

GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S "BLADE RUNNER"¹Monica TOMA²

Abstract

Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" is a complex, unique production that has allowed a variety of readings. This article proposes a new, Gothic interpretation of the film, viewed as a modern approach of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" combined with many other Gothic elements. The first part of the article enunciates the characteristics of the Gothic, whereas the second half identifies the elements of this genre in the film. The conclusions will show that the Gothic pervades "Blade Runner" on every level.

Keywords: Gothic, Blade Runner, Replicant, android, robot, monster.

1. Introduction

Ridley Scott's 1982 film "Blade Runner"³ is a loose adaptation of the 1968 short novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"⁴ written by Philip K. Dick. Although it was a box office failure when it appeared in the theatres, "Blade Runner" was much appreciated later when rediscovered on cable TV and video cassette, becoming a cult work for an entire generation. It is important to mention that Scott also released a Director's Cut of the film in 1992, which amplified the complexity of the scenario.

The plot is an intriguing one, involving a variety of science fiction elements. "Blade Runner" takes place in 2019 Los Angeles, which looks like a future megalopolis. The police receives a report that four Nexus 6 Replicants⁵ (Roy Batty,

¹ Blade Runner is one of the 50 films that are stored in the United States Library of Congress for its contribution to film culture.

² Monica TOMA, Associate Teacher at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, toma_monique@yahoo.com

³ The title suggests that the protagonist runs on the edge between humanity and inhumanity. In the film, a Blade Runner unit is a police squad trained to detect and "retire" any Replicant who returns to Earth from the off-world colonies.

⁴ In Philip K. Dick's view, the "sheep" metaphor refers to people who are psychologically human but behave in a nonhuman way.

⁵ The Nexus 6 Replicants are a new model of androids created by the Tyrel Corporation that are almost indistinguishable from human beings. Fearing this resemblance, Tyrel manufactured these androids with deliberately shortened lifespans. Feeling threatened by the presence of the Nexus 6

Pris, Zhora and Leon) have killed the crew of a space shuttle and escaped from an off-world colony. The androids have returned to Earth in order to get to the Tyrell Corporation and have their short life span extended. The Blade Runner assigned to hunt them down is the cop Rick Deckard, who falls in love with a fifth Replicant, Rachel.⁶

Zhora, Leon and Pris are destroyed, but Roy, the most dangerous android, succeeds in meeting his maker, Eldon Tyrell himself. Roy asks his genius creator to alter his genetic code so that he may live longer. When he discovers that this is not possible, he kills Tyrell in an act of despair. At the end of the film, Roy, who is about to die, has Deckard at his mercy, but decides to spare his life. Deckard and Rachel run off together.

This original and engaging creation has been interpreted and analysed in divergent ways. The film has been seen as a metaphor of the postmodern condition⁷, as a masterpiece of "future noir"⁸, or as a frightening dystopia⁹ envisioning a dark and dismal near future of our humankind. But, most of all, "Blade Runner" may be understood as a Gothic work. The article means to identify the elements of this genre in the film, starting from the premise that we are facing a story of transformation and conversion.

2. Characteristics of the Gothic

The Gothic was born during the Romantic and Victorian eras, appearing, as Botting affirms, "in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality." (Botting, 2005: 1) According to the English researcher, this genre "shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence" (id.) Being influenced by these two movements, the Gothic encompasses many of their themes, motifs, narratives and characteristics.

Replicants, the human society has banned them from Earth and only uses them for the difficult work in the colonies on other planets.

⁶ Rachel works for Eldon Tyrell and doesn't even know she is a Replicant.

⁷ See Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner" in *October*, no. 41, 1987, pp. 61-74.

⁸ The film reveals an entire *noir* sensibility: the femme fatale, the trench-coated 40's-style detective with a soft spot for a dame in trouble, lipstick, cigarette smoke, plenty of hard liquor, a grand piano, softly-lit rooms of old furniture, slow-moving fans, Venetian blinds and voice-overs, existential despair, darkness.

