

**CONQUERING THE LABYRINTH: HOW NEO-NOIR TRIES
TO SOLVE THE POSTMODERN CONDITION**

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The 20th century gave rise to Postmodernism, a time characterized by its transformations, change and reevaluation of past ideologies. Most of its features express a breaking away from any authority and the so-called center which promised definitive meaning. Thus, postmodernism opposes the assumptions that lie behind the traditional values and as a result there is an open search, an insistence towards finding truth. Postmodern noir embodies this idea of exploration; as the detective journeys a world that possesses no universal meaning. In postmodern narrative instead of solving a crime what is being investigated is larger questions about meaning. However, when a quest is usually defined as “a linear, or circular, narrative pattern, reflecting a deep structure of myth and archetype, and associated it with a specific literary genre—the romance” (qtd. in Eva Carda 4), the postmodern quest can be seen as entering a maze that has no clear beginning or end. As a result, the protagonist, which is usually referred to as the Metaphysical Detective, journeys through a highly fragmented world. Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* are two pieces of Literature that embody this disillusionment and the quest for identity which usually ends in disclosure. However, newer forms of Detective genre such as Neo-noir channel the ideas of postmodernism while also attempting to bring a new progression of ideas. More recent films like *Blade Runner* (1982) directed by Ridley Scott and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) directed by Denis Villeneuve explore a wide array of topics like free will, meaning and at the center the lack of identity and humanity that comes with a world that is riddled with artificial, with no way to find truth. The purpose of this paper is to contrast these works in order to see how they relate to each other and see how the theme of identity is explored and is still embodied in more recent works. I argue that new

iterations of the Metaphysical Detective embody and challenge the lack of identity and meaning, eventually offering not the solution but rather a way to combat the postmodern condition.

2. Postmodernism and The Metaphysical Detective

Valerie Mandeville posits in her dissertation *The Labyrinth as a Metaphor of Postmodern American Poetics* that postmodernism “forces the reader to alter one’s perspective, to reorient oneself to a new aesthetic” (1). By rejecting traditional literary traits or conventions, postmodernists create a new form of literature. As a result, breaking away from these conventions, postmodern literature often parodies or subverts the readers expectations and reevaluates past ideologies. One of its main philosophers is John Francois Lyotard who argues that “resorting to totalizing concepts for authority in contemporary condition is not reasonable” (qtd. in Moghbeli 2015). Meaning there is in essence no credible authority in which to find meaning. Science does not reach an agreement, but rather finds disturbances in philosophies. Postmodernism reflects a skepticism towards master narratives, because instead of there being one truth above all there are just too many. Moghbeli speaks in his essay *Art as Master Narrative* of Lyotards work on the narratives found in our lives, which he defines as an explanation of “the historical experience and knowledge”(2). For example a metanarrative could be religion or dogma leading to some kind of transcendental truth, or a philosophy which explains both knowledge and experience. The idea of one master narrative existing above all is rejected in the Postmodernist novel. Lyotard defines postmodernism as “an incredulity towards metanarratives” (qtd. in Carda 15). Mandeville adds that “people reject conventional truths or paradigms in favor of more local individual ideologies” (22). We can no longer use master narratives to legitimize our existence, instead we must rely on smaller multiple narratives to be our guides. Meaning is no longer linear or definitive, it is multiple in its nature and because of that there is no one way

to find meaning, but rather the problem now is that there may be too much of it. The journey within postmodern literature is oftentimes viewed as a maze, and, in this labyrinth, it is hard to find the exit, “One must always circle back through, returning to words and ideas that lead into other avenues. It's not a straight shot, but a retracing of steps and progression of renewal that allows one to exit” (Mandeville 14). Within the maze one must find a wide array of notions, meaning, identity, for the writer is “a modern day Daedalus constructing labyrinths of the mind to ensnare and enlighten readers; and the reader, who volunteers to descend into another realm of language in order to slay the monster of anti-meaning and return fortified” (Mandeville 24).

The one who journeys the labyrinth in Postmodern detective fiction is called the Metaphysical Detective, a term coined by Michael Holquist in his essay “Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction.” A Metaphysical Detective story is defined by Patricia Merivale and Elizabeth Sweeney as

A text that parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions- such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader with the intention, or at least the effect of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. (2)

These stories are about self-reflection. With the traditional plot eliminated the character is driven into the labyrinth of his own self in order to solve the mystery with only his instinct and his desire to become whole again. Holquist explains that the genre “gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well-known patterns of classical detective stories” (155). Thus, the Metaphysical Detective’s journey is inward. He sees the crime and the mystery as a way for him to solve the bigger questions of existence. By thinking of Metaphysical Detective stories as labyrinthian, we understand that it possesses layers

that the main character will try to tear down in order to arrive at a central truth he yearns to possess, an attempt for he usually never does. Once the reader enters the maze he is as lost as the detective, there begins the questioning and with it comes the fear of misinterpretation which drive us mad. In order to traverse this terrain “the reader must surrender to disorientation” (Carda 70).

