polluted biophysical reality contextualizing the experience of their citizens. Vanquished or not, these cinematic Cyber-Galateas force audiences to explore the ontological and ethical anxieties of the Anthropocene.

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