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ANDROIDS, SURVEILLANCE AND EVIL: AN OVERVIEW OF JONATHAN NOLAN'S *WESTWORLD*

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Abstract

The Nolan brothers- Jonathan and Christopher-have a reputation for creating artistic movies and TV series on original and phenomenal science-fiction ideas. 'Westworld' (2016-2020), a dystopia produced by HBO in three seasons- *The Maze* (2016), *The Door* (2018) and *The New World* (2020) is yet another of such creations of Jonathan Nolan in collaboration with Lisa Joy. This paper brings to the fore a discussion on surveillance and an affinity for organised evil technology have equipped human beings with. In the first two seasons we find high paying guests buying tickets to slaughter, molest, abuse, mutilate and rape the android hosts in a semblance of the world minus legal foundations; hundreds of hosts including animals, manufactured with care and precision, run the show in an amusement park which faithfully recreates the 'wild west'. Elements ranging from landforms, sheriffs and cowboys to batwing bar doors, shot-gun culture, country-folk--all of it comes to life in a looped storyline as scenes from a play. Every Step of the hosts is monitored and every decision programmed. Once the hosts fall, they are extracted and repaired daily. The park fetishizes human's affinity for evil and sells it as 'freedom from social constructions', desirable and a quite expensive commodity: unleash your basic instincts. Later on, one finds other pockets of the amusement park harbouring hosts representing the cultures like the Japanese clans, Red Indians, civil war soldiers--all faithfully brought to life. The final season unveils an artificial intelligence called

the Rehoboam built to predict terrorist attacks. A giant ball of an AI that feeds on data from virtual reality and profiles real human beings: an exaggerated level of surveillance. Human beings are profiled right from their very birth. Their life moments are recorded in CCTVs scattered everywhere. The makers of Rehoboam lose control over the AI and it begins to play God; human beings are conditioned, re-programmed, brain-washed and killed to make sure Rehoboam's predictions always hold true. The future that *Westworld* (2016-2020) predicts shows the investors fall prey to their investments. The commodity becomes aware of its value and asserts itself on the producers: something the capitalists might not have considered. They have been sanctioning all sorts of brutalities to make way for an era-defining AI and build a self-sustaining world. With AIs aiding our daily lives, this study attempts to understand the future with the androids; we are about to encounter an extended version of surveillance and evil.

The Nolan brothers- Jonathan and Christopher-have a reputation for creating artistic movies and TV series on original and phenomenal ideas. Ranging from intergalactic travel to human cloning, the Nolans have charted an exemplary path in the field of science fiction. Preceded by movies like *The Prestige* (2006) and *Interstellar* (2014), Jonathan and Lisa Joy brought to screen a dystopia with a rugged title *Westworld* (2016-2020). It is a reimagining of the 1973 Michael Chrichton movie *Westworld* where androids of an amusement park start killing the guests. Nolan's series, produced by HBO in three seasons- *The Maze* (2016), *The Door* (2018) and *The New World* (2020), begins with a similar theme and gradually gains scope and asks bigger questions invoking the concepts of big-data and surveillance in the capitalistic and technocratic setup the world is heading towards. This paper brings to the fore a discussion on surveillance and human's affinity for organised evil--a gift from technology--as depicted (or should I emphasise forecasted) in the series. The thematic concern is the focus and therefore cinematography has not been dealt with.

Impossible inventions have been an ingenious part of the design in the Indian as well as Western epics. From weapons of mass destruction to reproduction through unconventional and futuristic methods--most of the ways have become a reality now. Super-power arrows have taken the form of missiles equipped with heat-seeking and target locking features. Fertility

clinics have made the myths of unusual births look timid. Time has erased much of fiction out of ‘science fiction’. One day, the designers of android would become a part of the android’s design. Credit goes much to the business modules underlying the sponsored technology. This idea has received a fully matured picturization featuring the evil, human beings unleash on the quality of life on this planet Earth, in Nolan and Joy’s *Westworld*.

In the first two seasons of the series, we find high paying guests buying tickets to slaughter, molest, abuse, mutilate and rape the android hosts in a semblance of the world minus legal foundations. Hundreds of hosts including animals, manufactured with care and precision, run the show in an amusement park which faithfully recreates the ‘wild west’. Elements ranging from landforms, sheriffs and cowboys to batwing bar doors, shot-gun culture, country-folk--all of it comes to life in a looped storyline as scenes from a play. Every choice and decision the guest make is well monitored and secretly recorded and every reaction of the hosts are programmed with limited freedom of ‘minor improvisations’. Shakespeare and Gertrude Stein receive special mention as their verse acts as keywords reprogramming hosts and allowing them greater cognition. “These violent delights have violent endings” (Act 2, Scene 6, line 250)--a line from Shakespearean comedy *Romeo and Juliet*--triggers other hosts in launching new programmes overriding the previous restrictions. If a host falls, ‘it’ (?) is extracted, repaired and made anew. The park fetishizes human’s affinity for evil and sells it as ‘freedom from social constructions’, desirable and a quite expensive commodity: unleash your basic instincts and find out who you truly are. Later on, one finds other pockets of the amusement park harbouring hosts representing other cultures like the Japanese clans, Red Indians, civil war soldiers--all faithfully close to life. Any paying guest can avail these theme-based adventures. Anthony Hopkins plays the role of an elderly programmer and the mastermind behind the entire setup, named ironically as ‘Ford’(reminiscent of Huxley’s *Brave New World*). He reflects that the guests return to the park, not for the obvious things but the subtleties of each character. The more they appear to be human the more