City of Glass is a novel that portrays the fragmentation present in postmodern books and the subsequent lack of identity that occurs as the detective tries to solve the mystery. This novel is the story of Daniel Quinn, a thirty-five-year-old mystery novel writer, a man who lives in solitude. Quinn has lost his wife and child a few years before the start of the story, and since then he has cut off all ties to the outside world in an effort to cease to exist. But for a man who wants to cut all binds to the outside world, he yet continues to try to understand it. He writes a number of stories, but he does so under a pseudonym, William Wilson, a reference to a story by Edgar Allan Poe of the same name. This is an early reference in the story to his many identities that eventually surface, a sign of his coming madness. Quinn explains why he prefers mystery novels: “in the good mystery novel there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no world that is not significant” (8). In this world of mystery, one has the ability to connect all the dots, to find the murderer and solve the crime, the problem posed in the beginning. Quinn’s love for them may very well come from his own inability to solve uncertainties in his own life or world. In a novel problem are easily solved, for Quinn this does not happen in the real world and he has cast out any hopes of finding some finality that might restore him completely. The traditional detective creates order out of the chaos and provides an answer for the uncertainties of our world. By writing these stories Quinn attempts then to put order where there is disorder, an attempt to dull the pain caused by the passing of his loved ones.

In his isolation Quinn escapes from society and loses every aspect of his social life, only corresponding with his agent whom he has never even met in person. Jakob Pearson writes, “The driving force in everything [Quinn has] written so far lies in [a] yearning to participate somewhere and to break out of the isolation” (3). There’s still a yearning within him to break free from the solitude, but Quinn does not give in. This is reflected with his obsession in getting lost in the city:

More than anything else, however, what he liked to do was walk. Nearly every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, he would leave his apartment to walk through the city—never really going anywhere, but simply going wherever his legs happened to take him. New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and street, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city but within himself as well. (Auster 3)

The act of walking allows Quinn to escape, embracing the idea of being lost within the physical space of the city. The narrator uses the term labyrinth to speak of the space in which Quinn resides, alluding how lost he is in this city. He travels around with no clear direction, using “aimless motion” (61) as the means of coping with his loneliness. By drowning himself, he manages to “exert some small degree of control” (61). He acquires in his journey a sort of emptiness that relieves him of the pain of his past life. There is no clear end in sight to this maze. But Quinn will have the chance to end his isolation as he is called into action once he receives an unexpected call. It captures his attention and tangles him into a series of strange events that would make him eventually question his own identity. Quinn successfully enters the labyrinth when a man calls him asking for “Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency” (7). Quinn

rejects this call at first but is later on enthralled by the caller's persistence. He accepts the offer and plans a meeting with the stranger who we learn is named Peter Stillman. His quest then begins with a literal call to action, and while it is not clear why he decides to get involved in the first place it can be seen as a way for him to cope with his own life by using another person's identity instead of his own.

Upon arriving at the residence of Peter Stillman he is greeted by his wife Virginia Stillman, a woman that perhaps reminds him of the life he had held before tragedy came upon him. Later on, he finds himself speaking with Peter Stillman, although barely understanding the job he proposes for Peter speaks in an incoherent manner. Pearson expresses that at this stage of the novel Quinn feels like has been let down by the mystery at hand; it does not fill his expectation and instead he feels this mystery is not enough: "Expecting to be filled in on some illustrious criminal tale as, no doubt, Max Work often is in William Wilsons mystery novels, Quinn is disappointed" (4). Meeting Stillman who himself is a broken man, who speaks in a mechanical manner saying "my name is Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Mr Sad. What is your name, Mr Auster? Perhaps you are the real Mr. Sad, and I am no one" (17). The subject of identity pops up in this part of story, Quinn embodies the detective persona, acting in a different manner as they would in one of his novels, as he hears the words of Stillman our main character is interested in the case, so he shrouds himself in this facade and vows to solve the mystery.

The job Peter Stillman and his wife/caretaker pose is simple, to protect him against his father whom he needs to find and watch over for a series of days. Stillman is the product of child abuse by the hands of his father, who imprisoned him for nine years in a dark room without any contact to the outside world. Because of this, he has obvious limitations when it comes to talking

with others. His father was eventually brought to trial and was imprisoned for over thirteen years, and he was about to be set free, hence why they need a private detective. This showcases how the story moves from the traditional detective story, as even though there is no murder, there is still a potential crime, but Quinn is not a real detective and yet he will pursue the case. As the story moves on, we find the theme of fragmentation and loss of identity within our main character. There is a highly fragmented mystery; there is a linear movement within the story, but the clues do not amount to anything; they have no clear meaning or at least do not lead to definitive closure. This pattern is one that may well never stop; in fact, it never does for we do not get the resolution we desire. The protagonist instead goes on to find his identity, but he does not find the truth he yearns for, so he instead reflects on certain topics which are presented to him and yet he cannot seem to put the pieces together. Changing his identity over and over again until he can no longer do so. The Postmodern condition simply states that ultimately the search for a universal meaning is doomed, one could also say that there's too many clues, pointing in different directions but no resolution. Moghbeli uses Umberto Eco to explain the realities of postmodern fiction,

