

## Blade Runners and the 21st Century



In his essay, “The Replicant: Inside the Dark Future of *Blade Runner 2049*,” Brian Raftery suggests that, “The strongest sci-fi has always used the landscape of the future to help us process our worries about the present...”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Angelica Jade Bastién writes about *Blade Runner 2049*, and dystopias in general, that the genre, “should make us uncomfortable...make us question our roles...illuminate and critique current societal problems by reconfiguring them in an exaggerated, but still somewhat plausible context.”<sup>2</sup> While this may be a lot to ask of any genre, I believe that the Blade Runner films wrestle with the problems of the present as much as they do with the future.

In what follows, I argue that the Blade Runner series, and the criticism of it, serve as a barometer of American culture’s continued struggle with ideas regarding biological determinism and social marginalization. The Blade Runner films are a special case, in that *Blade Runner*’s handling of these themes, which made it a favorite with film theorists, has become anathema to many contemporary critics. The effort to address this tension in *Blade Runner 2049* reveals the current philosophical discontent surrounding these issues. This essay reviews how *Blade Runner* addresses the general theme of biological determinism and marginalization, considers contemporary criticism of the film, illustrates *Blade Runner 2049*’s engagement with the same issues, and discusses the subsequent criticism of that engagement.

### ***Blade Runner – Modern or Postmodern?***

Its curious aesthetic, combining dystopian future with film noir, and its effort to confront the anxieties of its time, including nuclear holocaust and the challenge to biological determinism (implicit in the 1960's and 1970's liberation movements), earned *Blade Runner* (1982) the title of first postmodern film from many critics.<sup>3</sup> *Blade Runner* used the plot devices of an ambiguous social deterioration and androids among us to pose the question: will the values of the Enlightenment (universal human rights produced by the bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th Century and expanded by the liberation movements of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century), hold up after the collapse of those bourgeois societies? The civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and a burgeoning gay pride were transforming the cultural landscape of the United States, by acknowledging the full autonomy and humanity of people of color, women and homosexuals. These social movements promised historically marginalized groups admission into bourgeois society, with its associated privileges and responsibilities, during a time that it faced the imminent threat of nuclear extermination. It is a reflection of the spirit of the times that other films and made-for-TV movies used nuclear holocaust (*A Boy and His Dog*, 1975, *Mad Max*, 1981 and *The Day After*, 1983) and androids among us (*Galaxina*, 1980, *The Terminator*, 1984, and *Cherry 2000*, 1988), to depict this anxiety as something of a Hobbesian dilemma: will the new social contract, forged by the liberation movements of the 1970's and 1980's, endure after the collapse of the society that produced them?

Despite the effort to remedy social marginalization, the continued antagonism between the world's two superpowers, and their expanding nuclear arsenals, threatened to marginalize everyone from the bourgeois society that housed those enlightenment values. By tapping into legitimate fears about nuclear war, apocalyptic films became a vehicle for universalizing the experience of marginalization, exposing everyone to the harshest realities of a world in which social norms disintegrate. It is common for futuristic films to portray a society in which the classic problems of gender, race and sexual preference are less likely to determine a person's fate, and the

apocalyptic plot line may be understood to accelerate the process: gender, race and sexual preference become less important when the world is on fire. Taking a skeptical tone, Basti  n describes the effort to universalize the experience of marginalization in dystopian film as, “escapades in which white people can take on the constraints of what it means to be the other.”<sup>4</sup>

The android motif offers an additional plot device for re-imagining future marginalizations without rehashing old tropes, which would diminish the futuristic feeling of science fiction films. A film wrestling with gender inequity, or the rejection of Jim Crow, might feel like a period piece or a documentary, rather than a work of futuristic fiction. The android motif, like the ape motif in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), allows a re-imagining of biological determinism and marginalization, in order to dissect today’s problems through a futuristic lens.<sup>5</sup> The android faces a form of social marginalization that attempts to transcend race and gender and ask the broader question: is humanity biologically determined? In this way, the plot device neatly expands to cover:

- Racial and gender determinism.
- The objectification of populations deemed to be biologically inferior.
- Social marginalization based on that objectification.
- Uncertain, future marginalizations.

Basti  n sees this tendency in science fiction as a weakness. To depict future worlds of oppression as worlds in which the classic problems of race have been solved is a failure to address the lasting power of racism.<sup>6</sup> Her critique rejects *Blade Runner*’s use of these plot devices to universalize the experience of marginalization, by presenting *all* viewers with a situation in which their bourgeois rights and privileges are threatened. “The genre hyperconsumes the narratives of people of color — which read as allegories for slavery and colonialism — yet remains starkly white in the casting of major roles, and often refuses to acknowledge race altogether.”<sup>7</sup> Hollywood’s reluctance to cast actors of color in major roles has been well documented and is not unique to any genre.<sup>8</sup> The criticism neatly reveals that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century concern over continued racial marginalization has replaced

20th Century worries about nuclear war and total marginalization. It also reveals a modernist philosophical thread in the otherwise very postmodern *Blade Runner*: the effort to universalize the human condition and allow citizens of privilege to engage with marginalizing narratives through the plot device of apocalypse and androids. This 21<sup>st</sup> Century criticism may justify a reframing of the modern/postmodern elements of *Blade Runner* that persist in *Blade Runner 2049*, helping to explain some of the contemporary criticism of both.

