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PRAGMATIC LOVE: LESSONS TAUGHT BY ROBOTS

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Abstract

The current analysis centers on the concept of “pragmatic love” and its three core characteristics – compassion, courage, commitment – as encompassed in three cinema productions belonging to the science fiction genre: Blade Runner (1982, director Ridley Scott), Baymax: Big Hero 6 (2014, directors Don Hall and Chris Williams) and Blade Runner 2049 (2017, director Denis Villeneuve). The analytical protocol pursues a two-step procedure: the definition of each of the three dimensions and its subsequent integration within the mediatic phenomenological experience. The three movies were selected due to their subtle, but convincing blending of Japanese and US-American elements (the former two) and the dissolution of these elements into a continuum of futuristic neo-noir aesthetics transcending conventional prerequisites of the prequel-sequel concatenation (the latter one). The conclusion outlines further potentialities of the concept of “pragmatic love” in everyday encounters as well as its ideological extensions into “awe” as both a necessity to action and a state of mind.

Keywords: live-action cinema; animation; future/reality co-creation; robots versus humans; multidimensional species.

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1. Introduction: fundamentals of pragmatic love

Throughout history, love has been perhaps the most observed and praised phenomenon, in its various appearances, experiences, delusions. From an emotion to a mental state, love as “pure love” seems to have positioned itself at the center of humanity’s preoccupations with itself. In contrast to that, the current analysis encompasses the three core characteristics of “pragmatic love” – compassion, courage and commitment – identified for this paper through extensive literature review and as displayed in three iconic cinematic productions: *Blade Runner* (1982, director Ridley Scott), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, director Denis Villeneuve) and *Baymax: Big Hero 6* (2014, directors Don Hall and Chris Williams) serve as independent variables in the analytical laboratory. The live-action cinema and animation at the intersection of Japanese and US-American visions of life, AI and humanness convey overwhelming messages of past reluctance to see beyond a static identity model with the simultaneous subliminal push towards understanding one’s own impact on the world and towards a dialectic dynamization of identificatory mechanisms. In doing so, they reveal the individual’s propensity to become a self-stylizing architect capable to grasp freedom in the name of radical responsibility, so that he/she turns from a “victim of history” to whom “life happens” into an active agent in the creation – or co-creation – process of the future and of reality. Accordingly, the current analysis takes into account three levels of the debate on the relationship between humans and robots, respectively

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bio-engineered “replicants”, while reflecting on the dimensions circumscribing historical phenomena: socio-cultural, economic-political and technologic-educational. The central paradigm of “pragmatic love” is defined both as a state of mind comprising emotions, thoughts, ideals, and as the necessity to action in the realm of quotidian events and challenges. In order to analyze the internal architecture of “pragmatic love” as creatively explored by the three cinema releases and in light of its core features, compassion, courage and commitment, I follow the protocol of defining each of the concepts and subsequently critically observing their integration within the cinematic conglomerate on multiple levels. In the *Conclusion*, I wrap up major ideas and suggest further research objectives in relation to similar mass-media projects detailing the not-so-visible extensions of “pragmatic love” as an individually internal affair seeking externalization.

Methodologically, I draw on more than twenty years of empirical-phenomenological fieldwork on Japan, Japanese animation, as well as in the slippery domain of Japanese and global mass media. The phenomenological experience is socio-culturally contextualized, emulated on cinema and animation as discursive mass-media and as performative orchestrations of an authentic self and resistance against conformity, uniformity, and the alleged superiority which comes from their association. Hence, live-action cinema and animation reveal the highest level of existential transcendence: the consumerist strategies visible in the global societies of late modernity turn out to be plain symptoms of a forever-postponed confrontation with the individual reality, and not sustainable solutions in terms of personal fulfillment and/or social cohesion (see Allison, 2013, 17, Sugimoto 2013, 25). I observe the multiple layers of cinema as cumulative symbols of universal mass-media, as cultural phenomena arrested in the stress-ratio between visual representation and musical intertwining, between arts and media, embedded in bureaucratic structures of administration and self-organization such as the release politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of producers and consumers, as well as the products themselves and their meta-narrative concatenations (see Suzuki 2018, 32; Buhler 2019, Cooke 2010). As my sources, I rely on extensive fieldwork with long-term participatory observation and empirical data collection, resulting from archive research of Japanese and Western documents and from informal discussions with Japanese producers and with Japanese and non-Japanese fans, experts, and other consumers of products of popular culture, domestic and international. This complex endeavor allowed unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception and processing of media phenomena in Japan and worldwide. Taking into account the fact that the media industry and its products are extremely vivacious and almost painful in their superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, the persistence and longevity of the *Blade Runner* problematic and its affiliated thematic complex throughout decades are a powerful reminder that vision, determination and mastery are worthy assets in the hierarchy of human values – although not always forthrightly advertised as such.

