

A Sonic Analysis
of
Blade Runner

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Abstract

This essay will be an analysis of the sonic content of the film, *Blade Runner*. It will describe how the sound connects with various cinematic features of the movie, as well as discuss, briefly, several important artists responsible for creating the world of *Blade Runner*. In addition, this essay will analyze the soundtrack in depth, showing the relationships between the music and the film's future noir style. Finally, it will examine a series of significant scenes and analyze the audiovisual synchronicity that occurs in them. A discussion of the central themes in *Blade Runner*, and the effect that music has on character will also be included here.

The Author

The story of *Blade Runner* was directly inspired by the science fiction novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, written by Philip K. Dick in 1968. Philip K. Dick, is considered by many to be the most influential and prolific American science fiction writer of the 20th century. Works of his have inspired films such as *Total Recall* (1990), *Minority Report* (2002), *Paycheck* (2003), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), *Next* (2007), *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), and *Total Recall* (2012). He has published 121 short stories and 44 novels, and has received several writing awards throughout his life, including a "Hugo" award for his novel, The Man in the High Castle. He also received two additional "Hugo" nominations as well as five

nominations for the “Nebula” award, including one for Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? in 1968 (“1968 Awards and Winners”).¹

To say that Dick took his writing seriously is an understatement. He never viewed science fiction literature as juvenile or trivial, unlike much of the writing community in his time. In fact, he greatly resented the pretentious nature of his contemporaries who saw science fiction as a “lesser” genre. He was an honest writer who was simply trying to write the best novel he could regardless of genre (*Blade Runner: Final Cut*).²

Film vs. Novel

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is the story of Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, who is on a hunt for five androids (fabricated humanoids with inferior human qualities), with the hope of making enough money to by his wife a pet electric sheep. The story exposes a philosophical and existential paradox that Deckard faces, when hunting down these “less-than-human” creatures. His action calls into question his own humanity, thus making him indistinguishable from the androids.³ This paradox differs from the story of *Blade Runner* in several ways. In *Blade Runner*, Rick Deckard is bullied into hunting down “replicants” not androids, by the police. Also in the process of hunting the replicants down, Deckard ironically becomes *more* humanized. His interactions with the replicants enlighten him. In *Blade Runner*, it is also hinted that Deckard is actually a replicant (android) himself and does not know it because

¹ "1968 Award Winners & Nominees". *Worlds Without End*. Retrieved 2009-09-27.

² *Blade Runner: Final Cut*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

³ Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Ballantine, 1996. Print.

of implanted memories in his head. By the movie's end, this possibility intentionally remains unanswered.

As mentioned above, several significant differences exist between *Blade Runner* and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?. Although these differences are secondary to this analysis, but it still should be noted that in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, characters use a device known as a “mood organ” that essentially lets the user plug in and control their emotions.⁴ It is comparable to the “soma” in Aldous Huxley's novel, A Brave New World. The novel implies that the “mood organ” uses some kind of music or sound to control the user's emotions. The mood organ is unfortunately absent in the world of *Blade Runner*. One could only speculate as to how an abstract idea such as the mood organ could manifest on film.

The Film

Blade Runner, was adapted/written by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, with guidance from the movie's director, Ridley Scott. The premise of the movie centers around four replicants from “off-world” colonies who return to Earth searching for answers pertaining to their biologically programmed expiration date, and in the process kill several people while they are trying to reaching their creator, Eldon Tyrell, the head of the Tyrell Corporation. Rick Deckard has been hired to hunt down and kill these replicants, but falls in love with one of them, and ironically discovers that he may actually be a replicant himself. Unfortunately, this awareness occurs at the same time that Deckard becomes truly in touch with his humanity.

⁴ Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Ballantine, 1996. Print.

