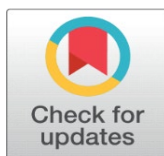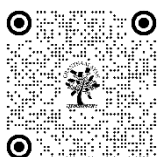# BLADE RUNNER 2049: A CASE STUDY OF AVANT-GARDE STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

Dark yet enlightening, cruel yet humane, ambiguous yet clear and finally calm yet pacy; *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) hits hard and in the right places. It redefines the concept of humanity in all its forms in addition to posing several existential and nihilistic questions Richards (2017). However, what is more striking is how it makes people go back to the basics and recalibrate their notions on what is humane and what is not. Denis Villeneuve's futuristic tryst with gloom and doom is as disturbing as it is emotionally stirring. However, *Blade Runner 2049* is also a definite attempt at avant-garde storytelling Guillen (2017). An unconventional cinematography, stunning visual effects, a distinctly experimental plotline, and a visible contempt for conventionality mark the movie's diegesis. The movie also projects a dystopian world view – one that seems futuristic albeit being quintessentially contemporary Zhang (2017). In fact, *Blade Runner 2049* remains loyal to the setting projected by the original version (*Blade Runner*) that came out in 1982 Propes (2021). A careful analysis reveals that the movie is nothing but a commentary on multiple issues including feminism, social decay, delinquency, imperialism, and brute exploitation. In a subtle way, the movie could also be a metaphorical representation of the unhindered march of science and technology, albeit at times with disastrous consequences. This paper makes a nuanced effort at dissecting the movie using two of the most well-known film theories – the Auteur Theory and the Feminist Film Theory. In the process, the paper also tries to segregate the avant-garde elements in the movie and establish it as a distinct case of novel narrative structure.

Keywords: Blade Runner 2049, Humanity, Avant-Garde, Storytelling, Dystopian

1. INTRODUCTION

When the Ridley Scott-directed *Blade Runner* (1982) was released, it did not really set the Box Office on fire. As film aficionados would probably agree, the reasons are multifarious. Not only was it unconventionally slow for a science fiction movie, but it was also a scathing commentary on class differences in a world that was run by corporate entities working solely for fattening the bottom line Berlatsky (2017). However, what irked the audiences the most was its strangely cynical approach towards the unchecked march of technology. The young tech-savvy generation did not take it very kindly. It is important to remember the bigger social context though. The Cold War was still on, and the Socialist Block had significantly

weakened. The world at large was taking a capitalist turn and the corporate interests had managed to get an iron grip on public affairs. One of the biggest traits of capitalism is to create a public illusion of mass development. Therefore, the educated and eternally privileged middle class, which has traditionally been the biggest beneficiary of capitalism, unapologetically crushes anything that goes against the system. No wonder then that *Blade Runner* did not make a lot of money. However, with time, the movie was able to generate a lot of academic interest so much so that influential filmmakers like Christopher Nolan and Steven Spielberg were deeply influenced by its stunning imagery and a dystopian take on existentialism Sharf (2021). Cut to 2017. Technocracy has well and truly arrived. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a reality and Machine Learning (ML) threatens to take all jobs away from human beings. The advent of social media platforms like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp* has practically converted human beings to humanoids. The spectre of cloning and the ethical discourse around it have made the concept of replicants and perennial slavery more real. Thus, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the much-discussed sequel to *Blade Runner* could not have been released at a more opportune time.

Just as anybody can figure out, the movie is unconventional by its very premise. Depicting a futuristic dystopian setting, just like the original version, the sequel also poses some existential questions – questions that contemporary human civilization is constantly grappling with. How humane is humanity? How can humanity be defined and described? Is the human civilization dependent on exploiting the underprivileged section? Are large corporate organizations practicing quasi-slavery? Does human civilization value a woman only for her reproductive ability? Is the widely discussed concept of gender equality only a façade to hide the obvious pitfalls of globalized and normalized patriarchy? These and more questions are likely to crop up when a viewer watches *Blade Runner 2049*. Does the movie answer some of these questions? Any film scholar would say that there is no definite answer to this question. Probably the film does or probably the film does not. However, what is more critical to understand here is the route that the movie takes to approach the above questions.

