

Analysis of the film blade runner as an adaptation of the novel do androids dream...

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Riley Scott crafts a masterful insight into the esoteric elements of his film's inspiration...with a touch of cinematic originality, writes DYLAN MORTIMORE. What constitutes the "real deal"? In the case of a novel to film adaptation, this is a subtle conundrum. And so, when a celebrated story is finally adapted for the silver screen, there comes an inevitable onslaught - the wrath of staunch book-readers ready to tear apart this monstrous imitation of their holy source material. To them, the film is a mere emulation - a fake. But perhaps adhering to the confines of a novel undermines a film's responsibilities.

Does inflexibility of characterisation, themes and plot detract from the "real" cinematic experience? Is a book-on-screen the most abominable kind of 'replicant'? Indeed, achieving the right balance and creating something authentic is the challenge of any talented director. And in the early 1980s, this became the challenge for Sir Ridley Scott when he agreed to take on the adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The result was an unexpected sleeper hit that forever altered the perception of the science fiction genre. *Blade Runner* showed us that a sci-fi picture could be profound and clever - an artwork. But the road to cult phenomenon was marred by the commercial disappointment of a box office flop (much like last year's sequel). What's more, it wasn't until a remastered edition in 2007 that Scott felt in complete control of his artistic vision. And that's what we take a look at today - the film set to kick off the sci-fi exhibit at the Gallery of Modern Art this weekend, *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*.

Now, for those who aren't so entrenched in the world of cinema, the novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, was published in the year 1968 and poses its own questions about what defines real and fake. The vehicle to explore this is Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter in pursuit of a group of escaped Nexus-6 androids - or replicants, as they're called in the Ridley Scott version of 2019. These humanoids are designed to think and behave like real people. Intrigue ensues when Deckard comes to question the nature of his work - and of humanity. The novel's prevailing themes - those of humanity and authenticity - are granted an engaging and detailed exploration in the adaptation. But where Dick opts for extra profundity, the director's focus is elsewhere. And it makes for an enthralling picture, deserving of its status as an eternal cult classic. What Scott achieves is the pivotal balance necessary to any adaptation: he selects the aspects of the novel most suitable for the mode of cinema, leaving space for his own artistic originality. As such, much of the 117-minute runtime is dedicated to enriching the visual experience, rather than investigating the novel's many complexities. And it's the right decision. After all, who could imagine *Blade Runner* without its defining Film Noir aesthetic.

With this in mind, Ridley Scott's 2019 *Los Angeles* is immersive. And, it is, in its own right, majestic. We get a sense of the city's scale through shots of impressive electronic billboards and prominent high rises. Yet, upon returning to ground level, we're exposed to dingy street corners, crowded night-clubs and abandoned apartment buildings. The feeling prevails that the city's grandeur when viewed from the skyline conceals an unforgiving dog-

eat-dog environment; Scott's chosen setting alludes to the thugs, low-lives and gangsters that inhabit this dystopian city. The novel, however, is set in San Francisco - a dusty, decaying wasteland, overcome by nuclear fallout.

To add to the contrast, much of Deckard's mission in the Philip K. Dick world takes place in locations of "high culture." Sound a little different to the bars and night clubs we see in the film? Scott wanted to play out a structurally simple Film Noir story, something palatable for Hollywood's many and varied audiences. The different environment when compared to the novel has visual appeal and is suited to the on-screen narrative: the story of a hardened, cynical detective. But, any good detective story requires one crucial element: the detective. Thankfully, Harrison Ford (known for his roles in Star Wars and Indiana Jones) plays an appealing archetype with the recognisable grunts of someone who 'walked away from the game.' But of course, in true noir fashion, Deckard is lured (somewhat forcibly) back into the bounty hunter world by shady police chief Harry Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh).

