



“Blade Runner” (1982)—Tech Noir

By Dr. John L. Flynn

Based on Philip K. Dick's imaginative 1968 novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, “Blade Runner”(1982) is a laconic, richly-textured treat for both the mind and the senses. This homage to the *film noirs* of the 1940’s and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) debuted just a few weeks after Steven Spielberg’s crowd-pleasing “E.T.-The Extraterrestrial,” and was largely ignored at the box office and universally panned by critics. Jane Maslin in The New York Times labeled it a “muddled . . . gruesome . . . mess,” while People magazine called “Blade Runner” “a slothful movie, dim both literally and figuratively . . . Better you should go down to your local foreign car garage and watch them repair a Porsche, if want to see something really exotic.” Shiela Benson

referred to the film as “blade crawler” in the LA Times, and Pat Berman in Southern Review called it “SF pornography” of the lowest caliber. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times gave it a big thumbs down, explaining “the movie’s weakness is that it allows the special effects technology to overwhelm its story.” Despite all the negative press, or may be because of it, “Blade Runner” became a cult favorite, and later emerged as one of the best science fiction films ever made.

The literate script by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples faithfully follows Dick’s novel (to a point) by contrasting the spiritually bankrupt, morally corrupt society of the humans with the violent yet ordered underworld of the replicants. Moreover, the central section of the film, in which Deckard and Rachel descend through the retrofitted structures of the city (and each other), is full of dark irony as the disillusioned loner confronts his own fears and anxieties, and ultimately discovers his own humanity. The replicants, as embodied by Rutger Hauer and Darryl Hannah, are neither good nor evil; they are simply artificial extensions of man's own human nature, and yet they also manage to emerge with souls and identities of their own making. But the film’s real success depends less on its underpinning of the Frankenstein mythos than on Scott’s extraordinary achievement as a director in creating a world that is both very remote and yet somehow very familiar.

Ridley Scott evokes the familiar conventions of film noir, including those from “The Maltese Falcon” (1941), “The Big Sleep” (1946), and “The Blue Dahlia” (1946), in his magnificent visuals and in the way in which he manipulates the central characters in his story. Jean-Luc Godard tried unsuccessfully to weave the conventions of the classic noir detective story into his vastly underrated science fiction film “Alphaville” (1965),

but here Scott succeeds in creating a unique hybrid that might more amply be described as *tech noir*. The rain-slicked streets of his Chinatown 2019 recall those of a past epoch in which melancholy detectives in rumpled trench-coats pursued dangerous femme fatales and struggled to solve highly complex mysteries. The landscape of “Blade Runner,” so vividly created by production designer Lawrence Paull and so beautifully filmed by cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth, is an important element that functions like one of the central characters in the piece. The neon haze, the never-ending rain, the retro-fitted buildings, the overcrowded streets, and the constant barrage of noise from talking billboards overhead convey the sense of melancholy, bleakness, alienation, moral corruption, evil, guilt and paranoia that are essential in the film noirs of the past. And yet, in adopting this form, Scott is telling us that this is the future, not the past. He does this with such panache and credibility that countless imitators have envisioned the future in much the same way.

Scott’s evocation of film noir classics not only permeates every scene but also influences each of the central performances as well. Harrison Ford’s Rick Deckard, a futuristic police detective cut from the same cloth as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, reveals in the voice-over narrative (another device borrowed from the film noir thrillers) that he is just an ordinary guy; he is not the heroic figure of Han Solo or Indiana Jones upon which audiences had come to rely, and Ford plays him like the sardonic, disillusioned and insecure loner that Humphrey Bogart made a career out of playing. He doesn’t give a shit about his partner Gaff (Edward James Olmos), hates his boss Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh), and manages to tolerate just everyone else with the same cool, detached indifference that he lives his life; after all, he’s just another low-life himself

struggling to get by. When Deckard phones Sean Young's beautiful and enigmatic Rachel to meet him, he is not asking her out on a date; he wants sex, and he doesn't especially care whether Rachel thinks he's using her or not. At first, to the morally-ambiguous Deckard, she is nothing more than a machine, and he thinks nothing about dragging her into the dark and gloomy sewer of violent crime and corruption that is his world. Like her counterparts Mary Astor or Lauren Bacall before her, Rachel is supposed to be the reliable, trustworthy and loving girlfriend who will do anything including die for the hero. Deckard eventually discovers that she is so much more than that in a very nuanced performance by Ford, and the killing machine that he has become must learn something about the quality of life from the machines he has been sent to kill in order to find his own humanity. In the end, when Deckard spares Batty (Rutger Hauer) and then runs off with Rachel, there's no question as to whether Deckard is a replicant or not. He's clearly human, but like so many of the trench-coated cops who had come before him, he had allowed his humanity to become submerged in the filth, and slime, and corruption of that dark and inhumane world of the noir thriller, and what remained was more machine than man.

The women in "Blade Runner" are equally complex individuals, and like all film noirs start out into one of two categories—the loving, dutiful girlfriend or the femme fatales. Rachel may on the surface of things appear to be nothing more than his loving, dutiful girlfriend, but she in fact despises him. She tells him that he is "not a nice man," and refuses his advances, even though she is programmed to be nothing more than another Nexus-6 servant. Rachel thinks that she is human. She even reveals that she has memories about her past which is more than we can say for Deckard. In the end, she

does come through for Deckard, and saves him by killing one of her own kind, but Rachel remains just as mysterious, duplicitous and deliciously complex as any of her cinematic counterparts. She may well become his mistress and sex partner, but never the dutiful girlfriend.

