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| Final Essay   |
| 2. Assess the cultural and/or industrial context in which a film adaptation(s) was produced. Demonstrate, using examples from the source and film, the effect this context had on the adaptation. |

## Did Philip K. Dick dream with Blade Runner?

“You will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.”

- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

There were several conceptual differences in the early development of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* as a feature film. In the late 70's Philip K. Dick, the original author, qualified the Robert Jaffe's screenplay adaptation as a “comedy spoof”. He also derided the Hampton Fancher's script in the first reading. It was quite a while later when Jeffrey Walker decided to involve Dick in the picture project, in order to involve him as a co-creator as well, and “Dick eventually became a supporter”. But even in this context, Ridley Scott -designated as the chief director- specified that he was not interested in “making an esoteric film” (IMDb, *Trivia*).

This works' transformation film seems like a struggle between the conceptions of Dick and Scott of art as a concept of expression, transmission and profitability.

On one hand, Philip Kindred Dick (1928-1982) was a science fiction writer born as a twin. His sister died a couple of weeks after they were born. This experience made him develop “a guilt complex and a hate towards his father and mother”, and also affected a significant part of his later, prolific, written productions.

Dick was, in fact, so precocious, that his first novel was finished when he was fourteen. As a literature enthusiast, he decided to study German Language and Philosophy at the University of Berkley and became a best-selling science fiction writer later in his life, but not a

rich man.

Dick's mental disorders emerged at the age of eighteen, with "a terrible agoraphobia". During his life, he took amphetamines in order to write faster, and also experimented with many kinds of different drugs. Some incidents, such a supposed burst of the CIA -to say it in Dick's words - or a supposed inner conversation with a superior, metaphysical being, made him a paranoid person, and he would pass the rest of his life thinking about the meaning of realities far away from this one. (García Fernández, *Dick*)

On the other hand, Ridley Scott (1937-), a British film director, started with painting and drawing. After his first production, *Boy on a bicycle*, which he made during film school, he "moved to New York with the aim of improving his skills in graphic design, photography and television; this [would] allow him to start working in the BBC and as advertising executive".

Later, Ridley jumped to the big screen with an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Duel*, which earned him the best *opera prima* price in the Cannes Festival. *Alien*, a horror and science-fiction commercial production, would establish the starting point of his mature production, that would reach its highest peak with *Blade Runner* (1982) (García Fernández, *Scott*).

Here we have the starting point for understanding the obvious changes that occurred during the translation from the written piece to its theatrical adaptation: a collision between an overflowing creative mind that "strove for mainstream popularity [its] entire career [and] never achieved it in his lifetime" (Brooker; 142) except in science-fiction, and a man who wanted to make money with art, and with a much more commercial conception of the artistic expression.

The first main objective should be to decide which parts of the novel should be translated and how. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a complex piece that, apart from the main plot, includes sub-threads, religious references, a different social structure, futurist concepts, bizarre machines, and some dilemmas about ethics and the status of Reality; after all, it seems that all we get is a big amount of textual information that was never considered to be represented in another way.

To include everything in a movie seemed to be impossible, because a transformation of a symbolic piece into an iconic one (Giddings, Selby, Wensley; 6) is "not simply a matter of translating a story from a literary medium into moving pictures of one kind or another. We were soon engaged in analysing narrative in one medium and another, and perceiving what could be done well in one medium and not in others, in discovering the strengths and weaknesses of language, sounds and pictures" (idem; ix).

They had to face these medium divergences and specificity. As the film medium skills

infers, and as we will analyze later, the image “implies a close relationship between signifier and signified” (idem; 6) and therefore a limitation of explaining abstract concepts, as well as an advantage in representing subjects or objects in action.

In addition to these limitations or capabilities, are added to the practice of the adaptation itself, should take “in account the commercial apparatus, the audience and the academical culture industry” (Naremore; 10).

In accordance with all the present obstacles for a faithful transposition between the complex, multi-threaded, original novel and a blockbuster film, it seems that they decided to perform an analog work (Wagner; 222-231) in the end, instead of trying to print the novel into the celluloid.

It is necessary to consider that Philip K. Dick wrote many of his novels inspired by his own visions, usually caused by hallucinogenic drugs. Works as *VALIS* (in which the main character's name is Philip K. Dick) tell us that we might consider his genre not just as science fiction, but also as a “personal, psychedelic fiction”.

