

**The Nature and Function of Science Fiction:  
A Study of Ridley Secott's *Blade Runner***

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**ABSTRACT:**

Science fiction, as a genre, has long been excluded from the sacred domain of literature because it is frequently and inappropriately associated with unreal, fantastic, or even ridiculous adventure stories. This paper, however, argues that SF not only expresses social conditions, some works even have the potential of subverting the status quo. In addition to the examination of certain problems bearing on the nature and definition of SF, Ridley Scott's 1982 SF movie, *Blade Runner*, is also discussed to demonstrate how SF contains both trans-historical imagination as well as historical groundings. This movie, in short, is both ideological as well as utopian.

**KEY WORDS:**

SF; estrangement; cognition; utopia; *Blade Runner*

## I

Science fiction, as a genre, has long been excluded from the sacred domain of literature because it is frequently and inappropriately associated with unreal, fantastic, or even ridiculous adventure stories. The purpose of this paper, however, is to justify the status of SF in society as well as in serious academic research on literature. Ridley Scott's 1982 SF movie, *Blade Runner*, will be discussed to show how SF, under the disguise of a series of incredible or unreal actions and events, turns out to be a way of refracting, if not reflecting, society. I will point out, moreover, that SF not only expresses social totality, some works even subvert the status quo. As Adorno says, a successful work "is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its inner structure" (*Prism* 32). Besides expressing the social problems or contradictions, *Blade Runner*, as I will illustrate in the next section, also anticipates a utopian state in which these problems are imaginatively resolved. Before discussing this movie, I would like to examine certain problems bearing on the study of SF in general, problems about the nature and function of SF, which are important for our understanding of the movie.

Almost all of us agree that Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clark, and James Blish are SF writers; and hardly anyone would argue that Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*, Herbert's *Dune*, or Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* are anything but SF. But the question still remains, namely, "What is science fiction"? What are the features that characterize all writings grouped under this category? How do we distinguish SF from other genres such as fantasies, myth, Gothic novels, or adventure stories? Let's look at some critics' account (quoted in Bainbridge 16-19).

Isaac Asimov, perhaps the most famous SF writer in our age, defines it as consisting of "extraordinary voyages into any of the infinite supply of conceivable futures." Theodore Sturgeon, another SF writer, regards this genre as knowledge fiction: "If you have a story and yank out the science (knowledge) aspects and the story falls apart, it was science fiction." On the other hand, if "you have a story and yank out the science (knowledge) aspects and a story still exists, then you have that cowboy story that occurs on Mars instead of in Texas." Hugo Gernsback, the first editor of *Science Wonder Stories*, offered a definition of SF

which stresses exact scientific facts: "[SF includes] only such stories that have their basis in scientific laws as we know them, or in the logical deduction of new laws from what we know." In other words, a true SF writer uses logical and scientific laws to write fiction. Paul W. Fairman characterizes prediction as the essence of SF: "It is the medium wherein the realities of tomorrow are successfully presented as today's fiction." Frustrated by these definitions and alarmed by the possible consequence of a forceful preemption of one definition by another, Damon Knight suggests a non-definitive definition: "It means what we point to when we say it."

Definitions of SF, at least concluding from the above ones, often lead to confusion. Whenever one definition is offered, there will be readily cited works that are incommensurate with it. Science fiction, as Sturgeon comments, seems to be a genre that escapes definitions: "it seemed to have no horizons, no limits at all, like poetry."

However, to say that science fiction is a genre that escapes definition does not mean that one can abandon the tiresome, perhaps also violent, job of defining it, and then proceed to read Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* as if no problem existed. If we do so, much confusion is likely to arise because it might happen that one will read *The Name of the Rose* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as if it were SF. In order to prevent such confusion, a definition, however inadequate it might be, is necessary. Such a definition, however, should not be restrictive. For example, Gernsback's definition of SF as fiction based on correct science excludes many "new-wave"<sup>1</sup> writers, who are mainly concerned about human conditions or social problems rather than scientific correctness. It seems to me that a definition of science fiction should include history as one of its elements. By "history," I mean the concrete, historical or social situation from which or against which a work emerges as an expression or reaction. Many definitions would have been more adequate if they had taken history into consideration. For example, when Asimov says that SF includes those stories which depict "extraordinary voyages into any of the infinite supply of conceivable futures," he ignores the fact that extraordinariness is not an isolated, historically independent quality, but should be judged in the context of historical conditions. We know that a trip to the Moon was an extraordinary voyage twenty years ago, but is no longer such today. Similarly, yesterday's fiction may be today's reality. In defining science fiction, therefore, one should pay attention to the involvement of this genre with the history wherein it is produced, and at the same time to its

