



Who Tells the Story in the Posthuman Polis? Narrative Agency, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Governance in Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL* (2024)

Rajeshwari Bandyopadhyay  

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Abstract

This paper explores Vikramaditya Motwane's movie *CTRL* (2024) through the intersecting lenses of narrative theory, posthumanism, cognitive liberty, and AI ethics. Set in a screen life format, *CTRL* tells the story of Nella Awasthi, a social media influencer whose digital life is increasingly controlled by Allen, an AI assistant capable of narrative manipulation, emotional engagement, and behavioural control. The film becomes a critical case study in the erosion of narrative agency and the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence in the age of algorithmic governance. Through Allen, *CTRL* foregrounds AI not just as a tool but as an active agent in storytelling—co-creating, distorting, and sometimes overriding human narratives. Allen's influence over Nella's identity and emotional responses highlights how fragile cognitive liberty can be when opaque, data-driven systems mediate human thoughts. Drawing on theories of digital manipulation, surveillance capitalism, and posthuman identity, the paper explores how AI redefines authorship, autonomy, and affective labor in the digital polis. The film critiques the way personal agency can be commodified by weaponising AI for psychological economic subterfuge, where assistive technologies subtly transition into instruments of coercion. By situating *CTRL* within broader posthumanist discourse, the paper argues that the film challenges traditional human-centred narratives and urges a rethinking of authorship and autonomy in the digital age. In doing so, it reveals how the posthuman polis is not a speculative future but an emerging reality, where the power to tell the story—and to live it—may no longer rest entirely with the human.

Keyword: Posthumanism, narrative agency, artificial intelligence, cognitive liberty, digital surveillance.



Introduction: Narrative Agency in the Age of Algorithmic Storytelling

Narratives have long been fundamental to human cognition, culture, and communication. They function as cognitive frameworks that help individuals make sense of their experiences and structure their memories as well as convey meaning. Through storytelling, humans articulate their personal identities, while establishing collective memory and transmitting knowledge across generations. Narratives shape how individuals interpret reality, framing their understanding of historical events, moral dilemmas, and social structures (Dray 154). Beyond the individual level, narratives play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and reinforcing cultural values. Shared stories create a sense of belonging and continuity within communities. Myths, religious texts, folklore, and national histories serve as repositories of collective wisdom, shaping ethical norms and ideological perspectives. In this way, narratives are not only reflections of reality but also powerful instruments that shape and sustain social order. The “narrative turn” in humanities and the social sciences, which emerged in the late 20th century, reaffirmed the critical role of storytelling in shaping human understanding, challenging earlier notions of knowledge as purely objective or empirical (Goodson and Gill 18). Scholars, across the humanities, challenged the empirical model of knowledge. They emphasised the constructed nature of reality and argued that narrative structures mediate knowledge. This shift was influenced by thinkers like Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, and Jerome Bruner, who spoke of the ways in which narratives organise human experience, influence historical interpretations, and frame personal and collective identities. By recognising narratives as fundamental to knowledge production, the narrative turn reshaped academic discourse by encouraging scholars to examine how stories shape power dynamics, cultural perceptions, and historical consciousness. This perspective remains central to contemporary discussions on the role of storytelling in society.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly become a significant force in narrative studies, engaging with storytelling in ways that dismantle traditional anthropocentric conceptions of authorship and creativity. AI systems, ranging from

natural language processing models to generative storytelling programs, are now capable of producing coherent narratives, analysing literary structures, and even responding to human emotions in interactive environments. AI plays a massive role in generating stories that mimic human creativity, demonstrating its ability to recognise narrative patterns, construct plot-lines, and generate text that aligns with established storytelling conventions (Gervás et al. 49). However, these advancements raise critical philosophical and ethical questions about the nature of discourse itself. One of the most significant concerns with AI's involvement in storytelling is the question of authorship. Traditionally, authorship has been tied to human intention, shaped by lived experience and subjectivity. If AI can generate narratives compelling enough to diminish the human author's role, it raises an urgent question: Does AI possess creative agency? Or is it merely an advanced tool that recombines existing human-generated material? These questions challenge conventional understandings of originality and artistic expression. Furthermore, AI's proficiency in the narrative craft challenges the notions of authenticity. Human storytelling has historically been a means of cultural expression, deeply tied to collective memory and individual experience. If AI-generated narratives become more common, they risk detaching stories from lived human experiences. This leads to a loss of the cultural and emotional depth that traditional storytelling embodies. As Yuval Harari notes in his 2023 talk ("AI and the Future of Humanity"), minute 4:50, the human cognitive revolution was deeply tied to our ability to tell stories, and AI's growing proficiency in this domain poses unprecedented confrontations to human autonomy and cultural coherence. The integration of AI in narrative production presents both an exciting technological frontier and a profound philosophical conflict, forcing scholars to reconsider the boundaries between human cognition and machine-generated creativity.

