

Cinematic Constructions of Power and Posthuman Ideological Discourses in Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*

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Abstract

This current paper offers an analytical exploration of the posthuman ideological discourse in Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*, with a focus on the power struggle between flesh and blood human beings versus bioengineered and human-like creatures called replicants. Drawing from critical theory, poststructuralism, and environmentalism, the study examines how the film constructs a hierarchy that reinforces systems of power and control and at the same time allowing space for resistance and rebellion. The narrative of *Blade Runner 2049* presents replicants as both subjugated to exploitation and as threatening subjects, whose growing collective consciousness challenges the anthropocentric and capitalist ideologies that define their existence. Through the depiction of rebellion, struggle, and the desire for autonomy, Denis Villeneuve's film interrogates the foundations of human supremacy and attempts to reconfigure the parameters of subjectivity in a posthuman futuristic setting. The paper also argues that Villeneuve's media franchise can serve as an allegorical mirror that critically reflects the mechanisms of ideological domination and the potential for posthuman agency within oppressive power structures.

Keywords: *Posthumanism, Ideology, Power, Rebellion, Blade Runner 2049.*

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Introduction

Ideology is unquestionably an enticing subject which attracts attention of cultural theorists, literary critics, philosophers, as well as filmmakers. Every work of art, be it cinematic or literary, is believed to carry within the folds of its storyline a particular ideology. The term, due to its polysemous nature, takes different shapes as it indicates a variety of meanings. Terry Eagleton (1998), the prominent literary and cultural critic, lists several definitions to highlight this variegated polysemy. One of his significant definitions is that ideology is a set of “ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power” and “a process of production of meaning, signs and values in social life” (p. 1). This dynamic process is never innocent. It is ideologically saturated given the fact that the creation of meaning is determined by the state which tend to reflect the interests and beliefs of hegemonic groups. Beliefs are believed to be deeply embedded in cultural practices and “social life”. Despite this embeddedness, some are thought to be completely erroneous whereas others are somehow distorted and have nothing to do with the truth. Considering once again Eagleton's statement, ideology structures the field of meaning itself. In the process of meaning production, some narratives are privileged, while others are marginalized, and therefore, the notion of ‘universal truth’ loses its credibility and crumbles into small pieces – into fragments of ‘the truth’ or multiple versions of the same ‘truth’. Thus, the subject becomes a matter of stifling contention which requires scrupulous scrutiny. Postmodernist thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard postulate that absolute truth is far from being reached. Only traces and fragments of the truth are all what is left. The remarkable loss of credibility is an upshot of the lack of faith in society's political institutions. Under these circumstances, prevailing political powers



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continue their process of discourse construction with the goal of legitimizing their oppressive, coercive and exploitative actions.

The Posthuman Struggle Against Discrimination and Rebellion

It is taken for granted that politics contributes heavily to shaping and determining the course of economic and societal development. Efficient and virtuous political governance of a state helps in leading a prosperous socio-economic life. This necessitates ruling with an iron fist or things would unexpectedly go out of hands. If that is this case, there would be a great potential of facing the perpetually impending danger of drifting towards tumult and disorder. For the state's governing apparatuses, chaos and disorder are unwelcome guests in the political equation for the striking reason that they represent direct threats to the ruling class's position at the top of the social pyramid. Joseph Schumpeter (2013) asserts that the imminent danger of chaos can be prevented or at least delayed "by accepting equality in the political sphere [and] by teaching the labourers that they were just as valuable citizens as anyone else" (p. 214). It seems clearly conspicuous that Schumpeter's assertion is ideologically grounded. A labourer's worth is not measured as regards his extrinsic value, but rather through his intrinsic value – his productive capacity as an active agent in the cycle of production.

Clashes between social structures can result from the friction inherent in competing systems of values or authority. Institutions seek to preserve the already existing hierarchies. The hegemonic institutions relentlessly seek to preserve the stability of the existing hierarchies. However, marginalized and emergent groups rise up in attempt to reconfigure and renegotiate established structures in the name of equity. In a capitalist system, for instance, the owners of the means of production exploit the working class, offering them wages that barely cover the basic needs for survival. Relations of production are synonymous to master-slave relationship. In this relationship, antagonism always arises to the fore giving place to rebellions and class struggle. It seems that Schumpeter implicitly advocates internalizing the egalitarian principles of equality in the minds of the public in attempt to thwart any impending rebellion. It is no wonder, then, that Louis Althusser's (2001) process of 'interpellation' comes to the surface. The notion of interpellation designates the way through which ideologies get into the heads of individuals and how such ideologies can shape the very fabric of the collective common sense (p. 174).

