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Yves Chevrier

Blade Runner; or, The Sociology of Anticipation*

Translated by Will Straw, Edited by RMP

For a great many critics, *Blade Runner* gave *E.T.* competition as the cinematic event of the 1982 season. Ridley Scott's film was hailed not merely as the latest commercial blockbuster from Hollywood, but because everyone viewed it as an important step in the hitherto rather flat history of SF cinema, if not as an unequivocal breakthrough. As I see it, this breakthrough does not reside in the "overkill" technique: we know that while the technical aspects of Scott's film have never before been done this well, they will be done better still—it is simply a question of time and money. Instead, the novelty lies in the film's visual perspective, from which, with unprecedented coherence and a sense of continuity verging on a *parti pris*, future society is depicted as a *milieu* rather than the negligible and neglected support for a conventional story decorated with scientific gadgets. To be sure, Los Angeles in 2019 (the year in which *Blade Runner* is set) is scarcely fiction. The society which produces genetic robots (replicants) and killers (the blade runners) in charge of eliminating them if they break the law (or otherwise need to be "re-called" for defects) is still close to our own. However, distance in time really has nothing to do with the particular "framing" through which SF may become essentially sociological. Obviously, neither narrative conventions nor technological fetishism will disappear tomorrow from SF films. Their elimination is probably not even necessary, provided that such fetishism no longer monopolizes the screen. There will always be, for our delight, policemen and thieves, good and evil, robots, God, and the obligatory avatars of Dr Frankenstein, but what we will also see, and closer and closer, will be the man on the street, the barmaid, and prostitute, and the galactic tramp. Those things overlooked or passed over in silence by the genre—crowds, architecture, streets, work, life, the pleasures of daily (and nightly) life—will henceforth be present.

Nevertheless, we should expect neither the penetrating analysis, nor the historical-mythical reflection which still remain the unalienable province of the best literary SF. We are only at the dawning (as far as SF cinema is concerned) of a visual sociology-fiction of the first degree, which shows much more than it explains by borrowing its images from the proliferating decors of comic-strip art.

Until recently, an anticipatory SF film was an often hasty, disappointing, and—to make matters worse—triangular marriage of a banal story (a western or thriller), shoddy metaphysics, and a few papier-maché gadgets of aggressively futuristic design. It is true that some directors (Scott himself in *Alien* [1978], George Lucas in *Star Wars* [1977]) were able to attend to technological

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verisimilitude, but to no avail: the puerile intrigues and infantile philosophical messages remained inescapable. *Blade Runner*'s story is likewise impudently dull and conventional, and its metaphysics aren't worth a plug nickle, but what a feast of images! The world of the future is seen by the viewer, rather than imperfectly signified (or symbolized) by the director. Like Zyga Vertov's inexhaustible "caméro-stylo," reporting live from the 21st century (in any case, this is the illusion created—which is all that matters), *Blade Runner* takes us close to the architecture, skirts around people and things, weaves its way through crowds, penetrates interiors: all, simply, because those operating the cameras (the co-author of *Blade Runner* is Douglas Trumbull, celebrated for his special effects in *2001*) have chosen to submit these things, in their most minute detail, to the viewer's gaze, along with vertical landing vehicles and other dazzling, noisy objects, which from time to time come into view in the course of the hero's adventures. What a pleasure to see a future world through the eyes of a young feline, when we had become so resigned to heaviness and bored yawns! This torrent of images holds us under its irresistible charm: the very charm, though musical this time, which enthalls fans of Wagnerian opera. *Blade Runner*'s music, no doubt like that of future Hollywood superproductions of sociological SF, consists of a visual polyphony, a *continuous image of society*.