⁹ Ridley Scott introduced a new type of dystopian landscape that resembled the real world but also Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Anticipating the emerging cyberpunk, he created a breathtaking urban atmosphere with huge modernist megabuildings, multileveled walkways, flying cars, neon-lit oriental advertising, streets full of Asians dressed in exotic clothes, artificial animal merchants, ghettos for impoverished migrants, etc.

Thus, this genre is deeply concerned with themes such as the desire to surpass one's own existential condition, the longing for eternity, loneliness, sinfulness, revolt, human reason as hubris when confronted with the monsters it creates or with its own monstrosity, the darkness hiding in plain sight, etc. By using inversion and reversal, the Gothic brings into light all that has been repressed and exposes everything that was secreted away. It opposes the natural and negates what has been deemed normal.

The Gothic reveals the uncertainties of the Romantic and Victorian eras in the face of the apparent dissolution of the ontological structures that provided until that moment a validation of being. It divulges the doubts of these periods concerning the nature of power and law by depicting the evils of an intolerant and unequal society. It expresses a critique of the existing ideological or political crisis by showing what could go wrong and what could be lost if things continue along certain paths. It expresses the feeling of insecurity brought about by the changes of the everyday world, by scientific progress and technological development with their dehumanizing tendencies.

In Gothic works, the fear of the unknown is accompanied by depression, anxiety and a fixation on death. A perpetual threat of disintegration comes both from inside and outside the boundaries of self and society. The loss of human identity and the alienation of the individual go hand in hand with psychotic fragmentation and psychological obsession. The body is ghosted by something alien and strange, being continuously displayed with its violent, yet vulnerable immediacy.

The protagonist is often an individual who stands on the edge of society, while the villain is the epitome of evil. The decaying and bleak environments are populated with strange figures reappearing from the past or from a distant place, with monsters, doubles, alter egos and other animated representations of the disturbing parts of the dark side of the psyche. The presence of these supernatural characters produces in the reader some sort of hesitation which is similar to the uncertainty produced by fantastic texts.

As a matter of fact, Tzvetan Todorov seems to perceive the Gothic as a mode of the fantastic which includes the marvelous and the uncanny. In his view, when a seemingly unexplainable event occurs in an otherwise realistic setting, the reader is forced to decide whether he finds himself in the realm of the "marvelous", where new laws of nature must be taken into consideration, or in the realm of the "the uncanny," or of the "supernatural explained," where the laws of reality are preserved, but where unfamiliarity appears in the familiar and familiarity in the unfamiliar. (Napier, 2012: 5-8)

The uncanny disturbs the homely and secure sense of reality and normality, transforming everything that is known into something strange and terrifying.

Shrouded in strangeness, the everyday world becomes alienating and threatening. The menacing castle or the ruined building, the gloomy forest, the dark labyrinth and the desolate city or landscape are areas of nocturnal violence and dread, portraying the deterioration of a once thriving world. The dangerous and mysterious nature of these places of doom is usually rendered by a multitude of visual and auditory elements: characters trapped in a room, lights blown out by the tempest, rusty hinges, howling wind, crazed laughter, sounds of footsteps and slammed doors.

In these environments based on feeling, the sublime and the horror dominate. In Botting's opinion, the sublime is associated with grandeur and magnificence, for it provokes terror and wonder. Its immensity reveals "a glimpse of infinity and awful power, intimations of a metaphysical force beyond rational knowledge and human comprehension." (Botting, 2005: 2-3) According to the same critic, this realm contains "all sorts of imaginative objects and fears situated in or beyond nature" (Botting, 2005: 3) which proliferate "in a marvellous profusion of the supernatural and the ridiculous, the magical and the nightmarish, the fantastic and the absurd" (id.).

