# Ideology as Dystopia:
# An Interpretation of *Blade Runner*

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ABSTRACT. Film and other forms of popular culture place enormously powerful tools at the disposal of students of politics and society. This paper analyses an aesthetically complex, philosophically disturbing and ideologically ambivalent cinematic dystopia of a few years ago, *Blade Runner*. Unlike the vast majority of films in the science fiction genre, *Blade Runner* refuses to neutralize the most abhorrent tendencies of our age and casts serious doubt on a host of the clichés about where we should locate their causes. Among the most significant questions it challenges us to confront are: In what does the "truly human" consist? Does the concept of imitating "truly human" beings retain any coherence once the feasibility of designing "more human than human" robots becomes an increasingly imaginable technological possibility? What might relations between the sexes and family life become if the twin eventuality of an uninhabitable earth and the perfection of robotic technologies should come about? While political theorists are asking themselves, "What and where should political theory be now?", this paper contends that at least part of their time should be spent at the cinema, deep in thought and imagination.

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> Only the perverse fantasy can still save us.
> (Goethe to Eckerman)

... was it not a sign that this was *not* the natural order of things, if one's heart sickened at the discomfort and dirt and scarcity . . .? Why should one feel it to be intolerable unless one had some kind of ancestral memory that things had once been different?

> (Winston, in George Orwell's *1984*)

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Western political thought during this century has been its deep sense of disillusionment with its inherited traditions of discourse, especially those of an imaginative kind which so wilfully violate the strictures of concept-formation demanded of aspiring scientific disciplines. Earlier periods of crisis tended to awaken an architectonic impulse towards mastery among political philosophers, "a belief that mind can furnish the formula for controlling the dynamics of change, and that, guided by this knowledge, political power can transform society into a community tinged by truth" (Wolin, 1960: 194). But the hideous brutalities of the two World Wars, the massive convulsions and destructive

technologies that followed in their wake, and an inability to relate the discoveries of Freud, Heisenberg, Einstein and Planck, among others, to the commonsense certainties of the past have eroded the last vestiges of optimism that such creativity and imagination require.

Under such circumstances, it has fallen largely to the art of our time to explore and clarify the sense of dissolution, fragmentation, simultaneity and decomposition that proved so subversive of earlier notions of "reality," and contemplate what the future might hold. In his monumental study, *The Social History of Art*, Arnold Hauser captured the sense of these developments well when he wrote, "the new century is full of such deep antagonism, the unity of its outlook on life is so menaced, that the combination of the furthest extremes, the unification of the greatest contradictions, becomes the main theme, often the only theme, of its art" (Hauser, 1953, Vol. IV: 234–5). In a more recent study for the New York Graphic Society, Katherine Kuh similarly observes that the art of our century "has been characterized by shattered surfaces, broken color, segmented compositions, dissolving forms, and shredded images." During the last century, she continues, "every aspect of art has been broken up—color, light, pigment, form, line, content, space, surface, and design" (Kuh, 1965: 11). Whether one's reference point is the fragmentation of color by the impressionists, the broken distortions of expressionists, the segmentation of surfaces and planes by the cubists, the surrealists' destruction of conventional space and time, the abstract expressionists' attack on form and pigment, the dadaist–pop subversion of the concept of art itself, or the so-called conceptualists' reduction of "reality" to pure structure and non-meaning, the "break-up" of form and content in modern art is undeniable. Perhaps no one captured the drift of this movement as a whole so profoundly as did René Magritte, perhaps the most durable and certainly the most philosophically inclined of the surrealists, a fact not lost upon the late Michel Foucault in his brief but extraordinary tribute, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Foucault, 1983).

The same sense of the "boundlessness of experience" and the emergence of a movement towards a "new sensibility" has been apparent to critics of literature during the last century as well. In 1890, when William James first employed the phrase "stream of consciousness" during the course of a philosophical and psychological inquiry, the notion of an interior monologue emerged, almost simultaneously, as a device of literary narration.[1] Though Erich Kahler discerns the origins of this preoccupation with introspection and the minutiae of subjective experience in the late 18th century, many critics credit Edouard Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, published in 1887, as the first example of the genre (Kahler, 1957; Kress, 1966). Whatever its exact origins, Kahler persuasively identifies the genre with the emergence of a detached spectator within the mind, a "second and coldest consciousness, a consciousness on another, even more detached plane, a consciousness beyond individual consciousness, as it were" (Kahler, 1957: 89). Commenting on later developments of stream of consciousness and related narrative devices, Kahler observed:

> These new techniques effected something most important: they have broken through the bottom of consciousness—on which the psyche had hitherto rested with confidence—and have likewise cracked the supposed solid foundation of chronological time (Kahler, 1957: 167).

