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Do Android Detectives Dream of Electric Cowboys? Western Retrofuturity in *Blade Runner 2049*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that although Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* is, like the 1982 Ridley Scott film to which it is a sequel, most obviously located within the genres of science fiction and neo-noir, it in fact engages extensively with the history of the Western genre. Villeneuve's film, I argue, is a crypto-Western, recuperating Western conventions within the aesthetic superstructure of other genres. *Blade Runner 2049* thus exemplifies how even our most future-facing popular culture can exhibit ghostly traces of nostalgia for popular frontier mythologies. The film engages with the debt that the figure of the fictive detective owes to the dime novel cowboys of earlier literature, locating its central thematic discourses about the nature of (post)humanity in a long American tradition of narrative art that glorifies the 'rugged individualist'. Meanwhile, in the film's world, human over-exploitation of the environment has, ironically, made the wilderness conditions of the mythologised Western past possible once more. This does not, however, render *Blade Runner 2049* a film incapable of imagining the future. Rather, I suggest, the film's future is plausible precisely because it reckons with the adhesiveness of the past, and little in the American past looms larger than the real-and-imagined old West.

KEYWORDS

Western; noir; detective; blade runner; cowboy; frontier; hardboiled

Open Plains, Mean Streets, and Nostalgic Revisionism

A cowboy is riding the open range beneath an open sky, the sun painting the prairie in radiant gold; he hears the music of the lowing cattle, the dry grass crackling in the wind, his horse's steady hoofbeat. This is a hard world, he thinks with a smile, but a good one. A detective, trenchcoated, looms from the crooked shadows of a city backstreet, jaw clenched and collar upturned against the driving rain; he is haloed for a moment by the sickly glow of a barroom's neon sign, then retreats once more into the deep dark. This is a hard world, he thinks with a grimace, and a sick one.

These might seem images of opposite Americas. One rural is rural, the other urban. One is connotative of a frontier culture of optimism, possibility, and positivist faith in national destiny; the other emblematises an anxious post-frontier lapsarianism, a debased world of delimited horizons and stunted hopes. The cowboy is an image of American morning, the detective an image of American night. If the cowboy and detective have the

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immediate appearance of being improbable partners, then the world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and its Denis Villeneuve-directed sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) may look like an especially unlikely place in which to find those seemingly contrary images reciprocally superimposed. Both of these films are well known for their welding of science-fiction conventions to those of the film noir detective story, but neither readily announces itself as operating in the tradition of the Western. Careful reading, however, discloses the insistent presence of the archetypal imageries, narrative tropes, and character types of Western cinema and fiction in both films. Focusing on Villeneuve's sequel, this essay asks what those Western signifiers are doing so far from home.

To ask why a cowboy might take on the appearance of a detective is to summon a long history within fictional narratives of the American West, the way we familiarly talk about them, and the widespread (mis)conceptions of history they inform, of using the term 'cowboy' to refer to figures who are not quite, in fact, cowboys. 'Cowboy' is habitually mobilised in popular discourse as a synecdoche for a cluster of adjacent figures of mythicised American heroism – a cast of resourceful, vigorous, wilderness-subduing types whose differing subsidiary guises are reflective of the differing social, geographic, and economic conditions that attended the American frontier as it advanced westwards throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Ray Allen Billington once put it in one of the last great works of the 'frontier school' of American history, the 'romantic characters' that define the popular imagination of westward expansion range from the 'coon-skinned trappers and leatherclad "Mountain Men"' associated with older, more easterly frontiers, to the 'starry-eyed prospectors and hard-riding cowboys, badmen and vigilantes' of the deserts and plains further west (Billington 1949/1967, 11). Frederick Jackson Turner, who had inaugurated the frontierist turn in American historical studies at the end of the nineteenth century, himself averred that 'the regulators of the Carolinas were the predecessors of the claims associations of Iowa and the vigilance committees of California', because they all shared the 'stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman' (Turner 1896/1921a, 212, 1893/1921b, 15). Between the frontiers of 'the Cumberland Gap and [...] the Rockies a century later', changes occurred in the clothes worn, weapons carried, and trades practiced by those who mastered each successive wilderness, but not in their characters and attitudes (Turner 1893/1921b, 12).

Even if we restrict ourselves to the mid-to-late nineteenth-century period and trans-Mississippi setting so often memorialised in popular culture as the 'Wild' West, we might note how often our common parlance uses the term 'cowboy movie' as a synonym for films in the Western genre, even though many of the heroes-on-horseback in Westerns are not, in fact, cowboys by occupation. They may be lawmen like sheriffs, marshals, or Texas Rangers; they may be bounty hunters, vigilantes, or other variations on the journeyman gunslinger; they may even be outlaws. J. Randolph Cox, writing on the early history of the Western as a literary genre, identifies 'six basic types of heroes [...]': the backwoodsman, the miner, the outlaw, the plainsman, the cowboy, and the rancher', but notes that even in the genre's foundational years the cowboy 'alternated with the plainsman' and appeared as a 'freelance figure who went from place to place in search of adventure', rather than as 'in real life a ranch hand and cowpuncher' (Cox 2000, 112). Only a minority of the heroes of Western myth in any of its popular narrative manifestations have ever been cowboys in that more technically accurate and fundamentally mundane sense, yet 'cowboy' is the word that has stuck to conjure and denote ideals of

solitary ruggedness, independent action, and healthy scepticism of authority as supposedly exemplified by the various popular heroic figures of the American West. As Karen Jones and John Wills put it, the term ‘cowboy’ has long been ‘read liberally as a collective term for all “frontier westerners”’ (Jones and Wills 2009, 83).

When I invoke the cowboy in this essay, I operate in precisely this long tradition of condensing and to a degree eliding a number of cultural archetypes of the American West into an evocative shorthand, not least because *Blade Runner 2049*, the principal object of my critical attention, seems to do the same. *2049* is a film nostalgic for its sci-fi own predecessor even as it revises its aesthetics and implications, but *Blade Runner* itself was nostalgic for the hardboiled fiction and film noir of the 1930s and 1940s even as it updated and deconstructed those traditions. Those hardboiled and noir narratives, in turn, were simultaneously expressions of nostalgia for and modernising departures from the mythos of the American West and its imagined heroes. Earlier still, when late nineteenth-century Western dime novels created ‘a mass vision of [...] the frontier for mainstream America to absorb’, they took a highly complex, centuries-long, continent-spanning psychodrama of spatial, racial, and economic conquest, and distilled it into a handful of stock characters who, ironically, were supposed to represent democratic individualism as the spirit that had animated a nation’s compulsive westward drive (Jones and Wills 2009, 83). If nostalgia is an attachment to the past that necessarily involves its misremembering, its distortion as it grows more distant from the present, then *2049*’s recursive retrofuturity, in which sentimentality about multiple histories is inseparable from a determination to rewrite them, inherits and indeed makes its own implicit subject a tradition as old as commercial storytelling about the American West itself.