The answer to the question ‘are androids human?’ raises a further question: ‘are we biologically determined?’, and the answer typically depends upon the androids. This is because, for the most part, Hollywood films were in agreement regarding the critical elements of humanity. A being that displays human feelings is human, and the most common mechanism for engaging those feelings involves a confrontation with love or death. In this fashion, the films tended to define humanity as having the capacity to display a complex, sometimes contradictory array of emotions. Straight forward, rational, and scientific responses to love and death suggest that the creature in question is a monster or object, lacking free will and therefore lacking humanity. For example, the robot in *Short Circuit* illustrates his humanity by sacrificing himself for his friends, while the android in *Galaxina* reveals her humanity by falling in love.<sup>9</sup> By exhibiting an extreme clarity of purpose and a lack of empathy, androids like the one in *Terminator* reinforce the gap between machines and people.<sup>10</sup>

The elevation of emotion over reason as the criteria for personhood is a classic theme. In a romantic comedy, the cold, calculating woman of reason is no match for the sentimental, passionate woman. But in *Blade Runner*, something more complex is at work. Unlike classic plots, in which the audience questions the humanity of a character, *Blade Runner* uses psychoanalytic and postmodern strategies to question the audience’s empathy and humanity.

The replicant looks like a person, acts like a person, and can only be distinguished from people through a Voight-Kampff test involving a study of the eyes for dilation as proof of real human emotions. To thicken the

plot, as Tyrell, their designer, tells Deckard that the replicant Rachael has been designed to feel real emotions, thanks to her implanted memories and experiences. As a result, Rachael believes herself to be human. Tyrell asks Deckard, “How many [Voight-Kampff] questions does it usually take to spot one [a replicant].”<sup>11</sup> Deckard answers that it normally takes 20 or 30, but with Rachael it took more than 100.<sup>12</sup> “More real than real,” is the maker’s motto, which combines the classic philosophical question regarding human nature with the postmodern question regarding identity formation.<sup>13</sup>

In the replicant, we encounter an object that is identical to us, perhaps better, but who is not recognized as human. The failure to acknowledge their humanity justifies their slave status. This pure reflection of the self, in the objectified, marginalized other, presents us with a perfect example of abjection, the form of self-alienation described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (appearing in English in 1982). For Kristeva, abjection involves the breakdown of the distinction between the subject and the object, and the most extreme form of this occurs when we see a human corpse. At that moment we are confronted with the materiality of death, our own death, as we see a subject (ourselves) become an object (the corpse).<sup>14</sup> The abject being is that which is stationed outside the symbolic order, its experience inexpressible. The living cannot experience death, but in that moment, the living can identify with the corpse, which signifies objectification and death.

Kristeva argues that objectified, marginalized people cannot express their experience of marginalization in the language afforded them by the dominant social order. Just as a woman may find it difficult to articulate her dissatisfaction with her role as a housewife in the language of patriarchy (as described by Betty Freidan in the *Feminine Mystique*<sup>15</sup>), Roy Batty, a replicant in *Blade Runner*, says he’s seen things you *people* wouldn’t believe.<sup>16</sup> His descriptions of, “Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion,” and of watching, “C-Beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate,”<sup>17</sup> sound like poetry, but never materialize for us on the screen, unimaginable for members of the dominant social order.

The plight of the replicants represents the objectification and marginalization that may be visited upon any human. The replicant exists

as the abject, outside the symbolic order, but the film stabilizes the abject so that both viewer (protagonist/audience) and viewed (replicant) experience abjection. Roy is the abject, unable to embrace the established social values, make meaningful choices about his life, engage his humanity.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the human protagonist Deckard experiences the abject when seeing the replicant as simultaneously distinct from him (as manufactured object, non-human, corpse) and identical to him. Thus, *Blade Runner* accomplishes the task of universalizing marginalization, by presenting the viewer with the marginalized other, while making them indistinguishable from us, leading Deckard (and by extension the audience) to question his identity. Abjection not only denies our subjectivity, it questions our entire notion of what it is to be human and the world-view and symbolic order by which we distinguish human from non-human. This is postmodernism: an existence in which marginalization perpetually lurks around the corner because the grand narratives that define our identity and future have been deconstructed.

*Blade Runner* asks audiences to question their standard for recognizing subjectivity with an eye to past marginalizations, and offers an answer in the death of Roy Batty and the love between Deckard and Rachael. In each case it is in their evident self-reflection and subtle responses to very human concerns that they reveal their humanity simultaneously to themselves and to Deckard. This represents the dissolution of abjection, and the possibility of full humanity for everyone, now and in the event of future marginalizations.

Rain dripping off his face, confronting his impending death, Roy offers us a Shakespearian monologue, in which he explains that his memories “will be lost in time like tears in the rain.” In the fashion of existential thinkers from Dostoyevsky to Derrida, Roy’s humanity and subjectivity show through as he accepts his mortality, which is what gives life meaning.<sup>19</sup> In *Movies with Meaning: Existentialism through Film*, Dan Shaw contends that Roy saved Deckard’s life because, through confronting his own death, he gains a more vibrant awareness of the things that are meaningful to him.<sup>20</sup> In the voiceover narration of the theatrical release, Deckard interprets Roy’s monologue for us: “Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody’s life, my life. All he’d wanted were the same answers any

of us want.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, he is one of us. Deckard’s narration supports Shaw’s Heideggerian interpretation of the scene, that in the face of his own death, life becomes more precious to Roy, even the life of the cop sent to kill him. From this, Shaw concludes that the replicants are persons (like human beings), and that Deckard recognizes that the replicants should be treated as persons.<sup>22</sup> Roy’s realization of his humanity releases Deckard from the fear associated with an encounter with the abject, and consequently, from his prejudice.

