

THE DYSTOPIAN CITYSCAPE – IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S *Blade Runner* –

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Rédigé sous la direction de D. ROCHE

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INTRODUCTION

Utopia – and its subsequent genres – first appeared in 1516 in the work of Thomas More¹, as the name of a faraway island, an ideal society bound by this very name to remain imaginary². As per L.T. Sargent's analysis of Utopianism, “the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism” is a form of “social dreaming” encompassing

The dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live. But not all are radical, for people at any time dream of something basically familiar. [...] If we are frustrated by something in our society, we dream of a society in which it is corrected. [...] At its root, then, utopianism is the result of the human propensity to dream while both asleep and awake (Sargent, 3-4).

From the very concept of utopianism will be derived number of others; the anti-utopia, which offers a harsh and pessimistic criticism of the utopian genre, often in an antithetical fashion as it goes “against Utopia and utopian thought”; or the dystopia, depicting a world in which seemingly everything that could go wrong has, in fact, gone wrong and left behind an unnatural void, an odd stillness of emotions about the human form and the wrecked landscapes it resides in (Sargent cited in Moylan, 127). For if utopianism “corrects” the reason for our frustrations, dystopia can, then, be defined as a society in which nothing is corrected, but in which the issues frustrating the subject are enhanced to force reflective thought on the readers or viewers of a dystopian work:

[Dystopia] produce(d) challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their author's and reader's door [...]. [Its] foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic (Moylan, xi, xii).

Dystopia was originally derived from various Greek terms such as the prefix “dys-” (most often used to form antonyms), the lemma “topos” signifying “the/a place”, and the affix “-ia” standing for the “state of being” of the previously established place (Lederer, 1134). The complexity of a finite, stable definition of the term dystopia is, in part, inherent to its constant evolution through time, and

in part due to the “expanded [...] connotations” of the particle “dys-” in the English language, most often tied to a Latin lexeme introducing the notion of a “problem” that can be observed within the dystopian space (Lederer, 1135). Besides, dystopian narrative, as we know it today, “emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s” (Moylan, xi). Thus, this thesis will remain more partial to the idea of an existing problem or disturbance in the diegesis as it fits more accurately the subtleties of dystopian fiction, as can be observed in such founding works as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *1984* (1949). The worlds depicted in these novels do not plunge the reader in a chaotic landscape of horrible despair, so much as they confront them with a world which might, at first glance, seem perfectly suitable to the development of mankind, appearing organised, structured and ultimately quite pleasant. It is not long, however, before the observant reader of fiction becomes aware that something is amiss, malfunctioning, *dysfunctional*, in the world laid out before them. Drugs and “Soma” to control the masses in Huxley's work, a tentacular administration thriving to control the very thoughts of the citizens through the “Thought Police” in Orwell's novel, a stifling hierarchy of power in both works – these all merge to place the reader in front of a desensitised and repelling population to the point where its very humanity is questioned.

The Dystopian genre, a sub-genre of the Utopian genre which is itself usually represented as pertaining to the Science Fiction genre, has remained fairly rare in both literary and cinematic mainstream productions since the term was first coined³. However, the production of dystopian works has been steadily increasing throughout the twentieth century⁴ to become a more popular literary genre favoured by teens and young adults, especially in the English-speaking world from which most of the dystopian works originate. It is also interesting to note that, in recent years, films which qualify as dystopias have been widely released and to very diverse audiences (e.g. Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013), Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* (2013), Gabe Ibáñez's *Autómata* (2014) or, more recently, the release of two dystopian films in May 2015 with Yorgos Lanthimos'

The Lobster along with the last instalment in the *Mad Max* franchise: the blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road*).

With his 1982 film *Blade Runner* (a loose adaptation of the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick), British director Ridley Scott undertook the sorely attempted journey that is the transcription of dystopian space to the screen, intrinsically offering a representation of issues and concerns of 1980s American society. *Blade Runner* brought about a new kind of dystopian landscape (that will later on inspire cyberpunk), both familiar in its cityscape resembling the real world as well as strongly reminiscent of one of the first dystopian films – Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) – and in its visual codification heavily influenced by the aesthetics of 1940s and 1950s film noir, but also unsettling by the hybridisation of science fiction and film noir that it operates. Including the Dallas, Denver, and San Diego sneaks, eight different versions of the film were released between early 1982 – during the post-production period of *Blade Runner* – and October, 2007 when the “Final Cut” version of the film came out. This last version of the film is the only one that is widely distributed today and shall be the main object of study in this present work, although occasional references to earlier versions will be made. Today, *Blade Runner* appears as an evident precursor of modern dystopian aesthetics in cinema. It participated in the beginning of a new wave of dystopian works throughout the 1980s when,

in the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification, sf writers revived and reformulated the dystopian genre (Moylan and Baccolini, 2).

Moreover, in *Blade Runner* like in most other science fiction and dystopian works, the background to the plot, the city and soundscape, seem to be – according to Ridley Scott – the elements through which dystopia is asserted as evident to the viewers, as “there are certain moments in movies where the background can be as important as the actor. The design of a film is the script” (R. Scott cited in Sammon, 71), “the setting *is* the film” (Bart Mills on *Blade Runner* cited in Sobchack, 262). Indeed, whether it be in literature or in cinema, the

inexperienced readers [or viewers] do not see that what appears to be the taken-for-granted background (the setting) is actually in SF the foreground (or driving force behind the total creation); for before a story can be followed or a character understood, the fictive world itself must be indulged in, grasped, learned and detailed in readers' own minds so that the matters of plot or character can literally make sense, the “setting” of the text [or of the film] is where the primary action is (Moylan paraphrasing Samuel R. Delany, 5-6).

Thus, it appears that the setting, the visual architecture of science fiction and, by extension, dystopian works are the foremost tools allowing the spectators into the subtleties, the rules and habits, of the world laid out before them. This connection between setting and primary action (plot) within science fiction and its genres is introduced more completely in Thomas Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), which analyses the relationship between setting, plot and characters in several contemporary dystopias, but focuses mainly on the protagonists as a way to enter the potential depths of these settings. So it is necessary to contrast this first theoretical framework with other sources centred on a more general study of the filmic representation of space in noir and science fiction films. This thesis will largely rely on the work of Vivian Sobchack in *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1987) that discusses the aesthetics of science fiction cinema through time and will allow me to identify and organise the genre's main characteristics as well as their relevance to *Blade Runner*. In order to further inform this research on the construction of dystopian space, I will reference the works of Barbara Mennel's *Cities and Cinema* (2008) that deconstructs cities and their depiction in films as well as David B. Clarke's *The Cinematic City* (1997) that details the relationship between cities and cinema. Additionally, a number of complementary information on the film has been provided by Paul M. Sammon's *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* that present the most complete summary of the elements making up the film, and explores the many problems experienced by the filmmaker and the crew throughout the pre-production, filming and post-production of *Blade Runner*.

The city of 2019 Los Angeles as imagined by Ridley Scott establishes a never-ending urban sprawl in which the main protagonist, the weary ex-blade runner Rick Deckard, lives and evolves after having been roped into taking his old job back to hunt down several replicants: dangerous

androids resembling actual human beings. The film then proceeds to explore the definitions of humanity in postmodern-styled settings as defined by Vivian Sobchack:

SF mapping of space in postmodern culture describes the sense in which its categorical and existential values have been *inflated*. This inflation is symbolically marked in two quite different representations. One visualizes an “excess scenography” so rich, intricate, and complex that it tends to diffuse the film's temporal force, and occasionally [...] its narrative coherence (Sobchack, 262).

This “excess scenography” is, according to Sobchack, “more than mere background” and constitutes the very essence of *Blade Runner*. The city of *Blade Runner* is not only a setting but a living background, perhaps already a physical manifestation of the dystopian nightmare, made out of smog and contrasting vibrant colours, of night and pouring bitter rain. Indeed, contrarily to most dystopias, *Blade Runner* does not clearly establish and identify the totalitarian entity assuming the controlling power over the society shown on screen. Therefore, after a lengthy study of *Blade Runner*, an ambiguity still remains: is the dystopian cityscape of the film so potent as to be made into a character? Is the city the embodiment of this elusive dystopian power that rules over the film's society?

This thesis will try to answer these questions so as to circumscribe the extent to which the urban background of a dystopia influences its foreground, that is to say its plot development and characters. If one posits that the city does, in effect, exist as an entity so complex that it has become a character, it would still remain necessary to begin this exploration of space with an analysis of its overall structure. Thus, the city of *Blade Runner* is first and foremost built around a paradoxical and structured depiction of space within the film. Moreover, it should be further understood as a human construct, and it appears that the cityscape has many important points of interaction with its inhabitants that affect the perception of space in the film (notably in order to accentuate a growing sense of claustrophobia). In the end, the city's failing oneiric lure and potentially reflective background forces the viewer back into its familiar, contemporary 1980s society, along with the social issues it faces.

CHAPTER 1

– THE ORGANISATION OF THE CITYSPACE –

The plot of *Blade Runner* primarily explores the dichotomy (or potential lack thereof) between the human and the machine: the replicants. Visually however, *Blade Runner* is about a city, it is a film in which screen space and the conception of it remains at the heart of the overall production. Indeed, the potency of the images it offers have turned the film into a paragon of representation of the cityscape in dystopian science fiction films. As Barbara Mennel writes,

Films about cities abound. They provide fantasies for those who recognise their city and those for whom the city is a faraway dream or nightmare. How does cinema rework city planners' hopes and city dwellers' fears of modern urbanism? (Mennel, I).

The city film thence appears as a mapping, a visual manifestation, of the dreams and nightmares of a society on screen; it appears as an expression of our perception of urban space. It is important to note, at this point, that the city's attributes and the effects it produces in such films are heavily impacted and informed by the genre used in each film. *Blade Runner* is at the juncture of two genres: science fiction – in which the city is most often absent or substituted by a microcosm reproducing its potential organisation and aspect – and film noir, “a distinctly urban cinema genre” which visually exacerbates many latent dystopian patterns (Clapp, 194). In the end, it seems that few films have developed their cityscape while paying such attention to detail as *Blade Runner*. The film was, however, strongly influenced by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), which uses a similar (“vertical”) organisation of space and operates a dystopian critique of class-based societies (Mennel, 41). Furthermore, it is mainly through the obvious use of noir codes in the cityscape of the film that the audience of *Blade Runner* is led to conceive its dystopian representation of space as an alienating re-creation of social space. De facto, the cityscape of film noir has always remained inhospitable, hostile even, to its human dwellers:

Film noir associates the city with alienation, isolation, danger, moral decay, and a suppressed but

very present sexuality. The alienation of characters finds expression in their repeated movement alone through the urban space and their chance encounters with other lonely characters. [...] Film noir associates the city also with a lack of emotions (Mennel, 49).

This allows a perfect transposition of the main dystopian characteristics to the screen and of its stifling atmosphere from the very beginning of the film when the audience is confronted to an all-consuming landscape of industrial decrepitude and consumerism. It is further maintained through the controlling dimension that is inherent to dystopian urban spaces and which transpires in Scott's film. As a result, the cityscape of Scott's film became, quite evidently, “an urban nightmare” (Redmond, 179), and a “festering hell-hole of technological overkill” (Williams, 5). In the end, I intend to show that the design of the film's cityscape is used so as to create a pervasive sense of alienation and paralysis.

An All-Consuming Cityscape

Dystopian space, although little discussed or defined, is usually easily associated with two ideas: that it is “typically totalitarian [and/] or environmentally degraded”⁵. In this respect, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is a typical dystopia: the audience, expecting to face their world gone awry, is shown a society caving in on itself, governed by totalitarian concepts and organisations ruling over the protagonists, and in the midst of an ecologically disastrous environment. Therefore, the film features “two intertwined strands of science fiction cinema, one focused on the spectacle of production technology and the other on the impact of technology” (Landon cited by Barlow, 43). *Blade Runner* opens by showing explicitly this twofold aspect in a world situated forty years ahead of the film's release, by confronting the audience to a never-ending urban sprawl and highlighting a failing consumerist society. The city “emerges as an affective power” and “works to instill a pervasive sense of alienation and loss” eating away at its inhabitants and at the very plot of the film

(Redmond, 179).

Entering a work of science fiction is, by definition, entering a “strange new world” that is to be interpreted and made sense of, a world in which spectators sometimes find themselves mimicking the protagonists they follow in their attempt to find their bearings (Moylan, 6); the spectator, much like the characters of the diegetic space, is subjected to a form of “disorientation”:

The disorientation of one who strives to read the signs of the place wherein he lands, simply to apprehend where he is and what is going on, desperately to grasp the rules and framework that produce and shape his fallen location, so that he might somehow regain his own place in the universe (Moylan, 4).

There is, then, a strong desire on the spectator's part to assimilate and integrate the filmic environment, so as to fully understand the driving force behind the actions and thoughts of the characters, the reason behind their existence and what their goals are. “Where in the world am I?” the spectator may wonder, “What in the world is going on? What am I going to do? These are questions common to science fiction”. These are questions which surface in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, although perhaps they appear more inherent to the characters' questioning their own status and identity (Moylan, 3). Where in the world are we, the audience? The answer seems obvious as white letters spell it out over an entirely black background: “Los Angeles, November 2019.” And yet the audience is projected in a world that does not exist, one it cannot know although this world cannot be completely foreign either (e.g. the Bradbury Building, along with the obvious visual referencing to *Metropolis*, are two of the most prominent examples of familiar elements being integrated to the film). The shock of the first few images of *Blade Runner* is not trivial after such an assertion of familiarity as Los Angeles is sprawled out on the screen in the way of a destructive and all-consuming beast, striking in its intricate artificiality. In fact, Paul Sammon begins his account of the making of *Blade Runner* by describing what came to be known as the “Hades Landscape” (that is to say the opening shot of the film showing the city) in the following terms:

Los Angeles. November, 2019.