Loosely based on the science-fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick, *Blade Runner* was focused on the disturbingly hypocritical representation of robots by humans and their co-existence, on the background of a dystopian future set in 2019-Los Angeles. The story unfolds as former police officer and “blade runner” Rick Deckard (embodied by Harrison Ford in one of his most iconic roles) is detained by Officer Gaff, who has a hobby of origami folding, and is brought to his former supervisor, Bryant: Bryant appoints him to track down four fugitive synthetic humans known as “replicants”, bioengineered by the powerful Tyrell Corporation to work on space colonies, and to terminally eliminate (“retire”) them, as they are on Earth illegally. Deckard agrees reluctantly, and during the subsequent development, he is confronted with circumstances and choices which test his ability to fulfill his task successfully particularly because they compel him to question and to a certain degree to rethink his own humanity, both in relation to the humans around him and to the humanoid “replicants” he is supposed to kill. Released in 1982 under the direction of Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* massively underperformed during its initial running and acutely polarized critics and viewers, with some praising its thematic complexity and visuals, and with others criticizing its slow pacing and lack of action – which was a necessary ingredient in the overall logic of the movie meant to allow for the profoundly philosophical and ethical dimensions to emerge from within the depths of the dramaturgic architecture. Nonetheless, it turned throughout the decades into a cult movie to be regarded as one of the all-time best science fiction productions. With its daunting and highly

acclaimed soundtrack composed by Vangelis, *Blade Runner*'s production design depicting a high-tech but decaying future inspired by Tokyo's realities of the early 1980s appears in historical perspective as a leading example of neo-noir cinema and as a foundational work of the cyberpunk genre. Moreover, it has been influencing various and numerous science fiction movies, video games, anime (Japanese animation) productions, television series, while simultaneously bringing the work of Philip K. Dick to the attention of Hollywood executives: several of his works were later adapted for cinema in impressive blockbusters, such as *Total Recall* (1990, director Paul Verhoeven, based on Dick's 1966 short-story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale*) and *Minority Report* (2002, director Steven Spielberg, based on Dick's eponymous short-story from 1956).

Baymax: Big Hero 6 was released by Walt Disney Pictures as its 54th work in the Walt Disney Animated Classics Series in the USA under the title *Big Hero 6* on November 7, 2014, after having been premiered previously in Tokyo at the 27th Tokyo International Film Festival on October 23rd, 2014, and in Abu Dhabi at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival on October 31st, 2014. At first sight, *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, a huge success both on a critical and on a commercial level, is a cultural product combining Western (US-American) animation styles and Eastern (Japanese) symbolical contents. Moreover, it appears as a translucent and optimistic echo of the 1982 neo-noir dystopian science-fiction movie *Blade Runner*: the plot is simple and refers, after the exploration of the emotional intricacies of sisterhood in *Frozen* (released by Walt Disney Pictures one year before, in 2013), to the complex and often unexpectedly competitive relationship between brothers. The directors Don Hall and Chris Williams tackle, I would say with graceful realism, the problematic of brotherhood in the absence of a functional family as promoted by classic standards, thus redefining family and family structure as a site of gradual self-discovery. The plot evolves around the main character Hiro Hamada – a quite typical Japanese male name – who is a 14-year-old robotics genius living in the futuristic city of San Fransokyo (a concatenation of “San Francisco” and “Tokyo”). Raised by his aunt, Cass Hamada, and his older brother, Tadashi Hamada, after the death of his parents ten years ago, Hiro spends his time participating in illegal robots' fights, until Tadashi takes him to the robotics center of his university where he encounters Tadashi's friends – all of them robotics nerds: two girls, GoGo and Honey Lemon, and one boy, Wasabi, as well as Fred, a sort of freeloader comic-books fan hanging around in the laboratory. A little later, his brother Tadashi introduces Hiro to Baymax, the healthcare robot he had developed in his quest to help people in need. Inspired by their enthusiastic research activity, by his brother's soft persuasion methods and by Professor Robert Callaghan's laid-back encouragement, Hiro decides that he wants to join the team at San Fransokyo Institute of Technology and starts preparing to present a breathtaking innovation that would allow him to enroll. The subsequent development of the plot follows Hiro negotiating with the challenges and hardships of life while learning to observe, analyze and understand himself and those around him, deeply dialectic entities embedded in the same shared human condition.

The 2017-released *Blade Runner* sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (director: Denis Villeneuve), is a reformulation of the century-old adage that being a human is the most beautiful thing in the whole universe. Decisively belonging to the neo-noir science fiction cinematic category, *Blade Runner 2049* takes place in 2049, 30 years following the events of the initial *Blade Runner*, an era in which bio-engineered humans known as “replicants” are slaves. The plot centers on K (short for his serial number, KD6-3.7), a Nexus-9 “replicant” who works for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a “blade runner”: an officer who hunts and “retires” (kills) rogue “replicants”, admirably embodied by Ryan Gosling in one of his most memorable roles. As he “retires” Nexus-8 “replicant” Sapper Morton, he finds, tracing the sight of a tiny flower, a unique sign of natural life in the chemical desert which is Morton's protein farm: a box buried under a dying tree. The box contains the remains of a female “replicant” who died during a Caesarean section, demonstrating that “replicants” can reproduce biologically, previously thought impossible. K's superior, though, Lieutenant Joshi, fears that this could lead to a war between humans and “replicants”. She orders K to find and “retire” the “replicant” child to hide the truth, as further investigating this secret threatens to destabilize society and the course of civilization. Acclaimed by specialists for its staff performances, direction, cinematography, editing, musical score, production design, visual effects, and faithfulness to the atmosphere of the original film, and criticized for its over-long runtime, *Blade Runner 2049* has