With an eye as much on the prerequisites of a new sensibility as upon the dissolved certainties of the past, Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* anticipated Kahler's

analysis by more than 30 years. Ulrich, the chief protagonist of Musil's fascinating novel, characteristically observed that "these days one never sees oneself whole and one never moves as a whole," going on to note that the new centre of gravity no longer lies in the isolated individual of traditional Cartesian epistemology but instead in the *relations* among things (quoted in Sypher, 1964: 123; cf. Burger, 1978). And many observers have been quick to draw strong parallels between the loss of personal identity in the art and literature of the last century and the obsolescence of Euclidean space and time in physics (cf. Matson, 1964). The quest for a strict observational truth, an "objectivity" of description, in both realms culminated in the eclipse of identity in the flux of the new world-view. In the prescient words of Wylie Sypher, however:

> A certain paradox is implicit in the new science, in anti-painting, in the anti-novel: we find the self in things; or, vice versa, we lose the self by finding the self in things. We recover the meaning of things by surrendering to them without supposing we can know them through our own clear ideas of them (Sypher, 1964: 123).

There can be little doubt that, of all media and forms of creativity, the film possesses a number of special advantages in capturing the frequently paradoxical complexities of the intermingling of space and time, selves and things, evident in the preceding discussion. Even in comparison with drama, in many respects the medium most similar to the film (especially by virtue of its combination of spatial and temporal forms), the cinema puts an infinitely greater number of elements at the disposal of the director, and their degrees of creative freedom are vastly superior to those of the theatre, or any other medium. Whereas on the stage it is impossible to separate color and object and to show their effects independently, in the film this problem can be overcome. Whereas on the stage, it is difficult to separate expression from the presence and cumbersomeness of the human body, in film this difficulty can be overcome. Whereas on the stage, it is difficult to show how a character is composed piece-by-piece until a strong and vigorous individual stands before us against the backdrop of a plausibly developed narrative, in film this difficulty, once again, can be overcome (cf. Feyerabend, 1975). Through montage (or editing), *truçage* (or special effects), and a host of other features *inherent in the cinematic form*, film is able to show the simultaneous effects of space, time, and context in ways that literally are inconceivable in other media.[2] The technical potentialities of film are such as to suggest:

> . . . the possibilities of a discontinuous treatment of time from the very outset and provides film with the means of heightening the tension of a scene either by interpolating heterogeneous incidents or assigning the individual phases of the scene to different sections of the work (Hauser, 1953, Vol. IV: 236).

Given these and a host of other creative possibilities unique to cinema, the question of whether film is a bona fide art (or merely a form of entertainment and mass culture) becomes secondary to the deeper question of whether the form and function of art itself, our whole way of "framing" and symbolizing the world, has not been radically transformed.[3] Moreover, as a form of mass culture, film constitutes one of the most influential media through which politically relevant meanings are shaped, thereby providing political theorists with a powerful resource in their quest to help clarify our social, cultural and political practices. The potentially liberating spirit with which I believe students of contemporary political theory should embrace the study of film and other forms of popular culture was perhaps best expressed by Walter Benjamin when he observed:

> By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling (Benjamin: 236).

For the remainder of this article I analyse an aesthetically complex, philosophically disturbing and ideologically ambivalent film of a few years ago in this spirit. The article thus seeks to conduct political theory "by other means" than the typical activities of reconstructing the thought of our predecessors, clarifying the languages and concepts we rely upon as citizens and scholars, or evaluating the performance and justification of public policies, political institutions and their leaders.

## A Content Analysis of *Blade Runner*

The movie in question, *Blade Runner* (1982), is a $30 million *film noir* dystopia, directed by Ridley Scott, and based upon the 1969 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, by the late Philip K. Dick, author of nearly 40 science fiction novels and collections of short stories. Dystopias are negative utopias, images of a future so terribly imperfect that, given a chance, people would prefer to flee as far as their wherewithal can possibly take them. Such nightmare visions of the future became a major science fiction genre in the 1970s and most Hollywood productions developing this theme project a future of irreversible environmental pollution, numbing overpopulation, frighteningly violent crime, intractable bureaucratic administration and authoritarianism, and the most heartless forms of economic exploitation.[4] The genre as a whole clearly reflects the exhaustion of contemporary ideologies and their inability to escape, in Henry James's apt phrase, from the "imagination of disaster" that has dominated so much of our century.

