

RIDLEY SCOTT'S DYSTOPIA MEETS
RONALD REAGAN'S AMERICA: CLASS CONFLICT
AND POLITICAL DISCLOSURE IN *BLADE RUNNER:
THE FINAL CUT*

Fabián Orán Llarena
Universidad de La Laguna

“The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression.”
(John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*)

ABSTRACT

Blade Runner has been the object of multiple inquiries over the last three decades. However, this essay analyzes the socio-political discourse of the text, one aspect yet to be elucidated. Taking as basis the 1992 re-edited version (*Blade Runner: The Final Cut*), the essay studies the film as a critical and contextualized response to Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-1989). The essay scrutinizes how the materiality of the socio-economic system presented in the film, and the discourses that revolve around it, embody a critical representation of the policy-making and cultural discourse of Reaganism. Thus, the ensuing text characterizes the film as a (counter) narrative that deconstructs the conservative ideology of the 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Reaganism, supply-side theory, hegemony, underclass, Off World.

RESUMEN

Blade Runner ha sido objeto de múltiples consideraciones durante las últimas tres décadas. No obstante, este ensayo analiza el discurso político-cultural del film, un aspecto aún por dilucidar. Tomando como base el remontaje de 1992 (*Blade Runner: The Final Cut*), se estudia el film como una respuesta crítica y contextualizada a la presidencia de Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). El ensayo escruta cómo la materialidad del sistema socio-económico presentado en el film, y los discursos que se construyen en torno al mismo, son una representación crítica de las políticas y el discurso cultural del Reaganismo. Así, el texto caracteriza el film como una (contra)narrativa que deconstruye la ideología conservadora de la década de los 1980.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Reaganismo, Teoría de la Oferta, clase marginada, hegemonía, *Off World*



Very few films in contemporary American cinema have generated philosophical discussion, market exploitation, popular worship and entrenched criticism, all at once. *Blade Runner* has been, indeed, subject to all of these tendencies. The film premiered poorly when it was released in June 1982. Reviewers considered Scott's slow-paced blend of film noir and science fiction, as well as its opulent dystopian setting and inquiries about the boundaries of humanity, pretentious and too reliant on special effects (Alonso 7).¹ It was the summer of a much kinder sort of science fiction, *E.T.*, as its unprecedented success attests.² The fact that Steven Spielberg's feel-good tale conquered both box offices and the audiences' hearts while *Blade Runner* was, at first sight, condemned to ostracism revealed eloquently how popular culture was beginning to articulate the sharp shift at play in American politics. After the violent and anti-establishment stories of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, and other filmmakers from the New Hollywood, other kind of cultural discourse was to dominate American popular cinema through the 1980s; one attuned to the political landscape Republican president Ronald Reagan would tailor during his two terms (1981-1989).³ An agenda constituted by economic anti-interventionism, polarizing evangelical rhetoric, rehistoricization of the recent past, military reinvigoration, and patriotism was reciprocated with a string of box office successes that bears strong kinship to the conservative backlash of the 1980s. Suburban stories strengthening the importance of the nuclear family (*E.T.*, *Back to The Future* [1985], *The Breakfast Club* [1985]), escapist tales reminiscent of adventure serials and comic book strips (*The Ghostbusters* [1984], *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [1989]), and a new type of hyperbolic masculinity (epitomized by the second [1985] and third [1989] installments of the *Rambo* series) became the most cherished cultural products of the Reagan Era.⁴

¹ See *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (313-115) in which Paul Sammon compiles the critical reception of the film.

² See the extensive and extraordinarily well documented article on *ET* published in *Wikipedia*. Quite interestingly, the article also comments how Ronald and Nancy Reagan were "moved by the film after a screening at the White House."

³ I recommend two volumes that take as subject the intersection between Reaganism and cinematic discourse: Alan Nadel's *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America*, and Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.

⁴ There was, nonetheless, a battery of films released during the 1980s that engaged in demythologizing Reagan's America and that did get wide public attention. The best examples are Oliver Stone's unvarnished, highly critical couple of Vietnam War films *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). However, it is hard to imagine some of the crudely violent and/or socio-culturally rebellious top grossing films of the 1970s such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Godfather Part II* (1974), or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) faring as favorably in the 1980s. In addition to this, several films ranking in the annual top 10 grossing films list of the 1970s are head-on critiques on mainstays of American culture such as family values, heterosexuality and individualism (an unthinkable reality in the 1980s). See *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), among others. To check the figures supporting these thoughts, see <http://www.teako170.com/box70-79.html>.



