

Blade Runner 2049

Today is Tuesday, October 24th, 2017.

***Blade Runner 2049* (2017 film)**

Spoiler warning: this extended critical review discloses pretty much everything that happens in the film.

Wet leaves are beginning to pile up, and after a brilliant fall day on Sunday, the week is shaping up to be wet, windy, and gray. I still haven't entirely shaken this lingering sinus infection and cough, although it is almost gone.

Grace and I finally got a chance to go see the new Blade Runner movie, dubbed *Blade Runner 2049*. We had to sneak out to see a late show, starting at 11:20 p.m. After a half-hour of trailers, and the movie itself, which is 2 hours and 43 minutes long, we didn't get back home until almost 3 a.m. (I'm old enough to remember when long films, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which is of similar length, had intermissions. Does anyone make long films with intermissions any more? Perhaps they should.)

Even fortifying ourselves with hot tea, we found ourselves having a little difficulty staying focused through the last hour of the film, tending to drift into a trance-like state in which we knew that we weren't following details as well as we could. But even in this state, we found some scenes genuinely disturbing, and had difficulty getting to sleep afterwards. So I don't recommend that you see a late, late showing of the movie.

We first thought that our failure to remain focused was mostly the lateness of the hour, but I went to see another showing after work yesterday, while Grace and the kids were out of town; I was wide awake. And again, I felt myself zoning out a bit, and at the same points in the film. And again, I found a couple of the scenes genuinely disturbing, although I didn't have to try to go to sleep immediately afterwards. Grace has vouchsafed to me that she continues to have difficulty sleeping since seeing the film. We both feel, to use the contemporary phrase without irony, a bit "triggered."

The original *Blade Runner* is an iconic and hugely influential movie, a cult classic. Like a lot of cult classics, it is also a bit of a storytelling failure. The dystopian future it portrays, with logos of Pan Am and Atari and other dead

corporations, is now in retrospect an alternate future. In this alternate future of the new film, we still have Pan Am and Atari logos, and even references to the former Soviet Union. (These are slotted in alongside obvious paid product placements for Johnnie Walker whisky in “futuristic” square bottles, and Sony electronic products that you can’t buy.) The *visual* world-building achieved in *Blade Runner* is some of the best and most convincing ever achieved in science fiction cinema, if not *the* best, but the new film gives it a run for its money.

The *noir* elements in the original *Blade Runner* are gorgeous, especially in the cuts that eliminated the mawkish, irritating voiceover. How I despised that voice-over when I saw the film in the theater! In fact, it was *Blade Runner* that eventually led me, decades later, to track down and watch a number of old *noir* films. As in those *noir* films such as *He Walked By Night*, atmosphere and menace are everything. Character development and plot can, and often do, fall by the wayside a bit.

Blade Runner, while retaining a slow and atmospheric mood throughout, actually devolves into a science fiction horror film reminiscent of some of the worst work of Roger Corman, in films such as *Galaxy of Terror*. The cameras linger on greasy, bloody, rain-drenched faces, eyeballs floating in tanks, skulls being crushed, eyeballs being gouged out, blood spraying, bones breaking, and nails stabbing through hands. The climax is a seemingly interminable cat-and-mouse chase scene with plenty of cheap jump scares. The romance, between Deckard and Rachael, is portrayed darkly, with little chemistry, and a scene that feels in 2017 like we are watching a date rape; it raises the question of whether a slave, fleeing her master and evading the police by sleeping with a cop, has the option not to consent to sex. In the Director’s Cut version of the original *Blade Runner* there is no happy, or even happier, ending; no one is really redeemed, except perhaps in a sense, those whose faces and hands are washed clean of blood in death.

And yet, the original is still a fascinating film, bringing up more questions than it answers, and giving generations of film students a chance to bring their own critical perspectives to slice and dice it.

What’s New

Blade Runner 2049 is set in a world that is even more decrepit and damaged and locked-down. It takes many of the most iconic settings and visuals of the original and references them again, but nearly in isolation. The world of this film is paradoxically closer to the world described in Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, while the story is entirely extrapolated, not adapted from anything Dick wrote — at least, not in the novel.

