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FEAR OF THE FUTURE: A SPECULATIVE EXPLORATION OF CINEMATIC DYSTOPIAS

BY

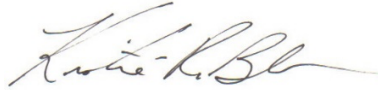
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FEAR OF THE FUTURE:  
A SPECULATIVE EXPLORATION OF CINEMATIC DYSTOPIAS

BY

KATARINA M. MCGUIRE

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

2022

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dearest friend Anna-Marie. Without her I would never have sat down and even started writing much less finished during one of the most difficult years for my family and myself. I leave this written declaration that the world is very much better for having her in it and my world is more complete than it ever could be without her. To have people like her with me makes the future a little less bleak and gives me the strength and courage to walk into it with a little more love, compassion, and understanding.

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## ABSTRACT

Dystopia is often thought of as a simple fictional device or some far off possibility of an unrecognizable Earth. But what if dystopias are actually allegorical devices warning of the long-term effects of social controls like criminalization as well as reflections on current socio-political conditions? The aim of this study was to explore cinematic dystopias and their depictions of and reflections on such themes, including how they might act as speculations on the future. Relying on qualitative content analysis, this study gathered data from three dystopic films, including *V for Vendetta*, *Minority Report*, and *Equilibrium*, all chosen for their criminological themes and futuristic settings. A secondary content analysis of contemporary socio-political conditions was also carried out using journal and news articles as well other media to examine similar but contemporary conditions and criminalization. Comparing the two results suggests that dystopian films act as sites in which current criminalization serves as the basis for speculating the possible dystopic nature of the future as a concept rather than a specific timeline. Therefore, this thesis adds not only to the growing literature within visual criminology, but also to everyday commentary on the current and possible long-term effects of over-criminalization, including its direct consequences in policing and punishment.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

When someone goes to sleep at night, they should be able to rely on a few things. Firstly, they should be assured that at no point during the night will anyone make entry into their domain that does not previously have permission to do so. Secondly, they should be assured that if they do not wake in the morning it would not be because of the deliberate actions of someone else. Lastly, they should be assured that laws and enforcement of those laws are in place to ensure the previous declarations. When Breonna Taylor went to sleep the night of March 12, 2021, she should have been assured that she would wake in the morning to continue her life of service by caring for the medical needs of others. Rather than ensuring that this would happen, laws and enforcing officers secured her death.

That morning, and the months that followed, saw the education of a nation on laws and policies that do not require law enforcement officers to announce their presence as well as the inculpability of such officers for their actions that resulted in the slaying of a woman in her home. Also, that such an incident is only one example of the systemic racism inherent in the U.S. Criminal Justice System seemingly aimed at the criminalization of people of color as well as other groups like the poor and homeless. People learned that rather than watching the plot of a dystopian film in which state violence reigns with ultimate power until a hero emerges to dismantle the regime, they were living the horrors of how a real government controls real people through policy,

criminalization, and punishment. Thus, this project aims to explore how real lived lives, like that of Breonna Taylor's, are reflected in dystopian film and how such films speculate a possible dystopic future based on the similarity of the socio-political condition today.

Dystopia is no stranger to inquiry as researchers have been exploring the topic since the coinage of the term in 1868 (Milner, 2009). Before then it was much more common to see utopia or eutopia as a philosophical and literary concept used to explore a society's future but increased in popularity soon thereafter. Dystopian film is a more recent area of interest for social science since films have historically relied on class consciousness to comment on dominant ideologies of society through the years (Wayne, 2020). Now, it is generally agreed upon that dystopia is commonly seen as speculation and used as allegory to reflect concerns regarding current socio-political conditions (Gibson, 2015; Ginszt, 2018; Milner, 2009; Mirrlees, 2015; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016; Moylan & Baccolini, 2003; Tan, 2020). Studies have since been able to focus on specific issues using lenses from various scientific areas of interest like the environment (Milner, 2009; Tan, 2020), the economics of liberal capitalism (Christopher, 2015; Gacka, 2018; Rottinghaus et al., 2016), and other socio-political concerns (Brammer, 2014; Ginszt, 2018; McFarland, 2017; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016; Williams, 2006). The extant research identifying criminological themes within dystopic cinema is the space in which this project engages.

