

Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*: A dreary future

Carlos Delgado
20 November 2017

Directed by Denis Villeneuve; screenplay by Hampton Fancher and Michael Green

Blade Runner 2049 is the sequel to the 1982 science fiction film *Blade Runner*, itself based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

This is the latest attempt by a Hollywood studio to revitalize (and presumably launch a billion-dollar franchise on the basis of) one of its long-dormant properties. Like many films of this nature, it suffers from a paucity of ideas, an undue reverence for its source material, and a distinct feeling of creative exhaustion.

The original 1982 *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, starred Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard, an ex-police officer-turned-bounty hunter who tracks down and kills "bioengineered" beings known as "replicants" in a grim, futuristic Los Angeles. Though the film performed poorly at the box office in its initial release, it gained something of a following in subsequent years due to its popularity on home video. Scott and his film studio famously feuded over the final cut, and several different versions of the film exist. Until recently, it was an open question whether Deckard was himself intended to be a replicant.

The new film, directed by Denis Villeneuve (*Incendies*, *Sicario*, *Arrival*), opens 30 years after the events of the original. We are told via onscreen text that a series of ecological catastrophes had brought humankind to the brink of ruin, but that the day was saved, of course, by an "industrialist," Niander Wallace (Jared Leto), who introduced "synthetic farming" techniques that averted famine.

The older models of replicants from the original film have been proscribed after a series of "violent rebellions." Wallace's corporation has introduced a

newer, more docile model, while the surviving older models are tracked down and violently "retired."

K (Ryan Gosling) is a "blade runner" (that is, replicant hunter) working with the Los Angeles Police Department. K is himself a newer-model replicant, and he somewhat unhappily goes about the business of tracking down and murdering "his own kind."

When K isn't hunting targets or getting dressed down by his superior, Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright), he spends his time in his apartment with his holographic girlfriend Joi (Ana de Armas), an artificial intelligence who appears before him via sophisticated imaging technology.

After killing an older-model replicant who had been living peacefully as a farmer, K discovers a cache of buried remains on the property. Subsequent analysis reveals that the remains belonged to a female replicant who had become pregnant and died in childbirth, something which no one had believed possible. Joshi, fearful that the news of a replicant birth would "break the world" and spark a war between humans and replicants, orders K to hunt down and kill all replicants involved, including the child.

Meanwhile, word of the child's birth reaches Wallace, who wishes to unlock the secrets of replicant reproduction in order to expand his army of replicant "slaves." He dispatches his assassin Luv (Sylvia Hoeks) to tail K and bring back the child for further study.

A series of winding and improbable plot contrivances eventually bring Deckard (Ford) back into the mix, now unambiguously revealed to be a replicant. A great deal of brooding, violence and pseudo-philosophizing about the nature of "humanity" ensues, culminating in a deadly encounter between K, Deckard and Luv, with the fate of the child (and perhaps more) hanging in the

balance.

After showing some initial promise with his sympathetic (albeit superficial) portrayal of the victims of Middle Eastern conflicts in *Incendies*, Villeneuve's work has taken a turn for the worse. His subsequent films have included the pro-"war on drugs" crime thriller *Sicario*, the dull science fiction slog *Arrival*, and now this tedious, preposterous and overly long effort.

It's worth asking whether the original *Blade Runner* needed a sequel in the first place, or whether the various artists' talents could have been better used elsewhere. Frankly, this reviewer never thought the original film deserved its reputation as a science fiction "classic." While that film was visually distinguished, with a memorably noirish rendition of neon-lit, rain-soaked Los Angeles, it was also narratively cold, meandering and dull. It was more of an accomplishment in production design than in cinema.

Unhappily, the sequel retains some of the most irritating aspects of the original film, including its murky, chiaroscuro lighting, its plodding pace and its overall dreary, depressed atmosphere.

The film expends a great deal of energy attempting to convince the viewer of its importance. The sweeping compositions, the lingering close-ups and the blaring synthesizer soundtrack all seem to insist that the various goings-on are of tremendous significance. This is a film that demands—or perhaps begs—to be taken seriously.

But there is little substance here. A more rigorous artist could perhaps have drawn out the social and psychological implications of "synthetic" beings that have become advanced enough to assume human characteristics. At the very least, she or he could have found parallels between the conditions of the replicant "slaves" and the conditions of our present-day laboring class. But aside from a brief scene in a child labor sweatshop, it seems that Villeneuve is uninterested in the conditions of toilers, human or otherwise.

A brief subplot reveals that some replicants are plotting "revolution" against Wallace and their human overlords, but this is only mentioned in passing and never amounts to much. This is a film whose method of tackling "big" ideas is to quote from the Bible and muse feebly on the nature of God, Man, Miracles, The Soul, etc.

The acting is uneven, at best. Gosling is wooden and uninteresting throughout, though this is at least partly attributable to the decision to make his character a non-human. Hoeks, who portrays Luv as both menacing and oddly vulnerable, is a bright spot. Wright and Ford do the best they can with the little material they're given. Leto-Wallace, delivering overwrought monologues in a bizarre, halting monotone with opaque contact lenses covering his eyes, is just ridiculous.

There are a number of clever and inventive visual tricks, including the holographic Joi overlaying a "real" body and a digital recreation of the original film's Sean Young. A handful of images of ruined cityscapes are quite striking. But all in all, the film spends nearly three hours saying nothing of importance. Various real-life crises are hinted at, including vast social inequality, the threat of ecological collapse and even nuclear war. But the film retreats to safer waters just as soon as it raises anything interesting, and it hides behind its robust imagery to mask a lack of artistic or intellectual substance.

This is bleakness without understanding, the work of artists who perhaps sense oncoming social catastrophe, but utterly lack the tools necessary to discern its source, much less raise any kind of alarm or protest.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact