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# Visions of the Future:

An exploration of the visual and thematic worlds of  
*Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*.

## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between the two feature-length *Blade Runner* films, placing a certain focus on areas of aesthetic, design, and thematic content with the aim of reaching new insights into the social, cultural, and ideological contexts in which the films were made. Each subchapter explores the films from a different perspective leading up to chapter IV, in which I consider the films in relation to the cultural theory of capitalist realism. Here I broaden the focus of the text to examine cinema's symptomatic and productive relationship to cultural processes, and how our visions of the future possess the power to impact what it will become.

KEYWORDS: *Blade Runner*, postmodernism, capitalist realism, cyberpunk.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

“How urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of strange new hallucinatory exhilaration — these are some of the questions that confront us.”

Frederic Jameson,  
*Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*<sup>1</sup>

## Purpose and Method

As Scott Bukatman says, *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982) is all about vision. In the film, vision is *the* core motif and the concept that “both makes and unmakes the self”.<sup>2</sup> It is also the medium through which we encounter the film world in all its incredible, and terrible, detail. Futuristic and dystopian narratives are often distillations of the hopes and anxieties of their time and this film is no exception. Through its analysis, we may learn a great deal about the social and cultural environment in which it was made. The visual language of *Blade Runner*’s futuristic dystopia is one that has influenced Science-Fiction film and media for an entire generation, but it is also at its core a product of the 1980s. The rather unique form and status of this enigmatic cult classic makes it a somewhat unlikely object for a sequel. Nevertheless, three and a half decades after the film’s release one appears. This fact gives us the opportunity to, through the comparison of these two texts, gather an idea of how the cultural, aesthetic, and ideological context has developed in the interim. What changes have occurred? How do these films relate to each other? And how does the sequel affect our view of the original film?

The aim of this essay is therefore to explore the relationship between the two feature-length *Blade Runner* films, placing a certain focus on areas of aesthetic, design, and thematic content, in the hopes that we, through their juxtaposition, might reach new insights into the social, cultural, and ideological contexts in which they were made. The essay is built around four separate chapters, each containing three to four subchapters. The introduction gives a brief account of the films, their narratives, and their reception, including a dive into the matter of the many versions of the 1982 film and which of these shall be the essay’s point of reference. I also take some time to explore the films’ relationship in an adaptational and

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<sup>1</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Bukatman, Scott. *Blade Runner*, 2nd edition. London: BFI Publishing, 2012, p. 13.

intertextual sense, establishing *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017) as part of a larger trend of Hollywood revisiting the 1980s and problematizing the notion of establishing a true canon of the *Blade Runner* narrative.

The second chapter explores some of the franchise's aesthetic elements and their connection to the Cyberpunk genre and aesthetic movement. Furthermore, it delves into the differences between the films' design philosophies and their use of architecture. This chapter also contains the subchapter: 'From Neon to the Hologram', in which I chronicle the shift within the Cyberpunk aesthetic where the once extensively used neon lights have been replaced by digitally animated holograms. In the third chapter, I explore the role and treatment of race and ethnicity in both films, as well as the allegorical meanings to be found in their depictions of slavery and the police force. Furthermore, I reflect on *Blade Runner 2049*'s subversion of the chosen-one trope, connecting it to posthumanist theories. Lastly, the fourth and final chapter explores the same film as an example of a new post-postmodern cultural and social paradigm. Here I broaden the perspective of the text to explore the concept of 'capitalist realism' and how it relates to the cinematic medium.

The concept of postmodernism appears frequently in this essay. It is, therefore, necessary to briefly define this term and its function within the text. Postmodernism signifies both the cultural-historical era between WWII and the end of the 20th century, as well as the theoretical movement which serves to define and explain social and cultural developments within this era and beyond. Postmodernism began as a reaction against modernist ideals, modes of expression, and schools of thought, but the movement has since evolved well beyond its relation to modernism. Postmodern theory is multitudinous, difficult to define, and contains many separate theoretical movements such as posthumanism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, etc. It does, however, place a certain focus on cultural representations in and across media and often challenges traditional conceptions of subjectivity and identity, making it an incredibly fitting framework for the analysis of the *Blade Runner* films.<sup>3</sup> In this text I, following the academic precedent, will connect Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* to postmodern theories. Subsequently, I will explore what cultural paradigm and theoretical framework best fits Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*.

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<sup>3</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 2.

## Introducing *Blade Runner*

*Blade Runner* is a loose adaptation of the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by author Philip K. Dick. The narrative takes place in an imagined dystopian version of 2019 Los Angeles where large portions of humanity have left the planet and synthetic bioengineered humans called ‘replicants’ are created to provide a disposable workforce in the space colonies. Due to mutinies on these space colonies, all replicants are forbidden on planet earth and law enforcement entities – called Blade Runner Units – are responsible for hunting down and ‘retiring’ those who escape. We follow the Blade Runner Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) as he is tasked with tracking down and killing a group of four replicants of the NEXUS-6 model whose goal is to get access to Dr. Eldon Tyrell, their maker, in the hopes that he can extend their deliberately shortened life-spans. Deckard also meets Rachael, a NEXUS-7 prototype who has been made to believe she is human. During the course of the film Deckard is forced to reevaluate his conceptions of what humanity is and in the end, even begins to wonder if he is himself a replicant. The film ends with Deckard and Rachael fleeing the city together, the question of Deckard's humanity left unanswered.

As Constantine Verevis describes in his text *The Edge of Reality: Replicating Blade Runner* the film was at its theatrical release a failure in both commercial and critical terms and only later gained a cult following through the medium of home video.<sup>4</sup> When considering *Blade Runner* one has to be conscious of its many versions, the foremost of these being the *US Theatrical Cut*, the *Director's Cut*, and the *Final Cut*. The *US Theatrical Cut* which was released in 1982 included, at the request of studio officials and against the will of Scott and Ford, an extensive voice-over track where Deckard in true Noir detective fashion sardonically narrates his endeavors. This version also included a “happy ending” scene that was shot after the end of principal photography and interestingly included unused shots from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).<sup>5</sup> The *Director's Cut* was released in 1992. In this version, the voice-over track and “happy ending” scene were removed and a dream sequence of a unicorn running through a forest was re-inserted into the film, among other changes.<sup>6</sup> Scott was however not fully satisfied with this version of the film and a *Final Cut* was released in 2007. This version was the first to be transferred digitally and included a new audio mix, color grading, an extension of the unicorn dream sequence, subtle improvements in continuity and

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<sup>4</sup> Verevis, Constantine. “The Edge of Reality: Replicating Blade Runner”. In *Film Reboots*, Daniel Herbert and Constantine Verevis (eds.), 65-79. Edinburgh: University Press, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. 3rd edition. New York: Dey Street Books, 2017, p. 346 f.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 406 f.

AV synchronization through CGI, etc.<sup>7</sup> In this text I will be utilizing the *Final Cut* as my main point of reference for the movie as it is widely held to be the definitive version. I shall furthermore take after Verevis by hereafter referring to the film as *BR2019*.

The sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, henceforth referred to as *BR2049*, takes place 30 years after the end of the first film. Before its release, three short films were created to display key events leading up to the sequel. The first: *Blade Runner: Black Out 2022* (dir. Shinichiro Watanabe, 2017) shows a pro-replicant attack leading to an electrical systems failure on the US West Coast as well as the destruction of a number of physical archives. This attack is explained to have led to stock market crashes and food shortages as well as the total prohibition of replicant manufacturing leading to the collapse of Tyrell Corp. The second short: *Blade Runner 2036: Nexus Dawn* (dir. Luke Scott, 2017) shows how 14 years later a man named Niander Wallace, who has bought out Tyrell Corp. and monopolized food production through advanced gene modification, gains the right to reassume the production of replicants by creating a new NEXUS-9 model that is designed to be entirely obedient. The third short film: *Blade Runner 2048: Nowhere to Run* (dir. Luke Scott, 2017) introduces the replicant character Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista) and the events leading to his confrontation with the Blade Runner “K” in the opening scene of *BR2049*.

