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## **“This Time We Take the Engine!”: Class War in Dystopian Films of the Occupy Era**

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**Abstract:** In the wake of the Occupy movement, a group of dystopian films were released that, despite many differences, share a unique series of characteristics. In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, *Elysium* and *Snowpiercer*, class war emerges as the main theme. The 99% are physically shut out from the world of the 1% by impressive barriers which must be destroyed through bloody struggle. The paper uses a critical approach, mainly Jamesonian, to examine historical, political, psychological and interpretative issues in this constellation of occupy-era films, and how they testify to the huge impact on the American psyche of the 2007 financial crisis and ensuing long depression, and the feeling of frustration that fostered Occupy. Of particular interest is the way in which these critical dystopias deal with the ideogeme of “ressentiment” while depicting the breaching of the residences of the elite by the pleb.

**Keywords:** Dystopian Films; Class Conflict; Science Fiction; *Hunger Games*; *Elysium*; *Snowpiercer*; Karl Marx; Fredric Jameson; Occupy; Great Recession

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Between 2012 and 2014, in the immediate aftermath of the Occupy Wall Street movement, a group of films were released that depicted forms of total class war in terms that Hollywood has usually steered clear of. Using a Jamesonian framework, this paper will argue that the Occupy-era films *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Elysium* (2013) and *The Hunger Games* tetralogy (2012-2015) are novel forms of dystopian texts, a reflection both of the growing inequality in the neo-liberal age and the shattering impact of the Great Recession on the psyche of advanced capitalist societies. This peculiar constellation of films, despite their striking, obvious and essential differences share a unique set of characteristics in terms of form and content that clearly distinguish them from previous members of the dystopian genus. Only the most obvious will be explored in this paper, in particular the central fact that these films are structured around the bloody conflict between the majority of humankind and another, much smaller, group of human beings who oppress and exploit them—in effect, the 99% versus the 1%. These new filmic objects openly address social conflict as necessary, unavoidable, global-in-scope, unrelenting and merciless – that is through “para-Marxist” lenses.

An essential difference between most turn-of-the-21st century dystopias, which rebelled against the instrumental logic of modernity and dehumanizing systems, and this particular cluster of films, is that the latter focus primarily on questions of wealth distribution and open social antagonism.

As a reaction to the widespread pessimism, anger and disaffection that characterized the subprime crisis of the late 2000s, the bank bailouts and the long depression, these films represent a unique moment in the history of cinematic dystopia. They constitute a distinct type of what Sargent and Moylan have defined as “critical dystopias”, narratives that “negotiate the darkness of dystopia with a militant, utopian stance that not only breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the alternative world but also self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account”.<sup>1</sup>

Sandwiched as they are between the critical dystopias of the 1990s and 2000s, the world-as-simulacrum films à la *Matrix*, and the later Trump-era, more jaundiced view of revolution and populism (*The Purge*), the dystopic texts that came out between 2011 and 2014 deserve their own designation. Their portrayal of vicious class warfare is so striking and their occupy-era concern with breaching barriers is so evident that they deserve their own designation. I thus suggest calling them *eripsopylaic*, gate smashing.

### 1. New Maps of Bad Places and New Maps of Class War

Set in the year 2154, *Elysium* depicts a dystopian future where the rich have migrated to the off-planet space station

Elysium, leaving the poor behind on Earth to toil in squalor and suffocate in an increasingly toxic atmosphere. Class conflict is allegorically represented through an Earth–Elysium dichotomy created through visual metaphor, cinematography and aesthetic juxtaposition.

*Snowpiercer* (2013) is a fine example of 21st century transnational cinema.<sup>2</sup> This English language movie, directed by famous Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho, features well-known American and British actors such as Chris Evans (the face of Captain America in *The Avengers*) in the role of the main character Curtis. Adapted from the 1980s French comic book series *Le transperceneige* by Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand and Jean-Marc Rochette, it presents an allegory of class struggle at the global level, depicting a post-apocalyptic world in which the entire remainder of humanity has been split into classes aboard the giant retro-futurist steampunk train “Snowpiercer”.

