

## Class Film #7: Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982)

In my experience, no film captures the interest of academia quite like Ridley Scott's 1982 Post-Modern, Science Fiction, Film Noir hybrid, *Blade Runner* (with the obvious exception of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941)). In my analysis of the film I will not be looking at the film's deviation from actual reality - I already touched on that in my Mid-Term essay on time in film (Main, 2019) and, although one could conceivably pen a book on this aspect alone, I will not be dwelling on that particular topic, here.

Nor will I be discussing the Post-Modern elements of the film (except possibly in passing) as I have already examined the film from that perspective during the course I took at Macquarie University. Instead, I aim to look at this film in a much more concrete manner than my previous reviews in this class, looking at aspects such as lighting, makeup, costuming, set design and other diegetic and non-diegetic elements.

In the three major reworkings of the movie, only the original theatrical version contains the Film Noir voiceover narration that, in my opinion, helps to characterize this film. While it is clear that this was not Ridley Scott's ideal for the movie, a fact reinforced by two subsequent recuts (Wilkinson, 2017), I feel that the removal of this narration detracts from the film. Much more can be said in a book than a movie, which is why the last *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* books were split into two films apiece, and the voiceover narration provides this background - we know who Gaff (Edward James Olmos) is and that he is speaking "City Speak" because Deckard (Harrison Ford) has told us - otherwise he's just some dopey guy mumbling gibberish.

It's all very well to say to Ridley Scott, "Hey, it's your movie, man. Whatever you want is best." but the truth is, it's actually Philip K. Dick's book and it's the audience's dime and time so he can't have total *carte blanche*. The question comes up often of whether or not Deckard is a replicant. Ridley Scott says categorically, "Yes!" (YouTube, n.d.). Philip K. Dick, who died the year the film was released (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019) so unfortunately we can't consult him, made no such suggestion and by some accounts is in agreement with Harrison Ford and myself that he isn't (Saavedra, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the day it's up to what you want to believe - while I can envision the storyline including either alternative<sup>2</sup> neither scenario detracts from the experiential enjoyment of the film. But the removal of the narrative does - it provides less insight (which was Scott's intent) as well as loses the charm of the Film Noir flatfoot gumshoe (which Deckard, essentially is) juxtaposed against the Futurist backdrop: "Raymond Chandler meets Isaac Asimov" (Suderman, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, I think unless specifically addressed in a later plotline, the issue is entirely irrelevant.

<sup>2</sup> I have not seen the recent sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) so I cannot comment on whether Villeneuve's universe incorporates the concept.

It's always raining in Ridley Scott's 2019; only the closing scene in the theatrical version shows otherwise, apart from the late afternoon scene at the Tyrell Corporation where Deckard administers the empathy test to Rachael (Sean Young) - the implication here is that the upper levels of Tyrell's office building rise above the clouds. But the lighting is low key and smoky shafts of light, also seen in Holden's office, imply a polluted environment. The city scenes reinforce this idea with the constant gas explosions from refineries - we see an urban industrialization on a mammoth scale and the environmental consequences. Not global warming as we are currently facing - that concept was oddly predicted long before the scientific community got serious about the idea in Richard Fleisher's 1973 dystopian epic *Soylent Green* - but the main environmental concern of the time: acid rain.

And, apart from the scene at the Tyrell Corporation and the closing scene of the theatrical version (where Deckard and Rachael drive away - it is also the only time you see a tree) it is always night or, at best, dusky twilight. The lighting is dim and low key but punctuated intrusively from time to time with harsh fluorescent lighting (a Futurist brushstroke) - the shafts of some of the umbrellas, the kitchen in Deckard's apartment, the Neon street signs in Chinatown and Hannibal Chew's "Eye World".

Fashions are '80s but exaggerated - Roy (Rutger Hauer) has a high, upturned collar and Rachael wears shoulder pads. Her makeup is exaggerated - not quite Boy George but the heavy, glossy, blood red lipstick and thick black eyeliner, as she appears initially at the Tyrell Corporation, portrays her almost as an androgynous automaton; a parody of what a genetically engineered machine woman would look like (yet, oddly not as "human" as Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014)). It is only when she plays the piano at Deckard's apartment and she sheds the businesswoman façade that we see a more human, feminine side; her makeup is softer, and she lets her hair down.

Tyrell (Joe Turkel) represents an aristocratic old world uncomfortably blended in modernity. In his bedroom is the latest in computer technology, extrapolated from computers at the time which were making major inroads in films such as *WarGames* (John Badham, 1983) and *Electric Dreams* (Steve Barron, 1984), culminating in finally discovering what went wrong with HAL in *2010* (a.k.a. *2010: The Year We Make Contact* - Peter Hyams, 1984). But the upholstery is turn-of-the-century. His large, thick trifocal glasses remind us of the failings of humanity and that his goal: to create replicants that are "more human than human" (semantically, a logical impossibility) is, in fact, a reality. His eyes fail but Roy's ... "If you could see what I've seen though your eyes" he tells Hannibal Chew (James Hong).

