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Prosthetic Gods and Cyberpunk: A Comparative Study of *Blade Runner 2049* and *Alita*

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Abstract

*Cyberpunk fiction is continuation of scientific advancements and technological marvels in science fiction narratives. It talks about man in a post human, dystopian era where man is slowly being replaced by Cyborgs and artificial intelligence. Man's connection with God has always been much debatable in literary fiction. It can either be accepting his deity or it is a revolt against him. In the futuristic setting, when humanity is at stake, man's connection with God has also changed. Man is at odds with his creator, god as he wants to acquire that supreme position in order to relinquish his desire of control and becoming a powerful demigod. God's deity thus can be seen challenged by a post human man who is armed with technology and unlimited possibilities than before. This concept of replacing God with that of prosthetic Gods has been analyzed in the data taken from two cyberpunk movies. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019). In the light of Sigmund Freud's essay *Civilizations and its Discontents* (1931), the motives behind man's becoming a prosthetic God and his psychological fears that lead him towards destruction have been studied in these two selected movies. This article aims at highlighting God as an absent figure in the cyberpunk fiction and the adverse effects of man's uncontrollable ambition or desire for gaining control and power over his fellow human beings. Moreover, it also highlights the manipulation of ultramodern or space-age technology in the hands of humans.*

Keywords: Cyberpunk fiction, Prosthetic Gods, Psychoanalysis, Dystopia, Freud



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Introduction

Science and scientific advancements have taken over every aspect of human life. As much as it has made lifestyle of the masses easier, it also has a negative downside attached to it. Fiction and reality share a close proximity. The certainties of science and human relationship affect the fiction as well. The complexities of the relationship between science fiction and human realities are manifesting (Mendua & Cheer 1). In recent times, sci-fi genre is much more evolved and is now moving beyond apocalypse or post apocalypse era. It has now entered in the era, where men are replaced with artificially intelligent robots and machines already. The old organic/ manual work or activities have been reworked and improvised with digital controls and touch screens. This portrayal also results in the loss of moral and human values among the masses. They seem to drift away from real or natural feelings. With the creation of artificial intelligence, such developments have blurred the line between human and robots to an extent that they both are barely differentiable. Humans can be seen living a methodical life and controlled by machines. This portrayal in fiction is known as the Cyberpunk genre.

Cyberpunk is a subgenre of Science Fiction. It is both a culture and a technological setup. This genre started in early 80's from the movie Blade Runner (1982). The significant themes were cyborgs and robotic control over born humans. Similarly, movies like Akira (1988) is another example of a cyberpunk movie. This genre is set in a dystopian or a post-apocalyptic setting. Other than scientific marvels and robotic setup, cyberpunk also revolves around capitalism. In this setting, upper higher or elite social classes get to have all the benefits and they control the lower classes, these classes are used as labor force who are not given any voice of their own. They cannot rebel against the system neither can they uplift their social status unless the authorities find them useful (Tabbi 1).



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Cyborgs and its study continue to play critical role in 21st century. In science fiction cyborg remains an extremely valuable figure to dig out possibilities of different forms of human. This research study is an attempt to look at evolution of human beings into prosthetic gods. Human civilization as Freud described is a progressive appropriation and adaptation by humankind to achieve godlike characteristics-omnipotent-omniscient. There were some attributes that were only associated with gods, those attributes were unachievable for human and therefore god was considered an ideal figure. Freud further accentuates that with the help of technological advancement he has achieved those unattainable qualities of god and he has come closer to being a god like figure to which he called “a prosthetic god” (Freud 39).

Literature review and Discussion

This research examines two science fictional movies *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Alita, The battle Angel* (2019) about Cyborgs to understand Freud’s concept of prosthetic gods given in book *Civilization and Discontent* (1961) with a focus on perspective of transition from modern to postmodern and beyond. This research seeks to find out the reasons behind loss of morality and humanity and the abuse of power as depicted in the selected data. We further study the downside of a Sci-fi or a futuristic Cyberpunk age in its portrayal of religious and cultural values.