grown increasingly popular with audiences since its release: distinctly, viewers and critics alike recognize in its visual construction of the future the prerequisites of a world of immense discrepancies and unlimited greed, on the one hand, and in its characters predecessors of humans increasingly becoming unwelcome on their own planet – not by means of a nefarious, over-exhausted nature, but by means of their fellow humans’ malevolence, on the other hand. The neo-noir science fiction genre delivers crucial dramaturgic pretexts to this more-than-dystopian vision of the consequences of current decisions, developments, choices, but *Blade Runner 2049*’s significant contribution resides in its ability to convey seeds of hope and positive solutions in the purifying power of water – which surrounds the final, climactic battle, and eventually drowns the past, symbolically – as well as in the transient, but consistent suggestions and appearances of the natural habitat – such as the flower and the tree at the beginning of the movie, the sand and the sky, the ocean. While the initial *Blade Runner* was bleak in itself and did not attempt any catharsis-inspiring denouement to transcend its exclusively dark interiors shying away from any sort of daylight or open spaces, *Blade Runner 2049* employs precisely daylight and open spaces as metaphors for humanity’s resurrection as a place of warmth, acceptance and conviviality. Unlike Deckard’s character which incorporated the existential anguish of early 1980s due to the Cold War’s threat of nuclear conflict, K’s composure and trajectory is clearly one which mitigates hope and faith in the name of an authentic greater good – not the one promoted by mass/social media, politicians and mega-corporations. As to be shown further below, within these parameters of dramaturgic discourse, what might be described as “pragmatic love” with its three major features – compassion, courage, commitment – circumscribe the existence, relevance and development of robots and of AI within the human community.

2. Compassion: self-love as acceptance of the other’s “radical otherness”

Compassion is one of the three elements contained in the structure of pragmatic love as an existential attitude, defined as the ability to feel, to identify with and to integrate the emotions of someone else. Two parameters are fundamental in the equation of compassion: empathy and integrity. Empathy means precisely the skill to immerse into someone else’s emotions, to feel them at the same level as the other person does. Generally, there are two categories of empathy: the cognitive one, referring to a type of empathy in which someone else’s emotions are rationally known without any real involvement of feelings, and the emotional one, which is central piece of the current argument (see Bauman, 1997; Giddens, 1990). Integrity, on the other hand, implies the ability of the empathizing subject to keep his/her own individual boundaries and not to get dragged by and into the emotional flows and ebbs of someone else, regardless of how strongly connected they might be. While empathy is the foundation of interhuman interactions, it is integrity which allows compassion to become a functional skill.

Blade Runner explores in depth the various dimensions of what it means to be human and of what exactly defines ‘humanity’ as a state of being within the larger cosmic circuit. The major element is empathy, which is employed in order to test the presumable humanity of those being chased and captured – and more specifically, in order to determine whether the person being tested is human or a “replicant”. In the latter case, they are supposed to be eliminated as they are deemed to be dangerous. A number of questions included in the test are focused on the treatment of animals, because “replicants” seem to respond differently than humans, without any signs of concern. Against the dystopian, dark background of the movie, with its quasi-omnipresent corporate power, apparently omniscient, omnipotent police, the simultaneous exploration of the consequences of huge biomedical powers over the individual, in particular in relation with the “replicants” implanted memories, occurs: the sense of oppressiveness is amplified by the humans’ almighty control over the environment, going hand in hand with the absence of any natural life, so that artificial animals stand in for their extinct predecessors within the all-encompassing nocturnal atmosphere. While empathy is touted as humans’ defining characteristic, it is eventually within the so-called “tears in rain” 42-word monologue towards the end of the movie that the value of compassion as the ability to withstand rage and revenge is revealed. It consists of the last words of the character Roy Batty (dauntingly portrayed in the movie by Rutger Hauer) and has been regarded as “perhaps the most moving death soliloquy in cinematic history” (Rowlands, 2003, 235), as it suggests that being human transcends death and

nothingness, but cannot escape sharing one's common joy and suffering: "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 the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain... Time to die." (*Blade Runner*, 1:47:06) Roy's final gesture to save his nemesis from a sure obliteration shows the main character, Rick Deckard, that despite his technological structure, he is potentially more human than real humans.

