

Blade runner and the dangers of science



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" illustrates the fact that Science Fiction films are frequently concerned with the dangers rather than the benefits of science and technology. Released in 1982, "Blade Runner" conveys to its audience a frightening and nightmarish vision of a dystopian technological future society. The film is set in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles in the year 2019. It is a world enveloped in a putrid atmosphere of darkness, gloom and corruption. Fallout from the recent nuclear holocaust, suggested by frequent explosive effects in the opening sequence, has blotted out the sun and acid rain perpetually descends.

Through its delineation and portrayal of three scientists, "Blade Runner" explores the dehumanizing effects of technology, together with the potential exploitation of science for the purpose of achieving a God-like omnipotence and political dominance in society. The opening text of "Blade Runner" provides the background to the film's plot. It outlines the origins of the NEXUS replicants and alludes to the genetic engineers who created them. As their name suggests, replicants were designed to replicate human beings so precisely as to be virtually indistinguishable from them.

However, replicants are supposedly bereft of emotion and are limited to a four year life span. In the opening text, the Tyrell Corporation is identified, together with its role in perfecting replicant technology. Replicants were designed and created to be used as slave labour in the off-world colonies. However, some mutinied and were banned from returning to earth, for which the punishment is death. The film's plot is primarily centred upon the character of Rick Deckard, a member of the special Blade Runner squads

which have been specifically established to identify and kill or “ retire” trespassing replicants.

The mutinying replicants, lead by Roy Batty, are on a determined quest to uncover the secret of their creation and thus a way of expanding their limited life span, since all are on the verge of death. There are three scientists in the film, parodying the Holy Trinity of The Bible and indicative of the idea that the scientist is the new God of the technological age. Tyrell is the most important of the three scientists and clearly emerges as the most powerful individual in the post-apocalyptic world of the film.

Tyrell is the all-knowing, all-powerful president of the Tyrell Corporation, the company responsible for the design and manufacture of replicants employed as slaves in the off-world colonies. Thus usurping the knowledge and power of God, the scientist has emerged as the new supreme power of the technological age. As the scientist, Chu, points out, Tyrell is the “ big boss”, the “ big genius. ” Tyrell “ knows everything. ” He is the “ god of biomechanics” Indeed, the scientist is revealed to be attempting to perfect God’s original creation, as the motto of the Tyrell Corporation, “ More human than human,” clearly indicates.

It is highly significant that is only from the high vantage point of Tyrell’s temple-like edifice that the sun is, at least, partially visible. The implication is that, in a world without the sun and its life-giving properties, the scientist is the new creator of life. This idea can be taken a step further, since it is the use of science and technology for destructive purposes and for the quest of world domination which has resulted in the corruption of the earth and its failed capacity to receive the light and warmth of the sun.

Thus a common, long-standing fear has finally materialized: the scientist has succeeded in usurping all power over life and death. Consequently, the scientist has asserted himself as the supreme God of creation. Moreover, science and technology, which are at the very centre of society in the film, now constitute the new faith which will save the world. It is science which has created the android slaves and the transport which have made it possible for human beings to journey off-world and colonize other planets.

Tyrell's perception of the replicant, Rachel, is typical of his God-like stance and arrogance. Rachel is viewed by Tyrell as little more than a test in manipulation and control: " Rachel is an experiment, nothing more. " The fact that some of the replicants have developed human-like emotions has led them to become volatile. By providing Rachel with the borrowed memories of his niece and thus a " cushion" for the developing emotions, Tyrell claims he seeks a greater level of power over the replicants: " If we give them a past... we can control them better.

However, while boasting of Rachel's superior capacity to be virtually indistinguishable from a human being, Tyrell denies her all self-knowledge, failing to inform her of the fact that she is a replicant and thus carelessly allowing her to struggle with the crisis of her identity. In contrast to Tyrell, the scientist Chu is an obscure figure. Assigned the task of genetically engineering the eyes of the replicants, he spends much of his time in the sunless, sub-zero temperatures of the basement in his shop, surrounded by ice and cold mists.

This, together with his foreign appearance and speech, renders Chu a rather mysterious, ghostly figure, perhaps a parody of the Holy Spirit of the Holy

Trinity. The third scientist, J. F. Sebastian, a genetic engineer, emerges as a type Jesus figure in the plot. His first act in the film is one of charity and compassion. Accidentally stumbling upon the runaway replicant, Pris, sleeping in the dark and cold amongst a pile of rubbish, Sebastian offers her comfort and shelter in his home.

Pris is presented as a lonely, destitute figure, referring to herself as “ sort of an orphan. Indeed, Pris and Roy Batty emerge in the film as a type of Adam and Eve pair abandoned by their creator in a corrupted Eden. Sebastian’s kindness towards the two replicants and general meekness of character reinforces his self-sacrificial Jesus type role in the film. Significantly, Pris refers to Sebastian as “ my saviour. ” Moreover, Sebastian offers the hope of salvation in the form of an extended life to both Pris and Roy by agreeing to help them attain the knowledge they require from Tyrell. The three scientists are portrayed as strangely isolated figures, completely cut off the world which they manipulate and rule.

The grandeur of Tyrell’s temple-like edifice serves as much to highlight his isolation as much as his God-like omnipotence. While Chu works away in a lonely, freezing basement, J. F. Sebastian resides in a large, dark, dank apartment in a building in which he is the only tenant. From this it is evident that the scientists themselves have become victims of their own technologically generated social fragmentation. Sebastian has even gone to the length of resorting to manufacturing automated companions: “ I make friends. They’re toys. My friends are toys. I make them.