What do the images show us? Beautiful mechanical-genetic video-electronic gadgets to be sure, but not too many, and none especially foreign to us. Even if it still eludes us, the near future has an air of familiarity. We can *make it out*, even if we do not yet know how to *make* it. By uncovering the familiar appearance of that which is still unknown, *Blade Runner* places us in the position of the child, Heidegger's poet-philosopher, or, in sociological terms, the alienated elites of the Third World. (As one high Libyan official admitted, "we [people of the Third World] sit in our offices, facing our TV screens, computer consoles and telephones, without even knowing how these things are made! Everywhere, you see men whose mentalities are those of the 16th century driving 20th-century automobiles. They think they are modern, but the cars are more modern than they are.")¹ Still, what makes *Blade Runner* so near, so real, is less the modesty of its venture into technological forecasting than the social vision accompanying its onslaught of images—and, above all else, the fact that it has a social vision. The new importance accorded decor is such that we see the environment of modernist symbols more than these symbols themselves; and this is, in fact, the way in which progress appears to us on a day-to-day basis. That is why the visual impact of *Blade Runner* goes far beyond that of *Alien* or *Star Wars*, which certainly made use—with verve and brio—of the technique of uninterrupted imagery, but without putting it to the service of a description of society. The first (and in this respect, the best) part of Scott's latest film turns on the shameless exhibitionism of this sociology-fiction, a presentiment of whose mode Kubrick gives us in the cerebral, elitist design of *2001*, as does Lucas in *Star Wars*' famous galactic bar scene, an early and brief attempt at "realism."

But its nearness *Blade Runner* does not owe simply to the *form* which its social vision adopts, the effective but unsophisticated naturalist "slice of life" à la Zola's *L'Assommoir* (to which I shall return). It is also the *idea* of progress guiding this vision which is our immediate contemporary. That is, the film has nothing about it of the triumphant modernism which our pluralism and pessimism, our recognition of cultural polycentrism, our respect for collective memory, and our visions of decadence, of overpopulation, of cultural synthesis, and of ecological catastrophe have replaced.

The acknowledged model for the Los Angeles of 2019 is Hong Kong, wherein mushrooming modernization and modernism (economic expansion, up-to-date municipal order, and vertical architecture) go hand in hand with the proliferation of traditional economic structures, habitual social and psychological behavior patterns, and archaic spatial organization. In streets busy with crowds, a low, horizontal jungle of shops thrives at the very feet of skyscrapers. Disorder surrounds and permeates order.

Similarly, the urban scene Scott shows us is *already* visible in the American megalopolis, a city-state whose society, cultures, and languages presently recognize the logic and the aesthetic of accumulation, of the "dumping ground."² The "human zoo" which, in the film, swarms around the bases of skyscrapers in an utterly medieval disorder in effect recalls that of the run-down sections of New York or Los Angeles, while the elite takes refuge in the geometry of its offices and lofty apartments, in its comfort, calm, and cleanliness. The distance is great between this valid and historically probable vision of a sedimented society—one infinitely diversified despite its integration, dominated by organizational layers—and a world which is uniform, barracks-like, regimented, and enumerated from one end to the other and from top to bottom, the spotless and transparent world, without noise or loose ends (except for the feats of the hero) as portrayed in classical SF and in political fiction (Zamiatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *1984*, and, in the cinema, Lang's *Metropolis*). It is precisely this distance which separates a vision going through the social from those which go around it.

To substitute the "excesses of cosmopolitan polycultures for the clinical nightmare of George Orwell"³ is, for Scott, a political choice taken against the dictatorships of the East, which he sees as conforming to the Orwellian model. (He may credit those dictatorships with too much efficiency—the totalitarian dream has had to backtrack, particularly on social matters, in the USSR, China, and elsewhere—but that is another story.) *Blade Runner's* vision testifies as well (and above all) to a less simplistic conception (but we should not say less optimistic, given the totalitarian connotations of all works of simplification and social integration) of modernization and its socio-cultural effects. The conception is by no means new, except on film. Numerous historians, sociologists, and futurologists have already shown that after a passing phase of "rationalization," modernization results in a further complication of social and economic structures. This was one of the paradoxes of the future pointed out—against our Weberian prejudices—in Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970). With *Blade Runner*, which unveils the society to come as an anterior future, SF has chosen an opportune moment to stop being futuristic while going over to the side of sociology.