In *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, Hiro's elder brother, Tadashi Hamada, becomes a symbol of mentorship and motivation, and transcends therefore the limits of brotherhood as a competitive relationship and undertaking throughout modernity: Tadashi Hamada is a positive, well-balanced young man on the way towards his own adulthood. After his death in the laboratory fire while trying to save his professor, the healthcare robot Baymax created by him takes over his task of guiding the teenager Hiro in the complicated alleys of puberty. In his turn, Hiro, the younger brother and the main human character, learns to overcome the pain of the loss of his brother in the pursuit of a meaningful life; in doing so, he transcends anger and the will to revenge, thus developing compassion and the ability to forgive – more often than not practical instruments in dealing with the intricacies and inconsistencies of the grown-ups' world (see Eagleton, 2003; Meštrović, 1997; Anderson, 1998). The compassionate care Baymax brings towards Hiro finds its counterbalance in the three college nerds – GoGo, Wasabi, Honey Lemon – and Fred, the half-way mysterious mascot at the San Fransokyo Institute of Technology, who serve both as inspiration and challenge to the young and inexperienced Hiro. Each of them portrays one main aspect of the complex personality of a mature man: GoGo is a tough athletic student, definitely a woman of few words. Wasabi is a smart, slightly neurotic young man, actually highly conservative and cautious, obviously the most normal in a group of brazen characters; in the second part of the movie, he turns, in a way, into the voice of the audience and points out that what they are doing is crazy, thus grounding the development of the plot by breaking the fourth wall. While being a chemistry enthusiast, Honey Lemon is a 'glass-is-half-full' kind of person, with a very specific mad-scientist spark in the twinkle of her eyes. Finally, Fred moves beyond his appearance of a school's mascot and science enthusiast, and while none of these four characters really changes along the movie, at the obligatory "we need to be a team" type of moment, the tension necessary in the dramatic development is created. In their unconditional love, Hiro finds a sense of peace and contentment – and the strength to move forward despite dearly missing his brother.

Eventually, in *Blade Runner 2049*, compassion is compounded by a sense of curiosity so typical for the average humans, but displayed by K, the main character and a "replicant" himself: K, the driving force beneath the story-line which is essentially a detective plot, tries to solve a mystery about his own past, the history of "replicants", the power of memory, and about what it means to be a human being. Touched by the inconspicuous presence of a flower under a dying tree – both symbols of decay, resurrection and the continuation of life –, K sets on a journey of initiation towards what might reveal him his own humanity. Throughout the movie, compassion and curiosity become the prerequisites for hope: the abandoned children in the orphanage and the half-"replicant" offspring Ana Stelline, now a grown-up, point out towards an even more distant future in which the acceptance of others' individual and radical otherness as well as differences is the foundation of the world, and not artificial concatenations. This is eerily reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s visionarism displayed and described in great detail in the literary works of Philipp K. Dick and Isaac Asimov, who dreamt and wrote about interstellar travel and human worlds of a future ahead of millennia, made possible by the crucial cooperation between humans and robots (Vest, 2009, 95-98; see Riesman, 1950; Haraway, 1991). K's final gesture as he quietly "dies" on the stairs of the building in which Ana's laboratory is located after he had brought Rick Deckard (from the initial *Blade Runner*) to meet his daughter for the first time, is one of defiant challenge: they are artificial "replicants", bio-engineered robots or cyborgs, more human than humans because in their mechanical outfit things do not change, they do not deteriorate and do not evolve despite events and experiences, unlike humans who learn and grow and change? A timeless question in itself, it is not answered in *Blade Runner 2049*, which subtly encourages viewers to debate and discuss potential meanings, options and preferences, instead of solely being passive recipients of mindless entertainment. Moreover, though, *Blade Runner 2049* hints

that compassion comes in humans with the ability to think freely and to act accordingly, and as the vital necessity to appreciate nature and art so clearly designed to enrich our souls.

In *Blade Runner*, compassion is a tool to defeat death and unravel deeper-than-in-humans humanity in bio-engineered “replicants”; in *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, compassion is a language spoken by friends acting as the Ersatz-family around the main character, employed to teach him the value of togetherness, trust and community; in *Blade Runner 2049*, compassion is a means to convey hope – even when it appears as hope-against-hope and a simulation in the futile quest for a presumable human core. As such, compassion mediates the advancement towards the discovery of a courageous vision, attitude and behavior, which then allows for selflessness in otherness.

3. Courage: living wholeheartedly

The word *courage* has developed from the Latin word *cor* which means “heart”. Traditionally, it refers to the quality of mind which enables one to meet danger and trouble without fear, because the heart is the seat of emotions and hence keeps one’s spirit, temperament, way of being. Boldness as a choice and willingness to confront agony, pain, danger, uncertainty, intimidation, compounded by the moral fortitude and physical strength to act in accordance with higher values in order to protect those in need, are essential parts of courage as it has been transmitted throughout the centuries (Davis, 1979, 33-37; Bauman, 2000, 112; see Clifford, 2002). Recently, though, the understanding of “courage” has shifted from its initial meaning of direct confrontation with adversity towards a softer approach: the ability to live in the present, to enjoy one’s life and to immerse oneself in the authenticity and vulnerability of being one’s true self (Brown, 2010, 23-37; Hooks, 2000, 48-57; see Fromm, 2010). Therefore, living authentically and in tune with one’s vulnerable identity have slowly turned into the crucial components of the late modern conceptualization of courage: the inner urge to be faithful to one’s nature and propensities rather than to adapt to social pressures and the enthusiasm to open up towards others and to share one’s innermost thoughts, emotions, expectations are essential features of a life lived courageously, wholeheartedly.

