

# Modernity: The Ultimate Problem of Contemporary Science Fiction Movies

Taking the Movie "Blade Runner: 2049" as an Example

Han Li

Beijing Normal University  
Beijing, China

**Abstract**—As a type of film, science fiction movies are full of philosophical thoughts for the future. By its nature, modern science fiction movies explore the modernity and future of people in modernity. The film "Blade Runner: 2049" breaks the hard shell of science fiction movies with its literary attitude and creates a special narrative and image style, which points out several breakthrough path for the creation of future science fiction movie.

**Keywords**—modernity; science fiction movie; type film

## I. INTRODUCTION

What science fiction movies need to solve is the ultimate problem of mankind: whether humanity can be reconstructed in the future world. Facing the rebellion of technology, whether human beings will evolve or degrade? American film "Blade Runner: 2049" has spanned 35 years since the last section "Blade Runner". Can the ultimate questions of human be answered in this section? Communication scholar Marshall McLuhan once said that technology is an extension of people. From the perspective of media development, this sentence is both elaborate and appropriate. However, in the real world, human beings have a real sense of crisis of being replaced. So after all, why do science fiction movies discuss such a motif? What questions about the future does it answers?

## II. MODERNITY: PANIC IN AN INDIVIDUALIZED ERA

Modernity began in the mid-seventeenth century. Charles Pierre Baudelaire holds that modernity is transient, perishable, and accidental. However, as a poet, Baudelaire's summary is obviously somewhat poetic. Sociologist Anthony Giddens said in an interview: "Modernity is an acronym for modern society or industrial civilization." Michel Foucault summarizes the modernity as an attitude similar to the "spirit of society called by the Greeks". Habermas believes that "freedom of 'self-determination' and 'self-realization' is the standard of modernity."

Ulrich Beck divided modernity into two phases: the period of industrial society and the period of risk society. The dividing line between the two periods is in the latter half of the 20th century. In the second half of the 20th century, two prominent features of the risk society in modernity are:

instrumental rationality and individuation. In Baker's opinion, the transition from industrial society to risk society is "quiet." In spite of this, the change is still obvious.

During the entire industrial society from the 17th century to the 20th century, rationality gradually replaced divinity, and science gradually replaced religion in Europe. Kant says: "There must always be the freedom to use one's own rationality openly, and only it can bring human enlightenment." However, in the stage of risk society, rationality gradually transforms into instrumental rationality. A major feature of instrumental rationality is the strict observance of the "cost-benefit" ruler. According to sociologist Charles Taylor, the advantage of instrumental rationality is the increased efficiency. However, the huge defect is "constantly technical contributed to the narrowing of life. The resonance, profoundness and richness that human environment once had are lost." Risk assessment is becoming a trend and some absurd data are becoming the strobe that controls the fate of anybody. Therefore, the perceptual and humane communication and association preserved by the traditional society are being replaced by costing accounting.

The second characteristic of risk society is individualization. In the second half of the 20th century, the life attitude of "living for oneself" became the mainstream of society. The classic system is gradually receding, which includes: country, class, core family, and ethnic group. The traditional social form is changed. Individuals shuttle in various social systems and form a kind of blind freedom. Because everyone has the freedom of choice, this freedom has instead become an anxiety and a burden. The fixed regular fate of everyone in traditional society is ended. "People have become one of the choices of the possibilities." Therefore, the external contradictions of the traditional society transformed into the social disease of the modern, so most people live their lives in anxiety.

Under such circumstances, the whole society shows a free state of combination of joy and despair because "the God is dead". However, is the "freedom" in the era of individualization is real freedom? Sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman argue that in modern society, individuals must acquire self-identity and attributes through consumer behavior. Although individuals disintegrate from traditional

social organizations, on the other hand, "new demands, controls and restrictions in modern society are imposed on individuals ... so individuals are entangled in a network of new rules, conditions and terms." Only minority of people in the consumer society have the attributes to own free through the reshuffling of the currency. "Freedom" is not so much a modern welfare as a tool for redistribution of resources. Therefore, it can be said that the "freedom" of modern society is a kind of indifferent "freedom."

### III. SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES: SELF METAPHOR IN INDIVIDUALIZED AGE

1902, Georges Méliès created the short film "A Trip to the Moon" to show humans' imagination on the extraterrestrial through simple special effects. This is the first attempt to model the future world by human. After a hundred years of evolution and technological innovation, today's science fiction movies have become one of the genre films with philosophical myths.

