

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Blade Runner A diagnostic critique

by Douglas Kellner, Flo Leibowitz, and Michael Ryan

from *Jump Cut*, no. 29, February 1984, pp. 6-8

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1984, 2005

“The ‘therblig’ is the ultimate attempt to turn man into machine: his unique concrete capacities into optimal standard labour. It is difficult to argue for the variety of modern labour in the face of the ‘therblig.’ In its robotisation of a ten-thousandth of a minute, capitalism shows us its desire to make robots of us all — all of the time.

— Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour*

Nightmare visions of futuristic societies, or dystopias, are a major 1970s science fiction genre and stand as signs of a crisis in U.S. ideology.⁽¹⁾ Dystopias are negative utopias, negative images of future worlds. Instead of being places where people might dream of living because everything is so perfect there, dystopias represent places from which, given a chance, people would prefer to flee because everything is so imperfect. Most post-1970s Hollywood films about the future portray worlds that contain extreme environmental pollution, overpopulation, violent cities, bureaucratic administration, and economic exploitation. Conservative dystopias project fears of breakdown of law and order (*ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK*, *THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR*), the disintegration of the family, and the curtailment of individual freedom by centralized governments (*THX 1138*, *LOGAN'S RUN*, *ROLLERBALL*). The films frequently valorize escape to nature (e.g., *THX 1138*, *LOGAN'S RUN*) and yearn for the past. In sum, conservative dystopias present individualism, the couple, the family, and other contemporary institutions and ideologies as more “natural” and desirable than their debased future forms.

In contrast, liberal and radical dystopia films focus on the dangers of increased pollution, nuclear war, and economic exploitation. Some contain veiled allegorical critiques of advanced capitalism (e.g., *ALIEN*, *OUTLAND*, *BLADE RUNNER*). They therefore make a critical commentary on current forms of life and social organization with images of what intensified corporate capitalism, political repression, and

contemporary forms of dehumanization might produce in the future. However, not all dystopias can be easily categorized ideologically. Some articulate complex and often contradictory attitudes toward, and anxieties about increasing mechanization and commodification of life in advanced capitalism, reveal possible ideological conflicts in such societies. We suggest that *BLADE RUNNER* provides such a case of an ideologically ambivalent dystopia. It is open to a diagnostic critique which analyzes its forms of ideology, the film's critique of traditional and contemporary dominant ideologies, and the limitations of the film's critique. We believe that the critic's diagnostic act provides an insight into contemporary society and ideology and indicates areas for radical political intervention — points that we shall return to later.

URBAN IMAGES, FILM NOIR AND THE REVIVAL OF EXPRESSIONISM

Nightmare visions of futuristic cities predominate in a series of films which portray the socio-ecological consequences of contemporary problems such as war and pollution. In a sense, these films are thematically related to disaster films since they articulate fears about nuclear, ecological, and socio-political catastrophe. Such fears stand as symptoms of the structural anxiety most people feel as they experience the instability of an irrational marketplace society. More conservative urban dystopias project fears of the breakdown of law and order in the polis. These often evoke a yearning for stronger authorities and legal institutions to eliminate "criminal elements" and to rectify anxiety through a pacifying force (e.g., *ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK*, *THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR*). *BLADE RUNNER*, however, like Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS*, presents a more critical dystopia in that it projects a future city which perpetuates corporate capitalism's distinguishing features — urban decay, commodification, overcrowding, highly skewed disparities of wealth and poverty, and authoritarian policing. The film's urban images present a world where advanced capitalism's worst features have coalesced to produce a polluted, overpopulated city in a society controlled by giant corporations.

The story of *BLADE RUNNER* is based on a science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick entitled *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?* It is directed by Ridley Scott (*ALIEN*, 1979). The film version focuses more directly than the novel on the relation between capitalism and technology, and between androids (called "replicants" in the film) and human beings.⁽²⁾ In the film's society, the Tyrell corporation produces "replicants" to work and serve humans. Replicants look exactly like humans and even have memory functions. But because they progressively become more and more "human" by acquiring feelings, they are programmed to live only four years. Some have rebelled against their subjection, so a special police, Blade Runners, exists to "retire" unwilling replicants. The story concerns four such replicant rebels who have returned to earth to get their "maker," the Tyrell Corporation, to reprogram them so they can live longer. A Blade Runner, Deckard (Harrison Ford), is called out of semi-retirement to "retire" them.