In Dick's novel, a nuclear firestorm has devastated the earth so badly that elite survivors and their descendants seek refuge in "Off-World" colonies employing extraordinarily sophisticated robots or androids known as "replicants" to do the hazardous and most demanding work as their slaves. While *Blade Runner* clearly presupposes this theme as a background assumption to the story, the film never specifically mentions the atomic war itself, instead leaving it to our imagination to comprehend how the festering hell-hole of technological overkill and a debased humanity *on earth* came about. The screen adaptation chooses to focus more directly than the novel on the relationship between commerce and technology and on the radically narrowing gap between humans and machines. Indeed, the super-sophisticated androids or replicants of the film have so drastically narrowed the gap itself as to cast serious doubt on the tenability of the distinction at its very core.

The replicants are the creations of the cadaverous-looking and heartless technotycoon Dr Eldon Tyrell and his multiplanetary superconglomerate, the Tyrell Corporation. Replicants look exactly like humans, indeed are even better looking; they have superior memory functions and extremely high intelligence; and they clearly are physically far superior to mere humans—"more human than human" is the boastful description of Tyrell of his high-tech handiwork. But because they progressively learn to acquire real feelings and emotions, qualities badly lacking in

the humans of the film, replicants pose an obvious security threat to those they were intended to serve, an eventuality that has been compensated for by coding them genetically, as a "fail-safe" device, for a lifespan of but four years. Just imagine, the planned obsolescence of "more human than human beings"!

The film begins with the return to earth of four Nexus 6 replicants who successfully have killed their way to freedom in the Off-World slave colonies. Their goal is to find their creator, the Tyrell Corporation, and convince it to reprogram them to prolong their lives. A special police force of "blade runners" exists for no other purpose than to "retire" such recalcitrant and spirited rebels, and one of their very best, Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford) is called out of "semi-retirement" to complete the job that less gifted colleagues could not.[5] Along the way, he falls in love with Tyrell's aide, Rachel (played by Sean Young), one of the most advanced replicants ever designed, though she herself does not "know" that about herself, having been programmed with all the memories of Tyrell's own niece. Deckard succeeds in "retiring" two of the rebel androids, has his own life saved when Rachel comes to his aid and "retires" another, and ultimately fights a bone-chilling climactic battle with the group's leader, Roy Batty (played by Rutger Hauer). Though Roy clearly wins the struggle and literally holds Deckard's life in his hands, his programmed lifespan was obviously near its end and he spares Deckard in what appears to be an act of mercy and compassion. The film concludes with one of Deckard's colleagues allowing him and Rachel to escape from the city and "head north," back to nature.

Despite the seeming simplicity of its plot, the stylistic complexity, ideological ambiguity and frequently searching, philosophical nature of the sparse dialogue we are presented with make *Blade Runner* a film that has much to teach, or at least worry, us about the unprecedented and life-threatening complexities of our technologies, the social and political definition of their deployment and development, and the incoherence of our currently stereotypical attempts to escape from the repercussions of the world we see taking shape before our eyes. In each of these respects (and several others beyond the scope of a brief essay to address), I would be inclined to characterize *Blade Runner* as a very successful work if by that we mean, in Theodor Adorno's apt description, not a work "which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (Adorno, 1967: 32; cf. Jay, 1984a,b: Chapter 8; Lunn, 1982: Part 3).

Aesthetically and thematically, *Blade Runner* combines many of the formal features of German Expressionism of the 1920s with narrative elements of the classic Hollywood detective genre of the 1940s and early 1950s *film noir*. From the former tradition, Scott borrows generously with a set dominated by dark shadows, hazy lighting, and odd camera angles—all of which creates an atmosphere of splendor and mystery, but ultimately conveying what one critic has described as "vision after vision of a definite 'terrible beauty,' both urban and human" (Dempsey, 1982–3: 34). The film begins, the same critic recalls, with

> . . . opening sweeps over the tenebrous, phosphorescent city as it spreads from
> horizon to horizon and spews rolling fireballs into the twilight; creepy, vertiginous
> views down skyscraper canyons to arterial streets; the streets close up, pulsating
> with forests of beings who look human but seem robotic; the death of Zhora
> [another replicant, played by Joanna Cassidy], which hurls her in slow motion
> through a succession of plate glass windows, with their flying shards throwing
> jagged flashes of neon in all directions (Dempsey, 1982–3: 34–35).