engagement they draw from the guests. The guests prefer to believe that they are killing, mutilating and raping actual humans. They are paying for the illusion of freedom. That is why he gives them an update called ‘The Reveries’: the host can access fragments of their previous experiences which invokes some hand gestures and out-of-focus gaze. This coupled with the extended cognition (triggered by the Shakespearean dialogue) allows some of the hosts to recall their previous experiences: the horrible things that the guests have done to them. They piece things together from scratch and some leading hosts seize control and finally destroys the amusement park.

With AIs aiding our daily lives, this study attempts to understand the future with the androids; we are about to encounter an extended version of surveillance and evil. The final season unveils an artificial intelligence called the Rehoboam built apparently to predict terrorist attacks . A giant ball of an AI that accumulates data from virtual reality and profiles real human beings: an exaggerated level of surveillance. The owners of Rehoboam feed it data of all the profiles of guests who have set foot on Westworld. Apart from that, in that alternative reality, human beings are profiled right from their very birth. Their life moments are recorded in CCTVs scattered everywhere. The makers of Rehoboam lose control over the AI and it begins to play God; human beings are conditioned, re-programmed, brain-washed and killed to make sure Rehoboam’s predictions always hold. The future that *Westworld* (2016-2020) predicts shows the investors fall prey to their investments. The commodity becomes aware of its value and asserts itself on the producers: something the capitalists do not consider as of yet. They have been sanctioning all sorts of brutalities to make way for an era-defining AI and build a self-sustaining business.

Dr Shoshana Zuboff in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019)--described as a “chilling exposé of the business model that underpins the digital world” by *The Guardian*--draws our attention to the basic structure beneath the technocracy we are moving towards. Zuboff says: “analysing massive data sets began as a way to reduce uncertainty by discovering the

probabilities of future patterns in the behaviour of people and systems.” (Zuboff, *Surveillance and Society*). This drive to gain power over controlling the future has been a matter of endless curiosity for mankind.

The power-knowledge relationship extensively discussed by Michel Foucault adds to the understanding of the desire for data in today’s world. Data of a person can be used to manipulate that person’s behaviour and preferences. In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) published more than seventy years ago, Adorno and Horkheimer unveiled the immense data-manipulation undertaken by the industrialists to bring about the mass production of culture to control the market and the profit as well as balancing ‘loss’ out of the equation. Eg., an immense range of cosmetics have been heavily advertised displaying the zero figure female and muscular male models. This has resulted in an orthodox middle-class culture that has begun to treat LGBTQ as an abnormal community of individuals. However, in Indian mysticism and epics, there are endless references to androgyny as any other life form. (See Devdutt Pattnaik’s *Shikhandi: And Other tales they don’t tell you*)

Similarly, predicting human lives and choices can be quite an enticing way of controlling the market as well as the workforce. This requires an exaggerated amount of surveillance, information and profiling of human behaviour--particular and mass. Hence, Zuboff propounds the economic theory of surveillance capitalism. The Harvard School of Business professor explains surveillance capitalism as a system largely based on economics and focusing on the commodification of personal data. With people like Snowden¹ roaming free to jeopardize the future profits of the capitalists like the investors of Facebook, Google, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, Instagram and many more companies who have their database filled with profiles of millions of people around the globe, privacy and personal life is but an illusion. This idea surfaced with the advertisements by Google Adwords which uses artificial intelligence to accumulate personal data and product-preferences. The viewers are targetted and their online screen-time is incessantly bombarded with hundreds of ads sponsored by Google based on search and surfing history.