The film's release on June 25th 1982, drew expectations of a blockbuster action/sci-fi/thriller, appealing to a mass audience. The target audience that the executives funding *Blade Runner* had in mind, would probably be the equivalent of today's Michael Bay movie fans. However, anyone who has seen *Blade Runner* and a Michael Bay movie would be see obvious differences in style and artistic focus. The focal point of Michael Bay's movies rarely revolve around heady existential questioning, and tend to center around the "awe" factor of special effects and other complex kinesthetic elements that are cinematically beautiful in their own right. While true that *Blade Runner* is a technical masterpiece which in its time, pushed the boundaries of what was physically possible in cinema, it also possesses a depth of story about it that many blockbuster action/sci-fi/thriller movies lack.

Conflict arose between producer Michael Deeley, Ridley Scott, and the Hollywood executives funding the movie. Deeley was forced to play middle man, while Scott felt that the dialogue and cinematic storytelling of *Blade Runner* would be more than enough to express the inner thoughts and turmoil of the main character, Rick Deckard (played by Harrison Ford). However, the executives felt that the artistic subtlety of the movie would be lost on such an unsophisticated audience, and that a voice over would be necessary to clarify the story. William Whittington writes, "In an interview, Michael Deeley called the voice-over, a 'concession' to Warner Brothers executives, who criticized the film as 'Dull. Pointless. Confusing.'" (Whittington, 170)⁵. Although these criticisms may seem inaccurate to fans of the movie, it might be helpful to keep in mind that according to a *New York Times* article, 1982 was

⁵ Whittington, William. "Blade Runners." *Sound Design & Science Fiction*. Austin, TX: U of Texas, 2007. 169-88. Print.

notorious for the rampant use of cocaine amongst Hollywood executives (*The New York Times* 1982)⁶, perhaps contributing to a short attention span on their part.

Ridley Scott and Harrison Ford reluctantly recorded three variations of a voice over monologue that would be strategically placed in various transitional scenes throughout the movie blatantly telling the audience self evident story elements (Whittington)⁷. Ultimately, the movie received mixed reviews and did not prove to attain the blockbuster status the producers desired. However, it began to gather a cult following through the eighties and director Ridley Scott was encouraged to release a *Director's Cut* edition of *Blade Runner* in 1992. This version ousted the panned voice over that irritated the most sophisticated movie buffs, who deemed it unnecessary. Scott also eliminated the optimistic ending that the original 1982 cut had, and ended on a darker more uncertain note. There was a third release of the movie in 2007 known as *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (Dangerous Days).⁸ This version digitally cleaned up some filming mistakes left in the previous two iterations.

Ridley Scott, famous for directing the films, *Alien* (1979) (and all of the subsequent *Alien* movies), *Gladiator* (2000), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *American Gangster* (2007), and *Prometheus* (2012)(“Ridley Scott”,IMDB),⁹ is a master at creating beautifully rich worlds on screen. *Blade Runner* is no exception. It is set in a dystopian society in Los Angeles in November, 2019. From a visual perspective, there is a thematic use of red and orange and yellow

⁶ Lindsey, Robert. "PERVASIVE USE OF COCAINE IS REPORTED IN HOLLYWOOD." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 30 Oct. 1982. Web. 09 May 2014.

⁷ Whittington, William. "Blade Runners." *Sound Design & Science Fiction*. Austin, TX: U of Texas, 2007. 169-88. Print.

⁸ *Dangerous Days: The Making of Blade Runner*. Perf. Ridley Scott, Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

⁹ "Ridley Scott." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 12 May 2014.

