HEAD OVER HEELS FOR ARTIFICIAL WOMEN, OR SACRIFICE, LOVE, AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE MODERN SCIENCE FICTION FILM: HUMAN CULTURE AND OBSESSION IN *BLADE RUNNER* AND *SOLARIS*

Introduction

Indeed I wonder: is the non-definability of science fiction perhaps an essential quality of it?

—Ursula K. Le Guin, The Norton Book of Science Fiction

What is it that makes up the landscape of a science fiction film, and why is it that the "non-definability" that Le Guin speaks of seems more easily applicable to literature than to film? Does the literary aspect of the genre inherently garner more visual and narrative freedoms? Do films suffer from a sort of artistic funneling that needlessly limits their creative possibilities, both narratively and visually? Are the sleek, modern, antiseptically clean, metallic, futuristic land and cityscapes of popular sci-fi films like I, Robot to blame? Or have sci-fi film junkies grown accustomed to expecting a certain stylized look from the genre?

All of these concerns are legitimate, but what keeps the science fiction film genre unique and relevant are the rare gems like Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982) and Steven Soderbergh's Solaris (2002), thoughtful films that, rather than reveling in monsters, aliens, mad-scientists and effects-laden space battles, take the viewer on an

internalized, intellectual and emotional journey, one that raises questions about human beings, the paths they are taking in the universe, the ways in which they relate to each other, and the values they choose to champion. While the sci-fi genre is indeed littered with the waste of shallow shoot-em-ups and inane gore-fests, infrequent but special films like Blade Runner and Solaris manage to squeeze through the drivel-centric Hollywood studio system; despite their systematic box office failure, these films establish considerable fanfare and cult-like status for those who prefer the sensitive, cerebral sci-fi experience. These films, like all great literature, internalize and pontificate on the human condition yet still manage to posit "trenchant political questions about our world, its political economy, its technologies and its future" (Kerman 23).

During one pivotal scene in Solaris, psychologist and protagonist Chris Kelvin discovers his wife Rheya lying on the floor. Clutched tightly in her cold, dead hand, a poem is visible; the final stanza reads: "Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion" (Thomas). Kelvin drops to his knees in horror when he sees the twisted corpse of his beautiful wife, lying crumpled on their bedroom floor. Although he is crippled by guilt and grief, he is otherwise unaware of the second opportunity that the poem suggests—he will have the chance to begin life anew with his lover—though his choice will not come without a price. Steven Soderberg's Solaris (2002), a second film adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's 1961 novel of the same name (Andrei Tarkovsky first adapted the book for the screen in 1972), like Blade Runner, reminds its viewers of the importance of choices, the power of love, and the meaning of sacrifice.

In another pivotal scene, this time from Blade Runner, the title character Rick Deckard returns home from his penultimate rooftop encounter with the replicant/android

leader, Roy. He arrives at his apartment, exhausted, finding the replicant Rachel asleep, and asks: “Do you love me? Do you trust me?” Rachel answers him to his satisfaction, and together they quickly abandon Deckard’s apartment, effectively closing the door (for the last time) on his home, his security, his job, and life as he knows it. In this scene from the director’s cut of Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982), loosely adapted from Phillip K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Deckard, like Kelvin in Solaris, chooses to bet it all on a woman who may or may not truly exist, who may not live beyond the next day, and who may not really know what love is or even know how to love.

Although many fans and scholars alike have written about Blade Runner and its implications in the twenty-three years since its release, very little has been said about Soderbergh’s Solaris and the themes that it shares with its legendary precursor. The protagonist in Solaris, Chris Kelvin, played by George Clooney, displays significant parallels with the central character in Blade Runner (1982), Rick Deckard, who is played by Harrison Ford. While Blade Runner reflects the political climates in which the film was created and comments on the balances of power and corporate responsibility within respective societies, both films take the viewer on a fantastic visual and emotional journey that incorporates parallel allusions to the human condition and effectively illuminates the strain that advancing technology places on human values. Though these films are separated by two decades of film history, each simultaneously reflects and predicts similar social and cultural ideologies. By far the most compelling aspects that the two films share, at least to this viewer, are the ultimate decisions made by Kelvin and Deckard; both characters make an extreme sacrifice for an uncertain future, giving up

everything in their lives, predicating their decisions on an idealistic chance of maintaining a romantic "love" relationship with a female character who is clearly not human. Their central characters, when placed in somewhat similar situations, make the same desperate, self-sacrificial, albeit inevitable choices.

Ridley Scott's multidimentional Blade Runner and Steven Soderbergh's pensive Solaris provide spectacular backdrops through which one can closely scrutinize existential questions, human values and life-altering choices. Both films examine what Joseph Francavilla calls "the undecidability of mutually exclusive categories: is something alive or dead, human or nonhuman?" (4). For Kelvin and Deckard, the answer to Francavilla's question is ultimately irrelevant; whatever these artificial women are, they are enough to prompt both men to make major personal sacrifices. According to Judith B. Kerman, in the introduction to her 1997 collection of essays, *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Phillip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Blade Runner "makes clear that the replicants are beings to whom moral discourse is applicable. In doing so, it asks the kinds of questions which make science fiction so valuable in thinking about the technological, political and moral directions our society is taking" (2). Blade Runner stands above lesser science fiction films because it asks important questions about the nature of humanity, the balances of power within societies, corporate responsibility, and the changing values of modern culture steeped in technologies. These questions are relevant in any setting, though when posited in Scott's visually amazing and thematically dreary, yet aesthetically beautiful frame, they resonate compellingly.

Although Solaris is twenty years newer than Blade Runner, it too offers compelling queries on humanity, though ultimately emphasizing a more personal dilemma: the willingness of a man to give up everything he has for the chance of a successful romance with a beautiful, human-like “woman.” Soderbergh, like Scott, has created an astonishingly real, futuristic, visual milieu, one that allows the viewer to suspend all disbelief and delve deeply into the human story that the stunning visuals merely support. It remains to be seen how well Soderbergh’s vision will have represented the cultural and political climate it was created in; time has given Blade Runner’s researchers plenty of perspective on the decade in which it was created, but like Blade Runner, Solaris is an individualized, human story, focusing on a central male character and his gradually altering psyche, framed by a spectacular visual front. As Roger Ebert argues, Solaris is “a workshop for a discussion of human identity. It considers not only how we relate to others, but how we relate to our ideas of others—so that a completely phony, non-human replica of a dead wife can inspire the same feelings that the wife herself once did” (1). Obsession with a partner that may or may not exist is what ties Kelvin and Deckard together, as a personal sacrifice for an unreal ideal becomes central for both characters. Though the distance of twenty-three years has granted scholars the perspective necessary to reveal distinct political and social commentary embedded throughout Blade Runner, Solaris has not yet earned such an informed perspective for critique (it may well reveal much more as the years pass), but the very human struggles that Kelvin and Deckard share draw the films together.

Chapter 1: Controversy in Production, Various Versions, and Unpredictable Reviews

There was no lack of controversy surrounding the creation of Blade Runner. Its labored journey to the big screen was one of the most difficult challenges of Ridley Scott's even-then formidable career (he had already spent a very successful decade making television commercials, and had recently finished the sci-fi blockbuster classic, Alien). Scott was subjected to quite a lot, politically and ideologically, while working on Blade Runner. He went over budget by 5 million dollars, was fired, re-hired, endlessly questioned and pestered by studio executives and actors alike (despite his success with Alien), and it took its toll. Actors fought on the set, and Scott clashed with Harrison Ford over Deckard's role in the film: "Scott originally wanted Dustin Hoffman for the role of Deckard, but eventually decided on Harrison Ford. However, the relationship between the star and director disintegrated: Ford felt that the director cared more for the sets than for the actors' performances" (Sammon 68).

Test audiences disliked the first run of the film, and the tangled web of film financiers instructed Scott to re-cut the film before its release, forcing him to add a pedestrian, didactic voiceover narration and an out-of-place, *ride into the sunset* happy ending, both of which Scott removed with the subsequent release of the director's cut, ten years later. Scott didn't have enough clout, or at least thought he didn't have enough to argue with the executives who were making demands on his picture, and as William Kolb has argued, "the film failed commercially because it disregarded traditional genre formulas and viewer expectations" (143). When he followed the financiers' demands, and

Blade Runner still became a disappointment at the box office, Scott lost a lot of personal confidence and did whatever his employers told him on his next flop, Legend (1985), which he has many times attributed to his lack of confidence and assertiveness: "I cut a lot of interesting stuff out of Legend that I'm now sorry is gone. Don't forget, I was also very insecure after Blade Runner. I felt sure I really had something, then watched it fail. What happened on Legend was definitely the result of my own crisis of confidence" (Robb 46). With Blade Runner, Scott wanted to make a science fiction film that said something real about human nature, albeit in part bleak and depressing, and the studios made it extremely difficult for this vision to emerge. Again, finances ended up dictating content.

What Scott wanted to say about human nature was largely focused on temporal limitations. Replicants, like their human counterparts, are searching for their origins. Like humans, they do not understand why they live; they only know that they wish to remain alive. Their memories are precious because they are signifiers of individuality, contextual reference points on a quest for identity. Kevin McNamara argues that this lack of individuality is pervasive in the film as well as the novel. This seemingly forced abolition of uniqueness has led the central characters, human and replicant alike, to rely on "images and narratives that fill the void of self," and in turn, "photography becomes a figure for the desire for history" (422). It is indeed a personal history that can validate existence for an individual. Replicants Leon and Rachel are fixated on photographs of their pasts, which are actually artificial constructs, consisting of implanted *memories*, complete with artificial photographic representations of the fabricated past lives of each

replicant. Annette Kuhn, in her seminal work, *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, reminds us that:

> The 'family photograph' produced by the replicant Rachel in Blade Runner as 'proof' that she is human likewise appeals to the slender promise of real-world referentiality embodied in the photochemically produced image; and yet this promise also calls into question whatever confidence we might have in the truth of the memories that we read off our photographs. (223)

What *is* a photograph, anyway? How much can it truly represent reality or history? Certainly a photograph is a slice of life that reminds one of a period in life that is remembered in a very specific way. But how genuine are memories themselves? Carl Jung argued that memories are malleable products of the unconscious mind, that our personal histories are recorded and manipulated on a subconscious level, that we often do remember things the way we would like to remember them. Whether or not this subconscious manipulation of memory distorts the truth in our pasts is never completely clear. The photographs in Blade Runner become important because they symbolize time, and time is what each replicant both desires and lacks. Roy Batty and his comrades only wish to live—they do not accept their predestined, premature termination, and Scott knew that each replicant must face the same choices that humans must face; they must choose what to do with the time available to them, however short.

