

## The Least Scary Option: *Blade Runner* and the Future City

*How and why does Blade Runner, a film about the future L.A., image that city in terms of the New York modernist metropolis?*

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* has provided rich pickings for cultural theorists, film critics, and urban planners since its release in 1982. The film has been continually revisited, even to the extent of having a high profile cinematic re-release. What makes it so fascinating? It is, in part, the prescience of its vision: clearly the film was ahead of its time. Yet this can be overstated - in many ways it can be seen as a fairly logical extension of the seventies science fiction cycle (particularly Scott's earlier *Alien*, or John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*, released a year earlier). And there are other films of similar vintage that also anticipated crucial movements without generating as much scholarly attention (an example being Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (also 1982), a film that has major flaws but is in some ways more ambitious). The film's fans would probably reply to such observations by arguing that *Blade Runner* is distinguished from its predecessors and contemporaries because put its various ideas together with more finesse. Less charitably, we might characterise *Blade Runner* as an ideal subject for study because it assembles a particularly diverse grab-bag of fashionable ideas for theorists to sift through; seen this way, *Blade Runner's* sometimes incoherent eclecticism becomes part of its attraction. Certainly, when we attempt to define *Blade Runner's* view of the city, we find ourselves confronted by numerous contradictions. The film manages to embody both modernist and postmodernist ideas, just as it mobilises the mythology and imagery of both New York and Los Angeles. How can these contradictions be resolved (if indeed they can be), and what is their ultimate meaning?

That all these aspects are present does not make them all equally obvious. Certainly the film seems to underline certain elements more than others. The film's evocation of Los Angeles, for example, is obviously signalled by its own title card that declares it to be set in "Los Angeles - 2019." There is nothing subtle, either, about the film's evocation of perhaps L.A.'s most powerful regional myth: *noir*<sup>(1)</sup>. This is most conspicuous in the original cut of the film, which includes a hard-boiled narration by Harrison Ford. This narration may border on self-parody at times, but there can be no doubt about the generic model into which it places the film. Even in the narrationless "Director's Cut," however, the influence is strongly felt. Harrison Ford remains a tough, disillusioned cop whether we hear his narration or not; the cinematography does not lose its rain-drenched darkness (for the exteriors) or hazy brown smokiness (as in the interiors at Tyrell's apartment). The character of Rachel is partly based upon *noir* models of the femme fatale, though her inscrutability is here mobilised for a somewhat different purpose. The costume design and hair styling for Rachel are clearly very evocative of fashions in the genre's post-war heyday<sup>(2)</sup>. Moving beyond *noir*, the film's depiction of the urban environment as largely populated by non-whites could be seen as playing upon the city's racial anxieties (although the racial mix is not quite L.A., with relatively few Hispanics). Drawing a slightly longer bow, we could see the abandonment of Earth for the outer colonies as mirroring the flight from inner urban areas by the wealthy in L.A. - an idea I will return to later.

The film's postmodernist tendencies have also been detailed extensively by such writers as Giuliana Bruno and David Harvey<sup>(3)</sup>. Most obvious is the film's use of postmodern pastiche: the film's production design emphasises the coexistence of multiple historical influences and styles, particularly of architecture. The urban decay and retrofitting shows the acceleration of industrial processes and recycling (which Bruno characterises as the process of becoming reliant upon one's own waste<sup>(4)</sup>) under late capitalism. Harvey is quick to note that the production of replicant's individual parts has been outsourced to street vendors, which extends the process of industrial devolution and flexible flows of capital found in post-Fordist economies<sup>(5)</sup>. The replicants' four year life spans (offset, claims Tyrell, by the intensity of their lives) are suggestive of the accelerated experience of life under postmodernism. The film's ruminations on the nature of memory (and the importance of photographs) evoke postmodern ideas about the mediation of life through technology and the elimination of "real" history. The film has also been suggested as one of the principal inspirations for the "cyberpunk" genre of science fiction<sup>(6)</sup>. Insofar as it marries noir to images of futuristic dystopia, this seems fair enough. Less convincing, though, are attempts to describe Deckard's examination of the photograph as suggesting the idea of cyberspace<sup>(7)</sup>; it seems more inspired by the scenes of technological detection found in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966) or Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974).