However, parallel to this filmic and cultural sway towards conservatism, people reacquainted gradually with *Blade Runner*. The palimpsestic texture of its aesthetic,⁵ and more pointedly, the ambiguities of the plot (mainly the real nature of protagonist Rick Deckard) prompted heated debate in the internet and in magazines among the increasingly large number of fans (Alonso 24, 25). Aware of the enthusiasm accruing on the film since its failed release, producers and director Ridley Scott reedited the film to attract the people that had been dissecting its intricacies for a decade. The result crystallized into *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (1992).⁶ The plot remains almost intact. In the 2019 Los Angeles, humankind has conquered outer space employing genetically engineered organic robots (replicants) to work on the so called “Off Worlds.” Four replicants escape from one of these colonies and return to Earth to have their four-year lifespan extended. Private investigator Deckard is forced by the authorities to kill (or, as it is euphemistically put, “retire”) the rebellious replicants. Nonetheless, subtle variations were made: the noir-like voice-over is wiped out (making Deckard more unfathomable), the original happy ending is substituted by a much uncertain and cryptic denouement, and, most importantly, the narration shows that Deckard is a replicant (thus, he is, in fact, eliminating their equals).

Films from the Reagan era have produced fecund and active critical engagement. However, it is surprising that the reappearance of *Blade Runner* in 1992 by means of its reediting and rerelease, and the slight yet very eloquent alterations made upon it, have passed unnoticed as object of study. Its reenactment as a cultural narrative, just a few years after Ronald Reagan left office, poses the need for a close analysis. Time has invested the story and its images with new meanings. As we will see, several elements in the narration represent a very critical examination of Reagan’s presidency. The film characterizes an economic and social system whose functioning and structuring encapsulate a speculative reading of the economic, political, and cultural practices of Reaganism.

Apart from a receptacle for plot events, the cityscape in *Blade Runner* is a dualistic space fraught with contrapositions and clashes that bring the political disclosures of the film to the fore. The Los Angeles envisioned in the film is not only prophetic.⁷ Reaganism instigated and ensured the fall of the already declining economic agenda of liberalism, a form of Keynesian management still redolent of the achievements of the New Deal that had dominated American economy since postwar years. Reagan saw fitting to introduce new approaches to an economy stagnant for most of the 1970s. A host of cultural observers and historians have analyzed in quite critical terms those policies of

⁵ A disparate set of influences make up the eclectic stylistic signature of the film: French artist Jean Giraud “Moebius”, the Gotham City designed by Bob Kane in the early *Batman* issues, German science fiction classic *Metropolis*, and classical film noir.

⁶ We will be referring to the film, however, as *Blade Runner* for the rest of the text

⁷ In *Dangerous Days: The Making of Blade Runner* (2007), film critic Kenneth Turan comments this:

“Whenever I walk around downtown I think this is becoming more and more like *Blade Runner*”. In his in-depth study of the film, Jesus Alonso states that contemporary cities are partially like the LA designed by Ridley Scott and his crew (56).





deregulation and strong reliance on free market that came to be known as Reaganomics. The socio-economic system presented in *Blade Runner* adheres to this line of thought as it intends to deconstruct and pinpoint the contradictions interred within the dynamics of Reaganomics. In the representation of urban spaces we may encounter two divergent realms: on the one hand, images that contribute to ensure and validate the grand discourses of mainstream institutions, and, on the other, the shadow city, “that part of the hypercity which not only conflicts with the formal, institutionalized images of the city, but actively seeks to challenge, invert or subvert them” (Darias-Beautell, 354). In *Blade Runner*, we see a constant friction between macro- and micro- perspectives upon the futuristic Los Angeles. Through the latter, the shadow city is revealed, a locus that exposes the threats of economic deregulation and supply-side theory, and the undercutting of the welfare system (both mainstays of the Reaganite agenda).⁸