Deckard falls in love with Rachel (Sean Young), one of Tyrell's most advanced replicants. Deckard manages to kill three of the rebel replicants, and fights a climactic battle with the fourth, Roy (Rutger Hauer). At the end, a police colleague allows Deckard and Rachel to escape from the city and flee into nature.

The images of a futuristic city under late, late capitalism allow *BLADE RUNNER* to be read as a social critique. The opening images of the industrial city's flaring smoke stacks and hazy pollution signify a world of total industrialization — Gary, Indiana, writ large. Industrialization has destroyed nature and forced all "fit" individuals to flee from earth to space colonies. The colored neon billboards and corporate ads dominating the skyline signify commercialization and are the dominant source of light in an otherwise obscure environment. The gaudy neon pink and red evoke a reference to Hell. In their sharp contrast to the dark streets below, the neon colors suggest the incongruity in late capitalism between the dazzling promises of consumption and the harsh realities of production and everyday life. The mixture of signs from Japanese, European, and U.S. capitalism points to a future society where trilateral capitalism has achieved its dream of a world economic system.

The cinematic play of bright, artificial images against a hazy background creates unsettling effects through which the urban scenes express social fears about urban decay and anxieties about total domination by corporations. The urban images portray a devastated environment with many houses abandoned and streets full of garbage. Crowds of people mill through rain-soaked streets, evoking common fears about overpopulation and "foreigners" overrunning future cities. On the East and West coasts of the U.S., for example, Japanese ramen and sushi cafes have replaced U.S. fast food chains, and visibly prominent are many Asian merchants and street people. The film here seems to articulate paranoia about Japanese capitalism "taking over" the United States. Nevertheless, the film's city (Los Angeles) seems under the hegemony of U.S. capitalism, which now seems to have incorporated its rivals into its structure. The society's economic structure combines small, street-merchant-style, "free enterprise" with paternalistic capitalist control. Most of the merchants in the film are Asian or European, whereas the corporate president and executives of the Tyrell Corporation are all North Americans.

Predominant in the film's setting are images of buildings which stand like fortresses towering above the masses of people milling through the streets. These towers contain corporate headquarters and look like Mayan temples. Inside, they have the trappings of palatial mansions and are often filmed in hazy golden light. The set design and narrative use of sets create an atmosphere of splendor and mystery. The high towers are accessible only by special flying vehicles, limited to the police, or by controlled access elevators. As does Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS*, *BLADE RUNNER* contrasts an upper city containing the powerful and privileged (the Tyrell Corporation offices, the police station) with a lower city containing the masses. *BLADE RUNNER* also features monumental

buildings and stairways as interiors, eccentrically lit and photographed at distorted angles, designed to make them appear overwhelming and ominous. There are other cinematic parallels to Lang's *METROPOLIS*. For example, the tycoon Tyrell has a marked physical resemblance to *Metropolis* boss, John Frederson, and Deckard's final duel with Roy copies in some respects the confrontation between Freder, the capitalist's son turned revolutionary, and *Metropolis*' evil Dr. Rotwang, who like the Tyrell Corporation created robots to serve as laborers.

In fact, *BLADE RUNNER*'s formal style throughout is neo-expressionist with dark shadows, hazy lighting, and odd camera angles. Thematically, too, the film contains marked expressionist elements.⁽³⁾ The android chief Roy's poetic speeches seem like abbreviated versions of the ideologically ambiguous, rhapsodic monologue found in much expressionist theater. And his conversion from poet-warrior to Christ-like savior recalls expressionist "transformation drama." Moreover, *BLADE RUNNER* borrows entire sequences from German expressionist films. In addition to the *METROPOLIS* parallels, the sleazy bar where Deckard finds the android Zhora is reminiscent of Mrs. Greifer's party in Pabst's film *THE JOYLESS STREET*, even down to the insect-like hats on the women. An image of Deckard, silhouetted on the stairway, parallels a similar moment in *NOSFERATU*. Overall, *BLADE RUNNER*'s emphasis on the degraded, alienating city parallels that of expressionist "street films" taken together. Thus one could read *BLADE RUNNER* as a reprise of Lang's vision of a futuristic city, featuring a final combat which conspicuously does not repeat *METROPOLIS*' appeal for class collaboration. *BLADE RUNNER* concludes by promoting the myth of transcendent romantic love in as desperate a way as another expressionist film, *DESTINY*.

