

Dystopia in the Science Fiction Film: Blade Runner and Adorno's Critique of Modern Society

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ABSTRACT

Science fiction films touch coming-future themes, particularly those referring specifically to futuristic technology and its influence over human life. Dealing with the resistance of the replicants in the approaching millennium, Blade Runner brings the feat of modern civilization into doubt through the image of the dystopian future. In Blade Runner, a city is filled with waste, pollution, and dirt and a corrosive rain falls from the polluted clouds. Adorno criticizes contemporary society and its civilization. Characterizing advanced capitalist society by its total administration penetrating into every sphere of life, he contends that modern society promotes alienation, atomization, conformism, and fatalism. Blade Runner provides a chance to contemplate the problems of modern society, proposed by Adorno's critical works. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze futuristic characteristics described in the film with Adorno's critique of modern society.

Keywords: *Blade Runner, Science Fiction Genre, Movie, Dystopia, Adorno*

1. INTRODUCTION

Most science-fiction films place their perspectives of future civilizations into one of two broad categories: "utopian" or "dystopian." The utopian perspective shows positive aspects of social development in the image of the future, stressing the identification of technological development with social development, the increase of human welfare by technological development, and the prospect of human emancipation from labor. The dystopian vision, however, creates foreboding images of human progress in the depiction of the future, emphasizing the denial of technological development with social development, the intensification of human alienation and passivity, and the rationalization of power mechanism by technological development. The contrast between these two viewpoints differs according to how each vision understands society, power, history, technology, and so on.

This paper analyzes a science-fiction film, *Blade Runner*, focusing on how Adorno's critique of modern society is related to this film. This film brings the adoration of modern civilization into doubt through the image of dystopian future. The critique of modern civilization has by now produced a vast literature, from the members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Benjamin to the French postmodernists such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. Among those scholars, this paper employs

Adorno's critique of modern society as an important theoretical base for the analysis of the film, *Blade Runner*, as a metaphor for revealing the anti-modernist notion. In my reading, *Blade Runner* explicitly criticizes modern civilization, regardless of the intention involved in the production of the film. My central concern is to analyze how the film represents society, human rationality, technology, humanness, and the hope of the subject as the agent within a critique of modernism.

2. ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIETY

Adorno characterizes advanced capitalist society by its total administration penetrating into every sphere of life. Adorno's analysis of mass culture discloses critical elements of mass society such as atomization and alienation of people, their passivity, and their susceptibility to mass culture. He sees modern society as potentially totalitarian with its almost complete administration and reification. No totalitarian system ever devised has been capable of making so large a percentage of its subjects perform the similar physical and mental activities on a daily basis, with content closely controlled by so few. Through the criticism on modern society, he contends that the society will be dominated by the characteristics of reification and administration as long as capitalism continues.[1] For him, human beings become dependent on the influence of administration and reification, and, therefore, there remain only the highest levels of the industrial and state bureaucracy in the society.[2]

For Adorno, administration is the mechanism of various,

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dispersed kinds of regulation on all spheres of human life. Thus, it refers to bureaucratic, governmental or corporate control over human life. In modern society, the forms of administrative capitalism are so closed that they leave virtually no space for an internal overthrow. Adorno regards as an attribute of contemporary society the enlargement of administration to an extent which seems to threaten the privacy and freedom of the individual. Capitalist production confines individuals so that they become helpless victims to what is offered them.[3] Human beings become dependent on the influence of administration. In contemporary capitalist society, therefore, there remain only the highest levels of the industrial and state bureaucracy. Administration extends even to culture through the culture industry. The notion of total integration echoes Adorno's diagnosis of the wholly administered society.

Following Lukacs' explanation of reification,[4] Adorno conceptualizes reification as the social forms in which modern rationalization appears. He especially ascribes the problem of reification to commodity fetishism and instrumental reason. Commodity fetishism transforms the relationship between humans into the relation of the objects. Instrumental reason is considered the pursuit of efficiency through standardization in a functionalist category. However, Adorno goes further than Lukacs in reconceptualizing reification beyond the economic horizon. Adorno reformulates the concept of reification as "identifying thought," which is the form of thought regulated by modern rationalism.[5] Reification for him is the suppression of heterogeneity in the name of identifying thought. Adorno explains that reification is the social phenomenon in which "unlike things appear to be identical or equal, and the mode of thinking which can only consider them as equal." [6] He believes that reification is in the historical process of being universalized. From this perspective, Adorno, for instance, critiques the idea of universal history. Universal history imposes identifying thought upon the nonidentical.

