**Blade Runner and the Postmodern:**

A Reconsideration

The ambivalence implicit in the two versions of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982; "Director's Cut," 1992) echoes the diverse and divided critical responses to the film(s).

Indeed, this film about authenticity and simulation has been so thoroughly interpreted and rewritten—by even its director—that a naive return to the "original" is, perhaps fittingly, untenable. This essay does not advance a new reading, but rather takes as its subject the ideologies of interpretation evident in criticism of *Blade Runner,* particularly its problematic encounter with postmodernism. In hindsight, this encounter testifies to fundamental ambiguities in the postmodernist enterprise, ambiguities with significant social and political implications. I will argue that postmodern accounts of *Blade Runner* depend on a series of strategic exclusions. Such accounts effectively displace not only modernist readings of the film, but also questions of narration, genre, popularity, and the specificity of the film medium. Lost amid the theoretical battlefield of the modern and postmodern are the film’s material and ideological contexts; *Blade Runner*’s cultural intelligibility is blurred by the modern/postmodern exchange. This critical impasse underscores the troubled politics of postmodernism as it confronts commercial narrative and other forms of popular culture.

Roughly speaking, critical responses to *Blade Runner* fall on either side of a modern/postmodern line. Postmodernist accounts diametrically oppose reading strategies dependent on conventional aesthetic notions (narrative, character, structure, reference, metaphor, symbol, etc.) that collectively we might term modernist. These two approaches entail radically different positions on the nature and function of interpretation. Modernist readings presuppose the film’s structural and semiotic depth, in stark contrast to the postmodernist emphasis on its surfaces. Some modernist interpretations discern utopian fantasies of redemption and transcendence embedded in the film’s apocalyptic veneer. A postmodernist approach, by contrast, emphasizes the film’s resistance to the interpretive impulse, its voiding of symbolic, utopian, and narrative meaning. The depthless postmodern surface incorporates fragments of once-meaningful codes and conventions that are now blankly cited without context or referent. The result is not a coherent aesthetic structure but an opaque and resistant pastiche.

Interestingly, the two versions of the film document a similar ambivalence about narration, depth, and utopian potential. The significant changes in the 1992 "Director's Cut" place the “original” in quotation marks, summoning in the process the question of filmic authorship and the much-discussed relation between the cinematic auteur and commercial film production. Furthermore, by foregrounding the question of authenticity, the phenomenon of the “Director’s Cut” restages a central concern of both postmodernism and the 1982 film. One might argue that the “Director's Cut” functions as a kind of postmodernist reading of the “original,” one that likewise suppresses narrative cues and utopian intimations. Ridley Scott’s 1992 version omits the studio-enforced “happy ending” and Harrison Ford’s voice-over narration, and introduces the chic postmodern suggestion—via the unicorn dream sequence—that Deckard himself might be a replicant. At the same time, however, the "Director's Cut" is also a modernist gesture. In particular, the voice-overs are a *noir* genre determinant, and their erasure lessens the film’s legibility as commercial narrative in favor of modernist indeterminacy—a tendency supported by the "new," more ambiguous ending.

In fact the voice-overs are a touchstone of postmodernist readings. From the perspective of pastiche, the voice-overs are exemplary instances of cultural citation, blank allusions to an incongruous *noir* sensibility. The voice-overs and "happy ending" are either conventional or opaque, egregious or essential, depending on the critic’s vantage point. The 1982 and 1992 versions of *Blade Runner* thus establish a foundational tension that fuels both modern and postmodern interpretations. Moreover, the genealogy of the dual texts and en-
suing critical division center on the problem of cultural legibility and popular narration.
What the modern and postmodern positions share is profound skepticism about the mean-
ingfulness of conventions, codes, and other building-blocks of commercial narrative—a skepticism mirrored by the “Director’s Cut” in its distrust of the film’s “original” commercial basis.