A criminological lens has allowed researchers to explore dystopian films in order to speculate what roles issues like inequality, politics, racism, surveillance, policing, and punishment may have in the future. While criminalization is explored as a

result of socio-political conditions within these films, there is a shortage of analyses investigating how dystopic cinema depicts the use of criminalization as a form of social control by the state through violence and punishment. In consequence, I hoped to narrow this gap by showing that dystopian films offer useful depictions of criminalization, particularly its real-world use by various governments with particular attention placed on the U.S. In doing so, it was possible to speculate on the effects of criminalization and what that means for the future.

There are many themes that could be studied in relation to the role criminalization plays in dystopian film, however, the purpose of this research was to explore the specific intersections of political power, criminalization, and violence through policing and punishment as portrayed in dystopian films. So, while dystopian films often depict individual and collective resistance to power structures, the detailed and specific analysis that such a topic deserves was beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, the particular purpose was to show that dystopian films are spaces in which the world offers warnings and reflections about the injustices that occur via policy and violence as they happen to real people in their real lived lives as a result of criminalization that occurs in the name of justice.

It is common to examine the past in order to better understand the world in which we live in today, as it is fairly expressive of what works, what does not, and why endeavors succeed or fail. It should be equally important to examine expressions of the future via popular media like film to better understand the issues and fears we have today and what they mean for the tomorrow we build. This project explores how films set in the future not only reflect current concerning trends but speculate on what may

happen if these issues are not addressed. By doing so it continues an important conversation about why occurrences like Breonna Taylor's death are not rare but part of a larger system that does not fully represent all of its people and the conditions in which they live.

While a more quantitative analysis could have successfully documented criminalization in dystopian film and revealed similarities to contemporary social controls, a qualitative approach was used instead. This allowed for a more speculative, interpretive, and sometimes rhetorical analysis in which various uses of power and punishment throughout the films could be fully explored in their relation to criminalization and why that matters to us today. Content analyses were conducted for three dystopian films chosen for their criminological themes, *V for Vendetta*, *Minority Report*, and *Equilibrium*. A more detailed description of the research design employed in this study may be found in the methods chapter.

In order to best present the rich data gathered from the content analyses, each film is given its own chapter in which a thematic analysis is offered following the literature review and methods chapters. This better allows the content of each film to be presented and interpreted as commentary using real-world examples of current socio-political conditions. The results are then summarized in a discussion chapter that describes the common themes and prominent issues displayed in the films. The usefulness of such realizations of the role criminalization plays in dystopian films is also demonstrated, allowing this study to fulfill its aim of exploring how dystopic cinema offers speculation about future socio-political conditions. Limitations and future recommendations for further study are also offered. The concluding chapter offers a

brief summary of why such films should not be disregarded despite their frequent categorization as science fiction, but rather should be taken as allegories allowing us to see the long-term effects of criminalization on society, and a genuine hope that we need not fear the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review provides relevant information on dystopia as speculative fiction which will provide essential context for the explorative analysis of dystopian film and contemporary criminological issues. Specifically, a review of literature that reveals why dystopia provides a site of speculation for the future based on the socio-political reality of today will be followed by an overview of relevant film theory. This review contains a summary of existing research that identifies a gap in the literature that this study hopes to fill. Finally, this chapter concludes with a description of the research questions and the purposes of this project.

#### Discovering Dystopia

Imagining a dystopia may bring to mind something like a bleak, post-apocalyptic landscape with either chaotic overtones or an extreme, centralized power that controls an overly domesticated population. This would be an accurate visualization and the familiar image may be due, at least in part, to the fact these are all elements frequently used to create dystopic worlds in various forms of popular media. However, such purely apocalyptic and disorderly portrayals do not capture the full scope of what a dystopia may or may not look like and why that matters. In fact, in terms of landscape a dystopia may be visualized as a controlled and “safe” city with order and organization (as in *Equilibrium*) or may involve creating both dystopic and eutopic environments for different classes of people (as depicted in *Elysium*). These varying physical and socio-

political conditions are one reason why dystopias are difficult to classify into one genre much less create sub-types, as well as a main reason why they are frequently relegated to a form of science fiction. Their often-fantastical settings (e.g., space, alternate reality, a single train) and hard-to-relate-to protagonists (the sole hero singlehandedly capable of saving the future) make good fodder for science fiction, but the familiar themes of authoritarian governments, narrow justice systems, complete surveillance, extreme punishment, and overcriminalization establish dystopias as connected to the real. These themes are in fact a source of real concern of the present and a fear for the future.

