Cyborg Noir: Symbiotic Thematic Signification in Blade Runner

Just as film noir reflected the new anxieties of America adjusting to postwar urbanism, Blade Runner addresses the postmodern technological anxieties of the 1980s. In adjustment to this new cultural context, the film incorporates science fiction semantics into a film noir syntactic framework. Doll and Faller evaluate Blade Runner to indicate that such multigeneric combinations lead to a short-circuiting or jamming of irreconcilable genre-specific signifiers.¹ Though this may offer a valuable explanation of multigeneric films’ critical performance, I contend that it fails to specifically address the distinction between semantic and syntactic properties of genres and, as a result, signification as it relates to a theme of cultural anxiety shared between genres. Blade Runner is not simply short-circuited; it is a film that generates updated questions of moral ambiguity, addresses anxiety over new forms of deviance and technology, and essentially finds noir in a different syntactic context.

Film noir can be roughly characterized as a genre preoccupied with cultural unease. For Doll and Faller, anxieties are frequently the thematic end-point of generic signification: “after conventions are recognized as belonging to a specific genre [...] specific meanings, arise [...] connected to deep-rooted human or societal fears and concerns.” ² Film noir’s ‘specific meanings’

¹ Doll, Susan, and Greg Faller. "Blade Runner and genre: Film noir and science fiction." Literature/Film Quarterly 14, no. 2 (1986): 89.
² Ibid. 89
are initially rooted in new postwar urbanism and economic growth. The recent memory of World War II’s automated devastation leaves noir with a fascination with the technological; noir captures technology as it changes how the city is traversed (with new forms of mass-transit), and how the city is seen and heard (with new technologies of recording and surveillance). That surveillance is not only the driver of technological anxiety, but also driven by anxiety over new forms of criminality and social deviance. Unlike the crime films before them, films noir find criminals among the urban working middle class; as the criminal becomes more obscured in the urban landscape, it becomes more important for the private eye or middle-class protagonist to follow and find them. Film noir’s paranoia is the product of a moviegoing public fundamentally anxious about the uncertain verifiability of discourse in centripetal space.

Genre films address those anxieties by building an association with certain semantic and syntactic signifiers. Take the example of Double Indemnity: technological anxiety is referenced through semantics such as telephones, voice recorders, doorbells, and public transit as metaphor. The connection to new criminality is more syntactic: though the specific crimes, criminals, and protagonists differ between films, films noir typically feature a narrative structure dominated by chase or investigation. Truth is hidden in noir’s characteristic low-angle shots and heavy shadows. Doll and Faller uncontroversially consider Blade Runner multigeneric, a “mixture of genres […] that precludes a simple, single, or predominant generic classification.” Though their

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7 Doll, Susan, and Greg Faller. "Blade Runner and genre: Film noir and science fiction." Literature/Film Quarterly 14, no. 2 (1986): 89.
identification is correct, they do not sufficiently describe *Blade Runner*’s specific synthesis of semantics and syntax to describe its signification about anxiety.

Their primary shortcoming is a focus on signification at a semantic level that ignores the dominance of film noir syntax. *Blade Runner* primarily draws on film noir’s tradition of narrative structure and visual style.\(^8\) It also adopts noir’s concern with the blurred definition of criminality.\(^9\) Its struggle to define the distinction between replicant and human is an adaptation of noir’s syntactic focus on deviance which—in noir’s conventional semantics—is usually expressed as a struggle to define and hunt criminals among the urban middle class. Though the characters and objects are pulled from contemporary science fiction, they’re arranged (both in plot and on screen) and relate to one another according to the norms and tastes of film noir canon, critical parts of any definition of film noir and of an understanding of its utility.