On closer examination, the polarized responses to *Blade Runner* may reflect an elemen-
tal duality at the film’s core. The differences between the two versions are suggestive and symptomatic but not extensive; divergent modern and postmodern readings refer to nearly the same set of raw materials. Can a single film embody the modern and postmodern at the same time? Aesthetically, many aspects of *Blade Runner* initially signal modernism: the juxtaposition of the old and the new, the dystopian vision of the urbanized future, the persis-
tent doubling of copy and original epitomized in the two heroes and their distinct narratives, and the anguished redemption of the human through heroic suffering, sacrifice, and disalienation. These diverse elements are so seamlessly sutured that in another sense the film seems almost classical: in Los Angeles 2019, the Blade Runner Deckard is coaxed out of retirement to hunt a group of escaped replicants (cyborgs with emotions, intellect, life-
span, and even memory), led by Roy, a Christ-cum-Oedipus figure (played by Rutger Hauer somewhere between Hamlet and the Waffen SS) who is out to meet his maker, the corporate genius Dr. Tyrell. In the course of his investigation Deckard falls in love with Rachel, Tyrell’s assistant, who with her upswept hairstyle and ostentatious fur coat closely resembles a 1940s movie star. Rachel gradually discovers her memories have been implanted and that she is, in fact, a replicant herself. Meanwhile, Deckard has “retired” all the replicants except Roy, who, knowing that his four-year life-span is at an end, kills Tyrell by gouging out his eyes, spares Deckard’s life in a final act of mercy, and dies on a rooftop as an almost ab-
surdly symbolic white dove flies from his hand. Rachel and Deckard are reunited and, in the 1982 version, escape to a pastoral landscape north of Los Angeles.

A modernist reading of this scenario might begin by disengaging the two narratives and establishing the various ironies of their juxtaposition. The first conforms to what film theo-
rlist David Bordwell terms the “canonic story” (157) of classical Hollywood narration: the protagonist Deckard is thrown into a dangerous confrontation wherein he begins a romance with a woman who is in turn implicated in the confrontation; Deckard overcomes both obstacles simultaneously and moves toward a happy though potentially uncertain future. The second drama, in which Deckard is only nominally involved, is the story of the mythic Roy and the search for his creator. Roy is blessed with superhuman strength (he is a combat model), a certain twitchy, serpentine sensuality, and a knack for pithy, lyrical moments of reflection (“time . . . to die”; or, his final lines, “I have seen things you people never dreamed . . . Now all those moments / in time / will be lost / like tears in rain”). As a spectator, the intense feeling of taboo or obscenity as Roy kisses Tyrell before gouging his eyes is testa-
ment to the primal associations of this scene: the original Freudian patrieide from which civilization was born, the Oedipal scenario, the betrayed Christ destroying the eyes of God as revenge for his own mortality. (This last interpretation is given some additional credence by the long iron nail Roy drives through his palm to stop his dying body’s convulsions.) In the manner of the tragic hero, Roy has a moment of profound recognition before death and his final act is a gesture of human compassion, as Deckard says (in a film noir-ish voice-
over), “I don’t know why he let me live. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had. Not just his life. Anyone’s life. My life.”

Thus the tragic redemption and death of the mythicized Roy allows Deckard a kind of humanistic rebirth; the disillusioned, heavy-drinking *film noir* anti-hero is transformed into a romantic leading man as he and Rachel enter the nebulous utopia somewhere north of Los Angeles. Ironically, it is the replicant who expresses the universalized mythic and tragic di-
lemmas of traditional heroic consciousness (Deckard: “All he wanted was answers to the same questions as the rest of us. How did I get here? Where am I going? How long have I got?”). Deckard, by contrast, as emblem of tough-guy classical realism, is reduced to the status of a disempowered, proletarian observer (“All I could do was sit there and watch him die”).
In this account, the film begins to assume an allegorical or ideological shape. Perhaps the contrast between Deckard and Roy implies that the dystopian consequences of commodity fetishism lead to mythologized machines that signify our alienation from epic, tragic, or otherwise meaningful experience, and we are thus condemned to proletarian squalor or the dead cultural forms of the past. Alternatively, the film may serve to ideologically contain precisely this kind of anxiety by finally vindicating a bitter, ambiguous, but nonetheless persistent humanity that survives the terror of technology, commodities, and the postindustrial city. Or, as Marcus Doel and David Clarke suggest in an elaborate and theoretically sophisticated essay, the film’s true utopian protagonist may be Roy, who refuses the dubious gift of life as a slave, and “lets himself die as something more than a (hu)man,” thereby highlighting the dreary complicity of Deckard and others who gratefully accept the “slow death” of labor under the dominant order (162).

