Blade Runner: The economic shaping of a film

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The setting: Hollywood in the 1980s

The structure of Hollywood film production has undergone profound changes over the last forty years. Following Anti-Trust legislation in 1948 which ruled that production and distribution had to be separated from exhibition, the major studios could no longer guarantee screens for their films. Combined with the rise of television ownership, this led to the break-up of the assembly-line system of production with waged workers. Instead Hollywood shifted to a system of freelance piece-workers working for independent production companies whose products were and are distributed and marketed by the major studios. In the 1960s, as studios faced serious financial problems, they were incorporated into giant conglomerates with interests in and out of the entertainment business.

Warner, the studio with the distribution rights on *Blade Runner*, grew at the end of the sixties from Warner Brothers into Warner Communications Incorporated (WCI). According to Gustafson, Warner was 'organised according to the principle of multiple profit centres which reinforce each other in an interlocking and financially conservative pattern that is designed not only to generate revenue and profits, but to keep such monies in the corporation.'[1] Warner became financially stable because of its capacity to divert money from profit-making to loss-making divisions of its enterprises, but also by turning its movie products into multi-media products through tie-ins such as videos, music, toys, clothing, books and computer games. *Blade Runner*'s eventual producers were The Ladd Company, a powerful independent group of the early eighties who also produced *Body Heat*. The dilemma for a group like The Ladd Company in its production strategy was whether to use Warner's existing structures for multi-media exploitation or set up their own deals and ancillary profits. The former was likely to be more effective but more designed to profit Warner, the latter less effective but likely to give them a greater share of the profits. Similarly

Warner themselves would look carefully at whether or not tie-ins in movies like *Blade Runner* are likely to be profitable, based among other things on their consideration of likely demographic appeal.

It should be noted, however, that the studio structure in the eighties changed further when studios started buying their way back into exhibition. In 1985, Columbia bought up a small group of New York cinemas and since then Universal/MCA, Paramount, Warner's, the Cannon Group and Tri-Star have all acquired or opened cinemas with the tacit approval of the US justice department. By 1988, the majors had acquired nearly a fifth of movie houses in North America, creating what many see as the beginning of an impenetrable vertical and horizontal monopoly. The advantages of vertical integration are that the corporation 'sells' products to itself and need not worry about being excluded from key markets.

This shift from the old studio to the new conglomerate structure has led to a concomitant shift from product to profit – and hence market-orientation. Production is funded by the studio but carried out by the independent company and in order to obtain funding, studio executives must be presented or 'pitched' with a 'package'. Desirable characteristics of a package would normally include:

1. The concept, preferably a 'high concept' or 'jingle' which reduces the story to a readily understandable – and hence marketable – phrase: for example Alien as '*Jaws* on a spaceship', or *Top Gun* as '*Star Wars* on Earth'.
2. A good title and a positive ending.
3. A blend of novelty and familiarity using heroes with whom an audience could easily identify.
4. An appeal to teenagers as the most frequent filmgoers as well as mass appeal to a wider audience, both male and female.
5. A bankable star and a big director.
6. Tie-in potential and previous success for the project in another medium such as stage or fiction.[2]

According to Murdock and Golding, the overall effect of this packaging means that 'the determining context of production is always that of the market. In seeking to maximise the market, products must draw on the most widely legitimated core values while rejecting the dissenting voice or the incompatible objection to a ruling myth.'[3] In this context, we may move on now to consider the vexed production history of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