*BR2049* follows the character K (Ryan Gosling), who is a Blade Runner and a NEXUS-9 replicant as he, through his confrontation with Sapper, discovers the remains of Rachael, which are revealed to show signs of having gone through childbirth. K’s superior Lieutenant Joshi sees this revelation as an existential threat to the world order and tasks him with finding the child and destroying it. During the investigation, on which he is accompanied by his holographic partner Joi, he begins to believe that he himself is the lost child and seeks out memory designer Dr. Ana Stelline to find out if a childhood memory of his is real or artificial. At the same time, Wallace has found out about the child and tasks his replicant right-hand Luv with acquiring it to learn the secrets behind replicant fertility. K’s search leads him to a hotel in the ruins of Las Vegas where he encounters Deckard, who, after experiencing the death of Rachael and leaving his child in hiding, has been living as a hermit ever since. Luv, having followed K, apprehends Deckard and destroys Joi’s emanator, effectively “killing” her. K, who was left in Vegas, is rescued by a mysterious faction of replicant revolutionaries led by a woman called Freysa who informs him that the child is Dr. Stelline and not him. Devastated and alone, K decides to rescue Deckard, kills Luv, and is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 462 f.

mortally wounded in the process. The two men go to Dr. Stelline's lab and while Deckard goes inside to reunite with his daughter, K lays down on the stairs in the snowfall and dies.

Interestingly and quite symmetrically, Villeneuve's film, like its predecessor, was a major loss at the box office but has, according to *IndieWire*, found new life through DVD and Blu-Ray sales.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the 1982 film, *BR2049* gained immediate, though not unanimous, critical acclaim with five Academy Award nominations and two wins.

## Blade Runner and the 80s Remake

*BR2049* is hardly alone in the revisiting of a cult classic, on the contrary, it is symptomatic of a much larger trend of 1980s nostalgia in Hollywood; a topic which is explored by Kathleen Loock in her article *Retro-Remaking: The 1980s Film Cycle in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*.<sup>9</sup> This trend constitutes a film cycle which has proven to be quite lucrative and, therefore, uncommonly long lived as such cycles are generally said to only be financially viable for five to ten years.<sup>10</sup> The 80s remake cycle however, began in the late half of the 00s with films such as *Miami Vice* (dir. Michael Mann, 2006) and *Transformers* (dir. Michael Bay, 2007), had a peak at the start of the 2010s with *Tron: Legacy* (dir. Joseph Kosinsky, 2010), *The Thing* (dir. Matthijs van Heijningen Jr., 2011), *21 Jump Street* (dir. Phil Lord, 2012) among many others,<sup>11</sup> and has survived into the 2020s with titles such as *Top Gun: Maverick* (dir. Joseph Kosinsky) expected to be released in 2022. Concerning Cyberpunk and Sci-Fi films, *Alien: Covenant* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2017) and *Ghost in the Shell* (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2017) were released the same year as the *Blade Runner* sequel, 2021 saw the release of *Dune* (dir. Denis Villeneuve) and *The Matrix Resurrections* (dir. Lana Wachowski), and a live-action *Akira* (dir. Taika Waititi) is announced to be in the works.

Much has of course already been written about Hollywood's apparent reboot-mania, the reasons for which are not very difficult to discern. Remakes, sequels, and spin-offs make stable investments in a market where incredibly high budgets have become the norm. Loock writes: "Remaking is a profitable business because it minimizes costs and risks by repeating

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<sup>8</sup> Sharf, Zach. 'Blade Runner 2049' Finds Second Life on DVD and Blu-Ray With Over \$21 Million in 2018 Sales. *IndieWire*. 2018-04-11.

<https://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/blade-runner-2049-dvd-blu-ray-sales-top-seller-2018-1201951120/> (Accessed 2022-03-28).

<sup>9</sup> Loock, Kathleen. "Retro-Remaking: The 1980s Film Cycle in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema". In *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (eds.), 277-298. New York: University of Texas Press, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Klein, Amanda Ann. *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Loock, Kathleen. "Retro-Remaking: The 1980s Film Cycle in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema", p. 277.



existing stories and by putting presold products back on the release schedule.”<sup>12</sup> This practice is not unique to the 21st century, rather, it has been a method of American filmmaking since its early days. However, some say that its increased presence in the contemporary film market might be a symptom of financially, and otherwise, uncertain times as they lead producers to be more careful in their investments and cinemagoers to seek the comfort of familiarity.<sup>13</sup> This might then explain the longevity of the 80s remake cycle, as the global financial and political security has continued to worsen, thus continuing both producers and audiences desire for safe bets. Uncertain political and financial times further prove to be fertile ground for the Cyberpunk genre of storytelling, which possesses clear anti-capitalist overtones and matches the general pessimism felt by many over modern developments. This may also be the reason for *BR2049* being, as I would argue, more overtly ideological than its predecessor, in the same way that current environmental challenges have led to the film placing greater focus on themes and motifs concerning the climate.

At this point in the text, it appears fitting to spend some time clearing up the terminology surrounding remake culture and where *BR2049* fits within it. It seems fairly obvious to define the film as a sequel and not a remake, as it makes no attempt to re-tell the narrative of the original film, but rather extends the narrative further with a clear sense of continuity. When it comes to the term ‘reboot’ things get more tricky as the definitions of the term seem to vary among both journalists and scholars. Many define reboots by the underlying intention of reviving a greater franchise. In this case, the *Blade Runner* sequel can be seen as a failed attempt at a reboot as its production company Alcon Entertainment did buy the rights to produce further prequels and sequels but was deterred by the film’s poor performance at the box office.<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to their book *Film Reboots*, Constantine Verevis and Daniel Herbert admit that the film might be considered a reboot in this looser definition of the term, which is often utilized in popular media.<sup>15</sup> But they also present a much narrower delineation, quoting William Proctor who argues that a sequel cannot be a reboot as a reboot by his definition “wipes the slate clean and begins the story again from year one”.<sup>16</sup> *BR2049* seems therefore to be in an uncommon position as it is indisputably a sequel yet so much time has passed since its precursor that its creation still constitutes an attempt to reboot the franchise. There is, however, another term that might be more fitting than any other,

<sup>12</sup> Loock, Kathleen. "Retro-Remaking: The 1980s Film Cycle in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema", p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. 3rd edition, p. 482.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert, Daniel and Verevis, Constantine. *Film Reboots*. Edinburgh: University Press, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert, Daniel and Verevis, Constantine. *Film Reboots*, p. 2 f.

Proctor, William. Regeneration and Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot. *Scope: Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*. nr. 22, 2012: 1-19.

namely, the ‘legacyquel’. This term was coined in an article by Matt Singer where he, fittingly, discussed two similar appearances by Harrison Ford in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (dir. J.J. Abrams, 2015) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2008). Singer defines the ‘legacyquel’ as a film in which “beloved aging stars reprise classic roles and pass the torch to younger successors”.<sup>17</sup> This has become a pervasive trope in reboots as it has proven to be a successful way to simultaneously reward the fans of the previous media and lay the groundwork for a new franchise and a younger fanbase.

Perhaps this means that the idea of *BR2049* becoming the birth of a new franchise was always doomed, as for the torch to be passed to a young successor said successor needs to be alive by the end of the movie. There is, however, little to suggest that even such an ending would have done the trick. When it comes down to it, *Blade Runner* is something entirely different from the trademarkable intellectual properties of *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*. Its contemplative atmosphere and penchant for ambiguity simply does not lend itself to continuous serialization. Moreover, further commercialization of the *Blade Runner* text would be in conflict with its inherent criticism of a commodified future and could lead to the alienation of its core fanbase as well as a catastrophic loss of its perceived artistic value. Meaning that perhaps the commercial failure of the sequel was a win for the story overall. With this outcome *BR2019* fans received the best of both worlds; both getting an ambitious, complex, and, arguably, worthy addition to the *Blade Runner* universe and making it unprofitable, thus protecting it from potential contamination through further installments.

## Intertextual Relationships

The intertextual relationship between *BR2019* and its sequel can, at first glance, appear quite straightforward. In simple terms, *BR2049*, like all sequels, derives from and continues the text of its predecessor. Since the first film predates the latter by several decades one might find it hard to see how the relationship could go both ways but the fact of the matter is that there are textual and narrative elements of Villeneuve’s film that recontextualize or even fully transform former truths within the 1982 classic. For instance, it poses that Rachael was created for the sole purpose of bearing Deckard’s child and that their meeting and subsequent romantic relationship were both parts of a plan by Dr. Tyrell to achieve replicant procreation. Additionally, the second film further battles with the question of Deckard’s ontological status

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<sup>17</sup> Singer, Matt. Welcome to the Age of the Legacyquel. *ScreenCrush*. 2015-11-23. <https://screencrush.com/the-age-of-legacyquels/> (Accessed 2022-03-31).

by hinting at it through dialogue: “He wasn’t long for this world.” “How so?” “Something in his eyes.”<sup>18</sup> It even goes so far as to feign a reveal and then rescind it, deliberately toying with the audience and thus displaying the filmmakers’ consciousness of their power to impact the text and canon of the cult classic. The intertextual relationships become even more complicated when one considers *BR2019*’s existence as an adaptation of the novel by Philip K. Dick, and that the film’s many versions can all be deemed individual texts themselves; each informing and, at times, negating the reading of the others.