A vast industrial landscape fills the frame. From foreground to horizon, thousands of oil refineries and processing plants litter the landscape. This hellish environment is dotted by dozens

of fireball-belching towers cocooned in a thick petrochemical haze.

Strange Futuristic vehicles zip by in the polluted overhead. One flies toward a pair of massive buildings looming over this Boschian inferno; the camera pushes in toward them, reveals the colossal structures to be pyramidal, Mayan-like ziggurats hundreds of stories high.

These titanic twin edifices house the headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation, a powerful genetic engineering firm (Sammon, 1-2).

The “Hades Landscape” – sometimes nicknamed “Ridley's Inferno” – projects us into a “hellish” vision of the future which is introduced by relatively long opening credits placed over a black screen and spelled out in white or red (for the title and the term “replicant” mentioned in the opening crawl). These opening credits are used along with various sound effects⁶ as a means to express several of the main characteristics contained within the first frame of the film. With the names of the film's producers, a first couple of loud thudding noises resounds, soon followed by another. The repeated low thudding which is recurrent throughout the opening credits, contributes to the creation of a first impression of space and depth. Before the “Hades Landscape” is even revealed, sound is used to show the omnipresent use of the “superfield” in the depiction of the outdoors in Scott's film:

Superfield [is] the space created, in multitrack films, by ambient natural sounds, city noises, music, and all sorts of rustlings that surround the visual space and that can issue from loudspeakers outside the physical boundaries of the screen (Chion, 150).

In the opening credits, there seems to be no end to that noise and, therefore, no limits to the space within which it occurs. This, in turn, enhances the threatening dimension of the cityscape. The stark contrast produced by an accompanying succession of high whole notes echoing in a similar fashion creates a melancholy atmosphere rendered pessimistic by a repeated glissando diminuendo, the pleasant melody slipping down to become a noise resembling that of a siren. This, along with the fact that the instrument used to produce those sounds was a synthesiser⁷, seem to ominously suggest the artificial dimensions of the city as its clamour, the noise of its breath simmers in the background to gradually increase throughout the opening crawl. A variety of airy noises and an intriguing churning of bells in the distance, a low and constant humming gradually wash over the audience to progressively ensnare it in the city's web. This was further perfected through the use of Dolby

Sound in movie theatres when the film was released. Then, finally, balls of fire pierce through the darkneses of the screen as a fade-in proceeds to reveal an extreme long shot of the technological “Inferno” of *Blade Runner*. The majority of the screen space (two thirds) is filled by a first overhead shot of the city by night, of its innumerable artificial lights and its heavy cloud of pollution. Despite light ornamental notes in the score evoking more directly the awe and thwarted beauty that such a landscape may inspire in the viewers, a deep bass note completes its alienating



Fig. 1 & 2. *Blade Runner*'s opening sequence.

dimension and is reinforced by an ominous clasp of thunder and a bolt of lightning piercing through the hazy skies of 2019 Los Angeles (fig.1). The following shot only enhances this aspect as a burst of fire engulfs half of the screen (fig.2), ebbing away to reveal the growing shadows of the Tyrell Corporation pyramids, the most representative entity of the consumerist dystopia in the film. This establishing shot appears as “typical of film noir” in which it is – much like in *Blade Runner* – usually located “near the beginning of the narrative” (Mennel, 52).

The correlation between film noir and dystopia in *Blade Runner* is made into an obvious association due to the general context usually set up in both genres where “characters reside in a hopeless or doomed world predetermined by the past” (Doll & Faller, 91). This “past” is apprehended differently in both genres however, as it is overlaid with “present” in dystopian works such as *Blade Runner* since the film references the real world contemporary to its release and evokes issues that usually remain relevant through time. The main divergence between both genres (and the reason

why the establishing of a distinction is necessary) is in their aims. Indeed, while noir films express pessimism and determinism, dystopia allows room for hope and reflexivity outside of its boundaries; and also has a didactic approach. In the end, the correlation between noir and dystopia is evident as both genres focus on alienated characters. Furthermore, the choice of location for *Blade Runner*'s setting is yet another way to suggest the negativity inherent to dystopian space. Indeed, 1940s film noir was “set primarily in Los Angeles”, a city which already stood as “an allegory for modernity” in cinematic representations at the time – “modernity” which, inside the dystopian context of the film (as well as in film noir), has been turned into an alienating nightmare (Mennel, 46).

Los Angeles as a setting for film noir reflected pragmatic production considerations but also imbued the real city of Los Angeles with a symbolic dimension of alienated urban space (Mennel, 47).

However, many noir films were also set in New York City, which was where *Blade Runner* was initially intended to be set, as Scott admitted: “the city's [...] been moved to the East Coast because it's raining so much” (Sammon, 76). From this other emblematic noir location, *Blade Runner* retains its never-ending downpour, decadence and verticality that complete and contrast the paradigms associated with – according to Mennel – the city of Los Angeles in noir films. As a result, the film continues several classical noir tropes in showing the city by “night and in the rain”, as well as in depicting “violent” characters (Mennel, 47). The noir-ish, oppressive “Hades Landscape” transforms the city of Los Angeles into “a force, an animus, or spirit”, a “beast with a life of its own”, much like “the city could be regarded in film noir” (Clapp, 26). The opening sequence of *Blade Runner* reveals “an industrial landscape gone berserk” and a city with “fireball-belching towers” spread out like as many mouths belonging to its gigantic alien body (Sammon, 231).

The cityscape in *Blade Runner* is perceived as threatening and alienating in the first few shots of the film, if only because its boundary-less body crushes under its insane proportions the few manifestations of the human body that are shown on screen – that is to say the various flying

cars thus rendered excessively small. Throughout this sequence, it becomes hard to conceive that humans could thrive in such an environment that is alienating to audience and characters alike. Subsequently, the depressingly negative aspects of the film's cityscape only increase as the film's background imagery appears to describe a consumed consumerist society, paralysed and failing to regenerate itself. This is mostly visible through the concept of retrofitting imagined by Scott and Syd Mead in the designing of the cityscape. The notion of paralysis underlining this aspect is further developed through the film's depiction of the off-world colonies.

The destructive consumerism of the society represented in *Blade Runner* is, then, visible within the concept of “retrofitting” imagined by Scott in his re-creation of Los Angeles in 2019. Retrofitting, the “upgrading [of] old machinery or structures by slapping new add-ons to them”, is the core concept on which the cityscape is based, the way through which the city comes to life (Syd Mead cited in Sammon, 79):

“We also slapped an enormous number of extrusions on those miniature towers,” said Dryer. “We called them 'RidleyTubes.' After a while they began to look like intestines growing out of these structures. The whole process of retrofitting became an important consideration to our miniature work, too” (David Dryer cited in Sammon, 232).

The tubes pasted onto the various appliances (cars, screens) of the film's futuristic world also cling up the sides of every single building of the city's underbelly, like “intestines” that spear right up into the sky to let out the fire-balls observed in the first overhead shot of the cityscape, its “neon and concrete veins and arteries appear clogged up and yet leaky, pouring despair and bilge onto its inhabitants” (Redmond, 179-80). Retrofitting applies to every single visual element of *Blade Runner*, the clothing, the set-building, the props, the genres used in the film, and thus the genre conventions it relies on. Above all, retrofitting contributes to showing the ways in which *Blade Runner's* society is failing.

[Ridley] Scott says his method is to 'build layers of texture,' so that visual information is imparted in every square inch of screen. Details proliferate. The umbrellas carried by extras have lighted tips because the streets are so murky. The television monitors that have replaced traffic signals provide deliberately poor pictures. Skyscrapers are built on top of existing structures – and are shown on the screen in their hundreds of stories [...] *Blade Runner* is a movie that's not

so much filmed as designed (Bart Mills cited in Sobchack, 263).

The monstrous city of *Blade Runner* is built around a “culture [that] was collapsing in on itself”, as can be seen with the presence of “little windmills” on the roofs visible near the end of the film. These were “supposed to be wind generators, for electric power. But they weren't working anymore – people had put them there a long time ago, they'd broken down, and then they were just left there” (Sammon, 190). It is no mistake that Batty dies in their midst, as yet another machinic casualty of a consumed consumerist society. It is also interesting to note that the characters – as artificial man-made creatures – are designed around the process of retrofitting; technology is retrofitted to appear human rather than machinic, and to become able to feel and learn rather than be dominated by a programmed logic of limitations. It therefore insidiously appears as a means to progressively replace organic matter with artificial matter, something which has been most successfully achieved in the film's cityscape and its lack of natural elements. Ultimately, *Blade Runner's* cityscape, much like the story it depicts, is a “deadly organism” which progressively “devours life” (Corliss cited in Marder, 89).

The city's incapacity to reverse this destructive consumerist process over time suggests that it is somewhat paralysed by its advanced technology. Conversely, replicants are rendered unable to reach their full potential as they are made to die before they can develop complex feelings and appear even more human than they already are. The notion of paralysis is further developed by the escape points that the city provides and which turn out to be unreachable. The main symbol of this unreachable, artificial, escapism is that evoked by the advertising of the “Off-World colonies” where “a new life awaits” along with the promise of a “chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure”, a motto repeated over and over again with excessive cheer and optimism by a man's voice when the blimp displaying this message is seen on screen. In the scene where it first appears, when the character of Deckard is first shown on screen, the blimp is seen from below in a low-angle shot. These shots are the only types of shots used to show the blimp,

suggesting that it circulates for the benefits of the masses of the lower levels, but also evoking a skyward escape and ascension, an elevation towards the higher levels inhabited by opulent minorities. However, the off-world colonies are never actually shown in the film, they remain a concept, a dream, a false and unattainable possibility of escaping the grimy cityscape of the film.

Blade Runner is all about urban disintegration: the Earth is so over-populated and polluted that (wealthy white) people are encouraged, through adverts that adorn everything from spacecrafts to the sides of hi-rise buildings, to move to Off-world colonies. Advertising, consumer goods, media and consumer conglomerates fuel the economy and indoctrinate the populace (Redmond, 179).

Moreover, the workprint version of the film evidences the idea implied in later versions that replicants are one of the many types of androids available as slave labour off-world. Indeed, a couple more sentences are added to the blimp's advertising rant to state that beyond "great pay", "new climates", and "amazing facilities", off-world-ers would also be "given" a "loyal new companion [...] for free". In practice, the off-world colonies are only accessed after a medical exam, which we learn characters such as J. F. Sebastian have actually failed, suggesting that, as in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, it is hardly possible for the people living on earth to move off-world. And if they ever did, they might come to find that the colonies are not the ideal world they were seeking, as is implied by the various references Batty (a replicant) makes to the off-world colonies. In the end, there are no new beginnings that await the characters, and the cityscape, therefore, begins to slowly close in on itself.

An All-Controlling Cityscape

Beyond the "dystopian subtexts of alienation" perceived in *Blade Runner*'s cityscape from the very beginning of the film, it appears quite evident that the city is ruled by totalitarian principles of control that are implemented on the population inhabiting it through various means (Sammon,

xviii). A most obvious one is the dividing of the population into several groups according to their social standing, a system which is reminiscent of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, as they more often than not operate a critique of contemporary class-based societies: “the city has been poisoned: turned over to a ruling class that has no concerns for the welfare of the masses; and the masses, regulated and controlled via consumption, lead docile lives”(Redmond, 179). This vertical dimension to the cityscape is furthered with the way controlling powers are put into effect in the film, following the pyramidal model of dystopian powers' construction and its rules.

The film uses the organisation of space as a means to express alienation and division by forming a pyramid-like structure on a smaller level of social groups, hinted at in the film's background:

Space is more often a “text” than a context. Absorbing time, incorporating movement, figuring as its own discrete event, contemporary space has become experienced as self-contained, convulsive, and discontinuous – a phenomenon most visibly articulated through the mise-en-scène and editorial practices of *Blade Runner* (Sobchack, 232).

The film divides the population of its city in groups according to the language they speak as well as their social and economical status, so as to establish a vertical hierarchy on screen. Sean Redmond argues in his article on “class pathology” in Scott's film that the film revolves around a “powerful story of social class”, presenting a “particularly depressing and pathological vision of the working class” – especially when depicting the main protagonists and the inhabitants of the “lower levels” (173). The film is visually structured to evoke the “nature of class difference [...] also stitched into the film's ideological system” (173). It represents a “class-perverted city space”, while “a profound distrust or dislike of social class haunts the film”; to the point where it seeps “into the power relationships and binary oppositions that can be found in the film's subtext and metaphoric centre” (173). Three social classes can thus be perceived on screen, each underlining different aspects of the cityscape and testifying to its alienating dimension, giving way to a most profound sense of loneliness.

The first divide that the film's audience is confronted to is obviously language. The city depicted in

the film, although explicitly identified as a futuristic Los Angeles, is a strange amalgam of “Hong Kong, New York, Tokyo's Ginza district, London's Picadilly Circus and Milan's business area” (Sammon, 101), a blend that is also reflected in “Cityspeak”, the language used by the lower classes of the city. For instance, at the beginning of the film, Deckard is first shown at a noodle bar, waiting to order. At this point in the narrative, nothing but the neon signs in Japanese and Chinese (or the presence of the Geisha on advertising screens) has hinted at the possibility that the inhabitants of the city may not all speak English and yet the “Sushi Master” addresses Deckard in Japanese, forcing him to resort to hand gestures in order to be understood (Sammon, 112). Immediately after that, Deckard is interrupted by Gaff who uses Cityspeak, an odd mixture of “genuine Spanish, French, Chinese, German, Hungarian, and Japanese” to form some sort of “gutter talk”, barely comprehensible and evidently not understood by Deckard (Sammon, 114,115). Thus, language is clearly established as a form of barrier in the city, one that is not easily overcome, even if the lower classes can still use a relatively approximative English to communicate (for instance, the Sushi Master translates Gaff's Cityspeak to Deckard, and, later in the film Chew, the Chinese owner of a shop designing eyes for the Nexus-6 replicants, speaks similarly to Roy Batty, one of the replicants pursued by Deckard).