Genre Genealogies and the Referential Chain

Despite their apparently antipodal differences, the detective and the cowboy in fact have a shared history as interlinked American cultural archetypes. The detective follows the Western hero in representing a robustly anti-authoritarian individualism: both are embodied claims that free agency and the willingness to assert it are forces for good in American life, indeed that life absent the personalised presence of such forces cannot be American. Both assert their agency in order to act as moral bulwarks against threats to the integrity of their respective worlds – whether those threats are unscrupulous cattle rustlers, Mexican bandits, and recalcitrant Native Americans, or gangsters, crooked cops, and femmes fatales. Neither is afraid either to administer or to accept rough – even extralegal – justice in service of this regulatory social role. Both, as such, are arbiters and defenders of American ‘civilisation’ who in fact sit slightly and paradoxically outside its bounds – to that extent, they are superheroes without superpowers. Both cowboy and detective, moreover, perform a further regulatory role upon the boundaries of American identity itself. Counter to the complexities of historical reality and notwithstanding revisionist depictions of more recent years, both the cowboy and detective have traditionally stood in the popular imaginary as icons of heteromascularity and of whiteness. Their heroised cultural status at once reflects and entrenches the narrow normate of American personhood; their mutual enshrinement of individualism as an American ideal

is indivisible from their coterminous enshrinement of the rugged white man as the ideal individual.

These proximities of character between the popular figures of the frontier hero and the professional sleuth are neither mere coincidence nor simply indicative of the ubiquity of masculinist individualism as a quality extolled in patriarchal democracies. Rather, there exist material connections between the historical cowboy and detective, connections with which authors, publishers, and filmmakers would engage when transforming both into enduringly popular fictive protagonists. As Blake Allmendinger notes, the two figures became historically conjoined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the rise of ‘livestock detectives’, cowboys who took to working for ranches or even detective agencies to apprehend and deter cattle rustlers (Allmendinger 1992, 115–18). Fiction was quick to reflect this blending of roles. In becoming assistant foreman at Sunk Creek Ranch, the titular hero of Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian* becomes a cowboy detective – the two figures already conjoined at the foundations of the Western as a literary genre, in a text incalculably influential on later fiction, film, and television. *The Virginian* marked an expansion of the cowboy’s cultural territory – from the downmarket dime novels in which he had first been popularly commercialised to ‘quality western literature’ (D. A. Smith 2021, 23). That (fittingly frontiersmanlike) ability to adapt and move into new spaces would come to define the remarkable endurance of both Western hero and detective as multimodal, transmedial figures, able to accommodate and be accommodated to multiple changes in dominant storytelling tastes and technologies as the twentieth century wore on.

As the dime novel Western declined, the pulp magazines that displaced it ‘recycled the same stories and appealed to the same audience’, while the cowboy also migrated to the screen with tremendous success in early Western films, making stars of Broncho Billy Anderson, William S. Hart, and Tom Mix (Jones and Wills 2009, 83). Cinema and the pulps would soon be joined by radio serials in an increasingly complex media ecosystem where popular Western narrative flourished, before all three faced the challenge of television. Decades later, videogames would arise as still another site in which the Western hero proved his seemingly endless formal malleability. He would be hotly pursued, though, across all those cultural forms by the detective, as a figure who was once part of the cowboy’s own historical and fictional genealogy took on an increasingly independent parallel life. As Michael Denning notes, both ‘detectives [...] and Western outlaws [...] proliferated’ alongside each other in popular literature, brought to prominence by the same developments in publishing culture, and performing for readers comparable roles against different backdrops (Denning 1998, 242). Ironically, Wister portrays his protagonist as looking askance at early detective fiction: ‘If I’d knowned that one was a detective story’, says the Virginian of a book he has been given, ‘I’d have got yu’ to try something else on me. Can you guess the murderer, or is the author too smart for yu?’ That’s all they amount to’ (Wister 1902/2005, 108–9). There is a metafictional joke here at the expense of a character who does not recognise his own significance as an early exemplar of the Western and detective genres’ historically informed proximity.

Indeed, as successfully as the Western genre would endure, across generations and across media, the detective is nonetheless legible as a character who at least partially supplanted figures of the frontier-era West in popular narrative contexts, reflecting a modernising and urbanising world. If the Western remains, in Bill Brown’s words,

‘the quintessential American genre’, the ascendancy of the detective as a figure whose consanguinity with the Western hero also made him a typological competitor signalled that the cowboy was now ineluctably a historical character, a paradigm of pastness, however resonant he remained and notwithstanding the continuing existence of real-life modern cowboys (B. Brown 1997, 6, 14, quoted in Jones and Wills 2009, 83). Deadwood Dick, a dime novel hero so ubiquitous that multiple real-life outlaws adopted his moniker as a pseudonym, started fictional life as a sometime stage driver, sometime bandit. As the West changed, however, later appearances transformed him into a crimefighter: ‘his frontier outlaw persona [...] simply merged with his new character as detective’ (Slotkin 1998, 146). Deadwood Dick’s evolution was ‘prophetic of the coming age of the dime novel detectives’ (H. N. Smith 1948, 284). On such foundations, John Scaggs concludes that ‘the identification of the frontier hero as the archetype of the private eye is well established’, and Richard Lehan describes Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, American literature’s best-known sleuth, as a ‘frontiersman [...] transformed by the city’ (Scaggs 2005, 64; Lehan 1998, 252). For Megan Abbott, similarly, the detective’s forerunners are ‘like-minded navigators of Western space or wilderness’ (Abbott 2002, 2).

When we see an American detective on screen or in print, therefore, we are also looking at a cowboy. Their geographic, social, and in many cases chronological contexts may be markedly different, but the modern, urban detective inherits much from the heroic figures of the pre-urban West and its open frontier. If the detective and the Western hero emerged as protagonists of popular fiction around the same time and in the same publishing milieu, the detective also represents an evolution of a cluster of related heroic frontier figures – the cowboy, the pioneer, the stage driver, the lawman, and paradoxically even the outlaw. If the fictional detective is in one sense a nostalgic throwback to the archetypes of pioneer heroism, a gunslinger from the mythic past preserved into modernity, he also represents that past’s erasure *by* modernity, as a figure whose contexts are urban and technologised, and whose rise to prominence in print challenged the Western hero’s primacy as the quintessential masculine hero of popular literature. Introducing a modern edition of the *The Virginian*, John G. Cawelti positions the detective less as the cowboy’s dark twin than as his Oedipal pretender: ‘the Western genre has increasingly faded into the sunset, and narrative types like the detective story [...] have taken its place’ (Cawelti 2005, xxxvi). It is tempting in such a context to read the *Virginian*’s disdain for detective stories as an act of self-defence.