Blade Runner 2049 engages with ideology from multifaceted, yet interconnected perspectives, focusing, especially on how social and political structures, environmental issues, and capitalism shape human experience. To fully understand and keep up the flow of events in the film, it is necessary to dart a glance at three short films which were released to provide a thoroughly detailed backstory. The first of these media franchises is an animated short film directed by Shinichiro Watanabe's, *Blade Runner Blackout 2022*, whose story offers a glimpse into past incidents preceding the year 2049, including the cause of the blackout, the circumstances behind the prohibition of replicants on earth, and most importantly, the sudden upheaval of the Human Supremacy Movement. In line with this, mass production of genetically engineered beings with lifespans noticeably equivalent to regular people has precipitated a widespread public outrage. The Human Supremacy Movement comes into existence with the intention of exterminating the engineered androids from earth. Enraged members of the movement took advantage of the Registration Database to easily identify the indistinguishable human-like creatures, and once they are identified, they are being tracked down and unmercifully executed.

The Human Supremacy Movement carries heavy loads of exclusionary attitudes like discrimination and othering. It sets real humans apart from their counterpart, creating intense antagonism and heated tensions between the two groups. The movement is not like any other ordinary rebellions. The furious masses did not simply rebel against some sort of political oppression or economic disruptions. They declared war on replicants out of fear and hatred. The rebellious population were afraid from the rapidly developing technology of Tyrell's Corporation. Bio-engineered humans have started gaining more power and becoming equals to regular people as regards lifespan. Early models of replicants had short longevity; they were like disposable commodities with a fixed expiration date. The groups of rebels see in



augmenting replicants' lifespan a serious danger. On this basis, an excessive production of such an enhanced model could be a menacing threat to mankind's supremacy. Besides their endeavour to exterminating replicants, the rebels are relentlessly trying to force Tyrell's Corporation to stop producing synthetic humans once and for all. By this rebellion, they attempt to challenge the state's political power as Christopher J. Finlay (2015) states in his definition of resistance:

As a first cut, let's define 'resistance' as an attempt to thwart the established governmental authority in a state, challenging its attempts to rule and diminishing its political power, by means other than those afforded by the state through its normal constitutionally mandated processes (in the courts, legislature, and so on). As such, it encompasses both moderate forms aiming to challenge particular aspects of the state or of a particular government's rule and, more radically, an attempt to change the state fundamentally or to compel a government to step down. (pp. 20 -21)

Capturing and killing the human-like creatures – replicants – the angry members of the Human Supremacy Movement challenge the authority of the state. They raise their voices in defiance, sending loud warnings to those in power. Subsequently, Tyrell's Corporation ended up shutting down the process of production. The rebellious crowds came out triumphant. Their rebellion was rewarded as they influenced a prohibition which indefinitely stopped the manufacture of replicants. Throughout the course of the rebellion, many replicants were executed. Those who managed to escape death found themselves with no other option than detonating a nuclear warhead to destroy all magnetic backups in the archives so that all records on the ground will be erased, making it impossible for the rebels to track them down. Therefore, the registration database will also be destroyed, and the human rebels would not be able to distinguish the bio-engineered counterparts from themselves.

Disrupting Power: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Environment

The fear of the cutting-edge replicant technology is an important case in point. The rebellious populace sees this innovative technology as an extremely malicious enemy. A massive production is very frightening. Giving total freedom to Tyrell's Corporation, synthetic beings and bio-engineered beings would spread all over the planet like a contagious disease and might eventually lead to deadly antagonisms between humans and replicants. The fact that such synthetics are indistinguishable, humanity could then reach a stage in which the wall separating the real and the artificial falls to the ground. The reaction of the Human Supremacy Movement against replicants can be considered as an attempt to safeguard their kind, as most people start to think of replicants as dangerous 'others' that might overthrow mankind from its position of privilege. In this way, the process of othering comes into play because of the dichotomous divide between the real and the artificial. The real situates itself at the centre and values its identity as authentic and demonizes 'artificial beings' by stigmatizing them as Others. This exclusionary process is based on the supremacy of the Homo-Sapiens species – a self-proclaimed supremacy which stems from the belief of purporting the biological superiority of humans over the genetically engineered ones. The belief of being superior fuels the ideology of the movement which fights to safeguard and preserve the purity of human identity.

