

Roxanne Tuckman

Dr. Tripp

ENG 492

13 December 2020

### Queer Times in a Dystopic Future

The ability to instill different senses and perspectives of futurity are abound within the science fiction genre where marginalized groups such as the indigenous peoples of the United States and African-Americans are given precedent and agency to pen an inclusive vision of the future that centers their agency. For a large part of science fiction, however, marginalized peoples are often pushed to the shadows—much in real life—to make room for white interpretation of the future and their existence in it, whether dystopic or utopic. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, however, the marginalized beings that were pushed to the shadows command the presence of the screen as the Replicant antagonists. While past scholars have interpreted the Replicants, Roy, Leon, Zhora, Pris, Rachael, and, arguably, Deckard, as evoking commentary on the type of chattel slavery that African-Americans had endured in the United States (of which there is no doubt), they also create commentary on how one navigates a queer existence within a society that historically, and presently, denounces their very existence and refuses them the rights and understanding of personhood.

While notions of Utopia and Dystopia tend to evoke an image of a far flung future outside the realm of the present, the dystopic landscape of *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles is vital focal point from which to understand how notions of past and present create an understanding of the future, and the place of queer bodies in it. In “Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and It's Others,”

Maria Varsam discusses the concept of “concrete utopia” and “concrete dystopia,” with the latter designated as historical “moments, events, institutions, and systems that embody and realize organized forces of violence and oppression” as a basis for informing notions of the future dystopic (209). From powerful law enforcement who are given free reign to hunt down Replicants for “retirement,” to the poor, disabled, and POC populace that walk about the streets of L.A., nothing is new under the sun of a dystopic future. For the Replicants especially, their existence parallels the tumultuous times that enveloped a 1980’s U.S.—namely, holdover distrust of the queer other from the McCarthy Era, LGBTQ+ activism, and a spiking AIDS crisis.

The McCarthy era is best known for the Red Scare, but an equally destructive and devaluing phenomena was happening at the same time, the Lavender Scare, an event that fomented dehumanizing, violent, and legally mandated acts towards queer of LGBTQ+ peoples that persisted well into the 1980s. In “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics,” Naoko Shibusawa discusses the mindset and talks behind the fueling of this queer witch hunt. In the article Shibusawa states mentions how, during the 1950s, Arthur L. Miller, a republican representative from the state of Nebraska, “deployed an anatomic metaphor, diagnosing that “the fetid, stinging flesh...[on] this skeleton of homosexuality” posed a serious threat to the nation’s well-being (724). By positing the “homosexual” as a “fetid” skeleton, Miller was evoking a sentiment (still held by some today), that the death, decay, or fall of society, and past societies—and by extension, past empires—was due to the “rise” of homosexuality. This sentiment was so widely acknowledged at the time, that a popular 1952 article by RG Waldeck decried homosexuals, and condemned them for ushering in a world wide conspiracy that “has spread all over the globe; has penetrated all classes, operates in armies and in prisons; has infiltrated the press, the movies, and the cabinets; and it all but dominates the arts,

literature, theater, music, and TV” (731). Much how the feared homosexual could be anywhere and everywhere, so too could the Replicants blend into society, and invoke their, supposed, terroristic activities upon a normative population, and cause untold rebellion. The question then becomes, how unreasonable would these acts of defiance or rebellion be if it is in opposition to an unsympathetic, all powerful, normative system.

As Martin Luther King Jr. has states, “a riot is the language of the unheard,” and for the LGBTQ+ community, and for the Replicants of *Blade Runner*, this is echoed through historic social unrest. In “The Stonewall riots, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Public’s Health,” Perry Halkitis remarks on the historic social movement of stonewall but also mentions how “[s]ome [ten] years earlier, a less well-known yet equally powerful clash with police materialized at Cooper’s Donuts in Los Angeles California” (851). The Cooper Donut’s incident was a response to state sanctioned harassment of LGBTQ+ peoples by law enforcement, harassment which included entrapment and police discretion to weed out who was and who was not behaving in a deviant manner. For the Replicants of *Blade Runner*, their rebellion existed long before the events of *Blade Runner* as evidenced by the prologue text which states that “Replicants were used Off-world as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets. After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an Off-world colony, Replicants were declared illegal on earth—under penalty of death” (*Blade Runner* 2:44-2:47). In order to protect normative interests then, the “mutinous” Replicants were to be feared as deviants and the narrative constructed that if they were not docile workers then they were dangerous fugitives that could destroy normative society. In the course of the movie, an act of defiance in the face of normative society is demonstrated through Leon’s killing of a Voight-Kampf test operator (*Blade Runner* 7:35), who would have targeted him for retirement or reprogramming. Though through

different means, both instances show an uncompromising retaliation to oppressive powers; by daring to strike back against oppressive regimes, both groups find new agency and a chance to change the future, if only slightly. There would ultimately be an obstacle for both groups that hampers their respective efforts, death.

