

Like Tears in Rain
Meditations on Science Fiction Cinema

Alex Kane

Introduction

The essays that follow were written out of a love for science fiction in all its forms: on film, in fiction, in video games, in comics. They were written neither for money nor as a means of declaring myself some kind of self-appointed expert on the genre. Many of them appeared for the first time in *Amazing Stories*, the world's very first science fiction magazine, while others are original to this volume—but each and every one of them has been revised and expanded for the sake of remaining timely. Science fiction has a hard time keeping up with the world, though, for many of us, it stands ageless and forever relevant in our hearts, a constant beacon of youthful exuberance and wonder at the full breadth of the universe.

I hope you'll enjoy my various explorations of the big-screen myths SF has given us in recent years. Imperfect though they sometimes are, I believe that seeing worlds beyond our own brought to life in a way that's both visible and readily accessible to the next generation of readers, dreamers, and creators is vital to keeping not only the written literature alive, but also to the mission of scientific discovery that is so often forgotten in this age of hardship and cynicism.

Whether or not topics like transhumanism and interstellar flight ought to be among our most immediate social concerns is something I leave up to the reader. But I will say this: Tomorrow is coming sooner than we may think, and science fiction gives us a vast canvas for exploring its various challenges and questions from the relative safety of our imaginations, long before we are forced to face them in reality.

So: if the future is Skynet, then *science fiction* is a kind of “T-850”—a Cyberdyne Systems Model 101, reprogrammed with a more benevolent temperament and sent back in time to warn us about the various Bradburian follies we'll inevitably make as our species advances.

(I use this last term in its loosest possible sense.)

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Like Tears in Rain

An essay on Ridley Scott's 2007 rerelease of Blade Runner: The Final Cut on Blu-ray Disc

You can almost smell the rain, feel it hammer the leather of your trenchcoat. Hear the harmonic buzzing of blue neon all around you. You can taste the Tsingtao, bubbly and cool on your tongue. If there's a single flaw worth noting about the Blu-ray transfer of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* ('07), it can be only the opening expositional crawl—an almost quaint artifact of its time, given the 2019 date it supplies—which is still valuable for its brief explanation of the “replicant” as a genetically-engineered, rather than mechanical, variety of android.

Blade Runner is a film valued for its stunning visual representation of the future, the relative diversity of its cast despite the quasi-Aryan villain Roy Batty, and the undeniable success of its all too human drama. But what makes it so timeless, a box-office flop that has been elevated to classic status over the years due to its cult audience, is its unpretentious use of metaphor: The replicant serves as a mirror for the countless ways in which humanity draws arbitrary divisions among its numbers, and the horrific conditions those who are labeled as subhuman, or as “the other,” are subjected to through various sociopolitical machinations.

It's only shocking if you choose to ignore our history.

For example, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is a twenty-first-century bounty hunter—an officer of the law contracted to hunt and kill rogue “skin jobs” amid the golden age of extraterrestrial colonization. Having previously quit the force, he appears reluctant in the film's beginning to return to his role as the titular blade runner; the expression on Ford's face as he is briefed on the Nexus-6 synthetics running loose in Scott's future Los Angeles shows the inner turmoil he faces he each time this sort of work comes his way.

His investigation leads him to the headquarters of the all-important Tyrell Corporation, where he's greeted by the first of the film's true stars: the replicant Rachael (portrayed by newcomer Sean Young, who is mesmerizing beyond reason in the role)—a Nexus-7, most likely, designed to be virtually indistinguishable from her human counterparts. And the first of her kind to go undetected by the Voight-Kampff test, which is intended to scope out telltale signs related to human empathy, or a lack thereof.

Her unique situation, however, is compounded by her creator's having kept her replicant status a secret. Due to false memory implantation, and sheer ignorance regarding her true origin, Rachael manages to answer “well over a hundred” empathy-based questions without Deckard at last reaching a conclusion as to whether or not she's human.

She is, for the audience, a symbol of the superficiality which is so often used in distinguishing one human being from the next—and one of many clues that suggest Deckard himself may be a replicant, especially given how little we're told about his past.

