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Building Blade Runner

NORMAN M. KLEIN

In February, 1990, at a public lecture series on art in Los Angeles, three out of five leading urban planners agreed that they hoped someday L.A. would look like the film *Blade Runner*. The audience, safe and comfortable in the Pacific Design Center, buzzed audibly with concern. One could practically hear rumors starting, that it was time to sell that condo by the beach, and move to Seattle.

Two of the designers gave specific examples. They loved Santee alley, a bustling outdoor market in the downtown garment center, also not far from the homeless district. Of course, that general area is slated for urban renewal anyway, so this was a safe comment. It is easy to root for the horse once it is off to the glue factory.

Another planner, architect for the powerful Community Redevelopment Agency, praised the Interstate Savings and Loan logo atop the new eighty-storey office building on the main library grounds downtown. It reminded him favorably of *Blade Runner*. That drew an audible hiss, so he added that in thirty years that bank would be out of business anyway, and the logo would be gone. Then he admitted that he had approved the logo because there was no way to stop businesses from getting permits to put one on buildings downtown (the governing rule, set up by the downtown redevelopment agency, allows for logos, though the full title of a company is considered invasive — ambience over advertising). He was saying, in effect, why not allow free enterprise to show its face honestly, without the seamless camouflage? We need more than cityscapes and skylines, he and the others were suggesting. Apparently, we need the rude aesthetics of an immigrant market, but imagine it safely barricaded between buildings hundreds of feet high. We want to return to a fanciful version of the urban ghetto, back to cluttered industrial imagery, away from the simplified urban grid. We need *Blade Runner* (or do we?).

The film *Blade Runner* has indeed achieved something rare in the history of cinema. It has become a paradigm for the future of cities, for artists across the disciplines. It is undoubtedly the film most requested in art and film classes I teach, whether to environmental designers, illustrators, fine artists, photographers or filmmakers. When it came out in 1982, many critics called it the success of style over substance, or style over story. But the hum of that Vangelis score against the skyline of L.A. in

2019, as the film opens, continues to leave a strange impact on artists and filmmakers.

When they are asked why, very little is said about the forties nasal drip in the film, the drone of the voice over, the smoky forties lighting, or the promethean androids, particularly Rutger Hauer, dying balletically. Most of the discussion is about that breathtaking pan, from the stoking fires into the brooding skyline, across to the pyramid of the Tyrell Corporation, back to the horizontal loops of slying pods, and finally down into the morass of Asian fast-food stalls on the street level.

Essentially, only the first four minutes have become the film. In terms of the special effects, these four minutes represent layers of nostalgia built each by a different technology, from a different era. The bottom layer is old-fashioned movie set, out of the thirties and forties. The climate is enhanced through a mixture of old glycerine effects from the late thirties (hurricanes inside movie sets) with a kind of eighties film xerography. The flying pods are enhanced through computer controlled effects, similar to those in Spielberg's *Close Encounters* (remember the arrival of the space ship at the end?). There are old mattes with new forms of mattes. The Tyrrell pyramid, so similar to the monoliths in *Metropolis* (1926), looks like a cathedral radio, like a zigurat (thirties moderne), and also like a copper computer board; it was the last model finished, based on earlier sketches by miniatures specialist David Stewart, and it reflects the final architectural statement of the film — a feast of audience memories turned into an amusement park about urban decay. We remember the old thirties neighborhoods long since destroyed, and imagine them as primeval sources for immigrant nightmares after the apocalypse, after the decline of continental American civilization.

In terms of the aesthetics of special effects, *Blade Runner* is a transitional film. It contains the forties memorabilia of Lucas and Spielberg films (from *Star Wars* to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). It also points toward the post-apocalyptic look of *Aliens* (biotech nightmare), of *Batman* (a softcore version taken from *The Dark Knight* graphic novel, which was influenced by the look of *Blade Runner*), even of Japanese cyberpunk like the animation feature *Akira*.

The construction of the bladerunner look is very revealing. The bottom layer, with all its street hubbub, was built in the Warners Burbank studios, literally on the so-called "New York Street" so familiar to us all from gangster films of the thirties and forties. It is very tangibly an old memory remodeled, a movie based on an old movie set about city life, like an Indian restaurant designed to look like movies about the shanties of Calcutta. The intent is to aestheticize poverty, not to look like a safe white boulevard, but rather like an explosive Lower East Side from the twenties, elbow to elbow. Americans, or at least Angelinos, want that old community sensation back, now that the density in L.A. must grow, particularly

since the immigrant population is expanding massively. Ironically enough, those old neighborhoods, the bladerunner streets as they looked in the forties, were precisely the ones that were torn down as part of a massive urban restructuring of downtown L.A., from the thirties into the sixties, when old Chinatown, the old Mexican Sonora, the old burlesque district, the old Victorian slum district, and other barrios west of downtown were leveled, virtually without a trace. It has been said that nostalgia only works when the original experience has been forgotten, so that the container is empty enough to fill with wide-ranging anxieties about what we have lost. So it seems to be with the street level of *Blade Runner* city.

