

Title: Some Years From This Exact Moment: Ambivalent Dystopian Science Fiction
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Source: *Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy*. No. 5 (2020):
75-90

Guest Ed.: Matthew Hill

Published by: ULICES/CEAUL

URL: <https://messengersfromthestars.letas.ulisboa.pt/journal/archives/article/some-years-from-this-exact-moment-ambivalent-dystopian-science-fiction-satire>



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Some Years From This Exact Moment: Ambivalent Dystopian Science Fiction Satire

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Abstract | This article investigates the relationship between satire and science fiction in three films: *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales*, and *Gamer*. Building on the work of sci-fi scholars such as Darko Suvin and Vivian Sobchack, as well as film scholars such as Steven Shaviro, Dan Harries, and Johan Nilsson, it proposes that these films, and others like them, are best understood as “ambivalent dystopian science fiction satires,” a term that effectively captures their combination of clear satiric critique and a celebratory, questionably satirical use of exaggeration and excess. By examining how each of these films utilize intertextuality and excessive stylistic techniques to create their satire, it hopes to better understand how these films can function as *both* striking satire and “trashy” entertainment, and why this ambivalence may help to account for their frequent critical and scholarly dismissal.

Keywords | dystopia; satire; *Gamer* (2009); *Southland Tales* (2007); *The Running Man* (1987)

Resumo | Este artigo investiga a relação entre sátira e ficção científica em três filmes: *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales*, e *Gamer*. Tendo por base o trabalho de autores como Darko Suvin e Vivian Sobchack nos estudos de ficção científica e Steven Shaviro, Dan Harries e Johan Nilsson nos estudos de cinema, propõe-se que estes filmes, e outros semelhantes, podem ser melhor entendidos como “sátiras distópicas ambivalentes de ficção científica”, definição que abarca a sua combinação de uma clara crítica satírica com o uso do exagero e excesso de uma forma celebratória e de sátira duvidosa. Ao examinar como cada um destes filmes utiliza a intertextualidade e técnicas estilísticas excessivas para criar sátira, espera-se compreender melhor a forma como estes filmes funcionam *simultaneamente* enquanto sátira acutilante e entretenimento “barato” e como esta ambivalência pode dar conta da frequente rejeição crítica e académica destes filmes.

Palavras Chave | distopia; sátira; *Gamer* (2009); *Southland Tales* (2007); *The Running Man* (1987)



Satire and science fiction have enjoyed a long, albeit rocky, relationship. While a canonical science fiction (hereafter SF) essay such as Darko Suvin's “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre” explicitly connects the critical methodology of SF with satire, many of the authors that Suvin cites (Jonathan Swift, Jack London, Yevgeny Zamyatin, etc.) are typically seen as more “literary” authors than as authors of lower class, “genre” SF (377). Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a strong tradition of SF works that prominently use satire, particularly in film, a form that thrives on such genre works. However, since literature and film are very different media in many respects, their approaches to SF and satire vary greatly as well. Brooks Landon identifies several major differences, including SF film's tendency to borrow from other genres more than SF literature does and a greater sense of ambivalence within SF film than in SF literature (14). He also argues that SF is determined more by reactions and responses of audiences than by any specific formal characteristics inherent in a text itself (Landon 5). If satire in SF film is particularly ambivalent, though, how can we effectively reconcile these two positions? How are audiences cued (or fail to be cued) so as to recognize satire in such films?

To address this, I will examine three films that clearly do *not* fit in with the prestigious critical works that Suvin references as representative of satirical SF: *The*

Running Man (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), *Southland Tales* (Richard Kelly, 2007), and *Gamer* (Nevelndine/Taylor, 2009).¹ All three are filled with graphic violence and vulgarity, embrace excessive action movie stereotypes and, in both production design and style, utilize over-the-top, often garish, visual presentations. These are films that have been frequently embraced as merely a guilty pleasure or have been derided as puerile, insipid, and much worse by various critics. However, they also share other similarities that seem to align them into a coherent category, one that I would label the “ambivalent dystopian science fiction satire,” a term that helps account for both their status as satire *and* the mixed or hostile reception to them as SF satires. While I do not intend for this to be a strictly defined subcategory or subgenre of SF as a whole, I hope to provide some insight on the confluence of SF and satire and *how* SF film as a whole can work to create this sense of ambivalence. In what ways do these films both clearly fit as dystopian SF satire *and* fail to do so for audiences? How can we reconcile these two approaches, and what might they tell us about SF, taste, and satire within film? In answering queries such as these, I hope to further expand our understanding of ambivalence, dystopia, and satire within the realm of SF film.