Umberto Eco (1994) argues that in postmodern fiction, the fictional world in which the characters inhabit is a rhizomatic world. He describes this realm as “so structured that every path can be connected with every other one.” So, there is “no exit into full meaning or certitude.” This rhizomatic pattern is evident in *City of Glass*. Quinn goes through different roles and identities throughout the story, from Daniel Quinn as a writer to William Wilson and then to Max Work and from Max work to Paul Auster, and in the end to Quinn as a fictional character with no real identity. The search for meaning is also limited to the city with its fragmented internal and external structure.

Accordingly, the world of fiction is filled with uncertainty, fragmentation, and skepticism, and does not contain any absolute reality or meaning. (2015)

There is no universal meaning or identity in this Postmodern world, no stability to define just one meaning. This is echoed by the character of the elder Stillman, who is obsessed with finding meaning for every living thing. Quinn first encounters this man when he arrives amongst a crowd of strangers in the subway, he follows a man who looks like the man in the picture on the basis that he had “a prosperous air about him” (56). He follows the man to a rundown hotel and begins his routine of watching him every day, noticing that he would oftentimes stop and study certain objects that he would encounter. He tries to make sense of the pattern, but the old man’s movements make no sense to Quinn and so he tries to identify if there was any meaning to be found in his walks. After meeting Stillman, Quinn gets a glimpse of his plans and his idea to find a new language which could unite the world. Old Stillman argues within the story that every object must have an end. He uses the famous example of the umbrella saying, “When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is the umbrella still an umbrella?” (77). Therefore, if an object loses its function then the meaning of that object must change. From there stems his need to discover this language that would unite people, this being the language, which was once spoken in paradise. When Stillman speaks to Quinn, he goes on about the brokenness of humanity, stating,

My work is very simple. I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of spaces, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap. (77)

He echoes the feeling of being broken, in disarray without finding meaning or a self that could make us whole. When Peter Stillman senior disappears, Quinn tries to contact the real Paul

Auster in order to see if he could help with the investigation, he finds that Paul Auster is not a detective but a writer much like he was. Later on, he tries to contact the Stillman's but finds that no one is answering, they too had disappeared. Since he cannot reach them, he commits to finding Stillman Sr. and watches the hotel every day until he would eventually return, he does not. In his hiding Quinn becomes a bum, a part of the city, eventually he finds himself without hope of finishing his task, he returns to his apartment but finding rented to somebody else and so he finds that not only the case had been a great bust, but he had been cut out of his life completely as well. There is nothing left of his identity to recover and the rebirth he had wished for is nowhere to be acquired. He understands that "he had come to the end of himself. He could feel it now, as though a great truth had finally dawned him. There was nothing left" (126). The ending leaves us with more questions than answers, and unlike the classic detective it is very uncommon, "As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now. I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me" (133). Quinn is lost, wherever he is, nobody knows, and so *City of Glass* is a novel that has a missing ending as we never find out what happened to him. He simply disappears and it's up to us to find a conclusion to the story and the mystery. The end is left up to the readers creativity, the identity crisis is never resolved or dealt with and so we never get an answer on how to acquire a stable self which is a side effect of the postmodern condition.

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* also tackles this subject of identity. It is often considered a "prototypical example of postmodern literature" (Carda 21). The story takes place in a fictional version of California in the 1960s when Oedipa Maas becomes the co-executor of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, her past boyfriend. This leads her to become tangled in a set of events and a worldwide conspiracy that will make her question her present and her past, not to

mention her own identity in the grand scheme of things. The plot revolves around the mystery of the secret underground postal service named Trysterio which seems like a fairytale or a huge conspiracy. Oedipa, a housewife who is married to a DJ jockey called Mucho Maas, takes on the role of the Metaphysical Detective in order to solve this mystery, and by solving this she may solve the questions of her own life as well. Pynchon never clears up the mystery for us, so we are left to wonder if perhaps it was all a grand joke or a hallucination, but Oedipa embarks on this journey in order to find real answers, never getting closer to the exit from the labyrinth. The novel's first words present this call to action and the disruption that comes afterwards:

One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. But this did not work. (1)

