



Future Imperfect

Philip K. Dick at the Movies

Jason P. Vest

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To my mother, Delores Vest, for keeping me honest

To my sisters, Katherine Driesen and Cynthia Tennison, for keeping
me humble

and

To the love of my life, Patricia Thomas, for keeping me happy

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This study compares the film adaptations of Philip K. Dick's fiction to their literary sources. Dick was one of twentieth-century America's best novelists, and his writing is a valuable contribution to American literature. Quoting his words is crucial to this project's success. All citations of Dick's fiction are reprinted by permission of the Philip K. Dick Trust and its agents, Scovil Chichak Galen Literary Agency, Inc.

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Introduction

The Man in the High Castle: Philip K. Dick and the Movies

I.

Lawrence Sutin makes a surprising statement in the preface to the 2005 reissue of *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*, his excellent biography of Philip K. Dick's authorial career. Sutin attributes Dick's growing popularity within American culture to two major factors: Dick's authorial talent, the appreciation of which has steadily increased since his death in 1982, and "the ongoing adaptation of Dick's works into movies at an astonishing rate exceeded only by Stephen King."¹ The second explanation, no matter how breathlessly Sutin phrases it, is hardly surprising when we consider the millions of people who have seen at least one of the eight films based on Dick's novels and short stories: *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), *Confessions d'un Barjo* (1992), *Screamers* (1995), *Impostor* (2002), *Minority Report* (2002), *Paycheck* (2003), and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). Sutin also wryly notes that film adaptations of Dick's work continue to be produced despite the fact that the author (unlike the prolific King) has been dead for more than twenty years. This fact offers even less reason for astonishment. Cinematic versions of Shakespeare's plays, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* have been filmed long after their authors' deaths, while the list of Hollywood adaptations of deceased writers' fiction is so extensive that it could fill an encyclopedia.

Sutin's unforgiving judgment of the cinematic adaptations of Dick's fiction, however, is surprising. He states, in uncommonly harsh language, that "the movies made from Dick's works, with the exception of the first of them, *Blade Runner* (1982), have been dreadful."² This comment brooks no debate. The film adaptations of Dick's fiction, in Sutin's opinion, are (with one exception) terrible.

Sutin is an excellent writer. His book, originally published in 1989, has become the standard biography of Dick because it productively examines how Dick's complicated, fascinating, and difficult existence led him to write some of the most visionary literature produced by a twentieth-century American author. Sutin's exhaustive research exposes previously unknown aspects of Dick's childhood, debunks myths about Dick's reputation, and offers lucid critical assessments of Dick's fiction. *Divine Invasions*, in fact, is a model of scholarly literary biography that scrutinizes the connections between its subject's life, work, and art with the skeptical sympathy necessary to revealing another human being's intellectual and emotional complexities.

Sutin's assessment of the Dick film adaptations, by contrast, is wrong-headed on two fronts. These movies, contrary to Sutin's contention, have not been produced at an astonishing pace. In the twenty-five years since *Blade Runner* first appeared in movie theatres, only seven other films based on Dick's fiction have been released (with an eighth, *Next*, based on Dick's 1954 short story "The Golden Man," scheduled for release in 2007). The film and television projects adapted from Stephen King's work occasionally equal, and sometimes exceed, this number in a single year, while, to take another well-known example, the quarter century following the first cinematic adaptation of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels (1962's *Dr. No*) saw fourteen additional Bond movies arrive in theatres.

The lengthy development period of nearly all the Dick adaptations has accustomed Dick's readers to expect a healthy (sometimes decades-long) delay between the announcement of a new film based on Dick's fiction and its arrival at the local multiplex. The term "development hell" is perfectly tailored for movies based on Dick's writing because his fiction is so ambiguous and evocative that translating it into coherent cinematic narrative is an unenviable challenge for film professionals. Dick's visions of a heavily industrialized (and often postapocalyptic) future require tremendous skill to visualize, while assembling the talent necessary to mounting complex movies like *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, and *Minority Report* in an industry as mercurial as filmmaking can take far more time than actual production.

