Tale of Two Futures: Visions of tomorrow or memories of the past?

By Brett William Mauser

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Introduction

The stylish, yet somewhat clunky car lifts off with jets of smoke seemingly pushing it from the earth. The tires relax, as the pressure from the weight of the vehicle is lifted. The car, now hovering feet off the ground, allows the tires to recede underneath and rotate into the night sky. The car is now airborne and flying under its own future technology.

A seemingly unique vision expressed in two separate films from the 1980s. The dream of a flying car is mirrored in both *Back to the Future II* (1989) and *Blade Runner* (1982). While the technology may be the same, the cities in which these modern marvels fly through are so fundamentally different; one must ponder how such distinctly separate visions of the future could exist within the same decade.

The cinematic and creative visions of Robert Zemeckis, director of the *Back to the Future* Trilogy, and Ridley Scott, director of *Blade Runner*, deliver two varying visions of the future, one a grungy post-apocalyptic dystopia, and the other a future full of hope and wonder. While on the surface, both films deliver different viewpoints of what the future might hold, they still hold similar themes and ideals in common.

The focus of this paper will be to investigate the impact of the political and social environment at the time of separate science fiction films and how those social and economic conditions led to the directors' visions of the future. This paper will also look at the progression of the vision of the future from the 50s into the 80s, and question whether or not films like *Blade Runner* were victims of structuralism and why films like *Back to*

the Future II were able to break the mold of what had already been structured as 'the future.'

The Evolution of the Future

Whether it is a novel, a painting or a film, works of art are influenced by the science, ideas and history of the culture that spawned it. Those contemporary ideas are reflected, examined and built upon by the author or artist. Science fiction films that depict the future are no different. Possibly one of the first science fiction works of art was that of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which was written after Shelley learned of the experiments being conducted on human cadavers with electricity. Science fiction films from the 1950s to the 1980s looked at their current culture as well as into their recent past, bringing nostalgia into their visions of the future. When they did, they unknowingly were saying that the more things change, the more they stay the same (Wittenberg, 2008).

The 1950s science fiction films, like Shelley's visionary work of *Frankenstein*, warned of where science could take us, but at the same time, was not embarrassed to show us the benefits as well (Beard, 1998). In the 1950s, the world was just beginning to dip its toe into the vastness of space. Artists and authors were imagining what the rocket ships that would take us to the moon and beyond might look like, but asides from the rockets and weapons of World War II, they had no idea what those rockets would look like, so the shiny rocket ships and flying saucers of that era were born (Beard, 1998). Artists and filmmakers had to pull from their own imaginations to create the image of the future so round geometric shapes and simple designs were constructed for interstellar space travel and futuristic kitchens.

As Kennedy pushed us to voyage to the moon in the early 1960s we began to see what space travel really looked like. Artists and filmmakers began having prototypes to look at as astronauts began to orbit the moon on scientific marvels guided by powerful computers designed by the world's most brilliant scientists. The images released to the public showed a much different vision than that of the art projected by comic book artists and authors of the 1960s. The flying saucers and shiny rocket ships were quickly outdated.

By the 1970s we had reached the moon. Video and pictures of NASA spaceships and rockets were in the nightly news and on the front page of local papers. People saw a different type of technology and began to see what space travel was like in the present and began to build the future with that in mind. The polished space ships of the past were no longer real. Spaceships were held together with nuts and bolts and not magical scientific glue. Filmmakers now had to take present technology and imagine where that tech would end up in the future (Beard 1998). Films like *2001* (1968) began to take the pictures of NASA spacecraft that people were seeing every day and show them what they would look like tomorrow.

But the vision of what the future would look like went beyond the architecture and technical specifications of future transportation. Futures had culture and governments and their own sets of problems, and more often than not, these visions of the future expanded on problems of the day and followed the slippery slope to their inevitable conclusion to project what might happen if the problems of today aren't

addressed by tomorrow. These visions, particularly in the 1970s, began to foresee a post-apocalyptic world or a menacing dystopia.