More specifically, the images that predominate in the film bear a number of strong resemblances to Fritz Lang's classic *Metropolis*. Kellner, Leibowitz and Ryan have captured this aspect well when they draw attention to parallels such as the visual salience in both films of the contrast between an upper city of fortress-like buildings which house the powerful and the privileged, like the Tyrell Corporation and the police, with a lower city containing the world's uprooted masses (Kellner et al., n.d.: 6–7). The high towers of commerce and power are accessible only to special flying devices, in the sole possession of the police, or by controlled-access elevators—in effect creating a microcosm of the "Off-World/Earth" distinction that underlies the whole film. There are several other cinematic parallels between *Blade Runner* and Lang's *Metropolis*. Viewers of both films cannot help but be struck by the marked physical resemblance of the technotycoon Tyrell and Metropolis's boss, John Federson; and Deckard's climactic duel with Roy imitates several aspects of the confrontation between Freder, the capitalist's disenchanted son turned revolutionary, and the malevolent Dr Rotwang, who, like Tyrell's superconglomerate, designed robots to be laborers.

More generally, expressionist themes run deeper still in *Blade Runner*. The emphasis throughout the film on the alienating and degraded city finds a number of parallels in expressionist "street films".[6] Kellner et al. point out that the replicant leader Roy's frequently poetic speeches,

> ... seem like abbreviated versions of the ideologically ambiguous rhapsodic monologue found in expressionist theatre, and his conversion from poet-warrior to Christ-like savior recalls expressionist "transformation drama" (Kellner et al., n.d.: 6).

*Blade Runner* also seems to borrow whole sequences of action from several other well-known German expressionist films. The sleazy bar where Deckard finally finds the voluptuous, worldly assassin Zhora before "retiring" her is quite reminiscent of Mr Greifer's party in G. W. Pabst's *The Joyless Street*, including even the smallest of details such as the insect-like hats worn by the women. A striking image of Deckard, silhouetted on a stairway, similarly recalls a moment in F. W . Murnau's *Nosferatu*. And the movie's abrupt, almost incongruous, conclusion of promoting the mythology of transcendent romatic love is as desperate and seemingly "out of place" as that of another expressionist film, *Destiny*.

The presence of many stylistic elements of the *film noir* makes *Blade Runner* an even more aesthetically complex and imaginative text to consider. Deckard adopts the voice-over, first-person narrator's role of the *film noir* detective and, in classic Raymond Chandleresque fashion, tells us before the movie begins that he had retired as a replicant hunter because the machines he was obliged to destroy had become so much more life-like with each passing model that he could no longer hide behind the Orwellian euphemism of "retiring" them. Once out of his own early retirement, he is asked by Rachel, "have you ever retired a human being by mistake?" and, despite his immediate reply in the negative, he obviously suffers from acute doubts, thereby setting in motion yet another element of the genre: the classic *anomie* of the *film noir* hero chronicly haunted by drink and defeatism.

Deckard's boss, Bryant, also embodies stereotypical tough, crude, boss-cop qualities common in the genre. Having summoned Deckard to the police station to persuade him to return to "blade running," he tells his top-gun that four "skin jobs"—the "niggers of old" Deckard later reflects—are "wild on the streets and need

to be aired out." "I need your magic," Bryant initially pleads. But ultimately it is his ruthless manicheism and crazy "logic" that prevail on Deckard's flattened sensibility when he asserts, "When you're not a cop, you're little people," a frightening view with which Deckard finally agrees, confessing "I'd rather be a killer than a victim." No wonder Deckard's only reaction to having had his own life spared by Roy was one of utter incomprehension, confessing "I don't know why he saved my life."

The stylization of Rachel also injects classical *femme noire* elements into the film—she wears furs, lots of red lipstick, a 1940s bunned "Andrews Sisters" hairdo, wine-tinted fingernails that glow as the dust-flecked sunlight streams through them, and a black sheath with padded "Mommie Dearest" shoulder-pads. In short, she is dark, sensual, mysterious and morally ambivalent, if not compromised, by the callow recessiveness of women and the overwhelming machismo of men in the genre (compare Kaplan, 1978; Schrader, 1986).

