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Blade Runner 2049 (Movie Review)

Abstract

"Blade Runner 2049' tries to ask the question of whether androids, like humans, are souls."

Posting about the movie *Blade Runner 2049* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/blade-runner-2049/>

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Comments

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Blade Runner 2049

 inallthings.org/blade-runner-2049/

October 18, 2017

Josh Matthews

Release date: October 6, 2017

Director: Denis Villeneuve

Film series: Blade Runner Film Series

Screenplay: Hampton Fancher, Michael Green

In the season of “Flatliners” and “It” being remade and released, “Blade Runner 2049” is yet another recent offering of 1980s pop-culture nostalgia. It’s a \$155 million work of fan-fiction that tries hard to honor its source material, the 1982 science-fiction film “Blade Runner,” which stars Harrison Ford.

Ford is back in “Blade Runner 2049,” exactly like he was in the recent Star Wars and Indiana Jones sequels, which also looked a lot like fan-fiction— watchable, but unoriginal and disposable. He again plays Rick Deckard, a “blade runner” who in the 1982 movie had to “retire” replicants. That’s a nice way of saying that blade runners are government bounty hunters who get to kill androids on the loose.

At the end of 1982’s “Blade Runner,” Deckard ran away with Rachael Rosen, a replicant he was supposed to retire but ended up falling in love with. “Blade Runner 2049,” which takes place thirty years after the original movie, picks up on its plot. (It would not be easy to watch this movie without having studied “Blade Runner .”)

“2049” features a replicant police officer named “KD6-3.7,” or K for short, whose job requires him to hunt down illegal replicants.

K (Ryan Gosling) faces the same existential dilemmas that Deckard dealt with in the original “Blade Runner.” Should K kill machines that seem to be conscious and rational beings, or should he treat them as humans? The catch in “2049” is that K is a replicant, a fact we find out in the movie’s opening scene, in which K kills a replicant who poses a curious question to him: “Do you enjoy killing your own kind?”

Gosling portrayal of K is unemotional; K never smiles. At the police station where he works, he’s tested repeatedly to ensure that he remains robotic, detached, unsentimental. This begins to change when K is put on a hard case involving a skeleton he discovers of a replicant who somehow gave birth to a baby. How could this be? The police chief, K’s boss (Robin Wright), wants him to keep quiet because she fears that the public will panic. She tells K that “kinds,” meaning androids and humans, should remain separate.

K’s mission is to find the first-born replicant, who would now be an adult. He knows that the mother of the child is named Rachael, whom we figure out is Rachael Rosen, played by Sean Young in the original movie. This means that Deckard, very likely, is the baby daddy.

However, other characters want the special replicant. The one who desires it most is Wallace (Jared Leto), an evil corporate CEO who revived the mass-production of replicants after the Tyrell Corporation (from the original movie) went bankrupt.

Wallace’s plan is to find the first naturally-birthed replicant, so that he can figure out how to make replicants who can breed. If he succeeds, he’ll have laborers galore. Otherwise, he cannot make enough replicants to fill demand— apparently the entire industrial universe, including Earth and all off-world colonies, needs lots of slaves. Working for Wallace is a nasty, killer replicant named Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), who tracks K to make sure that Wallace gets what he wants.

As his investigation deepens, K uncovers facts which suggest that he himself is the special replicant he is looking 1/2

for. Within him is an implanted, supposedly fake memory of a childhood incident, which he discovers actually occurred. Since the memory is real, is he Deckard's child? Is he a miracle child, the first replicant ever to be born of a replicant?

What follows is an existential crisis for K, who—becoming increasingly more human-like as the movie progresses—even gains a human name: Joe. His full name, Joe K, becomes the same name as the narrator in Franz Kafka's famous novel *The Trial*, Josef K.

What trial K endures is that of the police officer in Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the story from which sprang the 1982 "Blade Runner." (Thus Philip K. Dick is another possible inspiration for the name "K.") As with Rick Deckard in Dick's novel, K lives in an artificial world where nothing is really real. For example, his girlfriend is a virtual-reality computer simulation who can follow him wherever he goes. She tells him that she loves him, but we see images of her on gigantic neon signs in the cityscape. We're told later that she's a corporate product, one who simulates love but, apparently, can never provide the real thing.

All of this makes "Blade Runner 2049" sound like a movie of a thousand ideas. In fact, it is a movie only of recycled ideas, reminding me of a dozen films and videogames that it imitates—including "2001: A Space Odyssey," "Dune," "Her," "Ex Machina," and *Fallout: New Vegas*. Usually the pleasure in watching a new science-fiction film is that it talks to and tops older films, with gusto and imagination. Unfortunately, "Blade Runner 2049" doesn't improve upon its predecessors. It's mostly just an expensive homage to the more complex and poetic "Blade Runner."

However, for cineophiles, the special effects and cinematography in "2049" are superb, the lone two reasons to watch this movie. It contains many pretty pictures, most of which are inspired by Ridley Scott's vision in the original "Blade Runner."

But for the casual viewer, there are too many basic problems with "2049." One is that "2049" has the soundtrack from hell. Discordant blasts of noise blare and shriek in seemingly every scene. Since the movie is two hours and forty minutes long—another of its major faults—the noise seems to go on forever. The original score of "Blade Runner," famously composed by Vangelis on synthesizer, is only hinted at here and there. By the final fight scene, I was so repulsed by the noisetrack (I cannot call it a soundtrack in good conscience) that I nearly left the movie theater early.

The movie also rehashes everything from 1982's "Blade Runner." Not most things. EVERYTHING! The origami animals, Edward James Olmos, the shot of a giant eyeball, Deckard's piano, flying cars, synthesizer music that accompanies flying cars, plastic raincoats, the Tyrell Corporation building, retina scans, outdoor Asian markets, crying replicants, and so on, and so on. There are even scenes from the original movie in "2049." There's also a hideous-looking CGI-version of a 20-something Sean Young, who played Rachael Rosen in the original movie. And, of course, there's Harrison Ford.

"2049's" version of the future is so dreary that to sit through 160 minutes of it is sometimes a chore, in spite of the rather excellent cinematography. Los Angeles is once again a city of rain and endless sprawl. "2049" imagines that San Diego has become LA's garbage dump, and at that dump is a sickening child-labor scavenger operation, in which hundreds of bald-headed children find rare metals in the garbage for a nasty overseer. The world of "2049" is so awful that Deckard has retreated to Las Vegas, a deserted city mostly destroyed by nuclear weapons. Deckard lives the best life of anyone—he reads *Treasure Island* for fun and has a VR jukebox that plays Frank Sinatra, one of the few pleasant sounds in this movie. This vision of the good life lasts for about five minutes, as if "Blade Runner 2049" can't abide the thought of a pleasant place, or sound, anywhere in the world.

I wish that I liked this movie better. I wanted to. But, I feel as if I have seen it all before. A sequel has to go somewhere new—has to offer a new vision—to be interesting. "Blade Runner 2049" only does more of the same.

As did 1982's "Blade Runner," 2017's "Blade Runner 2049" tries to ask the question of whether androids, like humans, are souls. But, it itself lacks heart and soul.