(fire colors) contrasting a black backdrop. This creates an ominous dark and fiery mood. Scott directed *Blade Runner* in a style similar to the film noir detective movies of the 1940s and 50s, by using similar lighting techniques to create shadows across the characters' faces, and in many cases symbolizing their inner turmoil. Scott's set designers were inspired by art deco design style,¹⁰ popularized during the 1920's and 30's. This style of design pulls heavily from the art and patterns of ancient cultures such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Oceania, Greece, and Rome.¹¹ Examples of this can be seen in the pyramid like stone architecture of the Tyrell Corporation and Taffy Luis' exotic club. The final chase scene and location of J.F. Sebastian's apartment was also filmed in the Bradbury Building in Los Angeles, which makes many appearances in classic film noir movies including *Chinatown* (1974) ("The Most Popular Building in science fiction").¹² Since *Blade Runner* was filmed in color, rather than black and white like its film-noir predecessors, a "blue" theme becomes a common element that produces feelings of loneliness and alienation, and feels like the famous 1942 painting "Nighthawks" by Edward Hopper. This contributes to the dark nature of the film. However, Scott also layers on a Sci-fi element. The neon green, pink, and yellow colors contrasted against the blacks and blues of the city streets and buildings enhance the futuristic feel of the film. In addition, there are flying cars, immense futuristic buildings, androids, and advanced weaponry. The intermingling of the Sci-fi film noir styles has led to the use of the term "future-noir" when describing the style/genre of *Blade Runner*. This intermingling of genres is clearly and artfully apparent in the soundtrack and sonic landscape as well.

¹⁰ *Dangerous Days: The Making of Blade Runner*. Perf. Ridley Scott, Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

¹¹ "Art Deco Society of New York." *Art Deco Society of New York*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 May 2014.

¹² "The Most Famous Building In Science Fiction." *Io9*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 May 2014.

The Composer

Greek composer, Evangelos Odysseas Papathanassiou, also known as Vangelis, created the soundtrack for *Blade Runner*, as well as the soundtracks to *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and the original *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* by Carl Sagan (Vangelis, IMDB),¹³ The soundtrack for *Blade Runner*, can be described as a hybrid between blues oriented jazz and synthesized electronics. This blend of style further contributes to the film's classification as "future noir" a term used by *Blade Runner* expert, Paul Sammon (Sammon, *Future Noir*).¹⁴ Old film noir movies of the 40's and 50's, especially the ones with detectives, often have beautifully orchestrated scores that draw heavily from the jazz idiom. Jazz was after all, the popular genre of music in urban areas at the time. Vangelis composed the soundtrack of *Blade Runner* almost entirely on synthesizers. In spite of the idiomatic mimicking of jazz in the melodic, harmonic, formal, and rhythmic content of the music, the fundamental nature of the sounds (the timbres), are entirely electronic. The electronic timbres, which are the most fundamental element of the sound in the soundtrack, are relative to, and on the same plane as the setting of the movie (the future). Likewise, the idiomatic references of jazz and blues that emerge from the synthesized "future" sounds, are primarily on the same plane as the subtle "film-noir" stylizations. Of course, the soundtrack does not only function exclusively on these two planes as a stylistic gimmick. There are many elements of the music that connect with plot, thematic messages, character development, and physical actions occurring in the film. Vangelis uses synthesizers in general

¹³ "Vangelis." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 12 May 2014.

¹⁴ Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. New York: HarperPrism, 1996. Print.

for his compositions, so the “spacey” timbers heard in *Blade Runner* were nothing new to him. He did, however, add special effects into the music that allow the soundtrack take on a “futuristic” quality.

Although the original soundtrack heard in versions of *Blade Runner* is that of composer Vangelis, the initial release of *Blade Runner*’s soundtrack was a symphonic recording of the New American Orchestra and consisted of acoustic instruments. Despite the beauty of these recordings, the orchestrated soundtrack obviously lacked the spacey electronics of Vangelis. The “original” soundtrack by Vangelis, that was used in the actual movie, was not released until 1994, two years after the release of *Blade Runner: The Director’s Cut*. This version of the soundtrack contains more music than the orchestrated version (58.53 vs 33.16 minutes) and includes extra music by Vangelis not heard in the movie.

Sonic Themes and Symbolism

The soundtrack includes multiple sonic themes. Some of the more important ones blend with the film and story.

