The Significance of Film Noir in Blade Runner: The Final Cut

From the rain-swept dingy streets and flickering fluorescent lighting, to the ominous sense of fatality and *temps perdu*: Film noir makes its presence felt throughout Ridley Scott's Cyberpunk movie *Blade Runner: The Final cut*. During its development and heyday in the 1940's, Film noir on a thematic level did attempt to challenge the system and structure of society, but largely it focused on the individual sense of self and the nature of identity in relation to society - how far could you push the moral envelope while still being swept along by the undercurrent of traditional Hollywood conventions? (Quart and Auster, 1984, pp. 22-23). Alternatively, *Blade Runner* has plenty to challenge the structure of society in a dystopian backdrop of capitalist 2019 Los Angelis, but the real thematic meat on the bone is the stories of the characters themselves and their struggles to find a sense of identity and self in a world where no one can be trusted, a world which is distinctly *noir*. The Film noir tropes in *Blade Runner* are blended with those of Science fiction, as the film utilises the blank canvas gifted to it by the genre of Sci-fi to appropriate these tropes and explore the consequences of a future shaped by capitalism built on rapid technological advancement.

> *Commerce: is our goal here at Tyrell, more human than human is our motto… If we*
> *gift them the past we can create a cushion, a pillow for their emotions and*
> *consequently we can control them better. – Eldon Tyrell*
> (*Blade Runner: The Final Cut,* 1991, 00:21:05)

Much like the Proles in George Orwell's *1984*, the Replicants in *Blade Runner* are consumers of their own identity, steeped in the fabrications which construct their past and blissfully unaware of the hegemony which mollifies them into obedience. In the scene following Deckard and Rachel's first meeting and Voight Kampff test, we see Tyrell explaining to Deckard the nature of Rachel's design. To quote Roland Barthes on the subject of hegemony 'Everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie *has and makes us have* of the relations between men and the world' (Cited in Hebdige, 1981, p. 9). In what can be described an allegorical example of extreme hegemony, Tyrell has begun to implant memories into the Replicants to prevent them from questioning their existence, making them more accepting of their past and subsequently their future, similar to the way the Inner and Outer Parties in *1984* are constantly altering the news and historical archives to maintain a totalitarian ideology throughout 'airstrip one'.

One method of displaying *Blade Runner* as a pastiche of film noir is to show how it borrows iconography consistently throughout and earned its neo-noir classification on the aesthetics alone. For instance visually establishing the Replicant Roy Batty as the film's villain is achieved almost instantaneously, with a mid-shot of his feet which sweeps into a low angle shot showing Batty's silhouette as he strides toward the camera (00:24:09). The ensuing interrogation of Hannibal Chew (a genetic engineer who creates eyes for the Tyrell Corporation) has mis-en-scene laden with film noir techniques designed to empower Batty, with over the shoulder shot reverse shot sequences depicting him towering over Chew in a shadowy, claustrophobic laboratory. The visual stylistics such as chiaroscuro lighting and fogging (reminiscent of smoke filled bars) applied, add to the compositional tension in this scene, and although no serious physical harm actually befalls Chew audiences are

nonetheless held in suspense by the potential malice achieved by Batty's measured, confident and imposing demeanour as he exudes menace, reminiscent of classic film noir villain Tommy Udo from Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* (1947)

Thematically film noir expresses fascinations with both the past and present but also an over-riding fear of the future (Schrader, 1972, p. 11). By utilising the genre of science fiction *Blade Runner* is able to express a literal fear of the future, as the film's creators explore anxieties felt in an age when the industrialised western world is becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of humankind's hubris in the form of globalisation. With rapid advancements in technology since the mid-19th century the world's resources have become increasingly stretched, and American climatologists in the 1970's established the theory of global warming as a result of intense industrial activity. In this time mankind became aware of the extent to which industrialisation plays accessory to its own demise (Weart, 2014). Ironically this self-awareness coincided with the emergence of neoliberalism, an ideological system of global trade enabling the birth of hyper-capitalism.

The short lifespan given to Batty may bear relevance to the short lifespan which could be facing a hyper-capitalist society as it assumes control of the commercialised world and consumes resources at an alarming rate, something alluded to by Tyrell with his line 'The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very very brightly, Roy' (01:21:34). While Tyrell can be seen to literally depict a personification of capitalism, we can take Roy Batty either as a metaphor for individualist free thinkers, breaking free from the constraints enforced by capitalist society in the form of hegemony, or alternatively as a metaphor for hyper-capitalism as it supersedes and subsequently destroys its creator, capitalism. Prior to his death Tyrell describes Roy as 'the prodigal son. You're quite a prize!' (01:21:45) possibly referring to the resurgence of laissez-faire economic liberalism in 1970's America in the form of neoliberalism.

While global corporations continued to grow more powerful in real terms than even the governments, due to the industrial powers that be capitalising on global trade agreements, multi-national corporations investing heavily in the privatisation of government resources and the enabling of legislation allowing large corporations to operate outside of government regulations and restrictions, Film directors and screenwriters have been using transparent and subliminal semiotics in the moving image as a platform of expressing simultaneously the concerns of society and individuals. Paul Schrader on film noir stated 'Never before had films dared to take such a harsh uncomplimentary look at American life' (1972, p.8) and *Blade Runner,* as a pastiche of film noir, has appropriated the tropes and techniques used in 1940's cinema to express the anxieties felt in the years following the Cold War: rapid advancement of technology and commercialisation.

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