Finally, the blockbuster franchise, *The Hunger Games*, presents an allegory for class in its imagination of a future America called Panem, made up of 12 distinct districts and a separate metropolitan hub of governing elites called the Capitol. Class distinction is established through the contrast between District 12, the poorest of the districts, and the Capitol, whose population is reminiscent of *Snowpiercer*’s idle, excessively hedonistic, and passive elite. Indeed the inhabitants of district 12 wear clothes and live in buildings that are exact replicas of Hines’ famous set of photographs that documented the poverty of early 20th century Virginian coal mining communities. The intention to reference the proletariat as a class could not be plainer.

On a formal level, in addition to their adherence to the canons of quintessentially American “action-image” cinema<sup>3</sup>, one of the most obvious features of these films is their stripped-down model of social reality reduced to its simplest expression. Theorists of utopia have pointed out how this feature, Jameson’s “cognitive mapping”<sup>4</sup>, is the most important political contribution of dystopias<sup>5</sup> as they enable the viewer to grasp the social totality, i.e., the complex interconnectedness of the global capitalist system that remains hidden from contemporary human beings who perceive reality as a series of disjointed events. This partial knowledge leaves us helpless since social mechanisms can only be essentially altered if the entire system is cognitively graspable. The cognitive map in this set of films presents us with the simplest possible topology and also the most politically pregnant in our neo-gilded age: two very distinct areas – one of destitution and cruelty, the other of plenty and harmony. The privileged zone uses superior technology to oppress the other and keep the two worlds hermetically walled off with sophisticated barriers which can only be breached by the spilling of much blood. The whole of humanity is thus divided into two intrinsically antagonistic parts with no neutral or uninvolved parties, focusing our attention solely on the unavoidable, violent struggle between the two. This is embodied in the fate of the main characters and their fellow-dispossessed, compelled, for their very survival, to force their way into the world of the elite along a horizontal (*Snowpiercer*), vertical (*Elysium*) or inward spiraling (surrounding of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*) trajectory until they seize the “point of total control” from where they can take

over the entire social system. The various trajectories inform camera angles and visual metaphors. A prime example of this is the claustrophobic universe of *Snowpiercer*, where the horizontal movement forward is ingeniously staged by the exclusive use of three camera angles, namely, towards the rear of the train, towards the front, and sideways views (left to right). The rear-facing shot shows the masses piling up at the back of the train, as far as the eye can see, symbolizing the vast majority of humanity. The side-on left-to-right shot angle follows the movement of the train and the revolution’s onward march heading for the engine. These two views are accompanied by a third camera angle that is oriented towards the front of the train and constantly comes up against closed doors that occasionally open briefly but not long enough for one to distinguish what is behind.

Barriers and boundaries highlight how the neo-liberal decrease in upward social mobility has become a fundamental issue in the West<sup>6</sup>, particularly in the US<sup>7</sup>, one that was at the heart of the Occupy Wall Street movement<sup>8</sup>. The strong link between a lack of social mobility and the closing off of geographic areas to the poor (gentrification, gated communities) is the cultural and collective foundation<sup>9</sup> on which *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* are built<sup>10</sup>.

*The Hunger Games* highlights, through the referencing of Virginian coal mining, the crisis in Rust Belt blue-collar communities, their feeling of abandonment and betrayal by the elites who simply offshored factories and then accused these same communities of lack of ambition for their reluctance to uproot and relocate to places with more job opportunities.

In *Elysium*, the phenomenon of middle-class flight from the cities to suburbia is clearly denoted in the grim images of the Los Angeles mega-ghetto, which were filmed in Third World slums. There is also a clear reference to trans-national migration, specifically the multitudes of migrants that die crossing the Arizona desert or the Mediterranean. Earth-dwellers of mostly Hispanic descent try to reach the promised land on rickety spaceships meant to evoke the frail boats used by migrants. They are shot down by mercenaries, enabling the Elysium decision makers to keep their hands clean (in their own eyes) – a deliberate reference to the EU’s “fortress Europe” policy of outsourcing migration control to less developed nations<sup>11</sup>.

