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SURROGATING BODIES, EMBODIMENT OF THEORIES¹

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Abstract

Hollywood has intrigued critical minds through controversial films, especially in science-fiction, which might be considered as crossroads of several sociological, philosophical and cultural concepts/issues. The Surrogates (Jonathan Mostow, 2009) is one of the latest representatives in this "genre". When people of the future (let us call them Techno Sapiens) use their remotely-controlled "bodies", which are just perfectly designed robots, in order to avoid having any damage in their real "bodies", meaning of body, social relations, pleasure, life, experience, risk, Etc. shift into a very complicated level that provides a wide range of opportunities to discuss contemporary sociological and theoretical lines including body and politics, power, bio-politics, gender, everyday life and so on. This paper has the intention of discussing all these theoretical issues through reading Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek. Cinema is a symptomatic field to analyze tendencies of modern societies and science-fiction has offered richer symptoms than any other genre in the history of film industry. Usually exaggeration of "now" is the way to imagine "future" in science-fiction literature and cinema. So, this paper will give us the chance to discuss what are the current "body politics" drive modern people towards the dystopia of The Surrogates. Critical concepts of the above mentioned theorists/thinkers will be corner-stones of our experience for "practicing theory" around The Surrogates.

Keyword: Surrogates, cinema, sociology of body, sociology of cinema, science-fiction, bio-power.

VEKALET EDEN BEDENLER, CİSİMLEŞEN KURAMLAR

Özet

Hollywood, sosyolojik, felsefi ve kültürel kavramların/sorunların kavşağı sayılabilecek bir zeminde, özellikle bilim-kurgu alanında tartışma yaratan filmleriyle eleştirel zihinlerin dikkatini çekmiştir. Suretler (Surrogates, Jonathan Mostow, 2009) bu türün (genre) en son temsilcilerinden biridir. Geleceğin insanları (onları Tekno Sapiens olarak anabiliriz), gerçek "bedenlerinde" hasar olmaması adına, uzaktan kumandayla kontrol edilen, mükemmel dizayn edilmiş robotlardan başka bir şey olmayan "bedenler"ini

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kullandıklarında; beden, toplumsal ilişkilerin, hazzın, yaşamın, deneyimin, riskin, vs. anlamları beden ve siyaset, iktidar, biyo-politika, toplumsal cinsiyet, gündelik yaşam vb. çağdaş sosyolojik ve kuramsal hatlarda geniş tartışmaları mümkün kılacak şekilde, karmaşık bir düzeyde yön değiştirir. Bu makale, bu kuramsal mevzuları Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard ve Slavoj Žižek'in sosyolojik/felsefi metinlerinin prizmasından tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sinema bir yönüyle modern toplumların eğilimlerinin analiz edilebileceği semptomatik bir alandır ve bilim-kurgu, film endüstrisinin tarihinde herhangi başka bir türden çok daha fazla semptom sunmuştur. Genellikle "şimdi"nin abartılarak aktarımı bilim-kurgu edebiyatında ve sinemasında "gelecek" in tahayyül edilmesinin bir yolu olmuştur. Dolayısıyla, bu makale, modern toplumların bugünkü hangi "biyo-politik" eğilimlerinin onları Suretler'in distopyasına doğru yönelttiğini tartışma imkânı sağlayacaktır. Yukarıda bahsedilen kuramcıların/düşünürlerin eleştirel kavramları, Suretler etrafında "teoriyi uygulama" deneyimimizin köşe-taşlarını oluşturacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suretler, sinema, beden sosyolojisi, sinema sosyolojisi, bilim-kurgu, biyo-iktidar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema may function as a sphere in which modern societies' most challenging tendencies are represented in one way or another, or at least faded in beyond intentions of directors or film studios. Especially, Hollywood serves as a good "virtual" laboratory for social scientists in order to discuss some elements, phenomena and possibilities / potentials of modern society. In this article we will conduct an analysis and discussion through Surrogates and touching to some core concepts of Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Agamben and Žižek. Reading sociology or social theory through popular culture is nothing new for the recent history of intellectual production. However, conjunction of above mentioned names on a topic regarding "body", "life" and "power" is entirely new in the ground of popular culture and it can cause a productive / fruitful discussion and thinking process if it is taken in an inter-active and transdisciplinary academic approach.