Chimes

The sound of wind chimes often permeate the soundscape throughout the movie. These wind chimes sound in scenes at the Tyrell Corporation as well as in the presence of replicants. The first introduction of the Tyrell Corporation appears during an interrogation of the replicant, Leon. There are other occurrences of the chimes when Deckard meets Rachael, played by Sean Young, at the Tyrell Corporation, and when head replicant, Roy Batty, gives Tyrell a surprise

visit. The sound of chimes fades in and out during these scenes in relation to the concurrent dialogue, plot development, and tension. It is used as a meta-diegetic sound. Although no wind chimes in the shot, the scene where Deckard meets Rachael has a gold quality in the color that looks like shimmering water reflections. Also, the chimes seem to sync up to the smoke of Holden's (another blade runner) cigarette. Lastly, Tyrell's murder scene has the look of being lit by candlelight. This candle light also creates a shimmery effect. The oscillations of the chimes sonically mirror the lighting effects in the scene. The encompassing effect of the lighting and heavy use of gold color tones in the set, in addition to the chimes, makes the viewer associate the Tyrell Corporation as magical or mysterious. The Tyrell Corporation, in contrast to the rest of the world of *Blade Runner*, is beautiful, strong, and intact, like an Egyptian Pyramid. It should also be noted that the sound of chimes often occurs when the viewer/Deckard encounter any replicated organism, including a replicant owl at the Tyrell Corporation or a scale belonging to a replicated snake when Deckard searches Leon's apartment for evidence. So, the audience hears a loose thematic association with wind chime sounds and genetic replication.

Wolves

Another example of an ambiguously diegetic sound theme, is the synthesized wolf howl sounds heard in scenes of the Bradbury building, the location of genetic designer, J.F. Sebastian's, apartment. It's unclear whether or not the howling sound is simply the creaking of the old building or a wolf howling in the distance. This sound exaggerates the foreboding mood of the Bradbury building. Regardless of whether it is a creaky building or a wolf, Roy Batty, the lead replicant played by Rutger Hauer, decides to howl like a wolf during the final chase scene.

This howling theme serves many purposes. It could be simply the diegetic aleatoric sound of a creaky elevator, or an off screen metadiegetic sound of a wolf, and it can also be a device to create an ominous mood, in addition to holding symbolic content associated with loneliness, hunger, hunting, fear, and death. It also might be interesting to note the connection between wolves and sheep (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep). The wolf howl permeates through several cinematic and sonic planes.

PA Systems/Speakers

Scott uses speakers and PA systems to clarify less significant details of the movie. When the character Leon first appears, the audience hears his name via intercom in the Tyrell Corporation. The muffled words “first subject, Kowalski, Leon...” reverberate around the room. This not only accentuates the hollow vastness of the interrogation room, but also suggests that Leon is somehow being processed by some “big brother” figure. Further, on several occasions, violent acts take place off screen, as revealed through radio transmissions Deckard hears while driving in his police car. For example, after Roy kills Tyrell on screen, the audience does not actually see Roy then go on to kill J.F. Sebastian, who is in the same room. Instead, they hear the police report in Deckard’s car saying that the body of J.F. Sebastian was found along the body of Tyrell.

There are also the sounds of foreign languages being blared over the city streets from giant zeppelin looking ships. These ships also announce/advertize the “off world colonies” and describe them as “a chance to begin again” and “a golden land of opportunity and adventure.” These constant announcements throughout the movie parallel the themes of death and rebirth so

prevalent in the movie. The dystopian over-industrialized world of *Blade Runner* is deteriorating, much like all of the replicants, and J.F. Sebastian (who has a disease that makes his cells age faster). These announcements contribute to the overwhelming sense of impending doom, a significant undertone in *Blade Runner*.

Space Theme

The opening melodic theme contains the notes, Eb, F, C, Bb and modulations of the 1, up to the 2 down to the 6 and down to the 5 pattern can be heard at various points throughout the movie. I have decided to call this the “Space theme” due to its similarity to the theme from the 1977 sci-fi movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. This theme has similar characteristics to Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and the opening of Richard Strauss' *Thus Sprach Zarathustra*, both of which are associated to outer space because of their use in popular American cinema. The perfect intervals that are so prevalent in these melodies create a powerful and timeless timbre grounded in nature. This melodic theme is primarily used to create a sense of awe and wonder. For example, it plays during the grand opening shot of the over-industrialized, flame-spewing, dystopian 2019 LA skyline. Additionally, towards the end of the movie, when Roy Batty reaches out and grabs Rick Deckard's hand saving Deckard from certain death, the theme again plays. This time it underscores a dramatic shot of Roy as he lifts Deckard to the sky. This casts Roy in a positive light, as if he and his strength and wisdom and reverence are to be marveled the way we marvel at the stars and space.