I offer these fragmentary suggestions as indications of the profound allegorical, ideological, and utopian messages many have decoded in Blade Runner. Clearly, the film’s narrative structure—overdetermined by cultural, mythic, and dystopian associations—presents a compelling semblance of hermeneutic depth. It is therefore not surprising that Blade Runner has yielded an unusually high number of interpretive studies. The essays in Retrofitting Blade Runner, for example, touch on the film’s evocation of technology, radical politics, film noir, “personhood,” urban topography, the Doppelganger, detective fiction, and Miltonian epic. Methodologically, the essays encompass both content-based analyses of social and philosophical theme as well as more aesthetic, intertextual treatments of the film’s many inherited tropes, allusions, and references. Collectively, however, the essays share an implicit sense of the film’s aesthetic richness and depth. Blade Runner is treated as a subtle, engaging text that rewards divergent paths of inquiry. As Judith Kerman writes in the introduction, “Although one can argue the faults and merits of the film, its mythic level is amazingly well-integrated, especially the integration of a forties private eye story with a science fiction text which weaves seamlessly together themes from Frankenstein, Paradise Lost, and the Edenic Legend which both draw upon” (2). The spatial language of the description—vertical integration and horizontal seamlessness—suggests a three-dimensional coherency associated with traditional models of the work of art.

The abundance of interpretation documented in Retrofitting Blade Runner makes the film’s postmodernist cachet even more remarkable. Yet it is a commonplace in cultural studies circles to invoke Blade Runner as a paradigmatic example of postmodern film. Since the 1980s, architects, urban scholars, film critics, and cultural theorists have used the film to advance a variety of disciplinary aims associated with the postmodern watershed. As an investigation of time, space, identity, capitalism, and the city, the film has often been taken as commentary on, or indeed as evidence of, a profound historical and cultural transition. This is a curious phenomenon, not least because it implies, in the words of Doel and Clarke, that “Blade Runner has already achieved the oxymoronic status of a canonical postmodern cultural artefact” (141). It is not initially clear that postmodernism and canons are commensurable, or if from a methodological perspective the phrase “postmodern film” designates an object exemplary of a new cultural logic, a text reflecting an altered historical situation, or a new mode of film practice in some way opposed to modernism.

Indeed, postmodern readings of Blade Runner often fail to address the substantial question as to whether postmodernist aesthetics are reconcilable with narrative forms, or indeed with film in general. There are significant structural difficulties in defining what constitutes a postmodern film, which arise, in part, from ambiguities in the notion of postmodernism itself. Is postmodernism to be grasped as an historical period, a style of production, or some new phenomenological attitude toward the world of simulacra? Does postmodernism depend on the pre-existence of an institutionalized, commodified modernist aesthetic from which it will break and subsequently constitute itself? This last consideration is especially relevant to film, where what is generally taken as modernism (Welles, The French New Wave, Bergman, the Italian '60s, etc.) is in fact a heterogeneous and historically discontinuous set of responses to the dominance of commercial realism, which has endured in a more
or less stable form. In this light, can we argue that the films of Godard, for example, signify a profound postmodernist rupture with the canon of modern cinematic *auteurs*, or is the critique of representation and narration in a film like *Weekend* (1968) already implicit in the modernist project itself?