Deckard discovers Rachael’s humanity by making love to her, which can also be understood in terms of abjection. Though she believes herself to be human, by subjecting her to the Voight-Kampff test, Tyrell and Deckard force her to face the truth of her alienated status: she is the other, the object, the corpse. She cites her memories as evidence to the contrary, but Deckard dismisses them as implants from Tyrell’s niece.

Kristeva contends that we are both threatened by and drawn to the abject. Rachael represents a beautiful corpse for Deckard. Deckard represents the social system that objectifies Rachael. The contradiction of abjection blurs neatly with the irrational tendencies of affection, as depicted in so much of the literature concerning forbidden love: Romeo and Juliet’s passion is fated to end in tragedy, because they belong to rival families; Deckard and Rachael are star crossed lovers, because one is human and the other is an android. Because he is human, Deckard recognizes these contradictory feelings in himself and Rachael as symbols of love, of humanity.

Her re-admittance into humanity is achieved through their love affair, that develops the way most love does, slowly, awkwardly, and intimately. When Rachael wakes Deckard by playing his piano, and worries that her memories of lessons are implants, he reassures her and says, “You play beautifully.” Like countless Hollywood love scenes, *Blade Runner* depicts a reluctant woman, who gives in to the man’s advances only after being physically restrained and forced to participate. Rachael attempts to escape Deckard’s apartment, but he overpowers her and forces her to express her affection. He tells her to say, “Kiss me,” and “I want you.” She relents and accepts his affection.

By making love to her, Deckard asserts that the synthetic character of her memories is irrelevant to him, and that Rachael can transcend the corporate, manufactured determinism of her creation. Here, it is passion and love that liberate. If he had simply forced himself on her, she would have been objectified. Only by making love to her does he acknowledge her full subjectivity and force her to accept it. If we interpret the scene as a case of sexual assault, the film's central theme breaks down. Like Deckard witnessing Roy's death, the love between Rachael and Deckard alleviates abjection. For Deckard, the replicants no longer represent the corpse, the materiality of his own death. For the replicants, Deckard no longer represents the symbolic order that oppresses them.

Their story is twisted and raw, a macabre tale of love and death, but this is the nature of film noir, which always leads us into dark, uncomfortable spaces. *Blade Runner* uses the noir aesthetic to create a postmodern instability of both person and place, while clinging to the modern notion that individuals might transcend their social station through acts of virtue and compassion. In a fashion consistent with Hollywood cinema of its time, *Blade Runner* demonstrates that enlightenment values persist through individual acts of courage, magnanimity and liberality, which manifest the capacity for love and self-sacrifice. Recent reflections on the virtues expressed in these scenes by 21<sup>st</sup> Century critics reveal a shift in the morality and ethics of criticism, offering a new approach to identity formation, liberation and enlightenment values.

### **Postmodern/21<sup>st</sup> Century Criticism**

21<sup>st</sup> Century dissatisfaction with *Blade Runner* tends to fall into two categories. The first, identified earlier, revolves around the replicants, meant to be stand-ins for oppressed minority groups who rarely appear on the screen.<sup>23</sup> The replacement of people of color on the screen with white characters who endure and overcome marginalization creates a modernist narrative that Bastián argues understands history as a straight line of progress, and favors a “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” plot.<sup>24</sup> *Blade Runner*’s effort to universalize oppression denies a pluralist worldview, by making heroes of those who enjoy cultural privilege, and shifting the burden of liberation

onto the marginalized.

The second dissatisfaction focuses on specific scenes, which critics contend constitute a continuation of biological determinism, objectification and marginalization. Erik Haywood is one of many critics who contends that the love scene between Deckard and Rachael should be described as a rape scene (and as a result, he disavows the film's greatness).<sup>25</sup> In criticizing this scene, Haywood acknowledges that director Ridley Scott may have been attempting a certain level of emotional complexity: "She's had the memories of her creator's niece implanted in her mind, leading her to believe that she's actually human. Anyway, the idea seems to be that she and Deckard are both overcome with passion, but she's resisting because, having been told by Deckard that she's actually an android, she can't trust her emotions."<sup>26</sup> But Haywood ultimately asserts that this subtlety is irrelevant; the fact is that Deckard rapes her.<sup>27</sup>

It is a symptom of the spirit of the times that so few critics in the 1980's described it this way.<sup>28</sup> In an interview with John Tibbetts in 1982, Sean Young was asked about the love scene. Young expressed no concern about the consensual nature of the event,<sup>29</sup> suggesting that Deckard must force Rachael to confront her "sexuality as a human being," because she cannot trust her own memories, feelings or experiences.<sup>30</sup> This puts Rachael in a particularly postmodern position, unable to call upon her past to stabilize her present and her identity. I read the scene in the tradition of Hollywood cinema, as using sexuality and love to stabilize and humanize the characters, in a world that denies them both. Interviewer John Tibbetts considered the scene controversial, not due to questions of consent, but rather because feminists might be upset that the man takes the leading role and instructs the woman on how to behave sexually, a clear violation of the principles of sexual equity that emphasized masculine and feminine sexual autonomy. In answer to the question, should feminists be upset, Young says, "No."<sup>31</sup>

Thirty five years later, Haywood classifies Rachael and Deckard's struggle with abjection as rape, because the scene violates 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards of what constitutes consent. What makes this scene such an important social marker is that the debate revolves around what rape looks

like. No one is claiming that Harrison Ford *actually* raped Sean Young (unlike, Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, in which Maria Schneider claims, and Bertolucci acknowledges, that she was raped by co-star Marlon Brando).<sup>32</sup> But Casey Cipriani concludes that, "Rewatched with current eyes, Deckard and Rachael's "love scene" is...rape."<sup>33</sup> That contemporary critics *see* the love scene in *Blade Runner* as rape rather than romance marks a significant cultural shift since 1982, a shift that demands greater moral clarity about sensitive social issues.