Sutin's error in evaluating the movies based on Dick's work is not limited to misstatements about the speed at which they have been produced. His blanket generalization about their quality betrays serious inattention to each film's visual, narrative, and symbolic complexity. Even John Woo's *Paycheck*, the weakest of the eight films profiled in this book, includes enough worthwhile moments to qualify as an intriguing effort at transforming Dick's

1953 short story “Paycheck” into cinematic narrative. *Paycheck* ultimately disappoints the viewer by not fulfilling the greatness of its own premise, thereby failing to become an insightful adaptation of Dick’s writing. Woo’s movie is not, however, as dreadful as Sutin implies. Neither are the two Dick adaptations that were most unsympathetically reviewed at the time of their release: *Screamers* and *Impostor*. These films, while far from perfect, are better than their critics suggest. Neither is an outright failure.

Minority Report and *A Scanner Darkly*, by contrast, are excellent films that improve with each viewing. Sutin did not have the opportunity to see *Scanner* before writing his preface (in June 2005), but his dismissal of *Minority Report* raises serious doubts about his understanding of the cinematic adaptations of Dick’s work. *Minority Report*, like *Blade Runner*, is a movie that takes Dick’s original material seriously; that uses the author’s fiction as a launching pad for searching social, political, and economic commentary about American culture; and that offers its audience a story line and characters with intellectual and emotional depth. Pronouncing it dreadful ignores the achievement of *Minority Report*’s director (Steven Spielberg), screenwriters (Jon Cohen and Scott Frank), and production team.

Sutin, by refusing to examine the Dick adaptations in detail, is far too cavalier in his evaluation of these films. His task, of course, is to write a short preface for a new edition of Dick’s biography, not rigorous film criticism. As such, it is even more unfortunate that Sutin does not resist the tendency of bibliophiles to perpetuate an easy, cheap, and unreflective view of film adaptation that has become so ingrained in American culture that it now qualifies as a mindless cliché: the book is always better than the movie. The notion that words are superior to images not only is rampant in some quarters of the American literary academy, but has also worked its way into the popular mind so effectively that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this idea has the patina of unassailable truth.

This book assesses the quality of the first eight film adaptations of Dick’s fiction in light of their literary sources. It does not, however, assume that words (meaning short stories and novels) are superior to images (meaning films). Neither does it reverse this formulation to contend that movies are better than books. Arguments about the superiority of one medium over another, like arguments about the superiority of one literary genre over another, have become (despite vigorous scholarly debate) tiresome, tenuous, and tendentious. They generally resemble schoolyard brawls in which the proponents of one form (such as literature) deride enthusiasts of the other form (such as movies) with little understanding of the aesthetic possibilities, parameters, and prospects of either form. Such disputes, beyond their occasionally childish character, are generally too tedious to be interesting.

This book attempts to avoid such errors. It considers the cinematic adaptations of Dick’s work in relation to their literary sources by offering critical readings that supplement the current understanding of how Dick has

profoundly influenced American popular culture. Sutin is correct to note that the movies made from Dick's fiction have played a large role in promoting the author's popularity. With the exception of *Confessions d'un Barjo*, these films have also carved out a specific niche within American SF (science fiction) cinema that has exerted an acute, even overwhelming power over how we imagine the future will look, feel, and operate—in short, how the future will *be*. This influence is a welcome one for films adapted from the fiction of a writer unjustly labeled as a hack during much of his lifetime, although it also obscures the debt that these movies owe to their literary sources, even when the films depart wildly from Dick's original material.

The eight films profiled here include a few masterpieces, a few noble efforts, and one clunker. Each movie is an intriguing attempt to translate into cinematic language Dick's unique, unmistakable, and undeniable paranoia about the stability of human identity and the value of human relationships in a world that is careening out of control. These films do not always succeed, but each one includes moments that are recognizably Dickian in their ambiguity, transience, and haunting complexity. For this reason, among many others, they merit respectful consideration.

II.

Philip K. Dick, as his letters, interviews, and essays make clear, enjoyed film and television. He frequently refers to movies and television during the extended conversations with Gregg Rickman that are transcribed in the book *In His Own Words*, as well as during his long interview sessions with Gwen Lee that are available in *What If Our World Is Their Heaven?: The Final Conversations of Philip K. Dick*. Dick even tried his hand at scriptwriting during the 1960s and 1970s, completing story treatments for an episode of Larry Cohen's weekly television series *The Invaders*³ and for Bruce Geller's *Mission: Impossible*⁴ in 1967, only to have them rejected. Dick also drafted a 1967 proposal for an untitled television series, set in "the gray, foggy landscape of Heaven,"⁵ that describes the adventures of employees of We Are Watching You, Inc., "a small outfit among several giants," whose "record of bailing Earthlings out of jams is virtually 100 percent. . . ."⁶ This premise, as fleshed out by Dick, would have made a delightful weekly series, with intriguing characters, witty concepts, and satirical stories. As Brian J. Robb points out in *Counterfeit Worlds: Philip K. Dick on Film*, Dick's proposal about heavenly personages correcting earthly misfortunes bears a striking resemblance to some aspects of Donald P. Bellisario's time-travel series *Quantum Leap* (1989–1993), although it has even greater similarities (in premise rather than tone) to Michael Landon's *Highway to Heaven* (1984–1989) and John Masius's *Touched by an Angel* (1994–2003).

