

Dystopia fatigue doesn't cut it, or, *Blade Runner 2049's* utopian longings

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A short symposium piece on *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve US/UK/Hungary/Canada/Spain 2017) is hardly the place to rehash the question that concerns many in sf studies, utopian studies and political activism – what is utopia? – and yet here we are. We have arrived here because *2049* and its predecessor, *Blade Runner* (Scott US 1982), not to mention that film's literary progenitor, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, are all overwhelmingly seen as expressions of a neoliberal dystopianism that symptomatises itself through pseudo-cyberpunk aesthetics: gritty urban design, bleak lighting, bleaker narrative trajectories and a noir sense of futility in the face of humanity's injustices against those it oppresses (minus the women, who are not really people in either *Blade Runner* or its sequel).

Surely there is nothing positive in the *Blade Runner* (dare I say it) franchise, no glimmer of better worlds promised by utopian thinking. After all, if *Blade Runner* delivered on the urban grit of the hardboiled detective's dark alleys lit by neon signs imported from Japan (along with half the sartorial and set design), *2049* promised vast landscapes of urban decay wrought by capitalist expansion and climate catastrophe. The nostalgic remnants of the past – a grizzled Han Sol-, I mean, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), emerging not to hoots and cheers as the nudge-nudge-wink-wink fulfilment of fan desire but as its antithesis, an acerbic old man uninterested in his legacy – are obscured or obliterated by terrible but beautiful sandstorms, massive ocean swells and even more neon. And within this even more circumscribed capitalist-realist landscape, a detective yet again stalks representatives of the android underclass, questions his ontological status as android and/or human, and explores uneven power relationships with women. What is emancipatory in all of this; what thin vapours cling to the hopes for something better?

If the general tenor of critics' responses tells us anything, it is that *2049* is pure dystopia – bleak yet beautiful, maybe even brilliant (at least cinematographically) and definitely problematic. It took me two years to see *2049*, despite being impressed by the visuals in the trailer; I have never liked

Blade Runner, and I am bored by the reboots and sequels spewing out of Hollywood. But in the intervening years between its release and my first viewing, I followed the critical conversation with interest, curious how Denis Villeneuve, an often impressive filmmaker, had handled the sequel to a classic sf movie and how it fared as a blockbuster successor to a film that had initially been poorly received by popular audiences but had grown in stature through later re-evaluations and releases of multiple recuts. *2049* certainly ‘failed’ at the box office, netting barely 60 per cent of its production cost. Critics seemed split, however, almost all impressed by the visual phenomenon of *2049* but most finding it a shallow, overlong parade of problematic scenes.

To be sure, many of the critiques that emerged both from trusted colleagues on social media and in private conversations and among popular critics in venues such as *Vox*, *Slate*, *Vice*, *Los Angeles Review of Books* and others are convincing, especially with regard to the film’s treatment of gender, women’s bodies and the Orientalist residuals of cyberpunk’s early years (much more prominent in *Blade Runner*).¹ As Sarah Emerson argued, *2049* follows a trend common in American cyberpunk: the traces of Asian techno-futurism are everywhere, but Asians are not. Julie Muncy put the film’s sexist veneer plainly: ‘Women in *Blade Runner 2049* are constantly objectified by the world around them, turned into automated helpers, puppets, and sex toys’, largely referring to Lt Joshi (Robin Wright) and Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), who are thugs-for-hire for people with more social, political and economic capital, and Joi (Ana de Armas) and Mariette (Mackenzie Davis), who variously provide sexual pleasure for or pine after the film’s android protagonist, K (Ryan Gosling).² Most of these women die either at K’s hands or trying to protect him. Moreover, as Casey Cipriani notes, *2049* troublingly rewrites Deckard’s possible sexual assault (and at the very least emotional abuse) of Rachael (Sean Young) in *Blade Runner* into a love story that produced a child, the ‘chosen one’ of *2049*’s narrative, and the first product of either human-android or android-android reproduction (depending on the multiple, competing interpretations of Deckard’s ontological status).