Consider for instance the *US Theatrical Cut*. Since it excludes the unicorn dream sequence it does not hint at Deckard being a replicant. It does, however, through voice-over, reveal that he is a divorcee. Most importantly, its happy ending scene poses that Rachael does not have a termination date and that beyond the squalor of Los Angeles lies vibrant and seemingly unharmed nature. What are we to make of these textual realities and what are their implications for the canon as a whole? The *US Theatrical Cut*, however much we may wish to disregard it, was the first official release of the film. Furthermore, for ten years it was the only released version and thus the uncontested vessel for the canon of the story. Now, after the release of the two later versions, many view it in a very different light. Here I am taking care not to generalize. Granted, the *Final Cut* is widely regarded as the film’s primary iteration, but what about the audience that grew up watching the original release on VHS. Is their conception of the narrative less correct than others? Is the narrative canon something factual, does it exist within the mind of the viewer, or is it perhaps created collectively through social interaction in fan communities? Without elaborating too much on these questions concerning the field of media fandom studies, I would argue that all three propositions can be true. In the case of *BR2019*, discussions within the fan community have certainly played a great part in developing a public notion of the canon. This is not to say that there cannot exist other, private canons in the minds of individual viewers.

If we wish to deconstruct this concept further we may ask; who decides what a film means? Famously, Ridley Scott and Harrison Ford have differing ideas on whether Deckard is a replicant or not, with Scott stating that he is and Ford firmly upholding the idea that he isn’t. The same divide exists among the audience. So, do we trust the director or the actor more when it comes to questions of who, or what, the character is? Alternatively, to employ Saussurian terms: In the *Director’s Cut* and *Final Cut*, the origami unicorn left by the character Gaff on Deckard’s doorstep is the sign, signifying his non-humanity, but this connection between sign and signified only exists if the film includes the unicorn dream

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<sup>18</sup> Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Blade Runner 2049* (Alcon Entertainment, 2017).

sequence. If not, the origami figure instead signifies the threat of Gaff's presence and the fact that Gaff was there but let Rachael live. The sign, therefore, does not possess a fixed meaning but is instead influenced by external factors, illustrating a basic concept of poststructural theory. With this in mind it is clear that establishing a true canon of *BR2019* is a fools errand.

Denis Villeneuve has stated that the *US Theatrical Cut* was the version he grew up watching but that he now prefers the *Final Cut*.<sup>19</sup> To him, the cuts are two different films. He states: “[*US Theatrical Cut*] is the story of a human falling in love with an artificial being, and the story of [the *Director's Cut*] is a replicant who doesn't know he's a replicant and slowly discovers his own identity. Those are two different stories.”<sup>20</sup> The director has actively chosen not to announce his film as being a continuation of one particular version, instead choosing to draw elements from both canons as well as directly from the book.<sup>21</sup> Therefore we do not, and will likely never, know what the true canon is, if Deckard is a replicant divorcée, or how long Rachael would have lived had she not perished in childbirth, and in many ways we are better off for it.

## II. THE LOOK

### Introducing the Franchise's Aesthetic Elements

Despite its poor initial reception *BR2019* came to have an incredibly strong and widespread influence on Sci-Fi film and media, especially in terms of its visual aesthetic and areas such as lighting and production design.<sup>22</sup> According to *GameSpot* and *IndieWire*, Influenced films include: *Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), *Akira* (dir. Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988), *Ghost in the Shell* (dir. Mamoru Oshii, 1995), *The Fifth Element* (dir. Luc Besson, 1997), *The Matrix* (dir. Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, 1999), and the Christopher Nolan Batman trilogy among many others.<sup>23</sup> What all this influence has amounted to is the birth of the aesthetic

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<sup>19</sup> Welch, Alex. Blade Runner 2049 Director On Which Version of Original Film Is Canon. *ScreenRant*. 2017-07-29. <https://screenrant.com/blade-runner-2049-original-movie-canon/> (Accessed 2022-04-26).

<sup>20</sup> Cecchini, Mike. Which Cut Is Blade Runner 2049 a Sequel To?. *Den of Geek*. 2017-08-25. <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/which-cut-is-blade-runner-2049-a-sequel-to/> (Accessed 2022-05-03).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. 3rd edition, p. 372.

<sup>23</sup> O'Falt, Chris. 5 Ways 'Blade Runner' Changed the Look of Sci-Fi Forever. *IndieWire*. 2017-10-03. <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/blade-runner-influence-cyberpunk-sci-fi-ridley-scott-1201883053/> (Accessed 2022-03-28).

Pruner, Aaron. Blade Runner's Legacy: 10 Movies And TV Shows Inspired By The Sci-Fi Classic. *GameSpot*. 2017-10-04. <https://www.gamespot.com/gallery/blade-runners-legacy-10-movies-and-tv-shows-inspired-by/2900-1519/> (Accessed 2022-06-02).

connected to the literary movement known as Cyberpunk.<sup>24</sup> This sub-branch of Science-Fiction got its name from an eponymous short story by Bruce Bethke in 1983,<sup>25</sup> though it more commonly attributes its literary origin to the 1984 novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. The movement does however owe many of its aesthetic as well as thematic elements and motifs to Philip K. Dick as well as the original *Blade Runner* film.<sup>26</sup> Cyberpunk's perhaps most central motif is the futuristic, dystopian city which, like *BR2019*'s Los Angeles, is often presented as vast, dark, crowded, multicultural, hyper-technological, and highly corporate. At the movement's core are themes of morality and humanity in the face of transhuman technology and class oppression. *BR2019* constitutes the essential definition of a Cyberpunk film but the franchise's *Mise-en-Scène* is more complex and multifaceted than that of many of its progeny. Here I shall present some of the facets of both films' visual language, starting with *BR2019*.

*BR2019* is stylistically a marriage of Science-Fiction and Film Noir. Traces of Film Noir are apparent both in the film's lighting and cinematography as well as its characters and general narrative. It is also a clear influence on the film's depiction of the police; a subject which I elaborate on in chapter III. I have already mentioned the film's central motif of the futuristic megalopolis which according to Scott was inspired by his experience of New York,<sup>27</sup> but which more plainly draws its influence from East-Asian cities such as Tokyo and Hong Kong. In this city, flying cars and blimps navigate the misty and polluted air between screen-covered high rises while herds of people populate the dark and filthy streets beneath. Crucially, the advanced technology of the film world is not visible in the cityscape where all vehicles, objects, and buildings are in various states of decay. The eccentricities of the design of objects and environments in the world of *BR2019*, the bulkiness of electronics and vehicles, and the dusty impracticality of the Voight-Kampff machine, is not only a consequence of the film being created in the early 1980s but also stem from the idea that the funding and creation of new technology had been moved off-world, forcing those who remained to make do with electronics and cars that were up to twenty years old.<sup>28</sup> The aesthetics of the city are of course also largely the product of design work by conceptual artist and the film's so-called "Visual futurist" Syd Mead, whose art imbues the film world with a very specific flavor of 80s retro-futurism. Furthermore, *BR2019* takes many cues from Fritz

<sup>24</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. 3rd edition, p. 373.

<sup>25</sup> Murphy, Graham J. "Cyberpunk and Post-Cyberpunk" In *The Cambridge History of Science-Fiction*, Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (eds.), 519-536. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 519.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 523.

<sup>27</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Deutelbaum, Marshall. "Memory/ Visual Design: The Remembered Sights of Blade Runner" *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 17, nr. 1, 1989, p. 66.

Lang's iconic film *Metropolis* (1927). This is not only evident in the cityscape and its architecture but also in the reconstruction of specific shots from the film. The visual world of *BR2019* is however not merely filled with cool tones and neon lights. At its technological center stands the Tyrell Corp. buildings, first presented in sunrise resembling ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia; their interior is likewise reminiscent of the halls of a pharaoh in a historical epic. Tyrells living quarters inside the building could just as well belong to a Stokerian vampire with a taste for the baroque. Further, the character J.F. Sebastian brings with him aesthetics of the circus or a cabinet of curiosities with his collection of dolls, animatronics, and bio-robotic experiments.