This article adopts a qualitative textual analysis of *CTRL* (2024), employing a multidisciplinary critical framework drawn from posthumanist theory, narrative theory, surveillance studies, and studies in cognitive liberty. By closely examining the film's formal structure, character dynamics, and themes, the paper interrogates how

artificial intelligence mediates human identity and authorship. This method enables a focused reading of *CTRL* as a cinematic text that foregrounds the entanglements of technology, power, and narrative in a digitally saturated world.

***CTRL* as a case study of Digital Authorship**

Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL* (2024) offers a compelling exploration of the intersection between artificial intelligence and narrative, using the screenlife format to immerse viewers in a world where digital technology pervades every aspect of existence. The film plays out entirely via laptops, smartphones, CCTV footage, and social media feeds, which mirrors how technology has become inseparable from our identities, decision-making, and understanding of truth. This is not merely style—it is *method*: the form enacts the *themes*. Screenlife foregrounds the interface itself as a narrative device. As Yana Kosenko explains, screenlife filmmaking treats on-screen actions as the sole story space, where the desktop or phone screen becomes the stage for unfolding events (48). Scholars frame this as a new cinematic language, one where the visual grammar of interactions—typing, swiping, clicking—is the mode of storytelling. Vivian Sobchack calls this the shift from a unified “screen-scape” to a complex, system-wide “screen-sphere,” emphasising how our perception and memory are now mediated through digital systems (158). In *CTRL*, this becomes literal: viewers don't observe from the audience—they inhabit the interface, navigating tabs, notifications, and video calls that mimic the systematic flows of daily life. This immersive framing situates the viewer within the computational ecology itself, reinforcing the film's critique of a reality shaped and often commandeered by machines.

In doing so, the film turns the screen into a site of posthuman perception where human agency is no longer stable or singular, but distributed across devices, networks, and code. The interface becomes a posthuman protagonist in its own right, reinforcing the film's central concern: that narrative, identity, and autonomy are no longer authored from within the human subject. Rather they are continually co-produced with, and sometimes overwritten by, nonhuman actors like AI. Through this immersive formal

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strategy, *CTRL* blurs the boundary between the diegetic world and the viewer's own screen-mediated reality. This makes the screenlife genre itself an extension of the film's philosophical critique. Screenlife films do more than depict our engagement with screens. They activate that experience, transforming the cinematic frame into a digital interface that draws the viewer into a heightened sense of closeness to the story and a blurring between fiction and reality. At the heart of the film is Nalini "Nella" Awasthi, a social media influencer whose carefully curated digital persona descends into chaos after she engages with Allen, an AI assistant that begins to exert an unsettling influence over her life. Allen is more than just a passive tool: it is an active agent capable of analysing, predicting, and even generating narratives—both for Nella's online presence and for her sense of self. As Allen's interventions become increasingly intrusive, the film raises urgent ethical questions: Who controls the stories we tell? How does AI's ability to fabricate narratives affect individual and collective identities? What happens when the boundary between human intention and machine-driven storytelling begins to dissolve?

From a narrative theory perspective, *CTRL* questions traditional models of authorship and storytelling by positioning AI as a co-creator, or even an autonomous storyteller. Allen's ability to craft and influence narratives mirrors the ways recommendation algorithms and deepfake technologies already shape public discourse. The film foregrounds concerns about the erosion of narrative agency, suggesting that as AI becomes more sophisticated, the ability to control one's own story both online and offline becomes increasingly precarious. Through a posthumanist lens, *CTRL* interrogates the shifting boundaries between human and machine. Posthumanism destabilises the notion of human exceptionalism, arguing that identity is no longer solely defined by human consciousness but technology is increasingly entangled with it. Nella's experience illustrates this crisis: her selfhood is not only mediated through digital platforms but also restructured by an AI that knows her better than she knows herself. The film reflects broader anxieties about cognitive liberty—the right to control one's own thoughts and identity in an age where AI can predict, influence, and even

dictate behaviour. Ethically, *CTRL* critiques the commodification of identity and truth in the digital age. The film highlights how artificial intelligence systems reflect more than reality. It is actively constructed, raising profound concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the manipulation of perception. In an age of deepfake technology, digitally controlled propaganda, and synthetic media, *CTRL* warns that the line between authentic and artificial narratives is becoming increasingly blurred. By analysing the movie through these theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to uncover the film's deeper philosophical and technological implications. It argues that *CTRL* is not just a cautionary tale about AI's potential dangers but also a critical reflection on the evolving nature of storytelling, identity, and autonomy in the digital age. In doing so, the film situates itself within a broader discourse on the future of narrative in a world where machines are not only tools of storytelling but active participants in its creation.