This is precisely where the concept of avant-garde storytelling comes in. Before getting any deeper into the subject, it is a prerequisite to understand as to what avant-garde storytelling is all about. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines avant-garde as follows: *Avant-garde ideas, styles, and methods are very original or modern in comparison to the period in which they happen*. *Oxford Dictionary*, on the other hand, defines the concept thus: *preferring or introducing new and very modern ideas and methods*. In essence, avant-garde storytelling could be described as a novel and experimental way of telling stories. In other words, to classify a piece of art (in this case, the researchers are talking about a movie), it must dabble with original and new elements. The researchers in this case make a dedicated attempt to uncover those elements to establish the avant-garde character of *Blade Runner 2049*.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1) Conducting a narrative and thematic analysis of *Blade Runner 2049* using both the Auteur Theory and the Feminist Film Theory.
2) Pinpoint the exact elements that characterize *Blade Runner 2049* as an instance of avant-garde storytelling.

3. METHODOLOGY

The researcher does a narrative and thematic analysis of the movie and uses the Auteur and the Feminist Film Theories in doing so. The eventual analysis is used in pinpointing the distinct elements that make *Blade Runner 2049* avant-garde. It is essential that one understands both the Auteur Theory and the Feminist Film theories as the theoretical frameworks of the current study.

3.1. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS
3.1.1. THE AUTEUR THEORY

The Auteur Theory emphasises on the solo importance of filmmaker in the making of a movie. It tags the filmmaker as the author of a movie. The theory stresses on the fact that any movie has the distinct traits of the filmmaker. While the theory has been very controversial subject to its emphasis on an individual rather than on the team, the theory has been successful in analysing movies from both the narrative and thematic points of view. One of the specific reasons as to why the Auteur Theory helps in understanding the underlying dynamics of a movie is its capacity to unearth cinematic intentions. The theory helps in deciphering the perspective of the filmmaker herself/ himself. The fact that a viewer engages with a movie through the lens of the filmmakers helps one in comprehending the reasons for the presence of the chosen narrative and the thematic elements in the movie. The visual style that a filmmaker repeatedly uses in his movies devises a certain pattern – a pattern strong enough to connect a movie with the larger social superstructure. Tarantino and aesthetic violence, Hitchcock and mean women, Ray, and social decay – each director has a prominent visual motif that she/ he follows for most of her/ his creations.

3.1.2. THE FEMINIST FILM THEORY

The Feminist Film Theory, on the other hand, looks at cinema essentially from a feminist perspective and scans through the placement of female characters in a movie. The theory took a distinct shape through *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, a seminal paper penned by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey Mulvey (1975). The theory bases itself on the concept of Male Gaze Sampson (2015). To put it in simple terms, Male Gaze is the process of portraying women from an essentially heterosexual male perspective. Male Gaze can be understood in terms of three different perspectives: (i) that of the person who is holding the camera; (ii) that of the heterosexual male characters inside the diegesis of the movie; and (iii) that of the heterosexual audiences. Male Gaze reduces woman to a commodity and diminishes her importance. Therefore, a majority of the movies portray women to have only incidental roles. The presence of a woman in a movie is only for the purpose of eliciting pleasure. The voyeuristic male indulges in satisfying his heterosexual lust through the projection of seemingly pleasurable women bodies. Thus, women characters are reduced to their bodily presences.

4. UNDERSTANDING THE VISUAL STORYTELLING USED IN THE MOVIE

Before we analyse Blade Runner using the cited film theories, it is rather important to take a closer look at how the filmmaker masterfully uses the audio-visual medium to tell a potent story that is pregnant with future possibilities.