Historically, expressionism has often contained a social critique, but usually an ideologically ambiguous critique, partly because of the very style. Basic to expressionism are techniques of distortion, essentializing, and exaggeration, not only of the physical environment but of character traits and behavior as well. In *BLADE RUNNER*, expressionist aesthetic techniques both articulate critiques of capitalism and embody sexist, individualist and romantic ideologies — just as they did in 1920s German expressionist art, where expressionist style and techniques were used by both the Left and Right.

Moreover, many stylistic elements of film noir make *BLADE RUNNER* even more aesthetically complex. Deckard appropriates the voice-over, first-person narrator role of the film noir detective, and Rachel acts as a classic femme noire — dark, sensual, mysterious, and seemingly morally ambivalent. Like the noire woman, Rachel wears furs, red lipstick, man-tailored suits with padded shoulders, and a 1940s Andrews Sisters hairstyle. Film noir's "corrupt society" ethos also dominates and shapes this film's overall mood of cultural pessimism.

Consequently, expressionist and film noir elements serve more than a simply formal function. Historically, both styles have conveyed malaise

and disillusionment. However, expressionism generally has conveyed an active, outraged sense of justice or ethical idealism, while film noir's underlying point of view has been more amoral, cynical and resigned. *BLADE RUNNER* attempts to bring these elements together in an ideological amalgam that combines philosophical ruminations and economic critique with extremely regressive sexual politics and an individualism and romanticism historically typical of bourgeois ideology. This amalgam results in a play of conflicting ideological elements.

CAPITALISM, EXPLOITATION, AND REVOLT

BLADE RUNNER uses its highly stylized images and convoluted story to articulate fears of capitalist exploitation, technological dehumanization and the collapse of values such as love, empathy, and community. It sets into opposition the conflicts between these values and new forms of technology and social life under advanced capitalism. The technology / humanity opposition is delineated by three characters: Roy, a machine, longs to be human and fears death. Deckard, a human, increasingly sympathizes with the replicants. And Rachel, a replicant, thinks she is human and eventually enters a love relationship with a human, Deckard. Although most dystopias express fears of technology and depersonalization, *BLADE RUNNER* attempts to depict some mediation between technology and human values. Deckard says,

"Replicants are like any other machine. They can be a benefit or a hazard."

The film concludes with what seems a happy marriage of humans and replicants as Deckard and Rachel flee the city together.

The replicants stand for capitalism's oppressive features and, to a lesser degree, rebellion against exploitation. The Tyrell Corporation invents replicants to have a controllable labor force that will perform difficult and dangerous tasks. Similarly, capitalism today makes individuals into machines disciplined to fit into the labor system. The Tyrell Corporation has as a motto, "More Human Than Human." Ironically, the replicants carry out a very human rebellion, while most of the human characters seem to submit to corporate domination and a very dehumanized life. Intact, the narrative line establishes a clear similarity between Deckard's recognizing how the Tyrell Corporation exploits him and the replicants' rebellion, since both sides — killer and killed — reject their status as servants of the corporation and refuse further exploitation.

BLADE RUNNER presents a future society which blurs the line between human and machine, and it contains philosophical meditations on what it means to be human. Awareness of finitude and fear of dying are shown as distinctively human traits, along with knowledge of one's past. The replicants treasure their (faked) pictures of early life and their (programmed) memories of earlier events. They are characterized as being especially fond of pictures of their "childhood" and "families." Thus the film presents the family as a naturalized social unit. On their own,

the replicants form surrogate families, and the film ends with Rachel and Deckard's forming a family. And as the replicants become aware of their limited life spans, fear of death drives them to seek a longer future commensurate with their implanted memories and growing love of life. Roy especially treasures his warrior memories of past battles and aesthetic spectacles, and he is driven by fear of dying to discover his maker and to be programmed to live longer. When Roy learns that this is impossible, he murders the corporate president Tyrell and also the toymaker Sebastian, who had felt pity for him and taken him to see Tyrell.⁽⁴⁾ When Roy discovers that Deckard has killed his female replicant partner, Pris, Roy becomes inundated by very human feelings of love and loss and rage at Deckard.

