

ASHES OF THE FUTURE: NOSTALGIA AND RUINS IN CYBER NOIR NARRATIVES

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SOMEBODY ELSE'S AUTHENTIC MEMORIES

The first of the many contradictions associated with film noir has always been the lack of a clear definition of a corpus of films, or at least some requirements that would limit the films deemed to belong to the genre. In his comprehensive book on film noir, Noël Simsolo defines it as a “nebula” arising from a “collective unconscious” related to the loss of identity (2007: 17). The Spanish scholar Jesús Palacios denies the existence of a consensus on its nature and describes its legacy as a challenge for film writers (2011: 9). Heredero and Santamarina note its “extreme referential, diegetic, stylistic and dramatic dispersion” (1996: 11), while Gonzalo Pavés calls frankly for a reformulation of the methodology employed in research on the topic (2003: 175).

This debate over what film noir is or is not points to the second great contradiction associated with the genre: the shadow of nostalgia that

looms over its entire legacy, perhaps precisely because it is a ghost that cannot be reduced to definitions, a group of films that only becomes more elusive the more one tries to categorise it, or perhaps because it is characterised by a narrative always inclined towards past events (Ponce, 2011: 39). Since the detective films of the 1960s like *Harper* (Jack Smight, 1966) and *Tony Rome* (Gordon Douglas, 1967), neo-noir and nostalgia have always been two constantly interconnected entities, the term “nostalgia” here being understood as “the feeling arising from the desire to return to a time, a place, a person, an object, etc., of a past time, which is perceived as ideal [...] and which in the present moment is beyond our reach” (Muñoz Ocampo, 2013: 20-21).

This connection has not waned in recent years. Today, according to Matthew Cooper (2021: 2), “contemporary Hollywood cinema turns most eagerly to nostalgia for its primary source of power,” and neo-noir is no stranger to this tendency. In

films from different countries such as *Long Day's Journey into Night* (Bi Gan, 2018), *The Dry* (Robert Connolly, 2020), *The Kid Detective* (Evan Morgan, 2020), *It Snows in Benidorm* (Nieva en Benidorm, Isabel Coixet, 2020) or *The Little Things* (John Lee Hancock, 2021), we can find a fascination with the theme of nostalgia that goes even further than mere iconographic reverence (Andrade, 2010: 4), embedding the longing for the past in the psychological make-up of the films' detectives.

In each of these films, the investigator's retrospective journey serves as an excuse for an encounter with his past, and with personal traumas that find their ideal trigger in a crime. This idea has always been present in the genre. As Laura Silvestri (2021: 107) explains, the detective's investigation traditionally leads him to a moral re-evaluation of his own past, while at the same time exposing "the impossibility of return" and confronting him with "the irreversibility of time". The films mentioned above expand on this idea by making the investigator the subject of his own investigation, both detective and victim in the case he is trying to solve. His confrontation with the mystery constitutes a recognition that first and foremost concerns his own personal or romantic life.

This redefinition of the archetype (still anecdotal, but previously unidentified) reuses the blueprint of film noir to offer a first-person exploration with melodramatic affinities. The crime genre is thus given an introspective dimension that is more evident in subgenres such as the so-called cyber noir film, specifically in two big-budget movies: *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) and *Reminiscence* (Lisa Joy, 2021).

THE CRIME GENRE IS THUS GIVEN AN INTROSPECTIVE DIMENSION THAT IS MORE EVIDENT IN SUBGENRES SUCH AS THE SO-CALLED CYBER NOIR FILM

As established by Jesús Palacios (2011: 188) and expanded on by Madrid Brito (2015: 569), the cyber noir subgenre is defined as:

a singular combination of retro-futurism and neo-noir, which finds its point of departure and arrival in a peculiar postmodern sensibility, where time frames (past, present and future, not necessarily in that order) are fused and confused, generating a pervasive, ominous feeling of ironic nostalgia and nostalgic irony. Retro and Neo pair up and Cyber Noir is born (Palacios, 2011: 188).

