

# Introduction

## New World or Old?

Is not utopia—this leap outside—the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on?

Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization “nowhere” work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?

—Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*<sup>1</sup>

### ACCELERATED DECREPITUDE

The America of myth, especially the American West, beckons as a New World frontier, a “promised land” of opportunity where people can escape civilized society and the constraints of the past, start life afresh, and reinvent themselves. In this myth, the Old World of Europe and Asia suffers from the burden of history and the weight of time. It is overcivilized—wealthy, decadent, and encrusted with class divisions and age-old traditions that deny the poor genuine opportunities to improve their lives and that undermine the entrepreneurial vitality and individual initiative that mark America.<sup>2</sup>

But the promise of this mythic America goes beyond the liberal ideals of freedom and equal opportunity. It is spiritual. If the “sin” of the Old World is too much civilization, history, and tradition, such that the inherited past cannot be overcome, the “redemption” offered in New World America is a frontier wilderness that forces migrants to give up their Old World ways and offers them the chance to become a new kind of people, individuals responsible for their own fate and fortune and free to define who they are. The New World thus is a source of human progress, and America is the leading edge of human destiny, fulfilling a mission given to it by Nature and God. Indeed, scholars have pointed to the biblical resonances of this American self-identity, in New England Puritanism and later in the nationalist idea that the United States is God’s New Israel, a cho-

sen land destined to be a city on a hill and a light to the world. Such ideas have been expressed in sermons, political addresses, historical writing, paintings, music, Western novels and films, and other areas of popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

But what if we juxtapose that mythic history with stories set in the American West of the future? Does the United States still exemplify hope of progress? Or has it become an Old World society itself, as corrupt and class-bound as the Europe of old?

The iconic film *Blade Runner* (1982; director's cut, 1991), which is set in Los Angeles in 2019, tells such a story.<sup>4</sup> In *Blade Runner*, Los Angeles and America itself are no longer a New World frontier. They are dying. The story of America has ended in postapocalyptic chaos. The modern world and Western civilization are at an end, too. When the film is over, it is no longer clear even what it means to be human. The film is set in the future, of course, but it reflects fears often expressed by late-twentieth-century Americans. Where is the United States heading? How are globalization and international labor migration changing the nation? Is our industrial way of life ecologically sustainable? Do genetic engineering, computerized virtual reality, and other bewildering new technologies have the potential to change human nature? What, realistically, can people today hope for, and what should they fear? Perhaps most important, is the future determined, or can we still influence the course of American history?

Based on Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Blade Runner* is set in a surreal postindustrial Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> Harrison Ford plays Richard Deckard, a "blade runner," a special-services police officer who patrols the city looking for criminal "replicants" (cloned humanoids). Called "skin jobs" in the racist lingo of 2019, replicants are genetically enhanced, have programmed memories, and die after four years. They are impossible to distinguish from true human beings with the naked eye, and they perform dangerous, unwanted tasks "off-world," on space stations and settlements, working as soldiers, laborers, and prostitutes. "More human than human" is the boast of the Tyrell Corporation, which manufactures them. Blade runners such as Deckard hunt replicants who have escaped from their masters in outer space and fled to Earth to seek revenge for their slave status, discover their origins, prolong their brief lives, and perhaps become fully human. Over the course of the film Deckard finds and "retires"—that is, kills—a group of four fugitive replicants. In the end, he tries to escape Los Angeles with a female replicant that he loves, but it is no longer clear whether Deckard himself is a human or an advanced-model replicant.

Los Angeles in 2019 is rotting and decaying. The sun never breaks through the clouds and acid rain, as unbridled industrial development (and nuclear war?) has led to environmental collapse. Few animals are left other than insects and those

that are genetically engineered. The film opens with scenes of oil refineries belching smoke, factories unleashing flames, and mile-high corporate headquarters constructed to look like Mayan pyramids. The masses live below, in the watery city streets and decaying buildings, left to eke out a living beneath these corporate temples. Technology has overwhelmed nature, and California has become a dying Old World. Escaping the planet is the only way to find new frontiers, something only the well-off and healthy can do. In one scene an advertising blimp promises that “a new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure. New climate. Recreational facilities.” Los Angeles is no longer the promised land but a crowded, overdeveloped, overcivilized, decadent city.