Class divisions are more difficult to bridge when geographic barriers are set up, encouraging sharp divergences in lifestyle. This is a semi-conscious strategy on the part of the elite and the fortunate upper stratum of the middle-class to distinguish themselves from the pleb. For the past two centuries, the bourgeoisie has attempted to transform itself from a class into a caste, an attempt continually thwarted under capitalism by the logic of accumulation and expansion<sup>12</sup>. Caste barriers constitute a bourgeois fantasy of living in splendid isolation but they also entail a perpetual risk of destabilizing the whole system. In the films under consideration, when the caste system is breached, the hero is immediately invited to join the elite through a strategy of piece-meal co-optation. Both Curtis in *Snowpiercer* and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* refuse the bait out of class loyalty and the sense that the system already has feet of clay, so that the trickle of “new blood” turns into an uncontrollable

surge and “storming of heaven” – a radical destruction of the status quo.

On the level of Freudo-Marxian meta-psychological energetics, with tension building up at one end and strenuous efforts to seal off the system at the other, the Marcusean concept of surplus-repression may provide a useful insight. As the perspective of a post-scarcity world free from want for all becomes a distinct possibility, repression intensifies proportionally, in the guise of the “reality principle”, to counter the libidinal push to go beyond the world of necessity<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Confronting Neo-liberal Ideological Containment

One of the key aspects of this set of dystopias is that they confront us with the ideological strategies of contemporary capitalism, above all the concealment of the exploitative extraction of surplus labor. *Snowpiercer* demonstrates this most explicitly in its plot-twist revelation of the dirty – and smelly as Marx put it – little secret behind the Holy Engine. The Engine is claimed to be “perfect”, perpetually gathering speed as it circles the globe. But beneath the gleaming surfaces lurks an obscured reality of material, tangible human sweat and toil. The clairvoyant Yona (literally) sees through the train’s immaculate surface, and rips up the floorboards to reveal the small child working inside the guts and cogs to repair defective parts and keep the *Snowpiercer* running—a splendid metaphor for the circuit of capital accumulation, which must circulate eternally on a global level in order to increase indefinitely, but which rests on a carefully hidden element: labor.

This piercing through the veils of ideology is meant to show us that dematerialized work in the internet age is an illusion. Behind the façade of a clean, functional, interconnected digital world without visible labor, there are very real traces of sweat and tears. In the context of the early 2010s, and coming from a left-wing Korean director, this revelation is a clear reference to the “little hands” of sweatshop workers herded together in Foxconn factories to produce i-phones. Similarly, Max Da Costa builds the very robots that keep Elysium functioning in a sweatshop maquiladora where wages are kept to a minimum and the victims of industrial accidents are thrown out to die like so much junk (“I don’t want to replace the bedding. Get him out!” – “Yes, sir.”). In *The Hunger Games*, Panem is built on the fearful economic exploitation of the districts by the Capitol, leaving them to starve in makeshift slums devoid of the most basic amenities.

However, far more screen-time is given to the representation of death and gore than to showing the dependency of the establishment on the labor of the dispossessed. This has to do with the particular function of utopia/dystopia, which is, to “stage an implicit debate with the objections and ideological and political prejudices of its [viewers]”<sup>14</sup>.

The three films emphasize the elite’s framing of the dispossessed as drags on society, useless “freeloaders” (*Snowpiercer*), favela-dwellers controlled by gangs (*Elysium*), or brutish rednecks who cut each other’s throats in gladiatorial combat (*The Hunger Games*). On the surface, the poor are only suffered to exist, for the rich appear to have all the automation and technology they need to keep things running:

a consequence of a mode of production which conceals surplus value extraction. This resonates powerfully with the way the West’s Weltanschauung frames the destitute and the desperate transnational migrants<sup>15</sup>, while ignoring the benefits of such cheap sources of labor.