The old and the new coexist in pessimistic visions of a near future based on the depersonalisation of the human being, conflict with technology and increasing social inequalities. Since their inauguration with *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), these films have incorporated nostalgia as a prominent feature of an aesthetic universe "replete with vestiges and remnants of a past that refuses to die" (Palacios, 2011: 189), a reality that has reached the future without completely shedding the traces of its past, often to the discontent of its inhabitants. As Pérez and Zufiaur point out, "although the objects theoretically belong to the future, there is actually nothing new" (2021: 427) in Scott's *Blade Runner*, as its designs incorporate the notion of time in the deliberate dilapidation of the settings.

Adding the original nostalgia of the whole neo-noir cycle to this "eternally rainy, foggy and melancholy urban landscape" (Palacios, 2011: 205) and, finally, to the new characterisation of the detective described above, the aforementioned films heighten the feeling of loss of a past that is always slipping out of reach. Their stories portray sullen individuals whose yearning for the past reflects their lack of confidence in a future that has confirmed all our worst fears.

An analysis of *Blade Runner 2049* and *Reminiscence* reveals an explicit meditation in both films on the power of nostalgia, a postmodern awareness of their precursors in the genre and even a commentary on the current crisis of the cinema

screen. Both films were released in the last five years and both claim their space as innovative variants of the so-called “nostalgia film” (Cooper, 2021: 35) that dominates Hollywood production today.

BLADE RUNNER 2049

It is difficult to forget the first images of the original *Blade Runner*: that nightscape of a metropolis “whose expanse disappears into the horizon” (Pérez and Zufiaur, 2021: 425), peppered with bursts of flame, reflected in an enormous human eye. Just as Luis Buñuel had done in his short film *An Andalusian Dog* (*Un perro andaluz*, 1929), Ridley Scott’s eye served as a stimulus to transform our gaze and discover a new world of digital images. With *Blade Runner*, a new concept of science fiction was born: a murky, romantic pastiche combining the solitudes of the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s with the unexplored universes of futuristic speculation.

From *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) to *The Matrix* (Lilli Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, 1999), all cyber noir owes something to *Blade Runner*, yet no one had proposed a sequel

until *Blade Runner 2049*. This sequel recaptures some of the sense of wonder inspired by Scott’s film. However, it begins quite differently, with a prologue on a protein farm cloaked in fog and surrounded by desert plains. Despite being set several decades after the first film, the surprisingly humble cabin where the replicant Sapper Morton (Dave Bautista) lives contains several 20th-century objects that stand out. These items “do not merely have an incidental presence”, but “engage with the sense of yearning that the audience may exhibit in response” (Cooper, 2021: 35-36). Specifically, they are his reading glasses, the casserole dish boiling on the stove, the armchair and, most importantly, the piano that we associate with Deckard’s (Harrison Ford) love story in the first film.

Instead of evoking the future with images shot in the present, this prologue takes us to the past through the film’s futuristic universe. In *Blade Runner 2049*, old objects no longer pile up in corners like debris from a bygone era; instead, they mark a trail of meanings that viewers need to follow. Detective K’s (Ryan Gosling) investigation begins with bones and leads him down a path of ruins and ashes marked by a child’s old sock and a wooden horse. Nostalgia is present now not

Image 1. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)



only in the aesthetic, but also in the journey taken by the main characters.

Blade Runner 2049 makes a greater effort to maintain the genre's functionality than its predecessor. While Deckard investigated forward, into the future, to find the replicants who had escaped from the off-world colony, K investigates into the past to identify the corpse found in Morton's garden. K studies lab tests, checks police files, interrogates witnesses and travels to various locations that curiously include a junkyard, a child labor factory and a city abandoned due to radiation. In other words, settings belonging to the same iconography of the old, of the lost, of significant or existential ruin.

The replicant's outward journey clearly takes a retrospective direction. But so does his inner journey. In fact, the sequel updates the psychological principles that distinguished the androids in Scott's film, who defined themselves through dreams and fantasies, like the galloping unicorn later recreated in the form of origami. Conversely, Villeneuve constructs their identity through memories. "If you have authentic memories, you have real human responses," Dr. Stelline (Carla Juri) explains to K in her lab. If you know your past well, you can inhabit the present, even locked in a glass bubble, as she has done since she was a little girl.