The history of the cinema has already undergone one evolution of this kind, but in a quite different area: in its representation of Classical Antiquity. For Hollywood, and later for Cinecittà, Greece and Rome used to mean nothing but pediments and columns, flimsy fabrics and (again!) technological gadgets (but of an awkward and primitive rather than futuristic type, anticipating, rather than transcending, our own technology). It is worth recalling in this regard Joseph Mankiewicz's Cleopatra (in his film of the same name [1963]) as she directs the battle of Actium using a perfected system of optical signals and miniature models. This vision of a classical Golden Age, of a beautiful and orderly ancient Greece or Rome parenthetically interrupting an otherwise dark, dirty, and in general barbarous past extending up to the Renaissance, did not survive the subversive 1960s' iconoclasm of Pasolini and Fellini. The one in *Oedipus* (1967) and *Medea* (1970), the other in his *Satyricon* (1970) returned Antiquity to the context of agrarian

civilizations, to the Mediterranean matrix, to the dirt, disorder, and barbaric rites of ancient times. Medea's barbarism was Cappadocia, with its bloody agrarian rituals; and to show that ancient Greece was scarcely emancipated from that "savage" substratum (as well as to connect both to the present-day Mediterranean scene), Pasolini resorted to the romanesque style of the white and light Pisan Campo Santo, the pristine colors and costumes of early Quattrocento paintings, oriental trinkets of power (such as tiaras), and the sturdy faces of Southern Italian peasants. The same mix of ancient ritual and timeless cultural patterns also made Fellini's Roman world at once closer and more remote than previous cinematic representations of antiquity.

Whether from pessimism or (as was the case in the 1960s) a sense of its own limitations, Western modernity has had to reconsider its capacities to transform the world—e.g., to colonize the past and the future according to the almost totalitarian propensity of its science and its imagination. The struggle between the variegation of the world (and its peoples) and the utopian tendency to oversimplify is nonetheless not unique to the modernist discourse of science and progress (or the specifically totalitarian political perversions of the 20th century). Sociology and anthropology, with their first utterances (after 1500), confronted a unitary and reductionist vision grounded in the Bible and in those utopias whose prototype was put forth by Thomas More.⁴ In our time, the emancipation of the SF novel and film is akin to that occurring within scientific discourse, as described in the work of Michel Serres, Ilya Prigogine, and Edgar Morin.⁵ Escaping the restrictive stranglehold of the modernist utopia, the representation of the past and future (along with the study of same) henceforth emanates from the limitless, but prodigiously diversified domain of a "total history" diametrically opposed to the totalitarian scheme of things.

If one may speak of a visual revolution in *Blade Runner*, it is plain that it is limited to the fact that future society *is* represented: it does not extend to the cinematographic means of that representation. In other words, Scott, a banal director as far as these means are concerned, is not heralding a revolution of the medium in Jean-Luc Godard's or Kubrick's fashion. His originality lies rather in the establishing of a *unified field of vision* which includes society, thanks to a *topical shift* which thrusts forward and develops the sketchy social background of conventional SF film. With this new vision and new subject matter, the simplified *staging* of power gives way to a more comprehensive *showing* of society.

Such a revolution is reminiscent of the one that integrated space in Renaissance and Classical times. The topical shift which led Quattrocento artists to represent Nature and Man—the visible and the human—instead of the invisible and the divine (a shift which enabled them to represent the divine and the never-seen as *natural*) went together with the birth of homogeneous space (as opposed to Byzantine and medieval fragmented space). Painters like Masaccio, Piero, and Mantegna, sculptors like Ghiberti and Donatello, architects like Brunelleschi and Alberti, strove to link background and foreground in a single unit of representation modelled on the theatrical stage. Painting, sculpture, and architecture became one integrated whole with its immediate surroundings and in continuity with universal space, which came to encompass the heavens.⁶ Portrait painting obeyed the same principles. First set on a flat, heterogeneous background, portraits became integrated with their surroundings when painters opened narrow "windows," or *vedute*, through the background, in order to signify the endless continuity of infinite space beyond the subject of their (and the viewer's) attention. These *vedute* later expanded into wide-open landscapes, sometimes at the expense of the portrait

or original topic which, as with Claude, survived only as a pretext. One should recall, however, that Claude's harbors and scarlet seas, as well as Leonardo's mountain vistas and glaciers, Titian's golden woods, and Tintoretto's and Caravaggio's shadows, are not just poetic signposts leading the eye beyond the visible, but the lasting evidence of spatial oneness and continuity.