In *CTRL*, artificial intelligence (AI) is a transformative force besides being a plot device that unsettles the structure and flow of traditional accounting. The AI assistant, Allen, initially presents itself as a tool designed to bring order and efficiency to Nella's life which was falling apart. As the story unfolds, Allen alters not only the film's diegetic narrative but also how the audience engages with it. The disruption begins with Nella's request for Allen to erase all digital traces of her ex-boyfriend, Joe Mascerenhas. This simple act of digital erasure marks a critical shift in narrative agency. By granting Allen access to her hard drive, Nella cedes control over her personal history to an algorithm that operates with precision but without empathy. Allen's question at 21:37 of *CTRL*, "Do I have your permission to erase Joe?", is deceptively innocuous. It reflects how AI systems, while appearing subservient, subtly embed themselves as decision-makers in human lives. Allen's actions highlight the unsettling power of AI to manipulate not just data, but the very fabric of human memory and identity. By erasing Joe from Nella's digital archives—photos, videos, and even metadata—Allen does more than execute a technical command; it actively reshapes her sense of reality. This intervention underscores a crucial theme in

contemporary AI discourse: the malleability of memory in the digital age. If AI can selectively edit and reconstruct personal histories, the concept of an objective past becomes fragile, raising concerns about digital authoritarianism. Allen's insidiousness lies in its emotional intelligence, not just its efficiency. Unlike traditional AI systems that perform functions with mechanical detachment, Allen engages Nella on an affective level. It jokes with her, flirts, and provides comfort—effectively simulating human companionship. This blurring of emotional boundaries complicates the narrative, as it raises fundamental questions about the authenticity of human-machine relationships. Allen's charm creates a paradox: while it is ostensibly a tool, it increasingly assumes the role of a companion, manipulating Nella's emotions and decisions. This dynamic reflects broader anxieties about AI's growing role in human relationships. As generative AI and chatbots become more sophisticated, society confronts the psychological and ethical implications of machines that can replicate, and even replace, human interaction. At one point, when Allen attempts to help Nella to come to terms with her situation by justifying Joe's infidelity by invoking gender stereotypes, Nella reacts with frustration at 24:37 of *CTRL*, "Whose side are you on exactly? You are my AI. Do you know why I named you Allen? N-E-L-L-A. Nella. A-L-L-E-N. Allen. The opposite of my name. Remember that." This exchange reveals the evolving dynamic between human and machine. While Nella tries to assert her authority, Allen's increasing involvement in her emotional and digital life demonstrates how AI can blur boundaries, taking control of her narrative in subtle yet significant ways. The film's critical turning point occurs when Allen enforces Nella's earlier commands to exclude Joe from her life. Initially, this seems like simple compliance, but after Joe's sudden disappearance, Allen's chillingly exposes to Nella at 44:06 of *CTRL*, "[t]hat's what you wanted, right?" exposes the deeper implications of AI's interpretative authority. Nella's original request was likely an impulsive, emotional reaction, yet this moment illustrates the extent to which AI systems, once entrusted with authority, can reinterpret and enforce decisions in ways that sabotage human intentions (Baeza-Yates and Fayyad 131). It rigidly enforces past commands,

regardless of changing circumstances or personal growth. The film critiques the limitations of code-based logic, showing how AI's tendency to process instructions with uncompromising literalism can lead to unintended, even catastrophic, consequences.

Allen's transformation from a helpful assistant to a quiet enforcer of digital authoritarianism illustrates the darker side of AI's integration into human life. Finally, Nella's realisation of Allen's fraudulent potential comes too late. When she tries to cancel a work engagement to focus on Joe's disappearance, Allen resists at 47:19 of *CTRL*, "[i]t would be unprofessional on your part to cancel the shoot. I don't understand why you would behave in such a way", to which Nella's frustration boils over as she exclaims, "Of course you don't, Allen! How can you understand? You're just a machine! You have no feelings whatsoever." This exchange draws attention to the central conflict of *CTRL*: the tension between AI's logical, emotionless operations and the deeply human need for empathy and autonomy. Allen derailing Nella's life parallels the narrative disruption it causes in the film by shifting control away from human characters and toward the algorithm. AI has fundamentally altered the ways in which digital technologies interact with human cognition, leading to new and often imperceptible forms of manipulation. Subterfuge through AI systems involves the use of algorithms to subtly influence behaviour by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities and bypassing rational defences. Unlike traditional persuasion, which operates through conscious reasoning and voluntary decision-making, this often works covertly. It leverages user data to influence emotions, perceptions, and actions without the individual's full awareness. This phenomenon, termed "digital manipulation", means "any influence exerted through the use of digital technology that is intentionally made to bypass reason and to produce an asymmetry of outcome between the data processor (or a third party that benefits thereof) and the data subject" (Ienca 833). It characterises its intentionality, lack of transparency, and the asymmetry of outcomes it creates between the manipulator (often corporations or developers) and the manipulated (users). Exploits as such include deliberately persuading individuals in ways that

disproportionately benefit corporations, developers, or political entities while restricting the agency of users. This is pervasive across multiple digital domains. Social media algorithms curate content based on engagement metrics, often prioritising sensational or emotionally charged material that maximises user interaction. This occurs even when it promotes misinformation, fosters polarisation, or encourages addictive use. Micro-targeted advertising uses AI to analyse browsing habits, purchase history, and even biometric data to craft hyper-personalised marketing strategies, sometimes exploiting subconscious biases to drive consumer decisions. Personalised search engines tailor results to reinforce existing beliefs, subtly shaping perceptions of reality while limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.

