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Urban Decay and Sexual Outlaws in the *Blade Runner* Universe

**Replicants as Deviants.** The urban future of Los Angeles in Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982) is one of advanced decay, an sf-noir vision of a postwar metropolis in decline. This classic film has a strong legacy of scholarly discussion, but little has been written that situates the film in the context of the late 1970s’ and 1980s’ demonizing and policing of sexuality in America’s major cities. Based on Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), the *Blade Runner* universe includes several spin-offs, such as a Marvel Super Special comic published in 1982 that adapted certain scenes from the film more or less verbatim, and three official *Blade Runner* sequels in novel form by K.W. Jeter (1995, 1996, and 2000) that received mixed reviews. A film sequel to *Blade Runner* is also forthcoming. For the purposes of this essay, however, the focus is on three of the most critically acclaimed and popular texts in the *Blade Runner* universe: Dick’s original novel, Scott’s film, and the Westwood Studios computer game *Blade Runner* (1997). In these works, the protagonists are “blade runners,” law-enforcement officers tasked with discovering and exterminating “replicants,” androids almost indistinguishable from humans but for a subtle difference in their morality. The Los Angeles of the *Blade Runner* universe is a city in decay from the ravages of World War Terminus, an apocalyptic conflict involving biological and nuclear weapons that has sent the world into a protracted decline. The fatal blow has already been dealt to the city, and it is rendered in a sustained state of physical decay. It is, however, 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. While the city falls into profound disrepair and its citizens succumb to debilitating sicknesses, the furor over fugitive replicants consumes the attention of the authorities and the blade-runner protagonists. Scott’s film is reflective of a culture fixated on the policing of sexual outlaws in American cities, a trend that was escalating at the time of the film’s release.

Several critics have rightly linked the minority status of the film’s antagonists, the replicants, to America’s historical racial prejudice. Replicants are slaves, forced to work in the colonization of other planets (known as Off-world), recreating the “halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states,” as a TV commercial in the novel proclaims (Dick 16). Replicants who escape are hunted down by law enforcement as they attempt to pass as human. In the 1997 computer game, a group known as Citizens Against Replicant Slavery (CARS) attempts to assist fleeing replicants, and one of their members, Spencer Grigorian (Terry Jourden), likens their efforts to the underground
railroad. There are clear parallels to be drawn with the system of slavery and the subsequent ingrained racism in America. On the one hand, replicants are machines created for the purpose of conducting hard labor and consequently are physically different from organic human beings. The apparent consciousness and emotions of beings made to be, in the words of the film’s Eldon Tyrrell (Joe Turkel), “more human than human,” however, makes the division far less clear. Replicants possess at least some humanity, therefore, and their alienation from the products of their labor and their simultaneous status as property in the eyes of the law evokes a system of arbitrary prejudice and oppression visited on human beings in the real world. There are many further examples of the appropriateness of comparing replicants and those maligned on the basis of race but, as Scott Bukatman writes,

the film refuses simply to “naturalize” its victims as either women or blacks—Roy is as hyperbolically male and heterosexual as he is hyperbolically white. What defines the replicants as victims is the status they’re given; it is their treatment by humans, and nothing inherent about “them,” that makes them who and what they are.... Their inferior status is arbitrary, solely a function of legal definition. (76-77)

This is less the case in the novel, in which Dick presents replicants as clearly lacking something inherent to human beings, which he shows in such scenes as the replicants Pris Stratton’s and Rachael Rosen’s indifferent mutilation and murder of animals. In the novel these replicant characters are fundamentally, unalterably different, however human they may at first appear. The amorphousness of the replicants’ Otherness is something only introduced with Scott’s film adaptation of the novel. The humanity or inhumanity of these characters is not something innate but rather is constructed by society’s image of them, just as it is with prejudice on the basis of race or sexuality: the replicants are considered depraved, perverted, and sinful merely for their deviation from the supposed norm. As well as this narrative, there are several specific clues in the film, as well as in the novel it was based upon and the game that was based upon it, that encourage readings connecting the urban decay and social outsiders of the Blade Runner universe to the issues surrounding sexuality in 1980s America. While the replicants’ Otherness is generally well-covered terrain, this specific and pertinent contextualization is as yet undeveloped in critical work on the film.

Sexual McCarthyism. One key and quite explicit clue to this is in the manner in which blade runners determine if a suspect is human or replicant. This is generally achieved through Voight-Kampff (VK) empathy tests. The tests measure a subject’s reactions, and particularly their involuntary reactions (pupil dilation, blushing), to a number of morally and emotionally provocative scenarios which the blade runner reads out. A typical example from the computer game sees blade runner Ray McCoy (Mark Benninghoffen) claim his briefcase is made from “baby hide.” Subjects who display delayed or insufficient moral outrage at these scenarios are deemed to deviate from the acceptable norm and are assumed to be replicants who can be “retired,” in the
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euphemistic language of the department. More often than not, retiring a
replicant involves violent retribution against the deviant being. Anne Allison
writes of the violence inflicted on artificial life-forms in movies such as *Blade
Runner*, and argues that the reconfiguring of the humanoid body raises issues
of selfhood and queerness: they are “subjects who, made in the nexus of
violence, emerge with their lines of ‘humaness’ and ‘selfhood’ redrawn.
Unanchored from the semblance of monolithic roots, these new subjects
exceed the parameters of a singular identity and, in this sense, are queer”
(244). Though “queer” has come to be used by critics to designate a wide
spectrum of deviations from the norm, Allison’s point can be applied directly
to the issue of sexuality in its focus on the body.