Clarifying Ambivalence: Dystopia, Satire, and Film

Beyond Suvin, how have others characterized SF and satire? Vivian Sobchack connects satire with humor and parody, drawing attention to the comedic elements of satire that I also consider an integral component of the term (162-178). She likewise sees SF as particularly well suited to integrating with satire given that SF's “creation of a time and/or place not present” provides us with “the distance necessary for satire to function” (Sobchack 170). This provides a reinforcement of Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, pointing to how, by showing “ourselves *now* under the thin guise of *then* or *when*,” SF works with satire to defamiliarize our present so as to critique it (Sobchack 170). Ambivalence is also a defining feature of SF film for Brooks Landon, and he identifies it as referring to “the unique product of the intersection of literary SF themes and thinking with genre movie motifs and archetypes” that are

¹ While *Southland Tales*, the eagerly anticipated follow up to Kelly's cult hit *Donnie Darko*, did debut at the prestigious Cannes film festival in 2006, it met with an overwhelmingly negative response, and it is on the basis of this critical reaction (reinforced in the film's eventual theatrical release) that I consider it a “low prestige” film.

produced in SF film (19). Landon sees SF films as containing not only ambivalent but even contradictory worldviews within them, often directing ambivalence to aspects of society such as science, the military, and public authority (20). This also fits with David Sandner's argument that early works of literary SF satire, such as Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*, took the discourse around Europe's 19th century imperial project and the genre of the imperial romance and used SF to turn these into a satire of the imperial project itself (5-6). He also sees Georges Méliès' 1902 film *La Voyage Dans La Lune* as “borrow[ing] freely” from both the Verne and Wells novels, incorporating elements and ideas from each as it sees fit, and thus functioning in part to satirize those works and to satirize the notion of scientific advancement as a whole (Sandner 14). This provides an early example of SF satire using intertextuality to layer its critique, a process that deeply informs all of the films I will be examining, especially in their critiques of media culture at the time of their making. There is a clear line, then, between the ambivalence in SF film and the ambivalence present in the satirical SF of Verne, Welles, and Méliès. SF itself would also seem to be a particularly fruitful genre for incorporating satire because of this propensity toward ambivalent critique.

While this addresses the ambivalent aspect of the term, how does the “dystopian” aspect of ambivalent dystopian SF satire apply? Sobchack sees utopias and dystopias as providing “a natural affinity” with satire that helps explain why dystopia is a particularly useful descriptive term in the formulation of ambivalent dystopian SF satire (170). However, this is not intended to invoke the entire tradition of utopian and dystopian literature and/or film so much as it is designed to specify a particular subgenre of SF. Thus, in formulating this term, the dystopian element helps separate SF film satires more broadly (for example, parodies with satirical elements such as *Spaceballs* or satires not set within a clearly dystopian society such as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) from those SF satires that are explicitly placed in a dystopic setting. Furthermore, while I do not necessarily preclude the possibility of a dystopian SF satire set in the present or in an alternative history, the examples I am discussing here, as well as other films that would fit within this category, all take place in specifically dystopian futures.² If futurity is indeed a requirement for this category, it

² See, for example, films such as *RoboCop*, *Demolition Man*, *Escape from L.A.*, or *Starship Troopers*.

may be because it is necessary to create that sense of distance and estrangement from the present to clearly critique it, creating works that represent “*what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century*”³ (Shaviro 1).

