

The Depiction of Constitutional Systems with Pronounced Income Inequality in Popular Science-Fiction Film: The Case for a “Post Recession” Sub- Genre

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Main research question

The main research question of this study explores how the post-recession science-fiction sub-genre may influence popular conceptions of justice and constitutional transformation.

The 2008/09 global economic recession led to a renewed interest in the debate about systematic income inequalities. Popular outrage led to, among others, the “Occupy” protests in several financial districts throughout the world. Protestors claimed that the elite 1% of the population should be held accountable for the economic fallout. The broader argument was that the modern free-market capitalist system had failed to ensure material equality, and the fear was that the experience of 2008/09, that of a wealthy elite preying on a disenfranchised majority, would logically intensify over time.

Given this background, it was noticeable that several popular science-fiction films appeared from 2010 onward, which focused primarily on income inequalities in a mostly recognisable dystopian near-future.

Since the films in question all belong within the science-fiction genre, and contain strong dystopian plotlines, the question is how science-fiction emerged as a literary genre and how utopian and dystopian fiction ultimately became part of the genre. Also pertinent to the discussion is how some well-known utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts not only became immensely popular in their day, but in fact led to political activity.

This study investigates whether it is accurate to group these films within a sub-genre, and the degree to which they offer political alternatives for socio-economic inequality. The film selection is primarily informed by the date of their release, i.e. after the 2008/09 global economic slowdown; as well as by their depiction of gross income inequality as a major theme; and that they take place in a recognisable near future with at least one significant technological difference to the real world, thus qualifying them as science-fiction films. The selection is not exhaustive but is further informed by films that fared relatively well commercially and critically.

Finally, the potential influence that the sub-genre of post-recession science-fiction might have on popular conceptions of justice, and in turn, on constitutional transformation, is considered.

1.2 Sub-research questions

The first sub-research question for consideration is the influence of literature and popular media on conceptions of justice. This sets the analytical foundation necessary to consider the broader research question of how the post-recession science-fiction sub-genre may influence popular conceptions of justice and constitutional transformation.

The second sub-research question considers how science-fiction has emerged as a literary genre and how utopian and dystopian fiction ultimately became part of the genre. Included in this question is the investigation of how some well-known utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts not only became immensely popular in their day, but in fact led to political activity.

The third sub-research question is the extent to which a sub-genre of science-fiction, namely post-recession science-fiction, offers a political alternative to many current social ills, in particular socio-economic inequality. An implied question is whether these films can indeed be grouped as a sub-genre of science-fiction.

1.3 Theoretical and historical approach

The influence of literature and popular media on conceptions of justice is interrogated through the lens of a law and literature approach, with a discussion of how post-modern anti-foundationalism led to the emergence of neopragmatism.

In order to obtain an informed view of what science-fiction is, and to set a relative historical benchmark for political impact, several influential science-fiction texts are considered. This also helps to form a view on how the genre developed, and especially to illuminate how dystopian fiction can rightly be considered an automatic member of the science-fiction genre.

Having established the impact of 19th and 20th century science-fiction texts and having identified the elements that make them influential, the test is whether these elements are in fact present in the modern-day films under discussion. This is expanded upon by testing whether the common themes that link the films offer a compelling critique of the real-world experience of income inequality, rather than constructing a narrative that does more to entrench existing views.

Finally, the study considers some substantive “shortcomings” of the post-recession science-fiction genre, in that it is more concerned with symbolic gestures than actual political change or substantive debate. This “action-over-substance” approach is compared to the anarchist perspective, which espoused “propaganda by the deed” and emerged over a century ago.

Chapter 2 Law and literature, and Richard Rorty

2.1 Introduction

The research question under consideration in this chapter is the influence of literature and popular media on conceptions of justice. The development of the law and literature movement is discussed, with the focus on how the influence of post-modern anti-foundationalism led to the emergence of neopragmatism. The chapter sets the analytical foundation required in order to consider the broader research question: how the post-recession science-fiction sub-genre may influence popular conceptions of justice and constitutional transformation.

It is treated as axiomatic that the substance of law is influenced by societal convictions and permissive mores. This applies equally to constitutional law, if not more so. Constitutional deliberation, litigation and transformation is thoroughly monitored, since there is an expectation that it should reflect societal convictions.

It follows that a gradual change in social norms will over time lead to constitutional transformation. This is not a debate on the line between majoritarianism and judicial notice; rather it is a general comment regarding the observation that litigation is initiated, and constitutional amendments are proposed, based on the social norms of the day. There has never been a drive towards, for example, decriminalising bestiality or scrapping drinking-age limits, simply because it is safe to say that a societal consensus has formed on these issues for the moment, even in a richly pluralistic society such as South Africa.

This would imply that understanding social norms and the forces that shape them is just as important to the study of constitutional law as comparative law studies or constitutional precedent.

2.2 Law and literature

This study is premised on the argument that works of literature (or texts) ranging from great novels to pop culture are a viable source of jurisprudential engagement. Even though law and literature is presented as a creature of post-modernism, there is room to argue that law and literature heralds a return to the narrative-based histories and mythologies of antiquity that informed the way societies thought about morality¹.

In fact, looking at any period of history, there is ample evidence of the significant role that the popular literature or fictional texts of the day have had in terms of jurisprudential deliberation. Canonical law was obviously biblically inspired, and the Renaissance “men of letters” drew their inspiration from classical antiquity. If anything, the Enlightenment was the exception², which in a way makes it appropriate to think of law and literature as post-modern – in that came into being after modernism and as a response to modernism.

The appeal of law and literature, it is said, is that it offers a way to contemplate the ethical nature of law³. Put prosaically it is simply more fun to engage a text intended to entertain, but which simultaneously offers conceptual depth that a clinical legal text does not. The argument for law and literature is that both elements, law and literature, are united within language as cultural discourse⁴.

¹ Ward, I. (1995: 5): legal traditions such as native American, Islamic and Jewish law have continued to use metaphors and parables.

² Ward, I. (1995: 5), for example, argues that the alienness of metaphor and narrative fiction in contemporary legal theory is a consequence of the dominance of the “scientific” discourse that is a legacy of the Enlightenment.

³ Minda, G. (1995: 149)

⁴ Minda, G. (1995: 150)

Although much has been said of the interchangeability between “law” and “literature”, the difference between “law in literature” and “law as literature”⁵ is more than academic polemic and presents a fundamental difference in world view.

Law and literature developed from the “Great Books” approach of studying great works of Western literature to see how common legal themes such as revenge or guilt have been expressed⁶. In other words, this was a form of law in literature. The modernist instinct towards foundationalism raised its head in the law and literature movement as scholars would use literary texts to defend or advocate conceptions of law, in other words an Enlightenment or modernist approach, which implies that human values or core human truths about justice can be found in great literary works⁷.

Richard Weisberg for example sees law and literature as a vehicle to revitalise the ethical component of the law⁸, which would imply purposefully seeking out texts that either concur with a jurisprudential view or are made to fit such a view. The danger of this approach is that it may limit the analysis to a kind of post-facto analytical contrivance, less about analysis and more about pushing an agenda. It would obviously also suit the taste of reactionary voices who may justify their outdated views by referring to the depiction of equally outdated values in venerable texts, which would conveniently be robbed of their context. In the end, both approaches, either staunchly progressive or aggressively reactionary, are married in their essentialist approach to a text.

This is a similar critique to that offered by Richard Posner: that law in literature is problematic in that, as opposed to legal texts, it is impossible to access the authorial intent of a work of literature⁹. Similarly, Delgado and Stefancic took issue with the assertion by West that the moral reasoning of certain famous American judicial opinions could be found in contemporary texts. They argued that judges are in fact rigid in maintaining a difference between law and literature and that as a result their positions are determined by socio-political forces of the day¹⁰. However, this does not exclude the possibility for lawyers to use texts in order to understand the normative contexts of the day¹¹.

The latter “concession” by Delgado and Stefancic that texts can be used as a type of moral Rosetta stone to understand the conditions of the day muddies their initial argument. The suggestion is that a lawyer inhabiting time A will be better able to understand the social conditions in an earlier time B by reading a book written at around time B. It is certainly intuitively appealing and speaks to a great hope of understanding our forefathers, but a misguided hope nonetheless. It is misguided because it ignores the contingency of language: the simple truth is that the lawyer in Time A reading about Time B will not really find any meaning; rather, she will be creating a new interpretation of the text. This is where Posner is also correct in warning against finding truths regarding ethics of law within literature.

In the face of this uncertainty, the law and literature project luckily did not flounder or lose its status as a “serious” field of legal study, consigned to academic frivolity. The crucial development came in the late 1980s, when law and literature scholars took the famous “interpretative turn”, which allowed that literary criticism could be applied with equal vigour to the analysis of legal texts¹², further disabusing the facile dichotomy between literature in broad and “official” legal texts.

⁵ Ward, I. (1995)

⁶ Minda, G. (1995: 150)

⁷ Minda, G. (1995: 158)

⁸ Ward, I. (1995: 9)

⁹ Ward, I. (1995:13)

¹⁰ Ward, I. (1995:14)

¹¹ Ward, I. (1995:14)

¹² Minda, G. (1995:159)

Arguably the biggest element of this conceptual leap was anti-foundationalism. Whereas the foundationalists believed that the right answers and a social consensus on morality could be found, the anti-foundationalists rejected the very idea of a shared intellectual foundation that would inform such a consensus¹³. Richard Rorty initiated the “neopragmatism” approach, which focused on the creation of vocabularies to describe human reality¹⁴. Rorty is therefore a true post-modernist in maintaining that language and meaning are contingent on social convention¹⁵.

2.3 Neopragmatism

Rorty starts his argument by suggesting that scholars adopt the personhood of a liberal ironist¹⁶, where “liberal” denotes a belief that cruelty is the worst thing a person can do, and conversely that it is cruelty that one has the highest priority to avert; and “ironist” as someone who is aware of the contingency of their own beliefs and who is able to abandon the idea that those beliefs have an ahistorical or metaphysical foundation. Rorty defends the priority he gives to averting cruelty by freely admitting that there is no way to justify such a view without invoking metaphysics¹⁷. It is “pragmatic”, since his anti-foundationalism serves a purpose, rather than merely engaging in a seemingly nihilistic deconstruction of texts.

He also admits that societies or social groupings are founded on metaphysical or historical foundations, e.g. religion or race, but that his attack against such foundations is not an attack against the concept of human solidarity; it is rather an antagonism towards historical contingent solidarity¹⁸. This post-metaphysical solidarity calls for clearing away of prejudice and is sensitive to the pain of others¹⁹.

But how does one sensitise oneself to the pain and marginalisation felt by the “other”? This is where Rorty enters the law and literature debate and agrees with the broad argument that novels are able to give insight into suffering not previously imagined²⁰, and in keeping with the anti-foundational stance, does not maintain a difference between so-called high and low art²¹. Crucially though, the turn is away from a theoretical analysis and towards the narrative and demonstrates a reluctance to offer any description that seeks to provide a synthesised, single vision of life, but rather “a proliferation of Freedom rather than a convergence towards an already existing Truth”²².

The difference between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism within law and literature is writ large on this point. To grossly oversimplify: whereas the foundationalist law and literature scholars apply a suite of (well-intentioned) analytical tools as part of a unifying theory to go out and find common ethical truths in texts, the whole enterprise is doomed and fails to truly understand the view of marginalised voices. This is because the scholar still enters the project with a contingent vocabulary that “infects” from the start. An ironist is much better equipped to rather allow the text to “speak for

¹³ Minda, G. (1995: 161)

¹⁴ Minda, G. (1995: 162)

¹⁵ Minda, G. (1995: 229)

¹⁶ Rorty, R. (1989: xv)

¹⁷ Rorty, R. (1989: xv)

¹⁸ Rorty, R. (1989: xv)

¹⁹ Rorty, R. (1989: xvi)

²⁰ Voparil, C.J. (2006: 61) points to Rorty’s view as the novel being a vehicle for moral reflection.

²¹ Rorty, R. (1989: xvi): “The process of coming to see other human beings is a task for the novel, comic book or docudrama”

²² Rorty, R. (1989: xvi)

itself” and to support the creation of a new vocabulary that is better equipped to give meaning to the social questions at hand²³.

While the theoretical nuance around Rorty’s “solidarity” is well founded, it would be remiss of a cynic not to ask whether this is a realistic project given the overwhelming evidence that humans almost exclusively find solidarity based on metaphysical and historical foundations. The beauty of Rorty’s method is that such a comment can be exposed to be the product of reasoning based on a contingent reality that takes a pessimistic view of humanity, and that nothing stops the jurist or activist from constructing a vocabulary that gives greater explanatory power to this nascent possibility of solidarity based on an aversion to cruelty.

The theoretical basis of Rorty’s neopragmatism deserves a quick overview. According to Rorty, the German idealist philosophers did (partly) repudiate the view that the truth is “out there”, as they saw all matter as a construct of the mind, which invalidates non-human scientific truths. However, the idealists only went half-way, as they still clung to the view that concepts such as “mind” and “spirit” had an intrinsic value, and so could be found by philosophical analysis²⁴.

Rorty flips this world view on its head and argues that there is indeed a mysterious, unknown world out there with non-human origin, which we presumably have a right to find the answers to, but the “truth” is not out there as “truth” is a human concept that is contingent on human language²⁵.

It may be safer to say that there is in fact no world out there; how is it possible to delineate where socially contingent reasoning stops, and clinical assessment starts? If language is socially contingent, what makes the other senses of touch, sight, smell and hearing so different if culture is transmitted in a variety of ways?

The question then arises as to how society changes (assuming there is such a thing as change)? According to Rorty, society does not consciously change, but decides to change its vocabulary and gets into the habit of using certain words and discarding others²⁶. The temptation is to search for the criteria that bring about such a change, but that is part of the broader temptation to think of the world or the human self as possessing an intrinsic nature wherein those fundamental truths of the human condition can be found²⁷. It is imagination, unbridled by theoretical constraints, that is the central human faculty. Reason can only constantly re-establish an existing pecking order, whereas the creative spirit is what truly brings about change, or as Rorty puts it “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well is the chief instrument of cultural change”²⁸.

This change is also not about replacing old words with new under the pretext that the new ones are better. A new vocabulary is not “better” or more realistic; rather, the vocabulary one favours should be made attractive by showing it can better describe the topic at hand²⁹. The contingency of language implies a contingency of consciousness, which leads to the position that intellectual and moral progress is a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than an increasing understanding of how

²³ Minda, G. (1995: 166) notes that the post-modern reading also encourages multicultural perspectives to emerge.

²⁴ Rorty, R. (1989: 4)

²⁵ Rorty, R. (1989: 5)

²⁶ Rorty, R. (1989: 6)

²⁷ Rorty, R. (1989: 6)

²⁸ Rorty, R. (1989: 7): Admitting that this position exposed him to taking a foundational view on the way things are, Rorty offers the defence that “to say that truth cannot be discovered does not mean that there is no truth”.

²⁹ Rorty, R. (1989: 9)

things really are³⁰. The truly revolutionary moments in history occur when vocabularies clash and there is appreciation, not for how they fit together as a puzzle, but for how they can be used as tools to describe the world³¹.

As an aside, Ward makes the interesting comment that, based on the influence of Rorty and other anti-foundationalists, law and literature scholars are “resurrecting the art of rhetoric” in legal education, which was commonplace in antiquity³².

2.4 Rorty on 1984

Rorty’s analysis of the classic *1984* by George Orwell serves as a good example of his method. Rorty argues that no author has come up with a better way of depicting the political alternatives to liberal democracy than Orwell in *1984*, and crucially that he helped to convince the liberal intelligentsia of the day that conditions in Soviet Russia would not improve³³, or as Rorty puts it; “He broke the power of what Nabokov enjoyed calling “Bolshevik propaganda” over the minds of liberal intellectuals in England and America.”³⁴

Rorty also pins the success of *1984* in evoking a socio-political response on the observation that it was “the right book at the right time³⁵”, which raises a question regarding art for arts’ sake: would a text written purely for artistic merit be equally persuasive if it is so radical that very few of the current audience members understand it?

What Rorty seems to suggest is that to be creative in a way that changes society is to strike a fine balance between escaping the binds of established dialectic but remaining socially conscious: to “speak differently” but not too differently. But if an author sets out with a specific commentary on contemporary society in mind, then how radically new could the text really be? It may seem much of a muchness, and Rorty is not giving a set of prescriptive conditions, but this balance between a new way of speaking and social consciousness may be a conservative influence.

Rorty argues that Orwell was able to sensitise an audience to cruelty and humiliation that they had not previously noticed, not by stripping away the appearance to reveal the reality of Soviet Russia, but rather by means of a “re-description” of what may happen or is already happening³⁶. Although Orwell has maintained that the purpose of an author is to be “transparent” and, to put it simply, consciously avoid injecting personal views into a text, Rorty argues that the opposite is true and that one has to have a similar method as the “Stalinist apologists”³⁷. Put differently, an author must purposefully insert her own political views into the piece. Festenstein shows that Rorty is quite unapologetic in supporting social-democratic politics while simultaneously rejecting grand narratives³⁸.

Again, if the aim of a text is overtly political, does this not place restraints on its creativity? If language is socially contingent, is it not necessary to speak irrationally (to the eyes of contemporary society) rather than merely differently, in order to bring about any change? Throughout this paper there are instances where fictional texts purport to sketch a new dazzling vision of society but contain many half-measure bourgeois sensibilities that ultimately limit their ability to change minds. For example,

³⁰ Rorty, R. (1989: 9)

³¹ Rorty, R. (1989: 12)

³² Ward, I. (1995: 15)

³³ Rorty, R. (1989: 170)

³⁴ Rorty, R. (1989: 170)

³⁵ Rorty, R. (1989: 170)

³⁶ Rorty, R. (1989: 173)

³⁷ Rorty, R. (1989: 174)

³⁸ Festenstein, M. and Thompson, S. (2001: 203)

in *Looking Backward*, as discussed below, the promise of a consumerist paradise apparently does far more to motivate the audience towards socialism than an appeal to political justice, and in the film *Elysium*, also below, automatic free universal health care is implied to be the solution to the deprivation of income inequality and not merely an element of a more just system. The problem is perhaps that these texts engage in a type of negotiation with the audience; they are urged to imagine a different system, but at the same time contain enough creature comforts or measures of wealth to remain “realistic”.

The solution to this dilemma may be that Rorty is advocating for liberal irony, not radical change. The “liberal” in Rorty is satisfied if the world becomes less cruel, even if it is a gradual process. Owen comments that Rorty defends taking a light-hearted or irreverent approach in some philosophical discourses, as long as the imperative of preventing cruelty is put first, i.e. accepting cruelty as the “summum malum”³⁹. Although the far more serious cruelty of human trafficking may be solved by a radical change in society, the more realistic narrowing of the income divide apparently remains a worthwhile pursuit in the meanwhile.

2.5 Applying the law and literature neopragmatist methodology

Since the discussion forms part of a broader analysis of post-recession science-fiction, it is perhaps appropriate to consider what would then be the “wrong” way to go about applying a law and literature analysis.

The first clue that an analysis is striking the wrong path, is to inveigh the text with an authority beyond critical reproach and to suggest that it is more timeless than a legal text. If the law and literature project is aimed at showing the interchangeability of law and literature, the latter cannot be positioned as morally “superior”. The term “Great Books” is the first mistake. The texts and films in this paper, although popular to the degree that most people recognise the titles, are not treated as timeless classics, and is openly questioned whether there is progressive substance to them.

Secondly, there are layers of meaning “all the way down” in any text, so it is reductionist to conveniently halt the analysis at the first layer of abstraction. The approach followed in identifying texts, films and common themes is therefore hopefully not an exercise in a limited form of analysis. A limited form of analysis would look to the plot similarities and be content to draw conclusions on the validity of the social commentary of the films. The purpose of this paper is not to question whether the commentary is correct or accurate, which would tend towards circular logic, but rather to take at least one more step and ask how the themes may impact on social dialogue. The films are treated as products and influencers of a contemporary view on income inequality. On the uneasy slide between the two bi-causal forces of art and society, the focus is on the potential impact of the text on society (i.e. how it is received) rather than pretending to find sociological evidence for the production of so many similar films within a short space of time. To put it differently, it is not whether the commentary is factually accurate but what the perception is, which dictates societal change and by extension jurisprudential development.