The retiring of replicants that looks in the film and computer game so like
the killing of a human is in the novel an explosion of intricate machine parts,
yet in all three cases the violent retirement disassembles the simulation of
humanity. These bodies deviate from the human norm, and the violence
inflicted draws attention to this. When blade runner Rick Deckard (Harrison
Ford) retires Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) in the film, for instance, he at first finds
it difficult to distinguish the replicant from the crowds on the Los Angeles
streets. Upon taking his first shot, however, he forces Zhora into running
through mannequin-filled, neon-lit store windows. The scene highlights the
objectification of the replicant body, with Zhora’s slow-motion public
execution surrounded by the constructed scenes of commercial window
displays. At the same time, in clear contrast to the backdrop of inanimate
mannequins, Zhora’s human-like qualities are highlighted one last time
through the sound of a heartbeat in the background, the blood from her
gunshot wounds, and her mouth open in silent screams of pain. Scenes such
as this demonstrate how the ruthless binarism of the blade runners’ moral and
legal codes creates a distinction between acceptable and deviant bodies. The
replicants, initially indistinguishable from others on the Los Angeles streets,
are only differentiated through the violent intervention by blade runners
against those deemed to be inhuman.

The violent intent of the blade runners that queers these androids’
selfhoods is dependent on the interrogation of the empathy tests. In all three
texts, displaying empathy is depicted as a moral act, and consequently the
replicants’ difference from humanity, their lack of empathy, is immoral and
incriminating. This is often tellingly connected to deviations from the supposed
heterosexual norm. In the novel, in response to a question involving a picture
of a nude girl, Rachael interrupts to ask, “Is this testing whether I’m an
android ... or whether I’m a homosexual?” (43). In the film, Rachael (Sean
Young) asks the same question, “Is this testing whether I’m a replicant or a
lesbian, Mr. Deckard?” The implication is clear: the blade runners accuse
both Rachael’s of transgressive thought, of having a private (and perverse)
identity that would criminalize them in the eyes of the majority. In post-House
Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) America these characters display
the anxiety over committing an Orwellian thought-crime, of feeling taboo
desires and consequently being “outed” and punished. Joseph McCarthy had,
in fact, also persecuted homosexuals as part of his Red Scare communist witch hunt, in what came to be called the “Lavender Scare.” Individuals were administered tests such as polygraph interviews and psychometric surveys; merely by refusing to answer questions they could be accused by authorities of “homosexual tendencies” and therefore also a likely propensity to communist activities (Johnson 144). Wendy Pearson writes of how the fear of the ability of queers to invisibly “pass” manifests in “a proliferation of stories and films fixated on the danger of the alien who is able to assume human guise and travel unseen amongst us,” demonstrating that post-Second World War science fiction typically seen as anti-communist can also be read as homophobic (6). This environment of fear in which people seen as “twisted mentally or physically in some way” (Johnson 16) are rooted out and punished is strongly echoed in the VK tests of replicants in the Blade Runner universe.

Sexual transgression is also raised when replicant subjects attempt to turn the tables and accuse their accusers, demonstrating the universal vulnerability to being labelled deviant. In the novel, opera singer Luba Luft objects to Deckard’s sexual line of questioning and declares, “You’re not from the police department; you’re a sexual deviant” (90). In the computer game the dancer Dektora (Signy Coleman) ends a VK test, turning a gun on blade runner McCoy and remarking, “You’re some kind of sexual deviant.” In both cases, the replicants use this accusation as a cover to telephone the police. Bound by their commitment to and faith in the legal system, the blade runners await the police officers, not knowing that in the novel the officers are from a department infiltrated by replicants, and in the game are replicant sympathizers. Suddenly finding their roles reversed, the blade runners experience crises of identity, as they wonder if perhaps they are in fact replicants with implanted memories. In the film the dancer Zhora, too, seems to suggest that Deckard is a sexual pervert. When Deckard says “You’d be surprised what a guy’d go through to get a glimpse of a beautiful body,” she scoffs and pointedly replies, “No, I wouldn’t.” In these scenes sexual perversion is demonstrated to be subjective, with the potential for any individual to be accused of perceived deviancy and thus labelled criminal. The film takes a slightly different route than the novel, changing the opera singer Luba Luft into the topless dancer Zhora, and the game follows suit, with Dektora a topless dancer as well. The change in occupation thus connects the outsider replicants to taboo sexual activities rather than to the acceptable mainstream. In each case, with both Rachael’s and with Luba Luft, Zhora, and Dektora, the accusation of sexual deviancy and perversion carries with it fears of stigmatization and even criminality, and can be used as a weapon to destroy a person’s credibility. This is evocative of the crackdown on safe areas of sexual expression in American cities in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The Glamour of Decay: Los Angeles and New York City. Following from such postapocalyptic films as The Last Man on Earth (1964) and The Omega Man (1971), Blade Runner uses its Los Angeles setting as “a blank canvas on which to depict the neuroses of city life” (Bell 51). In Ecology of Fear, Mike
Davis writes that Los Angeles has become a singular place in the American imagination, as the prototypical American city built on land conducive to natural disasters. He writes that the “gleeful expendability of Los Angeles in the popular imagination is in no small part due to Hollywood, which, when not immolating itself, promotes its environs as the heart of darkness…. The decay of the city’s old glamour has been inverted by the entertainment industry into a new glamour of decay” (278). A prominent example of this can be seen in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939)—adapted into a film of the same name in 1975—in which the character Tod is planning a painting of Los Angeles on fire. He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd. (85)

In works such as this, the immolation of Los Angeles can be enjoyed as an aesthetic, even glamorous, spectacle. The appeal of an erosion of the built environment also extends, however, to the erosion of the constructed social architecture of the same space. After 1980 in particular, Davis writes, “the city turns from an endangered home into the Alien itself; and its destruction affords an illicit pleasure not always visible in previous annihilations” (282). Apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fictions, previously concentrated on London and New York, now focused their attention primarily on Los Angeles, and the city would be enduringly popular as a site of destruction. The Alien Other of the 1980s described by Davis “echoed highly publicized claims that ‘real’ extra-terrestrials were on a sexual crime spree” (340-41). The glamorization of urban decay in film of this decade, therefore, is connected to the perceived threat of sexual Otherness visited on the city, which finds expression in *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles and its transgressive replicants.