Roy, who had been presented as a Nietzschean poet-warrior, renounces his program as a ruthless killer and instead chooses pity and compassion; the Nietzschean *Übermensch* (Superman) thus becomes a *Mensch*, a human being.

In the final showdown between Deckard and Roy, Roy could kill Deckard but chooses not to. Before saving Deckard, Roy says,

"Quite an experience to live in fear isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave."

Roy's transformation stands as one of the narrative's most bizarre and interesting aspects. Roy breaks Deckard's fingers and sadistically torments the detective. He removes most of Deckard's clothing and prances around howling like a wolf. When Roy sees that his own hands are beginning to freeze up — the sign of his impending death — he pierces his hand with a nail to stimulate motor activity. Then suddenly he gains compassion and pity. Whereas he began as an Aryan warrior, he ends a Christ figure with a nail through one hand and a symbolic dove in the other. As Roy contemplates Deckard desperately hanging onto the edge of a roof, Roy strokes the dove and releases it before sparing Deckard, a symbol of liberation and peace. Deckard later says,

"I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he did before. Not just his life. All life."

And Deckard goes on to escape with Rachel, portraying the possibility of symbiosis between humans and machines.

BLADE RUNNER privileges empathy as the distinctively human trait, the basis of morality and solidarity with one's fellow beings.⁽⁵⁾ In BLADE RUNNER, the replicants' revolt is portrayed positively as a slave revolt. Deckard empathizes with the replicants' rebellion, refuses orders to kill Rachel, and flees with her with the aid of a sympathetic policeman. The film implicitly rejects aggression and violence, for both the replicant Roy and Deckard renounce their warrior roles. BLADE RUNNER's vision of possible harmonious relations between humans and replicants can be

contrasted to the technophobia in many science fiction films and the simplistic anthropomorphizing of robots in George Lucas' STAR WARS series. Furthermore, STAR WARS celebrates Jedi warriors and military action as high adventure and proof of manhood. BLADE RUNNER progressively renounces violence. This is especially obvious when we look at other recent Hollywood films that celebrate violence and militarism.

SEXUAL POLITICS, ROMANTICISM, AND INDIVIDUALISM

Despite its thematic complexity and questioning of contemporary values and institutions, the film has reactionary features. It is especially regressive in its sexual politics. The two female replicants that Deckard kills are derogatorily portrayed. One seems a whorish temptress, replete with snakes; she violently assaults Deckard. Another, a punk blonde, appears as a symbolic castrator in a combat scene where she uses scissor-like legs to attempt to snap Deckard's neck. In contrast, the "good" female replicant, Rachel, fulfills the common male fantasy of the completely pliant woman who serves all a man's needs. She is usually on hand when Deckard needs her and she even kills another replicant to save his life.

Moreover, the film uses her in a characteristic narrative way to arouse sexual tension, in a scene of threatened rape. Deckard tries to "humanize" her by "liberating" her sexuality. This scene is disturbingly close to presenting male power and violence in the form of forced sexuality as okay. It's shown as a way to "educate" women as to "what they really want" or about "what is good for them." In contrast to the pliant Rachel, the other female characters are her opposite and thus explicitly more *threatening*. They are killed, whereas the more submissive Rachel "gets her man," rewarded with the couple's romantic bliss,

Indeed, BLADE RUNNER ends by evoking romanticism. The heterosexual couple is presented as the route to happiness. The scenes showing Rachel and Deckard's embraces and their escape into nature are unusual in being brightly lit. The final escape and the dove release scene are the only times that the film employs natural color and light. However, the flight from the city into nature is ideologically ambivalent. Previous dystopias, like THX 1138 and LOGAN'S RUN, also show protagonists escaping from regimented authoritarian, bureaucratic regimes into nature. In these films, the escape would be to a conservative haven. It sanctions the return to more traditional (i.e. "natural") political, economic, and social institutions and arrangements.

In general, nature in dystopias plays different roles in different films. For instance, nature can take on a progressive value when it is used to criticize the destruction of the environment or the reduction of life to a profitable machine. In BLADE RUNNER, nature seems to represent a non-capitalist, non-oppressive, ecologically balanced world of compassion and community, a world of peace which rejects violence and exploitation.