Frontier inheritances present themselves readily in the analysis of fictional detectives who emerged from the same early twentieth-century popular publishing contexts as the Western hero – the hardboiled dicks created by the likes of Chandler, Carroll John Daly, and Dashiell Hammett. As I have written elsewhere, for example, Chandler’s Marlowe uses ‘frontier principles to negotiate post-frontier spaces’, and therein asserts that ‘those principles remain relevant and necessary precisely as a means of surviving [...] modernity while simultaneously querying the extent of [its] dominance’, in doing so demonstrating the detective’s ambivalent status as both a replacement for and an endurance of the Western hero (Docherty 2021, 93). The detective of popular mid-twentieth-century fiction and film is thus a complicated and even paradoxical figure of nostalgia for the cowboy and his cousins. The detective appears as a figure of reassurance to audiences who identify with his personal embodiment of white masculine individualism, in that he

performs a fantasy of the rugged pioneering type's ability to adapt, endure, stay on top, despite the encroachments of both the cultural diversity and the deindividuating anonymity of the modern city. White men, the detective says through his western inheritances, can remain kings of the wild frontier. In his very existence, though, the detective is simultaneously evidence that the western hero and his world have passed out of time. In supplanting the very figure for whom he connotes nostalgia, the detective contains a proposal that if a distinctly gendered and racialised rugged individualist is no longer unrivalled as the protagonist of the American story, those who mourn his decline should look inward rather than outward in search of explanations. Such dynamics are even further complicated when we consider more recent fictional investigators whose characterisation consciously suggests their pre-war hardboiled forebears: the detectives of 'neo-noir'. When neo-noir detectives invoke Chandler or Hammett they mediate, in a manner at once revisionist and nostalgic, a form of fiction already performing its own simultaneously revisionist and nostalgic mediation of Western myths and their heroes. The part of the cowboy who lives conflictedly inside the detective is now buried a little deeper, refracted through a further set of ironising lenses, the significance of his presence even more ambiguous. He is still there, though.

Consider Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), a genre-defining neo-noir which appears at times to be pure Chandlerian pastiche. Yet crucial periods of the action swap the gloomy, shadowed Los Angeles interiors so typical of film noir's original 1940s incarnation for exterior shots of the barren, arid landscapes beyond the city's limits, filmed in punishing brightness, while a historically inspired plot about the value of water in Southern California affirms that this is as hostile and threatening a landscape as ever it was. If the detective is a kind of urban cowboy, Jack Nicholson's Jake Gittes has to de-urbanise himself and hunt for answers among the farmers of the San Fernando Valley, who even within the film's 1937 setting are already anachronistic throwbacks to a lost West, standing in the way of a growing city. If, as Phillip Novak notes, *Chinatown* was understood when first released to present an 'allegory for the American experience in Vietnam', the sense that Polanski's film is obliquely about contemporary American efforts to subjugate the so-deemed 'savage' occupants of a distant, hostile wilderness is underscored by a kind of violent environmental nostalgia for the original, template-setting American frontier encounter (Novak 2007, 276). Neo-noir thus mobilises its own parent genre's complex engagement with the Western for narrative purposes, suggesting simultaneously the old West's supplantation by and endurance within modernity.

Blade Runner is a neo-noir that seems to abstract the detective yet further from his Western forebears through the application of a science fiction setting. Based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Blade Runner* has been called 'the first truly cyberpunk film' (Senior 1996, 1). Its dystopian 2019 Los Angeles backdrop, which Norman Klein once called 'a paradigm for the future of cities', is ironically now a place of the past (N. M. Klein 1991, 147). The narrative and aesthetic richness of *Blade Runner*'s then-innovative, now-clichéd combination of sci-fi and noir has seen it birth, as Robert Yeates notes, a transmedia 'universe' incorporating novels, video games, comics, an animated series, the cinematic sequel that is this article's primary subject, and a series of shorts released in conjunction with that sequel. Yeates succinctly explains the *Blade Runner* universe's premise thus:

In the texts which make up the franchise, the protagonists are 'blade runners', law enforcement officers tasked with discovering and exterminating 'replicants', androids almost indistinguishable from humans but for a subtle difference in their morality. The urban California of the *Blade Runner* universe is in decay from the ravages of World War Terminus, an apocalyptic global conflict involving biological and nuclear weapons that has sent the world into a protracted decline. The perpetually dark, acid-rain-soaked streets of Los Angeles are [...] distinctly post-apocalyptic: the fatal blow has already been dealt to the city, rendering it uninhabitable in the long term, and only through the retrofitting of failing structures and technology is its ultimate demise temporarily delayed. (Yeates 2021, 91)

On an immediate level *Blade Runner*'s futuristic dystopian setting, where artificial life forms, flying cars, off-world colonies, and advanced computing technology are the norm, seems to remove it from the mid-century aesthetics of first-generation noir. Yet this world is presented in ways that make abundantly clear its debt to such cinema: rain falls hard on mean streets; characters are inscribed with stark bars of light and shadow by Venetian blinds; Dutch angles abound. Environmental crisis, meanwhile, has only heightened and made more literal Los Angeles' longstanding identification with a noirish sense of shadow and inscrutability – casting the city into seemingly perpetual darkness and shrouding it in a hellish neo-smog of hyper-industrialisation. Just as much hardboiled fiction and the noir cinema it inspired, moreover, was responsive to white men's unease with the increasingly ethnically diverse America of the 1920s and 1930s, *Blade Runner* in turn uses its future setting to replicate those contextual thematics in hypertrophied form, depicting a polyglot L.A. where East Asian cultures, languages, and populations have become as prominent as Euro-American ones.

It is not only the film's setting that is 'stunningly Chanderlesque', in Mike Davis' phrase; its protagonist, blade runner Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is equally indebted to mid-century detective archetypes (Davis [1990] 2006, 44). In addition to his Los Angeles surroundings, Deckard shares with Chandler's Marlowe a trenchcoat, a complicated relationship with authority in general and the police in particular (having recently been recalled to service under duress by his former employer, the LAPD), and a propensity to drink heavily. Like Marlowe, Deckard has few friends, a hangdog demeanour, and a deadpan sense of humour. Where Marlowe seeks to keep himself largely aloof from close human relationships and the vulnerability of emotional entanglement, *Blade Runner* plays on that defining characteristic by gradually hinting that Deckard himself may be one of the non-humans he has been appointed to hunt.¹

A (possibly) robot cop in a futuristic dystopian megacity, then, seems to occupy a place in the detective's evolutionary tree exceptionally distant from the old Western hero. If *Blade Runner* looks back nostalgically to the golden age of film noir, its futuristic hyper-urban context emphasises the extent to which detective stories and cowboy stories have diverged from their shared origin points. Looking closer, though, connections persist. If Los Angeles is a recurrent setting in film noir and hardboiled fiction, it is also a setting that invokes myths of a more distant frontier past, as a place that symbolises, in its continent's end location and its paradigmatic urban mass, the terminus of the United States' historical westward expansion. Moreover, if the demise of the Western frontier at the end of the nineteenth century 'closed the first period in American history', in Frederick Jackson Turner's words, raising ominous questions

about the destiny of a nation built on westward expansion, the twenty-first century of *Blade Runner* locates in off-world colonisation a 'solution' of sorts to the problem of a frontierless planet (Turner 1893/1921b, 36).

