

## Through Galatea's Eyes: Humanity and Heroism in *Blade Runner 2049*

Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner* depicts a futuristic world, where sophisticated androids called replicants, following a replicant rebellion, are being tracked down and "retired" by officers known as "blade runners." The film raises questions about what it means to be human and memories as social conditioning. In the sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, director Denis Villeneuve continues to probe similar questions, including what gives humans inalienable worth and at what point post-humans participate in this worth. *2049* follows the story of a blade runner named K, who is among the model of replicants designed to be more obedient. Various clues cause K to suspect he may have been born naturally as opposed to manufactured. Themes from the Pinocchio story are interwoven in K's quest to discover if he is, in fact, a "real boy." At its core Pinocchio is a Pygmalion story from the creature's point of view. It is apt then that most of *2049* revolves around replicants, with humans as the supporting characters. By reading K through multiple mythological figures, including Pygmalion, Telemachus, and Oedipus, this paper will examine three hallmarks of humanity suggested by Villeneuve's film: natural birth, memory, and self-sacrifice. These three qualities mark the stages of a human life but particularly a mythological hero's life. Ultimately, only one of these can truly be said to apply to K, but it will be sufficient for rendering him a "real boy" nonetheless.

Although Pinocchio stories are told from the creatures' point of view, they are still based on what human authors project onto the creature. In the 1982 *Blade Runner*, empathy is one of the determining factors of humanness. *2049*'s attempt to see from a post-human's perspective, although laudably empathetic by the standards of the 1982 film, is inevitably futile and a necessarily narcissistic enterprise. What we learn from this exercise, however, are the qualities

we consider most human. The fact that *2049* conceives of replicants like K equating realness with being human may privilege the human, but it also demonstrates that humans value their humanness.

A natural conception and birth implies a divine spark, something humans cannot fully control nor replicate. Pinocchio is brought to life by the Blue Fairy, an external magical force, much like Pygmalion's statue is brought to life by Aphrodite. The replicants of *2049*, although made of organic material, come into being fully formed. A replicant born as a baby from a replicant mother would be an extraordinary phenomenon, just as often in mythology a hero's divine conception marks the way he excels others. For figures, such as Dionysus and Phaethon, proving their divine origins is critical for their identity. Thus, K's quest to find out if he is "real" hinges critically on his birth.

Also essential to constructing identity is memory building. For heroes like Odysseus the memory others have of him may be as important for his *kleos* as his own memories. Telemachus must build his *kleos* on these memories others have of his father. Oedipus too must reconstruct his identity in a similar way. In the 1982 *Blade Runner* replicants are given a past, that is memories, as a means of controlling them better. In *2049* authentic memory making, as opposed to having implanted memories, is a mark of being truly human. K's one childhood memory, although implanted, motivates his actions, as if it were real, culminating in an act of self-sacrifice.

Bound up with the notion of self-sacrifice is love. K is given the opportunity to love through a holographic companion he has purchased named Joi. The fact that K owns Joi would seem to position K as a Pygmalion himself. K, however, embodies an anti-Pygmalion, asking Joi not to say the kinds of things she is programmed to say. He also purchases an emanator for her, a

device that enables her to go wherever she wants. When K has reason to believe that he is naturally born, Joi tells K she has suspected this all along: “You’re special. Born not made. Hidden with care. A real boy now.” In this way, the film suggests that not only extending love but also being loved is a mark of humanity. “Hidden with care” invites comparison to the protection given to Zeus and the heroes of Greek myths, such as Theseus and Perseus. “Born not made” (γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα), commonly rendered “begotten not made,” also evokes Jesus Christ of the Nicene Creed, setting K up for his ultimate act of self-sacrifice. In this way he fulfills the motto of the Tyrell Corporation in the original *Blade Runner*, “More human than human,” establishing himself as both man and god.

#### Bibliography

Scott, Ridley, director. *Blade Runner*. The Ladd Company, 1982.

Villeneuve, Denis, director. *Blade Runner 2049*. Alcon Entertainment, 2017.