

Blade Runner

Originally released in 1982, Ridley Scott's film adaptation of Phillip K Dick's novel 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' was a box-office failure. However, despite this initial negative response, it became a cult movie, and its status as a significant science fiction film was further enhanced by the re-release of Blade Runner - The Director's Cut in 1992 which omitted the voice-over and, more significantly, featured a substantial change to the original 'happy' ending.

Ridley Scott's films include 'The Duellists' 1977; 'Alien' 1979; 'Someone to Watch Over Me' 1987 and 'Thelma and Louise' 1991. After being an art student and then a film student at London's Royal College of Art, Ridley spent ten years as a director of television commercials and he still runs a company that produces commercials with his brother Tony. As a film director Ridley Scott has a talent for delivering and fusing striking images and an eye for instant spectacle. His imagery is found from the Dark Ages, 1800 or 1492 or from the future of twenty first century Los Angeles. 'Alien' and Blade Runner have been highly influential of high-tech design and they have also fed back into TV advertising. Scott is recognised for his thoughtful direction of actresses such as Sean Young, Daryl Hannah, Lorraine Bracco and Geena Davis, enabling them to expand their range.

Harrison Ford plays the retired Super-cop in 2019 Los Angeles whose job is hunting mutinous androids that have escaped from the off world colonies. He is a specialist in identifying and destroying androids and is pressed back into service when a group of replicants illegally return to Earth.

Plots, character types, settings and filmic techniques, such as camera shots, sound effects, dialogue, music, lighting, editing and themes are all elements or conventions which are repeated from film to film and which allows us, the audience, to group and recognise them. Blade Runner has been said to be an important science fiction film which also contains elements of the themes and visual style of *Film Noir*.

- > What do you associate visually with film noir and with science fiction? Make a list of the iconography that you might find and of the kinds of locations you would expect in both kinds of film.

Science fiction has been popular since the early days of cinema when George Méliès astonished his audience with special effects combining theatrical tricks and photographic techniques to portray a landing on the face of the moon 'A Trip to the Moon', (1902). In the 1930s and 1940s audiences enjoyed the fantasy adventures of comic book heroes such as Flash Gordon, Dick Tracy and Captain Marvel and in the 1950s there was a massive revival of interest in the genre - partly due to the anxieties of post war relations between the USA and the USSR, a fear of the effects of new weapons and increasing reports of UFO sightings. Although Stanley Kubrick's '2001 - A Space Odyssey' (1968) had great impact science fiction did not become popular with audiences again until the late 1970s with 'Star Wars' and 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' (1977). The special effects created for these two films set a standard for future productions. Budgets for this new type of film were huge but so were the potential profits - the commercial possibilities of film merchandising were first realised with 'Star Wars' and the popularity of science fiction blockbusters continued up to the present day with the success of films like 'E.T.' (1982), Jurassic Park (1993) and 'Men in Black' (1997).

Much of science fiction creates a narrative world that is characterised by elements of fantasy. Blade Runner offers a science fiction world which also raises issues to do with our contemporary existence, and behaviour as human beings. Comparisons can be drawn between the replicants and the humans since although the former are 'machines' there is an ambivalence in terms of their representations. In particular in the characters of Rachel and Roy Batty there is an implicit suggestion that on occasion, their behaviour is more 'humane' than that displayed by the real humans within the film.

- What do you think is the purpose of this ambivalence? Why has the film maker created some of the replicants who are not easily identifiable by the audience as the villains?
- The science fiction film has been described as being like 'a shared dream...a mythic representation of universal concerns and fears', suggesting that the narrative of many science fiction films follow patterns that audiences are familiar with based on ancient myths and legends found in cultures and societies all over the world.
What might be the universal concerns in Blade Runner? Are there aspects of the film narrative that might resonate in other cultures?
- What are the universal concerns expressed in 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' (1977) 'E.T.' (1982), and 'Men in Black' (1997)? Look at the opening sequences of two science fiction films, make a list of the similarities and differences and identify what it is that seems to be the threat to mankind.

Film Noir is the name now given to a group of films made in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. The term 'film noir' is French and means literally 'black film'; it comes from the name of a series of books published in France which were mostly translations of American crime fiction writers, such as James M Cain and Raymond Chandler. The books were mainly about crime and often had a private detective as the hero who would fall for a treacherous woman (the femme fatale). Some of these novels were used as the basis for this group of films made during this period and several of the writers went to Hollywood to write screenplays for films associated with film noir, for example Raymond Chandler adapted James M Cain's novel for *Double Indemnity*. It is argued that film noir is a visual style and not a genre and that it has a set of visual motifs that can be applied to a wide range of films across different genres. It has also been said that it is a genre not a movement which can be identified with a certain period of time, place and mood - some critics describe it as a movement which reflects the mood of a particular time and picks up the feeling of uncertainty and fear in America after the Second World War with the accompanying feeling of the Cold War threat.