Before encountering the cacophony of dissenting voices to both analyze and critique this landmark film, one must decide which version to study. Though only two or

three cuts of Blade Runner are relatively available on either DVD or VHS, several versions of the film exist, and according to Blade Runner authority Paul M. Sammon,

> There are essentially five different. . . cuts of Blade Runner which have been seen by the general public, and one different American television broadcast version: 1) *The Workprint* (WP) (same as Denver/Dallas sneaks, Farifax Cut, UCLA Cut, NuArt/Castro Cuts—shown 1982, 1990, and 1991). 2) *The San Diego Sneak Preview* (SDS) (shown May 1982, once only). 3) *The Domestic Cut* (DC) (original 1982 American Theatrical Release). 4) *The International Cut* (IC) (1982 version shown in Europe/Asia). 5) *The Director's Cut* (BRDC) (released theatrically 1992). 6) *The Broadcast Version* (TV) (version broadcast 1986 over U.S. network television). (*Future Noir* 394)

There is much speculation over whether a new, more complete director's cut is in the works. Many fans and critics alike assert that the 1992 director's cut was rushed and does not represent Scott's complete vision for the film. At any rate, serious Blade Runner critics, fans, and Scott himself agree that of all cuts released, this version of the film is the one that most closely represents his intentions, and until another version arrives, the 1992 director's cut re-release version will be considered by this author as the definitive cut, even though multiple conflicts among the producers, actors, director, fans, and financiers continue to smolder. According to Richard A. Schwartz, "although they [Scott and producer Michael Deeley] continued to work on the post-production, Scott lost artistic control. Therefore, even the director's cut does not fully actualize Scott's final intention"

(40-41). Tandem Productions had assumed control at this point in post-production because of budgetary overruns.

The 1992 director's cut, Scott's most personal vision of the film, lacks significant supplemental material on the DVD (no letter of introduction, as in the director's cut of Scott's Alien and other films of his, no commentary, no deleted scenes, featurettes, or even interviews). There is a peculiar air of unfinished business and unsatisfied players that seems to plague this film, from the studio, to the director, to the star, and this conflict is material for another study of the director's cut of Blade Runner. There is currently an online movement to release a different, more definitive, director's cut version of the film, while the rights to the picture still remain stagnant in a legal quagmire.

Just as conflict plagued the production, reviews were all over the map. The critical reception to Blade Runner has been rife with contradiction. Reviews varied as often and as widely as the different versions of the film, though there was a definite resurgence of admiration for the film after the director's cut version was released in 1992. Upon its theatrical release in 1982, Pauline Kael argued that Blade Runner "gives you the feeling of not getting anywhere—of being part of the atmosphere of decay" (80). Gene Siskel, also writing in 1982, for the *Chicago Tribune*, obviously agrees: "Blade Runner, a grim sci-fi adventure set in the near future, looks terrific but is empty at its core. What's missing? For starters, how about a story" (1). Critics generally praised Blade Runner's visual style but found its story and characters to be lacking something upon its release to American theatres in June of 1982. Audiences seemed even less impressed. The budget for the initial release was $28 million; the box office receipts totaled $27 million upon the initial theatrical release, and merely $3.74 million for the limited theatrical release of the

director's cut version in 1992 (Clarke 54, 78). In the summer of 1982, audiences were much more taken with the sentimental crowd-pleaser E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, which also premiered that season. However, upon its re-release as a director's cut in the theatres and on VHS and DVD, Blade Runner enjoyed a huge measure of critical praise. It made many top film lists and even reached the pinnacle of several 'best of science fiction film' lists. Many critics did write convincing refutations of their original negative reviews, such as Siskel and Ebert, who went from thumbs down to "two thumbs up." Ultimately, Blade Runner was canonized at the top of just about everyone's opinion lists regarding science fiction film. It is now widely regarded as one of the most influential science fiction films of all time; transcending the genre, it is also designated as #74 on the American Film Institute's "100 Most Thrilling American Movies" list, and housed in the Library of Congress's collection of important modern films. Conflicting examples of the film's reception in 1982 include Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*:

> Science-fiction devotees may find Blade Runner a wonderfully meticulous movie, and marvel at the comprehensiveness of its vision. Even those without a taste for gadgetry cannot fail to appreciate the degree of effort that has gone into constructing a film so ambitious and idiosyncratic (1).

Ten years later, reviewing the director's cut for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert clearly disagrees with his former colleague (Siskel) and his own early review of the original theatrical release: "Blade Runner creates a vision of Los Angeles, circa 2020 [sic], which is as original and memorable as . . . Lang's Metropolis or Spielberg's Star Wars" (1). It is remarkable that Ebert's comments directly reflect those of Scott's regarding the few science fiction films that made any significant impression upon him.

One of them, as mentioned by Ebert, was George Lucas' 1977 blockbuster, Star Wars; another was Stanley Kubrick's magnum opus, 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Ebert was not alone. As David Desser puts it,

> It is too early to say if Blade Runner will enter the realm of high culture (has any film been admitted to the canon?). It is also doubtful if any of Blade Runner's increasing number of cult fans really care. But those of us who look to popular art for visions of hope, for glimpses at the possibility of humankind's spiritual rebirth, redemption and transcendence would do well to look carefully at this film. (The New Eve 64)

With the release of the director's cut in 1992, in the *Washington Post,* Desson Howe compliments both the visceral scenery and the nuanced performances:

> The film is great on every level: the poignant screenplay about man's futile quest for immortality; Scott's tremendous direction; the incredible, futuristic sets designed by Lawrence G. Paull, Syd Mead and others; the phenomenal special effects; and the touching performances, especially from Hauer, a replicant fighting against the ebbing of his life. His swan song is one of the most touching in modern movie history. (1)

Nick Cramp, in his 2001 review for BBCi Films, effectively summarizes Scott's vision: "Blade Runner impresses with its inquiry into the nature of memory, identity, and what it means to be human. The characters . . . are complex and well-realized. Blade Runner fully and richly deserves its reputation. It is simply one of the most extraordinary films ever made" (1). Managing to survive its controversy-plagued production, initial failure at the box office, and flip-flopping reviews, Blade Runner, though still somewhat obscure

when compared with Harrison Ford's more mainstream science fiction hits, has earned a top spot among the best of the sci-fi genre, still inspiring scholars to examine its fascinating, layered text.

Chapter 2: Reflecting 1980s Cultural and Political Ideologies

Ridley Scott's preoccupation with set design, art direction, and overall visual impact has garnered him both praise and criticism, especially regarding Blade Runner and its stunningly realistic portrayal of a possible Los Angeles of the year 2019. The film is indeed "heady stuff, and at times almost unbearably beautiful" (Warner 178). A background steeped in the visual arts, combined with his talent for design and an awareness of the cultural and political climate of 1980s post-Vietnam America, led Scott to create a film that not only set new standards for visuals in science fiction films but also asked more of the viewer than what may have been expected from a fantastic, futuristic, Harrison Ford *adventure* picture. Scott wanted his audience to think about their places in the world, and how the roles they assume both affect those they interact with and reflect their own cultural biases and political posturing. As Jack Matthews wrote,

> Scott did an amazing balancing act, giving equal prominence to the characters, the story and the visual backdrop. It's a film so visually remarkable, you could watch it with the sound turned off and still get your money's worth. But Scott never allowed himself to get caught up in the hardware and effects, as so many other science-fiction films do. He merely uses them to serve the story. (*Detroit Free Press* C:3)

Blade Runner remains an important work, not only because of its sensitive examination of the nature of humanity and its incredible visual design, but because it accurately reflects the American cultural and political climate of the 1980s and stands as an increasingly viable harbinger for what may become of earth in the near future.

Though Scott never admits (at least not in print) to an outright attempt at a cultural critique of 1980s-era America, Blade Runner clearly creates a visual representation of the oppressive, corporate-dominated decade in which it was produced. A heavily polluted urban environment, clearly divided by economic class, combined with an extremely diverse population awash in wide-ranging cultural influences, evinces a telling reflection of 1980s American culture and values. The 80s were a decade of decadence, of rapidly advancing technology, expanding corporate wealth and influence, and skyrocketing personal affluence. Baby Boomers were giving way to Yuppies—BMW-driving, stock-holding, briefcase-carrying stereotypes of young, successful, and wealthy upper-middle class men and women were seemingly everywhere. The desire to be young, good-looking, rich and powerful was all the rage. Every Yuppie wanted (and many of them had) ornate, ridiculously extravagant, enormous houses, expensive cars, and fancy things. Madonna wasn't the only "Material Girl."

As the rich got richer, the poor lost more than they had to lose. Cities like Los Angeles in the 1980s could simultaneously claim the highest numbers of both millionaires and homeless people living within county lines; 80s urban melting pots increasingly became epicenters of extremes: the ultimate in affluence encountered (or avoided) the destitute and the desperate with escalating regularity. According to a 1987 study of the homeless conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Los Angeles had become an epicenter of American homelessness, with up to 50,000 homeless people (Ropers 1). Just as the numbers of extremely poor and disenfranchised citizens rose steadily, the wealthy continued to build their estates and affluence; the gap that continues to grow progressively today gained its foothold in the

80s. These palpable divisions between the very rich and the very poor were widening and becoming impossible to ignore.

