



Blade Runner. Science Fiction & Transcendence

In what unfortunately turned out to be the last years of his life, science fiction author Philip K. Dick had evolved from a writer of traditional science fiction into an author more concerned with purely interiorized speculative realms. This is to say that whereas many of Dick's contemporaries—writers who rose to fame in the 1950s—were concerned with the *physics* of science fiction, its hardware, Dick was concerned with the *metaphysics*, the software; i.e., the human spirit. Novels like *Valis* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* hardly qualify as science fiction at all, but rather as religious meditations on human relationships and higher meaning. This spiritual, redemptive quality also pervades one of his finest classical science fiction novels, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

It is this redemptive quality, overlaid with a host of other allusions and subjected to the rhetoric of Hollywood film style, which is retained in the film version of the novel, *Blade Runner*. Criticism of Ridley Scott's version of Dick's novel has focused mainly on its spectacle, that most obvious rhetorical element of contemporary cinematic science fiction, or on its borrowings from other filmic traditions, such as *film noir*. The most intelligent critique of the film (and as yet one of the few to appear) places *Blade Runner* within a cycle of science fiction films intimately involved in exploring "the problematic nature of the human being and the difficult task of being human."¹ *Blade Runner* is here linked with films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Thing* and *Alien*. The dominant motif these films are said to share is the idea of "doubling," the cloning or copying of the self.

While J.P. Telotte's article is certainly one which deserves much attention (and to which the present study will again refer), *Blade Runner* should also

be seen as part of another cycle of science fiction films, a cycle of "transcendental" science fiction. This cycle includes *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Trek* trilogy, and the work of Steven Spielberg, especially *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. *Blade Runner*, precisely because of its roots in Philip K. Dick's novel and the way it uses cinematic and literary allusions, emerges as among the most profound and challenging of these transcendental works.

Blade Runner borrows significantly from Dick's novel, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and film noir, all fairly obvious sources which have attracted critical notice. Less obvious, but far more important in understanding the film's redemptive, transcendental vision, is the manner in which Biblical allusions and borrowings from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* contribute to the film's mythic structure. Telotte points the way toward acknowledging some of the deeper mythic allusions instead of being concerned merely with genetic engineering when he notes the combination of the Faustian drive and the Promethean impulse in the doubling motif.² And he also notes how this film about androids (called "replicants") is concerned with returning us to our human essences, "bringing us back to ourselves, making us at home with the self and the natural world. . . ."³ But the emphasis on human duplication, from my point of view, leads to an undervaluing of the emphasis on human redemption. And this, above all, is what *Blade Runner* is about.

The invocation of *Paradise Lost* in this context should not, one hopes, present anyone with intellectual prejudices. That *Paradise Lost* is concerned with man's redemption goes without saying, but that it qualifies, on a very basic level, as a science fiction, or fantasy, tale might be less clear. Milton's monumental epic, like many a fantasy or sci-fi epic, creates a self-coherent cosmology subject to its own laws and regulations. Milton spends a great deal of time discussing the physical atmosphere in which the story unfolds; heaven, hell and the Garden of Eden are all created to instill a firm sense of place. While strong characterizations and mighty struggles between heroes and villains are also present, one can easily overlook the physical descriptions which give us a palpable alternate universe. In fact, some of the descriptions of hell seem rather apt for the futuristic Los Angeles created for Scott's *Blade Runner*:

A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As on great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all; but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery Deluge, fed
With ever-burning Sulphur unconsumed. . . . (*Paradise Lost*, Book I: 61-69)

The heatless, soulless neon lights, the misting, acid rain and the teeming mass of humanity that populate this Los Angeles of the future is the very vision of hell as Milton saw it.

But if Milton's hell offers no hope to his "rebel angels," Ridley Scott's hell-on-earth does hold out some promise of redemption. To understand how such a transcendent vision can arise, it is necessary to elaborate on the significance of the film's roots in noir.