Memory constitutes an "essential part in the process of creating one's own identity" (Galán León, 2021: 38). K is aware that he is a replicant, but at the same time he acts with the sensitivity of a human being. Ana Stelline's hyperreal memories have created emotions in him that are also real and condition his behaviour. The professional investigation thus becomes personal and the detective also plays a client role. This shift changes the investigator archetype and its function in the plot. Instead of being guided by standard procedure, the protagonist is blinded by his initial findings and follows them with a recklessness that is almost fatal for the outcome of the story.

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The detective's nostalgia in *Blade Runner 2049* also expands into romantic terrain, in the form of K's virtual partner, Joi (Ana de Armas). Compared with the replicant Rachael (Sean Young) from the 1982 film, Joi represents an even more conservative female type, "a domestic slave who responds successfully to the emotional needs of men" (Sáez, 2017). Her character embodies the idea of machines that are more human than humans, but at the price of reproducing old conventional views of the role of women. For K, Joi is not only a potential romantic partner or an object of desire, but a "fantasised image based on the traditionalist era of the American dream" (Joaquin, 2021: 186). Only at the end of the film, when he stares at her billboard, does K realise that he has been constructing an illusion.

This persistent nostalgia of the detective in *Blade Runner 2049* even affects the emblematic character of Rick Deckard. In the first film, Deckard inherited the hallmarks of the hard-boiled detective: solitary, independent, disillusioned but at the same time idealistic, a laconic, sarcastic, hopeless romantic. The Deckard that Villeneuve reconstructs is much closer to the sensibility of our times; he reappears before us as a myth in a pop-culture context with which he tries to identify. "I like this song," he will tell K as Elvis Presley sings on a holographic stage.

In the Deckard of the sequel there is an overlap of the nostalgia for the 1982 film (and the modern cinema it represents today) with the personal nostalgia of the character himself. At the climax of the film, Wallace tempts him by "offering him a replica" of his beloved Rachael "to restore his

enjoyment and set aside his pain” (Joaquin, 2021: 194). This “sinister” image appeals to us then with the power of the past, explicitly doubting the potential of the sequel to match the seductive power of the original. It is a nostalgia, in this case, for a cinema that today is in critical condition, haunted by falling audience numbers and shut-down theatres; a nostalgia for the screens and images of the past, and thus for the settings of its most iconic stories.

For all these reasons, *Blade Runner* and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* end up being opposite experiences insofar as their conception of time is concerned. Thirty-five years after the first one, we find ourselves with a vision of the future that is no more advanced than the one we glimpsed in 1982. Pessimism and disillusion seem to have increased since then, and our world view is marked by an even greater yearning. At the end of *Blade Runner*, the replicant Roy Batty invited us to reconsider existence as a miracle to be enjoyed. At the end of *Blade Runner 2049*, the plot settles for the reunion of a father and daughter, with the hope of restoring basic family relationships so that new strategies can be planned.

In short, *Blade Runner 2049* is an innovative example of cyber noir, where nostalgia dominates the images both in aesthetic terms and in its narrative techniques.

REMINISCENCE

The central idea of *Reminiscence*, the directorial debut by Lisa Joy (who also wrote and produced the film), seems to be inspired by the most memorable sequence in *Soylent Green* (1973). The classic directed by Richard Fleischer ranks as one of the most obvious precursors to the cyber noir subgenre, a detective story set in a future of misery and desolation. Although Palacios does not include it as cyber noir because of the “complete absence of meta-generic complicity with the viewer” in the film (2011: 125), *Soylent Green* anticipates the pes-

simistic portrait of the future, the use of a crime fiction plot, the classical archetype of the detective and the nostalgia inherent to neo-noir.

In the future it depicts (curiously, the film takes place in 2022), the elderly can visit euthanasia clinics that provide them with a transition to their “home”. Lying on a stretcher, they watch a projection of images “drawing on a past when it was still possible to enjoy the flora and fauna” (Ortega, 2018: 113), as a kind of overdose of beauty that accompanies their final moments. It is as if the return to that ideal world of nostalgia were able to cause their deaths, or in other words, as if death itself were symbolised by their immersion in images belonging to another world and another time.

This concept reappears in the future depicted by Lisa Joy. As a result of technological advances, human beings can experience their memories in an immersive film screening. Since “the essence of nostalgia is not the memory of what is lost or its absence but the desire to return to it” (Muñoz Ocampo, 2013: 20), the experience becomes addictive as it allows the viewer to forget that outside the memory screening room, climate change has transformed the planet: the oceans have flooded the cities, economic inequality has continued to increase, night has replaced day and, in short, reality no longer holds any appeal for humankind.