Blade Runner reflects these economic and class divisions in a forthright manner, echoing the mounting class divisions of the eighties while simultaneously predicting what may be in store for Los Angeles and cities like it in the future, perhaps even as early as 2019. Within the film, there are clearly three class divisions: the affluent, the upper-middle (the class Rick Deckard fits into) and the street-dweller. The affluent, who have either left the planet for a new life in the more promising off-world colonies or have chosen, like Tyrell, the creator of the replicants (artificial humans created with four year life spans to serve wealthy humans), to live towering above the dismally congested and filthily polluted city blocks, "suggesting in a visceral way that the powerful are the only people who have a clear view" (Kerman 19). The urban environment of Blade Runner is peppered with slummy flats occupied by the unfortunate masses; the street people, who clog the messy thoroughfares—the punks, vagrants, idle miscreants and relatively average citizens—at least by earth's standards, who cannot afford but to trudge about and squat in available and sometimes condemned, abandoned dwellings; and those found somewhere in-between, like Rick Deckard.

One class of citizen does not easily fit into either extreme categorization: the cops. Blade runners, though not exactly cops, are "peace officers," occupying a territory somewhere between exaggerated wealth and sheer transience; they are middle class assassins, in a sense, hired and paid relatively well to "retire" replicants who have returned to earth and are perceived by the authorities to be, at best, ruthless murderers. Deckard's boss sums the situation up succinctly, albeit demeaningly: "If you're not a cop,

you're little people." Deckard obviously chooses not to be a "little" person, despite his initial aversion to dealing with the other blade runners and their cynical leader, Bryant, played by the inimitable M. Emmet Walsh. Deckard's job affords him what seems to be a very nice apartment (an actual Frank Lloyd Wright design) in a high-rise building with a balcony overlooking the city; though his small flat is certainly modest when compared to Tyrell's ornate Trump-like mausoleum-of-a-presidential-suite, it is an exponential improvement on the dank, leaky, abandoned building that Sebastian (a Tyrell-contracted genetic designer) is forced to live in and clearly affords Deckard a comfort level leagues above that of the average street person in the film: As Desser has noted, "the difference between the elite and the masses is visually dramatized by the spatial opposition High/Low. Here, the concept of the upper class is literalized" (112). Ultimately, Sebastian, Deckard, and Tyrell are exceptions to the obviously polar segmentation of the haves and the have-nots. Those who can afford it have simply left for a better life elsewhere, and those who have neither money nor opportunity are left to pick up the pieces of a broken earth, lodging wherever they can find shelter. This stark economic contrast is clearly parallel with the wealth and class distribution of mid 80s Los Angeles, where homeless people were brushed aside on the street corners below the towering, ornate living suites afforded by the fortunate.

Blade Runner was born in the cold war decade in which Reaganomics and "trickle down" theory, which openly prioritized military power above all else, had created a seemingly invincible nation, and cuts in federal spending on education and social policies like Medicare and welfare were matched only by the burgeoning price-tags of the technologically-advanced "Star Wars" missile defense system and the national debt, then

just beginning to push into the trillions. Reagan handed the country its priorities without significant protest: "By the time of [Blade Runner's] release [. . .]," Christiane Gerblinger would observe, "Reagan had begun implementing cuts in education, welfare, and housing, he had increased defense spending. . ." (19). America couldn't manage to feed or house hundreds of thousands of its citizens, but they would clearly be safe from the impending nuclear holocaust. While thousands lived in hunger and squalor, trillions were spent on weapons that were nothing but idle threats: certainly no one intended to ever use the nuclear weapons that were so copiously proliferated in the 80s.

It was a selfish time for many Americans; private interests and defense contracts were served well, and tax breaks for the wealthy made achieving the desired affluence that much easier. It was the era of the shopping spree, the dawn of America's explosive obsession with credit cards and living well beyond one's means. Excess was the rule, and outlandish styles of cars, clothing and art confirmed it. Tasteful or not, the 80s were *in your face*; many people indulged in America's opportunities to excess, and many of them seemed even more concerned with flaunting these indulgences. Image-consciousness was at an all-time high in America: tennis star Andre Agassi advertised a popular consumer camera with his tag-line "Image is Everything." As the stratospherically-popular singer/icon Madonna put it in the lyrics to her 1984 mega-hit, "Material Girl," "the boy with the cold hard cash is always mister right, 'cause we are living in a material world, and I am a material girl" (*Like a Virgin*). Real estate mogul Donald Trump became a media star and role model to many upwardly mobile young people due to his enormous wealth and business success, and yuppies adopted the suit and briefcase look, hoping to at least look the part of the affluent, successful young citizen *who meant business*. For many

living in the 80s, image *was* everything. As Jane Feuer argues in *Seeing Through The Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (1995),

> Reagan himself, as many have argued, was as much an image as anything else on TV during his presidency. In retrospect, it is clear that he was the ultimate media-constructed image of the times and that the fantasies of unlimited wealth and unlimited visual pleasure that came into office with him were, somehow, the realities of the era. Behind all the images lay only the economic bottom line for which all the images were superstructures. (1)

The nation had become focused on the background, the details, the "look" of things—the same kind of attitude or fixation for which Ridley Scott is often criticized. How far off *was* Scott, though?

In Scott's vision of LA, natural resources have been depleted, and organic life, save human beings, has all but vanished. Artificial animals are prized as token reminders of what the world was like before the human cockroaches descended upon it, spreading their disease, pollution, and death, ultimately rotting the city from within. Blade Runner presents a dark, depressingly severe, extensively polluted Los Angeles, pelted by a perpetual acid rain, enveloped in poisonous smoke and gases from blazing factories, obviously de-regulated and unchecked. Citizens of Scott's 2019 LA are clearly oppressed by the weather, apparent victims of 1980s corporate deregulation and the resulting environmental deterioration. They wear layers of plastic coats and hats to keep themselves dry, carrying luminous neon umbrellas to light their paths, protecting and leading them through the ever-dark, ever-rainy streets. Dirty water splashes everywhere; dark clouds, black smoke and gray steam clog the air, erasing what was once the clear

blue sky. Sunlight is virtually inaccessible; sources of light are almost exclusively the multi-colored, glowing, flickering neon that permeates the entire urban environment, from the city streets, to the skies above them, to the interiors of the shops and clubs that Deckard and the replicants frequent. There is a soft, fluorescent, manufactured quality to the light, which does its part to allay the harsh realism of Scott's urban milieu; clarity is distorted by electronic, artificial light.

The 80s, the *decade of decadence,* took a toll on the environment as well, and though Reagan had been "widely derided for claiming trees cause more pollution than cars" (Bridges), the damage had been and continued to be done. Although LA in the 1980s was beginning to show signs of serious problems with air quality, attracting the attention of the federal regulatory commission for large scale polluters, it had not begun to even approach the level of waste that Scott's LA of 2019 has reached. However, to some observers, President Reagan may well have been on his way to this sort of apocalyptic deregulation:

> In the early 1980s you didn't need to be a member of EarthFirst! to know that Ronald Reagan was bad for the environment. You didn't even have to be especially politically aware. Here was a man who had, after all, publicly stated that most air pollution was caused by plants. And then there was Reagan's secretary of the Interior, James Watt, who saw no need to protect the environment because Jesus was returning any day, and who, in a pique of reactionary feng shui, suggested that the buffalo on [the department of the] Interior's seal be flipped to face right instead of left. (Davidson)

James Watt and his president were not the only people who seemed to lack the appropriate focus, being more concerned with the details and appearances than what was really important for domestic policy and the American people: relationships, dialogue, communication, cooperation, *protecting the environment*. As legendary educator and activist Paulo Freire once argued, "Only through communication can human life hold meaning" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 77). Just as Reagan, "The Great Communicator," was failing to communicate with those whose lives his policies most directly affected, leaving the disenfranchised poor and middle class out of the collective national dialogue on the state of the nation, wealthy men and women were leaving *each other* out of the conversation, promulgating the *me* decade, in which "over one quarter of all couples who married in the late 1970s and early 1980s had divorced by the end of 1994" (Haskey 1). For a considerable portion of the American working class in the 1980s, the *me* decade didn't leave much room for *us*. Marriage, a partnership involving a compromising, give and take relationship, didn't seem to line up with the selfish cultural values of the times, and the divorce rate skyrocketed as a result. In the novel on which Blade Runner is loosely based, Deckard is divorced; in the film, there is no back-story, and he is merely alone. Either way, Deckard is a loner, and because of the film's emphasis on his solitude, a viewer can empathize with the premium he ultimately places on a chance at love, however distorted and based outside of *reality* it might be. 1980s American culture was losing sight of the value of love between human beings, placing its priorities elsewhere. Scott followed this unfortunate tendency to its logical conclusion: a world of alienation, a world in which we have surrounded ourselves with so much fabricated reality that we desperately long for truth, love, and human contact and interaction, or at least the closest

thing to it, and are willing to sacrifice everything for a chance at this feeling, however fleeting it may prove to be. In the end, Deckard places himself into the category of the hunted, knowing that other blade runners will pursue him, but realizing that alienating himself, putting his life on the line and becoming more like the replicants by allowing himself to engage with his emotions and to explore love with a replicant is his only chance at a new beginning.