Lighting is the most distinctive feature of film noir with highly contrasted areas of light and shade. Dramatic patterns of light and shade are created by light filtering through a blind or a latticed window. The shadows cast across the characters' faces suggest a hidden, darker side of their personality. Film noir is also associated with an urban context, cities and low life areas such as bars, nightclubs, motels and back streets in the dark. The male characters are dressed in trench coats, suits and hats with women dressed in glamorous evening wear.

- Dark shadows seem to dominate *Blade Runner* and at certain points Ridley Scott makes it deliberately difficult for the viewer to see the action within the frame.
Can you identify any moments in the opening sequences which seem to use film noir lighting, settings and iconography? Does this contribute to the mood of the film?

- Look closely at the sequence where we are first introduced to Deckard. How from the way he is positioned within the frame is his sense of alienation conveyed? Sum up the film viewer's first impression of him. How much does Deckard conform to the central male film noir character who is usually a disillusioned loner, a tough guy at odds with himself?

The hero of film noir films is inevitably fatally attracted to a woman who manipulates and betrays him. This woman is referred to as the 'femme fatale'; she is always very physically attractive with tight-fitting clothes, jewellery and a way of smoking cigarettes which draws attention to her body. She is usually mysterious and controls the hero with her changes of mood. She is dangerous and will lead him to his doom. These women are strong and active and can be seen as positive portrayals of women but they are also threatening and disruptive.

- Look at the sequence where Deckard first meets Rachel at the Tyrell Corporation. How do her clothes, hair and make up mimic the 1940's film noir 'femme fatale'? After watching the film can you identify how Rachel's character and behaviour does not seem in keeping with the 'femme fatale' image.

The world of LA 2019 is an unappealing one. Artificial neon light has replaced natural sunlight and the huge illuminated adverts add to the sense of disorientation. The humid streets are crowded with inhabitants who speak in a strange, yet familiar language and the frequent downpour of heavy, warm rain onto the waste-filled streets emphasise the sense of claustrophobia. Although there is no explanation as to why LA exists as it does, there is the suggestion that the world has suffered an ecological disaster and this humid, dark environment is the result.

It is clear from the opening sequence that this is a terrible place and offers a bleak view of the future world, which is far removed from our sense of 'normality.'

- Look closely at the opening sequence of the film up to the point where Holden begins to interrogate Leon. What evidence is there that this is a hostile place? How does the use of the 'introduction' suggest that there is a lack of 'humanity' within this place? How does the use of synthesised music add to the overall bleak mood?

It might be interesting for you to compare 'Blade Runner' with one or two of the films that have been identified as classic film noir texts made in the 1940s and 1950s such as 'Double Indemnity' and 'The Big Heat' and to identify the film noir elements. Other modern films which are considered to contain elements of film noir are 'Chinatown' (1974) and 'The Last Seduction' (1993). Take the opening sequences of two of these films and compare the elements that we have referred to such as lighting, location, music.

One of the central oppositions within the film is represented through the characters of Deckard and Batty. At the beginning Blade Runner follows the conventional narrative structure with the establishment of a 'bad' character in the form of Roy Batty. His brutality is in no doubt as we are informed that, as the rebel leader, he was responsible for the slaughter of twenty-three people in an attempt to escape to earth. The later murder of Tyrell, the maker of the replicants, is an act committed out of rage and frustration as he realises that he cannot prolong his life beyond the regulated four years. Ironically, in this search to make sense of his existence, Batty exhibits almost human qualities as he tries to find some kind of meaning to his short life span.

Questions about the ambivalent nature of Batty's role within the film are again raised by his final battle with Deckard. On a physical level Batty is far superior to the Blade Runner - indeed his fair colouring almost mimics the Aryan ideal of a 'superhuman'. However, as Deckard hangs off the edge of the building, Batty chooses to save his life and gives him his hand. This one deliberate act, done in the full knowledge of his own approaching death adds an element of tragic poignancy to the scene, further complicating the notion of the archetypal 'villain'.

- > Watch the sequence from the point where Batty rescues Deckard up to his own death. Look particularly at the sequence in terms of the *mise en scène*. Does this succeed in evoking a sense of empathy for Batty?
- > After watching the film discuss the presentation of the 'replicants'. Does the film make the viewer feel an element of sympathy for them and their situation? Look particularly at the attitude of Tyrell to his creations and the manner in which the replicants die, in particular Zhora and Batty.

Film outline: Time - the near future. America is under the control of a right wing dictator. People's lives are strictly controlled by use of computers and television. However, there are still certain individuals who struggle against the government. The individuals slowly come together to form a group who will confront the government.

- How do you want the story to develop? It could be purely science fiction or it could involve other generic elements. Your task is to develop the story and finish the synopsis; establish the genre; describe the opening sequences in detail so that the narrative clues and generic elements are established.