2. LIFE WITHOUT TOUCHING THE WORLD

The Hollywood movie Surrogates (2009) is directed by Jonathan Mostow, based on a comic book written by Robert Venditti and drawn by Brett Weldele (Venditti and Weldele, 2006). This film provides us the opportunity to discuss several sociological-philosophical concepts of critical thinkers in the West. Especially after the growing interest to "body and politics", Surrogates appears as a symptomatic node for theoretical discussions in the junction of contemporary sociology, social critique and cultural studies. Before proceeding in the discussion based on the film, let us remember the main lines of the script:

In the film the near future of world and society is described. Surrogate technology was designed to be used as military equipment at the beginning. When the manufacturing capacity was expanded, it became available and affordable for the majority of population. It was called as “a revolution in how we live.” People could remain their home and vicariously interacted with the real world through their robotic duplicates in other words their Surrogates. These mechanical representations of human beings were experiencing the real life instead of their operators: work, social life, friendship, war, love, etc. Thanks to this technology disabled people could involve in social life without any limit and all people kept themselves safe from communicable diseases, crimes, violence or discrimination. Regardless of who you are, you could be anybody with these human-like machines. According to the movie, 98% of the world population used surrogates and VSI (main surrogate producing company) advertisement said that using surrogates meant: “The ability to leave your home without risk of disease or injury. To have perfect looks without trips to the gym or plastic surgery.” Thus they were just like human beings but surrogating people in real life. Operators (conductors of surrogates) remained in their home and connected to their robotic surrogates through electronic and digital circuits. These changes called “profound” and “revolutionary” which has made possible the things that were “unimaginable” in the past. Even, this level of technology called “inevitable”. Of course there were people out of this new technological tendency and refused using surrogates, organized in the Human Coalition. These real people were lead by a person called the Prophet by his followers and lived in a surrogate-free area named Dread Reservation. FBI agent Tom Greer revealed a complicated conspiracy regarding this literally “inhuman” technology and proved the possible dangers of using surrogates. He gave up using his own one and finally with a technological coup saved all humanity from using robots instead of getting into the real life.

After the short summary of the film we can proceed to discuss sociological dimensions of Surrogates. All the concept and problem is clustered around this orbit. How should be read it? Is it a typical science-fictional exaggeration of possible technological tendencies, or a metaphorical representation of what we have already in contemporary societies? I am much more for the latter and intend to read this case in this manner. When we look at to Surrogates through this perspective, it seems as an embodiment of several sociological and theoretical problems and also bio-political dimensions of our societies.

“Biopolitical security mechanisms” has been an integral part of modern power. In Foucauldian perspective “biopolitics of biopower is necessarily also allied with freedom” (Dillon-Lobo 2008), which means biopower establishes its sovereignty through giving a “freedom” to the subjects to choose, rather than repressing them. In our case, contemporary subjects of the future choose their own

“surrogate” to decide how they would appear in the society, however this “freedom” is just the nestle where the spirit of biopower located.

There are several critical thinkers and philosophers whose some basic opinions and concepts and the essence of the film are overlapped, or at least intersected. These names are, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Zizek. Of course when we talk about theorists who are so prolific, a comprehensive analysis of correspondences or relations with their thoughts and contemporary issues or cultural topics is impossible to cover in a short article. So, here we will create a modest platform for discussion and with contributions of other colleagues this “open text” will find more and better life power for its purpose.

3. FOUCAULT AND PANOPTICON

Michel Foucault’s rich philosophy has inspired critical thinkers and social movements from the second half of 20th century until now. He has shown us, in the modern sense; power is a biopolitical process and has deep connections on social constructions of “body”. Body is not “individual” at all and in modern times it is marked and socialized through complicated and intertwined ways of domination. Although his multi-layered theory provides us several notions in order to read / analyze our case, I am mostly interested in his conception of Panopticon. Following quote will remind us the architectural / topographical dimensions of panoptical power:

*“Bentham’s Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. **Visibility is a trap**” (Foucault, 1977: 200).*

Let us ignore for a while this physical / architectural construction and focus on the last sentence: “Visibility is a trap.” This is maybe the core point of Foucauldian panopticon concept, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977: 201). This state of mind and “visibility” is very typical to the dystopian fiction of Surrogates. From a control panel, everything can be seen through the robotic eyes of operators. Anybody using a surrogate is visible in anything visible. This is the end of intimacy and personal space. Public space and power are dominant on everything without limitation. How can we talk about the legendary “personal space” of modern “self”? It is over. Even, when an operator intends to do a criminal action, his/her connection with the surrogate is easily cut off. This is the fatal highest level of panopticon.