Haywood takes further umbrage with Deckard for his silent ingratitude to Roy (in the final cut) when Roy catches Deckard and prevents him from falling to his death. This apparent indifference, and the rape, cross a boundary for Haywood, who concludes that Deckard is not a hero, a conclusion that he admits ignores the nuance of abjection and Deckard's moral awakening tied to Roy's death and Rachael's love:

Finally, it could be said that Deckard "finds his humanity" at the very end of the film once Roy saves his life. It's possible. But for me, by the time Roy makes his amazing dying speech on that rainy rooftop, my sympathies have swung so far in Roy's direction that I can't muster up any real interest in the resolution of Deckard's journey, or his reunion with Rachael in the closing scene.<sup>34</sup>

Moral clarity is precisely the sort of thing that *Blade Runner* denies us, mingling our uncertainty regarding our humanity with our uncertainty about love, sexuality and death. 20<sup>th</sup> Century audiences and critics generally accepted the ambiguity (whether out of an appreciation of the fragility of human subjectivity, or out of ignorance of racial and gender issues, is difficult to determine). 21<sup>st</sup> Century critics reject this ambiguity and see tolerance of such nuances regarding race and gender as failures of moral vision. We could pass this quest for moral clarity off as simply the opinion of one critic if this line of criticism were not so ubiquitous. The contemporary consensus is that *Blade Runner*, set in Los Angeles 2019, fails to satisfy the norms of Los Angeles in 2017, and that this failure continues in the 2017 sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*.

## ***Blade Runner 2049 – Still Stuck in the Past?***

What is perhaps most interesting about *Blade Runner*'s postmodern confrontation with abjection and critique of biologically determined marginalization is that the film has come under criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for re-enforcing outdated tropes that endorse racism and sexism. This is demonstrated in director Denis Villeneuve's casting of predominately white characters to toil under the fictional hardships that brown and black people experience in real life, and relegating the women to roles as prostitutes and lovers.<sup>35</sup> The irony that the first postmodern film was not sufficiently postmodern is hard to miss, so Villeneuve's decision to double down on *Blade Runner*'s approach to abjection in *Blade Runner 2049* raises the question, was he ignoring the criticism or attempting to fix it? My conclusion is that he was trying to fix it, while at the same time, attempting to honor the original.

Concerns over biological determinism remain in *Blade Runner 2049*, though modified according to the parameters of identity politics, sexual politics and the digital age. The film continues using death and love as vectors for escaping biological determinism. In the final scene of the film, we watch the replicant K die in much the same fashion that we saw Roy die in *Blade Runner*, with similar references to memory, loss and precipitation; K dies while it snows. Like Roy, K finds his subjectivity in sacrificing his life for something greater. Throughout the film, K wrestles with his biologically determined existence, designed to be a compliant replicant lacking robust autonomy. Freysa gives him the formula for transcending his biological limitation and affirming his humanity.<sup>36</sup> K must choose to die, to die for a cause, for the naturally born child of a replicant. In case the theme wasn't obvious, Freysa tells K that dying for the right cause is the most human thing he could do. No one will accuse Villeneuve of being subtle.

What is different this time is that the protagonist K (and nearly all the characters in the film) are unambiguously replicants. In an important shift from the original, the replicants of *Blade Runner 2049* permeate all aspects of society, and are easy to identify. Each comes with a serial number tattooed in their eye. Casting the protagonist as a replicant, certain of his

replicant status, reconfigures the audiences' relationship to the marginalized other. More directly than in *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049* thrusts the audience into the perspective of the marginalized, the abject.

*Blade Runner 2049* expands the source of abjection to corporately manufactured, digital beings, while delving more deeply into the relationships between digital beings, replicants and humans. The Wallace Corporation designs replicants like K to be more compliant than previous versions. K is a blade runner, produced to hunt down the remaining Nexus 8 replicants who are non-compliant and dangerous. K's compliance manifests as passivity and heteronomy, and the audience sees itself in K, going through the motions of life, including the nonchalant killing of a Nexus 8 who has taken up farming. K's sole pleasure is Joi, a digital woman that he purchased from the Wallace Corporation – the same corporation that made him. This hermeneutic offers a neat characterization and criticism of contemporary corporate culture that supplies us with our desires, through advertising, and meets them with products.

But where *Blade Runner* gave us a human and replicant romance (as forbidden love), *Blade Runner 2049* serves up a romance between an embodied biological replicant and a digital being. Though critics, including Matt Miller, were quick to point out that this relationship mirrors the one presented in Spike Jonze's *Her*, the plot device serves a different purpose.<sup>37</sup> No one doubts that *Her*'s protagonist, Theodore Twombly, is human, and that he has fallen in love with a digital app.<sup>38</sup> The romance between K and Joi develops between two manufactured, marginalized beings. This is not your friend falling in love with a phone app, it is the phone app falling in love with your microwave oven.

