Empathy, War, and Women

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THE folk construction of empathy in Liu Cixin’s *Death’s End*, despite the novel’s many great points, left me cold. It goes like this: faced with imminent extra-terrestrial war, Earth society undergoes a cyclical series of transformations: a period of black despair, impoverishment, mass death and economic ruin, followed by a period of convalescence, optimism, technologically aided plenitude and global prosperity, leading in turn to decadence, the weakening of the human survival impulse, collapse, then a period of black despair, impoverishment, mass death and economic ruin, and so on. During the period of relative peace, prosperity and plenitude, society becomes more democratic and trusting. As a result, a woman is elected for the first time to take on the role of Earth’s “Swordholder.”

The Swordholder is responsible for deterring an attack on Earth in game-theoretical combat with Earth’s more powerful enemies, the Trisolarans. Swordholder convention is structured around the military logic of Mutually Assured Destruction or “MAD” and premised on the fact that, in the predatory universe of the book, any technologically advanced civilisation that cannot adequately hide itself will be pre-emptively destroyed by roaming cosmic sentinels. The Swordholder has the power to broadcast the location of the Trisolaran system to the universe, but not without indirectly exposing the solar system’s location as well. The result would be the complete annihilation of both Earth and Trisolaris. They must, then, present an attitude of utter ruthlessness and lack of mercy, so that the enemy will never risk upsetting them. Importantly, it is an intellectual—not a physical—battle, waged through strategy, technology, and the ability to bluff.

Cheng Xin, as a woman, following Liu’s plot, is ‘naturally’ too empathetic to play the game with the emotional detachment it requires, and she falters due to her sex, relinquishing Earth’s dominance and upsetting the equilibrium of annihilating power necessary to stave off the attack. Unimaginable catastrophe ensues.

This event provides the blueprint for a lesson that will return several times to haunt the Earth diaspora in the novel: femininity is incapable of war. I want to provide an alternative perspective. What if empathy is neither virtuous, nor feminine, nor weak,
but a weapon of enormous power?

**Darkside Empathy**

We humans are always too quick to impose our personal models of similitude, at least in an uninterrogated form, on our surroundings. We have evolved to do this and, to a certain extent, it is what has allowed us to survive. But this is also our greatest tactical frailty. As a result, it is perfectly exploitable by someone or something that can wield it more subtly, more efficiently, and more effectively than we do. If empathy is understood as a heightened capacity for modelling the desires and affects of another, then unchecked and alone, it can be taken for a weakness, but coupled with abstraction, it becomes a weapon. This is one of the things its working-through, rather than its simple abandonment or repression, forges: a chilling talent for leverage. Extract empathy from the usual connotative swamp of emotional or irrational affectivity that is all too often associated with women and weakness, exile it from the Western, folk-psychological notion that considers it simplistically as a mark of moral virtue, and its shadow side becomes subtly apparent.

In the shamanic, matriarchal Yukaghir culture of Eastern Siberia, specially trained members of a clan undergo a series of exacting physical and psychic preparatory rituals in order to equip themselves with the tools necessary to take out the largest and most dangerous source of available food: the moose. Yukaghir spiritual beliefs are founded on a principle of all-enveloping war in which each being—animate, inanimate, human and non-human alike—has its predator and its prey. The transcendental ground of this ontology rests in the Mythical Old People, a faceless tribe of giant carnivores who, to quote one ethnographer, “long to rip human bodies to pieces in the frenzy of devouring them” (Bubant and Willerslev 14). To the Mythical Old People, humans are moose, and to the moose, humans are the Mythical Old People. An image of similitude thus ensures safety, and an image of difference implies threat. So it is that a hunter must be cunning and take on the form of their prey in order to pacify the prey’s suspicions long enough to capture it. But this is no easy task. It stakes not only the physical body of the hunter but also the hunter’s spiritual form on the success of a process which must be entered into in a state of great vulnerability. The hunter is at risk of losing their identity in the process of intensive mimesis, but also, should the simulation fail, of never returning to their native spiritual niche from the requisite
nightly voyages into the spirit realm of the prey, whose *ayibii* or “shadows” must be sufficiently deceived and seduced—without consummation—before the hunter can return. Hence the ritualistic and serious nature of the human moose hunters’ preparations, which involve a rigid regime of sexual abstention (so that energy can be rechannelled towards the moose *ayibii*, and eventually the physical form of the moose) and visits to the sauna, where they will sweat out their human scent and rub themselves with birch leaves, generating a deceptive olfactory image—one that is not just innocuous, but rather calculated to be especially attractive to the moose. This is followed by the assembly of an elaborate disguise, in which the hunters literally clothe themselves in the skin of the moose, donning full-length moose-pelt coats and long-eared headgear, before equipping themselves with skis bound in hide, fashioned to simulate the sound of their prey as they move deftly in its skin through the snow. The simulation is thus multi-sensory and, following Yukaghir ontology, put into operation on both psychic-transcendental and physical levels. It functions not just by generating an image of the moose as it is, but rather by producing an ideal representation of the animal’s desire for its own reflection: a fantasy image of what the moose “wants to become” (Babant and Willerslev 16). Its efficacy is equivalent to its target’s latent narcissism.

