The Critical Analysis Of Blade Runner According To The Social Theories

Directed by Denis Villeneuve Blade Runner 2049 (2017) is a fantastic sci-fi movie displaying a dystopian alternative world scenario in which the current society of the world has fallen apart and shaped by a new hierarchical social order. In this alternative world, the lowest part of the social hierarchy is made up of the living things called “replicants” who are bio-engineered humans with enhanced strength produced for serving humans. The humans are placed above these population in the hierarchy naturally. In other words, replicants are basically bio-human slaves.

In Blade Runner 2049 is referred that before the movie’s timeframe starts the first replicants codenamed as “Nexus 8” had rebelled against humans around 2020s and became prohibited. In those years, they were hunted down mostly by “blade runner”s. Afterwards people started to produce replicants again with a new serial number -Nexus 9-. However, it turned out that some of the older model replicants survived and in order to demolish them the blade runners continued to work as hunters. Going forward to the timeframe of the movie, 2049, it is seen that the new model replicants have been integrated into society even though they still face discrimination from the human population.

In this respect, the movie takes place in a dystopic Los Angeles where you may see this impact in the social lives of the citizens. Centers upon a character named Officer K who is a Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), a blade runner and a Nexus 9 model replicant himself, the movie starts with a scene where the audience can see the blade runner kill an outdated Nexus 8 replicant. Discovering that this replicant has a buried body of a Nexus 8 model replicant in his yard, he takes off after the truth. Later, he finds out that the replicant was a woman and died in the childbirth which is impossible for a replicant. Deeply associating this incident with himself, he starts to think that he is “the replicant baby”, the impossible one.

In the movie, one may see the social theoretical issues related to social order, modernity and ambivalence, mobility and speed, differentiation, identity, fantasy and desire. In this paper I’ll touch upon these related theories and associate them with the movie.

Starting with the social order, as I mentioned before one may see that there is hierarchy in the social order of Blade Runner 2049 universe. Comprising the bottom half of the hierarchy triangle replicants are seen as they belong to the service industry. They are kind of slaves or the working class in this universe while the humans are the masters or the wealthy class. In this universe, the replicants are forbid to revolt or rebel or reproduce. In this respect, this population conveys similar aspects to subjects of the biopolitics.

Agamben (1998) states that biopolitics -referring to the possibility of a new ontology that derives from the body and the forces- not only stands in opposition to biopower but also precedes it ontologically; biopower is responsive to a lively and creative force that is exterior to it, which it seeks to regulate and shape, without being able to merge with it. He notes that binary codes, disciplinary techniques and hierarchical structures play central roles, as their substance and objects have proven themselves to be more flexible and mobile.

In this respect, accordingly with the biopolitics, the replicants could be described as the exterior force in the universe which the authority could regulate and shape without having to merge with it. The authority is humans here. As mentioned before, when the replicants tried to rebel the consequence of their behavior had been the hunting of the whole Nexus 8 series of the bio-engineered humans. They are unconditionally controlled by the humans and they have no right to say in the series. The authorities may change their positions, locations, keep them silent via violence and keep them away from regenerating if they want just as the biopolitical objects.

One other social theoretical issue related to Blade Runner 2049's social order is modernity and ambivalence. Bauman (1991) indicates that the world is surrounded with friends and enemies; and there are strangers also; excluded this circle. Strangers are described as a person who arrives unexpectedly and stays without a notice. However, it's not like a guest, he stays forever; and it's not like the other people from the familiar population, he's different. Bauman describes the stranger as out of place:

"In the native world-view, the essence of the stranger is homelessness. Unlike an alien or a foreigner, the stranger is not simply is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. He is an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever 'arriving'" (Bauman, 1991).

Bauman notes that due to strangers' ambivalent positions, they become unwanted peculiarities who are constantly kept at bay since they are considered to be viruses within and parasites upon a host body. Accordingly he states that a stranger may bring the outside to the inside and demolish the bases of the societies. On the other hand, he indicates that modernity tries to make the borders grey between friend and enemy; kill the border between the strangers and the friends and enemies by establishing heterogeneous entities. He also adds that modernity tries to be ambivalent; demolishing the order which extinguishes the ambivalence:

"The stranger comes into the life-world and settles here, and so – unlike the case of mere 'unfamiliar' – it becomes relevant whether he is a friend or a foe. He made his way into the life-world uninvited, thereby casting me on the receiving side of his initiative, making me into the object of an action which he is the subject: all this, as we remember, is a notorious mark of the enemy. Yet, unlike other, 'straightforward' enemies, he is not kept at a secure distance, nor on the other side of the battle line. Worse still, he claims a right to be an object of responsibility – the well-known attribute of a friend. If we press upon him the friend/enemy opposition; he would come out simultaneously under- and over-determined" (Bauman, 1991).