While the world *Blade Runner* was cluttered and filthy, the relative simplicity and cleanliness of many of the scenes in this new sequel means that the symbolic meaning is often much more clearly present in the foreground, the characters acting on a cleaner canvas, even if it is gritty with radioactive dust. The new film

is even slower than the original, and even slower than director Denis Villeneuve's majestic *Arrival*, a better film.

Villeneuve in this movie sets up a number of parallels and easter eggs and bread crumbs. To the extent that they work and the reader can follow them, the movie succeeds. To the extent that they don't, and actions taken literally build up and become numbing, the movie fails. And so on the whole, the film is, like the original, a fascinating near-success, with elements of greatness.

The Performances

If there are any awards to hand out for this film, and I think there may be, they will be for the acting and the design aspects of the film, such as sets and costumes, not for the film as a whole. It will not win Best Picture.

Ryan Gosling is amazing in this film, and gives a very understated performance. His affect is so muted, most of the time, that when he betrays a feeling, through the smallest twitch of an eye or tilt of his head, we feel it. The three primary supporting actresses, Ana de Armas, Sylvia Hoeks, and Robin Wright all turn in excellent performances as well. Hoeks as Luv is especially creepy and compelling.

I also feel the need to call out one performance that is memorable — but memorably bad. Jared Leto is certainly creepy as Wallace, with his cloudy eyes and strange line readings. He speaks slowly and emphatically like a preacher reading a bible lesson. But I found it hard to convince myself that he could be real, even in the movie's world.

I'm not quite sure whether the actor or the director deserves more blame for his performance. In the original *Blade Runner*, Joe Turkel played Dr. Eldon Tyrell, who seemed very convincing as the affable and avuncular but cold-blooded technocrat, living in his Egyptian pyramid, staying up late to manage his investments, blinking at the world through heavy trifocal glasses. It's an odd affectation in a world where one of his suppliers grows eyes in tanks, perhaps indicating his moral blindness, and it is significant that Roy, who tells us "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe," blinds Tyrell before killing him.

Blade Runner 2049 apparently runs with this theme, making Wallace completely blind, emphasizing the idea that he is the successor to the blinded Tyrell. Wallace can see the world *only* through technology, via drones, an echo of our contemporary preoccupation with drones for surveillance and murder. That's also perhaps an interesting choice, but I dislike the way his visibly opaque eyes are made an object of horror. Blindness as object of horror, and blind person as psychopath, are common tropes, and including them is indicative of lazy, low-effort screenwriting. Apparently with those opaque contact lenses, Jared Leto really couldn't see at all on the set. I guess that sounds impressive — what great lengths he went to for his art! But I can't help but think of Alec Guinness playing the butler Bensonmum in *Murder by Death*. He didn't need anything like that at all to convince me that he couldn't see.

The Music

Before I dive into the story, I want to comment on the music, and its relationship to the music of the original. The original score, by Vangelis, remains one of my favorite examples of film music. It's gorgeous, ethereal, and moving. It covers many moods and many styles, bringing in real instruments such as piano and saxophone, while returning to a series of motifs played on brassy synthesizers. I often listen to it on headphones, as I do with other great scores, such as Howard Shore's extended scores for the *Lord of the Rings* films.

The new score gets the "brassy synthesizers" part right. It contains many little bits of sounds that are very reminiscent of the original film. But everything is amped up, and those synthesizer are now producing unsubtle new sounds designed to shake your seats. There aren't a lot of melodies, or even motifs; a lot of the new score consists of repetitive noodling, between the big "braaam" sounds that fill the theater when those incredible flying cars are landing. And honestly, with a full THX sound system running, those sounds get fatiguing.

What's a "braaam" sound? See this article, subtitled "how a horn sound ate Hollywood." Similar waveforms have been used recently in *Transformers* and *District 9* and *Inception* and, and, and, and... and now *Blade Runner 2049*. This should tell you just about everything you need to know about how original and interesting the score seems in context, which is to say, "not very." It works well as background sound, but I will not be purchasing the soundtrack album.

