

## **Content**

<b>I)</b>	Introduction	1
<b>II)</b>	Central topics	1
<b>III)</b>	Reaganism and its cultural consequences	3
<b>IV)</b>	The dystopia cycle	6
<b>V)</b>	The crisis of self	7
<b>VI)</b>	The crisis of political belief	9
<b>VII)</b>	Conclusion	11
<b>VIII)</b>	Bibliography	12

## **Introduction**

Much has already been written about Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982; 'The Director's Cut', 1992). So why another paper about a movie which has been discussed and analyzed like only a few others in the past 17 years? Being a product of the early Reagan-era, *Blade Runner* is inseparably linked not only to the prevalent world wide economic recession but also to the political circumstances of these times. It has also been labelled a 'postmodern classic' and even a 'canonical postmodern cultural artefact' (Clarke, Doel 141). Can postmodern ideas help to analyze the link between the apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles in the year 2019 as depicted in *Blade Runner* and the United States of the early eighties? I will try to show some of the movie's connections to Reaganism as well as to the social and economic conditions of this period by using ideas about the postmodern self and the postmodern age in general. How is late capitalism linked to questions of existence (Roy and his fellow replicants) and identity (Deckard and Rachel)? Is *Blade Runner* a comment on Reagan's policies or on the situation at the end of the 20th century in general? I hope that my approach will add at least some new aspects to the interesting and often controversial debate about Scott's movie.

## **Central topics**

The postmodern age is a visual, cinematic age. Representations of the real, whether in the form of film or photography, dominate our perception and have turned many societies, including the American, into visual cultures (Denzin VII-VIII). So the central motif of the eye in *Blade Runner* provides us with a constant reminder of how important questions of perception and representation of the real are for our interpretation of the film's content and

characters. The opening sequence already reflects the cityscape of Los Angeles in the mirror of a rigid eye. Only moments later, the centrally important Voight-Kampff -Test is introduced. Leon, a conventional Nexus 6 replicant, is facing an employee of the Tyrell corporation and a strange apparatus. This machine records the variation of “capillary dilations in the facial area and fluctuations of tension within the eye muscle” in order to determine if the tested subject is a replicant. Hypothetical questions are used to provoke involuntary emotional responses. By cross-referencing the resulting data, the operator is supposed to determine whether or not the tested subject is a replicant. With Leon, the Voight-Kampff-Test is working. He even shortens the procedure by shooting the Tyrell-employee, thereby confirming that he really is what he was suspected to be. With some of the other replicants appearing in the film, the situation is more complicated. Some of them have acquired enhanced empathic capabilities or were implanted memories as in Rachel’s case. Being closer to the ‘real thing’ than the conventional models, even the empathy test seems almost inappropriate to identify them as products of the Tyrell corporation. The border between humans and replicants dissolves, raising the central question of identity.

The test itself is highly problematic. It is important to note that it cannot confirm a tested subject as human. With such lack of positive confirmation, how can anyone be sure not to be a replicant him- or herself? This is the red thread that guides the viewer through Deckard’s contemplations while he is hunting rebelling replicants in the streets of Los Angeles.

What are the characteristics of the environment Deckard has to put up with? Scott’s nightmare vision leaves not much room for Los Angeles as we know it. Sunshine has been replaced by rain, light has been exchanged for constant darkness. Science fiction meets film-noir in this city of noise and danger. With his picture of the population, Scott obviously alludes to the fear of many Americans of Asians taking over not only Los Angeles but also the

rest of the west. Bicycle-riding, food-selling and fast-talking immigrants crowd the streets, always eager to display what western society assumes to be their characteristic attributes. They seem to be the only ones who have adjusted perfectly, working for the sake of future generations who hopefully will be able to live in one of the dream-worlds advertised by flying billboards: “A new life awaits you in the off-world colony, the chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure”. The icons of advanced capitalism are omnipresent. By giving us glimpses at familiar products (Coca-Cola, Jim Beam, Atari, Michelob), the director provides us with something we can relate to and at the same time signals the survival of huge corporations. While the city appears to be on the brink of total chaos and destruction, advertisements shine bright, symbolizing the invincibility of market forces. This is where *Blade Runner’s* outlook on the future development obviously meets the era of Ronald Reagan.