While humans have long been fascinated by the future, historically speaking, dystopias were not a common narrative prior to the mid-nineteenth century though they outpaced eutopias (from *eu topos*, or good place) soon thereafter (Milner, 2009). Dystopia actually refers to a bad place (*dis topos*), and not time (*chronos*), so it may be more accurate to say that this study seeks to explore criminological issues in *dyschronic* dystopias as depicted in film (Milner, 2009). This would suggest that not only are these bad places, but that they exist in a bad time (the future) as well. This future setting has made it so that dystopia mainly exists within and as a motivation for science fiction. Academically, when science fiction became subject to institutional study in the 1970s dystopias were initially either ignored as directed by Marx and Engels' (1848, ch. 3) imprecise declaration that utopias were simply "fantastic pictures of future society, painted at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state and has but a fantastic conception of its own position" or simply considered in opposition to eutopia (Milner, 2009). More recent literature (Baccolini, 2000; Moylan, 2000; Sargent, 1994)



still subjects dystopias to analyses in relation to eutopias rather than their own merit suggesting established prejudice against dystopia (Milner, 2009).

A review of such recent literature revealed three general views regarding cinematic dystopias in that 1) dystopias are fictional and films depicting dystopias are unrealistic and sensational, allowing people to accept their current circumstances and film companies to make money (Berg, 2008); 2) dystopias are real and dystopian discourse in popular media often reflect real fears and experiences of society and it is how that fear manifests that is important rather than the actual, often fantastic, events that take place in the film (Christopher, 2015; Tan, 2020); and 3) a middle ground in which dystopias are fictional but do relay real societal fears and often feature scenarios based on apocalyptic consequences of current socio-political and negative ecological trends (Raymen, 2018). The recent school of thought regarding dystopia was popularized by Baccolini and Moylan (2003) as either critical or uncritical. The main difference between them seems to be that critical dystopias offer a solution of sorts; not as a complete shift to eutopia, but a way in which the socio-political reasoning supporting the dystopia can be changed, destroyed, or resisted (Mirrlees, 2015; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016). In other words, critical dystopias contain hope for a future without dystopic conditions by supplying alternatives or force of action, whereas uncritical dystopias do not. They both also refer to the role capitalism plays in the dystopia depicted, with uncritical dystopias never directly relating the connection between capitalism and the dystopic condition in the narrative while critical dystopias more actively reflect the role between them (Mirrlees, 2015; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016).

While it is helpful to identify recurring themes in dystopias, it is not necessarily advisable to categorize some as warnings and others as simply anti-utopian. Cultural theorist Andrew Milner (2009) posits that while Baccolini and Moylan (2003) are correct in “that eutopianism resides within dystopia primarily as a warning,” it may be far too elaborative to “contextualize critical dystopia in relation to a specific historical moment” (p. 833). This is in direct response to Moylan’s (2000) insistence that critical dystopias were an innovation of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Milner, 2009). The terminology is also unfortunate in that to label something as uncritical when it may contain similar themes to what is deemed critical, and therefore worth analysis, is inadvisable. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the films were not subjected to an analysis of critical versus uncritical in an effort to recognize criminological and socio-political trends regardless of when the film was made and how it ends. In doing so, dystopia is given the chance to be analyzed by its own merit as speculation about the future without relying on eutopian ideals for definition.

### **Speculative Fiction**

The field of research regarding dystopian films has seen some development over recent years with much of it referring to the speculative nature of the genre and its use as a warning about or comparison to current conditions. As previously mentioned, work by Moylan and Baccolini (2003) is often referenced in an effort to critically explore dystopian films as such warnings and/or comparisons (Gibson, 2015; Ginszt, 2018; Milner, 2009; Mirrlees, 2015; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016; Tan, 2020). According to Frigerio (2017, p. 4) Baccolini and Moylan (2003) asserted that:

the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible

socio-political tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside.

There is much agreement that dystopian film is an effective parallel to our own socio-political and ecological concerns and serves as allegorical representation to inform as well as entertain in an effort to raise awareness and stimulate debate (Frigerio, 2017; Gibson, 2015; Milner, 2009). Dystopian films can therefore be used to shed light on real-life observations of world systems like capitalism, or specific conditions such as material scarcity, the polarization of society, and criminalizing the poor and minority populations.

