PHILIP K. DICK urged that the guiding theme of his work has been ‘chaos as opposed to order ... by which I mean flux, a necessary uncertainty – Goethe’s “element of chance that confounds the philosophies of God and man”‘. It is interesting to see, then, that Dick thought he could tempt fate by making a deal with the devil. Hollywood had somehow convinced him that they would faithfully adapt Dick’s 1968 novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? into a movie. Then they offered the struggling and ‘obscure’ writer a percentage of the merchandising rights provided he amended his screenplay continued to leave out most of the novel’s key elements, but it had come into its own and reintroduced ‘subtleties of meaning’. Dick was also astounded by a segment of Douglas Trumbull’s special effects for the film unexpectedly encountered on the six o’clock news: “I recognized it immediately. It was my own interior world (and) they captured it perfectly.”

Unfortunately, Ridley Scott had his own problems with the dream factory. Hollywood had little idea of what the director had captured on film and tried to take it in another direction. An intractable author became mired in a mutiny on set when the crew and compromised visions were subjected to corrupting influences. Creative differences and compromised visions were the order of the day. Blade Runner’s screenplay was being rewritten (independently) by two people up until the final take, and multiple versions with different endings abound. The five-disc collector’s edition also confirms that replicas of the various completed films have been in circulation. These range from the workprint to the theatrical (US), international and director’s cuts – some of which could have played in theatres or on television near you at different times. Blade Runner has therefore run the risk of degrading itself in the process, and begs the question: which is the real version?

Ridley Scott struggled with the issue of Blade Runner’s reality throughout the film’s (post) production, and invariably tangled with cast, crew and studio alike – virtually everyone was ‘ready to kill Ridley’. The famous lead took exception to the film’s central question and was reluctant to get with the program. There was a near mutiny on set when the crew felt like they were being treated like mere cogs in a machine. And when it was time to release...
Blade Runner into the world, it famously fell to earth. The movie tested poorly and the studio panicked by trying to make the film as unsubtle as possible. As Dick turned in his grave, the studio added a knowing voiceover, excised a cryptic dream sequence and implanted a false memory via a conventional Hollywood ending (among other things). The dream factory did its best to cheapen the original vision by trying to remember it for us wholesale. Considering the film was released under false pretenses – marketed as a sci-fi extravaganza and/or high voltage adventure – it’s no wonder that critics and audiences reached out to E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial (Steven Spielberg, 1982) instead.

And yet the film has defied its makers by refusing to die a premature death. Confounding expectations, its resurrection coincided with the rise of the machines: Blade Runner lived on (in one form or another) with the advent of VCRs and DVD players. The film took on a life of its own in an adaptable marketplace and emerging zeitgeist.

Indeed, the fate of Blade Runner is living testament to the creative process and its place within the flux of experience.

A belated ‘director’s cut’ (1992) was more an opportunistic studio rush release, while Blade Runner: The Final Cut (2007) is an attempt to stabilize the film’s fluctuating and misshapen identity. This twenty-fifth anniversary edition provided Scott with an opportunity to finally salvage a project shaped more by Edward Scissorhands than Philip K. Dick. He was able to do this via a digital restoration and minor tweaks. By restoring the original, Scott is taking viewers back to the future. Scott’s final retreat invariably becomes a celebration of the act of creation itself, and might even restore faith in the medium. Scott’s vision of the future is a place viewers might not want to feel shut out of. The spellbinding visuals tend to have a hypnotic effect and threaten to overwhelm characters and audience alike. The pensive tone, however, dispels any notion that we’ve entered a cinematic utopia aestheticized within an inch of its life. It is
ironic, then, that one of the biggest complaints levelled against *Blade Runner* is that ‘films can’t live by design alone’ – this argument is integral to the film’s own theme and teleology. Yet the film is not without design flaws. *Blade Runner* occasionally drags its heels in places, and the emotional distancing can be difficult to deal with. The film is arguably too reliant on Asian culture when conveying its feeling of otherness. There is also a sex scene that continues to raise eyebrows – the more intimate (deleted) love scene could have been reinserted in the final cut to resist accusations of misogyny. Nonetheless, *Blade Runner’s* ability to convey information and mood in visual terms is perhaps the most memorable thing about the film. Scott’s kaleidoscope of hallucinatory images – combined with Vangelis’ evocative score – situates us within a world characterized by feelings of displacement. As the lit-up pyramid readily attests, Scott turns towards the past and future to create a unique sense of time and place. The Janus-like approach simultaneously draws on tropes from film noir and science fiction, creating a world (and genre) unmistakably its own. Scott announces this juxtaposition from the outset: the film seamlessly transitions from an explosion of colour to low-key lighting. *Blade Runner* transports us across frames of reference by simply following a car to its destination – it is headed towards the pyramid dominating the skyline. We follow the movements of a ‘spinner’ flying speedily through space to a man waiting in a smoky room beneath a slowly spinning fan.