Thirdly, the ever-present temptation is to pretend to have found some truth, rather than admitting to having created a new way to describe the world. While several themes are identified, they are inherent to the films and are not presented as saying something about the real world or even applying a critical finality when describing the films themselves. The purpose is to create a new way of describing some

³⁹ Fensteinstein, M. and Thompson, S. (2001: 94)

films, to create a vocabulary that is not more accurate but more useful. The very use of “post-recession science-fiction” as a genre identifier is a rhetorical flourish that will hopefully support this attempt.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter argues that literature and popular media do influence societal views and conceptions of justice. Based on the law and literature analysis and Rorty’s neopragmatism, this is not because there are some great human truths hidden in works of literature that scholars can identify and introduce to law, but rather that societal change is driven by the convincing power of texts. An analysis of texts should therefore look towards this power to describe the world anew, but at the same time be aware of the implied balance implicitly advocated by Rorty: that however radical an alternative system may be depicted as being, there needs to be sufficient similarity to the world of the reader so as not to make the depiction too jarring.

The next chapter looks at how science-fiction has emerged as a literary genre and how utopian and dystopian fiction ultimately became part of the genre.

Chapter 3 Science-fiction, utopia, dystopia and political commentary

The research question in this chapter examines how science-fiction has emerged as a literary genre and how utopian and dystopian fiction ultimately became part of the genre. The secondary research question aims to interrogate how some well-known utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts not only become immensely popular in their day, but in fact led to political activity. The history and definition of science-fiction serves to categorise the selected films as such, whereas the discussion on politically influential science-fiction texts lays a base level of comparison for the impact and political substance of the selected films in the following chapter.

The texts⁴⁰ selected for discussion in this chapter have been referenced in several commentaries on science-fiction and is widely recognised for their political impact.

3.1 The definition of science-fiction

There are several definitions for the science-fiction genre. The most influential is likely that given by Suvin, who describes it as “a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment”⁴¹. According to Suvin, science-fiction contains a novel element, or *novum*, which is a fictional device that illuminates the difference between the world the reader inhabits and the fictional world of the text⁴². An alternative definition is given by Delany in that science-fiction is merely a way of reading a text⁴³. A romantic comedy set in space, for example, would hardly pass as science-fiction for Delany if the plot is entirely unaffected by such a radically different setting; if the plot could develop just as well on a contemporary terrestrial setting, then it would not qualify as science-fiction.

Roberts attempts to find a synthesis of the various views and states that the only agreement among the commentators is that science-fiction is a discussion where the setting is differentiated from the world of the reader, or audience, in a significant way, but that this differentiation comes down to a technological difference that has become normal in the world of the text⁴⁴.

In an earlier work, Roberts states that science-fiction is a genre where the fictional world is distinguished from the real by one degree or more⁴⁵ and that science-fiction is in fact another way to describe history. “The truth is that most science-fiction texts are more interested in the way things have been. Science-fiction uses the trappings of fantasy to explore again age-old issues; or, to put it another way, the chief mode of science-fiction is not prophecy, but nostalgia.”⁴⁶ Or, put differently, science-fiction is a *histography*⁴⁷. The latter definition could be interpreted to mean that the depiction of human behaviour in science-fiction, either on an individual or a social scale, would be recognisable when compared to actual historical events; or would be familiar to the contemporary reader or audience. No matter how strange the world or technology of a science-fiction text, human behaviour needs to be somewhat recognisable, so as to achieve the “cognition” to which Suvin refers.

⁴⁰ Edward Belamay’s *Looking Backward*, Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, and George Orwels’ *1984*.

⁴¹ Roberts, A. (2005: 1)

⁴² Roberts, A. (2005: 2)

⁴³ Roberts, A. (2005: 2)

⁴⁴ Roberts, A. (2005: 2)

⁴⁵ Roberts, A. (2000: 1)

⁴⁶ Roberts, A. (2000: 33)

⁴⁷ Roberts, A. (2000: 36)

From the above a tentative, and hopefully more accessible, definition of science-fiction can be distilled:

Science-fiction is a genre that depicts a world wherein a man-made aspect of that world is different from the reality of the reader or audience; and the centre of the plot explores the implication of this difference on a social, psychological and/or political level, assuming that the depicted human behaviour is largely similar to conventional real-world patterns.

The centrality of “man-made” in the above definition will be more clearly illuminated in the historical overview below.

3.2 The history of science-fiction

Considering the heritage of myths and legends across cultures, there has been an abundance of stories of fantastical voyages and strange creatures that would fit comfortably within a reductive view of science-fiction, but for the crucial difference that the “technology” or skill that is applied by the protagonists exclusively involves some metaphysical item. Along the way, authors of the day started to experiment with other plot devices. Lucian Samosata is widely seen as the first science-fiction author, based on his works *Ikaromenippos* and *True History* written between AD 160 and AD 180⁴⁸. *Ikaromenippos* tells the story of Menippos, who attaches a vulture’s feathers to his arms, which allows him to fly up to the heavens and the Moon, to give him a vantage of earth below. He then flies further past the sun to consult with Zeus on the “real state of affairs” as opposed to the “contradictory squabbling of philosophers”⁴⁹. The plot therefore develops from a science-fiction to theological fiction⁵⁰.

Roberts argues that while Samosata is widely seen as the first science-fiction author, he was in reality at the end of a tradition of fantastic voyages into the sky and planets in the classical world.⁵¹ He argues further that there was most likely a continuation of the type of speculative fiction touching on science-fiction following Samosata’s work, but lost material both before and after gives the impression of gaps in literary development in the classical world⁵².

Between AD 400 and the 1600s, there was again an abundance of fantastical tales, but they were all limited to the earthly arena and those texts that made a conceptual leap outside of earth viewed “the heavens” as a religious or supernatural idiom⁵³. So, when Dante Alighieri describes the voyage to different planets in his *Divine Comedy*, it is a theological idiom and not a materialistic plot. Similar to the Greek myths, the heavens were seen as divine and as such a voyage there transported the traveller outside the material realm⁵⁴.

In comparison to the classical writers, “medieval interplanetary voyages partook of a monotheistic unity, allied to a totalitarian religious authority that denied the imaginative possibilities that science-fiction requires”⁵⁵. Samosata’s work could therefore make the conceptual leap of a fantastic voyage without metaphysical aid or magical artefacts while engaging with philosophical rather than theological questions, even though the final arbiter is still Zeus. An example of these “restrictive”

⁴⁸ Roberts, A. (2005: 27)

⁴⁹ Roberts, A. (2005: 27)

⁵⁰ Roberts, A. (2005: 27)

⁵¹ Roberts, A. (2005: 30)

⁵² Roberts, A. (2005: 30)

⁵³ Roberts, A. (2005: 32)

⁵⁴ Roberts, A. (2005: 34)

⁵⁵ Roberts, A. (2005: 34)

conditions is the 1532 epic by Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, describing a journey to the moon that was not science-fiction but theological and moral idiom throughout⁵⁶.

The big break came with Copernicus and his re-evaluations of the Ptolemaic cosmology, initiating a conceptual development of the heavens being an extension of earth and no longer the exclusive realm of the supernatural⁵⁷. The authority and influence of the church, however, did not simply evaporate; several early science-fiction writers that borrowed from the work of Copernicus were at pains to confirm Christianity as a universal truth⁵⁸. The 1638 text *The Man in the Moone* by Francis Godwin, for example, talks of lunar inhabitants recognising Christian liturgy, to the joy of the protagonist⁵⁹.

Roberts argues that the tension between the new Copernican cosmology and traditional Christian revelation has never entirely left science-fiction⁶⁰. This argument can be expanded to a more generic position: that anxiety about technological or scientific development is very much a consistent theme for science-fiction. Scientific revelation often leads to a questioning of the established order, whether it is legal authority, received knowledge or long-held religious beliefs. Further, the “doth protest too much” instinct to stress a harmony between new revelation and established views, for example that humans and artificial intelligence can peacefully coexist or that cybernetic enhancements are not dehumanising, is perhaps unknowingly an indication that the antagonism will soon become a theme within the genre.

The new approach to viewing the cosmos as something that is real and yet vast beyond human experience opened the imaginative space of an infinite and radically different worlds ready to be explored, introducing a “sense of wonder” that has proved to be powerful in stimulating the creative energies⁶¹.

The pre-modern concern and use of moral or theological idiom may seem unsophisticated to a present-day audience, but the contrary could be true. The equalisation between space travel and moral journey in classical and medieval texts was in a way more honest about what was important to society, or rather, the texts were unapologetic about the importance of moral deliberation. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the modern-day discussion within post-recession science-fiction is entirely about material position. It is not even about a fundamentally unfair system, as the system does not change significantly. It is also contextually significant that the modern-day audience is most likely already relatively wealthy compared to the dire poverty witnessed in developing nations, yet the message of income inequality is still presented as something to be outraged about in a personal sense. It is not about the suffering of others, but about the relative “poverty” of the audience compared to the elite.

A second comment relates to the earlier point that Rorty’s pragmatism does not encourage radical experimentation. In the formative years of science-fiction, the general mood was that of speculation regarding technology and political systems. But as the genre has developed, it has seemingly become far more dogmatic in the way it follows world construction, to such a degree that a radically different world is not created anymore. Rorty also implies that there is an element of reception from the

⁵⁶ Roberts, A. (2005: 34)

⁵⁷ Roberts, A. (2005: 37)

⁵⁸ Roberts, A. (2005: 38)

⁵⁹ Roberts, A. (2005: 38)

⁶⁰ Roberts, A. (2005: 39) argues that the tension was further nuanced between a humanist/Protestant perspective – which veers towards materialism and unmediated explorations of the cosmos – and that of sacramental/Catholic perspectives – which stress the divinely mediated and magical universe.

⁶¹ Roberts, A. (2005: 40)

audience, which makes the case for not being too strange, so the problem is also that if an author or director were to create a radically different world with completely different political systems, it may well be that the audience would not be able to appreciate the novelty.

3.3 The emergence of utopian fiction

In the spirit of enlightenment, but perhaps not directly influenced by the Copernican revolution, Sir Thomas Moore published the seminal *Utopia* in 1516⁶², signalling the start of a genre that would develop in parallel to that of science-fiction, and which would later on arguably become part of it.