In *Blade Runner*, humanity has begun to use replicants to perform dangerous extra-terrestrial labour. A new frontier exists, but humans no longer wish to risk becoming frontiersmen: the symbolic West has moved off-world, its conquest outsourced. Replicants, however, have lately begun to return to earth, seeking either an extension to or revenge for their hard-wired four-year lifespan. If, therefore, *Blade Runner* at first appears to depict an immutably post-frontier world, a hyperurban, hyper-technologised place where capital has begun to compound its steady deindividuation of humanity by building a reserve army of artificial non-individuals, it is also legible as a film about the frontier's revenge. Create single-purpose neo-pioneers whose arduous forced labour at the known world's dangerous and distant margins recuperates the old social role of the frontiersman, the film warns, and don't be surprised if they come back to demand the frontiersman's definitional individualism, too. We could, however, conversely read the replicants as evocative less of mythicised pioneer heroes than of their frequent adversaries – the Native Americans subjected to genocide in the name of frontier-conquering destiny. As Yeates notes, 'critics have rightly linked the minority status of [*Blade Runner*'s] antagonists, the replicants, to America's long history of racial prejudice', and replicants' effectively enslaved status may most readily render them allegorically suggestive of African American histories of racial oppression. (Yeates 2021, 92). Yet if Deckard is Marlowe's figurative child, part of his inheritance is the frontiersmanlike identity that suffused his predecessor detectives. To identify Deckard with the figure of the frontiersman is to place his quarries, hunted by a society that deems them an alien threat to civic order (while denying its own role in creating that threat), in a role akin to that played by Native Americans in the frontier myths – as supposedly 'savage' others who frustrated the advance of American 'civilisation'.

To apprehend *either* Deckard or the replicants as frontiersmanlike figures is to recognise how, per William Katerberg, *Blade Runner* 'implies that America's frontier experiment did not truly redeem the Old World but merely staved off some of its sins, temporarily, and ultimately replicated them' (Katerberg 2008, 4). That both Deckard and the replicants he hunts might be seen as wearing the guise of frontier heroes attests to *Blade Runner*'s abiding moral and narrative ambiguities, but in either interpretation the dislocated presence within the film of its noir reference points' genealogy of frontier myth and heroic Western types complements its discourses about the nature of humanity, violence, right and wrong. Despite initial appearances, Scott's film proves deeply invested in exploiting the narrative adjacency between the Western and the noir, the cowboy and the detective. Ford's Deckard, a reluctant cop who takes down replicants but may be one himself, embodies that uneasy, ambiguous adjacency: his detective ostensibly exists to suppress the replicants' unlikely reinvestment of futuristic postmodernity with the violent instability of the frontier, but he too may hear that call of the wild. Thus *Blade Runner*'s engagement with classic detective fiction and film extends to its engagement with Western mythologies: Scott's detective, just like those of the early pulps, operates paradoxically as both an agent of frontier archetypes' obsolescence and the vessel of their mutated contemporary survival. Be careful what you wish for when it comes to nostalgic

American myths, says *Blade Runner*: the atavistic frontier of centuries past may not be as distant as it appears.

Blade Runner 2049 inverts the mystery of the film to which it is a sequel. Where *Blade Runner* begins with Deckard assumed to be human but introduces the possibility that he may be a replicant, *2049*'s protagonist K (Ryan Gosling) is a blade runner who begins the film knowing he is a replicant but uncovers information that may reveal him, and all replicants, to be more human than had been thought possible. Situating *2049* as a cultural artefact, we find ourselves removed by over a century, and several degrees of contextual separation, from the heyday of the dime novel cowboy who birthed the hardboiled gumshoe. Consider the complex nest of real and fictive temporal frames within which this third-generation 'neo-neo'-noir situates its narrative. If *2049* looks forward to its titular future year, it also looks back (most nostalgically through original star Ford's return as Deckard) to 1982, the year in which the original *Blade Runner* imagined a version of 2019. The 2019 that *Blade Runner* imagined, however, often looked a good deal like the mid-twentieth century because of the art deco aesthetics its world absorbed in its creative recycling of that era's film noir. By extension, therefore, *2049* looks back to that era, too. *2049* is less consistently stylised than its predecessor – art deco is not a conspicuous reference point here – but a 2019 that looked oddly like 1939 is a memory within the film, while more generalised noir cues (darkness, rain, fog, shadow, subdued colour flecked at dramatic intervals with gleaming neon hues) persist explicitly. Those recollected atmospheres by further extension situate the film in the lineage of the 1920s and 1930s hardboiled crime fiction that inspired iconic detective noirs. That fictional corpus' ghostly presence in turn means that the dime novel cowboy retains a faint vestigial trace in *2049*, by virtue of the hardboiled detective's prehistory as a Western hero who forsook the trail for the sidewalk as readers' tastes changed. Yet not only do the hardboiled reference points that situate Gosling's K in a tradition that extends to the dime novel cowboy appear largely indirectly, via *2049*'s referential relationship with the original *Blade Runner*, they also appear fragmented among other interpolated, interpolated, and implied contextual frames.

2049, for example, does make its own direct appeal to the mid-twentieth century, but to a later point than that for which *Blade Runner* is nostalgic. Where *Blade Runner* invokes the L.A. of the 1930s and 1940s, *2049* features holograms of Frank Sinatra in a 1962 performance and Elvis Presley in the white jumpsuit of his 1970s concerts. Both appear in a Las Vegas casino that seems in some scenes to have the mid-twentieth-century appearance of the lounges that Sinatra and Presley sang and caroused in, but which elsewhere seems to be an even older building. Indeed, scenes in the casino were filmed at the Budapest Stock Exchange Palace, a grand Beaux-Arts structure opened in 1905 (Heathcote 2018). Of course, there were no such buildings in the real Las Vegas at that time, and the older (i.e. mid-twentieth century) casinos of downtown Las Vegas were not built in comparable styles. Nor can this be a 'new' building within the film's world as the movie's Vegas was abandoned some years prior, having become uninhabitably irradiated. What we see in *2049*, therefore, most compellingly suggests a late twentieth- or early twenty-first-century Vegas casino designed to recall grand European architectures of the deeper past – something like the real-world Bellagio, which inflates to steroidal proportions the neoclassical Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni of its namesake Italian village (Minca 2005, 116).

So, whilst there is a chain of literary-historical influence and reference that connects the cowboy to K, because K is clearly inspired by earlier American detectives who in turn evolved from the heroes of early Western fiction, the connection is distant and abstracted, further attenuated by the occlusive presence of multiple other scaffolds of cultural and chronological reference in which Villeneuve clads his dystopic future. To locate the presence of heroic archetypes of the mythic old West in the character of Ryan Gosling's future supercop by tracing those archetypes' progressive dilution and transmutation through intervening generations of media demands a kind of critical regression analysis that might even appear tenuous – genre history as a game of telephone. We could reasonably ask, therefore, if the fact that the detective and Western hero share a fictive heritage inflects to any significant degree our experience of *Blade Runner 2049*, a work so far removed in setting, subject matter, and production context from the point at which detective stories and cowboy stories diverged into discrete traditions. At this point, is the cowboy-detective connection anything more than incidental?