In *Blade Runner*, the acute awareness of the fragility of human life arises from the characters’ interactions. The narrative loop circumscribing the possible humanity of the “replicants” – which is never really confirmed nor denied – metamorphoses gradually into an existential inquiry into the meaning of life: live life plenarily, grasp every moment and engage profoundly with life’s realities, as nobody knows when it might end, is the subliminal message. Vangelis’ daunting music, an eerie combination of human voices processed electronically and unidentifiable instruments, subliminally creates an inescapable tension between the dark, overwhelming tones of the movie and the hopeful finale, simultaneously questioning the very foundation of being human: is it a choice, a chance, or a crime? Interestingly enough, in this interpretation of the word ‘courage’, the “replicants” rather than the humans display the ability to live life at its outmost, to grab any opportunity at savoring it and to delve into the adventures it offers. The “replicants” were created to support humans and to fulfill the tasks humans were too weak to pursue efficiently, but, ironically, they somehow appear both inclined to cling to life and to enjoy it without doubting its value, meaning, duration. In opposition to them, those deemed as human are entangled in everyday struggles and ambitions, too confused to realize their own fragility and too busy to stop and ask themselves the hard questions which might lead to the revelation of their own vulnerable core – and therefore, to the real self, hidden beneath thick strata of conventions (see Fuller, 2007; Castells, 1997). In Rachael Tyrell’s ambivalent character (exquisitely embodied by Sean Young), Rick Deckard finds first insinuations of love as romantic attachment and gradually discovers within himself the resources to transcend his mission in the name of a greater goal: to love and be loved. In the narrative development of their interaction, various issues are addressed, such as the protective force of memories, or of the lack thereof, the importance of allowing secrets to be just that: secrets, the necessity to stand up for oneself and in doing so to shelter what – or who – truly matters from the evils of impersonal politico-economic decisions. This dramaturgic pursuit slowly leads to the fusion of the two layers of significance of courage into one conglomerate:

living authentically in the name of one's true self means, eventually, safeguarding those who matter to us from life-threatening dangers.

On the other hand, *Baymax: Big Hero 6*' story is both fun and engaging, thus strongly contributing to an atmosphere of ludic wholeheartedness: in a way, it combines a typical coming-of-age narrative line akin to Spider-Man's grasping "with great power" with the darker tones of finding one's true self in the midst of malevolent forces. Nevertheless, it moves beyond this concatenation of themes towards a more direct relatability with audiences. Hence, viewers do not just watch Hiro struggle as a teenager to define the man he wants to become, in particular after the tragic loss of his elder brother. They also observe Baymax and his halfway incredulous, halfway desirable advancement from a robotic nurse into a full sentient being. It is their relationship growth that drives Hiro on his pathway towards maturity while engaging the core elements of the story – or better put: it is *in* their relationship with its warmth, reliability, humanness that Hiro is led to discover his own pathway towards maturity (see Silvio, 2006, 122; see Bauman, 2003). However, rather than its plot, the structure and configuration of the characters are the strongest assets of *Baymax: Big Hero 6*. In the first place, Baymax, the healthcare robot, brings together two main elements of sustained efforts in re-defining masculinity in late modernity: on the one hand, there is what one might call the concept of 'tough cuteness' as a practical gate into adulthood, as Hiro Hamada, the male teenager whose care Baymax takes over, gradually discovers; on the other hand, the concept of "cool kindness" is intertwined, turning Baymax, the healthcare robot, into a symbolic archetype of the fruitful juxtaposition between the non-humanity of its character and the empathic warmth it radiates – which is, in fact, one of the key ingredients in the success story of Walt Disney Animation since its inception as the world knows it in 1929. Through the character of Baymax, this first official feature crossover cooperation between Marvel and Disney combines what the House of Mouse and the House of Ideas do best and unifies them into a warm, funny, heartfelt, riveting adventure film. In his quest for love, acceptance and belonging, Hiro Hamada uncovers a whole new universe of significance and engagement, in which friendship and individual freedom constitute the foundation of an innovative attitude towards self and others. Traditionally transmitted competition and repression turn into creative interdependence, peaceful co-existence and constructive cooperation – which is, after all, the essence of being a man in today's world, shaping a prosperous future of peace and abundance for all.

In this train of thoughts, *Blade Runner 2049* discloses its protagonist's pursuit on the quest for the meaning of life: K's journey towards who he hopes he might be – a real human, a product of the love story between a man and the female "replicant" for whom the man had left everything behind – which started with hope as catalyst ends up in a grand gesture of acceptance and *amor fati* in Friedrich Nietzsche's words (see Greene, 2018, 55-61; Žižek, 1998, 131-132). K learns to confront his own yearning for being human and to radically accept, in one of the most heartbreaking cinema scenes in recent history, its impossibility. Additionally, like in the initial *Blade Runner*, rage and revenge seem to be no options for "replicants", as instead they turn inwards and bring forth the best possible choice. K's story is not so much about living plenarily – although it magnificently displays the loss of individuality and serenity in a world too heavily reliant on technology and on its monetization in parallel with the sterility of technological overcompensation at the costs of simplicity, joy and immediate togetherness. K's story is about the value of courage in facing life as it comes and in dealing with it accordingly: in dignity. While *Blade Runner 2049* explores profound issues of identity ethics, human extinction, cybernetic enhancement and their philosophical counterparts such as freedom and control, wealth and oppression, love and indifference towards children, it does not approach K's decisions, gestures, actions from an ethical perspective, but subtly underscores them with a sense of acute curiosity, which then leads to courageous undertakings. Eventually, K becomes more than a distant echo of Franz Kafka's (Josef) K, the main character in the notoriously famous novel *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*, written in 1914-1915 and published posthumously in 1925): a man arrested and prosecuted by a remote, inaccessible authority, with the nature of his crime revealed neither to him nor to the reader. Kafka's novel tells of the intricacies of modern systems which are neither correct nor transparent, despite being made by humans for humans – and in its own way, *Blade Runner 2049* tells a similar story motivated by absurd, abrupt, aberrant developments, in which

the individual does not have a voice and the courage to embrace one's own destiny and death is the only ethical alternative to exist in dignity.