If we watch *Total Recall* (Verhoeven; 1990), based in the short story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale*, it is not hard to conclude that planet Mars acts as a kind of outer reality in which it is not possible to apply our world's rules (nothing is what it seems, there is a constant dream-like sensation, it is not possible to trust anybody, the world is more defined by personal needs than by a real map, etc.).

The attempt to adapt *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* meant that *Blade Runner* had to conform to the restrictions on a popular genre such as science fiction, and not to take for granted that the inner, subjective metaphysical visions of Dick could be understood, and also accepted, by the audience.

One of the most important points in the novel is the existence of a religion called Mercerism. It is based on Wilbur Mercer, who is represented on a screen, constantly climbing a hill; his followers are able to connect their feelings to Empathy Boxes, in order to share theirs and Wilbur's pain with the rest of the people who are connected. The messiah must avoid the rocks that others throw at him from the top and when, in the end, Mercer reaches the highest peak, the cycle starts all over again.

There is a kind of a consumerism-friendly antagonist, Buster Friendly, who has a twenty-three hour TV show and makes claims against Mercer's hoax. However, in the end, both seem to be fake because they could be androids or recreations, and that have never actually existed as the people perceive them.

It is obvious that none of this information was conveyed into the film, perhaps because of the difficulty of representing it on a screen or perhaps because of the truly personal, unique meaning that this signified for Philip. Instead, Roy Batty shows a big spontaneous empathy attack in the end of his life by letting Deckard stay alive and by releasing the pigeon; in some way, he could be feeling that no matter who lives whether one lives for four or eighty years, we will die anyway and we will suffer the same anxiety. The pigeon could also refer, in a very Nietzschean way, to the eternal return, the wheel of life that we are all trapped in.

The need for a background, because “science fiction” seems too open minded, called on Ridley Scott’s previous work. If we have a look at *Alien* (1979) it is easy to see the similarities between both movies: the future as a dark place, with huge contrasts and chiaroscuros.

If science fiction was its story genre, the policemen and the darkness of the film became a reason for the *film noir* as its treatment genre. When talking about Rachel’s role in the feature film plot, we can say that

“it is through this well-worn, often apparently moralistic and regressive conceptualisation of women, as much as its aesthetic of shadows and Venetian blinds or its world-weary detective and his doleful voice-over, that *Blade Runner* returns to the territory of *film noir*.” (Brooker; 159)

There is another remarkable idea that thrills the novel’s Deckard: an android sheep. In a post-nuclear world, the big majority of the animals had become extinct, and having a real specimen was a luxury and a demonstration of social status. Deckard had one, but it died from tetanus<sup>1</sup>, and then he replaced it for a robot. Asking about how real a living thing is is insulting.

He is also married Rachel, a person who has a replicant who looks just like her<sup>2</sup>. Close to the end, one of them kills the sheep (as a sign of vengeance, because Deckard decided to continue to be a hunter, if his wife was, or because he killed some other replicants, in the case of the android).

The film simplified this by “divorcing” Deckard, and assigning the replicant Rachel as his lover, saving one character in the process. Also Roy Batty had his own lover, and both men would fight for their women.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Westwood Studios videogame (1997), this pet is replaced for a female dog, and the replicants kill her.

<sup>2</sup> This reminds us the fabled idea of the *Doppelgänger*, the *evil twin* in the northern mythology, who appears as the nemesis of oneself. Should we consider this as a coincidence or think about some kind of relation with Philip’s dead twin?

The sheep would not exist in the screenplay anymore, and instead, Ridley Scott would talk about an owl, that is not as important as the novel's pet. This makes use of the image support, because, while we recognize it as a fake, we will be able to contemplate a strange orange shining in the animal's eyes<sup>3</sup>. This clue provided, everybody is able to try to guess which humans share this characteristic and, therefore, are replicants.

The visual factor becomes an important resource in the film, and then

“looking, being seen or not seeing what is really there, is also central to the film's narrative trajectory and subject positioning. These technologies of seeing -electronic eyes, scanners, photographic cameras, retina devices and so on- are everywhere in the film, and they produce a layered or a type of miraculous vision.” (Brooker; 186)

The same optic function that characterizes the cinema is present -as meta-cinema?- in *Blade Runner*. Far from it, the novel never refers to its own textual nature.

There is a key piece of the novel's plot that was excluded in its entirety from the movie, and came back again in the Westwood Studios graphic adventure. The replicants are supposedly imitating a whole police station, as a parallel reality inside the city, intended to confuse Blade Runners. Deckard is involved in this play and, when the whole conspiracy is discovered, they make him doubt his state as a real human being<sup>4</sup>.