The analogy with classical representation, however, is misleading. The classical integration of continuity was highly selective and hierarchical,⁷ whereas the representation of society in *Blade Runner* is cumulative and based on equality of parts and whole. In fact, it is the classical way of representing by selection, simplification, and reduction (a structural symbolization which may be called *vertical* or *maximum order representation*), as it is built into classical science and Utopia as well as into traditional SF, that is superseded in *Blade Runner*'s visual exhibition of the social. The topical shift—the showing of society instead of the staging of power—leads to an enumeration of numerous *things* (low grade signs) instead of the conventional staging of a few privileged *symbols* (high grade signs). Maximum order representation fitted (and was fitted to) the grand design of total power excluding complex social interactions (let us think of the Sun King cult in Versailles and of the cults of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Mao in our century as prototypes of SF's Evil Tyrants who rule, or want to rule, over lifeless polities); and accordingly, the formal shift (from high grade to low grade signs), in turn, helps move the emphasis from power to society. Instead of being absorbed into the mechanics of total control (and thus symbolized instead of shown), society is exhibited as a complex continuum whose webs encompass power structures and networks.

That kind of exhibition in *Blade Runner* is not, of course, the first instance of what could be called *minimum order* or *horizontal representation*. It can be argued that it occurs whenever the emphasis is placed on the "objective" side of art (Plato's mimesis). According to André Bazin's theory of "cinéma-vérité,"⁸ directors of realistic movies restrained their creative will so that a true-to-life democracy of things could replace the aristocracy of symbols characteristic of "untrue" art. This principle had already been laid out by various schools of 19th-century realism. As theorized by the "réalistes" (and later by Lukács), the novel was a cumulative structure opposed to the vertical symbolization built into drama. It was to bear witness to the rise of the people after the French and industrial revolutions by being, according to Stendhal's famous definition, a neutral "mirror carried along the road." Mirroring the world by means of a representation *equal* to the world had been a lasting fantasy even before the age of realism. But no sound "réaliste" ever entertained the hope of achieving such an equality by accumulating all the signs of every thing. Even Balzac, whose goal was to challenge society's prolixity, had to select and symbolize. This symbolization was done through characters and plots and through lengthy descriptions of well chosen, meaningful "things" (which could be feelings, thoughts, features, social traits, or historical developments as well as mere objects). Randomness became the later, more modern way to pretend (as with Vertov or with Proust's "mémoire involontaire") that one was not choosing at all, but following reality. But as it came to be more atomized, representation required a stronger, more integrated overall framework (or "grande form").

Wagner, Proust, and Joyce based this framework on mirroring symbols and structures: the common concern for reality.⁹ Vertov's seemingly "free" camera was more concerned with visual forms and rhythms—i.e., artistic construction—than with reality. Even the minimal art of Kafka or the *nouveau roman* (later extend-

ed to the screen by Marguerite Duras in *India Song* [1974] or *Le navire Night* [1981]) had to acknowledge the constraints of stylization: myth and intellectual constructions arose at the horizon of endless and seemingly “objective” descriptions as the unavoidable subjective price one had to pay for making sense. In short, representation has to be different from what it represents: lesser in scope, but greater in signification.

The difference in *Blade Runner* is one of the crudest kind. No symbolic realism, no structuring myth is to be found as the formal link welding together the description of society. As already suggested, Scott’s selection—that of grass-roots realism as exemplified by Zola and the naturalist school—is neither original nor worthy of high artistic praise. What makes it interesting is that it is the medium of a full-fledged desire, unprecedented in SF cinema, to show society.

What are the possibilities—what are the limits—of such an old-fashioned technique in its new environment?

The vision of future society is limited to a “social slice” (Gide’s infamous “tranche de vie naturaliste”)—the lower strata of society—so narrow that many viewers may feel that it is too low and too one-sided. It is true that grass-roots realism has an inclination for the sad and the sordid—no matter where or when the picture is taken. If, following the procedure used for the Los Angeles of 2019, you were to film certain streets and neighborhoods of ours through the narrow lens of the naturalist opera glass, you would be recording the same soot, the same noise, the same sadness. On the other hand, you would not see sun, beauty, art, love, wealth, etc.—which are also not present in *Blade Runner*. As in *L’Assommoir* or in the desolate universe of Wim Wenders’ *Hammett* (1982), such things must be imagined. Their imaginary presence follows naturally from what is shown, by the natural deployment of a social logic which assumes that right next to, or rather above, Zola’s or Hammett’s world is Proust’s or Fitzgerald’s.

