



### **Borders in *Grain* and *Blade Runner 2049* and Their Relation to Dystopian Fiction**

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Dystopian fiction abounds with the subject of borders, posing the question of why rigid borders become significant in some major dystopias or dystopian fiction, and what psychological effects rigid border policies can have on individuals. In this article, I will show that geographical and political borders manifest on different levels in dystopia. Borders within dystopia are a means to achieving certain psychological ends to control the masses. They accordingly manifest themselves on four different levels.

#### **Type 1: Closed Geographical Borders**

The first type is the border that divides countries. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, the couple in the story gets caught trying to escape past the border of a dystopian America into Canada. In another example, in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the apparently civilized world of the novel has been separated from, and is oblivious to, what it calls "the Savage World." The Swedish author Karin Boye's novel *Kallocain* "World State", too, presents a society that is oblivious to what life is like across its borders, supposing those living across the border to be a different species, while, in fact, we understand they are anything but.

In Semih Kaplanoğlu's SF movie *Grain*, which I am going to discuss, urban life is separated from the multiethnic rural life with dangerous high-voltage electrical poles that immediately incinerate anyone who dares to cross them. Although the urban areas plagued by riots are kept under control by military force and the dominant ideology (which aims to subjugate the population into subservience), they are afforded certain privileges such as better hygiene, housing, technological advantages, and even brothels. On the other hand, the rural areas suffer from a deadly pandemic, are spied upon all the time by drones, and have almost no wildlife left. It is, therefore, important to note that closed borders are used a) to demonstrate that what is across the border is inferior, contemptible, or insignificant (in *1984*, for instance, what is across the border is, derogatorily, referred to as "the enemy", whereas in *Brave New World*, the people across the border are "savage" and, therefore, inferior and insignificant); b) tight geographical borders also serve the purpose of distorting the reality of life beyond the borders (the borderline between what is real and what is illusory is blurred); and c) they are ultimately used to morally disengage individuals. According to social psychologist Albert Bandura, moral disengagement is a psychological mechanism "at which moral self-censure can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct". (Bandura 102)

For instance, euphemistic labeling, an effective moral disengagement tactic, is used to give positive names to evil organizations or evil actions. In *1984*, the Ministry of Love is actually

a horrendous organization that tortures and kills individuals. The Ministry of Truth, another organization in the novel, propagates lies. In *Grain*, too, despite all the evil in his world, Professor Erol Eron (Jean-Marc Barr), the protagonist and the main geneticist of the food company Novus Vita, prides himself in having a new house in the more privileged urban area. Eren informs Akman (Ermin Bravo), another geneticist, that he was, at least for a while, able to revive the dead soil enough to be cultivated. Akman asks Eren what he received in return. Eren answers that he was “promoted and moved into a better house.” This shows that Eren has limited awareness of the suffering around him and sees no reason to feel guilty about the advantages he reaps, which are ultimately used to protect the privileged urban areas and the profits of his company at the cost of the rest. Eren uses diffusion of responsibility to morally disengage himself: he feels like a cog in a machine who does what he is told, with no personal responsibility for the impact of his actions at all.

Borders can be said to make residents morally disengaged merely by relying on the fact that seeing is a much stronger humanizing factor than hearing. When we hear things, we rely on truth-claims without experiencing things for ourselves. As an instance of the humanizing power of seeing, Albert Bandura cites a Pulitzer Prize winning photograph “that captured the anguished cries of a little girl whose clothes were burned off by the napalm bombing of her village”, believing that “This single humanisation of inflicted destruction probably did more to turn the American public against the war than the countless reports led by journalists. (Bandura 108) In *Grain*, the fact that Professor Eren sees with his own eyes the realities beyond the borders of the Urban areas (dearth, hunger, epidemic on the one hand, and discovering fertile soil, woods beyond a wall, and an ant carrying grain at the end of the film on the other) that make him hesitate about going to his city. In Dick’s novel, as another instance of the power of seeing over hearing, it is seeing the singer Luba Luft’s reaction to fear at her own death—“her eyes faded and the colour dimmed from her face, leaving it cadaverous” (Dick 130)—that makes the bounty hunter Deckard decide not to kill her.