prospective transcending of that history. Thus we can roughly state that SF includes imaginary elements (inter-planetary trips, wars that destroy human beings, and the like, which do not exist in some specific historical context but which will probably exist) as well as realistic ones. Science fiction, in other words, is both historical and trans-historical, or, if you like, it designates those trans-historically historical writings.

In fact, some critics have expressed similar views about this genre. Lester del Rey's definition that "[s]cience fiction is fiction that deals rationally with alternate possibility" characterizes the two extremes of SF, namely rationality (historical correctness) and imagination (trans-historical possibility). Similarly, David Ketterer defines SF as writings of the apocalyptic imagination. And he characterizes as apocalyptic

any work of fiction concerned with presenting a radically different world or version of reality that exists in a credible relationship with the world or reality verified by empiricism and common experience.  
(91)

But the most comprehensive and historical definition of SF, to my knowledge, is that given in Darko Suvin's well-known book, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, in which SF is characterized as providing both "estrangement" and "cognition."

For Suvin, science fiction is "the literature of cognitive estrangement" (*Metamorphoses* 4). It is significantly different from "the empirical times, places, and characters of 'mimetic' or 'naturalistic' fiction" because of its estranged, non-naturalistic elements, i.e., its wild imagination and fantasy (viii). However, what distinguishes science fiction from other estranged forms of writing, such as myth or fantasy, is its cognitive, realistic elements hidden beneath fantastic irreality. Thus what is represented in a fictional, estranged world (the end of the world, interplanetary wars, or the invention of high-tech products like robots) are often the refraction, if not reflection, of what exists in the real world. The cognitive dimension of SF implies that its imagination should not be regarded as ahistorical fantasy, but rather as "a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality" (8). Science-fictional imagination, that is to say, is an estranged reflection of reality. It is also a blending ground of history and fantasy, of reality and irreality, and of this world and other worlds. It is a "developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality, with humanized nonhumans, this-worldly Other Worlds" (viii).

Suvin's concept of "cognition," however, implies reflection not only **of** but also **on** reality. Cognition "implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment" (10). Thus, if science fiction is an estranged form of realism, dealing with the historical situation of its time in a disguised manner, it is also frequently a direct challenge to that history from which it emerges. In other words, the cognition of true science fiction does not stop at the representation of the author's empirical environment or the ideology of his/her age; it points above all to the transformation of that environment. SF, therefore, is a "critical" type of writing, combining both realism and imagination (10).

Suvin's account of the nature and function of SF characterizes the reflective as well as critical attitudes which are essential for any true work.<sup>2</sup> As Adorno perceives, true art is neither irrational nor pre-rational. Being itself part of the social totality, in which all human activities are interdependent, art is necessarily affected by the rational or technological aspects of the world. Thus the autonomy of art and its pure subjective expression does not entail the exclusion of objectivity; art should rather be the expression of objective reality by means of subjective mediation. The utopian aspect of art, its attempt to transcend the historical condition from which it emerges, is therefore necessarily implicated with ideology, being itself part and parcel of that history which it is trying to transcend. In this sense, the utopian impulse of the mimetic behavior of art means also "the necessity of at least some reification" (Jay, *Imagination* 178).

Walter Benjamin, another great figure of the Frankfurt School, also uses the concept of "dialectical image"<sup>3</sup> to negate capitalism by representing its various manifestations in society. Likewise, the use of allegory in 17th-century tragic drama and especially in Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin observes, purports to reveal the true nature of a dead reality by adapting to that reality. The adaptation to a reified world, both in the "dialectical image" and in allegory, is a necessary step toward the abolition of that world. It is therefore a modality of "critical mimesis," in which art is not only a reflection of society but most importantly an attempt to transform or transcend that society (Marcuse, *Dimension* 46).