The Gothic shows a refusal of conventional limits, of civilised and domestic values, subverting good behavior in its narratives that seem to celebrate usurpation, betrayal and violent execution. Passion, excitement, unrestrained wildness and untamed frenzy defy social proprieties, moral laws and religious precepts. Horrible and strange events, awful incidents and life-threatening pursuits, mysterious adventures and dark romantic encounters feed the reader's appetites for sensational in an overflow of violence and vice. Menaces are spiced with thrills, dangers with delights.

The Gothic undermines the boundaries between life and fiction, reality and representation, the sacred and the profane, the good and the evil, the artificial and the natural, the rational and the irrational, the civilised and the barbaric. These antitheses produce excessive effects, opening the text to a "dynamic of limit and transgression that both restores and contests boundaries." (Botting, 2005: 6) Through this ambivalent play, Gothic works operate in a veiled sense. For even if they seem irrational and barbaric, dark and evil, their secret intention is to reassert the importance of sanity, virtue and propriety in an ever-changing world. By presenting the crossing of limits in its darkest and most horrifying form, the Gothic actually underlines the value of social and moral boundaries.

Modern twentieth-century Gothic recycles all these strategies, narratives, themes and motifs and adapts them to the challenges of the time, its creations continuing to engage the readers' interest and to attract them in the strangest and most unexpected manners. Talking about the pervasiveness of the Gothic across time and space, Botting affirms:

In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values. Gothic condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption. If not a purely negative term, Gothic writing remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic. In a world which, since the eighteenth century, has become increasingly secular, the absence of a fixed religious framework as well as changing social and political conditions has meant that Gothic writing, and its reception, has undergone significant transformations. Gothic excesses, none the less, the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries, continue to produce ambivalent emotions and meanings in their tales of darkness, desire and power. (Botting, 2005: 1)

3. Gothic elements in “Blade Runner”

“Blade Runner” is undeniably a celebration of transgression and excess, ambivalent in its aims and effects. It is a production that not only projects an overwhelming atmosphere, activating a sense of uncontrollable emotion, but also challenges our reason by blurring the bounds between the good and the bad, the legal and the illegal, reality and possibility, human and android. The film seems to express the humanity’s growing fear of technology while simultaneously inverting the generalised belief that uncontrolled science leads to dire consequences.

Weaving together motifs from Shelley’s “Frankenstein”, Milton’s “Paradise Lost” or the “Bible”, Blade Runner” treats profound themes such as: the created humanlike monster that hungers for realness, life and love, the hubris of creation, the sin against God or humanity, the separation of the creature from his creator, the fallen status of man, the desire for immortality, the crossing of boundaries into darkness, the need to surpass one’s own limits, estrangement, humanity and love. It is a film of richness and depth that tries to answer the profound questions of existence: Who am I? Why am I here? How am I supposed to use the time that I’ve been given?

The film’s ironic setting, Los Angeles or “the City of Angels” is a representation of a lost Paradise, a site of inequality, loneliness and alienation, but also of eroticism and surprise. The opening shot presents a disembodied eye which reflects some flames bursting from the tops of buildings, an obvious allusion to hell that shows man’s disillusionment with modernity. The polluted, decaying industrial city, where the sun no longer shines and on which a brown drizzle falls endlessly, where nature is almost extinct and everything is artificial, may also be seen as the opposite of the green, idyllic Garden of Eden.

This threatening, ruined city of the twentieth century with grubby streets and dark alleyways represents a modern development of the gloomy forest that appeared in earlier gothic creations, while the haunted castle hiding evil secrets has metamorphosed into a nightmare corporate building with endless labyrinthine corridors, cramped offices and locked doors where monsters are created or where people themselves become monstrous. Such a building is the enormous pyramid-like structure of the Tyrell Corporation that dominates the city with its sublime, synthetic artificiality.

Here resides Eldon Tyrell, the mad scientist and evil aristocrat turned into a capitalist manufacturer of androids, whose hubris lies in the arrogant design to make Replicants "more human than human" in their perfection, while simultaneously preventing them from developing in a human way. As a genetic engineer, Tyrel is paralleled in the film with the Heavenly Father of the Christian tradition. But he is neither God, nor good, and he soon reveals his limitations as a creator surpassed in many ways by his own "experiments". Just like in "Frankenstein", the maker tries to kill the monsters that he has created, but ends up dead because of his own creations.