As Scott Bukatman writes, however, the original title for *Blade Runner* was “Gotham City” (61) and the major set for the film was “the New York Street at Burbank Studios” that had been used in “numerous Warner Bros. crime films and noirs” (21). Despite the film’s ostensible setting in Los Angeles in 2019, therefore, the aesthetic is deeply rooted in portrayals of New York City, an environment long associated with urban claustrophobia, atrophy, and architectural recycling. Indeed, the city had recently experienced calamity with the fiscal crisis of 1975, in which President Gerald Ford initially declared that he would veto a bailout, effectively abandoning New York to its fate. The city had become unusual in an increasingly suburbanized America, with its downtown displaying the concentrated integration of disparate sections of society. As Marshall Berman writes, the tendency across the country was to abandon the city and move to “zoned suburbs protected from ‘them,’ from various stigmatized economic, racial and ethnic groups” (68). Emblematic of the stigmatization of New York City, Berman writes, is Times Square, which symbolized “un mauvais lieu, a whole city stigmatized” (68). *Blade Runner*’s
enormous video billboards clearly echo the aesthetics of today’s Times Square, but Wong Kin Yuen also points out that the film’s Hong Kong-inspired visuals evoke the Hong Kong “Times Square” mall, an apparently coincidental American-Asian crossover (5). Both Hong Kong’s and New York’s Times Squares are “patronized by practically all walks of life” and are “fairyland[s] of diversity and display” (6). The similarity seems also to have prompted the inclusion of a Times Square calendar displaying “the millennium’s celebratory riots” in Jeter’s first novel sequel (*Blade Runner 2* 12). The comparison between the city streets of *Blade Runner* and New York’s Times Square goes further than aesthetics, however, extending to the marginalization and demonization of a particular segment of its citizenry.

According to George Chauncey, the existence of Times Square as a central location in the gay landscape of New York City began in the 1920s (2). By the time of *Blade Runner*’s release, films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) had established a pervasive, though “arguably overblown,” image of Times Square, reflecting how the area had become “the most crime-ridden district in all of New York City,” with one of its most defining features being “the ambivalent attractions of the illicit, especially of non-normative sex” (Eeckhout 205). Times Square had become, in Pat Califia’s words, a “sex zone,” a designation which transforms the city into “a sign of desire: promiscuity, perversity, prostitution, sex across the lines of age, gender, class, and race” (216). Sex zones do not have an independent existence but rather are superimposed upon other spaces and generally come alive at night, providing community and security to various groups of the sexually stigmatized and providing a black market for contraband. Elizabeth Grosz views this as the strength of such regions, noting that “women, or gays, or other minorities, aren’t ‘imprisoned’ in or by space, because space (unless we are talking about a literal prison) is never fixed or contained, and thus is always open to various uses in the future” (8). In the 1970s these areas, and particularly in the sale of pornography and patronage of the bathhouses, generated “an economy that could support activism and assumption of a full-time, totally open gay identity” (Califia 7). The resulting sex zones such as New York’s Times Square created a space in which visitors could be educated in and practice safe sex and enjoy the company of others with whom they could identify and feel a sense a community. These areas also, however, attracted unwanted attention from city authorities, making it easier “to both demonize and control them (and to sanctify majority cultures and spaces)” (Knopp, “Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis” 136). Despite Grosz’s optimism about the “gay freedom” and “very large closet” of sex zones, the geographical delineation of sexual identities enabled far easier targeting of such groups by those who found their existence undesirable.

**The Policing of Sexual Identities.** In 1971 New York’s Mayor John Lindsay sought to move against Times Square as a place for sexual freedom with his “Times Square Development Council.” This led to the creation nearby of two police “super precincts” that objected to “the proliferation of prostitutes and
pornography primarily because they attracted unspecified ‘undesirables’ to the area” (Senelick 344-45). A number of other task forces also emerged to “return Times Square real estate to ‘good commercial uses’” (345); this continued well into the 1990s and beyond with Rudy Giuliani’s “crusades against ‘immorality,’ on behalf of ‘civility’” (Berman 68). Science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, in his autobiographical *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), is particularly concerned with the manner in which this kind of language disguised the destructive intent of the changes proposed. Of the “redevelopment” program he writes:

in the midst of that spurious vision of a stable world, it first struck me that “major development” of the Times Square area would mean *a priori* major demolition, destruction, and devastation in what had established itself not only in the American psyche, but in the international imagination, as one of the world’s most famous urban areas. (xiv)

The invasion of spaces such as the bathhouses by these movements made public spaces out of private ones, and the acts conducted within them accordingly became classified as “‘lewd,’ ‘indecent,’ or ‘unnatural’” (Califia 18).

As Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) became a national issue in 1981, raids on bathhouses took place across the country, pushing gay sex to less secure places such as rest stops and adult bookstores. Local newspapers publicly shamed people caught in these places, creating a homophobic environment of stigmatization and secrecy. Reagan was silent on the AIDS crisis until 1986, in his second term, although the religious right that helped bring him to power was bombastically vocal, as Allen White writes:

A significant source of Reagan’s support came from the newly identified religious right and the Moral Majority, a political-action group founded by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. AIDS became the tool, and gay men the target, for the politics of fear, hate and discrimination. Falwell said “AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals.” Reagan’s communications director Pat Buchanan argued that AIDS is “nature’s revenge on gay men.”

Many conservatives saw AIDS as an opportunity, hoping that the disease, “which they imagined as a ‘gay plague,’ would be a wedge to help them turn back gay rights once and for all” (Faderman and Timmons 308). This kind of divisive propaganda enabled intervention in the form of policing rather than prevention. Under the language of stamping out AIDS, shutting down areas of free sexual expression for gay people in fact slowed the fight against the spread of HIV, while at the same time Reagan “failed to act on AIDS because of his commitment to the New Right, which required a moralistic stance against gays and lesbians and drug users” (Brier 80).

This moralistic stance led to the Reagan-commissioned 1986 Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography (known as the Meese Commission after attorney general Edwin Meese). The report was a biased charade that, as Califia warns in the same year, “holds out the hope that by using draconian measures against pornography we can turn America into a rerun of ‘Leave it
to Beaver” (42); it indicated “a new wave of sexual McCarthyism. Porn is about to become the ‘red menace’ of the ’80s” (44). William E. Brigman describes how the report was an effort on the part of the administration to suppress pornography altogether: it “relied heavily on selected anecdotal presentations to mount a propaganda attack on pornography” and instituted new laws that “appeared to be aimed at child pornography, [but] were designed to regulate the producers of all sexually explicit materials out of existence” (158-59). Since the 1970s some feminist groups had also been campaigning against pornography, believing that “sexually explicit words and images were causally linked to sexual violence against women” (Senelick 346). The suppression of pornography, vital to the economy of the sex zone and gay neighborhoods, was crucial in undermining their stability. While not all visitors to the sex zone visit porn shops, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner write, “all benefit from the fact that some do”: “A critical mass develops. The street becomes queer. It develops a dense, publicly accessible sexual culture. It therefore becomes a base for nonporn businesses” (562). Zoning laws brought about in the wake of the Meese report broke apart these queer streets and thus prevented queer communities from continuing to develop in the cities.

These events led to a peculiar sexual climate. The late 1970s and the 1980s were an era when the sex zones and gay neighborhoods both provided safe communities for those of minority sexualities and simultaneously brought these people into a place where they could be more easily stigmatized and controlled by the dominant forces of society, when sexual puritanism promised to crack down on all forms of sexual expression, and when the AIDS crisis threatened to isolate and demonize these groups still further. It is in the midst of this environment that Scott takes a novel about a stigmatized, demonized minority who transgress the boundaries of the urban environment and threaten to corrupt society with their supposedly unnatural, perverse natures, and adapts it into a film that blurs the lines between this minority and the majority.

Permeable Boundaries. The occupations of Luba Luft, Zhora, and Dektora clearly connect these replicant characters to the sex zones of Los Angeles. Their employment as public performers also, however, highlights the performative nature of their existence on Earth: they are not really human female performers but rather androids in drag enacting the performance of being human. Intent on hiding their real identities, these characters are forced to lead double lives, performing the roles of acceptable members of society while bearing secrets that would see them rendered criminal. Links between the performative acts of replicants and sexuality can also be seen in the elaborate and theatrical confrontation between Deckard and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) in the final scenes of the movie. For Deckard the chase is, as Bukatman writes, “some kind of homophobic nightmare” (85). The use of the term here is one of the very few explicit references to homosexuality in critical work on the film. Using the term to describe Deckard’s fear of Batty’s unclothed physicality during the performance of his deadly masquerade,
however, Bukatman stops short of expanding on this idea to link the replicants to the sexual climate at the time of the film’s release. More generally, however, he demonstrates that the “performative side of Roy Batty breaks down traditionally drawn distinctions between the authentic and the artificial, or theatrical,” enacting “a performance of self that becomes an implicit challenge to Deckard’s stoic desire to preserve the ‘real’” (85; emphasis in original). By breaking through walls between rooms, climbing through windows, and leaping between buildings, Batty redraws the accepted routes of the built environment, much as he transgresses the metaphorical boundaries of the society that the built environment houses. He treats the Bradbury Building as, in Michel de Certeau’s words, “a space of enunciation,” expressing himself through his navigation of physical space just as one expresses oneself in speech through navigating language (98). Batty foregoes the established routes of the physical environment (doors, hallways, and stairs) in favor of spatial transgression, in a way that evokes his daily transgression between secret identity and public performance.

Deckard quickly loses his advantage; while he is pointing his gun toward a doorway, Batty breaks through the wall behind him, seizing his gun-wielding hand and breaking his fingers. It is clear from moments such as this, when Batty disrupts the physical boundaries of the building, that Deckard has entered a world in which the rules he follows do not apply. Deckard’s panic and loss of control are reflected in the heavy noir styling of disorienting lighting, soft focus, and spotlights shone through boarded-up windows, as he is forced into a way of existing in the world that he does not understand and that he finds intensely frightening. An additional visual indicator of this is the characters’ costumes. Whereas Deckard is wearing his heavy overcoat, which he has resolutely worn throughout most of the movie, Batty stands in contrast to this with his muscular physique clothed only in close-fitting shorts and a pair of shoes. Having disrobed specifically for this confrontation, Batty’s sexual physicality is a part of what Deckard finds so disorienting in this scene. As Deckard finds himself unable to take cover behind the now clearly permeable barriers of brickwork and doorframes, he too is forced to transgress the physical environment. Breaking the glass drawers of an old cabinet, Deckard utilizes its wooden frame as a ladder to reach the rotting ceiling and pushes himself through to the next floor. What Bukatman describes as Deckard’s “stoic desire to preserve the real” must be abandoned as the roles of hunter and hunted are reversed. With his established sense of normality shattered, the role reversal results in Deckard’s coming to some understanding of the replicant’s plight in Batty’s final moments. As Laura Kipnis writes,
Kipnis’s point here, on the transgressive culture of pornography, could be a description of Deckard and Batty’s life-or-death dance in this scene. Deckard, who had always resisted the world of replicants in his work as a conservative, self-protective blade runner, experiences something both terrifying and revelatory as he is forced to transgress these boundaries himself. The encounter is reminiscent of Delany’s celebration of Times Square as a site of “rewarding, productive, and pleasant” contact and sexual expression, in contrast to the harmful effects of the demonization of difference (111).

