

## The odds are never in your favor: the form and function of American cinema's neoliberal dystopias

Frame, Gregory

### New Review of Film and Television Studies

DOI:

[10.1080/17400309.2019.1622894](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1622894)

Published: 30/09/2019

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1622894)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Frame, G. (2019). The odds are never in your favor: the form and function of American cinema's neoliberal dystopias. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 17(3), 379-397.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1622894>

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**The Odds are Never in Your Favor:**

**The Form and Function of American Cinema's  
Neoliberal Dystopias**

**Dr Gregory Frame**

**School of Music and Media, Bangor University, Bangor, UK**

**Email: [g.frame@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:g.frame@bangor.ac.uk)**

**Postal address: 1 Springfield Mews, West Street, Hoole, Chester, CH2 3QX, UK**

## **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which dystopian cinema that emerged in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 provided pointed critique of two aspects of neoliberalism's economic and social policies: the deliberate imposition of precariousness across the working population which neutralizes dissent and forestalls collective opposition, and spatial segregation of rich and poor that is rigidly enforced. In *In Time* (Andrew Niccol, 2011), *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) and *Elysium* (Neil Blomkamp, 2013), the poor are plagued by uncertain employment, housing and healthcare, barely surviving under authoritarian regimes organized in favor of the rich and powerful. Despite the pointedness of this critique, however, this article also demonstrates how all three examples remain preoccupied with the possibility that heroic individuals can effect radical change, thereby providing a buttress to one of neoliberalism's central animating constructs. In some senses, they indulge in a form of "cruel optimism," suggesting that precariousness and inequality could be overcome by individuals with special qualities, when real solutions to these problems seem so elusive. This article therefore questions the purpose of these films in the contemporary moment, where neoliberalism is in its death throes, but nothing coherent has yet emerged to replace it.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, dystopia, cinema, precarity, class divides, "cruel optimism"

## Introduction

Despite its pretence of utopian ambition, for the vast majority of people, neoliberalism has been dystopian in character. As Henry Giroux argues, “Neoliberalism has produced a broad landscape of cruelty, precarity and disposability” (2015). Its primary achievement has been the “restoration of class power” to capitalist owners, following a major erosion of that power in the middle decades of the twentieth century (Harvey 2005, 79). The destruction of collectives that once functioned as a check on the untrammelled free market – trade unions, cooperatives, associations – has fundamentally undermined employment rights and working conditions. This has resulted in the emergence of a “Darwinian world”: “the struggle of all against all at all levels of the hierarchy, which finds support through everyone clinging to their job under conditions of insecurity, suffering and stress” (Bourdieu 1998). The ideal of meritocracy, founded on a “ladder” system of social mobility, has promoted a “socially corrosive” ethic of self-interest which both legitimizes inequality and damages community by demanding people exist in a permanent state of competition with each other (Littler 2013, 54). Those who fail within this system and find themselves poor, unemployed or destitute are deemed to have done so not as a result of their social status, access to education or training, or the inequities of social class under capitalism, but as a consequence of a personal failing, demonized by wider society as lazy, incompetent and feckless (Standing 2010, 77).

Neoliberalism’s success and persistent dominance over the economic, social and political lives of the public has been reliant upon the deliberate production of insecurity and “precarity” across the working population. Indeed, pervasive economic insecurity is the inevitable corollary of the neoliberal refashioning of society: the decline of unionization and dismantling of the welfare state since the late 1970s, coupled with the globalization of the labor market and post-recession corrosion of secure employment conditions through the proliferation of casual arrangements and “zero-hours” contracts, has driven more people into the category of workers known as “the precariat,” whose lives are “dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation” (Standing 2011, vii). The “precariat” is a globalized class that long predates the neoliberal iteration of capitalism. However, widespread debates about economic insecurity, or “precarity,” only became prominent in the West once it had spread in the aftermath of the financial crash to formerly affluent white middle-class youth (Puar *et al* 2012). The sudden and intense focus on this particular stratum of the “precariat” in the aftermath of the crisis is instructive: as Berlant argues, a crisis becomes general in mass political terms when it affects the bourgeoisie (2012, 166). This “jilted generation,” who

Berlant suggests “presumed they would be protected” from the precariousness that blights the vast majority of people, now suffer from the anxiety that not only will they suffer a decline in living standards compared with their parents, but that they may end up destitute and homeless because of the erosion of the safety net (2011, 120). “Obligated to do repetitive, inane or dirty and onerous tasks” (Standing 2010, 250), endure lives of material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety, the lives of the precariat are “defined by short-termism” (Standing 2010, 31), “fed by fear and... motivated by fear” (Standing 2010, 35). They are deemed irrelevant, disposable and expendable (Clary 2014, 44), deprived of a future, of education, of stable and fulfilling work (Puar 2012, 168), relegated to decomposing neighbourhoods where resources have dwindled (Tyler 2013, 8). Keeping one’s head above water is, under neoliberalism, deliberately difficult: so much energy is consumed by mere survival that it ensures widespread docility, compliance and political inertia, prevents collectivized political action against these conditions, and enables “the experience of precarity and individualized impotence to be experienced as normal and inevitable” (Gilbert 2013, 15).