The most nimble thematic element developed in *Blade Runner 2049* involves K's relationship with Joi, and her interactions with replicant women. When the replicant prostitute, Marietta, hears Joi's ring tone (*Peter and the Wolf*, by Prokofiev) she dismisses K as a potential client, explaining to her friends, "He doesn't like real girls."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Luv, who works for the Wallace Corporation, hears the ring tone and asks K if he is satisfied with their product. In a world divided into humans and replicants, Joi's digital

existence makes her a third class entity. Joi's narrative works to extend our resistance to biological determinism and accept digital beings into the sphere of humanity, in more or less the same way *Blade Runner* offered Rachael acceptance into the human sphere: through sexuality and love. Joi hires Marietta for a sexual threesome with K, risks her digital existence (life) by being downloaded into a portable storage device for projecting her image (emanator), and then dies trying to save K from the replicant Luv, who is hunting him. Her final words to K, before Luv crushes the emanator are, "I love you." These acts belie her status as mere digital object, a nature Luv reminds us of the moment before she steps on the emanator, asking K, "I do hope you're satisfied with our product." While Luv re-affirms her replicant status by ruthlessly following orders, *Terminator* style, Joi demonstrates her humanity by risking her life to save K, and upon realization of her failure to save him, expressing her love for him before dying.<sup>40</sup> Joi's non-material nature creates a greater barrier to her humanity than the replicant Rachael faces, but she overcomes it the same way Rachael does, through love.

Like *Blade Runner*, which forces us to interpret Rachael and Deckard's sex scene as an act of love, *Blade Runner 2049* forces us to view the sex scene between Joi, Marietta and K as an expression of Joi's love. The scene involves Joi superimposing her image on Marietta so that the two women (one digital, one replicant) become one. If this sexual encounter merely represents Joi's programming, then her destruction later in the film would only inspire the need to purchase a new Joi program. Instead, the audience grieves Joi's death along with K.

In what might be the film's most noir moment, *Blade Runner 2049* offers a new mode of being, where marginalized, manufactured products, like Joi and K, discover their humanity in their interactions with one another, rather than with humans.<sup>41</sup> Villeneuve toys with his audience, first, by presenting Joi's death as a tragedy to be grieved, and then by coldly invalidating that grief. At the end of the film, K encounters a 120 foot tall, naked, interactive advertisement for Joi. She steps out towards him, and says, "You look lonely. I can fix that." Then she calls him a "good Joe," the same name his Joi had given him. The *Blade Runner 2049* script reads,

“The name goes through K like an arrow. Joe? Jo? His mind fills with doubt and hope and doubt again. Was it all part of her program? Was she ever real?”<sup>42</sup> While clearly resisting traditional notions of biological determinism (race/gender) Villeneuve asserts an ambiguous biological/digital distinction that undercuts the emancipation theme. First, it leaves K’s commitment to the half-human child as his only avenue for discovering his humanity. In other words, his transcendence remains tethered to the oppressor. Second, Villeneuve maintains an ambiguous biological/digital distinction, presenting the digital being as the new corpse. For Villeneuve, the replicants may be human, but your digital girlfriend isn’t.

### **More Postmodern/21<sup>st</sup> Century Criticism**

21<sup>st</sup> Century critics of *Blade Runner 2049* raise the same reservations they had about *Blade Runner*: it fails to adequately address the real problems of race in universalizing the experience of marginalization, and tends to perpetuate traditional, misogynist narratives, especially those revolving around sex and love. Given that the protagonist is played by Ryan Gosling, a white man cast as a replicant (minority), the criticisms regarding race in *Blade Runner 2049* mirror the criticisms of *Blade Runner*. Though he reimagines the replicants, Villeneuve still uses them to universalize the experience of marginalization.

The question of misogyny is different; most critics agree that *Blade Runner 2049* addresses gender marginalization, but few believe that it succeeds in avoiding troublesome stereotypes. Emma Louise Backe acknowledges that sex and death engage Kristeva’s notion of abjection, but does not interpret these issues in *Blade Runner 2049* along those lines.<sup>43</sup> Instead, she argues that the film trades upon traditional notions of motherhood, and of biological determinism, in a plot that centers on an investigation into the possible offspring of a replicant: Rachael from *Blade Runner*. Rachael never appears in *Blade Runner 2049*, except briefly as an inaccurate replicant, and Backe acknowledges that the relationships between the film’s protagonist, antagonists and secondary female characters never suggests motherhood or reproduction.<sup>44</sup> But the central narrative of the film offers replicants liberation from their marginalized status through

child-bearing, which Backe suggests, “reinforces old ideas that biology is destiny and that women are and should be largely defined by their ability to reproduce.”<sup>45</sup> Backe argues that women remain anachronisms, unable to transcend their captivity as devoted romantic, sexual and moral partners to the men in the story, stuck between being digital lovers, replicant killers and traditional housewives.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the casting of women as cops, and as the leader of a new resistance, Rebecca Hawks and Maloney also conclude that *Blade Runner 2049* remains stuck in the past.<sup>47</sup> Backe summarizes the concern when she writes, “Considering recent attacks on reproductive health rights in the United States and the disavowal of gay, queer and trans rights in certain states and nations around the world, we should be particularly leery of media that promises transcendence while exemplifying conservative values.”<sup>48</sup> This criticism clearly places political concerns of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century above the film’s postmodern, noir aesthetic, which layers a dark pastiche upon a future that destabilizes the subject (viewer) and questions the modern narrative of progress. Backe wants the film to serve her political agenda, and tolerates no nuance regarding that purpose. She levels the same criticism regarding the love scene between K, Joi and Marietta.