It is important to notice that, due to the presence of the Replicants, the film blurs the boundaries between the uncanny and the marvelous. As already mentioned, the term "uncanny" describes things that follow the rational laws while at the same time being disturbing and unusual. In the realm of the uncanny, imaginary characters may appear in real life, effacing the distinction between imagination and reality and taking over the functions of the things they symbolise.

From this point of view, Tyrel's Replicants seem to belong to this realm. They are artificial humans produced by fusing machine preciseness with the matrix of human flesh, products designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. Even if twentieth century science has not reached that level, the viewer is willing to consider that technological development may bring about the creation of sophisticated androids. The spectator is led to believe that, one day in the future, the machines that do the difficult, hazardous work instead of the humans may have heat tolerance and acrobatic skills like Pris, the pleasure Replicant, or optimum self-sufficiency like Roy Batty, the android designed for war.

The Replicants are so well-perfected that it is almost impossible to distinguish them from their model without the help of the Voight-Kampf equipment, able to detect human empathy. The film suggests that those capable of empathy are representatives of the human race, while those without feelings are androids. The problem in "Blade Runner" is that the robots begin to behave more humanly than those who are supposed to be human beings.

Replicants not only develop emotions, they do so quickly enough that an emotional cushion of implanted memories is applied to them in an attempt to keep them under control. The emotional cushion of memories is meant to provide robots with a sense of being loved and cherished, as well as with a sense of self. Since these false memories belong to human beings and there are no causal links between them, this sense of self can only be questionable. (Reeve, 2015: 274) However, robots do possess self-awareness, just as Pris does, who establishes her own existence as Descartes considers that we can establish ours: she thinks, therefore she is. (Reeve, 2015: 276) Replicants also acquire a sense of identity by getting emotionally involved in their own authentic experiences. Moreover, they seem to have a life and a will of their own. This aspect is also noticed by C. Reeve:

Pris knows why she exists. Her tricks are things she was designed to do, just as Sebastian's toys were designed to welcome him home. Her revealing clothes and sexy body are part of the repertoire of a basic pleasure model. But if Pris is a pleasure model, while Zhora is trained for a kick murder squad, why is it Zhora who is working as a snake dancer in a strip club? Why is it Pris who has the murderous legs? A Replicant's intended purpose, it seems, is one it can subvert. Design is not determining or freedom-destroying. It isn't fate. Replicants can thwart it. (Reeve, 2015: 277)

By making us believe that robots can acquire free will and develop self-consciousness and feelings just like human beings, the film transports us into the realm of the marvelous, where seemingly impossible things can be explained by accepting a second layer of reality, with new laws of nature. Only by stepping into this dimension can we accept that the Replicant Rachel is able to fall in love with Deckard, or that Deckard, the lonely classical tough-guy becomes enamored with a soulless artifact.

Nonetheless, the blurring of boundaries between human and machine goes beyond this example. When the detective administers the Voight-Kampff evaluation to Rachael, she asks him if he could pass this test. Her question raises the possibility that Deckard, the Replicant killer, could be himself an android despite his seemingly organic appearance.¹⁰ This possible reversal of the situation is also suggested later in the film by Deckard's dream of a unicorn running through a misty forest, the appearance of the mythical beast hinting that his own memories might be artificial. Indeed, in the last scene of the film, Deckard finds in his apartment a small origami unicorn likely made by Gaff, a member of the police department who was shown earlier in the film crafting this kind of figure. His enigmatic grin might be saying that he has understood that he is a Replicant with implanted memories and that he accepts this fact.¹¹

¹⁰ Dick intends Deckard to be human, while Scott considers that he is a Replicant.