Clearly, the movie projects a dystopian setting where there has been a degradation of humanity. Therefore, often a hazy background is used to show the near destruction of nature in a dehumanized and technology-driven world. It makes the viewers hopeless and morose. Dialogues are short and crisp – often lacking humour and happiness. It showcases a world that is unhappy by its very nature. Breathing masks are used to indicate a polluted and unlivable world that is on the verge of becoming uninhabitable. The filmmaker clearly tries to use realism in the visual design so that the science fiction elements do not make the movie too predictable. The cityscape that punctuates the movie is hostile and brutal. Clearly, the filmmaker was inspired by many doomsday predictions concerning future cities. The cinematography is clearly inspired by cyberpunk literature and almost borders on being menacing. However, the intent becomes clear once the complete movie is dissected using two of the most important film theories in the history of audio-visual understanding.

5. ANALYZING *BLADE RUNNER 2049* USING THE AUTEUR THEORY

The biggest decision that the filmmaker makes in the movie is the construction of the character 'K', played masterfully by Ryan Gosling. While 'K' is a Nexus-9 replicant, he displays all the traits of a normal emotional human being. While he diligently does his job of being a Blade Runner with the *Los Angeles Police Department* (LAPD), he is deeply attached to his holographic AI girlfriend Joi, played by Ana de Armas. However, 'K' cannot function in consonance with his free will as he is a replicant. This is metaphorically representative of corporate exploitation of employees. From another perspective, it could also be deduced that 'K' belongs to the economically underprivileged section and hence is a virtual slave at the hands of the economically privileged section i.e., human beings. Although, economic and social disparity has been the subject of multiple movies, the fact that an advanced replicant, which is indicative of the unhindered growth of science and technology, could also be a metaphor for economic and class discrimination, could be considered novel and experimental.

Wallace Corporation, the company that manufactures replicants, is a multinational behemoth and its CEO Niander Wallace, played by Jared Leto, is ruthless about his economic ambitions. *Wallace Corporation* could be a metaphor for any of the global technological giants functioning today. In fact, through the characterization of Wallace, the filmmaker makes a distinct statement against the corporate control of essential global resources. The criminal extent to which Wallace goes to protect his interests could be a grim reminder of what might happen if human civilization lets capitalist ventures dominate the global proceedings. The drama that accompanies the character of Wallace is indeed something that could be considered experimental.

The entire movie is a question mark on what humanity is. The movie's premise is such that the replicants seem more humane than human beings themselves. Therefore, the movie also presents an existential crisis. In a way, it is also representative of the privileged class losing its fundamental human touch. In fact, it could be argued that the filmmaker still believes that the underprivileged section of the society, despite repeated discriminations, has been able to retain the human traits more than the privileged class. This element is indeed experimental by its very nature.

The movie also presents another paradox – the paradox of memory and its relationship with identity. Often, a human being is defined by her/ his memories and her/ his past experiences. This is where the movie pitches in. What happens if one loses her/ his memories? Does she/ he lose herself/ himself? Does one's persona change to something else? Although, the filmmaker skips directly answering these questions, he does give some hints. The fact that the identity of 'K' changes when he understands that his memories are implanted memories gives a fair indication of what the filmmaker essentially intends to convey – subtly or otherwise. The novel usage of the concept of memory is one of the most crucial elements in the movie Azarian (2015).

The replicants' freedom movement is essentially indicative of the movement for labour rights. In a world controlled by corporate monopolies, the issue of labour rights has become a complicated one. In the given backdrop, the filmmaker focuses on two related issues – the fact that labour movements are important and the fact these labour movements are too weak in the face of opposition from the corporate behemoths. The filmmaker in fact revels in the creation of such dichotomous ambiguities. This ambiguity is also a novel element that has been employed to drive the movie's point home Newton (2015).

The unstoppable surge of technology thereby leading to a technocracy is another fundamental point in the movie. The very fact that technology dominates humanity in every respect in the movie's diegesis is a part of the crafted dystopia. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has been constantly paranoid about the possibility of technology dominating humanity. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML) and Internet of Things (IoT), the fear seems even more real. Through *Blade Runner 2049*, the filmmaker decidedly shows as to what might happen if that paranoia comes true. In fact, the mechanization of human sentiments is a recurring motif in the movie thereby unmistakably establishing the intention of the filmmaker.