Like Deckard, Americans in the 80s were interested in a new start, yet they were still profoundly affected by their recent, violent history. The American cultural milieu of the 80s, while certainly focused on the future, wealth building, and assimilation into the urban, successful elite, was still haunted by the guilt and shame of the war in Vietnam, and according to Christiane Gerblinger, was dominated by a mythological need, a decade later, to revisit and redefine Vietnam (19). Gerblinger argues that America was prompted by this guilt and shame to reshape the country's involvement in the conflict, to romanticize it, in effect, and to begin recreating the memory of the war from a new perspective, a process she calls a "valorization of regression," which she sees as a lack of progress and a sign of weakness (19). Gerblinger is right to point out that without direct conflict with the seedier sides of American history, without allowing ourselves to confront, critique and understand the motivations for our country's actions in the past, there will never be progress; regression blends easily enough with denial. Continuing along these parallel paths of regression and denial can only lead to irresponsibility and recklessness: two qualities one would hope (perhaps idealistically) that a president would never embrace. Whether or not this approach to understanding Vietnam created a disservice to history is another story. As Gerblinger puts it: "Blade Runner, although an

unconventional film in many ways, is a product of this logic of regression in its suggestion that the preferable path for the development of humanity to take is a regenerative one" (19). Gerblinger is right to suggest that Blade Runner advocates a "regenerative" or fresh start for humanity—her advice would have served the ashamed, grieving Americans of the 1980s well—only through direct confrontation with a past both embarrassing and painful will we allow ourselves to progress as a nation or as individuals. We must admit who we are in order to fully embrace change and become someone or something else. In order for Deckard to truly become who he wishes to be, embracing change and uniting with the replicant Rachel, he must first come face-to-face with his identity; he is a contract killer. This confrontation—boldly admitting the reality of the situation—however disturbing it may be, allows and even motivates Deckard to begin again. Similarly, as Gerblinger argues, America in the 80s was severely preoccupied with her sad and embarrassing past in Vietnam, and only by admitting, accepting, and realizing the depth of this tragedy would her citizens be able to begin anew. Gerblinger sees hope in the relationship created between Deckard and Rachel because it embodies this confrontation, forcing a re-evaluation of socio-cultural norms: "when Roy and his fellow replicants 'fall' to earth, they do not descend into humanity, but rather challenge its constitution by the mere fact that they embody all of the elements of what has been repressed" (22). As Deckard kills the replicants one by one, he is gradually awakened to their perspective, aroused by their voracious enthusiasm for life itself. His life has become centered upon the unsteady precipice of the assassin, and everything else in his life has become inconsequential. Only by allowing the plight of the various replicants to open his eyes is he able to reconnect with his own passion for living.

In many ways, the roles are reversed for the humans and the replicants. Roy Batty, the hunted killer, the charmingly-intimidating replicant leader who is stalked throughout the film by the murderous Deckard, reverses roles and becomes the merciful one, both teaching Deckard about the preciousness of life and reminding him of the true gifts that mere existence offers. Roy sends Deckard on a journey that culminates in Deckard's flight with Rachel, which for Gerblinger "represents the potential for the realization of a new beginning" (25).

This mythological need to begin anew, a need that Deckard and the majority of LA citizens in 2019 are compelled to act on (Deckard by starting a relationship with Rachel, and others by leaving for the off-world colonies), has been a keystone of American philosophy since the Revolutionary War, and was re-ingrained in the American psyche in 1960, a year before significant American forces were deployed to Vietnam, when democratic party nominee John F. Kennedy saw the U.S. "stand[ing] today on the edge of a new frontier" (15 July 1960). The first Americans fled England with the hopes of making a new start in a new world, marking the beginning of an American tradition. Richard Slotkin, in his influential work linking popular culture and American history, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), writes: "the 1980s saw Ronald Reagan becoming the chief spokesman for a revisionist history of the Vietnam War. He represented that war as a noble, unselfish struggle that could have ended in victory if only the liberal politicians in Washington had not tied the hands of the military" (649). Slotkin supports Gerblinger's theory on the regeneration of the American psyche that was required for the country to re-evaluate its role in the war. Reagan was hoping to jettison American guilt and shame, attempting to make excuses and valorize what many viewed ultimately as an unjust, ill

conceived, and poorly executed war. During the Reagan era of the early 1980s, America was still having a hard time understanding Vietnam, the loss of life on both sides, and the apparent pointlessness of the war itself; the aftershocks of the war still resonated audibly: "The reality of America's involvement in Vietnam and its aftermath," Gerblinger writes, "has effectively been revised to correspond with how events should ideally have transpired. America's image of itself is rooted in a myth of nature, within a framework of a 'venerable tradition' of paradisiacal magnificence" (24). With Reagan at the helm, America and its government were trying to put a shiny new coat of paint on an evil, smoking, burned-out hunk of twisted metal. In Blade Runner, bureaucrats, like Deckard's boss Bryant, distance themselves from the brutal work that is merely execution, nonchalantly referring to the replicants as "skin-jobs," referring to their systematic extermination as "retirement." Like the America Gerblinger refers to as revisionist, Deckard initially distances himself from his violent past and bloody present, but he too learns that only by confronting his past and his reality will he enable himself to pursue a new beginning.

In the awkward 1980s, as well as in many previous periods in American history, the notion of a new beginning, closely related to the classical American myth of the frontier, wide open and free from history, held great appeal. Britain's Ridley Scott, with considerable help from American screenwriters Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, reflected this typically American, mythological need in Blade Runner. Most of these calls for new beginnings are wasted on Deckard, who is consumed by his mind-and-heart-numbing job as a government-endorsed killer. Although Deckard is bombarded daily with pre-recorded calls from a multimedia, blimp-like advertisement floating above the

dank streets in which he hunts, beckoning: "A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure," Deckard ignores it. It is only when he is a broken man, near death, spared by one replicant, and in love with another, that he manages to realize that he needs to start over and accept a sort of rebirth within himself. In Scott's Los Angeles, 2019, those who can afford to have taken the blimp's advice and relocated, beginning again, fleeing from history, escaping problems that plague them, embracing the quintessential American myth of the *new frontier*.

Like Reaganomics, this escapism is not only based on altering or ignoring history, but also on using up available resources and moving from one environment to the next, never minding if one drills in a wildlife refuge, contaminates corporately bought-out land, or ruins a natural habitat. The attitude in question is a selfish, usury one that lacks foresight, planning, or prevention. Scott's vision of Los Angeles is just that—always dark because of the thick smog emanating from the multiple factories seen at the beginning of the film. Black clouds envelope the city because no politicians have forced them to stop; the acid rain is perpetual, and nature is notably absent. Those without the funds to escape and "begin again" trudge through the blackened, toxic remains of what was once also a new frontier, a promised land bubbling over with opportunities and resources.

Though opinions of 1980s analysts certainly diverge wildly, often along party lines, Reaganomics represented for some a decidedly wasteful, urban outlook. Reagan alluded to Sylvester Stallone's fictional character Rambo in several public addresses and even suggested sending him overseas to deal with terrorists. Clearly this fixation on a fictional character representing the epitome of machismo has its roots in the *me first*

mantra of the American 80s culture: that which gets in the way of a particular political ideology is either destroyed, pacified, or trampled underfoot and abused, much like the environment. At the height of the cold war, who could argue with the assertion that America had to be absolutely the most powerful nation in the world, militarily and otherwise? Patriotism has been used as a launching point for worse political agendas than Reagan's. As Nazi leader Herman Goering confided to Gustave Gilbert, the psychologist assigned to him by the allies when Goering was on trial at Nuremberg in the wake of World War II, just before Goering was sentenced to death for "crimes against humanity," among other atrocities,

> Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and [for] exposing the country to greater danger. (snopes.com)

Certainly Reagan was not motivated to massacre an entire race, but the same manipulative political posturing used to push through legislation in the shadow of war was present in the 80s, as it is present today. America is comfortable in her role as the toughest of the tough, and she often manages to forsake her own issues and problems in order to maintain this image. Here again, Ridley Scott pushed the political climate of the day to one possible outcome. In Blade Runner, the earth, the environment, and all that is

organic has been severely neglected, resulting in waste and squalor and, ultimately, abandonment.

One could also argue that this Rambo "complex" is derivative of a fear of difference, or a fear of the Other. Deckard's "triumph," as Rebecca Warner argues, "is not that he manages to Get The Bad Guy but that he manages to Comprehend The Stranger" (178). That which Deckard initially fears gradually teaches him about what it is to be alive and to be in love. Susanna Santos Martins, in her 2003 dissertation, "Unnatural Futures: Imagining the High-Tech in Contemporary American Culture," sees Blade Runner as a clear reflection of society's fear of confronting that which is different, that which we do not understand. This fear can be related to other human races, gender, sexual orientation, or more specifically, the differences implicit in new technologies, as Martins explains: "science fiction films such as Ridley Scott's Blade Runner [. . .] ostensibly master the anxieties of confronting otherness—the technological other—while positing a universalized (but exclusionary and constraining) definition of humanity, which reifies particular versions of racial and sexual difference" (Abstract). In this sense, replicants are the doppelgängers that allow humans to maintain an unrealistically ideal image of themselves; they provide the distorted mirror that reinforces the particulars of human perfections and imperfections, serving as a living reminder (for humans) of their own self-ascribed moral and physical superiority. Martins looks at technology itself as a clear signifier of cultural change, noting that the only way to accept new technology into the world is to accept, to in fact count upon, the unwavering assault of change. According to Martins, these momentary conflicts, arising when culture is frightened by and hesitant to adapt to change, are the telling moments, often explored by thoughtful science fiction

films like Blade Runner that allow us to examine our humanity by confronting our humility, our strengths, our guilt, our inadequacies, and our potential for evolution. These momentary conflicts ultimately come down to choices, which humans and replicants both must make, about what to do with the time available to them. As the wise sorcerer Gandalf simply states in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, "all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." This wise summation of the human condition proves a telling commentary on the lives of the replicants as well, for they must struggle and fight merely to earn the choice of which Gandalf speaks. Martins does ultimately find hope in the relationships created between humans and replicants and the choices created by the interaction between the two groups, arguing that "the discourse of technology offers resources for imagining alternatives and even embracing difference, not just controlling it or trying to render difference irrelevant" (14). This is the kind of decision that Deckard ultimately makes at the end of the film, choosing to embrace the differences and accept whatever time he may have with Rachel. He does not try to make her think she is human; he does not try to convince himself that she will live any longer than any of the other replicants have. When Roy Batty spares him at the end of the film, there is a sort of role reversal, and the true value of the replicant's struggle is revealed to Deckard; he "lives because a nonhuman has human compassion, and a 'replicant' woman and 'human' man are joined by love, trust, and the acceptance of the other as more than 'other'" (Morrison 4).