A handful of critics have stressed that the economic bonanza Reagan claimed to have generated had less to do with a uniform growth than with a markedly uneven wealth distribution, conveniently disguised as overall national reinvigoration, and dangerously built upon an “orgy of debt and interest” (Nadel 27). “[T]he spending binge that gave the Reagan years a glow of prosperity,” historian Paul Boyer contended, “had been built on the back of a massive trade deficit, and thus had been financed by a vast outflow of I.O.U.s” (120). Gordon Gecko’s iconic line “greed is good” in *Wall Street* (1987) seemed to be the cultural subtext that entitled the creation of a “new wealth [...] built on insubstantial paper transactions, overleveraged credit, and sharp dealing that from time to time crossed over into illegality” (Wilentz 203). Within this so called “Era of Greed”, the GDP of the United States in 1986 was 104 percent, that is, what Americans spent on goods and services exceeded by four what they actually produced, thanks to the oft-vilified Japanese, Canadian and German capital (Reinhardt 125). The concern many commentators reflected upon was that future generation will be the ones paying the I.O.S through which Reaganism was financing American economy.

Blade Runner opens with a long shot of a slightly gloomy yet exuberant Los Angeles: characteristically wide, luminous, and unmistakably set in the future as a flying car crosses the skyline. The perfected technology, along with Vangelis’ appealing score, proffers an ode to opulence. After the first indoors sequence, a new long shot is presented to us, this time at a lower level of the cityscape. Nonetheless, the spatial and economic semantics remains the same. A gigantic virtual billboard of a geisha-looking woman covers the entire façade of a skyscraper. Consumerism has gained such dominance that is literally superimposed upon the cityscape, suggesting the strengths of the market (and, so we assume, of the national economy).⁹ The hypercity that is presented to us during the first minutes of the film conforms to the Reaganite narrative and its pervasive culture of greed.

⁸ See David Mervin’s *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency* (97) in which supply-side theory, as opposed to the Keynesian interest in the demand-side, is pithily explained.

⁹ Furthermore, the image of the Asian woman also indicates the weight of foreign markets, essential in the “orgy of debt” of the 1980s.

The selection of long shots, emphasizing a sense of overall richness, runs in parallel with the way “Reaganites dismissed concerns about the skewed distribution of wealth by pointing the wealthier society overall” (Gill 226).

However, film grammar morphs and, thus, the ideological texture of the film is disclosed. An extreme low-angle shot relocates the gaze of the film on the ground floor. The technological paraphernalia and the formidable infrastructures are below now, out of reach, and the plot is framed in the shadow city (where it will remain for the most part of the narration). As the film is re-contextualized spatially, advertisements of the Off World announce the appeal of leaving Earth: “A new life awaits you in the Off World colonies, the chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure”. That Reaganism sought to self-identify as “vigorous, joyful, and optimistic” as opposed to the “gloom and misery of the other side who talked about problems and taxes” (Naipaul) is an agreed-upon cornerstone of its cultural discourse. The conservative apparatus did not fail to characterize Ronald Reagan as an “easygoing, *decent* fella [...] someone “just like you and me”” (Miller 76). Exuding this purported bond with the average citizen, this self-merchandising as “Mr. Everyman” (Hamby 348), made identification easy “allowing the public to see itself as the beneficiaries rather than the victims of the rampant lack of regulation he fostered” (Nadel 8). But the film eschews from embracing the Reaganite narrative and its patriotic *joie de vivre*. The camera cranes further down until it reaches a rain-washed, crowded street where tacky neon lights and junk food stalls dominate the space. In opposition to the previous long shots depicting a technological apogee, subsequent scenes enhance a sense of structural poverty that underpins the entirety of the zero level. We encounter, throughout the plot, homeless people warming themselves up near fire buckets, extreme pollution and overpopulation, crumbling infrastructures, abandoned buildings, and unhealthy living conditions, an urban landscape that have much more in common with the ingrained poverty of the world of *favelas* in *City of God* (2002) than with any other cinematic portrait we have ever seen of Los Angeles.¹⁰ This visual emphasis on the clash between the empowered macro-perspective and the decadent micro-perspective of the shadow city starts indicating the real consequences of the Reaganite praxis:

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan accelerated the withdrawal of the federal government from assistance to the cities. The result was a decade disastrous for cities and their poor. As city governments confronted increased poverty, homelessness, crumbling infrastructures, rising drug abuse, crime, and AIDS, the federal government virtually stopped building housing, shrank its aid to cities, reduced benefits to individuals, and raised the taxes of the poor at the same time it lowered them for the rich. (Katz 463)