These so-called “ friends” consist of grotesque dwarfs in military attire and other bizarre figures who cackle persistently The leader of the mutinying

replicants, Roy Batty, may be viewed, on the one hand, as Lucifer, the Fallen Angel, who defies the power of his God, Tyrell, and for which he is cast out of the heaven of the off-world colonies and into the hell of a decaying earth. On the other hand, he may be viewed as Tyrell's Adam, indicated by the fact that Tyrell refers to Roy as his "prodigal son". In a parody of God's creation of man in his own image, the scientists employ their own genetic material to create the replicants.

For instance, J. F. Sebastian boasts of having contributed to the genetic make-up of both Roy Batty and Pris. Moreover, like Adam in the Genesis story, Roy Batty seeks the forbidden knowledge of his creator. He seeks out his God in an effort to uncover the secret of his existence so as to prolong and gain control over his own life. Unable finally to acquire this knowledge from Tyrell, Roy Batty kills him. Thus the cycle is repeated of the creation usurping and destroying his creator after attempting to seize privileged knowledge and power.

In this way, Roy Batty ultimately emerges as a representative of the modern man, struggling to re-discover his humanity in a society dehumanized by rampant technology and consumerism. This fact is poignantly expressed by Roy Batty's instinctive, compassionate rescue of Deckard, the man who had sought to destroy him, and the subsequent despairing image of Roy bowed down in the rain. Ridley Scott lingers upon this image as if to focus upon Roy's, and thus man's, ultimate sense of meaninglessness, loneliness and despair as he faces the inevitability of death in a godless universe that has been robbed of all significance and purpose.

Roy had sought to discover the meaning of his existence through the scientific principles which had created him. However, it is precisely because Roy's, and modern man's existence, is based on scientific principles that he fails to find his answer. Evident from the very opening of the film is that fact that science is no longer confined to the realms of academia, but has now become fully amalgamated with the consumer culture which supplies goods and services. As Tyrell points out, " Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell.

As the destroyers and creators of worlds, science and technology have emerged as the most valuable commodities in the culture of the film. The consequence of this all-powerful coalition of technology and consumerism is the emergence of a dehumanized, socially disintegrated world of mechanical voices and huge, computer-generated faces on animated bill boards; a society where each individual is identified by numbers and people struggle to establish any type of communal bond.

Ironically, in this disconnected world, only the replicants have managed to form any deep and meaningful bonds with one another. Significantly, the replicants consistently refer to one another by their first names - Roy, Pris, Leon and Rachel - while the human characters are impersonally referred to by their surnames, such as Deckard, Bryant, Chu, Sebastian and Tyrell. The replicants support one another and are bonded by their shared quest for survival.

Part of the standard test for the identification of replicants is geared towards the examination of emotional responses, since the capacity to feel is an essential definer of humanity. However, it is the human characters that appear emotionally crippled, leading emotionally cold, disconnected lives,

while it is the replicants who display a passion for life in their determination to find a way of prolonging it, as well as a deep affection for one another. Roy's distress at Pris' death is evident in the emotion he displays when he examines her dead body.

The depth of his anger and grief at the additional loss of other replicants such as Leon is indicated by the cruelty of his revenge against Deckard, breaking his fingers as payback for the death of each replicant in one of the final scenes of the film. Moreover, the only meaningful relationship which Deckard forms is with the replicant, Rachel, who seeks him out in an obvious effort to form some sort of emotional connection with him. The love relationship which forms between Deckard and Rachel appears as the only success story of the film's plot. After declaring their love for one another, Deckard and

Rachel depart at the conclusion of the film. However, theirs is an uncertain future in a world which continues to be antagonistic to the formation of human bonds. "Blade Runner", moreover, combines and explores some of the most defining ideological, technological and cultural aspects of the 20th Century. Apart from the rapid progress of science and technology and the emergence of the consumer culture, the film also contains powerful references to the fascist ideologies which promoted the concept of a master race and to Marxist concepts of class struggle.

Advancements in technology have resulted in the creation of replicants who are exploited as slaves by the more privileged humans in a society which is generally prejudiced against them. Bryant disparagingly refers to the replicants as "skin jobs." This is despite their obvious superiority to humans

in terms of their strength and, to a certain extent, their capacity to value and experience life. However, it is precisely due to this obvious superiority that the replicants may, on the other hand, be viewed as the genetically engineered realization of the master race.

Roy Batty, for instance, resembles the Nazi ideal of the perfect Aryan, blonde, blue-eyed and a perfect physique. Moreover, while technology has allowed for the migration of human beings to the off-world colonies, it is clearly an option available only to the privileged few. Even brilliant scientists such as Sebastian have been denied the opportunity to migrate due to his medical condition. The less privileged masses are, therefore, forced to remain trapped on a sunless, decaying earth.

Thus Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" is in many ways typical of the Science Fiction genre in that it essentially concerned with the dangers rather than the benefits of science and technology. The film presents the viewer with a nightmarish, futuristic vision of human society where the principles of science and consumerism have combined to assume a God-like control and dominance over human behaviour and natural emotional instincts, resulting in the exploitation and moral degradation of humanity.

In the dystopian universe of the film, human beings have become disconnected and alienated from one another under the dehumanising pressures of technology and materialism. Above all, the film explores the struggle for meaning and purpose in a world where the spiritual quest has been entirely subsumed by the values of capitalism, materialism, industry and greed.