The film's main literary source was the 1968 science fiction novel of Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In Dick's novel a world is depicted where animal life has almost completely been wiped out because of nuclear war. Human status and self-esteem are measured by the ownership of the few remaining animals, and if real animals are

not available then people have to settle for surrogate models such as electric sheep. Early in the seventies, Herb Jaffe optioned the novel and gave it to his brother to adapt for the screen, but, according to Dick, the resulting screenplay was dire. In 1974, a further source for the movie emerged. Alan E. Nourse, a little-known writer, produced a science fiction thriller called *Blade Runner* in which illegal doctors help their sick patients by using surgical instruments supplied by so-called blade runners. The celebrated novelist William Burroughs was later to write a screenplay based on Nourse's book. In the same year Hampton Fancher, a screenwriter, approached Dick regarding the rights to *his* novel and in 1978, when the Jaffes allowed their option to lapse, Fancher and his collaborator, Brian Kelly, immediately bought them up. They produced an eight page outline which was shown to Michael Deeley, the producer of Michael Cimino's Oscar-winning *The Deer Hunter*. Deeley then approached several production companies all of whom showed interest but requested changes, including a happy ending. The script went through several more drafts before 1980, when Deeley approached the British director Ridley Scott whose science fiction feature *Alien* was a top-grossing film of that year.

Before becoming a film director, Scott had made his name as a prolific director of television commercials in Britain and the United States, his most acclaimed successes being advertisements for Hovis, Strongbow Cider and Levi Jeans. At that time he was scheduled to direct an adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels, but production delays gave him a chance to work with Deeley instead and *Dune* was eventually directed by David Lynch. Scott's involvement clinched a financing and distribution deal with Filmways, an independent production company, and Dick's original title was changed to *The Android*. The project was budgeted at between twelve and thirteen million dollars but quickly escalated to over twenty million. Scott added to the cost by bringing in the renowned industrial designer Syd Mead at a fee of $1150 a day and a budget of one and a half million dollars over eighteen months.

The production encountered further difficulties. Shooting was originally planned for London but Harrison Ford, eventually to play the central character, Deckard, a private investigator or 'blade runner' of the future, refused the location because five out of six of his previous films had been made in London. Meanwhile Dustin Hoffman turned down the part because he was uninterested in the macho role of the central character. In 1981, moreover, Filmways found themselves in financial difficulty and the escalating budget of the movie too burdensome. The film went into turnaround and was picked up by The Ladd Company in association with Tandem Production. Meanwhile

Ford accepted the lead when the location was changed to Hollywood and negotiated a 20 per cent profit sharing deal. A start was made on creating a Los Angeles of the year 2019 on the Warner studio lot where Cagney and Bogart had shot many of their celebrated movies.

Script development also became more complicated. Scott and The Ladd Company suggested a major revision of the script, now titled *Dangerous Days*. As co-owner of the property, Fancher at first resisted but eventually agreed to another writer, David Peoples, being brought in to incorporate Scott's desired changes. Peoples introduced a new term 'replicant' to replace the more hackneyed 'android' and dispensed with the idea of Deckard's hunt for rebel androids being motivated by a desire for live animals. Other scenes dropped included Deckard's past exploits as a bounty hunter in days when it was easier to eliminate primitive and less humanoid androids. These scenes were excluded partly because of cost and partly because of Scott's feeling that the plot lines were already complicated enough. After the start of pre-production, Peoples took out of the script items such as a futuristic ambulance which had already been built at considerable expense. The movie title was now changed to *Blade Runner*, a term which had little to do with the story, but was felt to be more appealing and more bankable. This change, of course, necessitated the producers buying the rights to use the title of Nourse's novel on which Burroughs had already worked, and to which their own project had little relevance.

Another troublesome area of production was special effects. The special effects team, headed by Douglas Trumbull and Richard Yuricich, who had worked on *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, originally estimated the script's effects at five and a half million dollars while only two million dollars had been budgeted in production. The script had to be altered to reduce the number of effects and their eventual cost, covering 85 shots, was three and a half million dollars.[4] In March 1981, *Blade Runner* went into full production but Peoples was still changing the script, occasionally writing scenes that were to be shot that day. Each revision also took the script further and further away from the original novel. As Robin Wood remarked:

> *Blade Runner* is not really an adaptation . . . Gone or played down are most of the novel's structuring premises: the nuclear war that has rendered the earth unsafe for the support of life and health; the use of animals as rare, expensive, coveted status symbols: the pseudoreligion of Mercerism.[5]

It could be argued then, that although the film was built on motifs selected from the novel, it had become so different that it is best regarded, as Wood claims, as an autonomous work. Finally with relations between Ford and Scott strained over the director's demands

for endless retakes, shooting was completed over-budget and over-schedule with two endings, a downbeat ending and an alternative happy ending. In his initial cut, Scott opted for the former.

