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SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN RIDLEY SCOTT’S BLADE RUNNER

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The aim of this paper is to analyse Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982) as a postmodern film which foregrounds and questions the problematic concept of creation in cinema, and in art generally, from a double perspective. On the one hand, the diegetic process of creation, the genetic design of replicants, introduces the doubling motif, that of simulacra, a result of nostalgia for the past invariably accompanied by a preoccupation with authenticity. On the other hand, the extradiegetic process, the creation of the film itself, transforms this nostalgic looking into a critical revisiting of the past. By self-consciously foregrounding traditional strategies of representation, Blade Runner brings to the fore the constructedness of films through the omniscience of eyes, screens and substitutes for cameras within the space of the narrative itself. Likewise, by using and blending generic conventions, those of science fiction with those of film noir, Blade Runner liberates intertextuality from the confining conventions of previous cultural codes.*

According to Linda Hutcheon, “the postmodern is, if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the ‘natural’” (1988, xi). For his part, Norman Denzin defines postmodernism in the following terms:

a nostalgic, conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between the past and the present; an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visible; the commodification of sexuality

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and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine cultural ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, resentment, and a detachment from others. (1991, vii)

These two definitions of such a polemical phenomenon as postmodernism represent two opposed critical attitudes. Hutcheon regards postmodernism as a positive phenomenon insofar as it forces us to question, problematize, and denounce those limiting but long-established “truths” which have formed the basis upon which the present structures of power have been built and maintained. In contrast, Norman Denzin, echoing the more critical posture of important figures, like Lyotard, Baudrillard or Jameson, depicts postmodernism in negative terms and stresses what he considers the “entropic” direction of postmodern art.

Instead of having to choose between the above-mentioned positions, one can, in tune with postmodernism itself, accept the coexistence of different views. Postmodernism always questions but never offers monolithic or single answers. While avoiding any normative evaluation of Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982) as a hopeful or an entropic vision of art and the world, I analyze Blade Runner descriptively as a film which can be qualified as postmodernist due to its overtly self-conscious nature and its use, as well as abuse, of generic intertextuality.

I would like to take the following quotation by Denzin as the starting point of the analysis of self-consciousness in Blade Runner:

The postmodern terrain is defined almost exclusively in visual terms, including the display, the icon, the representations of the real seen through the camera’s eye, captured on video-tape, and given in the moving picture ... The search for the meaning of the postmodern moment is a study in looking. It can be no other way. This is a visual, cinematic age. The collage and the mixed-media-tele/audio text are the iconic markers of this moment. (1991, viii-ix)

The very first sequence of images in Blade Runner, a sequence which encompasses most of the motifs and symbols that progressively gain meaning as the film develops, shows an establishing shot which locates the action spatially and temporally. This is what Los Angeles looks like in November 2019 seen from above. What the camera discovers
in a long shot is a postindustrial, late-capitalist city with vehicles flying under a polluted grey-clouded sky. The linear development of this establishing shot is interrupted by the extreme close-up of an eye reflecting a gas explosion. The next shot takes us back to the general view of the city, now including a distant image of a pyramidal building upon which the camera progressively focuses. This shot is again interrupted by the extreme close-up of an eye and followed by a tracking shot of the pyramid. The next shot shows the interior of a room, a man smoking inside looking out. Immediately after, the camera focuses on the pyramid from a very short distance, searching for the windows of the room shown before, thus identifying the room with what the camera finally shows from the outside and connecting the two spaces, the inside and the outside. This first sequence of images is intended to visually describe the space of the action. Its development is, on the whole, linear and progressive if it were not for the two unexpectedly extreme close-ups of an eye. The meaning of these two shots is not easily grasped until the spectator becomes aware of the great importance that eyes, as the physical support of sight and of the gaze, possess in this film.