Yet simple inference is perhaps not the best way to present things which are absent, especially where film is concerned; and for that reason, Scott has taken steps to ensure that their presence is obstinately symbolized. Reference is made to the still-untouched “North.” The killer himself, however unfeeling, owns a few statues, a bonsai; and Rachel, that sublime genetic robot, plays a few notes on an old piano covered with family photos. The killer is surprised that “replicants” collect photos (synthetic, of course) representing a past which they never had, but which, we are led to believe, grows out of their short, programmed existence, as the time-dimension of their being to the world. These pictures are a good symbol of what might be the tenuous link between complexity in machines and sensitivity in life—a standard SF theme ever since Hal, the computer in *2001*, experienced the qualms of complexity. Even if he has chosen to carry his looking glass (Stendhal’s mirror) at asphalt level, the filmmaker has thus taken care to provide glimpses of the wider world, the *beau monde*, like so many filmic *vedute*. For a brief moment, the spectator catches Tyrel in the intimacy of his bedroom. This Tyrel, as the tyrant-chairman whose corporation produces genetic robots, is the obvious candidate for a simplified representation of power. What evil is he hatching, the viewer wonders? None at all, is Scott’s response. Tyrel is just busy with some stock portfolio or other, while outside, far away, far below (being one of the elite, Tyrel lives and reigns at the top) a flashing neon sign reminds us that another world, perhaps less decrepit than this one, is being built on distant planets.

Symbols also flash additional information on top of what is shown. We see an obvious ecological disaster. It rains, it’s cold in L.A.; the sun no longer shines there. The city is overpopulated. What the general consequences of all this are,

and how they bear on the economic structure of 2019, we are allowed to infer from the fact that an artificial, genetically engineered snake costs less than a real snake. Human beings, out of their inalienable right to live (this is why Scott crowds them onto the screen), have evidently restricted the scope of other life-forms to the point of virtually crowding snakes out of the planet. This counterpointing of symbolic details lets us see, as in perspective, the endless ramifications, multiple branches, and all-out complexity of a *complete* society through the segment that is shown in foreground (mainly the cringing underdogs, the dominated).

Blade Runner, in other words, attains a thoughtful balance between the said and the unsaid, the seen and its context. With but one important reservation: the political dimension is completely ignored. This is not to take *Blade Runner* to task for not having given a legal opinion on the essentially political problem of the destruction of the "half-alive." We can, however, reproach this voyeuristic film, which shows all, for not having shown us anything of politics, were it only briefly, while showing us the society's economy, demography, and ecology.

Consider, especially, the dramatic climax of the story: the confrontation between rebel robot and policeman anti-hero. It consists simply of the banal killing of a non-compliant machine by one member of the *ad hoc* death squad (the "blade runner"), and has no obvious symbolic signification. To be sure, doing away with an almost-human robot for not complying with a scientifically enhanced order could raise the specter of a dark Utopia. The killing, however, is restricted to rebel robots; it does not concern human members of society. Furthermore, it is not carried out by an evil symbol of order, but by an underling in a police force. It is made clear that this force is not omnipotent; nor is it the agency of a police state or a cradle for supermen. In fact, it is as hierarchized and respectful of the proper forms as is its counterpart in any contemporary law-abiding State. It is also underprivileged in the same way: the office of the blade runner, and even of his boss, is shabby compared to Tyrel's celestial palace. Lastly, the police performs its function among general indifference: the cop (whom we know from inside thanks to the voice-over narrative) feels like an underdog.

Along with other features of 2019, the moral portrait of the "hero" also recalls the ideological realities of late 20th-century law-and-order urban America. Like a solitary cop, he does his duty with no enthusiasm. He is no fool either: he knows that Good is perhaps not on the side of the Law. The final confrontation accordingly leaves us at a loss to say who is good, who is bad. Moral order is convincingly not more one-sided than social organization. Our moral hesitations and mental complexity guide the psychological model, as the atomization of our societies does the sociological model: a complex society precludes a simplified psychology as much as simplistic politics.