In 1974, French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin contracted Dick to write a screenplay based on the author's 1969 novel *Ubik*. Dick, excited by the

opportunity, completed a draft in only three weeks. Gorin, who was unable to secure financing for the project, was overwhelmed by the quality of what he describes as Dick's unfilmable script:

This is something that cannot be a film, although it is great on its own terms. It was a very Philip K. Dick adaptation of Philip K. Dick! [It was] very talkative, and [did] not have very much to do with how a movie could be done. I found myself both delighted at having that piece of work, and totally terrified about what I was going to do with it...⁷

The film never materialized, although Dick's faithful adaptation of *Ubik* exists in a limited edition (and now rare) book published by Corroboree Press.

Dick also admired movies that he believed achieved the status of art. The first film he probably saw was Lewis Milestone's 1930 adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's German novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.⁸ During the 1950s, Dick and his second wife, Kleo Apostolides, attended movies whenever they could afford them. Dick was also impressed by Nicholas Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and Robert Altman's 1977 film *3 Women*, telling interviewer Rickman, about *3 Women*, "I liked that a lot. Unbelievable."⁹

Dick's most famous brush with filmmaking is his complicated reaction to the production of *Blade Runner*. The author, who in 1968 compiled a fascinating document titled "Notes on *Do Android Dream of Electric Sheep?*" for filmmaker Bertram Berman, who had purchased an option on the just-released novel, was initially pessimistic about the project (directed by Ridley Scott), going so far as to publish an article titled "Universe Makers...and Breakers" in the February 15–March 28, 1981, edition of *SelecTV Guide*, his cable television company's newsletter, that sarcastically dismisses an early version of *Blade Runner*'s screenplay: "It was terrific. It bore no relation to the book...What my story will become is one titanic lurid collision of androids being blown up, androids killing humans, general confusion and murder, all very exciting to watch. Makes my book seem dull by comparison."¹⁰ Dick's attitude changed, however, when, in December 1981, he had the opportunity to view twenty minutes of special effects footage and to talk with director Ridley Scott. Dick was also pleased by a later screenplay draft that he read, leading him to embrace *Blade Runner* as an excellent cinematic adaptation of his original novel. Dick, in fact, told interviewer Gwen Lee less than two months before his death on March 2, 1982, that "the opening [sequence of *Blade Runner*] is simply the most stupendous thing I have ever seen in the way of a film. It's simply unbelievable."¹¹ Dick's death, which occurred less than four months before *Blade Runner*'s June 25, 1982, premiere, is therefore one of the saddest ironies of the film's production saga. Dick never lived to see the movie that is now considered a towering achievement in American SF cinema.

This tragedy naturally prompts readers of Dick's fiction to wonder how the author would have judged the movies that came after *Blade Runner*. This curiosity can never be answered, for the simple reason that all attempts to extrapolate Dick's opinions of *Total Recall*, *Screamers*, or *Minority Report* based on his reaction to an incomplete viewing of *Blade Runner* are pure guesswork. Dick's enthusiasm for film and television, however, assures us that he would have been as avid a viewer of these adaptations as any other member of the moviegoing public. It seems likely that Dick would have demanded more involvement in the later films' production than he was permitted for *Blade Runner*, although we cannot be certain of this prediction since Dick, who commented in 1980 that "You would have to kill me and prop me up in the seat of my car with a smile painted on my face to get me to go near Hollywood,"¹² might have been content to watch each film go forward from the comfortable remove of his Fullerton, California, home. If so, Dick would have resembled Hawthorne Abendsen, the title character of the author's 1962 novel *The Man in the High Castle*, who absents himself from the goings-on of the world around him. Dick, however, was one of the least pretentious American novelists of the twentieth century, so it is equally probable that he would have welcomed the opportunity to advise filmmakers on how to visualize his richly imaginative fiction. The misfortune for lovers of Dick's writing is that he did not live to see, and enjoy, how strongly his work has influenced American SF cinema.