For Oedipa the television seems to be a distraction of her daily life, an object that feeds her information, that keeps her boredom at bay. Eva Carda explores this idea of a consumerist society in which there is no grand narrative, there is no longer a true religion that keeps their search at bay. She quotes Tony Tanner who says that these activities that keep us from boredom are “the three substitutes for true religion in the contemporary world: The TV (with no message, the name of God (now an empty word) and drink (which doesn’t work)” (24). Oedipa’s life is empty, devoid of meaning which means Oedipa will use this quest in order to break free from the meaningless existence and will pursue a sort of rebirth. The call to action “propels Oedipa

upward, out of this banality: like Venus emerging from the sea she is already rising from a 'Californicated' level of existence into a new life. Her quest is a birth-passage, and from the beginning she is directed toward transcendence" (24). She is willing to go on this quest because it holds the promise of breaking away from monotony and to face the void in order to find herself in the process. Oedipa witnesses this void, she feels attracted to the call and recalls that she has tried to escape and yet Oedipa views herself as a damsel in distress, held in captivity on her ivory tower, waiting for one day to be rescued. She is not independent, she has not found herself yet, which is why in order to truly break free she must become free from others, to find her own meaning and identity. She is Isolated much like Daniel Quinn, she has lost the thing that makes her herself, this type of yearning for escape is further studied when she gazes at a painting in Mexico:

Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she'd wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry. She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had take her away from nothing, there'd been no escape. What did she so desire escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that

what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (11-12)

The painting presented in Mexico affects Oedipa because it presents her life, she recognizes that her life lacks meaning and thus she has to break free. By answering the call however the tide could be turned into her favor and she could complete the journey in order to find truth. Before she embarks on her odyssey, we get a sense already that Oedipa is not content with her daily life. She feels trapped. When Oedipa finds herself roaming through San Narciso in order to fulfill her new role as executor, first she stops at a shady motel called Echo courts where she meets Metzger, a child actor turned lawyer. Later on, they find themselves in a bar called the The Scope where she finds a sign in the woman's bathroom that seems like a muted French horn, this is her call to action, the starting point for her quest for the meaning of this sign, because of this she starts investigating the so called Tristero system. "Pynchon thus thematizes the void constitutive of postmodern American society as well as all the ways in which media and material goods are used to fill this void" (Carda 26). Alluding to a numbness that exists within our culture, embodied by Oedipa, and hinted in *City of Glass* in the character of Quinn but both characters will take on the role of the detective in order to escape the problems of their lives. The brokenness explained by the elder Stillman pervades within this story as well, there is a need for understanding our meaning and identity, a self-discovery. Throughout her journey she comes across an understanding of this void in herself, she will go as far as to see that even her past relationships had been an attempt to escape her world. Oedipa fears however that things will never reveal themselves to her, that she won't find the one truth and that in fact it has all been a lie in the first place. Halfway through the story she is fed up with all of the information she had

gathered, the clues were not amounting to anything and as she is caught in this void, she thinks to herself.

She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to— an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure. Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers. Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold, which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (76)

The quote reflects the idea that there is too much meaning in the world, but no one central truth as she had hoped. The idea of the muted French horn is a sign that has perplexed Oedipa as she embarks on a quest to find its meaning. It could very well be an illusion or even a fantasy, for reality eludes Oedipa and she fears that if she does not find the central truth, she will go mad. As she continues her search Oedipa will uncover numerous clues about the Trystero, journeying through different parts of San Narciso. She begins to find the symbol in different places, listening to several versions of its meaning, which also allude to the postmodern fragmentation of meaning. She encounters it in a gay bar, where a man wears a pin with the symbol, he explains to Oedipa that it represents a group of isolated people who believe that love is an ailment that must be cured. The symbol seems to have too many meanings, depending on the person that Oedipa encounters they tell her a different side of the story, but it does not amount to anything. For Oedipa it is all either true or untrue which is a very narrow way of seeing the world. After

finding nothing else about the sign Oedipa talks to her psychologist Dr. Hilarius in order to get advice or perhaps to get rid of her fantasy of meaning. He confesses to her that he's an ex-Nazi and he says to her "Hold it tightly" perhaps alluding to her own thoughts, identity. "Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be" (113). And yet Oedipa does not comprehend yet what it is she has lost. Dr. Hilarius is then arrested and Oedipa rants into Mucho outside, he interviews her believing she is somebody else, he could very well be in a trance because of his addiction to LSD or he may be on to something, perhaps alluding to a change in Oedipa. He tells Oedipa "Be yourself..." (113-114), it is not clear if he is alluding to some internal conflict within Oedipa and yet Andreas Signell says that he (Mucho) is "indicating that there is something to be found within a person that constitutes themselves" (17). She also speaks to Mucho's boss Caesar Funch. Funch who happens to be at the scene speaks about Mucho: "They're calling him the Brothers N. He's losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He's a walking assembly of a man" (115). In this scene where Oedipa meets Funch and her husband is acting erratic Andreas Signell expresses that Mucho is losing his identity, but that in fact that also implies that "there is something to be lost" (22) in the first place. Oedipa yet roams San Narciso grasping for meaning of the Trystero system, she uncovers that they had been around in events like the French revolution. She eventually attends an auction in which Inverarity's stamps were to be sold in order to uncover the secret of the Trystero but the story ends as the final auction begins, Oedipa's final chance to uncover the conspiracy. In the end Oedipa's very own quest for identity and meaning is a failure. Pynchon instead denies the idea that there is a unified self, he presents however in its place a "postmodern self" (Signell 27) who is fragmented, incomplete

