

# Blade Runner and the Divine Menace

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Pickens, Alexander W., "Blade Runner and the Divine Menace" (2017). *MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference*. 1.  
<http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/madrush/2017/bladerunner/1>

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ENG420

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### *Blade Runner* and the Divine Menace

One of the most prominent characteristics of film noir is its portrayal of mankind's fatalistic trajectory within a religious and economic context, two themes which are usually addressed separately, resulting in an incomplete understanding of many later noir films. Few films in the noir canon capture the modern synthesis of economics and religion as eloquently as *Blade Runner*. Considering both themes together allows the viewer to fully comprehend modernity's confluence of religion and economics in the wake of Christianity's decline, when Marxist dogma placed a corrupted capitalist presence where the Christian deity once resided. Within *Blade Runner* the Replicants function as the cipher for decoding the Marxist critique of hyper-industrialized Los Angeles to reveal the divine menace that is lurking beneath the dire economic wasteland.

In order to arrive at a correct understanding of the film, we must look carefully at its cinematographic mood. While some scholars such as Alessio focus on the hopeful religious motifs of redemption and creation in *Blade Runner*, other writers perceptively note that pessimistic religious imagery within the cataclysmic experience are more in keeping with the narrative and mise-en-scène of the film. Kerman assigns an apocalyptic subtext to the film by noting similarities with traditional Hebrew descriptions of the end times: a clash between good and evil, history giving way to eschatology, and the presence of a righteous witness to record the

demise of man's civilization (Kerman, 5). However, the world of *Blade Runner* fails to be actively apocalyptic, as the fate of all those residing in Los Angeles appears predetermined. Kerman takes great pains to construct allegorical representations of worldwide floods and towers of Babel within the film, straining the reader's credulity and suggesting another explanation.

The uneasy malaise and repetitious futility permeating Deckard's society combined with the perpetual gloom and belching flame (Image 2) suggest that the futuristic Los Angeles is more akin to a mythic underworld as described by such writers as Milton (Desser, 2). As Deckard wanders through a smoldering purgatory in search of rebellious Replicants from the off-world, he is repeatedly confronted by forces inherently economic that thwart all attempts to understand or escape the earthly squalor. Just as in mythic descriptions of the underworld, man in Deckard's Los Angeles is a Sisyphus condemned to repeat his labor in futility. If Deckard appears to escape the fate of his neighbor it is not because he is a righteous observer, as he does not transcend his myopic perception until the end of the film; on the contrary, he believes he dwells in limbo as he flirts with the prospect of escaping to the off-world. Whatever the case might be, the tone of the film is unmistakably plutonic.

While the abysmal nature of Deckard's world is readily understood by the mood of the city, the deity which governs it is understood by the social structure. When Deckard visits the Tyrell Corporation at the outset of the film, he ascends a colossal monument resembling an Aztec pyramid (Image 1.) that houses the representative of the capitalists on earth. Every visit Rick Deckard or Roy Batty (his Replicant counterpart) makes to this economic and theological focal point further develops the interaction of the two themes, leading the viewer ever-closer to a resolution. When Roy Batty arrives at this location near the end of the film and murders his father-creator in his quest for immortality, he calls Tyrell a "god of biomechanics." This is the

most revealing exchange in the film, the final culmination that had been building since Deckard's visit when the religious and economic themes first intertwined. The religious imagery surrounding entrepreneurial businesses such as the Tyrell Corporation suggests that the deities of this economic underworld are the capitalists themselves.

*Blade Runner's* inverted religious imagery may be seen as modernity's attempt to cope with profoundly fatalistic forces following the erosion of a Christian worldview since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As belief in the randomness of violence inherent in Darwin's natural selection spread, men lost the Christian sense of meaning derived from Biblical stories such as Job, which presented suffering and injustice within the context of divine purpose (Gibberson, 3). The absence of divine meaning produced a profound shift in literature that appeared in early noir films like *Detour* and *Out of the Past*, which express a somewhat nihilistic view as random chance overcomes man's attempts at self-determinism; men who seek to control their fate are portrayed as "naïve or self-deceived" (Pippin, 12). As noir films evolved, films such as *Chinatown* began to define the menacing presence which was frustrating man's attempts at self-determinism in such grotesque figures as Noah Cross.