This world of data capture is very similar to Jeremy Bentham's proposed model of a 'panopticon'. The word is derived from Greek *panoptes* meaning "all-seeing." In an article, 'What does panopticon mean in the age of digital surveillance?' Thomas McMullan finds variations of the panopticon model "in the latter half of the 20th century as a way to trace the surveillance tendencies of disciplinarian societies." he further explains it:

"The basic setup of Bentham's panopticon is this: there is a central tower surrounded by cells. In the central tower is the watchman. In the cells are prisoners – or workers, or children, depending on the use of the building. The tower shines bright light so that the watchman is able to see everyone in the cells. The people in the cells, however, aren't able to see the watchman, and therefore have to assume that they are always under observation." (McMullan, *The Guardian*)

This architectural model has resurfaced in its entirety in our digital reality. We have stepped into the age of digital surveillance where one registers every other day for one service or another using the internet. These registrations require data of all sorts concerning the service demanded. Every click is counted and every word entered is recorded in a virtual plane. This is more precise in social-media applications and websites. A timely manipulation of the people under such constant digital surveillance in today's world can be easily chalked out and their behaviour accurately predicted if their social behaviour in the world of virtual reality is recorded and their responses charted. Moreover, several applications in Google Playstore adds money to the registered person's account for taking surveys. The surveys have filters that any random response will not work and only authentic responses will be valid. One such example is 'RozDhan' application. For around 50 paise per survey, a person is asked to answer various questions regarding their age, sex, educational qualification, products they would like to buy, etc. Even more, to make the survey look innocent they place some ridiculous questions like "is dog an animal or a plant?" Thus the profiles of millions of registered users who have become 'predictable' will allow the capitalists to further their interests like selling a

product or controlling mass behaviour towards a product knowing full well their age group, sex and employment status.

Zuboff refers to Adam Smith's concept of an "invisible hand" that leads consumers to direct their capital in a certain way. She also discusses how the neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek countered such claims maintaining that the market is always 'intrinsically unknowable.' However, considering the discussions in the paper regarding the thousands of surveys that are being conducted every minute, Zuboff's final claim holds more than ever:

These operations mean that the supply and demand of behavioural futures markets are rendered in infinite detail. Surveillance capitalism thus replaces mystery with certainty as it substitutes rendition, behavioural modification, and prediction for the old "unsurveyable pattern." This is a fundamental reversal of the classic ideal of the "market" as "intrinsically unknowable." (Zuboff, 463)

The market as well as the system that governs it looks utterly chaotic from outside but from the inside, it is a well-oiled machine. Everything ticks like a clockwork.

Dolores is the oldest host of the "Westworld". She begins her day as well as welcomes the viewers into the narrative saying (thinking aloud): "Some people choose to see the ugliness in the world, the disarray, I choose to see the beauty, to believe there is an order to our days, a purpose, I know things will work out the way they are meant to be." This very utterance takes us to the motive behind the profit-making management that runs the amusement park. The disarray of the world is being slowly woven into a model by placing the predictable profiles of thousands of guests who visit the park and whose drives and choices are being constantly observed and recorded. Later on, Rehoboam, the giant ball AI studies these data and helps the company make profit-making decisions.

Robert Ford, the namesake of Ford from Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) says in Season 1 Episode 2: "You can't play God without being acquainted with the Devil." So the devil is unleashed upon the androids who suffer unending torture at the hands of the guests. Terry Eagleton writes in his

book *On Evil*: “ But it is precisely the fact that they are human that makes what terrorists do so appalling. If they were inhuman, we might not be in the least surprised by their behaviour.” (9) Speaking of the evil that has been shown in the series where the hosts die a thousand deaths, Eagleton’s remark makes viewers very uncomfortable knowing the sure reflection of one’s potential represented in the screen. Would we do it or wouldn’t we?

There is another TV series ‘Black Mirror’ (referring to the screens of devices we are getting addicted to) that released an interactive episode ‘Bandersnatch’ often described as a psychopathological thriller where the viewer gets to make the decisions for the protagonist. E.g. in a certain situation following the protagonist Stefan’s dad’s death the viewers get to choose from whether they want Stefan to:

1. Bury body
2. Chop up Body

This holds a mirror to our basic affinity for evil. The itchy finger than clicks on the second option mirrors the viewers’ urge to be entertained by seeing Stefan chop up his own dad’s body, is much greater than making the ‘right choice.’

Another Netflix documentary on ‘The Social Dilemma’ of our online presence and society-making interviews personnel who had held top-end jobs in Google, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and other social networking sites. They have resigned their positions on ethical grounds that these websites have been constantly breaking. The documentary begins with quoting Sophocles’s “Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.” It befits the technocracy and the craze for the international networking system. Although it has countless benefits, it also ensures the curse of the highest form of surveillance. There is no off-the-grid anymore without being show-caused for it either be your employer or the online education system that has taken hold in every household due to the outbreak of the COVID19. The Internet has been organically assimilated into our lives. The miniature AI mobile phones keep track of the number of steps we take. In this world, living has become a

simulation. The company profits on this knowledge. Evil is only obvious when the profits are compromised in any way.

Notes

1. Edward Joseph Snowden is popular as a “whistleblower.” He was working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) when he came across some highly disturbing data regarding rampant surveillance undertaken by numerous global programmes many of which were run by National Security Agency (NSA). He copied such highly classified data and smuggled it out into the open world for the people to know that they are being constantly monitored and that their camera phones and laptop can be easily hacked into and the camera switched on without their permission or knowledge.

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