



*This text is a note on Nabokov that should have gone into the article ‘Blade Runner 2049: Reproduction, the Human, and the Organic’ forthcoming in *Film and Philosophy* 24, 2019, but which had to be taken out. I present these thoughts here in this snippet.*

## ***Blade Runner 2049 and Nabokov***



Is a bioengineered human a real human or simply a sophisticated machine? The idea that “organic” means biological by default is not supported by Philip Dick whose *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* served as a blueprint for the original *Blade Runner* script. When a real cat dies in the novel the body decays, which does not seem to happen to replicants.

Isidore says: “Maybe I ought to call them now of bioengineered but not organic.<sup>2</sup> This use of before it starts to decay. Don’t dead bodies the organic (as opposed to the “merely” decay or something?”<sup>1</sup> Only organic waste biological) enables unexpected epistemological decays, whereas replicants/androids as and ethical developments of this Dickian conceived by Dick, are biological in the sense theme.

The baseline tests symbolize the non-organic chaos, which appears as a non-sensical reality in which everything is interlinked without being held together by a unifying, organic system. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the text is taken from a poem by Vladimir Nabokov that appears in Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*<sup>3</sup>:

And blood-black nothingness began to spin  
A system of cells interlinked within  
Cells interlinked within cells interlinked  
Within one stem.

The remaining lines of the test represent a vision that John Shade, the fictional character of *Pale Fire*, had when collapsing with a heart attack:

And dreadfully distinct  
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.

In the novel, these two lines are the result of a near-death experience. According to common belief, near-death experiences include experience of organic unity. John Shade believes he is dead though he is not.



Why was Nabokov's *Pale Fire* chosen for the baseline test? The book is an example of organic composition because it consists of a poem of an imaginary author, a fictional introduction, and a commentary. The novel is organic because it can be read in many ways. Narrator Charles Kinbote instructs the reader at the beginning: "Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done with the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture."<sup>4</sup> It is true that Nabokov uses those "instructions" to establish the narrator's lack of reliability at the opening of the book. However, this passage also insinuates something important concerning the formal qualities of the book. The specialist of video games Espen Aarseth notes that *Pale Fire* can be read either unicursively, straight through, or multicursively, jumping between the comments and the poem.<sup>5</sup> Similar to what we can do in many games, the novel's parts can be shuffled without undermining the unity of the whole. However, the whole is not static but influenced by the parts.

Nabokov's own writing method was organic, too. He always started with micro elements written on cards which he then shuffled. The result is not chaos but an organic whole called the novel. As the story unfolds, the parts can be arranged according to an overall plan. In the novel, Shade follows the same method: "John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, recombining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse."<sup>6</sup> It is telling that the writers of the film's "baseline test" scenes have chosen to deconstruct *this* very organic work by Nabokov. And deconstruction there is. The "sudden and forceful"<sup>7</sup> voice of the interviewer insists on the word "cells." Suddenly the dialogue turns into a fragmented experimental poem. An earlier version of the baseline test confirms the above impression.<sup>8</sup> If we compare the old and the new version we see that the latter has been produced by eliminating elements and creating gaps. Here is an extract of the old version:

Do you get pleasure out of being a part of the system? System.  
Have they created you to be a part of the system? System.  
Is there a sound that comes with the system? System.  
Is there security in being a part of the system? System.  
They were all put together at a time. Cells.  
We're going to go on. Cells.

The amended version presented in the film is a rudimentary tissue of lines that were left after random lines had been suppressed. The organic *Pale Fire* has been deconstructed. The novel is symbolically deconstructed in two other instances in the film. Joi, after holding the book in front of her, throws it behind her back making it disappear as it flies. Finally, Joshi uses the book as a coaster when putting down her drink and spills a little having "no idea it's precious to K."<sup>9</sup>

**Thorsten Botz-Bornstein**

---

<sup>1</sup> *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Another point is that replicants lack a personal history. Having no ancestors means having no family history. One might object that the same can happen to adopted children. However, being adopted *is* a history. Furthermore, many adopted children are looking for their origins and are in search of authentic persons responsible for their birth. Such authentic persons do not exist for replicants.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Pale Fire*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Shooting script.

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in Denis Villeneuve and Tanya Lapointe, *The Art and Soul of Blade Runner 2049* (London: Titan Books, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Shooting script.