All Points West

Blade Runner 2049 in fact reveals itself to be far more deeply and consequentially invested in embedding genre conventions of Western film within a detective story than initial appearances might suggest. That is to say, what seems to be a film that indicates how far the detective and the Western hero have diverged as figures is actually an unlikely vehicle for their reunification. It is remarkable, first of all, how much of *Blade Runner 2049* takes place outside the confines of future Los Angeles' dystopic sprawl. If noir is an archetypally urban form of storytelling, premised upon the darkness and alienation of the city, *2049* follows *Chinatown*'s lead as a noir that pits its protagonist against the challenges of non-urban environments with surprising frequency. *2049*'s opening scene sees Gosling's K executing an order to hunt down a renegade replicant, Sapper Morton. Morton is a farmer, and his farm comprises a number of hydroponic tunnels and a small single-storey structure where he lives. Morton's crop consists of grubs, grown in vats, which satisfy an overpopulated world's hunger for cheap protein. Notionally, we presume, his farm is within L.A.'s 2049 city limits – because K is an LAPD cop, and Morton falls under his jurisdiction – but there is no sign of the urban environment's intrusion here. The film's opening shots crawl over a grey landscape, showing the journey K must take in his 'spinner' (flying car) to reach Morton's location, and these shots seem to show that Morton's farm is one of many. Yet when we reach it, the farm appears entirely isolated. While we are on Morton's farm itself we see no indicators of any other farms or farmers, any infrastructure beyond that of the farm itself, any connectivity with the urban world. Diegetically, this makes sense: Morton has sought a remote refuge that gives him a chance of evading capture and 'retirement' by blade runners. Even if Morton is only one of many farmers, though, it is striking that, in the highly corporatised future *2049* depicts, the protein farming economy depends, at least in part, on individual farmsteaders, sole proprietors of what seem to be fairly small operations. *2049*, then, opens with the image of a man alone, living in what amounts to a shack or cabin, in a barren landscape beyond the fringes of 'civilisation', where he ekes out a living through small-scale farming. Of course, Morton is no rancher: that the animals he rears for their meat are

not cattle on wide prairies but wriggling grubs in vats seems to stand as a comment on humankind's exhaustion of the natural resources to which it once had access. Nevertheless, *2049* begins not with archetypes of noir or detective fiction but with figures and images drawn straight from the imaginary of the Western. Possessed of incredible physical strength, compelled by his fugitive state into almost total self-reliance, Morton is part homesteader, part frontiersman, part outlaw.

A later scene finds K trying to locate an orphanage in what was once San Diego. In *2049*, however, San Diego apparently no longer exists as a city – it has become instead a vast waste disposal site for the ever-sprawling Los Angeles. Yet if this vision of San Diego as a future junk yard is an alien one, its appearance has a curious familiarity. Composed predominantly of rusted metal, this landscape's colour palette is one of reddish browns. Moreover, large individual metal objects – discarded pieces of the skeletons of buildings and ships – loom out of the heaped expanses of garbage at irregular intervals, towering square protrusions. The appearance of *2049*'s trashscape thus unmistakably suggests the iconic geographies of the southwestern United States familiar from Westerns, most prominently Monument Valley. The latter was immortalised in as 'Hollywood's generic Western geography' principally by John Ford's repeated use of it as a filming location, commencing with 1939's *Stagecoach* (Zeman 1998, 319). Through the image of Monument Valley's remote, imposing barrenness, JoAnn Conrad writes, the 'struggle between civilisation and barbarism' that is the Western's defining dynamic was vividly 'mirrored in the struggle between man and wilderness' (Conrad 2015, 105–6). To present a filmic geography that resembles Monument Valley, as Villeneuve does, is therefore always to place the viewer in the 'mythic territory' of the Western as a genre (Zeman 1998, 319).

Tellingly, the San Diego-as-garbage-dump setting was referred to throughout *2049*'s production by a name that suggests an intent to evoke exactly such a Western geography: the 'trash mesa'. It is described thus in Hampton Fancher and Michael Green's screenplay, in an *Architectural Design* interview with the film's supervising art director Paul Inglis, and in the online portfolio of visual effects company Framestore (Fancher and Green 2017, 47; Inglis and Young 2019; "Blade Runner 2049" n.d.). Villeneuve thus deals here in heavy Anthropocene irony: the effect of the total industrialisation and urbanisation of the American West has been to transform a portion of it into a perverse facsimile of landscapes that have long defined the popular (and cinematic) imagination of the United States' pre-urban or anti-urban Western geographies. Even if the trash mesa is a product of an urban, commercialised, industrialised society's insatiable overconsumption (just as Morton's farm was), the environment created is not itself an urban scene of the kind we readily associate with detective narrative's noirish conventions; moreover, and again like Morton's farm, it is a non-urban environment that invokes the old West and its longstanding mythologisation. Furthermore, in the play of scale between K's sports car-sized spinner and the vastness of the trashscape, the hovering leviathans that periodically drop more garbage from the sky, and the mountainous individual hunks of debris, Villeneuve replicates how "Ford's representation of the valley is [...] most prominently characterised by the stunning size contrast between the rocks and the characters" (Kawamoto 2010, 48).

Where Ford sought a sublime combination of beauty and terror, however, Villeneuve offers only the latter. The film never shows us what the 'real' mesas of the Western deserts

look like in it its 2049, but its vision of almost total environmental catastrophe does not suggest a promising future for the great wild spaces of American myth: the implication is that the mesas, buttes, and rust-red plains that defined the Fordian imaginary of the West now are those of the San Diego trash-heap. Caroline Blinder has written of the photographer Richard Misrach, whose work frequently documents the anthropogenic ruination of American natural environments, that ‘the real charge of the images lies in those things that remind us of the picturesque even if presented obliquely – an unbelievable sunset blocked out by fog, the lush greenness of a waterway rendered toxic by waste’ (Blinder 2020, 583). There is a similar quality at play in the images of the trash mesa that director of photography Roger Deakins captures in 2049, the power of which is in invoking the very landscapes erased by the industrial processes and products that are the shots’ ostensible subjects.

There seems a further comment here, too, on the Western landscape as itself something mythic and constructed. Though John Ford often filmed on location, many of the iconic landscapes that seared themselves into a romantic American imagination of the old West through cinema of the early and mid-twentieth century were not images of real geographies at all but products of studio trickery. As Stephen Prince writes, ‘in the classical studio period [...] the dominant studio practice was to synthesise a location using partial sets, miniature models, matte paintings, rear projection, and composites achieved on the optical printer’ (Prince 2015, 144). Indeed, in the earliest days of cinema, innovative use of matte paintings created the unprecedented visual effects that made *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) one of the first smash-hit Westerns (Campbell 2022, 273). The construction of Western scenery via such techniques was thus a highly literal admission that the popular Western past was something illusory and fictive. Villeneuve compounds such a sense of Western geographic illusion by offering an ersatz mesa with a double-constructedness. Like the phoney deserts of the last century’s film sets, the San Diego garbage dump is a creation of cinematic art techniques. Simultaneously, though, within the film’s fictional world it appears as a grotesque mock-up/mockery of a natural environment once made famous by film – this debased iteration not merely artificial but the direct product of humankind’s destruction of the very natural environments its visual characteristics suggest, environments which may now *only* exist on ancient film.