and who yearns for the unreachable. The reader as well as Oedipa try to wait for an answer but this answer is taken from us as the novel ends abruptly before we can see the exit of the labyrinth. There is no one truth to be found; no one identity that stands over all of the rest. All we are going to find is ambiguity and no apparent solution the problem. What does this suggest? Perhaps Pynchon's lesson is that not all problems can be solved, not all questions have one answer and yet that there is something inside of us that makes us who we are. *City of Glass* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are texts which end without a complete ending, this means that the audience is expected to pick up the pieces of the story to forge an ending. Quinn for one disappears into the city never to be found, Oedipa awaits the crying of lot 49 and thus it is left to our own conclusions to fill the gap. These characters want to find something and yet avoid their identities like Quinn who oddly presents himself as Quinn but rather as other men, like Oedipa who creates a mystery and a role in order to break free from her boring life. Both find themselves in complex situation in which the clues do not amount to anything that they can hold on to. This is where *Blade Runner* comes in, while it does share many ontological concerns about identity and meaning it also diverges from the novels touched on by presenting not the answer but the starting point for the search of identity and meaning.

Having established the theme of identity in Postmodern works we move on to *Blade Runner* and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* to see a more contemporary take on this topic. These are two movies that intertwine classic film noir and science fiction in order to create a world that borders on the real and the artificial. They often question what it means to be human, what lies at the center of human experience and if it is only a trait found in humans. For the sake of this paper, however, I will focus solely on the aspects of identity and self and what these movie mention about it, but it's fair to note that they cover a wide array of topics.

First off, these films while most would say belongs to the genre of Sci-fi or Cyberpunk, it can be categorized as neo-noir, which embodies the classic characteristics (Mystery, Femme Fatales, Detectives) but with a futuristic setting. The city is still portrayed as a void of villainy and darkness as in traditional noir where the “noir city is a city gone wrong. Corruption suffuses the city in a ghastly light (Leary 2014). Neo-noir exaggerates the darkness of the city, and in *Blade Runner* even more so, this can be seen as a way to highlight the corruption within the city or as a mere choice of style from the director. Note that this kind of atmosphere is also present in *City of Glass* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Quinn and Oedipa journey socially corrupt cities, filled with illusions of the real. Quinn inhabits a “Broken City” (77) and Oedipa who is trapped in her tower, yearns to break free. The simulations have replaced the real, and the grand narratives have lost all credibility. The difference is that in 2019 Los Angeles where the story takes place the emphasis shifts towards the use of technology, very much like Oedipa who used the Television as a means of escaping her world and yet now the artificial has taken the place of the real. Abrams explains in his essay *Space, Time, Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema*:

Two things, however, were different and really make neo-noir what it is today. First is setting: What used to be the contemporary “space” of the Los Angeles city now becomes the “time” of the distant future and the distant past. Second is character: rather than looking for a criminal in the city that surrounds him, now the detective’s search is for himself, for his own identity and how he may have lost it. (7)

The detective is now solving a mystery and using it as a means to solve his own life in the process which is why he fits with the Metaphysical Detective: “He’s looking for himself as an other” (Abrams 9). Abrams further elaborates that in this new world there is no God, no grand narrative that defines meaning as well as in postmodern literature. “God and the devil are

replaced by science and Technology” (13). In this world the boundaries between the real and artificial are hanging on a fine line now that humans created androids which they call replicants. These beings are copies of humans and yet they are marketed as being “more human than human” (*Blade Runner* 1982). These humanoids are created by the Tyrell Corporation to serve as foot-soldiers, workers and to colonize other planets. In her paper *Blade Runner and Satre: The Boundaries Of Humanity* Judith Barad explains, “Although these complex androids look human, act human, and are at least as intelligent as their human designers, they are manufactured to live only four years” (21). This ensures that they never grow and evolve emotionally, because if they do, they would be indistinguishable from a human, and would eventually lash out.

The first *Blade Runner* movie begins by setting an even darker tone than what were used to in noir movies. Instead of present-day Los Angeles what we get is a technologically dominated world on the brink of chaos and destruction. As the camera moves to show the city, we witness the neon signs, the large screens displaying advertisements and holograms beckoning the crowds to join them in the outer colonies off world. Yasamin Hemmat argues that this is a world ruled by simulation. He echoes the ideas of Baudrillard saying, “A simulacrum is a copy of a copy so far removed from its original that it can stand on its own and even replace the original” (162). Hence, this is a world filled with illusions, and barely anything real remains in this not-so-distant future. Baudrillard will also express that the age of simulation is everywhere, that we are surrounded by contradictory concepts, and an “exchangeability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion, of left and right politics, of true and false messages” (qtd. In Weiss 11). This exchangeability leaves us with little room to find out what is real, in this world riddled with copies of the truth, thus we enter a state of numbness.