Most returns to nature operate within a liberal individualist framework that privileges individual self-possession and natural right. Thus we see many urban technological dystopias critique the loss of natural land and spontaneous, individual selfhood. *BLADE RUNNER* shares some of this familiar liberal individualism, but it also explicitly critiques corporate capitalism.

Yet the film's ending contains sexist, individualist, and overly romantic elements. The couple's flight embodies a male fantasy of escaping from social responsibility with a submissive woman. In effect, the ending advocates withdrawal and retreat from the inhumanity of capitalism rather than any collective struggle. Whereas the replicant Roy represents militant struggle against capitalist oppression, Deckard represents individualist revolt and flight. In many respects, Deckard is presented as a typical Hollywood individualist hero, the tough guy with a conscience whose rebellion merely amounts to getting away with his woman. The audience is led to identify more with Deckard's safer rebellion than with Roy's. Consequently, the idea of rebellion in *BLADE RUNNER* becomes defused and contained within conventional images of individual rebellion and flight.

The images of Roy, the replicant warrior who finds compassion, are also ambiguous. On the one hand, he serves as an icon of oppression and rebellion. He renounces the warrior role assigned to him by his programming. His poetic meandering combined with warrior posturing, however, makes this character susceptible to being read as a tragic fascist warrior. In fact, Rutger Hauer's Roy has unmistakably Aryan features, so much so that Philip K. Dick told an interviewer that after viewing the initial shots of Roy in action, he thought that he was

"seeing one of those Nordic supermen, one of those blonde brutes that Hitler dreamed of creating in the laboratory." [\(6\)](#)

Roy's motive for his transformation is also unclear. The film privileges Deckard's explanation, as it suggests that the experiences of finitude and empathy are distinctive human traits. In the face of his own death Roy renounces his warrior program. Although the combat scenes seem to celebrate violence and the warrior role, both Roy and Deckard give up violence at the end. Viewers may see this renunciation of violence as a preferred reading of the film.

Yet *BLADE RUNNER* offers no clear vision of liberation. The film's ambiguity in many ways reflects its conflicting views about liberation. Liberation is shown as rejecting exploitation in favor of more rational and humane forms of social and economic life; as renouncing violence and revenge in favor of empathy and compassion; as personal escape or withdrawal; and as the undifferentiated expression of suppressed passions, whatever they may be, and the experience of intensity for its own sake. Roy, in particular, embodies these conflicts. In him, the experience of passionate intensity and revolt against oppression are not merely valorized but are the same.

BLADE RUNNER's ambiguity, then, makes it hard to appraise the film's ideologies. On the one hand, the film seems to advocate flight into privatism, into conventional romance as escape. At times it seems to privilege an undifferentiated celebration of intensity. But unlike much expressionist art which prefigured fascism in a similar socio-cultural landscape in Weimar Germany, the film does not flee into atavistic mysticism or into a mystified celebration of the fascist warrior or ecstatic surrender. What BLADE RUNNER's conflicting views of liberation suggest most clearly is that segments of U.S. society are seriously disenchanted with capitalism but cannot envisage *how* a liberated society can be collectively constructed or what it would look like.⁽⁷⁾ This confusion leads to privileging havens of privatized empathy and romance so as to resist institutional exploitation and violence.

Such resistance — rejecting dominant public values of corporate exploitation, militarism, and commodification — cannot simply be dismissed as bourgeois privatism. The flight to an empathetic and romantic interior space away from the external realm of public callousness suggests a general human aversion to capitalist market values. In addition, the film's constituting a private realm of resistance provides a space for explicitly anti-market values and suggests that there are needs that corporate market capitalism cannot hope to fulfill (except in the form of religious ideologies). The flight to romance and to nature thus gives rise to at least a double reading. Romance signifies escape but also resistance. It atomizes the collectivity in ways conducive to domination. Yet it also creates a protected arena where a humane autonomy is possible, one founded in compassionate values and one that would be the basis for genuine collectivity. Thus if BLADE RUNNER exaggerates privatism, it may be because in contemporary capitalism humane values are only possible in the private sphere.

Moreover, although these commendable values fit into contemporary U.S. sentiment, their ideological use is sometimes quite conservative. And the film undercuts conservative romanticism in several ways. First, nature is not quite posed as a romantic, positive term against negative society (i.e., technology, the city, industry, etc.). This opposition is undercut through Rachel's flight with Deckard. It is a marrying of machines and humans in a symbiosis that deconstructs nature-technology oppositions despite the film's more general ideological portrayal of nature as an otherness that lies outside of human culture.