*Blade Runner’s* depths are reflected in its extraordinary surface appearances. It is where the truth is laid bare. An emotional landscape is projected onto the layers of the screen – feelings of oppression and degradation are embodied in a city built on broken promises and unfulfilled dreams. A culture clash manifests itself in the contours of the physical landscape, where ruin and decay are dwarfed by technology and splendour. It is no wonder the media-saturated culture offers the prospect of a ‘new life in off-world colonies … a chance to start again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure’. Essentially an existential crisis writ large, the film’s quest occurs against a background bringing cultural questions to the fore. When the blade runner (Ford) asks a suspected replicant (Joanna Cassidy) if she ever ‘felt exploited in any way … like, to get this job … did you do or were you asked to do anything lewd or unsavoury or otherwise repulsive to your person?’ he might as well be directing the question to himself: soon after, he is forced to shoot the semi-clad woman in the back as she runs for her life.

The exotic dancer is not the only thing that falls to the earth. The City of Angels has clearly fallen too and dragged everyone down with it. We quickly learn that off-world replicants have descended on Los Angeles in order to meet their maker – a man who has presumed to play God. Tyrell (Joe Turkel) is not only the designer of beings that are ‘more human than human’, but the corporation bearing his name appears to lord over creation itself.

One of the most intriguing things about the film is that there are few conventional intrigues to be found here. The film noir convention of a detective investigating a mystery – in this case, the whereabouts and/or motives of replicants – is telegraphed to the audience in advance. The film is configured around parallel investigations that invariably dovetail into each other. Consequently, Scott’s approach is both meditative and meditative. The goal is to create a brooding melancholy by establishing a link between parallel enquiries and dual (or duelling) protagonists. Indeed, the film’s antagonists arguably become its main protagonists as we also follow their lead and enquiries. They invariably befriend a kindred soul – prematurely ageing genetic designer J.F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) who literally (and fatally) makes ‘toys’ of his friends. The film’s ostensible lead, however, always seems to be one step behind them and is curiously being shadowed by someone (Edward James Olmos) second-guessing his every move. The blade runner finds himself sidetracked by the discovery that he might be falling in love with another product of the environment, Rachael (Sean Young).

Significantly, the script references William Blake’s *America, A Prophecy* to critically comment on the fate of the American dream. The replicants’ leader, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), deliberately misquotes, ‘fiery the angels fall, deep thunder rolled around their shores, bringing with the fires of Orc’. The implication is clear: the replicants see themselves as fallen angels and have returned to defy the laws of their ‘god’. They have discovered that they have a limited shelf life, and that a ‘fail safe’ has been built into them to ensure that they don’t get ideas above their station. When the ‘prodigal son’ (Batty) confesses that he has ‘done questionable things’ during his space travels, the ‘father’ (Tyrell) seals his own fate by dismissing the gravity of the situation. The resulting kiss of death is particularly horrifying in the final cut – audiences might want to avert their eyes.

While the script occurs in an interrogative and speculative mode, it doesn’t presume to offer many answers. It merely tries to navigate the grey area between appearance and reality. Particularly intriguing is the way it lets metaphysical questions play out between the characters and situations. Indeed, the opening scene literally turns into a series of questions designed to test for ‘real’ emotional responses. And the last line spoken is left as an open question as two lovers are forced to embrace the reality of their situation. The film’s searching moves towards two main themes: the nature of identity and the problem of mortality. Felt experiences provide the connective tissue, while identity becomes a (dys)function of memory.

One of the film’s more mystifying developments is when (presumed) human and replicant only have eyes for each other. Deckard and Rachael falling in love might appear perverse or inexplicable, but the script uses their relationship to explore depths of feelings confounding humankind since Adam and Eve. Most importantly, their ‘fall’ provides the film’s vision of the future with an old-fashioned counterbalance. By exploring the world through each other’s eyes, it intimates that love humanizes us all and offers true salvation. The ongoing attempt to resolve the mystery of Deckard’s ‘real’ identity, then, is the real puzzle. Ridley Scott has perversely announced that Deckard is a replicant – even if Harrison Ford (among other key personnel) begs to differ.