Yet, the films only fleetingly reference the Marxist narrative of an upper class vampirizing the working class, focusing instead on the desperate attempts of the poor to storm the gated communities of the well-to-do. This narrative angle must be seen as dialectically both regressive and yet paradoxically absolutely necessary in order to enable the viewer to be shown and therefore work through their own ideological blind spots, which are all the more powerful as they are never made particularly visible in the real world. The aim is to activate the “master ideologeme” of resentment<sup>16</sup> that is conveyed subterraneously in our culture. Jamesonian resentment, a critical re-deployment of the famous Nietzschean concept, is crucial to understanding how ideology seeks to preemptively exclude any counter-discourse from subalterns. For if the protests of the poor can be dismissed as mere envy and resentment of the rich, then a revolution is reduced to the product of bitter déclassé intellectual rabble-rousers who incite ugly mobs to senseless plunder and destruction. And by openly portraying the dispossessed as such a desperate mob, the films activate this ideologeme to better demonstrate its function: in the mouthpieces of the elite it is the main buttress of the status quo.

Had *Snowpiercer* or *The Hunger Games* focused on the brutal economic spoliation of slaves by their masters, then the viewer would be emotionally involved

(the escapism of mass entertainment that Brecht hated) but cognitively uninvolved – no *Verfremdungseffekt*<sup>17</sup> – for our own society conceals the fact that wage-earning is far from a free and transparent institution. The viewer would follow, at a safe remove, this ethical tale of the good fight against parasites and unearned profiteering without ever having to confront the ideological containment and displacement strategies at work in the First World's political unconscious.

Naturally, for the films' "utopian impulse" to succeed, in other words in order to defeat the resentment ideologue, there must be a Hegelian clash to the death between master and slave<sup>18</sup>. The have-nots must not appear to shrink away. Hence the deep thematization of bloody conflict, not for recognition by bourgeois society, but as a survival necessity which entails the destruction of the relations of production.

*The Hunger Games* self-reflexively deploys and reflects on this agonistic structure in a multi-layered fashion. The games themselves are a reflection of bourgeois social Darwinism and a Swiftian allegory of the ideology of competition (rigged of course) to obtain access to a decent standard of living. They are also a magnificent illustration of the way resentment is meant to function on a captive audience. The system forces the dispossessed to acknowledge the fact that they are morally no better than their masters, just as full of animal instincts. The fundamental soul-breaking of the slaves by the masters, and the masters imposing their ideological framework of competition, are mainly meant to expose the resentment of the downtrodden and use this to deny any higher moral ground to the subaltern. This is arguably the

ideological take-away from many modern cultural products, including those that invite us to empathize with the plight of the unfortunate. In a dog-eat-dog world, the cruelty of many of the young Hunger Games participants is used to foreclose any hope of change in the face of the forced evidencing of the ugliness of human nature. Katniss refuses the resentment trap and, at the oft-commented end of the trilogy<sup>19</sup>, the political message is made clear through the leering face of President Snow about to be executed. At that moment, Katniss recalls her last conversation with him, his final cynical comment that Coin "intends to take my place now". And witnessing Coin's grandstanding amid the grandiose architecture of the Capitol, Katniss realizes that she has indeed "been played" and turns her weapon on the female would-be dictator, the Hilary Clinton alter ego, who represents the continuity of resentment<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. New Dystopian Paradigms: The Dispossessed Already Know the Score – and so Does the Viewer

Those at the very top of the pyramid, the wielders of executive power, are cynically aware that might is right. This means that ideological strategies of displacement are mainly operative among the upper middle classes, the inhabitants of the Capitol and the *Snowpiercer*'s second class passengers who enjoy a privileged lifestyle in a pristine and beautiful environment. The primary school lesson scene in *Snowpiercer* illustrates this perfectly<sup>21</sup>.