The film also questions another romantic opposition, that between analysis (or science) and feeling, an opposition based on traditional distinctions between intellect and emotions. Analysis, instrumental rationality, is represented in the film by machines that dissect human and objective reality. For instance, the police detect replicants with analytic instruments that observe minute emotional reactions expressed in the respondent's eye. Analysis is presented as an instrument of power. Posed against this as a positive opposite is feeling, which the film presents as resisting analysis. In fact, the first replicant shown, Leon, literally blows the analytic machinery away with a gun when it

encroaches even on his "programmed" feelings. As with the first opposition, the film performs a limited deconstruction of this second opposition while nonetheless remaining within an essentially romantic ideological framework that poses feeling against analysis.

In the deconstructive moment, however, feeling is shown to have a rational basis, to be more human than analytic rationality. Empathy and feeling for others are shown to be the basis of human solidarity. Analytic rationality is depicted in turn as irrational and anti-human when used instrumentally in a policed, exploitative, and inegalitarian society. Although the film restores the opposition and finally makes a norm of feeling while denigrating analysis, it can only do so ironically, after questioning the opposition. Deckard's ironic parting line concerning Rachel – "I didn't know how long we'll have together. Who does?" – helps retrieve the film from being too romantically maudlin. By simultaneously questioning and affirming a set of romantic oppositions (nature-culture, analysis-feeling, humans-machines), *BLADE RUNNER* avoids the conservative sentimentalism that characterizes other romantic filmic sci-fi texts, like *E.T.* and Spielberg's other recent films.

Although we see multivalent possibilities for reading the thematics and style of *BLADE RUNNER*, we also clearly see its negative features. Humane values seem to be accessible only through the couple, not publicly. Such an opposition between public and private needs to be undone, and we can interpret the split between public and private spheres as a product of capitalism. From this perspective, in a humane, socialist society, private values would be respected and supported in the public sphere. Vice-versa, social values could be realized in the private sphere.

The exaggerated privatism of *BLADE RUNNER* represents contemporary capitalism where the only space that social and humane values can be practiced is the private arena. In addition, the concluding "utopia" represents a white male projection: Rachel follows Deckard, and Deckard actively drives the car with Rachel passively observing the landscape.

Moreover, the film deliberately establishes Deckard as a white macho figure set apart from the masses of largely non-white street people. Sexism and racism remain acceptable even if apologies for capitalism do not. This suggests that rejecting capitalism may be more thinkable to many people than rejecting patriarchy and racism — as some feminists, blacks, Hispanics and other racial groups have claimed. The striking sexism in a film about exploitation and liberation is revealing and testifies to deep-rooted sexism ingrained in male artists and to the threat that feminism poses for most males.

BLADE RUNNER's contradictory mélange of elements suggests that it can be read as a symptom of ideological confusion and conflict. On one level, *BLADE RUNNER* reflects the conflicting input of the film's producers and then suggests that collaborative art, if not necessarily

democratic, will represent more and more a contradictory mélange of views. As ideological differences sharpen, mass art tries to accommodate these differences, at the same time that it tries to appeal to differences in the mass audience that it seeks.⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand, this film's attempt to produce an amalgam of diverse ideologies points to the absence of a dominant monolithic ideology here. It suggests that ideological conflict, within certain limits, characterizes the contemporary United States.

Conflicting readings of an ideologically complex film like *BLADE RUNNER* are possible and even necessary. Even *BLADE RUNNER*'s individualist and escapist elements can represent cultural pessimism and crisis. The culture industries seem incapable of or unwilling to legitimate ideologies or advocate attractive models of social change. Doing so would make them advocate radical social transformation outside the ideological boundaries of mainstream Hollywood film. Dystopic films like *BLADE RUNNER* open up to critical scrutiny both social crises and various ideological solutions. They thus provide possibilities for a *diagnostic critique*. This would analyze the contradictory ideologies of contemporary Hollywood films and what the films themselves reveal about contemporary society and ideology. Such a cultural critique can be utilized to develop political strategies around the needs, desires, fears and fantasies articulated in popular film. Film can be one index for radicals to use as they seek to develop ways to intervene in contemporary culture which will evoke a popular response. A study of dystopias like *BLADE RUNNER* reveals fears in the United States about losing individual identity and freedom. It also reveals people's compensatory desire for a space of compassion and empathy, one immune to administration, mass leveling and commodification. As *BLADE RUNNER* indicates, the solutions offered for these problems in the contemporary United States are limited by the ideologies of liberal individualism, neo-Christianity, moral romanticism, and the family.