When Joi hires replicant Marietta for a sexual threesome with K, in which the two women are the aggressors while K is reluctant and passive, it is hard not to read this as an effort to satisfy the sexual politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>49</sup> But Jill Gutowitz complains that the love scene, in which two women try to satisfy K, simply reproduces the male gaze.<sup>50</sup> This criticism brings to mind Tibbetts worrying that Rachael’s being told what to do in the love scene might be deemed sexist. That critics in 2017 find Villeneuve’s re-working of the love scene, where the women are in control, as a denial of female agency demonstrates the extent to which the moral and political terrain around sexuality has shifted.

Casey Cipriani suggests that *Blade Runner 2049*’s storyline is built upon legitimizing traditional notions of rape as romance, suggesting that the film did not escape the sins of its predecessor. Rachael and Deckard’s romance in *Blade Runner* produces a child, and the search for that child supplies

the central plot of *Blade Runner 2049*. But rather than suggest that the first replicant child is the product of sexual assault, Villeneuve casts Harrison Ford as a man who has spent thirty years pining for Rachael, presumably to convince us of the truth of their love.<sup>51</sup> Cipriani's concern raises the question: what do we do about beloved, classic films that fail to live up to 21<sup>st</sup> Century sensibilities? She argues that "...the trope of a woman falling in love with her rapist reeks of misogyny. By basing the sequel's emotional core on the original's damaging romantic subplot, 2049's more affecting, human qualities are tarnished by a troublesome 'no means yes' mentality that one can only hope will die out long before we actually reach 2049."<sup>52</sup>

Like Haywood, Cipriani suggests that the sexual assault vitiates any effort to confront questions of human marginalization and hopes that films like it will soon vanish. The criticism adopts a particularly poignant line of contention with the *Blade Runner* films. Memories of, and relationships to, important cultural artifacts help stabilize human identity, as illustrated in *Blade Runner* by the importance of photos to the characters, and in *Blade Runner 2049* by the law forbidding the use of real memories to stabilize the replicants' identities. When critics condemn cultural artifacts like the *Blade Runner* films for representing toxic cultural norms,<sup>53</sup> they invalidate the memories people have associated with those artifacts. Like Deckard telling Rachael that her memories are implants, the delegitimizing of these historical artifacts can destabilize identity and cast into doubt the legitimacy of a person's life. Examining such anachronisms, the residue of a discordant past, as seen in the massive Atari advertisement that references an alternative history in *Blade Runner 2049*, is precisely the point of the shared aesthetic of the two films.<sup>54</sup>

Critics like Backe and Maloney complain that *Blade Runner 2049* missed the opportunity to transform the franchise into an incisive read of 21st Century society, by casting predominately white, male characters in the lead roles.<sup>55</sup> The fact that five of the first seven actors listed in the film's credits are women should provide at least some rebuttal to Maloney's argument that the casting is predominately male, but I am not interested in defending the casting. Rather, I believe that the film, and its criticism, reveals something

more profound about the character of 21<sup>st</sup> Century discourse. The casting of so many women in critical roles in the film shows that Villeneuve made a concerted effort to address 21<sup>st</sup> Century concerns regarding gender equity, but that like the motherhood plot, the updated love scene, and the failure to address the sexual assault in the first film, his effort was generally seen by critics as insufficient. Sam Ashurst explains, “For me, that’s the film’s real problem: women are present in the narrative, while simultaneously absent.” He attempts to explain this apparent contradiction, “*Blade Runner 2049* has the illusion of women, with nothing solid for them to do. It makes its female characters feel as hollow as holograms.”<sup>56</sup> It is an odd criticism of a film about “hollow” characters (replicants) and it reveals a discordant political agenda and the unstable nature of much of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century criticism of the two films.

At the very moment Maloney and Ashurst disavow the gender and racial determinism of Hollywood, each reaffirms it. Ashurst says that, “The only problem is, it was written by two men, directed by another... [but] we’re certainly not saying men can’t write (or direct) women.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Maloney dismisses the casting of Ana de Armas as Joi, “Although Armas was born in Cuba, her grandparents are European.”<sup>58</sup> Citing an actress’ heritage, going back two generations as disqualification for legitimate Cuban status reveals the lack of subtlety common in 21<sup>st</sup> Century identity politics and is precisely the sort of thing *Blade Runner 2049* asks us to question: biological determinism. Maloney’s objection to de Armas is that she does not look enough like an ethnic minority, leaving us to wonder if there might be a Voight-Kampff test for racial purity.<sup>59</sup>

Maloney also dislikes the objectification and casual disposability of the women in *Blade Runner 2049*. It is hard to defend senseless violence in an industry that has made violence a mainstay in its movies, but Maloney’s complaint centers around violence towards women rather than violence *per se*, and reveals further discontents apparent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century cultural criticism. Maloney explains that,

...in a deeply ironic twist, the plot itself hinges entirely on their [women’s] presence...If Villeneuve and screenwriters

Hampton Fancher and Michael Green recognized this, they must have ultimately decided they could accomplish the same goals without having to imbue those critical female characters with the same humanity as their male counterparts... Several moments almost comment meaningfully on women's disposability—Wallace's casual gutting of a newborn female replicant; a giant, naked Joi addressing K blankly from an ad—yet each time, they become sad moments in a man's narrative, rather than being recognized as tragedies for the women themselves.<sup>60</sup>

Maloney offers *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) as an example of a rebooting that addressed the political errors of its predecessors. This example shows that her objection to *Blade Runner 2049* cannot be to its violence, and the quotation reveals that she places the politics of identity ahead of the film's theme and aesthetic.