The city of Los Angeles imagined in *Blade Runner* reflects Reagan’s lack of interest in funding and ensuring urban balance. As journalist Andrew Kopkind argued

¹⁰ The setting design contributes to this greatly: the crew took a setting from the 1920s and re-built it, making it narrower and filling it with garbage, traffic, and abandoned scenery (Alonso 52).



as early as 1984, “[s]ince Reaganism sets the terms of the debate; it need not be overly concerned about the details. It holds the high ground; what happens at the lower levels is curious but not crucial” (Boyer 94-95). The city’s exacerbated polarization displays the likely consequences of such dissimilarities. And furthermore, thanks to its dualistic spaces, the film positions itself as (counter)narrative of Reagan’s discourse on wealth and prosperity. Whenever the camera zeroes in on the impoverished city ground or when it shows Deckard’s car being almost dismantled in the street, the film refutes the “American miracle” proclaimed by Reagan as well as his idea of how supply-side theory made “economy bloomed like a plant that had been cut back and could now grow quicker and stronger”.¹¹ It is not surprising that the macro-perspective is controlled by huge advertisements of Coca Cola or Pan-An. But as pointed out previously, the power and solidity of big business is not matched, in turn, with a well-established average consumer as the abundant images of poverty on the ground level certify. By means of presenting an economic landscape totally subjected to big business, powerful enough to become an enormous material part of the city, the discourse of the film validates the argument asserting that “Reaganomics is based, in large part, on the belief that only the large corporations can revitalize the American economy” (Carnoy and Shearer 113-114).¹² Moreover, along with the very materiality of the city, the film makes explicit the Reaganite narrative by leaving any form of government totally absent and unnamed.

In his first inaugural speech, Reagan offered one of his most famous lines: “[G]overnment is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” This head-on statement was not merely an ostentatious claim. It prefigured the economic management that was to predominate in the ensuing years, that is, transferring agency and influence from federal government to the markets. This anti-government position is examined in the film in rather negative terms. The narration renders, in visual terms, an oppressive sense of corporate culture. As opposed to Reagan’s glorification of free enterprise, in *Blade Runner* the corporate apparatus seems claustrophobically omnipresent, literalized on the walls of the cityscape as well as on the acoustic spaces through various advertisements. Corporations appropriate the city’s architecture and atmosphere while government is apparently absent. However, there exist deeper implications in the relationships between the socio-economic system represented in *Blade Runner* and the anti-government discourse endorsed by Reaganism. In both cases, the system provides a message of regeneration. Whereas in *Blade Runner* the Off World offers mottos such as “more space, all new” or “live clean”, Reagan’s coined the celebrated “Morning in America”, a promise to restore the moral strengths and affluence lost due to the wounds of Watergate, Vietnam, and the stagflation of the

¹¹ See Reagan’s “Farewell to the Nation”.

¹² The film’s warning of the dangers of supply-side theory did not lack links with a reality acknowledged even by members of the Administration: “[David Stockman, Reagan’s Budget Director] admitted that supply theory in general [...] was just a euphemistic cover (he called it “a Trojan horse”) for the so called trickle-down idea dating back well into the nineteenth century and discredited since the onset of the Great Depression—the idea that further enriching the already rich would eventually produce great economic benefits for lowlier Americans” (Wilentz 145).



1970s. Both the Off World and Morning in America are projected as inclusive, classless discourses. But evidences confirm that the prospects of comfort and stability they promote are attainable for specific upper class groups.

On the grounds that only large corporations and big business would reignite national economy, and provided with wide fiscal relief, wealthy tax-payers employed the advantages granted by Reaganomics “for conspicuous consumption (such as expensive foreign cars) or for stock exchange speculation rather than productive investment” (Kemp 221) as wealth distribution kept growing disparate. During the decade, for “those in the top 1 percent of the income bracket, capital gains grew by 112 percent and salary income grew by 81 percent, whereas for those in the bottom 90 percent of the income distribution, a whole decade of work yielded only a 3.9 percent wage increase” (Edsall, Edsall 196). Reagan’s Morning in America was, after all, hidebound by a class-oriented nature. Attuned to this, the Off World of *Blade Runner* is beyond the majority’s means. The first hint of this is the extreme overpopulation of the city (and the subsequent lack of decent living conditions) and the poverty that strikes most of the citizens¹³. This demographic and social reality seems strange given the fact that a “golden land of opportunity” such as the Off World is supposedly available for the entire population. The structural forces that shape this situation are brought to the fore when the film introduces us to J.F. Sebastian, a genetic designer living in an almost abandoned building who suffers a degenerative disease:

Pris: What’s your problem?