Reminiscence is thus a film explicit in its aim to portray nostalgia as a disease of our times. The protagonist’s voice-over is very clear in this regard, with observations such as “the past doesn’t haunt us [...], it’s us who haunt the past”, “nothing is more addictive than the past” or “nostalgia’s become a way of life”. The film is both science fiction and cyber noir, and yet it shows little interest in either. In relation to the former, the story basically takes place in indoor settings at night, especially the office where Bannister (Hugh Jackman) and Watts (Thandiwe Newton) do their business. Apart from a few digital panoramas of urban geography, we barely explore

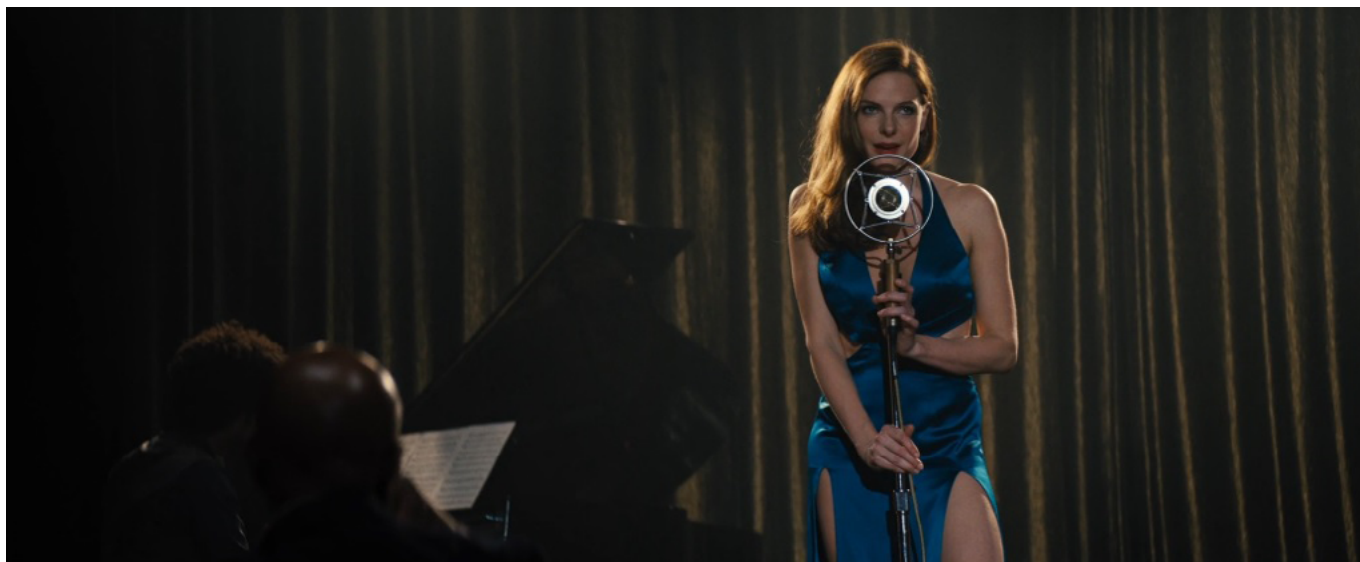


Image 2. *Reminiscence* (2021)

the details of the future world it depicts. In relation to the latter, *Reminiscence* adopts the detective procedure of the crime film in order to project its story back in time. Although it begins in a present tense supported by a voice-over, an ellipsis immediately transports us to the realm of memory. The enigmatic Mae (Rebecca Ferguson) has disappeared without a trace. Her love affair with Bannister has been cut short and, without knowing it, for several minutes we have been witnessing the detective's memory. The rest of the film will follow this investigation, which will use Bannister's own memories and those he extracts from witnesses to fill in the gaps and give a new meaning to this absence.

While seeming to be impeccably faithful to the neo-noir canon, in reality *Reminiscence* subverts its resources to privilege the love story over the detective story. The film does not narrate a crime fiction plot that incidentally brings about a catharsis for the protagonist; instead, the crime fiction plot serves as an instrument to explore the secrets of his love story.