This brings us to possibly the slipperiest part of ambivalent dystopian SF satire: satire itself. Putting aside for the moment the vast body of work on literary satire over the centuries, I want to briefly focus on some of the issues related to defining satire within film specifically. If classical satire can be (over)simply defined as “exaggeration to prove a point,” this approach struggles to suffice within the context of film (Stam et. al. 86). Many scholars on the subject define satire in relation to parody, with the former seen as “proving a point” through its use of content (generally social or political) while the latter makes fun of its targets via its use of form (that is, familiar aesthetic techniques) (King 93-107, Gray 47). This can create a further ambivalence, though, when media forms themselves are targeted by satire, as happens in each of the films I will be discussing: does using particular media forms thus make such examples parodies and “lesser” in some way than satire, or does it instead complicate common understandings of the form/content divide between satire and parody? More useful, and underlying my approach, are the perspectives on satire proffered by Dan Harries and Johan Nilsson. Harries critiques the form/content divide between parody and satire as reinforcing the “illusion” that form is separable from social discourse more broadly, instead opening up space for form/content and parody/satire to overlap and interact in more complex ways (32). Nilsson, drawing from the work of neoformalists such as David Bordwell, likewise embraces form as one of the ways in which films create satirical cues for their viewers, again blurring the line between form and content, and allowing for the possibility of satire, using both in its critiques (1-24). In the rest of this essay, then, I wish to consider the satire within ambivalent dystopian SF satire films as a humorous critique of the social/political and of media concepts/forms.

This is particularly important given that all of the films I will be considering do not simply critique the targets of their satire but simultaneously celebrate them as well. Likely one of the main reasons why many of these films are critically maligned is that they offer viewers conflicting cues, with a confluence of savage critique and joyous celebration. However, this is exactly why these films work as they do: by overlaying

³ Emphasis in original

the negativity and harsh critique of dystopian SF with the positivity of comedy and the invigoration of formal experimentation, creating an explosively dialectical form that is the embodiment of Landon's ambivalence *par excellence*. It is, finally, the reason why I label these particular films as ambivalent dystopian SF satire so as to separate them from works that invoke dystopian SF and satire to form an aggressive, but largely *un*-ambivalent critique, including films such as *Brazil* and any number of dystopian SF literary works, from *1984* and *Brave New World* to *The Handmaid's Tale* and beyond. Following Harries and Nilsson, then, I not only want to look at the form and content of these films, but also to provide a better sense of how these films cue satire to specifically create this ambivalent, dystopic effect.

The Running Man

Based on a Stephen King novel (written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman), 1987's *The Running Man* centers around protagonist Ben Richards (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a policeman framed for massacring protesters, as he competes on the TV show "The Running Man", where he is hunted as he tries to survive, clear his name, and ultimately take down the state-run ICS TV's totalitarian media empire. Critically, *The Running Man* received mixed or hostile notices, with its potential for satire singled out by *Variety* as being "paperthin [sic] and constantly contradicted" by the violence that it is supposedly critiquing ("The Running Man"). One particular reason for this ambivalence seems due to the film's use of exaggeration as a primary satirical technique, especially in its critique of celebrity culture. The arrival of Killian, host of "The Running Man" and arguably the most well-known face in the film's dystopic America, is presented via numerous low angle shots and a frequently roving camera that accentuate his adoring public, while his emergence from the limo itself frames a looming Killian standing against a bright, blue-white sky in an extremely low angle shot as if he were the hero of a classical Soviet film. The arrival of Buzzsaw, one of the show's star "stalkers", likewise uses a handheld camera to embed and align the spectator with the throng of celebrity hounds, while a shaky, shot/reverse shot encounter between Buzzsaw and one devoted fan ends with Buzzsaw violently shoving the man away before cutting to a shot of the fan on the ground, bleeding from his nose, and excitedly calling: "He touched me! Buzzsaw touched me!". Through this blending of stylistic techniques and content, the film satirizes the cult of personality and fervent

consumption of these media figures, as the fan's encounter with Buzzsaw merges media celebrity with something more akin to religious fervor to accentuate this satire.

