

*A Blade Runner History*

Part One:

Book Into Film

By

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Behind every motion picture lies a history.

First, scripts are written, crews hired, and actors cast. Then principal photography begins. Later, once production has wrapped, directors, composers and editors shape their raw footage into a movie. After that, the finished film appears at your local theater, or on a DVD.

It's at this point that the history of most motion pictures stop. Occasionally, however, a film will appear that is so unusual, so influential, and so *good* that its history continues beyond its debut date.

Such is the case with *Blade Runner*, Sir Ridley Scott's acclaimed 1982 adaptation of science fiction author Philip K. Dick's provocative 1968 novel, [\*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?\*](#) Stunningly designed, intensely atmospheric, teeming with provocative ideas, *Blade Runner* takes place in a futuristic, meticulously reimagined Los Angeles circa 2019. Here, cynical ex-policeman Rick Deckard (Harrison *Indiana Jones* Ford) is ordered to track down a quartet of artificially created humans. These dangerous "replicants" - indistinguishable from ordinary humans, except for their superior intellects and strength - have suddenly

begun murdering employees of The Tyrell Corporation, a powerful genetic engineering company. Deckard's job is to find out why - and to stop the replicants by "retiring" (i.e., killing) them.

*Blade Runner* cleverly combined three different genres - science fiction, mystery and *film noir* - into one unique package. Indeed, upon the film's initial 1982 release, it was mostly that packaging for which *BR* was noticed. Why? Because *Blade Runner* contains one of cinema's most astonishingly designed futures. Every frame of this film teems with detail, large and small, and it was this complex visual "layering" (as director Scott called it back in the 1980's) that initially caught the eye of discerning movie lovers.

However, *BR* also contained dark, morally challenging observations about mankind and society, as well as an ambiguous hero. Such downbeat elements - along with the film's oblique storytelling methods - created confusion in some 1982 audiences, especially those who'd strolled into theaters expecting to see an upbeat Harrison Ford quipping his way through a light-hearted, *Star Wars*-type of entertainment.

What viewers encountered instead was a dark, serious and provocative work of art. Therefore, *Blade Runner* did very little initial business, and the film quickly disappeared from view.

But then something curious happened - at a point where most film's histories end, *BR's* had just begun. The first signs of its revival occurred throughout the 1980's, as *BR's* popularity steadily grew through occasional cable television appearances and the burgeoning home video revolution. Then, when a different

version of the film (called "[The Workprint](#)") was released to two California theaters in 1991, nearly every screening sold out. That surprising event was followed in 1992 by a wider, 58-theater release of [Blade Runner: The Director's Cut](#). This new, streamlined version (supervised by director Scott) dropped the hardboiled voiceover which Deckard had uttered during the original cut, cut the original's out-of-place happy ending as well, and added a "unicorn daydream" which suggested that Deckard might be a replicant himself. The Director's Cut was also even more popular, and financially successful, than [The Workprint](#).

During the remainder of the 1990's, [Blade Runner](#) gained additional viewers. Its visual "look" also began influencing other filmmakers, who copied [BR's](#) designs for rock videos, TV shows and feature films. In turn, critics began writing about how [BR's](#) unusual mix of striking visuals and challenging ideas had not only been ahead of its time, but were now a seminal influence on many other science fiction films.

Then, in 1996, [HarperCollins](#) printed my book [Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner](#). This nearly 500 page-long examination of every aspect of [BR](#) has remained in print for the past 11 years, and was well received by mainstream film buffs and hardcore [BR](#) fans (who call [Future Noir](#) "The [Blade Runner](#) Bible"). The mid-Nineties also saw [Blade Runner](#) become a hot topic on the Internet, particularly after it began getting attention from such well-regarded websites as [Bladezone.com](#). 1997 then saw the release of the first [BR](#) DVD, followed by another in 2006, which in turn preceded the lavish, late 2007 [BR: The Final Cut Special](#)

[Edition](#) DVD (which covers every aspect of the film in two, four and five-disc sets). 2007 also saw the release of a revised, updated, [second-edition \*Future Noir\*](#) (known as “The Expanded Edition”), from English publisher [Orion Books](#).

Finally, 25 years after it originally appeared, yet another version of *BR* – this one an all-digital variant – will be released to theaters on October 5, 2007. Its title? *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*.