The maintenance of this state of affairs has also been dependent upon a rigid physical separation of rich and poor. Neoliberalism has, through the proliferation of private compounds, leisure cities and gated communities, precipitated “the unprecedented spatial and moral secession of the wealthy from the rest of humanity” (Davis and Monk 2008, 2) as “they seek to disengage from parochial loyalties and jurisdictions, thus to minimize the effects of legal regulations, environmental constraints, taxation, and labor demands” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 13). Gated communities are both responses to and inevitable consequences of the economic inequality created by neoliberal policies: Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder suggest that advocates of these structures view them as a “refuge from the problems of urbanization... a social bulwark against the general degradation of the urban social order” (1997, 3). These residential areas restrict access to the general public, in essence transforming public space into private refuge. They are reflective of a desire among the wealthy to absolve themselves of their civic responsibilities to live in cloistered, privatized, controlled environments that exclude anyone deemed undesirable (1997, 3). Anna Minton describes the “divided landscape of privately-owned, disconnected, high security enclaves side by side with enclaves of poverty” as the “architecture of extreme capitalism” (2012, xii). Helpfully for the purposes of this article, Davis describes these communities in the language of science-fiction: they are, to use the terminology of *Blade Runner*, “off-worlds” that allow the white

middle-class to avoid the realities of a changing, turbulent social landscape by retreating into “increased spatial and social insulation.” (1990, 227). Not only predicated on the provision of gentrified housing, neoliberal urban planning seek to transform “whole areas into new landscape complexes that pioneer a comprehensive class-inflected urban remake” (Smith, 2002, 96).

This article will interrogate the ways in which a group of films emerging from American cinema’s mainstream in recent years - *In Time* (Andrew Niccol, 2011), *The Hunger Games* series (Gary Ross and Francis Lawrence, 2012-15) and *Elysium* (Neil Blomkamp, 2013) – have extrapolated the experience of precarity and social segregation under neoliberalism to future dystopian societies. It will demonstrate how the films have both critiqued a fundamental aspect of neoliberal thought: the ways in which neoliberalism’s extreme social and economic inequality is maintained by creating a social environment governed by precariousness and insecurity for the majority, ensuring any revolutionary momentum is forestalled by the necessity of eking out an existence. Although the maintenance of this system is predicated at least in part on an authoritarian approach to policing that will mete out physical punishment to those who dare transgress the border, it is equally reliant on ensuring an exhausted acceptance of the situation. The impoverished majority are kept at a distance by their precarious existences: they are never likely to enjoy the resources necessary to cross the border to achieve “the good life,” although the fact that these “better” worlds exist means that the fantasy that one might transcend the precarious and insecure conditions of existence is a tantalizing possibility.

Indeed, despite the pointedness of their critiques, in imagining these utopian spaces proximate to their dystopian counterparts, these films have also reinforced neoliberal mythology, indulging in the very “cruel optimism” that governs contemporary societies: despite the enormous barriers to entry, these spaces function nonetheless as beacons of what life could be like if one has the necessary determination, bravery and skill to pursue it (Berlant 2011). The protagonists in all three films have these qualities and, therefore, the radical potential of these critiques is neutralized by their reliance on the archetype of the heroic individual to effect change. By telling reassuring stories of a hero’s rebellion (and triumph), these films ultimately reinforce neoliberalism’s fixation with individualistic solutions to social problems. Again, this contributes to the films’ “cruel optimism”: despite the overwhelming evidence that to achieve “the good life” in this environment is increasingly difficult (perhaps impossible), the fantasy that one might escape the cycle of uncertainty,

anxiety and precarity that characterizes life under neoliberalism remains an animating force for many. American cinema's dystopias imagine such liberation to be eminently achievable, as long as one is imbued with the necessary heroic qualities to overcome these seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

