EXPLORING SOLIDARITY IN CYBERPUNK CINEMA: REDISTRIBUTION AND RECOGNITION PARADIGMS IN BLADE RUNNER

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Chapter 6

Exploring Solidarity in Cyberpunk Cinema:
Redistribution and Recognition Paradigms in Blade Runner

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Abstract

This paper explores how the concepts of solidarity, framed through the paradigms of redistribution and recognition, manifest within cyberpunk cinema, focusing on *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Drawing on the works of Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler, the chapter examines the complex dynamics of solidarity in futuristic scenarios. This analysis highlights how cyberpunk narratives reflect the interdependence of socioeconomic and cultural injustices in shaping solidarity.

Keywords: Cyberpunk, Blade Runner, Solidarity, Redistribution, Recognition

JEL-Codes: P1, Z1, Z13, Z19

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1. Introduction

Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 sci-fi novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Blade Runner* (1982) and the second movie *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) have been the focus of numerous academic inquiries into the existential question of "what does it mean to be human" (e.g., Atterton, 2015; Barad, 2007; Norris, 2013; Senior, 1996; Shanahan, 2023). Yet, like most cyberpunk fiction, *Blade Runner* leaves us wondering what truly defines humanity without providing clear-cut answers (Senior, 1996). The Voight-Kampff test, on the other hand, is crucial to the plot of *Blade Runner* (1982) as it is used to distinguish humans from replicants - artificial beings in the form of a human- based on their level of empathy (Gaut, 2015). The test measures the replicants' body reactions, including respiration, heart rate, blushing, and pupillary dilation, in response to the emotionally stimulating questions (Sammon, 1996), making a person's level of empathy a crucial trait that defines humanity.

Starting from this, the concept of solidarity, which can be seen as "an active form of empathy," becomes important for understanding the complex dynamics of human connection in both movies. Solidarity, however, involves complex dynamics beyond the mobilized feeling of empathy, such as shared social practices, concerns, interests, or values (see Fraser, 1986; Honneth, 1995). This paper examines how solidarity mobilized in cyberpunk content and narratives through the lenses of redistributive and recognition paradigms. The paradigms of redistribution and recognition were pivotal in the debates on understanding the catalysts of social movements, most notably discussed by Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in the 1990s. Fraser (1995) argued that true solidarity requires addressing both economic inequality and cultural injustices, advocating a dual focus on redistribution and recognition to build a more just society. Butler (1998), on the other hand, critiqued the rigid categorization of new social movements as socioeconomic and cultural, suggesting a more fluid and inclusive understanding of justice claims. Fraser (2022) extensively discussed the interconnect-edness of economic, ecological, social, and political crises in her later work, and for some scholars (e.g., Johansson Wilén, 2023), the interdependence of redistributive and recognition justice claims was more explicit in these studies. This intersectional approach is reflected in today's social solidarity economy movements, which extend the field of the economy with socio-political, cultural, and ecological aspects (see RIPESS, n.d.).

Cyberpunk cinema, in this respect, reflects an intricate, dynamic, and interdependent model of the relationship between redistribution and recognition paradigms. It offers valuable insights into the perceived new solidaristic aspects of human and post-human existence, closely related to our current reality (see Burrows, 2005; Csicsery-Ronay, 1991; Florea, 2020; Kellner, 1995). This paper thus aims to explore how redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity manifest and interact within cyberpunk cinema and what sociological insights can be gleaned from an analysis of these cinematic content and narratives, focusing on *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). The following section briefly explains the cyberpunk genre's dystopic and

utopic dynamics. It will then establish the concepts of redistribution and recognition in the context of solidarity before analyzing the movies *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) in the light of these concepts.

2.   Cyberpunk- fluid genres

Dystopian accounts of places worse than our own emerged as the dark side of utopia in the 20th century. However, it was in the mid-1980s that the new creative movement of cyberpunk emerged, manifested in films like Ridley Scott's iconic *Blade Runner* and literary works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003. pp. 1-2). Mike Pondsmith, the creator of *Cyberpunk*, a pen-and-paper role-playing game released in 1988, defines the cyberpunk genre as the struggle of ordinary people oppressed by powerful political and social forces who use a combination of found, scavenged, and repurposed technology to fight back and achieve personal freedom (Pondsmith in Spencer, 2018).

