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Paper 2

Review of “Blade Runner 2049’s incongruous couplings: Living and dying in the Anthropocene.”

Hamblin, Sarah, and Hugh C. O’Connell. “Blade Runner 2049’s incongruous couplings: Living and dying in the Anthropocene.” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13, no. 1 (2020). 37-58.

*2049* has proven to be a film with a clear political message for a contemporary world: “‘Photogenic filth’ of its cities and the ‘blasted countryside’ of its rural landscapes”, establishing an anthropogenically devastated future as its foundation (2). However, unlike most films under the traditional cli-fi genre, there are zero mentions of climate change or possible solutions, instead it is acknowledged as an ineffable form of the narratives ontology, a common factor of realistic twenty-first century futurist film. Its position within an already established franchise forces *49* to connect itself to the original material through anthropogenic worldbuilding. Yet despite its commitment to an anthropogenic vision it often favors a “neon world of conspicuous consumption, reproductive futurity and human perfectibility” in respect to brand continuity (2) - this contradiction proves vital to an Anthropocene film. Authors Hamblin and O’Connell aim to examine how the intervention of Anthropocene theory into the *Blade Runner* storyworld comes into conflict with the aesthetics of the franchise” (Hamblin, O’Connell 2020, 2).

All cinematic media must approach anthropocene narratives “in relation to this new geologic epoch” (Hamblin, O’Connell 4) and *2049* is no different. The combination of natural history and human history indirectly captured by *2049* emphasizes the difficulty of visualizing the “scale and temporality of environmental transformation” (Hamblin, O’Connell 2020, 5). However human-centered narratives struggle to envision intangible objects, case in point the Anthropocene. Traditional Hollywood narratives will often reduce climate films to a “reductive spectacle,” as a problem to be solved within the span of two hours (5). Instead of envisioning life in this future environment, cli-fi will emphasize individual survival, ignoring the greater impact of an anthropogenic future.

An anthropocene aesthetic is established through its worldbuilding. For example, background details which flesh out *49*’s world conditions include references to sixth great extinction which have impacted food sources and water scarcity, weather patterns and sea levels. This specific worldbuilding tactic, coined “‘Anthroposcenery,’” depicts the “Ruined Countryside and the Junk City”; e.g. San Diego, Las Vegas, Los Angeles (Hamblin, O’Connell 2020, 7). However the upsetting fact is that all of *2049*’s anthroposcenery can be found in our current world as all landscapes are based on real global locations suffering from ecological devastation; of course the film’s futuristic first-world country locations are based on current third-world country locations.

*2049* favors narrative suspension rather than action-fuelled suspense, removing the human protagonist from the narrative, and establishing human’s inability to control the natural world and in turn transitioning from an anthropocentric to anthropogenic history. *2049*’s director Denis Villeneuve opts for slowness, extreme long shots, and panoramas, all producing anxiety among the viewer. But if the message is ‘nothing can be done’ then is *2049* a “nihilistic embrace of the spectacle or an aestheticising of the Anthropocene” (Hamblin, O’Connell 2020, 11)?

Hamblin and O'Connell argue the noir film genre can teach its audience how to die in the Anthropocene, as it visualizes our unsustainable lifestyles and in turn lays the foundation for future Anthropogenic culture. Moreover, it actively “works against the restoration of the status quo” vis a vis a capitalist developmentalism induced environmental apocalypse (Hamblin, O'Connell 2020, 13). To further drive the nail in *2049*'s coffin, K's (and the audience's) discovery of an exiled Deckard, signifies a “politics of negation and refusal,” as the decision to die in the Anthropocene is ultimately an anti-reproductive and anti-developmental resolve (13).