The Story

K, played by Ryan Gosling, doesn't actually have a name but a serial number, KD6-3.7. He is Nexus-9 replicant, a product of the Wallace Corporation, a later version of the Nexus-6 replicants, made by the Tyrell Corporation, that Deckard struggles to kill in the original *Blade Runner*. The Nexus-6 replicants were an evolutionary improvement over previous models — like Steve Austin's *Six Million Dollar Man*, better, faster, and stronger. But they threatened the status quo because they were capable of learning emotional responses, which could make them undetectable by the Voight-Kampff test. In other words, escaped slaves could hide successfully among the populace. The Nexus-9 models have been created to be more obedient, but apparently they have their own problems — they are capable of developing disloyal feelings, and so must be rigorously and frequently tested, to verify that their emotional responses remain unchanged, "at baseline."

As the story opens, K is dozing, his flying car on autopilot, traveling into the grim hinterlands, to investigate a lead about a missing Nexus-8, Sapper Morton. He finds an enormous, dour, grizzled man working to raise, in a plastic-tarped greenhouse, grubs that look like giant, bloated versions of the things you might find eating the roots of your lawn. A dead tree, anchored in place by cables, stands on the property. Morton is a former military medic, on earth illegally. In

a brutal fight, K retires him, but not before Morton tells him that he is “happy scraping the shit, because you’ve never seen a miracle.”

Leaving the property, K notices a tiny flower left at the base of the tree. He investigates the property using his floating drone’s ground-penetrating radar. Buried beneath the dead tree is some kind of trunk. K reports in to his supervisor, Lieutenant Joshi, and heads back to police headquarters, to undergo his screening. Like the Voight-Kampff, it’s a test of reaction time and emotional response. But unlike the original test, K must repeat words spoken to him, rapid-fire. In this case, some of the words were taken from a verse in Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*:

And blood-black nothingness began to spin
A system of cells interlinked within
cells interlinked within cells interlinked
within one stem. And dreadfully distinct
Against the dark, a tall white fountain played.

This is a beautiful, disturbing choice, and evocative of K’s artificial origin, as cells grown from the one “stem” of the Wallace corporation.

Howard Hawks defined a good movie as “three great scenes, no bad ones.” This early scene is one of a number of *great* scenes in *Blade Runner 2049*. K passes his test, and is granted his bonus for retiring a replicant.

In the Future, Even the Slaves Will Have Slaves

K is a slave, entirely beholden to Joshi; it is suggested in one scene that Joshi may have used him as her sexual plaything, and may wish to do so again. But intriguingly, K himself has a slave, of sorts, of his own: a holographic replica of a woman, Joi, another product of the Wallace corporation, designed to be his companion and to cater to his every emotional whim.

But Joi, though she seems sentient, is a computer program connected to a holographic projector, and can only exist inside K’s apartment, within range of the projector built into the ceiling. With his bonus, K buys her a gift: an “emanator,” a pocket-sized device, like a television remote control or cell phone. With the emanator, maintaining a connection via its built-in antenna back to the “real” Joi in the console in K’s apartment, K is able to carry Joi with him, and project her anywhere. She also apparently has some volition and control over her on/off switch, and is able to turn herself on and listen in on his conversations.

Meanwhile, the investigation continues. The buried trunk is dug up and opened and inside is found a set of bones. The bones are those of a woman. Minutely examined, the bones give up their secrets — she died in childbirth, and tiny scrapes on her bones indicate that the child was rescued by Caesarean section. As the eye of the scanner zooms in, we find in her bones a tiny serial number. The woman was a replicant, and yet became pregnant. In the original novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Rachael mourned her sterility, and in the present movie’s world, a fertile replicant is supposed to be entirely impossible.

K travels to the Wallace Corporation headquarters. The Wallace Corporation retains the records of the Tyrell Corporation, although they are fragmentary, damaged thirty years earlier in an event called the “Blackout.” Although the Blackout is not explained in detail, we are told that it destroyed almost all information stored “on drives,” which suggests that it involved an electromagnetic pulse. Perhaps it was caused by a device like a neutron bomb, perhaps the same one that left Las Vegas standing, but empty.