So, unless subscribed to the notion that dystopian films are purely science fiction and serve only as entertainment and revenue-making endeavors, such films can provide speculative insight into potential future manifestations of many contemporary issues. Films like *I, Robot*, *Wall-E*, and *The Matrix* show various futures in which technology and artificial intelligence have been overly relied upon resulting in an almost absolute dependence or control. Ecological disasters and a ruined Earth due to global warming, overpopulation, overproduction, etc. is a frequent plot point in dystopian films such as *Elysium*, *Soylent Green*, *Avatar*, *Snowpiercer*, and *Waterworld*. Other films like *V for Vendetta*, *Equilibrium*, and *Minority Report* offer futures in which society is controlled by the iron grip of governments concerned with absolute control over some or all aspects of its citizens. These last three films in particular deal with futures created by human deviance in the forms of a purposeful pandemic, World War III, and general criminality, respectively. Speculative explorations of such contemporary concerns make dystopian films of particular interest. It is these reflections of real, failing societies and connecting premonitions that create the complex

relationship between film, crime, and society (Brown, 2009; Tan, 2020). A brief review of pertinent film theory will help to establish dystopian film as relevant speculative commentary in order to better situate film itself as a site of representation and speculation.

### **Film Theory**

In order to develop well-understood methods of exploration as the film industry adapts and evolves, film theory is a field of study that has continued to beguile researchers and otherwise make use of other fields of study such as sociology, criminology, psychology, religion, and political science, just to name a few. In fact, the continued success of the film industry and the rise of recent popular philosophies has led to the formation of new schools of thought like Feminist Film Theory and Marxist Film Theory, among others. While any of these theories could be explored in order to illuminate dystopian films in general, three film theories in particular (Genre, Marxist, and Apparatus) would enhance the theoretical framework necessary to designate dystopian films as a social site of speculative commentary on contemporary socio-political issues.

As previously suggested, it is difficult to define the borders of dystopia as a genre given the vast plot devices, timelines, locations, character histories, and background information as well as production quality and techniques that writers, producers, directors, film critics, and moviegoers alike use to categorize films based on their own motivations and criteria. For instance, the film *Wall-E* could be placed in several genres based on type (animation), market audience (children and family), production company (Disney), and/or timeline and topic (science fiction or dystopia).

Genre theory explores this issue as well as how “the cycles and transformation of genres can... be seen as a response to political, social, and economic condition” as well as “[embody] certain values and ideological assumptions” (Chandler, 1997, p. 4).

Generally, genres can be viewed as fluid in that their evolution is inevitable and a birth of one is contingent upon the influence of one or more established genres (Chandler, 1997; Todorov & Berrong, 1976). The point is that a film need not be labelled or categorized as dystopian in order to be considered one for the purposes of this study and it is more how genres “provide frameworks within which texts are produced and interpreted” that is important as it provides justification to select films that may not be labelled or marketed as dystopian but those whose content qualifies as dystopian and can be analyzed as such for purposes of this study (Chandler, 1997, p. 5). It is these films that will be able to be analyzed for their connection to real, lived conditions.

While Genre Theory does acknowledge the political and social influences that take part in the formation and ambiguousness of genres, Marxist Film Theory is primarily interested in commenting on class relations and what role it has in film. By examining how Marx and Engel’s (1848) theory of class struggle can highlight how socio-political influences create and maintain the inequalities that exist between different social groups [identified by Marx and Engels as the proletariat (worker) and the bourgeoisie (capitalist)], researchers have been able to highlight how film content reflects, and how the industry as a whole revolutionizes itself to accommodate, these changes. In *Marxism Goes to the Movies*, Mike Wayne (2020, para. 5) relates that historically, films have always relied on class consciousness beginning as “extended critical commentary on the dominant institutions of established society.” The film

industry became increasingly entrenched with capitalism which shifted the working-class hero to the margins in favor of the middle-class materialist. This was a result of the increased integration of politics, capitalism, and even religion in film production, distribution, and exhibition. Particularly, science fiction films are, as Wayne (2020, para. 8) notes, often used to project into the future to explore “[themes] of class power, class struggle, revolt, and revolution” and illustrate collective unconsciousness thereby becoming a site of political allegory. And as previously established, science fiction films often contain dystopias which provide opportunity for viewers to realize their own position in relation to the conditions portrayed.

It has been established that dystopian cinema may consist of films, regardless of commercial classification, with relevant dystopian themes that draw from historical and contemporary socio-political conditions to be allegorical in nature. Apparatus Film Theory then provides a link between Genre and Marxist theories in that the film itself must be established to have the ability to provide the connection between the real and cinematic. This theory suggests that as an avenue of repeated interaction, film creates the opportunity for viewers to appropriate the identity of the film (via its’ protagonist(s) for instance) and apply it to their own reality (Davis, 2007). Thus, apparatus theory helpfully allows for a “critical appreciation of cinema and... a *creative doubt* prompting us to be aware of why and wherefore cinema functions in our sentient lives” (Conley, 2018, p. 145). Essentially, this theory allows that despite its connections and motivations to consumerism and capitalism, film is able to acquire political and philosophical connections to individual and collective consciousness (Conley, 2018). It

is these connections that then allow futuristic dystopian films to be essential in looking ahead to further understand criminological issues as established today.