This first point of division between the inhabitants of the city is gradually developed to show that it is related to money and space as well. Like *Metropolis*, the city is constructed on a model of vertical hierarchy where the rich and powerful live in the upper levels of the city, in empty, spacious and luxurious quarters, while the poorer classes reside down below and are confined to whatever narrow nooks and crannies they may find in the midst of the over-populated and over-flowing streets. The main protagonist is left stuck in the middle, neither too high up nor too low, and able to interact with all the social groups represented but still ostracised from these – a position typical of dystopian main protagonists as well as noir fiction private eyes/detectives: “The private eye – the most archetypal “hard-boiled” hero – operates as a mediator between [...two worlds]. He can move

freely between these two worlds without really being a part of either” (Krutnik, 39). This position can be seen visually through a shot of Deckard on his own balcony at night (fig.4), looking downwards, the viewpoint of the camera forcing the character into the shadow and isolating him from the lower levels of the city. “Even the film's horizontal/vertical design scheme makes a statement”: from the very beginning of the film, Deckard seems to be used as a means to discretely express the stark contrast between the majority of the city's population and a “privileged few”, most notably through his displacement within the screen space (Sammon, 5). For instance, following the various frames of the glum landscape introduced at the beginning of the film, Deckard is taken to the police station by a flying car, the spinner:

The last, “exterior” shot that the viewer gets before the spinner lifts off, is filled with smoke, rain, noise, pollution, faceless people scurrying about, and “vulgar” neon lights – in effect, all the motifs of social decay and dislocation. The shot is filthy, ugly and pregnant with disgust. One of the first signs that the viewers sees from the interior of the spinner, as it rises off the ground, is the word, flashing up on a monitor, “purge”. The violent connotations that emerge from this juxtaposition are relatively clear: that what is indeed being left behind, on the lower levels, should be purged, purified, washed away with a terrible rain. [...] The higher the spinner flies, the clearer, “cleaner” and more spectacular the scenery appears. Vast edifices and structures compete with one another for domination of the skyline, and the electric glow of adverts, spinners, free of pollution, smog and rain, radiate the scene so that it feels warmer, purer. The higher one goes, in fact, the better life appears precisely because it is free of people and their impoverished ways (Redmond, 181).

Indeed, compared to the over-crowded street-levels constantly overlaid with rain and smog, the residence of Eldon Tyrell is a cold and mostly empty haven of echoing silence. The room in

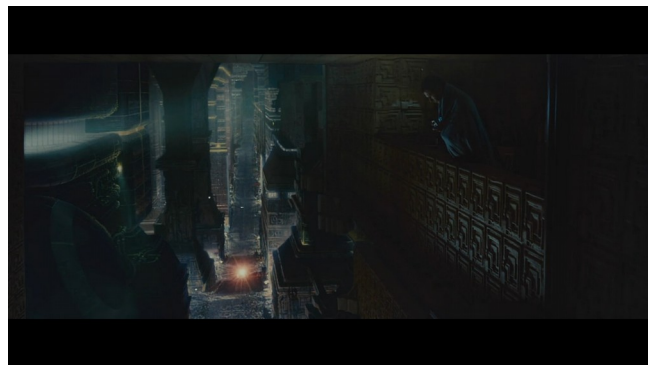
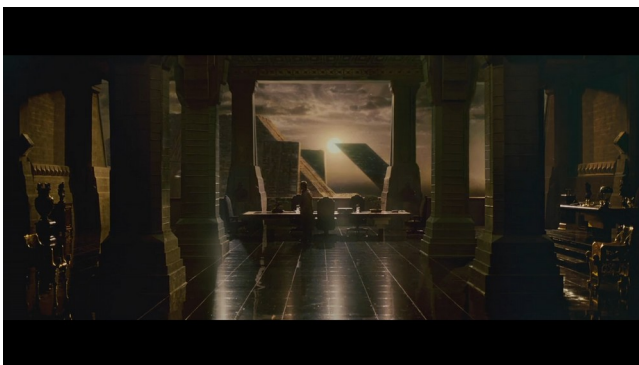


Fig. 3. Tyrell's office and sunrise. – Fig. 4. Deckard looking down from his balcony.

which Deckard is first received is huge enough to “dwarf” the characters shown on screen (fig.3), constructed around the same principles of symmetry that seem to rule over the aesthetics of spacial organisation in the upper level of the city (Sammon, 251). The large square columns accumulated on each side of the screen are reflected onto the polished dark flooring and possess a large solid base crushing the figure of Deckard, as well as a narrower part at the top, in a way that elongates each column to increase the room's height. Furthermore, Tyrell's apartment is the only place where natural light (and later on the clear night sky as well) is seen in the film, as sunlight is shown flooding its wide bay windows (although it is still veiled and quite weak). Furthermore, it is the only place – along with Deckard's own apartment – where plants (two bonsai trees) can be observed, in a world where their existence hardly seems to be possible. However, much like Tyrell's owl, it is indeed impossible to know whether or not these plants are natural. The various conceptions of space in the film ultimately produce a similar effect of imprisonment and isolation of the human body within the frame (especially of the main character's), be it because it is rendered so small in the upper levels that it is hardly visible anymore, or because it is lost in the movement of the over-crowded streets located at the city's lowest levels.

Thus, the film establishes clear boundaries between each sub-group of the city's population. The class-based system depicted in the film is, above all, visually expressed so as to show a vertical hierarchy where a small group of privileged citizens living at the highest points of the city are given access to quiet spacious areas in complete opposition with the blatant lack of space in the lower levels. The cityscape's totalitarian control over those who reside within its boundaries is also doubled with the setting up of a controlling power to rule over the population.

Indeed, the dystopian space in *Blade Runner* is governed by two different institutions that interact with each other through the main protagonist: the police force and the Tyrell Corporation. Generally, the dystopian pyramid of power functions as follows: a (totalitarian) controlling entity enforces its rules (sometimes through propaganda, religion, dogmas, etc.) over a population divided

in subgroups from which selected individuals may become the way through which the rules are applied (e.g. military, government, etc.). In *Blade Runner*, the overall controlling entity may very well be the city itself precisely because of its conception as a manifestation of powers emanating from human characters. There is no visible entity embodying power that is not manifested through the cityscape. In fact, the city is the result of its institutions, of frameworks and rules that shape the landscape; it has become an apparatus reflecting the totalitarian devices of control used by the police force and the corrupt Tyrell Corporation. From the very beginning of the film, the power of the Tyrell Corporation is thus asserted through the cityscape and the design of its space, as the two pyramids in which it is housed clearly dominate the landscape and loom high up above most other constructions. The cityscape itself is subjected to a form of surveillance through the “paramilitary” police force which, along with “corporate and other official vehicles”, is one of the few organisations to possess the numerous flying vehicles looming over the city; these vehicles whose headlights constantly intrude and sweep across the closed-off spaces of various indoor settings, sometimes blinding the characters (Sammon, 76). The police force's flying cars subtly put the finishing touches to the film's vertical organisation of space. Through their presence, the possibility of a controlling surveillance state is made into a reality; and the cars idly floating high above the city are only the final reminder that there is no escape from the film's futuristic Los Angeles. Furthermore, in the film the police uses blade runners to enforce the rule or law given at

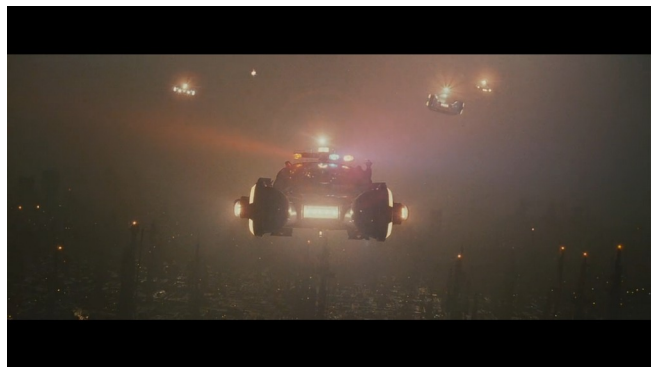
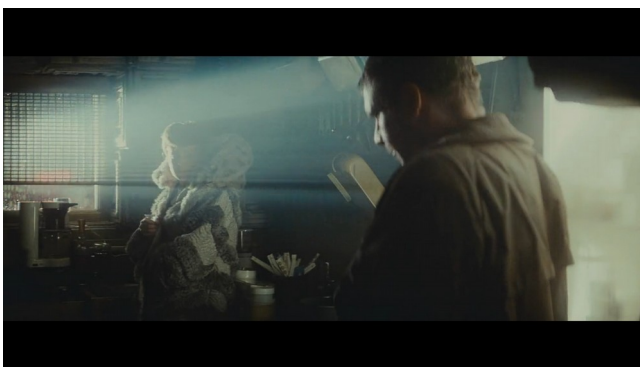


Fig. 5. A car's lights invade Deckard's apartment. – Fig. 6. Police cars floating above the city.

the beginning of the film, stating that replicants cannot be used on earth. However, this first power then becomes mixed with another one: that of the corporation manufacturing the replicants because of the presence of replicants amongst the blade runners (i.e. Deckard). These two organisations epitomise the conflict between human and non-human in the film's diegesis completely limit the path of the characters, forcing them to oscillate between either status all the while obeying their rules. Therefore, Deckard chases the replicants to 'retire' them, and the replicants try desperately to overcome their main built-in flaw only to fail, concluding the cycle of production. In any case, it is quite clear that the two organisations representing the city's power and control over its population have claimed as theirs the highest and widest vantage points over the city. Any vast, empty area of space therefore belongs to a privileged few, an empowered ruling class which seeks to control even the city's aerial space.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the city's endless body is spread out in a way that mimics some physical aspects of the human body, or of a gigantic womb from which the replicants were brought into existence and forward in a degenerate consumerist society only to highlight the ways in which it is failing. *Blade Runner's* “dystopian subtexts of alienation, rebellion and humiliation, its cautionary depiction of a disintegrating future whose institutionalised brutality was only one aspect of an overpopulated society teetering on the brink of apocalypse” sets up a perfect example of the monstrous aspect of the cityscape (Sammon, xviii). This destructive landscape emerges as a cinematic transposition of such pessimistic cityscapes as that described in the works of E. Hopper or Moebius (Jean Giraud, Gir), two widely known influences behind its creation (as it will be demonstrated later on in this present work). The city's organisation sets up a totalitarian background to the plot in which the

population is strictly divided into several class. This is also visible in the establishing of a visually vertical hierarchy on screen where the physically oppressed masses remain at a ground level, smothered in acid rain and fog, unable to see daylight, and crushed by high-angle shots of the city. This organisation is then reflected in the construction of the powers attempting to control the characters, that is to say the police force and the Tyrell Corporation; the former in charge of initiating cold-blooded killers (blade runners). In *Blade Runner*, the city and its governing powers are dysfunctional and terrible in their handling of urban space, of humans and replicants, and of violence. In the end, the city of *Blade Runner* is primarily built around a paradoxical definition of space that is established within the film. Indeed, through its opening shot, and many other frames showing a never-ending cityscape, the city is initially perceived as being boundless. As such, it is therefore inescapable and evidences a sense of alienation and paralysis. This idea is, once again, maintained through the depiction of a carefully delineated and heterogeneous space within the city itself as its “territory” is shaped “according to economic, social and other functions of urban life” (Clapp, 4).

CHAPTER 2

– THE BODY AND THE CITY –

The cityscape should be considered as a human construct, based on a human logic of spatial fragmentation. Indeed, in sociological terms, “place-making and image-making are among the earliest attributes defining humankind”, and the root concepts behind the creation of a cityscape (Clapp, 1). Conversely, it is necessary to analyse *Blade Runner's* cityscape in relation to its inhabitants in order to better understand the power dynamics expressed by the vertical design of space within the city. In human history, the city has always represented a potential ideal of “place-making”, conveying the paradigms of “home and social identity” to its inhabitants, and therefore setting the base to “image-making” (Clapp, 1). In the film's dystopian context, the cityscape takes on a relatively twisted way of interacting with its inhabitants, suggesting that the space represented on screen is a claustrophobic “projection of the human imagination” (Clapp, 194). From the very beginning of the film, the incredible width of the cityscape creates the antithetical impression of a closed-in, “self-contained” and isolated space (Sobchack, 232). This aspect is developed through, notably, the use of film noir conventions in Scott's film: “undeniably there moves in [noir] films a strange, often disturbing, impulse, one that seems to suggest a determinism, a locked-in-ness” (Telotte, 218). The city has no visible boundaries, and the possibility of encountering a non-urban space in the film's diegesis is rendered null, as it apparently goes against everything that the film implies in its visual depiction. Nothing in the city's conceptual features allows either the characters or the audience to escape its bounds, its “radiation-scarred” backdrop. In the film, the notion of “place-making” within the city is contrasted by a displacement and oppression of the main characters' bodies which is operated through the film's representation of the gaze. Here, I seek to demonstrate that the power relations visually expressed in the structural organisation of the city is more fully expressed in the use of screens within the screen space, and of a metafilmic interaction

between observer and observed. Furthermore, the idea that the city is an “image” resulting from human minds evidences the existing interaction between the cityscape and its inhabitants, as well as the shared attributes they possess.