The choice turned out to be a preview disaster. A rough cut was shown in Dallas and Denver, but the audience was unhappy with the downbeat ending and angry Ford fans threw cans and popcorn packets at the screen. Ladd Company executives ordered a hasty recut, concerned that they had an expensive flop on their hands. According to Alan Mackenzie, one crucial scene excised from the final cut attempted to eliminate the element of despair in Deckard's character.[6] Returning to his apartment, having just revealed to Rachael that she is a replicant, Deckard sits idly tinkling piano keys, surrounded by photographs. Into this scene Scott had cut now-absent flashes of a unicorn running through woodland. The motivation of this unicorn sequence became clear in the final scenes. Gaff leaves behind an origami unicorn, indicating that he knows Deckard's private memories, and the only way this could possibly happen would be if Deckard was a replicant with all his memories nothing more than artificial transplants. The original version ended with a despairing look of realisation on Deckard's face and a final shot of a lift door slamming shut. Scott accepted this crucial omission of his original ending but objected to others which attempted to give added pace to the film, including Ford's voice-over which was added to clarify the story-line. Out-takes from the opening helicopter shots of Kubrick's *The Shining* were also added to give the film an upbeat ending. At this point, relations between Scott and The Ladd Company were understandably strained.

With release pending, tie-ins proliferated Dick's original novel was now retitled *Blade Runner*, with a publisher's reassuring note that 'though the novel's characters and background differ in some respects from those of the film, readers who enjoy the movie will discover an added dimension on encountering the original work.' The book was promoted by Granada Publishing as 'the action-packed tie-in of the year' with display bins, counter packs and posters. However in June 1982, the picture opened to unfavourable reviews. After a first week box-office gross of nine and a half million dollars, Warner quickly initiated 'rapid pullback', withdrawing the film from US theatrical distribution and releasing it on pay television through its Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Network on the Movie Channel, as well as on hire or purchase video through its Home Video outlets. This restricted its US-Canada domestic rental to fourteen and a half million dollars as compared with production costs of twenty-seven million dollars.[7] The rule of thumb used in Hollywood is that for a film to break even, the domestic rentals must match the production budget with the marketing costs being offset by overseas and ancillary income. With

Blade Runner this had clearly not happened.

The tortuous production history of the picture has shown many inputs at work – both enabling and constraining its final shape. Conceived as the popular picture of a commodified and anonymous literary property, it ended up as a compromised filmic text and yet became a darling of the art-house circuit, a cult movie revered by critics who often felt safe in its apparent mass appeal while ignoring its commercial failure.

Blade Runner: The question of meaning

The picture has a narrative typical of many mainstream American movies. Deckard, the white enforcer hero, restores order to society and is rewarded by the love of a beautiful princess, Rachael (Sean Young). In a science fiction variation of this traditional theme, Rachael is, of course, a replicant. Yet the film presents some very puzzling features. The opening is a special effects *tour de force* with magnificent yet oppressive shots of a future industrial landscape reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Throughout the film, the city is perpetually dark and rain-soaked at street level with the sun only hazily apparent from the mile-high Tyrell building. The film ends with a shot of Deckard and Rachael escaping in his car (which has wheels and cannot fly). This shot then dissolves in helicopter shots, out-takes from Kubrick's *The Shining*, of a sunlit countryside with snow-topped mountains. Compared with the spectacular beginning, the ending seems artificial, an unsatisfying conclusion.

