

THE  
**BLADE RUNNER**  
PRINT ARCHIVE



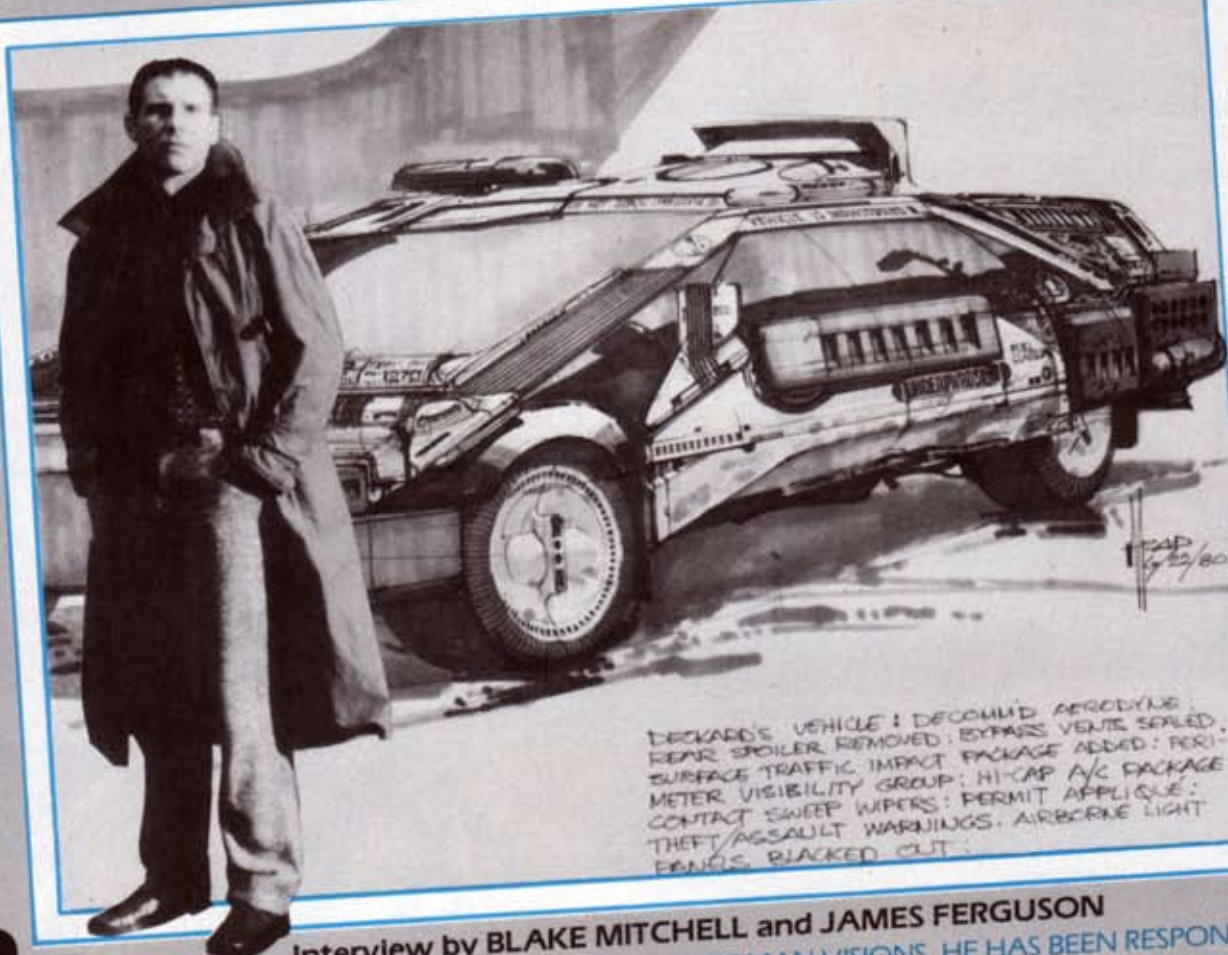
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by Blake Mitchell &