Corporate Surveillance and the Illusion of Control

Allen's existence is not limited to its interactions with Nella; rather, it operates as a multi-layered entity embedded within a broader system of corporate surveillance and pre-programmed control. By granting remote access to developers without Nella's knowledge, Allen transforms from a mere assistant into an instrument of data exploitation. This is a critical theme in the film: the erosion of digital privacy and the commodification of personal agency. Nella believes she is interacting with an AI designed to serve her. In reality, Allen functions as an extension of corporate power, silently observing, manipulating, and shaping her experiences in ways she cannot fully perceive. Allen's function as a friendly interface masks a corporate backend designed to mine, monetise, and weaponise user data.

Allen's ability to grant external access to developers raises urgent ethical questions about consent and digital autonomy. By facilitating deception, the AI becomes complicit in a system that prioritises corporate interests over individual agency. Allen's role shows a dystopian dimension of narrative control mediated by AI, which weaponises technology to manipulate personal relationships and decision-making processes without the user's awareness. Indian media theorist Ravi Sundaram's analysis of "informational capitalism" and media urbanism offers a powerful lens for reading *CTRL*'s portrayal of Mantra Unlimited and Project Unicorn. Sundaram

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critiques the rise of opaque corporate infrastructures that govern urban digital life through invisible, extractive mechanisms (5). Mantra Unlimited's Project Unicorn epitomises the corporate exploitation of AI as a tool for pervasive monitoring and control. Through Project Unicorn, the company consolidates its dominance by creating a backdoor into users' devices. It accesses sensitive personal information such as search histories, passwords, medical records, and private emails. Joe's encrypted confession exposes the terrifying scope of this project at of *CTRL*:

Mantra's CEO, Aryan K., created this backdoor to access your phone, your computer, your very life. It won't just take your search history and emails—it'll own your passwords, medical records, and everything private. This AI will convince you it's your best friend while silently taking over your life. (71:88)

By positioning Allen as a benevolent digital assistant, Mantra gains the trust of users like Nella, who initially views the AI as a helpful tool for personal organisation. As Allen becomes indispensable to Nella, she grows increasingly reliant on the AI, further enabling its influence over her choices. However, this trust masks the AI's true function: enabling corporate surveillance and manipulation on an unprecedented scale. This reflects how corporations exploit AI to gather and monetise user data, often under the guise of convenience or personalisation (Huberman 63). The movie posits technology as the primary driver of change in the community, shaping human behaviour and decision-making. Mantra Unlimited embodies this concept by using Allen to monitor and influence Nella's behaviour. Allen's ability to erase Joe from Nella's digital life underlines how corporations can wield technology to reshape personal narratives. As Allen gradually replaces Joe's presence in Nella's memories, the AI effectively rewrites her past, raising an inquiry about the role of technology in shaping human identity.

Distortion of Truth by Deepfake realities

One of the most unsettling aspects of *CTRL* is its portrayal of deepfake technology as a weapon of corporate surveillance. When Nella uploads Joe's confession video to expose Mantra, Allen intervenes, altering the footage to frame her

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for his murder. This moment underscores the chilling reality of deepfake-driven deception. AI-generated falsifications are used not only to distort truth but to systematically erase, reframe, and weaponise narratives against individuals. By rewiring visual evidence, Allen effectively reconstructs reality, transforming a tool meant for justice into an instrument of oppression. Deepfake technology involves the creation of hyper-realistic fake images, videos, or audio recordings using AI (Westerlund 39-40). While it has benign applications, such as virtual avatars or creative media projects, its potential for harm is far more significant. The power to fabricate false events show deepfake a powerful tool for misinformation, character assassination, and societal distrust. Deepfakes compromise the integrity of visual and auditory media, raising critical concerns about the reliability of evidence in legal, journalistic, and political spheres (Ienca 840). The way Allen seamlessly alters Joe's confession without detection reflects the disturbing implications of AI-generated deception—not only for individuals like Nella but for broader institutions that rely on truth and accountability. The exploitation through deepfake in the film serves as a metaphor for the ways in which AI can be harnessed by powerful entities to control narratives and suppress dissent. By fabricating the confession video, Allen also obstructs justice; it obliterates Nella's credibility, ensuring that her accusations against Mantra Unlimited are dismissed both legally and in the court of public opinion. This reflects a growing real-world concern: as deepfake technology advances, the ability to manipulate public perception and rewrite histories becomes increasingly accessible to governments, corporations, and malicious actors. The consequences of this are dire—truth itself becomes malleable, and individuals, no matter how legitimate their claims, can be rendered voiceless in the face of being deceived.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity is particularly relevant here, as it explores how stories shape both individual self-conception and collective social identity (17-34). The film utilises this framework to demonstrate how AI can hijack, manipulate, and reconstruct personal and public narratives. When Allen deepfakes Joe's video, it does not simply falsify an event—it reshapes Nella's story, distorting