In *Blade Runner 2049* the same problem occurs. The tone of the movie still continues to be grim and dark; the urban landscape overpowers the screen, and the earth has now been completely conquered by the human machine. Everything has been reduced to metal, we have lost our connection to nature and as such meaning is also fragmented. In a world where everything is so artificial there comes the question of identity and meaning within oneself, a need to escape the maze of nothingness. The audience is in search for something, our detective as well, that which defines our humanity and gives us purpose. For replicants are beings without souls and therefore are not human. Because of this, they cannot embody the human experience since they are not considered whole and are cast out as inferior.

The plot of the first movie, however, revolves around four replicant fugitives that are actively trying to reach their maker in order to have a shot at extending their life cycles. Enter the Detective, named Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a retired Blade Runner who lives a life of isolation, but is threatened into taking the mantle again one last time by his old boss Bryant (M. Emmett Walsh). Deckard is not your typical Blade Runner, although at first he views the replicants as means to an end, "Replicants are like any other machine - they're either a benefit or a hazard. If they're a benefit, it's not my problem." There is a questioning present, a waking from the numbness and the prejudice that exists towards these humanoids that have been alienated by society, often called "skin jobs" and treated as slaves. When Deckard is tasked with interviewing a Nexus 6 model called Rachael (Sean Young), he finds that it is harder to define the real and the artificial, much harder than before. He administers the V-k Test (Void Kampf) a test that determines if you are human or replicant, the interviewer asks questions which trigger an emotional response within replicants. Since replicants do not possess the ability to be empathetic they are quickly spotted as they are interviewed. After a large number of questions Deckard

comes to the conclusion that the woman in front of him is not human, and that she is unaware of that very fact. He asks Tyrell (Joe Turkel) the creator of replicants and owner of the Tyrell Corporation, "How can it not know what is?" But his answer seems to express that he aims to create a product that surpasses the humans; he is playing god. Rachael has an identity crisis after the interview and refuses to come to terms with the fact that she is not human. She visits Deckard in his home in order to prove that she is human. Deckard explains that the photographs, the memories are all implanted within her but still feels somewhat empathetic toward her plight, and in a voice over version of the movie Deckard says, "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were Blade Runners. What the hell was happening to me?" Is thinking and feeling enough to form an identity? Something is happening inside of Rachel, a questioning and a yearning to break free is present. The same with Deckard who himself feels trapped within the mantle of killer as a Blade Runner, in fact it was the killing which made Deckard quit his job in the first place and now both want to break free from their respective identities. Deckard continues his investigation, following leads and finding the trail of the lost replicants who were armed and dangerous. He finds an escaped replicant within a club, and subsequently starts a chase in the city, he ultimately kills her without asking any questions. In that moment he is attacked by another replicant, much stronger than he is, only to be saved in the end by Rachael who is now undergoing a change, acting out from her programming and caring for Deckard in his moment of need. When the film changes its point of view to that of the four escaped replicants we get a sense of their plan and their motives, but we also begin to understand that these replicants can think and act alone. They interrogate a man in order to find someone who could take them to their creator, the man reveals that someone named J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) could potentially take them there and so they set off to find him. When they find J. F.

Sebastian, they appeal to his humanity in order to get them to help them. Furthermore, the film raises the question of self when Pris (Daryl Hannah), one of the escaped replicants quotes Descartes “I think therefore I am.” Alluding to their understanding that if they can think they can also be alive as the rest of humanity. Sebastian ponders on the notion of their identity to which Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) the main antagonist says to him, “We’re not computers, we’re physical.” They are not some mindless androids, but they too are alive, walking and thinking as he is. Later on, J. F. Sebastian takes them to Tyrell’s house where Batty confronts his maker and asks him to add more years to his life to which Tyrell responds that he cannot. He tries to appease Roy by telling him, “The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very brightly Roy.” He exhorts his creation to revel in the last hours of his life, but Roy does not understand yet what that means. He kisses his maker and is subsequently freed from what held him back. He kills his creator in one final act of rebirth, but Barad notes that this scene echoes Sartre’s work, the only way to live in this world is to cast out our gods and to experience the despair, to be accountable:

By killing his god, Batty is reborn, now able to create his own essence. Along with Sartre, he recognizes that no god can determine his fate. With no one to determine his fate, he alone must assume responsibility for himself. He begins to experience the forlornness that Sartre describes. Living outside a replicants programming he must create his own rules and continue existing on his own terms. Now he is free—but without any creator to rely on for direction. Tyrell can neither give him more life nor make him human. Batty must save himself. (30-31)

He begins a transcendence of identity that will continue until the end of the movie, he however now embodies the despair of the human condition for he thinks he serves no purpose.