Just as many Americans have historically feared those who are different, seeking often to change their foreign ideologies, cultural practices or religious leanings, in Blade Runner, technology becomes the catalyst for an epic conflict: "technology often activates

familiar oppositions between the organic and the artificial, the natural and the monstrous" (Martins 2). Blade runners like Deckard and his boss fear replicants because they are different; they have an unknown potential. Until Deckard comes to know Roy and Rachel in the course of the film, he does not question his superiority over the supposedly inhuman replicants. By the end of his journey, however, he has begun a new life with an entirely different outlook. Christiane Gerblinger is right to suggest that the replicants in the film are doppelgängers for the humans, validating their existence by the Marxian principle of the producer always being elevated over what he produces (21). The replicants do indeed haunt their makers like ghostly doubles, presenting a level of perfection even the creator himself had not deemed possible, certainly boosting Tyrell's hubris (as their creator) to immeasurable levels, despite his fear of his own creation. As Gerblinger argues, the "controlling force in Blade Runner imposes its politics by way of a rhetoric of nature, and a subsidiary economic determinism intended to suppress both autonomous consciousness in labouring machines and independent critical thinking in their human counterparts" (21). Tyrell's fatal flaw though, when attempting to create the marvelously intelligent Nexus 6 model replicant in his own image, is his failure to limit its intellectual capacity. Roy knows as well as Tyrell that he should have been granted more life, and that it was entirely possible for him to have been created with a substantially longer lifespan. When he kills Tyrell with his bare hands, it is in retribution for his unfair, irreversible situation. When visiting the genetic designer responsible for creating his eyes, Roy says, "if only you could see what I've seen with your eyes," and when Roy finally meets Dr. Eldon Tyrell—his maker—he firmly states, "I want more life, fucker"; he is told to "revel in your [his] time." Tyrell is comfortably elevated above

his creation, condescending, yet affectionate, though not at all expecting his invention/slave to rise up against him, as Roy proceeds to do.

The irony that Gerblinger clearly points out is that the waning elements of humanity that the 80s culture hardly championed—empathy, individuality, self-expression—are most acutely expressed by the replicants, or *imitation* humans. As she writes, "when Roy and his fellow-replicants 'fall' to earth, they do not descend into humanity, but rather challenge its constitution by the mere fact that they embody all the elements of what has been repressed" (21). Ironically, Deckard becomes more human as he learns from the replicants he seeks to destroy. While her insights regarding Vietnam, Blade Runner, and the replicants are compelling, Gerblinger's assertion that humans must regress in order to progress, "alienate[ing] themselves into replicating otherness" (29), seems misguided. One of the more obvious qualities humans share with many other mammals is an ability to learn from mistakes. Certainly American citizens of the 1980s did not have to become soldiers of an elitist government in order to understand, learn from and progress beyond mistakes made in Vietnam. However, like Deckard, these same citizens would have to directly confront, admit, and accept as reality the atrocities they were at least indirectly implicated by; regression is not what is required, but confrontation is absolutely necessary for self-evaluation and ultimately progression. Likewise, until Deckard confronts and is made aware of the true nature of his "employment," he is jaded and desensitized to the reality of his situation. Despite Gerblinger's depressing evaluation of human potential and her *necessity* of regression, she still manages to find something uplifting in the ambiguous ending Scott reinstated in his film with the director's cut:

"Deckard and Rachel's flight represents the potential for the realization of a new beginning" (Gerblinger 25). Apparently, the new frontier ideal appeals to replicants as well as to humans, in 1982 and in Scott's 2019, alike.

Chapter 3: Disposable Culture: Technology, Eugenics, and Corporate Responsibility: A Disturbing Harbinger?

In her essay on Blade Runner as dystopia from an "ecofeminist perspective," Mary Jenkins focuses on the film's "vision of ecological catastrophe," and her culprit is the Tyrell Corporation, its experimental, technologically-advanced genetic manipulations, and the "policed society, foul air and. . . corrupt world" it has apparently been instrumental in creating (4). Jenkins is clearly offended by what she sees (within the context of the film) as an irresponsible and unforgivable manipulation of resources and humanity by a corporate leadership, whose attempts at controlling nature (an age old, arrogant notion) are foolish and ruinous. According to Jenkins, certain humans in positions of wealth and power have often been consumed with the denial of the fact that man is animal; this assumption feeds a hubris that ultimately leads to oppression and ecological problems. While Jenkins is certainly correct in her castigation of corporate policy and practice—her criticisms are quite relevant today as well—absent from her thesis is any blame placed upon the politicians who cater to and deregulate for the offending corporations. Are not our leaders responsible for the levels to which we hold such corporations accountable? Should we not hold ourselves responsible, to some degree at least, for electing leaders who make decisions that create federal policy? Famed science fiction film scholar J. P. Telotte disagrees with Jenkins' assessment of blame placing, arguing that Blade Runner "supplant[s] the menace from outside of our world with a problem or threat of our own construction" (148). Telotte is correct in arguing that within the context of Blade Runner humans can only blame themselves for the dismal

reality of their situation. After all, humans birthed the very real "hazard" by creating the replicants, but humans built the corporations as well. Not many would argue with Jenkins' critique of these enormous, environmentally destructive money making machines, but it is irresponsible to lay the blame for environmental abuse and the replicant debacle solely at the doorstep of the corporations. Ultimately, Jenkins sees Blade Runner as a sort of depressingly realistic harbinger for a very real, very possible future. She implicates corporations and global polluters, and derives all of this evil from the foolish obsession with "the total mastery of non-human nature" (14), an obsession Debbora Battaglia calls that of "humanity seeking to contain" and control life (495); the issues raised by the Tyrell Corporation in Blade Runner are certainly of a controlling, obsessive nature.

In Blade Runner, there is a complete absence of elected officials or governmental agents of any kind. There are merely the blade runners, the replicants, the shop, club, and restaurant owners, and those who walk the streets. There is no evidence of a relationship or even an interaction of any kind between Tyrell and the blade runners. The only clue pointing to a governmental influence is the fact that replicants have been "outlawed" on earth. The film seems to have eschewed all accountability for the citizens, and the viewer is not given a clear indication of the degree of influence the public has on its leaders. As William Kolb points out, "For [Blade Runner screenwriter-David] Peoples, the most interesting aspect of the script was the questions of what differentiates us from beings that are the same in every respect except their genetic origin" (133). Just as Mary Jenkins does not allow for the fact that the public is always implicated, at least to a certain degree, by the actions of those they elect, Blade Runner forces the viewer to assume that

society has run amuck, and whoever chooses to experiment with eugenics, and has the wherewithal to do so, is free to jump onto the at-best shaky moral and ethical ground on which the act of creating artificial humans resides. Though Jenkins may be errant in her exoneration of everyone *but* the corporate figures who actually do the experimenting and creating, she is eerily prescient in her 1997 summations of and predictions for the state of experimental genetics research and use in the United States:

> Ridley Scott's replicants could well be a reality by the year 2019. Each week journals and media report the 'advances' of science and technology. Computers, experts tell us, will reach 'at least' equivalence of human intelligence by 2019. Genetic engineers, having cloned Dolly the sheep, are, by the same methods, well on the way to being able to clone humans. The Human Genome Project is in the process of blueprinting the DNA of humanity. Human genes are being introduced to pigs in order to increase the supply of organs for transplanting in humans. Chickens have been genetically designed without feathers, ready for the oven. (6)

The *high-tech* landscape of which both Martins and Jenkins write is already upon us, certainly gaining footholds by degrees. Technology has integrated itself into our lives at an unprecedented level that augments daily. When we err, we blame the machines. We don't lose files; computers lose them. The computers are always there to take the blame for humans and their irresponsible and imprecise behaviors. When the ethical debate over human cloning reaches its pinnacle, who will be making the decisions? Though it lacks the time to indict every aspect of the coming challenges of further integrating humanity and machines, <u>Blade Runner</u> offers compelling questions about what is happening and

what will happen when this union comes full circle. As W. Russel Gray notes, “In such a society the creating of artificial life is a growth industry, a respectable big business of a future society that failed to ask the right questions—thus the polluted and diminished moral environment” (66). Obviously, big business is quite well established today, and according to David Desser, in his “Race, Space and Class: The Politics of the Science Fiction Film from Metropolis to Blade Runner,” “The future portrayed in Blade Runner is a frightening one not because it may happen, but because it is already happening” (121).

According to Wayne DeFehr in his dissertation “Energized by Inefficient Machines: Geometry, Epistemes and Cybernetics” (2003), the failing replicants reinforce the power of the Tyrell corporation; while seemingly subverting the dominant hegemony, they manage to uphold and contribute to the established corporate ideologies that rule over the culture in question (Abstract). As DeFehr observes, the replicants’ development advances exponentially, and they become “more human than human,” as the Tyrell slogan suggests, while the humans who create them become more and more lifeless and machine-like, destroying their curious creations systematically, securing their places of power, comfortably elevating themselves above the *artificial* humans. Ultimately, there is a sort of role reversal between the humans and replicants, each learning from the other, though initially the replicants are the ones who demonstrate blatant emotional responses like fear, hate, love, and sadness. It is only later in the film, when Deckard has come though his near-fatal journey/duty, that he actually learns the value of life though the replicants’ struggle. Alhough DeFehr makes compelling arguments for the role reversal between the humans and replicants that occurs gradually throughout the film, his assertion that “in Blade Runner, the humans and machines are not on converging paths,

but on parallel lines that remain distinct at infinity" (8) is decidedly inaccurate. Certainly the film's central conflict is based upon the needs of the humans versus the needs of the replicants, but DeFehr seems to have missed the point that Ridley Scott ultimately makes with Blade Runner: Humans and machines can and will merge; machines are a product of human consciousness, and they will eventually mirror us and expose our inadequacies. Our own creations will eventually (one can hope) remind us of what is so important and meaningful in our lives. Scott shows his optimism for the possibilities by uniting Rachel and Deckard at the end of the film, clearly positing them on a level plane in which each has sacrificed everything certain in life and placed trust and the future in the other's hands. This kind of kinship between human and replicant is clearly more united than merely parallel.

DeFehr's suggestion that the Tyrell corporation's deliberate construction of new technology with planned obsolescence (replicants with four-year life spans) increases the power and influence of the corporation is not unlike the American automobile manufacturing corporations like Ford, GM, and Chrysler, who saw enormous profits in the 80s, consistently producing automobiles that became obsolete within a few years, while retaining their success and influence in the industry. Automobiles were not the only disposable products that Americans devoured in the 80s; plastic bags, paper plates, throw-away contact lenses, and countless other products are even more popular today than they were then. As Susanna Santos Martins argues, "humans are not just rational, systematic, and replicable, like machinery, and certainly we'd rather not think of ourselves as subject to obsolescence" (6). Perhaps not, but naturally, Roy and his fellow replicants, like all living creatures, want "more life." Plastic bags and paper cups

obviously do not complain about their disposable nature; with living, breathing, self-aware individuals, the issue is decidedly different. Traversing the line between product and living being is going to be quite a challenging moral, ethical, political, and legal issue for the world to face when the capabilities of modern science are raised to the realm of possibility suggested in Blade Runner; however, these changes are already upon us, as evinced by the controversy over stem-cell research in the presidential election of 2004, and the ethics debate over Dolly the sheep.