It seems, however, that the most important function of closed borders is to create a sense of helplessness in individuals. In the late sixties, Martin Seligman conducted a series of experiments on dogs that came to be known as the theory of “Learned Helplessness.” In their experiments, out of three groups of dogs, two groups were administered electric shocks and a third group were put on harnesses and later released. While group two could stop the shock by pressing a lever, group three had no control over the shocks. Later, all the three groups were put inside shuttle boxes with two chambers inside divided by a low barrier. This time, the electric shock administered was on one side and the dogs could avoid it by jumping over the barrier. Interestingly, while the dogs in group one and two jumped over the barrier, the dogs in group three just remained in their place and whimpered. Because they had learned previously that nothing they did could actually stop the shock, they didn’t see a point in trying. (Seligman 407) Tight borders in dystopia can function in the same way. The individual feels helpless, as if they have no control over their lives even if they decide to leave the situation they are in and they give up trying. In the movie *Grain*, for example,

leaving the urban areas either means certain death or is extremely difficult. Such mechanisms, however, are not limited to what goes on across the borders of a country; they can effectively be used inside these borders.

### **Type 2: Borders within Dystopia**

The second type of border exists within the borders of dystopias and divides the minority from the supposedly obedient majority. Perhaps one of the main ways minorities are depicted in the SF genre is as androids, especially in Dick's fiction. Androids in both Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and its film adaptations *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) are different from humans and therefore subject to persecution and killing. Social psychology suggests that humans mostly have sympathy for what resembles them, what they are associated with, and what is closer to them in space and time. (Zimbardo 131) What is not associated with us or least resembles us, is not related to us and feels removed from us, arousing little sympathy. When a majority finds a minority least resembling it or associated with it, acts of dehumanization become easier.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, even though Deckard at some point doubts whether he really is human or android, we are made sure that he is a human and not an android. In *Blade Runner* the movie, however, deliberately breaks the boundaries between human and android by raising the question whether the blade runner Deckard himself might be an android (called replicants in the movie). In *Blade Runner 2049*, however, there is proof that androids are closely associated with humans. What differentiates this work from its two predecessors, however, is that Deckard's replicant lover, Rachael, who is dead, is discovered to have given birth 28 years before, breaking the boundaries between human and android by giving birth to the first half-human, half-android child. Isabel Miller emphasizes that the crux of the last film, unlike both Dick's novel and Ridley Scott's adaptation, is less "epistemological" than "psychoanalytic" (emphasizing the father figure and "the primal scene"): androids are manufactured and the initial question is if they were sentient beings in a Cartesian sense, but the question in *Blade Runner 2049* has become: are they "born" too? This question sets K (Ryan Gosling), the replicant protagonist, on a quest to find out if he is the first born android. The authorities in this movie do not want this fact to be known however; as Miller emphasizes K's female boss, Lt. Joshi (Robin Wright) is "intent on creating boundaries and borders". (Miller 194) Joshi justifies that "The world is built on a wall. It separates kind. Tell either side there's no wall, you bought a war. Or a slaughter". (*Blade Runner 2049* 26:00-27:00)

One of the most significant mechanisms that can divide the members of a society is highlighting or exaggerating the dissimilarities and downsizing the commonalities, especially to make the minority feel that they do not belong in the society that they are actually a part of. Mechanisms of moral disengagement such as de-individuation, demonization, blaming the minority for the problems of a society are also effective tools for creating a border. One of the ways to achieve this is to attach dehumanizing and over-generalizing labels to the minority. In the novel,

for instance, the character Phil Resch refers to androids as “murderous illegal aliens.” (Dick 62) In *Blade Runner 2049*, replicants are still “retired”, not killed. Numbers (or letters, as with *Blade Runner 2049*’s protagonist K) also serve the purpose of de-individuation. Philip E. Wegner, by drawing a parallel between the US policies under Trump, and, similarly believing that replicants in both movies are symbols of immigrants and outsiders draws our attention to such tactics in hating androids for no apparent reason and calling them “skinners” who might even “eat children”. (Wegner 137) What is anonymous moves further away from us in our minds and becomes less familiar, and is, therefore, more easily treated as an object. In dystopia, usually because of the psychological and regional borders that create a rift between people of different cultural, linguistic, or ethnic backgrounds, the majority in power do not come into direct and first-person contact with those in the minority and instead of experiencing and knowing the minority’s culture for themselves (such as making friends, knowing each other on an individual level, getting to enjoy and celebrate their differences), they rely on false truth claims and distorted representation of the minority that have little if any truth in them and are intended to subjugate and dehumanize them. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the fact that a baby has been born to an android is not just a possible “a symbol in the struggle” to emancipate replicants, (Wegner 138) but will also prove them to be far more similar to humans than has been shown. Keren Omry considers this birth in the movie to be (at least initially) a significant factor in actuating K to behave responsibly and unite Deckard (Harrison Ford) with his daughter Ana (Carla Juri), who is the real miracle child. (Omry 111) But both Omry and Sean Guynes conclude that it is the fact that K realized that he was not the chosen one that leads him take the right moral stance. While it is K’s mistake in thinking that he himself was the miracle child helped him to fight against his de-individuation and made him empathize more with both humans and other replicants, it was, as Guynes reminds us, K’s realization that he was part of a people, “a beat in the rhythm, a moment in the flow,” irrespective of whether he was the chosen one or not, which ultimately made him act morally. (Guynes 148)