In ideological and philosophical terms, the simultaneous presence and interplay between elements drawn from both expressionism and the *film noir*, as well as homage to a host of other Hollywood moments, make *Blade Runner* an extremely ambiguous and accordingly thought-provoking work of fiction.[7] Historically, both styles have conveyed a sense of deep malaise and disillusionment with the current state of society, but against the backdrop of quite different outlooks on the future and the potential for redeeming social action. Works of expressionism have tried typically to express the anxieties and intense pains of humanity "by revealing a suffering and a longing for regeneration which all share" (Lunn, 1982: 59). In so trying to build a "community of sufferers," expressionism thus has attempted to convey an active, outraged and an engaged sense of ethical, spiritual or political justice. In contrast, the underlying ethos of *film noir* characteristically has been that of the irredeemably "corrupt society," a society of amoral, cynical and resigned human beings. The co-presence and simultaneous play of these two cinematic forms within the same film thus provides us with a paradigm of the sort of disturbing creativity our time demands—a work, to recall Adorno again, that embodies the contradictions of our lives, "pure, uncompromised, in [their] innermost structure."

The majority of earlier dystopias on the screen were far easier to classify; equally, however, they were less illuminating for students of politics and society hoping to address the frequently contradictory, life-threatening tendencies of our age. Conservative dystopias, such as *Escape from New York* or *The Ultimate Warrior*, project grave fears about the breakdown of law and order, the decline of the nuclear family, and (as in *THX 1138*, *Logan's Run* and *Rollerball*) the radical curtailment of individual freedom and civil liberties by centralized states. They thus present contemporary forms of individualism, the monogamous, heterosexual couple and nuclear family, and a host of other institutions as far more "natural" and preferable than their debased replacements of the future, but without ever seriously scrutinizing the technological, economic and political processes that are daily at work redefining "nature." On the other hand, a number of liberal and radical dystopias, such as *Alien* or *Outlaw*, present us with an image of the dangers of nuclear catastrophe, increased population pressures and economic exploitation, with some even containing veiled allegorical critiques of advanced capitalism (cf. Kellner et al., nd.: 6). *Blade Runner* defies the consoling logic of this altogether far too familiar political terrain as it freely draws upon aspects of *both* of these outlooks on the future in its creative though disturbing manner.

## The Challenging Themes of *Blade Runner*

The film challenges us to consider many intriguing themes. Ridley Scott's characterizations are such as to "explode"—in Benjamin's striking phrase—two of the most deeply entrenched distinctions in the Western tradition *without* celebrating their destruction: that between humans and machines on the one hand, and between heroes and villains on the other. In a world of increasing automation, robotics, bioengineering and the prevalence of an all too frequently black-and-white, "good guys and bad guys" logic in political and social affairs, political theorists would do well to ponder *Blade Runner*'s treatment of these distinctions and reflect upon those processes at work that make them imaginable. Robots or androids with human qualities, monsters whose contrived "humanity" shames real human beings—Tyrell's "more human than human" replicants—have long been the staple of fantasies and science fiction movies (cf. Dempsey, 1982–3). King Kong, Hal 9000, and a host of otherworldly visitors (as found, for example, in *It Came from Outer Space, Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *E T—The Extra-Terrestrial*) all display qualities and traits held to be "human"—creative intelligence, the capacity for love and other emotions, humor, irony, benevolence and the consciousness of mortality. But in each of these cases, the lack of a human body seemed to reaffirm our confidence in their non-human nature. On the other hand, there have been a number of movies (such as *I Walked with a Zombie*, and the two versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) where beings with human bodies have had no emotions. So in these and a host of other movies, *form and feeling* have been essential criteria for our humanity. Scott's *Blade Runner* deprives us of all such comfort as he systematically scrambles the opposites by presenting us with androids possessing the full range of "human" emotions in a world of debased, robot-like human beings—spiritless, flattened and numbed by the crush and violence of the badly overfreighted world they have been left behind to endure and police.