In this respect, it could be said that in the movie the population which could be described as "strangers" or as the "ambivalence" could be depicted as the replicants. They are neither human nor mechanical gadgets. They have so many similarities between them and the humans in order to be considered as ones but also have so many differences from the humans which make them cannot be considered as humans. They are also not simply newcomers, people temporarily out of place arriving to the humans' lives. They come out of nowhere as eternal wanderers, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever 'arriving' to somewhere. This makes them become ambivalent, or in other words, abject. Accordingly with the modernism, demolishing the wall between strangers and the friend and enemies, in the movie, the replicants also are seen as both friends to the humans – Wallace's assistant- and the enemies – the rebels. Or, as both of these: Officer K.

The other social theoretical issue related with the social construction of the Blade Runner 2049 is the mobility and speed. In the movie, one of most important elements for the population is the need of speed and fast transportation; both for the messages which should be carried as soon as possible and for the physically transportation of the humans. It is seen that the transportation is carried out via flying cars meanwhile the communication is constructed on the services of holograms and mobile phones. All demonstrates the community of the Blade Runner 2049 has the basics of the fast life styles which the modernity points out.

Bauman (2000) states that mobility differentiates the human population rather than unifying it. However, mobility is a matter of choice for some, for others it is a fate. Virilio (1997) states that the speed is an element which becomes crucial the increasing mobility:

“Wealth is the hidden side of speed and speed the hidden side of wealth... People say: ‘You are too rich, but no one ever says: ‘You are too fast’. But they are related. There is a violence in wealth that has been understood; not so with speed” (Virilio, 1997).

These statement of Virilio could be encrypted as the speed is the power now. Virilio (1997) states that theories of light and speed now replace the previous more dominant theories of time and space; and it’s because of a new life standards which starts to overrule the older. With the increasing speed, the space starts to become irrelevant. Virilio indicates that the fastening telecommunication shorten all the duration and extension of time in the transmission of messages and images while the new mass transportation and interactive computer technologies changed the way the people travel and make it faster for urban or lived space and moreover; it made all danger and dissolutions of previous configurations of experience as space became virtual and took on new modalities. Considering these one could think that humans invented the technology, took the control of it and made it their slave, their instrument. However, according to Virilio it’s not like that. It’s just the opposite. In addition to that, one could say that technologies of mobility and the speed made reflecting so hard. And when there were no time to reflect, it also made it so hard to practice democracy. Virilio describes the change he sees with this statement:

“Previous configurations of space and time are replaced by time-light (i.e. the time of the speed of light) and a new 'lumiocentrism', in which the instantaneous flow of information ruptures previous configurations of time and space, requiring new concepts to describe the parameters and processes of the new worlds of technology and technological experience” (Virilio, 1997).

On a similar direction, Urry (2000) refers that the human society is moving from the conception of the “social as society” which is static and centered and was never much more than a kind of “banal nationalism” according to the author, to a conception he calls “social as mobility” which depends on movement. He indicates that moving away from such a static and centered conception as “social as society”, the new conception embraces being mobile and on the movement both for the human and the inhuman hybrids such as information, monies, technologies, goods and “bads”. He states that the most important components of these mobile conception are networks, flows and scapes. He suggests that the networks generate sophisticated and enduring connections between people and inhumane across space and through time. Flows relates to the movement of people, information, money, goods, “bads” across the social landscape. Being complex but not random, these flows travel within and beyond individual 'societies'. According to the author, the organizer of these flows are the scapes. With scapes, the networks of machines, technologies, organizations, texts and actors

constitute various interconnected nodes making the flows can be relayed. Urry (2000) indicates that mobility is a necessary with all of these elements to get people to public spaces and hold social networks together.

In the movie, similarly, one could see a population where the speed and the mobility is an important part of the life; along with one of the most important effect of the mobility which is non-uniting the society. This may be seen when one look into the social structure; replicants and humans live on the same world but they do not live together. They is a boundary is presented between the two population. Moreover, the replicants may be described as the products of the speedy life and it can be said that they are forced to be fast and mobile. Humans, on the other hand, are also affected by the mobility but not as much as replicants. The companies having the most developed and the speediest technologies are the most powerful one in the movie. The movie also demonstrates that with the increasing speed, the space starts to become irrelevant: the citizens may travel from somewhere far way to another point relatively fast and it doesn't matter where they are. In addition to these, the movie also shows that the technology is not necessarily the slave or the servant of the humans. The replicants are the products of technology but they rebel or do not function if they are not happy with their conditions in some cases. But the humans need technology to travel, to do their work if they want to be fast; this could be clearly seen in the movie.

