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Blade Runner: anatomy of a classic

A philosophical future-noir fable drenched in the heady perfume of death, Blade Runner is returning to cinema screens 33 years after its troubled birth.

The tale of grizzled bounty hunter Rick Deckard and his mission to execute a mutinous gang of replicants – synthetic biological androids who are barely distinguishable from humans – Ridley Scott's third film remains his most beloved and richly layered work. But does it still hold up decades later? And what can Blade Runner tell us about technology, politics, architecture, life, death and the human condition in 2015?

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Blade Runner (1982)

Blade Runner is saturated in melancholy, overshadowed by death and peopled by ghosts. Visually and sonically, it is awash with hauntological whispers.

In purely aesthetic terms, Blade Runner (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b69ac89d8>) remains one of the influential pop-culture creations of the modern age. It is certainly one of the most achingly beautiful, sumptuously art-directed films ever. The story takes place in a dystopian Los Angeles in 2019, a grungy industrial metropolis of deep shadows, low lights, constant rain and endless night. In the script, the location of the opening aerial panorama is listed as “Hades”, hinting that the lost souls in this story may already be dead and stranded in purgatory.

Ridley Scott (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9eee9506>) sketched many of the film’s design concepts himself with help from ‘visual futurist’ Syd Mead (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bb090e566>), production designer Lawrence G. Paull (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba19c7c9e>), art director David L. Snyder (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba8f89aac>) and special effects wizards Douglas Trumbull (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9f1e897c>) and Richard Yuricich



The Maltese Falcon (1941)

(<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1d44a92>). Working with old-school, pre-digital methods like miniature tabletop models and matte backdrop paintings, the Blade Runner team concocted a Betamax retro-futurism that is as much steampunk as cyberpunk.

Vintage Hollywood film noir is a heavy presence in Blade Runner, as much for its paranoid fatalism as its striking high-contrast style. Deckard's trench-coated, gruff, laconic detective is a clear modern-day twist on Humphrey Bogart (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9f15818b>) or Robert Mitchum (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9f4307da>) in their hard-bitten gumshoe prime. Indeed, actor-turned-screenwriter Hampton Fancher (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2bb07b134e>) wrote the script with Mitchum in mind. Of course, the role eventually went to Harrison Ford (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9f9ac0f3>), but his world-weary performance still owes more to The Maltese Falcon (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6afa3da1>) than the Millennium Falcon.



Nighthawks (1942), Edward Hopper

Reaching back four decades into the past to help imagine a future four decades hence, the film's visual reference points include Edward Hopper's iconic 1942 painting Nighthawks, Miss Havisham's clutter-strewn bedroom in David Lean's classic Dickens adaptation Great Expectations (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6ab7c97b>), and Joan Crawford's vampish outfits in Mildred Pierce (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6b06e2b2>). The film's rousing score by Vangelis (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1c7ed1a>)



Great Expectations (1946)

throbs with strident analogue electronica, but also lonely jazz saxophones and bluesy echoes from the past. Blade Runner is saturated in melancholy, overshadowed by death and peopled by ghosts. Visually and sonically, it is awash with hauntological whispers.

An Englishman in LA

Another reason Blade Runner has endured so long is the rich mythology surrounding its fractious gestation, a backstage drama which is now almost inseparable from the narrative on screen. A former commercials director fresh from shooting Alien (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6bbe2a40>) in London, Scott was an outsider in Hollywood at the time, his perfectionist methods clashing with his American cast and crew during the arduous all-night shoots in early 1981.

Ford was especially wary of his hard-driving British director. “It was a bitch working every night, all night long, often in the rain,” Ford recalls in Dangerous Days, an exhaustive three-hour documentary made for Blade Runner’s 25th anniversary in 2007. “All that Harrison had to do was trust me,” Scott argues in the Channel Four documentary On the Edge of Blade Runner, (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b84cee511>) “but Harrison’s not used to working that way.”