The upper levels are a mix of L.A. with Tokyo (a look that director Ridley Scott continued, as a kind of background-effects sequel, in *Black Rain*). The video billboards are clearly Japanese. The flying pods were designed by trans specialist Syd Mead, in the spirit of acrobats without a net, because in America and Europe, the idea of high spiralling loops for mass transit has been a designer fantasy since the teens. In this case, there is no track, only the craft in the air.

The endless rain, presumably very acid and a signal of a climate gone industrially mad, at first glance looks easy to do, but actually took considerable effort. The rain and smoke have a depth of field quite different from earlier films, where audiences sense a "curtain," as one of the special-effects advisors David Dwyer explained. Usually, the rain is double exposed, but none of the set behind it would tend to look wet. To add a depth of wetness in the *Blade Runner* rains, crews set up "little sprinkle spurts to make water drops in puddles when the live action shot was done without full rain," and backlit them. Afterward, to add these effects to shots where no rain was used (the "clean" shots), a new technique was devised; it allowed the final print to show the rain only where the water was backlit (along with extra puddles). In order to manage this effect, however, the composited scene had to be shot in low contrast black and white, as if the film were being returned to a forties black-and-white movie. After all, the thirties and forties gangster or later noir look often used rain as a symptom of the dark streets and dark souls inhabiting the city. It has become standard to think of forties detectives in their raincoats, so standard that the raincoat itself was parodied in *Columbo* shows. The bladerunner rain becomes the mark of the devil, in this case a devil of man's own making, the smog finally destroying the desert climate itself. I don't know what climate Scott and his effects people might have preferred in 1990, with all the debates on greenhouse effect (and severe drought everywhere in southern California). In the early eighties, they wanted dank rain, like a sticky night in old Havana, by way of Singapore, while the man in the Bogart haircut talks to us about his divorced wife, and his taste for clammy raw fish.

Interestingly enough, audiences in L.A. often remember this scene fondly — Harrison Ford at lunch — at a Farmer’s Market outdoor eaterie that might have possibilities. Indeed, there is nothing of the shopping-mall bistro here. It looks random, alive. But my memory of eating outdoors, having grown up in immigrant neighborhoods in south Brooklyn, is somewhat different. I see a world where no one has time or place to sit longer than a few minutes, where the streets are endlessly milling. I see the high urban decay of Coney Island in the early fifties, horny businessmen at Nathan’s coming on to men and women alike, luckily not young boys. It was unsafe, a place to watch one’s back. It was not homey, not what made a community. I suspect that was the look Scott was going for, but in this age of nostalgia for urban mix, he may have achieved the ultimate light show instead: an air-controlled night with Bogart in the shopping-mall ambience of a forties movie set.

Up in the zones of power, toward the Tyrrel pyramid, the shopping-mall ambience really takes hold. The optical camera work that blended all the effects together tended to airbrush the edges — to “blend, soften and add,” to “rephotograph something has already been built and photographed and make it even better.” The spirit of the theme park is very much alive here. We enter the space, and sense that the air-conditioning is designed to fit the mood. It is a fantasy that we see in deep focus, with each piece (climate, miniatures, movie flats) as a soothing reminder that this world is entirely under control, ominous, but clearly under control. We are tourists off the bus, in Orlando Florida, visiting a film noir ride. No matter how realistic the depth of field, we sense the artifice. We know, on some level, that many media have been put to work simultaneously. We know in the way movie-goers of the forties knew that hurricanes were being presented inside movie sets. There is no level of realistic special effects that does not leave us feeling safe, that we have somehow gentrified our worst nightmares, rephotographed them at our leisure. The bladerunner city, therefore is comforting in a strange way. We won’t live there. It is not our future. It is their future. But we will be allowed to visit. It makes for an interesting quiz actually. Ask the viewer: in terms of the future, do you see yourself as one of the dispossessed in *Blade Runner*, or one of the visitors?