In the screenplay it depends on the version. The early release with the voice over ignored Deckard as a replicant, and just talked about how Rachel would never be out-dated and emphasized the love story. However, in the Ridley Scott's cuts, Deckard is still out of this conspiracy, but he dreams of a unicorn; if the story tells us that Tyrell is able to implant memories and Gaff leaves an origami unicorn for Deckard, it is sure that the implicit message is that Gaff knows what is in Deckard's head and therefore the Blade Runner becomes also a replicant in the end of the film.

Maybe with the aim of making room for doubt to all who want to see Deckard as a human, all the movies start in a neutral context: a Chinese food bar, with Deckard alone, “reset”,

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<sup>3</sup> They probably chosen and owl because the aesthetic power of its eyes in comparison with the tiny, dark, discrete eyes of a sheep.

<sup>4</sup> Again, the *Doppelgänger* seems to appear melting two opposite parts: the hunter and the hunted. “Are these my enemies or my brothers, after all? Am I what they are? Moreover, am I *how* they are?”, Deckard should ask.

with an opportunity for going back to his old job. This adds consistency to the idea that Deckard lives deluded, and seems to be the Ridley Scott's (not his film company's) intention to finish the movie in this way.

If in the film this debate seems to be closed, in the end of the novel Deckard finds a toad in the desert that turns out to be a fake after all: it is a disappointment, but he still prefers to know rather than to be ignorant. This message leaves, as in the film, the impression of an uncertain concept about the faithfulness of what is real.

The novel presents the Earth as a post-apocalyptic place, in which the only humans living are those who are poor or not smart enough to travel to space and colonize other planets. Radioactive dust floats in the air, and men need to wear lead genital protectors to avoid infertility.

Furthermore, it might be quite difficult to contemplate such a depressing scenario in a blockbuster film, so the people in *Blade Runner* seem to be people acting as a transposition of the 80's cosmopolitans: full streets, trendy behaviour, a big amount of car traffic, complex city maps, big buildings, gigantic light advertisements, etc., all moved barely forty years to the future.

The dust does not exist either. Instead, the rain complements the darkness. Maybe as a memory of two basic human fears (fear of the dark, fear of the water), Ridley Scott uses these elements to recreate a place that invites you to choose between staying at home or facing the reality. This decision could be motivated, on one hand, because the dust is not a visual element for the *film noir* rather for a decadent film and, on the other hand, because Ridley Scott seems to avoid the too-obvious references to the background elements; it is enough to mention the war in the beginning and avoiding to add unnecessary material to the plot.

There are some elements that barely change from the novel to the film. The Voight-Kampff test is one of them; it is not just a machine used for asking about the faithfulness of the interviewed, it is also a pretext for the interview as an essential piece in the *film noir*.

The replicants are still not the basic element. Instead, they act as a *MacGuffin*, existing in order to make Deckard discover himself as a person. In the novel, to make him prefer his wife instead of the android sheep; in the film, for making Deckard discover how precious his time is.

And the Outer World Colonies remain as an invitation to ascend to somewhere better. There is only one exception to this point: in the novel, the characters seem to be trapped in the Earth, in the film, the colonies represent just another option for living, like a summer house.

The Penfield machine, and also the concept of *kippel* and the way it works were totally removed. The first one probably because it referred too much to the inner feelings, as the Mercerism, and as we can guess the cinema is limited in ways of presenting them; this device is supposed to provoke a specific emotional response in the person, such as “guilty because I forgot to turn down the lights before leaving” or “today is my birthday and my dad finally arrived”. And the second one, because it refers to Dick’s determined concepts about the rubbish and the decadency, and invites the audience to accept that the entropy transforms the clean places to fully filled dirty places.

In conclusion, the novel and the film start from very different points and reach different endings, but the same topics remain in both of them. Both treat the relationship between the humans and the androids, the thin line that divide these conditions and the status of reality (what is real, and also if an objective reality exists). The exceptions are that in Dick’s novel there is more emphasis on the religious theme, and in Ridley’s work, the emphasis is on the importance of the time we have (that is also a cliché in many Hollywood blockbusters).

Many of the original concepts were removed in the screenplay, but instead the director showed how the novel’s world should be, thanks to the power of the image, this is also referred to inside the film.

Closing, it is possible to assert that, while the novel is Dick’s personal writing about a world in which the status of reality is in question, the film signifies Scott’s aspirations as an author feature film director.

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