III.

This book evaluates the quality of *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Confessions d'un Barjo*, *Screamers*, *Impostor*, *Minority Report*, *Paycheck*, and *A Scanner Darkly* in relation to the short stories or novels that inspired them. As such, the book is a hybrid text that combines literary analysis and film criticism to examine how the differences between written fiction and cinematic narrative allow each adaptation's production team to transfer Dick's story into a visual medium.

This argument does not presume that Dick's written fiction is superior, better, or higher than the motion pictures adapted from that fiction merely because Dick employs words to tell his stories, while the films employ moving images. The presumption that words are better than images and books are superior to films participates in a tradition of intellectual arrogance that dismisses the value of cinema as a commercialized form of mass entertainment that cannot achieve the artistic heights of novels and short stories. As James Naremore notes in his thoughtful introduction to one of the best academic anthologies about this subject (simply titled *Film Adaptation*), a countervailing scholarly attitude toward adaptation acknowledges the intellectual legitimacy of film adaptation as an artistic process that tries to "'metamorphose' novels into another medium that has its own formal or narratological

possibilities.”¹³ This jejune perspective, Naremore implies, is a backhanded compliment that privileges the written word over the moving image by suggesting that cinema may be a separate medium into which written fiction can be translated, but that movies remain secondary to the printed word’s primacy. Naremore goes on to identify why conceptualizing film adaptation as the translation of a literary work is an impoverished metaphor: “The problem with most writing about adaptation as translation is that it tends to valorize the literary canon and essentialize the nature of cinema.”¹⁴

Naremore’s argument is far more complex than this brief synopsis allows, but his fundamental point is an intelligent response to the all-too-common supposition that cinematic adaptations must closely reproduce their literary sources in order to be successful, as well as this idea’s converse: film adaptations that do not closely reproduce their sources are unsuccessful or, at the very least, artistically deficient.

This book does not share this assumption. It also does not rigorously ponder the issues of film or literary theory, but rather considers the eight film adaptations of Philip K. Dick’s fiction to be intriguing cinematic narratives whose value is not dependent upon their fidelity to their literary sources. Each chapter discusses the differences and similarities between the profiled movie and the short story or novel that inspired it, not as an exercise in demonstrating the film’s insufficiency, but as a method of exposing how the transition from page to screen requires inevitable changes that make each adaptation a unique (although not always successful) work of art. The best adaptations of Dick’s work—*Blade Runner*, *Confessions d’un Barjo*, *Minority Report*, and *A Scanner Darkly*—demonstrate not only that his authorial inventiveness transfers to the screen but also that creative filmmakers can extrapolate his fiction into cinematic stories that respond to the pressing social, political, and economic issues of their day. These movies are also entertaining films that inventively dramatize intellectual concepts, future societies, advanced technology, and human relationships. Finally, they offer unconventional story lines, images, and personalities that frequently depart from the standard expectations of conventional Hollywood movies.

The eight films discussed here all include worthwhile insights into human behavior. *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report* are masterpieces that demonstrate how technological advancement and political oppression result in unwelcome social developments, while *A Scanner Darkly* nearly achieves the quality, complexity, and emotional maturity of these two films by focusing on the private lives of drug addicts. *Confessions d’un Barjo* offers a satirical portrait of marital tension that becomes a charming evocation of family dysfunction. *Impostor*, despite its poor reviews, is a nightmarish dramatization of how tenuous human identity becomes when institutional bureaucracy causes people to doubt the basis of their own personality. *Total Recall* confronts the ambiguity of human identity in a world where memories have become commodities that can be erased, altered, and fabricated. *Screamers*

presents an unpleasant political parable about the dangers of unchecked militarism and the hazards of advanced weaponry. Only *Paycheck* is an uninteresting, unaccomplished, and finally uninspiring film, although it offers enough interesting moments to qualify as movie that might have achieved greatness had its makers taken more time and care with its story.