Film noir has a clear semantic influence on *Blade Runner*—Doll and Faller’s analysis of this influence can be grouped into lighting, composition, and costuming decisions that emulate noir—but the film’s semantics are dominated by its science fiction influences. Though its Los Angeles is, in some sense, the same Los Angeles that features in *Double Indemnity*, *Blade Runner* presents a hypothetical Los Angeles of 2019. It is an “aestheticized [...] crowded, aggregate, and polyglot megapolis [...] dense, complex, and heterogenous with its additive architecture, sensuous ‘clutter,’ and highly atmospheric pollution.”\(^{10}\) The film does not claim to be a portrait of the city as it really is, as does *The Naked City*, but instead presents a “retrofitted

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utilization” of one of film noir’s most common backdrops, repurposed as a part of science fiction semantics because of its ubiquity. Ridley Scott may be tipping his hat to film noir’s geographic semantics, but his Los Angeles is divorced from this history; it is wholly science fiction. Film noir’s technological semantics are also updated for inclusion in Blade Runner. The film opens with an sequence of aerial shots of Los Angeles belching fire, ending in an approach of the Tyrell Corporation’s pyramid headquarters. The sequence is reminiscent of The Naked City’s opening sequence of bomb-bay views of New York, and may play on the same violent associations, but both the nature of the city and the accuracy of the camera’s movements reflect 1980s cinematic technology and science fiction imagination. Transportation technology also makes brief appearances. By expanding movement into a vertical dimension, the elevated railway in The Naked City presents Garza with a point of disappearance into the masses of the metropolis, disorienting his pursuers. In Blade Runner, Deckard is repeatedly picked up in flying cars that whisk him vertically into a different part of 2019 Los Angeles, breaking spacial continuity between scenes. Scott’s characters are similarly born out of science fiction semantics. Though the police detective and private eye are at home in films noir, Deckard is a blade runner—his job is only to seek out and destroy fictional technological threats. Those threats, the replicants, are androids that almost perfectly imitate their human creators. Their characters are far more connected to androids and cyborgs in modern science fiction than to the criminal villains of traditional noir, their technologies certainly well outside the semantic toolkits of early noir directors. Their existence and their relationship with Deckard only makes sense in the

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11 Ibid. 15.
context of the artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and advanced robotics explored in science fiction that postdates film noir’s heyday. Furthermore, Doll and Faller identify *Blade Runner*’s flying vehicles, futuristic cityscape, congested streets, everyday advanced technology, and cloned animals as science fiction’s visual motifs.\(^{14}\)

Though *Blade Runner*’s semantics are predominantly rooted in a tradition of science fiction, it’s necessary to include an evaluation of its generic syntax to understand the interactions of film noir and science fiction as they blend. Though “style may express theme,” it is wrong to conclude that theme is only rooted in style—though Doll and Faller are right to see *Blade Runner*’s semantics’ science fiction flavor, they miss a discussion at the syntactic level that implicates the thematic efficacy of multigenre films.\(^{15}\)

To best understand the meaning of syntax for Doll and Faller’s work, it’s necessary to adopt their terms. They draw on work by Jeremy Butler, who in turn borrows from Roland Barthes’ theories of literary signification.\(^{16}\)

The sound and image of the film (its style) can be called Signifier 1. The spectator’s first reading (on the denotative level) is the grouping of these sounds and images into narrative, character relationships, and emotions which is Signified 1. Continuing to the next level of Barthes’s model, we enter the connotative level of themes, ideology, and mythology. The relationship between style (Signifier 1) and narrative (Signified 1) becomes Signifier 2. The interpretation of style as theme grows out of style as narrative


\(^{15}\) Ibid. 91.

and may be designated as Signified 2. They go on to argue that though “traditional [film noir] signifiers may trigger expectations of specific signifieds, they do not and cannot support these expected signifieds.”