*Blade Runner's* treatment of politics and race is also poignant. Many formerly American-owned corporations are now run by Mexicans and Asians. The LA streets are populated by a hybrid mix of whites and visible minorities who speak a pidgin known as “Cityspeak.” These are leftover people, those too poor, sick, or defective to qualify for the off-world colonies. Few institutions of government are visible in the streets, other than the police, and interplanetary corporations dominate what is left of earthbound society. *Blade Runner* is a powerful dystopian vision of the near future set in the American West, a desolate postmodern depiction of the new millennium on a planet that has committed social and ecological suicide.<sup>6</sup> The idea of progress and the belief that America is “exceptional” because it has escaped the historical dilemmas faced by other civilizations have been revealed as sheer fantasy. And no obvious source of redemption is at hand, for the individual characters in the film or for America as a society.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphor that defines this America is “accelerated decrepitude,” or rapid aging. One of the minor characters in the film, J. F. Sebastian, is a misfit genetic engineer who helps two of the escaped replicants find their maker, William Tyrell. Sebastian suffers from Methuselah Syndrome (Progeria), a disease that accelerates the aging process. The replicants explain to him that they have the same problem, “accelerated decrepitude.” They tell him that they want to find Tyrell to see if he will help them to prolong their lives. More is going on, of course. The leader of the replicants kills Tyrell when he refuses to help them, and presumably also kills Sebastian. But the problem shared by Sebastian and the replicants is the fate of America as a whole: rapid aging. Building on the rich natural resources of the frontier West, the United States became a global power in the late nineteenth century and an empire in the twentieth. Now, in 2019, the American dream has already ended. If the dream of New World frontiers lives on, it is in outer space. But the new interplanetary colonies are staffed with genetically engineered slaves, the “skin job” replicants. The dream is based on racial exploitation.

*Blade Runner* thus implies that America's frontier experiment did not truly redeem the Old World but merely staved off some of its sins, temporarily, and ultimately replicated them. Juxtaposed with this *Blade Runner* future, myths of the American "promised land" ring hollow. They brush aside all-too-human failings. If such failings are to be redeemed, something more than new lands and frontiers in outer space will be required. Indeed, the frontier turned out not to be a solution to Old World problems but merely a new place in which to play them out.

*Blade Runner* is not wholly pessimistic. The replicants resist their unjust fate and dream of finding their humanity and freedom. Likewise, some human beings, such as Deckard and Sebastian, feel a kinship with them. Deckard falls in love with one and is saved by another, who could have killed him. The film thus has a utopian horizon defined by a fuller recognition of humanity, one that includes both the replicants and the earthbound misfits such as Sebastian. But it is dystopian because there is no political movement for change, not even a plan of action, and all the characters who seek individual change are either killed or forced to flee.

From the perspective of such imagined histories of the future, this book sheds new light on the mythology of the American West. Scholars have examined the West of the imagination in fiction, film, TV, tourism, the arts, and historical writing. They have studied American views of the future and explored tensions between ideals of progress and pastoral visions of the landscape. There also is extensive scholarship on science fiction and on utopian, dystopian, and apocalyptic fiction and film. But the intersection of these topics has been neglected. With the exception of one chapter in a survey of frontier stories set in space, studies that compare science fiction to classic frontier narratives overlook science fiction set in the West itself.<sup>8</sup> This book thus breaks new ground in drawing these themes together. It explores questions about American identity, frontier mythology, human transformation, and the future by analyzing dystopian, utopian, and apocalyptic narratives set in the far West. In so doing it contributes to scholarship on American culture, the West, the mythic ideology of the frontier, and utopianism and science fiction. But I also hope that *Future West* intrigues people beyond the academy, people who are fans and connoisseurs of these genres of fiction and film. More than that, I hope it moves readers to think about the history and future of the United States and the wider world. At one level, stories are just stories, and if the worlds of the future that they depict entertain and delight us, they have done enough. But even if not "real," literally, in imagining the future they nonetheless offer us an intriguing viewpoint, "a leap outside," from which to reimagine our own time.<sup>9</sup> Will our future be essentially the same as life

today, or will it in some radical sense be different? And will it be peaceful and progressive or terrible and terrifying?

The novels and occasional film examined in this book suggest that frontier myths incline people to imagine the future as a return to primitive conditions. Most futuristic narratives and settings reveal that people cannot easily imagine radically new societies evolving progressively out of their own existing one, let alone successfully addressing deep-seated social problems. Indeed, frontier stories of the traditional sort typically hold sway, even when set in outer space rather than the West.<sup>10</sup> In stories like these set in the American West itself in the future, society has been swept away by some kind of natural disaster or human-made holocaust. In the primitive conditions that ensue, survivors have been forced to start over and perhaps build a new kind of society. But it is frontier conditions that erase the problems of the past and make a better future possible. At the same time, and contradictorily, such stories indicate that in postapocalyptic new worlds the past cannot be swept away easily. The traditions that people inherit continue to shape the future in subtle ways. Whatever it is, for good or ill, the new is built out of the old. In a few stories, however, the crucial source of change is not the frontier but social-political movements that have the potential to overcome the injustices of the past and problems of the present (rather than erase them, *deus ex machina*).

