Crystallizing Social Discourse through Dystopian Films

By

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The future is unknown and there is no fate but what we make. This mantra came from the 1991 science fiction film *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, and it serves as an allegory for our fascination with dystopian films that serve as a "window on, and critique of, the present" (Schmidt). Dystopian films are gritty and bleak, typically set in the future, and portray a particularly frightening and unpleasant setting, such as a geo-engineered frozen planet Earth (*Snowpiercer*, 2013) or a London filled with surveillance cameras and ruled by an oppressive police force (*V for Vendetta*, 2005). They feature narratives that analyze existing conditions as well as the future abuses that might exist in potential utopian alternatives (Leigh 17). Dystopian films are often coded with liberal or conservative political leanings that offer a fresh perspective on social practices that might be considered natural or inevitable (Booker 4). Though these bleak images of the future run contradictory to what author Richard Dyer defines as a utopian sensibility that creates a sense of escape, they work on the same principle in creating a sense of what a dystopian future feels like. This paper argues that despite their fictional, highly stylized concepts of the future dystopian films serve as a contemporary critique of social issues while examining the potential threats they pose to our future.

The roots of dystopian films lie in late 19h century and early 20th century literature that offered social, political and psychological critiques of the industrial age. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 novel "The Coming Race" is a tale of doom for the human race, concerning

superior subterranean beings armed with powerful technology such as powerful vril wands and artificial wings that allow people to fly (Rabkin 14). Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1921 novel "We" warns of an autonomous future utopia set in a floating glass city and is "arguably the most effective of all the dystopian depictions of the technological abolition of man" (Rabkin 56). M. Keith Booker describes dystopian literature not as a genre but rather an oppositional and critical energy that runs parallel to modern cultural criticisms (3).

This type of grim social critique has existed in cinema since the silent film era. Fritz Lang's 1927 seminal science fiction film *Metropolis* features a failed utopia where a tyrannical ruling class controls the proletariat enslaved underground. Lang's dystopian vision originates from the work of Karl Marx and his concept of class antagonism and the division of society (Leigh, 19). Though *Metropolis* is considered influential in the science fiction genre, it wasn't until the introduction of the film noir style in U.S. cinema in the 1940s that the sub-genre of dystopian films began to appear more frequently and with more sinister content. The merging of science fiction and film noir "reinvented the critical energy of the historical novel by allowing for a narrative model of history that positioned the present as the future's past" (Leigh 122). Films such as *World Without End* (1956), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968) are a few examples of mid-20th century science fiction-based dystopian films with themes of oppression, autocratic government and post-apocalyptic warnings. In *World Without End* astronauts rappel through time to a 26th century Earth and must save humanity from the mutants that now dominate the landscape. Rather than opening with screen credits the film opens with the jarring image and loud sounds of a nuclear bomb explosion. *Fahrenheit 451* is based on the 1951 Ray Bradbury novel where books have been outlawed to curb independent thought and firefighters are instructed to burn any books found on

sight. Like *World Without End*, it also has an unorthodox opening sequence featuring a montage of surveillance devices while the credits are narrated rather than presented as on-screen titles. In *The Last Man on Earth* a plague turns the majority of people into night-dwelling creatures and the protagonist is left with the distressing task of collecting bodies lying in the streets and burning them in what equates to a landfill full of dead people. *Planet of the Apes* is set two thousand years in the future where humans are enslaved and oppressed by an evolved species of apes. The protagonist believes he is on a foreign planet until the final shot of the film where he screams, "You blew it up!" and the camera zooms out to reveal the remains of New York's Statue of Liberty on the shores of a beach.

In the article "Entertainment and Utopia" Richard Dyer argues that entertainment provides us with a form of escapism that serve as alternatives to everyday life, which serves as a utopia in and of itself (31). Cinematically this utopia is created in the feelings embodied in the films themselves rather than providing a physical construct of how a utopia would be organized. Dyer states that this form of escapism this is often found in musicals, citing the 1933 film *Gold Diggers of 1933* where the musical numbers are presented in a non-realist way that offer a utopian escape from the conflict in the narrative. This non-realist style includes wide camera shots, exaggerated set designs, overhead camera angles and heavily-choreographed performances accompanying the songs. If utopian films offer a feeling of escape and euphoria, what then, do dystopian films offer? On the surface the two forms seem diametrically opposed in that cinema offers an escape from everyday life while dystopian films pose terrifying futures full of despair. Despite their formal dissent, the film medium allows audiences an opportunity to confront our present day social fears through narratives that project them on to the characters temporally dislocated from us while accessing them through a medium that serves as a natural form of

escapism. They offer a platform for viewers to dissect intricate topics such as free will, a central theme in the 2002 dystopian film *Minority Report*, and engage in a form of social discourse not typically observed in everyday dialogue. *Minority Report* stimulates discussion regarding the hypotheticals of using precognition in an effort to thwart crime in the future.