Pris (Daryl Hannah) and Zhora (Joanna Cassidy), the other two female leads, inhabit the roles of femme fatales. Like Rachel, they are both gorgeous, and have been programmed as Nexus-6 replicants to serve as willing pleasure units to dominant male humans, but again, they don't do what they're supposed to do. Pris and Zhora recall the predatory likes of Veronica Lake and Barbara Stanwyck and all of those other dangerous women from film noir classics of the 1940's and 1950's. These mechanical women are mysterious, duplicitous, and double-crossing, and Deckard doesn't stand a chance against them. Our hero's lack of confidence and loss of ideals are sharply contrasted with Pris and Zhora's sense of perfection and optimism; both women are literally fighting for their lives, and will do anything, including kill him, even if it means they only get to live for another few hours. In most film noirs, the male hero has to choose (or have the fateful choice made for him) between the two types of women - and invariably he picks the femme fatale who seduces and ultimately destroys him. Ironically, neither woman uses her femininity as a weapon, as their counterparts so often do. Instead Pris and Zhora rely on brute strength to try to take Deckard out, and he in turn is forced to kill each of them—the only confirmed kills that he makes in the film. (Rachel kills Leon when Deckard's life is threatened, and Batty dies of natural causes.)

Batty, as played so marvelously by Rutger Hauer, is the blond-haired, Aryan leader of the Nexus-6 replicants. Like Frankenstein's Monster (as essayed by Boris

Karloff in the Universal pictures of the 1930's), Batty is not really a monster at all. He seeks acceptance and love from his creator Tyrell (Joe Turkel), like any prodigal son, and when Tyrell denies him, he destroys his creator. Much like Deckard himself, Batty is a morally ambiguous figure. Disillusioned, frightened, and alone, he is simply trying to get along with his life, and commits his various acts of violence (killing Tyrell and blinding Chew) because he is just as frustrated by the violent and corrupt world as Deckard. Only at the end, with the last few moments of his life clock ticking down, does Batty seize life (by very literally seizing the white dove). He savors the very essence of life, and in those moments becomes truly human. In fact, as irony would have it, Batty as the man-made replicant without a soul is the only one who can show Deckard where to find his own humanity; for it is only in his life-and-death struggle with Batty that Deckard becomes human, and makes the decision to run away with Rachel.

Prior to his death in 1982, Philip K. Dick was a very commercial science fiction writer, and many of his short stories have served as the inspiration for big budget, Hollywood blockbusters, including "Total Recall" (1990), "Screamers" (1993), "Impostor" (2002) and "Minority Report" (2002). One of his key themes from the essay "The Android and the Human" (1973) and the short story "The Electric Ant" (1969) dealt with the confusion between humans and mechanical simulacra, and that theme finds its way nicely into the final film. In the end, Dick felt that empathy was what ultimately distinguished the human from the machine, the spiritual from the mechanical, and the authentic being from even the most cunningly crafted pseudo-life, and there is no where else in the film that this is more poignantly rendered than in the final confrontation between Deckard and Batty.

Over the years, “Blade Runner” has developed a certain cult following among hard-core science fiction fans, and has influenced the writing of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Pat Catigan, Rudy Rucker, Neal Stephenson, and other cyberpunk authors. The film’s breathtaking visuals and tech noir sensibilities has inspired comic books, music videos, video games, and other films, including “Brazil” (1985), “Aliens” (1986), “Robocop” (1987), “Total Recall” (1990), “The Fifth Element” (1996), “The Sixth Day” (2000), and many, many others. In fact, until Steven Spielberg’s “Minority Report” in 2002, it’s hard to imagine a future time and place that didn’t resemble the one from the movie “Blade Runner.” But just as “Blade Runner” has inspired many films, Ridley Scott’s masterpiece was inspired by the “hard boiled” detective films of the 1940’s and 1950’s. I also think that some credit should go to Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 science fiction classic, “Alphaville, or The Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution.” With a style that evokes the black and white thrillers of the past, French New Wave Director Godard sends his own sardonic, disillusioned and insecure hero on a mission not that dissimilar from Deckard’s. Secret agent Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine), posing as a journalist from the Outlands, is ordered to hunt down and kill a scientist who has turned the human populace of “Alphaville” into machines that service a supercomputer named Alpha 60. During his investigation, Caution falls in love with Natasha (Anna Karina), a beautiful and enigmatic woman who has been turned into a pleasure unit, and he also begins to question his own wants and desires as he stumbles through the mechanized city that is always in darkness. Eventually, he manages to terminate the mad scientist and each of those robots in his employ, including the supercomputer Alpha 60, before escaping with Natasha to the Outlands. Caution must also teach her the meaning of love so that she can

escape the dehumanization of her machine programming. Many years ahead of its time, Godard's flawed masterpiece "Alphaville" was the thematic forerunner of Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner."

In 1994, twelve years after its initial release, Scott edited several key scenes (including Deckard and Rachel's escape to the rural landscape) and deleted the voice-over narration for a theatrical re-release of the film in some of the larger cities. The newer version (alternately referred to as "the director's cut") ends on a much darker note, suggesting through a series of intercut scenes of a unicorn that Rick Deckard may indeed be a replicant himself. The Director's Cut of "Blade Runner" still packs a punch, but is largely superfluous. We already had our suspicions about Deckard, and no amount of re-editing was needed to fill in those ambiguities. I also miss the voice-over narration that recalls the best of the film noirs of the past.

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