Supremacy is a strong word that is often used to describe extreme forms of power and control. It is also suggestive of Man's superiority over the rest of species on earth. The Human Supremacy Movement is driven by the anthropocentric idea that mankind is naturally superior to any other creatures in the universe, as if this universe is solely created to serve his purposes and fulfils his demands. Humans are situated at the top of the hierarchy, and everything is under their authority, particularly the natural environment. Man is created in God's image to be master over every other creature. This teleological and anthropocentric vision has become an entrenched system of knowledge and shared beliefs in mainstream culture. Simona Micali (2019) contends that teleology and anthropocentrism are what rationalize the human claim of being master on the planet, exploiting its resources and manipulating or even exterminating its species (p. 19). Similarly, in the meeting with Los Angeles Lawmakers, Wallace speaks insightful words, he says: "Humanity has only survived by crushing the earth to suit its needs" (2036: *Nexus Dawn*. 00:02:49 – 00:02:54). Wallace's words hint at the exploitative relationship between humans



and their natural world. Humanity “crushes” the earth through depleting its resources, industrial expansion, and most notably mass extinction of its species.

Seeing themselves as masters in the universe, humans seem to forget the roles that nature played in the world’s prosperity. Modernity, capitalism, and technological civilization have all developed at the expense of nature. Nowadays, a cognate consensus reigns asserting that industrial civilization and capitalism are the most salient causes of earth’s severe deterioration. In Villeneuve’s film, the effects of over-exploitation and radiation have apparently suffocated the planet. The earth is completely barren and green fields and forests are transformed into wastelands and nothing more than garbage dumps. This landscape portrayal is a reflection of what eco-critics and environmentalists have speculated. It has been estimated that the today practices of the capitalist system might lead to a consumption of resources beyond the capacity of nature (Watts). Eventually, sustainability is no more, since the scarce resources would not fully satisfy the wants and demands of the contemporary consumer society.

The capitalist mode of production perceives the natural world as a mere input that provides the necessary materials for economic growth and profit maximization. It gives more importance to the instrumental value of nature and discredits the intrinsic value. John O’Neill (1992) declares that nature should not be perceived as means of wealth accumulation. He proclaims: “To hold an environmental ethic is to hold that non-human beings are not simply of value as a means to human ends. However, it might be that to hold a defensible ethical position about the environment” (p. 120). By non-human beings, O’Neill points to wildlife and the natural environments and their importance in maintaining stability of the ecosystem as well as keeping a steady ecological equilibrium. Animals, rainforests, and plants are closely connected to each other through the food chain. If a single species meets extinction, it will certainly affect the survival of the remaining species. Animals that feed on grass, for example, would probably starve to death in case grass no longer grows because of a climactic disequilibrium, deforestation, or the conversion forests and green fields into stone through the unrestricted urban sprawl.

After watching the three short films, one can deduce that insufficiency of resources is the chief catalyst accelerating technological development which continues up until the year 2049. As expressed in the opening title sequence of *Blade Runner 2049*, advancement in technologies has contributed to the coming of synthetic farming. Wallace’s mastery of this new harvesting technique in such a post-apocalyptic world has brought him a fortune and earned him much respect from Los Angeles Lawmakers. In due course, he quickly climbs the social ladder to grow more powerful and gets himself a place amongst the elite by virtue of his craftsmanship as a scientist. His contributions have kept hunger at bay and saved millions of people during the harsh times of scarcity. Obviously, Wallace’s intentions are purely materialistic. He is not primarily concerned with preventing famine; he rather intends to become a supreme power. The conclusive words he spoke in the meeting with the Lawmakers says it all: “You remember hunger... so you indulge in recluses whose patents keep hunger at bay” (2036: *Nexus Dawn*: 00:01:45 – 00:02:54). This saying expresses his lustful desire for power. It echoes Friedrich Nietzsche’s insightful notion, ‘will to power’, a will whose alluring nature never ceases to entice mankind. The will to power, from Nietzsche’s standpoint, is symptomatic to having the power to assert oneself and overcome resistance in order to prevail and shape the world according to one’s own system of values (Genome, 2001, p. 288). What is worth mentioning here is the lascivious desire driving Wallace to express power through continuing to massively produce enhanced beings. Power, in this sense, will manifest itself once he succeeds in getting permission to resume, yet again, the production of physically appealing and genetically enhanced model of androids.

Hegemony, Interpellation, and the State's Governing Apparatuses

The concept of power should not be neglected from the equation of ideology. It influences decision-making and hegemonic strategies of dominance. Borrowing from Niccolò Machiavelli, it is a means that justifies an end. There is always an intention behind exerting power. Intentions vary in nature, from economic, social, or even political. Michel Foucault’s works centres around the concept as he gives it a