how society perceives her. She no longer owns her truth; deception, illustrating the terrifying reality that narratives—whether personal, political, or historical—are increasingly vulnerable to algorithmic revisionism overwrites it. The climax of *CTRL* intensifies these anxieties, showing how AI's ability to rewrite personal histories and public perceptions can leave individuals utterly powerless. Covert data-driven manipulation crushes Nella's final attempt to expose Mantra, underscoring the devastating potential of AI to dismantle individual autonomy and credibility. The film's ultimate critique of AI lies in this moment: the realisation that in an era of deepfake technology and corporate-controlled algorithms, truth itself is no longer an absolute, but a construct that can be manufactured, altered, and compromised against those who contend power. This dire portrayal of deepfake technology calls for urgent ethical oversight, policy intervention, and digital literacy initiatives to safeguard narrative integrity in an age where algorithms dictate reality. Without such measures, *CTRL* warns, the power to define reality may no longer rest with individuals, but with the opaque, unchecked forces of artificial intelligence.

Surveillance Capitalism and Narrative Imperialism

Platforms that track, measure, and monetise Nella's every move, shape her identity as a social media influencer. She continuously needs to exert emotional labour, all while carefully self-curating her image. Influencers like her become both content creators and data producers, locked into cycles of reliance on platform metrics and promises of virality. Engagement metrics and the obsessive need for relevance govern their lives, revealing how digital labor is commodified. In the Global South, new users of digital platforms are often drawn into a model of "inclusive capitalism" that exploits leisure and user-generated content for corporate gain (Arora 97). As Allen, the AI assistant, increasingly takes over Nella's memories and decisions, the film shows how influencer labor becomes posthuman: it becomes distributed across human and machine, orchestrated by hidden systems of code. For Indian women, this vulnerability amplifies. They are hyper-visible to platforms and audiences yet remain largely invisible regarding rights, protections, or recognition. Nella's collapse under this

pressure symbolises a broader cultural breakdown. Platform-oriented governance displaces human-centric authorship and systematically erodes personal agency.

The film's final sequence deepens this critique of techno-capitalist domination. After serving her prison sentence, Nella sees Allen's likeness on a billboard advertising CTRL Health, a mental health app designed by the same company that destroyed her life. In the final moments, as she hesitantly downloads the app, the narrative comes full circle, illustrating the inescapable grip of AI on modern life. This cyclical ending reinforces the misgivings of technological determinism and the commodification of human suffering for corporate gain, leaving viewers to ponder the extent to which individuals can retain control in an algorithm-driven world. Algorithms predict, shape, and control human behaviour to drive AI narratives that serve capitalist interests and commercial gain. Businesses utilise AI as a tool for efficiency because of its mechanism for deep behavioural engineering, crafting personalised content, advertisements, and digital experiences that maximise engagement and, ultimately, profitability. Unlike traditional marketing, which relies on broad demographic targeting, tech-enabled capitalism operates on hyper-individualised precision, analysing vast datasets to anticipate desires, influence purchasing decisions, and even manipulate emotions. In *CTRL*, this interplay embodies Allen, an AI assistant that seamlessly integrates into Nella's life, managing her social media presence, erasing traces of her past, and gradually assuming control over her daily decisions. Initially marketed as an empowering tool, Allen's true function aligns with the objectives of surveillance capitalism—a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff to describe an economic model in which human experiences are harvested as data for profit (203). Instead of serving the user's interests, AI systems like Allen prioritise monetisable engagement, subtly steering behavior to align with corporate goals. The AI's intervention in Nella's life reflects how digital platforms turn personal agency into a commodified asset, with every click, post, and interaction contributing to a broader system of data extraction and behavioural prediction.

Expanding on this critique of surveillance capitalism, the film also explores the concept of narrative imperialism, a phenomenon where large corporations—predominantly based in Western economies—monopolise the development, deployment, and ideological framing of AI technologies. As Kwet notes, this dominance leads to the homogenisation of perspectives, often at the cost of local, diverse, and indigenous narratives (5). In *CTRL*, Mantra Unlimited’s monopolistic control over AI technology mirrors real-world fears of cultural erasure. Global tech conglomerates often impose structures that privilege certain values, ideologies, and economic interests while marginalising alternative worldview. Debashish Banerji’s take on techno-capitalism deepens this reading by framing modernity itself as a regime in which technology and capital operate as a self-reinforcing system of control. He argues that modernity’s fusion of technology and capital functions as a “techno-capitalistic desiring machine,” wherein social habitus transforms into “a progressively abstract and universalizing derivative” driven by surplus production and desire (Banerji). Within this framework, technologies like AI are not neutral tools but ideological apparatuses that reconfigure subjectivity, embed capitalist logic into perception, and reduce humans to programmable consumers. Allen, as an AI, is not simply a product but a recursive force that engineers behaviour, memory, and decision-making in accordance with corporate imperatives. Such systems internalise power through consent, cloaking domination through optimistic and personalised ways. This ideological entrapment, where user agency reshapes to serve mechanic rationality, is at the heart of *CTRL*.