Sebastian: Methuselah syndrome.

Pris: What’s that?

Sebastian: My glands, they grow old too fast.

Pris: Is that why you’re still on Earth?

Sebastian: Yeah. I couldn’t pass the medical.

Echoing the sadly famous “preexisting conditions” that insurance companies use for refusing to provide medical coverage, the scene manifests the real nature of the Off World and its implicit class-bound discourse. In elucidating the agency of spaces as ensuring the hegemonic status, David Harvey sketches an idea paramount for both the Off World and, implicitly, for Reagan’s Morning in America: “[o]ne of the principal tasks of the capitalist state is to locate power in the spaces which the bourgeoisie controls, and disempower those spaces which oppositional movements have the greatest potentiality to command” (237). *Blade Runner*’s dystopia conforms to this description right down to very last detail. With its polarized spaces, the ground level has become an enormous inner city, alienated and undercut, and most importantly, conveniently fortified (those affected by illness are to remain in the zero level), while the outer space colonies appears as a “golden opportunity” targeted for everybody but achievable for those who can afford it or are physically fit. When the flying advertisement at the onset

¹³ When we first see the replicant Pris, she will hide beneath a pile of garbage.



of the film portrays the Off World as a “chance to begin again”, we ignored its actual status as a privatopia. Similarly, American population at large remained unaware of how Reagan’s economic policies of freeing the markets and lowering taxes turned the United States into the most economically stratified society of the first world and the world’s largest debtor (Gill 227, Wilentz 206).

In the film, government is not mentioned. However, we see forceful structural drives at play when there is any sign of danger for the system. Expansion towards outer space is a staple for the economic scaffolding of America in the late 2010s. As much as large governmental institutions remain invisible in *Blade Runner*, these are not inexistent. Framed in a subtle sense of Orwellian surveillance, structural forces are put to work in order to eradicate any deviance that may destabilize the hegemonic power. This is best exemplified in the way authorities function when dealing with the main event of the narration (the four replicants’ escape from the Off World). The replicants, created and exploited by and for the system, mobilize to transcend their deterministic roles and thus achieve better life standards. Trying to overcome the status assigned by the system will be too great a danger for the latter. Firstly, Deckard’s murderous quest is an example of hegemonic exploitation. As a replicant who ignores his real nature, he is being utilized to preserve the same system that has him subjugated by means of artificial memory implants which provide him with a sense of “humanity”. And secondly, and most significantly, his mission is nothing but a systemic procedure aimed to wipe out an uprising that challenges social stratification. The invisible yet expeditious system of *Blade Runner* operates under the same premises of Reagan’s anti-interventionism, that is, a form of government that apparently does not intend to interfere in social life but which, implicitly, engages in configuring material conditions in ways it privileges certain sectors of society:

[E]mpirical evidence shows that federal government interventionism (in the economic, political, cultural, and security spheres) has *increased* over the last thirty years. In the economic sphere, for example, protectionism has not declined [...] In the social arena, state interventions to weaken social rights (and most particularly labor rights) have increased enormously (not only under Reagan, but also under Bush Senior, Clinton, and Bush Junior). [...] [T]here has been no diminution in federal interventionism in the United States, but rather an even more skewed class character to this intervention during the last thirty years. (Navarro 22)

As seen above, the Off World quintessentializes this, but so does Reaganomics in many ways. When Reagan claimed that “as government expands, liberty contracts,”¹⁴ he distilled the agenda of the 1980s conservatism as well as the neoliberal policies that have dominated American politics since then. But also, these words certified the contradiction embedded in both Reaganomics and the Off World, that is, the “promotion of an anti-interventionist discourse in clear conflict with the actual increased state interventionism to promote the interests of the dominant classes and the economic units [...] that foster their interests” (Navarro 26). Several

¹⁴ See Reagan’s “Farewell to the Nation.”



