

Movie review on the world-building of blade runner

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1982 science-fiction film *Blade Runner*, director Ridley Scott takes great care to fashion a detailed, unique dystopian world for the characters to inhabit. The setting is Los Angeles in the (at the time of production) dystopian future of 2019, where corporations rule the world and synthetic humans called replicants have been outlawed. The film follows bounty hunter Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) as he is tasked to hunt down several replicants who have escaped to Earth. The care taken in the creation of the world of *Blade Runner*, in combination with the dreamlike, meandering story, creates a visual and cultural futurist's painting of a realistic dystopia as yet unseen in science fiction. This is combined with deep themes of identity and man's interaction with technology to create a meaningful and interesting masterpiece of speculative fiction. In this paper, we will analyze the production elements of the film, and how they work to tell this story of robots and humanity in the way that Ridley Scott envisioned.

STORYTELLING

Blade Runner is told in a very dreamlike way, with a slow, intentional pace, emotionally distant characters, and a simple, allegorical story. Layers of meaning and theme are injected into the forefront of the story through the setting, characters, and plot, creating a distance between the audience and the characters. In this way, the audience is meant to inhabit the world that was created for this film, in lieu of investing heavily in the story.

ACTING

The nuanced performances of the actors in *Blade Runner* provide an interesting contrast between the human and replicant characters, and express the characters' feelings and opinions of the dusky, rainy world of the future. Ford's Deckard, the protagonist, is as emotionless as you can get with a main character – he is consistently dour, stern, and serious. Throughout the film, Ford carries the weight of the world on his shoulders as Deckard, a divorced loner who is no longer a cop, but a bounty hunter who tracks down replicants. He has no family, no friends, and no connections to other people due to the overcrowded and destitute world of the future. In the opening voiceover, Deckard relays that his ex-wife referred to him as “sushi...cold fish.” As being a ‘cold fish’ is analogous with being distant and unfeeling, the audience gets this indication of Deckard's disconnect from the outside world (Reagle, 1995).

The replicants, on the other hand, while also having their serious moments, possess more collective spark and life than the human characters. The leader of the replicants, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), displays incredible passion and emotion, as well as malice in his dealings with the other characters. Pris (Daryl Hannah), the most unpredictable and hedonistic character, is a replicant. In fact, the most emotionless replicant found in the film is Rachael (Sean Young), who believes she is human. This stylized difference in performances help to convey the lifeless, cynical world Scott and crew are attempting to create, and the loss of hope and optimism the human characters have.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

The mise-en-scene of Blade Runner is perhaps its most unique and oft-emulated element; the realization of the future Los Angeles is so complete and detailed that it has served as the basis for many a futurescape in the films following it. Production designer Lawrence G. Paull took influence from many cyberpunk novels, as well as the work of comics such as *Heavy Metal*, in order to create a homogenized, impoverished yet technologically advanced society that the characters inhabit. In this future, cultures and languages have coalesced, melting the pot of American culture further until half the advertisements and people are Chinese or some variant thereof. Chinese writing is seen throughout the literature and signage of the film, and many of the shopkeepers in the markets that Deckard frequents are Oriental. The city of Los Angeles is almost a character in and of itself; its mood and atmosphere permeate every frame of the film. Every square inch of the place is covered in smoke, dust, rain and grime; it never seems to stop raining in the film, an intentional choice by the filmmakers to accentuate the bleakness of the world.

Throughout this destitute slum of a city, bright neon signs and floating video screens dominate the landscape (some even taking up the sides of entire skyscrapers). Cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth uses low-key lighting in the majority of the shots, as the world is presented in a perpetual state of darkness. Film noir-style use of light and shadow helps to bring about the feeling of destitution and dystopia this future world presents - light often comes in through tight, focused beams through blinds, or as harsh overhead

neon lights of the rampant advertisements in the city streets. Shots are often framed quite wide, seeing a great deal of the character's body, as if to further cement our distance from the characters. However, during deep moments, such as the many moments of contemplation Deckard experiences, and Roy's final monologue to him after their fight, extreme close-ups are used to bring the audience closer to the characters.

The use of color in the cinematography also tells the audience about the sociopolitical landscape of the world of *Blade Runner*. With some notable exceptions (the polarized sunlight outside Terrell's window), color is extremely desaturated, with blues, grays and greens dominating the environment. Neons are presented brightly, however, in direct contrast to the grimy city streets, as if to cement corporate and commercial influence over the beleaguered populace. On the other hand, the golden pyramid buildings of the Tyrell Corporation, which loom over the rest of the dark, shrouded city, are often bathed in golden sunlight, with bright lights shining from their tops. This color and lighting scheme informs the audience that they rule the roost in Los Angeles, if not the country or the world. The harsh, grimy and neon-striped metropolis surrounding it is poor and without hope.

EDITING

The editing of *Blade Runner* by Marsha Nakashima is slow and contemplative, leading to a slow pace and a relatively long length of shot. The opening shot of the movie fades slowly into an extremely lengthy establishing shot of the Los Angeles cityscape, lingering over it for nearly half a minute. This establishes the intentionally glacial pace of the rest of the

film; each shot is given time to breathe, and scenes are often edited with as few cuts as possible, if any. Throughout the film, coverage is used sparingly, as each shot is artistically chosen, the editing reflecting the painterly style of the shots. There are few fades, and what few fades occur are important for establishing of the mood, such as the aforementioned opening shot.