For example, another of the rebel replicants, Leon (played by Brion James), who deeply treasures the photos he has been given of his pre-programmed past, kills his police interrogator in a frenzy when cynically asked about his "mother"—"Let me tell you about my mother," Leon aggressively proclaims, as he empties his high-powered revolver at the inspector, blowing him through the window of a 90-storey skyscraper. When rebel leader Roy has finally found Tyrell's gnomic, prematurely aging genetic designer, J. F. Sebastian (played by William Sanderson), who helped "make" him, he proclaims, "We're not computers, we are physical," and he proves the point poignantly by greeting Pris (the fourth of the replicants, played by Daryl Hannah) with a juicy French kiss. When Roy finally confronts Tyrell (played by Joe Turkel), he displays great mental prowess by easily defeating the "grand master" at chess and desperately suggests state-of-the-art genetic solutions to his own terminal flaw, only to have Tyrell dismiss them all—"You're quite a prize, revel in your time." To which Roy replies: "I had in mind something a little more radical . . . I want more life, fucker." The climax to the encounter is one of nothing less than Shakespearean majesty and horror, though Oedipus is even more to the point: he kisses Tyrell on the lips, mercilessly pushes his eyes out with his bare hands, and, in effect, kills God (his father/creator) and commits suicide in one and the same act.

Pris is similarly given her own distinctive identity, visually combining the qualities of a waif-punkette "standard pleasure model" with the capacity for great spurts of graceful but lethally powerful movement and oddly illuminating behavior, such as

approaching J. F. Sebastian as he sleeps and sniffing him, or jogging away from the camera with eerie, poetical relaxation before a nearly successful assault on Deckard. Examples from the film could be multiplied at will but one final illustration of the purely semantic difference between machines and human beings has to suffice. When Leon "gets even" with Deckard for "retiring" Zhora (before Rachel finally saves him by shooting Leon in the back), he taunts him with the question, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it?", that resonates with a passion for life seemingly beyond the comprehension of Deckard, even when his own life is at stake—and, what's worse, Deckard knows it.

The faintly zombie-like quality of Deckard, with his aura of deep-seated detachment from what he is doing and his embodiment of stunted apathy all convey what one critic has described as "a palpable sense of a benumbed life force struggling to regain vigor in a poisoned world" (Dempsey, 1982–83: 36). But the numbness apparently runs too deep, as time and again the film undermines the hero/villain dichotomy that the *film noir* strives to project. And to the extent that Deckard succeeds at all in regaining his "vigor" and feeling for life, it is only by virtue of his having "fallen in love" with Tyrell's most prized creation, Rachel. Undoubtedly the most powerful image of this feature of *Blade Runner* comes during the final confrontation between Roy and Deckard. After Deckard "retires" Pris, Roy discovers her, mourns with her in his arms, and gives her a farewell kiss. He eventually tracks Deckard down in the spooky-rococo Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles, itself a symbol of the film's overall destruction of the hero/villain dichotomy. Roy repeatedly mocks Deckard's already suspect character with quips such as "Aren't you the good man; "Come on, Deckard, show me what you're made of;" "You'd better get it up, or I'll have to kill you;" and "You have to live to play, and if you can't play . . . ." Along the way, he demonstrates his obvious physical and mental superiority over his assassin by repeatedly outwitting the plodding but persistent Deckard—graphically breaking one of Deckard's "trigger fingers" for each of his now "retired" fellow replicants, and literally has Deckard hanging onto the ledge of the roof for his very life. Then, in full knowledge that his own life was near its end (having already extended it once by forcing a long spike through his own hand so as to trigger that last rush of adrenalin), he saves Deckard from sure death. As his programmed pulse finally begins to fade, he looks softly and forgivingly at the prostrate detective and reflects that it is "quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it; that's what it is to be slave." Continuing, he muses, "I've seen things you people would't believe . . . Attack ships on fire off the shoulders of Orion." And then, noticing fresh falling rain moistening his face, he releases a white dove and proffers that metaphor, "All these things will be lost in time . . . like tears in the rain." Thus, at least on this reading, although throughout the film Roy conveys the qualities of a blond Nordic superbreed or Aryan menace, the film's conclusion again undermines such a naive stereotype, showing him to possess a much greater sensitivity to the value of life, the meaning of freedom and its denial, and more compassion and solidarity than any of the humans that designed him or that sought to "retire" him.

Indeed, when Philip Dick himself saw the early out-takes of the film, shortly before his untimely death, he recalled that it had been his research into Gestapo records for another novel, *Man in the High Castle*, that had given him the idea for *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Dick recalls:

> I thought, there is amongst us something that is a bipedal humanoid, morphologically identical to the human being but which is not human. It is not

human to complain, as one SS man did in his diary, that starving children are
keeping you awake. And there, in the 40s, was born my idea that within our
species is a bifurcation, a dichotomy between the truly human and that which
mimics the truly human (quoted in Strick, 1982: 172; cf. L'écran fantastique, 1982).