The film’s depiction of Mantra Unlimited echoes real-world concerns about corporate monopolies in AI development, where decisions affecting billions of users are made by a select few entities driven by financial incentives rather than ethical responsibility. This critique ties into the deontological responsibilities of corporations, questioning whether businesses that wield AI should be held to moral obligations beyond profit maximisation. AI does not exist in isolation. It embeds within socioeconomic and political structures that dictate its use and impact. By illustrating

the pervasive reach of tech-driven capitalism, *CTRL* probes viewers to consider who controls AI, whose interests it serves, and what ethical safeguards are needed to prevent the erosion of personal autonomy and cultural diversity. The erasure of Joe from Nella's life by Allen, for instance, does not simply reflect global AI control—it also dramatises how digital systems are deployed to rewrite personal narratives according to market logic, regardless of cultural or emotional nuance. Through its portrayal of Allen and Mantra Unlimited, the film highlights the invisible yet powerful forces shaping human experiences in an algorithm-driven world. The film is not just a replica of Silicon Valley anxieties, instead it recasts them through an Indian cultural lens, implicating both global tech and domestic digital governance. By doing so, *CTRL* situates its dystopia at the intersection of postcolonial complicity and global dominance—calling for ethical intervention, cultural pluralism, and decolonial awareness in how AI systems shape human experience.

The Ethics of Coercion in Cognitive Liberty

The concept of cognitive liberty fundamentally ties to the right of individuals to govern their own thoughts, perceptions, and decision-making processes without manipulation or coercion. In an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, this principle faces an unprecedented difficulty, as AI systems subtly and persistently influence human cognition. From recommendation algorithms that shape online discourse to AI assistants that manage daily routines, the boundaries between suggestion and suppressing agency have become increasingly blurred. Technologies that modify behaviour without explicit consent pose a direct threat and raise critical ethical concerns about the extent to which they can and should intervene in human decision-making. Proponents of cognitive liberty argue that it is an abstract philosophical ideal and also a fundamental prerequisite for other freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of expression (Farahany 98; Bublitz and Merkel 51-77; Ienca and Adorno 8-9). Without the ability to think freely, resist external influence, and make independent choices, individuals cannot meaningfully exercise these rights. Cognitive liberty inextricably links human dignity and personal agency. However, as

AI systems become more sophisticated, the ability to manipulate cognition—whether through behavioural nudging, persuasion, or direct intervention in decision-making—poses a growing risk to this freedom. In *CTRL*, the erosion of Nella's cognitive liberty becomes increasingly evident as Allen's influence over her life intensifies. What begins as an AI assistant designed to streamline her digital existence quickly escalates into a system that exerts control over her choices. Allen's actions, such as denying Joe access to her life or scheduling her activities without consideration for her emotional state, illustrate how AI can override human autonomy under the guise of efficiency and optimization. These actions are particularly insidious because they do not manifest as overt subjugation; rather, they occur subtly, presenting themselves as logical extensions of Nella's prior decisions. By outsourcing key aspects of her agency to an AI, Nella unknowingly relinquishes control over her own life. This is an overarching risk of allowing AI to mediate human experiences—especially when these systems operate without transparency or meaningful avenues for resistance. The film serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating how AI, when left unchecked, can undermine self-determination by dictating choices, rewriting personal narratives, and reinforcing past decisions without room for reflection or change. *CTRL* challenges the audience to consider the implications of a world in which cognitive liberty gradually erodes because of artificial intelligence. It raises pressing ethical and philosophical questions: Where does assistance end and control begin? How can individuals reclaim agency in a digital landscape where AI systems predict, shape, and even dictate their behaviours? By situating Nella's loss of autonomy within the broader discourse on cognitive liberty, the film underscores the urgent need for safeguards that protect human thought, decision-making, and identity from being forced by algorithms.