The selected text contains multiple themes such as artificial intelligence environment, space expeditions and biogenetics. This study will explore the data from the thematic angle of Human prosthetic God instead of a real God. This research explores the concept of hegemonic control in a post humanist setting and explores its implication and effects over the future of humanity in an AI controlled world from a psychoanalytic point of view. It reveals the raptured human values in the coming future. It views God as an absent figure in the cyberpunk fiction. Moreover it studies the development of humanity and religious moral values in the futuristic setting. It also analyzes



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the sci-fi culture in fiction. Lastly, it aims at helping aspiring researchers to study sci-fi from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Cyborgs are a frequent figure appearing in science fiction novels and films. The concept of Cyborgs is very old but still investigated by researchers of the new millennium as it is continuously developing and playing crucial role in almost every field of life. Donna, Haraway is often credited for bringing Cyborgs into academia by connecting it with feminism. It was her essay after which Cyborg studies gained momentum among scholars of various fields. In her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” she defines Cyborgs as a cybernetic organism, which is a machine as well as an organism, a creature of both social reality and fiction (Haraway 5). Haraway considers this hybridization of machine and organism as a response to Eco, Marxist, Socialist, and radical feminist efforts to build on dualism theory of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism while approaching issues of science and technology (154). While looking at the consequences of this hybridization, Ollivier Dyens (2001) in his book *Metal and Flesh* argues that how we are shifting from our defined cultural realms and how the hybridization of machine and organism is taking us away from humanity. He gave the example of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis* which exemplifies the disruptive abnormal growth of a human where he stopped being worried about human problems, the more he is transformed into another specie, the further he gets away from humanity, being inhuman is his freedom (Dyens 61). Same is the case with other cyberpunk characters like in *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek* and many other such examples are present in cyberpunk genre.

Another important study on Cyborgs is done by Marshall McLuhan, his communication theory and Cyborgs as an extension of man is still famous till date. According to him “any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body” (McLuhan Understanding Media 45). Such extensions enables humans to “increase power and



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speed” (90) for example, wheel as an extension of a foot, allows the speed-up of movement. (43)
“The book is an extension of the eye” (35-7), “Clothing an extension of the skin” (38-9)

Such researches about cyborgs and their continuous developing relationship with human encourage further investigation in this area. This research work is a qualitative study, carrying an interpretive paradigm. The theoretical framework revolves around the idea of a man turning into a prosthetic God as described in Freud’s essay *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

According to Freud, man, in order to satisfy his ‘Pleasure Principle’ or ‘Ego’ is reforming his own organs through the deliberate use of science and art. In order to keep his control over his neighboring men, he is using intellectual abilities to take on God’s duties. He is removing the rift of Ego and Super Ego. He has lost control of his limits and is turning his wildest desires or wishes into reality. His behavior indicates that he rejects religion, metaphysical elements and humanitarian philosophy as a morally bounding force. These morals are limiting him against achieving his aim of controlling the other men in a God like fashion. The state of lawlessness is also prevalent in the life of such civilization. His mental state dominates the way of his life and the civilization at this point becomes neurotic.

Freud further asserts that, in order to serve humanity on the grounds of equality, one has to accept the philosophical or religious concept of virtues. He has to accept his physical and psychological limitations. Whereas an ambitious man or a group of neurotic intellectuals reject this idea and steer away from religion, calling it philosophy. Resultantly, their this behavior is of no good to humanity on a broader level as it only controls and does not reform humanity for the greater good of human civilization. A human in order to end his suffering or erase his limitations of not being capable enough in a human frame, he relinquishes his fragile self and try to become God through his mad ambition and intellectual abilities.



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He now moves beyond the concept of “time” and “space” and considers it as the greatest achievement of his civilization. However, due to his neurotic behavior he drifts from the basic principle of humanity and does not serve the good causes. He makes “happiness” his ultimate goal and achieves it by going against the natural balance or order. In order to escape the vulnerability of human limitations, he takes the different yet disruptive path and thinks for his happiness subjectively. He rejects fate and any such belief that restricts him from completing his goal.

Cyber culture is a setting where machines takeover human life in an imaginative or futuristic setting. It discusses the role of robots or Artificially Intelligent human replacements at its best. It also stems from sciences in the form of biotechnology. It is represented in media as an ideology and a possibly imaginative future of mankind. Technology is not merely an improvised version of past it also carries a cause with it. If it vows for change, it has the power to manipulate things in their natural order as well. Power is established through the medium of change (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelley, 2009).

