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The Eye of the Operative: A Kamikazic Dive into the World of Wachowski's *The Matrix* and Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*

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Words, visuals and sound have always been man's mode of expression of the past, present and of the unforeseeable future. The role of cinema in the second half of the twentieth century experimented with the visual representation of what may be called an 'afterlife' of human evolution. The representation of nature has been one of the crucial motifs through which films like *Aliens* (1979) and *Predator* (1987) heavily deals with extra-terrestrial colonisation of earth. With the cyberpunk film written and directed by the Wachowski sisters, *The Matrix* (1999), presents a perplexing conundrum — of a world post the advent of artificial intelligence and the treatment of human beings as mere batteries, hibernating in machines while the human mind is simulating the pre-advent of artificial intelligence in order to sustain the current present. Denis Villeneuve in his film, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), similarly depicts a world where synthetic beings are manufactured for labour, where life has transcended the boundaries of mortality to immortality. The protagonist of both the films, Neo and KD6 – 3.7, function as the eye of the state, the Panopticon. They are controlled by the state and act as the agent of state, which they try to break away from. This paper proposes to study the two films in relation to the act of surveillance, perception, control and tries to dive into the self-destructive attitude to either change the system by bringing in a revolution or to resign to one's fate using the theory of biopolitics as proposed by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, and the theory of posthuman pioneered by N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. The aim of the paper is to seek to answer the questions — who controls perception, who controls bodies and who can escape from this cycle.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Biopolitics, Panopticon, Posthuman, Self-destruction

"Something's wrong with the world. You don't know what, but it's there... all I'm offering you is the truth. Nothing more."

— *The Matrix* (Wachowski 00:27:17)

How do we present that is there and that is coming? Dystopia is a world which is seemingly ours, somewhere in the future, but still ours. M. H. Abrams in his book, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2008), defines the term as a "bad place", a meaning which is applied energetically in the world of science fiction, and provides a space "that represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (Abrams 378). Representations of dystopia are quite fertile in the grounds of literature and have produced phenomenal works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Antony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and many more to list.

While representations of dystopia are quite fertile in the grounds of literature, it found many other artistic representations. It was especially in the last decade of the twentieth century, that the world



of screens witnessed a mass development of dystopic fiction due to exposure to radical works from various disciplines such as Ihab Hassan's influential essay 'Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture' (1977), Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Donna Haraway's essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985), among many others. This new mode of representation of the changing world and the direction it was heading towards, found its sanctuary in the screens. Many dystopian fiction projects that won the audience with experimentations would be Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1988), and many others.

In the films of the Wachowski Sister's *The Matrix* (1999) and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the world presented to the fictional characters in the plot, is shaped by constant surveillance, control and a sense of duty. While both the films begin with the protagonists' submission to order, we find both Mr. Thomas A. Anderson of *The Matrix* and Officer KD6 – 3.7 of *Blade Runner 2049* taking a "kamikazic" dive into self-discovery, resistance and rebellion. Kamikaze refers to the Japanese military units which were formed to perform suicidal airstrikes. This suicidal inclination can be found in both Thomas and Officer K, where both sacrifice their lives to defeat the systems they were forced into.

Thomas Anderson of *The Matrix*, who goes with the alias 'Neo', on one-hand has a simple life working as an employee in a corporate office, and on the other, he operates as a hacker who challenges the norms of society, challenges the control of society and looks for an answer to a complicated question – "What is the Matrix?" (Wachowski 00:11:40). Trinity, a human operating in the shadows of the Matrix, to which she responds – "The answer is out there, Neo. It's looking for you. And it'll find you ... [she pauses] if you want it to" (Wachowski 00:11:43).

In *Blade Runner 2049*, Officer KD6 – 3.7 is a synthetic "bioengineered human" who is manufactured for "use off-world" and he is one of the many ideal slave labour who 'obey' the orders and rules of their creator. K, the improved replicant model, hunts the older Nexus 8 replicants "with open-ended lifespans", who once led a series of violent rebellion, and "retires" them (Villeneuve 00:01:40). K is literally a government operative and his role is defined by obedience and surveillance. In the first half of the cinema, we are convinced that his own thoughts and perceptions are continually shaped by Wallace Corporation's bio-technological control, signifying they are the controller of the new world. We are also made to witness K's acceptance into the new world and how his role as a blade runner constantly labels him as a non-human and is thereby conditioned to accept his existence as an artificial status. Although he is a replicant, he is without a 'soul' and he "has been getting on fine without one" (Villeneuve 00:28:10). K's eye is owned by the system and every step of his is monitored. His non-existence as a biological being also made him reliant on a holographic artificial intelligence product named 'Joi' who provides K the comfort he seeks in the dystopian world he inhabits — a world that he is meant to protect and patrol.