Denzin's above-mentioned comment on the postmodern as "a study in looking" explains only partially the film's foregrounding, either visually or by means of dialogues, of eyes in the act of watching. The use of eyes, the gaze, and related elements in Blade Runner is self-conscious not only as a feature of postmodernism's interest in the visual but primarily as an exploration of the mechanisms of cinema. Rather than being postmodern in emphasizing the look—a central concern in all films, in a sense—, Blade Runner is postmodern in that it self-consciously explores the nature of the look in the cinema. The representation of eyes, screens, pseudo-cameras, and related gadgetry in the film accentuates such self-conscious exploration. These representations of eyes and screens, as icons of the gaze, can be grouped according to their different purposes in the film. For instance, the narrative space is completely crammed with

1 Roy’s obsession with eyes and with seeing is sufficiently proved in the following two dialogues. The first takes place in Chu’s laboratory:
- **Chu:** You’re Nexus, eh? I designed your eyes.
- **Roy:** Chu, if only you could see what I’ve seen with your eyes.

The second dialogue is part of the final struggle between Roy and Deckard. After having decided to spare the blade runner’s life, Roy says: "I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe".

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switched-on blank screens, their presence hardly ever emphasized in each separate shot but constituting rather persistent background elements. In fact, almost every enclosed space depicted in the film displays, somewhere, a blank screen: Bryant’s office, Tyrell’s bungalow, Deckard’s flat. Moreover, the first time we encounter Deckard, the camera shows a group of blank television screens behind his back. Apart from their self-conscious meaning, all these screens help in creating an anxious claustrophobic atmosphere caused by the feeling of being constantly observed or spied upon by bluish, cold machines.

Other screens, meant exclusively as futuristic gadgets, serve to provide Los Angeles with a look of the future. I am referring, in particular, to the computers inside police cars, graphically showing the route the car is following and to the street video-telephones displaying the face of the person with whom one is talking. Others work to remind us of the past, such as the big screen fixed to a building, which peers over the filthiness and misery of this postindustrial society and carries familiar advertisements of Coca Cola, and the two mobile screens attached to both sides of the omnipresent flying shuttle, advertising the off-world colonies and throwing off powerful beams of light that filter through every square metre of space.

These exceptions notwithstanding, most of the representations of eyes, screens and gazes are extremely significant for the “hermeneutic code” of the film. The observation of eyes reveals the existence of replicants: through their eyes replicants can be unmasked. The Voight-Kampf Test is based on a machine used by blade runners to discover replicants, which, according to its own designer, Dr. Tyrell, registers any “capillary dilation of the eye, fluctuation of the pupil, involuntary dilation of the iris”. This machine is used twice in the film. First by

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2 Norman Denzin proposes a different explanation for this phenomenon when he quotes Caryn James’ words: “televisions in every room, videocameras in every elevator, department store and bank . . . offer a metaphor for the camera’s potential to isolate people and destroy lives” (1991, 11).