A more careful division between syntactic and semantic traits of genre leaves room for a more careful analysis of the interactions between blended genres. With that distinction in mind, I contend that film noir’s strong syntactic tradition instead ensures Blade Runner’s support for film noir’s expected Signified 2. Specifically, though the semantic details of its paranoia regarding deviance in a new urbanism (such as the technological nature of the replicants or the temporal setting) are atypical for noir, these idiosyncrasies do not preclude a thematic address of such cultural anxiety at a genre level. Furthermore, Blade Runner achieves exactly the thematic meaning expected of noir: it deconstructs the clean distinction between the righteous, normal self and the deviant, abnormal other. Rather than “refus[ing] to follow the traditional route ascribed to the act of signification of film noir,” the signifiers follow the same process of signification but carry different semantic baggage. Pyle gives a detailed analysis of Blade Runner’s replicants in the context of cultural anxiety. They are part of a deconstructive analysis that begins with “a textual system of a decisive [...] opposition, such as that between the ‘organic’ and the ‘mechanical’” and ends with a representation “disclosed to be both asymmetrical and unstable, rendered ‘undecidable.’” That deconstructive analysis is at the heart of Blade Runner’s Signified 2 as it relates to cultural anxiety; it is at least similar, and in some sense identical, to the ambiguous deconstructive

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18 Ibid. 92.
19 Ibid. 92.
analysis of morality/immorality or legitimacy/criminality that is film noir’s most defining thematic marker.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Blade Runner}’s Signified 2 is what its audience expects, but with a novel, updated focus for film noir’s syntax.

That understanding enables a better study of noir themes as they’re applied to science fiction or technological anxieties in other texts. Doll and Faller are quick to set aside the body of scholarship on those themes because “new readings can be located,”\textsuperscript{22} ignoring the flexibility of film noir’s established and studied syntax. A focus on the film that correctly associates it with film noir—not so dominantly with science fiction—can be a vector for “new readings” as well. Recognizing the coexistence of film noir and science fiction characteristics in \textit{Blade Runner}—rather than insisting one genre subjugates the other in multigenre film—better contextualizes the film as part of postmodern ‘new expressionism’ that muddles the clear stylistic distinctions between genres (in this case, film noir and science fiction) and across the history of a medium (between 1950s film and 1980s film).\textsuperscript{23} Once that connection is drawn and supported by a multigenre examination of \textit{Blade Runner}, further exploration of its interaction with postmodernism is possible. Specifically, breaking style down into its component parts—semantics and syntax—is critical to understanding the relationship between syntactic anxiety or paranoia in genres such as film noir and a the larger cultural context of anxiety in which the films are produced. Film noir and postmodernism share an intellectual orientation. Faced with “a whole new type of society,” both turn to the mundane.\textsuperscript{24} Postmodernism searches

\textsuperscript{21} Doll, Susan, and Greg Faller. "Blade Runner and genre: Film noir and science fiction." \textit{Literature/Film Quarterly} 14, no. 2 (1986): 95.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 92.
\textsuperscript{23} Jameson, Fredric. \textit{Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism}. Duke University Press, 1991: 54.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 55
for new meaning in popular culture previously presumed meaningless, the “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers’ Digest culture [...] and the grade-B Hollywood film.” Similarly, noir turns its investigative eye away from the gangster and career criminal, and instead searches for criminality and corruption in the urban middle class. By illustrating that similarity, a careful examination of *Blade Runner* perhaps sets the stage for an academic exchange between postmodern studies and genre theory. Connections can be drawn between anxiety or deconstructive analysis as they exist in postwar and postmodern America. One body of scholarship can be tested against the other. *Blade Runner*’s reuse of film noir syntactic signification about anxiety indicates postmodernism can anachronistically inform the study of film noir, and established scholarship about the significance of anxiety in film noir can generate new understandings of anxiety as it plays out in postmodern texts now. The ‘new readings’ outlined here offer value both to genre theorists and postmodern studies. Doll and Faller are quick to declare film noir subverted and short-circuited, but, through updated semantics in multigeneric films, film noir is still finding things hiding in our shadows—human and android alike.

\[25 \text{Ibid. 55}\]
Bibliography