Such stories typically play with the myths of the American West, restating and subverting them. The promise of the frontier was the freedom to leave the past behind. But rather than truly escaping inherited traditions or the constraints of civilization, the West of the future is burdened with the legacy of American conquest and is shaped by diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious communities. Under the influence of powerful new technologies (biotech, virtual reality, and so forth) and amid the consumer marketplaces and the liberal democratic political milieu of the United States, these cultures and communities have splintered, mutated, and intermingled. The “end of history” promised by propagandists of modern progress has turned out to be a mixed blessing at best.<sup>11</sup> If the United States once was considered the leading edge of progress, in these stories the dilemmas and failures of so-called modern progress plague the American West. Frontier myths promised the chance to start time anew, but the result has been the rapid aging of American society and the environment. What alternatives, then—if any—does the future hold?

*Future West* does not offer a historical survey of stories that imagine the region in the future. Instead it focuses on a small number of novels—and a few films and other odd bits and pieces (such as the Frontierland and Tomorrowland sections of Disneyland)—chosen to represent the various types of stories about the

future set in the American West.<sup>12</sup> Some of these might be considered popular culture; others are cult classics, didactic fiction, or literature. One novel, *The Turner Diaries* (1978), has inspired extremist political groups. What links them together are common thematic and narrative elements about the future of America as a New World society. Put another way, this study itself is not historical in character or method. Rather it is a cultural analysis of the historical vision—of the past and future of the West—in these stories.

Whatever the intent of the authors, these stories do not replay or subvert frontier myths merely to entertain. They also reflect both the fears and hopes of our late-modern time.<sup>13</sup> Novels and films have the potential to lead people to envision things about their lives and the world that they cannot easily engage in other ways. Stories can sanction complacency and legitimize the status quo, but they also can be subversive and lead people to resist fatalism and imagine hopeful new futures.<sup>14</sup> My primary focus here is on the ideas suggested in these novels and films, directly and indirectly. But even didactic novels cannot be treated as mere containers filled with ideas. Precisely because they are novels and films (works of culture) rather than systematic political, economic, or environmental treatises, they are potentially powerful—emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually. I thus examine the social and historical contexts in which they were created and have been read or viewed, and I analyze their genre or media character as science fiction novels and films. The project does not focus on reception theory, historical context, or formal analysis of science fiction novels and film but draws on such analysis where appropriate.<sup>15</sup> It does so to understand these narratives on their own terms and to raise questions about how they might influence people's social and political imagination.

In “apocalyptic” disaster stories, the American West that we know comes, or already has come, to an end as a result of a natural disaster or human-made cataclysm. In these stories, the West provides the setting and there is implied social criticism, but the focus is primarily on the individual characters. They usually are conservative and antiutopian, implying an unchanging human nature, idealizing a restoration of familiar social patterns and norms, and critiquing efforts to change society as irrational and pathological.<sup>16</sup> In “dystopian” stories, authors self-consciously engage in social criticism; characters resist passivity and oppression and explore alternatives to the failed society in which they live. In “utopian” stories (the most rare), characters try to address the problems of the past and present in radical new ways and to some significant degree succeed. But even in the utopian stories, political negotiation, compromise, and resistance are ongoing as tensions remain in building a “good place” in the West of the future.<sup>17</sup> In short, history does not end. In some of these stories, the West as a familiar place that is

home plays a central role, thus defying a traditional element of utopian literature: the notion that utopias are imagined “no places” that do not exist, or exist only far away or in the future. These “eco-utopias” put a strong emphasis on concrete places defined by their ecologies, enduring communities, and cultural traditions.

Crucially, given my interest in what happens when myths about the past imaginatively confront the future, the most compelling stories about the West of the future have historical themes. Whether utopian or dystopian, they explore the ties that bind the past and future together (as characters address the origins of the problems they face) and suggest the connection between inherited traditions and hope for the future (as characters draw on political, social, or religious ideals for inspiration). Rather than flee or forget the past, or passively accept its legacies as predetermined, they confront the problems of their day by drawing on the traditions that they have inherited. If the American West cannot escape its history, perhaps it can be redeemed in some other way in the future. If so, then hope for the future depends on a critical understanding of the past and a utopian appropriation of inherited traditions. Stories that address these issues suggest a more complex view of history, time, and hope than New World myths allow.

# Conclusion

## Stories That Save

Few things reveal so sharply as science fiction the wishes, hopes, fears, inner stresses and tensions of an era, or define its limitations with such exactness.