Despite all this, the film is far from being unquestionably a visualisation of postmodern Los Angeles. For starters, the film never quite convinces as a depiction of a future L.A.. Paul M. Sammon has documented the confusion about where exactly the film was set, noting that the film's setting switched from "San Angeles" (a San Francisco / Los Angeles megalopolis) to New York, and then back to Los Angeles<sup>(8)</sup>. The result is a curious hybrid city that bears only occasional similarities to L.A.. This is clear in the scene in which Deckard travels to the Tyrell corporation building. The Tyrell building's pyramidal structure, which emphasises horizontal expansiveness rather than height, is the most distinctly L.A.-inspired form in the film<sup>(9)</sup>. The views from Tyrell's window also evoke a smog-covered suburbia that is also strongly suggestive of L.A. Yet the city that Deckard departs from is made up of closely packed high-rise buildings; the scenes at street level that we see are much more reminiscent of New York, and the ever-present electronic advertising recalls Times Square. The filmmakers themselves acknowledge this New York influence: design artist Syd Mead says one conceptual exercise was based on an extrapolation of New York's form based upon the assumption that the height of the World Trade Centre towers would become the norm<sup>(10)</sup>. Indeed, the external sets were literally built upon the old "New York Street" at Warner Brothers' Burbank studios<sup>(11)</sup>. Elements such as the flying cars also downplay one of L.A.'s most prominent mythical representations - the freeway.

The link back to New York is crucial because it connects the film with a line of thinking that leads back to modernism rather than postmodernism. For the city, the cinema, and modernity have been linked all along. Scott Bukatman argues that "cinema, science fiction, and modern urbanism were interwoven products of the same industrial revolution."<sup>(12)</sup> Peter Wollen draws a more particular variation on the same theme, noting that the "history of film coincides almost exactly with the history of the skyscraper."<sup>(13)</sup>

The first half of the twentieth century was an era of high modernism, and the era in which the cinema found its feet - and it was New York, not L.A., that seemed to represent the ultimate metropolis in this period. Its vertical forms famously inspired Fritz Lang's 1926 classic *Metropolis*, and this in turn was one of the principal inspirations for *Blade Runner's* vision of the city<sup>(14)</sup> (Lang, of course, was also an important figure in the history of *noir*; it is interesting that one person should figure so prominently in *Blade Runner's* lineage).

The notion of New York as a modernist city is not necessarily an immediately obvious one, since the distraction of modernist architecture obscures some of the issues. David Harvey talks of the strict functionalism and simple forms of modernist architecture (the "International style"), for example, and these tendencies did extend to urban design on a broader scale<sup>(15)</sup>. Le Corbusier presents the most famous example: he was an architect, but his utopian visions of future cities were enormously influential and scaled down versions were often implemented. Harvey characterises the modernist planning style with admirably succinct comprehensiveness, describing it as centring upon "large scale, metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans, backed by absolutely no-frills architecture (the austere "functionalist" surfaces of "international style" modernism).<sup>(16)</sup>" Such architecture often found its way into science fiction of the sixties and seventies as a way of representing future cities, whether the intention was utopic (as in "Star Trek") or dystopic (George Lucas' *THX-1138* (1971)). This preoccupation of cinematic science fiction with such architecture was probably an important factor helping *Blade Runner* to appear so different. *Blade Runner's* break with this model was also no doubt part of the perception of the film as unquestionably postmodern.

Yet Bukatman argues that *Blade Runner* does indeed evoke modernist ideals; just a different version to that of Le Corbusier and his followers<sup>(17)</sup>. The functionalist model might form the basis for the cities' street plan and provide the impetus and architecture for its signature skyscrapers, but the city as a whole takes on a much more heterogeneous form. This was, of course, true well before postmodernism appeared, and didn't stop New York becoming the archetypal modernist city. As Bukatman says, "[Le Corbusier's] modernism is indeed rejected by *Blade Runner*, while the modernist experience of the city described by Simmel, Benjamin and Kraceur - disordered, heterogeneous, street-level - is revisited and renewed.<sup>(18)</sup>" Once again the dubious boundaries of the term "modernism" have caused trouble: modernist architecture might be strictly functionalist, but modernism as a movement is far more diverse and varied, with artists and theorists being very attracted to the idea of New York as a vibrant modernist metropolis. Just as postmodernism can be characterised as the cultural face of Post-Fordism, so modernism is linked to Fordist capitalism, and New York's status during this period as a centre of world finance put it at the centre of *all* modernist discourse, not just that of architecture.