Director and star mainly clashed over whether Deckard himself is a replicant, an interpretation endorsed by a much-debated unicorn dream

Director Ridley Scott and Harrison Ford on the set of Blade Runner (1982)

sequence, which hints that his human memories have been artificially implanted. Scott has long believed that Deckard is an android. Ford disagrees. “That was the main area of contention between Ridley and myself,” Ford confessed on the BBC1 series Hollywood Greats. “I thought the audience deserved one human being on screen that they could establish an emotional relationship with.”

Scott’s original edit of Blade Runner went way over budget and running time, allowing producers Bud Yorkin and Jerry Perenchio to technically fire him from the project and impose their own cut. In panicky response to negative test screenings, they removed the unicorn sequence, added a romantic escapist ending and imposed a clunky explanatory voice-over, which Ford recorded through gritted teeth. But these changes were not enough to save the film at the box office. It opened to mixed reviews and lukewarm crowds, failing to recoup its swollen \$28 million budget.

But the passing of time, and the boom in home video formats, helped establish a growing cult around Blade Runner. Soon the film spawned its own mini industry of academic papers, documentaries, literary and cinematic homages. A decade later, its reputation was sufficiently rehabilitated for Scott to take back control and restore his original vision, firstly in the 1991 Director’s Cut and later the 2007 Final Cut. After no fewer than seven different edits, Scott’s unfinished symphony was finally complete. Stripped of voiceover and happy ending, this is the definitive version returning to cinemas.

Origin story

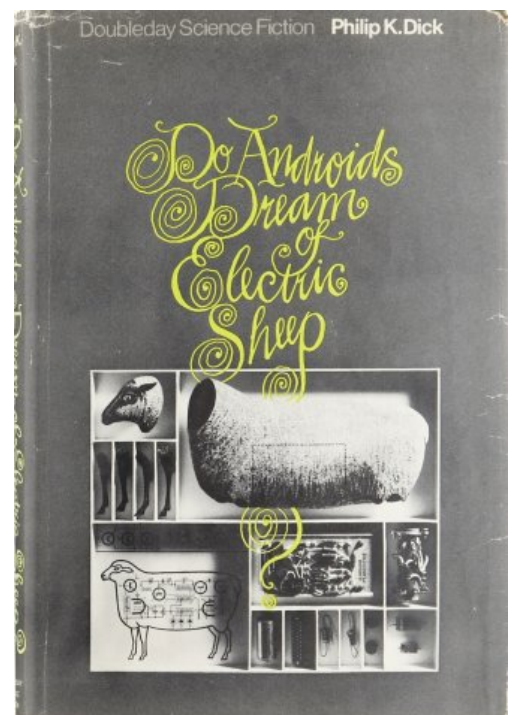
I literally came out in a state of shock. When I close my eyes I can still see that opening sequence... It's like being transported to the ultimate city of the future, with all the good things and all the bad things about it.

Philip K. Dick

The enduring cult surrounding author Philip K. Dick (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba14567ff>) may be another reason that *Blade Runner* still enjoys a high critical reputation as Scott's unassailable career peak. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, written at the height of the Vietnam war and haunted by the horrors of Nazi Germany, was a philosophical reflection on what it means to be human in an age of mass atrocity. The film's basic plot structure is surprisingly faithful to the book, though the differences are revealing of how Dick and Scott differed on the story's essential themes.

The novel takes place in San Francisco in the far-off futuristic year of 1992, on an ecologically ravaged Earth that is slowly crumbling into entropy in the aftermath of an apocalyptic war. The planet is also depopulating because of mass emigration to off-world colonies, but genetically damaged underclass humans – “chickenheads” – are forced to stay behind. Animals are dying out, and have consequently become vastly expensive luxuries, but synthetic pets are commonplace. A new Christian-style religion based on empathy, Mercerism, has developed a huge following.