These cinematic adaptations of Philip K. Dick's fiction, even those that do not achieve the mastery of *Blade Runner*, *Confessions d'un Barjo*, *Minority Report*, and *A Scanner Darkly*, are far from schlock SF cinema. They are intriguing, sometimes potent, and frequently fearful extrapolations of how American society might develop in future decades. These movies, because of their unconventional settings and unusual stories, cannot appeal to all audience members. They can, however, allow the critical reader of Dick's fiction to think about his ideas, imagery, and themes in fresh new ways. The film adaptations of Dick's work, at their best, are vivid reminders of how cinematic narrative can powerfully affect its viewer. They stand apart from Dick's fiction even as they descend from it. This complicated lineage, as well as its visual, narrative, and thematic intricacies, is the subject of this book.

CHAPTER 1

More Human than Human: *Blade Runner*

I.

After editor Terry Rawlings completed his first assembly of *Blade Runner*'s footage, in July 1981, he sat down with the film's director, Ridley Scott, to screen the result. Scott and Rawlings were so absorbed by the images unfolding before them that they forgot to speak. "Then, when the film finished and the lights came up," Rawlings later recalled, "Ridley turned to me and said, 'God, it's marvelous. What the fuck does it all mean?'"¹

Scott's reaction anticipated the response of audiences, reviewers, and scholars to his complicated, mystifying, and strangely beautiful 1982 film. As the first Hollywood movie based on Philip K. Dick's fiction, Scott's adaptation of Dick's equally complicated 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* has achieved mythic status among film critics, cineastes, and SF aficionados. As one of the premier American films of the 1980s, *Blade Runner*'s influence on later movies, particularly SF movies, is unquestionable, while its densely layered visual style has been celebrated by sources as diverse as the academic journal *Critical Inquiry* and the news magazine *Time*.

Few observers would have predicted so momentous an impact when *Blade Runner* opened on June 25, 1982. It was merely one of several SF and fantasy films released that summer. Nicholas Meyer's *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, and John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* had opened, respectively, on June 4, June 11, and June 25.

Each movie offered its audience an alternative vision of the human future, advanced technology, and/or alien life. *Blade Runner* was also a financial disappointment, as Paul M. Sammon makes clear in *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, his definitive account of the film's production, by noting that *Blade Runner* grossed just \$14 million during its initial theatrical run. This amount was considerably less than its \$28 million budget. Although figures compiled by the Internet Movie Database place the final gross (calculated on August 22, 1982) as \$26,168,988, the message is clear. *Blade Runner* was a commercial flop.

The most common explanation for this poor box-office performance blames the film's terrible reviews for sabotaging its success. Pat Berman's now-infamous declaration, first published in the July 2, 1982, edition of the *State and Columbia Record*, that *Blade Runner* is "like science fiction pornography—all sensation and no heart"² has been condemned so frequently by the film's aggrieved admirers that it symbolizes the unfair critical reception they feel *Blade Runner* endured in its own day. This legendary insult exemplifies a typical reaction by film critics to *Blade Runner*'s morally ambiguous and elliptically structured narrative: the movie sacrifices human feeling for visual spectacle. Roger Ebert's comments in his June 2, 1982, advance review of *Blade Runner* spoke for many of his colleagues: "[Scott] seems more concerned with creating his film worlds than populating them with plausible characters, and that's the trouble this time. *Blade Runner* is a stunningly interesting visual achievement, but a failure as a story. . . . The movie's weakness. . . is that it allows the special effects technology to overwhelm its story."³

The story, however, received much less attention than the visuals, leading Ebert and other reviewers to false conclusions or outright misreadings. Even *Blade Runner*'s positive reviews manifest a perceptual gap between the film's imagery and its story. The movie's deceptively simple plot is more complicated than a single viewing can reveal, meaning that *Blade Runner* demands multiple exposures to understand how evocatively it questions the nature of humanity, the social utility of technology, the relationship between organic and mechanical life, and the value of spirituality in a heavily industrialized (and apparently soulless) world.

Some reviewers wrote even more stinging assessments of the film's story than Ebert. Stanley Kauffmann, for instance, proclaimed *Blade Runner* "splendid, a strong argument for the Style Is All thesis"⁴ in his 1982 *New Republic* review, saying that the movie,

though all its achievements are utilized for a dull and silly film, is crammed with wonderful, if wasted, achievement. . . . To enjoy *Blade Runner*, you need only disregard, as far as possible, the actors and the dialogue. The script is another reworking of a threat to humans by humanoids—one more variation on the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* theme.⁵



Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) clings to life near the climax of *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's 1982 adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Courtesy of Photofest)

Kauffmann's invocation of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* avoids all reference to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* even as it acknowledges *Blade Runner*'s debt to older SF narratives. Many reviews mention the film's source novel in passing (if at all), but most fail to consider how, in adapting Dick's story, Scott and his production team faced the task of presenting, in two hours, one of American SF's most intricate, oblique, and richly suggestive books.