What we find common in both the worlds is the ever-present panopticon. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995) writes that a panopticon is –

"... a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organisation, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons" (Foucault 205).

Foucault while exploring panopticism, mentions how the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may "degenerate into tyranny" (Foucault 207). Panopticon, as a model then, became a model of functioning which had it itself the way to define the power relations of the everyday life of the humans (Foucault 205).

Both Neo and K exist within the system which controls and regulates their bodies, their identities and their perceptions. The Matrix, as explained by Morpheus is "Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us [humans] under control in order to change a human being into this [a battery]" (Wachowski 00:49:19). He continues explaining, "As long as the Matrix exists ... the human race will never be free" (Wachowski 00:45:36). Morpheus lets out the truth in one-



go – “The Matrix is a system ... that system is our enemy” (Wachowski 00:56:38). What can be easily understood is that the system which controls the human bodies who are reduced to the state of batteries, help the controllers being in power. In *Blade Runner 2049*, K is manufactured and used according to the needs of the corporation. His existence being servitude driven, has operativity built into his genetic codes. His movements and status as living is constantly kept in check through the drills after each ‘retirement’, through a “baseline test”, where K is evaluated for being serviceable to the Corporation. In his repetitions, what is indoctrinated in the process is the idea of a prison – “A system of cells interlinked within cells ... interlinked within cells ... interlinked within one stem ... within cells interlinked. Within cells interlinked. Within cells interlinked” (Villeneuve 00:14:03).

While panopticism looms large, the eye of the operative in both the narratives propagates a biopolitical control where both Neo and K are existing within the systems that regulates their bodies, their identities and their perceptions. Biopolitics is “the ruling by and through the flesh” (Mendeita 38). Michel Foucault defines biopolitics as –

“Society’s control over individuals ... not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body... The body is a biopolitical reality...” (Foucault 137).

With Neo, the biopolitics of illusion plays crucial role as it is the Matrix which regulates human bodies at the energy level, reduced to a mere mechanical and machine-like regime where their only function is to provide energy like batteries. For Neo to see beyond the biopolitical construct, freedom is required to reclaim one’s body from the digital control or manipulation. The Matrix stands as a digital panopticon where surveillance controls perceptions. With K, what plays out is the biopolitics of artificial life as it is the corporation which owns K’s body and has access even to his memories signalling that his entire existence is state-controlled. His body is designed specifically for obeying commands which is built into his genetic code. His existence or his bio-status is determined by the retinal scans.

Giorgio Agamben in his seminal work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) explores the notion of “homo sacer”. Homo sacer was a figure in ancient Roman law who could be killed without the act being considered a homicide, yet could not be sacrificed in religious rituals. This individual or “homo sacer” existed in a paradoxical state where they were excluded from the protection of law, yet still being under its influence. Agamben uses this concept to discuss “zoe” or “bare life” which refers to a mere biological existence which is devoid of political rights. He argues that modern government have the ability to decide whose lives are of importance in the legal sphere and of political recognition which effectively reduces a section of individuals to “bare life” (Agamben 71).

The replicants in *Blade Runner 2049* invoke the concept of “bare life”. They are designed and created for servitude and complete obedience, lacking any legal personhood and existing solely to fulfil the roles they are coded into. Their existence is marked by the lack of autonomy as they can be terminated or “retired” without any legal consequences — which highlights their status outside the realm of legal protection. K, too, much like the older models whom he “retired” as a part of his job, is now being hunted to be terminated. This further highlights the biopolitical dynamics which is at play where the individuals are subjected to the whims of the sovereign authority.

In the cinema, both Neo and K undergo posthuman transformations which redefines human identity in a dystopian world. In *The Matrix*, Neo undergoes a posthuman ascension where his kamikazic dive can be interpreted as his leap beyond the biological limits — a limit he was struggling to break away from — and he becomes a cybernetic entity who is capable of manually manipulating codes as reality and finally changing the perception of real. Neo’s mind which surpasses the body — the body stuck in the simulation of a world but is not real — embodies Nancy Katherine Hayles’ idea of posthuman consciousness which is detached from the flesh. Hayles in *How We became Posthuman* (1999) argues that the traditional Cartesian dualism of the mind and the body dissolves in posthumanism, allowing consciousness to be uploaded, transferred, or simulated without reliance on a biological body (Hayles 193).

K, on the other hand, is literally a posthuman from the beginning. He is a replicant or a synthetic being and is denied the right to self-identity. K’s struggles is not to transcend his flesh, but it is to be recognised as something beyond the manufactured identity bestowed onto him by the state. K’s entire



existence mirrors what Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) warns the readers of the commodification of bodies under the capitalist biopower. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti borrows from Foucault's concept of biopower and reworks it from the perspective of posthuman. She explains that in the traditional humanist framework, bodies were perceived as sacred, autonomous and with a sense of being protected. In posthumanism, the way we perceived bodies deteriorated into being perceived as commodities which can be engineered and is instrumental for capitalist gain. She stresses that in the era of advanced capitalism, bodies have transformed into being products which is stripped of individuality, dignity, or even self-ownership. Posthuman bodies then are not just exploited but they are designed for exploitation (Braidotti 119).