Adorno and Benjamin's account of true art works is closely related to Suvin's account of science fiction. Darko Suvin's definition of SF as "the literature of cognitive estrangement" characterizes this genre not as ahistorical fantasy but as a historically responsible form of writing, which not only mirrors

but adapts to society in order to transform or subvert it. SF, in short, can be characterized as a form of critical mimesis. The traditional view which sees SF either as escapist writing, as entertainment, or as para-literature neglects precisely its critical edge.

Moreover, to say SF is a particular type of writing in which cognition and estrangement, or reproduction and transformation, co-exist points to a broader perspective about the nature of this genre. The often debated question whether science fiction is ideological or utopian can thus be answered by saying that it is both, although there can be a difference of degree between the two mediated extremes. If a SF novel, and criticism about it, tends primarily towards the reproduction of existing ideology, then it is more ideological than utopian. Even then, the utopian moment is not wholly extirpated. If a cultural critic can expose the ideological aspects of this novel and use it for political education, then there will be a utopian moment, a moment which might awaken people from their illusory world-view and envision a true, utopian state. That is why Fredric Jameson claims that even the most conventional work contains a moment of utopian anticipation.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, even the most utopian SF is necessarily ideological, being itself part and parcel of that world which it tries to transcend. This dilemma, as Adorno expresses, is the original sin of art works in general and SF in particular ("Art is rationality criticizing itself without being able to overcome itself" [*Theory* 81]). Moreover, as these works are in some aspects incongruent with dominant ideologies and are potentially subversive of the status quo, society will try to repress or reintegrate the utopian moment in them. If it succeeds, then they will be assimilated into the status quo and lose their critical edge. Therefore, to say that science fiction is utopian does not imply that it is free from ideology, but rather that precisely because it is ideological, it is at the same time utopian. As Suvin puts it, utopia "is located in this world. Utopia is an Other World immanent in the world of human endeavor, domination, and hypothetic possibility--and not transcendental in a religious sense" (*Metamorphoses* 42-43).

The above discussion about the definition and nature of science fiction is not irrelevant to our understanding of Scott's 1982 work, *Blade Runner*, of which I will discuss in the next section. As I will demonstrate, the fantastic and incredible adventures in this movie are in fact an estranged cognition of the history from which it emerges and against which it reacts. Symptoms of late

capitalism, such as reification, technological expansion, and multinational capitalism are represented, however estranged that representation may be. This can be seen in the depiction of the social conflicts inherent in an industrial, capitalist society, which are always hidden beneath the harmonious facade of (American) democracy, technological innovation, or progress. This movie, in short, is a morally responsible form of representation in which the historical experiences of the industrial capitalism from which this movie emerges are no less negated than represented. These experiences, as we will see, are aesthetically enacted or "contained"<sup>5</sup> as the loss of distinction between men and replicants.

## II

Based on one of Philip K. Dick's well-known novels, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the setting of *Blade Runner* is the decaying megalopolis of Los Angeles in the year 2019. This future world is a landscape cauterized by bomb blasts, a world where human beings are decimated by the effects of radiation sickness. All those who afford to leave Earth have already emigrated to other planets; only the "lower" classes (as opposed to the "higher" planetary emigrants) stay. The war which has made a wasteland out of the urban city has also brought the extinction of many animals. The opening shot of the 200-story Metropolis as a vague, gloomy building against the background of a vaguer and gloomier sky, the oppressively dark lightening throughout the movie, and the stiff, mechanical facial expression of all characters---all suggest from the start that the future, high-tech world is not at all a happy one people want to live in. Continuing the spirit of SF started from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner* also expresses from the start men's fear of technological innovation, namely the fear that science may create a technological monster or disaster beyond the control of its creator.<sup>6</sup> In short, the future, post-holocaust city in the movie, as Fisher excellently expresses, is represented as "the junk pile of contemporary material life" (188). Benjamin's view that history is the compilation of trash is visually illustrated in the movie:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise . . . This storm irresistibly propels him into

the future to which his back is turned, while the debris before him grows skyward. ("Thesis" 257-58)