Villeneuve’s San Diego thereby suggests a world in which the potentially symbolic geographies of the mythicised old West are closer at hand than they might at first appear, in fact perversely restored and brought back into currency by the very forces of industrialisation and urbanisation that previously banished the old West to the realm of popular fantasy. In the same breath, though, the double-constructedness of the scene emphasises the extent to which the old West has *always* been a popular fantasy. Though purportedly representative of a phenomenal and historical place, even when the Western landscape was filmed on location Ford and other directors were in fact ‘inventing [Monument] Valley’ as a location in the (non-Native) American mind (Slotkin 1998, 305). As a reconstruction of a Western geography made iconic to the point of cliché by cinema, the trash mesa is in its own self-conscious constructedness a reminder that even its notionally ‘real’ referent was in a sense a fictive creation all along. 2049’s prospect of San Diego as a Potemkin Monument Valley reconstituted from urban-industrial detritus is thus a simulacrum in its truest Baudrillardian sense – ‘never what hides the truth’ but ‘truth that hides the fact that there is none’ (Baudrillard 1981/1994, 1).

Suggestions of Western tropes continue as K makes an abrupt landing in the trash mesa. After his spinner is hit brought to earth by a harpoon, K is surrounded by a group of scavengers who roam the trash piles, combing the garbage for bounty and repelling encroachments upon what they perceive as ‘their’ territory. Given the Western-evoking visual context of the location, it seems entirely plausible to interpret this confrontation as operating in dialogue with another foundational motif of Western narrative forms: the image of the white hero (whether cowboy, soldier, stage driver, wagon party leader, or other rugged frontier-conquering type), alone or otherwise outmanned, ambushed by vengeful Native Americans. Jennifer Jenkins notes that the ‘Attack on the Deadwood Mail Coach’ had been ‘a crowd-pleaser’ in pageants and spectacles that purported to simulate or re-enact the adventure of the old West ever since ‘Buffalo Bill Cody’s very first Wild West [show] in 1883’ (Jenkins 2014, 83). The ambush’s place in the Western fiction formula was secured by the popularity of *The Virginian*, in which it is a key scene, and its conventions were well established by 1916 when the prolific Western author B. M. Bower offered this typifying literary example of its dimensions both spatial and moral:

Indians had fired upon white men and for no just cause. Why was this so? Why had Indians surrounded them back there in the grove and tried to kill them? Why were Indians shooting at them from the ledge of rocks that circled this little basin? They had no quarrel with the Navajos. (Bower 1916, 280)

By 1924, ‘the Western genre “Indian attack” scene’ was sufficiently familiar to audiences that Will Rogers could parody it in *Two Wagons, Both Covered* (Hearne 2012, 124).

Later, as the post-war Western began the genre’s journey towards revisionism and offered marginally more nuanced portrayals of Native Americans – continuing to emphasise Indian violence towards white settlers but increasingly framing such violence in terms of justified grievance about loss of land and culture – the ambush trope remained a regular presence. It appears, for example, in *Fort Apache* (1948), *Broken Arrow* (1950), and *The Searchers* (1956). The ambush persisted as a key element of the Western formula because of its capacity as a dramatic device to deny or invert temporarily the assumed power dynamics of the Western in ways that are both politically and narratively expedient. White incomers may have the advantages of technology, the backing of a state, and (within the colonialist and white supremacist logics underpinning the continental conquest that Westerns mythologise) ‘civilisational’ superiority, but an ambush – implicitly an underhanded or unsporting tactic, made possible by intimate Native knowledge of the landscape – places them at a temporary disadvantage. Indeed, the ‘code of the fighting man’ that many ‘noted outlaws and shootists of the Southwest’ in the frontier era claimed to uphold expressly forbade ambush, deeming it a breach of ‘Western honor’ (R. M. Brown 1993, 16). Thus the ambush in fictive Western narrative became a device that allowed even morally compromised white protagonists to encounter not just dramatically necessary jeopardy but even provisional victim status, without ever calling into question their fundamental (technological, moral, civilisational) superiority over their Native adversaries.

The scavengers who assail K in 2049 strongly recall the dynamics of the ‘Indian ambush’ trope. Their technology – the harpoon – is ‘primitive’ by comparison with K and his spinner, but brutally effective. Indeed, even its method of operation –

a projectile that pierces and thereby incapacitates K's mode of transportation – seems evocative of a recurrent tactic in cinematic ambushes by Native Americans: the expertly aimed arrow that fells a horse, leaving a rider or wagon vulnerable. K may have every technological advantage over the scavengers, he may represent the 'civilisation' of the city and of law enforcement, but he is briefly at the mercy of his adversaries' deeper experience of local conditions and how to exploit them. Though their identities are obscure, the scavengers are framed as in some sense 'indigenous' to the trash mesa. They are victims of an extractive 'civilisation' that has exploited and destroyed the landscape where they live. Their presence on the land that precedes K's arrival; they act to neutralise what they perceive as an external threat to their territory; they are able to use guerrilla tactics to spring an ambush. Indeed, because their origins go unexplained the scavengers present simply as a feature of the mesa itself, a symptomatic constituent element of the environment's definitional hostility, much as foundational frontier historians like Frederick Jackson Turner drew scant distinction between the resistance to conquest presented by the West's geography and that presented by its inhabitants.

What *2049* offers here is something that no Western could offer in today's political climate: a scene that deploys the dramatic rhythms of an 'Indian ambush' but is literally deracinated. Unlike its original incarnation there is no racial or settler colonialist dynamic here. The hero-victim is portrayed as a genuine innocent; his attackers are malicious and misguided but their wrongdoing or 'primitivism' is in no way racialised. We may have moral qualms about K's larger role in the film's narrative as a purpose-built (though, crucially, involuntary) agent of state violence, but he intends the scavengers no harm and has no designs on their territory. This is therefore an encounter between what Turner called 'savagery and civilisation' in which it is possible – encouraged, even – to root without reservation for civilisation's representative. Pre-revisionist Western narratives may have deemed such a dynamic possible when depicting an ambush, but even films of the 1950s like *The Searchers* and *Broken Arrow* acknowledged at least some ethical complexity in attacks on white settlers by Native Americans. Certainly, it is impossible to imagine a modern Western presenting an ambush scene with a white settler as straightforwardly wronged and his assailants straightforwardly wrong. We might accordingly suggest that while the trash mesa itself, as a degraded, bathetic usurper of the mythic frontier vistas of old, stands as a critical comment on the destructive processes of settlement that Westerns romanticised, the ambush that occurs there simultaneously tempts a kind of reactionary nostalgia for the Western in its most unapologetically imperialist form. The messy political and historical entanglements of the 'Indian ambush' have been stripped away, leaving only its mimetic architecture's enduring capacity to thrill. We might therefore take this scene as a kind of challenge to the viewer. Is there really such a thing as an opportunity to consume the spectacle of an 'Indian ambush' purely hedonically, to cheer for the figure in the 'cowboy' role without moral anxiety, guilt, or compromise, once we recognise the underlying dynamics of the scene for what they are? This may be an abstracted simulation rather than the 'real' thing, but the enjoyment it invites us to take derives, after all, at least in part from the knowledge of what it is simulating. By seeming to restore the 'Indian ambush' trope to the realm of apparently unproblematic entertainment, the film asks why we might wish it so. Ironically, *2049*'s palatable repackaging of Western tropes invites us to consider our complicity with their histories.