While dystopias had been seen in past films like *Metropolis* (1927) science fiction films of the 50s and 60s still had a positive spin somewhere in them to avoid losing all hope of the future. But in the 1970s, the dystopia began taking hold in the mind of America. In the 1970s, there were perhaps several negative factors that led to the futures seeming so dark. Sometimes the writers and directors of these science fiction films had no answer to the problems they were presenting. Others saw society failing to fix the problems they were presented with and instead tried to find an easier solution by not fixing what was broken, but by starting from scratch. *The Planet of the Apes* series shows this lack of focus. A global pet pandemic that caused loving pet owners to lose their beloved cats and dogs led the society to begin adopting monkeys instead of trying to find a solution to the plague (Tucker & Wagner, 2013). This was an easy reflection of the 70s culture not taking care of the planet through recycling or finding a more efficient way of disposing of garbage, but instead, simply building more and more landfills.

Environmentalism wasn't the only concern people had. The warnings of the world running out of oil were seemingly coming true with the oil crisis of late 70s. Iran had taken US citizens hostage and the government couldn't, or wouldn't, do anything about it, and in the early part of the decade, the country was shaken by a political scandal that led to the resignation of a president wight he Watergate scandal. There was little reason for Americans to believe the future was anything but dismal and dark. While science fiction had always had its moments of darker and more foreboding futures, the

1980s saw a turn to an even more menacing future than in previous decades. The darkness continued, but as the country became more confident, a more positive outlook was born.

Period Piece as Commentary

It is not often that an audience wants to be beaten over the head by a message or political statement, but whether or not an audience is prepared for such a message, be it overtly placed, or hidden between the lines, filmmakers will often feel compelled to say something or speak out over an important topic. One would find it difficult to find any film or other work of art that is not influenced in some way by the artist's emotional connection to some current event or political, religious or philosophical ideal. Rather than confront the issue head on, a writer or director may hide their agenda or their opinions in the film's backstory or setting. Sometimes these messages are not even on the forefront of the filmmaker's mind, but are merely influencing factors that help shape and create the director's image of the film. Some genres of film are able to hide and dilute these issues better than others. Often removing the audience from their present time and placing them in the past or in the future gives the viewer a chance to disconnect from any and all real persons, places or events.

Science fiction, particularly those that jump into the future or deal with time travel are able to analyze current culture in the context of time and not just space, as a contemporary story does (Wittenberg, 2009). Some science fiction films hide their message with subtle overtones or analogies while others broadcast their agendas, such as the film *Elysium*, which Heaton (2013) calls "Matt Damon vs. The Space Republicans,"

in which political statements are so blatant that the "illegals" looking for employment in the wealthy world of Elysium are Spanish-speaking immigrants who are outlawed and brutally killed by "Homeland Security."

Whether the message is hidden or not, such tales look at the political issues that are in the forefront of the culture's mind at the time of writing or production and attempts to present the producer's answer to these problems through the morality tale it is intertwined with. Ramona Pringle (2013) called science fiction films, "our attempt to understand the present and make sense of an uncertain future (p. 31)." Since science fiction began to gain popularity in the early 50s, the vision of the future began to become darker and darker until it reached what might be considered a pinnacle in the cyberpunk thriller, *Blade Runner*.

The author of the novel that *Blade Runner* was based, Philip K. Dick, created a novel that focused on how the world has abandoned its fellow man and chosen selfishness over altruism and didn't focus on the benefits and the awe of future technology (Canaan 2004). Instead, the technology was used as a backdrop to ask the question, "What makes us human?" When the novel was adopted, with a dash of William Gibson's technology-based writings in which the term 'blade runner' as borrowed, Ridley Scott took Dick's original theme and continued the deep look into the heart of humanity. W.A. Senior (1996) said this look into humanity is reflected in the way the film was constructed and imagined through set design and cinematography. Written in the late 1960s, the fear of where technology would take us was already beginning to turn towards a more dystopian take and that vision continued through the 70s and well into the 80s.

