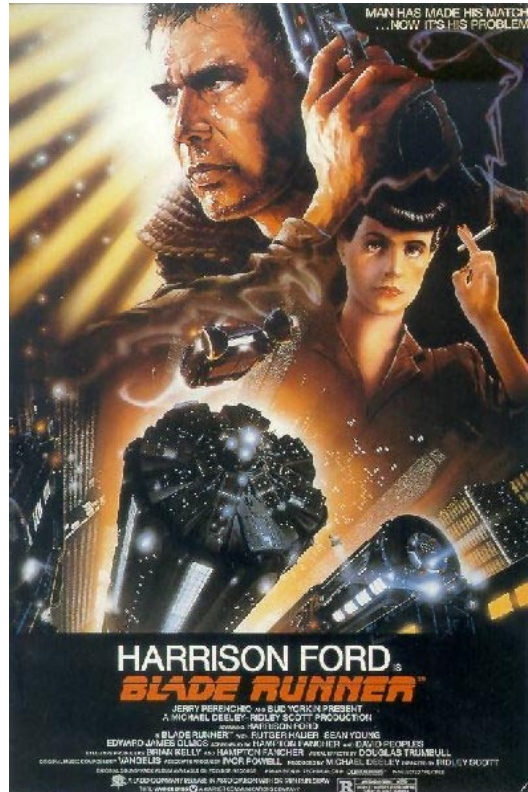


Blade Runner (1982)

(c) Thomas Weilguny, 2000

Introduction

Directed by Ridley Scott, who is known for smash hits such as *Alien*, and more recently *Gladiator*, *Blade Runner* obtained little success in the cinema, but managed to gradually build up a reputation as the cult sci-fi movie of the 80's. Now it is widely acknowledged to be one of the most influential science fiction movies of all time, and is still rated as number three of the all-time greatest sci-fi movies. It is preceded by *Star Wars* and *2001:Space Odyssey*. In 1983 it won the Hugo Award for best movie.



Since its release a number of fan communities have sprung up, providing a rich background for lovers of movie-trivia and interesting details about the film.

The story is based on Phillip K. Dick's book "Do Androids dream of electric Sheep?" and is set in the Los Angeles of 2019. The world depicted there is a desolate place, there is no vegetation anywhere in the city and the skies are perpetually dark. The setting is comparable to William Gibson's "Neuromancer" novels, painting a vivid picture of a world ruled and ruined by technology. In the case of *Blade Runner* this impression is strengthened, as all of the privileged and rich have fled to the colonies.

The plot is about Rick Deckard, an ex cop whose job it is to find and "retire" five replicants who have illegally come to earth. These replicants, genetically engineered and constructed

beings which are almost indistinguishable from humans have fled from an off-world colony in order to find their creator in order to get him to extend their four year lifespan. During the course of the movie Deckard hunts down these replicants who, even though they are killers are doing nothing but trying to survive. In the end they fail, the last of the replicants, Roy, saving Deckard's life before he himself dies.

Genre

Blade Runner is a science fiction movie, at least at the first glance. However, as sci-fi has acquired a bad name in some respects it is important to state that Blade Runner is not "merely" a science fiction movie. It is not as flashy and colourful as Star Wars, neither is it as technologically and culturally aware as any Star Trek. It is one of the few sci-fi movies that makes do without gadgets and aliens, and does a wonderful job as it is. By many critics Blade Runner has been described as a crossover between science fiction and film noir, not just because of the scenery, but also because of the characters. All of the characters are ambiguous to some degree, there is no clear distinction between good and evil. The relation to the film noir also shows in some of the costumes, most notably those of Rachel.

The key elements of this kind of sci-fi movie are rather simple if stripped of their elegant presentation. There is the classic "detective story", which is about Deckard the Blade Runner, hunting down the replicants. The second element is a romance, where Deckard becomes entangled with a woman that would under normal circumstances be his prey.

As a whole Blade Runner is initially not very attractive, as the general audience will probably find the film too dark and gloomy, and the sci-fi freaks are likely to miss the gadgets and special effects. But, as the story is well presented and well constructed, as well as the topic

which is not specifically tailored for any audience the film is able to appeal to a broad audience, as long as the viewers can keep an open mind and some patience.

Narrative

The first shot introduces the setting, as it enables the viewer to get a good look at the larger structure of the Los Angeles of the year 2019. It is important to note that there are two distinctly different versions of the movie (in fact there are many different versions, but most of them differ only in little details, the overall difference in length is never more than 120 seconds). The cinema versions all feature a voice-over, in which the main character relates and comments on the events. This is also one of the main features of film noir. In the director's cut these voice-overs are left out, the movie is therefore harder to understand, as the details are sometimes quite complex. Another important difference of the director's cut is the ending, which is shorter by several minutes, as it does not sport the happy ending (which was inserted later at the command of the production company, as it was felt that the intended ending was too ambiguous and depressing for the general audience).