At Wallace headquarters, K meets Luv, Wallace’s female replica assistant, who takes an interest in him. We learn eventually that the replicant who became pregnant was Rachael, Deckard’s lover from the first movie, a replicant who at first didn’t know that she was a replicant, but who initially believed herself to be Tyrell’s niece.

A Pentacle of Jealousy and Violence

So, just to review, we now have Luv, Joi, and Joshi, all with an interest of some kind or another in K. We also meet sex worker Mariette, who looks a bit like Pris in the original movie, although she is ultimately revealed to be far kinder than Pris. Mariette is directed to investigate K by a shadowy female figure. And so K has to navigate a difficult path around *four* women of one sort or another, two apparently human, one clearly a replicant, and one something even more humble than a replicant.

K’s heart is clearly with the meekest and most giving of them all, Joi. Joi invites Mariette to collaborate with her on an evening of pleasure for K; as she has no body, she cannot touch him. But with Mariette “wearing” her projected image like a second skin, she can, in a way, make love to K. This is a spooky and beautiful scene, ground-breaking in its special effects, and ought to count as another of the film’s great scenes, although it will certainly provide plenty of fodder for debate in gender studies classes for generations to come.

What will those class conversations sound like? In its treatment of these female characters the film gets, frankly, quite dark and quite ugly. There’s a very disturbing scene, which feels gratuitous, misogynistic, and uninvited, even on a second viewing. Wallace, though blind, inspects a new model of replicant, while Luv looks on. The female replicant is unceremoniously dumped from a plastic bag, as Luv watches, shedding a tear as the newborn replicant, covered with some kind of protective orange pseudo-amniotic grease, gasps for her first breath in a quivering, terrorized heap.

Wallace talks about how, even brand-new, the “clay” — evoking Genesis — feels fear. Does Luv cry, I wonder, because she remembers that feeling of fear?

Wallace drones on about how he can’t create fertile replicants. And even as he refers to the new replicant as an “angel,” he kisses her on the mouth, and then with a scalpel viciously slices open her belly, opening her empty womb in symbolic imitation of Rachael’s Caesarean surgery, and leaving her to silently

bleed to death, as Luv looks on impassively. Was this murder solely to terrorize *Luv*?

To Howard Hawks, a good director is “someone who doesn’t annoy you.” This scene is damned annoying. And although on my second viewing I was able to understand how the scene fits into the symbolic repetition of events, that doesn’t make it feel any more right.

In the original *Blade Runner* there is, to the best of my recollection, nary an actual blade to be found. But in the new one Villeneuve has taken the word “blade” much more literally and armed three characters with nasty little knives. Morton pulls a knife on K, but fails to do too much damage. Luv replicates Wallace’s attack on the unnamed female replicant twice, viciously slashing open Joshi’s belly, and she attempts the same move on K, kissing him and then slashing his belly, although she fails to kill K immediately. And the parallel nature of these scenes really don’t quite work without careful reflection; in the moment, the first one feels like something not just from a horror movie, but from a low-grade slasher film.

And days later, I still find myself wondering “why?” And if Wallace wanted to inspect the new product line, what was the result? Is Luv supposed to ship ‘em, or pulp ‘em?

Like the Corners of My Mind

As in *Blade Runner*, some of the key questions in the film turn on memories, and whether they are real, experienced naturally in real time, taken from someone else and implanted, or entirely synthesized and implanted. K is deceived, and this is one of the more brilliant, and complex, aspects of the screenplay. K retains a childhood memory — he recalls a small wooden statue of a horse, inscribed on the base with a date.

K, knowing that he is a replicant who has spent his whole life in slavery, believes that this childhood memory is a fully synthetic implant. He relates it to Joshi, when she orders him to. But when K returns to Sapper Morton’s farm and he discovers the same date carved on the base of the dead tree, in memoriam to Rachael’s death day and the lost child’s birthday, he comes to suspect that the memory is real, and that it actually happened to him. Thus he believes then he must be the lost child, the “miracle.” Joi tells him that she knew he was special: “born, not made” (a reference to the Nicene Creed), and a “real boy” (a reference to *Pinnocchio*). And when he discovers the horse statue exactly where he remembers putting it, many years earlier, he is both thrilled and terrified because it feels like confirmation of both his worst fear and his most private hope.