3. READING *BLADE RUNNER* WITH ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIETY

Blade Runner describes the future in the image of ruins. The film stages the ruins in 2019 when people have already experienced atomic catastrophes, although the atomic apocalypse was not explicitly visualized in the film. The city, 'Los Angeles,' in 2019 is filled with waste, pollution, and dirt. A corrosive rain falls from the polluted clouds. It reveals "an aesthetic of decay, exposing the dark side of technology, and the process of disintegration." [7] It is like a hell on earth, just waiting for the hope of redemption.

In the film, replicants are designed to handle work too dangerous or arduous for humans. They are invented as slave labor in the off-world colonies. The invention of these replicants seems to guarantee the emancipation from physical suffering in terms of technological development. The creation of replicants identical to humans is considered the triumph of the modernist project, constructed under the name of humanism. As a normative category, humanism is concerned with human welfare and the alleviation of suffering and is characterized by consideration for other. In the critique of modernism,

humanism is a hypocritical conception in that it tries "to register for those held within" the power mechanism "whose task is precisely to reproduce a humanist ideology." [8] In Adorno's view, humanism eventually becomes a tool for the instrumentalization of human rationality. Modernist notions reduce people into functions and dismiss spontaneity and self-reflection of the individual. Humanism becomes a self-contradictory concept, although it is developed as an answer to the needs of human emancipation.

Blade Runner concerns the definition of humanness in the context of the dystopia. Reflection on the moral status of the replicants allows us "to think more dispassionately about just what qualities of human life are required for the presence of personhood." [9] The film suggests that replicants are different from humans in terms of three primary factors: empathy, memory, and the physical opposed to the mechanical. Replicants are indistinguishable from a real human in that they are created by duplicating a human DNA molecule. They are not composed of a mechanical apparatus and share the same physical body as humans. The film emphasizes this aspect of replicants through a dialogue between Pris (Daryl Hannah) and Sebastian (William Sanderson); "We are not computers, Sebastian, we are physical."

Memory also distinguishes between humans and replicants. Photographs are regarded as the medium of memories. Leon (Brian James) collects someone else's photographs in order to manufacture a past he did not live. By photographs which tell her past, Rachael (Sean Young) has also owned manufactured memories since she was created. She is the only one with the "implanted" memory, which permits her to think that she is a "real" human. At the same time, the film shows that Deckard (Harrison Ford) also keeps photos to recollect his past.

Both replicants and humans keep photographs that act as a means for exposing the existence of the mother. Replicants cannot be considered humans because they do not have their mothers. However, *Blade Runner* paradoxically represents the absence of motherhood in human's life through depicting atomization of people. Whereas replicants never have a chance to appreciate what motherhood is since they have no remembrance of the entity of the mother, people are living as isolated men in the disappearance of motherhood without so much as knowing its significance.

In *Blade Runner*, empathy is introduced as a tool to differentiate humans from replicants. The replicant's lack of empathy is emphasized throughout the film. However, the lack of emotion is also revealed in the humans. Deckard evaluates himself as the callous man; "Sushi. That's what my ex-wife called me. Cold fish." Through Rachael's question to Deckard, "Have you ever taken that test yourself?" the film attempts to confuse human identity. Tyrell (Joe Turkel) is also depicted as the person who does not have feelings. Tyrell is considered as another Dr. Frankenstein. Both Tyrell and Dr. Frankenstein manufacture their own creations and are cruel toward artificial agents. Neither of them treats their creations as humans and considers the problem of moral responsibility for artificial agents. Although Tyrell is cruelly killed by his creation, the film does not provide sympathy for his death in that he is conceived as calculating, greedy, and unemotional. The film reveals more sympathy for the replicants, although they menace

and kill their creators.

Unlike Tyrell and Deckard, Roy (Rutger Hauer) and Rachael are shown as having feelings in several scenes: when Rachael kills Leon to save Deckard, when Rachael has a sad feeling after realizing who she is, when Roy cruelly kills Tyrell, and when Roy saves Deckard. In the film the characteristics of humanness are transferred to replicants, whereas the absence of humanness is associated with humans. Although three criteria tell who is human or not, however, *Blade Runner* shows that these factors are not appropriate means to distinguish between humans and replicants.

