

## Technology and Politics in the *Blade Runner* Dystopia

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The most compelling aspect of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, even for those who mostly dislike it, is its densely-layered imagining of a city in the not-very-distant future of Western capitalism. Scott explicitly intended the *Blade Runner* city as a serious extrapolation from our present, although he made a sophisticated distinction between a "comic strip" (his expression) and prediction (Kennedy 66).

Some radical critics have objected to the failure of Scott's film to carry through on a leftist critique of contemporary society, (Chevrier 55-60, Kellner et. al. 6-8) and it is clearly more intended as entertainment than as serious political commentary. However, a political critique of today's society and its trends is inescapably embodied in the film. Although operating within the context of commercial film-making, Scott and his collaborators have observed and extrapolated the contradictions of our time.

Like any big modern city, Scott's Los Angeles of 2019 is saturated with technologies; in fact, it is most striking for its layering of technologies, styles, lifestyles and ethnicities, which range from oriental peasant altars and cookfires through forties hats and building facades to off-world colonies and androids.

It is worth taking a closer look at several striking technological entities among this welter of very convincing details, and considering how they imply the politics of the story's society and construct a critique of our own. In exploring the relationship between the film's implicit political critique and the technologies which it presents as typical of and central to the society of the story, I will also inevitably show how the film's technologies tie the details together to create such a powerful sense of a real place.

### I

The most striking technological entities in *Blade Runner* are the city itself; the replicants (Scott's ingenious new term for biological android); the laboratory of Chew, designer of genetically-engineered eyes for replicants; and the Esper machine, a computer-like device for studying photographs.

The city is certainly the most striking phenomenon of the film. Scott's explanations of his cultural detailing are worth quoting. Note that they include sociological issues as well as technological, city systems and architectural issues. To Kennedy's comment that it's "very crowded, eclectic, full of hybridized details [e]specially in the architecture and streetscapes," Scott replies:

That's what's going to happen. I think the influence in L.A. will be very Spanish, with a big cross-influence of Oriental... I think various groups are developing today—faction groups which are religious, social, whatever—and Punk... some louts... who developed their own little culture of protest... they will harden up, so that there will be religious, political, social, and just nut-case factions. And I think the police force will become a kind of paramilitary, which they nearly are now. We're just one step away. (Kennedy 66-7)

Scott's confidence in his vision is no doubt part of the reason it's so convincing, but some of his explanations are also strikingly technological and economic, such as the reason for the "exoskeletal" physical look of the film, the new technologies stuck onto old buildings.

[His purpose is] primarily a logical one. We're in a city which is in a state of overkill, of snarled-up energy, where you can no longer remove a building because it costs far more than constructing one in its place. So the whole economic process is slowed down.

Significantly, he adds that "it's a physical feeling you get about that society" (Kennedy 68). He builds detail from the inside out, from imagining how it would feel to live in such a place.

Scott's Los Angeles is a place of contradictions, some of which have been noted by critics of the film such as Steve Carper (in an essay elsewhere in this volume), who feel it does not satisfy its own premises. These contradictions include new layered over old; crowded emptiness; constant rain and darkness in LA, the city of desert sun; and Manhattan-like towers and city canyons, larger and deeper than Manhattan's by an order of magnitude, replacing the suburban ranch style of Laurel Canyon. Pollution and dirt are everywhere, yet sushi (raw fish) is still on the cultural menu.

The most striking paradox, especially to those who have read the source novel, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, is the sense of overcrowding at the street level, while a major character, J.F. Sebastian, lives alone in a deserted building and states that there is no housing shortage. Indeed, almost everyone eligible has supposedly emigrated to the Off-World Colonies, and yet the streets swarm with Orientals, Hispanics and punks, and every light in the city's massive skyscrapers appears to be lit.

The Marxist concept of contradiction points to exactly such irrational social developments; indeed, it is a basic tenet of Marxism that such contradictions are inevitable under capitalism (Ollman 56-7). In our time we have the endless buildup of weapons which everyone agrees must never be used; prosperity based on increased unemployment and underutilization of productive capacity while people remain in poverty (an example to be found in Marx himself) (Fidlon 33, Kolakowski 297ff); nationwide public health service combined with nationwide toxic pollution.

In fact, in the 1970s in Holland and other European countries, the squatter movement protested rental houses standing empty when the poor had no place to live, and in New York City today, we have crowds of the homeless unable to live in hundreds of burned out or deserted buildings which landlords claim they can't afford to run. *Blade Runner's* crowded but underpopulated city is

not so unlikely after all, even though it remains paradoxical to the humane or stringently logical eye.

Published interviews with Ridley Scott do not support a claim that Scott or his writers, Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, were consciously trying to make a Marxist or leftist film, although the first issue of the radical film journal *CineAction!* featured an otherwise unexplained photo of the "rebel replicants" Pris and Roy above its inaugural editorial. But the film-makers explicitly set out to extrapolate from a clear-eyed view of our society (Scott is, after all, British, with the outsider's extra perspective), and the source novel by Dick is a very dark satire of American society.