But it isn’t to be. The viewer, before K, comes to understand that the implantation of the memory was part of a conspiracy, and that the sex worker Mariette knows of the memory. Is Mariette actually a replicant, working with the shadowy

replicant uprising? Or a human collaborator? We don't know for sure. And we don't know for sure whether the memory was ever part of a real, lived human experience, or entirely manufactured. Later, K comes to understand that the memory is not his at all, and he has to give up the illusion that he was both terrified by, and longed to embrace.

Eventually, in the ruins of Las Vegas, we meet Deckard, the eponymous blade runner of the earlier film. Harrison Ford, with his star power, plays a relatively minor role in this film, and even when he speaks, he is extremely taciturn. He complements, but does not overshadow, Gosling's role.

The Death of a Woman

There's a lot going on in the film, and there are more great scenes. I'm not going to spool out the whole plot, but there are more disarming, unnerving, deeply Philip K. Dick-ian moments. K investigates the records of births from 30 years earlier, trying to find a clue as to the fate of Rachael's child.

With electronic records destroyed in the Blackout, DNA records survive only on microfiche. K has to scan through the fiches manually, relying on his superior replicant memory and pattern-matching to look for anomalies. This is actually ridiculous — a human genome contains approximately 3 billion base pairs. I did not count the letters on the microfiche pages, but let's say that each can hold 100 lines by 100 columns, or about 10,000 characters, representing 5,000 base pairs. Six hundred thousand of these microfiche pages would be required to encode the full genome of a single person. But never mind — this implausible mixture of low tech and high tech is very, very Dickian.

Scanning the images rapidly, K discovers an anomaly — two records are duplicates, but one is for a boy, and one a girl. This is a medical impossibility, suggesting that a record of a deceased girl — she died of the fictional “Galatians syndrome” — was copied to create a record for a boy. K, with this information, comes to believe that he might be that boy, the replicant child — the “miracle” which could “break the world” and bring about, as Joshi warns him, a war, or a slaughter. But as with all clues in the film, we have to be wary of disinformation.

The reference to Galatians is a bread crumb. Galatians 1:6-9 reads (in the ESV text):

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

This is a warning to K that he must beware of a false “angel” — and here it is significant that Wallace says to Luv “you really are the best angel,” and that in

the climactic fight scene she tells K “I’m the best one!” But it’s also a warning about a “false gospel” — the implanted memory.

But there’s more in Galatians: it also tells us that two of the “fruits of the spirit” are — wait for it — joy, and love. But despite what Corinthians tells us, Luv is neither patient, nor kind, although Joi *is*. Here we have, in this world, a trick of perversity, in which a sex worker and a sex toy are more virtuous than love itself.

This is one of the best scenes in the film, but it gives you an even more special *frisson* if you know something of Philip K. Dick’s life story. Dick himself was a twin. He and his twin sister Jane were born six weeks early. Philip survived, and his twin sister died, only 41 days old. This experience profoundly influenced Philip. In his *Exegesis*, a sort of huge, free-form journal of philosophy and theology, Dick wrote:

The changing information which we experience as world is an unfolding narrative. It tells about the death of a woman. This woman, who died long ago, was one of the primordial twins. She was half of the divine syzygy. The purpose of the narrative is the recollection of her and of her death. The Mind does not wish to forget her. Thus the ratiocination of the Brain consists of a permanent record of her existence, and, if read, will be understood this way. All the information processed by the Brain — experienced by us as the arranging and rearranging of physical objects — is an attempt at this preservation of her; stones and rocks and sticks and amoebae are traces of her. The record of her existence and passing is ordered onto the meanest level of reality by the suffering Mind which is now alone.

This synecdoche — in which the events of Dick’s early life echo the unfolding theology and cosmology of his whole world — was everything to Dick in later life.