authors have engaged in documenting this type of double-sided political practices. Michael Zweig has succinctly summarized the polarizing large-scale effects that Reagan's non-interventionism brought about: "60 percent of all the gains in aftertax income from 1977 to 1989 went to the richest 1 percent of families. The bottom 80 percent of the population got just 5 percent of the increase." (65). Building on this, Alan Nadel maps out Navarro's maxim that anti-interventionism "intervenes" much more than one would expect. Nadel deconstructs Reaganism's anti-interventionist discourse and describes an economic program that, as the insulated dystopian America of *Blade Runner*, deploys the discourse of anti-interventionism and free market to establish a firm two-class society:

Tax systems firmly weighed against the middle class, coupled with the subsidies to business that create low-wage jobs, rewards for transferring jobs abroad, decreased support and subsidy for higher education, and permission to trim or eliminate health benefits and pension—all contributed to the unregulated growth of a population that has lost many of its middle-class options, or fallen into the category of the working poor, or, even worse, has joined and impoverished underclass. (26)¹⁵

This takes place at the level of the superstructure. But how do the different characters react and interact with the narrative of alleged anti-interventionism that constitutes the political landscape depicted in the film? In the history of science fiction film there are innumerable cases of characters or different elements in the narration being clear-cut metaphors of contemporary social concerns¹⁶. As opposed to this, the replicants are not disguised forms of a particular sector of American society. However, there exist very significant points of intersection between the exploited human-looking robots of *Blade Runner* and the maligned American underclass that went through a period of further impoverishment and discredit in the 1980s.

As a consequence of its market-centered policies, Reaganomics reduced investment in welfare.¹⁷ Aid for the poor and the unemployed was terribly damaged as billions of dollars were taken from such programs and re-directed to military spending (Boyer 133, Wilentz 141). But unlike previous, less sophisticated conservative agendas, Reaganism was buttressed by the work of social scientists and intellectuals who had recently researched and published on the negative effects of the welfare system (their target was, mainly, Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society"). Poverty and marginalization, they contended, had been enhanced by financing the lowest sectors of society on a continued basis, causing a "culture of dependence"

¹⁵ To see more data and research on wealth redistribution in the Reagan Era see Mike Davis's *Prisoners of the American Dream* (268), William C. Berman's *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton* (93-95), and Ian Derbyshire's *Politics in the United States: From Carter to Bush* (77, 115).

¹⁶ Science fiction during the 1950s is rich in this sense as very diverse types of aliens and monsters allegorized the prevailing anti-communism as well as the atomic fear. See, to name a few, *The Thing From Another World* (1951), *Them* (1954), or *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

¹⁷ However, Jimmy Carter had already passed similar laws due to lobbying pressures. See Bruce J. Schulman's *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (128) and Derbyshire (39).



that had debilitated individual action and eagerness for entering the workforce. The champion of this new take was Charles Murray, whose controversial writings informed much of Reagan's policies.¹⁸ Murray and his supporters hold that innate intelligence (or lack of thereof) is what conditions social status most decisively: "[L]ow IQ continues to be a much stronger precursor of poverty than the socioeconomic circumstances in which people grow up" (127).¹⁹ Murray's line of thought has been widely criticized for ignoring and simplifying the varied vectors of oppression and structural inequalities that produce and contribute to poverty. Thomas Sugrue, one of the most outspoken critics of Murray's school, condenses this opposition and expresses the discourse that *Blade Runner* puts forward in regard to the underclass:

[A]s the political spectrum in the United States drifted rightward in the 1980s, behavioral and cultural explanation of poverty moved into mainstream. A growing number of social scientists and policy makers argued that a new urban "underclass" had emerged whose poverty was rooted in antisocial attitudes and actions [...] In the hands of scholars and pundits, the term "underclass" has become a powerfully evocative metaphor. Allowing these commentators to ignore a reality far more diverse than they care to admit, the term has become a shorthand way of bundling together America's poor under a label that conjures up images of racial inferiority, violence, family breakdown, and uncontrolled sexuality [...] In a single word, the term "underclass" encapsulates middle-class Americans' most intimate fears and reaffirms their sense of social and moral superiority. (Sugrue 246-247)