This space theme is often used in conjunction with an electric harp sweep. This harp sweep can be heard at various points throughout the movie as well. Harp sweeps are often

associated with dreams or fantastic worlds. The world of Blade Runner is certainly fantastic, but it is also incredibly industrialized, dark, bleak, and alien. The electrification/amplification of the harp (especially in the opening shots of the LA, 2019), correlate to the horrible and ugly aspects of the world, yet the historically “magical” connotation that the harp holds in our society, connects to the mysterious and fantastic quality of the world.

The Blade Runner Blues

“Blade Runner Blues,” composed by Vangelis as a slow minor blues song, uses synthesizer pads with an electric trumpet lead. It uses a delay that mimics the echos often heard in city alleyways and sewers. This sound contributes to the film noir style of the movie, while as mentioned before, the synthesized nature of the timbres contributes to the futuristic mood of the piece.

However, this specific song occurs in key moments in the movie with the intent of creating a depressing tone. For example, it is played when Pris, the replicant played by Darryl Hanah, walks alone through the city streets, feelings of alienation and loneliness arise. “The Blues” as a genre have deep cultural ties to Africa and slavery, and are interpreted by many as a melancholy expression associated with the emotions born out of oppression. The blues can sound as if one were crying out in pain over their existential turmoil. The song also occurs when the replicant Zhora, played by Joanna Cassidy, gets shot by Deckard. As Zhora falls, breaking through glass windows in slow motion, only the sounds of gunfire, broken glass, a faint heartbeat, and the Blade Runner blues can be heard.

Love Theme

Another “jazz/blues” related piece, the “Love Theme,” incorporates the use of an electrified growling saxophone. The “Love Theme” plays when sexual tension occurs between Deckard and Rachael. In fact, the “sexy sax” sounds of the “love theme” come in specifically when Deckard reclines in a chair without his shirt on, while alone with Rachael in his apartment. The next shot reveals a silhouette of Rachael from behind, her hand on her hip, cocked to one side. After the song develops and the sexual tension in the room increases, Deckard has Rachael pinned up against the wall as if preparing to make passionate replicant love, the music comes to a suspenseful and dissonant fermata, as Deckard stares hungrily into Rachael’s eyes. He slowly moves in for a kiss, and right as their lips touch, the “sexy sax” of the “love theme” comes in.

The growling saxophone serves as an obvious symbol of their fiery love for one another, however, the saxophone is not entirely happy. There is a “bluesy,” sultry, and soulful quality inherent to the saxophone. The growling of the sax can be equated to the grit and edge that someone gets in their voice when they are crying out in passion. Again, the melancholy nature of the blues permeates the music and suggests that perhaps the relationship between Deckard and Rachael, though fiery and passionate, is in fact doomed to begin with because of the oppressing nature of the dystopian society, and the possibility that both Deckard and Rachael will die soon due to their genetically programmed expiration dates. Ultimately, the “sultry sax” fits into the cultural idiom of the *Film Noir* style.

Memories of Green

“Memories of Green,” a song for piano by Vangelis plays when Rachael discovers that she is not a human, but rather, a replicant with implanted human memories. Like the “Love Theme” and “Blade Runner Blues,” “Memories of Green” pulls from many musical elements seen in the blues, including similar harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic material. This bluesy quality of the music sustains the melancholy mood of the movie, and ties into emotions concerning uncertainty and death. The timbre of the piano is soft and pure in contrast to the rest of the soundtrack, which contains grit from sawtooth wave synth pads and other synthesized leads. The acoustic nature of the piano in contrast to the synthesized quality of the rest of the soundtrack creates a feeling of nostalgia, as if for a brief moment, the audience were brought back, emotionally, to an earlier time. This feeling of nostalgia that the piano induces, appropriately accompanies the emotions of Rachael, forced into questioning her existence, and choosing between holding onto or letting go of her precious but fake memories.