—H. L. Gold, *Galaxy Science Fiction*<sup>1</sup>

### LIVING WITH FEAR, LIVING IN EXPECTATION

The most significant point of reference for utopian and dystopian science fiction is not the small circle of writers and filmmakers of the sort whose work I have analyzed in this book. It is the people who read their stories and watch their films and TV shows. The same is true for the popular culture of the American West. How do consumers of science fiction, Western stories, Western clothing, dude-ranch vacations, and the like, especially those from the West itself, view themselves, their place in the world, and the way they live in it as individuals and citizens? The frustration for scholars, of course, is that the supply is easier to examine than the demand. A few studies have been done of how people “read” a particular novel, TV series, or film.<sup>2</sup> But wide-ranging studies of science fiction audiences and fans of Western American popular culture have not been done and would require massive interdisciplinary projects. And yet, with little evidence, it seems self-evident to say that part of the power and attraction of the material I have examined in this book is the potential that it has to speak to people’s experience of the present and to their fears, expectations, and hopes about the future, for themselves and for their descendants.

*Blade Runner* is a good example of this potential. Fear of death and the desire to live are central themes in the film. “Painful to live in fear, isn’t it?” asks the replicant Leon Kowalski as he prepares to kill Rick Deckard, the blade runner. “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave,” observes Roy Batty, the leader of the replicants, at the end of the film as he holds Deckard over

the roof edge of the Bradbury building. Though manufactured beings in both their bodies and souls, as even their memories and emotions have been engineered by the Tyrell Corporation, the replicants live in expectation. They do not want to die. They want to find their maker, extend their lives, and continue to experience things that earthbound people have never imagined. Replicants dream just as humans do. “If only you could see what I have seen with your eyes,” Batty tells his maker, Eldon Tyrell, the owner of Tyrell Corporation, just before killing him. Alone with Deckard on the roof of the Bradbury building, dying, Batty tells him, “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.”

In the 1982 version of the film, after Batty pulls him onto the roof rather than drops him, Deckard wonders in a narrative voice-over, “I don’t know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody’s life, my life. All he’d wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die.” With their four-year life spans, the replicants live intense, brightly burning lives before they burn out and die. “We began to recognize in them a strange obsession,” Tyrell tells Deckard near the beginning of the film. “After all, they are emotionally inexperienced, with only a few years in which to store up the experiences which you and I take for granted. If we gift them with a past, we create a cushion or a pillow for their emotions, and consequently, we can control them better.”<sup>23</sup> The replicants have manufactured memories and foreshortened futures and thus are defined by their origins even more than most people. But we too can feel trapped by the traditions that we inherit and the circumstances into which we are born—accepting the world as it is or nihilistically kicking against it. Or we can try to build on or radically transform our world in the hope of a better future. These choices confront Decker, who must decide whether to continue in the life he has lived as a blade runner or flee LA with his replicant lover. In the 1982 version, we see them escaping to the mountains in an improbable scene of blue skies, snowy peaks, and green valleys. By contrast, the 1991 director’s cut ends with them running into an elevator, with no promise of success or even a clear place or direction to go. There are no new frontiers in California, and there is no place for free replicants to go, on earth or in space. What are they to do?

Much more than the rationally considered hopes of emancipation and a better society, it is the gut-level fears and longings implied in such experiences that are the heart of dystopian and utopian science fiction, Western American mythology, and spiritual traditions. And it is these emotions; this anticipation; and the desire

for peace, well-being, and belonging that they point to that frontiers and utopian social engineering can only begin to address.<sup>4</sup> It is no accident that people have seen secularized forms of religious hope in utopianism, nationalism, and ideals of progress—the sublime promise of redemption can only be imagined “in a mirror dimly.” It is something more than mere emancipation, and it lies beyond the horizon of human agency, politics, social planning, or ecological resource management. But it is this promise, ultimately, that motivates utopian planning. This is why utopian dreams are so dangerous and so powerfully compelling, and why they inspire such fascination as well as horror, disdain, and bemused contempt.

If both emancipation and redemption inevitably and properly are part of utopian dreams, what does this mean for utopian politics? And if the powerful appeal of the stories examined in this book is the way they shape our dreams and echo them, subtly or directly, how aware are readers of this appeal? What do viewers make of *Blade Runner*? Do they think, “Boring” or “Cool” and stop there, with its success or failure as entertainment? Or do they identify with the experiences of the characters and recognize in the story something of their own environmental and social circumstances? Do novels and films such as *Blade Runner* provoke people to ask social, political, and existential questions: Where have we come from and where are we going in the twenty-first century? How long have we got? What can we do about it? Does a film such as *Blade Runner* provoke Californians to see their home as a place in need of redemption? Such films have the potential to change the way people today view the world and their place in it. In particular, such a story has the potential to incite the imagination of residents of LA and Southern California. But what is it that provokes one viewer to dream of what might be and consider changing his or her life and the world? And what leads another viewer to miss the film’s radical potential or to suppress such emotional and cognitive responses to it? In short, what transforms people, places, and frontiers and makes for something genuinely new?