The artists, art directors, and production designers of *BR2049* had the privileged but daunting task of honoring the cult classic's visual language while designing an environment 30 years in its future. Needing both to satiate the many vocal and passionate fans of the first film, and to align with the recognizably minimalist sensibilities of their director; Denis Villeneuve. The result is a more atmospheric, much less crowded world space that leans increasingly toward brutalist architecture as well as a cleaner design and an at times vibrant but minimalist color scheme. New environments are added to the film world such as the vast landfills of dystopian San Diego, the intensely orange haze of the radioactive ruins of Las Vegas, the tomb-like interior and archive of the Wallace Corp. building, and the great sea wall protecting Los Angeles from the rising tides of the pacific ocean. Furthermore, the film brings with it new motifs such as that of old Hollywood stars, holograms, the concept of trees, as well as religious imagery through the dialogue of Wallace, the main antagonist.

## The Architectural Cityscape

Architecture is an essential, though sometimes overlooked, part of the cinematic visual toolkit. It can be used by production designers to tell stories, convey atmospheres, and build characters; to create entirely new worlds, or to ground fantastical narratives in realism. It is a language that, often subconsciously, informs the audience's experience of the film world, and in the *Blade Runner* franchise, architecture is an altogether integral part of the now iconic visual environment.

*BR2019* is a film that embodies the postmodern spirit not just narratively but visually as well. The film's *Mise-en-Scène* was built around a core philosophy of 'retro-fiting' and 'accumulated progress'; the idea that buildings were not demolished, but continuously

stacked on top of each other or nestled in between.<sup>29</sup> This meant that elements of all styles and periods were free to be used in the construction of Los Angeles, 2019. This sense of having access to all of history at once is one of the many aspects which scholars have used to indicate the film's connection to postmodernity. Furthermore, it allowed the production to feature existing architectural landmarks as some of the film's core locations. The largest of these, and of most renown, being the Bradbury Building, which serves as the residence of J.F. Sebastian and the setting of the film's dramatic climax.<sup>30</sup>

The Bradbury Building by architect Sumner Hunt was completed in 1893 and has since been an iconic feature of the city and a setting for Film Noir classics such as *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974), *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944) and *D.O.A.* (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1950), as well as films like *The Artist* (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) and *(500) Days of Summer* (dir. Marc Webb, 2009) among many others. It figures in *BR2019* as a desolate ruin of its former self and as an homage to, and pastiche of, its Film Noir history. Adjacent buildings such as the Million Dollar Theatre and Grand Central Market are additionally used in exterior scenes, the latter being the location where Deckard hunts down Zhora. Another famous LA movie landmark is the 2nd Street Tunnel, known for its appearance in innumerable films, music videos, and commercials. The tunnel figures shortly in the film after the replicant Roy Batty has killed Dr. Tyrell. Other locations include the Union Station, which serves as the interior of the police building, and Deckard's apartment, which is in part filmed at, and otherwise modeled on, Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House.<sup>31</sup> These architectural elements of the film's *Mise-en-Scène* grant the film both a grandness of scale and historicity of the film world. They further place the story, not just narratively but also perceptibly, in Los Angeles.

This sense of spatial connection to the real world is somewhat lacking in the following film which was mainly shot in Budapest, Hungary. According to *Vanity Fair*, the production team "decided to build as many of the film's sets as possible –about 90 percent in total–", to maintain control over the film world.<sup>32</sup> The film does, however, use Budapest locations such as the Stock Exchange Palace by architect Ignác Alpár, which appears as the deserted Las Vegas casino where K and Deckard first meet.<sup>33</sup> Production designer Dennis Gassner is

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<sup>29</sup> Deutelbaum, Marshall. "Memory/ Visual Design: The Remembered Sights of Blade Runner" *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 17, nr. 1, 1989, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Sammon, Paul. *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. 3rd edition, p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, Julie. The Unlikely Inspiration Behind Blade Runner 2049's Futuristic Design. *Vanity Fair*. 2017-10-24. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/blade-runner-2049-production-design> (Accessed 2022-04-08).

<sup>33</sup> Zeller, Oliver. "Redesigning the Future". *Mark Magazine*. no. 70, 2017-10-03, p. 129.

otherwise secretive concerning potential locations saying: “the fun part is picking it out”.<sup>34</sup> Budapest was deemed fitting on account of its prevalence of Renaissance and Art Nouveau architecture, as well as its Brutalism.<sup>35</sup> In another interview, Gassner explains: “I always like to find a touchstone word to describe the film, so when I first met Denis [Villeneuve] I asked him what that was for this movie. He thought for a second and then said, ‘Brutality.’”<sup>36</sup> Brutality and brutalism are indeed more integral to the second film’s visual style. This is justified by the idea that by 2049, the climate has worsened to the degree that the acid rain has turned to snow and the earth is effectively “evolving into an ice age.”<sup>37</sup> For the art department, this meant that the architecture of the city had to appear able to withstand the elements. This approach is a contrast to the environment of *BR2019* where the architecture is crumbling and the rain is pouring into the atrium of the Bradbury Building.

The philosophy of brutality was likewise applied in the design of props, costumes, and lighting. The first piece to be conceived for the film was the LAPD spinner, designed by Gassner, which in the first film somewhat resembles a race car but in this film is more reminiscent of a gun or an exhaust vent. Syd Mead, who was the designer behind the original spinner reportedly returned as a concept artist for the sequel, though in a much smaller capacity than in 1982.<sup>38</sup> The film also features a new LAPD Building which appears as a massive, authoritarian, overturned cone; in some ways a reversal of the pyramids of Tyrell Corp, and an unmistakable turn from the Spanish Colonial Revival style of the Union Station. The interior of the Tyrell Building, now home to the Wallace Corporation, is likewise given a new look, though it preserves the warm color palette, ancient Egyptian atmosphere, and stone-centered materiality. K’s shoebox apartment is depressingly austere and widely different from the atmospheric, ornate space where Deckard resides in *BR2019*, although the tiles in K’s kitchen are meant to pay homage to the Mayan revival style blocks of Ennis House. It is a space perhaps more narratively fitting a replicant Blade Runner, especially one of the less individualistic NEXUS-9 models.

K’s apartment and the interior of the LAPD Building share a visual syntax that is foreign to, and very much in opposition with the design philosophies of the first film. Both spaces are sterile and monochrome with a sense of a coherent industrial design more fitting a spaceship than the crumbling city of dystopian Los Angeles. In fact, the film as a whole

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kadner, Noah. Production designer Dennis Gassner discusses the “brutal” environments of director Denis Villeneuve’s ambitious sequel. *American Cinematographer*. 2017-10-07.

<https://ascmag.com/articles/blade-runner-2049-designing-the-future> (Accessed 2022-04-06).

<sup>37</sup> Zeller, Oliver. “Redesigning the Future”, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 127.



displays a much less cluttered, decayed, and heterogeneous environment. A development which I consider a loss that disregards and thus undermines the stylistic philosophy that made the first film so very influential and yet unique in its genre. But which we can also view as a sign that the postmodern paradigm which so closely informed the first film's visual language no longer applies to the 2017 sequel, an idea that will be explored further in Chapter IV.

## From Neon to the Hologram

The release of *BR2049* and *Ghost in the Shell* in 2017 made evident that a shift had occurred, establishing a new paradigm within the Cyberpunk aesthetic. This is the paradigm of the hologram. The Cyberpunk cityscape which formerly had been defined by the glow of thousands of multicolored neon signs has now been overtaken by computer-generated holograms that are moving, spinning, and even interacting with buildings and people. In this subchapter, I shall elaborate on the place of neon signage in Cyberpunk visuals as well as its decline and how it relates to developments in the real world.

The prevalence of neon in depictions of futuristic cities originates in it being a defining feature of the visual profile of both Tokyo and Hong Kong. Video essayist Evan Puschack describes it as: “the bitter but beautiful light that signifies both the colorful radiance and the gaudy consumerism of modernity, the dark, dystopian side of which remains Cyberpunk’s basic focus.”<sup>39</sup> *BR2019* and the original *Ghost in the Shell* anime are two of the clearest and earliest examples of Hong Kong informing the visual aesthetics of Cyberpunk media. According to *The Guardian*, the use of neon signs in advertising became popular in the city during the 1950s and according to *Vox* the industry experienced a golden age in the 70s.<sup>40</sup> Both sources describe a competitive environment in which “business owner[s] tried to outmatch their neighbor’s neon signs, erecting ever taller and bigger billboards”, leading to the signs becoming so large and numerous that they “cascaded over the streets.”<sup>41</sup> This reality was reflected in the production design of *BR2019*, becoming one of its defining features. Neon is however nowhere to be seen in the sequel; production designer Dennis Gassner proclaims: “Actually, there wasn’t any neon in this film. It was all LED. That was just to keep it in a contemporary mode. Also, neon is extremely challenging to use, and it’s just not in

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<sup>39</sup> *AKIRA: How To Animate Light*, [online video], Nerdwriter1, 23 Nov 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf0WjeE6eyM> (Accessed 2022-04-06).