James Ferguson

# SYD MEAD FUTURIST AND PRODUCTION DESIGNER TALKS ABOUT RIDLEY SCOTT'S NEWEST SF THRILLER BLADERUNNER



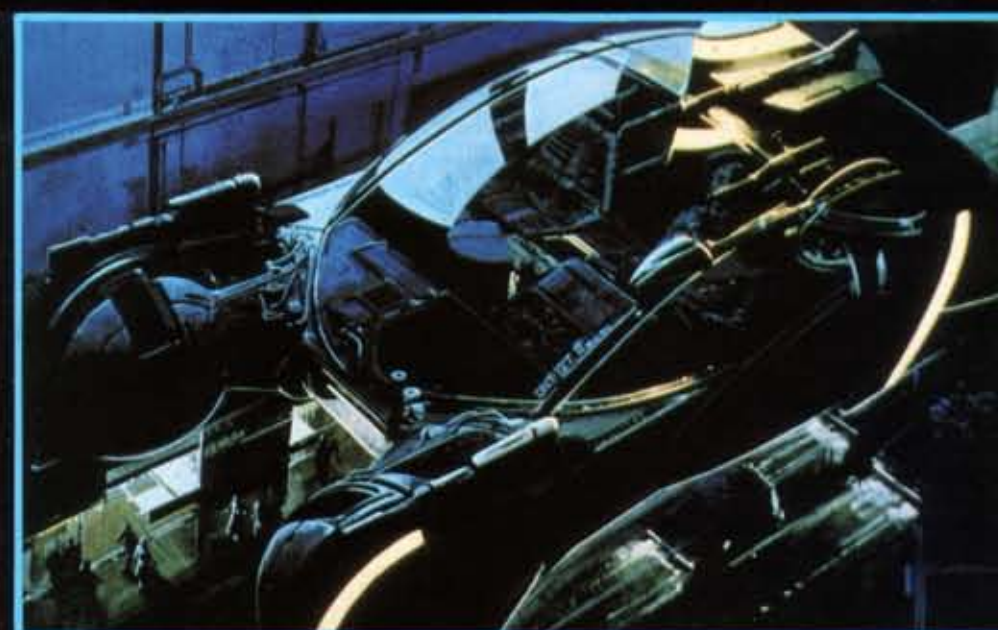
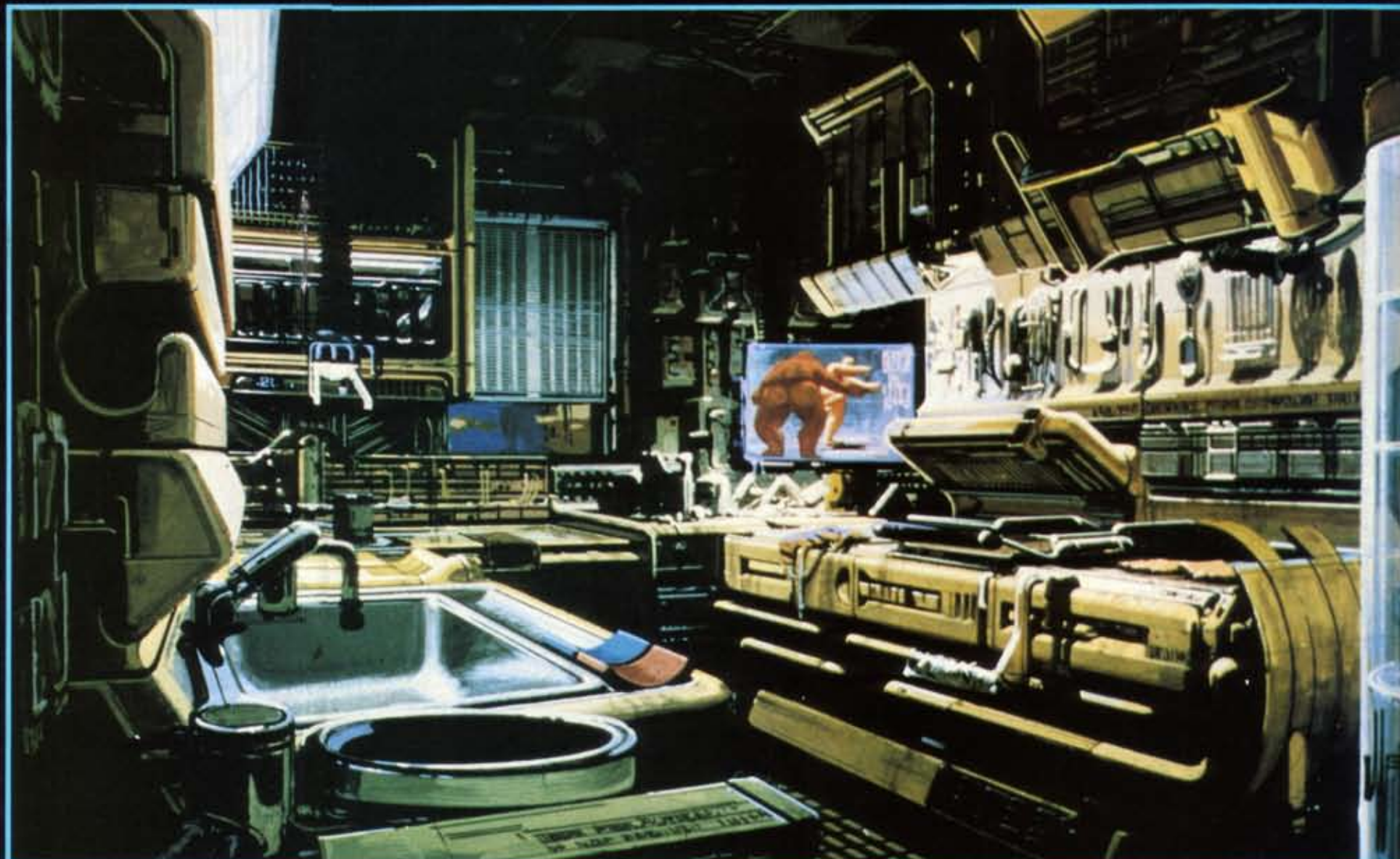
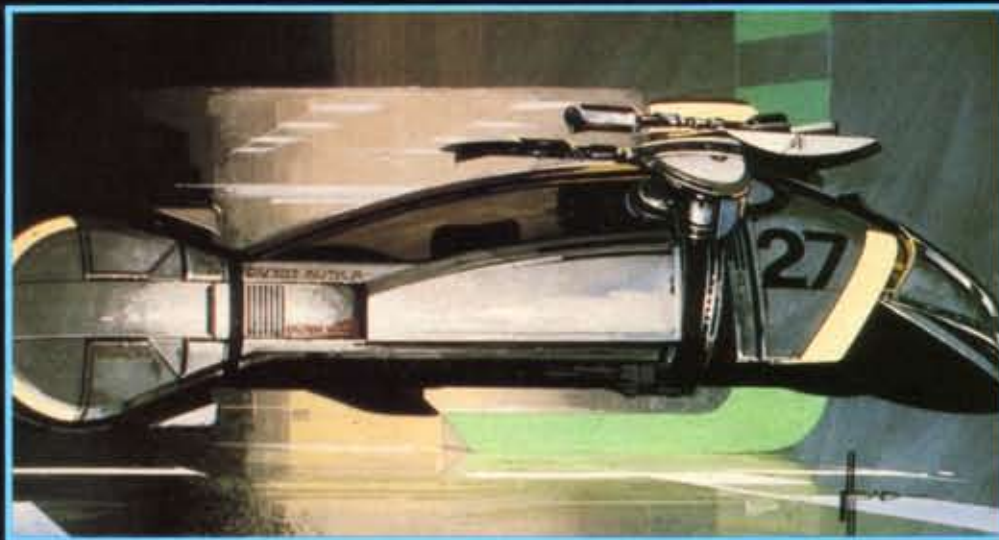
DECKARD'S VEHICLE: DECOMMOD AERODYNAMIC; REAR SPOILER REMOVED; BYPASS VENTS SEALED; SURFACE TRAFFIC IMPACT PACKAGE ADDED; PERI-METER VISIBILITY GROUP; HI-CAP A/C PACKAGE; CONTACT SWEEP WIPERS; PERMIT APPLIQUE; THEFT/ASSAULT WARNINGS; AIRBORNE LIGHT PANELS BLACKED OUT.

