

BLADE RUNNER



REVISION NOTES

CATEGORIES

Originally released in 1982. Director's Cut released 1991. Final Cut released 2007.

Directed by Ridley Scott.

Form – feature length fiction film based on novel “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep” by Philip K Dick.

Purpose – to make a profit for the studio, to entertain the audience, to challenge the audience, to explore ideas of corporate power/technology/genetic engineering.

Genre – generic hybrid science fiction/noir detective, elements of art-house.

Style – careful focus on the set design and look/feel of the future (‘retro-fitted’ future, not new), heavily influenced by film noir (darkness, shadows, uncomfortable camera angles), cyberpunk, futuristic Vangelis soundtrack.

Tone – Dark, pessimistic, dystopian.

Certificate – BBFC 15, MPAA R – contains strong violence, brief nudity, strong language.



INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Ridley Scott (Director)

Ridley Scott had made his name in England as a successful television commercial director. Scott was a hot property in Hollywood when choosing his second project after the relatively unexpected success of *Alien*. By choosing to do another science fiction film, this will have increased audience expectations for *Blade Runner*. This was essentially Scott's first Hollywood production as *Alien* was filmed in English studios. This led to unexpected difficulties with American crews and working regulations and there were many strained relationships with cast and crew on the film due to Scott's artistic style and desire to achieve perfection. The importance of design and art can be seen in Scott's work: he hired artists HR Geiger, Syd Mead and Moebius to work on the look of *Alien* and *Blade Runner*. He also cites Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* and French comic *Metal Hurlant* as influences on the look of *Blade Runner*.



Harrison Ford (Star)

Like Scott, Ford was possibly the hottest star in Hollywood when *Blade Runner* was released coming off the successes of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Audiences would have enjoyed his charismatic, witty, wisecracking heroes in these films which might have created an expectation for audiences that would not be fulfilled. However, his name would help attract an audience to the film. Ford did not enjoy his time working on the film. He felt that Scott did not give him enough direction (although other actors like Edward James Olmos and Rutger Hauer enjoyed the creative freedom Scott allowed them to bring to their roles.) He also did not have a good relationship with inexperienced co-star Sean Young and, like most people working on the film, did not enjoy the long night shoots in the rain. These shoots were necessary to camouflage the fact that the film was shot on a studio back lot and to make the special effects that created the city more realistic.

Production Companies/Budget

The film was co-produced and funded by The Ladd Company (through Warner Bros.), Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong film funder Sir Run Run Shaw who had previously worked with producer Michael Deeley) and Tandem Productions (credited as Jerry Perenchio and Bud Yorkin). The film had a sizeable budget at the time of \$28 Million and Perenchio and Yorkin had signed on as completion guarantors, meaning if the film went over budget they would gain additional rights. Because of this, when the film went over budget, Tandem tried (unsuccessfully) to fire Scott and Deeley to control the editing of the film. When the film received negative feedback from test screenings Tandem demanded that a voice over be added to the film and a 'happy' ending where Deckard and Rachel escape the city and drive through unspoiled natural settings (taken from unused footage from "The Shining"). This demonstrates the importance of commercial success over artistic integrity in Hollywood film making, that the director's control and vision can be altered to try to generate profit.

The Crew/Unions

Scott was working in Hollywood for the first time and issues between the director and the crew and unions emerged. Scott found many of the rules and regulations of the American crew silly and unnecessary, like not being able to line up or operate the camera himself. Scott was very demanding on set insisting on everything being perfect and often clashed with crew and financiers over multiple takes and reshoots that he would want. This led to animosity on the set with crew members printing and wearing t-shirts saying, "Yes Guv'nor, My Ass" and Scott responding with his own shirt, "Xenophobia Sucks." This was known as the t-shirt war. This shows the effects of rules and regulations and employment laws on the film making process and how production can be slowed having an affect on the budget.

BBFC/MPAA Rating

The film is rated 15/R for violent scenes, brief nudity and occasional bad language. This allowed the film makers to include more adult content more in keeping with the tone of the film. Scenes such as Roy Batty killing Eldon Tyrell by gouging his eyes or the slow motion shot of Zhora being killed as she crashes through several windows contribute to the film's adult certification but are also necessary in developing the characters of Batty and Deckard and showing their conflict around these deaths.



Release Date

The film was released in the summer of 1982, suggesting the high expectations the producers had for it (expecting it to be a 'summer blockbuster'). However, it was released just weeks after highly successful films like *Rocky III*, *Star Trek 2* and *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*. *ET* went on to be the highest grossing film of the year (and all time!) and was still playing in cinemas when *Blade Runner* was released. This would have had a negative effect on the success of *Blade Runner*. Also, the financial success of these films (and the other high grossing films of 1982) show a preference for 'feel good' stories, happy endings and pro-American underdog films. *Blade Runner*, with its bleak dystopian view of a future America mirroring many concerns of 1982 did not seem in keeping with what audiences were looking for at that time.