The retro aesthetics of *Reminiscence* serve a similar purpose. Lisa Joy's film evokes a future inspired by the United States in the 1940s and

1950s, the same era that produced film noir and legendary films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946). However, the plot twists also reveal this aesthetic to be a farce, as Cyrus Boothe (Cliff Curtis) has studied Bannister's tastes and designed a performance aimed at controlling him. The song Mae performs on stage and her clothing, attitude, manner of speaking and mysterious nature are all intended to present her as a weak-willed femme fatale, an irresistible "masochistic-paranoid male fantasy of the exploitative and sexually insatiable woman" who at the same time acquiesces to male domination (Žižek, 2011: 372).

As Martín Cerezo argues, "in every literary narrative there are theoretically two texts coexisting, the text we read and the text that the criminal tried to make us read" (Martín Cerezo, 2006: 54). But in the case of *Reminiscence*, there would be three. The first is a nostalgic neo-noir story designed by Boothe to seduce Bannister; the second is a neo-noir story of smuggling and blackmail, which Bannister investigates and which the audience must follow; and the third is the love story between Bannister and Mae, which he cynically imposes on the film in accordance with "our ten-

dency to construct systems of thought to suit our emotional needs” (McCausland and Salgado, 2021).

In this way, the crime fiction plot of *Reminiscence* is not only directed towards the past through nostalgia but also unveils the artifice of that nostalgia and its conformist effect on the character. In the end, Nick Bannister falls in love with a hologram, just as the replicant K does in *Blade Runner 2049*. His reduction of the love object into a mere male illusion confirms the impossible nature of his return to his noir origins. Just as the femme fatale can never be fully humanised, the noir genre will never be able to reconstruct the atmosphere and meaning of those classic films.

In contemporary cinema, the parameters have faded and stories collapse under the impossibility of their telling. As Carlos Losilla recently asked, “if we no longer pay attention to stories, how can we create images that rebel against them?” (2021: 23) The images in *Reminiscence* sink under nostalgia and repetition without finding more than a spurious satisfaction in their hollow forms. In the final scenes, Bannister passes through the curtain that separates the present from the past, or reality from fiction, and merges with the imaginary Mae in an elusive fourth dimension that can be identified in a way with neo-noir, which, despite enormous efforts, “embodies what is never a ‘modern film noir’, but its ghost, which is ultimately the case for all classical genres” (Losilla, 2011: 66).

The images that Bannister handles depart from reality and are transformed into a representation of a perverse nostalgia for him and his loved ones. The final decision to stay in the dream underscores the risk of idealising our past and breaking the ties that connect us to reality. Bannister himself compares his tale to Orpheus’s journey to rescue Eurydice, just as Eugenio Trías does with the story of Scottie and Judy in the classic *Vertigo* (2016: 37). However, unlike Hitchcock’s film, Bannister does not lose Mae but embraces the illusion of her existence in a spectral, unreachable space.

Lisa Joy’s film thus uses the crime film model to explore the toxicity of a certain nostalgia without daring to (or managing to) escape from it. It turns the detective into a victim of the past who brings together disparate fragments to construct a story to suit him, completely transgressing the foundational archetype of the detective as one whose “function is to confirm all the discourses used as a refuge and protection for those who do not want to see their ideas threatened” (Silvestri, 2001: 43).

PURSUING THE PAST

The analysis of these two films confirms that Denis Villeneuve and Lisa Joy both use the aesthetic and narrative resources of neo-noir, and more specifically of the cyber noir subgenre, as defined by Palacios and Madrid Brito. However, they also add meaningful variations that bring their work closer to another corpus of films (of which *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *The Dry* are emblematic examples) in which the detective’s investigation eschews the usual implications of noir to become an expression of a feeling of nostalgia, of an “internal or external contemplation of what has changed and what has been lost to time” (Cooper, 2001: 43) in their lives.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the discovery of a corpse allows K to confront his childhood memories and uncover the identity of his parents, the special nature of the replicants and his relationship with the missing Deckard. Meanwhile, the detective in *Reminiscence* obsessively evaluates his memories in order to make sense of the failure of his roman-

IN SHORT, BOTH FILMS MANIPULATE THE USUAL STRUCTURE OF THE DETECTIVE STORY WITH THE AIM OF OFFERING A REFLECTION ON MEMORY AND MYSTERY IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

tic relationship with the elusive Mae. Bannister uses the crime story to delve into his feelings and ascertain the boundaries between truth and lies in the memories of their relationship.