This new story, also, is about the death of a woman — of the replicant Rachael, her bones organized neatly in the footlocker-*cum*-ossuary. The dim, *noir*-ish scenes shot inside the Wallace Corporation headquarters look as if they could have taken place in the massive funerary space of an Egyptian pyramid, or a Mayan ziggurat. But in Villeneuve’s disturbing portrayal, it’s not just about the memorialization of a woman, but about her near-complete erasure.

A Little Respect (Please)

In the film’s creepiest moment, another great scene, Deckard is tempted by Wallace with the restoration of his lover. It doesn’t quite make sense, given the loss of information from the Blackout, but Wallace has made a new Rachael. And suddenly she is there, walking out of the darkness, asking Harrison Ford “did you miss me?” and, miserably abasing herself before him, “don’t you love me?” These. Are. Her. Only. Lines.

Ford is unnerved, as is the audience, because Sean Young did not appear as

herself in the film. Her younger face was re-created, digitally, with stand-ins for her bodily movements and voice. Ford, the actor, and Deckard, character, possibly a replicant, has aged — but Rachael II has not, being a newly-made thing, forever Young. We don't learn her age in the original movie, but in Dick's book, Rachael is just 18. She is a carrot to motivate Deckard — tell us everything you know about the fate of the child, says Wallace, and we won't take you off-world to torture you endlessly in some exo-Abu Ghraib, but instead, you can have your girlfriend back!

But women aren't allowed to grow old in Hollywood.

Deckard, wisely, is having none of it, and tells Wallace “her eyes were green.” This isn't necessarily true — Sean Young had brown eyes in the original, while in an apparently continuity error, her eye on the Voigt-Kampff display apparatus appears green. (This world can't even make the most basic facts easy). But Deckard knows that Rachael cannot come back and this new replicant can never be the Rachael he knew, and he also knows, or at least I hope he knows, that he is not his younger self, and so cannot ever have the same relationship with Rachael II that he had with Rachael.

Wallace knows this as well, because his Rachael II lacks the “miracle” of the original; she is sterile. Wallace can't create a fertile replicant, he believes, without studying the child. And after Deckard rejects her, Luv, obeying the smallest nod from Wallace, immediately shoots Rachael II in the head.

This is another deeply disturbing move, the destruction of a commodity, not a person — echoing Wallace's destruction of the unnamed female replicant, and echoed later by Luv's casual, unnecessary destruction of the harmless Joi, just to torment K. To Wallace, one of his “angels” — an elevated being — is to him, despite his high-flown language, really no more of a person than one of his more debased, fully-electronic sex-toy creations.

Male Mothers

The film is also about the myth of male mothers, in which men wish to “steal valor” from mothers by claiming the ability to create life themselves. It's an old, old trope. Athena sprang from the head of Zeus, after Zeus swallowed Metis and her unborn child. Metis was erased, as Rachael was erased, her child disappeared, but something more eventually came of them, imagined as the product of a twisted form of motherhood.

Wallace didn't erase Rachael the first time, as damaged records survive in the archives of the Tyrell Corporation, but he can do so now, and he wants her child, so that he can create new life from them, from his head — his relentless intelligence. Wallace wants to populate not just nine worlds with the Nexus-9, but to fill the space between the stars. He can't do it by manufacturing replicants. They must be able to reproduce. This explains, perhaps, just a bit, his rage against the unnamed female replicant's womb.

But K imagines, led by his falsified memories, that he might be the miracle child, who holds the genetic key to replicant reproduction, and that he could be the male “matriarch” of a future race of replicants. It’s not a comforting thought, because he knows that if this is true, the authorities will want nothing more than to erase him utterly, leaving no trace of his existence, while Wallace will want nothing more than to dissect him. Either scenario is the end of K. But it would give his life meaning to have a mother, to be a “real boy,” to have a soul, and even, metaphorically, to *be* a mother.

