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### The Last Man in Los Angeles

*Before the advent of the internet and extreme American Individualism, Ridley Scott's Blade*

*Runner foreshadows how lonely it can be to live in a big city.*

After chasing down the escaped replicant through a dimly-lit club, dirty alleyways and through shuttered storefronts, Deckard guns down the unarmed android on a busy sidewalk, and all sounds cease. Bystanders watch in silent contemplation, none making a move towards the still form on the ground. Once Deckard and some police units approach, a ship drones a command on repeat: “*Move along.*” In the dense crowd, that replicant was utterly alone in their final moments.

This is the world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Released in the tail end of a century marked by two global wars, political tensions, and amidst the threat of total nuclear annihilation, this film is the collective consciousness of a society reckoning with accelerated technological advancement and an increasing focus on the individual. Adapted from Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the film follows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a police officer in the far-future city of Los Angeles in 2019. Deckard is a Blade Runner, a particular type of officer tasked with dispatching and “retiring” (executing) replicants—androids who pass as human, but with comparable intelligence and incredible strength—who are banned on Earth. Deckard is also introduced to Rachael, a special model replicant who truly believes that she is human. As Deckard retires the rogues one by one, he questions his morality and his feelings for Rachael—and by the end of the film, doubts whether he is even human.

The film paints a decisively bleak outlook on the future. The world is dark, lit only by the fluorescents of electronic billboards, and the now incomprehensible progress of technology has made the world and its inhabitants foreign. At the story's core, however, is a very familiar sensation of feeling insignificant and alone amidst these busy surroundings. Though its sights are primarily set on probing the concept of humanity and morality, *Blade Runner* inadvertently creates the experience of being hopelessly invisible within the modern metropolis.

Something unique to *Blade Runner* is its cinematography. Much-too-wide establishing shots do little to help the audience orient themselves in this version of Los Angeles. At the beginning of the film, a pan over the seemingly familiar nighttime LA skyline slowly comes into focus, and each light is revealed to belong to a monolithic skyscraper, clustered by the dozens around a megastructure. This initial shot, not lasting long enough to take in the awesome scale of the landscape, communicates one facet of the city-dweller's lived experience: the city is too large to truly know. Though they are not on the same scale, the modern Los Angeles, for example, is already too large for any one person to know with any significant level of familiarity. The average Angelano will surely find community in their neighborhood, but we the audience are far from natives here. Within this wide expanse, the film's direction also manages to create a lingering feeling of claustrophobia. Scenes that take place indoors are equally disorienting, and the camera often keeps close to Deckard. Spaces are dimly lit and maze like, and the only time that Deckard (and by extension, the viewer) feels at all at ease is back at his apartment, when he is with Rachael, the replicant who he encounters at the beginning and is tasked with finding and returning to the corporation that made her.

On the subject of companionship, *Blade Runner*'s protagonist is severely lacking in this department. One of the most well discussed points of this film is its focus on isolation and being

othered. Deckard is often alone, despite being constantly surrounded by people, and almost never around people he wishes to be. From the start, Deckard is hustled by a former boss, essentially coerced into taking on this job of retiring the band of replicants and being vaguely threatened when he first refuses. Deckard's sole running around for the remainder of the film mirrors that of the average city transplant. Especially when first arriving in a city, it can be incredibly difficult to break into a social scene and form a circle of your own. Like our metropolises today, passersby on the street pay you no mind if they have no reason to. While there is nothing stopping someone from striking up a conversation with a stranger, our culture has shifted and our gaze is now held straight ahead or towards the ground, insulated by personal technology.

While this very insular mindset seems par for the course with today's standards, *Blade Runner* came out in a very different time. The American action and adventure films of the 1980s were not as introspective and somber as this one; many of the day's plots centered around a morally correct man with weapons and combat experience and a more loose interpretation of the law pitted against an easily condemnable foe. These protagonists were quick-witted, unkillable charismatic monsters with a sense of duty to protect their city or neighborhood from the evils of terrorism or crime. Deckard is none of this. He is easily othered in both appearance (he has none of the strange non-descript modifications that others do) and attitude (he seems much more tuned-in to his surroundings, often looking up or around while the extras stare blankly ahead as they walk). It would not be a stretch to say that Deckard has little love for his city, less so at the conclusion of the film when his 'community' forces him to murder four intelligent beings.

"Yearning" is a word that can describe some of the feelings evoked by the long shots and sad synths of this film. Yearning to be a part of something greater, and to have a place you can call home that deserves that title. Feelings of isolation and social disconnect have been on the

rise, lately as an effect from the widespread lockdowns that were enacted to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For months on end, people in cities were confined to the absolute essential spaces and social scenes were eradicated, and surely they felt this longing to be a part of something again. Even if you can be particularly isolated from individuals within the city, the city as its own entity is always there for you. Being pulled away from your main tie to a place will not leave you with more to be happy about than Deckard.

*Blade Runner* prophesied a much less connected world than the one in which it was conceived. Surely, it felt impossible to audiences then that society would become so abstracted and impossible to understand. In a way, the fear and longing of *Blade Runner* is in part due to our ambivalence towards ourselves. The people in this version of Los Angeles seem almost alien in how lifeless and unrecognizable they are. While we sport fewer cybernetics and are perhaps more personable than the average extra on set, it is a reminder that it is perhaps too easy to fall out of the collective and become outcast within your own city.

*Word Count: 1202*

## Endnotes

Ridley Scott, Vangelis, and Vangelis. *BLADE RUNNER*. USA, 1982.

“What's behind ‘Lockdown Nostalgia’?” WebMD, WebMD, 2022,

<https://www.webmd.com/covid/features/pandemic-nostalgia>.