Telotte recognizes the basic film noir setting of *Blade Runner*, and sees how the "bleak atmosphere" mirrors the "interior darkness that afflicts the characters."⁴ Michael Dempsey has called *Blade Runner* a "noir thriller" and says that while "the imagery and conventions of film noir may be nearing a . . . cul-de-sac," *Blade Runner* is nevertheless "the most overwhelming

example in years of the power that they can still generate."⁵ *Blade Runner*, however, does not merely evoke *noir* as an allusive strategy or a narrative convenience. Rather, in evoking the style and conventions of *noir*, it evokes its *mythos*. For our purposes we can best describe this *mythos* as "fallen."

It is not necessary to elaborate fully all the film's borrowings from *noir* or from the related formula, the hard-boiled detective story. It will be enough to outline them in order to demonstrate how the world-view that is presented may be said to be a "fallen" one and how a vision of redemption can be offered up within this universe.

Milton's description of hell fits not only the city-scape of *Blade Runner* but *noir*'s vision of the city as well. The neon lights, the rain, the shadows all create an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty; the impossibly immense skyscrapers oppress the humanity below. In such a world, alienation is the normal condition; to be part of the "lonely crowd" is the way things are.

The hero of *Blade Runner* is the archetypal American loner—alienated, alone, friendless, a killer. Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is only one step removed from Hammett's Continental Op or Chandler's Philip Marlowe. His voice-over, which serves as his introduction, clues us into the hard-boiled nature of the story and elucidates upon his position. Deckard, sitting on a bench, tells us that, "They don't advertise for killers in the newspaper. That was my profession—ex-cop, ex-blade runner, ex-killer."

Deckard possesses most of the characteristics of the hard-boiled detective. Thomas Schatz notes that in establishing the figure of Bogart's Philip Marlowe, "Hawks maintains a delicate balance between Marlowe's existential isolation (as detective) and the promise of human contact and fulfillment (as lover-spouse). . . ." ⁶ This dialectic is one of the defining characteristics of the hard-boiled hero. The "private" in private eye is definitely to be taken literally:

In the United States the detective is, most likely but not always, a private operative, and in two senses of the word: he does not work within an institution, the police, who are conventionally seen as corrupt or at least corruptible, the solution being part of the problem; and he is private, inward, to himself, unwilling to be co-opted by society and a little sentimental about his independence.⁷

And we also know that "though the detective is compelled to work in this chaotic and sinful society, he does not share its values; instead, he is always in conflict with or in flight from civilization. He finds no fruitful human relationship possible. . . ." ⁸

Deckard is an ex-cop, an ex-blade runner, doubtless in part because of the corruption of the system as seen in Captain Bryant, who calls replicants "skin jobs" (the equivalent of calling black people "niggers"), and in Gaff, a blade runner, who dresses like a dandy. Most importantly, however, Deckard is alienated from his fellow man, divorced that is, not only from his wife (who he tells us, thought of him as "sushi—cold fish"), but from all of humanity. It is ironic and significant that when Deckard does finally fall in love, does finally make a genuine emotional commitment, it is with a replicant—a woman who is not a human.

If Deckard is alienated from his fellow humans, he shares significant traits with the replicants whom he is hired to kill. He first finds himself irresistibly falling in love with Rachael (Sean Young), a young woman who he learns is really a replicant, a fact she herself was initially unaware of. Confused by her sensitivity and by his own emerging emotions, Deckard muses, "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade

runners." As the story proceeds, both Deckard and the replicants begin to share a very profound feeling: the fear of being hunted. Both Leon (Brion James) and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), the two male replicants he is hunting, confront him on this issue. Leon says to Deckard, "Painful to live in fear, isn't it?" while Batty, more philosophical, ruefully remarks, "Quite an experience to live in fear. . . . That's what it means to be a slave." The motif of the hunter becoming the hunted is not uncommon in hard-boiled fiction (or one of its off-shoots, the spy story), and it serves to make explicit the already implicit links between killer and quarry.