Scott was also trying to make a film which would make his audience uncomfortable, an artistic purpose clearly visible in many of his films to date, most notably in *Alien*. He thus has aesthetic reasons for building his "tangible" future by brutally honest extrapolation. He comments:

If the future is one you can see and touch, it makes you a little uneasy because you feel it's just round the corner (Kennedy 66).

What are some of the political implications of *Blade Runner's* city? For one thing, externalization of social control is very obvious, with police, police vehicles and computers everywhere. Even traffic lights can be used for crowd control. The social fragmentation Scott described in the first quotation above makes social solidarity unlikely, and the viewer feels this fragmentation in every street scene, suggesting that police control may be pragmatically necessary for social order.

In addition, the police seem to function not only as paramilitary but as a kind of industrial accident damage control for the big corporations. Deckard says, "Replicants are like any other machine. They're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, they're not my problem." The Environmental Protection Agency and the homicide squad have merged, suggesting not only that persons and industrial processes have merged in the replicants, but also that government and the corporations have become indistinguishable. Advertisements for the Off-World Colonies are identical in tone and delivery method to ads for Coca-cola and drugs. In fact, the only government we see consists of cops, advertising, and garbage trucks. None of this, in the age of Ronald Reagan, seems improbable.

The malfunctioning replicants are not the only toxic waste. The city is full of waste, both the filth that blows through the streets and rains down from the chemically-polluted clouds, and also the people who did not pass the physical and go off-world. Blade runner Deckard has no compunction about firing into a crowd when he chases Zhora. Policeman Gaff makes origami animals and people from gum wrappers and match sticks (see Rebecca Warner's essay elsewhere in this volume). When his boss Bryant tells Deckard "If you're not cop, you're little people," Scott punctuates the dialogue with a close-up of the finished product, a paper origami chicken made out of a discarded gum wrapper. This detail recalls the Dick novel, where the character J.R. Isidore is a "chickenhead,"

Scott gives us other indications of the political style of his city, and typically he does it by creating images that suggest other categories of realities. The arcology which houses the Tyrell Corporation, home of the genius/businessman who manufactures the replicants, looks strikingly like the Mayan Temple of the Sun, reminding us of human sacrifice. The opening scene, an interview between blade runner Dave Holden and fugitive replicant Leon, combines the methodologies of the psychological test, the lie-detector and the IRS audit. It is a scene full of terror, impressing on the viewer that the police powers of this society allow anyone to be defined at any moment as non-human, a target to be "retired," that is, shot on sight. Rachael asks Deckard, "Have you ever retired a human by mistake?"

Significantly, Scott uses visual techniques to create a social and physical space in which people's vulnerability is marked by their visibility, their inability to see and know, or their inability to escape seeing, an appropriate combination of traditional Private Eye issues with the implications of an "information society." In his expressionist style of camera work, more seems to be going on outside the screen than we or the characters can know. The film is not only dark, but our view is also constantly interrupted by passersby or objects. The dark sky, building walls and use of close-shots and telephoto make even outdoor space feel enclosed, as does the echoing quality of the sound track. (See Andrew Stiller's paper, elsewhere in this volume, for further discussion of the film's soundscape.)

In fact, the only space with sunlight, the only place which does not feel closed in, is Tyrell's penthouse apartment/office at the top of the arcology, suggesting in a visceral way that the powerful are the only people who have a clear view. I will return to this point later.

The city itself is visually and acoustically intrusive, its neon signs, broadcast advertising announcements and searchlights incessantly penetrating private apartments. Deckard at one point characterizes sexual exploitation with the image of men spying on a beautiful woman through a peephole, and he expresses his power over the beautiful replicant Rachael by his knowledge of her implanted childhood memories.

In a marvelous bit of technological self-reflection, several of the main characters in the film collect and treasure family photographs, including replicants Leon and Rachael, who use photos of friends or supposed family as talismans against their own lack of human connection. It's typical of Scott's artistry that he makes no big deal of this in the case of humans (Deckard himself, particularly, and his brutal boss Bryant more subtly), but he uses the replicants' photo collections to motivate major plot developments.

The photos are particularly important in relation to the Esper machine (Esper as in ESP), which is perhaps the most interesting single device in the film. The Esper machine highlights the issue of privileged sight raised above. Deckard has this personal computer-like device in his apartment and uses it to analyze one of Leon's photos. It literally sees around corners, progressively revealing to Deckard's predatory eye everything and everyone in Leon's hotel room when the photo was taken.