But what of the underdogs themselves? Are they also blinded by ideology? In the classic 20th century dystopian master narrative, the viewer or reader

accompanies the hero's voyage of discovery piecing together the rules of a strange world<sup>22</sup>, Suvin's “feedback oscillations” between viewer and the diegetic world<sup>23</sup>, gradually seeing through false and mystifying ideology to apprehend an underlying reality so that both the hero and (hopefully) the reader can start questioning authority<sup>24</sup>. In *The Matrix* or *The Truman Show*, suspicion and disenchantment, those signatures of modernity since the Romantic period, gnaw at the core of ideologically constructed reality.

However, in *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium*, *In Time* (2011) and *The Hunger Games* there is a quite different set-up, constituting another very distinctive feature of the Occupy-era dystopias. From the very start, the heroine and the audience already know all they need to know – viz. their position is subaltern, subservient and alienated under the iron heel of capitalism. Merely realizing that we are being lied to is not really that important, it is a given. Katniss does not need to swallow a red pill. She already knows, from the get-go.

The films are thus not only anti-ideological and empowering examples of deconstruction but also affirmations of class consciousness. A form of sublation occurs as the heroine and the spectator are exposed to more detailed knowledge of reality and ideological justifications for the system of exploitation, revelations which are accompanied by the temptation of co-optation into the elite. The main characters reject the bait and force through revolutionary change, their original motivation intact, even strengthened by what they have experienced. Thus knowledge is acquired, not to see through ideology, but rather to gain a more detailed picture of the system's

workings and its weaknesses in order to render revolutionary praxis more effective.

It is significant that the characters in the films are drawn from the working class, unlike the dystopias of the 90s, whose characters are drawn from the middle, professional class, the “yes men in grey suits” who are more likely to initially leave the status quo unquestioned (Neo in *The Matrix*, Truman in *Truman Show*). This decidedly lower-class point of view is meant to resonate with the feeling of downward mobility experienced by wage-earners in developed nations, especially the US, from the 2000s onwards, a result of the deskilling of labor and the proletarianization of the working and middle classes<sup>25</sup>.

Furthermore, there is no miraculous reversal of fortune as the lower-class characters are not set up as Hollywoodian rags-to-riches stereotypes. On the contrary, the assumption that they are privileged by gaining access to the world of the establishment is deconstructed from the very beginning. They are not poor hillbilly girls or boys becoming jedis, or awkward teenagers from poor backgrounds becoming superheroes – they feel a strong feeling of class consciousness and class loyalty from the very first scenes and very seldom waver from their original overarching goal of overthrowing the powers that be. Katniss might receive a flaming gown; she never feels any real desire to be co-opted by Capitol's insipid world of show business.

In a true Lukácsian fashion, the films thus give epistemological priority to class position. Knowledge of the world is a function of class and one particular class, namely, the proletariat, has true knowledge of the social totality, because it is treated and sees itself as a mere object (labor input)

and thus has a clear sense of how the system works<sup>26</sup>, whereas the members of the establishment cannot help but have their perspective skewed by ideology (defined by Jameson as papering over unsolvable conflict) and functionalist justifications of the social order. The bourgeoisie is necessarily, by the very position it occupies, forced to see itself and the world in functionalist terms – they see modern society as consisting of layered strata and interest groups, each playing their own role – not as irrevocably, irreconcilably antagonistic classes.

This is evidenced in *Snowpiercer* when the third-class passengers are given the lecture on the beneficence of Wilford. Of course, the representative of the elite, Minister Mason, Wilford's right hand, does not wholly believe in the holiness of the engine and is unwilling to sacrifice herself for the cause when she is taken hostage. It would be wrong however to see her as a mere exemplar of the upper class's selfishness and hypocrisy (although of course this is also the case), for it is also certain that the "character mask" of Minister Mason, paradoxically does believe the functionalist theories she expounds. Her social role dictates her personal beliefs.

MASON: Eternal order is prescribed by the Sacred Engine. All life flows from the Sacred Engine and all things in their place, all Passengers in their Section, all water flowing, all heat rising pays homage to the Sacred Engine in its own particular preordained position. Yes? So it is. Now, as in the beginning, I belong to the front, you belong to the tail. When the foot seeks the place of the head, a sacred line is crossed. Know your place! Keep your place! Be a shoe!