One way of trying to read the beginning of a film involves employing the formalist concept of the 'dominant'. Kristin Thompson argues that through the dominant 'the stylistic, narrative and thematic levels will relate to each other . . . The work cues us to its dominant by *foregrounding* certain devices and placing others less prominently'.[8] The dominant can usually be identified in the opening sequences of a film. In Scott's opening sequence, the stunning night shots of the vast industrial landscape are intercut with giant close-ups of an eye reflecting the golden tongues of flame shooting out of huge towers. The sequence ends with shots of twin neo-Mayan pyramids suggesting human sacrifice to the God, or Moloch, of capitalism. This encapsulates a major theme of the film as a whole: the individual trapped in a world dominated by conglomerates. At the same time Scott cues the spectator into what will be a recurrent motif essential to the understanding of the narrative – the 'golden eye'.

This motif is re-engaged immediately in the next sequence when Leon undergoes the replicant test, and throughout the film all replicants, that is to say genetically-engineered humanoid robots, are seen with glowing eyes. One specific shot, however, also shows Rachael *and* the supposedly

human Deckard with illuminated eyes, suggesting that Deckard too is a replicant. The enigma of the shot is then reinforced when Rachael asks Deckard if he has ever subjected himself to the replicant test. A further recurring motif is the fixation of the replicants with the photographs which reflect their artificially implanted memories. At the same time Deckard and Captain Bryant, who has coerced Deckard into hunting down replicants in the first place, are both visually framed surrounded by photographs. One of the main puzzles for the audience, therefore, is to decide exactly who is a replicant and who is not.

Perhaps the most puzzling motif of all, however, is that of the three origami figures which police officer Gaff constructs. Early in the film when Deckard is unwilling to take on Bryant's assignment, Gaff makes a tiny chicken from scrap paper and the meaning is obvious. Later when Deckard searches Leon's hotel room, Gaff makes a tiny figure of a man with either a tail or a penis. Here the meaning is more ambiguous. It could be that Gaff knows that Deckard is not a real man but an android. Near the end, as Rachael and Deckard flee from his apartment, Rachael steps on something which Deckard picks up. It is the small silver paper figure of a unicorn, and Deckard shakes his head despairingly at the memory of Gaff's last words as they come through in voice-over: 'It's too bad she won't live, but then again who does?' Without a knowledge of Scott's original cut, the connotations of the unicorn remain obstinately mystifying.

The mysteries of *Blade Runner* highlight what is the case with any film: pure textual analysis which ignores the institutional context can never lead to full understanding. In what follows I wish to examine further the general and particular production contexts of the picture which shaped its meanings. David Bordwell, a leading American critic, has argued that when viewers or critics interpret a film, the constructed meanings are of four possible types:

- referential meanings
- explicit meanings
- implicit meanings
- symptomatic meanings.[9]

I shall consider these types in relation to *Blade Runner*.

Referential meanings refer to the way in which the spectator constructs the story from a plot and a spatio-temporal world from the diegesis, while *explicit meanings* is when the spectator imputes an intentional meaning to the story and diegesis, such as a specific moral or message. As we have seen, Scott's original cut of the movie was altered, obscuring the final revelation of Deckard's 'replicancy'. Consequently many viewers and critics have had difficulty recovering the film's referential meaning, wrongly assuming that Deckard is human and interpreting the ending as 'a happy marriage of humans and

machines'.[10] Exceptions here are the ever-perceptive Robin Wood, and Alan Mackenzie who has documented the institutional background of the film.

Many critics, however, seem to agree on an explicit meaning. The film can be read as a radical social critique, portraying the horrific contradictions of advanced capitalism with its ubiquitous advertising promising the 'good life' to the few who can escape a filthy, over-populated and decayed city. Further, unlike many recent Hollywood films celebrating militarism and violence, *Blade Runner* ends with a renunciation of violence, foregrounding empathy as the prime human trait. In his climactic battle with Deckard, Roy Batty starts as an Aryan warrior but ends as a Christ figure with a nail through one hand and a dove of peace in the other, before saving his opponent from falling to his death. Moreover the film ends with a final act of empathy as Gaff allows Deckard and Rachael to escape.