In *Blade Runner*, courage is the way to view and approach others while carefully wondering about one's position in the world in an attempt to overcome loneliness and meaninglessness; in *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, on the other hand, courage is an existential attitude which opens up avenues of self-awareness and communication; finally, in *Blade Runner 2049*, courage is plainly bravery in the face of inevitable and inevitably painful truths in the name of a shared human condition which no-humans so desperately long for. Consequently, commitment creates the transition towards strength and warmth which then turns pragmatic love from an abstract concept into a concrete skill.

4. Commitment: perseverance in gratitude and respect

The third and probably the most important characteristic of pragmatic love is commitment: it binds compassion and courage into the flexible, unpredictable network of life and allows them to essentially contribute to the functionality of individuals. The three elements constituting commitment are perseverance – the ability to keep on going even when the perspectives seem bleak and the energy is low, or particularly in those moments –, gratitude – the capacity to see events, humans, things, as parts of a greater whole instead of internalizing them as insurmountable obstacles –, and respect – the skill to allow everyone and everything to exist in their own radical truth irrespective of our expectations (see Flax, 1990; Kristeva, 1974). Commitment goes far beyond the obligation to keep one's promise: commitment is an existential attitude which serves, simultaneously, as a moral compass in times of confusion, so that difficulties are not only observed and defeated, but crucial lessons are drawn from them, as well.

Rick Deckard is one of the most symbolic cinema characters: this status results from the metamorphose occurring during his journey of initiation which is the narrative pretext in *Blade Runner*. Like Andrew Harlan in another time and in another space (and in another genre: Isaac Asimov's science-fiction novel *The End of Eternity* from 1955), Rick Deckard evolves throughout the plot from a resolute member of the institution to which he had been assigned and which he serves faithfully to the best of his abilities, into a symbol of love. In his encounters with Rachael, he learns the various layers of his identity and the increasingly deeper vaults of his own loneliness and meaninglessness – until he transforms them into his existential mission. Unlike Andrew Harlan, though, Rick does not turn from an agent of the mechanisms he had previously attended to into their very nemesis; instead, he dissolves into the anonymity provided by dystopian futures. Moreover, his symbolical power as a cinema character resides in the universality of his gestures and in the memorability of his commitment to the tasks he has to fulfill as a policeman, which subsequently short-circuit his decisions and choices: in Rick's interactions with the secondary characters – his supervisors, the “replicants” – he is supposed to terminally eliminate the manufacturers of the bioengineered synthetic humans, the street vendors, the passers-by –, a nauseous sense of purposelessness creeps in, which is gently dissolved during his encounters with Rachael (see Rowlands, 2003; see Arendt, 1976). Like Andrew Harlan and Noÿs Lambent in Asimov's novel, Rick and Rachael undergo a subtle transformation from an illicit love affair into the very cornerstone of the intrigue leading to an unexpectedly emotional denouement. Likewise, on the background of the intransigent reality they face every day, the feminine presence confers both male characters a ray of light and hope to hold on to, something to protect and to believe in. Beneath the conservatism of the gender roles displayed, Rick's (like Andres's) individuality gathers clear contours precisely due to Rachael's (respectively Noÿs's) love and influence.

Inspired initially by the Marvel Comics Superhero team *Big Hero 6*, *Baymax: Big Hero 6* goes far beyond the superficial plot of telling the story of a young robotics prodigy who forms a superhero team to combat a masked villain. Rather, by means of aesthetic conversion and ideological transfer, *Baymax: Big Hero 6* displays commitment as a means to attain kindness, and its instrumentality as a newly discovered driving force on the background of typically Japanese metropolitan landscapes,

combined with slightly Victorian atmospheres and home-interior designs. In the construction of love as a pragmatic endeavor, commitment to one's goals is simultaneously displayed as a complex architecture encompassing respect, gratitude, loyalty, unconditional caring and discipline, in a practical attempt to replace the prevailing understanding of love as "romantic love" with the neo-humanist vision of love as authentic "self-love", as famously stated by Erich Fromm more than six decades ago (Fromm, 2006, 15-19; Bauman, 2003, 33-39). Set in a stand-alone parallel universe, in which San Francisco was largely rebuilt by Japanese immigrants in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake which had occurred in 1906 (although this premise is actually never stated in the movie), *Baymax: Big Hero 6* combines in the huggable stature of its main robot-character various dimensions: firstly, Hiro's lessons are necessary rites of passage; secondly, advanced technology co-existing with the retro-feeling displayed by San Fransokyo transcends the referentiality to late modernity; thirdly, the cityscape consisting of skyscrapers, adjoining hills and mini-islands, includes the reshaped Golden Gate Bridge as several overlapped *tori-i* (entrance gates at Shintô shrines in Japan) and, therefore, questions geographical boundaries; fourthly, the inclusion of a Nô mask (falsely identified in the movie as "Kabuki mask") as the identification attribute of the evil character is an essential universalization strategy in the procedure of dissolving cultural prejudices and symbolically initiates a future more open to genuine diversity. Hiro's prodigal talents are not prerequisites to his growth into a functional adult; underway, they turn momentarily into dangerous liabilities threatening to disrupt the project of understanding what had happened instead of blindly revenging as a means to put a symbolical band-aid over personal pains and losses. Surrounded by devoted friends who form an Ersatz-family including his aunt and Baymax, Hiro gradually learns the value of steadily moving forward and not jumping stages while accepting healing as part of the same process – even when letting go of past hurts means letting go of an important part of one's former identity, as well.