Screens and The Motif of the Eye/Gaze

In *Blade Runner*, the many different screens observed within the film constitute the main means of interaction between the cityscape and the characters. These screens are used most notably to reflect the image of an oppressed population by subjecting the gaze of a majority of characters to a certain degree of control and objectification. This paradigm of control of the gaze appears to be a classical trope in dystopian cinema, as can be seen in earlier films such as the 1956 adaptation of *1984* by Michael Anderson, in which ads and screens represent a totalitarian surveillance state and the eye of Big Brother, or Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), in which the character of Johhan Fredersen is shown looking downwards onto the city he controls. The motif of the gaze, of looking and staring is predominant in *Blade Runner*. Throughout the whole film, it mirrors notions of control, imprisonment and paranoia that are inherent to the dystopian genre, and that are expressed by a constant process of over-framing (frame within the frame) in the film.

Blade Runner is mainly set in the murk of a perpetual night and in order to light up the city, the director had to resort to numerous artificial neon lights. However, the light of these neons did not suffice and had to be completed by various props, such as lit up umbrella handles (that only succeed in further hiding the faces of those carrying them), or the impressive number of square screens littering the space of the frame to display ads and information no one seems to be paying attention to. The media are omnipresent and over-represented, and it is a stifling element within the screen space designed to underline, yet again, the alienating dimension of the cityscape: “One

futuristic notion I am absolutely sure of is that, in 2019, everywhere you look you'll be assaulted by media" (Scott quoted in Sammon, 241). Several types of screens are shown in the film: they either serve as newsfeed outlets, communication devices or are integrated to image-analysing machines such as the Esper or the Voigt-Kampff Test. These screens serve as the most potent manifestations of the "locked-in-ness" of the film's cityscape. The first one is perhaps the most discreet type of screen shown in the film, always seamlessly integrated to its surroundings, unassuming and yet omnipresent, which therefore makes it all the more insidious. The information continuously scroll up in tiny green font, unfolding on screens no one really looks at, and which are everywhere: in Holden and Bryant's offices, and at every street corner. These screens are strongly reminiscent of those found in Anderson's *1984*, in which almost every housing unit, street, and corridor is equipped with a sort of round machine functioning as a camera (like the eye of Big Brother) and as an outlet



Fig. 7. Michael Anderson's *1984* and the "eye" of Big Brother (1956). – Fig. 8. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982).

giving out news and commands to the flat's occupants and passersby (fig. 7). In *Blade Runner*, the Trafficators placed in every street seem to echo Anderson's representation as they, too, are able to give out verbal commands to regulate traffic through monotonous repetitions of "don't walk" or "cross now" that are heard in a couple of the film's street scenes (for instance, when Deckard chases Zhora):

Trafficators not only told pedestrians and vehicles when to halt and when to move forward, but also poured out a constant flow of video-screened information pertaining to traffic conditions,

news, and weather reports (Sammon, 102).

The second type of screen is that which is present on communication devices in the futuristic world of 2019 Los Angeles. Vidphons were “2019's amalgamation of a pay phone and a television set”, “the dirtiest graffiti-smeared objects on the block”, and the only Vidphon visible in the film is used by Deckard to call Rachael while he is hunting down Zhora (Sammon, 102 & 103). The dirty screen reveals a black and white image of Rachael as she picks up the call, and a black cross in the centre of the screen cuts through the lines of her face to underline her eyes. The borders of the screen delineated in the frame is an important instance of over-framing as a tool used to entrap the film's subjects within the screen space. Indeed, the sequence in which this conversation is contained is also the only instance in the film where the trapped character is able to control the projection of her image onto the screen, as she is given the opportunity to hang up and disappear from it. Conversely, a third type of screen is visible in the film: those on which characters are objectified and have their image analysed, either by a machine such as the Esper or the VKT machines, or by another (human) character. It should also be noted that the only characters subjected to this type of over-framing are

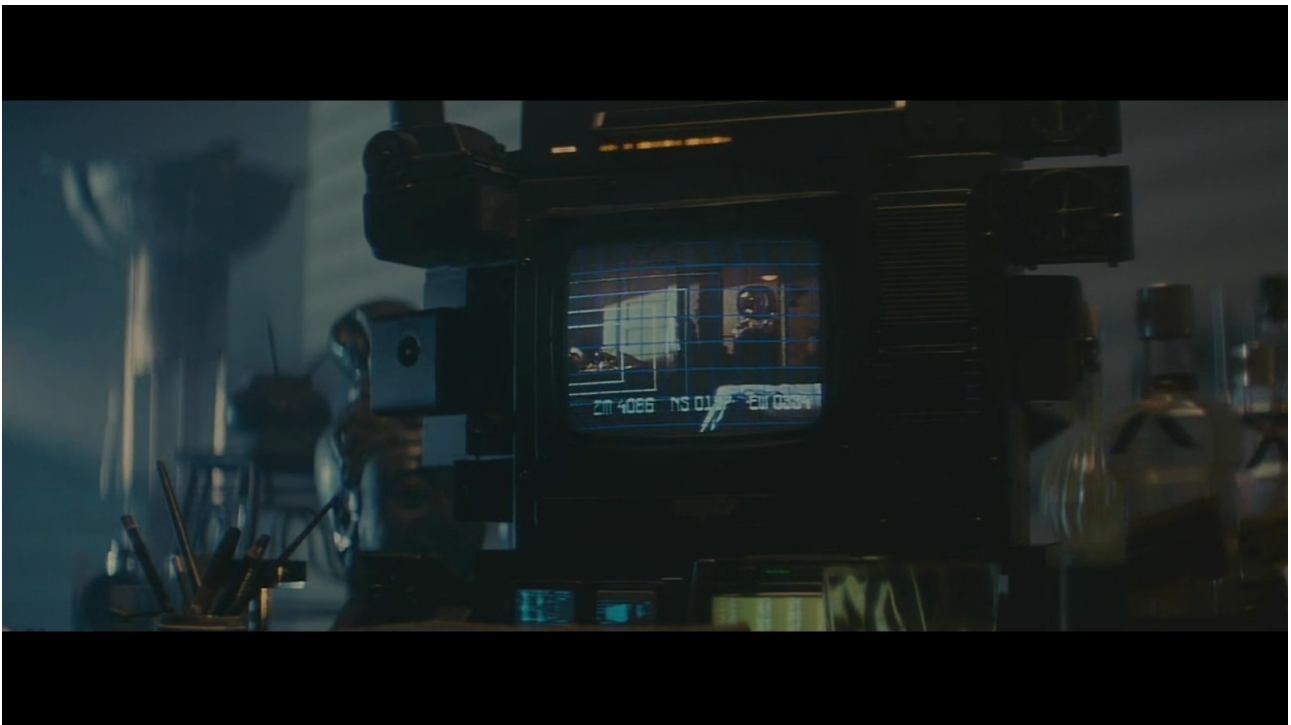


Fig. 9. The Esper, zooming in on a detail.

replicants, and mainly female characters. The Esper is a machine resembling a television, that allows Deckard to analyse in greater details Leon's (one of the replicants he is tracking down) photographs⁹. The Esper allows Deckard to penetrate the depths of a flat surface, a photograph, to turn it into a three-dimensional object in which he can actually move (if not physically, he is still able to access different angles, viewpoints, of the image). Moreover, this metafilmic allegory underlines the self-contained narrative and cityscape of *Blade Runner* as Deckard still remains limited by the physical boundaries of the photograph in his three-dimensional exploration of it – an idea corroborated by the grid patterns appearing over the image to divide it into smaller sections to be scrutinised. In fact, the main character thus finds himself in a position fairly similar to that of the film's audience, stuck outside of the image and world shown on screen but irrevocably pulled into it. The audience is limited in its “exploration” of the filmic space in that, it is unable to control the movement and angle of the camera; rather than being limited by physical boundaries like Deckard, the audience is constrained by its passivity in determining the viewpoints through which images are shown. Its position also physically mirrors that of Deckard when facing the Esper; and as he tries to figure out clues that will lead him to the replicants he chases, the audience similarly attempts to pick apart what it sees. Finally, the Voigt-Kampff machine appears as the most explicit way through which the idea of a self-contained space is depicted as it reinforces the repeated use of over-framing within the screen space and imprisons the gaze of the characters. The VK machine is made out of a rectangular base with a set of bellows and on which three control screens are shown, and from that base stems a lens at the end of a thin rod, focusing on the eye. Each time the machine is used, the viewer is confronted with a close shot of its screens and of the incomplete eye it shows, trapped in the black rectangle of the machine, and carefully isolated from the body it belongs to. The test itself is performed twice in the whole film, first while Leon is being interrogated by Holden, and soon after with a slight variation when Deckard submits Rachael to it. In this sequence, the sense of invasion of Rachael's intimacy is intensified as the VK machine is focusing closer and in on

Rachael's iris, first showing her whole eye framed by black curved lashes, before settling on her iris,

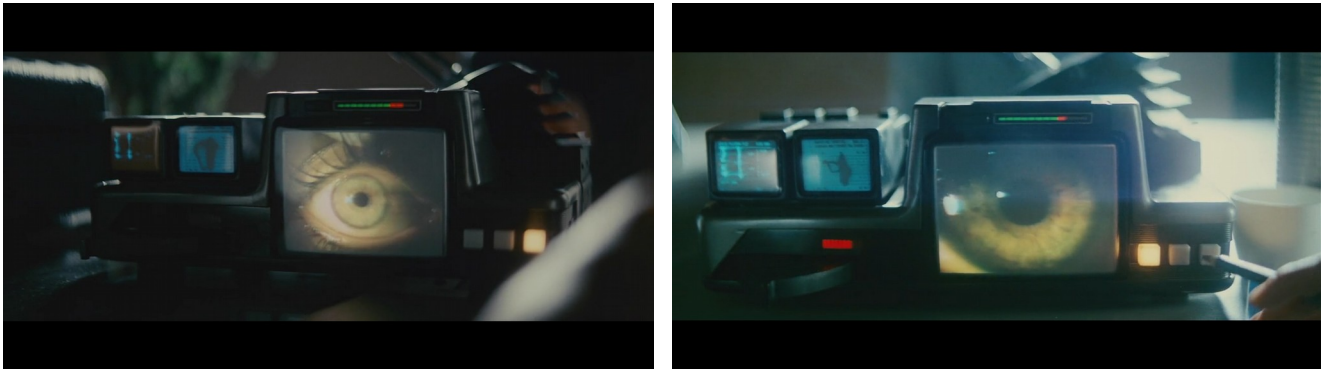


Fig. 10. Rachael's eye as seen through the VK Machine. – Fig. 11. Leon's eye.

which is heavily contrasted by the machine's light sharply shining onto it. The subsequent zoom-ins on Rachael's iris insist on the absence of an escape point for her gaze, just as there often are no escape points for the audience's gaze in frames showing the replicant characters.

Because of the over-framing, the most obvious connotation of the eye leitmotiv in *Blade Runner* is one of alienation, and the irises locked in the VK machine's screen seem to echo the giant staring eye represented at the beginning of the film that is intercut with the Hades Landscape. This eye,



Fig. 12. The symbolic eye (opening sequence).

conceived by the director as “Orwellian” and representing the eye of “Big Brother”, the eye of the replicant's maker – Eldon Tyrell – seems almost too big for the space it occupies, wide open in a paranoid surveying stare (Sammon, 382). This watchful eye is only partly visible, much like

Rachael and Leon's eyes in the VK machine's screen. However, contrary to these other instances showing a close-up of an eye, the staring eye of the film's beginning is associated with the first overhead shot of the city. The eye dominates it, watches over it, and perhaps even controls it. Rather than being subjected to alienation, this eye issues it and briefly embodies the elusive dystopian powers ruling over the film's cityscape and diegesis.

Thus, the various screens used within the film's cityscape progressively come to represent the alienation of the film's subjects by over-framing their bodies within the film's screen space, and in such a way that it alludes to prior filmic works such as Anderson's adaptation of Orwell's *1984*. The eye is further controlled and imprisoned through the various commercials and holograms visible in the film, which constitute one of the most potent manifestations of “image-making” in the film as they represent many aspects of the society built by Scott. Furthermore, they suggest an unreachable escape from the film's cityscape, notably by diverting the audience's focus and forming a deceptive background imagery. The commercials reflect the inhabitants' desire to escape in fantasised worlds all the while objectifying their subjects, much like the replicants are objectified. Indeed, the replicants are clearly opposed to the human inhabitants through the gaze of the camera.