### **Criminological Perspectives**

The various theories already cited and summarized thus far highlight dystopia's vast potential as a subject of study using various lenses. It is already clear that dystopia is useful in a speculative sense (Ene, 2016; Frigerio, 2017; Gibson, 2015; Milner, 2009; Moylan & Baccolini, 2003; Tan, 2020) with several works focusing on critical dystopias as depicted in specific films (Ginszt, 2018; Mirrlees, 2015; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016; Tan, 2020). Many of these same studies highlight the usefulness in relation to the specific perspectives in which dystopia has been studied. For instance, an environmental lens has been used to explore issues like climate change and other ecological concerns (Milner, 2009; Tan, 2020), with other studies using a political lens in order to examine concerns like government systems and social inequality (Berg, 2008; Brayton, 2011; Muñoz, 2018) or an economic lens that focuses on specific consequences of capitalism (Christopher, 2015; Gacka, 2018; Rottinghaus et al., 2016). Many of these studies, and still more journal and news articles, are film-specific, using media and film analytical approaches to reveal how one cinematic dystopia is useful in deliberating a vast array of socio-political issues (Brammer, 2014; Ginszt, 2018; McFarland, 2017; Mirrlees & Pedersen, 2016; Williams, 2006). However, only a few of these studies give attention to specific criminological concerns, which highlights the broader lack of such analyses within the field of criminology.

One study that does have a specific criminological perspective is Thomas Raymen's (2018) recent analysis of the hit television show *The Walking Dead* as

popular criminology. In order to assist in establishing popular criminology as relevant to criminology at large, Raymen (2018) asserts that analyzing popular culture by applying a criminological perspective can not only “offer a predictive window into the future,” but also can solidify the popularity of dystopian fiction as a connection to a collective consciousness concerned with “the present late-capitalist condition and the broader political climate” (p. 443). In doing so, he presents an opportunity for other studies, such as this one, to not only add to the growing dystopia literature, but to also add to newer criminological perspectives such as popular and visual criminology.

Visual criminology is a growing form of analysis within criminology that allows for the interpretation of images as representations of how power and control intersect with modes of visualizing and seeing (and unseeing) the ways in which violence, crime, and deviance are presented, and used, in mediatic forms (Brown & Carrabine, 2017; Rafter & Brown, 2011). Films, along with other forms of popular media, are sites of representation for the patterns and models of the current racist capitalist hegemony that exists in the U.S. For instance, Michelle Brown’s (2009) study on prison iconography and penal spectatorship revealed that the relationships between film and society are complex and exist not only as reflections of one another, but also as influences on each other (see also Rafter, 2006). This can mean that the ways in which dystopian films are mapped by social and political discourse to pursue unfavorable, and sometimes even apocalyptic, conditions reflect society’s most profound fears and concerns regarding threats to its aspirations (Brown, 2009; Ene, 2016). One way to better understand the role of dystopian film through criminology is to analyze the discourse involving criminalization and punishment as socio-political processes. While not specifically



related to dystopian films, Brown's (2009) study is among those that support the need for more analysis of the visual from a criminological perspective.

One other study that was helpful, as well as supports the overall need for visual analysis within criminology, is Sarah Armstrong's (2017) review of the politics of visibility in criminology. Armstrong explored the idea that it is possible for "multiple, complete realities" to coexist and by exploring these different realities researchers will be able to discover how a reality may exist without the problem that exists in one of them (pg. 416). She relays the importance of this by quoting Schept (2014) that "even the critique of representation 'can confirm or reify stereotypes already bound to images'" (Armstrong, 2017, pp. 416-417). For this thesis, it means that the stereotype of dystopia being bound to the label of science fiction and only housed within fantastical worlds can be challenged. They are in fact not only fictional and entertainment devices, but allegorical and relatable. Relatedly, Armstrong's concept of seeing-as situates "imagination at the heart of both critique and change," so that these imagined worlds can be seen as alternatives to conditions being lived today (pg. 423). In doing so, we are able to see and think critically about criminological issues like crime and criminalization as portrayed in dystopian films. While Armstrong opened the conversation to the problem of prisons and their persistence, I wished to conversate about dystopian films and how criminological issues like criminalization can be re-imagined in the future to truly see and critique criminalization as it exists now. In doing so, this study was allowed to realize its potential to not only reveal what may be possible for society, but what may not be.