Mysterious and cynical, Deckard is a protagonist who immediately captures our interest. It's also relieving for the cinema-goer that Ford shakes the many quirks and circumstances of book-Deckard: he is unmarried, lacks any apparent desire to own a live animal and is not engaged in constant self-reflection. These are aspects of the literary character that wouldn't meld with Ford's portrayal of the burnt out law-enforcement officer. Such omissions are consistent with the film's neo-noir style and aid the cinematic exploration of the novel's most prominent and thought-provoking philosophy. This philosophy, of course, concerns what makes us human. In

the novel, Dick has a focus on how the process of retiring androids 'dehumanises' Deckard, as signified by his deteriorating empathic capabilities. Scott puts an interesting spin on this for the silver screen, by suggesting that, perhaps, Deckard himself is a replicant. Rachael (Sean Young) even provocatively identifies that we've never seen Deckard take an empathy test. Such intrigue (in the absence of a definitive answer) positions us to consider whether being classified as a 'real human' is of any importance. And if the protagonist we have come to empathise and align ourselves with is indeed a fake, does this even matter? Audiences, unsurprisingly, latch onto this mystery, and we needn't look beyond the decades of reactionary fervour and speculation from Blade Runner's fans to appreciate the appeal of this plot point.

But, the rich and multi-faceted exploration of humanity doesn't end with Deckard; it extends to the portrayal of the replicants. Ridley Scott introduces us to his versions of Dick's humanoid characters, all of whom value their own lives. The leader of the group of renegades, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), even seeks out his maker, Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), hell-bent on extending his life. Similarly, the novel sees Baty, Irmgard and Pris use Isidore's apartment to hide from Deckard (he wants to retire them, after all). What this demonstrates is a survival instinct - a fear of death that we perceive as a staple feature of entities classified as human. Blade Runner then begs a question of substantial gravity: if replicants - people who are fundamentally synthetic - possess such a characteristic, should they be included in the institution of humanity? And the struggle of the humanoid reaches its

enthraling apogee near the end of picture. Initially, Rutger Hauer plays the quintessential antagonist: crazy, vicious and manipulative. His vicious side comes to the fore when he gouges out the eyes of Eldon Tyrell - a dystopian Prometheus, subjected to the ultimate punishment for ' playing with fire. '

Fire, in this case, is artificial intelligence, and the film leaves us with the visceral image of a ' father' murdered by his own creation. Combining an illusion to Greek mythology with an emotionally powerful scene brings memorability to Blade Runner for the intellectual and casual viewer alike. But it also keeps them hooked for the oncoming cat-and-mouse game - a fierce and exciting variation on Deckard's anti-climactic retirement of Batty in the novel, which, while passable in the literary world, wouldn't quite live up to the fast-paced action sequences of 1980s sci-fi flicks. Yet Scott by no means conforms to a Hollywood-esque resolution. Instead, an unprecedented display of empathic potential sees Batty save Deckard from the side of the apartment building.

Then comes the replicant's iconic (and powerful) ' Tears in Rain' monologue, Hauer's improvised soliloquy, where Batty contemplates his memories and fleeting mortality. Hauer, perhaps by diverging from the script, brings a personal and captivating touch to his career- defining performance. And this scene captures the depth of Philip K. Dick's ideas, albeit with a significant departure from the novel's confusing ending. But, it's a departure that many a cinema-goer appreciates - it's hard to imagine how Deckard's vague premonitions about fusion with Mercer would have translated onto the silver screen. Hauer's monologue and Deckard's last scene with Rachael best

signify the protagonist's transformative experience: Batty's musings confirm for Deckard that replicants are capable of being loving, empathetic and reflective. Scott interestingly investigates humanity but through a different lens to the novel; it is the depiction of replicants (rather than real people) that prompts a contemplation of human qualities. It's safe to say we're left with something profound to ponder - which is much more than we get from the average sci-fi romp. So ultimately, film, in its own right, is an artistic pursuit.

The science fiction exhibit at the Gallery of Modern Art this weekend only confirms that sentiment. And, in the case of Blade Runner, creating a film was an artistic challenge; no one has ever labelled *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as a novel made for the silver screen. But, Ridley Scott conquered this challenge. With an appreciation of the differences between novel and film, he expertly crafts an adaptation that changes so much from its source material but still retains the core ideas. And yes, it may have taken several cuts to perfect, but by 2007, Scott had found his 'real deal': the pinnacle of 'smart' science fiction which, much like Roy Batty, is a replicant that forever lingers in our minds.