"Blade Runner" was born in 1982, which was the third high-tide period of science fiction film. After the Cold War period, science fiction films gradually put their perspective on the doomsday feelings. The big theme presents the despair and panic about the future. The science fiction movies in the same period, such as "Jurassic Park" series and "Terminator" series showed the desperation of the future. However, science fiction movies in this period didn't have a very breakthrough development in the exploration of personal spirit. Compared to the big box office above, "Future Water World" with bleak box office achieved new breakthrough in the personal reflection. It no longer purely focused on the impact and destruction of technology, but rather considers the position of man in nature and return to the thinking of the human themselves. On this basis, "The Matrix" took a step forward by placing the philosophical issues of man and code, human beings and clone, human beings and humanity into the film and elevated the current science fiction movies to a higher level.

"Blade Runner: 2049" look to 30 years later, intending to discuss the authenticity and importance of human emotions. Modernity destroyed human imagination of freedom, resulting in two relatively large crises: moral crisis and anxiety crisis.

#### A. Moral Crisis

The prevalence of instrumental rationality has shattered the common sense in traditional moral concepts. "Utility" has become a value ruler of the society. Rationality and science have pushed mankind to another extremity of "Man will conquer nature." In fact, however, there is a feeling of loss that is self-seeking but cannot trust one another in the society as a whole. Utilities and calculations have overcome the thinking and enjoyment of beauty and replaced the sharing of common spirit. In this regard, Karl Heinrich Marx once said: "Businessmen who run minerals only see the commercial value of the mineral, but cannot see the beauty and uniqueness of the mineral; he does not have the feeling of mineralogy." In *The Blade Runner: 2049*, clone man is

synonym of instrumental rationality. Detective K's awakening is actually a kind of moral pursuit. He said in the movie: "I do not kill humans because they have souls." But his superior said: "Actually, It is also good that you have no soul." It seems to K that whether his girlfriend is physically or not is not very important, but what matters is their loyalty and sacrifice to each other. This human emotion is scarcely embodied in human, but the demand of clone man is strong. Because K knows that only with the soul, the meaning is true. From this point of view, human technology reform is a kind of evolution and degradation, which has really become an important theme to be explored by the film.

#### B. National Anxiety

Baker argues that with the decline of social norms, everyone's horrified and offensive ego emerges. They are lost in their own jungle, forming a "solitary confinement." Anxiety is a fear that exists in a longing and confused mentality. Everyone needs to bear the risk of failing due to their own choices. Therefore, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Anxiety is actually a kind of dizziness of 'freedom'." What is K's anxiety? When science fiction movies come to the present, the continuation of life is not the focus of imagination. The ultimate anxiety of human is to solve the relationship between loneliness and freedom. Why did K help detective Dick? Apart from his duties, K helped him because he felt the sense of belonging to a group. This collective feeling has disappeared. Through the organization, he hopes he can get what he has missed. Freedom is a desire before obtaining it. But after obtaining freedom, mankind longs for spiritual conversion. This is the contradiction and entanglement of mankind. When K experienced this, he realizes that the most wonderful thing about human is the alternation of happiness and sorrow of gaining and lost. This made him feel a long-lost return. Therefore, in the last scene, K lies in a vast white snow, waiting for the coming of his God.

### IV. FUTURE OF SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES: HARD SCIENCE FICTION? SOFT SCIENCE FICTION

As a genre film, the audio-visual style of science fiction movie is basically chilling. In the "Blade Runner: 2049", a large area of white and yellow fill in the movie, giving people a vivid sense of doomsday.

The science lab of scientist Wallace's is based on the water, which resembles human uterus that breeds the initial state of life. In the 1970s, "2001: Space Rover" of Stanley Kubrick created a unique tone for science fiction movies. It is using the mode of composition of single color and ripping the screen to express the feeling of ultimate in the future. Dirty slums and tidy research rooms, and poverty and wealth all have no vitality, lacking imagination of life. Whether these elements will be changed in the future? Does human's imagination of the future has no warm side?

Steven Allan Spielberg's "ET Aliens" and "Artificial Intelligence" opened up the perspective of soft science fiction. Science fiction has been transformed from the infatuation of special effects such as machinery and fighting

to exploring the relationship between people and the future, among which ethical controversy has become a spiritual connotation of science fiction films, especially soft science fiction. The film "Arrival" of Denis Villeneuve, the director of "Blade Runner: 2049" in 2016 is a literary film full of elements of science and technology. The movie explores a continuation and betrayal relationship of man's and self's origin. Coupled with the concept of reincarnation of the East, the whole movie is full of shocking philosophical thinking. Born in the chilly Quebec, Canada, Dennis Velenois has the movie style full of horror and eschatological philosophical interrogation. Different from other science fiction films, "Blade Runner: 2049" perfectly combines the features of both hard and soft science fiction. It not only uses very skilled special effects in the scene design, but the movie rhythm also breaks through the poetry of "Arrival". Furthermore, the breakthrough of "Blade Runner: 2049" on the previous one is deepening the cautious thinking of the important role of humanity to human and how human complete self-salvation in the future.