While such exaggeration is rife throughout the film, especially in the highly theatrical, over-the-top introductions of each stalker to the studio audience, much of the film's satire combines such exaggeration with an emphasis on intertextuality, adding ambivalence by critiquing a violent, star-driven media industry while also clearly functioning as a part of it. This is furthered by the film's casting, particularly in the case of Richard Dawson, famous as the host of TV game show stalwart *Family Feud* from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, appearing as “The Running Man” show host Killian. Dawson's appearance adds a layer of critique and connection between the dystopian future depicted in the film and the film's contemporaneous media landscape; the show's novum is not its extreme popularity or omnipresence but the fact that it adds lethal combat to the already extant cultural force of popular game shows. The presence of Schwarzenegger likewise adds to the film's ambivalent satire. His tendency to spout pithy one-liners, especially after dispatching stalkers and other foes, fits the archetypes of 1980s action cinema, but the film also calls attention to the constructed nature of this image, as when Schwarzenegger self-consciously delivers his most famous line from 1984's *The Terminator* when he tells Killian “I'll be back”. Elsewhere, after escaping from prison earlier in the film, Richards is seen wearing a World Gym t-shirt (pointing to Schwarzenegger's own bodybuilding past) with a large cigar clamped comically between his teeth. Such satirical cues leave us uncertain as to how to understand them: is this simply just another Schwarzenegger action vehicle, a tongue-in-cheek repudiation of such baroque, hyper masculine films, or some combination of the two?

The ending only complicates this further, as it climaxes with a host of action movie clichés: the villain is killed, the evil ICS goes off the air, and Richards “gets the girl” (Amber) as a synth-heavy 1980s power ballad rises on the soundtrack. But, rather than simply providing a clear, unambiguous return to normalcy for the spectator, this ending remains resolutely ambivalent. The song itself, obviously non-diegetic, is a love song with lyrics (such as “running away with you” and “you hit the right spot,” a line associated with Killian in the film) that, while tangentially linked to the film, essentially conflate the film with the extra cinematic realm of a musical tie-in: the film's events become little more than fodder for a marketable pop single. As the credits continue to roll, the song is replaced by “The Running Man” show announcer thanking the various

program sponsors, further collapsing the distinction between the film itself and the media production it satirizes. As the film ends, then, it offers the spectator no clear break between the dystopian SF world of the film and the corporate-sponsored, media-saturated landscape of its 1980s release.

Southland Tales

Although the world of media evolved greatly in the two decades between *The Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, it remains at the center of the latter film's dystopian SF satire. By then, the internet had become the prime target for critique, but the film also broadens its range of satire through a pointed critique of the post-9/11 George W. Bush administration.⁴ However, it was also met with a disastrous reception, both at its 2006 Cannes premiere and its virtually nonexistent 2007 theatrical release. This is likely due at least in part to its sprawling cast of characters and complex plot, which features a totalitarian America overseen by a Patriot Act-established organization called USIdent, a bumbling resistance movement (the Neo-Marxists) trying to bring it down, media celebrities, a presidential election, and a healthy dose of bizarre, half SF and half supernatural events. However, the critical reception often honed in on *Southland Tales* specifically as a failed satire, such as when Roger Ebert labeled the film as incoherent rather than satirical (Ebert 8). Even a champion of the film like scholar Steven Shaviro describes *Southland Tales* as SF over satire (65). Thus, it is worth examining some of the ways in which the film creates satire to better understand why it engendered such mixed responses.

Like *The Running Man*, *Southland Tales* makes use of a great deal of layered intertextuality, taking the tendency to combine characters and the popular personas of the actors that play them even further. Per Shaviro, each of the main actors in *Southland Tales* “works against their familiar personas” to create “a kind of cognitive dissonance” between the audiences' perception of an actor's star persona and the type of character they play in the film (88). But this goes even further as certain characters will vacillate between exaggerating their typical persona (much like Schwarzenegger does in *The Running Man*) and satirizing that persona by acting against type. This is particularly

⁴ Richard Kelly admits that 9/11 shifted the film's target from a satire of Hollywood to a satire of post-9/11 American politics (O'Donnell 8-9).

