Vertical Apocalypse:
Altered Noir Cityscape within **Blade Runner's** *Dystopia*
by Kurt Bullock

Following *Blade Runner's* release in 1982, film critics — even those who despised the picture — gave almost universal acclaim to the stunning visual creation of a future city. Director Ridley Scott grafted futuristic imagery upon a base of gritty leftovers from today's Los Angeles, and what emerged was a towering, yet restricted, Los Angeles of 2019 (Carper 186). While many elements of the *film noir* city remain firmly entrenched in the socio-structural characteristics of Scott's futuristic "City of Angels," the architectural cityscape he developed forces his chief protagonist, Deckard, to operate on a level never before encountered by Philip Marlowe or any other *film noir* detective: the vertical.

L.A. emerges in the opening sequence as a sprawling industrial landscape, stacks of chemical plants and refineries belching flame, even as huge mega-structures dominate the center of the city. Intimated is the city's vast expanse — a glittering neon world that, upon closer inspection, is an all but overwhelming cluster of advertising and enticing images perched high atop skyscrapers, all canvassed by hovercraft that zip along invisible flight corridors. But within moments of shooting of blade runner Holden by the replicant Leon, the viewer is dropped into a canyon created by huge superstructures hunched over dilapidated buildings and crumbling architecture.

This descent to ground level reveals the antithesis of the futuristic skyline. The old L.A. at street level has become a slum, a polyglot of ethnic crowds bustling past shops, stores and vendors. Looking up from street level, one must peer through wires and between massive skyscrapers toward the sky — and then only to gaze into smog-induced darkness and ceaseless acid rain.

The labrynthian nature of vertical space is thus exposed within *Blade Runner.* In all cases, overhead schematics supplied by omnipotent computers are necessary for travel through the sectored city. No longer can the individual navigate by eye-level perspective; multi-level pathways outstrip conventional travel (Staiger 39-40). The chaos of crowded carnival streets and empty roadways, all littered with refuse, fire pits, stone cairns and intricately-carved monoliths, is juxtaposed against the serenity — and power — of verticality. Deckard's pursuit of the evil replicants forces his vision upward, beyond street-level, to seek answers on a higher plane. As Marlowe and other *noir* detectives uncovered corruption within corruption, a hierarchy of evil, so does Deckard reveal, if only to himself, the sordid nature of life at all levels. Blade Runner's vertical architecture serves as metaphor for this hierarchy of evil power.

David Reid and Jayne Walker discuss in detail the apocalyptic city central to *film noir,* considering this "fated city" to be "the counterpart of the radiant 'White City' of official optimism" (70). They note especially the sinister and dingy mise-en-scène of *film noir,* with its "extraordinary visual, auditory and even synaesthetic effects." Protagonists are victims, bystanders, the apparently innocent, and the city in which their struggle takes

place is "fallen, guilty, complicitous," ruled by a sinister force that thwarts and deforms individual life (73-4). Emerging from the after-effects of the Depression and World War II, *film noir* exposed the omnipresent lateral power networks of burgeoning urbanization and industrialization and the static vertical hierarchy of power within government. Reid and Walker contend, "Rather than dramatizing the ordeal of change, as we are usually told, it would be truer to the mood of these films to say that they melodramatize the ordeal, or at least the fear, of changelessness. In this way the frustrations of the left and the fears of the right both found their way in the mythologies of *film noir"* (90). *Film noir* played to these fears in demonstrating that, no matter which way one turns, and no matter how far one travels, evil and corruption are sure to be there. *Film noir* characters reside in a hopeless of doomed world predetermined by the past, say Reid and Walker — a past most obviously signified by the sinister mise-en-scène of the entropic city.

Blade Runner plays to these same themes in its depiction of L.A. in 2019, only on a vertical plane rather than in a lateral spread of networks. The movie accepts street-level decadence as a given, and serves to expose through *film noir* techniques the vertical corruption inherent with a utopian society gone awry. *Blade Runner's* production designer, Lawrence Paull, from the onset saw the script as *"film noir."* Says Paull: "I started to think of those late '40s, early '50s films which always starred a dark, brooding city, and then extended that look 40 years past our own time" (Sammon 32). Scott himself states that he intended *Blade Runner's* city to be a "serious extrapolation from our present age" (Kennedy 66), and that his effort was to develop a film which would make his audience uncomfortable (Kerman 18). Scott did so by creating an apparent utopia on the higher vertical planes, but one that quickly becomes dysfunctional as it plummets toward street level.