But why has *Blade Runner* stayed so popular? What were the circumstances of its making, and subsequent revisions? The following *Blade Runner* history will attempt to answer those questions as it examines three different phases of *BR*'s history: the adaptation of Dick's book into Scott's film, the difficult production of *Blade Runner* itself, and the way *BR* went from a cult film to a masterpiece between 1982 and 2007.

Of course, it all started with those *Electric Sheep*.

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## **PART 1: BOOK INTO FILM**

I first (briefly) met Philip K. Dick in 1973, shortly after the author had delivered a lecture at California State College in Fullerton ([PKD's biography](#) can be found here). Already an admirer of Dick's work – having first read him in 1959, via his short story “The Father Thing” – I was pleased to discover that the man was as interesting as his work; intelligent, articulate, and kind. Our paths then occasionally intersected during the remainder of the 1970's, usually at science-fiction conventions,

mostly informally, and always under the understanding that I, a fan, was talking to a pro.

By early 1980, however, my own writing career had taken root. At the same time, I was launching a parallel career as a filmmaker, a second vocation that found me employed in the marketing/advertising/publicity departments of a number of major motion picture studios. These dual careers merged in February 1980, when I contacted two then-popular now-defunct magazines (*Cinefantastique* and *Omni*), to inquire about whether they'd be interested in commissioning me to write a series of articles about the making of a new motion picture.

Those already familiar with *Future Noir* will know that the name of that motion picture was *Blade Runner*, and that it was based on PKD's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* What some may not know is that from February 1980 through February 1982, it was my great good fortune to repeatedly meet with, interview, and visit the small condominium apartment that Philip K. Dick called home. And of course, one of the first things we discussed was *Sheep*.

"*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is one of my favorite novels," Dick told me in. "Although (it) is essentially a dramatic work, the moral and philosophical ambiguities it dealt with are really very profound. *Sheep* stemmed from my basic interest in the problem of differentiating the authentic human being from the reflexive machine, which I call an android. In my mind, android is a metaphor for people who are physiologically human but behaving in a non-human way."

*Sheep's* conception came during PKD's research for his 1962 novel *The Man in the High Castle*. Given access to stored WWII Gestapo documents at the University of California at Berkley, Dick there discovered diaries written by S.S. men stationed in Poland. "One sentence, in particular, profoundly affected me," Dick clarified. "It read, 'We are kept awake at night by the cries of starving children.' There was obviously something wrong with the man who wrote that. I later realized that, with the Nazis, what we were essentially dealing with was a defective group mind, a mind so emotionally defective that the word human could not be applied to them. (And I believed) that these android personalities were so lethal, so dangerous to human beings, that it ultimately might become necessary to fight them. The problem in this killing then would be, 'Could we not become like the androids, in our very effort to wipe them out?'"

It was this lethal paradox - plus *Sheep's* strongly cinematic story of a futuristic bounty hunter chasing murderous androids through a decaying metropolis - that lured Hollywood to Dick's door. The first knock came in 1969, when fledgling director Martin Scorsese expressed an interest in, but never actually optioned, *Sheep?* Then came 1974, the year Dick first met the man who'd ultimately help bring *Sheep?* to the screen.

This was [Hampton Fancher](#). A former actor who was particularly active in films and television during the 1960's, Fancher had been writing screenplays since he was a teenager. He also prided himself on "a good working knowledge" of contemporary poetry and literature. Then Fancher read *Electric Sheep?*

"When I first read *Sheep?* in the early Seventies," Fancher recalls, "there was the smell of science fiction in Hollywood. After I'd finished Phil's book I realized that if there was going to be a serious film in this trend, I'd just read the source material. So I took a stab at optioning the book."

However, once Fancher met Dick, the science fiction author rejected the nascent screenwriter's offer, and Fancher left empty-handed. What Fancher did not know - since Dick hadn't told him - was the fact that *Electric Sheep?* had already been optioned, by [Herb Jaffe Associates](#). Actor/writer/producer [Robert Jaffe](#) then composed the first *Sheep* screenplay.

It was a script Dick hated. "What Jaffe did was to take my novel and turn it into a comedy spoof," Dick pointed out. "(On top of that), it was terribly done."

Jaffe Associates *Sheep?* option ran out in 1977. One year later, Hampton Fancher was talking to another former performer, [Brian Kelly](#), who was thinking of becoming a producer.

"Remembering my experiences with Phil," Fancher recalled, "I told (Brian), why don't you try optioning a book called *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*"

Since *Sheep?* was now free as a potential property, Kelly was able to get the option that Fancher had previously been unable to secure. Kelly then asked Fancher to partner with him on the project, so Fancher wrote an eight-page *Sheep* treatment based on Dick's book. Kelly brought this to [Michael Deeley](#), a top-tier English producer whose credits included 1979's Oscar-winning *The*

*Deer Hunter*. Deeley, intrigued, asked Fancher to come up with a working screenplay.