### ***The structure and aesthetic of the neoliberal dystopia***

Dystopian visions from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), to George Orwell's *1984* (1948), Stephen King's *The Running Man* (1982) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) consistently imagine authoritarian futures in which the majority lead impoverished and desperate lives, forced into oppressive servitude to a brutal, dictatorial state. All these previous works also feature as its hero a rebellious individual either looking to escape the strictures of the system or effect broader change. What distinguishes the films discussed in this article from other literary and cinematic dystopias is their social organization along logics of neoliberalism: in all three instances, the heroes are members of the mass of humanity discarded by neoliberalism who, animated by changes in their personal circumstances (in all three instances, these revolve around death or potential death, rendering their battle against the neoliberal edifice a "nothing-to-lose" scenario), decide to fight the system. In all three films, the rich have secluded themselves away in what are ostensibly "gated communities": New Greenwich (*In Time*) is evocative of the wealthy neighbourhoods of New York City (both gentrified, hipster Greenwich Village and highly affluent suburb Greenwich, Connecticut); Elysium (*Elysium*) is more explicitly a kind of playground for the rich, like Dubai (its name evoking mythological, pseudo-religious imaginaries of utopia); The Capitol (*The Hunger Games*) is akin to a wealthy, modern metropolis like London and New York with a more obviously fascist aesthetic. What I am therefore concerned with here is, first, the visual and stylistic techniques the films use to convey these distinctions between spaces, and, second, the problematic reliance upon the archetype of the individual hero as a means of resolving the state of precarity in which the majority find themselves.

### ***In Time***

Set in 2169, *In Time* imagines a future in which time has become the universal currency. Humans are genetically engineered to stop aging at twenty-five, at which point they are given a year to live and anything further must be earned through labor. To run out of time

is to die. The future *In Time* constructs is consistent both with neoliberal thought and with its lived effects: neoliberalism has fundamentally altered humanity's relationship with time. Not only have technological developments undermined the previously clear demarcations between work and leisure, the decline in secure employment has led to the need to "labor excessively" in order to prove one's worth within the free market economy (Standing 2010, 205). As Mark Fisher argued, the transformation of production and distribution has had an impact on human nervous systems: "to function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or 'precarity' ... unable to plan for the future" (2009, 34). *In Time* reveals this to be a deliberate strategy on the part of society's rulers to ensure compliance and quell discord. While the rich claim, in keeping with neoliberal rhetoric, that this society is organized according to the principles of social Darwinism and "survival of the fittest," the reality is the system is artificially engineered: prices of basic goods and services, like coffee and bus fare, are arbitrarily raised to ensure the poor remain in a constant state of anxiety. As Fisher argued of the film, "the poor are trapped in a perpetual present tense, unable to plan or dream, all their mental and physical resources devoted to the exhausting hardscrabble for bare survival." (2012, 30). The richest people in society are "time lenders" (i.e. banks), from whom people borrow at exorbitant levels of interest. Ruthless and uncompromising "timekeepers" police the distribution of time to ensure that inequality endures. In reality, most people are too focused on basic survival to challenge this system: as protagonist Will Salas (Justin Timberlake) announces at the film's beginning, "I don't have time to worry about how it happened. It is what it is." This fatalism reinforces the argument of "capitalist realism" that neoliberalism has successfully rendered itself inevitable and unstoppable, the only means imaginable to organize society (Fisher 2009).

The society presented is a fairly clear analogy for our own. It is divided into "time zones." Crossing them is prohibitively expensive, meaning that the majority of the population are never likely to reach the wealthier areas that lie in the center. As Imogen Tyler suggests, "What characterizes neoliberal states is the creation of "wasted humans" within and at the borders of sovereign territories" (2013, 7). More than this, *In Time*'s social organization speaks to the logic of gentrification, and the means by which the vast majority are priced out of more desirable areas of urban centers. This is not to mention the deliberate "social cleansing" of major cities through the removal of people to the provinces (Taylor 2012). As Davis argues of Los Angeles, the "pleasure domes" of the rich in contemporary neoliberal



societies are “reciprocally dependent upon the social imprisonment of the third-world service proletariat who live in increasingly repressive ghettos and barrios” (2006, 277). This reality is reflected in the dystopia of *In Time*: the impoverished citizens of Time Zone 12 (of Dayton, Ohio – an exemplar of postindustrial decline that was once a hub of manufacturing in the aviation and automobile industries, but has suffered a forty-six percent decline in its population since 1960 – see Campbell 2016) live in a wasteland of rundown houses and factories, the decaying streets characterized by cracked concrete, weather-beaten brickwork, and rusting shopfronts **[Figure 1]**. The spare *mise-en-scene* conveys the barebones nature of their existence; there is no time for indulgence. This is revealed by the functional nature of the apartment in which Will lives with his mother. Sparsely furnished and simply decorated, with a decrepit fridge and plastic furniture in the kitchen, it is suggestive of an impoverished existence that feels temporary. There are also no doors on the cupboards or closets, as though the microseconds required to open them are a waste of time. This is reinforced by Will’s appearance: shaved head and grey overalls suggest someone with little need (or time) for ornament. They live largely on borrowed time, relying at best on the church and “99 seconds” stores that sell cheap goods, and at worst on payday lenders.