Although he proves mistaken, K spends much of *2049* under the impression that he may be the miraculous child of a union between two characters from the original *Blade Runner* – the advanced prototype replicant Rachael and Ford’s possibly-replicant Deckard. Until the events of *2049* it has been assumed that replicants cannot reproduce. On Morton’s farm, however, K discovers Rachael’s remains, which show evidence of childbirth; subsequent investigations lead K to believe that he was Rachael’s child. For K to discover himself the first replicant to have been born rather than made would both transform his own sense of selfhood (he yearns for humanity) and have dramatic political consequences in a world where replicants are expendable and lack rights. K must therefore locate Deckard, who has been in hiding for decades, to seek answers about his own origins. The search for Deckard proves to be another episode in which *2049*, beneath the stylistic trappings of a detective neo-noir, declares closer allegiances to the Western by evoking its defining narrative and visual tropes. K tracks Deckard down to the abandoned Las Vegas casino where the holograms of Presley and Sinatra play.

In the first instance, the Las Vegas scenes align *2049* with the conventions of the Western, as did the trash mesa ambush and Morton’s farm, simply by taking the film’s action to locales that look more like the settings of Westerns than the grimy urban milieus customary in detective noirs. Much as the film proposes a future San Diego devolved into a wilderness of garbage, Las Vegas too has been de-urbanised. Not only has radioactivity caused its population to flee, but in the absence of human intervention the desert has retaken what was once the city. Dust storms swirl everywhere; iconic structures of Vegas past lie half-submerged in sand. In one sense, Villeneuve’s Vegas is the converse of his Los Angeles – a reminder that Anthropocene modernity’s conquest of the planet, brutal and total as it may appear in places, is in fact fragile and provisional. Simultaneously, though, because the wilderness’ reclamation of Las Vegas in *2049* is the result of human action (irradiation, climate change, abandonment of environmental management measures that previously held the desert at bay), the city’s condition is itself legible as testament to the power of humankind to alter (for the worse) the environment. Either way, like the San Diego garbage dump, Las Vegas is another location where what is familiar to us as an urban environment has been revisioned as a desert – here, indeed, far more literally than in San Diego. The film thus twice sends its detective to locales that are familiar to us as the kinds of places where we might expect to find a noirish crimefighter, only to reveal that both have been transformed into settings that would much better suit the hero of a Western. *2049* uses its future setting to undermine our expectations of what Vegas and San Diego look like, and in so doing destabilises our sense of where to locate its action and protagonist in genre categories.

Deckard, when K finally finds him, is suspicious of the intruder’s intentions. Deckard tries to shoot K, before their struggle descends into a fistfight among the tables of the casino lounge, illuminated by the malfunctioning Elvis hologram. A fight between two characters is hardly a genre-specific piece of cinematic action. The conditions in which this one takes place, moreover – the combatants cloaked in darkness, often only visible in silhouette against the backdrop of the lounge’s mid-century furnishings, then sporadically lit up as the hologram flickers in and out of life – makes it one of *2049*’s most classically noirish moments. Yet the dynamic between the two characters in this scene specifically recalls the Western. There is perhaps no more familiar or characteristic motif in Westerns than the showdown. Well-known examples litter the genre’s history: take

Duel in the Sun (1946), *3:10 to Yuma* (1957), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), *The Shootist* (1976), or *Unforgiven* (1992). There are multiple Westerns simply called *Showdown* or *The Showdown*. Moreover, the showdown has recurred with such frequency that it has seeped into popular consciousness as a generalised signifier of the Western decoupled from any single specific exemplar. When Douglas McReynolds describes *Unforgiven* as concluding with ‘a saloon gunfight, the good guy killing all the bad ones,’ the showdown is not just the climax of a ‘familiar enough plot’ but something so embedded in audience expectations of the Western formula that it ‘satisf[ies] our inherent longing for some inherent universal order’ (McReynolds 1998, 50).

The showdown has its variations: sometimes it is between only two men, sometimes several – though in the latter case the typical dynamic is still to have a lone hero taking on a force composed of multiple assailants. Showdowns take place often, though not always, between adversaries who seem opposites but have more in common than they might care to admit, and often between men of different generations, with the older man fighting his own obsolescence. Indeed, when showdowns do involve a generation gap, the older participant typically represents an older moment in the mytho-history of the West itself, threatened by encroaching modernity (urbanisation, railroads, industry). In many cases, the showdown reunites men with some kind of ‘history’ – an estranged family connection or an unresolved grievance from years before. The archetypal showdown occurs under the blazing sun of a frontier town’s main street or, alternately, in the local saloon – its louvre doors creaking ominously as the antagonist enters.

2049’s debt to the Western showdown trope is amply illustrated by Henry King’s *The Gunfighter* (1950). Here, Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck) has gained such a reputation for being quick on the draw that he has become a target for any young gunslinger wishing to make a name for himself; he now wishes only to retire and escape from his gunfighting past but is shot down by Skip Homeier’s Hunt Bromley before he can do so. Instead of glory and triumph, Bromley soon realises that the act has rewarded him only with Ringo’s fate: his identity as an infamous gunfighter will now define him and pursue him until death. Like *The Gunfighter*, *2049* presents a showdown between an older man with a murky past he wishes to escape, who now seeks only to be left alone, and young man unsure if he wants to destroy or become his adversary. Deckard is an ageing, world-weary renegade confronting his mortality, who commences the fight with proof that he can still draw fastest – winking nostalgically at Ford’s own status as a symbol of cinema past by echoing the infamous ‘Han shot first’ moment in *Star Wars* (1977), another sci-fi spin on the saloon showdown in the most famous space Western of all. K, meanwhile is a young upstart – the elder man’s generational inheritor as both a son figure to Deckard’s character and his professional successor as a blade runner (not to mention his narrative successor as the series’ protagonist). Like Bromley and Ringo, through their fight Deckard and K realise that they already share a path. Their confrontation, moreover, is showdown-like as the long-awaited culmination of K’s search for the mysterious Deckard – neither a spontaneous eruption of violence nor part of a larger action sequence but a discrete and ritualistic set-piece. That it takes place in an abandoned location which thus serves solely as a backdrop to the fight emphasises this ritual quality, but a casino lounge also suggests a latter-day incarnation of the Western saloon. Of course, there is one crucial difference between the *2049* showdown and the Western duels it so clearly

emulates: the old stager Deckard survives, and allies with K. That they realise their kinship before destroying each other, however, unlike the duellists of *The Gunfighter* and its peers, itself proves indicative of precisely why 2049's Western allusions are significant.

A New Man

If *Blade Runner 2049* is a cowboy movie masquerading as a futuristic detective story, if beneath its sci-fi noir clothing we can discern the bones of something closer a Western, we might ask: to what end? How does a contextualisation of this film within the genre conventions of the Western inflect or articulate our understanding of what it means? Why does it matter that the detective's longstanding debt to the frontier hero ultimately reveals itself so consistently in a film that initially appeared to manifest only a distant ancestral connection with the Western? An answer lies in K and Deckard's showdown. Their fight, furious at first, fizzles out to a stalemate, the two arrested by the sound of Presley crooning 'I Can't Help Falling in Love'. Neither man seems physically defeated; there is no discernible logic to why they both suddenly abandon mutual destruction. Deckard simply says, gruffly, 'I like this song', and offers K a drink as an alternative to continued violence. If these two 'men' (one of whom is definitely a replicant and one of whom apparently remains unsure if he is one or not) fail to destroy each other, it is because in each other they finally recognise themselves, and in doing so confirm their own humanity. Each man spontaneously defers to his opponent's will to live because he shares it. This simultaneous defence of the self and recognition of the other as a sovereign individual is, in fact, 2049's most significant Western allusion, but it only declares itself as such in the context woven by the film's tapestry of other references to Western narrative convention.