SOCIETY

Growth of Corporate Power and Influence

By the 1980s, large corporations began to spend more money trying to influence government for their own benefit through lobbying. They began to hire professional lobbyists to operate in Washington on their behalf. This has led to a situation where critics suggest that large corporations have too much power and influence in society. This can be seen in the film where corporations like Tyrell occupy the dominant position in the city (in a huge pyramid suggesting they are to be worshipped like Gods? Batty calls Tyrell “the God of biomechanics” when they meet. He calls Batty “the prodigal son”) There is no mention of government in the film but logos and adverts are everywhere suggesting the power and influence of corporations in the world of the film.

Japanese/Eastern Economies

By the 1980s, America’s position as the world’s leading economy looked to be under threat from emerging economies in the East (in particular, Japan). While the American economy was still quite traditional, the Japanese economy was seen as the market leader in hi-tech goods. This was a concern to conservative America worried about seeing the country overtaken by an ‘enemy’. This is shown in the film through the proliferation of ‘Eastern’ influences: Deckard is seen eating noodles in the opening scene on a neon lit street which could easily be mistaken for Tokyo; Geisha’s fill building-sized billboards advertising cigarettes; the names and signs of Japanese tech companies can be seen across the city, the final scene between Deckard and Batty being lit by an enormous neon Hitachi sign.



White Flight

Conservative America was also increasingly concerned about increases in illegal immigration from Central America and from Asia. The film has tied this together with the cultural phenomenon of ‘white flight’ that took place in the 50s and 60s in America as increasingly affluent black citizens moved into more expensive areas where residents were predominantly white. This had the effect of the white people moving further into the suburbs, leaving the inner cities. This can be seen in the film through the street level scenes. There are very few white faces to be seen on the streets that are flooded with Asian, Hispanic and African influences. This suggests that white people (being the most privileged and affluent) have chosen to flee this melting pot but rather than escaping to the suburbs (there are none in a megalopolis) they have gone to new “off-world colonies.” This is reminiscent of America’s history where white Europeans settled and soon brought black slaves to labour for them just as the replicants are used off-world.

Inner City Decay

The struggling American economy also had a negative impact on major US cities. Mass unemployment led to growth in homelessness and crime, particularly in inner cities. Many audience members recognised similarities between the streets of Blade



Runner and 'Skid Row' in downtown Los Angeles. This is relevant as it suggests that those on street level in the film are the abandoned of this future society. The literal decay of J.F. Sebastian's building – completely abandoned, walls crumbling in the persistent rain – is also reminiscent of the real world abandonment of cities in the economic downturn.

Environment

Around the time of Blade Runner's production, there was an increase in the understanding of the human impact on the environment. Concerns about acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect as well as the constant threat of nuclear holocaust between the US and Russia were in the social consciousness. Many of these concerns can be seen in the film: the perpetual night suggests there has been some sort of atmospheric disaster (the only sighting of the sun – is it even real? – is in Tyrell's office which could suggest the sun is now the preserve of the rich); there seem to be few real animals left (*Do you like our owl? It's fake? Of course*) hinting at the devastation to species being caused by humans; the opening shot of the city shows a vast industrial landscape being mined for its every last resource; the size of the city and the fact people are leaving for "off world" colonies also suggests problems with over population.



AUDIENCES

Needs and Expectations

As stated above, the popularity of films released around the same time as *Blade Runner* help us to understand the needs and expectations of the audience at that time. Audiences would have been looking for a futuristic adventure, filled with action and having a satisfying resolution where the good guys come out on top. They might also have expected Harrison Ford to continue to play the 'loveable rogue' that they had seen him play as Han Solo or Indiana Jones.

Initial Unpopularity

These needs and expectations being unfulfilled undoubtedly contributed to the film's initial unpopularity. The film is slow and atmospheric, pondering big questions about existence and the human experience rather than be a rip-roaring futuristic adventure. There are action sequences but they are ultimately used to further these existential questions. Deckard is not the wise-cracking, all-action hero that Solo or Jones are. Instead, Deckard is a quiet anti-hero, a man with questionable morals, who drinks heavily to forget the things he has done, shoots women in the back and appears to force himself on another female character. Audiences did not respond well to the bleak, dystopian vision of the future, preferring films at that time that provided escapism from the difficulties of their real lives. The perpetual rain and darkness, the morally ambiguous characters and the overwhelming sense of pessimism was in stark contrast to most mainstream Hollywood films of the time.