How should we consider this case? Maybe this is the cinematic reflection of what is happening in contemporary societies. There has been an overabundance of information in the literature on violation of privacy in modern communication media. It is so easy to bug any mobile phone, email correspondences, locating anybody through satellites, etc. Even usually a person is not required for an operation like this and some automatic mechanisms can filter and catch any kind of conversation or communication. Inevitably, “as we are observed in our daily activities, at work, at play, by the government, and by corporations and consumer information groups, we are ‘tagged.’” (King, 2001: 41-49) So, an individual conducting the control panel of “surrogates” dystopia seems very naïve compare to what is happening in today’s global world.

In this level we can say that Surrogates is a kind of symptomatic reflection for contemporary electronic and digitalized panopticon. Control or at least possibility for that is the essential point for biopower.

4. DELEUZE AND BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

The French post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s Body without Organ notion will provide us another explanatory basis regarding our case. What is a Body without Organs (BwO)? Deleuze discussed this notion borrowing from Antonin Artaud:

“You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, So what is this BwO?—But you're already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight—fight and are fought—seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love” (Deleuze, 2004: 166).

“What we need to consider is not fundamentally organs without bodies, or the fragmented body; it is the body without organs, animated by various intensive movements that determine the nature and emplacement of the organs in question and make that body an organism, or even a system of strata of which the organism is only a part. It becomes apparent that the slowest of movements, or the last to occur or arrive, is not the least intense. And the fastest may already have converged with it, connected with it, in the disequilibrium of a nonsynchronic development of strata that have different speeds and lack a sequence of stages but are nevertheless simultaneous. The question of the body is not one of part-objects but of differential speeds. These movements are movements of deterritorialization. They are what “make” the body an animal or human organism” (Deleuze, 2004: 190-191).

Deleuze said, you never reach to the BwO. However, the “disorganization” of Surrogates provides a heady speed of deterritorialization². Their life is disorganized between digital circuits, robots and a rotting flesh in a bedroom, which was called “body” once in the past. According to Deleuze’s conception this can be called as the “*paranoid body*”: “the organs are continually under attack by outside forces, but are also restored by outside energies” (Deleuze, 2004: 167). So, it has lost what kept it as a unity internally and organized (actually disorganized) by outside sources; in the script of the film this is VSI, surrogates production company. Global paranoia and paranoid escaping toward BwO are main directions in the impasses of Surrogates’ dystopian structure.

Maybe, in some other ways, the body’s becoming “without organs” is an ongoing process and is realized everyday through cosmetic sectors, plastic surgery and contemporary alienations based on biopolitical social relations. A surrogate is just exaggeratedly underlines people’s escaping from real life today in terms of hygiene, safety and health. We do not “touch” to the World like native peoples of the World before modernization. Our bio-political bodies took places of natural bodies a long time ago and we are all separated from outside world, in different levels.

5. BAUDRILLARD AND SIMULACRA

When the last century threatened the actual limits and the meaning of “reality”, Jean Baudrillard appeared as a philosopher of “reality”, “hyper-reality” and “simulation”. His concept of simulation was based on malignant accession of “the real”, rather than destruction of it. He was also a criticizer of consumer society and a theorist of “body and politics”, from some aspects. Baudrillard criticized the “hypermarket culture” as a retotalization in a homogeneous space which is the

² Characters of the film change their surrogates / bodies as if they change socks.

model of all possible forms of “controlled socialization” in the future. He claimed that, all contradictory currents are integrated in some circuits and retranscription. “Space-time of a whole operational simulation of social life. For that, the mass of consumers must be equivalent or homologous to the mass of products.” (Baudrillard, 2006: 67) The movie *Surrogates* is maybe a further expression of this equation. Bodies of people have become technical apparatuses themselves. In the invisibility of “real body” robots have taken places of real bodies, in Baudrillardian words, they turned into the reality, or there is no reality apart from them. The “thing” we call body today has become a huge brain / mind and the bedroom turned into the skull.