At the heart of the myth of the American West is individualism – the notion that the frontier both demanded and engendered a character that insisted on self-making and self-determination, and resisted structures of legal, governmental, and social restriction. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur famously claimed in 1782 that 'the American is a new man, who acts on new principles', having rejected the 'servile dependence' of the old world (1782/2013, 32). The new nation's westward continental march had barely begun, but already Crèvecoeur identified the truest spirit of Americanism with those rugged – even unsavoury – characters who sought out and tested the furthest frontiers. 'He who would wish to see America in its proper light and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments', Crèvecoeur wrote, 'must visit our extended line of frontiers, where the last settlers dwell' (1782/2013, 34). 'Barbarous' as these self-exiled frontier-dwellers were, their refusal to accept the social regulation of their peers ironically made them essential servants of the very society they rejected. As the territory they had staked out gradually became a more 'well-regulated district' in their wake, these wild men would 'recede still farther' into the backwoods, expanding the boundaries of 'civilisation' by fleeing it (1782/2013, 34).

As the nascent United States pushed westwards, heroes both real and fictional – Davy Crockett, Natty Bumppo – began to embody the Crèvecoeurian ideal of a man whose wilful individualism both shaped the nation and was shaped by his wild surroundings. A century after Crèvecoeur, Frederick Jackson Turner embedded such figures at the heart

of his frontier thesis. The continent-crossing individualism that impelled Turner's frontiersman to reject 'the gains of civilisation' made him, like Crèvecoeur's 'barbarous' backwoodsmen, civilisation's paradoxical harbinger (Turner 1896/1921a, 209). In Turner's incalculably influential vision of Western history, the centrality of the frontier experience to the American development enshrined rugged individualism as the ideal of American (masculine) personality. He was the man alone, living on the edge of civilisation both geographically and institutionally, disdaining social refinement and perhaps even skirting the boundaries of the law, 'impatient of restraint' but upholding a code of personally embodied justice – that which Turner called 'the primitive idea of the personality of the law' (Turner 1896/1921a, 212). Even as Turner wrote, precisely that kind of character was already being heroised and mythicised in the Western dime novel, and the pulps, radio, and film would soon begin to embed him even deeper in the American imaginary. Adopting as its protagonist this uncompromising new man who had made an uncompromising new world in the West, the Western became a genre in which violent, mercurial figures, who walked a fine line between enforcing social order and destroying it, could be exalted. As McReynolds writes, the mythic West is a place where 'conflict has never been between law and outlaw, but between good and evil. And the West is Manichaeic' (McReynolds 1998, 50).

The Western hero's willingness to risk wrongdoing in pursuit of his personal conviction in a greater good is within the genre's logic *itself* a greater good because it testifies to the undimmed individualism by which he embodies American national ideals of self-reliance, liberty, democracy. The glorification of individualism as the cornerstone of nation-building character permitted outlaws and bandits both real and fictional – recall Deadwood Dick – to become Western heroes alongside the marshals and cowboys who chased them. The persona of the lone individualist whose sense of morality is more vested in a personal code than the strictures of the law is also, moreover, central to what the fictional detective inherits from his Western hero predecessor. Chandler's Marlowe and Hammett's Continental Op are often as suspicious of the apparatus of criminal justice of which they are notionally a part as they are of the criminals they hunt. 2049's K, in turn, ultimately begins to deceive and refuse the directives of his employer, the LAPD, when its institutional sense of how to protect the social order of the human-replicant society (an order to identify and exterminate Rachael's child) conflicts with his own personal sense of what is right and just (the faith in his own humanity he acquires from his belief that he is the child himself). For K, recognition of his own individualism and a newfound willingness to break the law, refuse orders, challenge the social conventions of his world, and escape to its unpoliced fringes (all impulses which should, in theory, be beyond the guardrails of his replicant brain) are one and the same.

All of this is to say that *Blade Runner 2049*'s Western allusions matter because they locate the film in an intellectual and cultural tradition that emphasises, underscores, and lends authority to its central claims for the individualism – and therein the humanity – of the replicants. By situating the film in the Western narrative tradition through repeated allusions and reference points, the film makes it impossible to ignore what K truly is: a literalisation of Crèvecoeur's new man, both the creation of a strange new world and a figure who demands to alter that world through the assertion of independent selfhood. By frequently framing its narrative dynamics within the conventions of the Western, and thereby reminding us that the detective was once a Western hero who in turn represented

the fictive idealisation of the Crèvecoeurian/Turnerian frontiersman's fundamentalist individualism, the film proposes K as a posthuman inheritor of the oldest stories America tells itself about its democratic values. In so doing, he and the film's other replicants stand as a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dystopian world, more willing to strive for their humanity than are the defeated humans around them. K discovers that he is not, in fact, Deckard and Rachael's child; he was made, not born; he is the product of an assembly line rather than a singular expression of love. Yet he is able to surmount his appointed role and act as an individual regardless. The mere belief that he is an individual is enough to make him one. *2049's* Western engagements demonstrate that human individualism's last, best hope in a dystopian world lies ironically in individuals who are not yet recognised as human – the futuristic reconstitution of the not-quite-human men of the backwoods whom Crèvecoeur feared and contemned while acknowledging that their fierce individualism bore the nation's hopes.

None of this is unproblematic, as perhaps becomes clearest when we apprehend the trash mesa scene as a deracinated 'Indian ambush'. Embedded within frontier myth and its historical manifestations in filmic and literary Western narrative are ideological justifications for and celebrations of settler colonialism, of indigenous genocide, of white (and male) supremacy, of American exceptionalism. If revisionist Westerns have been challenging and unpacking the genre's uncomfortable histories for over half a century now, *2049's* creative de- and re-contextualisation of Western tropes and images that originated in the unapologetic earlier popularisation of those histories might appear in a sense politically irresponsible. This is why it is crucial that its inheritor of the Western hero's mantle is a replicant. K has the physical appearance of a white man, true enough, but he represents a class of beings excluded from his society's vision of humanity, to the same degree that Turnerian frontier myth and its popular narrative outgrowths 'left Euro-American women, Native Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, African-Americans – all the "others" – outside of the heroic horizon' (K. L. Klein 1999, 12). The hardboiled and noir detective who followed the Western hero was likewise a social bulwark against threatening 'others', but here is remade as just such an other himself: K is an insurgent inversion of the types he inherits. *Blade Runner 2049's* call to renew the Western's democratic promise of individual liberty is thus at once an interrogation of the limits that promise held in its original incarnation, and an exhortation that the only hope for its rediscovery lies in its emancipatory expansion.

Note

1. The question of whether or not Deckard is human is vexed, and has been extensively muddled by the release of multiple cuts of the original *Blade Runner*. *Blade Runner 2049* reintroduces the character in a manner that maintains this ambiguity. It is, at the very least, *possible* that Deckard is a replicant.

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