<sup>40</sup> Fernández, Eduard. Hong Kong’s fight to save its neon shimmer - a photo essay. *The Guardian*. 2018-07-25. <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/jul/25/hong-kong-neon-lighting-threat-chinese-regulations> (Accessed 2022-04-06).

*The decline of Hong Kong’s iconic neon glow*, [online video], Vox, 8 Aug 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdpEYzvi8pI> (Accessed 2022-04-06).

<sup>41</sup> Fernández, Eduard. Hong Kong’s fight to save its neon shimmer - a photo essay.

favor any more.”<sup>42</sup> He is correct. Neon is just not in favor anymore, not in cinema nor in reality. Neon pipes are traditionally shaped by hand by their own guild of glassworkers. Naturally, LED technology has proven to be much cheaper and more efficient. The conversion to LED combined with regulation of outdoor structures by the government has led to neon signage being an endangered art form in Hong Kong and there are now museums and organizations established to protect it as a part of the city’s cultural heritage.<sup>43</sup> As for Cyberpunk cinema, neon has somewhat gone out of vogue. No longer the futuristic signifier it once was, it has become decidedly retro-futuristic. To visualize the future we now have to look further, just beyond our current technological capabilities, and what we find there is holograms.

Three-dimensional holograms are certainly not new to Science-Fiction. Their first appearance in a film was in the now iconic scene in *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977) where the droid R2-D2 projects a holographic message from Princess Leia to Obi-Wan Kenobi.<sup>44</sup> Neither is it new to display them as advertisements within a cityscape, as this occurs in *Akira* (1988). *BR2049* is, however, the first time a hologram has been given a starring role. In the same way that the film moves on from the motif of neon lights and the idea of Japan as an economic superpower (see chapter III), so too has it moved on from the question of the possible humanity of replicants. The same question is now transferred to the hologram; Joi, though the answer this time appears to lean decidedly less towards the affirmative. Joi exhibits behaviors that could point to her possessing artificial intelligence, but that term is no longer, if it ever were, considered to be synonymous with sentience. The limitations of her form are primarily presented visually, as glitches, freezes, transparency, interface elements, etc. She has no existence without the hardware of the emanator or the code that makes up her being, although the same can be said for humans, our bodies, and our DNA. Towards the end of the film, K encounters an oversized, naked, and pixelated advertising version of her. At once elucidating both her existence as a commercial product and the intrinsic exploitation of the female form which she embodies.

The role of holograms in *BR2049* and *Ghost in the Shell* fits within a greater trend of interest in digital simulations and virtual reality in Hollywood as well as in popular discourse. This development largely stems from video game culture, which in recent years has

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<sup>42</sup> Kadner, Noah. Production designer Dennis Gassner discusses the “brutal” environments of director Denis Villeneuve’s ambitious sequel.

<sup>43</sup> Fernández, Eduard. Hong Kong’s fight to save its neon shimmer - a photo essay.

<sup>44</sup> Connor, Steve. Star Wars ‘Hologram’ may become TV reality. *The Independent*. 2010-11-04. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/star-wars-hologram-may-become-tv-reality-2124595.html> (Accessed 2022-04-06).

experienced a meteoric rise into the mainstream. Films such as *Ready Player One* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2018), *Spider-man: Far From Home* (dir. Jon Watts, 2019), and series such as *Black Mirror* (BBC, Netflix, 2011-2019), *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, 2013-), and *WandaVision* (Disney+, 2021) all explore possibilities and express fears of simulated realities. Narratives concerning visual illusions and simulated realities further play a surprisingly important role in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which effectively has established their current place in popular culture. A noteworthy distinction is that while most films depict the simulations or virtual worlds as being created and controlled by mega-corporations, in the MCU they are always the creation of individual characters, both good and evil. It is hard to discern if this increased interest in simulation theory and adjacent concepts is solely a phenomenon of pop culture or if it might be a symptom of larger developments within the social consciousness. I believe that one key cause simply is that the technology is advancing quickly in areas of virtual reality and video game simulation. Likewise, holographic technology is not at all far from becoming reality.<sup>45</sup> The popularization of simulation theory can also in great part be attributed to individual actors such as Elon Musk, who through tweets and statements almost single-handedly brought the subject into popular discussion. Furthermore, the interest in such concepts can be linked to the upsurge in virtual currency. It seems that more and more objects and phenomena that we interact with in everyday life are becoming virtual and intangible. Narratives of simulations and virtual realities serve as ways to communicate this through culture and media.

### III. THE THEMES

#### The Cultural Cityscape and the Aestheticization of Race

When we first meet Deckard he is presented against the backdrop of large neon signs bearing Chinese characters. He walks across the street and orders sushi and noodles from an Asian street vendor. Above him looms an enormous screen displaying the image of a Geisha ingesting a pill. *BR2019* presents a vision of postmodernity that is exceedingly orientalized. Both the film and the film world are overflowing with Oriental signifiers. In the revelatory article *Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: Naked Lunch, Blade Runner, and Neuromancer* Timothy Yu discloses the origins of postmodernity being connected with Asian imagery and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

presents an in-depth analysis of its function within the film.<sup>46</sup> Yu argues against Frederic Jameson's view that postmodernism is "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination."<sup>47</sup> Instead proposing that "Western conceptions of postmodernity are built upon continuing fantasies of – and anxieties about– the Orient."<sup>48</sup> Yu believes this origin is exposed in cinematic and literary portraits of the postmodern city, particularly within the Cyberpunk genre where he observes a common narrative of "racialized conflicts against orientalized backdrops".<sup>49</sup>

To understand the function of Asian signifiers within *BR2019* we must analyze the film in relation to its original temporal context. In the 1980s, American fear of communist China gave way to the fear of economic domination by Japan, spurred by the exponential growth of the Japanese economy as well as the purchase of American companies and real estate by Japanese conglomerates.<sup>50</sup> *BR2019* expresses these fears by presenting a future that is, according to Edward K. Chan, "defined primarily in terms of a threat to mainstream American whiteness posed by racialized ethnic minorities."<sup>51</sup> In other words: a future where America has become culturally colonized by the East. I say *culturally* colonized as the power structures of the film world remain almost exclusively Western. The cityscape of dystopian Los Angeles follows a clear vertical hierarchy where the street level belongs to the orientalized, however multi-ethnic, lower class. There are spaces in the middle such as the airspace and the apartments of white characters like Deckard and Sebastian. Lastly, there is Tyrell Corp. and its founder who quite literally lives at the top of the pyramid,<sup>52</sup> but who we still might consider subordinate to the people living high above in the off-world colonies. Yu notes that the city, which in reality has a large Chicano demographic, conspicuously lacks any presence of Latinx culture. The same might be said for the Afro-American population, of which there is no trace in the film. From this he draws the conclusion that the city is not a site of futuristic realism, built on "current California demographic trends", but a postmodern imaginary filled with oriental signifiers.<sup>53</sup>

The cultural cityscape of the sequel differs in several intriguing ways. Firstly it displays a much larger presence of American companies while the signs of middle eastern

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<sup>46</sup> Yu, Timothy. "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner', and 'Neuromancer.'" *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 4, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 45–71.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Yu, Timothy. "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner', and 'Neuromancer.'" p. 46 f.

<sup>49</sup> Yu, Timothy. "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner', and 'Neuromancer.'" p. 47 f.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 53, 57.