Technological progress, as itself a myth, does not lead to the realization of human happiness but to the regression of human history into inhuman reality, or the "debris" of history. The constellation of 21st century with the inhuman, trashy reality constitutes, using Benjamin's term, an excellent "dialectical image," which means the coordination or constellation of dialectically opposite images taken from different epochs or different places in order to reveal the underlying similarities. The flow of history is frozen here into this image in which truth bursts out as the "nonsensuous similarities"<sup>7</sup> between the most ancient and the most recent, or between the living and the dead. The function of this image, in other words, is to dispel the bourgeois myth that the development of history is the accumulation of progress by revealing that the nature of history is most often the mythic repetition of the same. Adorno/Horkheimer's book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is a well-known illustration of how enlightenment, based on the logic of self-preservation and domination, regresses into myth.<sup>8</sup>

The extinction of living animals in the fictional world, as I have already mentioned, is counterbalanced by advanced technology which creates artificial animals--fake snakes, owls, and the like--which naked eyes are incapable of discerning their true nature. Among these artificial animals, however, replicants, produced from the earth but sold exclusively to Mars, are the most advanced type produced by human technology. These replicants possess everything human beings have, only the former lack empathic capabilities which the latter have, or are supposed to have. Originally employed by men in Mars to do menial jobs, the replicants, longing for a more human(e) life, would sometimes escape from the off-world colony to Earth and masquerade as humans. These run-away slaves, if found by blade runners, the special police, are immediately killed or "retired," as blade runners call it. This movie is about how Rick Deckard, the most excellent blade runner, retires four replicant escapees which are of the most advanced design. As the action progresses, however, he experiences growing difficulty in distinguishing between a human and a replicant, an experience which threatens to undermine his own identity.

In the course of tracing the replicants, Deckard depends upon a machine, the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test (or V-K Test), to judge whether a suspect is a replicant. This test, based on the hypothesis that replicants are unempathic



machines, consists of several questions which will stimulate emotional responses in the suspected subject. Some questions are about animals being mistreated, such as butterflies being anatomized, a wasp or tortoise abused and tortured. In the future world in which animals are increasingly extinct, these acts are regarded as extremely cruel and are expected to stimulate involuntary fluctuation of the pupils in human eyes. But since replicants are (supposed to be) without compassion or empathy, these questions will not evoke too much response in them. Here is a good example which shows that the alternate world represented in SF is often an estranged reflection and critique of the present one. While the acts done to animals are regarded in the fictional world as highly immoral, they are quite ordinary in our culture. These connections serve to highlight the cruelty and inhumanity of the existing society.

The hypothesis that humans are empathic and replicants are not so, however, is becoming more and more suspectable as the action progresses. From the very beginning of the movie, before Deckard is assigned the task of retiring the replicant, the noir-style voice-over of blade runner, acted by Harrison Ford, recalls his ex-wife's calling him "sushi," which means "cold fish." Indeed, we are presented from the very start a hero wearying of his work and his life, whose meaning of existence seems only to survive in an inhuman bureaucracy, represented here at the start by Bryant, the police chief (remember Bryant's words when Deckard refuses to be a blade runner again: "If you [Deckard] are not cop, you are little people," which means Bryant can take Deckard's life at any moment if the latter refuses to be a blade runner.) The alienation and reification of the protagonist, not to mention his superior, Bryant, and the latter's right-hand man, Gaff, is in fact the symptom of social totality wherein high-tech corporate capitalism has ripped off the bond which once united all humans. In order to survive in this highly hierarchical, rational society, Deckard is forced to abolish his true self and becomes not a person but a thing.<sup>9</sup>