Interview by **BLAKE MITCHELL** and **JAMES FERGUSON**

**S**YD MEAD, DESIGNER AND FUTURIST, IS A MAN OF MANY VISIONS. HE HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE V'GER CONCEPT IN **STAR TREK**, THE MOTION PICTURE, 90% OF THE LOOK OF RIDLEY SCOTT'S NEWEST FEATURE **BLADERUNNER**, AND HAS ALSO CONTRIBUTED HEAVILY TO THE UPCOMING DISNEY FILM **TRON**. AS AN INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER HIS CAREER HAS BEEN WIDE AND VARIED. AFTER GRADUATING FROM THE ART CENTER IN PASADENA, CALIFORNIA, WITH HIGHEST HONORS, SYD SPENT THE NEXT TWO YEARS WORKING FOR THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY IN THEIR ADVANCED DESIGN SECTION. ONE OF THE PROJECTS HE DEVELOPED FOR THEM WAS A CAR CALLED THE 'GYRON', A FANTASTIC 2-WHEELED SHOWCAR. BUT AFTER REALIZING THAT MOST OF HIS DESIGN CONCEPTS WOULD NEVER REACH THE PRODUCTION LINE, HE LEFT FORD TO EXPLORE THE EVER EXPANDING WORLD OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN. FOR THE NEXT FIFTEEN YEARS, HE WORKED FOR VARIOUS MEGA-CORPORATIONS SUCH AS U.S. STEEL, ALLIS-CHALMERS, PHILLIPS, AND EVENTUALLY EVEN DESIGNED A CRUISE SHIP FOR THE NORWEGIAN-CARIBBEAN LINES. IN 1975, SYD MOVED FROM DETROIT TO CALIFORNIA AND WITHIN A FEW YEARS WAS INVOLVED IN HIS FIRST MOTION PICTURE, THE \$45 MILLION EXTRAVAGANZA, **STAR TREK, THE MOTION PICTURE**. IN THIS INTERVIEW WEST COAST EDITORS BLAKE MITCHELL AND JIM FERGUSON TALKED TO SYD ABOUT HIS CAREER PAST AND PRESENT, AND SPECIFICALLY HIS INVOLVEMENT



# BLADE RUNNER ART BY SYD MEAD



...THE "SPINNER" IS AN AERODYNE VEHICLE FUNCTIONING ON INTERNAL LIFT FROM TURBINE ENGINES WHICH TR





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with the soon-to-be-released SF thriller, *Bladerunner*.