To some extent, their argument highlights the fact that the question of Deckard’s identity is beside the point within the context of the film’s own account of human evolution. *Blade Runner* is not a jigsaw puzzle that requires us to put various pieces together – its challenge does not lie in reassembling parts into a complete picture. The picture remains incomplete or moving because it is the struggle over identity that acts as the missing link. Indeed, it is the very act of questioning that bridges the evolutionary gap between human and replicant. To quote Ford’s account of the link:

*I thought the audience*
deserved one human being on screen that they could establish an emotional relationship with. I thought I had won Ridley’s agreement to that, but in fact I think he had a little reservation about that. I think he really wanted to have it both ways.11

The problem with Ford’s thoughts (and Scott’s pronouncement) is that it presupposes the very things at issue – namely, whether ‘human’ merits approbation and whether the label ‘replicant’ can clarify anything. ‘Deserves’ has nothing to do with it when the question of identity cuts both ways and directs us to past and future simultaneously. These beings threaten to (de)evolve into (conceptions of) each other, and the problem is adopting a default position with respect to the Blade Runner ideally leaves the audience similarly struggling with the issue of humanity, one that resists a (dream) factory’s setting for user-configurable options. The function of memory invariably becomes a red herring – it has never been a reliable source of knowledge anyway. The real issue is the way we process information or relate to our experiences.

Ford’s insistence on Deckard’s humanity also conveniently ignores the evidence on screen. The one-man slaughterhouse initially feels that he has ‘no choice’ but to accept his assignment and assigned value in the order of things. The apparently powerless man then goes on to kill two women, but another woman chooses to save his life as he gets a wake-up call. This wonderful specimen of a human then goes on to force himself on the replicant – we leave it up to viewer discretion to decide whether our killing machine is also a rapist.12 The script thereby encourages viewers to empathize with the entities being tracked down and killed. Pris’ (Daryl Hannah) ‘retirement’ remains particularly

shocking and necessitates a mercy killing. Batty’s death scene is among the most moving in recent memory, providing a claustrophobic film with its only true emotional release. As importantly, the replicants appear to be capable of establishing real connections with each other – something the future has rendered a distant memory. The metaphysical question, then, is not ‘who is what?’ The film’s central intrigue is that the moral categories threaten to become blurred or interchangeable, and that Blade Runner places us at the nexus between them. The question of identity is complicated by the fact that we’re asked to identify with the emotions of artificially created beings. The replicants become our surrogates in that the very concept of ‘humanity’ is problematized in the conflict between them. While it is questionable whether they are ‘more human than human’, there is little doubt that humanity has become less human(e) here.

Given the film’s mode of inquiry, the issue of humanity remains an open question by retaining an evolutionary imperative. The humans have apparently devolved to the point where they can only relate to each other as a means to an end, and seem unperturbed by the possibility that they might be committing murder. The replicants have evolved to the point where they have learnt to look out for each other and come to appreciate the value of their own lives. This is nowhere more apparent than with the replicant’s charismatic leader, Batty – the other killing machine is the most alive character on screen. Indeed, Batty is the only character who commits an act of compassion by literally reaching out to the man trying to kill him. As Batty retires of his own accord, he recollects moments that will be ‘lost in time, like tears in the rain’. It is at this point that their lives dovetail – Deckard is humbled and seeks out his own remembrance of things past by running towards an uncertain future. The greatness of Blade Runner, then, is that it attempts to look audiences in the eye and offers the real empathy test – simply by testing their loyalties and sympathies.★★★★1/2 It’s alive!

Steven Aoun is not a Nexus-Six but one of the Final Five, and is chlorinating the gene pool as we speak.

Endnotes
3 Purser, op. cit.
4 Boonstra, op. cit. According to Dick, ‘I was just destroyed at one point at the prospect of this awful thing that had happened to my work. I wouldn’t go up there, I wouldn’t talk to them, I wouldn’t meet Ridley Scott. I suppose to be wined and dined and everything, and I wouldn’t go, I just wouldn’t go. There was bad blood between us … David W. Peoples’ screenplay changed my attitude.’ The problem wasn’t so much Fancher’s original screenplay but that he was constantly forced to rewrite it, turning it into something ‘aimed at 12 year olds’ (to quote Dick). At one stage, Fancher also wanted to have his name off the film. It is worth noting that while Fancher and Peoples eventually received a joint credit, each thought the other was responsible for the voice-over and eventually discovered that uncredited writers also had a hand in it.5
6 While this quote is attributed to producer Alan Ladd Jr., who was describing Harrison Ford’s experience with Scott, it also describes the rest of the American crew’s experience with their British ‘governor’. Dangerous Days describes a ‘t-shirt war’ that occurred on set – one where the crew communicated their frustration with the director through slogans like ‘Yes, Guv’nor – MY ASS’, ‘You soar with eagles when you fly with turkeys’ and ‘Will Rogers never met Ridley Scott’ (Rogers famously said he had ‘never met a person he didn’t like’).
7 One of the tweaks of the final cut is the alteration of a pivotal word. In the previous cuts, Batty demands, ‘I want more life, fucker’; in the final cut he calls Tyrell ‘father’ instead.8
9 It is unclear why Scott opted for the apparent rape (a scene which was apparently improvised by Ford) instead of the mutually consenting version. A sympathetic reading of this scene would encourage the view that Deckard is merely forcing Rachael to acknowledge their feelings for each other, but this is still very close to rape.