The question remains, though: why all this New York imagery? To attribute it to the fact that the film was originally set in New York evades the central issue, since it doesn't tell us why Scott changed the setting to New York in the first place (Phillip K. Dick's source novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, was set in San Francisco<sup>(19)</sup>). The answer

probably lies in looking beyond the issues of postmodernism and modernism. Bukatman notes that heterogeneity is not purely a sign of postmodernist urban form, since it existed under modernism<sup>(20)</sup>, but of course this argument does not stop at modernism (and I'm not trying to imply that Bukatman thinks it does). Wollen points out that *Blade Runner's* city also has strong overtones of medievalism<sup>(21)</sup>, and this is important in grounding the discussion. Negative images of the city have centred around the issue of overcrowding since the middle ages, simply because high densities have always accompanied cities in the past. Depicting urban crowding and squalor is, quite simply, the most obvious way to present a nightmare future. This holds true in *Blade Runner* even though there are strange new twists: the city is only partially an overcrowded one, since the buildings are largely empty even while the street teems with life.

One of the challenges of the twentieth century city has been the change to this paradigm that has been wrought by the rise of the automobile. Suddenly, cities were freed from the necessity of density (imposed by mobility restrictions and infrastructure costs), and suburbs could expand endlessly. This is the model that L.A. epitomises, with its dismantled public transport system giving way to a seemingly endless suburbia linked by freeways. The problem is that urban problems do not go away. The poor can still be poor in suburbs, and the physical isolation that occurs in suburbia (even in the pleasant suburbs) can be psychologically devastating<sup>(22)</sup>. This shift in the urban fabric of cities in general - and L.A. in particular - wrought changes upon L.A.'s pet genre, the *noir* thriller: as Norman Klein points out, the suburbs became a new zone for *noir*, partially displacing the traditional image of the big, dark city<sup>(23)</sup>. An example is the sun-baked *noir* of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), a film which is set in the thirties but which presents one of the battles surrounding (and occurring in) what will soon be an ever-expanding fringe.

Suburbia has therefore become the new enemy of the planner, and in its extremes (as found in L.A.) represents the latest vision of urban hell. Models of planning in the era since the late sixties have therefore increasingly attempted to recreate small town environments<sup>(24)</sup> or to emulate the variety of inner city areas - with New York being one of the classic models to attempt to emulate<sup>(25)</sup>. These visions have, to an extent, filtered through to the general public. Klein notes, for example, that not only did planners see the *Blade Runner* future as something of a desirable outcome for L.A. ("... three out of five leading planners agreed that they hoped L.A. would someday look like *Blade Runner*"<sup>(26)</sup>), but that L.A. residents partially shared this view, thinking that the sushi street vendors in the film look impressively cosmopolitan<sup>(27)</sup>. Nevertheless, the seemingly complementary idea of suburbia as wasteland has gained considerably less currency. There is a strong investment in the idea of the suburb, both in L.A. and elsewhere, and to suggest problems with it can cause hostile reactions. Alida Brill, talking of the residents of Lakewood, California, an early (1950s) version of a planned suburban town, notes the high levels of anger that arise as such a utopian model begins to show signs of strain<sup>(28)</sup>.

Scott seems to have been aware of the possibilities of a suburban hell as opposed to his urban nightmare: talking of his original "San Angeles" conception for the city, he describes the megalopolis as "a single population center with giant cities and monolithic buildings at either end, and then this strange kind of awful suburb in the middle."<sup>(29)</sup> Yet

this seems to have been too threatening. By avoiding a depiction of the *Blade Runner* city as an L.A.-style low density nightmare, Scott has left audiences an escape. The idea of a dense, forbidding inner city is so familiar that it is almost taken for granted; it is also something that one can leave. In the original cut of the film, this is exactly what happens: Deckard and Rachel simply leave the city and return to a beautiful wilderness. (This point defies all logic, since we have been told animals are nearly extinct - so how stable is this ecosystem?). Yet even in the film's final cut the nightmare can be fled from. Rachel and Deckard still discuss fleeing north, and of course it is implied that much of the population has already left Earth for the colonies, much as they abandon run-down urban areas. This dulls the edge of the dystopic future, since we are being presented a situation in which only a certain underclass have to face the terrors of urban decay. But this is true already, and a thought that most have already learnt to live with.