Setting aside the romantic subplot—and the fact that they end up together, their uncertain fates entwined in the end—the scene in which Deckard reveals to Rachael what she really is, that she's a living, organic work of human artifice, with few memories or experiences to call her own, is a testament to Scott's brilliance as a director. This brief exchange also highlights, I'd argue, just how perfect Sean Young is for playing the part of a replicant ripped from the safety of her genetic cradle and told face-to-face what she truly is.

When Deckard sees how hurt she is by the revelation, he tries to take back his words, to assure her that it was all a terrible joke. But her innocence is lost in light of the man's knowledge; he pours a drink, and they make love, all to an incredibly beautiful, spacious piano track by Vangelis.

In a later scene, our conflicted blade runner examines photographic evidence while sitting near the piano in his apartment, sheet music laid out in front of him, and daydreams unexpectedly of a white unicorn: a symbol that comes back to haunt him near the film's end. Left as a calling card by Detective Gaff (Edward James Olmos), Deckard discovers a piece of metallic origami suggesting that the mythic animal of his dream may be a programmed archetype, not unlike the content of Rachael's own implanted memories. . . .

But it is Rutger Hauer's unforgettable performance as the fierce and relentless Roy Batty, whose ruminations on the ephemerality of time and experience serve as the film's thematic backbone, that represents the film's true gift to the realm of science fiction cinema.

"If only you could see what I've seen with *your* eyes," he muses, while trying to extract information about the Tyrell Corporation and its leader from a geneticist who specializes in growing cultured eyeballs.

Much of the conflict driving driving the film's intricate plot stems from the widespread manufacture and sale of genetically-engineered, "artificial" creatures, from snakes to owls to the humanoid Nexus-model replicants. Creations tell of an implicit creator, and Scott seems in this film, as with his more recent effort, *Prometheus* ('12), to explore the intelligence-design argument for God's existence: Close examination of organic tissue reveals serial numbers beneath a microscope's lens; android dreams act as windows into the Jungian interconnectedness of creation and the decidedly *social* human mind, at least metaphorically.

The film presents again and again the dilemma of those seeking in vain for their divine creator, only to find that true divinity is more often found in the mortal subjects of such a cosmic being's creation. Batty himself is a servant to the undeniable beauty to be found in each passing moment, and the uniquely subjective nature of experience. He reflects throughout the film on the tragedy of both consciousness and memory as fleeting, intangible impressions; he'd no doubt prefer the *preservation* of his experiences through the relative permanence of, say, art—or even a technology such as the Internet—over the simple act of dying and being ultimately forgotten.

His search for the key to extending his Nexus-6 lifespan, limited by his maker to a mere four yours, acts as a constant symbol for the cruel fact of our own impermanence, the finitude of existence. One can't help but feel for him, and share his pain, even as we strive to fully comprehend Deckard's.

As malevolent as the script forces Batty to become in terms of both his inner anguish and violent methodology, we see in him our own basic fears and insecurities reflected back at us: the basic undesirability of death, despite its inevitability; the harshness of a life spent in servitude; and the oft-perceived futility of revolution against an unjust ruling class.

"It's not an easy thing to meet your maker," he tells his father-figure creator, Dr. Eldon Tyrell.

And Tyrell asks, "What seems to be the problem?"

"*Death*," Roy Batty replies.

His irreverence toward Tyrell suggests that although death comes to everyone at one time or another, there is a certain moral failure in coming face to face with God (figuratively or literally) and demanding His mercy—in demanding the ageless but elusive prize of immortality. And Batty, much like pioneering corporate investor Peter Weyland, of Scott's *Prometheus*, finds that such demands are ultimately fruitless. That, like the biblical Job, a mortal man can find comfort and peace only in the acceptance of his own mortality; and God's intentions, if indeed there is a god at all, are neither to be known nor questioned.

Blade Runner, then, is most successful as an allegory of human beings divided by false social stratifications but united in their universal struggle with the sheer brevity of life. Just as moments glimpsed in the great river of time are invariably washed away—"like tears in rain," as Batty puts it in the famously improvised monologue that ties the film together near its completion—so, too, are human lives transient and finite.

All Your Rebel Base Are Belong to Us

In Defense of J. J. Abrams, or Why Your Beloved Franchise Is About to Become More Powerful than You Could Possibly Imagine

Since the news that J. J. Abrams will be directing the seventh installment of *Star Wars* hit, back in January of last year, fandom has been more or less polarized on the prospects. For many, cynicism came as the dominant knee-jerk response; others adopted what can only be called a cautious optimism. A collective groan seemed to resound across the net. But I must admit, I found myself rejoicing in the knowledge that these works—which have been such an integral part of my imaginative life for nearly two decades—are to be kept in competent hands.