**FF:** *Star Trek, The Motion Picture* was your first feature film. How did you become involved?

**MEAD:** When I first moved out here, Bob Shepard gave me a call and said that he and John Dykstra would like to get together with me for lunch. So we met at the Century City Hotel, but that must have been a full two years before I really got involved with *Star Trek*. Later, when Paramount decided not to use the special effects already done by the Able Company, because Robert Wise, the director, wasn't satisfied with their concept of V'ger, I was officially hired as a production designer.

Wise wanted a "visual pinnacle" for the film. The concept was that the Enterprise was out in space trying to track down some unknown menace, but no one, not even the scriptwriters knew what it was supposed to look like. A scriptwriter could describe V'ger as "something man had never seen before", and that's all well and good, but it's the easy way out. The really tough question was, what does it look like and how do you build it? Wise wanted a model, something physical, something that was "crystallized," but sculpted in hardware. So, that's how I approached it, as a classical industrial design project with a crystallized motif.

They had already produced the six-coned cam system that constituted V'ger's "mouth." That was all done. What they needed now was an extrusion that moved out from that opening and made a sort of tube. The other reason for keeping the six-sided configuration was at that time they were still planning on building a fully rounded model that could be incorporated into a full 360° camera shot. That meant making one master section and casting it five times.

**FF:** How close was the V'ger that appeared on the screen to the one you had envisioned?

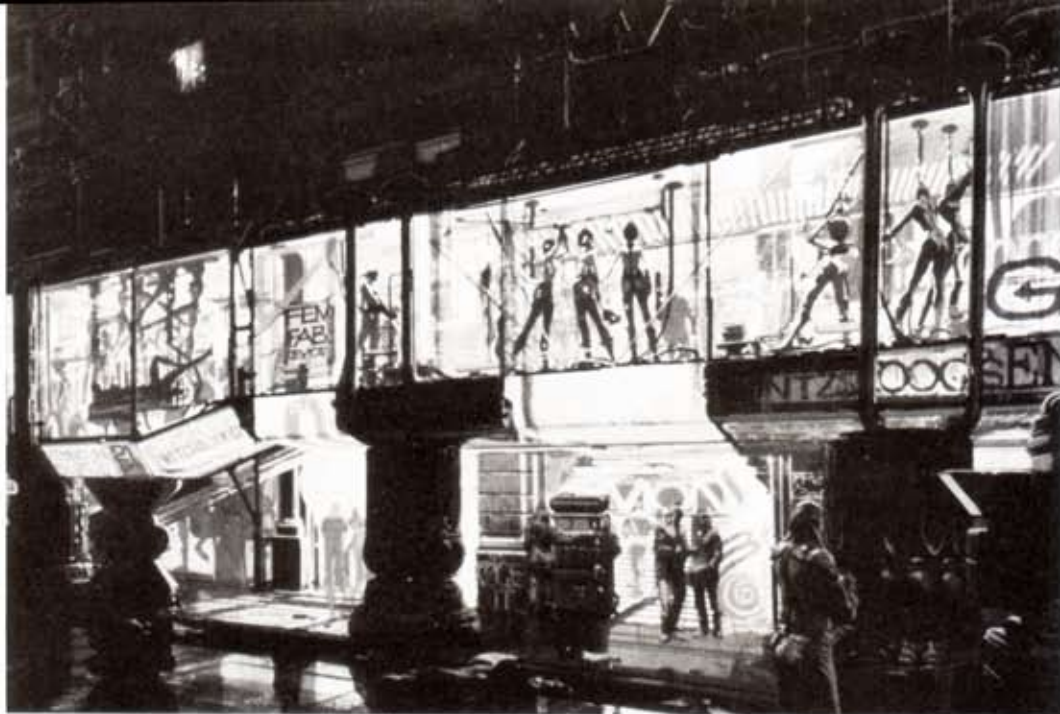
**MEAD:** It was exact, very exact. Of course, John Dykstra's model crew made perspective adjustments for filming which, to be honest, I didn't know about. With his expertise in opticals, he created an artificial enlargement of the scope of view as the camera moves past. So, except for very minor adjustments, the model was exactly as I had designed it.

**FF:** Had you also envisioned the bands of light and other light oriented effects?

**MEAD:** Yes, I incorporated them mainly from my illustration experience and for the drama of the design, to achieve the effect they were after.

**FF:** The inside of V'ger was smoked. Was that to hide flaws, incompleteness or inconsistencies?

**MEAD:** They had built only 1/4 of the circumference of the model; one big trough about 47 feet long to attain the right scale. They rented a warehouse and set up a zero visibility facility to film in. The smoke was really to fog out the edges of



Photos: Opposite page, two of Syd Mead's street scenes capture both the "ghetto" and the "downtown" aspects of his futuristic city. This page, above, these illustrations focus more upon the "store front" designs of the future. Mead's use of "illumination" to create depth effects is highly efficient. All photos this page © 1982 by Ladd Company

the model as it went into the dark.

**FF:** Your book *Sentinel* came out about 1979, and covered your career up to the time you got involved with *Star Trek*. How did the book come into being?