Replicants, because they are not human, are by definition alienated. Memoryless, emotionless, cut off from humans by genetic engineering and by law (human law), replicants seek for some meaning to their lives. Rachael and Leon, for instance, carry photographs to give them the feeling (literally, the *impression*) that they have a human past; it is a way of giving them memories, which might serve as a good definition of the origin of emotion—the difference between the then and the now. Deckard is at first puzzled by their possession of these pictures. But Deckard, too, surrounds himself with photo-memories, pictures, as Dempsey notes, "of people he obviously could never have known."⁹ But although these pictures are not from Deckard's past, they are of a past, which is almost as good. For to have a past, whether your own or one you have created, is also to hope to have a future.

Blade Runner also manifests, to an extent, the image of women found in *film noir*. Iconographically, Rachael, the replicant with whom Deckard falls in love, resembles the classic *femme fatale*. She wears her hair pinned up behind her head, and is often seen wearing jackets with the classic padded shoulders. Her links with the *noir* era are further stressed by the music on the soundtrack, which, with its heavy reliance on a saxophone, is in sharp contrast with Vangelis' synthesized score for the rest of the film.

The woman in *film noir* represents a chink in the male armor. Whether or not the woman betrays the man, she represents a movement away from his isolated self-sufficiency. This disturbs the hero. He feels a simultaneous attraction and repulsion, as much for this potential weakness on his part as for her threatening sexuality. Typically, of course, the *noir* hero succumbs to the woman's charms while the hard-boiled hero manages to resist.

In *Blade Runner* the *noir* image of female sexuality as a weapon wielded by women is made explicit. Deckard kills the female replicants, Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) and Pris (Daryl Hannah), in what might be called sexual situations. Deckard confronts Zhora in her dressing room backstage at the sex club where she does her act. They carry on a conversation, first while Zhora is naked and then while she dresses. When she asks Deckard to help zip her up, she attacks him. A noise frightens her and she runs away. Deckard pursues her and finally shoots her down. Later, Pris, who knows Deckard is coming, puts on a long veil and hides among the dolls in J.F. Sebastian's apartment. As Deckard sees her and starts to remove the veil, like a bridegroom approaching his shy bride, she attacks him. She performs two lightning-like flips, leaps high in the air and lands on Deckard's shoulders, crushing him between her thighs. Such blatant sexual symbolism is surely to be noted, even amidst the spectacular gymnastics. Deckard manages to throw her off him and shoot her. (Pris's paroxysms in her death throes is one of the film's most riveting moments.) We may say, then, that the female replicants use their sexual allure to catch the blade runner off guard momentarily and then they attack.

The characteristics of *film noir*—the alienated hero in the alienating city, the *femme fatale* and fears of women's sexuality—create an environment of

distrust, ambiguity and separation: a fallen world. In conventional *film noir* there is no hope, no redemption possible. There is only, usually, death. Not so in *Blade Runner*, however, for the film transcends its roots in *noir* and in so doing offers us a vision of transcendence. And it does so very specifically by alluding to *Paradise Lost*.

One of the central problems of *Paradise Lost* revolves around the issue of who the real hero of the narrative is. Milton's *intentions* on this point are clear, namely that the hero of this tale of man's fall from grace and his possible redemption is Adam. However, the *text's* intentions are less clear. The possibility of reading Satan as the hero is very real. Satan can be seen as the ultimate rebel who begins as God's brightest angel and who falls ignominiously into the depths of hell. Certainly no tragic figure in myth began so high and was brought so low. Too, Milton devotes almost an equal number of lines to both Adam and Satan. We are introduced to Satan long before Adam appears; Satan figures prominently in books I through VI, and VIII (the latter while he seduces Eve). Adam, and Eve, figure in books V, and VII through XII. The Romantics, of course, especially Byron and the Shelleys, found Satan to be the true hero of Milton's epic. It is well known that Mary Shelley wrote her novel *Frankenstein* partly as an "answer" to *Paradise Lost*, and Milton's own text figures prominently within the text of Shelley's novel. Too, it is possible to read Frankenstein's monster as a Satan or Eve figure in a structural comparison between *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein*.¹⁰ The links between *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein* are equally strong. Philip Strick has called both works tales about "the struggle with human facsimiles," and Telotte invokes the myth of Frankenstein on a number of occasions in his article.¹¹