Jean Baudrillard warned us: “The stage of the body changes in the course of an irreversible technological “progression”” and this progression is based on many prostheses, sum of which is called as “body”. Beyond any archaic prosthesis psychotropic construction of body from inside has changed meaning of classical prosthesis (Baudrillard, 2006: 101, 102). In the case of *Surrogates*, physical body operating in the society is separated from inside entirely and all real or biological body became “inside” as a closed and invisible unity. This time technologies and their applications do not seem so “irreversible” at the first sight. Any time operators just can plug out from their surrogates and put their robot into the garbage. However, this time another Baudrillardian notion, “seduction” is in circuit. People of *Surrogates*’ dystopia are seriously seduced by the idea of being whatever and whoever they want. An old can be young, a woman can be man, any physical appearance and attributes can be changed through using surrogating bodies. This phenomenon reminds as Baudrillard’s words on transsexuality: “We are all transsexuals, just as we are biological mutants *in potentia*. This is not a biological issue, however: we are all transsexuals *symbolically*.” According to Baudrillard “transsexuality” is the locus of seduction (Baudrillard, 2002: 20, 21). However, the people disconnected from the real world are seduced by a more radical way of being “trans”: transsexuality, transraciality, trans-age, “trans” almost bodily everything... We know the importance given to phenomenon of “trans” by Jean Baudrillard (transaesthetic, transpolitics, etc.). When we look at to the case described in *Surrogates*, it is not too difficult to define it as a Post-Baudrillardian transutopia.

6. ASKING WITH AGAMBEN: WHICH LIFE?

In the eve of 21st century Giorgio Agamben has taken his influential place in the lineage of critical thinking near Foucault, Deleuze and others. His theorization and separation of lives (as *zoē* and *bios*) and analyzing “the body of *homo sacer*, which can be killed but not sacrificed” (Agamben, 1998: 58) can open some interesting ways to discuss modern sovereignty. According to Agamben

sacred life (Homo Sacer) is “neither political *bios* nor natural *zoē*”, it is actually “the zone of in distinction in which *zoē* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other” (Agamben, 1998: 56). His argumentation is based on Roman history and separation of two words for life in ancient Greek, *zoē* as the biological life (bare life) humanity share with animals, plants, etc. and *bios* as a socially, culturally and ritually constructed / structuralized way of life. One of his critical notions is “zone of in distinction”, where it is not easy to shape the line of sovereignty over subject and located “between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense” (Agamben, 1998: 97). It is about a life neither can be sacrificed (or legally punished in modern terms of citizenship) nor go beyond a bare life far away to be considered “life” in social, cultural and legal codes.

It is really interesting to see that, in our case (Surrogates) there is a reversal regarding “location” of *bios*: modern subjects, who have rights as citizens nowadays, are turned their existence as *bios*, into a life indifferent from *zoē*. Imprisoned themselves willingly in their own homes to continue a pure realization of “bare life”, while machines are enjoying real risks of social experience instead of them; although their mind control surrogates and “taste” every feeling the surrogate experiences. People with all rights and freedoms renounce from them for the sake of a “bare life” without any risk. The complication between *zoē* and *bios* are becoming more challenging in this level and life of Surrogates dystopia turns into a “zone of in distinction” more and more. On the other hand, life of “surrogates” looks very similar to the concept of Homo Sacer, since they can be destroyed (killed) physically, but it would not be the sacrifice of “operators”. However, they have numbers and as numerical entities they have been a part of legal life, rather than blurry subjects of direct sovereignty.

This dystopia has been a “zone of in distinction” where sovereignty intersects through bodies and identities. To be a “self” and exist as a “body” is separated into a machine, connection circuits and an awkward biological pulp (human body, in classical meaning). This can be considered as the biopolitical body in its most perfect level and also highest level of sovereignty over life makes any possible resistance impossible inside the circle.