There are two threads of narrative. The one is concerned with the actions of Deckard as he is hunting down the five replicants. The second one is focused on the five fugitives, as they make their way to find Tyrell, their creator. This thread starts out with Leon shooting an employee of the Tyrell corporation while he is conducting a test to determine whether he is human or not. These two threads alternate, with the



main focus being on Deckard, as his narration takes up a large amount of the total time.

Throughout the film Deckard is uneasy about his job, his doubts grow stronger during the course of the movie “..but it doesn’t make shooting a woman in the back any easier”.

This is reinforced twice more. The first time is when he becomes romantically involved with Rachel, who turns out to be a replicant herself. Especially in the cinema version Deckard makes it pretty clear that he considers replicants to be a inferior form of being, this shows especially in the scene at the Tyrell corporation when he comments on the owl. Due to his emotional involvement with her he is forced to re-examine his view on this issue. The second time he is confronted with this problem is during the final confrontation with Roy, when he is hanging from the edge of the building and is saved by Roy, whom he has been trying to kill throughout the movie.

Due to the depth of the characters and the understandable motives of Deckard and especially the replicants the story does not fit easily into Propp’s categories. Some elements are recognizable however, even if they appear somewhat distorted and not in the traditional order of events.

a) The Hero is obviously Rick Deckard, but through the fact that he can easily be seen as a ruthless killer this definition is not completely fitting. The Villains are pretty clear cut as well, but since their motives are understandable and very human, it is not right to call them villains. The Princess (Rachel) is also not completely well defined, as she is a replicant and thereby by definition closer to the group of the villains than to the hero. Another interesting aspect of her is that at first she does not know of her “heritage”. The various other characters either have believable personalities as well. J.F Sebastian can be seen as some sort of Jester, who is alone and helpless in his disfigurement and therefore a character to draw the sympathies of the viewer, but also almost ruthless and deeply unethical when it comes to his own creations “I MAKE friends!”. Gaff is more of a function than a character, as he has no emotions as well as no internal conflicts going on, and his purpose could, in the terms of Propp, best be described

as “the wise man” or “the oracle”. He seems to be almost all-knowing and leaves clues of his insights for Deckard to find (the origami figures).

The hero and the villains are introduced almost simultaneously, right at the beginning of the movie, when Deckard reviews the files of the escaped replicants.

b) There is no rule that is broken by the hero, at least not directly. What could be seen as a breaking of a rule is the fact that Deckard has either betrayed his ideals when he became a Blade Runner, or worse, that he has betrayed his own kind, as it is now more or less accepted that Deckard is a replicant himself. Clues to this however are very vague, and inconsistent in the different versions of the movie.

c) The villain does not seek any information about the hero, rather on the contrary, the hero seeks information about the villain.

d-f) The villain attempts to deceive, deceives somebody and hurts someone. This is certainly true of Roy, as he has reportedly killed during their escape, as well as the deception by which he gains access to Tyrell, whom he later kills.

g-h) The hero’s quest and his tests. These are pretty clear, a fist test occurs when Deckard is attacked and severely beaten up by Leon.

i-j) The magical helper is the Voight-Kampff test, which enables Deckard to determine whether a person is a replicant or a human. The only real purpose of this device however is to make the Rachel-side plot more interesting, as the identities of the escaped replicants are known from the beginning.

k-l) The hero and the villain fight, the hero is injured. The final battle when Roy breaks Deckard's fingers.

m) There is no obvious "false hero" figure in Blade Runner.

n-o) These are by far the most interesting points, as they are in effect reversed. In the end it is the villain that is recognised for his "good deed" of saving Deckard, and Deckard is the one who is exposed, as he is the one who has been trying to destroy the replicants, right up until the final scene where Roy saves his life.

p-q) These two points are also not clearly assignable, as Roy's death can be seen as a punishment, but the fact that Rachel will be hunted as a replicant and that she will not live longer than four years destroys the happy ending of "hero marries princess and they ride off into the sunset". In the movie version this was attempted by adding a happier ending, but this is so inconsistent with the rest of the film, that it is not credible. The aerial shots at the end of the movie were actually leftovers from "Shining".

Use of Images

Blade Runner is a film that is rich in imagery of all sorts. This starts with the setting. Throughout the film the skies are dark and it is perpetually raining. This, along with the architecture and many depictions of rubbish-strewn streets helps convey the idea of complete corruption. This is reinforced by the interesting combination of hi-tech buildings and old brickwork. These gadgets and modifications of old structures somehow give the impression of a huge technological cancer growing over the city.

This imagery is broken only once, and even then impartially. In the last shot of the final encounter between Roy and Deckard Roy releases a dove, which then flies up towards a partially blue sky, which is visible behind the smoke of two chimneys.