Through the depiction of the dystopia, the film ultimately casts doubt on human rationality. As in the modern society, instrumental reason successfully continues its predominance in the dystopian future. In the framework of instrumental reason, human rationality is insulated from "emotion" and is considered as the basis for determining progress by way of efficiency. Instrumental reason consists in "the calculation of effectiveness and of the techniques of production and distribution: in accordance with its content, ideology expends itself in the idolization of given existence and of the power which technology." [10] Human rationality provides the most important impetus to induce the dystopian future and repudiates "the very ends of emancipation and humanization by which it is motivated." [11] In *Blade Runner*, instrumental reason again drives the society towards the last demolition. This death knell is different from the ruins by the nuclear weapon in that it is able to bring on the complete collapse of human destiny and history. Technological development does not realize the expansion of human welfare.

Modernist notions propose utopian images engendered by technology itself and, thus, they regard technology as "a means to an end." [12] This approach is located in the center of instrumental reason. Emphasizing that technology is inherently neutral, instrumental reason reduces the problem of technology to the dimension of effects, especially effects that are unexpected. The film shows this viewpoint in the scene when Rachael asks Deckard about Tyrell's creation of the replicants: "Replicants are like any other machine. They're either a benefit or a hazard." Later Deckard realizes that replicants differ from machines. He then falls in love with a replicant, Rachael. The film employs Deckard as a paradoxical case for a critique of modernism.

The film also discloses this approach of technology through the characterization of Eldon Tyrell, the creator of the replicants. Tyrell controls the androids' genes to improve their fitness as tools. The male is superior in strength and agility to their creator and the female is more beautiful for intensifying her role as a pleasure model. Moreover, replicants are more intelligent than their creators; in order to enter Tyrell's penthouse, Roy, the leader of the replicants, shows his superior ability in the chess game between Tyrell and Sebastian. For the completion of technical efficiency, Tyrell tries to eliminate the malfunction. Thus, he implants a fail-safe mechanism; if replicants may automatically express emotion, that is, the key factor distinguishing the human and the replicant, they are programmed to have just a four-year lifespan.

Although Tyrell is concerned about the malfunction of his creation, however, he never cares about the malfunctions of the

society. The film allows audiences to get the impression that atomic catastrophes cause the deformation of human through the image of Sebastian, Chew (James Hong), and others shown in the street. Social malfunctions are accompanied by the street people (the people shown in the street of the film), who are considered inferior people to the persons like Tyrell. *Blade Runner* tells the hierarchy of instrumental reason between humans. It is technology that symbolizes power and wealth. The people who pursue technical efficiency are able to take power and wealth, but the people who just use technology cannot secure power and wealth. Whereas the street people are living in the city like a dirty dustbin, Tyrell is living in an unreachable penthouse like the royal palace high atop the city's downtown. The police and some authorized people drive the flying vehicle, but the street people cannot get a license to drive this remarkable car. The street people depend on the bicycle as the most important traffic means.

In the post-nuclear context of 2019, the film depicts the future as "a totally administered world," revealed in the Adorno's conceptions. The corporate and administrative power regulates the city of *Blade Runner*. Social control is set up by the complete combination of the police with technology. The police play a central role in maintaining social order, but they cannot perform their task without the collaboration of technology. The police are depicted as paramilitary in the film. In the scene when Deckard is forced to kill the replicants, Bryant tells Deckard: "If you're not a cop, you're little people." The police play a role as paramilitary just for the corporate as well as for the administered. *Blade Runner* describes the future as a society dominated by a corporate and administrative system. It is a dystopian society that contains Adorno's critique.