Just as the permeability of its walls reflect his transgressive movements, the decay of the building also has connections to Roy Batty’s body. Coming to the end of his limited lifespan in the decaying Bradbury Building, Batty’s body begins to act against him, his fist closing against his will. His increasing physical deterioration and truncated lifespan have a clear resonance in an America still coming to terms with AIDS, discovered only a year before the film’s release. The corporeal anxiety of the AIDS era thus manifests in the film in the anxiety over degenerating physical, notably urban, space. N. Katherine Hayles writes that in Dick’s novels “androids are [often] associated with unstable boundaries between self and world” due to the fears they raise about the self being assembled and disassembled (160). This is equally the case in the film, as we see the fate of Batty and the architecture of Los Angeles tied together. As Batty dies, the dove he had been holding in his hands flies away into the polluted city sky; while certainly speaking to Batty’s liberation from the prison of his doomed body, this moment is also suggestive of Deckard’s awakening. In transgressing the enforced boundaries between Batty and himself, Deckard becomes aware of the arbitrary nature of these boundaries. With the division between replicants and humans no longer distinct and immutable, Deckard no longer needs to suppress his desire for the replicant Rachael.

Illicit Relationships. In both the novel and the film, Deckard’s relationship with Rachael threatens to leave him a social outcast and, potentially, a criminal. In the film, after he discovers that Rachael is a replicant, Deckard begins a romantic relationship with her. He forcefully initiates this relationship, physically restraining Rachael and ordering her to submit under the apparent threat of violence. Initially resistant and almost in tears, Rachael indicates her acquiescence to Deckard’s domination not only by repeating the phrases he demands she say but also by ad-libbing her own. The scene can be viewed as an example of taboo sexual role-playing, specifically of dominance and submission. As a blade runner, however, Deckard holds the power over whether the replicant Rachael lives or dies, and so her acquiescence may be only to appease Deckard and earn his protection. Indeed, as an android Rachael can be entirely objectified, literally owned and commanded by Deckard to do his bidding. Either way this is a scene that can be unsettling for viewers, presenting as it does a form of romantic or sexual interaction uncommon to Hollywood movies before or since. As such it is far more suggestive of non-mainstream relationships and the kinds of activities
marginalized to the realm of the sex zones of major cities. Jeter takes this idea of sexual ownership further in his first novel sequel, *Blade Runner 2*, insinuating that Eldon Tyrell’s niece, Sarah, was sexually abused by her uncle and that the replicant copy of her, Rachael, was built to serve as Tyrell’s sexual slave in Sarah’s place. In any interpretation of the character of Rachael, however, the sexual relationships in which she is involved are clearly intended to be deviations from those typically accepted by society.

At the film’s close, Rachael and Deckard leave the apartment, and Deckard notices an origami animal on the floor outside his door, the calling card of the police officer Gaff (Edward James Olmos). Evidently Gaff has toyed with the idea of retiring Rachael but chooses instead to allow her to live out her limited lifespan with Deckard. His gun raised, Deckard escorts Rachael into the elevator, implying that they will flee the city and the legal system that would criminalize their relationship. Despite this apparent taboo-breaking human-replicant relationship, however, the film makes a point of showing the sexual objectification of each of the female replicants by male humans. Deckard’s first meeting with Rachael in the softly-lit Tyrell building is charged with sexual tension, Deckard studying Rachael’s involuntary pupil dilation through the mediation of the Voight-Kampff machine as she slowly smokes a cigarette. Aside from Zhora’s occupation as an exotic dancer, police captain Harry Bryant (Michael Emmet Walsh) first introduces her to Deckard as a trained killer who is both “beauty and the beast”; Pris (Daryl Hannah) is described as “a basic pleasure model, a standard item for military clubs in the outer colonies.” The work of military space exploration in the *Blade Runner* universe seems to be primarily carried out by replicants, hence Batty’s final monologue describing how he has “seen things you people wouldn’t believe.” Thus whether the Tyrell Corporation designed Pris for the sexual gratification of android or human soldiers is unclear, though her seduction of Sebastian while in a romantic relationship with Batty demonstrates that there need be no rigid dividing line. Either way, female replicants are apparently all built with sexual objectification in mind but, while human-android relations might be permitted in the military clubs of the outer colonies, they remain transgressive acts on Earth.