Therefore, compared with stylized science fiction works such as The Avengers and Transformers, Blade Runner: 2049 has more features of future science fiction. It does not abandon the practicability of science and technology effects, but control the rhythm of the film in a gentle category. Compared to the previous one, this work has its own style. It can be said, "Blade Runner: 2049" has the following breakthrough for science fiction movies.

#### A. Nostalgic Image Style and Restrained Narrative

The last section of "Blade Runner" is defined as "Cyberpunk." In "Blade Runner: 2049", this retro style can be seen everywhere. Compared with other hard science fiction, this movie did not show much novelty in special effects. Even many viewers think it deliberately imitates the movie Ghost in the Shell. However, from the deep structure of the film itself, the real embodiment of the brand Blade Runner is the nostalgic part. The town where detective Deck hid, gentle Jazz, Monroe and Elvis Presley demonstrates the collective memory of the times. And that era, is exactly the enlightenment period of digital technology. Therefore, this town symbolizes the embryo of technical enlightenment. In particular, the advent of Harrison Ford rejuvenated the memory of the entire age without digital technology. At this demarcation point, detective K truly understands the subtlety as humankind is the pain and joy bought by love. It is just like the huge sculpture at the entrance of the town. As the creation of God, people are always struggling with destruction and creation. In this piece of film, nostalgia and doomsday feeling exist together. This fractured scene opens the thinking for future science fiction movie creation and finds a good coherence point for shaping a new narrative rhythm.

#### B. Technology and Hope

Paul Levinson, a media environmental scholar, once expressed his hope for technology. He believes that the development of media will bring hope to mankind. The crux of the problem lies in how we use it. He advocated "the

theory of media evolution" and held that media evolution is a sign of social progress. At the end of Blade Runner: 2049, K, as a clone man, finally understood the essence of human spirit. The experience of human's suffering and joy made him respect the value of life. Therefore, whether clone man can multiply is not the ultimate problem to be solved in the future. Through the growth of K, people have moved a step closer to perfect personality. Because he grows and revises constantly and his life is stronger than human beings, "Blade Runner: 2049" seems to be a prophecy of doomsday, but in reality it is reconciliation for technology. From the era of McLuhan to Paul Levinson, doubts about technology move toward affirmation in this film. This also provides an imagination for the realization of perfect human personality.

#### C. The Collective Strength

The biggest problem of modernity is the affiliation of human beings. Émile Durkheim argues that human's ultimate loss depends on religion and mass ceremonies to return. In "Blade Runner: 2049", the foreshadowing made by the director for the next episode can be seen: rebellion of clone man. Human beings gradually move towards individuals, whereas clone man move towards collectives because of their affiliation. Therefore, this film also explores the value and significance of collective at present and in the future proposed by Durkheim. After all, how do humans convert in a free future spirit? This even has more depth and value of thinking than exploring the clone man themselves seeking for love and reproduction.

### V. CONCLUSION

"Blade Runner: 2049" is produced in 2017, which is the era when individualization is prevalent.

The negative attitude of freedom and technology is blowing, and then what is the light and hope of mankind? It should be said that this movie gives a cold hope to the digital age in a hopeless way. As one of type film, the philosophy of science fiction movie always exists. However, its disadvantage lies in the restrictions of type film since happy ending limited the openness of the entire theme. This is also what the science fiction movies need to break themselves in future.

### REFERENCES

- [1] [British] Anthony Giddens. The Consequences of Modernity, tr. Tian He, Beijing: Yilin Press, 2000: 1.
- [2] [France] Baudelaire. The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, tr. Guo Hong'an, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1987: 424.
- [3] [British] Anthony Giddens, Christopher Pearson. modernity — conversations with Anthony Giddens, tr. Yin Hongyi, Xinhua Publishing House. 2001: 69.
- [4] [France] Michel Foucault. What is Enlightenment, tr. Wang Hui. Beijing: Sanlian bookstore. 1998: 430.
- [5] [Germany] Jürgen Habermas. The horizon of Modernity -- an interview with Habermas, tr. Li Andong. Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1997: 123.
- [6] [Germany] Kant. Historical Rational Criticism Collection, tr. He Zhaowu. Beijing: Commercial Press. 1990, 11(1): 25.

- [7] [Canada] Charles Taylor. *The Malaise of Modernity*, tr. Cheng Lian. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2001, 6: 7.
- [8] [Germany] Ulrich Beck. *individualization*, tr. Li Rongshan. Beijing: Peking University Press. 2011, 4: 16.
- [9] [Germany] Ulrich Beck. *individualization*, tr. Li Rongshan. Beijing: Peking University Press. 2011, 4: 6.
- [10] [Germany] Ulrich Beck. *individualization*, tr. Li Rongshan. Beijing: Peking University Press. 2011, 4: 2.
- [11] [America]Marx: *economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2000: 87.
- [12] [France] Jean Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Chen Yiliang. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2007: 58.