3 Philip Strick explains this blending of past and present, the old and the new: “The ruins strewn with garbage adapted for desperate new purposes are counterpointed by vaults in which a few putative triumphs of past creativity have been fiercely preserved. These polarities . . . are a science-fiction constant to such an extent that they surely reflect two essential but conflicting human appetites: for change and for the unchanging, for variety and for continuity, alongside the twin hungers for building up and knocking down”. (1989, 39)
Holden, when he interviews Leon, and then by Deckard, when he interviews Rachael. Although the two scenes end up with opposite results, the mise-en-scène establishes a strong parallelism between them. In both scenes emphasis is laid mainly on the functioning of the machine and on the eyes of the replicants as enigmatic objects of the blade runner’s investigative gaze. In this respect, the Empathy Test blends two of the major motifs of the film, the eye and the screen, which usually appears as a frame for sight. Yet the application of this test is double. Not only does it discover replicants, but it also distinguishes the apparent hero, Holden, from the actual hero, Deckard. For, whereas Holden is unable to unmask Leon in time and consequently unable to escape death, Deckard discovers that Rachael is a replicant despite the added difficulties he has to overcome in the process of detection: first, the fact that Rachael herself does not know that she is a replicant, and, second, Dr. Tyrell’s attempt, from the very beginning, to misguide Deckard by implying that Rachael is human when he tells him: “I wanna see a negative before I provide you with a positive”. Bryant also uses a video-computer screen to provide Deckard, as well as the spectator, with the initial information necessary to begin with the proper investigation. This screen features again in the scene where Leon kills Holden. This time, our second viewing and Deckard’s first, images are accompanied by Bryant’s additional comment on, mainly, the identity of these two people, a blade runner and a replicant, and on what is actually happening. During this scene, the camera alternately stresses, on the one hand, the images shown on the computer screen, the information, and the object of the gaze—both of Deckard’s and of the spectator’s—as the computer screen is progressively made to coincide with the frame of the viewer’s screen, and, on the other, Deckard’s face, particularly his eyes in a close-up which enhances the investigative function of the gaze. The alternation of shots from subject to object of the gaze in the investigative process is again represented in the scene where Deckard obtains additional information about Zhora by putting one of Leon’s photographs inside the Esper machine. This sequence functions as an internal mirror of the possibilities that the camera and its movements offer to manipulate space, to fragment and reorganize spatial units in such a way that they become meaningful for the viewer. In this sense, the sequence may be said to be extremely self-reflexive.
But it is also especially important for the development of the action because it provides Deckard with half of the information he needs to hunt down Zhora.

Deckard's hermeneutic function is paralleled by the replicants' quest. They transgress the law and return to earth in search for the elixir of life, whose formula is only known by their designer, Dr. Tyrell. It is noteworthy that replicants opt for Chu, an eye designer, as their first source of information, in their specific detective-like quest. From him they obtain the adequate pass which, in the person of J. F. Sebastian, will enable them to approach Dr. Tyrell, their ultimate objective.

Creation is another problematic concept in postmodernism in general, and in a postmodern film like Blade Runner in particular. The process of creation in Blade Runner is double: on the one hand, there is a diegetic process in which genetic designers "create" replicants, toys and artificial animals and, on the other, there is an extradiegetic process of creation of the actual film.

Jean Baudrillard's (1981) theory of the postmodern, with its critique of social theory, traditional Marxism, cybernetics, ethnography and semiotics, has been mapped onto the analysis of Blade Runner by Norman Denzin who opens his argument by referring to Baudrillard's work as follows: "This is the science fiction or negative utopia ... A nightmare vision of the futuristic, postmodern city". And he adds: "It looks and feels like Ridley Scott's 1982 film Blade Runner, which was set in the quintessential postmodern city, Los Angeles, in the year 2019" (1991, 33). Nevertheless, the fact that the whole of Baudrillard's work applies to the society depicted in Blade Runner interests me less than the way in which his theory, that artists "no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks" (quoted in Denzin 1991, 1), operates in the film. That is, I am particularly keen to question the value of Baudrillard's theory for explaining the abundance of intertextual references found in the film.

Baudrillard argues that there is no longer any room for change in our postmodern era, that it is impossible to create something absolutely new because we are all imprisoned in a system of previous cultural codes which can never be ignored and are continuously being reorganized in an attempt to move forward in one way or another. In his book Simulations, Baudrillard distinguishes three consecutive periods in history according
to the way in which signs and images relate to reality, namely, "the counterfeit", "production" and "simulation", the reigning "scheme of the current phase" (1983, 83). Blade Runner overtly acknowledges the age of the simulacra, for as Giuliana Bruno writes,

The narrative ‘invention’ of the replicants is almost a literalization of Baudrillard’s theory of postmodernism as the age of simulacra and simulation. Replicants are the perfect simulacra—a convergence of genetics and linguistics, the generic miniaturization enacting the dimension of simulation. (1990, 188)

In the same line, Norman Denzin refers to postmodernism as “an age of hyperreality”, one showing “a proliferation of myths of origin, and signs of reality. A preoccupation with authenticity” and explains further that “[t]he hyperreal age works under a strategy of deterrence, as if a surfeit of lived experiences could erase any doubt that the real has ceased to exist” [emphasis added] (1991, 31). And “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” [emphasis added] (Baudrillard 1983, 12). Hence, a preoccupation with authenticity and a feeling of nostalgia for the past seem two defining features associated with the postmodern era, as an age of simulacra, and of hyperreality.