This perversely-mangled utopia of tomorrow — frequently referred to as a "dystopia" — is almost necessarily derived from premises of today. In the same fashion that utopian commentaries are built upon hopes for rectifying the failures of the present age, dystopian propositions are derived from criticisms of modern urban life and the economic system that produces it. The signifiers of this troubled dystopia are its architecture and cityscape, housing the corrupt economic and political institutions (Staiger 21, 41). This is apparent in *Blade Runner's* dystopian L.A., where the privileged live high above, and the disenfranchised — apparently unable to gain access to "a new life" that awaits them on the neo-utopian colonies, complete with replicant servants — live far below. Deckard serves as the mobile character who explores the various vertical strata of this dystopia.

And herein lies the difference in *Blade Runner,* for it employs what could be called "vertical *noir."* Traditional *film noir,* as summarized by critic Russel Gray, is about "a sprawling, changing, disorganized American city representing a combination of corruption and lived futility." The detective hero, then, "moves in and out of a world of wealth and influence, but is at odds with it" (71). What is important about this is the lateral movement inherent within traditional *film noir;* the protagonist travels from site to site at surface level, the delusive field of play accessible on a single plane traversed perpetually, it seems, by the detective. His is incessant travel, one without destination, for

there is no conclusion, only a jaded realization at film's end that his battle with the powers of evil is hopeless, futile.

Blade Runner alters this movement by the protagonist, turns it on its side. Deckard is the loner in the big city, divorced, his ex-wife now living on the colonies. He belongs to the seething "underworld" of the street-level, as evidenced by his understanding of the creole cityspeak and his comfortable position at the streetside sushi bar, where he uses chopsticks. But this is where any parallel to the traditional *film noir* detective ends, for no longer is it a matter of Deckard trekking across the urban landscape, but rather up the urban landscape. And whereas the traditional *film noir* detective has no destination, only the realization of futile, perpetual motion, Deckard finds a personal revelation in his quest, and a possible solution to what is perceived as his growing dilemma: his love for the replicant Rachael.

The street level is a social and physical space that is exposed, in which people's vulnerability is marked by their invisibility; these are people unable to see and know, or to escape being seen. And Deckard operates at this street-level. But he also has been given privileged sight: use of the Voight-Kampff machine to expose replicants; vertical transport via personal access to police and other hover vehicles; the authority of a police badge; access to the powerful corporate tycoon Tyrell. Progressively, this enabling of verticality permits Deckard to see the interlinked corruptions of society, to recognize the evil that looms above. And this insight triggers his ultimate revelation: that indeed, the replicant just may be "more human than human," as Tyrell's slogan goes.

The largest, highest, and most magisterial of the buildings in this cityscape are the twin pyramids of the Tyrell corporation, the leading manufacturer of the androids who are banned from earth and allowed only on the colonies. Tyrell's massive 700-story super-structures from a distance resemble Mayan pyramids, temples of human sacrifice; up close, they are exo-skeletal constructs, buildings turned inside-out as it were, with conduits and elevators exposed. Their glowing searchlights, hovercraft landing pads — simply their height and mass — symbolize a future of wealth and progress, of technological triumph.

Inside, Tyrell's office is temple-like, open and high-ceilinged with candles, altar fires, bonsai trees, golden statues and ceramic busts on pedestals; squared Mayan pillars with intricate carved patterns appear to support the cavernous space, while friezes and repeated geometric motifs adorn the walls. The office appears as warm if sterile place of worship, in contrast to the dark, desolate and mysterious nature of Tyrell's personal living space. His bedroom has a Gothic tone, with a multitude of candles and candelabras, tapestries, and ornate, delicately carved wood furniture. Interestingly, both spaces are devoid of obvious technological wizardry or gadgets (though they are but concealed). While the building's external structures serve as an indicator of technological wonder, Tyrell's inner sanctums would appear to connote a nostalgia for an all-but-forgotten era, a yearning for a past spirituality.

Tyrell's office and bedroom are located on the upper floor of this tremendous building, an indication that those people who live in the highest, most prestigious places of the contemporary city are clearly elites. They are at the top of the hierarchical "pyramids" of economic or political structures — or, perhaps both, for Tyrell clearly manipulates the police force. Even though Tyrell himself doesn't appear as though he could — or would — step foot outside his reclusive, splendorous domain, he rules what critic Norman Klein refers to as the "zone of power" in *Blade Runner* (150). From his towering perch atop the pyramids, Tyrell is able to gaze at the world below, one which he neither clearly sees nor desires to experience. Implied is his cynicism about, as much as responsibility for, the failures of L.A.