In the novel the legal boundaries that prevent human-android relationships are more explicitly stated. Fellow blade runner Phil Resch asks, “Don’t you know, Deckard, that in the colonies they have android mistresses?” Deckard responds, “It’s illegal.” Resch replies, “Sure it’s illegal. But most variations in sex are illegal. But people do it anyhow” (123). Despite its illegality the transgression is evidently common in the colonies and even Deckard, whose job requires him to be opposed to replicants, “had found himself physically attracted by several” (81). Deckard’s reflexive response, “It’s illegal,” therefore, seems to hint at self-censorship. The supposed sexual deviancy of human-android relationships is apparently common and perfectly natural, only demonized in societal stigma and legal definition. Certain humans evidently feel attraction to androids and act on this attraction, though they keep this part of their lives secret to protect themselves from prosecution. There are clear
parallels to be drawn here with any number of criminalized acts marginalized to the sex zone, such as gay sex or prostitution, in which visiting “respectable” members of society secretly participate.

In the computer game the player character can enter a romantic relationship with one of two replicant characters. McCoy is himself either replicant or human, depending on the random selection made by the computer at the start of a new game, and on the choices the player makes through the game world. The method of play, either mercilessly retiring all replicants or favoring either Dektora or Lucy (Pauley Perrette), determines which of the several endings will take place. If Dektora or Lucy is favored in the player’s choices, McCoy will escape the city with them either alone or together with the other replicants aboard the “moonbus.” It is notable that both of these characters, Dektora and Lucy, are very visibly connected to social issues of sexual deviance. Dektora is of course a topless dancer in the red-light district of Nightclub Row (the same location where Zhora worked in the film), and the storyline of Lucy, Dektora’s fourteen-year-old daughter, includes issues of pedophilia.

From the first scene of the game it is made clear that Lucy’s sexual identity takes precedence for characters of the game world. Her previous employer Runcitter (Warren Burton), whom McCoy meets at a crime scene, refers to Lucy as “a very attractive young thing.” When McCoy asks if she was treated well as an employee, he explodes, “as well as any young tart should be treated!” Lucy later tells McCoy that Runcitter treated her as though she belonged to him. Though Runcitter is presumably unaware that Lucy is a replicant (and therefore able to be “owned” in the eyes of the law), his attitudes towards her nonetheless speak of a kind of sexual, patriarchal ownership and domination. Runcitter sees Lucy not as a person but as a sexual object. Another character, Early Q (Stephen Root), owns a nightclub advertising “live exotic dancers,” in which Dektora and other women perform as objects of sexual entertainment. McCoy notes that Early “used to call himself a humanitarian because he’d recruit orphans for his sex club.” Questioned about whether he knows Lucy, Early replies, “This ain’t no day-care center, General. ‘Course she ain’t half bad looking. My grandpappy always used to say if there’s grass on the field it’s time to play ball!” Unashamed to display his pedophilic inclinations in front of McCoy, Early nonetheless denies anything that could be seen as criminal. In one photograph McCoy discovers, however, it is clear that on at least one occasion Early sexually assaulted Lucy while her mother Dektora was in the next room. On discovering this McCoy remarks, in his voice-over, “Early, you sick bastard.” Though Runcitter’s and Early’s exploitation of Lucy is certainly presented as depraved in the game, if the player chooses to act on Lucy’s attraction to McCoy and to escape the city with her no judgment is made about McCoy’s transgression of the age of consent. Though their need to flee the city contributes to the feeling that they are acting outside the law, Lucy’s complicity in their relationship results in an upbeat, optimistic ending. Here the computer game medium shows its strengths: whereas it would likely not
have been possible to follow such a storyline in the novel or the film, the computer game allows players the opportunity to explore the idea of cross-generational relationships and the motivations of the characters involved. Offering multiple choices, the game allows (but does not pressure) the player to question her or his own belief in the moral basis for legal boundaries surrounding age of consent. The fact that the player-character may already be outside the law as a replicant further blurs the boundaries between what is considered right and wrong, providing an opportunity to experience traversing morally ambiguous terrain not easily explored in the linear storylines of the novel and film. Indeed, the ability to save and load games and thus try different routes allows curious players to transgress these boundaries and then return to safer ground if they wish.

Setting this narrative about the sexual abuse of a fourteen-year-old and her subsequent cross-generational elopement in the *Blade Runner* universe is fitting given the context in America at the film’s and the game’s releases. At the time of the film’s release, a national moral panic had been whipped up in the wake of the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act of 1977. This legislative act, as well as several others passed in the following years, was directed towards cracking down on the sexual exploitation of children, but it contained vague wording and could be liberally exercised. In 1996, the year before the computer game’s release, the Child Pornography Prevention Act was passed, banning any kind of computer-generated image which might be construed as an eroticized representation of a minor. Given the computer game’s inclusion of the romantic storyline for Lucy, the developers tread a fine line given the rigorous policing and public outrage at representations in any media of children’s sexuality. The broad applicability of acts such as these (and many others passed in the intervening years) led to a number of cases of aggressive police crackdowns on anything that might constitute a transgression of sexual thought. A number of high-profile court cases thus directed attention not towards preventing child abuse and protecting minors but rather towards “criminalizing thoughts and emotions,” often ruled by the Supreme Court as threatening to breach the First Amendment (Califia 66). Given these contemporary concerns, the computer game’s inclusion of both the sexualization of a minor and the option for the player-character to enter a cross-generational relationship presents a challenging set of moral issues. These issues are largely presented without judgment, inviting players to decide their own paths.

