

Blade Runner

By David Morgan

In the 1970s and '80s a new generation of science fiction filmmakers, greatly inspired by the films of the 1940s and '50s, brought to their work staples from film genres which had virtually disappeared from movie screens: westerns, adventure serials, and *film noirs*. The success of such movies as "Star Wars," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and "Alien" reinvigorated science fiction as a cinema staple, and gave it more credibility than it ever had in the days of Saturday matinees, when aliens came bearing zippers.

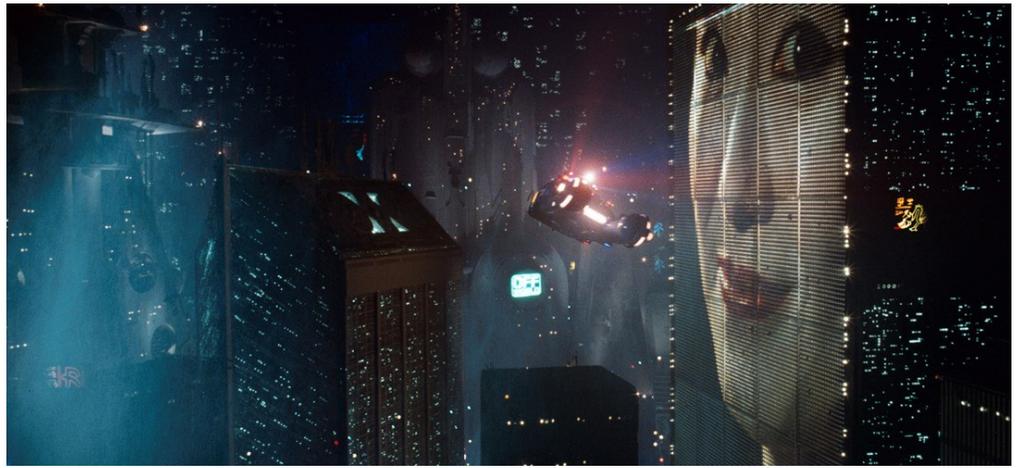
"Blade Runner" (1982) is itself an off-shoot of a genre which had virtually disappeared from screens: the hard-boiled detective story, such as the classics born from the novels of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. The dystopian air of "Blade Runner" should feel very familiar to fans of such dark-hued crime stories as "The Big Sleep," "Double Indemnity," "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Out of the Past" – stories in which urban centers like Los Angeles were hotbeds of vice and scandal, with a seen-it-all narrator presiding above the fray.

Created by director Ridley Scott with production designer Lawrence G. Paull, visual futurist Syd Mead, cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth, and visual effects supervisors David Dryer, Douglas Trumbull and Richard Yuricich, "Blade Runner" is set in the Los Angeles of the year 2019, a city inhabited by the lowest dregs of the human race. (People with means and foresight – who could pass the physical at least – had long since relocated to colonies "off-world"). In this oppressive environment where night rules and the rain never ceases, Harrison Ford's Deckard, a retired policeman of the Blade Runner unit (a force responsible for recognizing and terminating human-like robots called replicants, which are illegal on Earth), comes back into action. His mission is to find a band of four Nexus-6 replicants, which has made its way to Earth and to the Tyrell Corporation, the company responsible for their creation.

The initial theatrical release of the film was even told in the manner of '40s detective stories, with Deckard's wise-cracking narration layered on top, at the studio's insistence (supposedly to help the audience identify more with the taciturn hero and better penetrate the film's coolly dark atmosphere).

Deckard (VO): "Sushi. That's what my ex-wife used to call me. 'Cold Fish.'"

Also nodding to the conventions of *film noir* were the styl-



The spacescape of 2019 Los Angeles as depicted in "Blade Runner." Courtesy Warner Bros.

ized fashions of the beautiful robot Rachael (Sean Young), whose manicured hair and broad-shouldered attire recalled '40s screen icons like Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Crawford. Also resonant was the bluesy saxophone that glided over the electronic music score by Vangelis.

But just as some elements of "Blade Runner" pointed to '40s films, there were other elements that decidedly did not – explicit, bloody violence (including one man having his eyes gouged out by a replicant's thumbs); a more contemporary anti-corporate cynicism (L.A.'s hellish landscape, when not spewing fire, blasts giant neon ads for Coca-Cola, Pan Am, Atari, and Oriental conglomerates); and philosophical questions concerning a robot's life and death.

As personified by Roy (Rutger Hauer), a Nexus 6 born with the implanted memories of a childhood which never existed and who anticipates his date of termination following a maximum four-year life span, the replicants are seeking both the purpose of their existence and the seemingly impossible notion of immortality.

Roy: "It's not an easy thing to meet your maker."