But this is where Scott falters and where the narrative does upset the artistic balance. Instead of showing a real cop, Scott exhibits a caricature. The arbitrary convention of the detective novel, to be sure, roughly suits his purpose. But "roughly" is a near-fatal approximation that seriously undermines the credibility of the whole fiction. The "hero," in bad conscience, is not aware that there exist authorities to which he could transfer, at least *verbally*, the responsibility which torments him. That he should suffer without ever referring to higher ups, without political decisions and debates (killing half-living creatures is no small matter) is highly improbable. Even if he is a political simpleton, he should be expressing some grievance. And we cannot believe that he is acting on his own in a state of anarchy, where power and responsibility have dissolved, because we see that that is not so. The only explanation is that we are missing an essential psychological

veduta showing how the political order which we are led to surmise in and around society is integrated *within* the structure of the "hero's" ego. Which is to say that the story, at the dramatic climax, is not consistent with the logic of the socio-culturally shown. According to what we are shown, we cannot escape the conclusion that what is wanting in the blade runner's relationship with the *res publica* is neither a lack in his society nor in his mind, but in Scott's camera, in Scott's representation of power as a social phenomenon. Scott's blind—or soft—spot for America's favorite non-utopian Utopia finally shows. Deprived of super-ego and reduced to a simplified puppet, the "hero" is made to look not more tragic, but less real than the society he grovels through.¹⁰

Whether it be modernist, futurist, or technological, a political utopia cannot do without a social context, which resists its reductionism (even when the utopia is to all intents and purposes totalitarian). The discourse of the social, be it fictional or entertaining, cannot overlook the question of power without risking a regression to utopianism. *Blade Runner*, in going around this problem, violates simple psychological realism. At the same time, it depicts the future in the way the past used to be cinematically conceived and visualized from a futuristic perspective (e.g., in Mankeiwicz's *Cleopatra*), and thus retains something from the futurism which it disavows. This capitulation reminds us of the striking contrast between the formal mediocrity of this film (at the level of narrative structure) and the visual splendor of its realization, inasmuch as its censorship of the ideologically implicit takes the form, underneath its iconographic ingenuity, of a respect for clichés which in effect are laden with the savage utopianism of deepest America. This same contradiction undermines from within any aesthetic renewal of the comic-strip form.

In its present state, SF has been enriched through its transposition of such an aesthetic to the screen. It also has much to lose if it continues to embrace the conventions and hidden ideology of such a model. That it is constrained by the laws of the market-place or the (malleable) tastes of the public has yet to be proven. In this field, at least, innovation is to a large extent the province of the director, who is more a master of the form than of the overall project. A new genre, therefore, has yet to be invented: what we need is a *Star Wars* whose ambition would at the very least be that of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. To which some might reply: too intellectual (or too European); your demand carries with it the risk of sterilizing the genre. The visual accomplishment of *Blade Runner* proves, however, that a quite legitimate concern for complexity may serve to orchestrate a superb festival of images, provided that it is made the support of an appropriate cinematic language. We can appeal to the creative imagination, and express the hope that the super-productions which will inevitably exploit *Blade Runner*'s exhibitionist streak will satisfy the admirers of realism and sophistication (and of a coherent socio-historical striptease) as much as they will the somewhat prudish devotees of the comic-strip form.

NOTES

1. Interview in the *International Herald Tribune*, Sept. 15, 1982, p. 6.
2. See Philippe Garnier in *Liberation*, Sept. 19, 1982, p. 2.
3. Colette Godard, "Violence, conscience," *Le Monde*, Sept. 16, 1982, p. 15.
4. See Jacques Solé, *Les mythes chrétiens de la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris, 1979). Inasmuch as utopian simplifications did away with the variegation of the world for the sake of achieving an analytical model of society, they were part of science in the making. Alexandre Koyré, in his *Études galiléennes* (Paris, 1966), has

demonstrated that the main root of modern science was a decisive shift in the selection of what is significant and what is secondary, even illusory, in Nature. Thus, Galileo and then Descartes proclaimed that Nature was but “figures and movement”; as opposed to Aristotle’s description of (sublunar) Nature as organized quality, Descartes’ was an infinite universe of machines based on quantified movement. One of the ways utopian thinkers oversimplified human societies was in building a universal model of moral order which did *not* select social interactions (i.e., disorder and complexity) as a significant feature. In this non-selection, later SF found a ready-made model for the (dark) utopia of total power linked to the evil side of science and progress.