Technology was moving fast, the world was continuing to grow and it was becoming more and more reliant on resources that were becoming more limited with each passing day. People were becoming more and more anonymous as cities grew and expanded and commercialism and industry allowed more products to dilute people's individuality. In the film *Blade Runner* this anonymity is reflected through the way buildings, cars, even the people are covered by fog and smoke. People are hardly recognizable from one another as they move in large crowds where one face is indistinguishable from the next, just as commercialism crushed individualism through assembly line production.

Throughout the 1980s, through Reagan-era politics, an economic boom brought through the American oil industry and even through surprise victories such as sporting events such as the United States hockey team's victory over the Russians in the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic Games, America began to emerge from its collective mental depression. The country began to make piece with its loss of Vietnam and treatment of the veterans through films like *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). The new economic prosperity and reckoning with its past allowed Americans to begin to see the potential of a more optimistic future. By 1989, it was ready for a more positive vision, which was brought to them in the form of *Back to the Future II*.

Cultural Influences on Visions of the Future

When writing or dreaming of the future, people tend to reference history, both personal and cultural, as much as the their hope and fears of the future (Beard, 1998). Without a cultural base, a common language between writer and audience is missing.

Culture is used as a common language that links the audience to the story and allows them to feel the emotional connection. Novels, television shows and films are always influenced by the culture in which they are written. Both *Blade Runner* and the *Back to the Future* Trilogy are among a group of unique films that were just as much an influence on the culture that inspired them.

Back to the Future II was greatly influenced by the commercialism and product advertising of the 1980s and also in turn helped promote ideas and products that are still dreamt about today. Only just recently the world was fooled by the promise of hoverboards, like those in *Back to the Future II*, in an online infomercial, complete with Tony Hawk endorsement. The entire product wound up being a practical joke, but the products presented by the film are still alive in people's desires almost 30 years later (Mandell, 2014). Also a large influence on 1980s culture, the film *Blade Runner* inspired the phrase "Blade Runner scenario," which was used frequently by urbanists, city planners, and activists, to reflect the fears people had of how the typical United States city might end up (Leinberger & Leinberger, 2014).

Ridley Scott was directing *Blade Runner* just as Ronald Reagan was taking office. America was still feeling the negative influence of the gas crisis and a general low self esteem. The economy was far from healthy and we were beginning to look at the potential of man-made global cooling that could bring about another ice age. With the Cold War still heavily weighing on everyone's mind, reflected in films like *The Day After* (1983), the world seemed a dangerous place, full of enemies at every turn. By the end of the decade, Reagan's economic plan, an economic oil boom fronted by Texas investors

and developers and the founding of Silicon Valley in Southern California had increased the country's wealth and boosted our self image while the world was starting to look like a safer place as the Cold War started to wind down and as DePalma's *Mission Impossible* (1996) pointed out, there were no enemies. A global ice age was no longer a concern, but now it was flooding due to global warming.

Before *Back to the Future II*, the future seemed to be one which was overpopulated, polluted and science and technology was a burden or used mostly for evil. Douglas Williams (1988) saw a film culture influenced mostly by the fallout of World War II and the following wars and the fear of the nuclear bomb, along with the inability to understand the benefits and potential of scientific advancement. He proposed that it was the responsibility of the artist to bring this potential and fear into focus and help society understand where we were and where we were going. Unfortunately, that image was greatly tinted in the negativity of those wars and economic instability. Films like *Logan's Run* and *Planet of the Apes* (1968) all created worlds in which people wouldn't want to live.

Perhaps it is the warning of greed that drives most dystopian science fiction films. It seems dark futures are always overseen by large corporations spewing forth vile pollution from mile high smoke stacks. Even *Back to the Future II* presents an alternate time line, a 1985 that was corrupted by greed and brought forth casinos and titan pillars of industrial smog in the quaint little town of Hill Valley. Ironically, the small character of Bret, the homeless man in the first film, remains a homeless man in the altered timeline that was corrupted by greed.