Deckard, despite his affinity with the street, occupies a space that aspires to vertical significance. His apartment on the 97th floor contains many of the primitive elements of Tyrell's office, but also includes contemporary technological gadgetry. Etched stone hieroglyphs adorn the walls, and are repeated in the balcony railing; the ceiling, too, is tiled with repeated geometric patterns. Amidst the clutter sit Mondrian-backed chairs and a dome-shaped lamp whose tri-posts are scrolled. Bonsai trees grow in planters on the table, and classical sheet music, as well as old photos and sepia tints, rest on a wooden baby-grand piano. Seemingly out of place in this domestic mix are the multiple video monitors and a high-tech photo-enhancement machine, as well as the annoyingly voyeuristic light from passing hovercraft. Caught between the street and the ultimate height of Tyrell's pyramids,

J.F. Sebastian's space is at first a seeming contradiction. Despite his status as a genetic engineer, he lives in the isolated and desolate Bradbury Building in a seedy but thinly-populated sector of L.A. An apparently sad but brilliant loner, Sebastian is physically and emotionally removed from the crowds of the market sector, which is obviously overcrowded; he explains to Pris that there is no housing shortage in his section of the city — thus seemingly explaining the seclusion of his place of residence. The apartment itself is a microcosm of repressed Queen Anne splendor, its baroque elegance trapped within the confines of an ancient, decrepit building that represents *noir* L.A. The old, ornate fireplace is unused, in fact nearly covered with objects and so hidden; a Grecian urn is balanced precariously on a pile of books; the mechanical toys, such as the miniature Napoleon Bear and Kaiser Wilhelm, are child-like. All are abused artifacts of a regal past that is trapped within the shell of an entropic present.

Critic Frederic Jameson dissects the significance of the office and abode, noting that "whatever objects mean, they also outline a space of a specific type which can be empty or contain a presence" (41). These spaces map out a "social totality" which is a "complete and closed semiotic system" (45). What is most enlightening is not necessarily the contents of these spaces, in other words, but what is missing from these spaces: from Tyrell's apartment and office, any apparent technological marvels; from Sebastian's apartment, any sacred artifact given a rightful place of honor. Both obfuscate that which they hold sacred.

Further, these two sites are demarcated by elevation and verticality: Sebastian, on the fourth floor of an old building, Tyrell on the 700th story of a pyramid. In between, on the 97th floor, is Deckard, who maintains some items of primitive spirituality even as he uses technological marvels to track down the replicants. Also telling are the manner in which these spaces are probed: Tyrell's office permits the only view in L.A. of a golden setting sun; Deckard's apartment is penetrated by intersecting spotlights and a blinking RCA advertisement; and Sebastian's apartment receives the voyeuristic gaze of the floating advertisement ship that tells of the colonies to which he can never go, even as the ceaseless, filthy rain of L.A. filters through his dilapidated building and floods the surrounding apartments.

As noted, Deckard's privileged "vision" permits him access to higher stratas and a greater understanding of the pervasive virtual structure of L.A. But verticality figures into the narrative in other ways, as well. The replicants manage to work their way "up" from street level, after one is "fried" by a force field at the Tyrell headquarters and Leon is found out by Holden. Information first comes from Chew, the Tyrell affiliate who constructs eyes, at street-level; and it is at street-level where first Zhora, and the Leon, are "retired." Next, Pris manages to gain the confidence of Sebastian, and it is at this fourth-floor level that she becomes the next replicant "retired." Even as this is happening, Roy forces Sebastian to take him to Tyrell; after learning that there is no hope for increased longevity, Roy returns to the Bradbury Building, pursues Deckard to the roof, prevents Deckard from falling to street-level, and there dies "naturally" — even as his death brings a resurrection-of-life revelation to Deckard.

An intriguing aspect of this "vertical *noir"* is the role of Rachael, who serves as the femme fatale. Unlike the other characters, who are either located at specific elevations within the vertical grid or else aspire to "climb to higher strata, Rachael descends to the street-level. An unaware replicant, she assumes the role of assistant to Tyrell in his 700th-floor office (where she lives is not disclosed, although Deckard does call her). At first she descends to Deckard's 97th-floor apartment to confront him about her identity, following the Voight-Kampff test in the Tyrell pyramid. She is then invited by Deckard to a street-level club; she declines, saying she does not frequent such places, implying street-level establishments; but she does appear at street-level just in time to rescue Deckard by killing Leon. She and Deckard then return to his apartment, where she remains until their apparent escape at the film's end.

Blade Runner's "vertical *noir"* comes as something of an axial rotation to traditional *noir,* which operates on a lateral map, a horizon of points. The *noir* city is a fixed terrain, its locations articulated and discernible; Marlowe and his contemporaries travel from place to place, revealing corruption at every site. The lateral network is exposed, the evil uncovered at every node of power, all of which function on a single horizon. Blade Runner changes this by spinning the grid perpendicularly: the city, once a sprawling metropolis, combed by the slow-but-steady *film noir* detective, is now restricted laterally, leaving the stratas of corruption to be explored vertically in metaphoric fashion. The positions on this vertical grid are not so precise, not the fixed sites of traditional *noir.*

Power becomes a concept rather than a personification; it is in the architectural structure of the *Blade Runner* cityscape that this is most apparent.