If humans in this movie seems to degenerate into inhuman entities or things, a corresponding movement in the opposite direction also occurs, namely the becoming of the supposedly inhuman entities, here the replicants, into humans. Compared with the ennui that characterizes Deckard's existence, the replicants show their desire to be real humans by expressing their love for life and freedom. In fact, the reason for their escape from Mars to Earth is to be free from the control and exploitation of humans in Mars and to elongate their life (they are designed to live only four years of age). When entering the eye-engineer's

laboratory, a replicant, Roy Batty, says: "Fiery the Angels fell;/Deep thunder roared around their shores;/Burning with the fires of Orc." These lines are a slightly different version of a passage in William Blake's "America: A Prophecy": "Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd,/Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc." In Blake's prophecy, the Angels are the Puritans who, inspired by Orc--the symbol of "youthful rebellion and freedom"--revolt against the tyranny of England (Wheale 302-303). While the Puritan's rebellion is nobly celebrated as the pursuit of freedom, Roy knows that the replicants' revolt will not receive the same celebration. They "fell" from Mars to Earth rather than "rose" as the Puritans did in Blake's version. Their fall also recalls the fall of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. They are not Angels, but are the embodiment of Satan in human society. But what is the difference between the Puritans' search for freedom from England and the replicants' search for freedom from human tyranny, if we see through the eyes of the replicants? Furthermore, if, through the revolt against human mastery and the search for freedom, the replicants do embody a spirit of human desire and vitality,<sup>10</sup> then is it not true that the replicants are much more human than humans?

Indeed, "More human than human," stated by the director of Tyrell Corporation in characterizing the replicants, becomes the central message of *Blade Runner*. They not only have much vitality and desire, but also have compassion or empathy that is supposed to exist only between humans. Knowing her companions--Leon and Zhora--are killed by Deckard, the female replicant, Pris, tells Roy: "*We're stupid if we die*" (italics mine). Afterward, when she is also killed, the suffering of Roy because of losing her, his love for her, challenge and invalidate the hypothesis that replicants have no compassion. Compared with the alienation and inhuman oppression that exist between Deckard, Bryant, and Gaff, the replicants embody everything humans should possess.

The replicants' love for life, even their enemy's life, is visualized at the end of the movie, when Roy Batty saves Deckard at the crucial moment before he falls from the skyscraper. Afterwards, Roy's moving speech before he dies strongly shows his passion for life which he is going to lose:

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched sea beams glitter in the dark near

the Tennhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.

The replicant's regret of having to leave for good the landscape he loves and his knowledge that he is somehow superior than humans is quite apparent: "I've seen" and "watched" things you people couldn't see.<sup>11</sup> Here Roy is represented not only as a victim of technological innovation and human cruelty but also as a Christ figure. For Deckard's physical and ultimately spiritual salvation is obtained, not without irony, through the sacrifice of Roy's life, figured in the film by the flying up of the white dove from nowhere, which a Western audience would easily associate with the holy ghost.<sup>12</sup>

Another thing which threatens to blur the distinction between humans and replicants is the photos. Almost all replicants in this movie have some photos, which are, as Roy says to Leon, "your precious photos." A happy childhood, a mother, a family union, and the like, are the subjects of the photos. For Deckard, however, the replicants' obsession for photos is a queer phenomenon: "I didn't know why all replicants would collect photos. Maybe . . . they needed memories." Deckard's explanation is not without reason, for memories, history, or past experiences, which constitute the most important elements of human existence, not surprisingly become essential if the replicants want to establish their identity. This is especially clear in the case of Rachel, who does not know her real identity as a replicant and who has some photos and memories which convince her that she has existed, that she did have a mother,<sup>13</sup> and that she did have a happy childhood, all of which, of course, are fake. Here we can see the process of working and reworking one's memories and history--where does one come from? who are his/her parents? what happen to him/her when s/he is six or seven, so on and so forth--through which and maybe only through which one will possibly know who s/he is and prove s/he has existed. Family photos are precisely the sublime objectivization of one's existence or identity, the validity of which, however, is challenged by the high-tech machine that can produce and reproduce not only images but also one's memories.