The police have the exclusive right to decide who is a person or not, although the police cannot accurately tell if someone is a replicant or not. Thus, blade runners employ technology to get evidence for their task. By 'a psychological test,' the police create criteria for deciding humanness. The machine for this test measures contraction of the iris muscle according to various emotional responses. Like the case of memory, the film shows that this test is applied only to replicants. This test is given to two replicants, Leon and Rachael, in the film. When an inspector asks Leon about his mother, Leon cannot hide his existence as a replicant. After taking the test from Rachael, Deckard suspects her to be a replicant. The film mentions that this test does not completely convince Deckard whether she is a replicant or not, because she has a built-in memory. Power produces the evidence for judging the humanness by using technology, although the test is viewed as a clumsy test of questionable validity. Whereas modern society does not completely give 'a lie detector' to the right of decision, the future society provides 'an advanced detector' for the entire right to decide whether someone is human or not.

In *Blade Runner*, technology vastly expands its influence on the individual life. A detecting machine is used as a tool to realize power. The Spinner (the flying car) also symbolizes the combination of the police with technology. Only a few authorized persons and police operate this vehicle, which is capable of street driving, vertical lift-off, hovering and high-speed cruising. With remarkable functions of the Spinner, the police always scrutinize the city in the air and also in the street.

The computer system, centering on the operation of a high-density computer (ESPER), also plays an important role in constituting corporate and administrative power. The police vehicle and Deckard's apartment possess small models which can be connected with the large computer at police headquarters. The Tyrell Corporation also has this computer system. By using this computer, Deckard can analyze and enlarge photos, and, moreover, investigate a room without being there. In the film the computer system is possible to see and inspect anywhere in the city.

Blade Runner reveals that seeing is power itself through this computer system. Deckard can use the ESPER machine and inspect anywhere that he wants because he works for administered power. The city is completely supervised by technology whose system does not need walls, windows, towers or guards. It is a "panopticon city." [13] Before the modern period, Poster argues that power was realized "by the personal presence and brute force of a caste of nobles." In modern society, however, power is imposed "by the systematic scribbings in discourses, by the continual monitoring of daily life, adjusting and readjusting ad infinitum the norm of individuality." [14] The modern social control may be considered a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards, symbolizing as the police power and computing system in *Blade Runner*. In addition to the means for maintaining the status quo, technology acts as a tool for originating commercial profit. In the scene when Deckard meets Tyrell at the first time, Tyrell mentions that the realization of commercial profit is a real motive to stimulate the creation of replicants identical to humans. Neither the increase of human welfare nor alleviation of human suffering is an authentic reason for the production of replicants. *Blade Runner* describes the building of the Tyrell Corporation rising to the sky as the Babel Tower. The Tyrell Corporation is an allegory for a society which is destroyed because of the human's incessant greed.

In the film, the sky scenes are always accompanied by a huge splendid billboard and police vehicles driving between buildings. These sky scenes make a clear contrast with the gloomy street scenes. With Tyrell's profit orientation, a huge advertisement symbolizes the continuation of commodity fetishism in the future. Advertising is an example to understand commodity fetishism, whose operation transforms any object into a commodity to realize its exchange value. Neither the replicant nor Coca Cola becomes a commodity, if each of them cannot be formed by its exchange value. In advanced capitalist society, most commodities are economically suspect if they do not intensify their exchange values by way of advertising. Advertising is the means to keep industrial power.

The sky scenes make a clear contrast with the gloomy street scenes. This distinction tells the separation of splashy advertising from the people in the street. Through this comparison, the film shows that alienation of the people exists in the dystopian future, late capitalist society. In a society where capitalism is fully developed, each person is alienated from others. In *Blade Runner*, because the street people are alienated from their activities, they are unable to appreciate the social mechanism in which they live. In Adorno's view, by

establishing alienation of the people as a natural phenomenon, a reified and administered society strengthens the sense of fatality and obliges the people to regard negative factors in life and circumstances as natural causes or chances. At a denotative dimension, for instance, people's deformities resulted just from atomic apocalypses. As a connotative sense, the film reveals that the social system which induces atomic wars resulted in these abnormalities. In *Blade Runner*, the street people are living like birds in a cage. They do not recognize what happens to them in the conditions structured by this social system and cannot escape from them.

The film emphasizes people's passivity which is related to the manipulation of consciousness. The manipulation of consciousness means the loss of free will. Free will is the ability to refuse the form of subjectivity, constituted by society and power. The mechanism of power encourages people not to recognize the operations of the social system and impedes the proliferation of free will. *Blade Runner* manifests the disappearance of free will in the dystopian city through depicting the street people as alienated and dispersed individuals. By the loss of free will, the people of the film eventually conform themselves to anything that exists in the city. They are accustomed to given social conditions, in spite of their deformities, dangerous and detrimental environment, and surveillance of power.