5. See Michel Serres’ *Genèse* (Paris, 1982); Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers’ *La Nouvelle alliance: Métamorphose de la science* (Paris, 1979); and Edgar Morin’s *Le Paradigme perdu: la nature humaine* (Paris, 1973) and *La Méthode* (Paris, 1977). The evolution of physics, chemistry, biology, thermodynamics, and cybernetics in the 20th century requires a new model of scientific thought, at once closer to what used to be derided as “qualitative thinking” and further away from the one-sided preoccupation of classical science with universal, determinist, and one-way categories. For this new epistemology, disorder (entropy) does not only permeate order; it creates order from the structures of the universe down to man’s brain and to the most complex form of all: human society. This makes room for a multi-sided approach to the interplay of nature and culture, or power and society (Morin), as well as for the uncertainties theorized by modern science in the dialectics of “change and necessity” (Werner Heisenberg’s vision of quantum theory; Jacques Monod’s interpretation of genetic change and Darwinian evolution). In Prigogine’s words, man knows that he no longer has the *power* to understand everything from a unique center (which he thought he occupied). Knowledge appears as a *social* phenomenon resulting from a complex interaction with what is known. This “nouvelle alliance” might lead to a deeper understanding of things by bringing within the province of science problems (and solutions) which had long been given up to philosophy (*vide* Serres).

6. See Pierre Francastel’s *Peinture et société* (Paris, 1964). Contrary to popular belief, perspective was *not* the cornerstone of the new style. Since late Gothic times, it had coexisted with the traditional partition of space. Several things could be viewed simultaneously in different perspectives on the *same* painted surface. Late Gothic and early Renaissance painters had used that fragmentation not only to tell stories in time (each spatial cell telling one event), but also for representing the two basic kinds of space—worldly and divine. This spatial language was often matched by a parallel language of colors. Duccio’s *Maesta*’s in Siena—which have different perspectives and pigments for the divine and for the sublunar—can be “read” that way. After integrated space took over, painters used the divided framework of the *predella* in order to figure the time-dimension of the narrative (each panel being unified in time and space). Frescoes also allowed the archaism of narration to perdure within the framework of unified space. At the other end of the Classical era, the founding fathers of contemporary art deconstructed homogeneous space in much the same way, even before Cubism made a system—and a topic—of that deconstruction.

7. Compare Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966).

8. See Bazin, *Qu’est-ce que la cinéma?* (Paris, 1975).

9. This all-out symbolism makes *double* use of the symbol of the whole. In *space*, it is the conventional *single* thing encompassing all the things (Borges’s *Aleph*): Alberich’s ring in Wagner, the Narrator’s “universe within a cup of tea” (as revealed by the “petite madeleine”) in Proust, Mr Porter’s (HCE’s) sleep in *Finnegans Wake*. In *time*, it is the work of art itself as mirroring the history of the self (or world) through its structural *development* (Borges’s *Labyrinth*). The interested reader will find in Camille Bourniquel’s *Sélinonte ou la chambre impériale* (Paris, 1970) a fascinating fiction based on a quest for the symbol of symbols. It should be recalled that gnostic

systems were probably the first bodies of thought to make coherent use of this double articulation. For gnostic thinking, everything symbolizes and is symbolized by everything, but some things symbolize (and are symbolized by) more than others—be it in *space* (e.g., the snake biting its tail, alpha and omega, etc.) or in *time* (e.g., the gnostic rituals of initiation, still at work in the Christian mass, where the journey of body and soul through death and resurrection mirrors the sequence of the Creation from spirit to matter [Fall] and back to spirit [Redemption]). The modern use of the time (sequence) and space (simultaneity) articulations of symbolism for narrative purposes (and structuring) was heralded by the birth (a gnostic rebirth?) of dialectics in early 19th-century Germany. For Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), the Absolute is the logically moving totality of the world together with the consciousness (social through history, individual through philosophy) of this movement and logic from the “in itself” kernel (empty, metaphysical simultaneity) to the “for itself” fullest development (historical sequentiality).

10. Conversely, an elaboration of the blade runner’s psyche might have been a convenient way to provide the necessary political depth without distracting the camera’s eye from the lower levels of society: the psychological *veduta* could have served as political *veduta*, and vice-versa.