The representations of Los Angeles (as endless suburb; a physical embodiment of postmodern/post-Fordist decentralisation) and New York (as high density modernist metropolis) both have utopian and dystopian elements. *Blade Runner's* strength is that it anticipated many of the anxieties surrounding postmodern futures, and did so at a very early stage. Yet, in a film where visual design counts for so much, it has chosen not to represent a *suburban* hell. This makes its vision more familiar and less challenging; its urban future fits comfortably within the expectations of established genres. The mainstream American cinema has often shown the nightmarish side of dense inner cities or small towns, but has yet to start seriously examining the underside of the L.A.-style automobile dominated postmodern suburb. Since it is still yet to do this in 1998, perhaps *Blade Runner* should be forgiven for not making the leap in 1982.

## Notes

1. A solid discussion of noir as an L.A. regional phenomena is to be found in Davis, Mike, 1990, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Vintage, New York, particularly pp. 36-46. ([Back](#))
2. Descriptions of the noir influence upon *Blade Runner* run through virtually all commentary on the film; one of the more concise summaries of these influences can be found in the first few pages of Dresser, David, 1985, "*Blade Runner*, Science Fiction and Transcendence," in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Volume 13, Number 3, 1985, pp. 172-179. ([Back](#))
3. The latter is clearly indebted to the former, and acknowledges the influence; Harvey's piece is nevertheless valuable for its greater clarity and rigour (Harvey is the rare theorist who retained some self-discipline when his interests shifted to postmodernism). See: Bruno, Giulliana, 1987, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*," in *October*, 41, Summer 1987, pp. 61-74; and Harvey, David, 1990, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Cambridge and Oxford, pp. 308-323. ([Back](#))
4. Bruno, 1987, op. cit., p. 64. ([Back](#))

5. Harvey, 1990, op. cit., p. 311. ([Back](#))
6. Bukatman, Scott, 1997, *Blade Runner*, BFI, London, pp. 45-52. ([Back](#))
7. Ibid., pp. 46-47. ([Back](#))
8. Sammon, Paul M., 1996, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, HarperCollins, New York. ([Back](#))
9. I am thinking mainly of its horizontal expansiveness, but Peter Wollen suggests that its neo-Mayan architecture is indebted to an L.A. based architectural movement headed by Robert Stacy-Judd and Francisco Mujica. See Wollen, Peter, 1994, "Delirious Projections," in *Sight and Sound*, Volume 2, Issue 4, August 1992, p. 25. ([Back](#))
10. Peary, Danny, 1988, *Cult Movies 3*, Simon & Schuster, New York, p.35. ([Back](#))
11. Klein, Norman M., 1997, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, Verso, London & New York, p. 96. ([Back](#))
12. Bukatman, 1997, op. cit., p. 42. ([Back](#))
13. Wollen, 1994, op. cit., p.25. ([Back](#))
14. Bukatman, 1997, op. cit., pp. 84-85. ([Back](#))
15. Harvey, 1990, op. cit., pp. 66-98. ([Back](#))
16. Ibid., p. 66. ([Back](#))
17. Bukatman, 1997, op. cit., pp. 60-61. ([Back](#))
18. Ibid., p. 61. ([Back](#))
19. Peary, 1988, op. cit., p.32. ([Back](#))
20. Bukatman, 1997, op. cit., p. 60. ([Back](#))
21. Wollen, 1994, op. cit., p. 26. ([Back](#))
22. I speak from experience: I lived for six months in one of L.A.'s most pleasant and crime free fringe suburbs (Irvine) and found the built form of even this part of the city profoundly depressing. ([Back](#))
23. Klein, 1997, op. cit., p. 295. ([Back](#))

24. Interestingly, one of the leading examples of this movement, the planned community of Seaside, Florida, is used as the setting in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) to represent a nightmare of unrelenting niceness. [\(Back\)](#)

25. This latter trend owes a lot to Jane Jacobs' seminal book: Jacobs, Jane, 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House New York. [\(Back\)](#)

26. Klein, 1997, op. cit., p. 94. [\(Back\)](#)

27. Ibid., p. 98. Of course, these views romanticise the inner city, and Klein (who grew up in Brooklyn) is unimpressed, noting the glib dismissal of inner urban crime and decay in these reactions. [\(Back\)](#)

28. Brill, Alida, 1996, "Lakewood, California: Tomorrowland at 40," in Dear, Schockman & Hise (eds.), 1996, *Rethinking Los Angeles*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, pp. 97-112. [\(Back\)](#)

29. Sammon, 1996, op. cit.. [\(Back\)](#)