However, it is the connections between *Blade Runner* and *Paradise Lost* which occupy us here. One of the primary connections between them is precisely the question of who the hero of the narrative is. Whereas the usual *film noir* focuses on a lone individual (often his voice-over determines the narrative and emotional point of view), *Blade Runner* does not. There are five sequences in which Deckard does not figure: the first is the opening scene; the other four are scenes which focus on the replicants. Of those four, three center around Roy Batty. Furthermore, the longest period of time in which Deckard is not seen is a sequence of two long scenes involving Batty. Once the amount of screen time devoted to Batty is acknowledged, and the force with which his personality threatens to shift the focus of the film is recognized, it will be clear that *Blade Runner*, like *Paradise Lost*, answers the question of the hero ambiguously.

If Satan threatens to become the hero of *Paradise Lost* through the interest readers have in his character, so, too, does Batty challenge to become the hero of *Blade Runner*. The forceful qualities he is given call Milton's Satan to mind. First, it is generally clear that Batty and the other replicants whom he leads are to read as fallen angels. As Northrop Frye points out, both angels and devils "are associated with the imagery of the sky."¹² The replicants come to Earth from the off-world, that is, the heavens. Similarly, Satan "Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud/With vain attempt." (*PL*, I: 43,44) The Son then hurled Satan and his hordes "headlong flaming from the ethereal Skie With hideous ruin and combustion down/To bottomless perdition. . . ." (I: 45-7) This account corresponds to Luke 10:18, 19 in which Satan fell, "like lightning, out of the sky." Roy Batty is also associated with fire. Eldon Tyrell, Batty's creator, the replicant manufacturer (God, Dr. Frankenstein), marvels at how bright Batty's (short) life has been. When Batty is confronting Chew, who manufactures replicant eyes, he says poeti-

cally, "Fiery the angels fell, deep thunder around their shoulders roared. . . ." And, significantly, Satan and Batty rebel against their creators, both of whom may be said to dwell in heaven: God, of course, in Heaven and Tyrell in the penthouse of the 700-story pyramid that houses his corporation. But while Satan engages "In dubious Battel on the Plains of Heav'n" (I: 104), Batty confronts his maker and kills him.

Batty's Satanic qualities and his role as "adversary" do not quite prepare for the penultimate scene of the film. As "superman," Batty has killed men, and confronted and killed his god. When he finally meets up with Deckard (who has killed Leon, Zhora, and Pris) he clearly intends to kill him. First he torments him, breaking two of his fingers. Then, when Deckard is hanging for life from a rooftop, dangling on a precipice, Batty pulls him up to safety. Saving Deckard is Batty's last act before he himself dies, not from any wound inflicted by Deckard, but, rather, because his time is up.

This penultimate scene allows us to see that Batty also possesses characteristics we may associate with Adam and with Christ. As Adam in the Garden, Batty is created by god (Tyrell) to live in his Eden, the off-world. But Batty wants more answers to life. His fall, wherein he kills a crew on a ship and comes to Earth, is due to his eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Batty wants more life—he wants to know the *meaning* of his life before he dies. Before the Fall, man is without knowledge, but that also means he is without true love, for he must experience hate, fear, anxiety, and alienation before he can experience their blessed opposites. Before his fall, Batty is simply a robot; after the fall he is a heroic questor. Unlike Adam, unlike Mankind, however, he has no redeemer to provide transcendent meaning. But then Batty himself must also be seen as Mankind's redeemer.