While the struggle for personal freedom is prevalent among humans and artificial beings, social movements advocating broader societal principles remain largely unseen. As McKay (2002) says, cyberpunk's "punk" remains almost always passive in the stories. On the other hand, as the neoliberal conservative undertones of the 1980s began to assert their influence on social structures and everyday life with economic restructuring and right-wing politics, the cyberpunk genre offered a counterpoint - "a usefully negative if nihilistic imaginary" (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 2). The cyberpunk movement has become an art form reflecting the dystopian realities beneath the surface.

Moreover, the second wave of cyberpunk, predominantly authored by women such as Pat Cadigan, went beyond nihilistic anxiety and gave birth to a novel oppositional awareness. The creators of the second wave (including Octavia E. Butler, Cadigan, Charnas, Robinson, Piercy, and Le Guin) strategically embraced dystopian strategies, and their works became a critical narrative form, a means of grappling with the grim economic, political, and cultural climate of the era (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, p. 3).

Thus, the delineation between cyberpunk's first and second waves seems less like a rigid boundary and more like a fluid continuum. Kellner et al. (1984, 2005) distinguishes movies such as Blade Runner, Outland, and Alien from conservative dystopias - or classical dystopia (the first wave) - which present the couple, the family, and other contemporary institutions and ideologies as more natural and desirable than their corrupted future counterparts. Radical dystopian movies, on the other hand, highlight the dangers of pollution, nuclear war, and economic exploitation, and some contain allegorical critiques of advanced capitalism. Even for some, there is a sense of fluidity between the utopian and dystopian genres. As noted by Gibson, a prominent author in the cyberpunk genre, "I don't think I'm dystopian at all, no more than I'm utopian. The dichotomy is hopelessly old-fashioned, really. What we have today is a combination of the two" (Gibson *in* Seed, 2003, p. 70).

Based on this background, this paper contends that cyberpunk holds sociological significance as a radical dystopian genre most closely aligned with contemporary reality. It argues that these future scenarios can be valuable for interpreting today and offering a coherent future vision from a sociological perspective (Burrows, 2005).

3. Redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity

In the 1990s, an inspiring discussion emerged among feminists and left-wing thinkers concerning the intersections of justice in contemporary politics. This debate examined the relationship between 'redistribution' and 'recognition' as a potential means to achieve social justice. Some argued that injustice arose from unequal resource distribution, necessitating redistribution, while others contended that injustice resulted from a lack of recognition of different identity groups (gender, sexuality, race, etc.), necessitating recognition (Griffin, 2006). Axel Honneth (1995, p. 161), for instance, expressed concern about the possibility of obscuration of significant moral feelings with the fixation on interests (the objective inequalities in material opportunities) in the emergence of social movements. Honneth gives special attention to recognition as a moral category as a driving force behind today's social movements.

Fraser (1995), on the other hand, in her early period article, *From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice* in *A 'Post-Socialist' Age* discusses how the "struggle for recognition" has become the primary form of political conflict in the late twentieth century. Fraser gives equal importance to redistribution and recognition to build a just society (Fraser, 1998), emphasizing that political economy and culture are always intertwined in real life (Fraser, 1995). On the other hand, regarding cultural injustices, according to Fraser (1995), while both gender and "race" are seen as bivalent collectivities implicating both redistribution and recognition, sexuality is rooted in culture. From this perspective, injustice regarding sexuality is essentially a matter of recognition as homosexual individuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society, not having a distinct position in the division of labour. To overcome homophobia and heterosexism, the cultural valuations that privilege heterosexuality need to be changed (Fraser, 1995).

This approach initiated one of the most influential discussions about the relationship between redistribution and recognition paradigms between Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser. Butler (1998) challenges the idea that sexuality is rooted wholly in culture and that struggles are only for recognition. Butler inquires about the potential oversight of the manifestations of homophobia within the framework of the political economy and, consequently, the marginalization of non-normative sexualities by cultural standards, resulting in their portrayal as inferior. Indeed, for Butler, the suppression of non-normative sexualities is crucial for maintaining normativity and reinforcing the idea of the traditional family as natural (O'Neill-Butler, 2015).

Fraser's recent work has no explicit shift from her previous position. However, according to Johansson Wilén (2023), the interdependence of the claims of recognition and redistributive justice is further emphasized in Fraser's later writings, highlighting the socioeconomic constraints on both redistributive justice and recognition. In *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It* (2022), Fraser argues that capitalism is not just an economic system but an institutionalized social order with impacts across society. Capitalism creates institutionalized divisions between the economic front and non-economic backstories, concealing dependencies. She seeks to promote an expanded conception of capitalism that encompasses not just the economy, but also various social areas (Milstein, 2024).