BLADE RUNNER demonstrates the limitations of these contemporary ideologies while seeming to celebrate them. A diagnostic critique of the film heeds points of internal dissymmetry — where the problem depicted exceeds the solutions offered, where what the film describes undoes what it declares to be a way out. The sunnyvale nature at *BLADE RUNNER*'s end, for example, would ultimately relaunch the problem that the film depicts, for the ideology of nature forms the basis of the capitalist ideology that the film critiques. This ideology romantically conceives of nature as freedom, as a self-regulatory and harmonious organism. It thus becomes precisely the legitimating ideology of the capitalist "free market." *BLADE RUNNER*'s apparent escape from monopoly capitalism is thus operated by an amalgamated ideology that combines elements which traditionally legitimate monopoly capitalism. Moreover, as a practical course of action, flight into nature is prohibited by the very features that the film critiques — alienated labor's need to earn wages, total corporate control of the economy and society, and the dominance of exchange value over use-value.

Thus, a diagnostic critique of BLADE RUNNER can disclose that the solutions available in U.S. political culture are limited and often related to ideologies that underwrite oppression. A diagnostic critique of film seeks to outline the contours of those limitations and to point beyond them to solutions which are both attentive to these limitations while seeking to transcend them. It is in such a way that the reading of film might be of use for the development of political strategies for radical social change.

[1.](#) On dystopias as a literary genre, see Harold L. Berger, *Science Fiction and the New Dark Age* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1976). On post-1970s dystopia films, see the study in Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Politics and Ideology in Contemporary Hollywood Films* (forthcoming), and on the cultural pessimism in recent science fiction films, see H. Bruce Franklin, "Future Imperfect," *American Film* (March 1973), pp. 47-49.

[2.](#) *L'écran fantastique*, 26 (1982) contains a full dossier of interviews with Dick, Scott, and various other members of the film's production team. We shall draw on this material in the course of our reading.

[3.](#) On the styles, themes, and historical origins and environment of German Expressionism, see Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner, editors, *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin Press, 1983).

[4.](#) In an earlier script, after Roy kills Tyrell, he discovers that Tyrell is a replicant too and that Sebastian is really his creator! Roy then becomes furious that "God is Dead," and kills Sebastian! See *L'écran fantastique*, 36.

[5.](#) Jurgen Habermas tells of how in his last talk with Herbert Marcuse, Herbert stated, "I know wherein our most basic value judgments are rooted — in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others." "Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 25 (1980), pp. 11-12. In *L'écran fantastique*, the screenwriter Hampton Fancher states that for him, "Empathy is the key to the entire story" (p. 26).

[6.](#) See the interview with Dick in *L'écran fantastique*, p. 21.

[7.](#) According to the discussion in Franklin's article on recent science fiction films (see note 1), ANDROID contains a story where replicants actually and successfully carry out a collective slave revolt; unfortunately, we have not been able to see the film.

[8.](#) The *L'écran fantastique* dossier reveals that screenwriter Hampton Fancher saw BLADE RUNNER as primarily a tale about empathy (p. 26), while scenarist David People said he considered it essentially a police story (p. 31). Sean Young, who played Rachel, said she treated the film as "a romantic thriller, like CASABLANCA" (p. 48). Harrison Ford

(Deckard) perceived it as a detective story in the tradition of Philip Marlowe (p. 47). Ridley Scott interpreted it both as a "philosophical work" and as a futuristic police thriller (pp. 34ff.). Finally, the producer of BLADE RUNNER, Michael Deeley, speaks, who earlier produced THE DEER HUNTER. We suggest that this heterogeneity of input into the film, and the quite diverse ideological positions embodied in the film itself have produced a contradictory ideological amalgam, and that this sort of film requires multivalent readings that unpack the contradictory aesthetic and ideological components.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)