With *implicit meanings* the critic moves up a further level of abstraction and interprets the film thematically or symbolically. Implicit meaning here may be consistent with referential or explicit meanings or contradict them, for example, through the use of irony. In this context Wood has noted the irony of Roy Batty misquoting Blake:

> 'Fiery the angels fell: deep thunder rolled
> Around their shores, burning with the fires of Orc.'

According to Wood, the single alteration from 'rose' to 'fell' completely inverts Blake's original reference to the rise of the American democratic Revolution and suggests instead its ultimate demise.[11] The explicit meaning of the film, which it reinforces, lies after all in its depiction of oppressive giant monopolies destroying modern civilisation and polluting the planet.

Sources of implicit meaning are to be found not only in irony but also in pastiche and self-reference. The picture's cult status as a 'post-modern' film trades very heavily on this. For post-modernism refers to a whole cluster of concepts which are relevant here: cultural de-differentiation which breaks down the high/popular culture divide, the double coding noted by Umberto Eco which can bring both mass and elite 'readings' of the same cultural object, and finally a self-conscious fascination with style, generic mixing, parody and pastiche. Moreover such intertextualities are a prominent feature of UK television advertising in which Scott was such a seasoned veteran. Pastiche, in particular, is a central feature in the surface or depthless nature of post-modern texts. Images refer only to themselves or other pre-existent images rather than any extrinsic realities. Thus, as Jameson argues, pastiche tends to supplant parody in the stylistic pantheon.[12] Parody assumes consensus over comparison between the object of its wit and a communally agreed normality. If there is no such normality then parody

becomes mere pastiche, a neutral paste-up of references whose only function appears to be the provision of the pleasures of recognition.

In *Blade Runner*, examples of this abound. Deckard traces Zhora the replicant snake charmer to a night club, affecting a slightly effeminate voice to disguise his real intent. This is surely a direct reference to the scene where private eye Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) visits the Geiger book store in the 1946 classic *The Big Sleep*. There is no sense of parody in the playing of the scene, however. The reference is merely available to you provided you have *The Big Sleep* in your textual store. The picture also juxtaposes past styles and texts, referring among other things to Egyptian and Mayan architecture, German Expressionism and *Metropolis*, forties fashion, *Citizen Kane* and 'film noir', and contemporary punk. In classic Hollywood cinema most settings and props were motivated, that is to say, chosen to serve the needs of the narrative. In post-modern works, however, there is a stylistic excess largely unmotivated by the narrative, which merely allows film-makers to perform a cultural knowledge display, whilst providing the audiences with surfaces on which to pleasurably exercise their own cultural competences. This illustrates a key feature of post-modern texts, the deliberate construction of a 'double reader', one 'naive' and the other 'smart'.[13] Intertextuality then becomes the key method for engaging the 'smart' reader in this play upon 'encyclopaedic competence'.

Symptomatic meanings are ones constructed by the critic which the film represses, or which it expresses 'involuntarily'. Such meanings can usually be traced to economic, political, psychoanalytic or ideological processes. Symptomatic readings of *Blade Runner* have tended to concentrate on gender and racial representations. Here most critics have argued that despite their radical critique of capitalism, the filmic representations are depressingly reactionary and in line with the most of Hollywood output. Gender, for example, is highly stereotyped, pandering to some of the most deplorable male chauvinist fantasies. Ford plays a technocratic white male, possessed of a predictable machismo, who forces sexual relations on Rachael as if it is what she really 'wants', while Rachael in turn submits to this treatment and is rewarded with romantic bliss and the escape to a better life.

