

## Theology @ St. Barnabas: Blade Runner

*In celebration of its 25th anniversary, director Ridley Scott has gone back into post production to create the long-awaited definitive new version of his 1982 cult classic film 'Blade Runner'. One of my Oxford theological assignments was a reflection on an aspect of contemporary culture – and it wasn't a difficult choice to make. I lived on the East Coast of the US for almost four years (1981-4) and on one of my trips west went to the see the movie for the first time (on its release) in a downtown Hollywood movie theatre. It actually made the setting of Blade Runner quite surreal to walk back out onto the streets that provided the backdrop to this dark and troubled dystopian vision of the future. I must have watched it a dozen times since in addition to reading Philip K. Dick's novel, memorizing the Vangelis soundtrack – oh yes - and dropping a few not-so-subtle hints about dad's 2007 Christmas present! For those who've seen the film it's replete with religious and thought-provoking imagery – and its essential question about what it means to be human continues to provoke.*

Blade Runner opened in US cinemas on the 25<sup>th</sup> June 1982. It has since been hailed as one of the great films of the twentieth century, although at the time of release, amidst media hype, critical reaction to the film was generally negative. Given the success of Director Ridley Scott's previous films<sup>1</sup>, the public was disappointed with Blade Runner: expecting a special-effects-laden action film, they were instead presented with a dark, bleak, depressing vision of the future, in which most Hollywood 'values' are overturned.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, reaction to the film was so hostile that director Ridley Scott later commented, "You'd have thought we were boiling babies or something".<sup>3</sup> However, despite its initial commercial failure<sup>4</sup>, critical reassessments have steadily become more favourable. Blade Runner has acquired something of a cult following, and is credited with having inspired the basic aesthetic of the science fiction sub-genre "cyberpunk" from which more recent films like *The Matrix* clearly derive. There are many reasons that have contributed to this reassessment. There is the obvious enjoyment of simply watching a fantastic and brilliantly crafted, atmospheric film, with enigmatic characters who inhabit a stunningly created environment, and set to a compelling musical score by Vangelis. But there is also much more depth to the film which raises questions that merit serious theological reflection. The general volte-face of critical and popular opinion towards the film may have been the reason behind Ridley Scott's decision to release a Director's Cut in 1992, which restored his original

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<sup>1</sup> His previous film *Alien* (1979), a sci-fi horror, had proved to be an enormous commercial success. He has since directed a number of award winning movies including *Thelma and Louise*, and *Gladiator*. Harrison Ford, *Blade Runner's* star was, and still is, one of Hollywood's most bankable properties.

<sup>2</sup> Sammon *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, 1996: 314

<sup>3</sup> Sammon, *ibid.* p.389

<sup>4</sup> To profit most from a mass art form like cinema, it seems one must appeal to the lowest common denominators in a film, for example a love interest, or the desire to see justice done at the end of a film, and so on. *Blade Runner's* hero is an anti-hero: at one point he kills a fleeing 'woman' by shooting her in the back. The film generally presents a negative view of humanity, which may have contributed to its initial commercial failure (only just recouping its \$28m. costs),

intentions for the film.<sup>5</sup> As a text, the Director's Cut reveals exactly how Scott planned the film originally, and as such allows a variety of new readings of the film's themes. It is this later version that will be used here.

The essay is structured in three parts using the Action/Reflection Learning Model (based on Kolb's cycle of reflection): first, looking at what the film is saying (attending to careful description of the narrative); second, thinking about its content (analyzing the main theological ideas and considering any ideological messages that emerge); and third, briefly considering the learning from the previous two stages (to lay the basis for a developing understanding of the relevance of contemporary Christian witness).