The timing at which the song enters, provides further evidence supporting the correlation between “Memories of Green” and Rachael’s emotion. Deckard recites a list of memories programmed into Rachael’s head. Rachael proceeds to finish Deckard’s sentences as she realizes that her memories are fake. As soon as Rachael begins to speak, “Memories of Green” starts playing softly in the background. Feelings of nostalgia arise from the music as the viewer watches the scene unfold, and Rachael recalls her implanted memories. Since the viewer now feels sympathy for Rachael because of the emotional "sleight of hand" of the story/music combo, they view her as human in spite of the fact that she is a replicant. Thematic material also suggests that all of the replicants are like humans because of their memories. This reinforces the idea that one’s ego or self identity can be viewed as the sum total of their memories. Towards the end of

the film, Roy Batty brings up an interesting point, when he states: “I’ve... seen things you people wouldn’t believe... (laugh) Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those... moments... will be lost in time, like tears... in... rain. Time... to die...(Rutger Hauer)”¹⁵ This final quote presents a profound message, that if people view their ego as simply a series of events and memories, than their ego will inevitably die, and be “...lost in time like tears in rain.” The timbral contrast of “Memories of Green”, from the rest of the soundtrack, in conjunction with Rachael speaking, makes the viewer sympathize with her and begin to formulate their own ideas about memories and identity. *Blade Runner* displays this theme of how memories and human ego comprise the definition of being human. Roy’s final statement, although somewhat nihilistic, holds a profound truth to them. And, to take this a step further, when Roy saves Deckard’s life, he releases a dove into the sky right before his death, presenting the idea that one’s ego/soul does not exclusively reside in the memories of an individual, but rather a higher collective consciousness. And furthermore, that the altruistic actions of an individual, ultimately can immortalize them.

Another significant instance of the song "Memories of Green" occurs right before Deckard's brief daydream depicting a unicorn. At this point, Deckard sits at a piano playing music in the same key as “Memories of Green,” while the actual song plays in the background. This somewhat obfuscates the non-diegetic nature of the music. As the music plays, the viewer sees Deckard’s memory of a unicorn, running through a fiery orange-red forest. It should be noted that the *Original Cut* omits this dream sequence, perhaps because the Warner Brothers executives thought it too confusing. This scene in conjunction with "Memories of Green"

¹⁵ *Blade Runner: Final Cut*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young. Warner Brothers, 2007. DVD.

suggests that this unicorn sequence exists as a recurring dream or memory (there could be unicorns, it's sci-fi) of Deckard.

It should also be noted that Scott uses a visual motif that depicts replicants with glowing eyes, a look similar to what one would see when shining a flashlight into the eyes of a dog or cat at night. Throughout the movie, replicant people as well as replicant animals display this motif. In one scene, Deckard himself shows this glow as well, which suggests that perhaps Deckard himself has been artificially created like the replicants he hunts. With this in mind, one can only postulate as to whether or not the dream of the unicorn actually belongs to Deckard, or has been implanted into him. The final scene of the movie shows Deckard picking up an origami unicorn off of the floor, smirking, and leaving with Rachael. Deckard's co-blade runner, Gaff, played by Edward James Olmos, creates little origami figures throughout the movie. The fact that Deckard finds what must be Gaff's Unicorn, reveals two things. First, it shows that Gaff had been at Rachael's apartment to kill her, but decided not to. Secondly, the fact that Gaff created a unicorn instead of any other animal, shows that he somehow knows at least some of Deckard's most private thoughts. This was also Gaff's way of explaining to Deckard why he let Rachael live. He views both Rachael and Deckard as unique and ironically human because of their memories.