Cross-cutting is often used to compare characters and their respective journeys. During the final showdown between Deckard and Roy, one particular lull where they are separated shows how they heal themselves and prepare for their continuing fight - Deckard resetting broken fingers, Roy injuring himself with a stigmatic nail through his palm in a ritualistic manner. The latter is often thought to represent a Christlike depiction of Roy, and perhaps Deckard (Reagle, 1995).

Slow motion is used in varying but significant instances, most typically in the deaths of the replicants. When Zhora is killed while running from Deckard, she crashes through several panes of glass, surrounded by mannequins, all in slow motion as Deckard continues to shoot. The moment of death for Pris (the second shot Deckard fires at her) is also represented in slow motion, a harsh contrast to the frenetic, epileptic flailing the injured replicant does when she is first shot. At the end of the film's climax, with a dying Roy Batty talking about 'tears in rain,' the film slows down as Roy lowers his head and remains motionless, implying his death.

SOUND

A vibrant soundscape was created for *Blade Runner* by sound editor Peter Pennell in order to create a meld of contemporary and futuristic sounds for the vehicles and weapons in the film. The buzz of the spinners as they fly through the landscape, as well as the boom of Deckard's gun when it fires (particularly during the 'retirement' of Zhora) are at times both familiar and alien, a certain hollow tinnyness to them making them feel less than real, and yet strangely futuristic and grounded.

At the same time, the deliberate removal of sound effects is used intentionally to emphasize certain scenes. The retirement of Zhora, for instance, features no sound during the slow-motion sequence of her running through the glass panes, all but the sound of Deckard's gun. This accentuates the brutality of what Deckard is doing to Zhora, who merely wanted to survive.

The musical score, by composer Vangelis, is completely synthesized, permeating the film throughout purely as a mood-setter. The music is always low-tempo and consists of long series of tones being played, with melodies that convey mystery, drifting, and discovery, all things that Deckard experiences throughout the course of the film. However, the synthesized nature of the notes always makes the music sound alien and futuristic, but in a nuanced, jazz-like way. The only music by actual instruments is heard in one scene in Deckard's home, where Rachael plays a few notes on the piano. This is meant to display her desperation to hold on to some semblance of

humanity, particularly as she had killed the replicant Leon to save Deckard's life in the previous scene.

STYLE/DIRECTING

This is the third film by director Ridley Scott, who had directed the science fiction horror film *Alien* in 1979 prior to this. That movie, like this one, also presented a grim and down-to-earth view of science fiction, as the setting of the movie was a broken-down space hauler occupied by the equivalent of blue-collar astronauts. This refusal to adhere to shiny metal and clean, curved shapes, like the science fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, helped to pioneer, along with *Star Wars*, the aesthetic of a gritty, worn-out future. It is clear that Scott wanted to ground science fiction, taking it out of the realm of the fantastical and offer a more conceivable vision of a possible future for our real world.

SOCIETAL IMPACT

Blade Runner, like many science fiction films, presents a measure of escapism, as you are drawn into the detailed fictional world of futuristic Los Angeles. You are meant to be drawn completely into this other world, which is why so much care and attention to detail was taken in the production design. Oddly enough, it is the touch of realism in the production design and worldbuilding that allows an audience to invest more of their attention in the film – much of the city and technology feel like natural progressions from everyday modern technology.

In the theatrical cut of *Blade Runner*, Deckard provides narration to several points in the film, though they are purely to convey exposition of the main concepts the audience is expected to understand (Deckard's thoughts and feelings, the definition of replicants, etc.) In subsequent cuts, this narration was removed, as it was inserted at the time at the insistence of the studio, who wanted the nuances of the story explained to the audience. Therefore, the narration could be considered an unnecessary part of the film, since the same points Deckard raises are conveyed (though more subtly) by the direction and performances of the characters.

The issues raised in the film are almost purely societal and metaphysical, including the nature of identity, and the search for purpose in life (as portrayed by Roy's eventful, but short span, and his quest for more time), tying in with the assertion that "movies have something to say often beyond their literal meaning" (Goodykoontz, Section 9. 1). However, there is also an element of criticism toward corporations and capitalist society present in the film, evidenced by the rampant, domineering corporate advertisements and billboards that dominate the sky and the street. It is implied that the corporate culture rules everything, and that is what has led to the dystopian future presented in the film, as well as the persecution of the replicants, who were only created to be slaves, despite being fully realized, sentient beings.

GENRE

Blade Runner is, first and foremost, a science fiction film. Though there are elements of an action-adventure film, its style most closely resembles film noir, as it features a world-weary detective character, a pervasive feeling of

dread or despair, and use of low lighting with plenty of shadow. Science fiction tends to explore the human condition and social issues through fantastical elements that make the conversation more palatable to an audience. The science fiction elements are central to the story, as it uses the concept of artificial beings who look just like humans to explore the nature of what it means to be human in the first place. Deckard's and Rachael's questions and doubts of their humanity are reflected by the desire for survival presented by the replicants.

CONCLUSION

The use of the varying elements of film production in the movie *Blade Runner* all coalesce to create a unique, interesting and lyrical film that speaks to human issues of identity and the frailty of life. The mise-en-scene, the sound, music and editing all coalesce to form an organic, living world for the characters to inhabit, and for the audience to believe could potentially happen in the future. The movie itself becomes more about this world than the primary plot, as Deckard and the replicants attempt to find their own sense of self and identity in a world that has been overrun with pollution, corporate oversight, and black market dealings. Ridley Scott sought to tell a very presentational story that would be conveyed through mood and atmosphere, and in this instance he succeeded with aplomb.

References

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