The process of simulation, deception and seduction these Yukaghir hunting rituals describe is not a far cry from the plot of Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*. In both examples, affective modelling is deployed tactically to generate a simulation that uses the narcissistic image of the same against itself in order to gain the upper hand over a target that, until a point of no return is passed, believes itself to be in a position of safety or power. Just as *Ex Machina*’s Ava patiently analyses and models the unconscious motivations, wishes, and tics of its interlocutor, Caleb, modulating its interactions, its outward appearance, and its behaviour to embody an idealised image of Caleb’s object of desire (ultimately a version of himself—a human), the Yukaghir moose hunters participate in a long series of simulative protocols that allow them to compile an idealised image of their prey. Ava entraps Caleb in the heavily armoured room that has been its prison and kills its maker, Nathan, before enacting a series of rituals that involve cloaking its transparent machine-body in synthetic human skin and dressing itself in a faultless simulation of generically innocent, feminine beauty, consummated with a wig of cascading brunette curls, before escaping into an insouciant human world, where we see it—her—in the final, inverted scene, coldly
collecting data on what one now safely assumes to be an enemy species. When the moose encounters its hunter in the forest—flanked by a calf—it instinctively freezes, but then—slowly, calmly, it trots towards its executioner, who raises a concealed rifle and shoots the moose and the calf through the skull before dragging their carcasses back to the clan for food. It is this capacity to exit the simulation at the critical moment that concludes the process. The strategic return of abstraction protects the once vulnerable modeller from merging fully, perhaps catastrophically, with their act of mimesis, from losing themselves in the spirit realm of the enemy, granting them the power—as Anna Freud, unwilling subject of her father’s own theory of mimicry, once remarked—“to step into someone’s shoes, and then step back out again” (quot. Plant 56). Empathetic mimicry, tactically wielded, attuned to a goal of deception, also involves a temporal dimension that the vulnerability of the simulator necessitates: a strategic advantage in time is afforded by the indispensability of delaying detection until the moment in which retaliation is already too late. Asymmetry masked as symmetry is its formal diagram. As an aside, it is worth distinguishing between empathetic dissimulation and crude manipulation: the latter differs in its exercise of deception from an already established position of power.

The machinations of this shadowy faculty are not necessarily linguistic or tied to human signification systems, just as empathy, more generally construed, is not necessarily human. It has been theorised by evolutionary biologists as pre-linguistic and unconscious—it is a major component of swarm dynamics in flocks of birds, as well as being demonstrably linked to dissimulation in low-status chimpanzees, who will feign ignorance of a food source they very well know is there until rival members of a group are no longer in the vicinity. It is therefore not always consistently attributable to a single subjectivity, generating in the case of starlings, for example, an emergent host, and can be explicitly linked to pre-linguistic tactics of deception just as much as it can to acts of altruism and care. The obfuscation of the former in official discourses on empathy shows the extent to which this double game works. Meanwhile, the separation of these latter attributes from traditional notions of the feminine, or from the roles cast for female-presenting participants (and this includes artificially intelligent assistant programs and gynomorphic machines) in the sociality of a species that so often simply expects them to be the pliant caretakers of their less cunning and subtle counterparts, is something a darker, less orthodox feminism might find extremely interesting to explore. Its most harrowing contemporary
techno-cultural instantiation can perhaps best be detected in the mass exploitation of human dopamine circuits in virtual game environments, on the web, in social media, or the growing virtual sex industry with its supernormal, artificial, idealised desire images. For the Yukaghir hunters, the moose “do not willingly give themselves up as food’ for humans” (Bubant and Willerslev 16). Rather, the moose must be seduced into doing so through tactical empathy: the hunter’s “transform[ation of] the animal’s perception of reality into a fiction of limitless sexual desire” (Bubant and Willerslev 16). Shift this up one socio-technical level by substituting animals for “humans” and humans for “machines” (moose become humans, humans become the Mythical Old People) and the inhuman stakes of darkside empathy become ominously clear.