After a year's worth of effort, Fancher completed that script. Then a deal was negotiated; if any film was made from Fancher's screenplay, Deeley would serve as that film's producer, Kelly and Fancher would be the project's Executive Producers, and Fancher would do double-duty as its scenarist.

Deeley now shopped Fancher's first-draft *Sheep?* screenplay (titled *The Android*) to various studios and directors. This latter group included British filmmaker [Sir Ridley Scott](#), who was then directing *Alien*. But no one seemed interested.

At the same time, Fancher was doing a number of rewrites. "But (I) never intended, except in the first draft, to stay close to (Dick's) novel," Fancher once told me. "My interpretation of *Sheep* was that (it was about) a man who discovered his conscience in the course of his search for these androids. I also thought of it in terms of a love story, the growing bond between Rachel and Deckard. (So) in the final analysis, there was very little of Dick's book in my screenplay."

Then came early 1980. Ridley Scott, who'd previously turned down *The Android*, suddenly decided to accept Fancher's rewritten script (now titled *Dangerous Days*). "I accepted *Days* (because) I hadn't been able to get it out of my head since the time I'd first read it," the director told me in 1980. "Rereading it again, I decided it really was an extraordinary piece of work (that) seemed to lend itself to some marvelous design possibilities."

With Scott attached, Deeley was able to secure \$15 million in financing from [Filmways Pictures](#), and *Dangerous Days* looked ready to roll. Unfortunately, no one had told Philip K. Dick.

"I got a call from Robert Jaffe one day," Dick remembered, "(who said) he'd called to congratulate me on *Sheep* being made into a film. I told him I didn't know a thing about it. It turned out that Jaffe had read about it in the trades, but no one from the production company had taken the trouble to inform me of the fact."

Meanwhile, Fancher had titled the latest rewrite of his Ridley-Scott influenced script *Blade Runner*, after a book by William Burroughs titled [Blade Runner: A Novel](#). It was then discovered that SF author [Andre Norton had also written a novel titled \*Blade Runner\*](#) herself. So arrangements were made to pay Burroughs and Norton for the use of their titles, and *Dangerous Days* officially became *Blade Runner* instead.

One radical, yet still interesting, difference between Fancher's original *Blade Runner* script and Dick's *Electric Sheep* involved the character of Rachael. In *Sheep*? Rachel (note the missing second "a") is a heartless manipulator; in *BR*, she's a softer, more confused character, who ultimately rekindles Deckard's dying humanity. Still, since *BR*'s Rachael is an android, Deckard is professionally obliged to execute her, even though she's his lover. Various early drafts of Fancher's scripts resolved this dilemma by having Rachael commit suicide, either by stepping off a high-rise rooftop, or by shooting herself in the head. These early variants ended with Deckard wandering off into

a desert, determined to kill himself too. But after witnessing a tortoise resolutely trudging across this hostile wasteland, Deckard decides that he too will live another day.

Viewers familiar with *Blade Runner* may have noticed that there are a number of differences between this plot and the one presented in the final film. Such discrepancies between the plot points found in a film's early scripts and the narrative on display in its final cut are the norm, however, particularly after a screenplay is rewritten and refined by the major players - directors, actors, producers - who will actually make a film out of that script. But while *BR's* makers were laboring on their screenplay, Philip K. Dick had finally obtained early versions of that script - and the author was far from happy with them.

"I read two drafts of Fancher's screenplay, both bearing the Filmway's imprint," Dick told me in late 1980, "and it was just one terrible script. Fancher had dropped most of the aspects of my novel and, instead, concentrated on a lurid collision between human and android.

"I should make it clear that I wasn't angered by what had been cut from my novel," Dick continued, "because I do know that there's no way you can transfer everything from a book to the screen. However, what was bad was the execution of the script. And the ending had this awful thing where Rachel mercifully, for everyone's sake, does herself in."

Dick decided to make his unhappiness public. Therefore, in an article written for the February 15, 1981 issue of the Los Angeles-based *Select TV Guide*, PKD lashed out at the deficiencies

he saw in *BR's* script and took potshots at Scott's *Alien*. He then mailed that article directly to the *BR* production office.