As for all the smugness and nerd rage? I still can't say for certain what makes Abrams the most triggering name in geek culture. Arguments could be made regarding his occasionally sexist decision-making in the rebooted *Trek* series, perhaps. That is not something I'm prepared to defend or condone in any way. I strongly suspect, however, that he simply evokes the ire of so many fans for some perceived misstep regarding the final season of *Lost*, which may or may not have had anything at all to do with Abrams himself.

To which I say, it's *Star Wars*. These things are bound to happen. There's simply no intellectual property in existence that has such passionate fans. You give us a character like Jar Jar Binks, you'll witness an outcry of hate on a *galactic scale*. You deliver a poor 3-D conversion job for an already shaky, disappointing film, and you'll find us weeping on our way back out to the parking lot.

And plus, y'know, Han *did* shoot first! Don't get us started.

All that stuff aside—*The People vs. George Lucas* laid that era of *Star Wars* fandom peacefully to rest, I'd say—Abrams really is the best thing that could possibly happen to this mythology. To be honest, prior to the official announcement, I hadn't even entertained the idea as being a remote possibility. He had reportedly declined involvement with the as-yet-untitled *Episode VII* early on, for one, and he's been at the helm of the equally colossal *Trek* franchise since his 2009 reboot. Probably not somebody with a lot of free time on his hands. But now we're told he's taking the reins of Lucas's career-making brainchild, and I genuinely could not be happier about it.

Here's why:

Um, yeah. Star Trek.

There's been a lot of criticism leveled at Abrams's two *Trek* films. (Some of it warranted; most of it nonsensical.) People like to give him a lot of grief about the lens-flare gimmick, but seriously? *C'mon*. I mean, do you go around knocking Tarantino because all his scripts are bloated and dialogue-heavy? Or crucify Scorsese for dropping too many F-bombs in a gangster flick?

Gimme a break. Even Lucas used the lens flare technique to great effect during some of his key lightsaber duels—in the prequel trilogy, sure, but let's face it: *Revenge of the Sith* is one of the best things Lucas has ever given us as a director, outside of *THX-1138* and *American Graffiti*.

Before the '09 *Star Trek*, I didn't give a hoot about about Trekkie culture. Whatever Kirk and Picard had to offer just didn't appeal to me as a kid. I was a Lucas loyalist, I guess, having never seen the original series from the sixties, nor *The Next Generation* and its various subsequent spinoffs. None of the many pre-Abrams *Trek* films ever appealed to me.

Those early Angry Robot teasers sunk their hooks into me, though. Got me curious enough to watch *just this one*, and so when the thing finally landed in theaters, I was there. Cautiously optimistic. Buttered-popcorn smell permeating the air.

And then . . . suddenly I was reading the Alan Dean Foster-penned novelization. Watching the original series (or *TOS*, as it's often called) for the first time and totally digging it. Giving this old, slightly dated bit of film-and-television history a chance after finally having glimpsed a bit of promise in it. Experiencing *The Wrath of Khan* at long last.

Because, my friends, J. J. Abrams had made it all new again: with familiar faces delivering great, memorable performances; with a Beastie Boys song sitting right at home in a galaxy-spanning space opera; with a heightened sense of drama and peril, from the genocidal destruction of an entire planet by birthing a black hole in its core to having a young Vulcan meet his much older, wiser self courtesy of accidental time travel.

He's bringing science fiction into the mainstream.

And unlike the heyday of Michael Bay's overhyped *Transformers* movies, we no longer have reason to be embarrassed about it.

When *Into Darkness* landed in cinemas around the world a year ago, it swiftly became the highest-grossing entry in the history of the franchise. Regardless of where you stand on the issues of whitewashing Benedict Cumberbatch's role as Khan and Alice Eve's gratuitous stripdown scene, it's hard to deny the more positive aspects of the film within the larger context of *Star Trek* as a pop-culture staple with undeniable staying power. (See another of the essays collected in this volume, "Jingoism and the Culture of Fear: A Look at the Politics of *Star Trek Into Darkness*," for my exploration of the film's attempts at social commentary.)