First, the general complaint that the replicant women are not imbued with the same humanity as their male counterparts is a curious criticism, because most of the characters are replicants, and Villeneuve goes to great lengths to make this point. The protagonist K is the least human of all, and when his boss, Lieutenant Joshia (a real woman), "berates him at work and then invites herself over, drinks his alcohol, and comes on to him,"<sup>61</sup> he stoically responds that he should be getting back to work.<sup>62</sup> As per the 20<sup>th</sup> Century standards, this stoicism exposes a lack of emotion and subjectivity. Villeneuve can hardly be criticized for making the replicants seem like pseudo-humans.

Second, Maloney, Ashurst, Backe, and Gutowitz misread Villeneuve's effort to harmonize the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's worry about androids with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's concern over digital technology and instead reads the hologram character as nothing more than an expression of masculine fantasy. Maloney dislikes the character for being a manic pixie dream girlfriend, ignoring the fact that the character who occupies the lowest position in the film's hierarchy of being (below replicants and humans) is the character who ignites the spark of hope in the replicant K when she suggests that he might be human, "pushed into the world, wanted, loved."<sup>63</sup> In updating the Blade Runner franchise, serious consideration of digital reality would be necessary, and the burden of this role fell entirely upon de Armas. It was Armas' character

who travels the farthest, from holographic app to K's true love and then back again, in the form of the giant, holographic advertisement.

Finally, Maloney's concern (echoed by Miller and Gutowitz) that the moments that could have commented meaningfully on the disposability of women become sad moments in the men's narratives rather than tragedies for the women is accurate, but trades upon a misunderstanding of the genre. The film noir aesthetic places the protagonist in a hard-boiled setting, where objectification and disposability come with the territory. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown."<sup>64</sup> This final line in Roman Polanski's famed neo-noir *Chinatown* reminds us that there is no platform for tragedy in film noir, no position of privilege from which we might gain some perspective, understanding, or closure. Instead, we are confined to the perspective of a human, often a detective who, like Dante's Beatrice, guides us through the underworld. But unlike Virgil, our protagonist is deeply flawed, hardly better than the scum we encounter, forcing us to determine, from the psychoanalytic hints, what is real and what is false. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown," finishes a scene designed to raise concerns over racism, sexism, and incest, without offering any tritely optimistic solutions. Maloney's hope that the film might have provided an "an incisive read of 21st Century society" is a lot to ask of any film, but especially of a franchise committed to the film noir aesthetic, which is intended to obscure and dissemble rather than provide clarity and comfort.

My conclusion is that, in conjunction with its critics, the Blade Runner films present us with a unique barometer of 21<sup>st</sup> Century anxieties regarding social marginalization based on race and gender. The contemporary criticism of the films displays a nuanced understanding of film and literary theory, including a postmodern suspicion of grand narratives and a search and destroy approach toward any themes supportive of traditional power structures based on racial or gender essentialism. The Blade Runner effort to universalize the experience of marginalization and portray the endurance of enlightenment values references a modern world view that many 21<sup>st</sup> Century critics distrust, seeing it as another "conservative narrative that suggests oppression can be overcome if people just try hard enough."<sup>65</sup>

In an age of pluralism, efforts to render a universal perspective make contemporary critics worry that traditional narratives of dominance are being maintained. Basti n writes about *Blade Runner 2049* that, “There is something disturbing about filmmakers portraying white characters as both those most harmed by oppression *and* the sole heroes able to dismantle it.”<sup>66</sup> As before, the critic’s confrontation with the *Blade Runner* films demonstrates the discord in 21<sup>st</sup> Century criticism. It was Basti n herself who instructs us that “Dystopias should make us uncomfortable.”<sup>67</sup> We can only conclude that she believes the narratives ought to discomfort someone else.

In light of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century criticism we have examined, *Blade Runner* failed to predict the politics of 2017 (which it made at least a superficial attempt to do). However, it successfully engaged the anxieties of its own age, as proven by the quantity of scholarship on the film. The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century was an age of uncertainty and fear, a fear of nuclear holocaust and technological horror, a fear that the intellectual legacy that laid the foundations for our liberation movements and social gains might also be responsible for their total annihilation. The postmodern *Blade Runner* expressed these fears without oversimplifying or mollifying them with grand narratives of progress or social justice, and instead offered a path for individual resistance to an otherwise dehumanizing vision of the future.

It is easy to forgive *Blade Runner* for failing to anticipate the future, thirty-five years out, but the failure of *Blade Runner 2049* to satisfy the politics of 2017 attests to a very different sort of social anxiety. That neither film could mollify the political demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is in large part due to the complexities and contradictions at play in postmodern criticism. Villeneuve admitted in an interview with *The Telegraph* that he created a monster, and although he was mostly referencing the length of the film, he might just as well have been referencing his stated effort to be as close to the original as possible, while updating the politics and creating a film with broad appeal.<sup>68</sup> That so many critics recognize *Blade Runner 2049*’s effort to challenge biological determinism in accord with 21<sup>st</sup> Century sensitivities and still find it unacceptable leads me to question the assertion

that began this paper.