true of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, former professional wrestler turned action movie star, whose performance as Boxer Santaros both plays up his persona (as in his knowing wink to Dr. Kuntzler) and combines it with atypically comic acting (such as the frequent nervous tapping together of his fingers).⁵ Of course, nearly all of *Southland Tales*' characters are exaggerations, if not outright caricatures. Beyond dialogue, the costuming and makeup of certain characters (especially Baron von Westphalen and Nana Mae Frost) add significantly to this, as does the *mise-en-scène* of various locations (such as the headquarters of the Neo-Marxists). While this causes Shaviro to argue that the film's compositional logic has “little to do with conventional film syntax”, there are many times when the film does make use of such conventions for satirical ends (70). *Southland Tales* incorporates such “grandiose stylistic flourishes” as the lengthy Steadicam shot when Boxer first boards the Baron's mega zeppelin, but much of the film is more mundane in its emphasis on simple single shots, two-shots, and shot/reverse shot editing patterns (McCarthy). This mundanity serves an additional function, as it often works to invoke the conventional visual syntax of mainstream comedy and merge it with dystopian SF film to create a new, hybrid approach emphasizing the comedic elements of its satire. The emphasis on reaction shots, the division of characters into “straight” and “crazy” comic duos (as when Krysta Now and her director, Cyndi, discuss Krysta's business plan), and even the foregrounding of Neo-Marxists Dream and Dion as improvisation comedians (played by the duo of improvisation comedian Amy Poehler and dramatic actor Wood Harris, respectively) all work to seemingly blend disparate genres and reinforce the film's satire of “comically inept” political discourse.⁶

Southland Tales also uses the constant presence of consumption (literally and figuratively) and the body (especially through depictions of, and references to, defecation and vomiting) to create a sustained satirical critique of consumer culture. The graphic interface used early on to provide the film's backstory juxtaposes news clips, maps, and other moving images (akin to a packed browser window) with the display's three corporate sponsors (Bud Light, Hustler, and Panasonic) on the left side

⁵ It is worth noting that, while firmly established as a comic actor now, *Southland Tales* was one of Johnson's first explicitly comic roles.

⁶ Shaviro uses this phrase to describe the Neo-Marxists in the film, but it effectively applies to other groups as well (64).

of the frame.⁷ Shortly thereafter, a shot pans past a tank with a large Hustler logo on its side, even more explicitly merging the consumption of sex with an ever-expanding military-industrial complex. Other examples involve more literal consumption, as when Krysta drinks from a can of her own branded energy drink, her face on the can pointed toward the camera so as to mirror the actual Krysta's face as she drinks. Much like *The Running Man*, this conflates and combines the cult of consumption with the cult of personality, but in an even more densely layered way. Take, for instance, the character of Starla as she attempts to contact and meet her idol, Boxer. She constantly eats cheese puffs, drawing a comparison between her star consumption and her physical consumption, which reaches its zenith as Starla follows/stalks Boxer before finally meeting him: a rack focus moves from Boxer in the foreground, absurdly attempting to drink an entire six-pack of Bud Light at once, to Starla, eating (as always) in the background. Through what is perhaps a too conventional element of film style, *Southland Tales* merges the mindless consumption of media personas with the mindless consumption of food into a scathingly humorous, if potentially thinly cued, satirical critique.

The film takes this further by also concentrating on what happens after consumption, especially in the film's insistence on toilets and bathrooms in its settings. A key prop in the Neo-Marxists' headquarters is a massive toilet bowl near their computers, while Starla's main job at USIdent involves her observing the LAX bathrooms on a four-way split screen, as if foregrounding excretion to balance her constant consumption. Unsurprisingly, the drop site at which Krysta delivers incriminating video to aid the Neo-Marxists is located inside a toilet stall. And shortly thereafter, Nana Mae, eating while watching her USIdent monitors, witnesses a man in the midst of a beachfront drinking party vomiting profusely. Not only does this present us with the inverse of consumption, using *mise-en-scène* to enhance the film's satire of consumer culture, but it foregrounds an emphasis on bodies and the bodily. This works within the broader context of the film's emphasis on diminished intelligence to simultaneously celebrate the physical while mourning the decline of the mental, creating a particularly visceral indication of the ambivalence permeating *Southland Tales'* use of satire and SF.

⁷ Shaviro calls this “a brilliant list” that incorporates “three crucial commodities that are bought and sold in the age of affective labor: electronics, intoxicants, and sex” (72).