The visual style of Will’s journey to work in the film’s opening scenes reinforces this harried feeling. It is characterized by a rapid editing style and brisk camera movement that first moves around Will’s head before tracking alongside him. He is shown taking in brief glances at the surveillance system that monitors the residents of Time Zone 12, and interacting with a young child begging for time. By contrast, the rich live in New Greenwich, which has the appearance of a postmodern cityscape, complete with glass-fronted, sanitized urban squares sitting alongside curiously old-fashioned, pseudo-imperial structures like the casino in which the rich gamble their seemingly endless time. These are people with *time* to devote to ornament and ostentation above mere functionality – the casino features chandeliers and marble floors, calling to mind imagery associated with the idle aristocracy. These structures also stand in stark contrast to the simple furnishing and dress in Time Zone 12. Will’s arrival in New Greenwich is marked by a distinct shift in visual style. As his hired vehicle crosses the border, the camera tilts upwards to reveal the well-kempt traffic islands and glass-fronted skyscrapers; Davis describes the “reflective glass and elevated pedways” of Los Angeles as “the archsemiotics of class war” (2006, 231) **[Figure 2]**. The cars move easily through the streets, the camera mirroring this relaxed feel as it follows Will languidly when he climbs out of the vehicle, tracking from side to side, underpinned by the orchestral

score's calming rhythms (a sound clearly influenced by the "trip hop" style of Massive Attack). Will forgets himself and begins jogging towards his destination, demonstrating the effect of neoliberalism's inculcation of an ethos of perpetual productivity has had on him. He is at odds with the *mise-en-scene* of New Greenwich: his unadorned appearance and inability to blend in with the slower pace of life mark him out as an alien. This is entirely in keeping with neoliberalism's strategies of "othering": Will's presence in New Greenwich disturbs the rigid stratification of society between rich and poor. New Greenwich is clearly modelled on the kinds of neoliberal landscapes described by Minton: as she says of Canary Wharf in London, the wealthy can move "seamlessly from office to luxury waterfront apartment ... with minimal contact with the surrounding environment." (8). Will does not belong in the segregated environment of New Greenwich, where there is, in keeping with the fiercely policed spatial divisions between rich and poor, fear of difference and fear of strangers.

### *Elysium*

While the target of *Elysium*'s critique of neoliberalism is different, placing particular emphasis in the inequities of healthcare in a privatized system, the construction of space and the visual style employed to convey its politics are remarkably similar to *In Time*. The film establishes its perspective swiftly in its opening scenes: by the end of the twenty-first century, Earth, here embodied by Los Angeles in 2154, has been ruined by disease, pollution and overpopulation. The planet's wealthiest inhabitants have fled, and now live in orbit on Elysium, an artificial structure that is, as the name suggests, akin to paradise. In this, *Elysium* represents the most obvious example discussed in this article of the tendency in dystopias of neoliberalism to construct their worlds around rigid spatial divisions between rich and poor, where "Capital and its workforce become more and more remote from each other" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 13). The contrast between Earth and Elysium is, as Davis noted of the social divisions of 1980s Los Angeles, the "fortress city," dividing the "fortified cells of affluent society and 'places of terror' where the police battle the criminalized poor" (2006, 224). The visual contrast created by the film's aerial camera in the opening sequence is stark: where Earth is characterized by smoke, filth and crumbling infrastructure, Elysium is sleek, sumptuous, and tranquil. Where the rising camera over Earth, accompanied by a severe, grating rock soundtrack, suggests it is desperate to escape this hellish landscape, it appears infatuated with Elysium, gliding towards its metallic frame before racing along its surface,

complete with lush vegetation and serene bodies of water [Figure 3]. The appearance of the film's title is accompanied by an ethereal, whimsical sound that confirms it as nirvana in the world constructed by the film. Elysium is constructed, like a gated community, as a "snug, safe, almost womb-like environment" (Minton 2012, 79).