For both the Replicants of the movie and of, predominantly gay men in the 1980's, their very life is put under danger of being cut short; while the Replicants' would be a tangible, scientific failsafe to ensure the safety of society, the conservatives of America would view the AIDS epidemic as divine intervention upon a "fetid" creature like the "homosexual." In "'Only Your Calamity,'" Joe Wright discusses the societal effect that the AIDS epidemic had on the LGBTQ+ community, namely that of stigma and social death; "stigma is created by a collectively held belief that a given attribute "spoils" a person. If stigma means that a person is viewed as "not quite human," social death means that a person is viewed as "not quite alive" (1789). For those of the LGBTQ+ community, to be diagnosed with AIDS was to endure a "spoiled" existence from the eyes of normative society—for many conservatives at the time, the epidemic was seen as a type of "divine intervention" that would rid society of queer undesireables, or "unhumans." For the Replicants who are designated by "it" or "skinjob," (with male and female only being used as base identifiers instead of humanizing elements) their "expiration date" was also viewed as invaluable countermeasure by the governments at large and by Tyrell, to ensure that their, although needed existence, wouldn't progress past their usefulness. Like their queer counterparts, the Replicants faced a seemingly incurable dilemma, not to mention the obstacles of scarce medical care or even a concerted willingness to address their concerns as living beings (Halkitis 851). Even when Roy confronts his god-creator Tyrell, the scientist can offer nothing in the way of meaningful help except the platitude, stating "the

light that burns twice as bright burns half as long” (1:24:54-1:24:57). The problem, however, is that it is Tyrell’s own fault, and his adherence to the normative that causes the so-called deviants or queer individuals to burn twice as bright, to make noise and declare their existence to an otherwise indifferent world.

If dystopia embodies notions of fear, violence, and unease, and is a reflection on the historicity of a country or peoples, then the ways in which queer individuals navigate a normative society also informs the position of power that oppressors like police chief Bryant, and Tyrell, the god-creator who acts as both clinical scientist and unmoving doctor have over them in society. Though the humanity of Deckard is questionable, Bryant does offer the Blade Runner an ultimatum in helping him catch fugitive Replicants, practically threatening him—to which Deckard responds internally “if you’re not cop, you’re little people” (13:17-13:18). Deckard also remarks on Bryant’s use of “skinjob” as a slur, comparing him to racist police men of that past who looked unkindly towards Black men (12:18-12:24). Bryant understands the power he wields as a police chief, one of the few lucrative and esteemed positions one could have within this dystopic society, and one in which he is tasked in keeping the supposed peace. As Robert Yeates states in “Urban Decay and Sexual Outlaws in the *Blade Runner* Universe,” “it is...the perceived moral decay of the deviant Other, the illegal trespassing of replicants within city limits, that the authorities promote as society’s principle concern...Scott’s film is reflective of a culture fixated on the policing of sexual outlaws in American cities” (65). Poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and a large population of people with disabilities who cannot make the trip off-world, none of this is as important as stopping the Replicant bogeyman—a sentiment mirrored by the 1980’s Reagan era.

If Bryant acts as an enforcer for an oppressive system, then Tyrell embodies that oppressive system entirely—the cold and calculating nature of the capitalist inventor renders new human-like bodies as fungible and interchangeable, a useful commodity literally to be bought and sold just as Black slaves were during the “early” history of the United States. Though Tyrell espouses notions of making beings “more human than human,” which may appear to be a rather lofty and philosophical goal, he shows that it is just simple capitalistic sloganeering, telling Deckard that, ultimately, “commerce is our Goal here at Tyrell” (22:40-22:42). Tyrell also delights in having Deckard test Rachael with the Voight-Kampf test—a procedure he pushes Deckard to enact solely to ascertain whether or not Rachael, his “greatest creation,” can “fool” the test, and by extension, fool “human” eyes. Though Tyrell is not so much a loudmouth racist the way Bryant is, he still ultimately denies the Replicants personhood, and plays at their life and experiences as though it were an experiment he was indulging in.

