

Scott Bukatman: Bladerunner

London: British Film Institute 1997 (BFI Modern Classics), 96 S.,

ISBN 0-85170-623-1, £ 7.99

It sometimes seems to me that Ridley Scott, through *Alien* (1979) and *Bladerunner* (1982), managed to single-handedly revitalise critical interest in SF cinema. Until then, unless a work was by a Kubrick or a Tarkovsky it wouldn't be taken seriously;

it was dross. At best SF was over-looked, and the films which were difficult to disregard because of their economic success and cultural impact, such as *Star Wars*, were analysed in terms of their commodity/blockbuster status.

Bladerunner has probably stimulated more critical interest than any other film in the last twenty years; the question of Deckard's humanity has generated 'more discussion on the Internet than the existence of God.' (p.80). Scott Bukatman has the unenviable task of making sense of this wealth of intellectual thought, and he has done an excellent job of it. Not only has he managed to produce a concise overview of the major debates, many which involve that dreaded postmodernism word, and put them into some kind of perspective, but he has made it relatively readable too.

„SF constructs a space of accommodation to an intensely technological existence.“ (p.8) and „shows us stuff“ (p.10). The many references to eyes, and seeing leads Bukatman to believe *Bladerunner* is a „drama about vision. But it is also a drama of vision.“(p.10), although seeing guarantees absolutely nothing as you can't identify a replicant by simply looking at it.

Bukatman positions *Bladerunner* as a precursor of cyberpunk, exploring the same tensions: the city becomes symbolic of ever invasive technology, and a physical representation of the increasingly chaotic electronic, rather than urban, world in which we live.

In fact, far from being an exemplary example of postmodernism, the richly textured city of L.A. in 2019 of Ridley Scott and his 'futurist' Syd Mead's imagination, could be viewed as a deeply modernist city, „heterogeneity and urban chaos are nothing new, after all.“ (p.60). Scott's obsessive vision of a retrofitted world – one which is constantly 'up-dated' by having things added on, is the process by which cities normally evolve; the city that ones sees being only the upper-most level.

The first part of the book concerns itself with the film's tortured production history, its initial financial and critical failure and the subsequent triumphant release of the, still compromised, 'Director's Cut' in 1992. Although the 'vision' of the film comes from Ridley Scott, it is clear from Bukatman's account that without the original inspiration of Philip K. Dick and the collaborative efforts of cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth and Douglas Trumbull's EEG effects group, *Bladerunner*'s urban verisimilitude couldn't have been realised.

Then comes a discussion of the film's most obvious out-standing attribute: its detailed depiction of the „failure of the rational city“ (p.50), which so overwhelmed viewers. A city more New York than L.A., inspired by *Metropolis* (1926) which had itself been inspired by New York. A dark city whose urban chaos and anonymity could also be viewed positively. And in the same way as 'noir' negotiated the tensions between „order and disorder, perception and spatial exploration and [...] threatening urban spaces“ (p.49), *Bladerunner* (and cyberpunk in general) does this in the context of expanding technology. In *Bladerunner* Deckard fulfils the similar roles of classical private detective and cyberpunk's 'post-alienated protagonists' (p.50) that of connecting with different strata in society. As with *Metro-*

polis the privileged are literally at the top and the under-class at the bottom. However, Bukatman places much emphasis on the essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' by Georg Simmel, which views the city in a more positive light, a place where personal renewal is possible too, where even a replicant hunter can regain his empathy.

The third part of the book concerns itself with the film's philosophical centre: What does it mean to be human? „The Human/Android division is the narrative vehicle for the deeper and more urgent distinction to be made between Human / Inhuman.“ (p.70). Deckard's restoration of empathy is as important as Batty's development of it: „what has feeling is human.“ (p.69) The various arguments Bukatman lays out about memories and feeling makes this section the most interesting. He also gives, in my opinion, valid defences to possible reactionary readings of the film, especially concerning gender and racial politics. Deckard may be a white male battling through a ghetto environment but Batty, who is the ultimate slave, is startlingly Aryan. It is how the replicants are treated which makes them slaves, not something which is inherent to them.

As for the issue of Deckard's humanity, Bukatman feels it is the *ambiguity* of the film, unicorns notwithstanding, which gives it meaning, and so the answer to this question, for him, is ultimately pointless. If Deckard turns out to be a replicant, what is the moral of the story?

Bukatman has done an impressive job, and although I would have liked a little more discussion about the acting and the actors, I would recommend this well-illustrated book as an introduction to the film, as well as to fans and academics who are more familiar it.

Drew Bassett (Köln)