This paradigm shift is especially significant if we compare the characters of K and Bannister with the detective in the film *Soylent Green*, the precursor to the cyber noir genre. In that 1973 picture, nostalgia is always expressed through Sol Roth, the old man played by Edward G. Robinson. As a symbol of a world that has now disappeared, Sol passes on his memories of a life filled with light in contrast to the darkness of the cyberpunk world. But this nostalgia does not apply to his friend Detective Thorn (Charlton Heston), as Fleischer depicts him as a pragmatic, savvy man immune to idealisations and fantasies, an analytical individual capable of getting to the truth by “putting together what is normally kept apart” (Silvestri, 2001: 36).

In contemporary film noir, detectives have resigned themselves to a chaotic world that makes them prone to self-doubt, as “while before the world had a meaning (one defined by fate), even if it could not be understood, now this meaning has disappeared, and total irrationality reigns” (Andrade Boué, 2010: 9). Added to this today is a second level of meaninglessness resulting from the crisis of the cinematographic image, from “the way contemporary cinema has collapsed as a collective illusion and the repercussions this has had on the collapse of cinema itself” (Losilla, 2021: 34). In Villeneuve’s film, this appears as an exploration of its ties to the first *Blade Runner* and the longings of the type of cinema it represented. In Joy’s film, it emerges as a critique of the contemporary omnipresence of nostalgia and the development of conservative stories to satisfy our desires.

In short, both films manipulate the usual structure of the detective story with the aim of offering a reflection on memory and mystery in human relationships. This raises the question of whether this small corpus of works should be added to

the list of modalities reviewed and expanded by Cooper in his study of nostalgia films (2021: 44). These are contemporary neo-noir films in which the detective’s investigations represent a first-person nostalgic impulse aimed at resolving existential questions. It is a category of films associated in some cases with the modern “anti-thriller” (García Vidal, 2015: 575) and in others with the “metaphysical” detective story (Merivale and Sweeney, 1999: 2). In any case, it is an interesting movement worthy of study that vindicates nostalgia as one of the main traits of the detective in film noir. ■

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Abstract

The cyber noir genre was born in 1982 with the release of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), the first of many films to fuse the resources of classical film noir with dystopian science fiction. Since then, there have been numerous variants of this modality in which the investigations of the noir detective take place in a dehumanised world that raises questions about the goal of technological progress. Focusing on *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) and *Reminiscence* (Lisa Joy, 2021), this article analyses the current evolution of a genre influenced by the nostalgic obsession affecting Hollywood today. These are two films in which neo-noir's nostalgia for its precursors is harmonised with a personal nostalgia represented by the detective's exploration of the past. This analysis confirms that both films could be classified as a new form of the contemporary nostalgia film.

Key words

Film noir; Science fiction; Cyberpunk; Film analysis; Nostalgia; Detective.

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CENIZAS DEL FUTURO: NOSTALGIA Y RUINAS EN EL RELATO CYBERNOIR

Resumen

El género *cybernoir* nace en 1982 con el estreno de *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), la primera de muchas películas en fusionar los recursos del cine negro clásico con la ciencia ficción distópica. Desde ese momento, han llegado a los cines numerosos exponentes de esta modalidad donde las actividades hermenéuticas del detective *noir* se aplican a un mundo deshumanizado que llega a cuestionarse la meta del progreso social y tecnológico. Tras el estreno de *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) y *Reminiscencia* (Reminiscence, Lisa Joy, 2021), este artículo analiza la evolución de un género influido por el pensamiento nostálgico que afecta hoy en día a Hollywood. Se trata de dos películas donde la nostalgia del *neonoir* por sus modelos se armoniza con una nostalgia íntima que simboliza la actividad retrospectiva del detective. Su análisis fílmico confirma la pertinencia de incluir ambas obras como una forma novedosa del llamado cine de la nostalgia actual.

Palabras clave

Cine negro; ciencia ficción; *cyberpunk*; análisis fílmico; nostalgia; detective.

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