<sup>51</sup> Chan, Edward. K.. "Race in the blade runner cycle and demographic dystopia" *Science-Fiction Film and Television*, Vol. 13, nr. 1, 2020, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> Yu, Timothy. "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner', and 'Neuromancer.'" p. 52, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 57 f.

influence are notably fewer. Secondly, there has seemingly out of nowhere appeared a large number of signifiers connected to the CCCP. This appears to be a nod to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In which the Soviet Union still exists and is referenced several times. An interview with supervising art director Paul Inglis reveals that the idea was to move somewhat away from references to Japan, as it no longer embodies the impressive economic growth it once did, and instead to show more signifiers of influence from China, Korea, and India, the rising economies of the 2010s.<sup>54</sup> Edward K. Chan notes that there is more whiteness present in the film's crowd scenes, and suggests that this might be a calculated compensation for the racialization of the previous film.<sup>55</sup> He does however add that it is “decidedly not mainstream American whiteness but rather Eastern European.”<sup>56</sup>

When viewed with a critical eye it quickly becomes apparent that *Blade Runner* as a franchise has a questionable relationship with race. In the 1982 film, racified people serve as the dystopian backdrop to what amounts to an ‘allegorical slave narrative’ where all major characters are white.<sup>57</sup> Ethnicities are fetishized in that they are made a central part of the film’s aesthetic, but are given no actual agency or representation within the narrative. These issues are somehow only amplified in *BR2049*. While the preceding short films displayed an improvement in representation with multiple major characters of color, the sequel returned to a mostly white major cast. The characters of mixed or non-white actors are often left racially ambiguous as in the case of Joi, who is played by Latina actress Ana de Armas. In the screenplay, Joi is first described as “Goddess, girlfriend, geisha and, right now, goddamn bombshell,” meaning she is explicitly meant to be both racialized and highly sexualized.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the script describes the stairwell of K’s apartment as having “Pungent signs of ethnicity everywhere”, revealing the underlying biases which inform the depictions of race in the film.<sup>59</sup> Another inexplicable decision is the appearance of the questionably named character Mr. Cotton, who in the script is described as a ‘gelding’<sup>60</sup> and presented as the black master, and inferred abuser, of hundreds of mostly white and Asian child slaves. Mr. Cotton is later beaten by the protagonist. Chan writes of this: “The reaffirmation of whiteness over blackness [...] makes *2049* qualify as a retro-noir in a similar way to the original film.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Young, Liam. “Not For Us: Squatting the Ruins of Our Robot Utopia: An Interview with Paul Inglis, Supervising Art Director of *Blade Runner 2049*”. *Architectural Design*. Vol. 89. 2019, p. 128.

<sup>55</sup> Chan, Edward. K.. “Race in the blade runner cycle and demographic dystopia” p. 71.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> Fancher, Hampton and Green, Michael. '*Blade Runner 2049*'. Unpublished manuscript, 2017. <https://www.scriptslog.com/assets/scripts/blade-runner-2049.pdf>, p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> Fancher, Hampton and Green, Michael. '*Blade Runner 2049*', p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> A castrated male horse [Cambridge Dictionary].

<sup>61</sup> Chan, Edward. K.. “Race in the blade runner cycle and demographic dystopia”, p. 72.

Indeed, these patterns of racial insensitivity may, in part, stem from the first film's roots in the Neo-Noir genre.

It deserves mentioning that both *Blade Runner* films begin with a shot of a caucasian, blue eye. What this eye signifies is left to the viewer's interpretation; some say the eye belongs to Batty, as the film puts narrative focus on his eyes and eyesight, others view it as an all-seeing eye that is beholding the world. However, the likely unintentional effect of this is that both films from the very first shot symbolically assume a caucasian perspective.

## Allegory and Depictions of the Police Entity

“Every leap of civilization was built off the back of a disposable workforce. We lost our stomach for slaves. Unless... engineered. And I can only make so many.”

Niander Wallace,  
*Blade Runner 2049*<sup>62</sup>

With this one line, *BR2049* makes explicit both the *Blade Runner* narrative's connection to Marxist theory *and* its allegorical depiction of slavery. The ideological and allegorical content of the films seems to have had disproportionately little bearing over their critical and academic analysis. It is, however, impossible to deny and exceedingly relevant, even today. In the filmic universe, replicants are desperately fighting not only for their survival and liberation but, perhaps most poignantly, to be seen as equal to human beings. Furthermore, the police force's sole function within the narrative is to uphold systems of slavery and to hunt down and eliminate anyone who wishes to escape it. This mirrors the origins of American policing which, in the south, started as slave patrols who were tasked with doing just that.<sup>63</sup> These meanings within the films seem too specific and indiscreet not to have been deliberate, especially considering the Los Angeles Police Department's well-documented and oft-discussed history of racism.

When viewed through this lens, *BR2019* becomes an incredibly layered and striking critique of structures of policing in America, which grows even more powerful with the revelation that Deckard himself might be a replicant. Henry Kidney describes how “in the film we [...] see a continuation of the modern policing mentality. [...] The goal being to

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<sup>62</sup> Fancher, Hampton and Green, Michael. '*Blade Runner 2049*', p. 36.

<sup>63</sup> Waxman, Olivia B.. How the U.S. Got Its Police Force. *Time*. 2017-05-18.  
<https://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/> (Accessed 2022-04-26).

separate police from the citizens they ‘protect’ and the criminals they hunt.”<sup>64</sup> Further saying: “there’s debate around whether the Blade Runners are in fact replicants themselves, which only makes this enforced separation even more crucial, if they are.”<sup>65</sup> In the film, there is a clear enforced separation between humans and replicants, similar to the policing mentality separating cops from criminals. Deckard’s narrative can therefore be read as an allegory of a white policeman unlearning this mentality and combating his biases against criminals or black Americans. Conversely, in *BR2049*, K can be likened to a black police officer within a racist police force, who is forced to assimilate into, and kill to protect, a system that was built to continue the oppression of his people. We might ask ourselves what the film could have been like if K had been cast as African American.

Villeneuve’s film was created in the interim between the Ferguson riots against the killing of black Americans by the police and the 2020 global Black Lives Matter protests, meaning that it was released at a time when such issues were close to the surface of the social and political climate. By explicitly acknowledging these themes within the *Blade Runner* text, *BR2049* increases their significance and visibility within *BR2019*, becoming yet another example of the sequel affecting the reading of the original film. Of course, both films’ potential value as slave liberation narratives and critiques of the police state is thoroughly undermined by their problematic treatment of race, which I have elaborated on in the previous subchapter. It is tough to reconcile the narrative’s potentially radical, allegorical critique of racist societal structures with the insensitive and, at times, blatantly racist way ethnicities are used and portrayed in both films. Similarly, any Marxist commentary the films might wish to impart is muddled by their status as Hollywood products and, in the case of *BR2049*, by the production being placed in Hungary where they conveniently received around 30 percent in tax cuts and where there are no unions for film workers.<sup>66</sup>

## Post-Anthropocentrism and the Death of the Chosen One

Journalist Emily St. James writes that “the best thing about [*BR2049*] is what it isn’t”.<sup>67</sup> What she is referring to is the film’s thorough subversion of the ‘chosen one’ trope, which for so long has pervaded popular cinema and which can be found in storytelling traditions as far

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<sup>64</sup> Kidney, Henry. *Blade Runner: Slavery, Policing & White Supremacy. Fourth Floor*. 2020-11-12. <https://www.thefourthfloor.co.uk/culture/blade-runner-slavery-policing-white-supremacy> (Accessed 2022-04-26).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Why Hungary is a Haven for International Film Productions?. *Budapest Reporter*. 2021-01-14. <https://www.budapestreporter.com/why-hungary-is-a-haven-for-international-film-productions/> (Accessed 2022-04-27).

<sup>67</sup> St. James, Emily. The best thing about *Blade Runner 2049* is what it isn’t. *Vox*. 2017-10-09. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/9/16433088/blade-runner-2049-spoilers-review> (Accessed 2022-05-04).

back as ancient Greece. All the required setup is there; we have an oppressed and orphaned protagonist, a rumor of a special child of significant heritage with the potential to change the nature of the world order, and we have an object, the horse figurine, which would link said protagonist to this rumor, placing him in the middle of an old and momentous conflict. The expected next step would be to have K embrace his destiny, join the revolution and become the leader of the replicants.<sup>68</sup> However, just when we believe he is about to do just that, the film turns this trope on its head. K learns that he was mistaken, that the child is Dr. Stelline and not him, and that he *truly is* nothing more than who he believed himself to be in the beginning. Likewise, the audience learns that K is insignificant in the grand scheme of things, his only heroism being that he found himself in the right place at the right time and, crucially, made the right choice.

In a way, the idea of being the chosen one, of possessing an inherent destiny and potential for greatness, is an incredibly modernist and humanist notion. St. James writes: “The chosen one narrative [...] is all about considering the primacy of the self, trying to find a way to fit yourself at the center of the tale, rather than realizing that certain things are out of your control.”<sup>69</sup> The modernist era was largely defined by this urge, as by an optimistic belief in the potential of man. Then arrived postmodernism, and with it, posthumanism. There are many posthumanisms, but the area which I believe to be most relevant to this text is specifically that of post-anthropocentrism, i.e. the questioning of the belief that humans and their existence are the most important and central facts in the universe.<sup>70</sup> The debate around this way of thought is only growing, spurred on by the philosophical effects of climate change.