Back to the Future was also influenced by the 80s growth of personal gadgets. Cleaner products with simplicity at it's heart. *Blade Runner,* on the other hand, was produced on the heels of the 70s where cars were big and clunky, and repairing one's own car could often be solved with duct tape and a basic tool box found in most people's garage and a trip to the mechanic was feared because it was a major issue. In the 80s cars were getting 'smarter' and safer and the technology more complex.

Environmentalism was starting to take hold in the 70s with the success of Greenpeace and by the 80s people were starting to take it seriously. Economic incentives for recycling and being more environmentally conscious were being introduced and the environment was starting to be talked about around the water cooler. The country was beginning to take the environment seriously and strides were starting to be seen. Hope for a cleaner planet was starting to peak through which allowed a cleaner vision found in *Back to the Future II* to be taken seriously and not laughed at as an impossible joke.

Greed, pollution and crime were not the only cultural fears expressed in Scott's *Blade Runner*. Douglas Williams (1998) said the fear of the breakdown of the nuclear family is also represented in the film, not only though the main character of Decker's divorce, but through the eerily low number of women and children represented in the film. The major corporations had replaced them with replicants or robotic toys.

The fear of reverse colonization was also becoming one that was consuming most of America. After the loss of Vietnam and the expanding influence of Communist China, Americans began to fear the Orient more than the Russian threat (Yu, 2008). This fear was represented in *Blade Runner* through the highly neon kanji that litter the streets and

the massive monitor billboards across the city on massive skyscrapers that feature

Geishas drinking soda and popping pills, two popular products of the 70s and 80s. One

of the largest clues to the debate as to whether or not Harrison Ford's Deckard is in fact a

replicant is found in his opening shot where he sits in front of a kanji that translates to

'origin.' Even *Back to the Future II* shared an Asian influence as Marty McFly's

employer in the year 2015 is Asian and winds up firing him. Recent TV shows and films

can still see the influence of Asia on the future, with such shows as *Firefly* that mingles

English and Chinese, much the way *Blade Runner* did in the early 1980s.

Ridley Scott, director of *Blade Runner*, said his vision of the film was a "sense of

overload," and a world that was sucking the planet dry of resources and just couldn't

quench its thirst (Beard, 1998). Nothing new was built from the ground up, everything

was tacked on while *Back to the Future II* had its town square which was cleaned up and

remodeled, the gas stations were rebuilt from the ground up, the movie theater had

received a new marquee complete with holographic shark, and the malt shop was given a

full facelift. *Back to the Future II* showed the influence of the urban renovation policies

that many major cities were starting up in the late 80s and early 90s, renovation programs

that are still continuing today (Leinberger & Leinberger, 2014).

Wittenberg (2008) said that many cultural theorists considered *Back to the Future*

II as an "epitome of 1980s American culture, and of the retrograde outlook of the Reagan

era (p. 52)." While influenced greatly by the technology of the 1980s, the film was also

influenced by gender roles, commercialism and the politics of the time. Wittenberg

(2008) noticed the cultural phenomenon of gender roles in *Back to the Future* as that

predominant in the 80s where sympathy of a woman is the wrong way of finding love and the aggression of a man is the right way. This is exemplified by Wittenberg's description of how Marty's future is less desirable when his mother and father fell in love due to his mother's sympathy for his father, but when his father stands up and punches the antagonist Biff, Marty's future is altered and his family becomes more desirable and successful.

While often criticized by some as being too optimistic, it is hard to ignore that *Back to the Future II* celebrated our advancements as much as *Blade Runner* warned of them. For instance, there has been strong criticism of how Marty influences an African American to pursue a career in politics in the very year the Civil Rights movement began (Wittenberg, 2008), but what is often overlooked is how it celebrates how far we had come in only 30 years, from a time of segregation to a time when a black man could be elected mayor in a small town America, a future that could never have been imagined in the 1950s.