Unlike the first *Blade Runner* and *Baymax: Big Hero 6* who stay after all at the surface of human emotions, *Blade Runner 2049* digs into the perishability of humanness and questions its universalist prerogatives: in the face of adversity and loneliness, what can the individual do? K does not have an answer. He does not even start with looking for an answer. He is neither motivated by boredom and a general sense of malaise like Rick Deckard nor by grief provoked by the loss of a beloved brother – instead, he commits himself to a journey of initiation in which he acts both as the protagonist and as the antagonist. A mere tool in the hands of ruthless, psychopathic police superiors and corporation executives, K emulates human subjects in his quest. Like the tiny flower which kickstarts his journey or like the soft snowflakes which end it, K is merely an insignificant piece within the continuously moving mechanism of the world. In doing so and despite his mechanical bio-engineered structure, K manages to turn his insignificance into a voice of significance, into a cosmos of meaningful transformation and consistent interactions which, eventually, lead to pivotal experiences (see Fuller and Goffey, 2012; Meštrović, 1997). Particularly in his encounters with the elderly Rick Deckard, in whom K feels like finding a father due to his assumptions to be his child, there is this warmhearted dynamic of intergenerational transfer towards a better future, a future of hope and well-being for all. Their gestures of commitment to being their true selves brings them together on the stage of potential worlds to come: their first encounter in the derelict casino of Las Vegas and the ensuing fight are reminiscent of long-gone life-stories, as are the decrepit holograms of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Liberace. Once a symbol of limitless possibilities, the casino is the hide-out of dreams and hope. In Deckard's fatherly figure, K attempts to see glimpses of his own humanity – fleeting glimpses, as it turns out, when Freysa, the leader of the "replicant" freedom movement, discloses the gender of Deckard's and Rachael's child. Once again, though, K's commitment to truth and unconditional humanness leads him to find the best outcome for all those involved: transcending his own otherness as a true-to-himself "replicant", he reunites father and daughter.

In *Blade Runner*, commitment becomes the life force which enables the main character to overcome his condition; in *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, commitment is the precondition *sine qua non* of the main character's progress into a functional existence, accompanied, guided and supported by his friends; in *Blade Runner 2049*, commitment is the thread which unites humans and non-humans in their common quest for hope and a future to hope in/for. More than an ideological artefact or an aesthetic construction, commitment confers solidity and identificatory cohesion to narrative lines which would

otherwise fall into the banality of epic overcompensation. Eventually, in grasping the depth of love as a pragmatic endeavor and not as an ideatic state of mind and soul, humans and robots learn the value of togetherness in a world – present as well as future – of uncertainty, evil and cruelty.

5. Conclusion: towards a phenomenology of (pragmatic) love as awe

This paper has been focusing on the core characteristics of pragmatic love as a means to conceptualize and develop a sense of urgency towards the necessity to embrace – rather than reject, as traditionally taught – one’s budding uniqueness. In discussing three cinema productions which center on the relationships between humans and robots or bio-engineered “replicants”, the theoretical elements shifted gradually from the phenomenological experience to the quotidian participation and made possible the slow emergence of a state of “awe” in relation to both the mental-emotional perception and its subsequent processing of love as a pragmatic endeavor. “Awe” is understood, therefore, as an existential attitude which allows the consistent exploration of one’s individual embedding into the socioeconomic system, be it external or internal, in a lighthearted, non-judgmental manner; this puts “awe” in direct correlation to the “sublime” as described by Robert Greene in his writings: a combination of Sigmund Freud’s “oceanic feeling” and of the Stoics’ understanding of one’s mortality as expressed in “memento mori” (Jung, 1970, 129; Greene, 1998, 143). Furthermore, all three cinema works analyzed in the current paper transcended both at the time of their release and in the decades and years ever since prevailing stereotypes on science fiction productions, so that in their central journeys of initiation, the fears and confusions of late-modern young men and teenagers, notably male ones, are realistically and emotionally depicted. Simultaneously, they decisively move away from the classic plot of giving in to one’s negative emotions, while pursuing narrative policies of overcoming sadness, loss and the wish to retaliate. In addition, *Blade Runner* and *Baymax: Big Hero 6* are far more than adaptations of their original releases and *Blade Runner 2049* deepens its prequel rather than turning into its epigonic continuation: nonetheless, all three movies pay honest tribute to their aesthetic-ideological sources, surpass their models and develop own universes, with clear messages and profiles. *Blade Runner* and *Baymax: Big Hero 6* draw on Japanese elements, but *Blade Runner 2049* pivots towards a rarely encountered diversity of images and ideas acknowledged in a Hollywood production so far. Finally, all of them are futuristic works, re-creating *avant-la-lettre* the world of tomorrow: a dystopian space dominated by bleak oppression and hopelessness, respectively by violence and resentment, but containing the very seeds of a beautiful resurrection, fresh and convincingly attractive in its colorful plurality.