Thus, the commercials and other holograms shown in the film reinforce the impression of unease stemming from the cityscape. The commercials the audience is confronted to seldom vary and are repeatedly seen on screen to accentuate the oppressive aspect of the narrative, as the lack of diversity underlines the limits of the society depicted in the film. If commercials sometimes show a link with our contemporary world by advertising “Coca Cola”, ironically projecting a white blinking “enjoy” over a red background on other shadowy buildings, they mainly represent a Geisha advertising different items such as cigarettes or pills. The Geisha is a redundant background element throughout the film, mostly visible when the characters are airborne, as her gigantic face is laid across the sides of the city's darkened towers. Much like the repeated “enjoy” of the Coca Cola ads, her exotic figure sometimes lurks at odd angles in the sides of the frame; her deathly and distorted

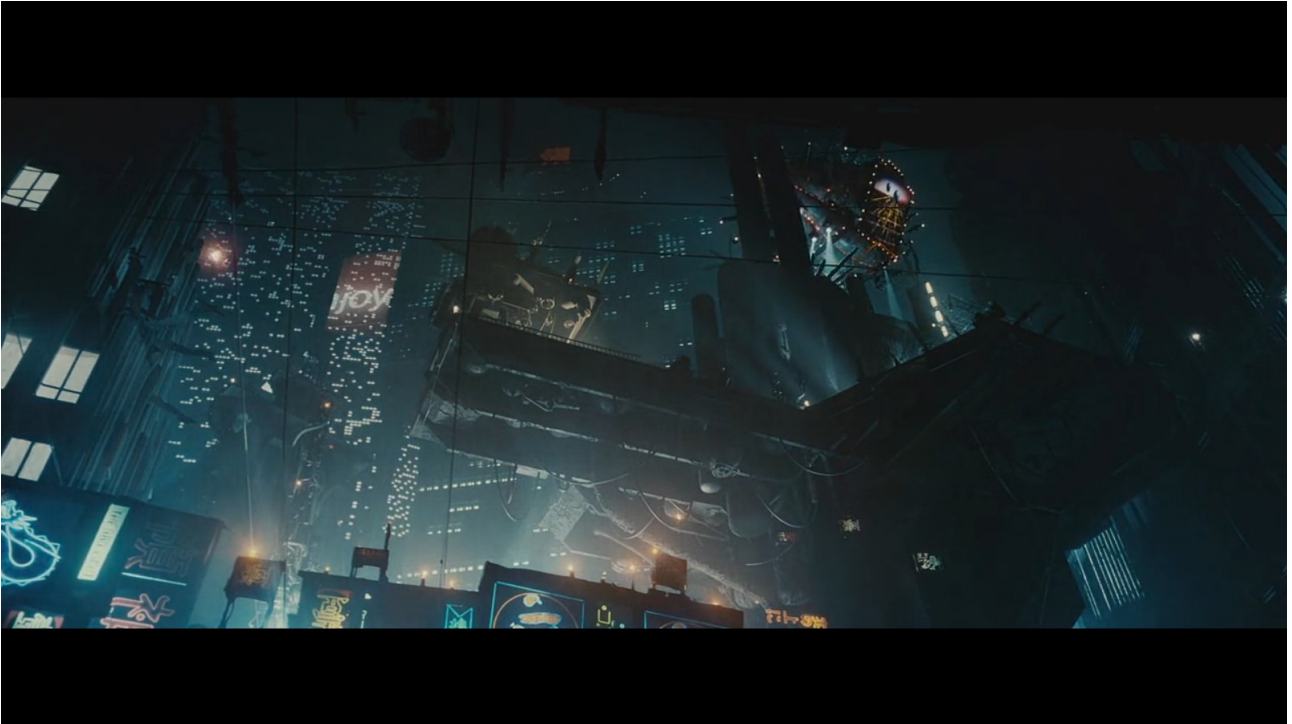


Fig. 13. Advertising screens in the cityscape.

pale face starkly lit in the way of 1940s noir actresses, as she exhales smoke or swallows an orange pill and smiles. The ads establish a noir-ish fetishization of the Geisha's lips, voice, and hands contrasting the aforementioned close shots of the characters' eyes. Due to the look of the ads, they also underline the city's mixity, its multiculturalism. Moreover, the commercials immediately transport the audience in a phantasmagoric world – a dreamed and unreachable elsewhere. However, the commercials are overlaid with a sense of duplicity and appear to be “phony oriental commercials where geisha girls are doing unhealthy things. Smoking, taking drugs [...]. To kind of continue with the oppressive feeling throughout the landscape” (Scott cited by Dryer in Sammon, 242-243). The Geisha is everywhere, and bound to remind the audience of the Big Brother posters found in Orwell's novel and its 1956 adaptation. Indeed, although it does not suggest a threat nor a promise of totalitarian surveillance (explicitly stated on the Big Brother posters: “Big Brother is watching you”), its redundant presence is unnerving and overlaid with negative connotations. Towards the end of the film, she suddenly emerges overhead on the screens of the blimp, a huge flying vehicle displaying ads, singing in a traditional Japanese style. Her image is blocked by iron

bars (see Fig. 17), turning her into a failed symbol of exotic escapism, advocating an unhealthy lifestyle, all the while representing the redundancy of the cityscape. De facto, the ads, much like other props (such as the newspaper read by Deckard at the beginning of the film, which is found

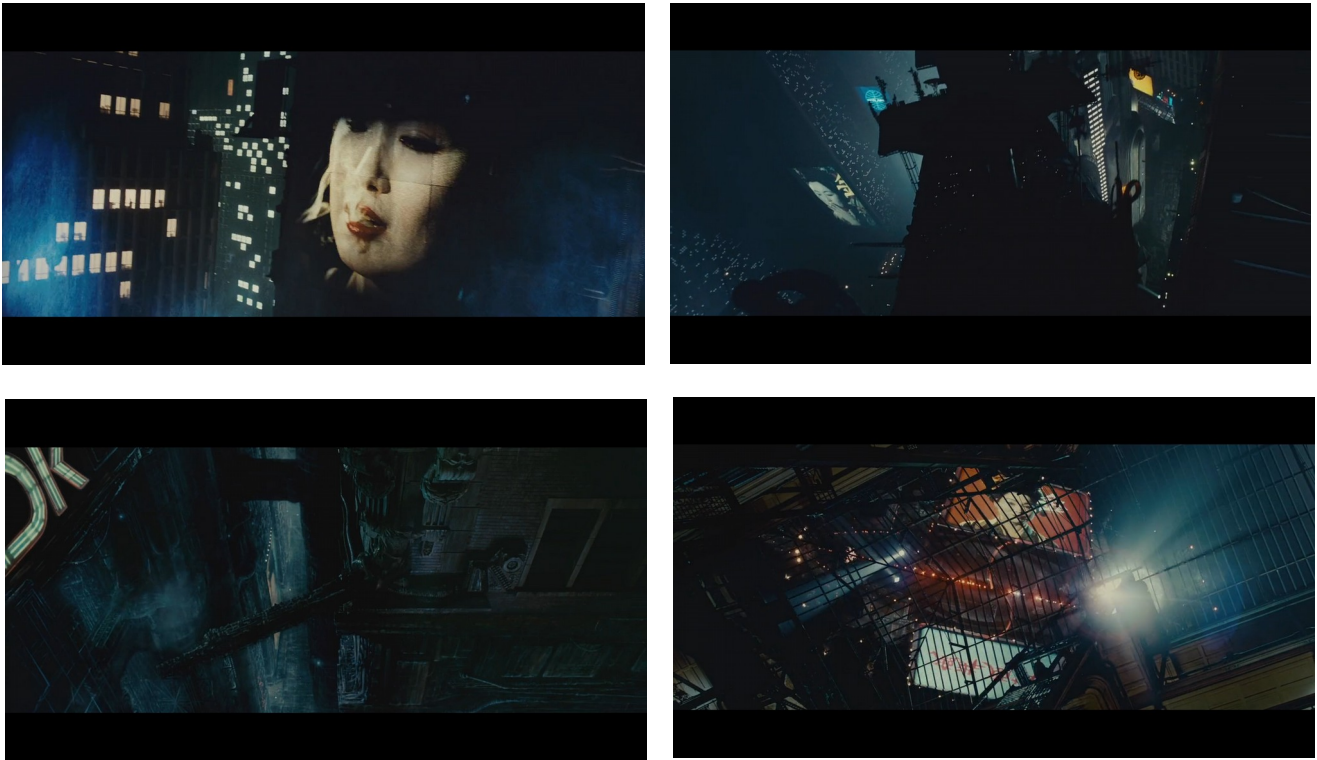


Fig. 14, 15, 16 and 17. The Geisha

again at Leon's place, except it is stained and looks much more ancient), participate in the creation of a sense that the cityscape is slowly closing in on itself as the film progresses – an idea which finds its culmination in the film's abrupt ending where an elevator's doors close to hide Deckard and Rachael from view (workprint, 1992 and 2007 versions). There are, in fact, few outside locations shown in the film and they only appear different thanks to the various angles through which they are filmed and the different lighting of the set. Once the audience becomes aware of this, due to the repetitiveness of the ads, props, and neon lights, it becomes trapped within a self-contained space. Quite ironically, both of the commercials are also overlaid with an idea of (visual) pleasure unlocking the audience's ability to fantasise over artificial escape points.

Therefore, through a process of over-framing, the film sets up a systematic imprisonment of the eye

and of the gaze in *Blade Runner*. Moreover, the commercials, holograms, and propaganda-like messages broadcasted in various areas of the cityscape only reinforce the “locked-in-ness” of the cityscape. Indeed, through their repetition they allow the audience to understand the restrained number of outdoor locations shown on screen, and consequently feel trapped within the space expressed in the frame. Conversely, the characters are physically locked-in, displaced and objectified; they see their bodies de-constructed into smaller units and subjected to fetishisation in the screens littering the film's cityscape. The dystopian construct of space allows only for a stunted recreation of the image and identity of the self while the replicants struggle to establish their own. Indeed, from the body of the beast laid out before the viewer (the city), that of the replicant emerges as a key figure in the film's plot and interrogations over the question of identity and humanity. These man-made, objectified beings appear as a sheer product of the city's artificiality, and are introduced through an opening crawl at the very end of the introductory credits:

Early in the 21st Century THE TYRELL CORPORATION advanced Robot evolution into the NEXUS phase – a being virtually identical to a human – known as a **replicant**.

The NEXUS-6 Replicants were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them. Replicants were used Off-world as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets [...].

Through this short introductory text, the figure of the replicant is foregrounded as its most basic features are detailed. The body of the replicant is placed under intense scrutiny as that of a being almost perfectly resembling that of a human, but drastically opposed to it by its status of sophisticated machine that can be destroyed (“retired”) at will once it is no longer useful. There, the replicants are characterised by their non-human traits, incredible “strength and agility” and “intelligence”, symbolising the film's “obsession with, precisely, the *difference* between *Replicant* and human within the film” (Doel & Clarke, 150). The replicant is a replaceable commodity, “characterized by [its] built-in obsolescence” (a four-year lifespan) and its serialised production (Doel & Clarke, 148); they are the most virulent manifestation of 2019 Los Angeles' degenerating consumerism, a “commodity *par excellence*” (Doel & Clarke, 153): “Replicants were manufactured

like a car, to last only a short time so that people would have to buy a new one” (Sammon, 140). Furthermore, replicants may have names, but they are quickly followed by identifying serial numbers referring to their “incept date” (the date of their creation), their abilities, and the purpose for which they were made. In fact, aside from the first replicant shown on screen, Leon (N6MAC41717), all the other replicants are introduced by way of a production number written out next to their faces. The strong dichotomy maintained between human and replicant in the film demonstrates that “The *Replicant* stands as a post-humanist figure for an inhuman(e) world – but only on condition that this figure remains flawed in relation to the wholesomeness of real (human[e]) life” (Doel & Clarke, 153). Ultimately, the replicants, through their ability to feel and question their existence, slowly replace the desensitised humanity inhabiting *Blade Runner's* cityscape. De facto, the inhabitants of the city follow the rules visible in most dystopian works in their gregariousness and lack of response in the face of violence and murder, as is suggested by the use of the word “retirement” to signify the killing of replicants⁸. Moreover, this notion is rendered even more subversive when Rachael wonders about the possibility for a blade runner to inadvertently mistake humans for replicants and “retire” them instead. The city works around normalising the very act of killing by using such de-emphasising terms such as “retire” instead of “murder”, “kill”, and forces human-like beings into life only for them to die shortly thereafter. In the scene where Deckard kills Zhora, the darkened blurry forms of passersby can be seen as they walk through the street behind Deckard, uncaring of the gunshots. As Zhora falls to the ground, some of them stop to gaze curiously onto her dead body from behind Deckard while others can be seen in the foreground (obstructing the camera's frame, Fig. 19) walking right by her body in complete disinterest, their shadows briefly reflected on the pieces of broken glass surrounding Zhora's body as they move. Her still body rests on the pavement (fig. 18), under the plastic gaze of the mannequins displayed behind the shop window she fell through, covered in artificial snow in an ironical suggestion of purity, but also of death and of the grief visible on Leon and Deckard's faces.

The dummies also appear to be dressed in a similar fashion, as they wear revealing clothing made



Fig. 18. Zhora's dead body. – Fig. 19. Passersby obstruct the camera's frame as they walk around Zhora's body.

out of black and transparent plastic, which enhances the idea that Zhora is an artificial being, a machine, a plastic doll. Only Leon and Deckard, placed on an equal plan through two successive frontal medium long shots where the characters' stances mirror one another, seem affected by the whole ordeal, even though neither of them is actually human. The contrasting lack of reaction of the citizens, as well as their unfazed way of unhurriedly moving out of Deckard's shooting range seem to either suggest that this type of scene is a regular occurrence to which they are used, or that the population of this futuristic city no longer places value on “human” lives (since, afterall, the appearance and outlook of the replicants is not perceptibly different from the other human characters). Objectified, easily discarded and replaced, the replicants are trapped inside the cityscape's many screens and their quest to gain a longer lifespan and an identity is therefore controlled much like their gaze so that they remain unable to escape their fate.

Pathetic Fallacy and The Mirror Motif

Although the characters appear to be trapped within the cityscape, the film is structured in

such a way that this world appears to be a trompe-l'oeil. Indeed, the cityscape seems to be a subjective manifestation reflecting the characters' moods and perception of urban space. This paradigm is implemented through a form of repeated symmetry: each visual event, each character finds itself tied to another towards which he bears some sort of likeness. The motif of the mirror is omnipresent throughout Scott's film, and consequently produces a doubling effect in the film's plot and aesthetics, as well as in its diegetic and structural architecture. Following this pattern, a direct link is established between the cityscape and the characters evolving within its bounds.