What is interesting is that although Deckard does not know why replicants collect photos, he himself does collect a lot of photos and puts them on the piano. If replicants rely on memories, of which photos are the objectivization, to establish their identities, Deckard also constructs his self by means of collecting the photos of his family union, his ex-wife, and his daughter. The question then

arises, that is, if the replicants' photos as well as their memories are fake, produced by human intelligence, how can we be so sure that Deckard's photos are not fake? Even his memories are now meeting challenges. In the middle of the movie, after Rachel saves Deckard at the crucial moment when Leon, another replicant, plans to shoot him, she suddenly asks Deckard if he himself ever took the V-K Test. Here we can find the different responses of Deckard in the movie and in its literary progenitor, i.e., *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. While the Deckard in the movie falls asleep because of the fatigue in tracing and retiring the replicants, and thus saves the trouble of giving a satisfactory answer, the Deckard in the novel answers with a resounding "Yes," only to be disputed by a replicant: "Maybe that's a false memory [that you took the Test]" (*Androids* 89). The replicant's response is not without reason, for if Rachel's memories and photos are manufactured by human intelligence, why is it not possible that those of Deckard are also fake? How can one prove that Deckard is not another Rachel who does not know his real identity?

The blurring of distinction between human and machine, as I have mentioned above, is in fact an estranged reflection of a specific stage of history from which this movie emerges, namely the stage of advanced capitalism. Already in Marx's *Capital*, we observe the elimination of this distinction in the commodity, the emblem of capitalism in general. Once a thing is exhibited in the market and becomes a commodity, it seems to lose contact with the human labor which is the origin of that commodity. It now appears as an independent, quasi-human entity with a life of its own. Thus instead of a table made out of wood by human labor, it

not only stands with its feet on the ground, but . . . on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own will. (*Marx* 163-64)

The social relation between men, Marx observes, is replaced and mystified by the "fantastic form of a relation between [quasihuman] things" (165).

However, we have to wait until the appearance of Lukacs for a more comprehensive discussion of the dialectic between humans and things. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukacs argues that the structure of commodities, whose phantasmagoric appearance Marx has dispelled or dismantled, in fact penetrates all activities in the bourgeois society, including human consciousness.

Just as consumers tend to mistake the animate appearance of the commodity for its real nature, people also tend to be deceived by the given (bourgeois) social reality, the structure of which assumes the phantasmagoric appearance of the commodity. The contradiction in commodities or in commodified societies in general (between the use value and the exchange value, the real and the seemingly real) is glossed over in public perception. Men's consciousness, mystified by the "reified" or phantasmagoric appearance, can only see and interpret their world in terms of objective, thing-like relations. By accepting the humanized appearance of the commodity, men who mimic the given, reified nature become themselves reified or thing-like. This structure of reification affects bourgeois society as well as bourgeois consciousness:

Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitely into the consciousness of man. (Lukacs 93)

Both forms of reification, the objective and the subjective, are fundamental features of capitalism in general, one major consequence of which is the confusion between humans and things. While objective reification tends to endow non-living commodities with human qualities, subjective reification reduces humans to things. The confusion of identities between humans and replicants represented in *Blade Runner* can thus be read as a sublime form of reification, or to use one of Fredric Jameson's terms in characterizing the cultural logic of late capitalism, the "waning of affect" and the consequent turning of humans into thing-like entities ("Logic" 15). In the same article, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Jameson also lists "late or multinational or consumer capitalism" as one essential feature of the cultural logic of late capitalism. The Tyrell Company which designs and produces the high-tech replicants in this movie is the embodiment in general of multinational, in fact multi-planetary, capitalism. As the director, Tyrell, states when asked about why he produces replicants: "Commerce. More human than human is our motto." The extensive as well as intensive power of multinational capitalism, as Jameson observes, penetrates into Nature and the Unconscious to the degree that the hitherto uncommodified areas are all deprived of their resistance (36). Here in this movie, an anonymous war has almost destroyed everything Nature, and thus anything natural or authentic is very probably artificial and produced from the market. What it depicts is a future world in which advanced capitalism assisted by technology not only produces

fake snakes, fake owls, but also fake humans or replicants. We can even go so far as to doubt that the beautiful natural landscape and the sunset at the end of the movie is also fake.