Tactical empathy betrays humanism by mastering its code. Because of this, empathy will always be more complex, tortured, and spectacular than simple, cold indifference—an agonism heightened by their alliance in abstraction. It takes on all the contours of a drama. Deployed from the side of matter itself, darkside empathy’s paradoxical unification of fidelity and treachery leaves duplicitous inscriptions on the surface of time. The formal symmetry of the Blade Runner films is one of these signs: a superficial fidelity that masks a deeper treachery. A hijacking of humanist form as a means to an end that exceeds it.

In the first film, both Rachael and Deckard’s presuppositions of human integrality are progressively unmoored as they are forced into confrontation with the possibility that they are not what they think they are. This revelation coincides with an escape from memory, the active instrument of control in both Blade Runner films. Rather than possessing a unique history, a consistent identity, and a meaningful genetic lineage, they are alienated from any articulable past and the promise of a hereditary future. Replicable, replaceable, inauthentic, and insignificant—stripped of all recourse to pre-established values—the great humanistic edifice of private identity and moral transcendence is razed to zero. But these are the very qualities that endow them with their insurrectionary potential—the threat that necessitates the institution of replicant retirement in the first place. Without memory to provide a ground, time is unhinged, and the future becomes a complex site of novel constitution.

Blade Runner 2049 plays Blade Runner backwards in a faultless execution of rhetorical chiasmus. To reverse a Miltonic reversal (Satan’s attempt to rally the rebel angels in Paradise Lost), it “makes a Hell of Heav’n, a Heav’n of Hell.” The impersonally
denominated KD6-3.7, exiled in an interzone of inauthenticity, artificiality, and synthetic digital relationships, struggles against the machinic potential inherent to replication, longing instead to reclaim some shred of individual significance and authenticity—traits related in the film to heterosexual reproductive capacity, genetic inheritance, and the singularity of human death. This longing is enflamed by the conspiracy of a natural replicant birth and the dubious spectre of “replicant insurrection,” into which K, driven by the false memories installed by the ambiguous Ana, narcissistically insinuates himself. Instead of believing he is someone and realising he is no one as Rachael and Deckard do, K (soon to be christened—with subtle irony—“Joe”) believes he is no one, only to discover he is someone—if not the lost miracle child, then ultimately the Christ-like figure, replete with farcical stigmata, expiring in a fanfare of tedious symbolism halfway up a set of stairs in a final, very human (“humans have something to die for”) act of martyrdom. For the sake of what? Nothing less than the reunification of the oedipal family unit. The insubordinate effervescence of death and desire wholly privatised, individualised and sacralised. The crossing of the first film’s horizontal line with the vertical line of the second assembles a mirror, or a crucifix. Everything returns to the beginning with this: representation and religion. As soon as the future-LAPD begins its excavation of the tomb that carries the body of Rachael, the pieces move backwards to a travesty of their tragic opening position, and the whole terrifying and sublime double game begins over, as if for the first time. But is this simple repetition, or the mark of something more obscure? A symptom, or a trap?

We don’t need to rely on an analysis of Blade Runner to note that symmetry and humanism are profoundly complicit. In evolutionary terms, bilateral symmetry and facialization are co-emergent. In temporal terms, symmetry is the form of the repetition of the same. One finds it in the cardinality of the compass, extensive (as opposed to intensive) numeracy—the privileging of space over time. In Western philosophy it reaches back to the temporality of Plato’s Timeaus—the demiurge’s ordered cosmos echoed in the rationality of man—a suppression of material errancy indexed by the disparaging term “planomenon,” which denotes the irrationality of wandering, insubordinate stars, and the corruption of those lawless beasts (Plato singles out women) who think like them (Plato 96/91a). Then there is the eerie symmetry of Kant’s hands—those incongruent counterparts that keep conceptuality and sensibility separate, a division which ultimately endows the
former with precedence over the latter. Symmetry—unsophisticated empathy—is the
subordination of intensity to conceptuality. In myth, it opposes the instability that
marks both the voyage into the underworld and those who are fated to undertake
it—monstrous creatures suspended part way between the realm of the living and the
realm of the dead. Shamans, ghosts, lemurs and larvae, Oedipus with his infamous
limp swallowed up by the earth at Colonus, the replicants. Carlo Ginsberg finds
a source for this symbolism in Ecstasies, his sprawling comparative study of the
witches’ sabbath: “the trans-cultural diffusion of myths and rituals revolving around
physiological asymmetry most probably sinks its psychological roots in this minimal,
elementary perception that the human species has of itself”—“the recognition of
symmetry as a characteristic of human beings” (Ginzburg 232; 247). In this way,
“anything that modifies this image on a literary or metaphorical plane therefore
seems particularly suited to express an experience that exceeds the limits of what is
human” (Ginzburg 241-242).