Blade Runner's architectural design is built around a systematic doubling of plot events, characters, and also physical locations. This structure further enhances the film's claustrophobic atmosphere, as the audience finds itself confronted to a constant contrasting of dual entities. The most obvious occurrence of doubling in the film involves the pairing of characters: it will later on prompt the use of structural mirrors in the editing of the film (i.e. shots echoing one another and doubled within a sequence). Each character finds herself/himself with a shadow occupying a similar position:

The Pris/Sebastian relationship is another example of *Blade Runner's* fascinating “doubling effect” [...], a persistent mirroring of characters and situations which occurs throughout *Blade Runner*. For what is Pris and Sebastian's pairing if not the dark, tragic echo of Rachael and Deckard's own romantic relationship? (Sammon, 145).

Other instances include characters such as Tyrell and Batty as father figures (Tyrell to Batty and Batty to the replicants he leads); Pris, Zhora and Rachael as characters embodying different aspects of threatening femininity (but also because Rachael's innocence is negatively reflected by Pris' childlike cunning behaviour or Zhora's seductive manners, etc.); Deckard and Batty as the representatives of the conflict between the human and the machine. However, the mirror is put forward as most evident in the relationship between blade runners and replicants, two drastically opposed entities linked by the red spelling of their statuses in the title and opening crawl of the film to signify a lack of difference, and ultimately hint at the fact that Deckard is not human but one of the replicants he seeks to destroy in doing his job. This allows the director to hint at the structure of

the film from its very beginning by already somehow answering the film's argument. Additionally,

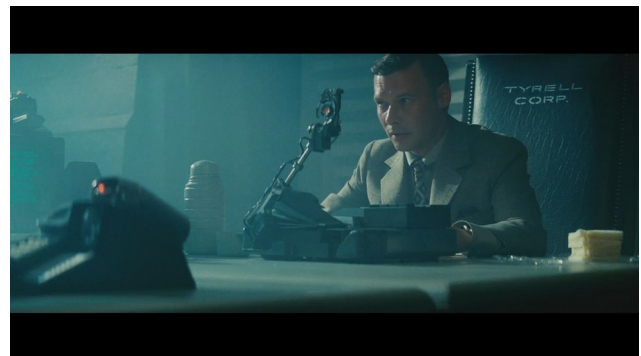


Fig. 20. A Symmetrical interrogation room with Leon (left) and Holden. – Fig. 21. Leon (shot).

Fig. 22. Holden (reverse shot).

the doubling of actions undertaken by characters within the film is constant, to the point where the editing of some sequences is just made out of a series of shots opposing one another to visually insist on the odd sense of symmetry already expressed by the characters' positions. For instance, the sequence opposing Leon and Holden at the beginning of the film shows an almost perfectly symmetric room (fig. 20), with each character placed at one end of a large table (fig. 21, 22), sitting on identical chairs, facing one another, asking questions to one another as they each point their gun

on the other (as revealed at the very end of the sequence). Symmetry is maintained in the editing as each shot is doubled (through a succession of shot/reverse shot); a close shot or an angled medium shot followed by another, etc. This symmetry of editing and of the design of interior scenes is further maintained in the overall cityscape, and buildings of importance within the diegesis are thus doubled. The opening sequence of the film thus reveals a long shot progressively zooming in on the gigantic “twin” pyramids that will be seen time and time again in the film and which “house the headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation, a powerful genetic engineering firm” (Sammon, 1-2). Moreover, overhead shots of the city are always filmed at least a couple times from a similar viewpoint, except with different lighting and different ads displayed on the many large screens placed on the city's skyscrapers (so as to avoid the creation of an obvious sense of déjà vu).



Fig. 23, 24. An instance of redundant framing in the film.

Furthermore, these mirror images of the cityscape and in the narration participate in the constriction of space in *Blade Runner*. For instance, several sequences echo one another in their construction. However, a tighter framing is observed in the second repetition of a sequence (again, this follows the progressive enclosing of space and of the narrative in the film). The repetition is structural: it relies on a similar editing with tighter framing, and also creates an echo within the diegesis. For instance, the sequence in which Deckard unveils Pris echoes a later sequence in which he uncovers Rachael. It should also be noted that some mirror images depicted in the film are metafilmic images, reflecting the position of the film's audience (e.g. Deckard and Bryant in a darkened room

examining screens showing the replicants to be killed by Deckard), thus drastically opposing it (initially) to the replicants' bodies.

Thus, the cityscape and the characters of the film further interact with one another due to the stylistic use of a doubling effect within the film. Indeed, the cityscape's organisation reflects the doubling effect that is present both in the diegesis and editing of the film. This in turn exacerbates the oppressive atmosphere of the film. Moreover, the cityscape and the characters interact more directly with one another. Indeed, the cityscape of the film appears to be one of the bodies investigated by the protagonists. Furthermore, the cityscape and the characters often present similarities in their appearance and identifying traits, evidencing a pathetic fallacy in the conception of the cityscape.

In dystopian fiction, the background to the plot is the main object of investigation, as it sets up the rules of the universe that are to be understood by the reader or the viewer: “[It] indulges the reader's pleasure in discovering and thinking through the logic and consequences of an imagined world” (Moylan, xvii). In *Blade Runner*, the filmic transcription of this background – the cityscape

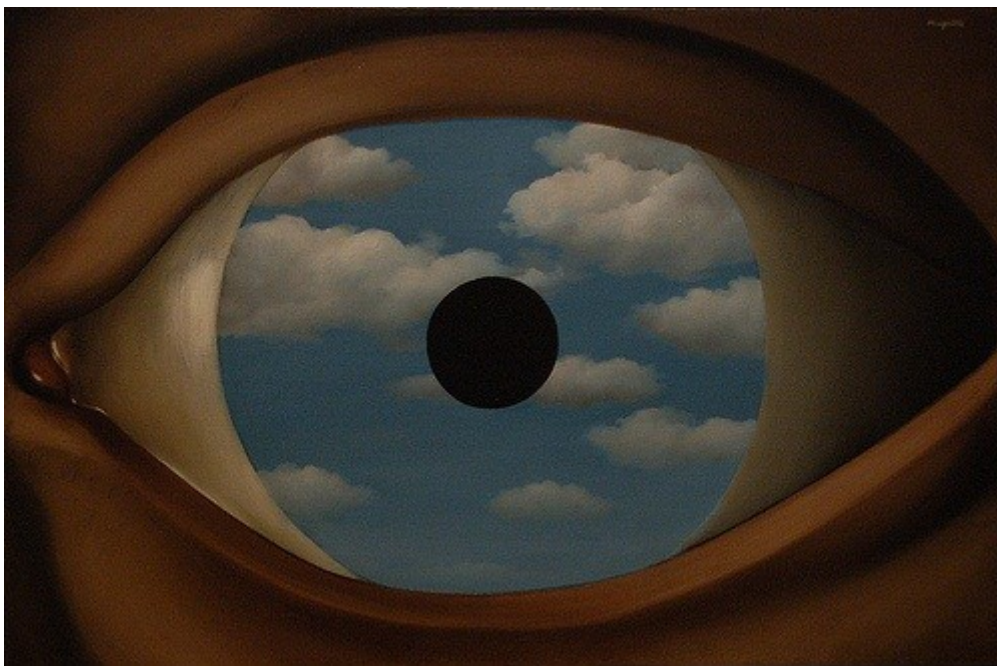


Fig. 25. Magritte, *Le Faux Miroir* (1928).

– has become the body that is being investigated, subjected to the questing gaze of the characters as their place and the stability of their position, their self-definition, is questioned. At the beginning of the film, the Hades Landscape is reflected in a single eye blown up to fill the entire frame. This disembodied eye is never clearly attributed to a character and allows for a more abstract interpretation. As per the reading of Clarke and Doel, the eye bears an uncanny resemblance with Magritte's painting entitled *Le Faux Miroir*, signifying that it is but a mere re-creation of the real (143). In the film, this shot is interesting as it represents the only instance of direct confrontation between the eye that allegorically may refer back to a human character, the audience, or a totalitarian power and the cityscape. This short interaction is reflexive. By sending the viewer back to the boundless scenery of the Hades Landscape through the contained boundaries of the iris of a human eye, it introduces – through a reflective surface mirroring the landscape – the idea that the film's cityscape must be investigated, de-coded, and carefully looked at by the spectator.

The interaction between the cityscape and the characters is also a source of reflexivity as they both mirror some attributes of the other. Therefore, the “state of advanced decay” of the city is “paralleled in the 'accelerated decrepitude' or premature ageing of J.F. Sebastian, the genetic engineer through whom the renegade *Replicants* seek to make contact with Tyrell, their maker” (Clarke and Doel, 146). Moreover, the “marked contrast between J.F. Sebastian's apartment (in the otherwise deserted shell of LA's Bradbury Building) and the high-tech pyramidal structure that houses the Tyrell Corporation implies monopoly capitalism”; “and the explosion of a Fourth World



Fig. 26. Sebastian's cluttered apartment. – Fig. 27. Tyrell's chambers

underclass in the interstices of the city speaks of the hyper-deskilling of labour”, constraining Sebastian to “seek residence in a decaying shell” in spite of his position as a genetic engineer (146). Sebastian, as a product of the world in which he lives, has physically taken to some of its specificities. Moreover, Sebastian also lives at street-level, amongst the poorer LA underclass, and in the most “decrepit” environment found in the crumbling city. Once that parallel is drawn, however, it becomes obvious that each character physically mirrors the space they inhabit and the two interact reciprocally. This suggests that space is a projection of the characters' own physical and psychological state, a pathetic fallacy. For instance, the replicants (Batty, Leon, Zhora, and Pris) evolve mostly at street-level as well, all the while their time slowly runs out and they each die, one after the other. The figure of Pris appears as most versatile. She is first shown on screen under the rain, walking a desolate street before seeking refuge among industrial waste, and burying herself under soggy paper and plastic. Later on, after having entered Sebastian's apartment (bathed in cold blue-ish light), her outlook changes and becomes more androgynous to mirror the many dolls scattered all over Sebastian's place (fig. 26). On the opposite end of the spectrum (fig. 27), Tyrell is always neatly and opulently clothed in the midst of his equally regal chamber (in which golden tones dominates screen composition to further suggest his wealth). The resulting contrast reinforces the film's critique of class-based societies.

Therefore, *Blade Runner* appears to explicitly experiment with the notions of “mirror” and representation. It does so by constantly using a visual rhetoric of doubles and doubling effects in its depiction of the “mood-image” (which later inspired the noir genre and thus *Blade Runner*), initially used in German Expressionist films. “[It] functions as a pathetic fallacy, as a way of suggesting the pessimism of the world and the alienation of the central characters” (Redmond, 178). *Blade Runner's* mirror effects are efficiently set in motion through the film's structure: its plot and editing. Each visual occurrence and each event is almost systematically duplicated, or echoed by another similar one. Besides, this mirroring is furthered through the characters and their interaction with the

landscape surrounding them as they question it and integrate it in such a way that the cityscape becomes a reflection of each character, and each character is in turn affected by their environment.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the film's cityscape appears to be the entity through which the city's population and the film's dystopian powers interact with one another. Indeed, in order to represent notions of totalitarian control, the screen space is used as a means to oppress the character's bodies by imprisoning these within the many screens littering the screenspace, thus reinforcing the sense of claustrophobia expressed throughout the film. Screens are also used in order to convey orders (e.g. the traffickers) or scrutinise space (e.g. the Esper and the VK machine), symbolically referring to the absence of hidden spaces in the city, and that there is no escape from the watchful metaphorical eye represented at the film's beginning nor from the city. Furthermore, the use of screens to represent “phony” and troubling commercials advertising unhealthy lifestyles or the faraway utopias that could be the off-world colonies only seem to enhance the cityscape's “inhuman” and artificial outlook (Doel & Clarke, 144). However, the cityscape progressively comes to be understood as a reflection of the film's characters as the mirror images within the plot and the architectural representation of the city are developed. It seems then that the city is an echo of what humanity has become, a creature that has operated some form of mimesis to represent its population and the power dynamics in charge of its stratification. This trait contributes to the strengthening of the claustrophobic dimension perceived in the cityscape and is underlined by the setting up of mirror image in the diegetic structure of the film and in its editing.

CHAPTER 3

– RETURN TO THE VIEWER'S CONTEMPORARY WORLDSPEACE –

In their 1997 article on *Blade Runner* and postmodernism, Doel and Clarke contend that Scott's film is “not a mirror but a *screen*” (141).

Cinema does not re-present, re-produce, re-play, or re-flect. Hence, as Deleuze [...] demonstrates, conceptualization should work “alongside” rather than “on” the cinema: resonance rather than reflection; encounter rather than capture; invention rather than re-presentation. [...] Accordingly, we will not attempt to identify the structure, meaning, location and significance of the image in the mirror (Doel & Clarke, 141).

Doel and Clarke thus suggest that, in *Blade Runner*, the cityscape fits Deleuze's paradigm of the “crystal-image”, as it represents a city built on “sheets of past” where different “pasts” are represented “simultaneously” in a “direct time-image” (Deleuze, 98). However, this argument (though valid when analysing postmodernity and the representation of time in *Blade Runner*) is clearly in opposition with the most basic dystopian constructions, as Deleuze's time-image is above all “inexplicable” (Deleuze, 100); “the image in the mirror” cannot be decoded (Doel & Clarke, 141). On the other hand, dystopia's foremost purpose of “helping [readers and spectators] to raise their consciousness” is achieved through a

machinery [which] invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be re-presented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political and cultural dimensions (Moylan, xii, xvii).