From its inception, the utopian novel proved to be a potent force in generating political debate. The cultural historian Jacques Barzun comments that utopia is such an accommodative genre that many political treatise often take its form (or idiom)⁶³. Miller et al. argue that utopian texts are so effective because they perform two simultaneous political functions: they explicitly criticise existing systems from a radical perspective, rather than a reformist perspective; and they offer new ideals and show how they will be realised in a changed system⁶⁴.

While many political and theoretical texts may be labelled “utopian”, there is an important proviso to avoid broadening the definition to something nonsensical. “Utopianism is not merely the advocacy of an ideal – if it were, all political thinkers would be utopians in some respect. It consists in the application of the ideal, or ideals, to every aspect of social life, with revolutionary consequences for the reorganisation of society.”⁶⁵

The political ferment of 18th and 19th century Europe proved to be a suitable environment to show the potency of speculative systems as they related to real-world political activity. “Not surprisingly, this moment witnessed not only an outpouring of Utopian writings, but also to the establishment of a number of experimental Utopian communities”⁶⁶. Many of these communities or movements were inspired not from a clearly articulated political theory, but rather from a fictional text. In 1840 Etienne Cabet published the utopian *Voyage to Icaria*, which was so well received that he became the leader of a Utopian socialist movement whose membership peaked at 400 000⁶⁷. In Russia the 1863 novel *What is to be Done?* by Nikolai Chernyshevsky “would serve as a major inspiration for the Russian revolutionary movements”⁶⁸.

The recurring question throughout the paper is, however, how radical can these texts be? Two seminal works of fiction that have had proven political impact, namely *Looking Backward* and *The Iron Heel*, are discussed in further detail to explore this question.

Looking Backward (1887)

Towards the end of the 19th century a utopian novel came along that, while obscure today, has proven how influential the genre can be on political discourse and ultimately policy development. In the USA Edward Bellamy published his *Looking Backward 2000* in 1887, with Seed commenting that the work

⁶² Roberts, A. (2005: 53)

⁶³ Barzun, J. (2001: 117): “Writing utopia’s is a western tradition, and it is found in other genres than explicit accounts of imaginary countries.”

⁶⁴ Miller, D. et al. (1991: 533)

⁶⁵ Miller, D. et al. (1991: 533)

⁶⁶ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 85)

⁶⁷ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 86)

⁶⁸ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 87)

had “a direct impact on the political discourse of its day, gave birth to political movement called ‘Nationalism’ by Bellamy and influenced progressive policies for nationalisation of public utilities”⁶⁹.

Although there were multiple utopian texts written in the 19th century, *Looking Backward* is considered the most influential of the time⁷⁰. The plot involves the protagonist being transported to the year 2000, where he finds a harmonious and collectivised America with what is essentially a centrally controlled socialist economy⁷¹.

Based on such face value metrics as book sales and translations, *Looking Backward* was immensely popular and in fact spawned hundreds of clubs that lobbied for Bellamy’s “Nationalist” collectivist ideals, and which evolved further to an official political party that contested (but lost) the American presidential election⁷². Its influence stretched beyond American borders, as Guarneri notes: “leaders of many social and political movements credit it with spreading their doctrines more effectively than any other means”⁷³. In literary terms, *Looking Backward* prompted over a hundred utopian novels as rejoinders in the United States, but the novel left a diverse legacy as often opposing ideologies would later lay claim to fulfilling its message⁷⁴.

Within the United States, President Roosevelt would enlist several Bellamy devotees into his “brains trust” that shaped and supported the New Deal⁷⁵, and Francis Townsend, after reading *Looking Backward*, wrote the old age social pension scheme, which ultimately led to a pension programme⁷⁶.

Guarneri argues that modern literary utopias do four things: they critique existing society, they indicate potential means of social transformation, they propose an organisational blueprint for an ideal society, and they extrapolate the present into the future⁷⁷. *Looking Backward* was successful in stimulating so much political debate because it engaged all four of these aspects⁷⁸.

On presenting utopia as social critique, Bellamy conveyed established socialist critiques through the “cognitive estrangement” of Suvin to render the present unfamiliar⁷⁹. He achieved the “estrangement” by treating his present late 19th century as the past, emphasising differences between future ideals and present problems through sociological generalisation, for example by describing 19th century labour strife in a way that was accessible to all “Western” readers⁸⁰. By criticising the system, and not individuals, Bellamy was able to create a detachment that “especially pleased educated middle-class readers, who expressed relief not to find class hatred”⁸¹.

The idea of “detachment” can however also dehumanise and later demonise an entire class of people and conversely create a false nobility in others, as discussed within the context of post-recession science-fiction. If the wealthy are depicted as impossibly elite, without any virtues and only guided by

⁶⁹ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 87)

⁷⁰ Roberts, A. (2005: 119)

⁷¹ Roberts, A. (2005: 120)

⁷² Roberts, A. (2005: 120)

⁷³ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 1)

⁷⁴ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 2)

⁷⁵ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 22)

⁷⁶ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 23)

⁷⁷ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 3)

⁷⁸ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 5)

⁷⁹ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 5)

⁸⁰ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 6)

⁸¹ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 7)

base greed, the theme becomes established in the public mind and the next step is surely to persecute individuals of this class.

On presenting utopia as social transformation, Bellamy succeeded because “once utopians located their promised land in the future, not in the past or abroad, the question of how to get there became a societal issue”⁸². However, in contrast to the view of Miller et al., as stated above, i.e. that utopian politics is revolutionary, advocates of *Looking Backward* were more inclined to gradual and non-revolutionary socialism (e.g. British Fabians) because the text stressed a non-violent transition⁸³. “The New Deal illustrated how, even during the turbulent 1930s, the reformist potential of Bellamy’s vision continued to outweigh the revolutionary impact of his blueprint.”⁸⁴ This links with the earlier point that even if a text is radical, its execution may be gradual because the audience is not conditioned to be truly revolutionary.

While the “estrangement” was duly fulfilled, the “cognition” exposed a fundamental flaw of the entire project. While contemporaries are expected to imagine a world that is centuries ahead, the author must make the world intelligible by filling it with recognisable artefacts, or “to demonstrate that utopia is truly possible, its authors provide reassurance that much of it will be familiar”⁸⁵. There is also an attempt to reassure readers of continued cultural norms while technology is shown to have advanced⁸⁶. Guarneri argues that by doing so, Bellamy is in fact undermining collectivist aims and showing that he is “not interested in drastic cultural transformation”⁸⁷. This “reassurance” is similar to the type of “negotiation” with the audience that Rorty seems to imply.

Rather than a revolutionary text, *Looking Backward* was in fact bourgeois because of its materialism, and in fact can be reinterpreted as predicting modern-day American consumer-style society⁸⁸ or even a consumerist dystopia⁸⁹. “[T]he concrete details of *Looking Backward* fed readers’ materialistic desires more than their moral deeds, promising to provide more and better goods and gadgets to everyone rather than teaching them to want an altogether different life”⁹⁰.

Guarneri notes that, with the emergence of totalitarian regimes in the 1940s, some heralded *Looking Backward* as a precursor to fascism and central planning, since the promise of material comfort was used by most totalitarian regimes to corrupt and bribe the populace⁹¹. “As the wheel of history turned, one generation’s utopia became another’s nightmare.”⁹²

The Iron Heel (1907)

In 1907, Jack London published *The Iron Heel*, a spiritual successor to *Looking Backward*. Siegel notes that outside the United States, the text had “an enormous effect, educating large numbers in Marxism

⁸² Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 9)

⁸³ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 10)

⁸⁴ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 23)

⁸⁵ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 24)

⁸⁶ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 25)

⁸⁷ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 25)

⁸⁸ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 26)

⁸⁹ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 29)

⁹⁰ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 28): in the discussion on post-recession film in the next chapter, we will see how the protagonists in each film do not always reject the life of the antagonistic elite, but that much of the drama is derived from their efforts to attain an equivalent position, which prompts the question: are these films not perhaps a broader middle-class allegory for “making it”?

⁹¹ Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 28)

⁹² Guarneri, C.J. (2007: 29)

and inspiring generations of revolutionists”⁹³. The author also stated that he was inspired by *Looking Backward*, but that he wanted an exposition of socialism⁹⁴.

The Iron Heel focused more on the process of change, the revolution, than the utopia that was waiting on the other side. “The magnitude of the task of conquering capitalism, the power and ferocity of the ruling class, is the theme of *The Iron Heel*.”⁹⁵ *The Iron Heel* is similar to *Looking Backward* in that it considers the activities of its protagonist several centuries hence, when socialism has finally been universally installed. The plot device is that of a researcher looking back at the social turmoil of the early 20th century. Siegel notes that by giving it a scholarly framework seven centuries hence, it assures the reader of the ultimate victory of socialism⁹⁶.

Whereas *Looking Backward* has been criticised for its veiled bourgeois mores, *The Iron Heel* developed utopian writing and started moving towards the dystopian. Moylan notes that *The Iron Heel* merged utopian and naturalist writing⁹⁷. Moylan argues that the legacy of naturalism was to clash with the previously held “utopian” view that historical development could occur alongside human improvement, if not perfectibility; whereas humanity is depicted as animalistic in naturalism, “... ruled by the most primitive instincts of self-preservation, uncontrolled passion, violence, and lust for power. Thus, at the heart of naturalism lies the belief that society can, at best, contain these drives, but not overcome them.”⁹⁸

Here again there is a constraining factor to a radically new political experiment, if far more nuanced than the bourgeois influence in *Looking Backward*. But in a way it is a continuation of what *Looking Backward* already suggested: people are motivated by material desires, not ethical concerns. The ultimate constraining factor, from *Looking Backward* in the 1800s to modern-day post-recession science-fiction films, is the view that humanity cannot improve itself. In other words, what use is the neopragmatist project if the limitation is humanity’s vicious nature (which theoretically we should be able to overcome by creating new ways to transcend the human condition)?

3.4 The emergence of dystopian fiction

Some of Bellamy’s contemporaries were prescient enough to foresee the severe implications of his political system long before fascism emerged. An example of such a text is *Caesar’s Column, a Story of the Twentieth Century* published in 1890 by Ignatius Donnelly, which took Bellamy’s premises in a dystopian direction⁹⁹. Within the political left, William Morris wrote *News from Nowhere, or an Epoch of Rest* in 1891, which depicts a society that is more pastoral but still has socialist leanings¹⁰⁰. But far more than offering a different view on socialist utopia, Morris’ work also signalled a growing unease with the pace of mechanisation that would soon evolve utopian writing into the dystopian genre and thereby link the utopian/dystopian text with that of science-fiction.