The problem of postmodernism and film thus smuggles in with it the problem of modernism in film, or, in other words, the dialectic of modernism and mass culture, in which cinematic entertainments are usually regarded as a low cultural form. Here we recall the familiar image of the monolithic Hollywood studio of the ‘40s or Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of the “culture industry” as emblem of commodification and reified consciousness. Indeed it is from this particular morass that French critics will attempt to symbolically rescue and exalt a corps of commercial *auteurs*—Hawks, Hitchcock, Ford, *et al.*—on the ironic grounds that a particular modernist notion of directorial genius permits film art to transcend the barbarity of commerce. This is to suggest that the idea of modernism in film is inherently problematical, inscribed as it is within the ideology of mass culture and the question of aesthetic value.

It is in the 1970s, however, that film acquires a new kind of *ex post facto* critical urgency and even prescience, as the emergence of the postmodern calls into question the distinction between high and low cultural forms, often conferring critical, political force on objects previously considered commercial. Postmodernist theory will argue that the inexorable forces of reification, multinational capital, and the electronic media engender a “society of the spectacle” (Debord), in which depthless images and signifiers circulate and crystallize in an anarchic pastiche of random forms, genres, and styles (Jameson 113-18). The new cultural logic of the sign will have consequences for the subject, who will no longer be marked by the deep emotions of anxiety, mourning, and terror that characterized alienated modern man, but will instead register experience as a kind of blank succession of differences (the editing of the television ad), intermittently punctuated by random, almost narcotic episodes of intensity. The epistemological dilemma of the subject is compounded, in postmodernist theory, by a new, diffused experience of urban space as continual movement without the benefit of perspective or differentiation between various buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and communities. Indeed the temporal mode of postmodernism will be conceived as a “perpetual present” (Jameson 119), in which all historical, emotional, or spatial depth is rendered in jumbled configurations of surfaces and *simulacra*. Here poststructuralist accounts of the decentered subject are offered in analogy to the spatial and cognitive disorientation of the postmodern individual, and a schizophrenic paradigm of the free play of desire becomes the emblem of postmodernist subjectivity.

It is at this point that politics re-enters the equation, because any conception of postmodernism is implicitly also an account of modernism, modernity, and the process of historical change. Thus one position will celebrate the end of totalizing ideological “grand narratives” and the liberatory potential of new modes of science and technology (Lytard 27-37); another will deride the specious and secretly totalizing populism of this view and look with nostalgia on the critical force of modernist negation (Habermas); still a third will view postmodernism as the very cultural logic of multinational capitalism, and will search, in dialectical fashion, for both the utopian and ideological dimensions of this new historical situation (Jameson).

Putting aside the general problem of postmodernism and film, it is not difficult to see why a certain aggrandizing postmodernist aesthetic would recuperate *Blade Runner* as a privileged object of study; indeed it appears to confirm the aspects of the postmodern discussed above. The film as a whole exhibits something of the parody-without-irony quality of the postmodernist pastiche. The somewhat grotesque assemblage of characters drawn from widely different genres—the *film noir* anti-hero and femme fatale, the 1970s camp fashion of the replicants, the bigoted police captain, his inscrutable Oriental deputy, the nearsighted mad scientist—all are played with a perverse, solemn, naturalistic attention to detail; there is hardly a trace of humor in the film. Also the story engages in little of the explicit utopian or dystopian moralizing, which typifies the science-fiction/action genre
(James Cameron's *Terminator* [1984], for example, uses the cyborg/hunter conceit in a fable of nuclear apocalypse). Although the periodic firestorms, incessant gloom, and constant rain are clichés of an apocalyptic vision, there is not even a proto-political sense of social unrest, class consciousness, or (with the exception of the ambiguous "off world" and the hazy utopia north of Los Angeles) any suggestion of a better place. In a film about cops who hunt and kill replicants, we might at least expect a portrait of a futuristic police state. Despite their fancy hovering police cars, however, the cops here are neither fascists nor technocrats, but instead a trench-coated '4O's-style gumshoe (Deckard) and a throwback version of the Southern white sheriff (Bryant). (As the two sit drinking bourbon in an office with a wooden desk and ceiling fan, Deckard tells us in voice-over that "Bryant was the kind of cop who in the old days called Black men niggers.")