While both *Blade Runner* films place themselves within the posthumanist field of thought; exploring and challenging our definitions of humanity and its relation to technology, I believe that *BR2049*’s direct critique of the ‘chosen one’ narrative trope further aligns it with post-anthropocentric perspectives in particular. In the film, K possesses very little power. He cannot liberate the replicants. Neither is he able to defeat Wallace in any truly meaningful sense, only managing to temporarily prevent him from torturing Deckard and finding Stelline. He is only a very small piece of a larger puzzle. This being said, there does exist a ‘chosen one’ within the film’s narrative, it just happens not to be the protagonist. K learns that he is not the center of his own story, the same discovery that the human must make if, and when,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*. Anthropocentrism. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropocentrism> (Accessed 2022-05-05).



she assumes a post-anthropocentric worldview. This insignificance, this lack of agency over his own story not only makes the character that much more interesting, his actions that much more heroic, but also makes him a figure that the audience can empathize with. His desperate hope that he might be more than what he is, that he might have a greater purpose, that *he* might be ‘chosen’ connects with the viewer on both a personal and emotional level. Shane Bertram expresses: “[K] doesn’t connect with us by speaking to some fantasy of who we as the audience wish we were or could be, but to who, and what, we actually are, and to the nobility that it’s possible to find there.”<sup>71</sup>

## IV. POST POSTMODERNISM

### Capitalist Realism and Depictions of the Anthropocene

A greenish-blue eye opening, a spinner flying over enormous solar farms, endless soy harvesting fields, dystopian agriculture, and a dead tree. These are the opening images of *BR2049*. With these shots, the film introduces its environment and sets the tone for what dystopia looks like in the 21st century. The ecological themes that, in the first film, were only alluded to are now placed at the front and center of the narrative. In Villeneuve’s film, we are presented with the vast desolation and emptiness that surely will follow the global environmental collapse that lies before us. We are shown the great landfills, the dust-filled deserts, the artificial fields, and the monumental sea wall, built to protect the city against the rising ocean. Matthew Flisfeder argues that while *BR2019* reflected latent fears about a dystopia that was thought to be approaching, *BR2049* “responds to our current awareness of dystopia already realized – this is now the world in which we *live*.”<sup>72</sup> (emphasis in original)

Ample studies have been made, analyzing *BR2019* through the lens of postmodernism. This pairing is both logical and fitting, considering the film’s subject matter and the fact that it was released right at the moment when the theory first rose to prominence. Flisfeder expresses that it is the film’s “attention to history and subjectivity both formally and thematically” that makes it especially fitting for the postmodern lens.<sup>73</sup> According to him,

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<sup>71</sup> *Why You Love A Hero Who Doesn’t Matter | Blade Runner 2049*, [online video], Shane Bertram, 16 Aug 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JP3Rv-x3uI> (Accessed 2022-05-05).

<sup>72</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. “Blade Runner 2049 (Case Study)”. In *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, Anna McFarlane, Graham J. Murphy and Lars Schmeink (eds.), 144-150. New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 144.

<sup>73</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 89.

however, postmodernism is no longer the reigning paradigm. Flisfeder chronicles three events leading to what he views as the end of postmodernism, the first being the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992. The second being the 2008 market crash and the third, and final nail in the coffin being the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, which to him have come to signify the end of both the postmodern era and the 20th century as a whole.<sup>74</sup> So, if postmodernism truly is dead, then naturally we must find a new lens through which to view the second *Blade Runner* film. Flisfeder believes that he has found the answer.

In his case study of *BR2049*, he explores the ideological meanings within the film and how they relate to the state of the world post postmodernism. This is a world that he argues is “marked by discourses of the biopolitical posthuman subject” and the “looming threat of ecological catastrophe brought on by climate change”.<sup>75</sup> Flisfeder believes that K’s predicament as a conscious replicant and slave, aware of his artificial memories, aware of his exploitation by those in power, mirrors the condition of the 21st-century individual. He writes: “like K [...], we know that our condition is one of control and servitude, but we continue to submit. [...] Similarly, we are aware of the social, political, economic, and ecological problems that we face in our contemporary age and can avow this at a conscious level.”<sup>76</sup> He further likens K’s resignation to his fate to the resignation brought on by capitalist realism, which he believes is the paradigm that succeeds postmodernism and which will come to define the early 21st century.<sup>77</sup> ‘Capitalist realism’ is a term coined by theorist Mark Fisher, which he defines as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>78</sup> Fisher and Flisfeder both quote Frederic Jameson as he proclaims: “it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism”<sup>79</sup> This predicament of the mind is the reason why we find ourselves unable to enact any real change to battle the ongoing ecological collapse.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 15 f.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *The seeds of time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. p. 12.

The same has also been said by theorist Slavoj Žižek.

## The Cinematic Language of Capitalist Realism

Fisher uses Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* (2006) as an example of capitalist realism in cinema.<sup>80</sup> I would also present the films *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon Ho, 2013), *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021), the 'comedy special' *Inside* (dir. Bo Burnham, 2021), series such as *Years and Years* (HBO, 2019), and the aforementioned anthology: *Black Mirror* as being clear examples of cinematic portrayals of the same condition. By comparing these pieces of media, as well as *BR2049*, we get a picture of what elements make up the capitalist realist narrative. What these examples have in common are expressions of profound nihilism and pessimism as well as the search for human connection in a digitalized and/or unstable world. The very same expressions which I believe can be found at the core of post-2010 internet culture, hinting that this trend is not only a film cycle but a larger social and cultural evolution. This is not to say that Hollywood cinema and other popular media does not, even now, continue to exhibit many traditionally postmodern modes of expression, such as sarcasm, self-referentiality, metanarratives, and so on. Nor that there are any signs of these tropes disappearing or becoming less pervasive in the foreseeable future. This is perhaps because they largely align with the nihilism and pessimism of the new paradigm. We should not view capitalist realism as being in opposition with-, or an abrupt change from-, the postmodern. Flisfeder expresses that he views capitalist realism as "the final stage of the postmodern – late postmodernism, perhaps" or "postmodernism *to the extreme*" (emphasis in original), explaining that it is postmodernism that is the cause of the capitalist realist condition.<sup>81</sup> If we agree that capitalist realism could be the reigning social and cultural condition of the 21st century. What might then be the elements of its visual language? Perhaps this is the insight we may reach through the juxtaposition of the *Blade Runner* films.

First, we must acknowledge that there is a difference between media *embodying* capitalist realism through form and aesthetic, and media *portraying* the same condition through narrative and theme. The films and series which I have presented above all qualify for the latter category. This is not to say that some of them cannot also be capitalist realistic in form and aesthetic. What this means, however, is much harder to determine. Perhaps it is still too early to tell what a capitalist realist visual language might look like. Even so, I shall now present my predictions and informed guesswork.

If we are to use *BR2049* as a sign of what the visual language of capitalist realism might be, the answer appears to be this: Isolation, desolation, and brutality. The film exhibits

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<sup>80</sup> Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?*, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Flisfeder, Matthew. *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*, p. 18.

an empty clean-ness that is shared by many of the futures depicted in *Black Mirror*. It also, contradictorily, shares a brutality and grittiness with *Snowpiercer* and *Children of Men*. I would place *BR2049* within a trend of big-budget films moving away from the glossy, humoristic spectacle of postmodernist blockbusters and toward a more minimalistic, realistic, and art-house-inspired cinematic language. *Don't Look Up* and *Inside*, however, are examples of the opposite. The film and the 'comedy special', which through narrative and theme portray capitalist realism perhaps more directly than any other, are incredibly postmodern in their form, both displaying a deliberately noticeable composition and soundtrack, and occasionally adopting attributes of online video and news media. It seems then that capitalist realist cinema can, and *does*, swing both ways. On one hand, moving toward a more serious, artistic, and naturalistic visual style, and on the other: elucidating the absurdity of postmodern life and culture by pushing the peculiarities of its visual language to the extreme.

One could, however, say that most, if not all, films already embody capitalist realism, and have done so for a very long time. Moreover, we may ask ourselves if not all films are, at least in some part, complicit in causing the condition in the first place. In the introduction to his book *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro explains that in addition to being *symptomatic* of cultural processes, films are also *productive* in that they "participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them."<sup>82</sup> This, they do by generating subjectivity, or 'affect' in the audience. Meaning that perhaps Cyberpunk literature and cinema constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy that, by so thoroughly linking all visions of the future to late capitalism, has robbed us of our ability to imagine anything but. In this sense, *BR2019* is doubly complicit, as it set a precedent, and inspired further depictions of late capitalist dystopia. *BR2049* is likewise complicit as it aimed to revitalize the Cyberpunk genre and update it to fit 21st-century perspectives. Furthermore, it portrays the world post climate collapse in a cautionary, yet, scenic way. Giving the audience tools to imagine ecological destruction rather than systematic change. This, however, is not merely a Cyberpunk phenomenon. As such a large majority of globally influential films originate in Hollywood, they are all unavoidably imbued with the neoliberal perspectives which dominate the American political imagination. It seems, then, that even the most thorough cinematic criticisms of late capitalist society still effectively entrap the audience in a capitalist realist worldview.

