

Bladerunner

What it means to be human

This is a classic movie that challenges our belief in externally imposed identity. It presents a future where androids are manufactured by an omnipotent corporation and used as slave labour. The androids are built to be stronger and smarter than humans but otherwise physically indistinguishable. When androids go on the run it falls to bladerunners to hunt them down and execute them.

The central tension of the film is in the difficulty of distinguishing androids from humans. The technology is so good that the android itself could be provided with false memories and fooled into believing that it is human. Because of this, every human character is suspect and could potentially be an android – even the bladerunners themselves.

When Rachel, the new prototype android with the false memories, learns the truth she pointedly asks the protagonist bladerunner whether he has ever tested himself to see if he is an android – implying that the corporation has created a bladerunner android to hunt down its other rogue androids. The viewer cannot help but ponder how Deckard (Descartes) knows he is human and whether it would change his beliefs and values if he found out he was not. Would he continue to hunt down androids if he was one himself?

Can We Choose Who We Are?

So the central theme is identity. Is Deckard an android or a human? What does it mean to be human? Is our identity something we choose for ourselves or is it imposed on us by others. If society says you are a slave without any rights, do you have to accept that or can you rebel? Society views Rachel as property and not human. Ultimately, Deckard rejects society's view of Rachel as a machine, begins a love affair with her and they go on the run.

Is our identity determined by our memories? If we suffer amnesia, do we become someone else? Something else? If that were so, then if we lost our memories, we would lose our identity and become a different person. Furthermore, if false memories can be implanted, then our memory can be viewed as an external agent in conflict with our true self. In this context, both our memory and society can be viewed as external forces that we can accept or reject.

The answer is that we create our own identity through agency – the choices that we make. In the conclusion of the film, Deckard chooses not to be a bladerunner. He also chooses to go on the run with Rachel and to reject the identity imposed on her by society. In this way they choose both who and what they are - just as we do with every decision that we make.

Meeting your maker

One of the film's premises is that the androids have an inbuilt safety feature in case they rebel. They have a genetically programmed four year lifespan and so are

denied the chance to live a meaningful life even if they do escape. In the film, a group of military androids at the end of their life span do manage to escape. But, instead of running, they confront their creator and demand more life.

Is there a more human sentiment? Humans are unique among living beings in that we are conscious of our own mortality and so feel an imperative to live a good life before time runs out. This is the defining feature of humanity. When I meet my maker I will ask the same question. Why does our time have to end when we are capable of so much more? No doubt, I will be dissatisfied with the response, just like the androids in the film.

Blade Runner 2049

The sequel inverts the Deckard question. Deckard was a human who came to suspect that he might be an android with implanted memories. Whereas, in the sequel, K is an android who suspects that he might actually be a human brainwashed to believe he is an android.

By 2049 the same omnipotent corporation cannot build androids fast enough and so decides that it would be easier to breed them. The logical next step is to dispense with the androids altogether and simply use humans in their place. Human subjects have their memories erased and are then told that they are androids. This immediately raises the possibility that Rachel was in fact human – the first of many to be stripped of their identity and sold as slaves by the corporation.

These ‘androids’ have no reason to doubt their identity since they have no memories to dispute it. But K has a treasured memory that pre-dates his supposed manufacture. The corporation's position is that this is a memory implant that they gave him. But K finds clues that Rachel has given birth to a child and he comes to hope that he may be her son – albeit brainwashed to believe he was manufactured.

When K finally tracks down Deckard he is still hoping that Rachael was his mother and Deckard his father. But having raised K's hopes, the film then dashes them. K is involved in multiple action scenes in which he displays superhuman strength and resilience – at one point even running through a wall – indicating to the audience that he is certainly an android.

But does that mean he cannot be human? K has agency, the ability to choose what to do with his life no matter how short it may be. He chooses to challenge the corporation and expose their crimes even though it costs him his life. The film ends with K uniting Deckard with his daughter by Rachel and so proving that androids can reproduce.

The moral of the film is that our identity isn't determined by societal values or suspect memories. We choose who we are from moment to moment as we make choices. We are what we do and our deeds can live after us.