Instead of embracing the essentialist assumption that poverty lies mainly on innate conditions, the depiction of the underclass in *Blade Runner* is multifaceted even though the replicants must face the most inescapable ill-fated destiny. They are, nonetheless, a perfected version of the worker from a corporative perspective (and, therefore, from the stance of Reaganomics). Their extremely short lifespan provides a four-year disposable worker with, allegedly, no emotional responses that may problematize the tasks imposed. They are the most suitable units for the ultimate capitalist state and, implicitly, for Reaganomics: "most work schedules are extremely tightly ordered, and the intensity and speed of production have largely been organized in ways that favour capital rather than labour [...] all part and parcel of a daily work rhythm fixed by profit-making rather than by the construction of humane work schedules" (Harvey 231). Due to the strict temporal trajectory they are subject to, the replicants become metaphors of the type of worker demanded by supply-side theory: de-unionized, rapidly and easily interchangeable for other, and left adrift in the market to be used by large companies. Echoing the macro/micro duality explicated earlier, this sense of dominance underpins the first indoors sequence of the film, where "waste disposal" replicant Leon has his humanity tested. Pure sci-fi as it is, the sequence has strong connections with the emergence of stringent

¹⁸ See Alonzo Hamby's *Liberalism and its Challengers* (358-359).

¹⁹ In the book quoted in this text Murray repeatedly states that his object of inquiry is white poverty (something many liberal commentators tend to forget).



methods of control on the part of employers: “[i]n the 1980s the union proclivities of workers are increasingly monitored in elaborate pre and postemployment screening and data collection. Employers commonly rely on psychological examinations, polygraph tests, and (in a return to more traditional methods), direct surveillance of the shop floor” (Fantasia 67). Interviewed by an arrogant white collar, Leon ends up shooting him. The dialogue is plunged into a rarified atmosphere of surveillance. Machinery in the form of cameras permeates the visual construction of the scene, interfering in eye-line matches of the editing. The subtext of the sequence will resonate in the entirety of the film: the lowest sectors of society are to be constantly scrutinized and chased by larger structures of power. But in narrating the ensuing manhunt dynamics, the film shows that, unlike humans, the purportedly one-dimensional robots are able to develop emotional competences and affective responsibility: “it’s only the replicants who, through most of the film, display intersubjectivity by caring about each other [while] all the humans [...] live alone, without any apparent intimate relationship to anyone else” (Barad 29). If Murray homogenized the elements that generate and perpetuate poverty by focusing on innate conditions, *Blade Runner* “humanizes” the replicants de-personalized and reified by and for the system by granting them a range of disparate emotions (love, rage, revenge, and redemption). When, few moments before dying and having saved Deckard’s life, Roy Batty recites his legendary monologue about the wonders he has witnessed in his lifetime, the film finally fractures the assumption of the “underclass” as a monolithic social entity supposedly prompt to decadence and stagnation.

Nowadays audiences are more than used to see films from the past being re-made and re-released. *Blade Runner* is *rara avis* in this regard as well. Although it is clear that its numerous re-edits respond to a profit-oriented strategy on the part of the studio, there is virtually no other re-edited film as culturally eloquent and politically meaningful as *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*. Apart from the complex and engaging questions it poses about what constitutes being human, the film forces the viewer to re-consider critically what do we understand by anti-government positions and to what extent is the narrative of free market and non-interventionism really deprived of constraints and very precise class-based intentions. The examination of Reaganism in the film under these premises, and the far-reaching consequences of the current economic crisis further strengthen the idea that the (economic, social, and cultural) narrative of deregulation must be always under scrutiny and critical revision since it is built up upon quite contradictory terms that represent its polarizing aims as an individualist quest towards freedom. In the 2010’s this may come as too self-evident for many. However, *Blade Runner* discusses these problems and offers a very critical conclusion as early as 1992. This discourse, as the dying Roy Batty said, should not be “lost in time, like tears in rain”.

Reviews sent to author: 2 September 2014. Revised paper accepted for publication: 25 February 2015.