The replicants escape until they are tracked down by Deckard. Deckard kills Pris in an encounter and Batty is infuriated at the sight of her dead body. Roy chases Deckard who finds himself unarmed, until they end up in a rooftop overlooking to city. When facing Deckard at first glance the audience believes Batty will try to kill Deckard but the replicant has other plans in store. In the final moments Deckard falls only to be saved by Roy in a final attempt to undo his programming. Roy has now grown empathetic; he has assumed a sort of identity. He teaches Deckard what it takes to be human, what one needs to be free and cast off the life of isolation. Because in the end Blade runners long to be interlinked, to be with others. Roy delivers his famous lines, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain. Time to die." His memories make him who he is, his experiences give him a self and a purpose. Deckard further on explains in his voiceover, "I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments, he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life, my life.". The film suggests that Roy has found some sort of meaning, something to live for and to die for other than himself. The film ends on a cliffhanger as Deckard and Rachel ride off into the sunset, Judith Barad suggest that "Blade Runner and Sartre urge us to escape this programming and become authentically human" (33) in order to come together. But what does that entail? The mystery of identity is left however somewhat unresolved, although it differs from the novels as our characters choose to break free from their predetermined roles and instead embody new ones by the end, like Deckard who is no longer a Blade Runner and taking a chance to live for himself, acting with free will.

Blade Runner 2049 brings another progression to that same idea echoed in the first movie, directed by visionary director Denis Villeneuve, it takes place 30 years after the first one

and follows the journey of K (Ryan Gosling), a replicant Blade Runner who now retires his own kind. Our protagonist is aware of his own artificiality, he is one who embodies this new world, he has no connection to the outside world and possesses no worth for he does not have a soul or an identity. He understands that these memories that are the cornerstone of his self had been implanted in order to fulfill a role. He is the embodiment of the artificial consumer as well, his girlfriend being an artificial intelligence called Joi (Ana de Armas). K's role is to uncover the truth behind a replicant body he has found, who had given birth before her death. Thus, comes the subject of the soul, for if a replicant could give birth, it means there could be hope for him as well. "To be born is to have a soul" says K, as if it is almost an honor to have one, the soul being the distinction between human and replicant. A soul would give meaning to their experiences. It would mean that a replicant is also a separate entity, "more human than human," and as a result on par with the human experience.

Early in the film K finds a date carved underneath a tree which is also the same date carved on the wooden horse of his artificial memories. He questions if perhaps he is the child that had been born many years ago. He begins to feel a certain emotion, a desire perhaps to become more. K decides to keep this dangerous secret and so the detective embarks on a journey which he hopes is of self-discovery. It is here we begin to understand that in this artificial world the biggest problem is that of connection and identity. If one is surrounded by constant illusion, how do we know what's real? Our protagonist, although a replicant, longs to feel human, to have an identity of his own because when our world is surrounded by illusions the self is inevitably lost. If we go back to Oedipus in *Crying of Lot 49* there is a scene in which the narrator expresses,

At some point she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and she couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror. Then she remembered that the mirror had broken and fallen in the sink.(49).

The broken mirror illustrates her fragmented identity an inability to become whole in the way she desires. K although a replicant also longs to feel complete, to be interlinked with people and yet we may find out its almost impossible. He is a fragmented being, part artificial memory, part Blade Runner and now he lives the illusion of having a soul. His attempt at finding connection is further illustrated by the character of Joi, who is created solely for the use of consumers and to exhaust the desires of its buyer. The billboard of the product says, "Everything you want to hear" , echoing the fact that everything that Joi says is a programmed response in order to make the consumer feel pleased. Joi is not a self-aware intelligence; she possesses no sense of self and showcases the meaninglessness of artificial connections in our modern world unlike K who although artificial is now beginning to feel new emotions.

K has a yearning instead to be human, to have his own self, which is why Joi pushes the idea that K could be a human boy. Since K, later on called Joe, yearns for an identity which could break him free he accepts this idea. As Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright) tells K in her office, "Were all just looking out for something real," showcasing that feeling of emptiness that humans and replicants feel as a result of their condition. In fact both humans and replicants are more alike than they let on, living a world that constantly tells them who they should be, their experience reflect our own in many ways. As the movie continues, he tracks down Dr. Anna Steline (Carla Juri) in order to find out if his memory is in fact real. Steline affirms his suspicion that in fact the memory he possesses is real, that it was lived by a real person in the past, usually these were fabricated and not copied. He ponders the implications of finally having an identity,

and the realization that he too could be interlinked with humanity. Andreas Signell places the center of identity in the mind using the example of Oedipa who talks about “projecting the world,” claiming that it is one of the basis of identity. “A broken mirror then reflects the self” Illustrating that identity can be created and that it is mutable, “the entire countryside must be taken into consideration when viewing the self” (29). K’s lack of identity mirrors the broken identity within characters like Daniel Quinn and Oedipa. These characters are lost trying to find meaning, to grasp into something meaningful that could give them an identity, for Quinn it could be the solving of the Mystery, for Oedipa the breaking away from her dull life, for K it is embodied as a soul.