Raftery and Basti  n suggest that science fiction is well positioned to help us process and critique the present, but 21<sup>st</sup> Century identity politics is not easy to process. While decrying the monolithic vision of the Enlightenment, and demanding pluralism, postmodern cultural critics have established narrow limits for representing good and bad modes of being in the world. How could *Blade Runner 2049* honor a classic like *Blade Runner*, which plays upon early 20<sup>th</sup> Century tropes and aesthetics, without assaulting 21<sup>st</sup> Century sensibilities? In an age when critics ask, ‘is Ana de Armas sufficiently ethnic to play this role?’ it is hard not to think of Tyrell asking Deckard in *Blade Runner*, “How many questions does it usually take to spot one?”<sup>69</sup> Perhaps *Blade Runner* did not need as much updating as was initially thought. Perhaps the series, with its noir moral discord and anachronistic discomfort, delivers precisely the incisive read of the 21st century that Maloney hoped it might.

## Jack Simmons

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Angelica Jade Basti  n, “Why Don’t Dystopias Know How to Talk About Race,” *Vulture*, August 4, 2017, accessed in February 2018. <http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/why-dont-dystopias-know-how-to-talk-about-race.html>

<sup>3</sup> Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 247-258.

<sup>4</sup> Basti  n.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Simmons, “Genre Racism: The Colonizing Power of *The English Patient*”, *Film and History*, edited by Rollins, O’Conner and Carmichael, (annual on CD-ROM, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> *Short Circuit*, John Badham, 1986 and *Galaxina*, William Sachs, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> *Terminator*, James Cameron, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> *Blade Runner*, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Shaw, *Movies with Meaning: Existentialism through Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017), p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Simmons, “The Continental Perspective on Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia,” *Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide*, edited by Michael J. Cholbi (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Shaw, pp. 88, 96.

<sup>21</sup> *Blade Runner*.

<sup>22</sup> Shaw, pp. 95-97.

<sup>23</sup> Devon Maloney, “*Blade Runner 2049*’s Politics Aren’t That Futuristic,” *Wired*, October 6, 2017, accessed December 2017.

<https://www.wired.com/story/blade-runner-2049-politics/>

<sup>24</sup> Bastién.

<sup>25</sup> Casey Cipriani, “*Blade Runner 2049* Tries to Make a Love Story Out of the First *Blade Runner*’s Violence,” *Browbeat*, Oct. 12, 2017, accessed December 15, 2017. [http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/10/12/blade\\_runner\\_2049\\_makes\\_a\\_love\\_story\\_out\\_of\\_a Rape\\_scene.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/10/12/blade_runner_2049_makes_a_love_story_out_of_a Rape_scene.html)

Also see Eric Haywood, “There’s Something About ‘*Blade Runner*,’” *Balder and Dash*, September 2, 2014, accessed June 15, 2017. <https://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/theres-something-about-blade-runner>

<sup>26</sup> Haywood.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John C. Tibbetts, “*Blade Runner* 1982, Sean Young,” *Conversations in the Arts and Humanities* 1982, accessed October 30, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIdlYZbugT8>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Elae Izadi, “*Last Tango in Paris*: Why the Rape Scene involving Maria Schneider is Only Generating Such and Outcry Now,” *Independent*, Monday, December 5, 2016, accessed August 2, 2018.

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<sup>34</sup> Haywood.

<sup>35</sup> Bastién.

<sup>36</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*, Denis Villeneuve, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Matt Miller, “*Blade Runner 2049*’s Wild and Haunting Sex Scene Will Have People Talking about It for Years,” *Esquire*, October 9, 2017, accessed July 29. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a12808498/blade-runner-2049-sex-scene/>

<sup>38</sup> Spike Jonze, *Her*, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*.

<sup>40</sup> Sam Ashurst, “Can We Talk about *Blade Runner 2049*’s Problem with Women?” *Digital Spy*, October 9, 2017. <http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/feature/a839916/blade-runner-2049-gender-issues/>

<sup>41</sup> If we extrapolate from Devon Maloney and Basti  n’s idea that the replicants are stand-in’s for racial minorities, then this plot presents a trajectory for transcendence for minorities independent of the dominant social class.

<sup>42</sup> Hampton Fancher and Michael Green, *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017, *Script Slug*, accessed May 2018. <https://scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/blade-runner-2049.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Emma Louise Backe, “Replicants and Reproduction: *Blade Runner 2049* and Sci Fi’s Obsession with Motherhood,” *The Geek Anthropologist*, October 19, 2017, accessed in January, 2018. <https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2017/10/19/replicants-and-reproduction-blade-runner-2049-and-sci-fis-obsession-with-motherhood/>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Hawkes, “*Blade Runner 2049* May Be Set in the Future, but Its Treatment of Women is Stuck in the Past,” *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2017, accessed August 2, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/blade-runner-2049-may-set-future-treatment-women-stuck-past/>

<sup>48</sup> Backe.

<sup>49</sup> Cipriani.

<sup>50</sup> Jill Gutowitz, “*Blade Runner 2049* Review: The Patriarchy Is Alive and Well in the Future,” *Glamour*, October 6, 2017, accessed August 2, 2018. <https://www.glamour.com/story/blade-runner-2049-review>

<sup>51</sup> Cipriani.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*.

<sup>55</sup> Maloney.

<sup>56</sup> Ashurst.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Maloney, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> *Blade Runner 2049*.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski, 1974.

<sup>65</sup> Basti  n.

<sup>66</sup> Basti  n.

<sup>67</sup> Basti  n.

<sup>68</sup> Denis Villeneuve, cited by Robbie Collin, “*Blade Runner 2049* director Denis Villeneuve: ‘We made a monster. I won’t do it again,’” *The Telegraph*, February 3, 2018, accessed May 1, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/blade-runner-2049-director-denis-villeneuve-made-monster-wont/>

<sup>69</sup> *Blade Runner*.