RÉSUMÉ

Yves Chevrier. Blade Runner, ou: la Sociologie de l'anticipation.—La nouveauté de Blade Runner (1982) ne réside pas dans ses aspects techniques mais dans sa perspective visuelle. Dans ce film, Ridley Scott nous offre quelque chose de presque unique dans le cinéma de SF (quoique approché parfois dans le 2001 de Kubrick et dans la scène de bar galactique de La guerre des Étoiles de Lucas): la vision d'un milieu social complet. BR contribue au cinéma de SF en établissant un champ de vision unifié qui inclut le fait social. Ce que Scott a accompli est à de certains égards comparable à l'ouverture de vedute—de ces “fenêtres” englobant une unité et continuité spatiales—dans la peinture de la Renaissance. Mais, en plein contraste avec le schéma classique d'ordre hiérarchique et vertical maximal, BR suit un principe d'ordre minimal, de représentation “horizontale” de la société. Cela s'accorde bien au réalisme “primaire” pour lequel Scott a un évident penchant. Il nous montre le triste et sordide Los Angeles de 2019, monde qui dans son désordre quasi-médiéval fait penser au Hong-Kong d'aujourd'hui et qui fait penser aussi, par sa juxtaposition d'un “zoo humain” avec la belle vie résidentielle de l'élite technocratique, à certaines mégapoles américaines modernes. Il nous permet d'inférer aussi, par des références au Nord encore vierge, au bonsaï et aux statues du blade runner etc., que juste à côté ou au-dessus de ce monde de Zola ou de Hammett, il y a celui de Proust ou de Fitzgerald.

La valeur visuelle révolutionnaire de BR est cependant confirmée à ce qu'il en vient à aborder la dimension politique. En montrant le paysage social, Scott omet le souci traditionnel du cinéaste: la mise en scène des pouvoirs et des luttes pour le pouvoir. Plutôt que de trouver un moyen narratif pour faire saisir la conscience psychopolitique adéquate à sa nouvelle peinture du social, Scott régresse vers les formules usées de la littérature à sensation ou du roman policier et offre, en la personne même du Blade Runner, un stéréotype de bande dessinée plutôt qu'un individu plausible. C'est pourquoi si le cinéma de SF veut réaliser son potentiel comme nouveau genre, le type de vision sociale que BR atteint n'est pas suffisant: il nous faut un réalisateur avec les capacités d'un Tolstoï et l'ampleur ambitieuse d'un Guerre et paix. (RMP)

Abstract.—*The novelty of Blade Runner (1982) does not reside in its technical aspects but in its visual perspective. In his latest film, Ridley Scott gives us something almost unique in SF cinema (though it is adumbrated—barely—in Kubrick's 2001 and in the galactic barroom scene in Lucas's Star Wars): a vision of a complete social milieu. What is original to Blade Runner as a contribution to SF film is the establishing of a unified field of vision which takes in the social.*

Scott's achievement is in a way comparable to the opening of vedute—of “windows” evincing a spatial oneness and continuity—in Renaissance and Neoclassical (portrait) painting. But in contrast to the Classical scheme of hierarchical, or vertical—and hence maximum—order, Blade Runner follows the principle of minimal ordering, or horizontal representation, in exhibiting society. This sorts well with the “grass-roots realism” that Scott evidently has a penchant for. He shows us the sad and sordid Los Angeles of 2019, a world which in its nearly medieval disorder resembles present-day Hong Kong and also, in its juxtaposition of a swarming and ghettoized “human zoo” with the skyscraper existence of a managerial elite, some modern American megalopolis. At the same time, he allows us to infer, through references to the still-virgin North, to the blade runner's bonsai and statues, and so forth, that right next to—or rather, above—this world of Zola or Hammett, as it were, is that of Proust or Fitzgerald.

Blade Runner's visual revolutionariness is confined to what it represents, without extending to how it does so. Moreover, the film falters, almost fatally, when it comes to dealing with the political dimension of its vision of society. In showing the social, Scott neglects the traditional concern of SF cinema (though also something which keeps it in the throes of utopian totalitarianism): the staging of power (and power struggles). Rather than discovering a narrative vehicle adequate for conveying a psycho-political awareness commensurate with his novel depiction of the social, Scott regresses to the formulas of the thriller or detective fiction and offers, particularly in the person of the blade runner, a comic-strip stereotype rather than a psychologically plausible human being. If SF is to realize its potential as a new film genre, the kind of social view that Blade Runner affords is not enough: what is needed is a director with Tolstoy's abilities, and a film with the ambition of War and Peace. (RMP)