This oversight not only explains why *Blade Runner* was underpraised in its time but also speaks to the difficulties of transferring a book as intellectually challenging as *Electric Sheep* into cinematic form. Scott's film cannot overtly reproduce every detail of Dick's novel, but this fundamental truth of cinematic adaptation should not reduce our appreciation of *Blade Runner*'s achievement. *Blade Runner* is no less a narrative than a visual triumph, particularly in its suggestion that spirituality is essential to preserving authentic human identity in a world where technological proliferation, environmental degradation, and economic repression have become the norm. The film's mature treatment of this theme qualifies it as a masterpiece whose dark, dirty, and grungy atmosphere masks its intellectual and emotional sophistication. *Blade Runner* is not a perfect film, but, as we shall see, it is a significant contribution to SF cinema and, more generally, to the American film tradition.

II.

Blade Runner, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, enjoys a much different reputation than its initial reviews suggested. The movie has attained the status of film classic in the quarter century since first appearing in theatres. *Blade Runner*'s admirers have so relished this reversal of fortune that a myth

about the film's critical response has developed over the years. *Blade Runner*, contrary to this conventional wisdom, was not so critically unpopular in its day that it was considered a total failure. Some reviewers, including Pat Berman and Stanley Kauffmann, excoriated what they considered the film's many flaws, while other observers were merely unkind. Pauline Kael's long *New Yorker* essay about *Blade Runner*, titled "Baby, the Rain Must Fall," takes the movie's underlying themes seriously but finds the film itself an inadequate vehicle for expressing those themes. Her review features typically acerbic (and condescending) judgments, most notably "the moviemakers seem to have decided that [Deckard's] characterization was complete when they signed Harrison Ford for the role"⁶ and "If anybody comes around with a test to detect humanoids, maybe Ridley Scott and his associates should hide."⁷

Other critics treat *Blade Runner* with more respect. Jack Kroll, in *Newsweek*, says that *Blade Runner*, "for all its gloom and somnolence, is a compelling addition to this genre [of stories about mechanical people]."⁸ Richard Corliss, in *Time*, identifies *Blade Runner* as a film "likely to disappoint moviegoers hoping for sleek thrills and derring-do. But as a display terminal for the wizardry of Designers Lawrence G. Paull, Douglas Trumbull and Syd Mead, the movie delivers. The pleasures of texture have rarely been so savory."⁹ Hiawatha Bray, in *Christianity Today*, criticizes *Blade Runner*'s ending but praises the special effects and set design as having "created the most stunning image of a future city since Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*."¹⁰ Bray concludes his review with words that anticipate *Blade Runner*'s later standing as an important contribution to American SF cinema: "But of all the summer's releases, only *Blade Runner* is truly adult in its thoughtfulness and complexity. If you enjoy science fiction, by all means see this."¹¹

This mixed critical reaction demonstrates *Blade Runner*'s fundamental ambiguity. Audiences did not know how to respond to the film's ambivalent story line, odd characters, and overwhelming visuals. The high regard in which SF enthusiasts, scholars, and even casual viewers now hold *Blade Runner* attests to the accuracy of literary scholar Northrop Frye's belief, expounded in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, that "it is clearly the simple truth that there is no real correlation either way between the merits of art and its public reception."¹² The film's current esteem accrued over many years, resulting from the increased exposure that home video and cable broadcasts of *Blade Runner* made possible. Seeing the film again enticed old and new viewers to decipher its puzzling narrative, visual complexity, and intriguing characters.

The number of academic articles devoted to *Blade Runner*, to take one potent example of the film's newfound influence, mushroomed during the late 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in Judith Kerman's excellent 1991 anthology *Retrofitting "Blade Runner": Issues in Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" and Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"* Kerman's text was so popular that a second edition appeared in 1997,

one year after Paul Sammon's *Future Noir* offered an authoritative account of *Blade Runner*'s difficult production.