Critics have thus engaged smartly and tenaciously with *Blade Runner 2049*, especially with regard to questions of identity politics and biopolitics, since the possibility of android-based reproduction appears as a necessarily

1. On *Blade Runner 2049*’s updating of the original film’s techno-orientalism, see Edward K. Chan’s essay, ‘Race in the *Blade Runner* Cycle and Demographic Dystopia’.

2. For further analysis of *Blade Runner 2049*’s amplification of the original film’s misogyny, see Graham J. Murphy’s ‘Cyberpunk’s Masculinist Legacy: Puppetry, Labour, and *ménage à trois* in *Blade Runner 2049*’.

heterosexual culmination of capitalist fantasies of an endless supply of (genetically non-human) slave labour, and, at the same time as a revolutionary fantasy of the android underclass's desire to free themselves from human control. Androids, in the narrative Villeneuve seems most keen to emphasise, lack a basic faculty of those who are fully people, wholly free: the ability to heterosexually reproduce in loving family units. But Villeneuve is not short-sighted, and cleverly juxtaposes the androids' liberation fantasy of reproduction with the slave labour fantasies of Niander Wallace (Jared Leto), an android manufacturing magnate – and moral offspring of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos – who wants sexually reproductive androids to colonise the solar system, make it habitable for humans, and send mining/terraforming profits back to earth. Wallace's plantationocenic³ future draws on the history of racial slavery that produced Euro-American global hegemony while excising the system's racial dimension, a not-uncommon trope of sf that Isiah Lavender III calls 'meta-slave' fiction (see his *Race in American Science Fiction*, especially ch. 2), and at the same time promises one kind of utopian future for humanity the abundance of the solar system bequeaths its plenty to humanity, its producers hidden away, the unknown known. This is the United States.

Wallace's promised fascist future (complete with the Nazi-esque emphasis on reproductive bodies, especially white voluptuous ones, like the unnamed replicant played by Sallie Harmsen) is, as all utopias are, a dystopia for those who do not benefit. *Blade Runner 2049* and its predecessor are not only dystopian in aesthetics but in the ways they express capitalism's biopolitical control over gendered, sexualised and racialised bodies eking out a living in the economic and environmental devastation of ceaseless urban sprawl. And all of this through the trope of meta-slave narratives that rely on mostly white actors playing replicants hunted for the crime of attempting to live past their corporate-mandated termination date. Not surprisingly, then, some critics attempts to explain *2049*'s poor box-office performance and low audience ratings by reference to the concept of 'dystopia fatigue', the idea that we have seen so many dystopias and are so depressed by the dystopia that has become all the more apparent in our daily lives that we just cannot handle another bleak movie, let alone one that is two hours and 44 minutes long. While this argument certainly has its merits from a market perspective (markets do get oversaturated; genre cycles are no exception), it is a flaccid attempt to explain the many complex and competing reasons why a movie can 'fail' to the tune of tens of millions of dollars. David Fear of *Rolling Stone*, for example, claimed

3. See Haraway 162n5 for an account of this term and its origin.

that the film failed with moviegoers because reality finally got worse than, say, life in *The Hunger Games* series.

While the naivete of such arguments is fascinating,⁴ I am more interested in how Fear and other critics fail to see *Blade Runner 2049* as a radically hopeful film. In this light, the beauty of its cinematography is matched by its brilliant examination of ‘chosen one’ narratives, a strong reminder in an arguably self-centred age that we have only a small part to play in the revolution we seek to shape, that our shaping of the future is as movers in the assemblage, part of a whole. Indeed, I see the rejection of K’s chosen-one status, which he believed in so strongly, and which the film smartly hints at again and again to lull the audience, as a powerful and fundamental rejection of neoliberal rhetoric that designates individual action as the font of social change. K’s eventual discovery that it is not he but Ana (Carla Juri), who is the child of Deckard and Rachael radically does away with the masculinist narrative of the noir detective and both disappoints K and frees him from the burden of the replicant revolution’s growing messianic hopes for a human-android saviour. It is a stark, necessary reminder that we – each of us separately – are not the beneficiaries, but that we – all of us together – are.