Roy's meeting with Tyrell (Joe Turkel), head of the Tyrell Corporation and the person responsible for the design of the Nexus 6 replicants, is like that of a prodigal son returning to his father's home. But Roy does not come seeking forgiveness or redemption. He wants what he sees as his due: life. He has been cheated out of existence beyond four years due to his makers' fear of their creation.

Tyrell: "You were made as well as we could make you."

Batty: "But not to last."

Tyrell: "The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long, and you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy."

Deckard, like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, does not concern himself with such metaphysical questions while he is doing his job. The cynicism with which he at first separates himself from society, and from the personalities of the replicants he hunts down and "retires," is liberated only after having faced death too many times, with little of the buoy-

ant bravado exhibited by his characters in the "Star Wars" films or "Raiders of the Lost Ark. Light years away from his charming and rugged Han Solo or Indiana Jones, Ford's Deckard wins audience empathy not so much by charm or heroics but by his redemption.

As a film character, Deckard's aloofness, his smart-alecky narration (which was stripped from later cuts of the film) and his motivations are reminiscent of the detectives of earlier films – Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade and Phillip Marlowe, Robert Mitchum's Jeff in "Out of the Past," and Ralph Meeker's Mike Hammer in "Kiss Me Deadly." He's a superior figure in relation to those of questionable morals and few scruples – the criminal classes, nightclub owners, vendors of artificial snakes – and is the only bulwark between humanity and the dangerous artificial humans in our midst. To Deckard, machines are either a benefit or a hazard, and if they're a benefit they're not his problem. He only exists to erase the hazards. But it is his exposure to the replicants – and particularly to the beautiful robot, Rachael (Sean Young) – which allows him to grow as a character as he goes about the business of killing.

Deckard (VO): "The report would be routine retirement of a replicant. Which didn't make me feel any better about shooting a woman in the back. There it was again – feeling in myself, for her."

As the film progresses, he chooses to see these replicants not as manufactured imitations of human engineers, but as life forms like himself.

Like himself? A cottage industry of speculation about the film's hidden meanings has, naturally, inspired the reading that Deckard, too, is a replicant – with implanted memories, no early history, an unemotional approach to his assignment, and a seemingly superhuman endurance for vicious beatings at the hands of superhuman robots. He bleeds, of course, but is that *real* blood?

Going to the ones who should know, the suggestion that Deckard is a replicant – rejected by the source novel's author, Philip K. Dick – has been both confirmed by Scott and dismissed by Ford, while screenwriter Hampton Francker says the answer should be left ambiguous. However, with the reediting of the "director's cut" (released in 1992) and the "final cut" (released in 2007), there is increased evidence that Deckard *is* a replicant, such as a telling piece of origami that mirrors a dream of his about a unicorn – an artificial, implanted memory!

Deckard (VO): "I didn't know why a Replicant would collect photos. Maybe they were like Rachael – they needed memories."

By making Deckard a replicant, Scott pulls the rug out from under his hero, who discovers at film's end that his entire life has been manufactured to serve a society which can find no room on Earth for replicants.

Traditional science-fiction movie heroes, and their Saturday matinee ancestors, generally have been made up of equal parts of courage, idealism and charm – fighting off alien invaders, defeating terrifying monsters, rescuing the damsel from a rampaging robot. However, Deckard (like the characters of Scott's previous film, "Alien") is a product of recent science fiction in which the hero is not a cartoon character created by filmmakers to dress an expensive set, but a person whose origins are extrapolated from our own times and then pushed ever so slightly into the future, in order to take liberties with the character's environment but not the character himself.

In the context of science fiction, Deckard is the rare existential sci-fi hero. His claims to heroism are not that of a fantasy character like Superman but of an ordinary man confronted with a situation in which he may either escape or be seduced by his environment, and whose testament of courage is that he does not resign himself to the morose life of his contemporaries. Having been nurtured by a pessimistic environment, Deckard manages to rise above the dreariness and corruption of his world and escape the suffocating influences of the future Los Angeles, while rescuing the hunted woman he loves.

There are a couple of antecedents for such a protagonist: Eddie Constantine's Lemmy Caution, in Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville" (1965), whose quest is to "retire" the sentient computer behind a technologically-advanced society; and Charlton Heston's Frank Thorn in the 1973 science fiction thriller "Soylent Green," whose investigation of a nefarious corporation reveals the truth behind the green protein crackers they sell. (*Spoiler alert: "Soylent Green is people!"*)

Since "Blade Runner" is a study of the individual's emptiness in the face of his society, Deckard succeeds in doing what few characters in Hollywood science fiction have done: He outgrows his futuristic, technologically-awesome world and reestablishes his worth as a human being (or, if you will, a replicant), something which, though not as spectacular as defeating a squadron of invading aliens or slaying a monster, is nonetheless just as triumphant – and, in a dystopian future, something even harder to accomplish.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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