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**ENVISAGING THE FUTURE: DYSTOPIAN FILMS AND SOCIAL CHANGE****M.K. Neeraj**

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**Abstract**

Dystopian movies often explore themes like the fallout of Capitalist avarice, anarchy, war, oppression, and mass poverty. They tend to be prophetic in nature and demonstrate an uncanny ability to predict the future by analysing anomalies in current trends. Many theorists argue that it is man-made disasters rather than natural ones that drive the narrative in dystopian literature. However, in an age when the boundaries between what is natural and man-made are fast disappearing, dystopian movies can be seen to strike a balance between these seemingly polar opposites by attributing the cause of dystopian events to anthropocentric factors, especially human hubris and ecological myopia, while not denying the complex interplay between the two at the same time. The present paper will analyse selected dystopian movies of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century as full-blown manifestations of the political and social discontents of the present.

**Keywords:** *dystopia, virtual reality, sci-fi, AI, futurism*

The question ‘What next?’ is the driving force which makes human beings develop narratives about the future. If it had not been for this question, we would have still lived in the Dark Ages and there would be very little impetus to explore the multifarious possibilities of the present to forge a better future. However, it can be seen that this question, which has encouraged human beings to expand the latent potential of technology, has also ushered in the possibility of a global apocalypse resulting from the never-ending human desire to bite off more than can be chewed. Through the pioneering use of technology, human beings have elevated themselves to a position of envy in the natural order. Although human beings have no moral or ontological edge over the plants and animals they share the world with, they have presupposed for long that they are at the very centre of life. This self-proclaimed position of centrality has manifested itself in the form of atrocities against the planet, a wide variety of animals, and certain categories of humans too.

Sci-fi films are incredibly prescient in that they can use available variables to predict the future with only a negligible margin of error. Though this does not hold true for every film, it is still undeniable that sci-fi films present the logical culmination of socio-economic and political trends of the present, were they to remain unchanged. It is because of the distress signals sounded by sci-fi films that society at large has been able to remain awake to the dangers posed by Capitalist

greed in the form of ozone depletion, global warming, habitat loss, and so on. Dystopian film, a sub-genre of sci-fi has been particularly efficacious in undoing the anaesthetic effect of Capitalist as well as consumerist ideologies. It has forced us to take responsibility for increasing carbon emissions, overconsumption, the littering of digital wastes, and a host of other activities which we believe will leave no imprint on the planet.

According to Lyman Tower Sargent, a dystopia is “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (9). Dystopian films have always attempted to alert its audience to anomalies in current social situations—anomalies that can spiral out of control and lead to future debacles. It is upon the bedrock of dystopian literature that the dystopian film genre is built. It looks to the writers of dystopian fiction like HG Wells, Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury, George Orwell, and many others. Though dystopian literature was looked upon earlier as the staple of doomsday prophets and considered the result of the overwrought imaginations of scientifically inclined writers, a succession of wars, each more potent than its predecessor in terms of its ability to wreak global havoc, has proved that dystopian fantasies have merged with our reality. As a result, dystopian literature has achieved mainstream acceptance as many fictional works of this genre have been adapted into films which help the spectators vicariously visualise what could happen if a particular technology falls into the wrong hands or if it is used for the wrong ends.

Through symbolism, simile and metaphors, these movies highlight the problems the world is facing at present and try to envisage their consequences. Many of the technological advancements which are likely to happen in the future can be seen in these movies. For instance, tablet computers were shown in the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film contains a lot of futuristic technology that was only developed later in real life. It showed astronauts on board ‘Discovery One’ using tablet computers called “Newspads”. The Linus Write-Top, which came bundled with a stylus, was the first-ever tablet. The fact that it was released in 1987, a year after the film made waves, speaks volumes for the prescience of sci-fi films. Video calls were also first shown in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Similarly, military drones were shown in the 1984 film *The Terminator*. The film depicts a future in which humans are killed by computer-controlled hunter-killer drones and robots. Though the use of drones by militaries was a distant prospect at the time when the film came out, contemporary warfare has incorporated drones and robots into it inasmuch as it seeks to reduce human casualties and maximise the precision and efficacy of assaults. Other examples are holograms, automated cars, and prostheses.

Apart from the recurring themes of environmentally fragile society consequent upon after a nuclear war or a zombie apocalypse, dystopian films also show us political and religious extremism, climate change, global epidemics, and cyber/biological warfare even before they became a reality. A case in point is Michael Radford’s adaptation of George Orwell’s novel *1984*. The film is set in April 1984, 40 years after the second world war. Winston Smith, the protagonist, is living his life within the totalitarian state of Oceania under the consistent surveillance of the ‘Thought Police’. The media are under strict scrutiny and no item of news that diverges from the official version is printed. Sometimes even past events are disavowed and replaced with spurious accounts that restructure the narrative in favour of the ruling class. If a past enemy becomes an ally, then records are altered to reflect this amity retroactively and vice versa. The people, however,

have no say in any of this. They are compelled to be complaisant with the machinations of the regime or be persecuted for their defiance. They gobble up fake news and go about their lives mechanically. Any kind of resistance is met with relentless repression and the rebels are “vapourised”. The situation becomes more absurd since it is most often children who report the malcontents to the Thought Police for brownie points. No one might have thought that the book or the film was anything more than the ultimate parody of a self-sustaining world order undergirded by rationality and conventional ethical codes. But we now know that the twenty-first century marked a descent into the nightmare of state-sponsored surveillance and oppression for many nations. Ensuring homogeneity of thought and feeling through the careful curating of public opinion has now become a reality with media houses and state governments working in unison to feed people egregious lies that will keep them contented and docile. Democratic principles have been eviscerated; they no longer keep the dream of universal freedom alive but serve only to supply the ruling classes with the necessary rituals for hoodwinking their subjects.