¹¹ According to Reeve, the question of Deckard's being or not being a Replicant remains open:

"Blade Runner" begins with Rick Deckard as the main character, but, as Michael Martin says, "our allegiance is altered through the film, and we come to sympathise with Roy Batty, the Replicant, who appropriates the role of protagonist." (Martin, 2005: 107) As a Replicant, Roy has been living in exile from Earth but, since his assigned four-year life span is approaching an end, he is coming "home" to request a prolongation of life from his creator.

Roy exhibits many of the characteristics of the Byronic Hero.¹² He possesses an Apollonian physical beauty and superhuman abilities, he is a poet, a philosopher and a genius who can win at chess against his maker. However, he is also an outcast who refuses to abide by society's laws, he is arrogant, dangerous, angry and filled with hatred. His fiery, daemonic side is revealed in the beginning of the film when he intentionally misquotes from William Blake's *America: A Prophecy*, transforming Blake's rising angels into fallen ones. The fact that he identifies himself with a fallen angel is also apparent when he kills Chew, who designed his eyes and Sebastian, who tried to help him. When he murders Tyrell while kissing him, we are reminded of another dark character from the Bible: Judas.

Bloodshed is in Roy's nature, for he has been designed as a combat model with optimum self-sufficiency. But that does not mean he does not feel guilty about his acts. Roy kills because he is tormented by the horror of his own life as well as by the limitations of mortal existence in general. He rebels against Tyrell, his tyrannical maker, in order to take revenge for his own mortality, but also to destroy the cruel authority which manufactures androids in order to use them as slaves and then have them killed.

It is interesting that, when he finally meets his creator, Roy does not ask for more time, but for more "life". In the Replicant's case, this might also mean "more freedom" or "more meaning". There is yet another interpretation to this. According to the Sacred Scripture, to which the film constantly refers, God's breath of life implies the creation of man as a unity of body and soul. Thus, the android's request

As he seems to fall into a dream, we seem to see it with him. A white unicorn charges towards us, twisting its head to gore something with its horn. When the dream evaporates, the screen fills with a close up of Deckard's family photographs. The message, apparently, is that his dream is an implant that is known to Gaff, his photographs, fakes. Like Rachael, he is a Replicant—mortal, but also soulless. Well, that is one possible message, one way to read Gaff's final figure. But there is also another. In one of his notebooks, Leonardo da Vinci gives voice to some common lore about how unicorns finally get hunted and captured: "The unicorn, through its intemperance and not knowing how to control itself, for the love it bears to fair maidens forgets its ferocity and wildness; and laying aside all fear it will go up to a seated damsel and go to sleep in her lap, and thus the hunters take it." Deckard knows this lore, we may suppose, and dreams about a unicorn because he has already begun to fall for Rachael, and—subliminally—to register the consequences. (Reeve, 2015: 11-12)

¹² The Byronic Hero was created by George Gordon Byron. He represents an important character type of the Romantic period. Roy is a mixture of Romantic and Gothic elements. (Marin, 2008: 81-86)

might suggest that he not only wants to have his genetic code altered, but that he also longs for an immortal soul, which is out of Tyrell's jurisdiction.

One of the most impressive moments in the film is that of the struggle between Roy and Deckard that takes place in the old Bradbury Building. The gloomy atmosphere, the wildness of the characters and the intensity of the hunt are emblematic of the Gothic technological nightmare. John Kerber, who also highlights the noir and science fiction elements in the scene, notices:

[...] the rooms are darkly lit, with boarded up windows casting horizontal shadows on the character's faces. Lightning flashes and thunder booms outside as the rain pours down harder than ever before in the film. [...] mechanical structures and beeping machines set the backdrop while Batty, now nearly naked in only his underwear, screeches and stalks Deckard throughout the halls of the Bradbury Building. [...] Batty's vitality is nearing an end, and he knows it. In a close up shot, his pale white hand uncontrollably clenches and begins to make a fist, signaling that he is beginning to shut down as he has reached his expiration date. He growls, "Not yet!" while he grabs a nail out of the floorboard and drives it through his palm in an attempt to shock it back to life. (2017: 26-27)

