

Joe and the ‘Real’ Girls: *Blade Runner 2049*

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1 About halfway into *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), Officer K (Ryan Gosling) finds himself seeking the source of a wooden and quite literal Trojan horse that, he has been told, originates from a hotbed of radioactivity. K sends his drone-like camera into the vaporous twilight to find the locus of contamination. Constantly moving and re-centering simultaneously, the viewfinder reveals the first of numerous and giant sculpted women littering the Vegas wasteland. A “heat analysis” reveals “life” collecting in a tangerine puddle at the fingertips of her delicately carved hand. The digital equivalent of these deserted Galateas, K’s fembot companion Joi (Ana de Armas) responds, “what is it?” to which K retorts, “guess we’re about to find out.” Like life itself, both this question and the film’s very quest are of woman (figure) born.

2 The world in *Blade Runner 2049*, as “Madame” Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright) warns, is “built on a wall that separates kind,” thus demarcating between humans and replicants, the manufactured species introduced in the original film that continue to dominate the narrative in the sequel. The crux of differentiating who is on either side of this wall reaffirms this very question: of woman born?

3 Directed by Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* is a direct sequel to the original *Blade Runner* (1982) directed by Ridley Scott (who serves as an executive producer here), written by David Webb Peoples and Hampton Fancher, who also wrote the screenplay for the original. Thirty years after the events of the first film, Officer K finds himself commissioned to kill replicant Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista), and at Morton’s farm he stumbles upon a discovery: buried bones. These bones belong to replicant Rachael (Sean Young), a main character from the original *Blade Runner*. More than the mystery of the body’s identity is the mystery of its procreative powers. Her autopsy reveals ‘she’ died while giving birth to a child, a point that further complicates the concept of being “of woman born” while powerfully amplifying the Tyrell Corporation’s motto from the original film, which boasted that the company manufactured beings “more human than human”—mechanical copies that surpass the originals. The remainder

of the film largely focuses on K's quest to find this "miracle" child born of Rachael and Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the space between the original film and this "sequel," a word that fittingly comes from late Middle English, meaning "offspring" or "descendant."

4 In "*Blade Runner's* Moving Still," Elissa Marder asserts that "the photograph is the true 'subject'" of the original film, that "the photograph is the site of humanity and the locus of the film's quest for origins" (139). The "still" photograph Marder analyzes is the one Rachael has of her mother, false evidence that she's a 'real girl'; the mother in the photo is "no more Rachel's mother than she is anyone else's" (143). *2049* repeats a similar photographic gesture when K unearths a photo of a mystery woman holding the baby he seeks. Since we know the baby's mother, Rachael, has died in childbirth, we also know that this woman only operates as mother symbolically, just like in Rachel's mother-picture in the original film. And, after finally uncovering Deckard's whereabouts, K silently peruses his apartment's décor and stops to contemplate a framed photograph of Rachael that he has displayed on a table, surrounded by wooden figurines he has sculpted, a *mise-en-scène* tableau that sustains the undercurrent of woman as art object(ified). Yet, despite its staged appearance, it is a photograph of the film's one and only mother.

5 Many of the female characters in *2049* do 'mother,' or at least protect their charges, whether it be Freysa (Hiam Abbass) who helped deliver Rachael's baby and thus plays mother as the mystery woman in the aforementioned photograph, or Lieutenant Joshi, one of the film's only seemingly 'real' women, who displays warmth enough when K is designated off baseline that she offers him safe passage from the building. What flows through the veins of both films is this 'still' mother, as well as the necessity for the mother to be dead, rendered 'still.' Yet *2049*, which begins with a literal unearthing of the bones of the miraculously procreative Rachael, affirms even more powerfully than the original that "mother is not easily buried" (Marder 143).

6 In an undoubtedly meta- moment, *Blade Runner 2049* uncannily reproduces the original film's Rachael in the not-flesh, part of Niander Wallace's (Jared Leto) attempt to dupe a love-starved Deckard into giving up the whereabouts of the replicant resistance. To depict the resurrected Rachael, London-based effects company MPC digitally de-aged

images of 1982 Sean Young and combined those with current photographs of her taken with a capture rig and kit, essentially reproducing her from “stills” along with the assistance of many computer programs, some of which, like 3D animation software Maya and painting program Mari, are named as if they were women themselves.