Replicants are superior to humans in every way except for longevity and emotion. The closeup shot of Pris (Daryl Hannah) plunging her hand into a pot of boiling water (it is glass so we can see what is happening) demonstrates their superiority. Leon (Brion James), likewise, shows his ability to endure the unnatural by plunging his hand into a gel at the opposite end of the temperature scale in Eye World while Hong shivers at the idea. At this point I'd like to put in a special word for Brion James' Leon character. Leon has a wild-eyed look of fear and incomprehension. We see it in Holden's office, and we see it again when he tries to kill Deckard ("Wake up, it's time to die") after Deckard retires Zhora (Joanna

Cassidy). Both Leon and Roy exhibit a certain insanity but of two different types: Leon is crazed and obsessive, Roy is cold and calculating - both are abnormal conditions for a human and this only serves to enhance the difference between Replicants and humans - they may be more human than human but that makes them something other than human, something that's reinforced several times but most artistically when Zhora crashes through several plate glass windows in a futile attempt to escape an inevitable fate after Deckard puts a bullet in her back, an act which he tells us in the narration was not tempered by it being officially reported as a "routine retirement" (an aspect of his personality that is lost in the Director's and Final cuts). This sequence is shot in slow motion and with the sound of the shattering glass, has an almost calming and therapeutic effect, while actually depicting a woman running in fear from what she perceives as a heartless killer.

It would be impossible to look at *Blade Runner* in any meaningful manner without examining the prevalence of garbage and pollution. The low lighting and smoky ambiance, the acid rain and the belching refineries are only part of the experience. When Deckard is eating his noodles in Chinatown, those of us who have lived in Asia or in or around an urban Chinese community are virtually treated to an olfactory sensation - you can almost smell the body odor, wet dogs and dried fish. This synesthesia is also apparent in the opening scene where Holden (Morgan Paull) is administering the empathy test to Leon. Again, it's smoky, like in Tyrell's office, and the characters, Holden in this scene and Rachael in Tyrell's office, add to the thick fog by smoking cigarettes. Holden puffs violently on them creating thick plumes of smoke that are backlit to enhance the effect of almost clogging the audience's throat. Rachael is more elegant, but the effect is still there, perhaps pronounced by the passage of time and fall from grace of smoking as a social activity. We live in a mostly smoke free environment now, so the thickness of the air in this retrospective viewing is more pronounced.

But apart from the air, we see the street scenes are littered with garbage, both human and ordinary refuse. Not human refuse such as the foul pollution that Monty Python satirizes in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam & Terry Jones, 1975) whereupon the characters state that Arthur (Graham Chapman) must be a king because he's the only one not covered in feces - the organic squalor of the middle ages where bacteria wasn't even a dream in a disturbed person's psyche, but more the refuse of a deteriorating civilization, street dwellers and urban thugs. The streets are littered with papers and Pris wraps herself in household trash as she waits for J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson). It is this aspect which defines this film as Post-Modern: the chaotic decay of a society that abandons itself in favor of the "new" and the "now" - the advertising blimp that peddles "a new life" in the Off-World Colonies rises over the filth. It looks like an alien UFO *a la Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) with its many flashing directional colored lights and symbolizes the next stage of humanity.

Despite the fact that we are told, up front, that this is Los Angeles in 2019, there is nothing actually recognizable that indicates LA. We never see the Hollywood sign and we never see the beach. The long shots of Gaff and Deckard's cars zooming over the Valley, towards or away from the non-existent Tyrell Corporation are the only clues we have. It is almost as though Scott deliberately went out of his way to

disguise the city as if to show that the important thing to remember is that it is a city - any city - in decay.

Many things contribute to make *Blade Runner* the film that it is; gritty urbanity, deep performances, somber settings and philosophical ramifications which I have not even hinted at in any of my treatments of the film but have become more relevant, particularly in the light of discoveries made only this week (Greenfieldboyce, 2019). But underneath it all and holding it together is the music of Vangelis which provides a haunting backdrop that blends with the film so well that it is noticeable when it's not there, such as the scene where Deckard enters Tyrell's office, and when it is there, such as the scene where Zhora is retired, it is both calming from its legato nature and chilling from its synthesized minor keys, providing an almost surreal effect.

Finally, when I started this piece, I described *Blade Runner* as a "Post-Modern, Science Fiction, Film Noir hybrid." I've already touched on the Post-Modern aspect and it is clear that the primary genre is Science Fiction. I've also discussed the Film Noir aspects. I should, however, have included another genre: horror. The basic elements are there, particularly in the final sequence where Deckard is being hunted by Roy. There is fear and suspense and when Roy kills Tyrell, the glow of the candle light, set against Hauer's smeared black eyeliner and shocking white hair with his expression of anguish as he kills his "father". The music, one of the few scenes in which the music is not by Vangelis, is monastic, suggesting something demonic. The red glow in Pris's eyes (also seen on the owl in Tyrell's bedroom in the aforementioned scene) reinforce the lack of humanity and reminds us to be scared because these are, after all, intelligent machines - not like Joshua in *WarGames* or Skynet in *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) - Philip K. Dick's machines are far worse because they can imitate humans so readily and that adds the fear of infiltration. Even Gaff, with his Middle Eastern features, olive skin and jet-black Van Dyke beard resembles some depictions of the devil - everyone is decadent, everyone is inhuman, everything is in decay.

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