

# Movie Review

## New Blade Runner Still Misses Philip K. Dick's Radical Vision

Matthew Lucas

2018

a review of

"Blade Runner 2049." Director: Denis Villeneuve 146 min. (2017)

"Blade Runner 2049" slightly recalibrates the social dimensions of Ridley Scott's 1982 android rebellion tale, "Blade Runner"—based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—tailoring it for a new generation.

Scott's original had largely written out much of Dick's political and ecological concerns. And while some of the changes are mildly admirable, the new film is as limited and lacking in vision as its predecessor—especially in respect to the roles of women in its posthuman future.

In the original film, Scott imagined a world of nightmarish Reaganomics that barely breached the Sci-Fi genre beyond its set design. It presented a dystopian future in which chattel slavery has again become accepted, as android laborers—called Replicants and manufactured by the sinister Tyrell Corporation—are sent to outer planetary colonies to work. Traditional human labor properties are transposed upon them.

Male androids are tasked with production and manual work, and women androids are more often consigned as "leisure models," providing sex work. Having organized, the androids revolt and are quashed. Bounty hunters, called blade runners, hunt down the older rebel models to "retire" them.

Back on Earth, this exportation of labor and production to the colonies has not led to abolition of labor for humans, but rather to a shift toward low wage service work. People of color are mostly seen working in retail and restaurants, women are seen again primarily in sex work and burlesque, and white men populate police forces and front corporations.

It's a messy narrative of moral and existential ambiguities, in which few are lifted by the posthuman future into anything transcending the dour roles already assigned to them in postindustrial societies. This is especially true for the women in the original picture.

"Blade Runner" hits an unfortunate nadir when Rachael (Sean Young), a Replicant who had believed she was a human, is raped by the chief protagonist, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). By forcing himself on her, Deckard paradoxically maintains Rachael's status as an android incapable of consent, and grotesquely promotes her to human status as a woman capable of having physical and emotional contact.

"Blade Runner 2049" covers much of the same territory. New hope in the Replicants' revolt is found in a child born to a Replicant mother, sidestepping the knotted existential conundrums of the original film. Because they have the capability of giving birth, the humanity of this slave labor force is on more firm ethical terrain.

Where the original shifted its weight between anti-heroes, asking rather than answering ethical dilemmas, the new film's position is clearer. Corporate powers and police forces are juxtaposed against exploited labor with respective black and white hat simplicity.

The miracle android pregnancy, presented as the ultimate and legitimizing (and incidentally, trans-exclusionary) labor of women, pushes the Replicant cause forward. However, it does little for women in the film and the way they are portrayed.

Still, the posthuman world of the Blade Runner franchise fails to advance beyond a reductive and reactionary view of their traditional, male-orientated labor roles. The scant actual presence of women in the film exacerbates the issue. Two villainesses and two rebel leaders flash on and off the screen without much to distinguish them by. Sadly, the best formulated female character is the hero K's (Ryan Gosling) companion, Joi (Ana de Armas). She is a hologram.

Conceptually similar to Samantha, the female-voiced OS who becomes the love interest in Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her*, Joi is the made-to-order wife to K. A compliant piece of technology, she provides her male companion with on-demand domestic and emotional labor.

Early in the film she welcomes K home, inquires about his day, offers to mend his torn shirt, and busies away making him a holographic dinner, which she presents to him with a kiss as she lights his cigarette. She is ageless, entirely affirming, and possesses no troubles outside of her companion's, but is unable to perform one significant labor for him—sex.

In a scene that epitomizes "*Blade Runner 2049*"'s dehumanizing misogyny, this is resolved when she is synched with a prostitute, Marlette (a name perilously close to marionette) in order to accomplish intimacy with K. As with Rachael in the preceding film, it is sex that promotes Joi to viable human status.

Populating the screen with objectifying advertisements and hyper-sexualized statues of women, this sequel repeats most of the sins of the original with minor adjustments. This bleak future still comes across as a dingier apocalypse version of our own, complete with crumbling junk factories full of child laborers and a nuclear-irradiated desert metropolis.

No longer led by the compelling but murderous Roy Batty, the Replicant rebellion engenders more sympathy, but is dramatically deflated. Any meditation on posthuman possibilities, if there are any, really, are undermined by its lazy and unimaginative fiction.

Worst of all, while we're spared a repeat of the original's unforgivable rape, we're left with its repugnant misogyny.

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