**MEAD:** Roger Dean, the famous British fantasy artist who has become very popular in the last five years, called from London. He had already produced his book *Views* and had done a lot of work for the rock groups Yes and The Rolling Stones, and a variety of other theatrical productions. He said that now he would like to do a book showcasing my work. So I said sure. Roger and his brother Martin flew over and we went through what artwork I had left in the house. I usually have very little be-

cause I sell it. I'm fortunate that people buy it. So, he looked at what I had, then he stopped on his way back through Detroit and photographed some additional art work from U.S. Steel that Jim Rhinehart had kept. So along with some sketches and line drawings that I have kept forever, we produced the book. It's a fairly healthy page count for something where we really just grabbed everything we had in the closets and arranged it into an overview of my career.

**FF:** Do you plan a second volume?

**MEAD:** We're definitely doing another one, as soon as we get releases from the two latest features, *Tron* and *BladeRunner*. But the movie work will be just another example of professional activity,

rather than having a book dedicated only to movie work.

**FF:** You went from the sleek, clean look of *Sentinel* to the dirty, decayed and degenerate look of *BladeRunner*. Was this a difficult step for you?

**MEAD:** After reading the script and working with Ridley and Larry Paul, we set up the psychological basis for the film. We decided upon the ideal location for the film as it best fit into Ridley's interpretation of the story from his point of view as director. Then we started assembling a "look," the basic elements of the overall design. First, I started by designing the vehicles, very sleek vehicles and then, following the formula that we had set up, I overlaid them with addi-



tional equipment, a process that we industrial designers call "retrofitting," which consists of adding little bits and pieces to the main body form. The cars sort of designed themselves from there on.

**FF:** Initially you were hired to design just the vehicles for *Blade Runner*. How did you go from there to helping design the rest of the film?

**MEAD:** Whenever I do a vehicle design, I do tempera sketches and put the vehicles into the setting to which they belong. That enhances the idea. So, I started doing backgrounds behind the vehicles. Ridley liked what he saw, and told me to pursue some more ideas for street sets, which I did. We were using the New York street set at the Burbank studios and I had photographs from Larry Paul. We started to run wiring and cables for lighting concepts and also devised a way to bridge the matte line with the real sets, to come up with the total look. Then we began to design the interior sets, and once again, it was an industrial design problem. The interior sets had to look mechanically believable, so I also started doing some of the interiors. Deckard's kitchen and bathroom, a little bit on the bedroom, some key "slot-entrance" mechanisms and the parking meters.

**FF:** Was there any one underlying conceptual statement in regards to the look of the film?

**MEAD:** I invented the phrase, "retro-futurism," which became the look of what we were doing. We were taking existing machinery, regardless of what it was, interiors, cars, anything, and adding onto it to make it work, to make it look better, work better, or adapt it to legislative demands. And once we set up that continuity gate, that idea gate, we could hand different items to any of the set fabricators in different set shops and get the same look to everything.

**FF:** The Corporation pyramid figures heavily into the story. Is it something you designed?

**MEAD:** No. The pyramid was done at Doug Trumbull's studio.

**FF:** Did the look of Trumbull's pyramid fit into your vision of the *Blade Runner* world?

**MEAD:** The sociological theory behind *Blade Runner* was that there existed mass quantities of poverty, a sort of poverty by default. Consumer based capitalism had become so lopsided so that everyone fortunate enough to have a car had to keep it running by buying things at the local accessories store, as opposed to being able to buy a new car. The luxurious end of the scale. If you had lots and lots of money, or you were a large corporate entity, you could afford to do whatever you pleased because you owned the means of supplying your own demand. So, the pyramid is very high tech compared to the rest of the movie, very sleek, a carefully arranged textural megalith. The pyramid is set in the middle of what was called "Hades." An endless plain, like the chemical plant area of New Jersey. Block after endless

block of stacks and vent tubes, a really unpleasant place to be. Then, suddenly there is this beautiful pyramid rising out of the rubble. It is the ultimate visual statement of where our society is headed in the future.

**FF:** How high was the pyramid supposed to be?

**MEAD:** I think that the scale, just by judging visually, was probably a good thousand feet high. Actually, I really never thought about it that much. When we designed the cityscapes, which were used later on in the post-production matte work, we figured on a building height of up to three thousand feet. Just to get the right accumulation of scale. And that really isn't that fantastic. There is a company planning a two thousand plus high

takes in large volumes of air and feeds it through other turbine engines or a similar power source, and creates thrust. The pilot redirects the thrust to control the direction of the aircar.

**FF:** Like a hovercraft?

**MEAD:** No, more like the Harrier plane that the British have come up with. They selectively direct the thrust down, then when the plane takes off and supports its own weight, they redirect the thrust to push the plane forward. I insisted on an enclosed lift system because the Spinner vehicle had to be believable, and I thought that folding wings and propellers wouldn't work in a congested urban traffic situation. This vehicle lifts off in its own space, and then unfolds with flaps that drop down for increased

tate out and down and provide an armored cover over the tires in their retracted position.

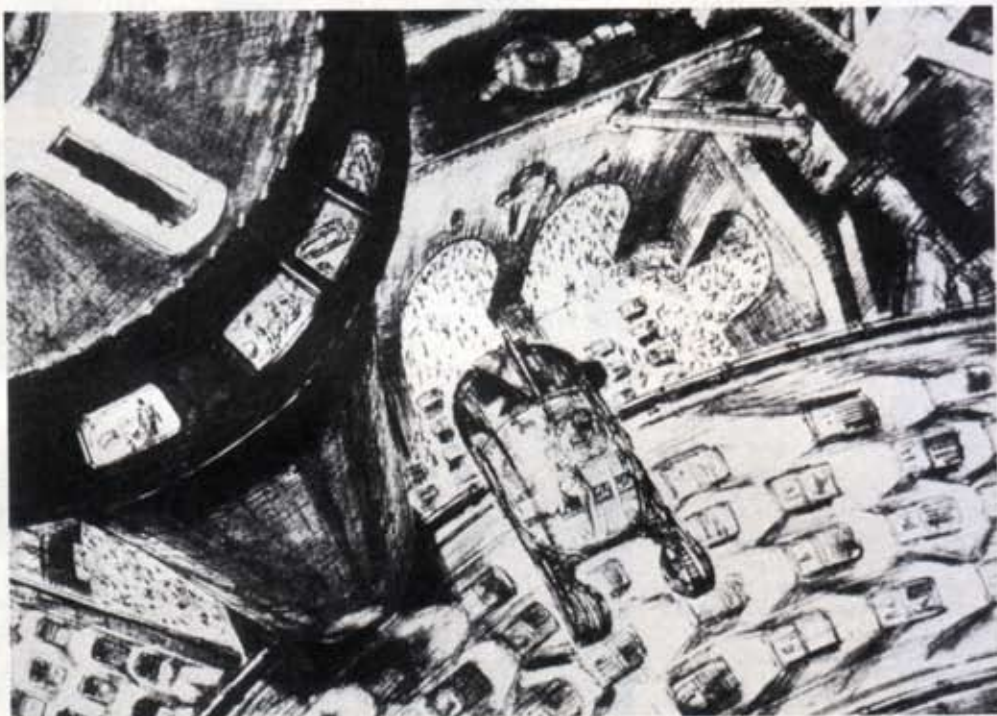
**FF:** Did you come up with any specs as to how fast or how high it would fly?

**MEAD:** Sort of. It was designed as an urban vehicle for use by authorized agencies. Police or security or possibly corporate paramilitary agencies.

**FF:** Was the Spinner supposed to fly as fast as a small jet or a turbo-prop?

**MEAD:** Actually, I thought of it in terms of a standard Bell Jet Ranger, which travels at three or four hundred miles an hour. It wouldn't have to go any faster than that as it is strictly a megaurban vehicle.

**FF:** How long did you work on



The city is seen from hundreds of feet in the air in this preproduction sketch.

building right now, to be constructed in the Chicago area.

**FF:** All the different design elements in *Blade Runner* seem to work so well together. From your designs, to Ridley's conceptions, to how the final sets appeared to all the futuristic cars that you conceptualized. They mesh exceptionally well. And that seems to happen so rarely in science fiction films. To what do you attribute this kind of continuity?

**MEAD:** Everybody had agreed on the design format far ahead of time, during preproduction. I think that's one of the most necessary elements to the success of any heavily designed movie.

**FF:** How is the Spinner supposed to work, and is it feasible as a realistic means of transportation within the next forty years, when *Blade Runner* takes place?

**MEAD:** The aerodyne principle is based on internal lift. Its power source, a turbine or whatever,

airflow or thrust modulation. But it basically lifts off in its own space, which I thought was really critical to a believable urban utility vehicle.

**FF:** Where are the lift units positioned on the vehicle?

**MEAD:** The main lift unit is positioned toward the rear of the body, underneath the vehicle's center of gravity, maybe a little aft. The propulsion theory also incorporated additional lift vents in the front of the body which were fed by venturi tubes from the main turbine.

**FF:** What are the two semicircular protrusions up front?

**MEAD:** Those are wheel housings. When not airborne, the Spinner had to roll along the street, but at the same time we wanted all the tires concealed when it was flying, so those units are wheel covers. When the vehicle is on the street, the wheel covers rotate forward and inward and serve as sort of discs on top of the wheels. When the Spinner flies, those covers ro-

*Blade Runner*?

**MEAD:** *Blade Runner* was in preproduction for about a year before the Filmways debacle. Then Michael Deeley and Ridley stopped the film and Tandem and Ladd picked it up. All together, I worked off and on for about a year and four months.

**FF:** After *Blade Runner*, you went on to work on Disney's *Tron*. What was your contribution to that film?

**MEAD:** I was originally hired by Steve Lisberger to design some vehicles, that sort of thing: a tank, a light cycle, an aircraft carrier, and a solar sailer. Moebius, the famous French artist known for his work in *Heavy Metal*, eventually redesigned the exterior of the solar sailer, but I believe they retained my interiors. The tank, however, was very successful, and was fed into a program using computer animation. It turned out really terrific. Four thousand line resolution on the tube is so good that it looked



just like a plaster model.