"It's not an easy thing to meet your maker." states replicant Roy Batty as he stands face to face with his creator, geneticist Eldon Tyrell. Perhaps no movie of modern time has better explored the definition of what it means to be human than Blade Runner. The Tyrell Corporation's motto, "More human than human", serves as the basis for exploring the human experience through 'true' (i.e. biological) humans and created human forms, or replicants. "Replicants" - advanced genetically engineered humans - are created by the Tyrell Corporation for the purpose of slave labour and dangerous assignments. "Blade Runners" are the members of a special police squad whose job it is to hunt them down and kill them should any find their way back to Earth from their "Off-World" colonies where their superior strength is exploited for commercial gain.

As the movie progresses we are presented with surrealistic images of Los Angeles in the year 2019. The futuristic imagery and film-noir feel is arguably some of the best ever done on film. The future imagined by the Director Ridley Scott is not so much ominous as encroaching. The dark, rainy streets, the subdued, filtered light, and the atmospheric sounds and images all conspire to enfold viewers' imagination and draw them in. Symbolism about the meaning of humanity is woven powerfully throughout the film, relying to a great extent on biblical metaphor.

In it we are presented with types of angels<sup>6</sup>, demons, heaven and God as the creator, as well as allusions to Christ himself. The replicants have been seen as representing fallen angels. Replicants 'fell from grace' when they mutinied against their creators by killing humans in an off-world colony to commandeer transport to return to earth.

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especially given that it was released at the same time as *ET*, a 'feelgood' film that was the box office success of 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Such is the surprising longevity of interest in Blade Runner, that Vangelis also re-compiled his own "composer's cut" released in April 1994 (Warner Music UK Ltd.)

<sup>6</sup> When the replicant's leader, Roy Batty (or 'Baty' as the name is spelt in Dick's book – see below), is introduced in the film he recites a slightly altered version of a William Blake poem using the beginning, "Fiery the Angels fell..." rather than Blake's original: "Fiery the Angels rose, and as they rose deep thunder roll'd around the shores: indignant with the fires of Orc..."

A powerful symbol that recurs throughout the movie is that of the eye. The sophisticated, computerized 'Voigt Kampff'<sup>7</sup> empathy test that Blade Runners use to detect if someone is a replicant or not measures the responses of the eye to psychological questions. The first person that the replicants seek out to solve their questions of life is the man who genetically designed their eyes. It also seems that the preferred method of killing humans is for the replicant to gouge out the victim's eyes.<sup>8</sup>

As the movie unfolds we learn that the genetic designers that created the replicants programmed them with only a four-year life span. Replicants were meant to copy humans in every way except for emotions, and to keep them from creating their own emotional responses their lives were artificially shortened. The replicants have returned to Earth to find out how to live longer and to do that they will ultimately have to face their creator.

But the creator has made yet another experimental model of replicant that is given memory implants. Because the new model, Rachael, has memories to reflect upon she is as yet unaware of her status as an 'engineered person'. As she learns her true identity her path becomes inextricably entwined with Blade Runner Deckard, played by Harrison Ford. As his character progresses Deckard comes to symbolize the contradictory nature of the human experience by equating replicants to machines in one instance<sup>9</sup> and being emotionally wrecked after having killed a renegade replicant in another.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately he falls in love with the new, experimental model, Rachael.

The replicants turn to another genetic engineer in their quest for answers. J.F. Sebastian is a young man in an old body, being inflicted with 'Methuselah's Syndrome' that causes extremely accelerated ageing. Sharing the fate of a premature and seemingly unavoidable death, he is persuaded to use his chess-playing relationship with Tyrell as a pretext for gaining access for Roy Batty to the CEO in person in his Corporation headquarters. Tyrell's office creates the mood of an ancient Egyptian pyramid or Mayan temple - the home of the Earth-bound god. As Roy enters the highest level of the pyramid he steps into the ethereal realm of Tyrell's bedroom. Only candles light the space and reflect off white curtains and whiter surroundings. The creator is arrayed in flowing white robes.