4.   Methodology

According to Mikos (2014), film analysis is becoming increasingly important in societies heavily influenced by media. Indeed, films, as a form of communication, are closely connected to the way society communicates and interacts. They are integral to social and discursive practices and reflect social conditions and individual structures of society.

For analytic film analysis, one must begin with developing a general cognitive purpose (Mikos, 2014), which is, for this study, a content and narration analysis of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*. This analysis will involve a contextual analysis of the films to consider societal events, cultural movements, and political climates that shape movies' themes, narratives, and reception (see Barsam & Monaham, 2013). Analyzing films this way may also require theories from various disciplines, making them both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. There is, therefore, no single path for analysis, as it draws from different methods and theoretical assumptions based on the aim of the analysis. Based on this, this paper establishes the movies' relationships to their broader historical and theoretical contexts through redistributive and recognition paradigms of solidarity.

In conducting content and narration analysis, I watched the selected movies, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*, three times, taking into account the academic debates surrounding redistribution and recognition paradigms. Additionally, I reviewed the relevant academic articles on the selected movies to further inform my analysis. The subsequent sections will contain theoretical and historical reflections, interpretations, and contextualization of the analyzed data.

5.   Cyberpunk- "high tech, low life"[1]

Blade Runner (1982) was released during significant social and political upheaval in the United States and globally. The film was made against the backdrop of the early 1980s, a time marked by rapid technological advance, economic uncertainty and heightened cultural anxieties. Indeed, the 1980s saw the rise of neoliberal economic policies characterized by deregulation, tax cuts, and a focus on free-market principles. These developments manifested as corporate power consolidation and neoliberal financial reforms result in stagnation, volatility, and increased inequality rather than stability and reduced income gaps (Harvey, 2010). Blade Runner reflects these socio-economic realities - in both movies - by depicting a dystopian futuristic scenario where powerful corporations dominate society, exploiting human and artificial labour for profit. The stark contrast between the skyscrapers of the wealthy elite and over-crowded streets inhabited by the marginalized underscores the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. According to Kellner et al. (1984), an analysis of dystopian works, such as *Blade Runner*, sheds light on the concerns of people in the United States about mass commercialization and government control and the potential loss of personal identity and freedom.

Indeed, the 1980s also saw the rise of identity politics, which have been in political discussions since the 1970s (Wiarda, 2016). Movements advocating the rights and recognition of marginalized groups, including women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ individuals, gained momentum during this period. According to Adilifu Nama (2008), the replicants in Blade Runner could be interpreted as symbolically representing escaped enslaved people who shared the same socioeconomic status as enslaved Africans during the era of legalized slavery in America. Replicants were designed to have shorter lifespans than humans and were primarily created as slave labour for off-world colonies. Injustices rooted in gender and sexuality are also apparent within this societal framework. This is evident in the creation of female replicants, such as Pris Stratton, one of the rebel replicants in the film, who are designed as "pleasure models" (Brown, 2011) for off-world military personnel. Thus, sexuality has been commodified to serve the company's economic and political objectives. The second movie would further explore sexuality with the involvement of companies and the state in the reproduction process of replicants.

The themes of redistribution and recognition are intertwined throughout the narrative of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049*, even though, on initial viewing, the replicants' struggle appears to align more closely with the theme of recognition. Looking closer at Blade Runner (1982), replicants are more robust and faster than any living human but have a shorter lifespan. Each replicant has only a four-year lifespan, which prevents them from becoming equal to humans and developing their sense of identity over time. Still, they possess emotions, memories,

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[1] "High tech-low life" was used in the preface to William Gibson's Burning Chrome to describe the cyberpunk world's high-tech but oppressive and unequal conditions.

and aspirations like humans (Barad, 2007). The reason the Tyrell Corp, the creator of replicants, gave replicants the capacity to think for themselves was to make them as human-like as possible to enhance productivity on off-world colonies. However, this desire also gave the replicants, to some extent, free will. Indeed, some replicants chose to rebel against their creators, which is the central plot of the 1982 film. *Blade Runner* (1982), thus, follows Rick Deckard, a "Blade Runner" whose job is to track down and eliminate rebellious replicants. The rebel replicants' plan is to confront their creator, demand an explanation, and request an extended lifespan. One of the rebel replicants, Roy Batty, finally finds his maker, Dr. Tyrell. However, soon after, Roy realizes that life extension is not possible for replicants and kills his maker.