Fascinating as the device is by itself and as a cinematic descendant of *Blow-up*, it is stunning as a commentary on privileged sight as an aspect of power and as an extrapolation on the tradition of the Private Eye. Although the term



"Esper," used in the film credits, suggests the paranormal, everything about the machine and Deckard's use of it suggests that it is a routine technological device, something analogous to a PC.

Only three people in *Blade Runner* see clearly and completely. Tyrell, the tyrant of technology whose web of control penetrates an entire genetic engineering industry and extends to the Off-World Colonies, is the most obvious. Only the police and Tyrell, who designed the replicants' brains, can see the replicants' dates of death. Neither his assistant Sebastian nor the eye-designer Chew can see the "Big Picture," and both die because they see something they do not have the power to survive seeing.

Deckard, the blade runner, like a classic private eye, progressively comes to see the interlinked corruptions of his society. The Esper machine is only the technological projection of this task, but it makes particularly clear that in this society seeing is the property of power; Deckard has and uses the Esper machine because he is a killer for the state. The Esper machine is the ultimate "eye," more perfect even than the replicant's genetically-engineered eyes, but in-depth knowledge of evil means living under the rule of death, as Deckard does as long as he remains a blade runner. Seeing leads to destruction for the powerless. Deckard's privileged sight is confirmed by the bird's-eye views of the city he has from the police vehicle.

## II

The surprising third "seer" is Roy Batty, the genius replicant, and replicants represent the other great technological entity of the film. Roy tells the humans, "You people wouldn't believe what I've seen with your eyes." He is obsessed with the beauty and terror he has seen in interstellar war, and grieves that with his death what he has seen will be lost forever. Batty breaks through and sees past barriers with hands, head, and brains. His nature, the question of whether he and the others are human, is at the moral and political center of the film. His ability to see is implied in the very first frames of the film, when a clear blue eye surveys the hellish landscape of Los Angeles. Although the eye's owner is not shown, only Batty could have a blue eye like that one.

The replicants are genetically engineered, evidently in parts—Chew designed their eyes. This suggests a process more like manufacturing than like growth. Chew's fascinating lab, the only glimpse we get of the technologies which create the replicants, is a small cryogenics workshop in a slum. Chew is clearly a subcontractor, suggesting a widespread industrial network and also suggesting that Tyrell himself may be a genetic engineering equivalent of Jobs and Wozniak, the garage tinkerers who founded Apple Computer and changed the world. Sebastian, his apartment full of the friends he literally made, is obviously a restyled computer hacker.

Scott again has extrapolated from current trends:

What if large combines in the next few decades became almost as powerful as the government? Which is possible. They'd move into all sorts of industries...eventually they'd go into genetics. And then you reach the point where genetics starts developing into the first "man-made" man. I think it could happen in the next 12 or 15 years.

From there...you can quite easily slip into breeding a second-class generation to do things which normally you or I wouldn't care to do, or psychologically couldn't stand to do... You take a humanoid and dick around with his brain, bring him along certain psychological lines, and he's going to go along quite happily (Kennedy 66).

It's particularly interesting that Scott's model of the dominant industry features not the fat-cat capitalist but the genius who designed the ultimate product and became president of a company, a type we can see all over Silicon Valley. He evidently still likes to "roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty" as an engineer. As a contemporary Marxist text notes:

[science has been transformed] into an actual productive force...radically altering the already developed industrial production, opening qualitatively new prospects before it (Fidlon 36).

Although some technologies have been widely disseminated in the film's society which are very expensive today, such as Chew's lab and the electron microscope used by a Cambodian woman in a street market stall, control of such detail-oriented technologies evidently does not carry with it wide-ranging political power like that implicit in the Esper machine. This suggests severe limits to populist hopes that falling prices of high technology necessarily lead to "trickling-down" of power.

Replicants are created full-grown and only live about four years. It is not clear whether this "flaw" was created on purpose, to prevent replicants from maturing emotionally into autonomous creatures—Bryant presents this view, but later Tyrell and Batty argue possible "cures," and Tyrell insists that "we made you as well as we could." Did the "god of biomechanics" create death to prevent his creation from becoming a god too, or is he less than all-powerful? We never know, although the film's possibly flawed ending, in which Rachael is revealed to have no built-in expiration date, suggests that he is lying.

As in the case of any slave, the design flaw is not so much the short life as the development of control problems which make a short life convenient. Rachael is Tyrell's experiment in improving control; he gives her implanted memories of a family, because this need for a connection is the "itch you can never scratch," as Leon calls it, which makes the replicants undependable. The slave's itch for freedom is also an itch for human connection to replace the commodity relations of slavery.

Replicants are clearly disposable. They are not only to be destroyed if they malfunction, but their short lives make them the ultimate in planned obsolescence. They must be either cheap to build or very valuable in use, probably both. The Off-World advertisements which present them as personal servants for emigrants suggest that they are cheap, but we also know that these four are military models: a combat/colonization defense model, a nuclear fission loader/waste engineer, a political assassin and a "standard military pleasure model." Although we know little about the Off-World Colonies, it is clear that colonial wars have accompanied capitalism.