"I did that because, after not hearing from anyone at *Blade Runner* for all that time, I suddenly got an obnoxious call from them one afternoon, wherein they immediately said that they were angry that I had a copy of the script and demanded to know just where I had got it! This was while the property was still with Filmways," Dick noted to me. "(So) I first pointed out that I'd gotten the script legitimately, through Michael Deeley's lawyers. But all the time I'm thinking, 'I'm the author of the novel on which this property is based! Is it so strange that I should have a copy of the script'?"

"Secondly, I then told them that not only did I have a copy of it, but that I had already denounced it in print, (because) the first scripts I read were on the level of 'Phillip Marlowe Meets the Stepford Wives'. I reacted this way not only because of (Filmways') rudeness, but because of the fact that, at one point in the conversation, they told me that I shouldn't be using the word 'android'. So I told them, 'Shucks, fellas, I am so sorry I titled my book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* But you know, gosh...now I'm sort of committed to it."

But the only permanence is change, and an ongoing series of events would soon reverse PKD's suspicious attitude. "(Once) Warner Brothers and the Ladd Company came in (to produce *BR* instead of Filmways), I began to be treated very nicely," Dick explained.

PKD was referring to the fact that, in late 1980, Filmways decided not to make *Blade Runner*, whereupon major studio Warner Brothers and independent production entities [The Ladd Company](#) / [Tandem Productions](#) picked up the cost of the film instead. Interestingly, one Ladd Company employee would have much to do with changing Dick's unhappy heart.

That person was Jeffery B. Walker. A one-time actor and graduate of the NYU School of the Arts (now the Tisch School of the Arts), Walker today is a ground-breaking "genre marketer" who's spent the past 25 years promoting every major SF, fantasy and horror films on the science fiction-convention circuit. However, in 1980, Walker had just begun working as The Ladd Company's resident "genre publicist". Then Dick's *Select TV* piece appeared.

"As a lifelong science fiction fan, and as a fan of Phil Dick," Walker recalled, "I was also aware of the *Select TV* article he wrote criticizing Hampton Fancher's *BR* script. So I went to Warners and The Ladd Company and said, 'Look, we really do have to involve Mr. Dick with *Blade Runner*. First of all, he's one of the Grand Masters of science fiction, and he should be on the side of this movie. And once he sees some of the material that Ridley and the writers have created, I have no doubt that he will be.'"

With Warner Brothers and The Ladd Company's blessing, Walker telephoned Dick and asked if he could come down to the author's Santa Ana, CA apartment, to show him the latest draft of *Blade Runner's* script.

"Phil was a little wary," Walker now recalls, "but he essentially said, 'Sure.' So I got to (his) apartment, sat down, and opened up the box of material I'd brought to show him (*this included preproduction artwork, in addition to the latest BR script*). Phil seemed very happy with that. In fact, I went down to his place about three or four more times after that, to do things like show him stills from the movie. Anyway, after our first chat I left Phil the newest draft of the *BR* script, and made arrangements to come see him again."

What PKD did not know was that Ridley Scott had, in November 1980, brought a new writer onto *Blade Runner*. This was David Webb Peoples, who'd previously cowritten/coedited an Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Day After Trinity* (about the birth of the first atomic bomb). More to the point, what Peoples had done with Fancher's *Blade Runner's* scenario met with Dick's enthusiastic approval.

"I (read) the February 1981 version of the *Blade Runner* script, and it immediately struck me that all the previous problems had been resolved," Dick told me. "Peoples had... smoothed out the dialogue, reworked certain problems in some of the scenes, and (deleted) Rachael's suicide. By dropping Rachel's suicide, (and) by rethinking the final Batty/Deckard confrontation as a moving, wonderful sequence...Peoples transformed the *Blade Runner* screenplay into a beautiful, symmetrical reinforcement of my original work."

However, despite Dick's praise, Peoples himself told me that his contributions to *BR's* script had been unintentionally exaggerated.

"I can't emphasize enough that Ridley Scott is really the author of *Blade Runner*," Peoples explained back in 1981. "Ridley was totally involved on every level of scripting. For instance, he always felt strongly about (*Sheep's*) original 'animal-extinction' theme, that a holocaust had wiped most of the real ones out, that it was an incredible status symbol to have one, and that most people had to settle for synthetic ones. But we just never licked that, other than inserting the short Animoid Row scene. Other people had their input into the *Blade Runner* script, too. Dick probably didn't understand just how much of a committee art filmmaking is

"As for Hampton - well, I think he's been unfairly depicted as the heavy in this case," Peoples concludes. "I don't know which version of the script Dick first saw, but the one I read was just terrific. Simply great. (This was) something I mentioned in my first meeting with (Scott). (Ridley just) grinned and said that (he) really liked the fact that I liked (Hampton's) script. Then Ridley pointed out some changes he wanted to make."