### **Type 3: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Borders**

The third type of border is both interpersonal and intrapersonal. It is an indispensable corollary of the previous two types of borders. Firstly, it is important that people spy on each other. Although this subject is not a central theme in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Grain*, mistrust between people, as an inevitable consequence, is seen in both. The world of *Blade Runner 2049* is similar to *Grain*’s wasteland; nature and animals are mostly dead; one cannot know whether a person is a replicant, a spy, or a replicant friend belonging to the underground movement. In *Grain*, too, the existence of riots, prison camps, military rule, and drones all mean that people cannot trust each other. Fear is the psychological mechanism by which dystopias and despotic governments operate: it is the opposite of a feeling of trust. What we fear we cannot trust, and what we do not know arouses suspicion and mistrust. In dystopias, this fear is essential for the ruling power as a tool for controlling the people. One’s spouse can be a spy. That is why family ties and intimacy in relationships are targeted, discouraged, or forbidden by the dystopian regime. The fact that no one is able to trust another person, even those closest to one, means that the totalitarian regime is

trying to give its citizens the sense that none of their actions, or what they express as opinions, are, or can be, hidden from them, or remain unknown to the ruling power. This acute sense of being surveilled is, in turn, internalized to the point where one expects to be unable to trust their loved ones and acts accordingly.

Here, we enter the realm of the individual, the secret self that can be hidden from others and is the only safe place for the person. Hence, in dystopian societies, the person creates a border that can widely divide their inner self (the real self that is known to themselves) and a social self (which is in shape the dystopian regime requires of its citizens). Therefore, a border is created within the individual (intra-persona border). But the dystopian ruling power does not want this secret self to exist; it wants to subjugate the totality of the individual, hence the Thought Police, and the spying drones.

In *Grain*, in the scene where professor Eren and Akman are sitting around a fire, Eren tells Akman the reason he crossed the border was to look for him. Akman tells him that “you’d better look for yourself.” The self in “yourself” can be interpreted as the self that has been taken away by the ruling power. In *1984*, the Party is cognizant of the fact that the inner self of the individual must be erased and replaced by the ideal citizen that will ensure its continued survival and domination. The individual who has not completely internalized the teachings of the regime must know that even if they were able to keep their thoughts to themselves, the Party might find ways of accessing their secret thoughts, feelings, and fears.

#### **Type 4: Temporal Borders**

In *Grain* and *Blade Runner 2049*, too, one would expect “splintered selves,” although other types of borders are marked as stronger themes in the two films. In both films, the past is denied, which is the last of the four major border types in our division, namely “the temporal border.”

As an example of the temporal border in *Grain*, the young man who accompanies professor Eren across the border tells him that if he remembers “correctly,” his childhood camp “was right behind” the hills. *Grain* leaves more questions unanswered. What was Eren’s own past? What exactly went wrong in the film? The movie appears to be more focused on how things have turned out than what went on before. There might be two reasons for this. Firstly, *Grain* builds upon other major themes in the SF genre by suggesting that the planet was plagued by chemical wars, synthetic products, and authoritarianism; corporate wealth and power took over and the earth became uninhabitable and was subsequently divided into three main parts: “the city,” “the untended nature,” and the supposedly “dead lands.” Its focus on the present might have another, (more significant) reason: the past is supposed to be insignificant in the film: in dystopian fiction and societies, the borders have a cyclical order. It appears, then, that the stronger the geographical borders of a country or society, the stronger the border dividing the present from the past. Just as the reality of what is across the closed geographical borders is either denigrated, distorted, and/or depicted as malevolent, so is the past, in a similar fashion, denigrated, distorted, or considered insignificant.

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