In Sci-Fi or cyberpunk movies, human condition can be seen in a Posthumanist setting. In a Transhumanist scenario, where humanity can be seen at the brink of collapse. Natural elements are replaced with artificial replicas but while doing so, the evil characteristics of power and control keeps on increasing. A human rule over umpteenth robots or Cyborgs. However in Gillet’s (2006) opinion the Cyborg body is comparatively more at the verge of psychological decline as compared to a human. As a Cyborg interface is like getting two bodies at a time. Samuelson (2018) asserts that in sci-fi narratives, except from technological wonders one cannot overlook the chaos and social injustices that kind of future may bring. Humanity is collapsed in a futuristic, dystopian setting According to Daly (2019), in a futuristic setting, mankind may rise above their weaknesses but the hegemony between race and class still dominates the narrative. The domination between “us” and “them” is prevalent and fascism is the dominating ideology.



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1. Loss of Ego and Super Ego:

Ego is a person's reality whereas super ego is the moralizing force that decides between the reality and the actions of a person according to his social environment. Similarly, in these movies, after the blackout or fall events, the sense of morality or good or bad dissuades. Although one can see the ongoing debate of finding humanity among chaos but man's demons has lead him astray. Law enforcing authorities such as police and cops are present in the frame of establishment but they are also disguised as secret police that kill every act of rebellion against the government. The characters have risen above their human weaknesses and they are drifting apart from following a natural order.

In *Alita: Battle Angel*, this concept can be seen in the form of Cyborg culture. In the Iron city, in order to escape death and injuries, humans are transformed into Cyborgs. The concept of natural death sounds alien to them. They run to different doctors and industries for their organ replacement with that of a machine's. They do not want to feel human vulnerabilities anymore. As the human body limits them and in the form of artificial body organs they receive eternity and even if they die, their brain remains protected. The Cyborg brokers use them for fighting purposes and sell them after increasing their powers. At an instance Dr. Ido refuses to help Vector, (the Cyborg broker), he says "I won't help you build monsters" (*Alita: Battle Angel*). The character of Alita showcases the idea of Prosthetic God as her powers or fighting skills are far more advanced than the residents of the Iron city and after finding her nanotech suit, her powers get limitless.

The character of Nova, who builds Alita's nanotech suit, is an eccentric scientist who wants to test his different theories on the masses and controls them through various tactics. "Nova demands body parts for his experiments. Especially the brain of the people he admires. And that is the only way anyone ever gets to Zalem" (*Alita: Battle Angel*). His ally, Vector transports him



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human organs and Cyborgs under the guise of motor ball championship. The dream of getting into the city of Zalem is used as a buildup lie to exert power over them and through this, Nova wants to control the world by becoming exceedingly powerful. At the outro of the movie, when Alita, points her sword towards Zalem it shows her ambition and desire to take over Nova and his schemes. This desire of control and hegemony is not used for moralistic purposes, rather it is used to emerge as a prosthetic God as God can be seen an absent figure in such fiction.

The powerful Cyborgs also known as “Hunter-Warriors” kill the wanted criminals to gain bounty points. There is a state of lawlessness and the capitalist market rules. This chaos and fear of being deprived from their powers, every person on individual level wants to be powerful. According to Freud, “the newly won power over time and space” (Freud, 1930, p.1) enables man to go beyond his human limitations. As going beyond human limitation, erases the sense of morality. Through various games such as “Motor ball games”, Cyborgs test their strength and the knocked out ones use drugs in order to not be defeated again “And I made a machine body for him of obscene strength” (Alita: Battle Angel). In this turmoil, secret police or hunter-warriors are licensed hunters or killers that register to kill or excavate any potential threat to the so called order established by the capitalist bodies towards the masses. “It's a harsh world. The strong prey on the weak down here” (Alia: Battle Angel).

The Ego and Super Ego fuses into one another, leaving behind no sense of right and justice. It drives man's neurotic desires and results in a ruptured humanity. The ambitious man starts challenging the natural order and due to the enhanced technological advancements he rebels against his moralistic consciousness and he has more control over his present and future.

2. Prosthetics and Civilization in *Blade Runner 2049*:

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the concept of manufacturing replicants under Tyrell corporations, supports the idea of Prosthetics as this authority is associated with God as creator of man. The



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character of Niander Wallace who also happens to be an industrialist is manufacturing artificially intelligent bioengineered humans to enhance the capabilities of a normal human and turn him into a powerful human. He also hunts and preserves humans from past civilization before and after the blackout event. He uses their body parts to make artificial, AI models that share exemplary resemblance to a normal human structure and are mentally far more capable than a human brain. The state department of LAPD kills these replicants or bioengineered humans to avoid any threat of rebellion against the authorities. In this situation, human authority is supreme here as it misuses robots and machines for killing purposes. They are also into a neurotic condition owing to the access towards time and space. Due to excessive experimentation and technological advancements as depicted in the movie, natural virtues of love, relationship and humanity is being replaced by chip enabled emanators, interfaces and large digitized screens. The AI agent Luv looks realistically human and works for Wallace. At an instant she tells agent K about emanators “You can customize them as much as you'd like. As human as you want them to be” (Blade Runner 2049).