Victim of Structuralism

Much of the way the horse has become associated with the western, the flying car has become associated with the future. This association even appeared in a 2000 IBM commercial starring Avery Brooks, where Brooks declares at the beginning, "It's the year 2000, but where are the flying cars? I was promised flying cars" (IBM, 2000). While the image of the flying car could be seen in films dating back decades, the most iconic images of flying cars in most American's minds are that of the flying police vehicles in

Blade Runner and the flying Dolorian in *Back to the Future II* and *III*. This symbol, when seen, instantly creates an image of the future.

Will Wright (2009) describes the impact images and symbols have on a culture. When creating a film, the producers are creating a myth, which Wright says is a, "communication between a society and its members. (Wright, 2009, p. 270)." He continues to explain that symbol or image must be properly interpreted to be understood correctly. It creates a particular grammar that the audience understands. When the horse is seen in a prairie, they instantly interpret that they are watching a western. That same horse galloping through the streets of New York still has a western feel and the audience would probably associate the person riding the horse to be from a western state or modern day cowboy.

These images, like the horse or flying car , are a structured image that is shared by society. When *Blade Runner* introduced its dystopian future, complete with flying cars, it set up an image of the future that society began to agree upon as the vision of the future in science fiction films. The visions of *Blade Runner's* future became accepted by the majority of America, so much so that it was difficult to present a contrary vision of the future. With the cultural influence on the film, and the influence that the film had on future generations, *Blade Runner* became the accepted idea or myth of what the future was. In this way, the film became the structuralist view of the future. When *Back to the Future II* introduced its future, the structured element of what the future is was suddenly broken and a more optimistic possibility was presented, but that would not have been possible without culture beginning to change direction throughout the 1980s.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the fine line between modern and postmodernism is the film *Blade Runner* which has been analyzed by both viewpoints (Begley, 2004). Whether the obvious narrative quality of the film, or the film's post apocalyptic vision, the film was both inspired by and inspired the cultural fears of the times.

Blade Runner was greatly influenced by the punk movement, even being dubbed cyberpunk. While a product of the punk movement, by the end of the 80s, that movement had become the standard vision of the future (Beard, 1998). A devaluing of the human being progressed from the 70s into the early eighties, and through the punk movement, which expressed a deranged idea of equality through the idea that everyone was equal because everyone was worthless (Beard, 1998).

Then suddenly in 1989, *Back to the Future II* created a brand new version of the future, one with flying cars, hover boards and clear blue skies. It was suddenly a world where people controlled their own future or at least had a say in it. This film changed what the word *future* conjured up in people's minds. Suddenly it could be a positive thing.

In this way, *Blade Runner* and the dirtier, grittier science fiction films could be considered modernist film while the creation of a new and more positive future in *Back to the Future II* and other films that followed could be considered the postmodernist science fiction films as it took the canonized vision of what the future will look like and injected a sense of hope and a genuine sense that the future is in our own hands. In a way it was a rebellion of what society had deemed the appropriate vision of the future. Instead of a

political movement that stands up against those in power and says everything is wrong, or the world will be destroyed if we stay on this path, now we had a maverick able to stand up and say how great the future can be.

Conclusion

What exactly influenced the change of vision from the dystopian *Blade Runner* with smoggy and gritty Los Angeles neon-lit streets to the clean, prosperous hologram laden roads of *Back to the Future II* could be the political and social attitudes brought on by the hopelessness of the 70's initiated by loss of faith in the government through Watergate and perpetuated by the incompetence of the Carter administration and then the reemergence of the strength of the United States though military funding and economic prosperity seen in the 1980's. What is certain is that these films greatly influenced other films that came after it and were influenced by those that came before. They were influenced by our culture and they laid foundations of change into our culture. These changes could be for the better. Positive futures, such as those created by shows like *Star Trek,* influenced scientists and capitalists alike and pushed them forward to create inventions such as the flip-phone and the iPad. While science fiction films can serve as a warning, they can also serve as a promise of what the future can be. A film like *Blade Runner* can warn us what trading in our humanity for technology can bring us, but a film like *Back to the Future II* can show us what our future can be like if we take care to make the right choices. Frederic Jameson said, "In every utopia there is a dystopia. In every dystopia there is a utopia."