Blade Runner 2049, though visually dystopian with its post-apocalyptic California and crime-strewn streets, and playing into *Blade Runner*’s legacy as a classic of the 1980s dystopian film, is undercut by duelling narratives of utopian possibility. On one hand, that of neoliberal capitalism’s extension of the Plantationocene (in the fallout of the Anthropocene) to the stars. On the other, that of a global underclass’s messianic rebellion against the Plantationocene here on earth. These duelling utopianisms try to wrest control of the dystopia around them by means of one of that dystopia’s most destructive systems of biopolitical organisation: a heteropatriarchy that culminates, forcibly if necessary, in the reproduction of a being through heterosexual sex. Where Wallace seeks a new labour force, a new, more durable, cheaper, and more easily produced slave caste, the replicants seek a saviour to prove, in some sense, their humanity. (We are left to guess at how heterosexual reproduction will truly free them from human servitude, as though this was not the key means by which slavery *extended* itself even after the US outlawed the trade in enslaved persons from Africa in 1808.)

Of course, this is not to suggest that both utopian projects carry the same moral or political weight simply by being technically utopian ideologies.

4. It is an argument that has cropped up again and again, even in recent history; see Linda Holmes in 2010 complaining about *Breaking Bad* in the article that might very well be the origin of the term ‘dystopia fatigue’, though by no means the origin of the sentiment.

Rather, I want to point out that the film is ultimately uninterested in the fulfilment of these utopian projects based on the discovery of Deckard and Rachael's genetically successful coupling (forced, as critics have suggested, or otherwise). Clearly, we are meant in the tradition of un-self-reflexive Hollywood narcissism to root for the underdogs that we are not (or at least I, as a white college-educated American man am not). Moreover, Wallace's violent project of meta-slavery (embodied in his ruthless, pointless slashing of the unnamed naked female replicant)⁵ is understood by the film (and audience) to be intuitively The Bad Thing. At *2049*'s end, the replicants have seemingly won, and what is more, Deckard has been united with his daughter (for some reason that was important). Heterosexuality has triumphed in a world so fascinated with embodied sexuality, and yet the film turns away from the replicants' triumph, not to deny it, but instead to remind us of K's position. Yes, Villeneuve recentres the male protagonist, and yes, despite being a well-played bait-and-switch, K was essentially the hero of the movie, but as the ruggedly handsome Ryan Gosling lays there, probably dying, we are reminded that K – the ostensible hero for the past 2.75 hours – is not needed for the revolution to continue.

Why does this matter? For one, it is enlivening to see yet another major blockbuster film in a major sf franchise declare its hero and the heroic legacy to be, in essence, a whole lot of codswallop (see also *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Last Jedi* (Johnson US 2017)). *2049* is not about the bleakness of our reality – one so apparently bleaker, accordingly to *Rolling Stone*, that it just did not pass muster with 'our' day-to-day, whoever the 'we' of Fear's critique is – but about the actions we take toward the collective good, learning along the way that we are not the sole beneficiary, that we are not the chosen one, that we are not the centre of some grand uprising, but that we are tears in rain, one in the collective, an agent in the assemblage, a beat in the rhythm, a moment in the flow. If this is not liberating, to know that the million utopian impulses of the collective toward what we hope is a better, more just world is not dependent on one person – on me, you, on *that* guy – but rather emerges from collective power, from what Scott Henkel theorises as the 'swarm' of direct democracy within a long and multifaceted Leftist tradition, then I am not sure what is.

Blade Runner 2049 is by no means a guide to action for the Left, but it is a call of sorts. K's story, wrapped up as it is in all the garments of misogyny

5. For a more in-depth analysis of this scene and the legacies of slavery that inform *Blade Runner 2049*'s biocapitalism and the real subsumption of life, see Sherryl Vint's essay, 'Vitality and Reproduction in *Blade Runner 2049*'.

and masculine heroism, is nonetheless a call away from the cult of heroes championed by a neoliberal representative democracy that assures you it is not who you vote for that matters, but just that you vote, no matter that the popular vote is superseded by a system designed in the Plantationocene to give primary say in the ‘democratic’ process to the slaveholders. K’s story, his lifework and death, are a call to join the swarm, to see oneself as a part of the movement, instead of *as* the movement – its scion, its saviour – itself.

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