Subtly encased within Blade Runner's cityscape is a representation of social flaws, evoked in a post-industrial environment. These flaws are characterized by the crowds, by the excessive technology and advertising, and by urban decay. They are portrayed in the vertical and environmental juxtaposition of the street-level, the space of Sebastian's apartment, the space of Deckard's apartment, and even in the artificial tranquillity of Tyrell's office and bedroom — the serenity of which is contrasted, if not betrayed, by the stark scene of Holden interrogating Leon in a lower level of the Tyrell monolith during the film's opening sequence. This is a city in the grip of recognizable problems: overcrowding, pollution, acid rain, urban squalor (Ruppert 9-10). These problems, however, seem to vanish as one proceeds higher and higher on the vertical plane. The gloom and rain at street-level are non-existent at the peak of Tyrell's pyramid, where a glowing sunset over the balcony must be shaded before Deckard can conduct the Voight-Kampff test on Rachael.

Vertical juxtaposition exposes the utopia to be a dystopia, however, a juxtaposition elaborated on and interpreted not just through narrative but also through mise-en-scène. Architectural corruptions of a utopian scheme gone awry are apparent in the contrast of high-tech pyramids with overhauled, decrepit buildings. Critics Susan Doll and Greg Faller hold that "the computerized advertising blimp and billboards, the massive skyscrapers, and the artificial animals seem to suggest scientific advancement; however, these images also imply the antithesis of this promised utopia in the crowded, darkened sky, the congested and garbage strewn streets, and the extinction of numerous animals — in others words, it is a true dystopia" (94).

Through what critic John Pierce calls "sociological backgrounding" (205), Blade Runner carries forward criticism and analysis by means of imagination and manipulation of the *film noir* and science fiction genres through development of an altered, vertical cityscape. The wealthy and affluent rule in their arcologies, while the poor swarm seemingly subterranean warrens. High rises, pyramids and glass towers intermingle with revival architecture, retrofitted buildings, and the debris of past urban sprawl. In between, the police patrol the skyways, though they have no power of prevention, nor even intervention; rather, they can only "clean up" afterward.

Established vertical stratas — what critic Leonard Heldreth calls "the space of a force of relations" (41) — depict the power relations inherent within the vertical cityscape of *Blade Runner.* Here, the lateral structure of classic film noir is abolished, remaining only in the computer schematics that map the labrynthian city and provide some small sense of orientation among the debris, the decay and abandonment, even as they denote the restrictive horizon of L.A. in 2019. In a "future noir city more nightmare than vision," according to Staiger, "more anxiety than wish fulfillment" (23), it is the vertical cityscape which defines the function — or perhaps dysfunction — of Ridley Scott's entropic dystopia.

Works Cited

Carper, Steve. "Subverting the Disaffected City: Cityscape in *Blade Runner." Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press (1991), 185-95.

Doll, Susan, and Greg Faller. *"Blade Runner* and Genre: *Film Noir* and Science Fiction." *Literature Film Quarterly* 14.2 (1986): 89-100.

Gray, W. Russel. "Entropy, Energy, Empathy: *Blade Runner* and Detective Fiction." *Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press (1991), 66-75.

Heldreth, Leonard G. "The Cutting Edges of *Blade Runner." Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press (1991), 40-52.

Jameson, Frederic. "The Synoptic Chandler." *Shades of Noir,* ed. Joan Copjec. London: Verso (1993), 33-56.

Kennedy, Hailan. "21st Century Nervous Breakdown." *Film Comment* 18.4 (1982): 64-68.

Kerman, Judith B. "Technology and Politics in the *Blade Runner* Dystopia." *Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press (1991), 16-24.

Kerman, Judith B., ed. *Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1991.

Klein, Norman M. "Building *Blade Runner." Social Text* 9.3 (1991): 147-52.

Pierce, John J. "Creative Synergy and the Art of World Creation." *Retrofitting* Blade Runner: *Issues in Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner *and Philip K. Dick's* Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Ed. Judith B. Kerman. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press (1991), 201-11.

Reid, David, and Jayne L. Walker. "Strange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned City of the Forties." *Shades of Noir,* ed. Joan Copjec. London: Verso (1993), 57-96.

Ruppert, Peter. *"Blade Runner:* The Utopian Dialectics of Science Fiction Films." *Cineastem* 17.2 (1989): 8-13.

Sammon, Paul M. "The Making of *Blade Runner." Cinefantastique* 12 (1982): 20-47.

Staiger, Janet. "Future *Noir:* Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities." *East West Film Journal* 3.1 (1988): 20-44.