Differentiation is another social theoretical issue one may see in Blade Runner 2049. In this respect, the conceptions of Bourdieu and Luhmann should be mentioned. Bourdieu (1992) refers that the society is not a pure, homogeneous entity. It doesn't have a unified nature. It is differentiated and modern life doesn't have any escape from these. According to the author, everybody in the society chooses to define the fields where they will act differently. And it leads the different capitals- power areas- to appear. The author describe these capitals with these sentences:

"The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe, or, in other words, by discovering the powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure of this space is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital, that is, by the distribution of the properties which are active within the universe under study — those properties capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holder. …these fundamental social powers are, according to my empirical investigations, firstly economic capital, in its various kinds; secondly cultural capital or better, informational capital, again in its different kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, social capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and symbolic capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1987).

When it comes to Luhmann, he sees social system as an operationally closed environment; however, he indicates that that doesn't mean that the systems cannot make contact with the other systems. Luhmann (1995) also states that the social system divides itself into different pieces with the environmental pressure; and, this brings further transformations. Then, each differentiated subsystem is confronted by new environments and each new environment began to consist of newer subsystems.

In the movie, it can be seen that the society consists of at least two differentiated sub-societies. It is referred that the replicant population is not a naturally emerged but a produced population. This leads them to participate the society later than the humans and change the structure of the society. In this respect, it could be said that this addition led the humans and the society to differentiate and place themselves into different fields. Even the replicants are affected from this and placed into different fields. Some are polices as K or assistants to the authorities as Luv.

The last social theoretical issues I observed in Blade Runner 2049 are related to the movie's main character K. They are the identity, desire and fantasy triology. According to Lacan (2006) the infants pass through a stage called "Mirror Stage" in which recognizing the external image of their bodies led them produce a psychic response which make them pick out a mental representation of an 'I'. That may happen either via a reflection in a mirror, or delivered to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver. He states that it makes the child "identify" with the image which led infant emerge perceptions of selfhood. Žižek (1989) states that in order to have an identity one should reunite with his mother; go back to the womb of the mother but it's impossible. Because of this one cannot have an identity; instead, they can only "identify", he states.

According to Lacan (2006), desire is the main essence of the men. One desires about what he lacks. And the desire is universal. The desire of the person is always the desire of one another. He states that there are two types of desires; one is a desire for recognition from 'others'; the other is desire for the thing that the others supposed to desire, in other words, the things the others lack. Moreover, desire is a thing one can never reach; as soon as one gets near it, it moves. One common desire of the man is to have an identity, he refers. He states these in these sentences:

"To return psychoanalysis to a veridical path, it is worth recalling that analysis managed to go so far in the revelation of man's desires only by following, in the veins of neurosis and the marginal subjectivity of the individual, the structure proper to a desire that thus proves to model it at an unexpected depth – namely, the desire to have his desire recognized. This desire, in which it is literally verified that man's desire is alienated in the other's desire, in effect structures the drives discovered in analysis, in accordance with all the vicissitudes of the logical substitutions in their source, aim, and object" (Lacan, 2006).

When it comes to fantasy, it could be described as a channeling method of the desire. Lacan (2006) refers that fantasy is a scenario which stages desire. In these mental scenarios, one may dream about having the things they lack. According to him, the fantasies stages certain relations and interactions between the desirer and the object of desire; and they have complex structured scenarios, unlike the simple hallucination of an object. Žižek (1989) refers that fantasies teach the people to coordinate or control what they desire and gives them the illusion to have they lack.

Considering these, it could be said that the movie demonstrates K's chasing after his desire: an identity. From the beginning it is shown that he identifies himself with the "blader runner" role in the society. Later, after he learns that there is a replicant born child around there, he identifies himself with this role. He desires to be this child. In the movie it's stated that it is also every replicants desire. K also constructs fantasies about being the only replicant born child. He desires to be special, he desires to be loved. He fantasies about that; being unique, special and loved; having an identity. He desires to be recognized, just like the other people. And he moves

in his life according to this desires. He tries to reach his desire and fantasies about reaching it. And this gives him the temporary satisfaction of not lacking the most essential sense of the human beings which they can never reach: identity.