The destruction of classical Christianity was accompanied by a reversal of economic assumptions in the modern era that led to a more complete intersection of economics and religion portrayed in *Blade Runner*. Because the imponderable forces of classical economics espoused by Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill could not be absolutely confirmed in a system as large as national markets, they required a certain level of faith from their disciples. Central to the classical economist was the concept of the *invisible hand* which said that market equilibrium (through competition) and specialization benefit everyone by raising the standard of living. Because of the lack of a holistic evaluation of the *invisible hand*, Marx believed classical

economists had an unquestioning faith in unseen conditions that had acquired an almost mystic quality (Urquhart, 6). According to Marx, this faith came at the expense of considering societal impacts and the risk of economic tyrants, which he emphasized when responding to the classical economics of Smith and Mill in his *A Critique of Political Economy* (better known as *Capital*). Just as Marx claims to be unmasking the mysticism of classical economics by describing the unseen threats lurking behind Mill's single-minded devotion to a free market, *Blade Runner* claims to be unmasking the divine menace by presenting a society where Marx's prophetic warnings of unrestrained capitalism have come to pass in a cataclysmic terminus caused by such entities as the Tyrell Corporation.

The spread of Marxism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century thus dispelled the malaise that overcame society following Darwin's emergence, filling the theological void formerly occupied by traditional Christianity. In chapter 32 of volume 1 of *Capital* Marx references the "strange God" of capitalism who "proclaimed surplus-value making as the sole end and aim of humanity" (Marx 1906, 827). This inversion of the Westminster Catechism is no coincidence, as Marx states that a zealous devotion to profit endlessly reproduces the conditions of class stratification that lead to the "bad infinity" of capitalism (Urquhart, 7). Whereas Christianity had presented forces working against mankind as benevolent (e.g., having a greater purpose in suffering despite man's disinclination for suffering), Marxism presented a more menacing counter-agent to man's agency. Early noir films had captured the futility of suffering without fully describing a cause; *Blade Runner*, as one of the most modern noir films, was able to articulate a matured Marxist critique in a scientifically fantastic setting that allowed for a graphic depiction of prophecies yet unrealized.

As earlier mentioned, the Replicants are key to understanding a Marxist interpretation of *Blade Runner*. These highly overdetermined symbols enlighten the viewer to the methods employed by the capitalist gods who approach omnipotence, while at the same time exposing the weakness and injustice of the tactics. The Replicants as fetishized commodity represent the catalyst for the capitalist system; the Replicants as machine represent a threat to labor; and, finally, the Replicants as labor represent a threat to the divine menace insofar as solidarity with other laboring classes could lead to a successful rebellion against the owners of capital.

The fetishized commodity within the nuanced nightmare of *Blade Runner* must be demystified to be fully appreciated. The deliberately grotesque free market of Deckard's Los Angeles features a perpetual cycle of consumption and production whose catalyst is the commodity fetish that, Marx notes, displaces needs with wants. As Deckard wanders the futuristic Los Angeles he is surrounding by the perpetual allure of exotic commodities (image 3a and 3b) which have acquired "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Elster, 63). Deckard moves through the city as one separated from the average inhabitant who exists to serve the commodity, numbed by the endless market cycles that dictate his existence. The film moves from one scene of consumption and production to the next; even J. F. Sebastian turns his deserted apartment building into a scene of labor, albeit a farcical existence producing commodities for his own consumption as he is a discarded relic of capitalism who knows no life outside of labor. Deckard himself succumbs to the lure of the fetishized commodity in Rachel, where the boundary between Freud's sexual fetish and Marx's commodity fetish is blurred just as it was in Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity*. As Deckard is seduced by Rachel she becomes the commodity whose lure allows the Tyrell Corporation to control him, just as the capitalists control the rest of the city with other fetishized commodities.

The mystical influence commodities exercise over consumers is of paramount importance to economic theory, even classical economists. Just as noir critiqued this problematic topic, Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof asserts that the market's manipulation of consumer desires has produced a level of consumption and debt unparalleled in human history (Akerlof, 19). His critique aligns with Marx, who sees debt as integral to enslaving the consumer in the oft-convulsive business cycle. Any critique of debt and overconsumption is labeled "blasphemy against the Holy Ghost" (Marx 1906, 827). Furthermore, just as Marx employed religious imagery when describing capitalist free markets, Akerlof likens the constant lure of commodities to temptation (the serpent of Eden is featured on the cover of Akerlof's book *Phishing for Fools*). When temptation similarly overwhelms Deckard he succumbs to the humanoid commodity Rachel and finds himself indebted to the capitalists, laboring for his wages and to gain possession of Rachel.