Coming back to the double—diegetic and extradiegetic—process of creation that I mentioned before, I would argue that Baudrillard’s ideas, just mentioned, would only account for the diegetic process of creation, that is, for the creation of replicants in the movie, where the doubling motif, the motif of simulacra, is but a result of a feeling of nostalgia for the past which is invariably accompanied by a preoccupation with authenticity—replicants must be perfect replicas of mankind. Not so for the extradiegetic process of creation, the creation of the film itself, which rather exemplifies Linda Hutcheon’s (1988) comment on the postmodern not as a nostalgic look back to the past but as a critical revisiting of it. This would explain the meaning of generic intertextuality in the film. Let us analyse each of these processes of creation separately.

At the very end of his interpretation of the film, David Dresser declares: “we may understand the replicants not simply as mimetic doubles or doppelgängers, 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" (1985, 178). Likewise, Philip Strick refers to the replicants as "immaculate replicas of mankind" (1982, 168). But it is J. P. Telotte who pushes this doubling motif further. He argues, and in this sense reaffirms Baudrillard's idea that there can never be anything absolutely new, that both Eldon Tyrell, master designer of replicants, and J. F. Sebastian, his chief genetic engineer, "have endowed their creations with a certain reflexive capacity, Tyrell's figures mirroring his own desire for perfection, beauty, and transcendence of mechanical limitation, Sebastian's reflecting not only his own defects, but also his flawed view of himself" (1983, 48). Thus, it could be said that the primal reason for the doubling motif in Blade Runner is nothing else than a feeling of nostalgia for the loss of a much better, happier form of life. The loss of family values would explain why Dr. Tyrell creates Roy and Rachael, 4 namely to compensate for the children he never had. J. F. Sebastian, whose inability to pass a medical test has isolated him from humanity in a huge empty building, makes life-like toys to keep him company. Likewise, after having been exterminated by pollution, animals have to be artificially manufactured and the only vegetation that the film shows is some artificially cultivated trees, so-called bonsais, which have to be grown inside, protected from the poisonous acid rain constantly pouring outside.

The feeling of nostalgia is always accompanied by a huge preoccupation with authenticity. Replicants are perfect simulacra: they look like humans, act like them, talk like them and they even have feelings and emotions. However they lack a history, a past upon which to understand their present and calculate their future. Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida affirms that

History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it —and in order to look at it we must be excluded from it ... That is what the time when my mother was alive before me is—History. No anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time starting from myself —whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against

4 Tyrell addresses Rachael at one point as "my child" and he endows her with his niece's memories. Furthermore, Rachael lives with Tyrell as a daughter in his bungalow until she discovers that she is not a human being but a replicant. On the other hand, when Tyrell faces Roy, he calls him "the prodigal son".

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her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder. (1981, 65)

History, photograph, mother and memory are put together in Barthes’s quotation. For the replicants, as for Barthes, History is a whole composed by three different but complementary parts, the memories awakened by photographs of the mother as the origin of individual identity. This is why memories, photographs and the mother constitute three of the major motifs of the film. Leon kills Holden because he lacks the necessary background to respond to the instruction: “Describe in simple words only the good things that come into your mind about your mother”. And it is precisely the memory of a mother, among others, that prevents Rachael from suspecting she is a replicant, just as it makes Deckard’s effort to unmask her more difficult, as well as fascinating. Therefore, the replicants’ lack of identity is primarily due to their lack of history. That is why they come back to earth. That is why Roy does not stop until he faces Dr. Tyrell, his origin, his “Father”, committing the Oedipal crime and reversing the topos of blindness. As Giuliana Bruno says,