### **Reaganism and its cultural consequences**

When Reagan came to power in 1981, the United States were still suffering from the effects of economic crisis and recession. After the fall of Nixon and Carter, there was a longing for new concepts and ideas. The idealist movement of the sixties and seventies had failed and the stage was set for the rise of the so-called materialism. Reagan seemed to be aware of the desire for a reaffirmation of values. What America needed was a rebirth, a complete ideological renewal. Lacking a visionary program, the New Right emphasized a romantic nostalgia for the past, wiping out the boundaries between the past and the present. The cultural aspects of this new ideology are described very well by Norman K. Denzin in his ‘Images of Postmodern Society’. The New Right established clear concepts of who the ideal subjects of the 80s and its ideology were and how they represented the new values of hard work, self-reliance, health and religion. A general politics of morality redefined the meaning

of the average citizen, the ordinary individual. Repressive politics centered around abortion, drug and alcohol abuse and “the general social health and moral hygiene of American (...) society” (Denzin 6). The underclass as well as homeless people and drug addicts were defined as morally unworthy and unemployment, in the eyes of the New Right, was the result of a lack willpower and initiative. These ideological polemics helped the conservative government to maintain its control over society. Even economic and political crises were employed to strenghten the belief in the President and his policies. Being patriotic became the most important identity an American could hold (Denzin 6).

Reaganism created several fields of discourse where common sense and ordinary, typically American values were celebrated. The American school system was employed to prepare the children for the harsh reality of capitalist competition. Racial and ethnic minorities and their cultural heritage were said to undermine the American agenda. Any form of cultural individualism was regarded as being dangerous. The family once again became the center of American culture. Women were supposed to be housewives and abortion was defined as a crime against nature. Minority youth gang members and drug addicts were used to produce a “series of moral panics” (Denzin 7) by being held responsible for a large proportion of crimes against orderly white citizens. The bottom of the American society was also accused of abusing the welfare system. In the eyes of the Right, “the welfare system undermined self-confidence and perpetuated poverty” (Denzin 7). Giving money to the needy constituted an act which endangered the earned wealth of the nation. Interestingly enough, the Right employed cultural texts to convince the public of the need for conservative policies:

In each case, the moral panic took the shape of cultural texts. These texts attempted to capture the crisis in question, represent it over the media, and show how the New Right was containing these threats to the traditional order. (Denzin 7)

Cultural politics became the main carrier of the conservative ideology. Since the public self was increasingly defined by mass-culture, this media-oriented strategy seemed likely to be very efficient.

The growing influence of film and media in general also increased the awareness for support and criticism voiced through mass-media productions. Many cinematic narratives of the 80s engaged politics in a very immediate way. American military power, the revolutions in Latin America and the controversy regarding the war in Vietnam are some examples where the political material was emphasized and placed in the foreground (Prince 155-156). There also was a more indirect approach to political representation. Fantasy films, as Robin Wood points out, “by and large, can be used in two ways - as a means of escaping from contemporary reality, or as a means of illuminating it” (183). Wood compares *Blade Runner* and another very popular fantasy production: “Against the Spielbergian complacency of *E.T.* can be set *Blade Runner’s* vision of capitalism which is projected into the future, yet intended to be clearly recognizable” (183). *E.T.* was simultaneously released with *Blade Runner*, making the films competitors at the box-office. After the critical establishment’s reaction to *E.T.* had been ecstatic and *Blade Runner* had earned only indifferent or skeptical reviews, Ridley Scott’s movie became a financial failure while *E.T.* was a major success. This is especially surprising since an affirmative ending was added by the responsible studio. They feared that the original version would be too depressing and pessimistic for a commercial audience. All of this led Wood to the following highly political assumption:

I take these facts as representing a choice made in conjunction by critics and public, ratified by the Motion Picture Academy - a choice whose significance extends far beyond a mere preference for one film over another, expressing a preference for the reassuring over the disturbing, the reactionary over the progressive, the safe over the challenging, the childish over the adult, spectator

passivity over spectator activity. (182)

### **The dystopia cycle**

Woods made this statement in 1986, right at the beginning of Reagan's second term and it was expressing a strong feeling of unease and even anger. *Blade Runner*, together with *Escape from New York* (1981) and *Outland* (1981) seemed to be the forerunner of a series of movies depicting critical visions of the future. This group includes the sequel to Scott's *Alien* (1979) which was called *Aliens* (1986), *The Running Man* (1987), *Robocop* (1987), and *Total Recall* (1990). They projected the political present, offering "a harsh portrait of ongoing socioeconomic decay" (Prince 156). Through the displacement of a future setting and the mediation of the fantasy and science fiction theme they indirectly addressed the increasing social and economic problems of the United States. Their outward appearance being that of fantasy, the films pointed out the crises of contemporary American society. According to Prince their achievement was "to contextualize them (the crises) within that more comprehensive set of dilemmas of politics and representation known as postmodernism" (156). This group of films also "employs visual and political designs that attempt to envision, and often contest the shape of a postmodern future and the crisis of political belief and control that it entails" (156). Prince interprets this reaction as a symptom of the growing social fragmentation of the Reagan period as visualized in the films mentioned above. By seeking the solution of the problems in the past, Reaganism became their manifestation. The cycle of science fiction films began to depict the likely outcome of this helpless policy.

