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Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner by Matthew Flisfeder
(review)

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Ultimately, the implications of this blurring between zombie and vampire (and between hero and anti-hero) are twofold. As Abbott concludes:

This engagement with the undead across popular culture, including film, television and literature, highlights a cultural fascination with the undead and the threat of apocalypse that is a response to an unsettling cultural climate in which we are bombarded by the threat of annihilation – something that is played out and critiqued by the many texts I have discussed in this book. It however, also stands as evidence of a cultural appropriation of this apocalyptic threat. (201)

In other words, the slow merger of the vampire and the zombie into a single undead figure still embodies twenty-first-century popular culture's many anxieties about race, class and other kinds of identity politics, but it also reflects our ongoing attempts to commercialise, domesticate and exorcise those fears. The vampire/zombie hybrid represents a key, emerging site within this struggle.

Abbott's study encompasses an impressive range of texts across film, television and literature. Most have already been the object of extensive academic scrutiny (with several notable exceptions), but Abbott very successfully builds on this existing work to construct fresh and highly nuanced readings. Though its complex analysis of the place of the undead in popular culture is likely most rewarding for monster scholars or horror fans, it is written in a way that is also accessible to less engaged or specialised readers. It offers a valuable introduction to the sympathetic zombie/vampire in twenty-first-century popular culture, and a fascinating vision of where this figure might be headed in the decades to come.



Matthew Flisfeder, *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. 175pp. US\$19.95 (pbk).

James M. Elrod

Matthew Flisfeder's book undertakes precisely what its title suggests it will do; it comprehensively presents the history and features of postmodern theory and criticism and then applies these set of analytics to a close reading of Ridley Scott's 1982 classic sf film. Flisfeder's text is part of the 'Film Theory in Practice' series by Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing. As such, he gears it toward readers interested in learning media theory and close reading practices in tandem. In this work, Flisfeder successfully demonstrates how a specifically Marxist and postmodern analysis of *Blade Runner* can provide insights for understanding our contemporary late-capitalist society, culture and politics. Taking an intertextual interpretive approach to the

film and other works of popular culture, Flisfeder lays out a cognitive map of our capitalist realist setting, reclaims the radical potential of postmodern theory and highlights *Blade Runner* as a prism through which to consider the transition from modernity to postmodernity and from the postmodern to the capitalist realist present.

Flisfeder divides his book into two chapters, the first providing an account – as concise and clear as one could hope for – of the history of modernism and postmodernism (broadly defined) and their major tenets. In order to guide the reader to an understanding of postmodernism as a reaction to modernism, he begins by exploring the latter, covering everything from Marxism and psychoanalysis to semiotics and structuralism. Flisfeder contends that although modernism attempted to distance itself from market logic and produce ‘art for art’s sake’, capitalism ended up commodifying and institutionalising all sectors of society, including art, and turned modernism’s ‘practices of subversion ... into the dominant ideology’ (84). Postmodernism, Flisfeder argues, is then what happens ‘when subversion is no longer subversive’ (84). The first chapter also fleshes out the primary elements of postmodernism, under which Flisfeder identifies some of its positive improvements on modernism – its pluralism and dissolution of the lines between high art and popular culture – as well as what he sees as its more problematic critiques of master narratives of historical teleology. Marxism and its historical materialist reading of history is one such metanarrative that he wants to retain, however, and use to reframe postmodern readings to see past their ‘cynical resignation’ (85). His claim is that other traits of postmodernism – pastiche, parody, double-coding, irony and simulation – can only be fully grasped as political if they retain awareness of ‘commodity-class dynamics of contemporary capitalism’ (83). Given the nature of the book’s focus and target readership, much of what Flisfeder discusses in the first chapter is positioned in relation to film and media, and he uses numerous examples from movies and television to illustrate his points. *Blade Runner*, in particular, is chosen as a text which lends itself to a Marxian postmodern reading, which is the focus of the book’s second half.