With the turn of the 19th century, a split emerged in science-fiction literary culture between “high culture” or high modern, and mass culture that produced pulp science-fiction¹⁰¹. Although both high and low culture had to deal with the same rapid societal changes, the high modernists in general were

⁹³ Siegel, P.N. (1979: 30)

⁹⁴ Siegel, P.N. (1979: 30)

⁹⁵ Siegel, P.N. (1979: 30)

⁹⁶ Siegel, P.N. (1979: 30)

⁹⁷ Moylan, T. (2000: 89)

⁹⁸ Moylan, T. (2000: 89)

⁹⁹ Roberts, A. (2005: 120)

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, A. (2005: 120)

¹⁰¹ Roberts, A. (2005: 156)

hostile to increasing technological change, whereas popular culture reacted with excitement¹⁰². While some high modernists embraced technology, i.e. the so-called futurists, Roberts argues that it was at heart a life-denying and fascist movement, with Filippo Marinetti for example attracted to an aesthetic of total war¹⁰³. Marinetti would go on to endorse Mussolini¹⁰⁴, which clearly confirms suspicions of fascist sympathies.

The hostility to technology among high modernists ranged from fears of dehumanising and reducing individuals to mere cogs in a machine, to a loss of primitive nature and contact with the organic and spiritual¹⁰⁵. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* published in 1930 is seen as the "key dystopian fiction" of the 1930s¹⁰⁶. The tradition further developed to equate the interest in machines and mechanisation to that of a death wish, with the high modern abhorrence of technology translated into the view that science-fiction was necessarily dystopian¹⁰⁷. Examples of the high modern literary school include Huxley's *Brave New World*, *1984* by Orwell, Robert Graves' *Seven Days in New Crete*, and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis 1927*. "In each of these cases an imagined future society has been ordered along technological or scientific lines to the detriment of the individual quality of life of that society's citizens."¹⁰⁸

1984 (1949)

1984 is arguably to the most recognisable literary dystopia and stands alongside *Animal Farm* as the most famous works by George Orwell, both of which have become short-hand ways to express the fear that socialist regimes inevitably become autocratic and will only offer a bleak and oppressive existence without the hope of systematic reform.

There is an often-overlooked historical context, which makes the text even more gripping. *1984* was written shortly after the end of World War II and well before international communism was publicly seen as a threat in the US and UK. Even though Orwell was a democratic socialist, he foresaw that the lack of constitutional weights and counterweights allowed socialist leadership too much room to abuse power, with the consequent dangers to human rights, at a time when Western views of socialism and Soviet Russia were far from widespread antagonism¹⁰⁹.

In 1933 the English intellectual and playwright George Bernard Shaw published the "Social Conditions in Russia" letter to the to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, defending Soviet Russia against accusations of human rights abuses. While the context of the letter was obviously British antagonism towards Bolshevik rule, attitudes apparently softened; during the war Joseph Stalin was affectionally called "Uncle Joe" and in 1941, the London Philharmonic Orchestra performed a concert to celebrate his birthday¹¹⁰.

As Rorty also suggests, the success of *1984* is arguably not its accuracy of reporting on Soviet rule, or airtight theoretical critique of international socialism, but rather the visceral way it illustrated the

¹⁰² Roberts, A. (2005: 157)

¹⁰³ Roberts, A. (2005: 157)

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, A. (2005: 157)

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, A. (2005: 158)

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, A. (2005: 158)

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, A. (2005: 159): in Chapter 4 we will consider how post-recession film has viewed technology as necessarily negative and a means to enslave the poor and improve the lives of the elite.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, A. (2005: 159)

¹⁰⁹ Gaddis, J.L. (2005)

¹¹⁰ Service, R. (2004: 466)

dangers of autocratic rule¹¹¹. While *1984* has been appreciated as literary classic, it also succeeds as liberal-democratic propaganda to this day¹¹².

The text is arresting because it offers such a bleak view – the world of *1984* does not have individualism, honesty or even love, except for the love of Big Brother¹¹³. The plot of *1984* offers a brief glimpse of hope that the hero might succeed in either overthrowing the oppressive regime or at least escaping its crassness by enjoying small but illegal comforts. But any hope is shattered by the end of the book, and he is left in a thoroughly worse state; he betrays his lover and the last bit of individuality is tortured out of him.

This depressing end is important because it achieves a double blow to the mind of the reader. Audiences are used to finding their heroes in dark and terrible places, but the pathos of the text lies in them overcoming this challenge. *1984* therefore sends out a powerful warning: once the system has changed into such an autocratic state, nothing can change it for the better. Put differently, there is no narrative closure where the ending resolves the earlier tension, which would otherwise lessen the reader's interest in political action¹¹⁴. Commenting on *1984*, Roberts states that "The science-fiction-ness of the book is not its purported future setting. Rather, it is a world in which the individual has been wholly superseded by the corporate identity of – in this case – The Party."¹¹⁵ Roberts argues further that *1984* says that the individual has died and that the party is immortal, making it important for literary development as it shows there is possibility to have a novel without any character at all¹¹⁶.

The cynical views of human nature also manifest in a modern-day deep distrust of "perfect" societies, the implication being that they hide much darker secrets. Two prime examples are the *Stepford Wives*¹¹⁷ and *Pleasantville*¹¹⁸, both of which initially present a seemingly harmonious but deeply patriarchal society closely resembling the "white suburban" experience of the mid-20th century. Once the façade is peeled back, the ugly truth about sexual oppression emerges. The films are also proof of the inherent nostalgia in science-fiction identified by Roberts as discussed above, as both also satirise latter day nostalgia for the so-called post-World War 2 golden age.

It is striking that, as with post-recession science-fiction films discussed below, *1984* also focuses significant attention on what can go wrong in dystopia but does not consider how the system can improve. So, as Rorty points out, while it provides a striking political alternative, it is a cautionary tale, not exploratory. It is also striking that Orwell decided to depict the horrors of totalitarian rule in two ways: through a system that is inherently corrupt in actively lying to the citizenry, and through the material deprivations that are faced by the citizens. The citizenry, for example, can only buy sub-standard gin and recreational sex is suppressed. Which leads to the question; if a system is so thoroughly corrupt, would that not be bad enough? Or rather, assuming the system depicted general material comfort within a corrupt system, would *1984* be as convincing politically? The strong emphasis on material discomfort within a totalitarian, or dystopian, system seems to make the similar

¹¹¹ Gaddis, J.L. (2005:2, 3): "his book had impressed and frightened its first readers. Subsequent readers responded similarly: 1984 became the single most compelling vision in the post-World War II era of what might follow it."

¹¹² Moylan, T. (2000: 9): "SF...can be socially and politically insightful and incite-ful even as it is an elegant fictive exposition."

¹¹³ Moylan, T. (2000: 9)

¹¹⁴ Moylan, T. (2000: 55)

¹¹⁵ Roberts, A. (2005: 209)

¹¹⁶ Roberts, A. (2005: 210)

¹¹⁷ Films in 2004 and 1975, based on the Ira Levin 1972 novel.

¹¹⁸ 1998 film.

point as *Looking Backward*: that utopia is all about material comfort. Would *Looking Backward* have been as popular if the vision of a socialist utopia was not about consumer conveniences, but rather about moral certitude in a system that still delivered crushing low-income mediocrity?

3.5 Why was utopian/dystopian fiction so effective in generating political debate?

Having considered the broad development of science-fiction and its merging with utopian writing to ultimately create the dystopian genre, the question remains as to why these utopian or dystopian texts – such as *Looking Backward*, *Voyage to Icaria*, *The Iron Heel* and *1984* had such an immediate impact on political discourse of the day.

The outsider

Moylan notes that one literary element has remained constant since the origin of utopian fiction in the 1600s: that of the outsider as observer, whether it is a conventional traveller in Moore's *Utopia*, a spacetime traveller, or even an existing participant who comes to realise the strangeness of the society in which they live¹¹⁹. "New utopias work from the perspective of a citizen of the utopia or at least an "outsider" who is faced with the existential-political decision to make a commitment to the preservation of the further development of the utopia."¹²⁰ Similarly, Guarneri noted the "estrangement" used in *Looking Backward*¹²¹: because the protagonist is as confused as the reader by the situation he is in, there is a process of systematically understanding the world of the text. The reader is able to inhabit the protagonist, and as Moylan argues, because the character within a utopian text engages with political questions, the reader is called upon to consider their view on the matter, which makes the engagement more active than in other genres¹²².

A real place in the future

Moore's *Utopia* was structured as a voyage to a different place¹²³, almost a dream-like state with no bearing to the audience. This arguably kept the genre tame in that readers would likely engage with the text at the same level as a work of fantasy or mythology, possibly remembering a few moral lessons. The change of background from a vague notion of another place, to sometime in the near future¹²⁴, clearly changes the tone, urgency and seriousness of work to such an extent that Suvin defined utopian texts as a "socio-political subgenre of sci-fi"¹²⁵. Similarly, Isaac Asimov remarked that science-fiction texts began to move away from questions of physical science to social realities and problems, "often opting for near-future tales that were closer in time and space to the authors' and readers' immediate social realities"¹²⁶. *The Iron Heel*, *Looking Backward* and *1984* were all quite explicit about the real-world context, strange but still recognisable, of their future settings.

Fictional plot

The 19th and 20th century utopias and dystopias stand apart from Moore's *Utopia* in both the way that the plot unfolds and the immediate impact that *Utopia* had on political debate at the time. While Moore's *Utopia* was a series of lectures on the utopian society, the later texts all involved protagonists

¹¹⁹ Moylan, T. (2000: 4)

¹²⁰ Moylan, T. (2000: 54, 55)

¹²¹ Guarneri, C.J. (2007)

¹²² Moylan, T. (2000: 55)

¹²³ Barzun, J. (2001: 117)

¹²⁴ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 88)

¹²⁵ Wenger, P.E. (2005: 88), referring to Suvin: "[I]f a reader can manage to see the world differently...she or he might just... do something to alter it – perhaps on a large scale or ever so slightly."

¹²⁶ Moylan, T. (2000: 30)

and high drama. It is quite possible that this is more than just coincidence, and that the full application of a conventional fictional plot will make a text more politically influential.