Photography and the mother are the missing link between the past, the present and the future. The terms of the configuration photography/mother/history are knotted together in dialectics of totality and division, presence and absence, continuity and discontinuity. (1990, 191)

Paradoxically, however, it is Rachael, the replicant, who provides Deckard with the necessary stimulus for his own self-awakening and a proper sense of humanity. For Deckard also needs a history, a past, as is clearly shown as the camera pans around the collection of photographs —some of them not even his own but apparently belonging to the previous century— that he keeps on his piano.5 At the beginning of the film, when he introduces himself, he does it in absolutely defeatist terms —he has lost every source of stability, his job, his social status,

5 In fact, at this moment as well as in the final Edenic escape, the film leaves the question open that Deckard might be a replicant himself. For when Bryant informs Deckard about the group of replicants that have returned to earth, he mentions six replicants. Yet, by the end of the film only five have been found. Thus, the possibility remains that Deckard himself might be the sixth replicant.
his wife— but it is Rachael, a replicant and a woman, who provides him with a reason to defy the system and to abandon the society he continuously depicts as constricting and oppressive.  

Unlike the diegetic process of creation of replicants and other simulacra, the extradiagnostic process of creation of the film as such does not comply with Baudrillard’s theory on postmodern art.  

While it is commonly acknowledged that Blade Runner is a pastiche of previous films and a blending of different cinematic genres, namely, science fiction and film noir, these obvious intertextual references cannot, in my opinion, be explained, only as the result of a nostalgic longing for the past. In this respect, James Collins criticises Baudrillard’s theory because it, like that of many other critics of postmodernism, “conceive[s] of the situation in chaotic, entropic terms” (1987, 12). For his part, Collins offers a more comprehensive vision of postmodernism:

Rather than a mere expression of nostalgia, postmodernism may be seen as an attempt to recover the morphological continuity of a specific culture. The use of past styles in this case is motivated not by a simple escapism but by a desire to understand our culture and ourselves as products of previous codings.

(1987, 22)

6 In this respect, the film portrays Rachael as partaking of the main features of noir femmes fatales (as will be further developed in due course) to whom Frank Krutnik refers as the “very otherness” of the hero and of male society. Rachael’s otherness in Blade Runner is two-fold: not only is she a woman, but also a replicant. For Krutnik “the woman, then, presents the hero with the opportunity to transgress” (1991, 141-42).

7 In saying this, I disagree with Norman K. Denzin who believes that “[f]ilms like Blade Runner (1982) . . . invoke a nostalgia for earlier films, while presenting a mix of pastiche and parody of these productions” (1991, 10). I believe that a more positive reading of intertextuality can be made in this film.

8 Philip Strick (1989) mentions that it was Scott’s intention to give the film a look equivalent to Ron Cobb’s Nostromo. Douglas Kellner et al. (1984), for their part, find in Blade Runner certain reminiscences of German Expressionist films, like the atmosphere in Zhora’s bar, which reminds them of a similar scene in Pabst’s Joyless Street (1925), or Deckard silhouetted on the staircase of the Bradbury building, a scene reminiscent of Nosferatu (1921). Apart from this, the allusions to Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1926) are also evident. Yet, these are only stylistic reminiscences and I am especially concerned with narrative and thematic reminiscences, mainly to Fritz Lang and film noir, which will be analyzed in due course.
Susan Doll and Greg Faller refer to Blade Runner as a “multigeneric” film (1986, 89), since it actually combines conventions from more than one genre, those of science fiction and of film noir,9 as I intend to demonstrate in the following pages. “Science fiction”, argue Doll and Faller, depends for its identification on spatial displacement (other worlds, galaxies, dimensions), temporal displacement (future, past), its use of scientific or non-contemporary devices and themes dealing with a too rapid technological progress. Traditionally the genre invokes a basic paradox, the omnipotence of human science and the fragility of human society. Science fiction reflects a fear of life in the future, particularly a fear that we are destroying ourselves through science and technology or losing control of aliens or machines. (1986, 92)