In his analysis of *Blade Runner*, Flisfeder shows how the film surfaces postmodern themes that challenge authoritative accounts of history, liberal notions of subjectivity as centred, and modernism’s Western and phallogentric positions. He accomplishes this by engaging in a close reading of the film as a ‘constant simulacrum of itself’ (97), which is evident through the various editions of its theatrical release, Director’s Cut (1992), Final Cut (2007) and its incarnations in the digital present. He also explores the film’s genre hybridisation of noir and sf into a cyberpunk, hyperreal setting, its use of parody

and pastiche, its manipulation of *mise-en-scène*, its questioning of subjectivity and its postmodern emphasis on spatialisation rather than temporality. For example, Flisfeder calls attention to how the 'glossy images of consumer spectacle' and presence of digital technology in *Blade Runner* contrast with the 'decay' and 'cultural density', which would make it difficult for viewers to specify a locale for the setting had the film not clarified it as Los Angeles at the outset (93). Furthermore, he notes the costumes evoke both 1940s film noir and 1980s punk rock, the architecture both art deco and the pyramids of ancient civilisations, and the diegetic Coca-Cola and Pan Am advertisements both futuristic and 'eerily familiar' (93). In other words, Flisfeder positions *Blade Runner* as the 'quintessential example of postmodern cinema' (70). However, he also incorporates intertextual interpretation, drawing on analysis of other postmodern works such as *Star Wars* (Lucas US 1977), *The Truman Show* (Weir US 1998), *Tron* (Lisberger US 1982), *Memento* (Nolan US 2000) and *Fight Club* (Fincher US/Germany 1999) as purviews to access new surficial readings of *Blade Runner*. His goal is not to provide a definitive interpretation of this one film or any other works he references (for that would not be very postmodern), but rather he shows *Blade Runner's* significance as a marker between modernism and postmodernism as well as a tool to make sense of our capitalist realist present. Flisfeder contends that the film maps out avenues for ways of thinking about 'postmodern practices of identification', through social media and digital platforms, that cynically function to will 'back into existence forms of authority' deconstructed through postmodernism itself (139–40). He argues *Blade Runner*, as a dystopian fiction, highlights a type of postmodern and capitalist realist cynicism, one in which people are aware of the world's present and looming problems but where ideology works to create denial of responsibility.

Flisfeder's work certainly achieves its goals, both to educate the reader on postmodern theory and criticism and to use *Blade Runner* as a mediator for postmodernism (then and now). The first half provides an adept guidebook for the reader through dense historical and theoretical territory. Though this part might be skimmed (or skipped) by scholars well-versed in Freud, Fredric Jameson and film theory, it is a relatively brief and invaluable resource for readers who might easily feel bogged down or lost within the forest of philosophical and social theories from the European Enlightenment until now. Moreover, Flisfeder's insights and commentary on modernism and postmodernism are percipient and plentiful. It is worth reading by even the most theory-savvy for this reason alone. Additionally, this section tackles the central question of the book: Why does a rehash of postmodernism and late capitalism matter now, and why is *Blade Runner* the perfect film on which to conduct this analytical

venture by applying its vast theoretical scope? The answer: *Blade Runner* speaks to the postmodern present through its questioning of discrete subjectivities and authoritative sources of history, and through prefiguring negative aspects of the 'unfettered multinational capitalism' (145) that characterises our eternally-present global reality.

Although Flisfeder makes a compelling case for seeing *Blade Runner* in this way, one might question why postmodernism, which currently seems so out of vogue in many disciplines, should be the privileged theoretical lens. Flisfeder himself acknowledges this potential critique, noting that postmodernism seems to have given way to what Mark Fisher refers to as 'capitalist realism' (16). However, Flisfeder contends that such a movement is merely postmodern in its most *extreme* form, brought on by the global dominance of capitalism and a predominant culture in which postmodernism has finally 'succeeded in ridding culture, society, and politics of history' (17). Drawing heavily on Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, Flisfeder's approach to postmodernism is unapologetically Marxist. He proposes that the class struggles prompting debates over economic and political models provide the 'big ideological disputes' for our world but the 'culture war[s]' are merely asking the 'small questions about identity' (149–50). However, he ameliorates this somewhat problematic position by acknowledging the boons that identity politics and cultural studies have brought to leftist politics in general.

Flisfeder's larger point, underlined in his conclusion is that we can imagine a more radical future and film can help us in this pursuit. *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner* is a valuable addition to the theoretical conversations that matter the most, those that take us past surfaces and restore the multiple meanings that reshape subjectivities, histories and society at large. Because it is set in 2019, *Blade Runner* is poised to show how late-capitalism has stagnated even as it has replicated itself into every area of life. As Flisfeder contends, when neoliberal ideologies and market practices commodify resistance itself, making it a part of the mainstream, the new Right and neoconservatism begins to look 'increasingly like the only radical alternative to dominant culture' and the only 'truly counter-hegemonic force' (26–7). The projects of our time, therefore, according to Flisfeder, might be reinvigorated using materialist readings of history to reimagine our present reality and meet the ideological threats to a more progressive world.