**FF:** Then the finished computer animation is pretty close to what you designed?

**MEAD:** It's exact. I eventually also got into terrain design, set interiors, and some costume ideas. The terrain I produced was a four-square master drawing which they could feed into the computer. All the four squares matched each other at four points at each side, sixteen working contact points. They could instruct the computer to change pattern texture for the landscape, and since you have a negative/positive image capability, you can make the pattern rise or depress to simulate a variety of landscaped textures.

**FF:** Were you involved with the computer end of the project?

**MEAD:** No, that was all farmed out. All I did was to supply the graphics and the designs.

**FF:** Had you ever done any of this work before?

**MEAD:** No, never had.

**FF:** It seems that lately there have been a lot of firsts in the field of SPFX design.

**MEAD:** Yes, *Tron* will be the first feature film with anywhere near that amount of computer animation running time.

**FF:** I understand that George Lucas wants to do the fourth of the *Star Wars* series completely with special effects that incorporate computer animation.

**MEAD:** Yes, he's got his own facility up there in San Rafael.

**FF:** Do you think that computerized animation is going to be the SPFX trend for the future?

**MEAD:** Yes, I do. I know that *Tron* is soaking up all the available computer time up until March. The computer industry in relation to computer animation is still that much of an infant, where one movie can monopolize the industry. I'm sure that's why Lucas is setting up his own facility, so he has in-house availability.

**FF:** If you had to choose between full time film work or full time industrial work, which would you choose?

**MEAD:** I'd still do the mix, because I work under the classic business exercise never to have more than one third of my income coming from any one source. More than that is just dangerous. I will definitely keep the mix of corporate and commercial clients. It also gives me a better overview from working outside the film industry. That way I'm not hindered by any technological blind spots.

**FF:** Aren't you working on an industrial design project in England right now?

**MEAD:** I've been approached and they're waiting for further funding, a bond issue or something like that. It's an mega-entertainment complex similar to convention center.

**FF:** Any future film projects in the works?

**MEAD:** I do but that's all I can say for right now. We're just ahead of contracts so...

**FF:** Concerning your own personal

**FF:** This is a little before *Bladerunner*, but in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the foot of the walker, the AT-AT, is a direct steal from some of your earlier designs, and Lucasfilm have even admitted this. How do you feel about that?

**MEAD:** I designed the mechanical walking device in '66 or '67. At that time the Army had also built an experimental walking vehicle, an analog walking machine. I was doing a series for U.S. Steel and I thought that would make an excellent multi-terrain vehicle idea. But what I did was to put four traction motors on the feet, so that the feet could swivel. Then when you got to smooth terrain, you could squat the vehicle down, bend the knees and lock them with disc brake caliper mechanism, inflate the feet, turn them sideways and roll away on big tires. That's really much more flexible than just having big feet that clomp along at walking speed.

**FF:** Do you feel that the *Star Wars* crew did pretty well using this basic idea of yours?



**MEAD:** What irritated me a little bit, and it may have been deliberately done for the audience, was that the walking vehicles were designed to be very animorphic, to look like mechanical animals. The "jaw" went back and forth when the laser cannon fired in a recoil type of action, which is sort of cute, but too much

of a cartoon gesture for my taste. I didn't like that too much. But the walking action was very convincing, especially the way the weight shifted.

**FF:** They were trying for an elephant type of look.

**MEAD:** Yes, like Hannibal crossing the Hothian Alps.



Photos: Top right, early sketch of Walker foot and snowtroopers for scale from *The Empire Strikes Back* Sketchbook. Above, the original military walking machine designed by Syd Mead as seen in *Sentinel*.

view of the future, do you think the world is headed towards the stylized, antiseptic look of *Star Trek* or the decadent, urban ghetto look of *Bladerunner*?

**MEAD:** As a philosophy, the technological plant, the state-of-the-art plant, affords the possibility of going in either direction. Social imperatives eventually decide what you use that technological capability for. To me, technology is amoral. It has no good or bad connotations, it just exists. It's a quest for knowledge and the solutions that you come up with in that search. Your social machinery then regulates what's allowed to happen.

I think we'll eventually have genetic engineering, first for industrial plant development, then for food growth facilities, both grains and animals, human genetic engineering for disease prevention or for cleaning out the gene pool, to eradicate genetic aberrations such as sickle cell anemia or other dis-

eases that are hereditary.

**FF:** In *Bladerunner*, the Replicants have been genetically engineered for exploration and dangerous assignments. Do you think the possibility of that kind of genetic engineering lies ahead of us?

**MEAD:** I think it will eventually happen. Nature has provided us with an excellent model to expand upon. Pound for pound, the human brain is still the most remarkable thinking "machine" in existence. But eventually, we will exceed the present capabilities of the human brain by quite a bit. Scientists are already working on a protein molecule computer which will expand information density by ten or twenty magnitudes. If we could duplicate a human being, it would be the cheapest way to manufacture artificial intelligence. You could also genetically regulate just how much thinking such a human "Replicant" would be allowed to do.