This interest has only increased. *Blade Runner* is now more popular than its source novel, having become an object of almost obsessive popular and scholarly attention. Although the film's respectable reputation is a welcome change from its original reception, this high regard should not obscure the ambitious novel that both preceded *Blade Runner* and made the film possible. Divorcing the film from its literary source has been necessary to establishing *Blade Runner* as an independent work of art, but this tendency has unfortunately concealed the movie's debt to *Electric Sheep*. Such an oversight not only diminishes the ability of *Blade Runner*'s audience to understand the intelligent manner by which Ridley Scott, screenwriters Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, and the film's crew transformed Dick's fascinating novel into cinematic art but also reduces *Electric Sheep* to little more than the inspiration of a famous film (a reduction that *Blade Runner* itself indulges by delaying the novel's on-screen acknowledgment until the end credits).

Less important to my analysis are *Blade Runner*'s separate versions. The differences between the original theatrical release and the 1992 Director's Cut—most notably, the absence of Deckard's voice-over narration from (and the restoration of Ridley Scott's preferred ending to) the Director's Cut—have been exhaustively covered by other writers. Sammon's book offers the most comprehensive account of these differences, as well as the many versions of *Blade Runner* that served as test screenings before the film's theatrical release. Several articles in Judith Kerman's anthology also provide excellent discussions of this topic. Audiences more familiar with the theatrical release may have starkly different perceptions of the film's character development, narrative pacing, and thematic unity than viewers who have only seen the Director's Cut. This book, however, only examines the Director's Cut, which, at the time of this writing, is *Blade Runner*'s definitive edition (the theatrical version, still available on videocassette, has never been released in digital video disc—DVD—format). The Director's Cut also complicates the viewer's perception of Rick Deckard's spiritual awakening, making it a worthy adaptation of Philip K. Dick's provocative novel. *Blade Runner* may not be an explicitly religious film, but its story of a bounty hunter who comes to question the morality of exterminating supposedly inhuman androids not only resonates with *Electric Sheep*'s most important concerns but also demonstrates how successful an adaptation *Blade Runner* is.

III.

The most obvious difference between *Blade Runner* and *Electric Sheep* is that the movie compresses Dick's 240-page novel into two hours of film narrative. This necessity required Ridley Scott and his screenwriters, Fancher and Peoples, to exclude many of the novel's events and characters to trim

Blade Runner to manageable cinematic length. Dick himself understood this obligation. In an interview with writer Gwen Lee conducted less than two months before his death on March 2, 1982, Dick (who had viewed twenty minutes of the film's special effects footage in December 1981 and who had read at least two versions of the screenplay) explains the differences between literary and cinematic narrative:

The book had about sixteen plots going through it and they would have had to make a movie lasting sixteen hours. And it would have been impossible. And this is not how you make a movie out of a book. You don't go scene by scene. I mean, this was the trouble with *Death in Venice*, for example. And you just cannot do it. It just won't work out. Because a lot of the book consists of just long conversations. A movie moves and a book talks, and that's the difference, you see.¹³

Dick's comments indicate the difficult task that confronted Scott, Fancher, and Peoples in transforming *Electric Sheep* into cinematic form. They cannot include every detail of Dick's novel, nor should they try to do so. The resulting film would be too ungainly and bloated. Dick's understanding of how novels and films diverge in their possibilities and parameters is an important recognition of how cinematic adaptations cannot be judged based on how faithfully they reproduce their literary sources. Such judgments misperceive a movie's uniquely visual method of storytelling.

Blade Runner, consequently, excises many of *Electric Sheep*'s salient events. The most significant change is that Dick's novel posits a religion called Mercerism that does not appear in Scott's film. Mercerism allows Earth's inhabitants to extract some hope from their constricted and unhappy lives in the wake of a nuclear holocaust. World War Terminus (the novel's term for this catastrophe) has created an environment so toxic that the American experience has fundamentally changed. Many animal species have become extinct, human survivors must wear lead shielding (including codpieces) to protect future generations from genetic damage, and a vigorous colonization program has relocated much of the populace to other planets. The remaining survivors have developed a caste system in which people mentally or physically deformed by radiation (known as "specials") are treated as near pariahs. *Electric Sheep* reveals their outcast status in stark terms: "Loitering on Earth potentially meant finding oneself abruptly classed as biologically unacceptable, a menace to the pristine heredity of the race. Once pegged as special, a citizen, even if accepting sterilization, dropped out of history. He ceased, in effect, to be part of mankind."¹⁴

This passage occurs just prior to the first appearance of John Isidore, a man who "had been a special now for over a year, and not merely in regard to the distorted genes which he carried. Worse still, he had failed to pass the minimum mental faculties test, which made him in popular parlance a