The Replicants are not symbols of mere passivity, however; they also embody a threatening aspect of a Marxist understanding of capitalism: the machine. The Tyrell Corporation's advancement of technology has resulted in a humanoid invention which, as Wilson explains, is an uncanny creation lying somewhere between miracle and monstrosity; the lure of a complex invention is combined with the unsettling feeling that the machine invented may prove to be the undoing of the inventor (Wilson, 13). However, while Wilson sees the final battle between Deckard and Roy Batty as Deckard's attempt to cope with his imperfection in the presence of the machine's transcendence, this struggle is more likely Deckard's fight for survival on the labor market. Batty as machine has stolen from Deckard "both the tool and the skill in wielding that which had formerly belonged to the worker" (Pratten, 21). Throughout the film Deckard is increasingly aware that he has lost his leverage against the bourgeoisie to the

machines because the Replicants, who are able to live off-world by serving the bourgeoisie, have replaced Deckard (who might hypothetically be able to negotiate his way out of the underworld if he was able to offer his skills to the capitalists). The Replicant does not sensitize Deckard to his own humanity, as Telotte and others believe; they shock him with the inhumanity of the labor market when he competes with the machine. The moment of reconciliation between Deckard and Batty is not a moment of transcendence of the machine but the moment Deckard understands that the capitalists have been deluding him with the prospect of off-world escape into thinking he is in limbo. He now understands that he is condemned to the economic underworld of perpetual labor because his negotiating power has been lost.

Deckard's epiphany transforms his outlook. Not only does he fully comprehend the complexity of Tyrell Corporation's humanoid machine, he understands that he has been degraded to such an extent that the distinction between him and the machine is nearly undetectable. The reason Deckard and Batty have so much in common is that the capitalists have reduced Deckard's existence to a single purpose of labor and he "has succeeded in becoming all that he is not" (Ollman, 152). Indeed, the uncertainty he experiences about whether he is a Replicant stems from labor's resemblance to a machine that has acquired his skill as a laborer (Elster, 157), particularly if that laborer's identity is bound up entirely in his skill. He understands his kinship with Roy Batty is more than a coincidence.

Because the machine that the laboring class has created has become "more human than human," as the Tyrell Corporation boasts, the Replicants have become another form of labor. The machine is a literal embodiment of Marx's *species-life* wherein the laborer "duplicates himself" (Elster, 42) under the direction of the capitalists, the proletariat 'replicating' itself and swelling its ranks. Fearful of a rebellion such as Batty has led, the capitalists control the laboring



class by orchestrating internecine strife, hiring Deckard to hunt rebelling Replicants. This leads to the final moment of solidarity when Batty saves Deckard from his fall, after which Deckard understands the extent to which he has been used to neutralize a rebellion among his own class and he at last abandons the capitalists. In keeping with a religious retelling of man's fate, Roy Batty's apparent crucifixion in this scene (his hands are pierced and he releases a dove when he dies) is symbolic of the rebirth of Deckard beyond the clutches of capitalism. His moment of enlightenment at Batty's death changes his fatalistic trajectory.

Though Deckard appears to be little more than a pawn for overpowering forces, a completely fatalistic reading of *Blade Runner* inherently contradicts not only the ending of the film but also the dogma of Marxism. Although Marx employs religious themes, both Marx and John Stuart Mill were responding to theologically-inspired historians who used predestination to deduce reductionist laws for society (Sherman, 6); although laborers are controlled by circumstances, laws of economics are fundamentally social and can experience irrational behavior outside the model, such as Roy Batty's rebellion that led to a shocking invasion of the bourgeois aesthetics of Tyrell's inner chamber (image 4) and Deckard's alliance with Roy. Although neither of these acts is a complete escape from capitalist domination, they are expressions of resistance that create structures of feeling whereby Deckard realizes private dissent while maintaining public assent (Williams, 128). The foreboding pall that lies over Deckard's Los Angeles cannot negate the indeterminate denouement of the film: although one might not escape the sway of the superstructure, one can avoid being defined by it. *Blade Runner* is not so much a description of conditions which have hopelessly ossified as it is a cautionary tale about the potential for such a scenario if men become apathetic and rely on faith in numinous market outcomes without considering the forces behind them.

The decline of Christianity as the primary social impetus led to the rise of alternative ideologies which, while they might not be intrinsically religious, function in a religious manner. *Blade Runner* captures such a religious core within a Marxist understanding of capitalism as an omnipotent force which tends toward malice. However, the fate of society remains in the hands of an enlightened humanity that resists the temptation of commodities and responsibly handles technological progress. The viewer is thus prompted to investigate a system which even capitalist economists acknowledge as problematic in order to guard against his own society descending into an economic underworld.

*Appendix*

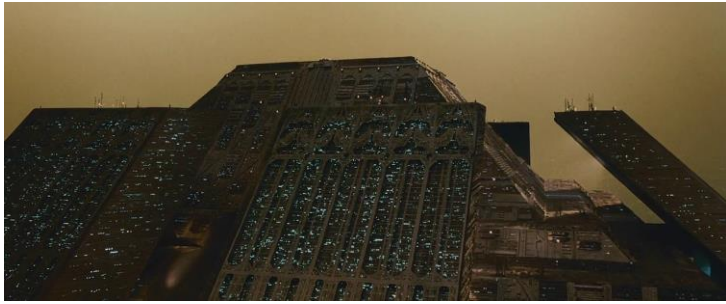


Image 1.



Image 2.



Image 3a and 3b.



Image 4.

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