

Prospero

A bombastic sequel

“Blade Runner 2049” is a flawed replicant

Don't believe the hype



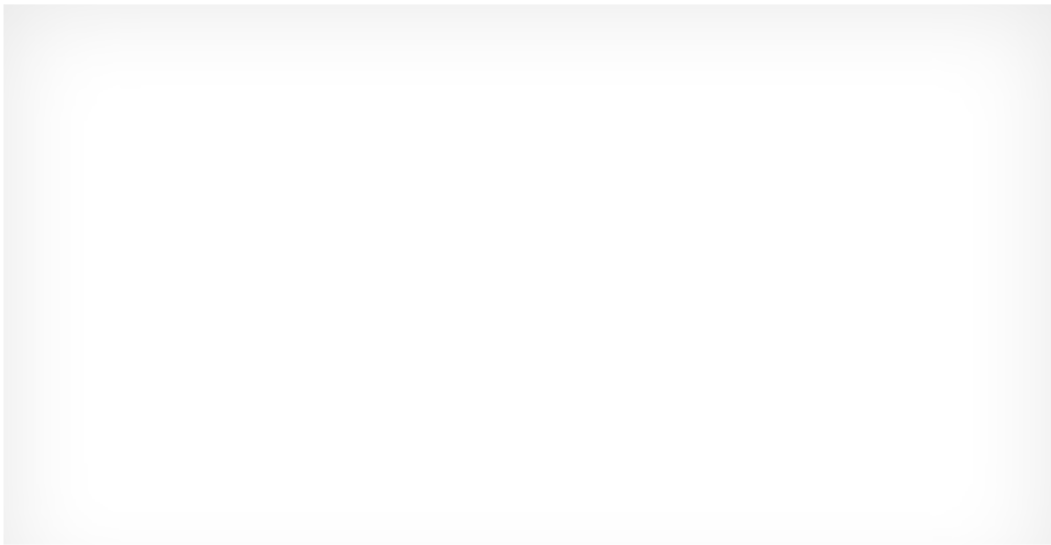
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Note: this review contains plot details

SEQUELS to science-fiction thrillers tend to be bigger, louder, more expensive and more expansive than their predecessors—and that’s if they come out after two or three years. Imagine how much bigger and louder a sequel might be if it was made after 35, and you’ll have some idea of how “Blade Runner 2049” compares to Ridley Scott’s 1982 classic.

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In contrast with most current sci-fi hits, the original “Blade Runner” was a low-key, low-budget indie yarn. But the follow-up, directed by Denis Villeneuve (“Arrival”), is proud of its vast scale, from the chair-vibrating volume and intensity of the throbbing electronic score to the endless sweep of its misty dystopian cityscapes.

There is a repeated insistence that the fate of the galaxy is at stake, and plenty of long, moody close-ups, many of them of eyes filling with tears.

How grandiose is “Blade Runner 2049”? Well, it features one woman named “Luv” and another named “Joi” (no sign of “Peece” or “Blyss”, mind you), so Mr Villeneuve and his team were clearly in no doubt that they were making a profound existential epic. It would have been easier to agree with them, though, if the story (by Hampton Fancher and Michael Green) weren’t so thin and threadbare, or so riddled with holes.

Loosely adapted from “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”, a novel by Philip K. Dick, the original “Blade Runner” revolved around Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a world-weary Los Angeles police detective who specialised in “retiring” replicants: lifelike, super-strong androids who rebelled against their human masters. Deckard is back in the sequel, but it is almost two hours into a 160-minute film before we see him. Despite his prominence on the posters and in the trailer, the lovably grizzled Mr Ford has little more than a cameo.

Before his Ben Gunn-ish reappearance, we meet another cop—Ryan Gosling’s Officer K. He is handsome and wears a long leather coat and walks everywhere as slowly as possible, but he is never as sympathetic as Deckard. On a routine robot-shooting mission, K discovers a trunk packed with human bones, or, as it turns out, replicant bones. Back at police headquarters, a forensic scientist determines that the bones belonged to a woman who once gave birth. This is a world-shaking revelation, because it proves that replicants are an autonomous species that deserves equal rights.

Or does it? If humans have been happy to treat replicants as disposable objects for decades, it is difficult to see why one child would change anyone’s attitude. It is also difficult to see why the replicants’ designers gave them ovaries in the first place if the thought of procreation worried them so much. Luckily, no one raises either of these points in the film. Instead, K’s tough-as-nails boss (Robin Wright, who looks as if she has stepped out of the “Judge Dredd” comic strip), orders him to find and “retire” the miracle child. Meanwhile, Niander Wallace (Jared Leto), a tycoon who now runs the replicant business, has his own take on the issue. He believes that he could create far more replicants if only they could reproduce biologically, so he is just as keen as K to track down the replicant of woman born.

Again, this motivation doesn’t bear up under scrutiny. If the youthful-looking Niander has already mass-produced “millions” of adult replicants, as he boasts, then his current manufacturing methods must be a lot quicker and simpler than the old-fashioned way of making babies. They must involve a lot less nappy-changing, too. The film tries to distract us from this obvious flaw by declaring that, basically, Niander is a lunatic. He is a cartoon supervillain with silver eyes, black kimono-style pyjamas, and a habit of striding around his painfully chic but impractical lair, reciting his plans to a sidekick who must have heard them a thousand times before. In short, for all its pomp and pretension, “Blade Runner 2049” is a Hollywood superhero blockbuster at heart: the kind of bombastic, effects-packed film which expects you to gasp at the spectacle and not think too much about the logic.

And so it has a villainess (Sylvia Hoeks), seemingly based on the unstoppable cyborg in “Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines”, who can repeatedly stroll into a police station, murder someone, and then stroll out again (there are no security cameras in the future, apparently). It has a team of murderous baddies who are kind enough to beat up the hero and then leave him slumped on the floor, when it

would have been far more sensible either to kill him or take him with them. And it has an unresolved plot which serves to set up a further sequel, so as to keep the franchise going.

If “Blade Runner 2049” seems to be more artistic than a typical sci-fi blockbuster, that’s partly because its ponderous pacing and mournful tone demand that you take it seriously, and partly because it is so visually and aurally impressive. Shot by Roger Deakins, a multiple Oscar nominee, it sends K to a series of hazy, beautifully desolate, colour-co-ordinated wastelands, each one more strange and magnificent than the last. True, Mr Villeneuve is building on the rain-lashed neo-noir designs which made “Blade Runner” so atmospheric—all steam, neon, Asian influences and multiple languages—but the otherworldly vistas can convince you, at times, that the film is as important as it thinks it is.

But then you remember all the other tech-noir films that have come out in the past 35 years. Steven Spielberg was pondering whether robots could be human in “AI: Artificial Intelligence” (2001). The gargantuan holograms that loom over the dark streets are like the ones in the recent “Ghost in the Shell” (2017). The hero’s live-in virtual girlfriend (Ana de Armas) is awfully reminiscent of the one in Spike Jonze’s “Her” (2013). And as for the hero’s Kafkaesque name, K—wasn’t that what Tommy Lee Jones’s character was called in “Men in Black” (1997)? “Blade Runner 2049” may seem to be bigger than “Blade Runner”, but in terms of pioneering creativity and soul, it is about half the size.

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