As a key film of the cycle, *Blade Runner* immediately shocks the audience with the look of the megalopolis which I have already mentioned above. Giuliana Bruno put it this way:

The link between postmodernism and late capitalism is highlighted in the film's representation of post-industrial decay. The future does not realize an idealized, aseptic technological order, but is seen simply as the development of the present state of the city and of the social order of late capitalism.

(63)

High rise, high-tech buildings stand next to decayed and rotten tenements. The chaos on the streets seems unbearable and the mix of races and advertisements signals the arrival of the global market. The American economic hegemony seems to be over and mainly Asians control the smaller enterprises. English is no longer the dominating language as Japanese, Spanish and even German sentences are audible. The visual design obviously speaks to contemporary dilemmas. The anonymous masses on the streets allude to another phenomenon of the 1980s, that is the explosive growth of homelessness and the resulting underclass in American society. The so-called 'reform' of low-cost housing together with a cutting of social services and a growing inflation endangered the economic survival of a large number of American citizens, forcing many of them out of their homes. Looking for food, clothing and jobs these "ghosts of former lives and selves" (Prince 168) gathered in the major cities. Their presence was highly unpleasant the rest of the community: "(...) a collective anxiety passed through those still working, still with families, in the realization that they, too, could be cast adrift or cannibalized by the economy" (Prince 168). For Prince, this is one of the reasons, why "threats to the self and to personal and psychological survival are experienced so intensely throughout the dystopia cycle" (168).

### **The crisis of self**

In *Blade Runner* all characters are under a constant threat. Even the potentially dangerous replicants are bound to die: either through Deckard or through the elapsing time of



their limited life-span. Ridley Scott nicely sums up their dilemma. When Roy Batty finally meets Tyrell, his maker and boss of the powerful Tyrell-Corporation, he is asked: ‘What seems to be the problem?’ Roy’s answer: ‘Death’.

While the replicants around Roy Batty are concerned about their seemingly inevitable physical extinction, Deckard’s thoughts circle around his identity and, more or less, also around the meaning of life. The replicants are a challenge. Their human appearance together with the assumption of emotions blurs the boundaries between the authentically human and the machine. The difference between humans and machines, between flesh and blood and constructed biodynamics begins to dissolve. The plot already reveals some interesting aspects. A machine (Rachel) saves the life of a human (Deckard) who is about to be executed by another machine (Leon). Deckard then falls in love with the machine. Also, a human being is having the same ‘physical’ problems as the replicants. Sebastian suffers from premature aging, the essential problem Roy and his partners are confronted with. In the end, the created even kills the creator when Roy in all his anger and frustration, murders Tyrell.

In the course of the movie the starting point of the whole story is being turned around. The *Blade Runner* Deckard now is being hunted by the replicants (Faulstich 104). A change of roles can be observed throughout the whole plot.

Deckard’s troubles become obvious when he applies the Voight-Kampff-Test to Rachel. He finds it more difficult than usual to determine her identity as a replicant and is confronted with a growing emotional involvement concerning the case of his potential victims. Rachel, a new model of replicants, has strong feelings and believes in her implanted memories. “Did you ever take the test yourself?”. This short and precise question triggers Deckard’s painful doubts. Who and what is he? As a Blade Runner he is a tool of those who rule the dark world of 2019 and is supposed to be a ruthless hunter without any emotions.

Where is the difference between himself and the replicants he tries to kill? Also, the character of Deckard is played in a very cold way, suggesting his android qualities.

Probably the most important sequence to be reinstated in the Director's Cut was Deckard's dream about the unicorn. Gaff, the police officer, at three different points in the film folds tiny symbolic origami figures and always leaves them within Deckard's immediate vicinity. The last model he leaves for him to come across is a small unicorn. Deckard finds it as he and Rachel flee his apartment. His memory of Gaff's last comment - "It's too bad she won't live. But then again, who does?" - can be heard in voice-over. Clark and Doel name the obvious implication: "(...) Deckard's dreams, like Rachel's memories, are not private and personal but issue from some kind of implant - such as those manufactured by the Tyrell Corporation, or the collective unconscious, for example" (155).