Cult Status

When the film was moved quickly to home viewing formats (Cable film channels, VHS) its cult status with sci-fi fans began to grow quickly as they were able to enjoy the nuances and layers of the film. The film was able to grow its fan base from there. This led to the subsequent release of the "Director's Cut" (building on the notoriety of the ownership issues, alternate ending and voice over) and for the 25th Anniversary of the film's release, "The Final Cut" with more additional footage that Ridley Scott had intended to include. The influence of the film grew with *Blade Runner*-esque designs and images appearing in advertising, music videos, computer games and other science fiction films. As audiences became more sophisticated, no longer simply looking for the cathartic 'Hollywood' ending, the appreciation for *Blade Runner* also grew to the extent that a sequel has been made now over 30 years after the original film's release.



US Audiences

The US market is the biggest and most influential market with the ability to dictate a film's financial success or failure on its own. It is important for American films to appeal to American audiences. The casting of Harrison Ford was intended to appeal directly to a mainstream audience due to his success in *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*. However, there are many other aspects of the film an American audience might have found problematic. Deckard is a problematic 'hero' – moody, morally ambiguous, and his status as 'hero' is questionable. Traditional US heroes either survive or sacrifice themselves saving others. Although Deckard survives and escapes, he has to be saved by the 'villain' Batty which adds complexity to the hero/villain narrative. As we have said, the US audience also seemed to be looking for a more optimistic and escapist type of film than *Blade Runner* at that time. US audiences often expect to see America as a main setting. While this is the case in *Blade Runner* (Los Angeles), it is a dark and dystopian vision of the future in the US with the streets more akin to Tokyo and Marrakech than LA.

Adult

The film has a 15 BBFC/R MPAA rating restricting viewing to adults only. The film deals with complex ideas and characters that requires viewers to pay close attention. An adult audience might also be more willing to accept the bleak dystopia and the ambiguous open-ending, perhaps more accepting of life's difficulties and more used to life not always having a happy ending. Most Sci-Fi fans also tend to be adults due to the complex narratives and ideas that are often dealt with in these films.

Cineliterate

The film received mixed reviews on initial release with many criticising the plot and pace of the film while most praise was about the look of the film and the special effects. This was reflected in awards as it was nominated for and won several awards for production and costume design, cinematography and the Vangelis score. However, it was studied academically and as time went on the critical appreciation for the film has grown. Notable critics like Mark Kermode and Roger Ebert both cite it as one of the most important films of the 20th Century. It is also permanently preserved by the US National Film Registry as a work of cultural significance. The look of the film has been continually praised and its influence can be seen in various forms of media.



Female

The female audience is obviously a large demographic so there must be some attempt to appeal to this audience. The love story between Deckard and Rachael is one attempt to appeal to the female audience. However, some might argue that the relationship is too one-sided with the helpless Rachel controlled at several points by a forceful Deckard (drunk call from bar, the sex scene, the end.) It could be argued that the film creates strong female characters: Rachael is confident and self-assured in the interrogation with Deckard; Zhora physically dominates Deckard in their fight; Pris is intelligent and manipulative, taking advantage of JF Sebastian and also dominates Deckard physically when they fight. However, all of the female characters are replicants which could be read negatively as a comment on their 'synthetic' nature. The film also frequently refers to replicants as slaves which also suggests that the female characters are to be submissive to their male creators. The female roles are also submissive and exploitative: Rachael is PA to Tyrell, following his orders and is discarded when no longer of use; Zhora is dancing in a strip club; Pris is the "basic pleasure model" and relies on her sexuality to manipulate Sebastian. These reading



might all be off-putting to a female audience. Science fiction also tends to be more appealing to male audiences due to a focus on technology and action.

Audience Readings

How audiences respond to texts and their intended meanings is something that can be discussed. There are three broad types of audience reading:

- *Preferred reading* – the reading intended by the creator of the text. In Blade Runner this might be along the lines of Deckard is the hero who learns what it is to be human and chooses to escape the dystopia with Rachael who he has fallen in love with.
- *Negotiated reading* – the reader broadly accepts the preferred reading but sometimes modifies it in a way which reflects their own position, experiences and interests. This could be a politically left wing audience believing that Batty is the hero of the film as he rebels against an autocratic establishment and shows the importance of community and interaction.
- *Oppositional reading* – the reader understands the preferred reading but does not share the text's code and rejects this reading in favour of an alternative frame of reference (radical, feminist, etc.) This could be a black American audience recognising similarities between the history of black oppression with that of the replicants and rejecting this future society where such discrimination continues to exist.

There are other oppositional readings but be careful as it is easy to go off in tangents with these.