Roy states simply that what he wants is more life. He has come into the presence of the creator, into the creator's own realm, with a supplication. Tyrell remarks that Roy is the prodigal

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<sup>7</sup> Details of this are taken from the book on which the film was based: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick (1968 New York: Ballantine Books)

<sup>8</sup> The Bible uses the illustration of the eye hundreds of times to show its importance as a gate to the soul. Jesus says in Luke 11:24 "The light of the body is the eye", possibly meaning (for the Director's purposes at least) that not only do the things that we look at affect our soul, but also that our eyes can show what is already in there.

<sup>9</sup> "Replicants are like any other machines. They're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit they're not my problem."

son returning to his father: a sinner returning to his god for forgiveness and grace. Like the son in the parable, Roy begins to confess the sins he has committed (“I’ve done questionable things...”) and, as the father, Tyrell brushes these aside as “nothing the god of bio-mechanics wouldn’t let you into heaven for”. Tyrell confides in the prodigal replicant that, having tried all genetic techniques within his knowledge, it is impossible to bestow on him more life. The all-powerful creator is helpless to heal because the genetic code is irreversible. Roy takes the face of his creator in his hands, tenderly kisses him (an image that is reminiscent, perhaps, of the kiss of the betrayer in the garden), puts his thumbs into Tyrell’s eyes, and crushes his skull.

By now Deckard has tracked the replicants, which the police refer to as ‘skin-jobs’, to the home of Sebastian, who was also killed by Roy at Tyrell’s office. All that remains at Sebastian’s home are the genetic ‘friends’ he created to stave off his own loneliness, and a female replicant, Pris, hiding among the shadows. She has covered herself in a white veil and blackened both her eyes.

A brief but terrifying fight leaves Pris dead and Deckard awaiting Roy’s return. As Roy discovers his last friend dead, he begins the stalking of his final victim - yet knowing his own life span is drawing to a close. When his body begins to go into spasm and his hand stops working, he rips a nail from a floorboard and plunges it into the centre of his palm exclaiming “not yet!” This powerful image of the crucifixion marks a dramatic change in the replicant’s character that leads to the climax between the two ‘men’, one who is human and the other who is “more human than human”.

Having lost his gun, Deckard has tried to escape across the rooftops. A frantic jump between two buildings leaves him hanging from the building’s edge. Roy now appears behind Deckard holding a white dove snatched from the rooftop.

Roy stands over the struggling Blade Runner, who is struggling for a grip, hanging by his fingertips from the wet girder and anticipating the inevitable fall to his death. The moment that Deckard loses his grip the nail-scarred hand of Roy Batty grabs him and pulls him to safety. Having been saved, Deckard watches, powerless, as his saviour quietly dies. In his dying soliloquy<sup>11</sup> Roy voices his longing for eternity and grieves over the fact that all the beautiful and breathtaking things he has seen will be lost in time:

“I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe: attack ships on fire off the shores of Orion. I watched C beams glittering in the dark above the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain...Time to die...”

Not only has he learned emotions, he has learned the value of life. At the moment of death he releases the dove he is holding which flies towards heaven and - for the first and only time in the film - there is a small patch of blue sky.

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<sup>10</sup> Zhora, whose death is portrayed in slow motion crashing through the glass of an endless shopping mall clothed in a plastic cape which resembles angel’s wings.

<sup>11</sup> Remarkably unscripted and filmed in a single take.

In the final scene, as the film closes, Deckard is confronted by another policeman who knows about his love affair with Rachael and lets him know that he will not interfere. All the way through the film, this character, Gaff, has made origami models of animals<sup>12</sup>. This time he has left behind the figure of a unicorn in the apartment where Rachael is asleep, unharmed. He thus leaves Deckard to run off with the replicant, the hunter becoming the hunted. In Deckard's mind he hears a replay of Gaff's earlier comment: "Too bad she won't live, but then again who does?"<sup>13</sup>

Blade Runner doesn't necessarily answer any of the questions that it raises, but it does leave the viewer pondering the meaning of life and humanity. This second section considers further the significance of the film's content in order to analyze the main theological ideas and consider any ideological messages that emerge. It addresses some of the eternal questions that human beings have been asking throughout history, for example: What does it mean to be human? What *is* reality? What does it mean to be act morally?