The films' proletarian outlook implies that the positioning of the viewer, the authorial intent and the functioning of the "feedback loops" between our world and the diegetic world are all significantly different from that of previous dystopian movies. The spectator is more than ready to cheer on the dispossessed in their campaign to overthrow the establishment and achieve an equal distribution of wealth, a politically significant stance especially for a comprehension of the tremendous shock, doubts and rage expressed throughout American society following the Great Recession and the multi-trillion dollar bank bailouts<sup>27</sup>.

The dialectical contradiction between what this paper stated in part 2 ("the viewer must be confronted with their ideological presuppositions") and in part 3 ("the viewer already knows the score, already sees through ideology") is an essential part of the films' discourse. Using Moylan's incisive definition of critical utopias that was alluded to at the beginning of this paper, this staging of the violent breaching of class barriers, which subterraneously mobilizes the resentment ideologeme in the political unconscious, is the core of how these films "self-reflexively refuse the anti-utopian temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account". For through their rooting for the underdog, the audience is in effect, whether they realize it or not, faced with the dialectical tension between their own class-based sense of being wronged, and the ideologically-conditioned tendency to label violent changes to the status quo as resentment. The fact that these movies refuse to set new barriers to channel popular fury and depict the total eradication of exploitative



relations leads to a type of critical dystopia that eschews the irony-laden cynicism about the real-world efficacy of would-be revolutionaries that characterizes later films of the decade (Camelo Johns in *The Purge* or Freysa in *Blade Runner 2049*). It also eschews the reactionary Marvel model, that takes it for granted that superheroes must continuously guard against resentment and that only super-villains want to change the world.

Great-Recession-era films are exceptional in that they place the viewer in a unique position of experiencing this contradictory charge simultaneously and reveling in the great unwashed’s push for radical upheaval. The tremendous energy unleashed by this juxtaposition corresponds to the basic drive of our current social, cultural and political interactions as The First and the Third World are fast becoming conjoined – old Colonialist formations and new Globalized disaffection – are giving birth to the future.

#### **4. The Point of Total Control, Political Naivete and the Specter of the Post-Revolutionary Dictator**

The endings of all these films have been assessed in many different ways by commentators, a reflection on the multiple facets of 21st century liberal political thought. Canavan in his essay on “*Snowpiercer* and Necrofuturism”<sup>28</sup> lists the wildly divergent political interpretations of *Snowpiercer*. The endings of *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* have equally been praised or decried as either “as subtle as a sledge hammer”, “the only weakness of the film”, or “exhilarating”. This is a welcome development in that it provides the

contrasting points of view that supply the dialectical means of seizing the multiple mediations that link a society and its cultural productions.

If dystopias are susceptible to so many different interpretations, it is mainly because, as privileged loci for political reflection, they mirror the contradictions of an epoch and its political unconscious. Jameson draws a parallel with Freud’s dream theory, in which both wish-fulfilment and the reality principle are simultaneously at play. And as Sargent, Levitas<sup>29</sup> and Moylan have remarked, dystopias reflexively and dialectically contain both utopian and properly anti-utopian (to be carefully distinguished from dystopian) sentiments, both emancipatory humanism and cold calculating Realpolitik, so as to be able to lay out the issues confronting a society and work through them. In the context of the Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street moment, a period characterized by intense soul-searching, it is to be expected that this type of text would stimulate inquiry into issues of political strategies and tactics.

In the movies discussed in this paper, the protagonists and the desperate masses must reach an “endpoint of total control”. Their journey along horizontal, vertical or circular routes is geared towards reaching the holy engine, the orbital station’s super-user computer terminal or the central ministries of the Capitol. This corresponds, of course, to the architectural conventions of “action-image” cinema – the succession of battles with increasingly tougher adversaries culminating in a final duel<sup>30</sup>. Here, the characters use the knowledge gained from traversing earlier boundaries to cognitively and pragmatically force the powers that be into showing their inner workings

and thus revealing the fact that they can be forced open and taken over by determined humans just like any other mechanism. Society is a human construct not a natural one (although ideology would have us believe otherwise) and can therefore be changed by Human beings – that is the ultimate lesson of Marx. Throughout the films, a greater pragmatic understanding is gained and the coordinates of the solution become steadily simplified in the same forward movement.