Earth is firmly established as the opposite. After a brief sequence featuring him as a child, we meet Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) as he prepares for work in his decrepit, sparsely furnished single-room house. Like Will in *In Time*, Max has a shaved head and dons simple overalls to prepare for work at a factory. A wide-angle shot confirms the niceties of domestic living are non-existent – there is not even a door for the toilet. There is a simple table, dresser and sink, with a decaying stove and microwave. When Max walks out of the front door, the room is revealed to amount to little more than a crumbling hovel. The camera reverts to a handheld style here, lending an immediacy and realism to the brief shots of children playing in the street, dogs barking, and people going about the daily struggle of simply surviving in this barely habitable slum. Like Will, Max is accosted by street urchins begging for money, a similarity that establishes both protagonists as possessing some, albeit limited, economic power within a social milieu characterized by desperate poverty. Furthermore, as with *In Time*, the sequence establishes the surveillance experienced by the citizens of Earth, Max noticing the monitoring aircraft flying overhead. Law enforcement robots beat Max during a stop-and-search while he waits for the bus, a draconian response to an ill-advised joke. An electronic tag on his ankle reveals his criminal status. The proliferation of criminal offences under the neoliberal regimen has been analysed as a crucial facet of its armory, creating vast swathes of the populace with limited rights, as well as subduing opposition through fear of finding oneself on the wrong side of the law. As Loïc Wacquant argues, neoliberalism has "effectively extend[ed] the formula of despotic control from the prison to the ... regulation of social marginality" (2009, 314).

Earth is here constructed as the nightmarish conclusion of the neoliberal experiment: environmentally ruined, overpopulated by impoverished migrants, "governed through social and economic insecurity, fear and obedience" (Puar 2012, 165) [Figure 4]. It is a set of circumstances so desperate that considerable numbers of people seek to make the treacherous journey to Elysium to seek refuge, another way in which the films discussed here explore the "cruel optimism" of contemporary neoliberal society, as well as obviously calling to mind the contemporary flows of migrants from war, terrorism and abject poverty in the Middle East and Africa. They are repelled by force: all inbound foreign craft are shot down. Anyone who

escapes with their life is arrested and summarily deported. Earth is in essence one enormous slum, the only remaining solution in the neoliberal era “to the problem of warehousing this century’s surplus humanity” (Davis 2007, 201). Elysium has been constructed as a galactic gated community, allowing some humans “to secede from public contact, excluding others from sharing in their economic and social privilege” (Blakely and Snyder 1997, 3). In many respects Elysium stands as a clear example of the neoliberalized neighborhood’s determination “to exclude the places and people they perceive as threats to their quality of life” (44-5). The visual and aural contrast used to establish the fundamental difference between Earth and Elysium is blunt: it reinforces the claim that gated community environments create the sense that ““being inside” becomes a powerful symbol for being protected, buttressed and coddled, while “being outside” evokes exposure, isolation and vulnerability” (1997, 28). Earth’s people are therefore rendered abject: they constitute “the dehumanized waste, the disposable dregs and refuse of social life” created by neoliberalism (Tyler 2013, 21). The residents of Elysium, like those of a gated community, guard their privilege jealously.

### *The Hunger Games*

*The Hunger Games* treads much of the same ground, although the origins of its dystopian vision are slightly different. The nation of Panem is constructed around the wealthy Capitol, surrounded by twelve districts that exist in varying states of poverty. What is distinct, however, is that authoritarianism has been instituted because of a widespread rebellion against the *status quo*. “The Hunger Games” – an annual, televised pageant in which one boy and one girl (between the ages of twelve and eighteen) from each district must fight to the death until only one person remains – is employed as a means of instilling a sense of insecurity and fear in the populace, ensuring their continued compliance with the system. The series’ hero, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) lives in District 12, the poorest region of Panem. Utilising a handheld aesthetic that, like *Elysium*, lends it the immediate qualities of direct reportage, the opening scene of the first film establishes this world: District 12 is a coalmining community set in the Appalachian Mountains, historically an impoverished area of the United States. Its inhabitants scrap for survival by living in ramshackle, rotting log cabins, handwashing their clothes, and catching and cooking small animals. The dirt, rusting infrastructure and barter economy suggest a world more akin to a

nineteenth-century environment of self-reliance than anything contemporary [Figure 5]. Indeed, Ve Neill, makeup designer on the first film, compares the aesthetic of District 12 to *The Grapes of Wrath*, demonstrating the extent to which images of poverty and destitution rely upon the well-developed iconography of The Great Depression (Seekings 2017). This impression is reaffirmed by the clothing the children wear for The Reaping, the ceremony that will decide the inhabitants of each district that will participate in the annual slaughter. Although Katniss's mother suggests the dresses worn by Katniss and her sister, Primrose, amount to their Sunday best, they are inordinately plain, in keeping with a milieu characterized by a washed out, miserable grey look, reflecting the appearance of the rural subjects of Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photographs.