The two other female replicants are in different ways both pornographic models of female sexuality. Zhora is a nude snake charmer whom we see showering, then dressing in leather bra, pants and boots under a see-through raincoat. She is shot in the back by Deckard and careers in slow-motion through several plate glass windows. Pris is a 'basic pleasure model' with punk hairstyle, studded collar, leotard, suspender belt and stockings, who tries to kill Deckard by squeezing his head between her thighs. When Deckard first shoots her she has a furious seizure: the second shot produces slow-motion orgasmic pelvic

thrusts. The violent, extended portrayal of these 'retirements' are in complete contrast to Leon's death, shot once through the head by Rachael. It is possible to interpret such scenes as economically and culturally predicated on providing voyeuristic pleasure for the largely male audience of the film. Sex sells movies and provides product differentiation from the sanitised network television of the US.

Similarly, racism seems to underlie the ethnic composition of the figures in the picture, with its 'normal' white hero, and white power figures, contrasted with the large number of exotic, mainly Asian, proletarians of the underclass inhabiting the city. This can all too easily be read as reflecting a white Anglo-Saxon fear of the Western cities of the future being overrun by foreigners of a different skin colour.

Alternatively, it could be argued that this stark depiction of racial and gender differences is deliberate. On this logic, *Blade Runner*, rather than using involuntary stereotypes, is deliberately showing up the ideological construction of race and gender under capitalism. In Bordwell's terms of course, this would be an implicit rather than a symptomatic meaning. But these alternative meanings merely illustrate a perennial problem of criticism: is it genuinely possible to validate an unambiguous interpretation of film? It also illustrates a major problem of social critique in both mass media and high art. How can one represent oppression without at the same time being implicated in it?[14] The dilemma here in *Blade Runner* becomes acute. Although it has some radical potential, its recut version seems to be politically conservative, providing only an imaginary individual solution to real social problems. It suggests that human empathy and human values are *only* expressible in the private sphere of the heterosexual couple and not in the public domain. Further, escape from human misery is accessible only to special individuals, not to whole sections of an oppressed society. From this standpoint, *Blade Runner* can be seen as largely reflecting in its own time the dominant ideologies of Reagan's America and Thatcher's Britain.[15]

Notes

1. R. Gustafson 'What's happening to our Pix Biz?' in T. Balio (ed.) *The American Film Industry*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 579.
2. See J. Monaco *American Film Now*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 8-27: M. Litwak *Reel Power*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987, pp. 72-81.
3. G. Murdock and P. Golding, 'Capitalism, communication and class relations' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott (eds) *Mass Communication and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, 1977, p. 40.
4. See *Cinefantastique* vol. 12, no. 5/6, 1982: C. Finch *Special Effects*: *Creating Movie Magic*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1984, pp. 184-98; D. Millar *Cinema Secrets: Special Effects*, London: Apple Press, 1990, pp. 61-6.
5. R. Wood *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 182.
6. A. Mackenzie 'Blade Runner - death of a thousand cuts' *Voyager* 1, 1982, pp. 61-4.
7. For further details of the making of *Blade Runner* see *Starburst* nos. 50, 51, 53. A. Mackenzie *The Harrison Ford Story*, London: Zomba Books, 1984, pp. 64-83.
8. K. Thompson *Breaking the Glass Armour: Neoformalist Film Analysis,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 43-4.
9. See D. Bordwell *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 8-9; D. Bordwell and K. Thompson *Film Art: An Introduction*, 3rd. ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990, pp. 40-3.
10. M. Ryan and D. Kellner *Camera Politica - The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 251.
11. Wood *op. cit.*, p. 186.
12. F. Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 16-19.
13. U. Eco *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, chs. 3 and 5.
14. L. Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 2-10.
15. The director's cut was screened for two weeks in Los Angeles in September 1991. Todd McCarthy's review in *Variety* (September 30, 1991, p. 69), argues that the director's version calls for 'a serious upgrading of its critical standing.'