Scott's vision of Los Angeles, both reflecting the culture in which it was created and predicting the trajectory of what is in store for the city of angels, is powerful because of its realism. It is in fact a harbinger of what is to come, a claim evidenced by Blade Runner's cultural melting pot of languages, foods, styles and customs, its dizzying take on a polluted, smog-filled landscape, its look to the sky for more interesting and unique forms of personal transportation, and its prediction of the conflicts ahead when artificial intelligence becomes even more intelligent. This film has staying power, not just because of its stunning visual portrayal of a frighteningly possible future, but also because of its genuine look into what it means to be human—a choice of what to do with the limited time that is available to the individual—a choice everyone must make, human or replicant. According to Stephen Mulhall, Deckard achieves a sense of "equality" with the replicants, after he falls in love with Rachel, and ultimately gives her the choice of either loving and trusting him or of being alone (37). In this mutually respectful situation, according to Mulhall, Deckard respects Rachel's agency, though she is a replicant, and brings her to his own level, whether he acknowledges his own possible inhuman status or not. Only through mutual respect and understanding can true "human" interaction be

possible—a lesson Deckard learns throughout the course of the film. Ultimately Mulhall lays a huge responsibility for relating humanity to viewers on the directors of such films, though he admits that the final evaluations of what constitutes either human or inhuman behavior are up to the viewers themselves. This evaluation is precisely what is so engaging about the film: viewers' assumptions about what is or is not human are challenged throughout the film. As a result, the viewer is engaged in the struggle between the humans and the replicants, and forced to examine preconceived notions that labels like *human* signify.

Scott asks a lot of his viewers, and Blade Runner allows them to make these choices about human behavior themselves instead of having a tightly-wrapped, moralizing lesson dropped on their doorsteps. Scott Bukatman is also preoccupied with Blade Runner's ambiguity, how it "refuses to explain itself," doesn't give up any kind of direct, didactic message, and how Scott assumes a level of intelligence in his viewer, an assumption which, according to Bukatman, creates a thoroughly dense world, both visually and thematically, one that ultimately works because of its "unique demands" on the viewer (8-9). Vivian Sobchack, in her widely-read *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, sees Blade Runner as a "particularly instructive film, one elegantly poised at the precise point where the high modern and the postmodern meet to diverge" (272). Sobchack sees the film as a jumping-off-point for future science fiction films, which must become more introspective and critical of the human condition, though most of them lack its depth and continue to focus more on being "conservatively nostalgic" (273) about the tendency of science fiction to portray a depressed, alienating and dishearteningly inhuman future.

There are many windows through which one can look when evaluating this work; a major part of its staying power can be attributed to Ridley Scott's visual mastery of Blade Runner's mise en scene. After immersing oneself in the incredible visuals, spending perhaps an initial viewing solely on taking it all in, returning to the film multiple times can be a rewarding experience. Because of Ridley Scott's talent, socio-political awareness, and dedication to his art, ultimately Blade Runner has stood the test of time, insightfully reflecting the sensibilities of 1980s America, musing on the nature of humanity and the time constraints placed upon it, and offering a telling look at what may well be in store for all of us.

Chapter 4: The Case for Solaris

Thoughtfully produced, sensitively shot, brooding psychological dramas are rare in the science fiction genre. Robots, exploding laser blasts, chases into hyperspace, lightsabers, aliens, and evil computer systems all have their places in the sci-fi film pantheon, but to some discerning sci-fi geeks, this author included, the best science fiction films only use the future and technology as compelling backdrops for real human drama. Steven Soderbergh's Solaris is exactly this: a contemplative, fundamentally human drama. Though Solaris is too recent a film to have earned the thoughtful perspective that researchers require for measuring social significance of a film, and scholars have yet to give this film a fraction of the attention they have bestowed upon Blade Runner, it is only a matter of time. The film, though lacking the level of socio-political commentary that Blade Runner embraces, does share quite a bit with its predecessor, taking the viewer on an emotional ride by carefully examining death, guilt, regret, love, memory, and other integral human emotions, while positing its characters in a highly stylized and yet credible futuristic milieu. As producer Rae Sanchini states on one of the DVD's featurettes, "this film has at its core one of the most spectacular romances you can imagine." One of the film's actors, Jeremy Davies, who plays the character known simply as Snow, sees Solaris as a

> low-tech science fiction film [. . .] in place of gadgets, there is character dimension and communication and an actual story. I would actually categorize this film as 'psyche science fiction.' It's a psychological sci-fi love story, a cross-pollination of a lot of different genres. It's definitely a

> different animal than what most people expect from sci-fi. (rottentomatoes.com).

Even though there is certainly a convincing array of outer-space gear, including futuristic astronaut outfits and a massively intricate ship whose polished corridors are meticulously detailed and color-coordinated and whose outer hull is generated by computer graphics, these details are merely outstanding production design aspects that provide a realistic setting, never taking away from the engaging story about Chris Kelvin and his personal dilemma, but always keeping the viewer convinced of the setting. Soderbergh, like Scott, is careful not to allow the technology and gadgets to overwhelm the story.

Solaris stands out as an important work because it, like Blade Runner, confronts and engages many of the challenging aspects of human relationships any great literature must examine. Any effective dramatic work must illuminate truths about the human condition; just because a film slips into a particularly pigeonholed genre such as sci-fi certainly does not mean that it is exempt from these expectations. Rare enough, though, is the sci-fi film that truly challenges its viewers, forcing them to engage the movie on many levels beyond genre-specific entertainment. Of course, the science fiction genre of film is littered with thousands of films that do not measure up to such high standards, and there are also those of us who can love a shallow film just as much as a deeply moving one, albeit for completely different reasons. Unfortunately though, for those viewers who appreciate a slowly moving, pensive, existential sci-fi drama, the pickings are slim. As Solaris' star, George Clooney remarks,

> What makes Solaris relevant today, is that it deals with the basic issues we constantly question and wonder about: love, death, after-life. The things we don't have any answers to. We want to define things, and those things we can't define, terrify us. We want to know how high is up, how old is eternity. Everything we know as humans has limits—a beginning, middle and an end. No one in this story has answers; they just have really good, smart questions. (rottentomatoes.com)

The indefinite has always been a source of inspiration and a motivation for scientific research: two characteristics traditionally present in central characters of science fiction films. But with Solaris, the fiction goes far beyond science, and into the realm of the personal psyche: Solaris is "a fiction of ideas, and a fiction of people. It's not about robots and lasers and all of these things" (James Cameron, Producer, DVD commentary).

Solaris hit screens twenty years after Blade Runner, and yet it too stands as a powerful visual representation of the culture in which it was created, despite its indeterminate future setting. As Soderbergh says,

> we didn't want to be specific about how far in the future the story takes place, but we didn't want it to feel like the distant future. . .and we didn't want the film's look to call attention to itself or center around what new technology is going to be available, because that didn't seem relevant to the story. (rottentomatoes)

Though Blade Runner maintains a very specific date for its setting while reflecting the 80s and predicting a future less than four decades after its creation, Solaris is perhaps set forty, sixty, or eighty years beyond the year it debuted (2002); because the settings of the

films are clearly parallel—neither film appears to be placed very far from the other chronologically, though the urban environments contrast markedly—it is not very important to say precisely when the story takes place, and that is probably why Soderbergh decided not to specifically place the film chronologically. What matters is the fact that the setting invokes an entirely convincing aesthetic sensibility of a not-too-distant future Los Angeles or any other major city. In fact, the only clues pointing to which country Kelvin and Rheya live in are the familiar language of English and the seemingly democratic social structures, evinced by Kelvin's job as a psychologist, his freedom of travel through public modes of transportation, his visits to various bookshops and stores, and his relatively affluent apartment home. Kelvin has a very similar living situation to that of Rick Deckard: a comfortable, stylish home that is less than extravagant but well above (both literally and figuratively) the average person's standard of living.

Instead of taking a radically altered, ultra-futuristic stance on the production design of Solaris, Soderbergh decided on a more reserved approach to the overall look of the film and its set design. While everything looks very streamlined, clean, and metallic, nothing stands out. One might notice the overlapping, synchronous shades of blues, greens, and grays that permeate the film's palate, giving every surface, both in space and on earth, a sort of cool glow, but there are no outrageous or ornate designs. The architecture of Kelvin's surroundings is decidedly modern and yet contemporary, adding to the notion that the future is the present, or that the future is not at all distant but already upon us. Kelvin's plight transcends the setting; he is, like Deckard in Blade Runner,

faced with universal questions about what it means to be alive, what happens after death, and what can be done with the time available in between.

Although it shares much in the way of thoughtful examinations of human relationships and existential pondering with its more famous predecessor, Solaris contrasts markedly from Blade Runner in its failure to address broader political, environmental, and social issues. In Solaris, there are no outward signs of urban desolation and pollution as evinced in Blade Runner. Though there are advanced space stations, like the Prometheus, the ship on which Kelvin encounters the strange phenomenon, there is nothing to suggest that the people of earth have abandoned the planet for colonization elsewhere. There are no blatant markers of class division as in Blade Runner, but Soderbergh chooses instead to focus Solaris on the human drama; the romantic relationship factor, integral to Blade Runner, is all-encompassing in Solaris. The details outside the windows of Kelvin's apartment; the scurrying people on the streets, busy with their own lives; the weather or the environmental considerations of the times—Soderbergh treats all of these would-be details as mere window-dressing. He is not, like Ridley Scott, concerned with making a political reflection of his time or predicting a possible future for his Los Angeles. What he is concerned with is the human drama; everything else is background minutiae. This approach differs markedly from Blade Runner's richly textured, detailed environments. Screening Solaris, the viewer is less absorbed into the environments (one criticism often leveled at Scott's Blade Runner) and more focused on the central characters and their plights. Most of the time, the backgrounds of earth in Solaris are fuzzy at best, not as clearly defined or detailed as those in Blade Runner, but this contrast makes perfect sense: Scott was trying to envelope

his viewer with a world that could be very real in the future; Soderbergh wanted to focus his story almost entirely on character.