With the setting and history extrapolated and oppressors defined, one can now envision the ways in which the Replicants of the story, Leon, Zhora, Pris, Roy, Rachael, and, arguably, Deckard, navigate their queer existence—namely their acts of rebellion, their relationships and their adherence to the status quo. In reference to the Stonewall Riots and preceding events, Halkitis states that “[t]he rebellion grew out of frustration and anger at a society that was denying our existence and simultaneously persecuting us for our identities (851). Though not necessarily denying their existence as tangible beings, the society of *Blade Runner*, understands the Replicants to be queer or deviant in nature, as they “appear human,” but are ultimately robbed of their personhood. As Yeates states, “[t]heir inferior status is arbitrary, solely a function of legal definition...[t]he humanity or inhumanity of these characters is not something innate but rather is constructed by society’s image of them (66). In the film the Replicants are never afforded

personhood, Deckard even refers to Replicants as being “like any other machine they’re either a benefit or a hazard (18:13-18:16). The act of killing a Replicant is never actually described as a killing or murder, rather, it’s referred to as retirement, as if putting to rest an old or defective machine. Due to these wrongs levied at them, the Replicants’s plan of action is to track down Tyrell and demand a longer life is a decidedly rebellious one. No longer content with living in the shadows or living in fear of their inevitable fast approaching death, they are willing to risk the precious time they have left to live and confront Tyrell head on, and are more than willing to kill the enforcers of a corrupt system—like Deckard—when he shows up again and again to thwart their endeavors.

The relationship that Roy, Pris, Zhora, and Leon have is both out of survival as well as community. Like many queer people of the past—and of the present to a degree, notions of being orphaned or left without a home are embodied in the Replicants, most notably when Pris tells J. F. Sebastian that she “doesn’t have a home,” but that “she does have friends,” whom she is looking for (39:31). While it may initially be easy to dismiss the companionship or family ties of Zhora and Leon as being merely useful to the romantic coupling of Roy and Pris, Roy displays profound grief in telling Pris that “there are only two of us now,” to which Pris replies “then we’re stupid and we’re going to die” (1:15:45-1:15:52). Even if longevity were available for them, Roy and Pris would have to walk a lonelier existence as their two companions had been gunned down in the street, and they would still have to outrun their deadly boogeyman, the blade runner.

Though there is no “typical” displays of gay, lesbian, or otherwise queer love, the inherent queer bodies that the Replicants inhabit still present how love and affection between queer is understood within a heteronormative society. The coupling of Pris and Roy are queer

due to how society perceives them. Although their outer appearance alludes to a certain understand of man and woman, there are only identities provided to human individuals. Since both their bodies are fungible, and therefore “not really human” and “not really alive,” they effectively have no gender and cannot be classified under normative notions of sexuality. Upon seeing their initial display of affection towards each other, J. F. Sebastian recuses himself from them to make breakfast, visibly uncomfortable with their interaction (1:15:07). Shortly after, Sebastian notes that he “knew” they had to be Replicants and is relieved to have figured them out (1:17:00). Though Sebastian is the most well intentioned of the humans that interact with the Replicants, he still exoticizes them, viewing them as having wonderful bodies, and keeps up the divide between Replicant and human.

The coupling of Deckard and Rachael, on the other hand, is more a kin to an assumed heteronormative man realizing he can deviate from the heteronormative notions of society. After Deckard administers the Voight-Kampff test to Rachael, he confronts Tyrell about his findings, claiming that “she’s a replicant isn’t she?” (22:19). When Tyrell confirms Deckard’s assumptions, he is quick to flip the way he addresses Rachael, asking Tyrell “how can it not know what it is?” (22:35-22:37). The quick flip of pronouns is an important distinction to be made as Deckard attempts to rectify his and Rachael’s respective positions in society. Much how transgender individuals are denied personhood and regarded as “it,” so too is Deckard making the attempt to “other” the queer Rachael. Despite his attempt to distance Rachael from himself in terms of status, Deckard becomes deeply infatuated with her, even internally noting a “feeling in myself, for her, for Rachel” (59:10) after having killed Zhora. It is his fight with Leon, however, that elevates the consideration of this love being queer, most notably when Leon tells Deckard how “nothing is worse than having an itch you can never scratch,” to which Deckard responds



“oh I agree” (1:02:26-1:02:32). The notion of scratching an itch evokes many different ideas, though the chief among them is referencing sex. Up until this point in the movie, whenever Deckard is forced to interact with the Replicants he can never get the thought of Rachael out of his mind, and his possible slip of the tongue to Leon is just further confirmation of his conflicted love for her.