Scene Analysis

This section analyzes a number of scenes in chronological order. It focuses on Scott's use of sound beyond the musical score.

Opening Credits/Scene of Los Angeles

Some noteworthy elements of the music during the opening credits include the use of the “space” theme melody, in addition to a low percussive sound with heavy delay. The credits transition into a pitch that sounds like a siren, descending and ascending frequency as *Star Wars*-esque text scrolls up the screen. The dark and dissonant music during this scrolling implies a disturbing meaning behind the text, which provides context for understanding the world of *Blade Runner*. A loud bassy percussive sound blasts when the “Los Angeles, 2019” text appears on screen, to intensify the weight of the dystopian future. The first aerial shots of the heavily industrialized Los Angeles combine the “space theme” with the electric harp theme. The harp sounds in addition to the booming sounds, synchronize with, or “mickey mouse” the flames erupting from the smokestacks. A flying car zooms across the sky. The soaring sci-fi nature of the “space theme” appropriately pairs with this craft. Sweeps of processed synthesized noise serve loosely as foley material for these flying cars which depict an aerial LA traffic scene.

Leon's Voight Kampff Test

In the first scene with dialogue, a Blade Runner named Holden, interviews the replicant, Leon. This scene stands out because of the way Scott uses sound to build tension. Leon who has attempted to infiltrate the Tyrell Corporation by applying for a job must take a “voight kampff” test. This test determines whether or not someone is a replicant.

Wind chimes ring in the beginning of the scene, which as pointed out earlier, Scott associates with the Tyrell Corporation and replication in general. During the test, Leon struggles with the questions. A subtle heartbeat accelerates in the background, mirroring Leon's accelerated anxiety. Also the ambient sounds in room itself and from the “voight kampff”

machine, consist of an assortment of electronic pops, clicks, and beeps. The volume and density of these electronics increase as the tension builds. At one point, swirly ultra high pitch electronic frequencies, not a part of the machine or room peirce through the cacophony of sounds. Their timing suggests that they that reflect Leon's innermost brain frequencies, almost sonically representing his reptilian defence response. In addition to this complex blend of electronics, the blade runner's voice possesses a slight delay as the camera zooms in on Leon's face, implying that the test causes Leon to become delirious with agitation.

This tension all comes to a head when Holden asks Leon about his mother. The volume drops and Leon gets very calm. The silence undercuts the tension previously built. Only the faint sound of a single machine beeps at this point. Leon then says, "My mother? I'll tell you about my mother!" and proceeds to shoot Holden twice with a futuristic gun. The sound of the gun has synthesized electronic qualities to it that give it an off-worldly feel and contributes to the futuristic spacey quality of the movie. In addition, by temporarily relieving the audience of the sonic tension that had been building prior to the explosive sound of the gun, Scott creates a more powerful climax to the scene as Holden gets blasted through the office wall.

Zhora's Chase Scene

The scene where Deckard chases and guns down Zhora could have inspired one of the Jason Bourne action movies. The majority of the shots from the time Deckard runs outside, to the time Zhora Crashes through the glass windows, last only a second or two from shot to shot. This frantic pace creates a frantic mood in the scene. Since the characters run through overpopulated, futuristic streets, Scott uses a diverse blend of aleatoric sounds to create a sonic illusion, placing

the viewer on the street as well. As the camera angles cut back and forth between the two characters, meticulous sound mixing has the audio perspective match the changes of the camera perspective. This creates the illusion in the viewer that they move to a different point within the same environment. The most obvious example of this sound editing technique occurs when Zhora hides in a tunnel entrance, and all of the city sounds receive a reverb/echo effect when the camera focuses on her. Some sounds that add to the ambiance include: oboes, foreign languages, horns, shouting, mumbling, chanting, water on a city street, sirens, engine sounds, screeching brake sounds, and robotic talking crosswalk signs. As in the scene where Leon shoots the blade runner, Holden, all of the sounds except the gunshot, broken glass, and a faint heartbeat fade when Deckard starts shooting. “Blade Runner Blues” begins to play, underscoring the oppressive existence of replicants.