In the book, Deckard is married, as is his chief android rival Roy Baty (renamed Batty in the film). Rachael, the beautiful replicant who forms an uneasy emotional bond with Deckard, is a synthetic human made by the Rosen Corporation (Tyrell in the film). She is also an exact twin of Pris, one of Deckard's targets for assassination, which complicates their affair.



Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? US first edition cover

Sex between humans and androids is illegal in the novel, but that does not prevent Deckard and Rachael from sleeping together. The final battle between Deckard and Baty is much less dramatic than in the film, but it still plunges the bounty hunter into anguished soul-searching about the fuzzy gap between humans and androids. At the close of the book, when Mercerism is exposed as a hoax, Deckard begins to question his own capacity for empathy.

“The purpose of this story as I saw it was that in his job of hunting and killing these replicants, Deckard becomes progressively dehumanised,” Dick told *Devo* magazine in 1981. “At the same time, the replicants are being perceived as becoming more human. Finally, Deckard must question what he is doing, and really what is the essential difference between him and them? And, to take it one step further, who is he if there is no real difference?”

When Dick wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* his key inspiration was not the dawning age of robotics but the real-life Nazi mass murderers whose diaries he had studied for his previous novel *The Man in the High Castle*. “For me android is a metaphor for people who are physiologically human but behaving in a non-human way” he told Paul M. Sammon, the author of *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, in 1981. “I use such terms as android and robot, but I’m really referring to a psychologically defective or malfunctioning or pathological human being.”

Scott found Dick’s novel “too theological” and took the story in another direction. For his part, Dick was scornful of Fancher’s early script, branding it “Philip Marlowe meets the Stepford Wives”. He was deeply suspicious of the film business in general, telling Sammon: “You would have to kill me and prop me up in the seat with a smile painted on my face to get me to go near Hollywood.”

All the same, novelist and filmmakers had a friendly meeting at a Santa Monica screening room in late 1981. Dick was hugely impressed by a preview showreel of visual effects footage from *Blade Runner*. “It was the greatest 20 minutes I ever experienced,” he gushed to Sammon. “I literally came out in a state of shock. When I close my eyes I can still see that opening sequence... It’s like being transported to the ultimate city of the future, with all the good things and all the bad things about it.”



At the screening, Dick and Scott cordially disagreed about the meaning of *Blade Runner*. The author explained that he conceived the androids as soulless, selfish, homicidal sociopaths who challenge Deckard’s sense of his own humanity. But as Dick later told Sammon, “Ridley said he regards that as an intellectual idea and he was not interested in making an esoteric film.” Instead, Scott described the replicants more as superheroes who cannot fly. Dick was left speechless.

The replicants

Hauer pushed to make Batty a romantic, flamboyant, sexualised dandy: half-rock star and half-terrorist.

Blade Runner certainly has far more sympathy for the devil than Dick's cautionary novel. The film first presents Batty (Rutger Hauer (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b9fccff0b>)) as a Luciferian fallen angel straight out of Milton's Paradise Lost, drawing the parallel himself by mischievously misquoting William Blake: "Fiery the angels fell / deep thunder rolled around their shores..." He also exacts diabolical revenge on Tyrell (Joe Turkel (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba29142bd>)), the god-like corporate father figure who shuns the replicant's desperate demands for an extension of his four-year lifespan, gouging out his eyes before murdering him. Frankenstein meets Oedipus.



Blade Runner (1982)

But Batty later displays real tenderness and compassion when his android lover Pris (Darryl Hannah (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba0ec1d2b>)) is killed. In the final rooftop battle with Deckard, he ultimately chooses to save the bounty hunter's life despite his superior strength. Jamming a nail through his hand to keep his failing internal systems running for a few extra minutes, Batty goes from symbolic devil to Christ-like figure, sacrificing himself for mankind's sins and thus proving himself morally superior to Deckard. "You are kind of rooting for both of them," Scott says in On the Edge of Blade Runner, "but you are really feeling tragically concerned and sorry for the replicants."