The way in which Deckard’s love comes to fruition in the movie is hampered by his aversion to Replicants, and in effect, an aversion to the feelings or knowledge that he too might be a Replicant, a deviant. After the events of Zhora and Leon, Deckard finds himself and Rachael inside his apartment. Taking a leap of faith, Deckard initiates a kiss on Rachael’s neck, to which Rachael has no perceptive emotional response and instead tries to leave the apartment. Angered that his advances are rejected, that he would allow himself to seep into a sense of the queer or a type of deviancy, Deckard obstructs Rachael’s exit and slams the door closed. He forces his hands on her and yells for her to reciprocate, demanding that she say “kiss me,” “I want you” and “put your hands on me” (1:12:11). At this moment, Deckard knows he has transgressed the line of normative sexuality by expressing feelings towards a Replicant, and he desperately justifies it through actions of violent, heteronormative masculinity to compensate. Despite the tears and sorrowful look on Rachael’s face she reciprocates to Deckard and gives into his demands, ostensibly granting this interaction to be consensual.

If one assumes that Deckard has been a Replicant this time, whether knowingly or unknowingly, then the actions he has taken throughout the film reflect the normative avenues of survival some queer people take. In avoiding outright persecution, they instead uphold the persecution directed towards “out” Replicants. When Deckard monologues after his interaction with Bryant, he states that he “quit [the police] because I had a bellyful of killing, but then I’d

rather be a killer than a victim. And that's exactly what Bryant's threat about little people meant" (16:20-16:32). Deckard knows full well that law enforcement has unrestrained authority when it comes to dealing with Replicants, and he knew that his tenuous position as a Blade Runner was barely enough to keep him above the "little people" of society—he'd rather be persecutor than be persecuted. One of the most telling instances of Deckard's understanding of his normative actions of survival is when he states that "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings, neither were blade runners. What the hell was happening to me" (36:14-36:18). In a twist of convenient circumstance, Deckard's job allows him to display all the emotions—or lack thereof—of Replicants, while still allowing him a degree of safety within society. What calls Deckard's actions into even further question then, is how emotional he is when he must take the life of a Replicant. He "get's the shakes," and drinks heavily to curb his nerves—a questionable series of actions as the bystanders around him are either totally oblivious to the "retirement" of the Replicants or provide just a cursory interest in what has happened. If Replicants were merely the machines he claims them to be, and if he's supposed to feel nothing as indicated by his job, then the fact that he experiences such degrees of mental anguish reflect on the possibility that he is in fact, a Replicant, a deviant, queer.

In the dystopic future of *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles, the fissures and ruptures of the past and present rise into the future and create vital commentary on the existence of queer bodies who are so often pushed to the margins of society. No matter in historical fact or fantastical fiction, those peoples considered deviant by a normative society will continue to endure and find avenues with which to not only live and survive, but fight back as well, in the hopes that a new futurity can be found. Their lives, their memories, and their histories will be remembered as a foundation for a better future, and not merely just "tears in the rain"

## Works Cited

- Halkitis, Perry N. "The Stonewall Riots, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Public's Health." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 109, no. 6, June 2019, pp. 851–852. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305079.
- Scott, Ridley, director. *Blade Runner*. Warner Bros., 1982.
- Shibusawa, Naoko. "The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics." *Diplomatic History*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2012, pp. 723–752. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44376170](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44376170). Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- Varsam, Maria "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, edited by Raffaell Baccolin and Tom Moylan, Routledge, 2003, pp. 203-224
- Wright, Joe. "Only Your Calamity." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 103, no. 10, Oct. 2013, pp. 1788–1798. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301381.
- Yeates, Robert. "Urban Decay and Sexual Outlaws in the *Blade Runner* Universe." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 65–83. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.1.0065](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.1.0065). Accessed 2 Nov. 2020.