K eventually finds out he is not the miracle child. He is anguished by this discovery and yet Freysa (Hiam Abbass), another replicant argues that our identity is found in the meaning of our lives which we ourselves choose. As Freysa says, “Dying for the right cause is the most human thing we can do” Meaning is in fact not universal but relative to our experiences. To be human, to have an identity is to love, to have a cause to fight for, somebody to live for. Our identities are always mutating, take Batty who’s purpose and identity changes towards the very end of the movie, he becomes a savior. Deckard lets go of his Blade runner life and rides off into the sunset accepting a new purpose. K changes his roles during the movie, a trait found within *City of Glass* and *Crying of Lot 49*, as our characters’ journeys shape them into eventually becoming something other than what they were. For example, Quinn gains a new awareness in his journey, “through his quest, Quinn, like Oedipa, becomes aware of the “other” America that he likely did not encounter in his every-day life as a writer” and so during his travels he gains a “new awareness of his surroundings, but also travels to places he hasn’t visited before” (Carda 56). In his journey K also gains a new awareness and accepts a new meaning, letting go of his

foolish dreams and choosing a noble cause of freedom, and thus it leads him to a final catastrophe. We can say that K embodies the opposite experience of Roy Batty, the villain of the first movie, by being humanity's hope for something more. K has found free will and acted with one with meaning, saving Deckard in the process. Note that in his final moments, K finds himself surrounded by pure white snow, a symbol for his own calmness now that he had found a semblance of an identity or meaning. He says to Deckard, "All the best memories are hers." He finds comfort in past memories that are not his and yet Sartre argues that man will always be free, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (qtd. in Brevda 332). Man has free will and choice and because of this reason is why man is pursued by nothingness. A self-constructed soul is the only way to find meaning in the world, whether it is to love, to protect, we choose our own identity, but it is not set in stone. K is not only the lost child in his memories, but he is also a set of experience, emotions and events that make up his own everchanging identity. Their experiences, the people they encounter, the notions they reflect upon ultimately lead them to become something other than what society wanted them to be, to have an identity. To possess a self is to define their own construction of meaning, to be interlinked with other people. Both movies perhaps allude to the fact that in order to actually find meaning, we must first face death in order to be reborn. Barad quotes Sartre saying, "In order to get any truth about myself . . . I must have contact with another person" (29). In order for us to understand ourselves we must understand others, in discovering the other I discover myself in the process. It is an ongoing process but in the end K now had his own experiences, he had found a home in this father figure and in the noble quest he chose for himself. His final surrender ends. He is interlinked and finds peace in eternity, an opposite to the movie's antagonist called Luv who dies within the literal troubled waters of her life.

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the loss of identity and features of postmodernism present within the Metaphysical Detective stories like *City of Glass* and *The Crying of Lot 49* in order to contrast them with more recent takes on the genre like *Blade Runner* and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049*. The postmodern era is one that is characterized by continuous change and rejection of master narratives which leaves without ways to legitimize our existence unless we find some type of meaning. *City of Glass* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are a representation of the postmodern world, the fragmentation within them, the idea of too much meaning and a mutable identity depicts the human condition of the contemporary era. This brings about a crisis of identity which at first may possess the hopes of finding truth and reality, which has been lost in the first place. While Oedipa becomes a detective because she “wants to escape from her boring life” Quinn “Decided to masquerade himself as a detective named Paul Auster” as to “Forget his pain triggered by the real events” (Mehmet 2017). Postmodernism offers no permanent solution, only the means of coping, our detectives try to find the center in which to find meaning, venturing into the labyrinth only to be trapped within. While they may be able to understand that meaning is not universal, they do not yet possess all the tools for a complete self. Moghbeli explores this idea saying that the Metaphysical detective’s efforts are in vain, “In many cases the exhausted detective leaves the mystery unresolved. Thus, the story remains open-ended, and it is up to the reader to draw a conclusion” (2609). This is where I argue that *Blade Runner* and its sequel bring a progression to the genre. Both movies explore a world bound by consumption, a society so heightened by technology which “problematizes the concept of identity for the individual” (Greenwood). Although the movies do not offer a complete answer on how to find our self and our identity, they hint at the fact that in order to find meaning and break free we must choose our own path and in doing so we may enter in a state of

rebirth, an understanding we must not run from each other, but rather remain in harmony with one another. Barad continues to say that when it comes to *Blade Runner* (1982) Sartre explains humans are “simply what we make of ourselves through our choices and actions” (22). Sartre would argue that replicants inability to choose is what differentiates them from a human, but if they could bypass that, then they would essentially become human, they would have an identity. By exploring the idea of the soul, the movies suggest that there is no true self, and thus our path is ours to choose. The journey is a path to gain a new awareness that was not there before and thus understand that there is no unified identity to be found, but rather a postmodern self in a fragmented world. As we journey through the world, we compile experiences that help us make sense of the world. The films do not offer a definitive answer but hints at the way towards self-discovery. First, we must accept like Sartre that there is no god, but rather each of us is responsible for our actions. While this is not a definitive answer, the one truth that our Metaphysical detective yearns for in terms of his identity, it lays the groundwork for the completion of the journey or a way to pursue meaning in an otherwise world filled with illusions of the real.

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