Now in this paper, we will argue that the point of total control reached at the end of the films is the reduction of the cognitive, pragmatic and diegetic dimensions of Jameson's "cognitive mapping" to one single selfsame point—the point of action and control of the totality. This is the end product of cognitive mapping, a point that controls and therefore symbolizes the myriad of interactions and interconnections that make up the social totality. The social whole which is ordinarily un-representable is here suddenly symbolized in one supreme revolutionary event and act. As Jameson's discussion of the importance of cognitive mapping makes clear, no change can occur without an attempt to reassert the possibility of grasping (in the mental and physical sense) social totality, a cognitive step which leads to a practical act, which is the very aim of the political.

Little wonder then, that this singular point of control, this center of decision-making and human control over the system, should be the specific locus onto which anti-utopian epistemological and political doubts and challenges will latch.

One immediate objection to the film's endings is the fact that it is naive to assume that a power structure can be so

easily changed as is represented on-screen. The very notion of an ultimate source of power, one that can be readily located, is dangerous as power is notoriously diffuse, shifting and prone to rear its ugly head in most inter-human interactions. Can changing one short line of code make all human beings citizens of Elysium and is this enough to guarantee that robots will feed, heal and protect all human beings? Can simply blowing up the engine really allow a new non-European humanity to start off from scratch and establish a new mode of being? Is this not the height of political naivety? We should however keep in mind Moylan's warning (based on Sargent's careful distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia) that the political situating of a work as "naive", and thus a hostile view of critical dystopian "happy endings" is often disguised anti-utopian thought in practice<sup>31</sup>.

Then there is the more serious charge that the intrinsic danger in a "simplistic solution" is that it means that violence becomes justified. The fact that only a small handful of revolutionaries (usually only one person) manages to single-handedly alter a whole system in critical dystopian films is seen as both galvanizing, showing as it does that the system can be changed by individuals, but as also constituting a serious flaw in that the use of violence in the pursuit of political goals sets a dangerous precedent. This argument must be taken into account in any dialectical and materialist view of reality and how to change it.

And it is precisely an essential function of dystopias to confront the issue of ends and means together with the master ideologeme of resentment in order to consider political implications in a fashion

that is not uni-dimensional. This is the case in *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* which do address the danger of too-much power in the hands of one hyper-charismatic leader who represents the aspirations of the people, who might be tempted to become a dictator. At a first glance, it might appear that the movies do so simply through emphasizing the natural benevolence of the revolutionary leaders, their reluctance to assume governmental authority (Curtis and Katniss) or by simply having them die (Curtis and Da Costa) and retire from the scene after the deed is done. Katniss deliberately stays out of government and ultimately kills the charismatic menace in a final effort to maintain small-scale, locally-accountable government. But a more in-depth consideration will show that for these Occupy-era films, the most effective counterweight against the emergence of a strong man lies in the very radicality of the revolution, the very thoroughness of the destruction of the previous system, which creates a brand new mode of production and of being.

A less than total extirpation of the old order, a premature end to the process of total cultural transformation would inevitably lead to the carrying over of the

old ideological unconscious into the new world, immediately rebooting the whole oppressive system the protagonists tried to annihilate in the first place.

In this respect, the very openness of the ending, the fact that the film must conclude with the elimination of the oppressive system, and only provide vague glimpses of the post-revolutionary age is therefore a structural necessity. For critical dystopias cannot show the day after without annihilating a large part of their political charge, which is the emphasis on the possibility of radically altering things. Showing an on-screen, materialized version of the post-revolutionary future, with people confronted with new situations and problems would inevitably distract from the main point the films are making. Delivering a comprehensive—with all the vividness of CGI—“blue-print” of the future, risks tainting it with our own present-day political unconscious, with its unacknowledged representations of control and concealment<sup>32</sup>.