This stands in marked contrast to the Capitol, which has an unmistakably totalitarian aesthetic inspired by Ancient Rome. The buildings and town squares are enormous, characterized by symmetry and simplicity. They are designed to project strength and unity, but also to overwhelm and intimidate [Figure 6]. Production designer Philip Messina suggested the structures were modelled on brutalist architecture of the mid-twentieth century, particularly edifices from totalitarian states such as Red Square or Tiananmen Square (Lionsgate at Home, 2012). *The Hunger Games* reveals its indebtedness to 1984 through the propaganda films beamed into the districts that emphasize the conflicts of the past and the necessity of collective sacrifice. The citizens of the Capitol, by contrast with those from District 12, are extravagantly dressed, replete with carefully maintained, ornate hairstyles and beards, and improbably white teeth. The Capitol's citizens are clearly designed to appear as exaggerated versions of the twenty-first century's metropolitan elite, their costuming and make-up rendered from the imagery of high fashion. It is arguable that in presenting the inhabitants of the Capitol in this way, the film attempts to paint the elite as effete, decadent, alienating, and obscure. In keeping with neoliberalism's rigid social stratification, the chance that one might become a member of the elite is restricted to the cruelly optimistic possibility of surviving (and therefore winning) The Hunger Games. The collision of savage violence with the gaudy aesthetics of reality television (the stage on which Katniss is interviewed would not look out of place on *The X-Factor* or the *Got Talent* franchise, with garish multi-colored lighting), speaks to the limited escape routes from poverty afforded the poor in contemporary neoliberal society: win a reality show, or join the army. It is a world in which even the neoliberal *rhetoric* about meritocracy no longer exists: the poor are disciplined by

the threat of brutal punishment for rebellion, with youthful revolt kept in check by the churning anxiety that they may be sacrificed.

### ***Opposing and defeating the neoliberal dystopia***

While they construct vivid dystopian worlds founded on neoliberal ideas, the films discussed here are characterized by two interrelated tendencies: an inability, or refusal, to imagine what a society organized around alternative principles might look like, and a dependence on narratives driven by heroic individuals who ultimately overcome (but do not necessarily revolutionize) the systems that oppress them. The former is perhaps an inevitable consequence of capitalist realism and neoliberalism's successful construction of itself as akin to an unstoppable, inevitable force of nature. According to Neal Curtis, this has led to a tendency to try desperately to shore up, or reconstitute, the neoliberal society rather than contend with, or theoretically reflect upon, its myriad faults and inadequacies (2013, 77). The latter is typical simultaneously of the valorization of the heroic individual as the locus of agency in mainstream cinema, as well as neoliberalism's resolute faith in the individual over the collective. All the films, to varying degrees, conform to a significant extent to what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have described as "folk politics" (2016, 9). "Folk politics" assumes that opposition to the corporate, abstract, all-encompassing neoliberal consensus should be "human scale," emphasising authenticity, immediacy and reform. It favors practices that are ephemeral, rely upon idealized imaginaries of the past, and romanticize "voluntarist and spontaneous" rearguard action against neoliberal oppression (11). It also rejects complexity, seeking desperately to individualize the neoliberal enemy when "what is truly terrifying is the generally asubjective nature of the system." (15). In its reliance upon conventional stories of heroes and villains, the films discussed here fall into many of the same traps, in many respects an inevitability of emergence from a mainstream that has always struggled with comprehensive systemic critique.

Perhaps the most instructive example here is the character of Secretary Jessica Delacourt (Jodie Foster) in *Elysium*. Delacourt is a ruthless, unyielding authoritarian figure willing to use any means necessary to maintain the *status quo* on Elysium, including the illegal employment of psychopathic mercenary Agent Kruger (Sharlto Copley). Blomkamp's casting of a white South African in this role renders transparent the film's attempt to critique the separation of Earth and Elysium as an *apartheid*-style social division, underpinned by