One student has told me that *Blade Runner* feels very much like downtown L.A., where she lives, not because of the density, but because of the artificially controlled political chaos. Perhaps that is part of the bladerunner appeal. It looks like decay in the hyper mall, complete with transfer vehicles out. And many artists today, whatever their politics, however leftist their intentions, feel themselves slowly being forced into an elitist outland, into the hyper-sphere of high finance and elitist salesmanship. Increasingly, one is facing the theory of socialism without the working class, of populist art strategies that get snarled between mass-

culture marketing and the increasing separation between the classes in the very districts where art is made for public places, in sections of Manhattan, Los Angeles, London. It is a classic problem, centuries old: how to avoid servicing the wealthy patron. But now, with the class differences widening, and these gaps clearly reflected in cultural markets (from film, video, museums, to education) — also in urban planning (gentrification), and in the social background of students who make it to art schools, or to colleges at all, the problem finally has become too complicated to confront directly. We face it more easily as nostalgia, while we wait to see whether something terrible will bring down the whole house of cards — in the spirit of a bladerunner future. We wish for the old mom-and-pop stores in the old mixed neighborhoods that no longer fit well in the electronic, transnational world we live in today. *Blade Runner* helps us remember high urban decay at the moment before a community sank like a stone; or was gentrified into something else. Since Los Angeles is now increasingly a “multi-ethnic” immigrant city (less white, more dense), urban planners need to imagine a fantasy future much different than they had earlier. For the most part, they imagine a fanciful ghetto revival, a dream that once upon a time, there were neighborhoods where classes and races mixed freely; and so there will be again. For the moment, until Los Angeles changes even more completely, as it will long before 2019, bladerunner planning is still mostly hypothetical, like a movie still — a frontier outpost, a wetlands preserve. It reminds the viewer that the poor may retake the momentum of urban life, but for the moment, the old urban community is gone for good somehow, except as a movie set. For the moment, nostalgia replaces social reality.

The bladerunner reality is drifting farther away. At the same time, the bladerunner shopping mall is growing more tangible, like a mock journey through a museum installation about starvation in America, like the shows about homelessness, like bladerunner discussions at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles. We watch the future emerging like an air-conditioning unit designed to obscure the poverty and confusion that lay only a few blocks away. We do not want to be isolated, but we do not want to be singled out for misery either. We wait like the bladerunner policeman, to be called into action, with all the futility that goes with it — an old-fashioned film noir (what good can we do?). But all in all, we would rather eat off the street, mix with the locals a little but not too much, just let the crisis provide us with a visual symphony. As Baudelaire explained: “Anywhere, anywhere, just out of this world.”

Additional Note.

The director’s cut of *Blade Runner* has been shown recently, but only to restricted audiences, in museums etc. It runs a few minutes longer than the commercial release, without the voice over, and without the happy

ending. Very likely, it will become more available eventually, particularly since it suggests a darker vision that is more suitable to the mood of the nineties, while “bladerunner” comes into popular use, in daily newspapers, particularly as an architectural term (i.e. in a mainstream review of Frank Gehry’s work, as a way to describe the “inventive... post-apocalyptic” qualities of post-minimalist architecture).

This was written before the real-estate decline of the spring and summer, 1980, before the Iraqi crisis, and its linkage to the world economy. The era of Reagan-Bush gentrification appears to be ending, or entering a strange global, twilight phase — a neo-Victorian, computerized version of gunboat diplomacy. Urban planning in L.A. has slowed; crises in city agencies and political tensions on the streets have grown. However, the spirit of real-estate social planning continues, in the L.A. romance with the post-apocalyptic, as a form of “bladerunner inventiveness” (phrase in *L.A. Times* used to describe Frank Gehry’s architecture). The term “multi-cultural” also has come even more into vogue, with a baronial flourish in the newspapers that means adding a few chairs to the lord’s table, but probably not much of a shift in the way power is wielded in Los Angeles. Blade Runner city suggests two contradictory processes running straight into each other: (1) real-estate prices and policies continue to make white L.A. increasingly more segregated; (2) at the same time, the political power of Mexican-Americans appears to be growing here, as well as the growing rift between middle-class Mexicans who want to leave the barrios, and the poor who cannot. (Much of the Asian population is headed directly into many valley suburbs already.) Ultimately, the bladerunner image may take on a very conservative meaning after all, about the unraveling of the American political process turned into a glamorous drift into infamy — pauperization versus the “multi-cultural” suburb. With the recent single showing of the director’s cut of the film, it becomes apparent that originally *Blade Runner* was meant more as a psychological journey, that it was hoped the film could survive without the voice-over and the happy ending that was added finally. Now, the irony of that happy ending has been compounded; it reads increasingly as white political fantasy. Consider L.A. in the spring of 1991, with its police scandals revealing what many white cops felt they were expected to do to keep a lid on racial problems in the city. In similar fashion, the detective Deckard is hired to kill the cyberpunk problem, before it spread to the wealthy districts. According to the film, a repressed group slowly vanishes within the cracks of a suburbanizing, but declining, America. However, in L.A. this year surely the crisis shows no signs of vanishing. The tension in L.A. between growing white segregation and a growing non-white population cannot be wished away, pushed away, nor presented as a “multicultural” harmony. A 60s novel was remapped in a way that seems very appropriate for the shocks coming in the 90s.