Another aspect of Ridley Scott's characterizations deserves mention, that
concerning the traditional cinematic hierarchy between man as "bearer of the look"
and woman as its object. In a number of different contexts, feminist critics have
underscored the extent to which the dominant genres of film have been
overwhelmingly defined by and obsessed with sexual difference—with the male
portrayed as active/protagonist/narrator and the female as the passive creation or
spectacle of his power, authority, fantasies and "gaze."[8] Because of its preoccupation
with evil and corruption, film noir paradigmatically embodies these sexual hierarchies
by presenting viewers with two types of women—one sexual and treacherous, the
other chaste and good—to symbolize the male hero's conflict within himself and with
the problematic world he's expected to help "clean up." Feminist critics, who tend to
view this "virgin/whore" dichotomy in film noir as characteristic of women's general
representation in classical cinema (cf. Kaplan, 1978), will find Blade Runner in some
ways typical of the genre in its treatment of women. Zhora and Pris clearly embody
the stereotypical threatening, sexual, treacherous type, while Rachel's innocence, her
emotional virginity, itself the handiwork of Tyrell's designs, presents us with Scott's
most "delicate embodiment of frail humanity struggling for re-emergence, which is
also how Deckard comes to view it" (Dempsey, 1982–3: 37). And undoubtedly this
quality of innocence, her frail humanity, explains Deckard's attraction to Rachel and
his desire to "go north" with her to escape from the filth, acid-rain and violence of the
city.

But the all-pervasive violence of Deckard's existence has disturbingly exacerbated
the traditional dominance that male "heroes" exercise over women in the film noir. In
gratitude for her having rescued him by shooting Leon, Deckard takes it upon himself
to show Rachel how strong "feelings" can be for "real" human beings in a scene of
forced sex indistinguishable from rape. He pins her against a wall and orders her to
"Say 'kiss me';" "Say, 'I want you',"... "Put your hands on me." While there are
many plausible ways to interpret Deckard's behavior in such a scene, as well as
several others in the film involving Rachel, one that feminist criticism would
recommend would be to expose the contradiction "pure and simple" of the
simultaneously oppressive and vulnerable nature of masculine dominance that
Deckard's character embodies.

Yet another feature of recent feminist criticism and analysis of film noir is relevant to
our understanding of Blade Runner and the world it imaginatively portends. One of the
most striking aspects of traditional film noir has been the absence of family life, leading
some commentators to conclude, in fact, that the genre contains a critique of the
nuclear family that is so devastating that no narrative can successfully resolve or
redeem it (Harvey, 1978). One of the interesting, though again disturbing, aspects of
Blade Runner is how little effort is made to counterbalance the main storyline about
corporations replacing the family among replicants with some plausible reassertion of
its role in the life of humans. Though Deckard has an ex-wife, who called him
"sushi ... cold fish," he tells us, we never see her in person, nor is it clear that she is
present in the gallery of photographs on his piano that prompted his recollection to
Rachel. Except for replicants, the only other women (and the very few children) in the
film are a motley throng of deformed and decrepit victims milling about in the

acid-rain "down below," conversing in "city-speak," a "mish-mash of Chinese, Mexican, and German." Whether intended or not, a feminist analysis of the absence of family life in the film would highlight the subversive nature of the genre in terms of undermining the traditional locus of patriarchal authority and site of our spiritual well-being.

Every political community makes distinguishing claims about itself which it articulates as its governing principles. Such principles, along with their implementing practices, provide the coherence for the community, enabling it to define itself internally, to the world at large, and to future generations. Beneath the official and authoritative voices of society, however, there also have always been other voices, speaking in different tones, using different vocabularies and media of expression, and imagining alternative arrangements of power and authority. Typically, these are the voices of losers, outsiders, the exploited, and creative visionaries. And more often than not, one of the best places to hear these marginalized, dissenting voices has been in the literature, drama and art of a society (compare Schaar, 1981; Boyers, 1985; and Howe, 1987). It seems to me that film places enormously powerful new tools in the hands of those seeking to bring these two types of voices into closer communication for, as Sergei Eisenstein pointed out during the infancy of its evolution (Eisenstein, 1942) the whole ontology of the cinema and the goal of its best directors is to involve the spectator in the process of creating the film. And films which are intentionally ambiguous and aesthetically complex, like *Blade Runner*, demand that the viewer respond in an active, imaginative and "writerly" (as opposed to a more passive and "readerly") fashion.[9]