In the end, emancipated humanity inherits the earth. What use they make of their freedom is in their own hands, but at least the physical and mental gates and barriers have been torn down and they can move forward. At last.

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## NOTES

1. Tom Moylan, *Scraps on the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Oxford, Westview Press, 2000, p. 195.
2. Ye Dam Yi, "Locating a Transnational Film between Korean Cinema and American Cinema: A Case Study of *Snowpiercer* (2014)", in *Pleridel*, vol. 14, n° 1, 2017.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 141151.
4. The term was coined by Jameson (1983), but the concept has deep roots in 20th century Marxist aesthetics. Lukács in particular laid emphasis on the fact that the best forms of realism allowed the audience to grasp the interplay of different social classes and resulting social dynamics.
5. Tom Moylan, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
6. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2014.
7. Stephen P. Jenkins, *The Great Recession and the Distribution of Household Income*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
8. Michael A. Gould-Wartofsky, *The Occupiers: The Making of the 99 Percent Movement*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015 ; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, Oakland, PM Press, 2014, p. 346360.
9. Mark Bould, *Science Fiction*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 187.
10. Here we should mention the slightly earlier *Sleep Dealers* (2008) that displays many eripsopalaic traits.

11. One cannot understand *Elysium* without also mentioning how the film strongly references the debates surrounding Obamacare (2010-2016) by showing how residents of Elysium use nano-technology to render themselves immortal while denying access to this technology to the rest of humanity.
12. Alain Bihl, *Le premier âge du capitalisme*, Paris, Syllepse, 2019, p. 357412.
13. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1974.
14. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, New York, Verso, 2005, p. 410.
15. Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration*, Fifth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World, Fifth edition, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
16. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2015, p. 201.
17. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 1979.
18. And in fact a Marxian motive of the refusal of all masters and the abolishing of all classes as utopian horizon.
19. William Irwin, *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*, Hoboken (NJ), Wiley, 2012.
20. The fact that the establishment spares Katniss's life at the end of the first game constitutes an interesting and multi-layered comment on the dialectic of the mass media, that are both overtly authoritarian and yet subtly emancipatory. Let us not forget that we are actually watching a film that has grossed close to a hundred million dollars, and yet whose depiction of class warfare is politically groundbreaking. Dystopias are formally very much inclined to self-reflexively project their content onto their form and vice versa. Mass entertainment tries to impose the will of the elite and yet cannot help but respond to the deep desires of the average Joe and Jane. Unpacking all the political implications of the first film's ending would require a lot of careful attention.
21. Some commentators have noted that one potential problem with the Occupy Wall Street slogan of “the 1% vs. the 99%” is that in some cases it distracted from the fact that, although 1% of the American population owns 40% of the nation's total wealth, the next 9% own another 35% (75% in all for the top decile). The top decile, and to some extent the second top decile, therefore share an objective (although ideologically mediated and so more knee-jerk than clearly conscious) interest in maintaining the status quo. But would “*We are the 90%*” really have constituted a better slogan?
22. Tom Moylan, *op. cit.*, p. 611.
23. Darko Suvin, *op. cit.*, p. 71; Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1988, p. 37.
24. Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.*; Tom Moylan, *op. cit.*
25. Anne Case, Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton UP, 2021.
26. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1972, p. 169.
27. Don Peck, *Pinched: How the Great Recession Has Narrowed Our Futures and What We Can Do About It*, New York, Crown, 2011.
28. Gerry Canavan, “If the Engine Ever Stops, We'd All Die: Snowpiercer and Necrofuturism”, Milwaukee, Marquette University, English Faculty Research and Publications, 2014, URL : [https://epublications.marquette.edu/english\\_fac/298](https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/298).
29. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Basingstoke (England), Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, in *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, n° 1, 1994.
30. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 153.
31. Tom Moylan, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
32. It is therefore no surprise that Suzanne Collins' return to the Panem universe took the form of a prequel (*The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, 2020), later turned into a film (2023), as did the creators of the Netflix series' take on the unstoppable Snowpiercer.