What is most compelling about the relationship between the two films is their thoughtful and sensitive portrayals of the two central male characters, Deckard and Kelvin, and their chaotic attempts at pursuing romance in the futuristic settings created by Scott and Soderbergh. In both films, the chance at a successful, romantic, love relationship is endlessly complicated by advances in technology, alienation of the individual in society, and the increasingly blurred definitions of what it means to be human.

Chapter 5: Loss, Guilt, Regret, Memory

In Solaris, after losing Rheya, Kelvin trudges though his life on earth without incident, without enthusiasm, seemingly devoid of even basic emotional reactions to the world around him. Even though he is a psychologist, Kelvin is detached from his work and indifferent to his environment. In voiceover, he speaks of trying to "find the rhythm of the world where I used to live . . . I made a conscious effort to smile, nod, stand, and perform the millions of gestures that constitute life on Earth. I studied these gestures until they became reflexes again, but I was haunted by the idea that I remembered her wrong." Kelvin has been consumed by the loss of his wife; he is perpetually bombarded mentally by flashing images of happy memories shared with Rheya, and everything else in his life has become monotonous and empty. Much like Deckard in Blade Runner, he walks the city streets in the rain, alone, cold, and empty.

Though the viewer isn't privy to Deckard's loss, it is interesting to note how he, much like Kelvin, is reliant upon memories to keep him going. Until Rachel, there is no companion in his life. He interacts with no one but his co-workers, and only when his boss recruits him for another job. Deckard returns home nightly to an empty apartment. He pours himself a drink and sits at his piano, looking over his collection of vintage photos. Are they pictures of his family? Do they remind him of a life lost long ago? Could they be connected to his personal memories; are those memories even real? Deckard's detective work keeps him centrally focused on the concept of memory-the exact concept that Kelvin obsesses over when trying to somehow remember his wife in the *right* way.

Much of Solaris is presented as a whirlwind of Kelvin's memories of his dead wife. He tries desperately to hold on to these memories, searching for clues that may lead him to a better understanding of his present situation, much like the replicant Leon in Blade Runner, who clings to "precious" photographs which remind him of the validity of his existence, despite the fact that they, like his memories, are imitations, far from reality: "Leon clinging to his photographs symbolizes his awareness of his self as enduring through time; the photos remind him of that duration, i.e., his own identity" (Gwaltney 35). Kelvin's quest for an ideal memory of his wife clearly parallels the replicants' quest to validate their own memories and, in turn, their lives.

Guilt and regret are emotions that Chris Kelvin and Rick Deckard share in spades. Deckard is progressively worn down by a job that forces him to execute replicants who become increasingly real to him as they are gunned down. Harrison Ford comments on Deckard's guilt-laden job:

> I am conscious of violence in a film. I abhor it when it is used for the sake of itself. I was anxious to make sure that this character represented an abhorrence of violence. . . . After every incident of having to kill someone, the character's revulsion is clear. And ironically, what he's killing are not human beings. And yet, his empathy with something that looks like a human being—which is later to lead him into a romance with, basically, a machine—affects him. (qtd. in Starburst, 44-7).

The closer Deckard gets to Rachel, the more he learns about the legitimacy of the lives the replicants lead and the very human needs and desires to which they too are subject. Shooting an unarmed female replicant in the back as she flees is clearly upsetting

for Deckard; his disgust and shame is written all over his face as he looks down over her lifeless body. Deckard's past is shadowy though; all the viewer is privy to is his reluctance to rejoin the other blade runners and his apparent reliance on liquor to soothe his aching, guilt-ridden body. Chris Kelvin suffers from similar guilty feelings over having driven his wife Rheya to suicide. He continues his life begrudgingly, going through the motions in an empty way, purely existing. Both men lead existences entirely dominated and overshadowed by death; it lingers everywhere and ultimately prompts both men to make enormous, sacrificial changes in their lives.

Additionally, technology clearly serves as an instigator of conflict in both films. The uneasy partnership between man and technology is blatantly illustrated in Kelvin's friend Gibarian's video recorded message, which beckons Kelvin to the Prometheus space station. As Gibarian's recording ends, the video transmission distorts, revealing a fractured, segmented face, foreshadowing the coming collision between the humans and the advanced, manipulative technological capabilities of the planet Solaris. Solaris somehow possesses the knowledge of each crewmember's innermost fears and regrets. The process of applying this knowledge manifests a tactile reality in the form of deceased loved ones, revealing the nature of the planet's incredible technology, which has the ability to magnify acute personal anxieties for individuals. As Gibarian puts it himself, "we don't want other worlds; we want mirrors." Gibarian seems to understand before anyone else in the film does that we are too wrapped up in ourselves to deal with the implications of highly advanced worlds far beyond our own. Soderbergh's film reflects current cultural trends, as evidence of the alienating power of technology is shown early in the film, during a scene in which Kelvin presides over a group therapy session on

earth. Several of the patients complain about feelings of isolation; the television, the internet, and the fast-paced, computerized world have worn on their personal identities, forcing them to become one with a nameless, faceless demographic that mass media and marketing have created. Kelvin's patients feel that as the world has become more connected, they have retracted from society, becoming lost in the crowd and shuffle of modern urban life. Soderbergh is clearly commenting on the continually alienating relationship between humanity and the new technologies with which our culture is continually obsessed. Ironically, Kelvin attempts to help his patients deal with their isolation as he slips further into his own detached, depressed loneliness. The "nihilistic shrink," as Gibarian calls Kelvin, is clearly afraid of being alone. When the new Rheya asks him if it was hard for him to be alone without her, he replies that it was "easier than being with someone else." Kelvin would rather embrace an empty existence than attempt to replace his lost love. When speaking of their love, the new Rheya says that she wishes they "could just live inside that feeling forever." Kelvin decides that there must be a way for her wish to come true, and this overwhelming passion eventually pushes him into new dimensions, beyond his imagination. As Clooney describes Rheya's manifestation, "she doesn't exist or she exists on a different plane, and I'm perfectly willing to sacrifice a little bit of reality for a while just to have a night with my wife again" (DVD featurette). Soon one night is extended into a lifetime, as Kelvin decides to remain on the ship in the hopes of spending the rest of his life with this version of his dead wife, echoing Deckard's choice to abandon everything in his life for an indeterminate future and a chance at love with a replicant female known as Rachel.

When Kelvin ventures onto the ship Prometheus orbiting the planet Solaris, his life is complete. He deals with the consequences of his actions on a daily basis. Rheya was his everything, and because of his anger at her secret abortion, she has committed suicide, and he is very alone. He reluctantly accepts the mission to Solaris, feeling less than helpful as a psychologist when he is in such a deep state of depression himself, yet he does not hesitate to help his friend Gibarian, who is obviously in trouble. When Kelvin encounters someone whom he thinks is Rheya on the ship, he is being manipulated by a technology much more powerful than anything known to his world, a technology that follows a scientific process, creating beings based on the knowledge it derives from the humans in its orbit. Solaris is hyper-intelligent, a somehow prescient being, in the form of a planet, possessing a technology so advanced that it has the power to manifest the desires of the hapless crew of the Prometheus, creating "visitors" who look, sound, and feel exactly like the person who died on earth years ago; Kelvin is summoned to assess the problem and return the crew to earth. As Soderbergh describes the planet Solaris, "it knows more about yourself than you do" (DVD commentary). Technology can be defined as the process of applying knowledge toward a practical end. Solaris uses what it knows to create a physical being; its knowledge is used practically to manipulate. Technology, in this sense, has the power to both instigate and eliminate the sources of conflict, or "visitors." Solaris has the technological ability to create these semi-human beings, tormenting the Prometheus' crew and forcing them to examine their personal fixations and obsessions. The crew of the Prometheus has devised a way to destroy the non-human visitors with a high-tech particle beam. Similarly, in Blade Runner, Tyrell possesses the intellect and the technology to create the replicants, beings he thinks of as a

benefit to society, yet in doing so, he installs a four-year life span, the source of the replicants' plight and the reason they are searching for their maker. In each dichotomy, technology is both the problem and the possible solution.

Chapter 6: Replicants and Visitors

The visitors in Solaris share many striking similarities with the replicants in Blade Runner. The replicants, as Francavilla observes, "function as mirrors for people, by allowing examination and moral scrutiny of ourselves, our technology, and our treatment of other beings, and by defining in their tragic struggle what is truly human" (14). Replicants are the central source of conflict within the film, yet they are the source of the emotional transformation of Rick Deckard as well. He has built a career on destroying them, but during the course of the film, he gradually acquires an empathy for them that incites a major life transition and an abandonment of his familiar, though alienated existence. When Deckard chooses to adopt a life on the run with Rachel, he places everything on the line for a fleeting chance at romance with a being that is not human. When Kelvin chooses to stay on the Prometheus instead of returning to earth with Gordon, he too has sacrificed everything for the indefinite possibility of a relationship with a woman who is not real. Will Rheya return to the ship? How long will she live? Will she continue to try to commit suicide? Will she continue to accept and love him like the real Rheya did? Will he be able to live in a fabricated reality with her, knowing that she is not human, failing to understand how and why she seems to so fully exist? Deckard faces similar questions when he chooses to leave his apartment forever and begin a new life as a fugitive. How long will Rachel live? Can she really learn to love him? What will their relationship consist of, once they are constantly being hunted? Replicants like Rachel and visitors like Rheya throw a wrench, albeit a lovely, tempting, affectionate, romantic wrench, into the lives of Deckard and Kelvin, one that neither man can ignore;

these artificial women are techno-organic manifestations of the desires of desperate men who long for second chances. As Soderbergh puts it,