Commenting on *Looking Backward*, Roberts notes that the actual political ideology is quite repellent: workers and women are disenfranchised and forced into an “industrial army”¹²⁷, but that Bellamy was able to “sell” the idea because “the imaginative recreation of utopia in a popular genre breathes life into, and casts an attractive light over, an otherwise repellent social order.”¹²⁸ A potentially large part of the political-treatise-as-story is the very idea of radical revolution, not systematic reform. The protagonists may be adept at debate, but the change also comes from an almost intuitive and societal “unshackling” in a very dramatic and often violent way.

The promise of material wealth

Moore’s *Utopia*, *Looking Backward* and *1984* all seem to suggest that the evidence of a just system lies in material wealth or at least material comfort; or as *1984* would imply, the lack of political justice or freedom leads to material deprivation. The clear correlation between material wealth and a just system then questions whether other noble aims such as equality, freedom and brotherhood are as powerful in eliciting a political response as merely promising the audience more comfort under a different regime. Do utopian and dystopian texts become politically impactful because they appeal to our better angels, or because they function as thinly veiled consumerist pornography? The evidence would suggest that there is no clear division, but that the latter motivator does count for more.

3.7 Conclusion

The chapter has identified the emergence of science-fiction as a genre and the crucial element of a man-made item, or technology, rather than a metaphysical intervention, as a defining characteristic of the genre. The tension between creating radically different worlds versus a recognisable version of the future was explored, which is an extension of the so-called implied “balancing act” that Rorty seems to suggest. It was established that the latter option of depicting a political alternative that is not too radically different from the reality of the audience, and also by implication one that stresses material welfare as an end in itself, should be able to carry some political influence.

As an aside, if material wealth is such a powerful motivator, is this not an adequately or more powerful priority for a liberal ironist than a more vague “end to cruelty”; is material wealth not only a proxy for, but in fact the very essence of not suffering cruelty? Having said that, restricting the aim of a liberal ironist would concurrently restrict her scope for being receptive to depictions of suffering or pain not previously thought of; the rich also bleed, after all.

The next chapter looks at post-recession science-fiction as it appeared in recent films and its potential potency in eliciting political dialogue.

¹²⁷ Roberts, A. (2005: 121)

¹²⁸ Roberts, A. (2005: 120)

Chapter 4 Post-recession science-fiction

4.1 Introduction

The research question under consideration in this chapter is the extent to which the sub-genre of science-fiction, post-recession-science-fiction, offers a political alternative to many present social ills, in particular that of socio-economic inequality.

The 2008/09 global economic recession led to a renewed interest in the debate about systematic income inequalities. This was particularly due to the perception that the supposed instigators of the recession – professionals in the financial industry – were seen to have been financially rewarded and not sanctioned for their actions, while so-called “blue-collar workers” and “middle-class households” were impacted by retrenchments and property loss, among other misfortunes. Mass outrage led to the “Occupy” protests in several financial districts throughout the world. Protestors claimed that the elite 1% of the population should be held accountable for the economic fallout. The broader argument, however, was that the modern free-market capitalist system had failed to ensure material equality, and the fear was that the experience of 2008/09 – that of a wealthy elite preying on a disenfranchised majority – would logically intensify over time.

Given this background, it was therefore noticeable that several popular science-fiction films were released from 2010 onwards that focused primarily on income inequalities in a mostly recognisable dystopian near-future.¹²⁹

The question is whether these films can be grouped as a sub-genre of science-fiction, to be called “post-recession science-fiction”. Having established the impact of 19th and 20th century science-fiction texts and the identified the elements that make them influential, the test is whether these elements are in fact present in the films. A further question is whether the common themes that link the films offer a compelling critique of the real-world experience of income inequality, rather than constructing a narrative that does more to entrench existing views. Put differently, do the films also keep the balance between the somewhat different and the reassuringly similar?

While the films hold a host of thematic and plot similarities, the selection is primarily informed by the following shared characteristics: the date of their release after the 2008/09 global economic slowdown, depicting gross income inequality as a major theme, and taking place in a recognisable near-future, with at least one significant technological difference to the real world, which qualifies them as science-fiction films in broad terms.

The selection is not exhaustive: it is further informed by films that fared relatively well commercially and critically – films that have become cultural artefacts and shorthand references. A short synopsis of each film, coupled with commentary of the time to indicate the socio-political impact, will be followed by thematic analysis.

4.2 *In Time* (2011)

*In Time*¹³⁰ is set in a near future where people stop aging at the age of 25, but are engineered to live only one more year, with a built-in timer displaying the amount of time left before they die. Time is then treated as a currency that is used to indefinitely extend human life. It is established from early

¹²⁹ Lambie, R. (2013): “*In Time* was still notable for being one of several recent mainstream films which openly questioned, through the filter of science fiction, why the gulf between the wealthiest and the poorest should be so huge”.

¹³⁰ *In Time* (2011) Directed by Andrew Nicol [Film]. USA: 20th Century Fox.

on that the working-class earns subsistence time-currency wages, leaving most within 24 hours of their timer running out, forcing them to keep working to stay alive.

The protagonist is Will Salas, who lives from hand to mouth, making literally just enough to live each day. Through a chance encounter, he learns that the timer system is a way for the elite to achieve immortality while ensuring population control of the poor.

Will is able to rob enough time from the wealthy and distribute it among the poorer neighbourhoods that working-class citizens are able to leave their jobs – causing factories to shut down and physical class integration to occur.

The film expressed such clear political commentary that most critics made the link with the Occupy movement which occurred at the time of release. O'Hara noted that the film is “howling anger at the 1 percent”¹³¹, Anderson stated that the film is a “pleasing, often rousing movie for the 99 percent”¹³², and LaSalle argues that not only is the film an extended metaphor for the state of the economy, but it also makes its point with far greater force than any documentary on the banking crisis and that “It arrives in theatres at a time when people are camped out in New York saying the same things as the people in the movie.”¹³³. O'Hehir¹³⁴ and Corliss¹³⁵ also note the real-world political statements being reflected in the film.

4.3 *The Hunger Games* (2012 – 2015)

The Hunger Games is a young adult science-fiction novel trilogy that was released as four films¹³⁶, but which will be treated as a single text. The trilogy is set in a dystopian future America (“Panem”) in which a highly centralised form of government housed in the “Capitol” exerts authoritarian rule over the pacified districts following a civil war. The title of the trilogy heds from the central plot of the film – that of a gladiatorial-type contest held each year between teenage representatives (called tribunes) from each province.

The protagonist is Katniss Everdeen, volunteering on behalf of her younger sister to contest in the games. As the series progresses, Katniss becomes more aware of the political theatre of the hunger games and how it is used to subjugate the districts while giving the impression of in fact celebrating political harmony. The character of Katniss develops from a surly but dutiful teenager to that of a charismatic celebrity, learning how to manipulate her fame to ultimately become the literal poster girl for the successful popular uprising against the centralist oppressive regime.

The Hunger Games film series touched on several topical social issues over the course of its release, particularly the manipulative and distorting effects of reality TV, and how even a subversion or rejection of the genre can be repackaged as reality TV¹³⁷. The political and protest imagery of the films was so resonant that the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) initiated a “We Are the Districts” campaign in direct reference to the films as a way to equate

¹³¹ O'Hara, H. (2011)

¹³² Anderson, M. (2011)

¹³³ LaSalle, M. (2011)

¹³⁴ O'Hehir, A. (2011)

¹³⁵ Corliss, R. (2011)

¹³⁶ *The Hunger Games* (2012) Directed by Gary Ross [Film]. USA: Lionsgate Films.

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013) Directed by Francis Lawrence [Film]. USA: Lionsgate Films.

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1 (2014) Directed by Francis Lawrence [Film]. USA: Lionsgate Films.

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2 (2015) Directed by Francis Lawrence [Film]. USA: Lionsgate Films.

¹³⁷ Leigh, D. (2015)

American social conditions to those depicted in the films¹³⁸. The imagery of the film also included physical gestures that were then appropriated in the real world: in 2014, political protestors in Thailand, many of whom were arrested for doing so¹³⁹, gave the so-called Hunger Games three-finger salute, implying that the regime in their country is similar to the oppressive regime in the film¹⁴⁰.

4.4 *Elysium* (2013)

*Elysium*¹⁴¹ is set in the year 2154 in a society where the wealthy reside in a utopian-like space station called “Elysium” that, crucially to the plot, also includes free access to regenerative medical chambers called “Med-bays”, which can heal any disease. The poor live in slums on earth that are overcrowded and severely polluted. The general implication is that the earth has become an unhealthy system and that the rich elite have escaped to the space station.

The protagonist is Max da Costa, a former car thief on parole. After exposure to a lethal amount of radiation at the factory, Max has only five more days to live. He seeks out ways to travel to Elysium, where he can use a Med-bay to heal himself.

Max has to fight off the security chief of Elysium and her henchman Kruger to gain access, but ultimately, he is able to hack into the Elysium system and declare all citizens of earth as also citizens of Elysium, thereby activating automatic med-bays providing free medical services to the entire world population.

Corliss notes that the film speaks to two current political dialogues; that of the Occupy Wall Street movement on the one hand, and conversely the xenophobic fear of American cities being overrun by Latin-American immigrants on the other¹⁴². Dargis¹⁴³ and O’Hehir¹⁴⁴ note that even though the film starts off as an interesting political analogy, it soon muddles into typical action film tropes and loses potential impact, or as Bradshaw puts it, “That satirical spark is lost among the hardware and detonations.”¹⁴⁵

Despite the lukewarm critical response, the movie elicited a strong reaction based on the perception that it advocated for several progressive policies. Debruge notes how several news organisations on the right of the political spectrum accused the film of being leftist propaganda¹⁴⁶ and admits that he shared the same view, but crucially questions whether appeals to progressive (“Occupy”) sympathies are heartfelt, or merely populist means to pull in large crowds.

4.5 *Snowpiercer* (2013)

*Snowpiercer*¹⁴⁷ is set in 2031 during an ice age that was intended to counteract climate change but in fact decimated the world population. The title is derived from the train driven by a perpetual motion engine that contains an entire society and which navigates a perpetual track through heavy snow. The

¹³⁸Hentges, S. (2015). The AFL-CIO campaign can be found on <https://aflcio.org/2013/11/22/hunger-games-are-real>, and it is noteworthy that the title of the webpage is: “The Hunger Games Are Real”.