**Deviancy and Class.** It is not only replicants in this universe, however, who are marginalized as outsiders. In the film, J.F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) is a character whose low status is demonstrated spatially. Driving a ground car and entering his home, the Bradbury Building, by a street-level entrance, he is shown as being less privileged than Deckard, who drives a hover-car called a “spinner” and enters buildings through their roof entrances. As with other dystopian films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Time Machine* (1960), *Blade Runner* establishes a “high/low dichotomy with the wealthy literally
occupying the upper strata of society, while the workers struggle below” (Bukatman 63). Given the film’s architectural roots in New York City, this evokes the systematic restructuring of the city in the post-Second World War years by Robert Moses. As Robert A. Caro writes, Moses recreated New York to separate and divide its populace, as he “tore out the hearts of a score of neighborhoods,” “flooded the city with cars” (19), and left minority groups and the poor “dispossessed” (20). This creates a city in which one dominant “type” occupies the privileged position while a variety of minority and subjugated groups are kept at a distance. Through *Blade Runner*’s presentation of “unchecked urbanization,” the social disparity created by this division results in “levels of misery rarely seen in American film” (Vest 10). This spatial separation creates a vast disparity in living conditions in *Blade Runner*. For instance, the entrance to Sebastian’s home is piled high with garbage in which Sebastian finds another outsider, the replicant Pris. Outsiders such as Sebastian and Pris are thus shown as having been side-lined and discarded, living out of sight of the affluent and elevated members of society among the urban detritus that the novel refers to as “kipple.” Lonely and isolated, though for different reasons, the two find acceptance and company with each other. Sebastian is socially stigmatized because of a medical condition, Methuselah syndrome, which causes him to age quickly and has left him unable to pass the medical exam necessary to move Off-world. His “accelerated decrepitude,” as Pris refers to it, means that he feels he has more in common with the replicants than with the dominant strata of society, and he quickly sells out his boss Tyrell to Pris and Batty.

Sebastian’s equivalent in the novel, J.R. Isidore, is part of a more widespread group of the socially stigmatized known as “specials.” “Regulars” who have stayed in the city rather than relocating Off-world are eventually corrupted by the dust from World War Terminus, which turns them into specials. Isidore is a member of a subset of specials known as “chickenheads,” tainted people who have diminished mental capacity. By law chickenheads are unable to reproduce or to move Off-world. Deckard wears a lead codpiece and undergoes monthly check-ups to confirm his status as a regular, defined as “a man who could reproduce within the tolerances set by law” (Dick 8). The definition of the family is thus legally protected from transgression through mixing with chickenheads, just as it is against the law to become sexually involved with an android. In a seemingly prophetic choice, Dick imagines the alienating condition affecting subjects through sexuality, just as many cases of HIV were to be transmitted through sex. In this way Cold War-era anxieties regarding the bomb and global war provide a suitable form for AIDS-era anxieties of the sexual transmission of disease and make the novel a well-suited source text for a film released in 1982.

Isidore, like Sebastian, has sympathy for synthetic life, which he views as being a result of his own low status: “maybe it’s I, John Isidore said to himself. Maybe when you deteriorate back down the ladder of evolution as I have, when you sink into the tomb world slough of being a special—well, best to abandon that line of inquiry” (63). Discrimination against minority groups
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is a luxury afforded only to the privileged, and Isidore more readily finds acceptance among others who are as ostracized as he. Isidore is overjoyed to have company in the form of Pris Stratton and Roy and Irmgard Baty. Initially unaware of their replicant status, he is determined to keep his own status a secret: “I have to keep calm, he realized. Not let him know I’m a chickenhead. If he finds out I’m a chickenhead he won’t talk to me; that’s always the way it is for some reason” (23). On discovering his guests are replicants, however, Isidore finds himself so connected with them that he becomes their dedicated servant. Isidore later draws the parallel in their statuses himself, when speaking to the replicant Roy Baty about the replicants’ illegality on Earth: “I’m a special; they don’t treat me very well either, like for instance I can’t emigrate.... You can’t come here; I can’t [go Off-world]” (140). After the sense of belonging he had felt, Isidore finds that he can no longer exist in solitude: “The silence, all at once, penetrated; he felt his arms grow vague.... You have to be with other people, he thought. In order to live at all.... You can’t go back, he thought. You can’t go from people to nonpeople” (175). When Deckard retires the replicants, Isidore gives up his life in the otherwise empty apartment building, heading “deeper in town where there’s m-m-more people,” where he can become part of a community again (193). After having lived in self-imposed isolation in the suburbs, the meeting with the replicants gives Isidore the realization that he can find solace in the company of others who have been socially excluded. Heading deeper into the city of San Francisco, a city already well established by the time Dick’s novel was published as the sanctuary in the US for gay, lesbian, and trans people, Isidore finds community and identification in a metaphorical sex zone of the similarly disenfranchised.

Arbitrary Division. While the replicants and specials are clearly outsiders, the power of the Blade Runner universe lies in the fact that the dividing lines are always blurred. The silence Isidore experiences in his empty apartment building, which “smote him with an awful, total power ... as if it—the silence—meant to supplant all things tangible” (18), is also experienced by Deckard and his wife Iran, who sometimes hear the empty apartments “at night when [they were] supposed to be asleep” (5). The loneliness of existence is not specific to those physically alone such as Isidore but is felt by all in an increasingly depersonalized urban future in which people are categorized, judged, and criminalized by the law. Doubt is also cast in each work about the human/replicant status of the protagonist. Deckard in the novel and film and McCoy in the game all experience moments of doubt over this, and the narratives never conclusively settle this question one way or the other. At any moment they might be discovered and fall on the wrong side of the law, destined to be hunted until their short lifespans run out. Lastly, as much as these hierarchies consume their lives, the characters in these works are all stuck on Earth, trapped in the moribund city of San Francisco or Los Angeles. If the blade runners survive their assignments they will still eventually succumb to radioactive dust, and if replicants successfully evade capture they
will cease functioning after only four short years. For all their efforts these characters are all outsiders, each as disenfranchised as the other.