WORKS CITED

- ALONSO, Jesús. *Blade Runner: Lo que Deckard no sabía*. Madrid: Akal D.L, 2001. Print.
- BARAD, Judith. "Blade Runner and Sartre: The Boundaries of Humanity." *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conrad. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007. Print.
- BERMAN, William C. *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. Print.
- BOYER, Paul. "The Latter Years". *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*. Ed. Paul Boyer. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990. Print.
- CARNOY, Martin and Derek Shearer. "Reaganomics: The Supply Side of the Street". *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*. Ed. Paul Boyer. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990. Print.
- DARIAS-BEAUTELL, Eva. "Who's Afraid of the Urban? Canadian Literatures Go Downtown." *Canadian Studies: The State of the Art*. Ed. Klaus-Dieter Ertler et al. Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2011. Print.
- DAVIS, Mike. *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*. London: Verso, 1987. Print.
- DERBYSHIRE, Ian. *Politics in the United States: From Carter to Bush*. Edinburgh: Chambers, 1990. Print.
- EDSALL, Thomas B., and Mary D. Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991. Print.
- FANTASIA, Rick. *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Print.
- JEFFORDS, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994. Print.
- HAMBY, Alonzo. *Liberalism and its Challengers: From F.D.R to Reagan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- HARVEY, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990. Print.
- KATZ, Michael B. "Reframing the Underclass Debate". *The "Underclass Debate": Views from History*. Ed. Michael B. Katz. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.
- KEMP, Tom. *The Climax of Capitalism: The U.S. Economy in the Twentieth Century*. London: Longman, 1990. Print.
- MERVIN, David. *Ronald Reagan and the American Presidency*. London, New York: Longman, 1990. Print.
- MILLER, Mark Crispin. "Virtù, Inc.". *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*. Ed. Paul Boyer. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990. Print.
- MURRAY, Charles, and Richard J. Herrnstein. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks Book, 1994. Print.
- NADEL, Alan. *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 1997. Print.
- NAIPAUL, V.S. "Among the Republicans." *New York Review of Books*. 25 October 1984. Print.
- NAVARRO, Vincent. "The Worldwide Class Struggle". *More Unequal: Aspects of Class in the United States*. Ed. Michael D. Yates. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2007. Print.



- REINHARDT, Uwe. E. "Reaganomics, R.I.P.". *Reagan as President: Contemporary Views of the Man, His Politics, and His Policies*. Ed. Paul Boyer. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990. Print.
- SAMMON, Paul M. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 1996. Print.
- SCHULMAN, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002. Print.
- TROY, Gil. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. Print.
- WILENTZ, Sean. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1972-2008*. New York: Harper, 2008. Print.
- ZWEIG, Michael. *The Working Class Majority: America's best kept secrets*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2000. Print.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. United Artists, 1979. DVD.
- Back to the Future*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Universal Pictures, 1985. DVD.
- Blade Runner: The Final Cut*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 1992. DVD.
- Born on the Fourth of July*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Orion Pictures, 1986. DVD.
- The Breakfast Club*. Dir. John Hughes. Universal Studios, 1985. DVD.
- Carnal Knowledge*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Avco Embassy, 1971. DVD.
- City of God*. Dir. Fernando Meirelles. Miramax Films, 2002. DVD.
- Dog Day Afternoon*. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Warner Bros., 1975. DVD.
- E.T.* Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures, 1982. DVD.
- The Exorcist*. Dir. William Friedkin. Warner Bros., 1973. DVD.
- The Ghostbusters*. Dir. Ivan Reitman. Columbia Pictures, 1984. DVD.
- The Godfather: Part II*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1974. DVD.
- Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. UFA, 1927. DVD.
- Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Paramount Films, 1989. DVD.
- The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Dir. Don Siegel. Allied Artists Pictures Corporations 1956. DVD.
- Platoon*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Orion Pictures, 1986. DVD.
- Rambo: First Blood II*. Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Tri-Star Pictures, 1985. DVD.
- Rambo III*. Dir. Peter McDonald. Tri-Star Pictures, 1988. DVD.
- The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Dir. Jim Sharman. 20th Century Fox, 1975. DVD.
- Them*. Dir. Gordon Douglas. Warner Bros., 1954. DVD.
- The Thing From Another World*. Dir. Christian Nyby. RKO Pictures, 1951. DVD.
- Wall Street*. Dir. Oliver Stone. 20th Century Fox, 1987. DVD.



OTHER SOURCES:

REAGAN, Ronald. "Farewell to the Nation". 11 January 1989. Audio.

REAGAN, Ronald. "Inaugural Address" 20 January 1981. Audio,