The political critique is inescapable, pointing to our world, where soldiers are "cannon fodder," workers and native peoples expendable, and where corporations move both polluting plants and dangerous products offshore to third-world nations whose people resemble the swarming street people of *Blade Runner*.

To make the point clearer, Scott has created distinct ethnic and class distinctions in his small group of replicants. Roy Batty, brighter than most humans and built for self-sufficiency, is the classic Aryan superman, while Leon Kowalski, designed to be a nuclear fission loader and waste disposal engineer, is a "sweating greaseball" (Kennedy 64), an ethnic stereotype with a weak chin and bulging eyes. In Scott's world the genetic designers choose ethnic types which suit their (and our) prejudices about who make the best garbage men. While the issues are less clear for the three females, intelligence and refinement of features and feelings are highest in Rachael (who carries the implanted memories of Tyrell's niece) and lowest in Pris, the military prostitute.

Scott's comment about a second-class generation clearly points to political questions—are replicants machines, or are they slaves? What are the moral and political implications of creating people who have no free will? These questions are raised in *Brave New World* and other science fiction novels, but never before with such force in film. They are explicitly questions about the relationship of technology to politics and morality in the age of genetic engineering. (See Marilyn Gwaltney's comments on these issues, elsewhere in this volume.)

If the escaped replicants are merely malfunctioning machines, as Deckard has been taught to believe, then their killing of humans is a sad accident, morally meaningless except, please note, for possible corporate liability which is nowhere mentioned in the film. Deckard's killing them is morally neutral or positive. But if they are rebelling slaves, their murder of human oppressors is comprehensible and may be justified, while their destruction serves to strengthen the oppressor. So Deckard's dilemma has a powerful edge.

As the film builds our empathy with the replicants, it strongly suggests that they have the rights of humans, and the contradiction of the replicant industry becomes clear. Replicants, sentient and even sapient beings, have been created as slaves to free humans from being slaves. Their nature as "physical" beings, not computers, is not in fact identical with that of humans—they are both more childlike and more like animals, characteristics which have been consistently attributed by oppressors to oppressed people (Levin et al). They are also much stronger, a characteristic often implied in the "animalistic" side of stereotypes, as in the case of blacks. But they love, hate, dream, think, grieve, feel loyalty, generosity and yearning. The Off-World Colonies may be paradise for humans, but they are clearly a slave camp for replicants.

These questions connect not only with slavery but with genocide. The most obvious hint is the casting of Rutger Hauer, a perfect "Nazi type," as Roy Batty, but there are others, more subtle: the old woman with the electron microscope in the animal market is labelled Cambodian in the film credits, and the Jewish family names of a millionaire and a chickenhead in the Philip Dick novel are changed to neutral names in the film. Beyond a simple change of ethnicity, Tyrell in particular is a shift from a washed-out stereotype of a Jewish industrialist to a portrait of a man whose fascination with science and his own creative power

totally overwhelms any moral scruples. Tyrell even looks a bit like the Nazi Angel of Death, Dr. Joseph Mengele.

But the larger question of the film which is related to genocide is the ability of the state to define the human and to destroy those who fall outside the definition. This is indisputably one of the points made by both *Blade Runner* and the source novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Although the film's only reference to nuclear technology is Leon's design specifications, the novel is explicitly set after a nuclear war. Both Naziism, with its industrial factory style of murder, and nuclear weapons, with their push-button convenience, give the politically powerful greatly-increased ability to define their opponents' humanity as less valuable than their own political ends and to act on the definition, in essence to shoot into the crowd, with as little compunction as Deckard's when he stalked Zhora.

Genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, genocide, nuclear war all combine technological, moral and political dimensions. Genetic engineering and artificial intelligence, whether or not we believe that human-like results are forthcoming soon, have already raised new and important questions about what human beings, bodies and minds, really are. Genocide and nuclear war, technologies which expand possibly-innate human destructive impulses to global scale, make the answers to these questions newly urgent. The means are technological, the implications moral, but the critique and the solution have to do with political power. With these technologies, we must be especially careful what or who comes to be defined as non-human.

The extraordinary thing about *Blade Runner* is that it raises these questions by showing them rather than by discussing them, by successfully incorporating its serious issues within the seamless complexity of its vision. Unlike all too much political art, it carries forward analysis and criticism by means of the imagination and by skillful manipulation of popular, even worn-out, genres. Finally, it doesn't matter whether Scott and his colleagues intended a radical film or not. By the logic of the film's extrapolation, the power of its archetypes and the visceral rightness of its world-making, *Blade Runner* raises trenchant political questions about our world, its political economy, its technologies and its future.

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