Blade Runner is a pastiche, and when you peel away some of the layers, its core vision is one of Metropolis<sup>14</sup>, a continuing obsession with modernism, where the future city is a kind of monster New York.<sup>15</sup> Many critics have cited Blade Runner as the acme of postmodern films,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A motif that emerges more centrally in the book, where a radioactive Earth's remaining inhabitants are desperate to own one of a diminishing number of living species of animal at prohibitive cost. Deckard is introduced in the book as owning an electric sheep, and is at great pains to conceal its artificiality from his neighbours.

<sup>13</sup> In a Channel 4 documentary interview in June 2000 ('On The Edge Of Blade Runner'), Ridley Scott finally revealed the answer to a plot twist in the film that had been the topic of fierce debate for nearly two decades. Movie fans have been divided over whether Harrison Ford's hard-boiled cop character Deckard was also not human but a genetically-engineered replicant - the very creature he is tasked with destroying. Little suspicion was raised by the 1982 original version of the film. But a decade later the Director's Cut edition - although deliberately ambiguous - convinced many that the hero was indeed a replicant. In the Director's Cut version, the biggest clue for analysts was the appearance of a unicorn on screen while Deckard is lost in thought. The image of the mythical creature appears again towards the end of the film when he picks up an origami model discarded by another character, Gaff. As the replicants had no memories of their own, they had to be implanted, and fans interpreted the appearance of the model as a sign that Gaff knew what Deckard was thinking because it was an image shared by other non-humans. In the documentary, Scott discusses the scenes and asked what they mean, he confirms with a grin: "He's a replicant".

<sup>14</sup> The title of a 1927 early science fiction film by Fritz Lang that presents a pessimistic prediction of a future society where workers are portrayed as lifeless. Its essential tag line is "There can be no understanding between the hands and the brain unless the heart acts as mediator."

<sup>15</sup> Blade Runner engages in pastiche at a number of levels. Its architecture, for example, reveals several different styles. Its opening scenes show futuristic looking refineries, but then concentrate on a building that is a pastiche of Mayan architecture. The interiors of the Tyrell Corporation are designed in an Establishment Gothic style. The Police Headquarters echo the Art Deco look of the New York Chrysler Building (etc.).

<sup>16</sup> David Lyon's (1994) *Postmodernity* is introduced with reference to Blade Runner.

which is interesting, because postmodernism carries with it an inherent tendency to devalue art, insofar as postmodernism posits that all semiological systems are self-referential and as such incapable of any truly representative relationship with reality. In contrast, as identified in the first section, *Blade Runner* makes use of mythical, and in particular Biblical, imagery to espouse some of its ideas and critiques of the future. Moreover, there are clear moral and ideological themes that relate to the politics of power and oppression. As such, it could be seen as a rejection of the 'depthlessness' of postmodern ideas in favour of a view of humanity which is redemptive, and which contradicts the celebration of meaninglessness typifying postmodern theory. The use of imagery from mythic and religious meta-narratives offers humanity the possibility of self-definition through moral truth. It is thus argued that the film's optimism is the result of a creative paradox: while the film suggests that dehumanization is all that technology has to offer, it is the ultimate creation of this technology, the replicant Roy Batty, who seems to find the path to spiritual and moral enlightenment.

