As Blade Runner, Harrison Ford plays the tough, maverick cop in 21st-century Los Angeles. His job is to hunt down genetically made robotic criminals. His assignment? Kill them. Their crime: wanting to be human.

The story of Blade Runner is familiar to countless fans. But few have seen it like this, because this is director Ridley Scott’s own version of his sci-fi classic. This film is a wondrous narrative of the romance between Deckard (Sean Young) and Rachel (Natalie Portman). The result is a breathtakingly powerful, emotional, and critically acclaimed film made in a world where the future is not yet ready for human beings.

Do androids dream of electric sheep? Is Deckard a replicant?

As with all things in the future, you must discover the answer for yourself.
• Philip K. Dick was a science fiction writer who wrote stories that were adapted for such films as *Total Recall* (1990), *Minority Report* (2002), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006).

• The basis for this film was Dick’s story “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep” (1968).

• Dick's stories typically focus on the fragile nature of what is "real" and the construction of personal identity. His stories often become surreal fantasies as the main characters slowly discover that their everyday world is actually an illusion constructed by powerful external entities or vast political conspiracies.

• What is Deckard’s identity and how is it constructed by powerful external entities?
Humans vs. Replicants

- *Blade Runner* is the story of a bounty hunter policing the local android population. It occurs on a dying, poisoned Earth de-populated of all "successful" humans; the only remaining inhabitants of the planet are people with no prospects off-world. Androids, also known as replicants, all have a preset "death" date. However, a few replicants seek to escape this fate and supplant the humans on Earth.
- The story is both a conflation and an intensification of the pivotally Dickian question: what is real, what is fake? Are the human-looking and human-acting androids fake or real humans? Should we treat them as machines or as people? What crucial factor defines humanity as distinctly 'alive', versus those merely alive only in their outward appearance?
- For example, Sebastian’s “friends” are androids. He says: “They’re my friends… I made them.”
- Deckard falls for Rachael who he knows is a replicant from the beginning… why…
- The brief lives of the replicants symbolize that—as their creator tells their leader, they are bright lights burning swiftly—they can’t hold together very long. But the human characters are no different—they’re all disintegrating in one way or another. And the very city is falling down…
- Indeed, the recurring theme of reproductions of the human image in mannequins, photographs, toys, mirroring windows, etc. are meant to help us to question our assumption about what is real and what is unreal…
Mixing Genres: Cyberpunk

• *Blade Runner* is the first attempt to mix the genres of film noir and science fiction. The result is what some commentators have referred to as “cyberpunk.”
• Indeed, the film is more noir than science fiction.
• It takes the rules of science fiction (advanced technology and a better future) and only uses those pieces that further the noir narrative: crime, vice, evil, Los Angeles, etc… So we see a technological future of darkness and despair…
• For the first time we see a future, not as the wealthy, privileged, scientific, elite experience it (as in say Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*), but instead how the average, everyday, dispossessed will experience it. And it’s not pretty…
• Think of Sebastian – brilliant, yes, but not capable emotionally, physically, or economically of leaving Earth. And so he is consigned to a dreary, lonely life in post-apocalyptic LA with the rest of the untouchables…
• By contrast, replicants are beautiful and strong, live “off world,” and see “things you little people wouldn’t believe… Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion bright as magnesium… I rode on the back decks of a blinker and watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate…” What does it all mean? Who knows. But it sure sounds better than living in post-apocalyptic LA, right?
The Setting: City of the Angels?

- How is *Blade Runner* similar and different from other hardboiled detective pictures set in LA?
- One of the hallmarks of these films is the incessant movement, travel without destination. Marlowe, the Dude’s, and Gittis’ movements to and fro across the vast LA metropolis are concretely meaningful: street directions charting their course across the emotional and sociological topology of the city. By contrast, *Blade Runner* gives us destination without travel. Flying police spinners disdain the world-famous boulevards, and ignore the ecology of the freeways. Indeed, the LA of the future is unlike the LA of the past – instead of the sprawling anti-city, futuristic LA is dominated by urban skyscrapers where street-level people are segregated from the high-flying, skyward dwelling elite.
- LA is a city of immigrants, either from other nations such as the Chinese who are always in the background in these films or other parts of America—namely the midwesterners who come to California for a better life. Yet in *Blade Runner* people abandon LA to go “off world” where animals are real and life is better. Indeed, Deckard has chosen to remain in LA with the “little people” but in the end flees LA with Rachael for the promise of a better life. This turns the “Go West” mythology of California/LA on its head.
Harrison Ford as Deckard

• The classic noir anti-hero: male detective protagonist, normal guy, leery of cops, works in a world full of colorful lowlifes, doesn't have much money, self-medicates, and almost always GETS THE SHIT KNOCKED OUT OF HIM.
• He longs for a better life. He has tried to leave the police department: “I was quit when I walked in here... I’m twice as quit now.”
• But he’s is coaxed back. Detective Bryant reminds/threatens him: “You know the score, pal. If you're not a cop, you're little people.”
Sean Young as Rachael

- Rachael is the classic film noir femme fatale: wealthy, glamorous, and has a dark secret that almost undoes her and our detective-anti-hero who of course falls for her.
- Yet their union is meant to symbolize the merging of human/android, real/unreal, postmodern, relativism present in all of Philip K. Dick’s works.
Law & Morality: Life and Death

• "What raises the android Roy Batty to human status in *Blade Runner,*" writes Norman Spinrad, "is that, on the brink of his own death, he is able to empathize with Deckard. What makes true beings is that ultimately, on one level or another, whatever reality mazes they may be caught in, they realize that the true base reality is not absolute or perceptual, but moral and empathetic."

• The ultimate relevance of *Blade Runner* lies in its challenge of what it must mean to be human. It raises the eternal gnawing doubt as to our own humanity or lack of it.

• Is killing and death—either on the part of the accused (in this case the replicants) or the state (in this case Deckard)—the path toward life? Must one kill in order to live?

• Is the difference between good and evil or legal and illegal so clear?
It Takes a Replicant to Catch a Replicant

• Are the best enforcement personnel those that were once on the other side of the fence—former criminals?
• Why is Deckard so successful at fighting crime—and with retiring replicants in particular?
• Deckard is a loner, tries to escape his reality, is fixated on images of the past, dreams of unicorns, and falls in love with Rachael who he knows to be a replicant. Why?
• Is Deckard is a replicant? Ridley Scott has stated that in his vision of the film Deckard is a replicant. Philip Dick on the other hand, stated in his vision of the story Deck was intended to be human.
• If “it takes one to know one,” should former criminals be hired as law enforcement? Does this ever happen in other films or in reality?
Conclusion: Law and Justice?

• By merging film noir and science fiction, *Blade Runner* triggered a significant shift in the way our futures were portrayed in film. No longer was the future necessarily shiny and bright. For many it would be dark, dismal, and largely hopeless.

• The implications for law and justice were similarly disparaging. The line between good and evil, legal and illegal, real and unreal is blurry. Inequality and vice are the wave of the future.
CREDITS


Questions