neoliberal ideology. Delacourt has been compared to Margaret Thatcher in demeanour and politics (Mazierska and Suppia 2016, 145). There are similarities between Thatcher's uses of the police as the armed wing of her deeply unpopular neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, but Delacourt's ruthlessness, her French accent, white hair and power suits suggest it is more instructive to consider her as an approximation of managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde [Figure 7]. Although established after World War II as a guarantor of the global financial system, the IMF has evolved into a fundamental part of neoliberalism's artillery, seizing crises in developing economies as opportunities to impose radical free market reforms. Its primary responsibilities are not to the well-being of the population at large but to foster optimal conditions for the realization of profit. In order to achieve this, it often runs roughshod over democratically elected leaders, as it has done recently (in conjunction with the European Central Bank) in Greece. Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu refers to the IMF as one of neoliberalism's "armed extensions" (1998). Delacourt's authoritarianism, her willingness to use violence against the impoverished citizens of Earth, and her plan to overthrow the leaders of Elysium, are illustrative of the film's pointed critique of the tendencies of people like Lagarde and, by extension, organizations like the IMF, to operate as the draconian enforcers of neoliberal policies. The stark divisions between Earth and Elysium must be maintained, and by brutal force if necessary. Having said this, in individualising what is by its nature corporate, *Elysium* implies that the neoliberal authoritarianism espoused by Delacourt dies with her at the film's conclusion.

This is problematic for several reasons, as are all the endings of the films discussed here. *Elysium* concludes with Max's death, having successfully made every person on Earth a citizen of Elysium, thereby ensuring they have access to the same levels of medical treatment. Max sacrifices himself for the good of the many, rendering his story a blunt allegory of Jesus Christ. This observation may seem banal given the ubiquity of the Christ story in mainstream cinema, but it reflects the predominant tendency in popular film since the onset of neoliberalism's crisis to present the defeat of mortal threats to humanity and the resolution of social and environmental catastrophes as contingent on the benign intervention of (super)heroic individuals. Max's reconstitution as an indomitable cyborg in the opening act of *Elysium* renders him a mechanical saviour in the mold of *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), defeating the forces of neoliberal inequality embodied by Agent Kruger and Secretary Delacourt in the film's *denouement*. But how can they have been defeated, when neoliberalism is hegemonic, interwoven into the "normative fabric of everyday life itself"?

(Srnicek and Williams 2016, 65). The excessive display of the film's final scene in which the overwhelmingly non-white inhabitants of Earth are whisked to Elysium to receive treatment and care rather indulges in this "cruel optimism": while on the surface it appears that "the good life" has been secured for all, there is little sense of the society that might emerge afterwards, given that Earth remains a ruined wasteland and Elysium too small to sustain such radical change. Is structural change even possible? The film either dares not, or cannot, answer this question, because alternatives to neoliberal capitalism as yet do not operate outside of the folk-political traditions that characterize opposition to it.

*The Hunger Games* saga is somewhat different, but only inasmuch as it conforms to a tradition intrinsic to the folk-political opposition to neoliberalism. The final film concludes with the successful overthrow of the authoritarian government of Panem, and the assassination of the leader of the revolution, President Alma Coin (Julianne Moore), because of her own dictatorial tendencies. In keeping with Katniss's intention at the beginning of the saga to live in the woods to escape oppressive surveillance by the authoritarian government of Panem, she retreats with Peeta (Josh Hutcherson) to the rural idyll of District 12 to live out her days as a wife and mother. The contrast with the opening scenes in District 12 is stark – where it was previously a harsh, grey, industrial environment, here Katniss sits in a sun-kissed meadow, holding her baby while watching Peeta play with their other child **[Figure 8]**. *The Hunger Games* retains a lingering suspicion of the revolutionary new government and an affirmation of one of neoliberalism's articles of faith: the only person you can, and should, rely on, is yourself. Katniss imparts this wisdom to her small baby, rendering her central role in the revolution as an unwanted nightmare. Her retreat to District 12 suggests the film remains, consistent with its first instalment, "motivated by a vision of a return to the organic and the local" rather than imagining how a society founded on principles alternative to neoliberalism might work (Fisher 2012, 30). This is the essence of folk politics, seeking a "retreat into the local in order to avoid the problems of a complex and abstract society" (Srnicek and Williams 2016, 49). *The Hunger Games* therefore avoids having to imagine what a new economic, political and social settlement might look like.

*In Time* concludes on a note of continued rebellion against the system. Will and Sylvia (Amanda Seyfried) have become folk heroes thanks to their determined campaign to rob banks and give the stolen time to the poor. By flooding the timezones, they liberate the precarious workers from their exhausting servitude. However, there is no indication that their rebellion has inspired others or ensured the destruction of the system, with the final shot of