In the film, Roy's yearning for more life can be interpreted as a call for the equitable distribution of a fundamental resource: time. As a replicant, Roy is engineered with a predetermined, finite lifespan, a glaring injustice when contrasted with humans who naturally have the potential for a longer life. However, his struggle, in my view, is not just for more years of life but for the opportunity to fully embrace life, a privilege that has been withheld from him and other replicants. Thus, Roy's begging for more life can also be seen as a demand for recognition of his humanity and individuality. Indeed, replicants like Roy are denied recognition as beings with their desires, emotions, and identities. They are treated as mere tools or enslaved people, defined by their function rather than their intrinsic value as living beings. Roy's wish for more life is thus a plea for recognition that he, and by extension all replicants, are not just expendable creations but beings deserving of the same recognition as humans. This may include the right to life, freedom from fear, and self-determination.

Some of the film's narratives reflect the intricacies of the claims for redistribution and recognition. When, for instance, Roy is confronted with his maker, Dr. Tyrell, Tyrell asks, "Would you like to be modified?". Roy answers, "I had in mind something a little more radical... I want more life...". This may not simply indicate a desire for a longer life (fairer distribution) but rather a request for "more life," including recognition and rights. Also, near the end, during the intense confrontation between Roy and Rick Deckard, Roy knows that his predetermined lifespan is almost over. In the rooftop chase in heavy rain, Deckard fails to leap, leaving him clinging to the edge of a building, his fingers the only thing preventing him from falling to his death. Roy lectures, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave." Deckard's hand slips; Roy reaches out, grabs him, and pulls him up to safety just in time. Here, too, Roy is fully aware of the conditions of slavery and wants recognition of his existence for others. Indeed, replicants undertake tasks that are too dangerous for humans, such as heavy labour and combat, and face death for defiance in off-world settlements without any legal rights, which makes them literally slaves. Moreover, Roy, as a replicant, has been living with the knowledge of his imminent death and the constant fear of being hunted, which he equates to a form of slavery.

On the other hand, ironically, the ones who are replicants carry out a very human rebellion, and most of the human characters seem to resign themselves to corporate

domination and a very dehumanized life (Kellner et al., 1984). This perfectly matches the Tyrell Corporation's motto for replicants: "More Human Than Human." Replicants, in this sense, display a more human characteristic with the solidarity they establish among themselves and the struggle they wage. Indeed, the replicants contrast with unempathetic human characters, showing passion and concern for each other, while the mass of humanity on the streets remains cold and impersonal.

6.   Redistribution and recognition paradigms after thirty years

Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* expands on the thematic complexities of its predecessor, further exploring the interplay between redistribution and recognition in a dystopian future. Set thirty years after the events of the original film, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) still grapples with many of the same socio-political themes, albeit in a more contemporary setting. In 2017, when the second movie was released, rapid technological advances, including artificial intelligence, robotics and automation, were evident. The impact of the 2008 financial crisis was still felt, with many people experiencing stagnating wages, precarious employment, and reduced social mobility. Additionally, concerns about climate change and environmental degradation were at the forefront of global discourse in 2017. *Blade Runner 2049*, thus, introduces audiences to a world grappling with the consequences of technological advance, environmental degradation and societal decay (Flisfeder, 2019).

Looking at the story briefly, in the year 2049, thirty years following the events of *Blade Runner* (1982), replicants are still treated as enslaved people. "K," who is a Nexus-9 replicant model, works for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a "blade runner." This time, "blade runners" are replicants who hunt and "retire" other rogue replicants. After K retires replicant Sapper Morton, he discovers a box buried under a tree at Morton's farm. The box contains the remains of a female replicant (Racheal, who Deckard fell in love with in the first movie) who died during a cesarean section. This discovery exposes that replicants can reproduce biologically, which was previously thought to be impossible. Thus, Joshi, K's superior, is afraid that this knowledge could cause a war between humans and replicants and orders K to retire the replicant child.

As in the original, in the sequel, the police guard the barrier between humans and replicants, which exists to maintain replicants as a source of labour and sustain the system's productivity. On the other hand, Wallace Corporation, which exerts near-total control over society, hopes self-reproducing replicants will boost its business: more slave labour. Controlling the "reproduction" of replicants, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the industrialist Niander Wallace broods on how to create replicant workers on a scale sufficient for his imperial plans: "Every leap of civilization was built off the back of a disposable workforce ... But I can only make so many ... We need more replicants than can ever be assembled. Millions, so we can be trillions more" (Chen, 2020, p. 15).