In his 1975 book, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that new “humane” practices of “discipline” and “surveillance” used in new institutions such as prisons, mental asylums, schools, workhouses, and factories, have reshaped punishment in the modern world. These institutions produced loyal people who obeyed rules of society not just because they were threatened with corporal punishment, but because their behaviour was continually shaped to guarantee that they properly internalized the dominant views and values. New “disciplinary” sciences, according to Foucault, attempted to make every “deviance” visible, and hence correctible, in a way that the prior social order could not. Foucault predicts in his book that surveillance technologies, which might seem to make life more governable, will lead to life being discretised and controlled by Capitalist interests in the future. It seems that at this point in history, what Foucault predicted is finally coming true. If *1984* presented us with the figure of Big Brother who watched everyone round the clock and regulated behaviour, now we have not one but several Big Brothers who control everyone and make us internalize select social norms.

P. D. James’s *Children of Men* (2006), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and starring Julianne Moore and Clive Owen, is another example. *Children of Men* is set in the year 2027 when an infertility crisis is shown to have been plaguing humanity for twenty years. There are no births and the people are waiting for a mass extinction to put them out of their misery. Even when the whole world is facing chaos, war, and destruction, Britain claims to be the last functioning nation. It has closed its borders and is engaged in a war between the government and a group called the ‘Fishes’ who supports and fights for immigrant rights.

Almost two decades years after the release of the film, Europe was confronted with a massive refugee crisis brought on by Syria’s civil war and continuous humanitarian crises spanning from Libya to Afghanistan. Despite the fact that migrants are not being imprisoned yet, the crisis has inflamed extreme right-wing attitudes, with most European governments becoming increasingly hesitant to take more refugees, claiming economic and security concerns. The film gained even more traction after Covid-19 spread around the world, and more recently, as news of declining birth rates made the rounds, heightening concern about humanity’s fate. The film again was like a short recap of what is happening around the world.

Another film that deserves mention is *Ready Player One*, directed by Steven Spielberg, from a screenplay by Zak Penn and Cline, and based on Ernest Cline’s novel of the same name.

*Ready Player One* is quite a unique story within the field of dystopian studies. The movie is set in a bleak, gloomy future in the year 2045. It portrays derelict metropolises, totalitarian-looking corporations, and unnerves the spectator with its unmitigated undercurrent of constant danger. However, a large part of the action takes place in the utopian world of the OASIS, which is so starkly different from actual reality that it is almost instinctive to think of it as a completely separate reality.

The earth is on the point of chaos and disintegration, but human beings discover salvation in the OASIS: an expansive virtual reality universe created by the eccentric James Halliday. People engage in simulated activities in the virtual world of the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation). The real intention of creating the huge community of OASIS was to provide users a place where they could socialize, shop, and attend school, all the while leaving the creator out of its functioning. But the trouble comes when OASIS is about to be taken over by an evil corporate company called IOI. The real world is sacrificed in favour of the virtual one. A corporate institution, IOI makes a virtual world for people to escape reality, a world where they could achieve everything they ever wanted. In such a world, people will have the right to choose what they want to be, how they look, and so on.

The plot revolves around the race to the Easter Egg prompted by the death of James Halliday, the creator and majority shareholder of Gregarious Games, the software house that produced the OASIS. An Easter Egg is a hidden feature present in a video game that is intentionally put in by the game's creator and is often made difficult to discover. In his taped will, Halliday informs all the users that the first to find the Easter Egg he has planted in the game and protected with three challenges will inherit his money and shares, consequently becoming the owner of the OASIS. The key to win the challenges is in the user's deep knowledge of pop culture of the 80s and 90s, with particular reference to what Halliday liked and played as a child.

Wade, just like many other users, spends his free time learning about cult movies and books, studying Halliday's life, and "retrogaming" or playing older console-based games, computer games, and arcade games. After successfully deciphering the riddle of the first challenge, Wade wins it and gains the first place in the race. He subsequently teams up with a small group of virtual friends to solve the rest of the riddles. However, his achievement is noticed by IOI, a corporation trying to gain control of the OASIS, which tries to bribe him into working for them. After Wade's refusal, IOI locates him in real life and bombs the Stack in which he lives, killing his aunt and her partner and prompting him to hide in the old van in which he normally plays. While progressing in their quest for the Easter Egg, Wade and his team also meet in real life as they try to avoid IOI's manhunt. Wade becomes aware of the fact that IOI is actually exploiting indentured servants to track down the egg and, as the final confrontation approaches, turns to every other user in the OASIS for support against the IOI. Having survived IOI attempts to kill him both virtually and in real life, Wade finally obtains the Easter Egg and becomes the owner of Gregarious Games, a role he decides to share with his team and use to improve the too often ignored real world.

*Ready Player One* stresses the importance of turning our gaze away from misty-eyed utopianism to the real concerns of the present. It communicates the perils that can arise from our eagerness to leave the tangible world behind and find solace in an all-too-perfect virtual world where people can free themselves from the fetters of biological and social limitations. The film

drives home the idea that what masquerades as a technological utopia can often be a lurking dystopia. While *Ready Player One* implies that nostalgia and utopian thinking can coexist, it argues for a pragmatic approach to the issues of our time, showing ultimately that the reality we inhabit is worth fighting for more than any virtual paradise.

Thus, it can be seen that many dystopian movies address pertinent political and social issues with aplomb and insight. Though they have a tendency to exaggerate our anxieties, acting as an extension of society's socio-political problems, the critique they deliver is almost always spot-on. These films serve as cautionary tales about a world that might end with a whimper rather than a bang if we are not more reasonable in our attitude towards each other and the planet.

## References

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