The didactic purpose of dystopian fiction thus necessitates the presence of links between the “screen” showing the film and the reality of the audience; the film references (as it must) the real world. A dystopian work, therefore, revolves around the very notion of “re-presentation”. Indeed, it works towards establishing an “enlightening triangulation” (or cyclical motif) in which reality (“the actually existing society”) informs the “text” (an “estranged revision of the alternative world”) to be decoded by the viewer in their “individual [...] limited perspective”, so as to bring them back to reality (Moylan, xvii). In *Blade Runner*, it seems that what is shown on screen could potentially

allow for an escape from the real by using Clarke and Doel's idea of “resonance rather than reflection”, as the film maintains several oneiric lures in its cityscape as well as in its diegesis. In fact, the city appears to attempt seducing the male characters and the audience by taking on the aspect of an alluring, dream-like, feminine entity through its female characters. On the other hand, when faced with the claustrophobic, gradually narrowing space of the film's cityscape and the progressive tightening of the frames in the film's editing, the audience is directed in such a way that, rather than finding a way out of the city through dreamlike sequences (much like the characters), it finds a way out in the film's representation of societal issues.

The infamous “escapism” attributed to sf does not necessarily mean a debilitating escape *from* reality because it can also lead to an empowering escape *to* a very different way of thinking about, and possibly being in, the world (Moylan, xvii).

Indeed, although these issues may seem to be inherent to, and contained within the film, they reflect 1980s societal issues and concerns. Therefore, I argue that the film thus becomes a means to establish a mirror-image of 1980s America in its invented future.

Producing the Dream: Oneirism and the City

In order to avoid characters escaping its bounds, the city of *Blade Runner* maintains several oneiric lures intended both for the main protagonist of the film and for the audience. These exist as a means to keep the film's protagonists from searching for a way out of the city. Thus, the city insidiously becomes its artificial female characters, seductive and dangerous, and perpetually drawing in the main male protagonist. Moreover, several elements of the cityscape and soundscape try to oppose the nightmare vision through the familiar characteristics of the landscape, and through the evasive hints referring to an idyllic life on earth outside of the city. Finally, the dreamlike facet of the city is enhanced by the absence of representation of time's passing throughout the film.

In his 1997 article on the place of cities as background in films, Colin McArthur argues that, in some early feature productions of the 20th century, the “country/city opposition” is “so deeply grounded in (American) culture [...] that it surfaces in the least expected places” (McArthur, 21). In such films, “small towns” were idyllic spaces (“Arcadia”) drastically opposed to the “metropolis” (“Sodom”) (McArthur, 21,23). This Manichean view of these two contexts directly impacted the inhabitants of either spaces, and is reflected in their values and appearances. In more recent years, “the worsening condition of 'real' inner cities [...] has been paralleled by cinematic representations of the city as a desolate battleground traversed by human monsters on the very margin of sanity” (McArthur, 31). One of the films analysed by the author to support his argument is *Sunrise* (1927), in which the male protagonist is torn between two women, one representative of the countryside, the other of the city. The city is thus turned into a female construction subjected to the gaze of the male protagonist.

Similarly, it could be argued that the film's cityscape is a feminine entity dominated and governed by male corporations. In fact, the female (replicant) characters of *Blade Runner* represent different facets of the city, all the while fitting the model of the “city girl”: “smoking”, “made up”, “undomesticated”, and “erotic” (McArthur, 21). These artificial bodies that embody the city are contrasted and opposed. For instance, the femme fatale, embodied by Rachael, is drastically opposed to the other two female characters: Zhora and Pris. While Zhora and Pris seem to be excuses to keep Deckard within the city space as he tracks them down and brutally murders them, Rachael repeatedly mentions the possibility of “going North”, of leaving the city and finding a more peaceful life away from its violence. And while Zhora and Pris are hyper-sexualised – the former through her job in a nightclub and her performance with a snake (not shown directly on screen), and the latter through her design (she is a “pleasure model”) – Rachael still retains an air of innocence about her and is visibly more vulnerable (although she is still an archetype of what the noir genre's

femme fatale looks like). The hyper-sexualisation of Pris and Zhora is also asserted through the conditions in which they are submitted to the male gaze. Indeed, both characters are first seen on a screen in a darkened and smoky room of the police station, their bodies on full display under the watchful gaze of Bryant and Deckard. Zhora is also represented performing later on in the film, but only through sound and she is not visible. Instead, the audience watches the captivated gaze of Deckard staring at her (again in a shadowy and smoky place), and is left to imagine what the performance might look like. It even seems that the looks of the female characters are designed to favour fetishization; for instance, Rachael's dark clothing and pale skin always underline her red-painted mouth, and Pris' painting of a black line over her eyes heavily accentuate them. Finally, the paleness of Pris and Rachael's skin reference quite clearly the white powdered face of the Geisha, the city's most perfected depiction of an artificial and dreamlike female body. The female bodies represented in the film “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for a strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 4). Their figures are clearly subjected to the male gaze of the main character and the eye of the camera is thus explicitly shown as pertaining to a masculine entity. Indeed, since “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” as men are “reluctant to gaze at [their] exhibitionist like” (Mulvey, 3), the camera's eye can only be perceived as being that of a man. It is also interesting to note that Deckard's reverie, his vision (or dream) of a unicorn moving through a forest, is played shortly after Rachael's first visit to his place as though her depiction of her own implanted memories caused Deckard's to resurface. Ultimately, in the 1982 release of the film, Rachael does lead Deckard to leave the city as the two characters are shown driving out into a luxurious countryside under clear blue skies and a brightly shining sun (fig. 28, 29). It is possible to argue, however, that this ending is but a mere illusion, wishful dreaming away from the city (much like Deckard's vision of a unicorn) and into a landscape contradicting all that the film presupposes. The colour scheme further highlights the dream-like air of the sequence as the audience is no longer



Fig. 28, 29. Two frames from the 1982 theatrical release's ending.

confronted to the artificial hues of the neons lighting the city by night. The melancholy music, along with a slight white veil over the image due to the brightness of the light, seems to allow the interpretation of this sequence as an unreal event. On the other hand, this ending may also be interpreted as the actual escape from a self-contained cityscape which manipulates the gaze of the



Fig. 30. The luxurious countryside of the 1982 theatrical release's ending.

characters so that they would not be able to see beyond its realm or doubt its veracity, and into a

wild idyllic scenery signifying the two characters' freedom.

Moreover, the nightmarish vision of the city is contrasted by *Blade Runner's* ambiguous score and soundscape. Indeed, extradiegetic music in the film is most often used in sequences showing the cityscape, either with the deserted rainy streets by night or while the characters are flying above the city. In the first case, the music is slow and melancholy, highlighting the pathetic dimension contained within the lowest levels of 2019 Los Angeles.

Vangelis settled on an overall mood ... [of] “futuristic nostalgia”: a dizzying melange of unabashed romanticism, ominous electric rumblings, gutter-level blues, delicate celestial shadings, and heartbreaking melancholy [...]. Vangelis' working methods closely mirrored Ridley Scott's own technique of “layering” (Sammon, 273-274).

The soundtrack accompanying flight scenes is much more ambiguous: the shadowy and hazy landscape unfolding before the audience is overlaid with a music suggesting a sublime dimension to the cityscape. A sensation of wonder and levity is thus created by long high whole notes, complemented by 'twinkling' bell-like sounds, “delicate celestial shadings” (273). Furthermore, the intradiegetic soundscape perpetually intrudes to ambiguously merge with the score, so as to seamlessly fit in with the synthetic music, while continuously disturbing the rhythm with discordant machine sounds and disembodied voices. Finally, the intradiegetic music seems to reflect the cosmopolitan feel of the city's streets, exotically mixing Oriental and Far-Eastern music with the “gutter-level blues” of the score in the same way that the street-level population is a result of ethnic mix (273). Ultimately, the film's score and soundscape strongly contrasts the nightmare vision of the city and instead suggests its dream-like quality. The blurriness of the rain-soaked scenery along with the vivid and colourful glow of the neon lights further support this representation; and the lack of sunlight connotes that time of the night where dreams most certainly occur.

In the end, the oneiric dimension of the cityscape is perfected by an absence of representation of time: time's passing is never clearly expressed in the film. This is mostly inherent to the film's representation of a postmodern space:

Signifying the complete collapse of time and space in cinematic representation, the postmodern

city has been realised most forcefully in the work of Ridley Scott, its fullest expression generally conceded to be *Blade Runner* (McArthur, 32).

In fact, the only way time is ever expressed is through the character of Roy Batty; through his blueish nails, his slow loss of control over his limbs, and his natural death due to his reaching the end of his four-year lifespan. Paradoxically, the lack of time and the replicants' quest to get a longer lifespan is central to the film in which night succeeds to night. As it is impossible to gain any sense of time throughout the film, a growing impression that the diegesis simply operates outside of time in a quite surreal manner is developed as the plot unfolds. In fact, the lack of representation of time insidiously paralyses the narrative as it is both absent and distorted into one slow, long and starless night (although a careful viewer will remember that stars are shown once in the film, like a sort of surreal manifestation, after Batty has murdered Tyrell and is returning to street level by using an elevator with a glass roof). Time, one of the film's obsessions, is the last of the film's oneiric lures, it is abstract, suspended, but also eternal within the bounds of the city.

Reflecting 1980s American Society and its Invented Future(s)

As stated earlier in this thesis, a dystopian landscape is constituted by re-creating the contemporary landscape, the actual world surrounding the person producing a dystopian work. Most often, therefore, a dystopian film's background discusses societal issues that are usually represented hyperbolically within the film. These latent issues progressively establish links with the actual world of the viewer so that they might be able to escape the enclosed dystopian space of the narration. However, this return to the real world is effected in such a way that the viewer should no longer be able to ignore the issues raised in the film's background. In order to turn *Blade Runner's* cityscape into a mirror of 1980s Western society and the issues it faced, Scott used the film's genres in a retrofitted manner, therefore establishing ties with the audience's past and present time. In turn,

the resulting image offers the reflection of *a* potential future.

In *Blade Runner*, the use of science fiction and film noir becomes a means to connect more closely with the audience as it stirs up familiar images and references. Indeed, these genres are assembled to form what Scott will explain to be “[a] 40-year-old film set 40 years in the future” (Scott quoted in Kennedy, 4); or a “high-tech blend of forties-style detective thriller with twenty-first century science fiction” (Scott quoted in Sammon, 2). The film's noir imagery forces the reader to go back to a cinematically familiar and strongly connoted universe. Indeed, the film's merging of science fiction and film noir allows for disorientation as much as it provokes nostalgia for a long-passed era. Its unrecognisable streets are familiar in their highly contrasted chiaroscuro recalling film noir aesthetics and in their architecture evoking various works of fiction. For instance, the cityscape shares many resemblance with that of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and its Babel Tower



Fig. 31. *Metropolis*'s Babel Tower. – Fig. 32. *Blade Runner*'s police station.

(Fig. 31) is reproduced almost exactly in *Blade Runner* to house the police station (Fig. 32), the high angle of the shot contributing to make the resemblance even more vivid. What's more, *Blade Runner*'s Los Angeles appears to be heavily influenced by the work of French artist Jean Giraud (who then worked under the pennames Gir or Mœbius), a well-known figure amongst science fiction illustrators. The influence is such that the Rydleygrams (the drawings made by Scott showing his expectations for *Blade Runner*'s visual design) strongly resemble Giraud's drawing

style (fig. 33, 34), which was first brought to Scott's attention in *Heavy Metal*¹⁰ (Sammon, 75). Moreover, the film's plot as well as the organisation of its city recalls Giraud's short comic “The Long Tomorrow” (1975): “My concept of *Blade Runner* linked up to a comic strip I'd seen him do a long time ago; it was called 'The Long Tomorrow'” (Scott cited in Kennedy, 4). Consequently, by making such references, the cityscape of *Blade Runner* retained an aspect of familiarity in the mind of the viewer.

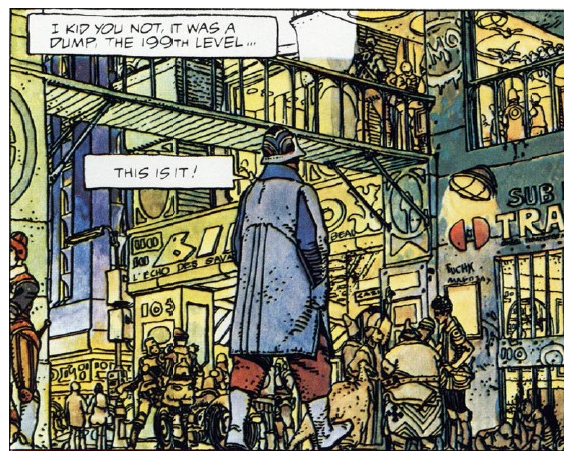


Fig. 33. A Ridleygram. – Fig. 34. Excerpt from “The Long Tomorrow”

Moreover, the approach to science fiction in *Blade Runner* allows for the reproduction of the dystopian pattern of representation of the real world and of the context during which the film was written and produced. Indeed, in science fiction, utopia and its genres represent a type of fiction deemed to be a form of “social dreaming”. As such, dystopian narrative forces reflective action onto the audience. Because of this, no matter how distant in time *Blade Runner* was located, or how advanced its society is, the film's audience was – and still is – bound to establish links back to issues contemporary to the film's spectators so as to better understand this terrifying mirror of a future.

Therefore, the genres *Blade Runner* uses effectively create a link between the audience's reality and that depicted in the film. In doing so, the science fiction and noir conventions support the more specific aims of dystopia as a mirror of a future. The world projected on screen in put

forward as a conceivable occurrence, an image of what the world might become, a possible world. This serves to make the argument of dystopias more compelling in the eye of the viewer as “few things reveal so sharply as science fiction the wishes, hopes, fears, inner stresses and tensions of an era, or define its limitations with such exactness” (Gold cited in Redmond, 173). This mirror appears as a projection of 1980s issues and concerns and their potential development in a future not so remote in time that it would become abstract.

Blade Runner maintains some of the societal issues evoked in Dick's novel – issues that are still mostly present in today's dystopian narratives.