In the end, *Back to the Future II* and *Blade Runner* are both sending the same message. If we don't allow greed to consume us, protect our environment and preserve our humanity, we can create a better world, or avoid a disastrous one. The message is the same, but the methods are different. One is positive reinforcement while the other negative reinforcement. Whatever the method of delivery, the intent is the same, to remind us that our future is our own.

References

Beard, J. (1998). Science Fiction Films of the Eighties: Fin de Siécle Before Its Time. *Journal Of Popular Culture*, *32*(1), 1-13.

Begley, V. (2004). Blade Runner and the Postmodern: A Reconsideration. *Literature Film Quarterly*, *32*(3), 186-192.

Brooker, W. (2009). All Our Variant Futures: The Many Narratives of Blade Runner: The Final Cut. *Popular Communication*, *7*(2), 79-91. doi: 10.1080/15405700802659056

Canaan, H. (2004). Christopher Palmer. Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern. *Utopian Studies*, (1), 141.

Gordon, A. (1992). You'll never get out of Bedford Falls: The inescapable family in American science fiction and... (cover story). *Journal Of Popular Film & Television*, *20*(2), 2.

HEATON, A. (2013). Matt Damon vs. The Space Republicans: Science fiction with technology that's more realistic than its politics. *Freeman: Ideas On Liberty*, *63*(9), 39.

Leinberger, C, & Leinberger, L. (2014). The Top 12 Movies About Urbanism." Nextcity.org. Retrieved from: www.nextcity.org/daily/entry/the-top-12-movies-about-urbanism

Mandell, N. (2014). Tony Hawk Apologizes For Lying About Hoverboards. US Today. Retrieved from: http://ftw.usatoday.com/2014/03/tony-hawk-is-very-sorry-he-made-everyone-believe-hoverboards-were-real

Mircea, E. (2013). The Postmodern Condition of Cinema in Hollywood Culture. *Scientific Journal Of Humanistic Studies*, *5*(9), 106-113.

Pringle, R. (2013). Life Imitates Art: Cyborgs, Cinema, and Future Scenarios. *Futurist*, *47*(4), 31.

Senior, W. A. (1996). Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity. *Film Criticism*, *21*(1), 1-12.

Wagner, C. G., & Tucker, P. (2013). Sci-Fi and the trans-simian future: a televised marathon of the Planet of the Apes movies inspired a few thoughts about what science fiction thinks of the future of civilization. *The Futurist*, (3). 64.

IBM. (2000). Where Are My Flying Cars? Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/
     watch?v=vzm6pvHPSGo

Williams, D. E. (1988). Ideology as Dystopia: An Interpretation of 'Blade Runner'.
     *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science
     Politique*, (4), 381. doi:10.2307/1600763

Wittenberg, D. (2008). Oedipus Multiplex, or, The Subject as a Time Travel Film: Two
     Readings of Back to the Future. *Discourse*, (2), 51.

Wright, Will. (2009). Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader. Ed. John Storey.
     4th ed. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman. 270-284.

Yang, Wei. (2013). Voyage into an Unknown Future: A Genre Analysis of Chinese SF
     Film in the New Millennium. *Science Fiction Studies*, (1), 133. doi:10.5621/
     sciefictstud.40.1.0133

Yu, T. (2008). Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: "Naked Lunch," "Blade Runner," and
     "Neuromancer.". *Melus*, *33*(4), 45-71.