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<sup>82</sup> Shaviro, Steven. *Post cinematic affect*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2010, p. 9.

## Redeeming Corrupted Visions of the Future

In the introduction to this essay, I proclaimed that futuristic and dystopian narratives are often distillations of the hopes and anxieties of their time. This is a fact that, upon second consideration, reveals wider, and more troubling implications. To put it in another way, we cannot truly know the future. Therefore all conceptions, depictions, and predictions of it are, at their core, little more than projections of the present. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they are any less accurate, since, as we have established in the previous subchapter, depictions and conceptions of the future hold a great power to influence it. What this means is that there is potentially a downward spiral where the future is always informed and molded by anxieties in the present. This line of thinking evokes a very pessimistic view of humanity's ability to change or influence the future in positive ways, which can only be combated by broadening the collective imagination.

Cyberpunk has a younger, more optimistic cousin called Solarpunk. Solarpunk is essentially the antithesis of Cyberpunk. While the latter depicts a future marked by ecological, societal, and moral collapse, Solarpunk instead envisions a future where humanity successfully coexists with nature, where buildings are covered with greenery and solar panels, and where technology figures as a helpful tool as opposed to a dehumanizing threat. Hannah Steinkopf-Frank writes: "At its core, [...] Solarpunk imagines an end to the global capitalist system that has resulted in the environmental destruction seen today."<sup>83</sup> Meaning that the core objective of this movement is to battle the effects of capitalist realism. Solarpunk, which started as a literary genre in early 2000s Brazil, and as an aesthetic on Tumblr in the early 2010s, has since grown into a social movement, and is, according to Steinkopf-Frank "on the precipice of wider influence", with Solarpunk themes figuring in *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018), and with production company A24 announced to be adapting the Solarpunk book *The Parable of the Sower* for the screen.<sup>84</sup> There is, however, a great risk of Solarpunk becoming no more than another aesthetic adopted by corporations as added commercial value or being used to greenwash companies and real estate. Still, if the movement rose to the mainstream of the social consciousness it could greatly impact the ways in which we imagine the future, thus potentially lessening capitalist realism's grip on our subconscious.

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<sup>83</sup> Steinkopf-Frank, Hannah. Solarpunk Is Not About Pretty Aesthetics. It's About the End of Capitalism. *Vice*. 2021-09-02. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wx5aym/solarpunk-is-not-about-pretty-aesthetics-its-about-the-end-of-capitalism> (Accessed 2022-05-11).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## V. CONCLUSION

How shall I conclude an essay with so many disparate points of interest? In this text, I have elected to explore the *Blade Runner* films from a wide range of perspectives in order to better illuminate their relationship to each other as well as various external contexts. I have touched on both commercial, intertextual, cultural, architectural, racial, allegorical, posthumanist, postmodern, and capitalist realist aspects. Through the analysis of these two films I have also had the chance to consider the Cyberpunk genre and aesthetic shifts within it, and to examine cinema's relationship with, and power to influence, cultural processes. I have concluded that *BR2049* is more overtly ideological than its predecessor because of the economically and politically unstable times in which it was made, that the intertextual relationship between the two films as well as *BR2019*'s many versions is complex and mutually transformative, and that it is difficult to fully determine a canon of the original film text. Furthermore, I have displayed key differences in the films' approach to aesthetics and design and concluded that these are symptomatic of a shift away from traditionally postmodern modes of expression. I have also explored the causes for the rise and waning of neon as a motif within Cyberpunk cinema and connected this to technological advancements as well as developments within the social consciousness.

At first glance it may seem that the *Blade Runner* sequel fails to recapture the 'muchness' of the cult classic, as so few films do. However, the analysis of the films' intertextual relationship has revealed the courage underlying the filmmakers' visual, narrative and thematic choices. Few filmmakers dare approach a sequel with as much originality and assuredness as to transform meanings within the original text and bring new ideas, themes, and motifs to their own film. Both films are of course not above criticism, especially in regards to their orientalism and treatment of race, the causes and manifestations of which are explored in Chapter III. Still, if one digs deeper they both hold within them powerful critiques of racist American policing structures and the exploitation of labor. They also prove fertile ground for the application of postmodern, posthumanist, and capitalist realist theories. I have concluded that *BR2049* is symptomatic of the capitalist realist condition, but also that it, along with most cinematic media, is complicit in causing the same condition by generating subjectivity in the audience.

The aim of this essay was to compare the two film texts in relation to each other as well as their cultural and social contexts to gain a better idea of what has influenced their

depictions of the future. In the end, the text has turned the other way around to explore how depictions of the future *influence us*, our cultures, and social contexts. The essay's examination of the *Blade Runner* films has revealed their potential to, through displaying visions of the future, capture the experience of being alive in our time; a time in which it seems that many experience a feeling of great powerlessness. Though one could interpret this analysis to mean that we, the audience, are helplessly at the mercy of cinema, which controls our imaginations and thus shapes our futures. A more hopeful interpretation could be that we, the creators, – by which I mean everyone – have the power to, through artistic mediums such as cinema, influence the imaginations of others and thus inspire positive change.

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## Films & Series

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|---|--|
| <i>(500) Days of Summer</i> (dir. Marc Webb, 2009)                                      | <i>Inside</i> (dir. Bo Burnham, 2021)                          |
| <i>21 Jump Street</i> (dir. Phil Lord, 2012)  | <i>Metropolis</i> (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927)                      |
| <i>Akira</i> (dir. Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988)   | <i>Miami Vice</i> (dir. Michael Mann, 2006)                    |
| <i>Akira</i> (dir. Taika Waititi, TBA)  | <i>Parable of the Sower</i> (dir. Garrett Bradley, TBA)        |
| <i>Alien: Covenant</i> (dir. Ridley Scott, 2017)  | <i>Ready Player One</i> (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2018)          |
| <i>Black Panther</i> (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018)  | <i>Rick and Morty</i> (Adult Swim, 2013-)                      |
| <i>Blade Runner</i> (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982)   | <i>Snowpiercer</i> (dir. Bong Joon Ho, 2013)                   |
| <i>US Theatrical Cut</i> (1982)   | <i>Spider-man: Far From Home</i> (dir. Jon Watts, 2019)        |
| <i>Director's Cut</i> (1992)  | <i>Star Wars</i> (dir. George Lucas, 1977)                     |
| <i>Final Cut</i> (2007)   | <i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i> (dir. J.J. Abrams, 2015)   |
| <i>Blade Runner: Black Out 2022</i> (dir. Shinichiro Watanabe, 2017)                    | <i>Terminator</i> (dir. James Cameron, 1984)                   |
| <i>Blade Runner 2036: Nexus Dawn</i> (dir. Luke Scott, 2017)                            | <i>The Artist</i> (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)             |
| <i>Blade Runner 2048: Nowhere to Run</i> (dir. Luke Scott, 2017)                        | <i>The Fifth Element</i> (dir. Luc Besson, 1997)               |
| <i>Blade Runner 2049</i> (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017)                                  | <i>The Matrix</i> (dir. Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, 1999) |
| <i>Black Mirror</i> (BBC, Netflix, 2011-2019)   | <i>The Matrix Resurrections</i> (dir. Lana Wachowski, 2021)    |
| <i>Children of Men</i> (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006)                                      | <i>The Shining</i> (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980)                |
| <i>Chinatown</i> (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974)  | <i>The Thing</i> (dir. Matthijs van Heijningen Jr., 2011)      |
| <i>D.O.A.</i> (dir. Rudolph Maté, 1950)   | <i>Top Gun: Maverick</i> (dir. Joseph Kosinsky, 2022)          |
| <i>Don't Look Up</i> (dir. Adam McKay, 2021)  | <i>Transformers</i> (dir. Michael Bay, 2007)                   |
| <i>Double Indemnity</i> (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944)                                       | <i>Tron: Legacy</i> (dir. Joseph Kosinsky, 2010)               |
| <i>Dune</i> (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2021)   | <i>WandaVision</i> (Disney+, 2021)                             |
| <i>Ghost in the Shell</i> (dir. Mamoru Oshii, 1995)                                     | <i>Years and Years</i> (HBO, 2019)                             |
| <i>Ghost in the Shell</i> (dir. Rupert Sanders, 2017)                                   |  |
| <i>Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull</i> (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2008) |  |