¹³⁹ Mydans, S. (2014): “The salute, which in the movies is a daring act of silent rebellion, began to appear here in the weeks after the May 22 coup. The authorities warned that anyone raising it in public could be subject to arrest.”

¹⁴⁰ *The Guardian* (2014): The article shows how different protestors use the salute as a form of protest.

¹⁴¹ *Elysium* (2013) Directed by Neil Blomkamp [Film]. USA: TriStar Pictures.

¹⁴² Corliss, R. (2013)

¹⁴³ Dargis, M. (2013)

¹⁴⁴ O’Hehir, A. (2013)

¹⁴⁵ Bradshaw, P. (2013)

¹⁴⁶ Debruge, P. (2013)

¹⁴⁷ *Snowpiercer* (2013) Directed by Bong Joon-ho [Film]. South Korea: CJ Entertainment.

elites live in the extravagant front cars while the "scum" is forced into squalid conditions at the back of the train.

Curtis Everett is the protagonist and lives in the tail section and organises a successful revolt to get to the front part of the train, which houses the engine. Upon meeting the designer of the train, Curtis is informed that the seeming revolt against the class-based system was in fact a ruse to kill off many of the passengers. Curtis also realises that the tail-end passengers are kept as fuel and parts for the train. Following an explosion in the engine of the train, it is derailed, and two passengers escape into a possibly inhabitable world.

The political overtones in *Snowpiercer* have been recognised by several commentators¹⁴⁸, but there is additional depth in the film's portrayal of the middle class (i.e. the mid-segment of the train) who believe they act in a progressive and sustainable way, but "ignore the problems anyone with less money than themselves has to deal with"¹⁴⁹.

4.6 Themes

The films cited above have several similarities that could further support the idea of a sub-genre.

The rich-poor divide as a physical divide

The films are depicted from the perspective of the downtrodden protagonist aiming to overcome the limitations of the system. This radical difference between rich and poor is portrayed as a physically different space.

In Time depicts possibly the most muted difference, as the system allows for travel between the two poles, whereas in *The Hunger Games* there is considerable time spent contrasting the 18th-century type dwellings and lifestyle of the districts with that of the hyper-modern architecture of the Capitol. This is also where the idea of forced class segregation developed within the sub-genre: it is only the select few from the districts, who in any event will be slaughtered for entertainment, who are allowed inside the Capitol. In *Elysium* the physical divide between impoverished Earth and the wealthy Elysium space station is the major plot point of the film. Even though Elysium is visible from earth, it is impossibly far to reach¹⁵⁰. With *Snowpiercer* the forced segregation on the linear train is again a central motif and overcoming each successive barrier between elite and the poor brings with it violence.

The use of a physical divide to represent the income divide is grounded in the very real experience of vulnerable groups who are excluded from wealthy areas by a combination of (predominantly economic) factors. Of course, South Africa is the modern example of forced segregation due to Apartheid, and the legacy of spatial Apartheid is still arguably one of the largest obstacles to social cohesion and equality. Even though there is a physical nearness between classes, it is quite easy to appreciate how it may seem that the wealthy inhabit their own world.

Ennobling the poor, dehumanising the rich

As the antagonists in the films, the wealthy receive very limited and unsympathetic treatment and are portrayed as necessarily decadent and two-dimensional; whereas the poor are fleshed out but conversely portrayed as inherently noble. In *The Hunger Games*, the title points to the very real hunger and lack of food faced by the outlying districts, whereas the elite in the Capitol indulge in vomitorium-style orgies in order to over-consume. Martial prowess as opposed to brute violence is used

¹⁴⁸ Stevens, D. (2014): "the film's subterranean critique of capitalist depravity suddenly gets... more than a little heavy-handed"; and O'Hehir, A. (2014), who introduces the film as "The 99 percent fight back aboard a train to nowhere, in a dazzling action flick that's also a political parable".

¹⁴⁹ Van Der Werff, T. (2014)

¹⁵⁰ Debruge, P. (2013) states that "[T]he film conveniently ignores how the various classes coexist on Earth."

throughout to contrast the inner nobility of the vulnerable against the decadent nature of the elite. Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* can survive successive rounds of gladiatorial contests and even a civil war, without having to resort to violence, even though it is made clear that she is deadly with a bow and arrow. Max da Costa in *Elysium*, who is in a fragile (and terminal) state and augmented with an outdated exoskeleton, reluctantly squares off and beats the hyper-violent and better equipped mercenary, Kruger.

The inherent nobility of the poor reminds one strongly of the so-called “noble savage” European cultural motif, as discussed by Barzun, as a manifestation of the broader impulse towards primitivism¹⁵¹. “The savage with his simple creed is healthy, highly moral, and serene, a worthier being than the civilized man, who must intrigue and deceive to prosper”¹⁵². But this pigeon-holing of the vulnerable as noble is equally dehumanising and a problematic theme seen in the context of a text that on the face of it would argue for progressive change.

If the downtrodden are inherently noble, then a shift in power or a change towards a radically egalitarian distribution of wealth would imply that there is no more need for laws that previously oppressed the poor and constrained the worst excesses of the rich. Hence, the democratic value of public consultation can also be done away with, creating a path towards dictatorial rule. It is this naïve narrative of inherent nobility that ultimately leads to totalitarianism.

The revolution is immediate, but not transformative

In the films, the system is changed through violence, rather than through negotiation or constitutional transformation. As discussed above, both the physical separation and the very fundamental moral difference between rich and poor create a situation where there is no opportunity for debate or negotiation.

Ironically, these science-fiction worlds that dare to explore the implication of strange technologies and dystopian systems stop short of taking the next conceptual step to imagine what the new system would look like.

This critique is central to the broader research questions of the paper: do the conceptual political aims of the revolutionaries match their zeal? Do they truly intend to change the system, or merely aim for an improved material position? Put differently, perhaps it is not a contest of ideas or even of principles, as much as it is a scramble for material gain.

In Time does not do away with the timer system; the protagonist merely gives away enough time-currency to allow for some measure of class integration. As an aside, throughout the film there is already an appreciation that price inflation erodes the amount of time-currency a person truly has. The logical conclusion is that the gratuitous equal distribution of time-currency will result in hyperinflation and reset the system on its previous trajectory, if not negatively impacting the poor to a far greater extent.¹⁵³

The Hunger Games does depict the danger of violent revolution when it becomes apparent that the revolutionary leaders have no intention of changing the system, but after the political tumult the instituting of some form of democracy is implied. It is striking that *The Hunger Games* is the only film that considers the transition from revolution to new regime. It even goes so far to consider themes of

¹⁵¹ Barzun, J. (2001: xv – xvi)

¹⁵² Barzun, J. (2001: xvi)

¹⁵³ Lambie, R. (2013) states: “*In Time* openly revels in the notion of redistributing wealth, but its final image of Justin Timberlake and Amanda Seyfried robbing banks and dishing out time cartridges to an excited populace was more wishful thinking than workable solution.”

retribution and reconciliation with regard to the former oppressors. In this respect, it is a remarkably balanced film. But again, the “happy ending” is not a radically different political and social order, but more a familiar process of re-democratising.

Mattes argues that the equivocation between the gladiatorial-type games and the civil war suggests that the latter is also nothing but a spectacular sham¹⁵⁴: “This is problematic, in that it indicates that the political struggle – literally political, a struggle for the control of the polis at the centre of Panem – has been, virtually, for nought. If political struggle is pointless, and power is inevitably filled by beings-to-be-corrupted, then why have we bothered following Katniss and her band of the disenfranchised?”

Elysium is the “worst offender” in terms of its depiction of the outcome of immediate revolution. The ending would suggest that the only difference between rich and poor was access to regenerative health care and that there is no need to delve into the actual root cause of the income divide. Again, as a pedantic aside, if health care can be shared indiscriminately, why was it limited in the first place? The film exposes a degree of wilful ignorance regarding standard socio-economic principles: surely the services of the Med-bay could be provided on earth at a cost as well?

Peter Debruge argues that while the film was accused by commentators of being leftist propaganda, it is possibly something far more populist and apolitical – he states that “blockbusters are designed to appeal as broadly as possible — it stands to reason that the “1%” has become such a popular target of recent studio films¹⁵⁵”. In other words, it is not really about opening a political debate, but rather about making a statistical determination as to what topics will sate the appetite of the audience for revenge or public reprimand¹⁵⁶.

The depiction of revolution in *Snowpiercer* is more nuanced, as it speaks to more than the linear breaking-down of class barriers: from total poverty, through the middle class and ultimately to the elite. It is only through breaking the train in its entirety that two passengers can step outside “the system” and truly initiate a new way of living. While it succeeds brilliantly as a metaphor, it leaves little for political discussion.

The audience in *Snowpiercer* is indeed challenged to ponder what should happen after a successful revolution¹⁵⁷. The answer is complicated by the warning that the revolution is part and parcel of entrenching the system, making *Snowpiercer* the most radical in terms of messaging, if the most vague in terms of actual direction. Speaking to *Snowpiercer* and similar stories of “unchecked economic inequality”, Konstantinou notes that they “aren’t finally sure if they want to be taken literally or figuratively” and that “Dystopian movies like *Snowpiercer* risk doing more to inspire quietism than necessary action”¹⁵⁸.

Lambie notes that “these movies reflect the world as it currently is, but offer few valid ideas as to how it could be improved¹⁵⁹”; but he also cautions that science-fiction remains a medium to ask questions and not necessarily give a full set of answers.

¹⁵⁴ Mattes, A. (2015)

¹⁵⁵ Debruge, P. (2013)

¹⁵⁶ Debruge, P. (2013): “Much of what Republican pundits mistakenly see as Occupy Wall Street support is merely a form of “mass-ploitation” — Hollywood seizing on angles that appeal to the widest possible audience.”