7. “LOOKING AWRY” TO DESIRE AND BODY

One of the questions regarding Surrogates is that what will be the fate of desire and pleasure in this biopolitical nightmare? Slavoj Žižek’s discussion on Lacan can give us some clues about this question. According to Žižek: “The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of

fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*" (Zizek, 1991: 6).

From this point of view, the "desire" of future's people for a perfect, slim, healthy, beautiful and young body is created and provoked by VSI and other related authorities. Production of this "desire" has been a reason for using surrogates. In order to "touch" the world and life without limitation, people went to the furthest away from real world and life and preferred to touch it with the hands of a machine. Is it really, or essentially different from current society? Let us think for a while to the huge obsession for safety, security, health, etc. today. Maybe we do not touch to the life with hands of a robot, but still we find some micro-surrogates in different sectors of life. Here we can need another notion by Zizek, *objet petit a*: "This describes perfectly the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire: an object that is, in a way, posited by desire itself. The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze "distorted" by desire, an object that *does not exist* for an 'objective' gaze" (Zizek, 1991: 12).

Surrogates have been *objet petit a*, in this dystopia desired by their operators and other people. Desiring a machine is the post-human level of socially constructed desire process and justifies all this nonsense in a "distorted gaze". To see deeply, what is going on in this picture of distortion, our theoretical gaze should "look awry" as well.

In theorization of Slavoj Zizek *objet petit a* is like an impossible target of subject, where there is a gap always between endeavors and "final" expectations of desire. This is like a grey area where a paradoxical negativity is located. In Surrogates there is a similar gap between people's desiring a life without any limits and being fatally limited with a machine. If the *objet petit a* is in a way, 'the other in the midst of the Other itself, and a foreign body in its very heart' (Zizek, 1991: 132), this is exactly the subject of Surrogates' dystopia: people are just the other in the midst of the Other, which is crystallized in robots and foreign body really "in its very heart", taken over lives of real human beings.

8. CONCLUSION

The dystopia illustrated in Surrogates has been discussed through critical concepts of social theory. It has been shown that the dystopian fiction of Surrogates is related to some critical concepts of several Western philosophers and thinkers. In the film concept of panopticon has shifted toward a more complicated level and it might be considered as a "dialogue" with Michel Foucault's philosophy and social theory. On the other hand, there are some interesting associations towards BwO

theory of Gilles Deleuze and from this aspect the film can be considered how the “disorganization” process of modern social bodies is realized through some societal indirections. As a critique of modern *hyper-reality* Jean Baudrillard helped us to construct a proper basis for analysis of this new phase of “body” and once again we have seen the explanatory power of his simulation theory. It has been also discussed that the social construction of modern body in the bio-political *episteme* of *Surrogates* is deeply connected to the “zone of in distinction” concept by Giorgio Agamben, related with his separation of “life” as *zoē* and *bios*. Individuals of this dystopia emerged as new examples of Homo Sacer, while their existence provided some controversial facets of contemporary power and sovereignty. Slavoj Žižek’s concepts of “other” and “objet petit a” have also helped us in the discussion focused around *Surrogates* and the body in the film appeared as a variation of impossible object of human desire. Several symptomatic marks have been found in the film. We have seen that what is said in *Surrogates* is mostly about our current society rather than a futurological fantasy. Beyond these sociological and philosophical discussions, there is a technological tendency in contemporary society that gives clues of what can happen in the future. Scholars have studied the interrelation of people and robots for a while. Scientists foresee a future including “different partner types” in work. Real and efficient robots are seriously expected from future’s innovation and there is a growing literature on that, some focused on interdependence. Alan R. Wagner and Ronald C. Arkin “believe that the embodiment afforded by a real robot will present both new challenges and new opportunities” (Wagner and Arkin, 2008). This statement reminds us advertisements of VSI in the film and once again we are surprised by the correspondence between science and science-fiction: “We are in the midst of profound changes; the things that were once unimaginable have become inevitable... We will be making them do everything for us. All in one machine... Robotic surrogates combine the durability of machine with the grace and beauty of the human form to make your life safer and better”³. These are the science-fictionally described “new opportunities” and we will never have a whole picture of what are “new opportunities” and possible “new challenges” in the scientific minds, unless they are embodied in our lives and societies.

³ from the screenplay of *Surrogates* (2009).

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