Images of Batty as Christ are scattered throughout *Blade Runner*. The first shot of Batty in the film is a close-up of his right hand and we hear him say "Time enough." (For what? To discover the meaning of life or to become the redeemer of Mankind?) This same hand, in the penultimate scene, will have a spike driven through it. (Batty himself drives the spike through his hand in order to give himself the sensation of pain. He realizes he is dying and wants the sensation to help keep him alive a little longer, ostensibly to kill Deckard.) Batty also, miraculously, produces a dove from out of the air. (It is miraculous because the bird is presumably a real one even though most animal life is extinct in this future world—something clearer in Dick's novel than in the film.) The dove, of course, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, a symbol usually associated with light. A dove, for instance, is seen by Jesus following his baptism by John: "At the moment when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him." (Mark, I: 10, 11)¹³ When the dove descends upon Batty, Batty sees the light and is changed from adversary to redeemer, from antichrist to Christ. Prophet-like, he says to Deckard on the rooftop: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. . . All those moments will be lost in time like tears in the rain. Time to die." His "time to die" recalls Leon's saying the same thing to Deckard earlier, but then it was *Deckard's* time to die at Leon's hands. (Rachael, however, kills Leon at that moment.) And while we think that Batty is also referring to Deckard's final moment, he is actually talking about his own as he expires, releasing the dove as he does so. The dove flies to the heavens, the camera following, revealing the first daylight sky in the entire *noir* film. Batty and the dove reveal the light to Deckard.

Deckard's realization, his revelation, revolves around the last remaining replicant, Rachael. He rushes to his apartment when he realizes that Gaff, another blade runner, knows Rachael is there. Deckard believes Gaff intends

to kill her and he wants to be there to prevent it or, we may believe, to kill her himself. Gun drawn, Deckard enters his apartment. He finds Rachael and takes her out with him. On the floor near the elevator, Deckard notices an origami unicorn on the ground and so realizes that Gaff has been there. (Gaff has throughout the film created various origami figures.) In myth, the unicorn is a symbol of the virtuous maiden and could only be captured by a virgin. The two, Deckard, the blade runner, and Rachael, the replicant, enter the elevator. This scene is a nicely effective way of transforming Rachael from a *femme fatale*, a Fallen Woman, into a symbol of the Virgin who helps Deckard achieve redemption.

Deckard must put aside his distrust of women, must transcend his emotional aloofness, must finally make the ultimate commitment—to give of himself and his humanity. To its credit, *Blade Runner* resolves its issues within the specific science fiction context it creates. Man merges with his creation. This new Adam and his genetically engineered Eve will become first father and mother of a new species. And they—we—have an ambiguous, ambivalent, violent rebel angel to thank for it.

If Roy Batty is Satan, Adam, and Christ all rolled into one, and Deckard is the human recipient of the replicant's redemptive/heroic mission, what are we left to conclude? Mainly, that the allusions to *Paradise Lost*, to *Frankenstein*, and to other works similarly concerned with the question of what it means to be a person, allow *Blade Runner* itself to participate in the redemptive process. For we may understand the replicants not simply as mimetic doubles, as doppelgangers, but as metaphors for our artistic creations. In *Blade Runner*, the replicants are products of technology and imagination. In other words, they are works of art made in our human image. Art, we may understand, can take on a life of its own beyond what its maker intended, but such a life can be positive. Such a work can possess innate qualities that improve our lives and make us whole. Art, whether it is the creation of "replicants" or the creation of *Blade Runner*, holds out the possibility of transcendence.

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NOTES

¹ J.P. Telotte, "Human Artifice and the Science Fiction Film," *Film Quarterly* 36, No. 3 (1983), 44.

² Telotte, p. 45.

³ Telotte, p. 50.

⁴ Telotte, p. 48.

⁵ Michael Dempsey, "*Blade Runner*," review, *Film Quarterly* 36, No. 2 (1982-83), 33,37.

⁶ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), p. 137.

⁷ Robin W. Winks, *Modus Operandi: An Excursion into Detective Fiction* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), p. 87.

⁸ George Grella, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel" in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Robin W. Winks, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 110-111. Grella's contention may also be compared with Raymond Chandler's famous dictum, "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean" from *The Simple Art of Murder*.

⁹ Dempsey, p. 37.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the links between *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 213-247.

¹¹ Philip Strick, "The Age of the Replicant," *Sight and Sound* 53, No. 3 (1982), 168. Telotte, pp. 44, 45, 48.

¹² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 163.

¹³ Recall that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton invokes the Holy Spirit, who "... from the first/Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread/Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss/And mad't it pregnant. . . ." (I: 19-22).