Though dystopian films might seem “aloof” from social problems as Ryan and Kellner argue in their book “Camera Politica,” dystopian narratives very much encompass the fears and anxieties of the conservative and liberal political ideologies in the U.S. In his essay “Atavism and Utopia” author Eric Rabkin writes, “Like all fictions, utopian literature must deal with the values and experiences of its audience” (1). This also applies to dystopian literature and the literary narratives of cinema categorized as dystopian films. Most of the dystopian films made post-1970s make candid social commentary through the lens of a liberal or conservative ideology. Sociopolitical changes in the 1970s were reflected in cinema through films that offered a “hopeless vision of the social universe” (Ryan and Kellner 86). These themes reflect the crisis of confidence from the era, interpreting fears of unregulated corporations, untrustworthy leaders, rising crime and a breakdown of institutions.

The narratives of liberal dystopias reflect the fears of the progressive class with disasters caused by environmental threats such as pollution or man-made threats such as nuclear war or economic exploitation. They often make statements regarding social organization, dehumanization and the effects of capitalism. The 1973 liberal dystopian film *Soylent Green* warns of an overpopulated planet scarce with resources. It paints a horrific picture of the year 2022 where man’s reliance on industry has ravaged the earth, leaving processed food rations known as “soylent green” produced by the Soylent Corporation as the primary source of human sustenance. The film offers a commentary on man’s destruction of the environment as the

greenhouse effect has left Earth in a permanent summer season and expresses fear of advanced capitalism and corruption when it is discovered that the processed "soylent green" supposedly created from ocean plankton is actually produced using human remains. The 1995 film *Waterworld* is a set five-hundred years in the future where the polar ice caps have melted, leading to a global flood covering nearly the entire Earth under water. Survivors are scattered across the vast ocean in atolls, searching for a mythical "dryland." The narrative focuses on the social organization of the survivors, including an economic system that relies on the collection of dirt and scraps from the sunken cities below the water.

The origin of catastrophes in conservative dystopias mimic the political leanings of the bourgeois class with dreary futures blamed on a breakdown of law and order, the disintegration of the family, or the loss of individual freedoms due to centralized governments. They often romanticize escaping to nature, the family, and other modern intuitions as more desirable than their future form. (Kellner, Leibowitz and Ryan). The 2012 film *The Hunger Games* creates a future divided into twelve "districts" overseen by an oppressive regime residing in the "Capitol." The narrative offers a critique of an autocratic government that attempts to keep social order by holding a yearly contest consisting of a duel to the death, made up of two participants from each district. The protagonist often escapes the borders of her district to hunt and enjoy the beauty of nature, a reflection of the conservative values of returning to a simpler time via nature. The 1987 film *The Running Man* is set thirty years where society is ruled by a totalitarian state. The narrative reflects the conservative fears of the loss of individual freedoms when the protagonist is wrongly convicted of murder and forced to fight for his life in a televised execution.

Kellner, Leibowitz and Ryan argue that the more complex dystopian films require a diagnostic critique as they often present contradictory attitudes towards capitalism and

technology. A comparative analysis of two ideologically opposed dystopian films, *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Escape from L.A.* (1996) reveals both opposing ideological viewpoints and a shared set of fears and anxieties of the future. *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, features a narrative set in a dystopian Los Angeles in the year 2019. The economy is driven by the Tyrell Corporation, a technology company that produces human-like androids known as replicants. The replicants are nearly indistinguishable from humans and the Tyrell Corporation motto is "More human than human." The Tyrell Corporation headquarters sits ominously on the edge of Los Angeles like a great ancient pyramid, housing the company founder Dr. Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel). Replicants are banned from Earth and used exclusively to build off-world colonies necessary due to overpopulation and the uninhabitable nature of Earth. When replicants defy their orders they are hunted down and retired by a special police force known as Blade Runners. Retired Blade Runner Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is recruited to hunt down the newest Nexus-6 models who escaped to Earth illegally to extend their four-year life span after sensing their own mortality.