7 Despite science-fiction’s emergence at the expense and usurpation of the female body and its procreative powers in the tradition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, *2049* exalts the surprisingly reproductive Rachael to goddess status. Niander Wallace, *2049*’s Dr. Frankenstein, not only embraces but hopes for his own scientific reinstatement of that which was cast out: a procreative female. Wallace aims for his “new model” to be the Eve to a next generation of replicants who actually reproduce, as we are told Rachael has done with Deckard (not to put aside that this act of procreation equates to her death). External to the film and as part of their own marketing campaign, MPC declares on their webpage that they are “Leading the race to digital humans with a photoreal character for *Blade Runner 2049*.” In essence, taking over the role of mechanical mother, the conditions of the film’s making mirror the narrative content of its story. MPC’s reproductive work within the film, similar to the digital recreations of the predeceased Peter Cushing in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), and the ethical ramifications of reanimating the dead (what Victor Frankenstein quite literally does in Shelley’s novel) only reinforce the boundless ethical and philosophical quandaries born of *Blade Runner* and continued here in the sequel.

8 Not only surprisingly human, *Blade Runner 2049* is surprisingly feminist as well. Villeneuve’s early directing projects suggest his preoccupation with the portrayal of women. His first two feature films were predicated on issues of female subjectivity and reproduction: in *August 32nd on Earth* (1998), Simone decides to have a baby after a near-death accident, and in *Maelstrom* (2000), post-abortion Bibiane fails to measure up to her celebrity mother. Cara Buckley at the *New York Times* points to a strong pattern of female protagonists in many of Villeneuve’s films and suggests his feminist leanings are “ingrained in Mr. Villeneuve’s DNA,” as if he were programmed like one of his film’s replicants. In their interview, Villeneuve affirms his exploration of “the shadows of masculinity and femininity, and the tensions between both” while filming *Blade Runner 2049*.

9 One may assume that female representation in *2049* perpetuates Hollywood's historical projection of woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" famously condemned by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay in feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey 715). Indeed, *Blade Runner 2049* offers a kaleidoscopic bevy of kinds of women, like the murderously empowered yet ultimately subservient Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), but almost none of them 'real' in the traditional sense. Not just women, all of the 'male' characters are fraudulent too. The film participates in traditional gender stereotypes and iconographies not to confirm but at least to contaminate them. K's first digital projection of Joi as 1960s housewife corroborates traditional stereotypes only to reveal how they are as unreal as 'she,' and film itself, really is.

10 Believing he was not made but born, Joi decides K needs "a real boy" name, as his mother would have given him, and settles on one analogous to her own: Joe. The slipperiness between gender and identity here compels us into acknowledging that the film takes the mis-identification of both as central to its story, *2049* reflecting upon gender disparities more deeply than its predecessor. In order to seek out an anomaly in the computerized birth records of 6-10-21, Joe and Joi join forces by literally syncing bodies, only to unearth the aberration: two children, one male and one female, with the same DNA. Because this would be impossible Joe concludes that one is a copy, and since the records indicate the boy survived, we are fated to believe the girl has perished. This interpretation is aided by the fact that Harrison Ford and Ryan Gosling appear as if they come from the same filmic DNA, therefore 'syncing' in both looks and performance. But the film plays up these literal resemblances only to thwart them. The audience expects the film will continue to affirm the masculine perspective and make Ryan Gosling the prodigal son. Instead, traditional projections become empowered prophecies, and in the end we come to realize it will be a woman who leads the promised resistance.

11 Freysa, the head of the replicant resistance, almost literally quotes from the sentiments found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* when she explains their cause to K near the film's end. These replicants can finally affirm being "more human than human" specifically because a child has been born to one of them, an equal affirmation of maternity and humanity. In *2049*, there's power in being "of woman born," and in this way the replicants' resistance equates to the

resistance Rich says is bound to emerge when patriarchy is unmasked as the true illusion, as “a pervasive recognition is developing that the patriarchal system cannot answer for itself; that it is not inevitable; that it is transitory.” Many reviews lament *Blade Runner 2049*’s dated and patriarchal representation of women, completely missing that the emphasis on the male perspective is meant to highlight its destructiveness, and signal its imminent destruction.

Works Cited

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