Apart from the lack of spatial displacement, the rest of these features can be easily recognized in Blade Runner. Although Doll and Faller acknowledge a series of visual motifs recognizable as those of science fiction such as flying vehicles, futuristic cityscapes suffering from overpopulation, advanced technology, androids and cloned animals and, despite the parallelism they establish with the myth of Frankenstein, they do seem to appreciate the appearance of these elements in the film for their own sake but only insofar as they “subvert the film noir signification process in Blade Runner” (1986, 92). Consequently, by emphasizing the subversive potential of science fiction on the film noir signification process, Doll and Faller disregard the fact that the two sets of generic conventions actually complement each other. Instead of talking about generic subversion, it seems more accurate to talk about generic mixture. Likewise, they remain blind to the meaning of each set of conventions per se.

9 This blending of genres is visually enhanced by the film. One example is the following: at one point the camera focuses on one of the flying police cars and simultaneously we see a car that seems to have come directly out of a Hollywood film of the 40s. An even more significant illustration is the advertising shuttle itself, a flying vehicle typical among the motifs of science fiction cinema, and like film noir, the slogan takes a parodically detached view of the American Dream: “A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies; the chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure”.

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In fact, apart from the bizarre alternation of past and present in the film and the doubling motif, both of which have already been recognized as specific science fiction themes, it is precisely through the conventions of science fiction cinema that the religious symbolism, especially present at the end of the film, may be understood. According to Vivian Sobchack, the science fiction film is a film genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown (1980, 63).

David Dresser considers Blade Runner a mixture of film noir and of what he calls “transcendental SF”, since, as he argues, the film is above all about human redemption as promoted by the replicants (1985, 175).

Redemption is attained twice: first, individually, of Deckard with the help of Rachael, as has already been mentioned; second, collectively, of the whole of humanity through the conversion of the leader of the replicants, Roy. Images of Roy as Christ are scattered throughout the film, although, in my view, the actual process of redemption is set in motion from the moment Roy faces Dr. Tyrell and loses, then, any remaining hope he might have had of expanding the duration of his life. In this scene, Tyrell metaphorically stands for God, the Creator and the Father—“Not an easy thing to meet your maker”, says Roy, and a bit later Dr. Tyrell tells him “Look at yourself Roy, you are the Prodigal Son”—while Roy is consecutively the prodigal son and Judas, as he kisses Tyrell before killing him. Unable to achieve transcendence himself, Roy turns into the redemptor of mankind, symbolically killing God and committing suicide for the sake of humanity (Dempsey 1982, 38). From this moment on, the references to the figure of Christ increase. Like Christ in his passion, Roy is first wounded in the head, once with a gun and twice with an iron bar. A few moments later, when he realizes that he is dying, he takes a spike —significantly the one in the middle of a group of three— out of a rotten wood and drives it through his right hand to keep himself alive a little longer. The camera, through close-ups, emphasizes each of his movements, thus foregrounding their religious significance. Finally, when Roy dies, after having saved Deckard’s life, the white dove he had been holding flies to the heavens, showing a daylight sky for the first time in the film and holding a promise of redemption.
The use of film noir conventions in Blade Runner is also significant in itself. To start with, the term film noir "was not initially a definitional or categorical term but served rather to locate multiple and unsystematized forms of style" (Krutnik 1991, 16). What was to be identified as the "noir" style or genre, then, is in fact "a hybrid set of stylistic practices generated through the combination of several pre-existing genres" (Krutnik 1991, 22). As J. P. Telotte explains, and like Blade Runner itself, film noir holds an "ambiguous posture on the borders of genre" for film noir is both conventional and disruptive (1989, 2). Yet, despite its paradoxical nature and its rich variety of discursive formations and stylistic features, film noir displays a number of recurrent themes, which Telotte describes as follows:

This large body of films, flourishing in America in the period 1941-58, generally focuses on urban crime and corruption, and on sudden upwellings of violence in a culture whose fabric seems to be unraveling. Because of these typical concerns, the film noir seems fundamentally about violations: vice, corruption, unrestrained desire, and, most fundamental of all, abrogation of the American dream's most basic promises—of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution. Taken as a whole, the noir films are noteworthy neither for their subtlety of expression nor their muting of our cultural problems; to the contrary, they deploy the darkest imagery to sketch starkly disconcerting assessments of the human and social condition. In their vision, crime and corruption seem almost a matter of decor, dark trappings of a world suddenly shown in a new and most revealing light. (1989, 2)

This description can be seen as a summary of the main elements of Blade Runner, a general account which could be complemented with Krutnik's selected four features of film noir: "a shift towards chiaroscuro visual stylisation; a critique of the values of postwar American society; a new 'psychological' trend in the representation of character; and a recurring attention to excessive and obsessive sexuality" (1991, x). But, what is the meaning of the conventions of film noir in the context of Blade Runner, a film which incessantly draws from those conventions?

The most direct influence of film noir on Blade Runner takes place at the level of its iconography, represented by the low-key filtered lighting (mainly

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10 In a review of Blade Runner, Dempsey refers to it as a "noir thriller" (1982, 33).
in the interiors); claustrophobic framing (overcrowded streets and pubs, excessive use of close-ups); shadows and reflections (never fixed beams of light but always distorted by Venetian blinds, grates, etc., and the omnipresence of screens as substitutes for mirrors); distorted camera angles (high angle overhead shots, like the ones used when Deckard investigates the Bradbury building or when he and Gaff approach Leon’s hotel); bleak urban rain-soaked landscapes; Rachael’s tight-fitting suits with padded shoulders, her excessive make-up, her deep red nails and her 40s hair-style. Doll and Faller also observe the four typical characters of film noir in Blade Runner, namely, the investigator, his doppelgänger, a corrupt authority figure and the femme fatale. Yves Chevrier denounces as a failure on Scott’s part the fact that “instead of showing a real cop, [he] exhibits a caricature” (1984, 56), without seeming to realize that Deckard is a typical film noir detective. Classical noir rejects the existence of pure heroes and emphasizes the human nature of its protagonists. Indeed, during the first half of the film, Deckard is rehabilitated to his previous job because he is the best —Bryant says: “I need you, Rick; I need the old blade runner; I need your magic”. But when he refuses to assume his job, the camera focuses, from a very short distance, on Gaff’s origami figure, a chicken, implying that Deckard is after all a coward. Furthermore, the voice-over narration, which relates Deckard to such well-known, hard-boiled detectives as Philip Marlow, parodically contrasts the depiction that the film makes of Deckard in the sequence of the final struggle against Roy, where it is Roy who becomes the hero, saving Deckard from a sure death by lifting him in the air with a single hand as if he were a puppet. To some extent, then, Roy would be more of an unusual villain, although classical noir is pervaded by moral ambiguity with respect to the hero and the villain. This is especially relevant in Lang’s use of doppelgängers in films such as The Woman in the

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11 It should be mentioned here that the voice-over narration disappears in the new director’s cut.