Yet *Blade Runner* can also be interpreted as being consciously postmodern, in that it explores some of the issues to which the phrase relates. Although famously difficult to define, postmodernism does refer to the ways that signs become more important than the things they signify. As Dominic Striantii says:

The mass media, for example, was once thought to hold a mirror up to, and thereby reflect, a wider social reality. Now reality can only be defined in terms of this mirror. Society had become subsumed within the mass media. It is no longer even a question of distortion, since the term implies that there is a reality outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and that is precisely what is at issue according to postmodern theory<sup>17</sup>

The idea of the 'simulacra' lies at the heart of *Blade Runner*. The simulacra of the film, Replicants ("skin jobs"), are indistinguishable from humans. 'Human' thus becomes a very ambiguous term. The word 'human' requires a context to give it meaning - by juxtaposing ourselves in opposition with another we define ourselves. This sheds light on many aspects of the film. Why are the replicants not allowed on Earth? Why, if they are capable of developing their own emotional responses, are they ruthlessly denied the opportunity to do so? The answer to these questions relates directly to the human-replicant relationship. The humans of the film treat the replicants ruthlessly because, in a way, they must in order to imbue the concept of 'human' with some meaning in a postmodern world. But they cannot keep this violent hierarchy from collapsing: the replicants prove they can be just as human as the humans themselves - perhaps more so because they are the only ones in the film that seem to have established meaningful relationships (and included in this, of course are Deckard and Rachael). The cultural code upon which the world of the film is based is, like Los Angeles (the city of angels) itself, corroding, resulting in a crisis of definition for humanity. If there can be no reality, but only a simulacrum of it,

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<sup>17</sup> Striantii, D. *An Introduction to the Theories of Modern Culture* (1994: 224)

we must surrender to simulation. To pick up on an earlier point, Blade Runner's humans attempt to protect their identity in the postmodern world by enforcing a violent hierarchy between human and replicant: but discover that doing this is not possible. As Raman Selden says of Blade Runner:

(In *Blade Runner*), is a parallel scenario to Baudrillard's view that humans should surrender to the triumphant world of objects; human subjects are involved in a (mostly losing) battle with invasive postmodern technologies.<sup>18</sup>

So what might we find of particular theological significance in Blade Runner? Having attended to the narrative strands and analyzed the significance of the content in terms of modernism, postmodernism and theology, this brief concluding section attempts to summarize its main questions and challenges.<sup>19</sup> The film certainly presents a number of valuable opportunities for Christian engagement and witness. There is the desire to meet one's maker; the desire for life that has substance or meaning – a longing for eternity. There is anger at one's maker when our deepest desires seem unheeded. There is a longing for the natural, multi-coloured, living beauty of creation, rather than a synthetic substitute. There is the primacy attached to investing in loving, caring relationships despite the inevitability of death. Essentially there is a preciousness to life, and a desire for authenticity rather than unreality. There is, moreover, a warning associated with the consequences of human knowledge's increasing ability to manipulate or replicate life.

Perhaps the main message that emerges is that it is we human beings who are the 'real' replicants. We too are programmed soon to die. We too have seen things. But these cannot be all there is. We want to live again. We want to make sense of the things that have happened to us. Enter Christ into our fallen world: who is 'homoousios' with the Father; of one and the same substance; begotten, not made; who bore our sins in his body on a tree; who reconciles us with our creator.<sup>20</sup>

## Sources

See footnotes for references. Having entered "Blade Runner - Postmodernism" and turned up some 1340 entries on an internet search (accessed on 30.11.02), it is clear that the film continues to raise significant questions twenty years after its release. The following sites (rather randomly selected) were of interest:

<http://www.majid-salim.co.uk/br/intro.html>  
<http://www.devo.com/bladerunner>  
<http://www.brmovie.com/Analysis/#Religion>  
<http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/bladerunner.html>

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<sup>18</sup> Selden, R. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1993: 181)

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to a long-standing American friend, Vince Books, who took time to e-mail me a response to this question. We have discussed our mutual admiration for Blade Runner on many occasions.

<sup>20</sup> Prof. T Weinandy 'Trinity to Nicaea' Lecture Series at the Oxford University Examination Schools - Michaelmas term.

<http://www.artisticwhispers.homestead.com/files/bladerun.html>  
[http://www.brmovie.com/Analysis/William\\_blake.html](http://www.brmovie.com/Analysis/William_blake.html)