To return to the context of the suppression of cities’ sex zones in the early 1980s, a similar dynamic is at work. Lawrence Knopp writes that “dominant forms of gay male identity politics are strongly linked (ideologically, if not in practice) to the infiltration by gay men of mainstream economic and political institutions” (“Sexuality and Urban Space: Gay Male Identity Politics” 154). As with racial passing, during the postwar Red Scare and Lavender Scare the political and sexual Other in the city was someone who could not be identified by sight, who was in fact not noticeably different from anyone else. Lines drawn by vaguely worded laws designed to police sexual variation during these years did not represent actual fundamental differences but were merely arbitrary. Yet however arbitrary they were, being accused carried severe penalties in a society embroiled in a moral panic and new conservatism that emerged in reaction to the 1960s and was encouraged by the new religious right that contributed to the election of the Reagan administration. Scott’s film and the computer game based upon it take a novel set in San Francisco, the home of some of the first gay neighborhoods in the US to suffer from the crackdowns of the late 1970s and 1980s, and transplant it to Los Angeles, a city that glamorized decay, adding an aesthetic that draws on the look of New York, a city notoriously in economic decline in the 1970s. Whether consciously or unconsciously utilizing such motifs, the franchise reinforces these great American cities as locations primed for destruction, with the arbitrary divisions established between its citizens only helping to precipitate this end. *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles of 2019 is a city fixated on decay, both in its physical architecture and in the supposedly deviant individuals infiltrating its populace; as such it reflects the supposed moral decay of urban centers that was very much a part of the popular conversation at the time of the texts’ releases. Whether specials, replicants, or blade runners, the characters of the film, the source novel, and the computer game are all detrimentally affected by this fixation and the vigorous policing of the arbitrary dividing line separating out what is deviant or undesirable.

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NOTES


2. There are multiple versions of *Blade Runner* in existence, but the three major releases are the theatrical cut (1982), the director’s cut (1992), and the final cut (2007). This article will not attempt to delineate the differences among these versions, as they have been thoroughly analyzed by other scholars (see, for instance, Paul M. Sammon’s *Future Noir* (2004) for differences between the theatrical and director’s cuts, and online resources such as Doc Idaho’s comprehensive comparison of the director’s and final
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3. A computer game also titled Blade Runner was released in 1985 for the Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, and ZX Spectrum. It was very poorly received. Unable to obtain the rights to the film, the production company said it was based “on the Van Gelis [sic] soundtrack” to the film and is only loosely based on that universe (Mangram 14). The Westwood Studios computer game was released for PC in 1997, and ties in very closely with the film. Several locations and characters from the film are featured in the game, and the player character Ray McCoy’s investigations almost have him crossing paths with the film’s Rick Deckard at several points, although they never actually meet. Several actors from the film voice the videogame versions of their characters, including William Sanderson (J.F. Sebastian), Brion James (Leon), and Joe Turkel (Eldon Tyrell). The lush filmic environments of the game were taxing on systems in the game’s time, and it was packaged on four separate CD-Roms. Despite selling in excess of one million copies and receiving largely favorable reviews, it is now no longer available (Woodard).

4. See, for instance, Barringer’s “Blade Runner” and Nishime’s “The Mulatto Cyborg.”

5. The convergence of religion and politics, initiated only a few decades previously and the groundwork for the Reagan administration’s relationship with the religious right, is explored in Kruse’s recent One Nation Under God.

6. For more on the feminist anti-pornography movement and the supposed connection between sex and violence, see Bronstein’s Battling Pornography.

7. Scott’s change of the name Baty to Batty may be a link to the informal, pejorative term for a male homosexual, “batty boy,” a phrase of Caribbean origin. The term has seen more widespread use in post-Second World War Britain than it ever has in America (“Batty boy”; batty bwai; batty bwoy” [The Concise New Partridge Dictionary]). As Scott was born and grew up in England in the years this was first introduced, it may well have been familiar to him.

8. The dove flies into a clear sky in the director’s cut. The choice to introduce a clear blue sky at this point is incongruous, given the aesthetics of the rest of the movie, but it further emphasizes the freedom of the dove in flight. The polluted sky in the final cut tempers this optimism, more closely fitting with the film’s ending: Rachael and Deckard resolve to make a life together, but Rachael has a limited lifespan and, if Deckard is a replicant, so has he.

9. In the theatrical version this is made more explicit, ending with an added scene in which Deckard and Rachael drive a ground car along a sunny mountain road. The voiceover during this scene tells the viewer that Rachael is “special,” without the limited lifespan of other replicants.

10. In the majority of the possible narrative lines the game can take, it does seem clear that Lucy is a replicant. On some play-throughs, however, a Voight-Kampff test determines that she is human.

11. In the narrative line in which Lucy is human, this might explain why she has two replicant parents.

WORKS CITED


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**ABSTRACT**

The urban future of Los Angeles in Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982) is one of advanced decay, an sf-noir vision of a postwar metropolis in decline. While the city falls into profound disrepair and its citizens succumb to debilitating sicknesses, however, the furor over fugitive replicants consumes the attentions of the authorities and the blade runner protagonists. The film and the 1997 video game based upon it take a novel set in San Francisco, the home of some of the first gay neighborhoods in the US that suffered from the crackdowns of the late 1970s and 1980s, and transplants this to Los Angeles, a city which glamorized decay, adding an aesthetic that draws on the look of New York, a city notoriously in economic decline in the 1970s. The plight of specials, replicants, and blade runners in the *Blade Runner* universe reflects the context of a culture fixated on the policing of arbitrary dividing lines separating what is designated sexually deviant or undesirable in American cities at the time.