Blade Runner is a liberal dystopian film in that it warns of an environmental crisis, overpopulation, our own dehumanization and advanced capitalism with an economic structure that grows so big it devours itself. Many of the liberal anxieties are interwoven throughout the narrative. Los Angeles has become an industrial wasteland, shown through an opening shot that swoops over the crowded city, flames spouting out from industrial towers, before closing in on the Tyrell Corporation, a massive structure that looks like a retrofitted ancient pyramid. Ryan and Kellner write, "…the neo-Mayan architecture of the corporate buildings suggests human sacrifice for the capitalist god, and Tyrell is indeed depicted as something of a divine patriarch" (252). It is this expansion of capitalism and industry that led to the environmental crisis that has

humans developing off-world colonies in which they can continue life. This necessity begets another liberal anxiety, the dehumanization of society and reliance on technology. Replicants are created for the purpose of traveling to dangerous planets to make them habitable for the impending arrival of humans. The anxiety over both genetic engineering and capitalism is ironically discussed by a genetically engineered character when the replicant Rachael (Sean Young) says, "I'm not in the business. I am the business." In the *Blade Runner* narrative, capitalism has expanded to the point that it has shifted from products to people. Advanced capitalism and anxiety over the U.S. global economic dominance is also reflected in the film as Japanese culture is pervasive throughout Los Angeles. Japanese signage and businesses line the dank L.A. streets. Foreign economic dependency is implicitly referenced when a craft floating above the city advertising trips to off-world colonies announces, "This announcement has been brought to you by the Shimago-Domínguez Corporation, helping America into the new world." These crafts are incredibly intrusive their bright lights are seen invading dark corridors and interiors throughout the film.

Escape from L.A. is a science fiction film directed by John Carpenter and serves as a sequel to the 1981 conservative dystopian film *Escape from New York*, also directed by Carpenter. *Escape from New York* addresses conservative fears such as punk subcultures, feminism and liberal policies, where only a "tough, conservative, martial arts, military hero named snake can save the day" (Ryan and Kellner, 258). *Escape from L.A.* is set in Los Angeles in 2013 where a 9.6 earthquake has separated Los Angeles and the surrounding areas from the mainland, turning it into an island. The soon-to-be President (Cliff Robertson) had previously called Los Angeles a city of sin and predicted it would be separated from the country by God. Once elected, the President amends the U.S. Constitution, making his term permanent. Shortly

thereafter he relocates the capital to Lynchburg, Virginia and enacts several new policies that construct a "moral America" in his image. New laws outlaw freedom of speech, alcohol and tobacco, red meat, profanity, pre-marital sex, and guns. Immorals and undesirables are given the option of death by electrocution or deportation to Los Angeles, now known as Los Angeles Island, a walled and guarded prison. The President maintains his autocratic power domestically by abolishing opposing political parties and globally with the threat of a weapon called the Sword of Damocles, a device that can render electronic instruments useless. When the Sword of Damocles is stolen, the President turns to prisoner Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) to recover the device in exchange for a full pardon. Plissken eventually recovers the device but double-crosses the President and initiates a code that knocks out the entire planet's electronic devices, sending Earth back into the dark ages.

Escape from L.A. is a conservative dystopian film that expresses anxieties over an authoritative government, loss of individual freedoms, and a breakdown of civil law and order. There is also an element of a romanticized past, as Adam Zilberman notes, "This is a pro-nostalgia antihero, disgusted by the world around him…" ("*Escape From L.A.*, Today"). The premise of the conflict is based upon the conservative fear of centralized government and losing individual rights in the form of an autocratic President that amends the constitution to assure his permanent place in office and encroaches basic individual freedoms based on his own moral code. The President fractures the existing government to the point of relocating the capitol. Conservative fears of gun control become a reality when firearms are outlawed. The right to a fair trial is dissolved when those deemed immoral are automatically sent to Los Angeles Island or worse, executed.