We begin to perceive something of the incongruity and resistance of these cultural and narrative forms, their apparent unwillingness to yield any depth of hermeneutic insight or organize themselves as a structural, symbolic, or allegorical unity. In a general sense, this expresses the logic of postmodernist negation, by which a whole order of significations are fragmented out of referential context and reproduced as glossy spectacle, an image of totality that is in fact no more than the empty expression of its contradictory surfaces. The film frustrates our attempts to formulate correspondences or construct interpretations. Thus the replicants, artificial owls, and snakes suggest the technological domination of nature, yet paradoxically the ending is a redemption of the replicants' humanity. The densely crowded and Asianized inner city, resembling perhaps a poorer district of Tokyo, seems in sharp contrast to the anachronistic 1940s world of white cops (and Rutger Hauer's Aryan-looking superman) who inhabit the upper floors of skyscrapers and corporate pyramids; yet despite an obvious spatial sense of domination, there is no meaningful point of interaction: the two cultural worlds appear as distinct conceptual realms. Ultimately, the film offers the maddening, insensible juxtaposition of an entire *noir* sensibility (darkness, rain, trench coats, voice-overs, alcohol, lipstick, cigarettes, existential despair); a complete "other" overcrowded Orientalized culture of bustle and commerce; and the seemingly irreconcilable mytho-heroic world of the replicants and Dr. Tyrell.

As the result, or perhaps the precondition, of this semiotic heterogeneity, the film induces a kind of cognitive deadness in the face of its dislocating urban topography, relieved only occasionally by moments of epiphany. We are taken from the vaguely Mayan stone facades of the Tyrell pyramids, past the flashing Coca Cola billboard, into the teeming streets of little Tokyo or Bangkok, and back inside the softly-lit *noir* rooms of old furniture, ceiling fans, a grand piano, and plenty of bourbon and cigarettes. The logics of inside and outside, the vertical and horizontal planes, in total do not add up to any verifiable, objective sense of space.

This form of postmodern resemblance centers on the prohibition of the hermeneutic gesture, and presumes a hypothetical spectator in a state of intermittent ecstasy and chronic dislocation. On the whole, however, the postmodernist appropriation of *Blade Runner* rests on an ideal spectator who is very nearly an academic critic. In an exemplary article, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*," Giuliana Bruno rapidly enumerates postmodern characteristics as if the film were a theoretical text, a kind of illustrated companion piece to the work of Fredric Jameson. Borrowing Jameson's notions of schizophrenic temporality and spatial pastiche—the former borrowed by Jameson from Lacan—Bruno outlines the film's "imaginary geography" (186), its "excess of scenography" (187), and the revelation of Lacanian schizophrenia, now rooted in the experience of the replicants, who are "condemned to a life composed only of a present tense" (189).

I am interested in the rhetoric of this kind of postmodernist criticism, which yields a number of interesting formulations. For example, Bruno writes, "the postmodern aesthetic of *Blade Runner* is . . . the result of recycling, fusion of levels, discontinuous signifiers, explosion of boundaries, and erosion. The disconnected temporality of the replicants and the pastiche city are all an effect of a postmodern, postindustrial condition: wearing out, waste" (185). This circular argument assumes the ultimate ground of the film to be nothing
less than postmodernity, which in some fashion "causes" the narrative and mise en scène and is then retroactively attributed to a "postmodern aesthetic" behind or within the film. A postmodern aesthetic might be either a phenomenon of postindustrial society or a style of film practice, but it seems strangely mimetic to suppose it is both at the same time. Bruno equates the film's content with a postmodern historical situation, then implies, under the ambiguous umbrella of the "aesthetic," that the film both represents and exemplifies postmodernism. As an extended assault on representation, there is a serious question whether postmodernism can itself be represented. Is Blade Runner postmodern or a representation of postmodernity?