In this futuristic scenario, the traditional workforce still stands at the centre of the economic and political system, signalling the validity of the traditional "family system" and "normative sexuality" with self-reproducing replicants. Furthermore, in *Blade Runner 2049*, the relationship between Joi, K's holographic companion, and K may be seen as a powerful illustration of how corporate power not only creates labour power with the production of replicants but also manipulates consumer behaviour within a capitalist system. K, a replicant and a blade runner, represents both the labour force that serves the interests of the powerful corporations and the consumer who fulfills his needs and desires through products created by the same system (Joi is also a "product" of Wallace corporation). This dual role highlights the influence of corporate power in shaping both labour force and consumption. The character of Joi's relationship with K also highlights the complexities of identity, gender, and sexuality in a society where the boundaries between reality and illusion are blurred. Joi is sophisticated; however, she is portrayed as a stereotypically domesticated housewife serving her "man" and, thus, her character raises questions about gender dynamics and politics within the replicant identity (Flisfeder, 2017, para. 22).

On the other hand, in the second film, we witness not only the exploitation of replicants but also of humans more closely. The exploitation includes a semi-illegal entrepreneur who uses hundreds of human orphans for child labour in scavenging old digital machinery. When this is the case, Žižek (2017) rightly asks, "Where do human "lower classes" stand?" (para. 7). As in the previous movie, this film also depicts humans who have resigned to their circumstances or silence about the antagonisms among humans and non-humans.

Going back to K's story, as he delves further into his investigation of the replicant-human child, he uncovers a revelation that challenges the very foundation of his perception of identity and humanity. This struggle is depicted in his belief that he might be the child of a human and a replicant (Deckard and Racheal), a belief that gives him hope that he might be something more than what he was created to be. K's journey in *Blade Runner 2049* is deeply tied to his search for recognition - not just as a replicant, but as a being with his own identity and humanity. Throughout the film, K grapples with questions of who he is and whether his life has meaning beyond his programmed function. However, when he discovers that he is not the child, but just another replicant, his sense of self is ruined. Yet this realization also pushes him toward an understanding of his own value and agency, independent of the labels and roles imposed on him by society. Indeed, his eventual decision to help Deckard reunite with his daughter, even knowing it may cost him his life, signifies his self-recognition as more than just a tool; he sees himself as someone capable of making meaningful choices, deserving of recognition as an equal.

On the other hand, Žižek (2021) argues that the story's form - characterized by a slow pace and aestheticized imagery - diminishes its potential to convey a progressive, anti-capitalist message. Instead of enhancing the story's critical content,

the form obscures it, leading to a presentation that avoids taking a clear stance and comes across as passive or neutral. This undermines the story's potential to challenge capitalist ideas effectively. Moreover, the rebellion led by Freysa, a prominent figure among the replicants seeking to resist their creators and oppressors, is depicted as somewhat negative. Freysa might belong to the older models, like a Nexus-8 or a model with a degree of autonomy. Despite her aspirations for a new order where replicants are no longer subjugated by human masters, she desires K to eliminate Deckard before Wallace can interrogate him and capture Rachael's child. Ultimately, K chooses not to align with either the replicant underground movement or the authorities, opting to remain impartial.

Conclusion

This paper does not aim to determine which paradigm, redistribution or recognition, predominates in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Rather, it aims to explore how these two paradigms are portrayed and woven into the narratives and content of the two movies, taking into account their broader implications for societal reflection. In both films, the injustices related to recognition and distribution are deeply intertwined within their narratives, demonstrating that meaningful societal change necessitates a combination of both struggles. The struggle for redistribution or recognition remains passive unless it becomes collective and includes injustices that emerge from both paradigms. Indeed, even if Roy, the rebel replicant from the first movie, had his wish and all replicants lived longer, would it solve all the problems? Here, the motto should not just be about a "longer life" but also "more life". Otherwise, the best-case scenario would be for androids to obtain some civil rights and achieve equality with humans to be "equally exploited." In the end, even though the potential of *Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049* to present a progressive, revolutionary, or alternative socioeconomic system is controversial, the reading of such films can aid the development of political strategies for social change (Kellner et al., 1984, 2005), and the solidarity-based socioeconomic movements.

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