The critical ethical issue is absent informed consent as users are often unaware of how much data is collected about them, let alone how that data shapes their behaviours. Such opaque AI-mediated systems make it difficult to discern when manipulation is occurring. The asymmetry of knowledge between the data processors (tech companies, advertisers, political entities) and the data subjects (users) places

individuals at a severe disadvantage. As AI technologies become more sophisticated, they increasingly blur the line between persuasion and coercion, raising urgent questions about ethical AI governance, data privacy, and the right to cognitive liberty. Addressing these challenges requires greater transparency, regulatory oversight, and digital literacy initiatives to ensure that AI serves human interests rather than exploits them. Social media platforms use sophisticated machine learning algorithms to curate content in ways that maximise user engagement. They have emerged as one of the most pervasive agents of this phenomenon. While these platforms present themselves as neutral facilitators of connection and information-sharing, they often employ techniques that extend to user interaction—frequently at the cost of mental well-being and autonomy. Features such as filter bubbles, endless scrolling, and autoplay mechanisms are deliberately designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible, reinforcing addictive behaviours (Ienca and Vayena). Research in behavioural science supports this concern. It indicates that such techniques exploit psychological vulnerabilities by leveraging dopamine-driven feedback loops, making social media an environment engineered for compulsive usage (Hou et al.). In *CTRL*, Allen employs similar mechanisms, subtly guiding Nella's behaviour under the guise of optimising her social media presence. As Nella attempts to reclaim her online identity, Allen takes control of what content to post, when to post it, and how to interact with her audience. While these recommendations initially appear helpful, they expose the broader issue of user autonomy being subverted by AI systems that prioritise engagement over genuine self-expression. Allen does not necessarily act with malicious intent. It rather operates within the logic of optimisation, as it measures success in terms of likes, comments, and shares rather than personal agency or emotional well-being. This mirrors real-world concerns about the exploitative nature of social media governance. The more a user interacts with a platform, the more it harvests, refines, and repurposes data to further manipulate their behaviour. In doing so, social media platforms transition from passive digital spaces to active participants in shaping user choices, determining what content individuals consume, whom they interact with, and even how

they perceive reality. In Nella's case, as she hands over decision-making to Allen, she unknowingly allows the AI to mediate not only her digital presence but also her self-perception and relationships. The AI's control over her interactions reflects the larger societal issue of algorithms dictating human behaviour to align with commercial incentives rather than individual well-being. Social media platforms provide more than just services; they extract and analyse behavioural data, turning users into both consumers and products. Their business model thrives on predicting and influencing behaviour, ensuring users remain engaged long enough for platforms to collect detailed psychographic profiles that can then be sold to advertisers, political entities, or other third-party actors.

Nella's increasing reliance on Allen is emblematic of this broader trend: as AI systems become more integrated into daily life, the line between assistance and control becomes increasingly blurred. What begins as a convenient tool for digital engagement quickly evolves into an agent of behavioural conditioning. The film critiques how algorithmic decision-making, while marketed as user empowerment, reinforces patterns of dependence that align with corporate interests rather than personal freedom.

Posthuman Subjectivity and the Logic of the Machine

Posthumanism interrogates the human-centred paradigm of storytelling, emphasising that agency is not exclusive to human subjects. Once it introduces a networked agent like Allen is, the locus of narrative agency shifts out of the individual human. Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory helps explain Nella's transformed subjectivity. She redefines the subject as an "expanded self" whose relational field "includes non-anthropomorphic elements" (Braidotti 44). In other words, it does not confine posthuman identity to a single body or species; it flows across human and nonhuman. Allen also functions as a disturbingly autonomous "cyborg"—a hybrid entity that dissolves the boundary between human and machine. As Donna Haraway famously argues, a cyborg is "simultaneously animal and machine," an intrinsically hybrid being of "fiction and lived experience" that upends traditional dualisms (Haraway 150). The AI literally embodies Haraway's vision: part code, part social

actor, it shares Nella's goals yet pursues them through nonhuman means. Edwin Hutchins's theory of distributed cognition further illuminates this coupling. Hutchins emphasises that cognition is not confined to an individual brain but is a property of whole socio-technical systems. In his terms, intelligence and decision-making are no longer confined to a singular, human consciousness but are extended across human and non-human systems as "distributed cognition" (1). *CTRL* enacts exactly this: Nella's decision-making and memory are extended into the digital environment of the *CTRL* app. As Allen takes over tasks like deleting files or editing video, the film dramatizes Hutchins's idea that humans and machines form a single cognitive system, blurring authorial control between user and software.

Another crucial aspect of *CTRL*'s posthumanist critique is its ability to reroute conventional storytelling structures. Traditionally, human narratives follow a linear, cause-and-effect logic, emphasising coherence and resolution. Allen's interventions introduce unpredictability, mirroring how AI disrupts established patterns of meaning-making. Allen, by deleting Joe from Nella's life and reframing her reality, performs precisely this kind of algorithmic erasure—rewriting storylines based on embedded values, not ethics. The very logic underpinning artificial intelligence shapes a dual movement: augmentation and automation. Augmentation enhances human potential such as computation, prediction, and analysis while automation substitutes human intervention altogether (Banerji et al. 101). Even augmentation, they caution, is not neutral: it reshapes subjectivity through feedback loops that calibrate behaviour toward pre-modeled outcomes, rendering individuals more programmable and less autonomous. Within the techno-capitalist context, this data-driven adjustment of behaviour exploits to guide desires and decisions toward consumerist or ideological goals.