> The theme of predestination is crucial. . .Kelvin and Rheya's relationship had ended very badly. When she appears on the Prometheus, they both struggle with the idea of the relationship traveling the same path it did before. Those issues of memory, guilt, potential redemption and the opportunity to do something again and maybe do it differently, appealed to me. As one character says at a certain point in the film, 'there are no answers, only choices,' and it really does come down to that." (rottentomatoes.com)

Although Kelvin initially attempts to rid himself of the "imitation" Rheya, he is quickly won over by her and seduced by the possibility of some sort of relationship with her; however, he has met his match in Gordon, the ship's doctor, powerfully played by Viola Davis. Davis describes her character as "a straight shooter, the voice of reason about the Prometheus. . . she doesn't believe the crew should embrace these 'visitors' or give in to whatever it is that Solaris is doing to them psychologically and emotionally. She's found a way to fight it, whereas everyone else seems to be in the planet's thrall" (Solaris DVD Commentary). According to Davis' character Gordon, "it is a mistake to become emotionally involved with them [the visitors]." She has clearly been through an ordeal with her own visitor, arguing that Rheya is, much like Gibarian's previous statement, "a *mirror* [my emphasis] that reflects part of your mind. She's not human, . . . and I'm threatened by that." Gordon is no match for Kelvin's determination to reunite with his love, whether she is human or not, and even after Gordon has destroyed the latest

incarnation of Rheya, Kelvin decides to sacrifice everything for a chance at being with Rheya again, letting everything ride on the chance that she could return to the ship. As James Cameron has noted, "Kelvin is being given a second chance, but it's a second chance that's heavily freighted with a lot of the burdens of the first chance, and a lot of the possibilities for failure are still there" (DVD Commentary). Kelvin is taking a chance much like the way Deckard runs away with Rachel to face an indeterminate future, and, as David Desser argues in "The New Eve: The Influence of Paradise Lost and Frankenstein on Blade Runner," "redemption comes to Deckard and Rachel from the humanistic idea of transcendence through love amidst one's own existential condition" (61). Love, or at least the romantic, idealistic notion of it, is enough to motivate Deckard and Kelvin to the drastic measures they choose.

The central female characters in Blade Runner and Solaris are not the only ones who go through an existential crisis. Kelvin begins to doubt his own existence on several occasions throughout Solaris, often wondering aloud whether he has died already. When a ghostlike version of Kelvin's friend Gibarian enters his room one night aboard the Prometheus, Kelvin says "you're not Gibarian; you're just a puppet." Gibarian turns the accusation back onto Kelvin, echoing the replicants' struggle in Blade Runner, arguing that "like all puppets, you think you're actually human . . . that's the puppet's dream: to be human." Kelvin replies by asking what Solaris wants, and Gibarian tells him: "If you keep thinking there's a solution, you'll die here." Though initially he vows to "figure it out," ultimately, Kelvin does not care about the solution, and he is content to be with the current version of Rheya, abandoning all else, whether he is alive or dead.

Deckard shares some of Kelvin's doubt about his own existence, though he is less vocal; however, others have been quite vocal about Deckard's condition in Blade Runner. Much controversy surrounds the subject of whether Deckard could be a replicant himself. He never responds when Rachel asks him if he has ever taken the Voight-Kampf test (the procedure Deckard uses to determine whether a person is a replicant or not). He experiences a dream about a unicorn, and near the end of the film, his fellow blade runner, Gaff, leaves an origami unicorn at his doorstep. Is this a coincidence, or conclusive evidence that Deckard's dream of a unicorn is an implant, like Rachel's fabricated memories, of which Gaff is familiar? Ridley Scott has argued that Deckard is a replicant (Robb, *Ridley Scott* 39), though Harrison Ford and producer Michael Deeley vehemently argued against the suggestion that Deckard was a replicant (Sammon, *Future Noir* 362). Whether Deckard is considered human or not, there are some eerie moments in both films that suggest, at least partially, that the central character could be one of the non-humans, but these speculations only add to the dramatic questioning about what it means to be alive and in love and why both humans and others strive so purposefully toward these goals. As Steven Soderbergh states in a commentary track on the Solaris DVD, Solaris concerns "the leap of faith that we make because the options are either [to] make that leap of faith or be alone." Deckard and Kelvin choose to love artificial women, created, at least in part, by advanced genetic research and practices, issues which resonate transparently in contemporary society.

Deckard's relationship with the genetically fabricated Rachel—and Kelvin's affair with the reconstituted Rheya—offer commentary on the ethical issues concerning genetics research; as argued here previously, genetics is a rapidly-advancing field that

consistently courts controversy with its every move. The women central to these films exist as ideal versions of themselves, cloned versions of a female ideal created in the minds of the men. They become reflections of the male characters' obsessions, embodying their guilt, regrets, and longings. If genetic research is allowed to continue in its current direction, and society decides to eventually allow human cloning, what will the consequences be? Will private citizens like Kelvin be allowed to re-create their dead spouses, as Solaris does for him? Perhaps these ideas sound a bit far-fetched, but cloning is already happening with animals; as the technology and science progress, the ethical debates are sure to rage on. What initiates the extreme sacrifices that Deckard and Kelvin make? The desire to have love and to be in love is a powerful force, even in the complex futuristic worlds created by Soderbergh and Scott. As Leonard Heldreth argues, "the answer to the question of what is human is not a simple answer but a complex, shifting pattern depending upon time, space, and interpretation" (47). Who has the authority to decide what is or is not human, what is or is not worthy of love? Technology has complicated the world and alienated people from each other; these forces combined with Kelvin and Deckard's own errors have created broken men who will sacrifice everything for love, or at least a version of love that they can achieve within the complex worlds in which they reside.

Solaris, like Blade Runner, examines personal obsession and sacrifice, but it did not share the production controversy, which was so prevalent on the eldest film. Though Solaris' production was much less of a long-term headache for Soderbergh than Blade Runner was for Scott, the film flopped at the box office in a similar manner. Again, audiences were not ready for a thoughtful, slowly paced take on the sci-fi genre.

Existential dramas are rarely tickets to box office gold, and though Clooney proved many critics wrong, jettisoning his patented playboy smirk and tackling his difficult emotional role with fervor, Solaris failed to strike a chord with audiences and earned less than half of its production costs at the box office. Financing was easily covered by Fox and Lightstorm Entertainment, and there was no highly-publicized legal maneuvering and tangling, as in Blade Runner's case, but critics were all over the place when it came to evaluating Solaris. As Roger Ebert put it,

> At a time when many American movies pump up every fugitive emotion into a clanging assault on the audience, Soderbergh's Solaris is quiet and introspective. There are some shocks and surprises, but this is not Alien. It is a workshop for a discussion of human identity. It considers not only how we relate to others, but how we relate to our ideas of others—so that a completely phony, non-human replica of a dead wife can inspire the same feelings that the wife herself once did. . . it evokes the rarest of movie emotions, ironic regret. ("Solaris")

Other critics were considerably less enthusiastic, calling Solaris "a ponderous and dreadful film" (LaSalle), "willfully anti-spectacular" (Wilmington), or a "prolonged grief counseling session with a minimalist sci-fi backdrop" (Gonzalez). Stephen Hunter of the Washington Post castigated Solaris' "obdurate avoidance of anything that could be confused with pleasure," arguing that the film "drives about a quarter of the audience out of the theater before it is half over. . . because it's slower than molasses in Siberia." As with Blade Runner, critics were quick to jump on the attack towards a non-traditional science fiction movie; however, some critics appreciated Soderbergh's work. Sam Adams

of the *Philadelphia City Paper* wrote that "Solaris is a boring movie. But it's the best kind of boring movie, the kind that gives you plenty to think about, and plenty of time to think about it." Perhaps J. Hoberman summarized the film best in his review in *The Village Voice*: "Solaris achieves an almost perfect balance of poetry and pulp. This is as elegant, moody, intelligent, sensuous, and sustained a studio movie as we are likely to see this season—and in its intrinsic nuttiness, perhaps the least compromised." Steven Soderbergh himself has argued, when asked about his own consistently updated 'top ten' film list, that a film cannot be considered truly great until at least a decade has passed since its release. Perhaps, as with Blade Runner, Solaris' value will be revealed over time, and many critics will reverse their negative stances. Whether they do or not, this writer hopes that despite the major studio's financial woes, directors like Scott and Soderbergh will inspire more talented directors to create intelligent science fiction films that move well beyond the pedestrian shoot-em-up conventions of Hollywood action films. We can only hope.

Conclusion

Important science fiction films don't come along very often. Ridley Scott's Blade Runner has earned the respect of international sci-fi fans and critics alike, making bold statements about the American 1980s culture and offering eerily on-target predictions for what the future may hold for cities like Los Angeles, but what makes this film resonate deeply for many viewers is its unconventional yet compellingly human love story about men, women, and machines. For this viewer, what is most fascinating about this multi-dimensional film, other than the questions it raises about the nature of existence and the meaning of the word 'human,' are the sacrifices made for not just life itself, but for companionship, for love.

Twenty years after Blade Runner's release—after it long since earned its reputation at the top of its genre, Steven Soderbergh, with a little help from James Cameron, released his pensive, existential sci-fi drama, Solaris. Though Soderbergh's film for the most part steers clear of the social political commentary of Scott's film, it too provides a sensitive examination of the nature of humanity, the demand for life, and the sacrifices made for love. While critics have been slow to warm up to the film, and scholars have yet to explore this film with the depth of study it deserves, Solaris posits many questions similar to those of Blade Runner, aligning itself as a worthy companion piece to its elder, more distinguished precursor.

Some would argue that Solaris not a worthy companion, and that because it lacks the multidimensional social and political commentary that Blade Runner is stocked with, it is a lesser achievement. To some degree, these critics are absolutely correct. Solaris is

not as politically or culturally aware as its famous predecessor, and because of these shortcomings, it could easily be placed in another category altogether. But because Solaris, like Blade Runner, offers keen and sensitive observations on the nature of humanity and the complex layers of emotion, memory, and choices that make up the intricate web of relationships, because of its moving portrayal of a sacrifice for the chance at uncertain love with an artificial woman, it deserves to be discussed seriously, alongside its influential antecedent, Blade Runner.

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