¹⁵⁷ LaSalle, M. (2011)

¹⁵⁸ Konstantinou, L. (2014)

¹⁵⁹ Lambie, R. (2013)

4.7 Post-recession science-fiction compared to earlier texts

The common elements identified in earlier science-fiction texts were the protagonist as an outsider, the milieu as a real place in the future, a fictional plot as opposed to a political treatise or documentary, and the promise of material wealth if a utopian system is achieved or conversely if a dystopian system is overthrown. These elements are clearly present in all the films, and when considering the third theme of “The revolution is immediate, but not transformative”, the following arguments can be made:

The sub-genre continues in the tradition of negotiating with the audience

Aside from the prima facie plot elements, there is a clear thematic link stretching from the earliest instances of utopian science-fiction to present day films: the promise of material wealth or improvement. Not to belabour the point, but this is the manifestation of Rorty’s implied argument that a text should seek to describe the world anew, but at the same balance the novelty with the familiar. Political alternatives are fine, as long as the audience can see that pursuing those alternatives will lead to material improvement. Moral regeneration or the quest for justice is a far second in terms of priority, if those concepts have not already been conflated with material wealth. This conflation leads to a potential problem: that the sub-genre’s fixation on material well-being means that the political discourse is superficial.

The sub-genre gives no substantive socio-political message and has no real impact

The most noteworthy element shared by all the films is the level of detail, or rather the skewed level of detail: the films enjoy careful exposition of their systems in order for the audience to appreciate the challenges the protagonist faces, and the true nature of the system is gradually revealed. However, the level of detail that goes into explaining the system ebbs away towards the end of the film; there is no appetite to depict a new system that is a radical alternative to the original dystopian one or in fact radically different to the one the audience inhabits.

This reminds of the popular statement by Slavoj Žižek, when considering the apocalyptic science-fiction movies that were released in the mid-1990s and the apparent global consensus around free-market capitalism: that even though we can consider the end of the world, the far more modest but radical change in capitalism is beyond the pale.

In the same vein, the political high point of post-recession science-fiction is merely the adoption of some aspects of the symbolism. Whereas the utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts of the 19th and 20th centuries were able to elicit discussion and action on political concepts, the films of post-recession science-fiction at most are used as shorthand for political protest or subversion against established regimes. The clearest ideological position under which to categorise the genre would be “dissatisfaction”, or rather, an ideology of action over substance – things need to change, but there is no idea of how, or in what direction.

4.8 Conclusion

The selected films arguably share enough characteristics in common that it is safe to group them under the sub-genre of post-recession science-fiction. The films all elicited a political debate of sorts and the imagery was adopted for real-world political campaigns. Besides focusing on the income divide, being set in a near-future dystopian society, and being released after the 2008/09 economic slowdown, the films also share several themes.

The first salient theme that emerges is that of a physical separation between rich and poor, which speaks to the experience of vulnerable groups who struggle to access wealthy areas in modern economies. The second is that of the inherent nobility of the poor; and conversely, the decadence of

the rich. This theme is highly problematic, since it may easily develop into a dictatorial consensus. The third theme is that revolutionary process is rapid, but that the true extent of transformation is limited.

This limitation can be ascribed to a variety of factors, including a mere unwillingness on the part of the director/author to delve into detailed political discourse, as with *In Time*; or implying that a democratic outcome would be the natural state of equilibrium, as in *The Hunger Games*; or applying commercial considerations that make it worthwhile to vilify the so-called 1% but unnecessary for political experimentation, as with *Elysium*; or using artistic considerations to make general social points rather than to give a detailed overview of what is possible, as in *Snowpiercer*.

However, the further implication of these limitations, when compared to utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts of the 19th and 20th centuries, is that the sub-genre in fact continues in the tradition of negotiating with the audience by stressing material wealth as a goal rather than a just but radically different system, and further that the sub-genre gives no substantive socio-political message and has no real impact. Given the lack of substance, the clearest ideological position under which to group the sub-genre would be “dissatisfaction”, or rather, an ideology of action over substance – things need to change, but there is no idea of how, or in what direction.

The next chapter looks at how the underlying political messages and themes found in post-recession science-fiction may influence constitutional transformation.

Chapter 5 The roots of constitutional transformation

5.1 Introduction

The research question to consider in this chapter is the potential influence the sub-genre of post-recession science-fiction might have on popular conceptions of justice and in turn, constitutional transformation.

In the preceding chapter it is argued that the political high-point of post-recession science-fiction was merely the adoption of some of the symbolism. This “action-over-substance” ideology of post-recession science-fiction is remarkably similar to the anarchist “propaganda by the deed” that emerged over a century ago.

5.2 Propaganda by the deed

Members of the anarchist movement in the year 1874, following the failed Bologna uprising, reconsidered their strategy and realised that there was no real chance of a general insurrection¹⁶⁰. They instead developed a strategy known as “propaganda by the deed”, which called for violent action to show both the desperate nature of their social situation and to reflect their ruthless determination, to be executed through a small armed band¹⁶¹. This was carried out by various assassinations and acts of terror that led to the popular image of “anarchists as ruthless men with bombs under their coats¹⁶².”

Once the ideology of violence began to spread among supporters of the cause, targets for acts of terror also spread beyond the political or symbolic attacks to include public spaces associated with bourgeois and commercial values¹⁶³, and also became a defence for purely criminal actions¹⁶⁴. Joll finds that after two decades of propaganda by the deed, the constitutional machinery for social reform was more efficient and it became more sensible to join a trade union or political party in developed economies in order to legally agitate for piecemeal reforms¹⁶⁵. Ironically though, the use of propaganda by the deed was not supportive of the anarchist cause even though it attracted significant attention, since those excited by the sensationalist violence found the theory quite tame, while those who were attracted by the “high-minded optimism” were shocked by the indiscriminate violence¹⁶⁶.

Most revolutionary movements before and after 19th-century anarchism adopted acts of violence to further their political aims, but what makes anarchism stand out is that their propaganda by the deed was foremost about the centrality of violence and not theory; violence was the medium for engagement, not a means to more substantive deliberation.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, post-recession science-fiction texts have several common themes, but in terms of their call to action, the unifier is the centrality of violence in political discourse and constitutional transformation. This is the link to the anarchist concept of propaganda by the deed, and the need for violence to effect political change. The anarchist move towards propaganda by the deed was born out of an apparent frustration with popular (i.e. democratic) uprising not being effective. The use of violence in post-recession science-fiction is legitimised by the physical separation between rich and poor and the very ethical otherness of the rich. Hence, violence in the sub-genre

¹⁶⁰ Joll, J. (1979: 102)

¹⁶¹ Joll, J. (1979: 103)

¹⁶² Miller, D et al. (2000: 13)

¹⁶³ Joll, J. (1979: 112)

¹⁶⁴ Joll, J. (1979: 114)

¹⁶⁵ Joll, J. (1979: 126)

¹⁶⁶ Joll, J. (1979: 129)

arguably becomes an end in itself: since there is no real idea of what change needs to occur, it is an expansive revenge fantasy and not a substantive argument against systemic inequality.

5.3 A tentative prediction on constitutional transformation, or, what vocabulary is being created?

Having established that post-recession science-fiction films implicitly advocate for violence over dialogue to effect political change, what kind of vocabulary, in the neopragmatic sense, do they create? The films do sensitise an audience to previously unseen pain, such as the dehumanising impact of living on a hand-to-mouth wage, having to perform degrading acts for an elite class to survive, the injustice of being denied medical care and the visceral alienation of physical class segregation. These are all worthwhile vocabularies in the liberal ironist project of exposing and reducing cruelty. Unfortunately, the second part of each text is devoid of real solutions, instead seemingly advocating for violence.

Within the context of constitutional transformation, this would suggest placing the highest priority on narrowing or overcoming the income divide regardless of the destabilising sanctions required; while simultaneously excusing acts of violence or terror committed by marginalised communities against the affluent as legitimate expressions of social frustration. Should the vocabulary created by the post-recession science-fiction sub-genre enter the social consciousness, it is therefore quite possible that the so-called contextual reading in constitutional rulings will offer rulings along these lines.

The implied balance advocated by Rorty, between radical political alternative and recognisable system, and the influence of seeking wealth over more vague forms of justice, should also manifest in this vocabulary. The aim is material betterment, or rather, closing the gap between rich and poor. It is not about finding a different space for the poor or finding different ways for the poor to be better off than the rich in other ways. It is about the poor aspiring to be in a similar position as the rich, which is ironic, given that the rich are apparently so decadent. This is where the limitation of Rorty's balance coupled with the over-emphasis on material wealth may have the biggest impact, since it precludes consideration of possibly creating other rights and obligations for the poor or allowing society to develop in a way that does not view a narrowing income gap as the only measure of success.

5.4 Conclusion

Literature and popular media do influence societal views and conceptions of justice, but this is not because there is some great human truth hidden in works of literature that scholars can identify and introduce to law. Rather, it is because societal change is driven by the convincing power of texts. At the same time there is an implied balance, which states that however radical an alternative system may be depicted as being, there needs to be sufficient similarity to the world of the reader so as not to make the depiction too jarring.

Considering the history of science-fiction as a genre through 18th and 19th century texts, it was found that depicting a political alternative that is not too radically different from the reality of the audience, and also by implication one that stresses material welfare as an end in itself, should be able to carry some political influence.

Having considered the films, it was found that they arguably share enough characteristics in common that it is safe to group them under the sub-genre of post-recession science-fiction. The implication of the several identified salient themes, when compared to utopian and dystopian science-fiction texts of the 19th and 20th centuries, is that the sub-genre in fact continues in the tradition of negotiating with the audience by stressing material wealth as a goal, rather than a just but radically different system. Given the lack of substance, the clearest ideological position under which to group the sub-

genre would be “dissatisfaction”, or rather, an ideology of action over substance – things need to change, but there is no idea of how or in what direction.

Considering this ideology of action over substance, a comparison with the anarchist concept of propaganda by the deed is made and shown to link with the portrayal of the use of violence in post-recession science-fiction as an end in itself.

Post-recession science-fiction films implicitly advocate for violence over dialogue to effect political change, and the films are devoid of real solutions, as they advocate wholly for violence. Within the context of constitutional transformation, it would suggest placing the highest priority on narrowing or overcoming the income divide regardless of the destabilising sanctions required; while simultaneously excusing acts of violence or terror committed by marginalised communities against the affluent as legitimate expressions of social frustration. Should the vocabulary created by the post-recession science-fiction sub-genre enter the social consciousness, it is therefore quite possible that the so-called contextual reading in constitutional rulings will offer verdicts along these lines.

The implied balance advocated by Rorty between radical political alternative and recognisable system, and its limitation by being coupled with the over-emphasis on material wealth, may have the biggest impact, since it precludes the consideration of possibly creating other rights and obligations for the poor or allowing society to develop in a way that does not view a narrowing income gap as the only measure of success.

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