Roy's piercing of his own hand with a nail may be seen as a reference to Christ's Crucifixion or as an anticipation of his radical transformation from a murderer into a savior. When he finally has the opportunity to watch Deckard fall to his death, Roy instead saves him, thus freeing himself from his limitations and acquiring true freedom. Roy's overcoming of his condition convinces the bounty hunter that Replicants are more than just machines. In his final monologue, Deckard empathises and identifies with Roy because he recognises that the Replicant's predicament and dilemmas belong to all mortal existence, either android or human:

I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before, not just his life, anybody's life, my life. All he wanted were the same answers the rest of us want; where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? (Blade Runner, 1:47:28)

The scenario seems to suggest that, in the last moments of his life, Roy, the machine programmed to kill, has a moment of profound revelation and understands the great law of the universe which reaches its perfection in love. In a truly Christian manner, he forgives and saves the one who tries to kill him, treating Deckard like a brother with whom he can share the most meaningful experiences of his life.

Roy's soliloquy, brilliantly improvised by actor Rutger Hauer, is extremely moving: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the Shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die." (Blade Runner, 1:47:06) This extraordinary monologue is an account of the Replicant's

memories of especially beautiful and horrifying moments that bear the touch of eternity. Talking about Roy's awe inspiring words, Wilson affirms:

These are numinous shimmers of the violent harmony into which the cosmos occasionally coheres. Such instances are ephemeral but they nonetheless comprise portals to the eternal, the condition in which one is no longer troubled by time—the past as regret or nostalgia, the future as anticipation or dread. The foliate flames of dying ships, the scintillations of unexpected beams—these events seize the watcher, pulling him from the cares of the ego and opening him to marvels unfettered by minutes and maps. (Wilson, 2006: 92)

As Roy dies, he releases into the sky a white dove, symbol of the freed soul going to heaven, but also of the Holy Spirit who descended upon Christ at his baptism. Roy's obsession with Christianity, as well as his evolution from the condition of a "fallen angel" to the imitation of Christ, shows the longing of the machine for a transcendent reality, for love, connection, and realness.¹³ For this reason, he evokes the compassion of the spectator.

4. Conclusions

In the spirit of the Gothic tradition, "Blade Runner" crosses the borders between the human and the machine, but also between the uncanny and the marvelous, by depicting "almost human" androids that are capable of feeling emotion. Just like other Gothic works,¹⁴ the film illustrates the uncertainties of its own era concerning science by showing how the androids are considered a threat to society because of their resemblance to human beings. The Gothic is also present in the menacing atmosphere of the film and in the plot full of murders and violent executions: bounty hunters kill Replicants, while Replicants kill people and androids alike.

"Blade Runner" explores Gothic themes such as the need to surpass boundaries, monstrosity, alienation and revolt, containing many characters that are representative of this genre. Rick Deckard embodies the lonely hero who stands on the edge of society, while Eldon Tyrell is the evil scientist who creates monsters (the Nexus 6 Replicants) and ends up being killed by his own creation. The powerful, vindictive antagonist Roy Batty represents the monster which revolts against his maker because of his miserable condition, but also the monster that turns out to be more human than his human creator. By operating in an ambivalent way and by using ambiguity¹⁵, the film reasserts the importance of real values in an ever-changing world. Due to this abundance of Gothic elements, "Blade Runner" may indeed be considered a Gothic work *par excellence*.

¹³ The longing of the machine for life, love and realness reminds us of the puppet's longing to become a human being. (ex: Carlo Collodi's "Pinocchio")

¹⁴ For example, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein".

¹⁵ Deckard, the Replicant killer, could be himself a Replicant.

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The author

Monica Toma obtained her bachelor's degree in Romanian, French and English Language and Literature at the "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia. She received a master's degree in the History of Images, History of Ideas and a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. She also got a master's degree in the *Culture and Language of European Organisations* at the University of Bucharest. She has published various articles in a number of nationally and internationally recognized journals. At present, she is an Associate Teacher at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.