K's precarious condition where he is aware of his manufactured-ness, being engineered in a lab where he was moulded for complete obedience and subservience, was programmed to kill his own 'kind' and his entire existence is regulated through bio-embedded protocols such as the baseline test. His body does not belong to him, it belongs to the state, thereby labelling his existence as a corporate asset. Although K, much like Neo from *The Matrix*, tried to carve out his own identity assuming that he was "born ... not made" (Villeneuve 01:14:51). Joi's insistence on K being 'special', being a real person, instilled the idea that he came out of a womb and pushed into the world where he was loved. K, for the first time in his life, felt he mattered, that he was not an anonymous face in the crowd. Someone, his mother, sacrificed her life and chose to give life to him. After stumbling into evidences which were meant for destruction, K becomes 'Joe' for Joi. His romantic partner insisted that he deserves a name and it was 'Joe' because he is "too important for 'K'" (Villeneuve 01:15:12). K left behind the identity imposed onto him by the state and accepted a new identity, with a name for an individual. K internalised an identity he created for himself and his capacity for love, pain, and desire are irrelevant for the capitalist fantasy of Wallace Corporation whose ultimate desire is to reproduce replicants, pervading into species control and monopolise upon life itself.

Neo and K's trajectory from being operated, devoid of autonomy, metamorphosing into rebellion, ends in a self-destructive act for their pursuit of truth and true liberation. Neo's dive into the unknown digital abyss by choosing to swallow the red pill and escaping into the real world, and his insistence on resistance rather than running away from the "agents" — leading to his death. He is, thereby, reborn as and his old self and Mr. Anderson, an identity of the artificial world, is erased. Neo, in *The Matrix*, embraces his posthuman destiny. His final act in the film reflects a leap of faith — something he lacked in the beginning as he could not jump across tall buildings without the fear of death. He can now manipulate the reality as he sees it, and defies the programmed reality of the matrix. The Wachowski Sister's *The Matrix* holds an optimistic promise of a better tomorrow where the 1990s cyber-revolution's dream that escape is possible and that systems can be broken, systems can be challenged, and systems can be changed. The cinema ends with Neo's optimistic over voice —

"I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'll show these people what you don't want them to see. I am going to show them a world... without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there ... is a choice I leave to you." (Wachowski 2:07:59)

Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* provides perhaps a more realistic approach. K's dive is a fall into an existential ambiguity where he seeks an identity — only to realise his insignificance. K, now as Joe, understands the futility of his expectations and dreams when he is exposed to the truth that he was not born from a womb, but it was a girl and that girl is Dr. Ana Stelline, the unique dream-maker in the Wallace Corporation. It was to protect her identity that the resistance group destroyed the trace. K's memories were not his, but hers, which was supplanted into his mind so as to provide the replicants a more emotional and authentic memory. K realises that he was never the chosen one and he was just an ordinary replicant leading a life on his own. K's further encounter with an advertisement of product Joi of the Wallace Corporation, further helped him realise his role into the world he was manufactured in.



Joi's speaking advertisement continually brought out K's daily conversations with her such as "what a day, hmm?", "you look lonely" and "you look like a good Joe" — erases all the concrete beliefs of himself. He for the first time reads the selling point of the product 'Joi' — "Everything you want to hear. Everything you want to see" (Villeneuve 02:17:11). K discards his identity as 'Joe' and reluctantly accepts the state imposed identity as he never was anything other than a cog in the machine.

K's journey ends not with a revolution but a self-sacrifice where he chooses to ensure Deckard's union with his daughter but nevertheless remains a forgotten instrument of the system as he realises that his life means nothing and that "dying for the right cause is the most human thing we could do" (Villeneuve 02:06:20). In trying to save Deckard, K is fatally wounded and accepts death while staring at the sky which was snowing. K's kamikazic dive is into oblivion, a destiny which he tried to resist but failed to. In a way, his self-destruction was the only path for liberation. The existential fatalism lay in the irony that the system adapts and freedom may exist only in personal sacrifices. *Blade Runner 2049* offers a more cynical vision where the dystopian systems of power are too powerful to be dismantled where it is only in the personal sacrifices where the individual can be found.

The dystopian protagonist of both *The Matrix* and *Blade Runner 2049* struggle against leading to a transcendence or they are consumed by their worlds. In a way, perceptions although controlled by the sovereign changes with awareness, control over bodies changes with resistance and escape is possible and all that is required is courage.

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