If Abrams and the marketing folks at Paramount can make something like *Star Trek* look cool and exciting to a wider, younger audience—make it feel *mainstream*, even—then I count that as a very good thing indeed. Science fiction literature surely benefits from a growing interest in cinematic SF. Oftentimes, media tie-ins act as gateway drugs into that otherwise overlooked

corner of the bookstore. You grow your audience, you grow fandom as a whole; to count this as a loss simply feels pedantic and elitist.

Can you name a more impressive debut than Mission: Impossible III?

With the possible exceptions of *Moon*, *District 9*, and *The Adjustment Bureau*, I'm hard-pressed to think of a recent first-time directorial effort half as much fun as Abrams's first summer popcorn flick. Sure, it may feel a tad overedited in the second act, and the romance subplot does overwhelm the MacGuffin-centric main storyline a bit, but the third *Mission: Impossible* film is arguably the best in the series, Brad Bird's breathtaking Burj Khalifa sequence notwithstanding.

Cruise made a solid decision hiring Abrams to give his flagship franchise a gritty, slightly more believable aesthetic for its third outing—and in doing so gave him the conduit necessary to prove his filmmaking chops. It's undoubtedly the very reason we have the latest *Star Trek* films.

And let's not overlook all his metatheatrical theses from Super 8, a film I found to be enormously heartfelt and affecting.

No, I'm not joking.

The guy's got a lot to say, and as much as people love to bash family-friendly fare like *Super 8* and its spiritual predecessors in Spielberg's filmography, it managed to convey a profound love for the art of visual storytelling.

The character of Charles Kaznyk in particular (played expertly by newcomer Riley Griffiths) spends much of the film espousing wisdom gleaned from his journey as an amateur screenwriter and director. He discovers through various filmmaking magazines that story isn't just about action, violence, or mystery, but rather the characters who are made to suffer through it. His inclusion of Alice Dainard's character (Elle Fanning) in their zombie-horror *Super 8* film is meant to add depth and humanity to the drama, thereby gaining audience sympathy.

Exactly the kind of thinking that added a new level of relatability and excitement to the *Star Trek* franchise, in other words.

Super 8 isn't an alien invasion movie. 'S not a monster movie. Not *really*. It is a story of adolescent dreams, of familial loss and reconciliation, which all the while celebrates the shared magic of storytelling.

"It binds the galaxy together. . . ."

George Lucas's limited involvement with the forthcoming sequel trilogy signifies the end of one era and the dawn of another. By allowing new screenwriters and directors to take up the mantle of Dark Lord of the—well, y'know, to write and create their own worlds, characters, and myths within the larger *Star Wars* universe—he is giving the fans a real go at shaping his legacy.

Something that, arguably, he's been doing with tremendous success since the 1980 release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Irvin Kershner, along with screenwriters Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan, brought the saga to what many consider to be its very pinnacle.

Lucas made film history with the original *Star Wars* in 1977, and he almost lived up to its brilliance when he hit his stride once more with *Revenge of the Sith* ('05). But the franchise has unquestionably shone its brightest in the hands of the fans themselves.

As with *Troops*, Kevin Rubio's award-winning mockumentary film featuring Imperial stormtroopers making their daily rounds across the dunes of a *Cops*-inspired Tatooine, complete with the familiar "Bad Boys" theme and a certain smoldering pair of moisture farmers. Or Matthew Stover's *Revenge of the Sith* companion novel, which I consider vastly superior to . . . well, at least five of the *Star Wars* movies, in terms of the writing. The examples go on and on: *Shadows of the Empire*; *Robot Chicken Star Wars*, *Blue Harvest*, and the other *Family Guy* spoofs; LucasArts' *The Force Unleashed* and its sequel; the various Dark Horse Comics runs.

Some say that the *Clone Wars* series is the best thing to happen to the franchise since '77.

Star Wars is first and foremost a realm defined and upheld by its fans. Always has been, always will be—and Abrams himself knows that as well as anybody. No doubt that's why he initially denied any involvement whatsoever with the forthcoming sequel trilogy.

As far as this fan is concerned, having one of *us* behind the lens this time around means the best of that galaxy far, far away is still yet to come.