Gamer

Likewise, the 2009 film *Gamer* loves to emphasize the bodily and relationships between the mental and the physical. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that many of the critical responses to the film emphasized reviewers' negative physical reactions to the film, calling it (among other things) "a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets" (Catsoulis), that fails to "conjure anything that remotely resembles satire" (Nelson). One reason for this reaction may be the way in which the film incessantly works to "hyperbolize the contemporary media landscape," saturating its satire so much as to make it apparently invisible (or at least a failure) for some viewers (Shaviro 93). Some critics did note this approach, though, as in Fred Mason's warning that "films with this sort of excess, sarcasm and parody run the risk that they do not come across as intended" because "the lines between critiquing society and spectacularizing that under criticism are very thin" (Mason 11). *Gamer* follows death row con Kable as he attempts to break free from the violent, massively popular game "Slayers" (where he is remotely controlled as if he were a video game character by his "player," the rich teenager Simon), free his wife Angie from a form of sexual slavery in the other massively popular game, "Society," and take down the evil Ken Castle, the tech genius who made the ability to control others' actions possible. By taking the form of an exploitation-styled action movie, *Gamer* both fits within and constitutes a satire of action cinema, helping to make it another example of ambivalent dystopian SF satire.

Exaggeration is a constant presence in *Gamer*, especially at the level of the film's style, which pushes tendencies in mainstream action cinema to absurd extremes. If David Bordwell's concept of "intensified continuity," with a tendency toward shorter shot lengths, more extreme lens lengths, closer shot scales, and a constantly roving camera, has helped to define mainstream cinema, especially action cinema, in recent decades, *Gamer* intensifies these elements to the breaking point (Bordwell). Its average shot length is often extremely short: a not atypical scene such as Kable's trip to the Humanz headquarters takes up just forty-one seconds of screen time but is split up over thirty-eight shots, including one that is only a single frame long. Extreme lens lengths abound and create extraordinary juxtapositions, such as the one between an extreme close-up of Kable's eyes as he sits outside of prison after the first Slayers match and an extreme long shot of him and Freek dwarfed by a massive, chalky white cliff. The film's

combat sequences likewise frequently feature tight shot scales in close proximity to Kable that accentuate the chaotic action unfolding around him, and they are shot with rapidly moving handheld cameras that inject constant adrenalized movement into the film. Such intensely intensified continuity leads Shaviro to cite the film as a prime example of a work that pushes past the conventions of continuity, intensified or otherwise, into the aegis of a new stylistic regime: post-continuity (122). Other elements within the film's *mise-en-scène* further this insistence on exaggeration and excess. As in the production design of both *The Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, *Gamer* embraces bad taste in depicting its dystopia, especially in the garish colors and costuming seen in the game world of Society, but elsewhere as well. Video and computer screens are not merely omnipresent, but they often overwhelm characters, as in Castle's two-story tall screen or in Simon's gaming room, consisting of one all-encompassing screen filled with a dizzying display of data. Even the film's lighting is pushed to the point of excess (and beyond), from the flashing lights creating a rapidly morphing chiaroscuro in the transport vehicles taking prisoners to matches to the dramatic lighting at Castle's home that "puts more or less everyone who's ever cited Jacques Tourneur as an influence to shame" (Vishnevetsky). Excess, then, is not a specific formal technique of the film as much as it is a structuring principle, influencing it at every turn.

Then, what is the function of all this excess? On the one hand, it works to satirize action cinema by calling attention to the excesses already inherent in the form, and like *Running Man* and *Southland Tales*, it incorporates the media throughout to critique its omnipresence and the exploitative practices of consumer-driven entertainment. However, for each moment of clear critique, as when the film focuses briefly on repetitive actions by NPCs during Slayers matches (two characters endlessly exchanging play money; a woman in the stands repeatedly exposing a pair of plastic-molded breasts), there is another example where the film indulges in the very spectacle of sex, violence, and consumption that seems to contradict its satire. Nevertheless, the methodical way in which the film develops the relationship between mind and body implies more of a playful critique than a mindless celebration. Shots of the players controlling "avatars" in Society are framed against abstract, black backgrounds, emphasizing their mental control at the expense of their physical presence, while the portions of the film in the Society game itself center around the grotesque physicality

that players force the Society workers to endure. Literal consumption is foregrounded in the scenes with the player Gorge, a morbidly obese man who is constantly seen in sweaty close-ups, often stuffing entire waffles oozing syrup into his mouth; he plays Society to mentally engage in the physical pleasures of which his actual body is ill-equipped to partake. Thus, when a player is disconnected from their avatar it becomes a form of death, as when Simon declares “I’m dead” when he loses Kable’s signal. The distance between the mental and the physical experience is no substitute for the experience itself.