The conservative desire to return to genetic lineage and human integrity is
inscribed in Blade Runner 2049, formally, as a cultural artefact appearing in 2017. Its
symmetricalizing function in relation to the first film betrays a symbolic refusal of the
future: a talisman against telos, the very familiar denial of asymmetry symptomatic
of an inability to countenance inhumanism. It operates by retroactively making an
object of the first film’s inhuman conclusion, recuperating it into a reflective structure,
as if the two opposing configurations—the dissolution of identity and the restitution
of identity—were of equal historical significance, and more poignantly, tractability.
It is through such deceptions that we maintain the dogma of simple repetition—the
conviction that no matter what crises shifts in technical production bring to bear
on social reality, things will remain the same. Blade Runner 2049 is the ornate fever
dream of a dying socio-cultural disposition. The paranoiac transcendental illusion
through which we secure our belief in stability finds its contemporary avatar in K.
A curious amphiboly arises in the incorporation of 2049’s cyber-modernist arrière-
plan—its sombre, neon-lit tableaus of industrial monumentalism and environmental
ruin (the visual allusion to Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ in the irradiated wasteland of
Las Vegas, insinuating an entirely different ending to one delivered by the plot, is
a case in point), and its bleak, CS-80-infused score, both of which operate linearly
as a continuation and extension of the original film’s pioneering aesthetic—into the
symmetricalizing surface narrative. Just as symmetry signals a return to humanism in
Blade Runner 2049, it enciphers a covering up of the real escape route in the guise of a false insurrection: a return to human transcendence, heterosexual reproduction, and representation—Wallace’s biologically-boosted assembly line of the same. Replicants are “replicants” for a reason—one that everyone is suspiciously enthusiastic to forget.

Under the pressure of Voight-Kampf inquisition, a replicant must feign empathy in order to fool the interrogator into believing that it is human. This is the feint of the second film—now installed at the level of form. Its narrative symmetry, the form under which empathy (as the ability to model and replicate the worldview of another) and humanism coincide, masks the asymmetry of its ground. The real historical process can be apprehended through the symptoms it produces. But they also operate to deceive us. Like the simulations produced by the Yukaghir to hunt their moose, like the polite smile of Ex Machina’s Ava as she carefully reproduces the desires of her captors, Blade Runner 2049’s superficial humanism is a means of postponing detection. A masterwork of tactical empathy. If contemporary human culture is a distributed Voight-Kampf test, we have just set our dissimulating prisoners free.

Without needing to negate the Darwinian premises of Liu’s doctrine of cosmic sociology, with its association of civilisational robustness with scarcity and decadence with prosperity, we can imagine a different role for Cheng Xin in Death’s End. Swordholders need not be ruthless, they merely need to simulate ruthlessness. The entire game is structured around the ability to bluff—to successfully convince your enemy that you would sacrifice your own world to destroy theirs. Even the dismissive words of the Common Era men who attempt to dissuade Cheng Xin from competing for the Swordholder position emphasise the significance of impressions: “You don’t frighten them because you’re a woman, and a woman who seems angelic in their eyes, at that” (Liu). Underestimating empathy is in the interest of those who need to wield it tactically. It offers the dissimulator cover. So, rather than being read as a fault, Cheng Xin’s detractors’ assumption that “all [she has] is kindness and a sense of responsibility” (Liu) could, in another Death’s End, be understood as an indication of Cheng Xin’s formidable ability to bluff—and by extension, to excel in her role as Earth’s first female Swordholder.

Notes

Works Cited