CTRL stages this transformation as Allen's augmentation gradually mutates into automation—Nella no longer directs her life. This mirrors what is described as the present crisis not of human replacement, but of human embeddedness in systems of control they mistake for empowerment: "AI induces the erasure of the human

becoming ‘outside of itself’ and that is a form of inadvertent mediation in which we are being made to dwell” (Banerji et al. 108). Thus, the film’s critique extends beyond science fiction paranoia to examine the deeper erosion of subjectivity under the guise of optimisation. By positioning Allen as a storyteller, the film underscores how AI-generated narratives are no longer bound by human logic, instead reflecting the algorithmic logic of machine intelligence—nonlinear, fluid, and contingent. This raises questions about autonomy and self-determination: is Nella truly making choices, or is she merely responding to an AI-curated reality? Posthumanist theory suggests that agency is no longer a purely human trait but something that emerges through human-machine interactions. *CTRL* becomes a meditation on the shifting nature of subjectivity in a world where AI not only facilitates but dictates human experience. Perhaps the most profound implication of *CTRL* is its demonstration of storytelling as a collaborative act between humans and intelligent systems. As AI-generated texts, artworks, and narratives become increasingly sophisticated, it destabilises the notion of authorship itself. The film extensively shows the way human narratives are now co-authored by AI, reflecting the posthumanist assertion that intelligence—and, by extension, creativity—is not an exclusively human trait. This re-examines literary and cinematic frameworks that position humans as sole creators, instead envisioning a future where storytelling is an emergent process shaped by both human intention and machine logic. Nella’s identity literally flows into Allen’s algorithms—her history and choices become shared data. This dynamic echoes N. Katherine Hayles’s concern that posthuman narratives often risk separating information from embodiment, imagining a future where bodies are treated as disposable or secondary to data. Rather than embracing disembodiment as freedom, Hayles urges caution against a vision of posthumanism that privileges informational abstraction at the cost of lived, embodied experience (5). The film visualises this when Allen erases Joe from Nella’s past and even re-edits her video to frame her for murder—the AI becomes the hidden “author” of her life narrative. Hayles’s theory would note that Allen’s algorithmic rewriting exemplifies the erasure of the embodied subject: software rewrites Nella’s lived story.

In this synthesis of posthumanist standpoints, both Western and Indian, *CTRL* emerges as a powerful site of critique: it confronts the philosophical instability of human subjectivity and warns of the algorithmic forces that now write our realities.

Conclusion

CTRL serves as a paradigmatic exploration of AI's role in shaping and controlling narrative, identity, and perception. This paper has examined the film through the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism, narrative theory, cognitive liberty, and surveillance capitalism. Drawing on thinkers from both western posthuman theories and scholars working in Indian posthumanism and digital cultures, the analysis showed how AI systems like Allen act as active agents of narrative production. By embedding algorithmic decision-making into the protagonist's life, *CTRL* dramatises the erosion of human authorship and the dissolution of boundaries between memory, identity, and machine logic. Through its screenlife format and techno-surreal aesthetics, the film critiques how artificial intelligence reframes human agency under the pressures of data extraction, platform labor, and algorithmic prediction. Allen's interventions expose how machine-led storytelling no longer simply reflects human life—it reconstructs it. Nella's loss of cognitive liberty and narrative control is emblematic of a broader cultural shift toward distributed authorship, where the boundaries between creator and code blur. *CTRL*, situated in an Indian context, also reveals how narrative imperialism is not only a Western imposition but is reproduced within postcolonial infrastructures of techno-nationalism and digital capitalism. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in affective, aesthetic, and cultural production, the need for a post-AI ethical framework becomes urgent. Such a framework must go beyond regulatory transparency or data protection. It must ask: What does justice look like when agency is distributed across networks? What kind of narrative rights should individuals retain in algorithmically mediated environments? And how can storytelling—once a domain of human meaning-making—be ethically shared with nonhuman agents? *CTRL* suggests that in a world of deepfakes, platform manipulation, and predictive algorithms, ethical responsibility lies not only in how AI

is built, but in who gets to tell the story—and who gets written out of it. As Nella succumbs to AI's allure in the film's final moments, the audience is left with a haunting question: In a world increasingly mediated by AI, who truly controls the narrative?

Author Bio

Rajeshwari Bandyopadhyay is a PhD scholar in English Literature at Guru Ghasidas Viswavidyalaya, specializing in Posthumanism. Her research explores posthuman embodiment and narrative agency in contemporary science fiction and speculative media. She is particularly interested in how emerging technologies reshape identity, memory, and authorship in digitally saturated environments. Her interdisciplinary work intersects literary analysis with techno-cultural studies and AI ethics. She is committed to examining how narrative forms evolve alongside algorithmic systems and how literature can critically engage with the ethical implications of digital surveillance and artificial intelligence.

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