Despite the warring ideologies in *Blade Runner* and *Escape from L.A.*, they do share a common narrative theme. The resolutions of both films revolve around what Rabkin calls a tenant of utopias (and conversely, dystopias), “A real return to the Garden finally depends on a basic change in human nature” (6). Regardless of this affinity, the two films cannot escape the trappings of their own ideologies. The final scene from each film firmly establishes their opposing ideals, even while expressing the same sentiment of human transformation and technology phobia. The last line of dialogue in *Escape from L.A.* uttered by Plissken is, “Welcome to the human race.” The conservative ideology returns to a simpler, nostalgic time where humans reigned over technology. In *Blade Runner* the liberal ideology is on display when a genetically engineered other assimilates and finds love and freedom in the arms of a human.

Escape from L.A. also supports Rabkin’s assessment that utopian and dystopian literature must deal with the values and experiences of its audience. *Escape from L.A.* had been in development for nearly ten years when the 1994 Northridge Earthquake and the L.A. riots resuscitated the project (Boulenger). Richard Dyer builds on this notion in writing that the emotions we associate with entertainment forms such as film develop “by acquiring their signification in relation to the complex of meanings in the social-cultural situation in which they are produced” (32). These meanings are often presented in a non-representational form such as color, texture, movement, camerawork, mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound. Building on the notion that different modes of representation correspond to different modes of perception, Dyer states that “it is important to grasp that modes of experiential art and entertainment correspond to different culturally and historically determined sensibilities” (31). In dystopian films, these relationships involve both the representational and non-representational

elements of the narrative and the present-day social or political issues that the narrative is critiquing.

Dyer created categories for entertainment's utopian sensibility, defined as "temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment" (33). The categories of utopian sensibility are energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community. He defines energy as the capacity to act vigorously; abundance as having enough to spare without sense of poverty of others and the enjoyment of sensuous material reality; intensity as an experiencing of emotion directly, fully, unambiguously and authentically without holding back; transparency as the quality of relationships in both represented characters and between performer and audience; and community as togetherness and a sense of belonging. Dyer cites these categories as a utopian solution to a social tension or inadequacy and to be effective the utopian sensibility has to be realistic in that it utilizes experiences the audience can relate with. Despite the absence of utopian sensibility in dystopian films this principal still applies, which explains the liberal or conservative approach that dystopian narratives embody. Rather than offer a solution via one or more utopian sensibility, dystopian films magnify liberal or conservative tensions and fears by draining any type of utopian sensibility solution. In *Blade Runner* Abundance is replaced by scarcity of land, widespread poverty and economic exploitation. Energy is replaced with an exhausted weary protagonist, forced into a job he doesn't want to take. Intensity is replaced by the dreariness of gritty, retrofitted Los Angeles where the sun never reaches. Transparency is replaced by a bombardment of advertising and a constant reminder of the off-world colonies only available to the bourgeois. Community is replaced by a fractured society both geographically and in the conflict between replicant and human. In *Escape from L.A.* Abundance is replaced with the slums of Los Angeles Island, Energy is replaced with a

similarly exhausted and hesitant protagonist, Intensity is replaced with a California coast demolished by earthquake and flood. Community is replaced with selfish and greedy characters.

If Dyer's assertion that entertainment works because it responds to needs created by society is true it begs the question, what needs are being met by the absence of the utopian sensibility in dystopian films? Dyer uses the utopian sensibility primarily within the context of musicals and points to gaps or inadequacies in capitalism, but notes that these are gaps that capitalism promises to deal with. He describes the gap in musicals as one between the narrative and the numbers, with heavily representational narrative epitomizing the problem and the numbers as the nonrepresentational utopian way in which things could be better (34). Dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* and *Escape from L.A.* take an opposite approach, imagining a bleak future heavy in both representational signs through mise-en-scene and special effects and non-representational elements in the absence of utopian sensibility to create an impending society based on liberal or conservative-based fears. Instead of gaps existing between narrative and numbers as Dyer illustrates with musicals, the gaps in dystopian films exist as how contemporary socio-political issues lead to the dreary futuristic landscapes.