Blade Runner, invalidating an oppositional structure between humans and replicants, questions human nature. Disputing three criteria for distinguishing between humans and replicants, the film seeks another essence of human nature. The film suggests "thinking about oneself" as the way to access the essence of human nature, by using Descartes' dictum: "I think, Sebastian, therefore, I am," Pris says. For Adorno, thinking about oneself is "an act of negation, of resistance." [15] It induces the pursuit of freedom, which is the human will to release from the status of immaturity. Human authentic nature is viewed as the pursuit of freedom through thinking about oneself. *Blade Runner* attempts to find the essence of humanness not in humans but in replicants, regarding replicants as the mirror of humans. Replicants endeavor to extend their four-year lifespan. Their rebellion is a metaphor for negative thinking repudiating their given identity. Lack of emotion is a metaphor for the status of immaturity. Their will to overcome a limited lifespan is a metaphor for the pursuit of freedom.

Proposing that thinking about oneself is the only road to secure the authenticity of human nature, the film shows the hope about the subject as the agent through the existence of replicants. At the beginning of the film, *Blade Runner*, employs "the retirement" instead of "killing" and emphasizes the replicant as the device, that is, the means for a goal. At the end of the film, however, replicants are described as another type of humans and treated as humans like ourselves. Deckard symbolizes it in a dialogue after watching Roy's death; "All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?"

Adorno conceptualizes thinking about oneself as "negative thinking." Negative thinking is a way of overcoming social mechanism through rejecting what happens to us (humans). *Blade Runner* shows how replicants try to overcome their subjectivity regarded as a tool. For replicants, negative thinking

begins with the denial of subjectivity as a machine. Their resolution to extend a limited lifespan is the will to pursue freedom. The film especially reveals it through Roy, the leader of the renegade replicants. Like other replicants, Roy cannot extend his life without Tyrell's assistance. The relationship between replicants and Tyrell is similar to the relation of the slave to the master. Roy rejects obedience to power by killing his master, although he knows that he and other replicants cannot but die. After killing Tyrell, Roy has a chance to kill Deckard but then saves his life. In this scene, Roy rescues Deckard from dropping, even though Deckard kills Pris, Roy's lover. Here, Roy is not a mere rescuer. The film suggests that Roy enables Deckard to escape a reified and administrative society and to seek a redeemed world. In terms of this connotative sense, the film reveals that Roy has already overcome the lack of emotion and becomes an autonomous individual.

4. CONCLUSION

Adorno criticizes modern society and its civilization. Characterizing advanced capitalist society by its total administration penetrating into every sphere of life, he contends that modern society promotes alienation, atomization, conformism, and fatalism. Adorno thinks an important factor of inducing these pessimistic perspectives as the predominance of instrumental reason. In terms of instrumental reason, human rationality is degenerated into the means to accomplish efficiency and, thus, turns against the increase of human welfare which it pursues.

Blade Runner shows a critique of modern civilization in the image of the dystopian city. The city is described in the light of ruins. This setting itself is a metaphor for a society which consolidates social contradictions more than modern society. In the film, the social system forces people to be alienated from each other, from their activities, and the society in which they live. The police and technology play the most important roles in preserving the status quo. Power is not merely a constraint on human lives but a central component in the constitution of human lives. The perversion of human rationality is disclosed through reexamining the existence of replicants and the essence of human nature.

Blade Runner seems to be a film that reflects Adorno's critique of modern society. However, this film does not cease with providing the criticism of modern civilization for audiences. Through the critique of modern civilization, *Blade Runner* paradoxically gives a chance to think about the essence of humanness, society and power, and the relation of humans to society. As Adorno tries to correct the corruption of reason through a critique of modern civilization, *Blade Runner* proposes to rediscover authentic humanness by way of a critique of future society and its civilization.

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- [2] Introducing the concept, "the authoritarian state," Max Horkheimer explains the attributes of administered society. For him, it is the whole mechanism constituting the institution that exists for the maintenance of the existing social system offered by modern capitalism. See M. Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State," *Telos*, Vol. 15, No.1, pp.3-24, 1973.
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