

Synthetic vs. natural: an analysis of costuming in blade runner

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Ben Boudreau Professor Butorac English 151 10 May 2010 Synthetic vs. Natural: An Analysis of Costuming Used in Blade Runner Blade Runner written by Scott Bukatman and published in 1997 discusses the making of, and larger issues addressed, in Ridley Scott's film Blade Runner (1982). Bukatman, an Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Stanford University, has written several books on film. His book takes a look at the film formally, ideologically, and even historically.

He addresses the film formally by talking about the production of the film. He briefly discusses the process of refining the film's script which is loosely based on the book *Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. Bukatman talks of Blade Runner's design, touching on the narration, the production of the props and set, special effects, and cinematography of the film. In his ideological analysis of the film he touches on larger social issues in the film such as urbanization, immigration, racism, and post modernism.

On page 19 Bukatman says " With its city that resembles nothing so much as a vast boundless refinery and its world that no longer contains any traces of nature" This discussion of the set and props hint at the problems of urbanization as shown in the film. Bukatman uses the androids as examples for how the film can be viewed as addressing racism and immigration. The paranoia against the androids could represent the racism against Asians which was growing at that time in American history due to Asian's expanding economic influence (Bukatman 74).

Racism against blacks is shown by the androids classification of non-human because during the time of slavery in America, blacks were also not viewed

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as human (Bukatman 75). One way post-modernism is addressed, according to Bukatman, is by begging the question what does it mean to be human? This question is a major theme throughout Bukatman's book. In this paper I will discuss the issues of the environment and industrialization. I plan on doing this through the use of costuming in the film. I will analyze the use of synthetic versus natural costuming.

This paper will cover the wardrobes worn by Rick Deckard, Pris, and Rachael. Rick Deckard, played by Harrison Ford, is the protagonist in Scott's Blade Runner. Known as a "blade runner", Deckard is a member of the Los Angeles police department who is employed to "retire" genetically designed humanoids known as "replicants". These replicants were designed by the Tyrell Corporation to do work in off-world colonies. Because of their superior strength and comparable intelligence, the replicants were viewed as a threat to the human race. After a bloody uprising on an off-world colony they were deemed illegal on earth.

In response, Rick Deckard and his group of blade runners are put in place to hunt down and retire these humanoids. Deckard lives in futuristic Los Angeles set in 2019. The city described by Bukatman is a "vast, boundless refinery," which "no longer contains any trace of nature" (19). Deckard's costuming throughout the film differs greatly from the rest of the characters. He wears a large brown sport coat with patch pockets for most of the film. The coat's color is very earthy and natural looking in comparison to other characters' costumes. It looks unpressed and wrinkled as if nothing has been done to modify its look.

Underneath he wears several different dress shirts all with basic patterns and muted colors, along with a plaid styled tie. His pants appear to be dark gray, possibly flannel but nothing remarkable. It is almost as if Deckard is your typical working class male found on any large city's street during the 1980's. I believe he can be viewed as representing the past, a time where a natural environment existed and urban landscape did not completely dominate the planet. By dressing the film's "good guy" in natural and earthy attire I believe Scott could be voicing his opposition to urbanization and the destruction of the natural environment.

In the beginning of the film you learn that a group of Nexus 6 replicants have escaped from an off-world colony and traveled to earth illegally. They have come to earth in hope that their creator, Tyrell, can extend their short life span of only four years. These Nexus 6 replicants, which are said to be "more human than human", were designed with superior strength and agility for use on the off-world colonies. One of the escapees is known as Pris. Born on Valentine's day, Pris is a "basic pleasure model". She is also the girlfriend of the strongest replicant, Roy Batty.