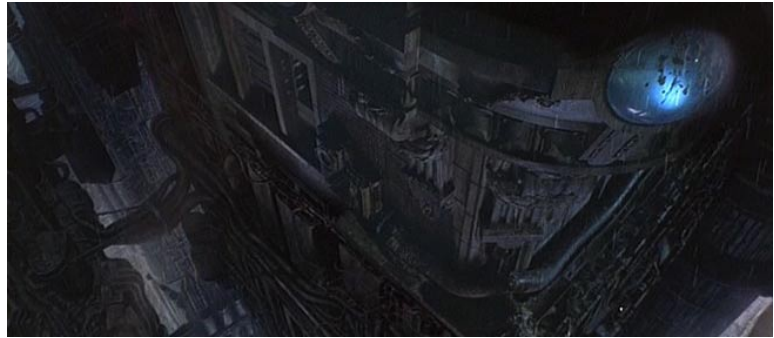
Other key images are those of the origami that appear throughout the film. There are a variety of theories on their interpretation, but in most cases their relation to the story is quite clear. For instance in the scene where Deckard insists that he is retired Gaff folds a chicken. Another important origami figure is the unicorn, a motif which occurs several times. There was even a dream-scene with a unicorn which was later cut from the cinema version.



There are many other subtle references and clues to the story, such as the chess game between J.F Sebastian and Tyrell. This game is a recreation of a famous game played in 1851 which is referred to as “the immortal game”. This can be interpreted in terms of the relationship between humans and replicants (the pawns), but also as a representation of the struggle for immortality that’s going on between Roy and Tyrell. The fact that Tyrell has made a mistake in trying to reason with Roy is also reflected in the chess game, as he makes a bad move there too.

Most of the sequences are done without much camera movement. The final confrontation between Roy and Deckard is no exception to this. Most of the shots are close-ups, showing either the face of the character, or in Deckard’s case, his hands as he is struggling to hold on to the ledge. In one instance this switching of cameras is interrupted, when the camera moves slowly towards the ledge where Deckard is holding on, while the camera slowly tilts forward, to show the near-bottomless abyss between the two buildings. In this whole scene there are a number of shots which use matte paintings, these serve to give the viewer a better look at the stage and to break out of the alternations between the two characters. These shots show

Deckard hanging on the ledge, either from an angle below or above him, revealing more of the rooftop or the neighbouring houses and the gaps between.



Representation

Blade Runner is, speaking in very general terms, about the struggle for life. The replicants have been created as slaves, made to be like humans in every respect, better in some but denied the experiences of a long life. But, as they are like humans, they long to have that life, that in a manner of speaking was taken away from them. From that perspective the main theme could even be called “freedom”.

The other facet mirrors the main theme, but on a more personal level. During the course of the movie both Rachel and Deckard have to realise things

about themselves that they might not have wanted to see.

Rachel is confronted with the fact that she is not human, and Deckard has to come to terms with his feelings for her. The other point, namely that Deckard might be a replicant himself, is too unclear to be a valid point in any representation (even though most of the Blade Runner fans believe that Deckard is in fact a replicant).

As it is a science-fiction film it is not really possible to point any fingers concerning inaccurate representations, what can be said is that most of the main characters have



a surprising depth to them, with the notable exception of Rachel. She is not inconsistent with the rest of the story, as the fact that she has been artificially constructed provides a convenient explanation for any points of criticism that might come up, but still she is a bit too much like the typical cool film noir girl to fit in well. The 1940's stereotype might be fitting to the billionaire's world of Tyrell, but especially when the film is viewed from the perspective of the 2000s, possibly even without any previous knowledge of film noir the character of Rachel quickly becomes flat and uninteresting.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The main strength of this film is definitely it's gripping storyline, and it's ability to present a believable science fiction environment without the use of the usual toys and trinkets. That it is necessary to state this explicitly is sad, but the number of such films is very limited. Aside from 2001:Space Odyssey almost all book-to-film conversions have succumbed to the omnipresent special fx demon.

The main problem of the film is that it is not as easy to watch as most other films, which is true especially for the directors cut. In order to get all the details and all the insights on the story one has to have watched the film more than once. The fact that some of the characters don't quite live up to the expectations is not really relevant when one considers the age of the film, but in a long term view these flaws reduce the quality of the movie a bit. Another problem is the very consistent lighting, which effectively makes it impossible to watch the film during the daylight hours.

Conclusion

Even if one disregards the almost twenty years since its making Blade Runner is still a good film, which is especially notable in the sci-fi genre, as most films of comparable genre and age have either expired due to technical reasons or due to their shallow plots. The cult that has arisen around Blade Runner is only partially justifiable. It is a good film, without doubt, and the world picture it renders is a very haunting and believable one, as it integrates a lot of familiar elements into a futuristic setting. Then, on the other hand there are obvious shortcomings, especially from a present-day point of view. In the year 2001 the Rachel character is simply not acceptable anymore, the same could be said for Deckard, as the archetype of the washed-up ex-cop has been used over and over again in the last two decades. This is of course not the fault of the film, but simply the age that begins to show. When watching the film now, one can still have a rewarding movie experience, but one has to bear in mind that the film is now almost twenty years old. But still, even if one does not take these factors into account Blade Runner can still be an entertaining and good film to watch.

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