While *Blade Runner* (and film generally) leaves a lot to be desired in terms of the criteria of evaluation we ordinarily apply to works of systematic political thought, it does so, I believe, in a spirit completely in keeping with the predominant characteristics and mood of our age. For ours is a time of extremity, continually suffering from the threat of two equally fearful but seemingly opposed destinies: that of unremitting banality, on the one hand, and of inconceivable terror, on the other—two aspects of life seldom raised in the pages of our professional journals.[10] The constant play of cinematic forms in Scott's work allows him to convey the simultaneity of these two equally fearful and opposed destinies.

That symbolic universe of communication and expression we call art both creates and reflects the nature of human experience and of the political reality with which we must contend. As opposed to most other movies in the tradition of science fiction, *Blade Runner* refuses to neutralize the most abhorrent tendencies of our society and casts serious doubt on a host, though by no means all, of the clichés about where we should locate their causes. Among the more significant questions it poses are: In what does the "truly human" consist? Somewhat differently, it asks, who's designing whom and for what purposes? Is there any reason to believe that, by virtue of their professional training and the economic realities of their research, the bioengineers and political authorities that enforce their proprietary rights and patents will even know the difference? Does the concept of imitating "truly human" beings retain any coherence when the production of "more human than human" robots enters the historical stage as an increasingly imaginable technological possibility? What might relations between the sexes and family life become if the twin eventuality of an uninhabitable earth and the perfection of robotic technologies should come about? In light of these and a host of other questions *Blade Runner* provokes, if I were pressed on the more familiar question being posed by political theorists of late, "What and where

should political theory be now?" (Nelson, 1983; cf. Trent and Moggach, forthcoming), I should reply that, surely at least a part of our time ought to be spent "at the movies, deep in thought and imagination."

## Notes

1. The work by James was his classic, *Principles of Psychology*. On the historical development of "stream of consciousness" in literature, see Humphrey (1958).
2. On the complexities and creative potential of cinematic form, compare: Mast and Cohen (1974: Parts 2–3); Vogel (1974); Heath and Mellencamp (1983); Nichols (1981); Mertz (1980).
3. For a helpful discussion of this debate in the context of literature, see Lowenthal (1968).
4. On dystopias as a literary genre, see Berger (1976); and on the cultural pessimism and social functions of recent science fiction films, compare Franklin (1973) and Sontag (1974).
5. The title of the film, *Blade Runner*, was taken from a reference in the script for the movie by Philip Dick. As Strick explains, "It is a 'licensed to kill' term for the trained replicant hunter, and coincidentally the title of a 1974 science fiction thriller by Alan E. Nourse for which William Burroughs once wrote *Blade Runner* (*A Movie*) as a screen treatment," although nothing else Nourse or Burroughs developed was ever used by Scott (see Strick, 1982: 171).
6. For useful introductions to expressionism, compare: Eisner (1969), Miesel (1970), Pascal (1973) and Sokel (1959).
7. For those still hesitant about treating film and other forms of popular culture as significant social texts and imaginative works of fiction, see Barthes (1972, 1985). Among the *many* other Hollywood moments in the film that Ridley Scott exploits are the *Blow-up*-like scene in which Deckard uses an Esper machine to find imagery in one of Leon's photo collection that is invisible to the naked eye; Fellini's trade-mark heroine from *La Strada* in the character of Rachel; the chess game for time against death between Roy and Tyrell taken from Bergman's *Seventh Seal*; the climactic high point in which Roy spikes his hand as did Rod Steiger in *The Pawnbroker*. I am indebted to David Kettler for emphasizing the significance of several of these parallels to me, as well as stressing the salience of allusions in the film to classical literature, such as Roy's imitation of Lucifer's lines from *Paradise Lost*, a *Coppelia* scene, and the recurrence of Christian motifs.
8. For a very helpful overview of these themes, see Mayne (1985). Two of the earliest and most influential studies of the images of women in film are Haskel (1987) and Rosen (1973).
9. The distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" texts is at the center of the work of the late Roland Barthes, useful introductions to which can be found in Barthes (1972, 1985).
10. For a devastating but, I believe, largely correct analysis of the narrowing of concerns and hyper-specialization of journals in the discipline, see Ricci (1984). For the same development in 20th century philosophy, compare Kuklick (1977), Levi (1976) and Sullivan (1986).

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