

Blade Runner

(1982, Ridley Scott)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Context (AS & AL) Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study

- A bleak and dystopian neo noir fable that draws on the conventions of film noir and science fiction. Set in a futuristic Los Angeles in 2019, a place that is simultaneously high tech and decaying. A weary and nihilistic private detective/bounty hunter (Deckard) is brought out of retirement to hunt down a group of renegade ‘*replicants*’. Paired against the classic noir femme fatale who is most likely a *replicant* herself. A psychological battle plays out as Deckard struggles to keep hold of his own sense of self as the past, present and future are in flux. Prophetic issues of the insidious creep of advertising images and societies run by mega corporations rather than a democratic political system loom heavily over the characters’ lives. Impressively oppressive aesthetics crossing at times into the absurd draw the spectator into a horrific version of the future that puts the death humanity at its centre through its exploration of mortality, memory and identity.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Golden Opportunity/Questioning Leon. Scenes provide useful introduction to Key elements of film form and introduce main themes - 7.20-15.35

- Deckard dream of unicorn/motif of photographs. Useful for themes, time and identity - 40.43
- Roy confronts Tyrell. Useful for key themes of identity and responsibility Key for philosophical ideas of humanity - 1.20-1.23.20

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Shooting of street scenes using a high frame rate to cause the effect of a pulsating, stilted feel to the vivid and dominating neon signs and lights.
- Shafts of volumetric light are a recurring element in many shots as are searching lights shooting out of hovering blimps above the city, the shafts penetrate many scenes in the film and shoot straight through the darkness. These shafts of light illuminate very specific parts of the sets and enhance the depth of the scenes because of their three-dimensionality. They have volume, enhanced by the thick layer of fog that penetrates most of the scenes in the film. This also creates this sense of off-camera space. The shafts of light rarely reveal their sources, but they suggest life and activity beyond the darkness of the frames.
- And in addition, the light shafts push forward this theme of dystopian oppression, suggesting a world where privacy is marginalized and no place is *completely* dark and isolated.

Mise-en-Scène

- *Blade Runner* has a highly distinctive visual style. Best described as ‘retro-future’ (akin to steam punk). Dark crumbling buildings reminiscent of great American cities now in a state of entropy are juxtaposed with teeming Far Eastern mega city shanty town communities and garishly brash off world colonies. A post-modern architectural mash up. Much action on Earth takes place in the dirty and decayed streets that exist under a polluted cloud. In this world, it rains continually.

- *Blade Runner* pays homage to a film-noir aesthetic with low key lighting, high contrast images and dark, murky environment in which paranoia, anonymity and despair is the dominant mood.
- Backlight, smoke, rain and lightning to give the film its personality and moods.
- Neon signs loom heavily over characters casting a sickly and unescapable presence.

Sound

- Soundtrack by Vangelis is a dark melancholic score that mixes traditional composition and futuristic synthesizers.
- The haunting saxophone 'Love Theme' brings a melancholic and fatalistic tone to the action and characters' actions.
- In this original release in 1982, the studio insisted that Scott record a voice over (from Deckard) as they felt that the plot was too obtuse that audiences would be unable to follow the storyline. Scott resisted this but had to yield to the studio's demands. The Director's Cut version, released in 1992 was without the voice over. The voice over anchors the film into film noir conventions. The hard boiled, world weary, nihilistic commentary reflects the dystopian landscape where characters are disconnected from their environment.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The dominant representations of the male figure in film are negative. Deckard is trapped in a version of masculinity that limits his emotional responses and internalises experience. Links with male self-destructive film noir characters is obvious. Other images of masculinity draw on conventional ideas of power, control and sadism. It is left to the male non-human *replicants* to voice desire, fragility and any meaningful philosophical viewpoint.
- The representation of women is narrow. The female *replicants* are either constructed as a male fantasy as sexual gratification or objectified for visual pleasure. Rachael fulfils the appeal of the ice maiden femme fatale. The one sex scene between her and Deckard is also troubling as the encounter is ambiguous in terms of sexual consent.
- Whilst Scott wanted the setting to merge

urban USA with the rising cities of the Far East, specifically Shanghai, the film lacks the inclusion of any black characters. Critics have argued that the *replicants* are 'surrogate blacks' in terms of their non-status on Earth and as fugitives from the off world colonies who must be hunted down and eliminated.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Dark, nihilistic and brooding, the film's use of mise-en-scène is impressive. Overtly 'art directed' with a post-modern bricolage aesthetic. Repetitive use of browns and blacks in the crumbling buildings and rain soak streets. Cold blue tinge to scenes of 'artificial'.
- The origami unicorn motif has stimulated much debate with critics. Some see it as 'proof' that Deckard is a *replicant* who has been programmed with created memories. Scott inserts fantasy dream sequences of a mythical unicorn, filmed in slow motion soft focus. Meaning is ambiguous and unexplained but suggests a yearning for escape.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Political

- Set in the near future, Los Angeles is under the control of a right wing dictator.
- Corporations in the form of the Tyrell Corp have come to dominate society. A dystopian vision of the future where big business and mega corporations dominate. Towering above the ordinary people in huge triangular shaped corporate headquarters, faceless and callous megalomaniacs rule with a ruthless capitalist energy. They build off world colonies to fulfil the dream of escape and pleasure whilst simultaneously destroying the Earth.

Technological

- *Blade Runner* engages directly with impact of technology on society and individual, taking a philosophical viewpoint that poses the question of what it is to be human. The power of corporate private industry has taken the place of democratic society and is represented as corrupt and self-serving, manipulating technological advances to enhance profit and power whilst dehumanising people.
- Scott imagines a future flying cars, impossible

buildings and super-fast space ships. Characters live alone in decaying homes. Streets under constant surveillance and bombardment by crass TV broadcasts. Technology serves basic human needs. At the centre of this is the development of androids known as *replicants* who can pass for humans in all aspects except morality. This difference that becomes the philosophical heart of the film around which the key idea of 'what is it to be human' unfolds.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur (A Level only)

Starting points

- Scott's roots are in art direction, for the BBC, and advertising, he created his own company in the late 1960s. Ridley Scott
- as an auteur filmmaker based on his strict adherence to his personal artistic vision as well as desire to control production. Scott film is recognizable by its play of light and shadow and near-lascivious love of sprawling wide shots and intricate detail. So exacting and skilful is the look of his films, that in the early days he was accused of favouring style over content. The world he creates is much bigger than the characters he placed in them
- We can use the *auteur* theory to assess the charges of misogyny that have been made against *Blade Runner*.