In the film, we follow Pris as she befriends the genetic engineer, J. F. Sebastian, so Roy can get closer to Tyrell, their creator. Throughout this film we see Pris in very unique costuming. We first see Pris wandering the crowded streets alone in the rain, dressed as a classic street prostitute. Her hair is frizzy and blonde, looking as if it has been bleached. Around her neck she wears a metal dog collar. A black shirt barely covers her up, and her black nylon tights clearly show her upper thighs. Faint traces of mascara

make her eyes appear dark. Anticipating J. F. 's route home, she hides outside his apartment disguised under newspapers. J. F. gets off the bus and runs into Pris, not being able to resist the company of a gorgeous girl in his lonely apartment, J. F. invites her in. She spends the night there and quickly becomes "friendly" with him. The next morning Pris goes through a transformation. She wanders his apartment looking through the endless amount of toys and mannequins. She begins playing with his make-ups, and cakes her face with clownish white powder. Next, she closes her eyes to spray them with a black jar of spray paint. This make-up on her face gives her a "created look".

She appears completely unnatural at this point, and begins to resemble the toys found in J. F. 's apartment. She uses this ability of looking fake to her advantage when she encounters Deckard in the end of the film. In this scene we see Pris posing completely lifeless among the toys. Her only disguise is a long white veil. She transforms visually into a kind of ghostly bridal doll. In this film, Pris is the polar opposite of Deckard. She wears dark synthetic clothes that appear to be unnatural and fake. Her make-up gives her the appearance of a lifeless toy mannequin. Deckard eventually spots the replicant and a fight ensues.

Deckard shoots Pris twice and retires her. I believe the killing of Pris by Deckard gives us another possible example for urbanization and the environment. Pris can be read as one of the evils in this film. Being a replicant, she represents the future, where there is no evidence of nature and the cluttered city dominates the entire landscape. If you look at her

costuming, it is very artificial and synthetic looking. Deckard, on the other hand, is dressed naturally and earthy. His killing of Pris could give some evidence of Scott's opposition to urbanization and the future of the environment.

One of the most interesting characters in Blade Runner is Rachael. She is the latest experiment of Tyrell, designed because of the flaws of the Nexus 6 models. Tyrell believes that the replicants have started to develop their own emotions. He believes this is due to the fact that they have no framework within which to deal with the formation of new emotions. Tyrell implants memories of his niece into Rachael and also does not reveal to her, until later, that she is a replicant. Rachael figures it out after she is given a Voight-Kampff test. She leaves Tyrell and in desperation turns to Deckard, who is under orders to kill her.

Deckard ends up falling in love with her and spares her life. In the film, we see two different types of costuming for Rachael. In the beginning when Deckard meets Rachael in Tyrell's pyramid throne, we see a tall, dark, statuesque woman. With broad squared shoulders, exaggerated proportions, straight lines, and lacquered hair she appears to be flawless. She looks to as if she is mechanical, fulfilling her role as a replicant. Later in the movie she goes through a gradual transformation. At this point of the film she is sitting at the piano in Deckard's apartment.

Rachael is wearing a more feminine dress that paints broad stripes of tan and cream across her body. As she lets her hair down, we see her change

from the artificial hair she wore previously to a bushy and more natural style. We also see Rachael as she transforms from a pale white face with bright red lips to a more tan and feminine face with little or no lip stick. I believe that the transformation of Rachael can be viewed as representing hope. Rachael stands for the future. She is portrayed in the beginning as being very unnatural but through her transformation she becomes more natural looking like Deckard.

This could be Scott showing us that there is hope for the future, and that the future can be a place where nature exists. This pinning of good versus evil, natural versus synthetic, is just one of the many ways the costuming of Blade Runner can be read. In Ridley Scott's films, the messages or issues addressed by the film are very subtle. They will never come out and hit you in the face. You often have to watch his films several times and really think about the film after you have viewed it to really understand what he is trying to say. This is what makes Scott's films so great.

His films will provoke thought and stay relevant and important to the film industry like few other films can. Even authors such as Scott Bukatman missed what this particular use of synthetic and natural fibers could be saying. Although this message about urbanization and the environment is hidden and could be read a number of different ways, I do believe Scott might be voicing his opposition to urbanization and the destruction of the natural world. Works Cited Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young. Warner Brothers, 1982. Film. Bukatman, Scott. Blade Runner. London: British Film Institute, 1997. Print.