Blade Runner (1982)

Hauer persuaded Scott to let him write his own poetic lines for Batty's death scene, the celebrated "tears in rain" speech. From the moment he was cast, Hauer pushed to make Batty a romantic, flamboyant, sexualised dandy: half-rock star and half-terrorist. He ended up with far more charismatic screen presence than Ford's scowling anti-hero. "He's not the hero, he's the bad guy," Hauer says of Deckard in *On the Edge of Blade Runner*. "He gets a gun pointed at his head and then he fucks a dishwasher, and then he falls in love with her. It doesn't make any sense."

Sex and race in Ridley Scott's future vision

Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave.

With hindsight, the sexual and racial politics of *Blade Runner* certainly belong more to the late 1970s than today. Besides a few marginal background characters, all the women are replicants employed in male fantasy roles: Pris the "basic pleasure model" sex worker, Zhora (Joanna Cassidy (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba0ec4348>)) the scantily dressed exotic dancer, and Rachael (Sean Young (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba0d2812a>)) the icy femme fatale who swiftly surrenders to Deckard's bullying advances.



Blade Runner 1982

The single sex scene between Deckard and Rachael is uncomfortably one-sided, at least at first. A longer shot of their embrace, now available as an out-take, is more tender and erotic but still not wholly consensual. Scott admits this scene is “one of the least successful in the movie”. Both Ford and Young have expressed unease about it.

Even more strikingly, African-Americans seem to be almost entirely absent from the future LA of Blade Runner. The filmmakers reimagined the street-level city as a multicultural bazaar of Asian and Middle Eastern influences, mirroring then-current American anxieties about growing economic rivals to the East – wrongly in the case of Japan, but prophetically in the case of China. Edward James Olmos (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba1993287>), who plays Deckard’s mercurial police minder Gaff, also came up with a polyglot ‘cityspeak’ slang, combining elements of Hungarian, German, Japanese and other languages. The melting-pot notion of America permeates every scene.

Which only makes the lack of black faces on screen all the more baffling. And yet, on a metaphorical level at least, the renegade androids are clearly following in the footsteps of runaway slaves. “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it?” Batty muses as he dangles Deckard high over the city’s streets. “That’s what it is to be a slave.”

In his 2008 book *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, Adilifu Nama argues that the androids in *Blade Runner* are “symbolically black” figures in a futuristic allegory of the past. “As escaped slaves from an off-world site, replicants share the same socioeconomic status as that of enslaved Africans during America’s period of legalised slavery,” Nama writes. “*Blade Runner* blatantly references America’s racially exploitative past and imagines a return of the repressed.”



Blade Runner (1982)

Memory traces

As a cultural catalyst, the influence of *Blade Runner* is hard to overstate. In cinema alone, it launched a flood of Philip K. Dick adaptations, from *Total Recall* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b79d3411b>) to *Minority Report* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8245411d>) to *A Scanner Darkly* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8a870faa>). The grungy cyberpunk aesthetic and future-noir cityscapes of *Brazil* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b69aed562>), *Strange Days* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7d7357e1>), *City of Lost Children* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8ae93e16>), *The Fifth Element* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7f13695f>), *Twelve Monkeys* (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7dfb1b96>), *The Element of Crime*

(<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b69473e49>), Dark City, (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7f3803ae>) the Matrix (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b81295544>) trilogy and many more all owe a debt to Scott's sumptuous sci-fi symphony.

Dark love stories about human males falling for synthetic females have also become commonplace since Blade Runner, most recently Spike Jonze's Her (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/527c29bccb748>) and Alex Garland's Ex Machina (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/54b7d99e194cf>). Garland also adapted Kazuo Ishiguro's novel Never Let Me Go (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b8d58e6f4>) for director Mark Romanek (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba101782e>) in 2010, a sombre near-future fable about human clones bred as organ donors who vainly fight for a few more years of life. More than any killer-robot blockbuster, these small cerebral films capture the yearning melancholy of Blade Runner, explicitly sympathising with their replicant heroes.