Thus, the film presents us with excesses that foreground the experience of the film for the spectator. Perhaps the ultimate example of this is during Kable’s escape from the game zone. He drinks a bottle of vodka, stumbles into the Slayers match, finds an abandoned vehicle, and proceeds to vomit and urinate alcohol into the gas tank to provide it with fuel. Numerous shots depict this action, including shots from inside the gas tank itself, looking up through a small aperture at Kable as he vomits, and later urinates, into the tank. Here, the bodily and the intensely physical are the very means of escape. But where does this leave the spectator, sitting watching the film more like a player than a participant, thrust into the middle of the film’s physical spectacle via intensely immersive stylistic devices while still experiencing everything at a remove? Like a loop, we return to the ambivalence of ambivalent dystopian SF satire, a closed circuit of the celebration of the experience and the damning of its implications. The spectator is ultimately not the winner or the loser; they simply are a part of the cycle.

Conclusion

In many ways, this sums up ambivalent dystopian SF satire as a whole. Each of these films expresses a concern with the power of media and consumption perpetuating a *mise-en-abyme* of violence and spectatorial absorption, painting a picture of a dystopian future that is less “some years” in the future than it is the “exact moment” of now.⁸ However, each film also embraces its status within this media landscape as a product for consumption, and they are unable to provide answers as to how to break this cycle and move forward. Perhaps this is why these films, and many others that fit this form of dystopian SF satire, meet with critical ambivalence if not outright disdain.

⁸ To paraphrase *Gamer’s* opening epigraph, which also serves as the title of this piece.

Viewers may acknowledge that these concerns are present, but they want answers, a way past this dystopic cycle, while the films themselves remain more “procedural” and “demonstrative” than “self-reflexive” (Shaviro 126). They work to bare the device not of themselves as texts, but of the media landscape itself in which they are firmly entrenched.

Why these films in particular, and the concept of ambivalent dystopian SF satire in general, is valuable, then, is because they so tightly intertwine the distance necessary for cognitive estrangement, the shock of seeing things as they are from the perspective of a future elsewhere, with the awareness of the norms inherent in the popular media forms that these works use now. They are rich texts because they force the spectator to try to disentangle these strands (and the larger web of globalized capital of which they are a part) without being able to fully do so, not in spite of this fact. And because they are dense texts, there are far more issues in these three works (not to mention the others cited) than I have had the opportunity to discuss here. Certainly, issues of race and gender are key, and often problematic, concerns for all three films. Is Terry Crews' Hackman in *Gamer* simply a racist stereotype, a satirical critique of the African-American stereotypes in action films, or both?⁹ A similar question could be asked of Amber *vis-à-vis* gender stereotypes in *The Running Man*, the treatment of Angie's character in *Gamer*, or the films of Nevelidine/Taylor in general, which have been specifically referred to as “hyper masculine” because of their extremely hyper mediated nature, an observation that could likewise apply to each of the three films discussed here and their musclebound male action stars (Palmer, *Cranked*). My sense is that, much like the prime targets of satire in these texts, the answers to these questions are ambivalent, potentially celebrating demeaning aspects in their presentations of race and gender as much as they are critiquing them. What is ultimately important for us to do, then, is to better wrestle with these questions and the ambivalence within such dystopian SF satires. What ideas are worth dealing with in these films? What do they tell us about the time of their making and the world we live in now? Ultimately, they can help us better understand what ambivalent dystopian SF satire is, how it functions, and why we are so fascinated with joyfully critiquing the very things we are ashamed to desire.

⁹ The character of Serpentine in *Southland Tales* also functions in much this way in relation to Orientalized, “exotic” Asian stereotypes.



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