6. ANALYZING *BLADE RUNNER 2049* USING THE FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Blade Runner 2049 is both a nightmare and a pleasant break when analysed using the Feminist Film Theory. It is important to put the nightmarish elements first to get a grip over what the movie tries to project.

Throughout the movie, women are given importance primarily subject to their reproductive ability. The developed countries are facing the existential crisis of a low birthrate. The movie projects this concern through dystopia. In quite simple words, no matter how women fare in other occupations, their primary purpose is to give birth to children. It would not be an exaggeration to note that the entire movie carries forward this paranoia of the world having to survive a catastrophic decline in population subject to a decreasing birthrate and this paranoia creates a disturbing novelty.

The next thing in line is the general projection of women in the movie. Either they are shown as digital homemakers or as killers or as incidental characters devoid of a moral compass. While there can be arguments that the intentional degradation of womanhood is a part of the projected dystopia, it is also a reality that the movie somehow vindicates and validates that degradation. The degradation is so stark and so on the face that it becomes another disturbing novelty.

The glamourization of the woman replicants is indicative of the fact that the movie is being projected for heterosexual man thereby somehow reasserting the

intrinsic heteronormative belief system of most of the societies. The perverse glamour that one sees through the movie is another experimentation with novelty.

While the nightmarish feminist elements are stark and obvious, it is important to look at the positive feminist representations as well. The fact that it is a girl that carries the replicant legacy is representative of the filmmaker's empathy towards women. This creation of a replicant child is where the sequel diverges from the original version and the same is extremely novel in nature.

The basic premise of the movie has a deep empathy for women. The relationship of 'K' with Joi is indicative of that. It seems like a contradiction of sorts. The filmmaker successfully juxtaposes both apathy and empathy for women in the same movie thereby establishing the novel and experimental nature of the movie.

7. ELEMENTS THAT CHARACTERIZE *BLADE RUNNER 2049* AS AN AVANT-GARDE MOVIE

1) The character 'K', a replicant, is metaphorically representative of corporate exploitation of employees.
2) Wallace Corporation could be a metaphor for any of the global technological giants functioning today.
3) Through the characterization of Wallace, the filmmaker makes a distinct statement against the corporate control of essential global resources.
4) It could be argued that the filmmaker still believes that the underprivileged section of the society, despite repeated discriminations, has been able to retain the human traits more than the privileged class.
5) The movie also presents another paradox – the paradox of memory and its relationship with identity.
6) The filmmaker focuses on two related issues – the fact that labour movements are important and the fact these labour movements are too weak in the face of opposition from the corporate behemoths.
7) The very fact that technology dominates humanity in every respect in the movie's diegesis is a part of the crafted dystopia.
8) The entire movie carries forward the paranoia of the world having to survive a catastrophic decline in population subject to a decreasing birthrate.
9) The movie intentionally degrades womanhood, and the degradation is a part of the overall dystopia.
10) The glamourization of the woman replicants is indicative of the fact that the movie is being projected for heterosexual man thereby somehow reasserting the intrinsic heteronormative belief system of most of the societies.
11) The fact that it is a girl that carries the replicant legacy is representative of the filmmaker's empathy towards women.
12) The basic premise of the movie has a deep empathy for women.

8. CONCLUSION

Blade Runner 2049 asks multiple questions. However, it does not answer those. In a way, the movie is reflective of the decay that marks contemporary human civilization. Through a futuristic dystopian setting, the filmmaker probably wants to

give a few warnings to fellow human beings. That aside, the film is deeply contemplative in nature. Existentialism and nihilism mark the various layers of the movie. Although the basic premise of the movie has been dealt with by many other movies, the storytelling mode and the usage of elements are truly avant-garde. That is exactly where *Blade Runner 2049* will stand the test of time just like its predecessor did.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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