Instead, he is told by the resistance leader Freysa that he is *not* the miracle child. He is nearly undone by this loss. But he now knows that the child must be Ana, the woman who creates memories — and who gave him another bread crumb, when she told him that there was a little bit of herself in the memories that she creates. Ana, left in a literal bubble of sterility since childhood, is the miracle, who harbors the secret of replicant fertility. This leaves a lot of unanswered questions. Is she really immune-compromised, forced to live in “sterility?” Or was that also a protective lie? Was Ana really raised in the electronics reclamation facility with the other boys? Does she remember this? Or was that memory entirely falsified? And if it was, why were the records there destroyed, or was that a false bread crumb?

In a final act of disobedience — he has come a long way since his “baseline” — K delivers Deckard to Ana, and dies of Luv’s slash to his belly, the visceral repudiation of his hoped-for motherhood. Like all men, he must content himself as best he can, transcending his servile drone existence through the pursuit of love — Luv — whom he had to drown. With no Joi, and no Luv, K dies. But at least Deckard, date-rapist and absentee father, gets to meet his daughter. It’s not exactly a happy ending, but K does die a free... “man?”

Other than That, How as the Play, Mrs. Lincoln?

This review on Vox makes an excellent point when it says “the film has big ideas, but not enough clarity around them.”

The themes in this film, unlike in *Arrival*, sag under the weight of the unrewarded slow movement, the preoccupation and even infatuation with the look of things (snow falling, holograms, the LA streets) that the original *Blade Runner* never indulged to such an obvious extent.

And in addition, *Blade Runner 2049* fails the Howard Hawk test, because it does have bad scenes: bad, as in troubling, horrifying, and to me, not justifiable by their contribution to the larger story arc.

Wallace can’t manufacture replicants fast enough to keep up with demand, and yet he murders several of them. Rachael II, when she fails to appeal to Deckard, apparently can’t be considered fit for any other purpose and must be destroyed. It strains credibility, and reeks of the casual violence against women that make up slasher movies. Plenty of male replicants are killed, but they usually die

quickly, double-tapped. I really didn't need to see Luv drowned, in real-time, in a scene that seems to take forever. Not all the death scenes are horrible, or feel gratuitous — Joshi dies bravely. But too many of the deaths — and there are a lot of them — feel like torture.

Blade Runner 2049 does have at least three great scenes, and perhaps more, and its world is a beautiful and horrifying world. But it takes too long to tell its story.

Sean Young apparently participated in the making of the film, in a way. Her name is in the credits. But as I watch, I can't help but wonder how the actress, who is now 57 years old (while Harrison Ford is 75), might feel upon watching the finished film. Is she troubled by the way her character's story emerges, and how it is revealed that her character died and was nearly erased, deliberately, for the sake of her child?

Deckard can barely bring himself to speak Rachael's name; he does not do so until very late in the film. Although it is touching, perhaps, to see that he has kept her picture.

How would Young feel, watching, as Rachael is made to reappear, reanimated, again as a slave, to plead for Deckard's love, only to be shot in the head, killed instantly, execution-style, erased again, leaving only the faint hope that her name might be remembered again, by insurgent replicants and her "miracle" daughter, in a sequel?

Let's remember that this is fiction, and the screenwriters and producers have had 35 years to come up with something better to do with Rachael, whose "love scenes" with Deckard in the original remain painfully uncomfortable to watch. Was this really the best they could do?

And I wonder, as we all get worked up about the Harvey Weinstein story and the women in our lives reporting "me too," if those screenwriters and producers ever gave what they were doing a second thought. Did they have any empathy at all, for Rachael, and for Young?

Brilliant. Beautiful. Puzzling. Troubling.

It's a stunning film, but usually when you say that about a movie, it's not because you actually feel like you received a head injury while watching it. Unlike *Arrival*, *Blade Runner 2049* left me injured, and numbed, as if one of the blades sliced into my guts as well, severing a few of my nerves. The puzzles are fascinating; I have been thinking about them for days. But if the *moral* weight of a film is put on the scale to determine, in part, its ultimate success or failure, this sequel's brutality towards not just the characters but towards the audience itself has to count for something.

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Pittsfield Township, Michigan

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