Unexpectedly, Bruno's postmodern reading depends on the affirmation of traditional aesthetic correspondences. "The narrative 'invention' of the replicants," she writes, "is almost a literalization of Baudrillard's theory of postmodernism as the age of simulacra and simulation." Literalization would seem to be an outmoded figure in the era of simulation. Similarly, Bruno argues that "Blade Runner presents a manifestation of the schizophrenic condition," and that "it is in the architectural layout of Blade Runner that pastiche is most dramatically visible and where the connection of postmodernism to postindustrialism is evident" (188). The language of manifestation, visibility, and evidence is incommensurable with a theory emphasizing the impenetrable quality of appearances. Indeed, at the outset, Bruno introduces her project using a decidedly familiar interpretive trope. "Blade Runner," she writes, "will be discussed as a metaphor of the postmodern condition" (184).

Are the deep, binding significations of metaphor compatible with what Bruno describes as "the dominance of representation and the effacement of the referent in the era of postindustrialization" (187)? Ultimately, it seems, Bruno's postmodern reading conceals a strangely traditional hermeneutic practice. The theory of opaque surfaces is read from the surface of the film. What, finally, is the status of the Blade Runner itself? Is the film an exemplar or a commentary? Can narrative film mimetically reproduce postindustrial relations? Is Ridley Scott the author of postmodernity?

The tension between hermeneutic and postmodernist practices begins to suggest an intractable conflict between postmodernism and critical "reading" as such. Earlier, I outlined a modernist approach to Blade Runner, while suggesting affinities with postmodernist theory based on hermeneutic resistance and spectatorial positioning. Yet taken together, even these tentative formulations betray an opposition between postmodernist dislocation and the film's narration. The plethora of critical interpretations points to a modernist symbolic drama with a wildly exotic background, but from the postmodernist position, symbols and narrative markers are mere stylistic adornments to the imagistic pastiche—blank and psychotic instances of postmodern citation.

What is at stake in this debate is the fate of narrative in the postmodern condition. While virtually every species of postmodern theory will affirm the collapse of the distinction between high and low cultural forms, in practice, a relatively eclectic array of phenomena—the Wooster group, experimental video, John Cage, hotel architecture, Laurie Anderson, Blade Runner—are most often singled out as examples of postmodern culture. This leaves the older forms of mass culture (e.g., the sitcom, the Hollywood thriller or romance) in an ontologically ambiguous position. Despite the celebrated end of representation and narrative, the representational machinery of popular narration inexorably grinds on. The Hollywood aesthetic continues to obsessively rework the styles and genres of its own classical period. Is the romantic thriller or the television sitcom to be regarded as mere ideological echo, the afterimage of a now historically superseded mode of cultural production? Is the repetition of genre a case of postmodernist citation?

These questions of narrative turn also on the fate of the various tragic, mythic, realist, humanist, and proletarian heroes and protagonists, or, if we begin to consider history as narrative, on the fate of subjectivity itself. As the concept of the postmodern continues its slide from critical vogue, it is increasingly important to distinguish postmodernism as an interpretive strategy and postmodernism as a total aesthetic, political, and philosophical system. As the postmodernist theory of surfaces is superseded in the academic world, it
acquires spurious depth as an institutionalized and reactionary rhetoric of culture, a form of inherited consciousness that substitutes knee-jerk cynicism and fashionable despair for what originally served as radical questioning. The dialectics of *Blade Runner* were at least partly foreclosed as it took its place in the official gallery of the postmodern condition. In the balance is the question of whether we are any longer to speak of the protagonist and the subject, narrative and history, or whether narration itself, in its various guises, is simply another cognitively empty element of the postmodernist code.

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**Works Cited**