Love Scene

In addition to ideas surrounding the use of the saxophone during the love scenes with Rachael and Deckard, another interesting sonic moment occurs when Rachael remembers that she knows how to play the piano. As the love theme plays softly in the background, Rachael starts playing a different song on the piano. The song, not coincidentally in the same key as the soundtrack, sounds as if the diegetic music of Rachael somehow communicates with the non-diegetic world of the soundtrack or vice versa. Vangelis transitions out of this beautifully and incorporates thematic material from the piano solo into the non-diegetic soundtrack music. The music in this scene also “mickey mouses” the sexual tension exhibited by Deckard and

Rachel. The music swells on a tense harmony while Deckard forces Rachael against the wall. The tension releases with a cadence as Deckard and Rachael finally kiss.

Tyrell Murder Scene

As mentioned earlier, Scott associates wind chimes with Tyrell. However, Tyrell's murder scene also contains some interesting foley effects. The *Original Cut*, significantly shortens Tyrell's death, with most of it taking place off screen. Roy crushes Tyrell's head with his bare hands. The shot cuts away, but muffled screaming and loud crunching sounds give the viewer the impression that Roy is crushing Tyrell's head with his bare hands. The later cuts of the film actually show Roy crush Tyrell's head and gouge his eyes out on screen. Also, the use of the dark ominous strings foreshadows Tyrell's impending doom, and the synthetic symphony comes in, increasing in volume and dissonance as the violence ensues.

The Final Bradbury Building Scene

The final scene in the Bradbury Building has many interesting sonic elements. The scene starts with Deckard searching J.F. Sebastian's apartment for Pris and Roy. Sebastian's apartment sounds like an old toy store filled with the laughter of J.F.'s fabricated friends. Since the audience is aware that Pris is hidden in plain sight, the laughter can be interpreted as being directed at Deckard and his temporary ignorance. When Deckard shoots Pris, she screams and uncontrollably thrashes on the floor in a bizarre unearthly way. The audio engineers overdubbed her scream with several additional screams, to create a superhuman sound, fitting for the superhuman replicant.

As mentioned before, distant wolf howls echo through the building. Synthesized noise sweeps create the illusion of ships passing over head. The faint sound of the “off world colony” zeppelin announcements blair off in the distance. Soon after Pris gets killed, Roy arrives at the building. Rain also begins to fall, and the sound of trickling water in conjunction with the city ambience, enters into the soundscape. Once dialogue starts, background noise dramatically changes, and decreases in volume. Roy begins to howl like a wolf. This brings into question whether Roy has always been the source of the howls or if he was communicating with an imagined wolf. Drums roll and cymbals crash as Roy easily leaps from one building to another, chasing Deckard. Deckard, not so graceful or athletic, ends up hanging on the edge for his life. A bell tolls in the background symbolizing either redemption or impending death. It is unclear whether or not the bell is part of the soundtrack or part of the scene, being played off in a distant cathedral. As Roy saves Deckard, the space theme plays with chimes. The use of so much thematic material in rapid succession contributes to the climatic function of this scene. The scene ends with the solitary sounds of the rain and Roy’s monologue.

Concluding Thoughts

Blade Runner is certainly a cinematic masterpiece with beautiful ideas. The soundtrack has a futuristic yet bluesy quality that mirrors the *future-noir* style of the film. Many other musical themes and sonic effects contribute to the depth and richness of the world, and have the power to guide the audience’s emotions concerning the heavy existential questions presented in *Blade Runner*. The team behind the movie’s creation incorporate a multitude of sonic devices that help captivate the audience. Many of these techniques add emotional and symbolic depth to

the story and convey multiple layers of symbolic meaning within the film. Between the future-noir soundtrack of Vangelis, and the thoughtful work of the sound designers and foley artists, the sonic content of *Blade Runner* ultimately enriches the story and shapes the emotional journey that the viewer experiences.

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