Wallace's characterization sheds light on his human ambition and his desire of freeing himself from any human miseries. He is blind but he covers his deformity by seeing through an artificial eye into six dimensions at a time. He offers former Blade Runner, Deckard the AI model of his deceased wife Rachel in order to disclose information about the upcoming replicant rebellion. “Help me... and very, very good things can come to you. You don't have children. Do you? Oh, I have millions” (Blade Runner 2049). Here it can be seen that Wallace has acquired the Godly authority of making new yet far better human versions through robots and AI. His mad ambition is now making him find the undercover mysteries of a human and a replicant's offspring so that he can make far powerful technology in future to regain his control over masses. “First thought one tends to fear to preserve the clay. It's fascinating. Before we even know what we are, we fear to lose it. “Happy Birthday. Shh...We make angels. That is how I took us to nine new worlds”



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(Blade Runner 2049). These dialogues show that Wallace is mocking at the fragility of humans that God has sent in the world. Whenever a new model gets manufactured, he likes to hear the words “Can you at least pronounce a child is born?” (Blade Runner 2049).

The “libido” instinct is used by Wallace and other authorities to trap humans into making them feel vulnerable due to their neurotic sexual desires and want to have secrets of hidden civilizations. “Whole town was something... one time. Forget your troubles. See a show. Gamble a little. Win some money, lose some money. They made money seem like candy” (Blade Runner 2049).

In the 2049 version of Los Angeles, a community of humans lives in the scrap yards as cheap labor force because they belong from lower social classes. They still keep manual records and do not have access towards the computerized records. The replicants are endangered and humans are confused and furious at their own manufactured products. “If a baby can come from one of us, we are our own masters. More human than humans. A revolution is coming. And we're building an army. I want to free our people. If you want to be free, join us” (Blade Runner 2049).

In both the movies, through the characters of Wallace and Vector, the ambition of becoming a Prosthetic God can be viewed. Both of them are humans and manufacturing a mass population of Cyborgs, replicates and robots to suite their evil purposes. By employing the artificial intelligence and bioengineering technology in an unlawful way, they take over many worlds and strive every day to bargain these artificial versions of humans to carry out secret operations and kill the rest of the humanity. They want to rise above their human weaknesses and act in malicious ways. These characters can also be seen supporting and carrying out the capitalist agenda where they choose genius people and discard or “retire” those ones who rebel against their authority. The technology establishes itself in the mind of a person as a subjective voice. After it combines itself with a person’s personal fears and disassociates with its human body in



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an external space he may overcomes his worldly sufferings but he cannot escape from the anxiety caused in a technological realm. This results in the loss of his human identity and further fuels the “egotistical sublime” (Tabbi, 1960).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would say that Cyborgs are reality of our century. Their creation benefits us in many ways but the destruction they are capable of causing cannot be overlooked. Cyberpunk literature and movies are a new beginning to a different kind of research which seeks to explore the limits of human life and also transcending those limitations through the creation of Cyborgs. Cyberpunk characters offer us transcendence from our limited life and propose the idea of being limitless and powerful. On the other hand, going beyond human makes us less human and more machine and we lose our sense of humanity. The robots and Cyborgs analyzed from the two selected movies were the representation of a desire to become a God, which we called ‘prosthetic gods’. These prosthetic gods are beyond the concept of humanism and defy all the rules of religion and humanity. Such movies allow us to explore the possibilities and dangers attached to their creation. These characters represent the psyche of an overly ambitious in such a future where humanity is at loss and due to digital capitalism, authoritative humans are controlling their robotic creation in a God like fashion. They are no more bound to follow rules and there is no concept of religion in both these movies. They take the matter of creation and death in their own hands is replacing natural objects with artificial ones to prove their fatal power and access. Driven by their ever-increasing ambition, they are presenting God as an absent figure in their narratives. On the other hand, their fears push them to stay at the top of their game and subside every rebellion. As it is in human nature to resist and control, these demi gods are taking matters into their own hands to turn themselves into prosthetic Gods. These prosthetic gods appear to be



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a magnificent creation but in fact it is troubled as well. As Freud said that with all these advancements man does not feel happy in his godlike character (49).

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