the film showing Will and Sylvia drive up to another, but much bigger, bank. Fisher argues that this hesitant conclusion “is perhaps what is most characteristic of the current moment, in which fragmented challenges to the dystopia of neoliberalism may presage a moment of radical change” (2012, 33). However, the film’s ending arguably reveals more than this: the bank at which Will and Sylvia arrive is clearly modelled on the Georgian marble and spare classicism of the Federal Reserve Building in Washington, DC, which was built during the Great Depression [Figure 9]. While the couple’s apparently altruistic attempts to redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor most obviously calls to mind the story of Robin Hood, it is more useful to consider them as a futuristic Bonnie and Clyde. Although the outlaw couple actually tended to rob small stores and rural gas stations during their crime spree between 1932 and 1934, they have been mythologized in popular culture for their bank robberies. They dared to revolt against an economic system that had visited abject poverty and destitution on the people of the United States in the years following the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. In relying so heavily on folktales and mythology in its imagined rebellion against the inequities of neoliberalism, *In Time* reverts to the tendency of folk-politics to indulge in nostalgia for the rebellions of the past, romanticising older forms of resistance to capitalism. Furthermore, it is surely no accident that the bank in the film’s final shot is intimidatingly large, Will and Sylvia appearing in wide angle shot microscopic against its oppressive backdrop. While their rebellion is animating, the sheer size of the bank suggests that the system will endure for a long while yet.

### ***Conclusion: The ideological function of neoliberal dystopia***

By suggesting that the defeat of neoliberalism’s regime of grotesque economic inequality, fiercely policed separation between rich and poor, and precarious, insecure labor could be achieved by exceptional individuals willing to fight back against the system, these films reinforce many of the concepts they seek initially to question. They are, perhaps inevitably, indulgent of the “cruel optimism” outlined earlier: if you are tough enough, resourceful enough, brave enough, and clever enough, the thinking goes, you could outwit and defeat a means of social organization that has proved itself as malevolently adaptable as a virus. Neoliberalism continues to sell us the possibility “the good life” even though the very policies it has implemented make such an achievement increasingly unlikely. The same goes for its defeat. *In Time*, *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* offer us images of heroes who bring

neoliberalism to (or near) its knees in an environment when even an economic crisis as severe as the one the world endured in 2008 was not enough to deliver radical change.

What possible function might these films therefore play in the ongoing struggles against a form of economic, social and political organization that is seemingly invulnerable, and increasingly tyrannical in character? The similarities between these “near-future fantasies” and our actually lived experiences of neoliberalism are so obvious that they should be, as Rebekah C. Sheldon argues of contemporary dystopian literature, “understood as historical fictions of the period” (2015, 207). Despite its near death experience in 2008 and the series of electoral shocks that have followed, no compelling alternative to neoliberalism has established itself in any of the mature democracies. While it is certainly not the job of popular culture to resolve our economic, political, social and environmental crises, it must be said that the failure of our visual culture to imagine a form of social organization that challenges the assertion that “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism’s race to the bottom on employment rights, work, and economic inequality leaves us in an endless feedback loop of desperately trying to make do and mend our crisis-ridden social landscape. It would seem to prove the assertion, variously attributed to Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, and H. Bruce Franklin, that it is “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Indeed, the films discussed here find it considerably easier to imagine a capitalism predicated on tyranny than they do a system that might replace it should that tyranny be somehow overcome.

This is perhaps because neoliberalism has birthed an increasingly reactionary political culture and fostered anti-democratic ideas. Is it any wonder? As a concept it is totalitarian in nature, reducing all aspects of reality to the logics of economic competition. The films discussed in this article render vivid the consequences of this. But they are also inevitably implicated in it, having been produced and distributed within its economic structures. This is not unusual. Produced within the studio system, many of the most revered films of the Great Depression sought desperately to get the capitalist show back on the road; to rescue the economic system rather than drastically remake it. The films discussed here, if not entirely sharing that impulse, appear to propagate the notion that the right hero could defeat the neoliberal monster. While neoliberalism may indeed be monstrous, personifying it fundamentally misconstrues its all-encompassing, impersonal, slippery character. Defining it as a conventional villain furthers the misleading notion that it can be overcome by conventional means. So, rather than perpetuate the old Marxist argument that these kinds of

films operate as shiny distractions from our oppression, offering us pleasurable spectacles of rebellion to neutralize our desire to take to the streets in reality, I propose we instead understand them as conservative responses to the crisis we are experiencing in our own Gramscian interregnum: we live in a moment when the neoliberal system is dying but we have no robust conceptualization of that which will follow it. These films allow us (if only for their duration) to indulge our desire for the system's destruction, even as we acknowledge that fear of what radical change could bring will probably neutralize meaningful attempts to do so. In such an environment, we fall back, perhaps inevitably, on our folkloric tendencies, looking for mythical solutions to intractable, real problems. Therefore, these films play a role in imagining what a defeat of neoliberalism could look like, even as we return once the credits have rolled to maintaining our fragile positions within its crumbling edifice.

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