12 J. P. Telotte explicitly refers to this moral ambiguity and to its effects on the spectator: “in the noir world the criminals and the law usually seem equally culpable, both the self and society at fault. For this reason, Robert Porfirio describes its typical character as one who finds himself ‘set down in a violent and incoherent world’ that he must deal with ‘in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world’. Such conditions... would seem to leave audiences feeling less assured that right and justice would prevail than disturbed and challenged in a most fundamental way —in terms of their individual desires and interests, the cultural order, even the human condition”. (1989, 33-34) Indeed, this is the feeling the spectator gets out of Blade Runner.
Window (1944), Scarlet Street (1945), The Big Heat (1953), or Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956). As we have seen, Blade Runner consciously does away with the moral differences between the detective, Deckard, and his doppelganger, Roy. Replicants are presented as killing machines which have to be annihilated by the hero, the blade runner, in order to restore security to Los Angeles society. Yet, the film proves that replicants can be the redeemers of the whole of mankind, that far from being killing machines they value life much more profoundly than humans do.

Rachael’s image is, likewise, that of the femme fatale, “the treacherous and destructive [as well as alluring, I would say] female who figures in so many films noir” (Telotte 1989, 33). When Deckard first meets her in the Tyrell Corporation, she is portrayed as an erotic object for the hero’s gaze, whose “frozen, posed and glamourised image” (Krutnik 1991, 150) fascinates Deckard. Rachael’s role as noir femme fatale is analogous to her role as seductive android since the nature of both is uncertain to the hero, an enigma for Deckard’s double role as man and blade runner. However, as soon as Rachael discovers her fake identity, she abandons her destructive role of femme fatale and saves Deckard’s life by killing Leon when he was about to kill Deckard, undergong a very harsh transformation from seducer to seduced, from killer to victim,13 and becoming at that very moment the chaste princess who has to be rescued from the cruelty of society. Again, there is a scene in the film which metaphorically shows this change: seeing Deckard is asleep, Rachael sits by the piano, takes off her padded-shouldered jacket, undoes her 40s hair-style and starts playing the piano, suggesting that underneath her removable mask of femme fatale, she is really a very sensitive scared woman. In this respect, Blade Runner echoes other noir films, such as High Sierra (1941), Mildred Pierce (1945), The Blue Dhalia (1946), The Big Heat (1953), and, especially, Party Girl (1958), which also features a redeemed femme fatale figure.

13 Frank Krutnik clearly accounts for the ambivalence of the femme fatale as a “male fantasy” in the following words: “in the noir ‘tough’ thrillers the femmes fatales tend— as Christine Gledhill has suggested—to be rigorously and aggressively subjected to male investigation and moral censure (also they frequently die)”. (1991, 63) ... There is, then, a significant ambivalence attached to the ‘erotic woman’: she is fascinating yet at the same time feared. There is an emphatic strain of male sexual paranoia that runs through the 1940s ‘tough’ thrillers: the idea that women can be gently converted from self-seeking ambitious to other-directed love is framed as a fantasy that is less easily realisable than in the 1930s. (1991, 63)
Finally, but interestingly enough, *Blade Runner* does away with the “strange, often disturbing, impulse, ... that seems to suggest a determinism, a locked-in-ness, that is reflected in the fatalism of so many noir characters and the inevitability of their situations” (Telotte 1989, 217-218) for both Rachael and Deckard renounce their pasts and escape from an oppressive society to enter a new beautiful land full of future promises. This final Edenic sequence of *Blade Runner* can be read as a metaphor for the meaning of the whole film which, by blending the generic conventions of science fiction with those of *film noir*, is able to transcend generic limitations and to liberate itself from its negative imprisonment in a system of previous cultural codes. Likewise, by self-consciously foregrounding traditional strategies of representation, *Blade Runner* brings to the fore the constructedness of films through the omnipresence of eyes, screens and substitutes for cameras within the space of the narrative itself. With *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott demonstrates that there is still hope for postmodern art, that there actually is a way out of the apparently blind alley which, for some critics, postmodernism seems to have reached. “Or does he not?”, one asks, since *Blade Runner*’s revised version does away with this happy ending and consequently makes the film more pessimistic and ambiguous. A postmodern film, *Blade Runner*, must remain ambiguous and paradoxical. Hence, although it self-consciously explores the mechanisms of cinema and questions generic conventions, it cannot offer a monolithic or single answer.

**WORKS CITED**