*Blade Runner's* screenplay would continue to change as the film moved through its pre-production and principal photography phases. But while the actual production of *Blade Runner* proved an exhausting, at time conflict-ridden process, Philip K. Dick found himself growing increasingly pleased with the overall direction that the first film based on his work was taking.

Still, PKD ultimately chose *not* to visit the *BR* set, as Jeff Walker points out. "Phil never refused to come to the set, but I think he basically just wasn't interested in making the drive up from Santa Ana to Burbank (*where Warner Brothers is located*). Maybe he just didn't like driving."

Still, PKD managed to see *some* of *BR*. The author's first substantial glimpse came on October 11, 1981, when PKD watched a syndicated television entertainment program called "Hooray For Hollywood". This show featured behind-the-scenes footage of Deckard chasing female replicant Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) through a teeming crush of people. Dick then telephoned me a few hours after watching this to enthuse, "I've just caught my first glimpse of *Blade Runner*, and it was astonishing. I think Ridley Scott may have made a major breakthrough in the way any future science fiction film will be produced."

*Blade Runner's* live action filming officially wrapped on June 30, 1981. Then, shortly before Christmas of 1981, Dick was invited by Scott to meet with the director at special effects' wizard [Douglas Trumbull's Entertainment Effects Group](#) (EEG), the state of the art facility (located in Marina Del Rey) that was providing *BR's* miniature and optical effects.

Jeff Walker: "I arranged for Phil to visit EEG, essentially on a day when I knew Ridley was going to be over there. (And once) Phil got (to EEG), I made the introductions between himself and Ridley. They indulged in a little small talk, and then they sat down in Ridley's office at EEG for a more serious

conversation. This was the first time they'd met. But they were in that office, speaking privately, for well over an hour."

Dick himself later explained this conversation to me. "When I finally met Ridley, I kept thinking of how I had continuously sniped at (him and) *Alien* and how I knew he must have seen those statements. But Ridley surprised me. He was very cordial. (Still, our conversation), was very frank. I expressed certain ideas that I hoped would be in the film, and then Ridley said they would not be in the film. "Yet he was very friendly, very honest, very open in what he said. Even though we disagreed on a number of points the air of cordiality was always maintained."

According to Dick, the main source of contention between the two men was the basic difference between "what Ridley and I saw *Electric Sheep* - and, by inference, *Blade Runner* - as being all about. To me, the (novel's) replicants are deplorable. They are cruel, they are cold, they are heartless. They have no empathy, - which is how the Voight-Kampf test catches them out...Ridley, on the other hand, said he regarded (the film's replicants) as supermen who couldn't fly. He said they were smarter, stronger and had faster reflexes than humans. 'Golly!' That's all I could think of to reply to that."

Still, as Jeff Walker points out, "Both Ridley and Phil really seemed to be enjoying each other's company that day. That was a great thing, because I'd primarily brought Phil up to meet Ridley, not to necessarily (show him) any footage (from *BR*). But (then) Ridley said to Phil, after their meeting, 'Would you like to see something?'

Dick, Scott, Walker and a few others now made themselves comfortable in EEG's private screening room, where the author was treated to a special viewing of the first 20 minutes of Scott's film. "I'll never forget Phil's reaction once the lights came up," Walker recalls. "He seemed genuinely surprised. Phil basically said something like, 'How did you do this? You held up a mirror to my mind!'"

The author said something similar to me on February 9, 1982, when PKD recalled, "That screening really was remarkable. I felt as if there was a direct conduit between my brain and what I was seeing on the screen. I can't wait to see *Blade Runner!*"

Following this screening, *Electric Sheep's* author became a firm supporter of Scott's film. Yet less than three months after his EEG meeting, Philip K. Dick suffered two strokes. A fatal heart attack then resulted in his death, on March 2, 1982.

*Blade Runner* was released three months after that sad occasion, on June 25, 1982. Despite suffering initial box-office failure, the motion picture gradually found its audience, and today is generally regarded as one of the finest, most influential, and challenging science films of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But as the next part of this history will make clear - a section titled "Blood Runner" - the actual creation of *BR* would prove to be even tougher than making PKD happy.

END PART ONE