Of course, the big news for Blade Runner fans is that a belated sequel is now in production, without Scott but with Ford. Meanwhile, Spanish director Ion de Sosa has just made a minimalist version of Dick's original novel, titled *Androids Dream* (*Sueñan los androides*). Set in 2052, and shot among the high-rise apartment blocks of Benidorm, it consists of documentary-style vignettes of harmless replicants being brutally 'retired' in shops, restaurants and nightclub toilets by a steely human bounty hunter. Dick's morally troubled anti-hero is reborn as a fascist Terminator, coldly gunning down women and babies. De Sosa leaves the audience to fill in their own political subtext.



Sueñan los androides (2014)

Blade Runner's influence on broader pop culture is also immense. It spawned numerous comic books and computer-game spin-offs, plus three sequel novels by K.W. Jeter, and has long been cited as an influence by cyberpunk author William Gibson. The Vangelis score also has its own separate cult following: Massive Attack have performed it live while Tricky, Dillinja and many others have sampled it. Band names borrowed from the film include The Tyrell Corporation, the Replicants and Basic Pleasure Model.

Thinking about the future

21st century LA is awash with chain-smokers, puffing away both indoors and out. Surely the most outlandishly inaccurate prediction in the whole movie.

As political and technological prophecy, Blade Runner has a more mixed scorecard. On his DVD commentary for *The Final Cut*, Scott describes the backdrop to the film as "industrial imperialism", a dystopic world "run and owned by three corporations". In a recent Guardian feature (<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/14/why-blade-runner-is-timeless>), Michael Newton writes "One of the good guesses Blade Runner made about the future is that it would

not be governments, but corporations who would really run things. Indebtedness to commercial power depersonalises the people in this film: more even than dispensable workers, the replicants are not makers of the product, they are the product.”

But androids do not walk among us yet. Four years from the fictional future of the movie, the science of robotics is now sufficiently advanced for Stephen Hawking to warn recently that full artificial intelligence “could spell the end of the human race”. We have mapped the human genome and cloned Dolly the sheep, but synthetic replicants are still many decades or even centuries away.

Sadly, flying cars are also still the stuff of dreams, though the Slovakian company Aeromobil (<http://www.aeromobil.com/>) promises to go into mass production this decade with their sleek, gorgeous, Blade Runner-ish vehicle. Many of the film’s other analogue-age gadgets, like clunky wire-frame computer graphics and video payphones on street corners, now belong to a future that has long since passed. Even more anachronistically, 21st century LA is awash with chain-smokers, puffing away both indoors and out. Surely the most outlandishly inaccurate prediction in the whole movie.



Metropolis (1927)

Architecturally, Blade Runner continues to spill out beyond the screen and shape the contemporary built environment. The film’s infernal cityscape was partly inspired by the ICI Wilton chemical works close to where Scott grew up on Teesside in northeast England, as well

as “Hong Kong on a bad day”. But the design team also drew on the work of Italian Futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Sant%27Elia), the socially stratified high-rise citadel of Fritz Lang (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2ba17a710d>)’s silent-movie classic Metropolis (<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b6b0544c6>), and the fantasy urban vistas of French comics artist Jean ‘Moebius’ Giraud – indeed, Scott invited Giraud to join the production, but he declined as he was already busy with another film project.

Scott also filmed at some iconic Art Deco locations in LA. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Mayan-influenced Ennis House stood in for Deckard’s apartment, while the cavernous Union Station became police headquarters. Meanwhile the landmark Victorian-era Bradbury Building played itself, but was transformed into the semi-derelict apartment block where Deckard and Batty stage their final battle.