The three dimensions of pragmatic love outlined in *Blade Runner* on the background of a dark, dystopian future in which humans are increasingly controlled by over-individual systems, highlight the necessity of robots or so-called “replicants” in the stress ratio of grasping and comprehending the humanity of humans as a counterforce. It is pointedly during the interaction with the fugitive “replicants” whom he is tasked to eliminate that the main character is confronted with his own skewed sense of self and is ultimately compelled to acknowledge the relativity of rules in the name of love. Moreover, in Rachael’s questionings about her own nature – she has been implemented with memories of a little girl, but at some point, she starts inquiring into the veridicality of her thoughts, emotions, states –, Rick is able to find his own enjoyment of life and to start to dare thinking about pursuing a pathway of more authentic – perhaps even more sustainable – goals. One might go as far as to argue that *Blade Runner* avoids the dispiritedness of punk-noir by tuning in to the emotionality of the narrative line and in doing so, by symbolically addressing the issues of existential meaningfulness and loving togetherness rather than the bleak chase of runaway fugitives. In this reading, *Blade Runner*’s display of love – pragmatic or otherwise – circumscribes the main character’s quotidian endeavors and pushes them in the direction of a benevolent, warmhearted humanity rediscovered. Eventually, the compelling ambiguity and semi-obscure atmosphere of the movie serve the purpose of recovering an individual sense of self from the unknown of over-controlling institutions and to set it free into universalism.

Baymax: Big Hero 6 is, at its most basic, the story of Hiro's process of development from a prepubescent teen into a responsible adolescent. Without a direct family of his own, he appears at first sight as a typical hero with fragmented background and unable to gather the remainders of his individuality. Nonetheless, throughout the movie, Hiro acknowledges the presence of those around him, both humans and non-humans, as necessary entities to accompany him on his journey into a functional adulthood. In *Baymax: Big Hero 6*, what is conceptualized as pragmatic love appears as a juxtaposition of recovery from loss, slowly getting accustomed to cope with the new reality while learning not to demonize potential enemies, and finding the willingness to move forward instead of remaining stuck in the wounds of the past. The catalyst beneath this entire protocol is, of course, the health-care robot Baymax who becomes thus a symbol of fraternal love and a glimpse into the potentialities of the future: a future of respect and loyalty, of faith and warmheartedness. In stark contrast with the ambivalent bleakness in *Blade Runner*, from which it extracts its Japanese-flavored inspiration of times to come in which nations and nationalities will have disappeared and humans will have created an ecosystem which they share with robots, cyborgs and other technologically enhanced entities, *Baymax: Big Hero 6* delves into the innocent worlds of childhood and early puberty and explores with humor and optimism their ups and downs while drawing on models of healing, growth and far-sighted vision. Hence, love turns into an instrument of discovery and development, mediated through the animated cute images of a healthcare robot acting as a friend.

Lastly, *Blade Runner 2049* is a tale of loss and hope – and of overcoming one's own shortcomings in the name of truth and of the greater good. While love is scarce in the general context of the movie with its far-reaching overwhelming dystopian landscapes and the foundation of the narrative line is the quest for a child resulted from the love between a human and a "replicant", compassion and courage serve as catalysts for the inquiry which eventually reveals the motivating power of commitment as a liberation and empowerment skill and as a tool – both for humans and for non-humans. On the background of a detective story with its typical twists and turns globally expanded, the main character K enterprises a journey into the past – of mankind and of himself – which is supposed to set him free. Nonetheless, while the mystery is solved, the basic questions of the movie are not, and instead the three parameters of the definition of pragmatic love are combined in a somewhat transgressive manner: courage appears as bravery in face of adversities and commitment is the ability to keep on going in the name of truth and of the decision to be one's authentic best self. In such an interpretation, love as pragmatic love is an emotional space of the individual caught up in impossible dilemmas who has to choose oneself in the protocol of saving the world. *Blade Runner 2049*'s ending offers one of the most powerful lessons in self-love and self-acceptance in recorded cultural works: a life lived in the name of truth is circular in itself in terms of significance and relevance.

It might be argued that self-awareness of one's own humanity begins with the reflection on the transience of human existence in relation to the potential endlessness of artificial intelligence and bio-engineered entities created to simplify life. At the same time, what has been conceptualized as "pragmatic love" permeates the sordid numbness of the quotidian flow of events and allows for a sense of awe to raise within ourselves: this is perhaps the goal of arts, to awaken the sleeping warriors inside the viewers and to send them on irresistible journeys of self-discovery. It is the objective of further scientific endeavors to delve more deeply into the dynamics and mechanics of those journeys, outlining with acuity the joys and perils of wholeheartedly exploring adventures, experimenting uncharted dimensions and rewriting individual and collective stories.

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