Gaff's access to Deckard's dreams clearly points towards Deckard being a replicant. In addition to this the replicants begin to show their 'other' side. Roy acts like a human being when he mourns his dead friend Pris (Faulstich 110). When, in his final moments of existence Roy Batty saves Deckard, he "has come to cherish all life, anyone's life" (Prince 166). The end of the film completes the circle as Deckard and Rachel unite and try to escape.

### **The crisis of political belief**

Apart from the estrangement of the real self and the struggle for identity, the replicants contain another dimension of criticism. The replicant as a product stands for the life under an extreme form of capitalism. The president of the Tyrell Corporation has no problem to say it openly: "Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell. More human than human is our motto". "I am the business" Rachel adds after discovering that she is a replicant.

The "tentacles of power" (Prince 165) of the Tyrell corporation have an interplanetary reach. Its brilliant Nexus 6 replicants are produced to serve their capitalist masters in

off-world colonies knowing that their only reason for being is to function as workers. In the world of *Blade Runner* production has extended to the human body itself (Prince 168).

Corporations control the state whose only representatives throughout the film are the police and the bounty hunters. By supplying the state with the products it needs, the Tyrell Corporation is in control and employs the state to provide security for its economic operations. The critical portrayal of the state's representatives together with the anarchic mood in the future Los Angeles can be interpreted as serious skepticism regarding the ability of future structures of power to deal with what the film identifies as the main problems of the United States. This crisis of the belief in political control is a typical postmodern phenomenon and also a major theme of the dystopia cycle (Prince 160).

Before summing up my discussion I want to return to the central motif of the eye. As I have already mentioned the movie features an almost endless variety of eyes and allusions to perception: the Voight-Kampff-Test focuses on the eye, the eyes of the replicants sometimes glow mysteriously, Leon and Roy visit the Eye Works factory where Leon is playing with genetically engineered eyes, while joking with Sebastian Roy is holding glass eyes in front of his eyes, Tyrell wears enormous glasses which enlarge his eyes. The list is enormous and these are only a few examples. With regard to the era of Ronald Reagan one explanation for this almost obsessive use of the eyes seems to be of a special importance. The growing influence of film and the media was employed by the government whose strategy proved to be very successful. Reagan made extensive use of the media to spread political images and to promote his campaigns. *Blade Runner* seems to contain a warning that there might be more to a picture than we see at first glance and it is an appeal to watch closely: As Deckard looks at Leon's collection of photographs he discovers one that is particularly interesting. It shows a seemingly empty hotel room but a close analysis reveals the image of the replicant Zora which is reflected in a mirror.

Another implication of the constant presence of the eye could be the fear to be watched. Eyes in the form of cameras can also serve as a means to control and monitor. Complete surveillance by the government as the ultimate nightmare vision of the future?

### **Conclusion**

What is the essence of the paper? I think that one thing is very clear: *Blade Runner* cannot be discussed without taking into account the political, economic and social background of the times during in which it was produced. But what was at the heart of society's condition during the eighties? The knowledge that the future cannot be a better place? I think that Scott's film is a statement about the human condition rather than an overtly political comment. Of course, politics cannot be neglected but the importance of the political aspect is overwhelmed by the intensity of the personal struggle of the replicants and the character of Deckard. The political condition of the eighties might be partly responsible for the feelings and problems of the earth's inhabitants (whoever they are) but politics have long lost and maybe never had the status of being able to cure man's illness. *Blade Runner* mirrors the insecurity and weakness of the postmodern being. The result is enlarged and therefore frightening but nevertheless close to the original.

## Bibliography

Blade Runner. The Director's Cut. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, and Edward James Olmos. Warner Bros., 1991.

Bruno, Giuliana. "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner." October. Summer Summer 1987.

Denzin, Norman K.. Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema. London: Sage, 1991.

Faulstich, Werner. "Der neue Science-fiction-Film: Blade Runner (1982)". Fischer Filmgeschichte Band 5: Massenware und Kunst, 1977-1995. Ed. Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995.

Doel, Marcus A. and David B. Clarke. "From Ramble City to the Screening of the Eye: Blade Runner, death and symbolic exchange". The Cinematic City. Ed. David B. Clarke. London: Routledge, 1997.

Prince, Stephen. Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film. New York: Praeger, 1992.

Wood, Robin. Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.