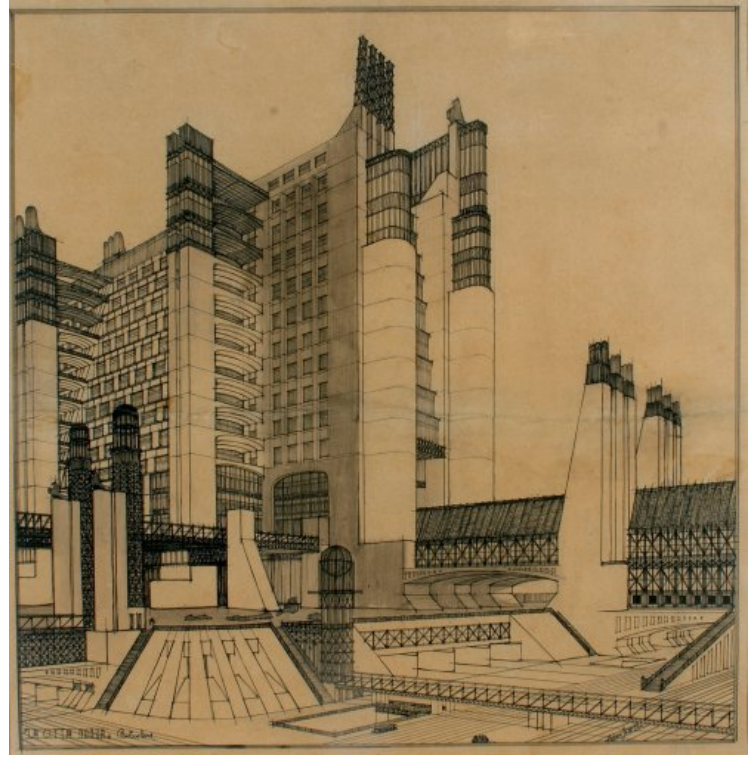
By retro-fitting the much-filmed New York street set on the Warner Bros. back lot with a mash-up of past and future elements, Blade Runner helped envision the deconstructed time-warp style that would come to define architectural postmodernism – or “crunchy comic-book architecture”, as Scott calls it. The teeming street markets, monumental

skyscrapers and billboard-sized TV screens also proved prophetic of 21st century urban life, especially in booming Asian mega-cities. “In Shanghai certainly, the way urban development is going, Syd absolutely had it nailed,” claims Scott in *Dangerous Days*.

The key building in *Blade Runner* is the monumental triangular hulk of the Tyrell Corporation headquarters, a knowing throwback to the pyramids and ziggurats of ancient Egyptian, Aztec and Mesoamerican civilisations. Towering triangular structures have always been expressions of power, both financial and spiritual. Today they find their echo in Orwellian edifices like the Luxor casino hotel in Las Vegas, the Shard in London, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai or the Ryugyong ‘hotel of doom’ that looms over Pyongyang in North Korea. All were built after *Blade Runner*.

End game

In an early draft of the script, Batty kills a replicant Tyrell while the real one sleeps in a cryogenic sarcophagus at the apex of the pyramid, awaiting resurrection like some 21st-century pharaoh. Behind all its visual fireworks, mortality is the story’s central theme, and another reason why *Blade Runner* still strikes a universal chord today. “Too bad she won’t live,” Gaff tells Deckard, a sly reference to his affair with Rachael. “But then again, who does?”



House with external elevators (1914), Antonio Sant'Elia

Everybody in Blade Runner is haunted by mortality, not just the replicants. Initially reluctant, Scott himself only agreed to direct the film after his older brother Frank died of cancer, reasoning it would be a “quick fix emotionally”. In March 1982, Philip K. Dick was felled by a fatal stroke at the age of 53. He never got to see the finished movie.

Drenched in death, Blade Runner is a dark vision of the future, but Scott’s definitive Final Cut ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Mortality is inevitable, but before it comes, empathy and trust and love are possible, even between human and android. At the end of his killing spree, Deckard is no longer raging against the machine. Because, deep down, maybe he is the machine.



Blade Runner (1982)

In cinemas

The BFI release of Blade Runner: The Final Cut (</whats-on/bfi-film-releases/blade-runner-final-cut>) is in cinemas

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