*2049*'s narrative contradicts its fundamentally anthropogenic world and film style: continuity continuation has produced a human-centered narrative and style in both the original *Blade Runner* and *2049*, creating a “tension with a nostalgic retro-futurist vision of a techno-capitalist tomorrow unconcerned with” anthropogenic challenges (Hamblin, O'Connell 2020, 14). For example, K eating at a night market embodying the franchise's “need to repeat, mark and market itself via the visual registers of the human-centered film style of the original”; due the requirements of a franchise, *2049* struggles to move away from its anthropocentric narrative (14). Identical to the original version of this scene (with Deckard), *2049* invalidates the catastrophic climate change and agricultural and technological ruin occurring both in the storyworld and outside of it, creating a sense of nostalgia that ignores the anthropogenic, geological passing of time. The replication of this scene purposely forces the audience to return to an outdated concept of the future. Following the film's first extreme shot scale, this scene “re-establish[es] a grounded human-centered perspective and framing” which alludes to the primary path of this narrative: “heteronormative, biological reproduction as the recovery of the future” (Hamblin, O'Connell 2020, 16).

*2049*'s worldbuilding can be interpreted as a continuation of “a developmentalist affirmation of life” demonstrated by its technological advancements (Hamblin, O'Connell 2020, 18). For example, the drones establishing a “technologically enabled omniscience” links itself to the “territorializing functions of techno-capitalism” (18). The film may re-establish the fact that developmentalism encourages anthropogenic climate disaster yet, as mentioned previously, life doesn't end upon the arrival of environmental apocalypse, it continues business as usual.

Hamblin and O'Connell then ask the simple question: What does it mean to claim *2049* as an Anthropocene film? There are three answers laid out, the first of which: “To assert that it is this very (paradoxical) repressed awareness that truly makes *2049* a film for the contemporary moment” (Hamblin, O'Connell 2020, 20). The juxtaposition of cognisance and disavowal matches our own, voicing our unresponsiveness to our reality and to surmount the “development-Anthropocene dialectic” (20). The second answer given: “To argue that this tension exposes the limits of Hollywood cinema as a formal and industrial practice incapable of engaging with the Anthropocene's ‘plenum of ungraspable hyperobjects’ in any meaningful way beyond aestheticised spectacle” (20). As a product of infinite developmental futurism, *2049* both

depicts the Anthropocene and is a product of the Anthropocene itself, therefore “invalidat[ing] the very logic of franchise” (20). Yet *2049* ultimately falls prey to a traditional Hollywood narrative structure in the form of a human-centered protagonist overcoming a challenge, a (successful) blockbuster requirement which ultimately contradicts the Anthropocene. The third answer: “To attempt to perform a counter-disavowal that both works against the unintentional privileging of harsh economic reality as the absolute barrier to possibility and that also refuses to conform to the technological drive and closure of narrative” (Hamblin, O’Connell 2020, 21). This possibility will promote anti-reproductive, anti-developmental strategies yet strive for the same reproductive, developmental futurity; for example, in *2049* the replicants return to Earth signifying our path to confrontation with an anthropogenic reality. Ultimately, Hamblin and O’Connell argue *Blade Runner 2049* can only offer the audience mediation of the Anthropocene (as opposed to narration).

Rather than use the Anthropocene as a hero’s journey and a singular problem to solve by a singular protagonists, Hamblin and O’Connell’s “*Blade Runner 2049*’s incongruous couplings: Living and dying in the Anthropocene” examines how *2049*’s Anthropocenic worldbuilding can influence the logistics of an established franchise. This approach is vital to current and future films of all cinematic genres as environmental degradation becomes prevalent to day to day life. Furthermore, unlike other cli-fi films, this article lays out the framework for *2049*’s manual to dying in the Anthropocene; this is visualized in the narrative’s refusal to reference the Sixth Extinction, or any ontological event in the same vein, instead opting to indirectly acknowledge climate apocalypse as a given. Using the Anthropocene as a primary worldbuilding tactic rather than the subject of the film is a skill filmmakers are still learning - how anthropo scenery and traditional blockbuster narratives can work with each other rather than against each other, favoring the intersectionality for the disconnect between the two. Of course the hardest issues we face, capital “C” Climate change, go down best with a spoon full of sugar, our favorite films and even better films that have already been established as fan favorites. In this way, choosing *Blade Runner 2049* as the vessel for an Anthropocenic narrative (however indirect its role) was a wise decision. Our world’s simultaneous love of cinematic nostalgia and perhaps perverted ability to look ahead to a desolate world come together in *Blade Runner 2049* as demonstrated by “*Blade Runner 2049*’s incongruous couplings: Living and dying in the Anthropocene.