The science fiction films of the [...] seventies mirror a developing neo-isolationism (perhaps a result of a costly involvement in Southeast Asia); a diminishing fear of nuclear apocalypse (partially a result of the thaw in the Cold War); and a growing concern with domestic, terrestrial issues – most of which are related to totalitarian government control of people's lives or to overpopulation, food shortages, pollution and ecology. Consequently space travel appeared only infrequently [...] Likewise, extraterrestrial visitors to this planet diminished in number.

The single theme [...] that dominated the science fiction imagination between 1970 and 1977 was overpopulation and its concomitant problems (Dean cited in Sobchack, 226).

Blade Runner seems to pursue entirely this tradition of using the science fiction genre to represent more directly contemporary issues of “overpopulation”, “pollution and ecology”, “fear of nuclear apocalypse”. Indeed, contrary to later science fiction films such as Georges Lucas' *Star Wars* and Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Blade Runner* does not equate “technological wonder” with “domestic hope”, but instead retains the “cautionary” and “pessimistic” tone of earlier science fiction films, as well as their “cool” and “detached [...] vision” (Sobchack, 226). In *Blade Runner*, technological wonder has become an obsolete notion as technology is negatively related to artificiality and is opposed to the human and nature. This is made explicit by the showing of the heavily-polluted, suffocating streets of a post-apocalyptic 2019 Los Angeles. This background, which presupposes the post-atomic world war background of Dick's novel, evidently reflects a somewhat latent fear of atomic warfare in 1980s America (though fading and less potent than in 1940s film noir), as the Cold War was coming to its end. Furthermore, the climate of *Blade Runner* is largely based on the real world increase in pollution, and underlines the

growing concerns of the American population when it came to environmental issues. The surge of the environmental and ecology movement in the US throughout the 1960s, still ongoing at the time of *Blade Runner's* release had, indeed, brought about the passing of several laws related to the protection of the environment with, most notably the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the passing of the Clean Air Act in 1970. Along with the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts (1972 and 1973), the Clean Air Act evoke real-world issues reflected in *Blade Runner*. In fact, in his work analysing the noir LA landscape, John Buntin repeatedly underlines the similarities between 1940s film noir showing smoggy backgrounds and the actual world. Indeed, the heavy smog of 2019 Los Angeles is but a more striking manifestation of the smog that had “settled permanently over downtown Los Angeles” in the early 1940s (Buntin, 100). Moreover, the industrial nightmare that 2019 Los Angeles has become echoes the “industrial powerhouse” Los Angeles gradually turned into up until 1945, when “Southern California was responsible for 15 percent of the country's total industrial output” (100). The smog has become so thick in *Blade Runner* that it causes space to seem narrower, but also provoked a radical change in the city's climate as it is now subjected to a heavy acid downpour, the industrial waste of the atmosphere spat back on the lower level population to impair their health (e.g. Sebastian's illness).

Moreover, the constant mass of people milling about at street-level is depicted in the film as being mostly from East Asia. The predominance of East Asian cultural elements in the city, and the little use that is made of the English language at street-level, seem to provide an isolationist's nightmare, in which Western culture is turned into a minority and became almost obsolete, replaced by an amalgamation of both cultures, and of the many others represented in Cityspeak. This depiction presents a potentially threatening image of US immigration in which the fourth wave of immigration (starting 1965) that brought in mainly East Asian and South American migrants has turned out to be so significant that the English language is practically obsolete as well (though it is still quite clearly the administrative language used in 2019 LA). The film seems to toy with the

representation of this population as a means to evoke the “Yellow Peril”, the idea that “in the aftermath of the Communist takeover of China” and after World War II, East Asian immigrants “were no longer regarded as allies but as possible spies and were therefore viewed with suspicion and distrust” (Avakian, 145). Indeed, it appears that the perception of Asian populations on the American West Coast hardly changed in the decade following WWII as “signs and comments of 'No Japs Allowed' and 'No Japs Welcome'” were still visible and impacted durably the perception of Asian immigrants in the US (145). It should be noted that the fourth wave of immigration to America is most fully embodied by the character of Gaff who is “primarily Mexican-Japanese” with a “lineage in America [that] stretched back at least five generations” (Sammon, 113).

The images thus evoked by the film's background is rendered all the more striking as it represents a society with “no future” (Sobchack, 226). The inhabitants of the city are stuck on earth, unable to move to the ever elusive “off-world” colonies, the last remaining emblem of an existing better world or life (an idea rendered doubtful by the advertising of these colonies throughout the cityscape, almost as though the population knows better than to believe that it could be a more profitable option to move there). The early to mid-seventies science fiction films from which *Blade Runner* was also inspired were similarly “not successful box office”:

The films of this period are overtly despairing in their evocation of a future with no future. [...] The films dramatize, as well, disenchantment with a “new” technology whose hope has been exhausted, which has become “old” (Sobchack, 226).

Once projected into an imagined future, and with a negative outcome, the social issues facing the film's characters, as well as the spectators watching the film, demand to be addressed, and solved, in order to be avoided:

[It is] possibly helping them to raise their consciousness about what is right and wrong in that world, and even to think about what is to be done, especially in concert with others, to change it for the better (Moylan, xvii).

Ultimately, dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* foreshadow events, their potential outcome, and depict a bleak future in order to raise awareness on issues which – although they are not set within

the film's plot, or part of the story itself – dominate the film's cityscape, its background. It should also be noted, that dystopian films often maintain a horizon of hope in their narrative, and thus allow for an escape into the real where solutions could be found.

Conclusion

Blade Runner is constructed in such a way that it leads the audience back to the real world and the societal issues they face. Indeed, by using oneiric lures which ultimately reveals that there are no possible escape from 2019 Los Angeles for the characters, the film forces the audience to seek out a way back into the real. Moreover, this return to the actual world is suggested to the viewer through the film's setting up of a mirror image of the world in which the audience lives. Indeed, the genres used in *Blade Runner* appear to be an efficient way to connote familiarity in the mind of the viewer and suggest that they superimpose their knowledge of film noir and science fiction codes onto the film to establish stronger ties with the audience's contemporary world. Conversely, the film's background imagery and cityscape are built so as to favour the audience's return to their contemporary world by using, most notably, the existing LA smog and depicting one of its possible outcome to create an even more alienating atmosphere to the film. The film thus develops ecological concerns in a world that seems to have survived a disastrous atomic warfare. Furthermore, the film's population is depicted as being the logical development of the fourth wave of immigration that started in the 1960s and predominantly concerned East Asian and South American populations. By creating this reflective image, the film perfects its dystopian didactic aims and shows that the city exists as a possible world alongside ours, imagined so that it could be avoided. It seems, then, that the city is a form of mirror image, a creature miming our real world's potential outcome.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the design of a dystopian space is built around the entity ruling over that space. In almost all dystopian works, this entity is clearly established and usually embodied by the figure of a man – often deified – or a group of powerful few that exist as an incarnation of totalitarian dystopian power. In *Blade Runner*, however, this entity is not clearly identified, and the audience is never explicitly given the name or shape of this elusive power which strives to alienate the populations it governs. Conversely, the film establishes a powerful background imagery, and the city seems to emerge as the main apparatus through which dystopian power is enforced – notably through its architecture and organisation – and perhaps even created. The city's basic architectural organisation seems fairly easy to apprehend, although it is based on a dizzying paradox: the cityscape is both impossible to observe in its entirety due to its width and at the same time constructed around a principle of hierarchisation and strictly (de)limited space which is used to alienate the film's protagonists. The city is a “locked-in”, enclosed and finite (though not visibly so) space. Moreover, characters are further alienated through the many screens littering the screen space and in which their bodies are contained. Interestingly, it initially seems that the city is an artificial being that retains some organic traits, “intestines” and “mouths”, as though it were some kind of disproportionate monster. This idea echoes the film's aesthetics of doubles and doubling effects which are reproduced in the visual architecture of the cityscape as well as in the structure of the diegesis and the editing. Additionally, the cityscape's appearance gradually turns out to be a reflection of its inhabitants' own physical beings and of some of their specific traits (state of health, social status, etc). Furthermore, it ultimately appears that the city's enclosed space and the reflexivity of its construction forces the viewer to establish links of meaning between the film's

representation of a future society with the audience's present: the world of the film is in fact presented as one possible outcome of our contemporary world and of the issues it faces. Therefore, the notion of pathetic fallacy is used in the film in such a way that the city thus becomes a projection of its dwellers' fears, as well as of our own as a society. Indeed, the fears suggested in the film, the issues represented are built upon societal fears which were fairly present in 1980s American society and which are, for the most part, still relevant today. The city's organic artificiality, its dreamed cityscape, its dystopian construction are, in fact, the result of the city's inhabitants understanding and building of urban space. Rather than being a monster or the entity from which dystopian power emanates, the city was originally the enforcer of that power, and has evolved in such a way that it has perhaps become automated, impossible to reverse. Ultimately, the city of *Blade Runner* is a re-creation of the replicant figure. As a carefully constructed representation of dystopian canons, it operates a mimesis of both the film's protagonists (and adapts itself to their decrepitude) and of the actual world in which the audience lives so that they might come to better understand their contemporary world.

Today, dystopian space is usually constructed following two different models. It is either made out of sanitised, bland spaces, clearly suggesting an absence of emotions and human interaction which follow George Lucas' construction of space in *THX 1138* (1971) with films such as, for instance, Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Lobster* (2015) or the upcoming film by Drake Doremus, *Equals* (2016). Indeed, in these films, space is obsessively organised to look uniform and unobtrusive; in works such as *The Lobster* or the TV series *Wayward Pines* (2015), it thus becomes picture perfect to the point of disturbing. In most instances, however, the dystopian construction of space in films follows the paragon instated in 1982 by *Blade Runner*, in which the city space has become a nightmarish evolution of contemporary (and familiar) cityscapes. Filmmakers such as Terry Gilliams have repeatedly referenced *Blade Runner* in their work by depicting similar cityscapes and enhancing some of its features (narrow inside spaces in *Brazil* (1985), and an overwhelming rainy outside

space in *The Zero Theorem* (2013), along with aggressive commercials following passersby as they walk). Others have experimented around *Blade Runner's* eternal night and its absence of representation of time (Alex Proyas' anamorphous *Dark City* (1998), Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), Rintaro's *Metropolis* (2001), as well as numerous other cyberpunk Japanese animated films). Finally, *Blade Runner's* organisation of space is still often cited in films with little to no modifications (e.g. Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Gabe Ibáñez's *Autómata* (2014), the Neo-Seoul of The Wachowskis' *Cloud Atlas* (2012), etc.). Thus, *Blade Runner* has strongly impacted the representation of dystopian space in films and it has become the archetypal image of a dystopian future.

- 1 The full title *De optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* literally translates, "Of a republic's best state and of the new island Utopia".
- 2 Etymologically the word "utopia" is divided into two lexemes: "u", the Greek letter associated with the unreal (Greek word "ou", literally "no") and joy (prefix "eu-"); and "-topia", derived from the Greek "topos" signifying "the/a place", and "-ia" the "state of being" (Lederer, 1134).
- 3 No one knows for sure when the term was first used. However, the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd ed., Oxford University Press, September 2005, definition of "dystopia") says it was first used in an 1868 speech by John Stuart Mill, in which it was contrasted with the concept of utopia.
- 4 Such referencing lists as the one suggested by Wikipedia ("List of dystopian films") correlates this affirmation, although the list's construction is based on a very wide definition of "dystopia", as well as undoubtedly forgets lesser known films having used the dystopian genre. It remains a relevant reference, however, in that it offers a list of mostly well-known and well-distributed films (therefore accessible to a wide audience). Moreover, because of the wide set of characteristics tied to the dystopian genre in this list, it is possible to observe the way dystopian elements infiltrate and mix in with other types of film and other genres.
- 5 This definition is the one given by the online Oxford Dictionary (at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>).
- 6 The following analysis of the music and sound effects used in *Blade Runner's* introductory credits was originally written for the AN0D241X class (Arts, Musique et Danse) in an essay analysing some of the characteristics of *Blade Runner's* score.
- 7 "The long [music] notes in the film's opening credits were created on Vangelis' Yamaha CS-80 synthesiser, an instrument that featured many performance controls, including a ribbon controller that gave Vangelis the flexibility to apply a pitch bend to his notes. It also had a polyphonic aftertouch, which gave Vangelis control over each note's inflection and modulation by varying the amount of pressure on each key pressed on the instrument." (Nemo Studios)
- 9 This sequence has been further analysed by Florian Lamarque (DEMA, M2R) in a talk given on January 29th, 2016 and entitled "*Tears in Rain*": *the blurring of senses in Blade Runner*. It was then discussed in relation to synesthesia.
- 8 It should be noted that this lack of emotional response, of feeling, is typical also of film noir characters. There is, in fact, a strong correlation between dystopia and film noir as genres, and both are often dealt with by using a fairly similar terminology.
- 10 *Heavy Metal* (in French, *Métal Hurlant*, 1975-1987/2002-2004) was a French comics magazine in which some of Giraud's work was published.

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Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Written by Hampton Fancher and David Webb Peoples, based on the novel by Philip K. Dick. Music. Vangelis. With Harrison Ford (Rick Deckard), Rutger Hauer (Roy Batty) and Sean Young (Rachael). Warner Bros., 1982. DVD. Warner Bros., 2007.

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Dangerous Days: Making 'Blade Runner'. Dir. Charles De Lauzirika. Warner Bros., 2007.

Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Written by Thea Von Harbou and Fritz Lang. Music by Gottfried Huppertz. With Alfred Abel, Brigitte Helm, Gustav Fröhlich and Rudolf Klein-Rogge. UFA Paramount Pictures, 1928. Kino Lorber.

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