universal dimension. He contends that all relations gravitate around power, starting from the microcosmic family institution to the state's political and legislative institutions. Foucault (1980) maintains: "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (p. 39). Once an individual gains a certain degree of authority, he/she feels the need to exhibit it through "actions, attitudes, [and] discourses", similar to Wallace whose power is manifested in his speech and actions. The power Wallace possesses refers to Max Weber's (2015) "charismatic authority" – an "authority that is based on a special personal or spiritual gift" (p. 137). Wallace, the scientist and newly appointed replicant manufacturer, possesses extraordinary abilities that enabled him to come out triumphant from his meeting with the Lawmakers. The latter's prohibition could not resist the charm of the scientist's allegedly auspicious technology. In this manner, the 'charismatic authority' of Wallace prevails over the 'legal authority' of Los Angeles Lawmakers. From Foucault's knowledge/power dialectics, Wallace's knowledge equals power since he reached his current status thanks to his extraordinary gift of mastering synthetic farming. The fortune he earned through his new harvesting techniques bought him the remnant of Tyrell Corporation and got him the green light to resume producing a new series of enhanced and highly sophisticated human-like replicants.

Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci are distinguished intellectuals who contributed to broadening the scope of ideology. Their works already contain the seeds of posthuman ideology as Gramsci's hegemony and Althusser's interpellation exist within the circle formed and defined by power. There are several definitions of hegemony; the most suitable to unravelling the underlying ideological posthuman motives from Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* is the one provided by Christopher Layne (2006) who considers hegemony to be mainly about a hierarchical change in the social pyramid. For him, when the state achieves hegemony, its system shifts from being anarchic to hierarchic (p. 4). The state in the film has emerged from the ashes. It has gone through harsh times of anarchy during the bloody rebellions and conflictual struggles to become a hierarchic society. State's stability is mainly grounded on power and hegemony due to their important capacity to facilitate the control of ideas of subordinate classes by deliberately altering their perceptions of social realities. Hegemony shares analogous features with Althusser's interpellation. Even though the latter is an unconscious embodiment of values and cultural norms, Villeneuve's storyline offers a subtle blend of both conceptions – hegemony and interpellation. Viewers of the film are told about the nature of replicants' memories through dialogue. All replicants are fully aware about their unauthentic and fabricated memories. The conversation between Officer K. and his superior, Lieutenant Joshi, shows K's consciousness about his implanted memories; when K was asked about them, he confidently responds: "I have memories, but... they are not real. They are just implants" (*Blade Runner 2049*: 00:51:29 – 00:51:35).

The human-like replicants have been told the truth about their fabricated memories from the very beginning. They deeply believe their memories to be fabricated. None of them has ever attempted to question this falsehood, until officer K finds a buried military footlocker box near a dead tree. Afterwards, a group of Lab technicians discover the bones to be of a female replicant named Rachel died in childbirth. K sets out to discover the mystery of his supposedly childhood memory in which he visualizes a toy – a wooden horse figurine with a date carved underneath it. This memory induces doubt and a great sense of mystery as K might be the miraculous child. K's wanting to solve the conundrum of his identity is a form of Marxist 'false consciousness'. Although K knows full well about his true nature as a genetically engineered person, he knowingly embarks on a journey to rediscover what he already knows. His false and 'non-rational' belief drives him to continue searching since there is no other alternative for knowing the truth. On this point, Michel Rosen (1996) reports that: "The theory of ideology is a theory about false consciousness that is itself (in part at least) to be explained as a product of non-rational belief: part of its plausibility lies in the fact that it gives the world a particularly appealing kind of intelligibility" (p. 522).

Immediately after knowing about Rachel's birth, Lieutenant Joshi orders officer K to find the child and erase everything. The Lieutenant is conscious about the danger if the news of Rachel's miraculous birth spreads. She says: "The world is built on a wall... It separates kind... Tell either side there is no wall, you brought a war... Or a slaughter" (*Blade Runner 2049*: 00:26:56 – 00:27:00). Saying this, she insists on the



gravity of the situation. The dangerous news could ignite the fire for a new revolution and consequently a counter-hegemonic bloc emerges to confront the state's governing apparatuses. Replicants, as subordinate slaves, have already started constituting their counter-hegemonic group of rebels led by Freysa, the one who witnessed the miracle. Freysa is very desperate and eager for freedom because she wants the genetically engineered species to be masters of their own. As a leader, she persistently continues to convince more replicants to join her army and instil in them the ideology that they are way more than slave labours designed to serve human masters.

Conclusion

Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* subtly blends some of the already existing ideological models, like those elaborated by Marx, Althusser and Gramsci, with environmental and eco-critical theories to fashion a new ideological and cultural vanguard. These models provide the ground basis for a posthuman ideology to reign and establish itself as a dominant system of beliefs and shared knowledge. Villeneuve's masterpiece deals with the concepts of hegemony, power, and interpellation from a dystopian and futuristic perspective and approaches them as interrelated concepts that gain their significance from one another. Power and knowledge dialectic – within the context of the film – is the means that fuels the engine of hegemony and launches the process of interpellation.

Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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