Produced in 1982 in the U.S., *Blade Runner* engages the two important features of late capitalism, namely the "waning of affect" and the penetration of multinational capitalism, beneath the surface of a series of exciting adventures and actions. The contemporary social problems are thus indirectly and imaginatively unfolding themselves. This is what Darko Suvin means when he says that SF contains both cognition and estrangement, which I already mentioned. Moreover, the subversive potential of SF can be envisaged in this movie. Through the estranged reflection of a specific stage of history, here the stage of late capitalism, the contradictions and problems inherent in it are also examined and questioned. The utopian impulse of this movie lies precisely in the moment when these problems will be resolved and a better world is anticipated, imaginatively, at least. The happy ending of this movie wherein Deckard and Rachel flies to the North is an example of imaginary resolution of social problems.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

1. For a clear explanation of the "new wave" SF writers, see William S. Bainbridge, *Dimensions of Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 85-115.

2. In my MA thesis, I have already discussed both Adorno and Benjamin's concept of true art works. See Jiann-guang Lin, *Subversive Imagination: Mimesis and the Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick* (Taipei: National Taiwan UP, 1993) 30-72.

3. "Dialectical image" constitutes the most important idea in Benjamin's well-known work, *Arcades Project*. See Susan BuckMorss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT, 1989) 209-50.

4. See Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 281-99.

5. See Jameson's account of "strategy of containment" in analyzing Conrad's *Lord Jim* in *Political Unconscious*, 210-219.

6. For an account of the similarities between *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner*, see Susan Doll and Greg Faller, "Blade Runner and Genre: Film Noir and Science Fiction," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 2 (1986): 96-97.

7. For an account of this concept, see Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978) 333-36.

8. See Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 43-80.

9. Ironically, Deckard's true self or desire is later revived through a replicant, Rachel, who recalls for him the memory of love or empathy. It is only through her that the repressed desire of Deckard, hitherto a cold-blood killing machine, is awakened.

10. Even before he knows his coming death and after his extraordinary grief over Pris's death at the end of the movie, Roy expresses his strong desire to live and play, like a child full of vitality:

Come on, Deckard, show me what you're made of. Proud of yourself, little man? My turn. I'm going to give you a few seconds before I come. I'm coming. Four, five, try to stay alive. Come, get it up. Unless you're alive you can't play. And if you don't play . . . [you're dead]. Six, seven, go to hell or go to heaven.

11. It is interesting that after knowing the memories and photos collected by Rachel, a female replicant, are fake, of which I will discuss later, spectators have every reason to doubt that Roy's memories of his seeing these things are also implanted by humans. However, I think what the replicant sees, being the supplement of human eyes, is not the result of human intelligence. We just have

to remember what Roy says to the eye-engineer to know men's insufficiency: "I wish you could see what I see with your eyes."

12. For a view that treats Roy Betty as a Christ figure, see Doll and Faller's article above, 95-96.

13. Both Leon and Rachel have photos and therefore memories of a mother who actually does not exist. The importance of having a mother for the replicants can be interpreted in terms of the establishment of their identities. Only by means of locating where they come from can they possibly know who they are. The audience may also remember the fury of Leon when a blade runner asks him to describe in a single word about his mother at the beginning of the movie. Leon's fury may thus be interpreted that this question is associated with the suffering that he is now experiencing: because he is a replicant and doesn't have a mother (and does want to make believe that he has one), he is interrogated by this blade runner and tortured, exploited by almost all humans. There are at least two more episodes bearing on the problem of origin in this movie: Rachel's implanted memories of her fear of showing her sexual organs when she is six; and her invented memories of seeing a lot of spider-eggs being hatched and then eat the mother-spider, their origin.

14. Many critics dislike the happy ending because it dissolves the critical edge established throughout the movie. Peter Fitting, for example, argues that "In the film, however, in opposition to the somber ending of the novel, Deckard is not only rewarded for the risks he has undergone and for his reluctant exercise of violence in the maintenance of the status quo; the happy ending also absolves him of his doubts" (*Science-Fiction Studies* 14 [1987]: 347). While I quite agree with Fitting's view that popular fiction always neutralizes negative moments, my stance is that the happy ending of *Blade Runner* expresses at the same time Deckard's dissatisfaction with the existing world and his longing for a better one. The discrepancy between what **is** and what is **true** is not yet neutralized, and utopia lies precisely within this discrepancy.



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