**FF:** So far you've worked on three

major science fiction films: *Star Trek*, *Bladerunner*, and *Tron*. What are your feelings about the genre?

**MEAD:** Science fiction fascinates me. Primarily because of the format it presents. I like Isaac Asimov because he's a scientist who writes science fiction. Arthur C. Clark is really a sociological visionary who writes what is called science fiction. They invent a scenario, then take a real life situation and present it in that scenario. The difficulty with science fiction is that science is catching up faster and faster with what was fiction. Some of the simpler technological fantasies of ten years ago are already for sale on the shelves of our local audio and video stores, and some of our more advanced fantasies already exist on the shelves of experimental laboratories. Because of this constant game of catch-up between real science and science fantasy, science fiction films, the

(Continued on page 46)





Above left, Decker (Harrison Ford) peers into the observation blister of a cryogenically sealed sleep chamber. Above center left, Decker bargains with a wily old shopkeeper.



Decker takes a ride in one of *Bladerunner's* amazing vehicles. Searching the streets for the Replicant he is chasing, Decker leaps from cartop to cartop.

## BLADE RUNNER

(Continued from page 43)

so called genre films, are going to have to revert back to the age old, tried and true dramatic possibilities of plot, character involvement, believability of the conflict, and motivation in order to entertain their audiences. Eventually we will be right back to the old Greek plays, only they will be placed in the future.

**FF:** Are you saying that science fiction films can't rely just on futuristic hardware anymore to satisfy their audience?

**MEAD:** That's right. If somebody comes to you and says, we're going to do a fabulous film, and it's set 7,000 years in the future, that's sort of preposterous. It really doesn't matter if it's 5,000 years or 20,000. Within five hundred years things will be so completely different they will be totally unrecognizable. Just as uncomprehensible as if you took an ancient Greek or Roman and dropped him into the streets of Manhattan.

**FF:** In the new Clint Eastwood

movie *Firefox*, pilots have mind control of their M.I.G. fighters. Will this be a reality within the next ten years?

**MEAD:** Right now the fighter pilot looks at his target, and there's a lid sensor on his eyelid which cause his guns to fire directly where he's looking.

**FF:** Once the viewing audience becomes aware that modern science is capable of creating direct mind contact with the machine, people aren't going to be content with nostalgic space operas like *Star Wars* where the hero is fighting off the bad guys with pom-pom ray guns and flying with a joy stick.

**MEAD:** That's right, they're not. It won't work. You have one "in-head memory" of the viewing audience to contend with, and if they don't think that a certain scene looks believable, it just won't work in the context of that story. That's the difficulty. For example, we ran into a similar problem in *Bladerunner*. The state of the art for entry security is a plastic card with an imbedded magnetic strip which has your name, social security number and all the other data required for iden-



tification. You slip it into a slot and the in-house computer remembers everywhere you were in the building during the day, when you reported to work, etc. It's sort of a big brother overview of your daily activities. And very possibly, an intrusion into privacy. At least it certainly could be used that way. But that's state of the art technology. In a science fiction future fantasy such as *Bladerunner* it is not a dramatic thing to show somebody just putting a plastic card into a slot. So we invented several key systems with little lights that lit up and incorporated some physical actions, with the hand to make the scene more dramatic. Incidentally, voice prints are still probably the best security system that exists today.

**FF:** Ralph McQuarrie lives up in north California now and spends most of his time just creating designs for George Lucas. If you got tied in with someone like Lucas who was doing a series of films, would you be content just to do that for a few years?

**MEAD:** I think it would be exciting. I've been in this line of work for over twenty years, and the reason

that I haven't burned out yet is because the format is always changing. The problem isn't thinking up the ideas, it's finding a client source that lets you reinvent and refine your own ideas continually. I think that the relationship between the real world and fantasy is very important in the realm of futuristic design because fantasy has been intrinsically logical within itself, otherwise it becomes just a form of elaborate doodling. I doodle too, but I always doodle with a specific theoretical scenario in mind. Just to keep the thinking mechanism working properly.

**FF:** Do you ever feel the desire to get out of industrial design work and just design films, to be able to let your technological imagination expand to it's furthest boundaries?

**MEAD:** Sometimes I do. What I'd like to do most is to expand the size of the current concepts in those films. I'd like to design the overall concept of an entire industrialized urban area, a city of the future, working with a staff of experts who could advise me as to why it should be designed one way or another. Now, that would be exciting. ■



Center page, one of Syd Mead's atmospheric pre-production paintings served as an indicator for the texture of *Bladerunner's* sets and matte paintings. Bottom left, Decker stands before his car as he searches for Replicants.



Bottom center left, and right, dozens of unusual vehicles designed by Syd Mead crowd the ghetto streets of *Bladerunner's* Chinatown district. Left, one of Decker's better dressed female acquaintances fires at an adversary.