One of the ways *Blade Runner* addresses liberal fears is by questioning the dehumanization process through technology and advanced capitalism. A close-up look at the façade of the massive pyramid-like Tyrell Corporation headquarters reveals that the building itself resembles a machine, laden with antennae, pipes, hoses and vents. Once inside, Deckard meets Dr. Tyrell and his "more human than human" replicant assistant. Dr. Tyrell's quarters are expansive and rich with design that includes chiseled columns, sparkling tiled floors and marble accents. The room is filled with golden hues and is one of the only scenes of the film where the sun is seen, a stark contrast from the shadowy streets and dimly lit interiors of Los Angeles and

its buildings, prompting Deckard to comment, "It's too bright in here." Symbolism of pyramids is heavy as the exterior of the Tyrell Corporation structure is prominently on displayed in front of the setting sun. The gaps in *Blade Runner*, an inhospitable planet and the promise of humans continuing life on off-world colonies, are being dealt with through capitalism by way of the Tyrell Corporation and the replicants being used to create hospitable colonies.

The film also makes a commentary on the top-down, perverted economic system when two replicants visit Tyrell Corporation genetic designer J.F. Sebastian (William Sanderson) in search of help. Sebastian fails to qualify for travel to an off-world colony due to a rare aging disorder known as methuselah syndrome and used for his talents by Dr. Tyrell. The scene indicts capitalism through the ways in which Sebastian is cast aside by his employer, the Tyrell Corporation. Despite his importance as a genetic designer he remains a lonely man facing the same "aging decrepitude" one of the replicants self-identifies with, left alone to his devices, a group of genetically engineered misfit toys, in a ramshackle corner of the dilapidated Bradbury Building.

The conservative fears of loss of freedom and breakdown of law and order are strong themes in *Escape from L.A.* The film's exposition lays out the way these issues might play off one another with a narrator that introduces a 1998 Los Angeles ravaged by crime and immorality and the creation of a United States Police Force. Soon after, building on his correct prediction of a massive L.A. earthquake, a newly elected President entrenches himself with a lifetime term and sets about ridding the country of those that he deems undesirable citizens. The consequences of the actions from the opening sequence is culminates with Snake Plissken's arrival at the Los Angeles Island Deportation Center. Bound and heavily guarded, Plissken is led through the halls of the cold and colorless concrete processing area where men, women and children are casually

executed via electrocution, carried out for committing “moral acts” that for some is as little as being considered a runaway. Once in a small holding room Plissken is offered a pardon and the chance to be a free man, to which he responds, “In America? That died a long time ago.” Though a prisoner, Plissken speaks on behalf of all U.S. citizens when he claims freedom no longer exists under the current all-powerful regime.

Conservative fears are also manifested in the subculture makeup of prisoners housed on Los Angeles Island. When Plissken begins his search on the island he encounters scantily clad prostitutes and armed, heavily tattooed militants resembling skinhead neo-Nazis, walking contradictions to the plush interiors of the still intact downtown Los Angeles Theater. From there Plissken makes his way to Sunset Strip, which resembles a third world bazaar, where he finds biker gangs, ruffian street vendors, and a Latino-led revolutionary parade. It is a highly stylized vision of the Wild West filled with postmodern tropes that reflect contemporary anxieties.

Though hidden behind a thick veil of varying genres, special effects and film noir, dystopian films are almost universally social problem films. Ryan and Kellner observe, “The social problem film genre has traditionally been a battleground between conservatives and liberals regarding such social issues as crime, political corruption, drugs, and youth gangs” (87). These are all popular tropes for dystopian cinema. Class is a trope almost exclusive to the social problem or dystopian film, as popular Hollywood narratives historically have centered on the middle and upper classes, often while celebrating capitalism (Benshoff and Griffin, 171). Even through the conservative lens, money, power and greed are popular tropes in dystopian films, even if unintentional. In the book “Pretend We’re Dead” author Annalee Newitz analyzes the pervasiveness of capitalism in film and literature. “It’s crucial to acknowledge that the people creating the books and movies…may not have self-consciously intended to draw connections

between what is monstrous and what people do for money…It lurks in the background, shaping events and infecting the plot line" (Newitz, 3). She writes that the indictment on greed and capitalism is sometimes an accidental byproduct of the narrative.

Ryan and Kellner argue that because the dystopian genre is so far temporally removed from present day, the radical positions they take are able to circumvent the current realist ideology of Hollywood (254). Operating under this premise directors Ridley Scott and John Carpenter were able to create unique dystopian visions of Los Angeles that reflect the social fears of liberal and conservative ideologies of the era in which they were produced. They share an uneasiness about the future that both contradict and complement one another. It is, then, that some of the most frightening visions of the future Hollywood can imagine ultimately serve as the safest place for complex topics to coalesce to allow for present-day social discourse.

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