While all these studies differ from each other in terms of subject, perspective, and even methods, what they do have in common is that they all support the premise of this study. Whether they agreed that dystopian films provide speculation for the future, or that the visual image is increasingly becoming an important method and/or subject of analysis, or even that film is an effective means for representing and interpreting socio-political conditions of the present and future, all these studies have created a small gap in which this study hopes to unceremoniously situate itself. In doing so, it will fulfill a small objective among its broader aims.

### **Aim of Study**

The ultimate goal of this project is aimed at continuing a conversation about the speculative nature of dystopian films started by other researchers with special interest paid to how dystopian films depict criminalization in a future time. In doing so, this project makes a contribution to not only dystopian literature, but visual criminology as well, thereby fulfilling a secondary goal of addressing a gap in the literature. While dystopian films are often criticized for their inability to offer realistic commentary on contemporary conditions, they do offer an interpretation, if not representation, of possible dystopic circumstances as a result of socio-political conditions. For the purposes of this study, futuristic dystopian films were critically analyzed to reveal how criminalization, aided by the respective films' specific political situations, resulted in various forms of punishment and injustices to the human condition. This analysis provides comparison to social issues that have caused recent or continued concern today, which allows dystopian films to be used as a site for speculation for the long-

term effects of such issues. This exploratory study was achieved through a process of a qualitative content analysis as described in the Methods section below.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This study integrates my interests in visual media and criminology by examining how dystopian film portrays criminalization. In so doing, this study answers the call for continued research in visual criminology (Brown & Carrabine, 2017). This study is also situated within the contexts of popular criminology in that it analyzes concepts of crime and justice within popular media. Thus, this study has a solid foundation within criminology overall and is able to situate criminological issues in a larger portrait within popular media of what a dystopic future might entail.

In order to explore what future societies may deem worthy of criminalization and punishment, and how that relates to contemporary socio-political conditions, film selection was narrowed to dystopian films that are set in future (including near future) timelines. Thus, the criminological themes of *V for Vendetta*, *Equilibrium*, and *Minority Report* were analyzed. These films were not chosen for their popularity, though they collectively made \$496,252,178 from their worldwide releases (boxofficemojo.com, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d). Rather they were chosen for their relevance to the study given their futuristic timelines and prominent themes of criminalization. In addition, critical reviews and other responses to the films including interviews with the cast, directors, and writers, established the importance of the depicted themes and even debated their connection to speculative fiction by acting as warnings and “what ifs.” Therefore, these

films offer insight into possible conditions of criminalization in a future setting and thereby offer commentary on the speculative nature of dystopian films.

While these three films are the main sample of this explorative study, they are not alone among dystopian films in containing criminological themes. A list of dystopian films was created, since an exhaustive list of dystopian films remained elusive, using the genre indices located on BoxOfficeMojo.com (2021b). “Dystopia” was not listed within the genres, but “future,” “near-future,” and “apocalyptic” were, allowing a list to be created for potential, purposive selection. Yet, this list was not exhaustive either, as some films were absent that were clearly dystopian in nature like *Elysium*, *Equilibrium*, *Avatar*, and *Wall-E*, so other genres like “science fiction” were also examined for film inclusion. Some films were excluded outright for the purposes of this study, such as *2012* and *The Martian*, for devices like an exclusively apocalyptic plot or general lack of relevant criminological and/or dystopian themes. While not chosen for the main analysis, many of the remaining films are mentioned throughout this work suggesting these themes are not film specific, but familiar to cinematic dystopias in general.

The content analysis required the collection of various information from these films. This included information revealed from components of films like dialogue, landscape, actions, plot, character histories and other background information, imagery, and even relevant information regarding production. Careful observation allowed the gathering of data relevant to the themes of the study and it was recorded in the form of copious, detailed notes that were then organized according to their relevance to the themes of this study. This allowed for a thorough analysis and comparison to

contemporary concerns. In order to gather information referring to current, relevant criminological trends and concerns, a literature search consisting of journal and news articles, books, and other written and visual reports was conducted. The information gathered in this process of content analysis was then categorized in a similar manner as the film analysis again according to the themes of the study.

The main themes of this project are those that help to situate criminalization in dystopian film within the context of contemporary reality. As such, the themes explored were political systems, criminalization, and punishment. From repeated personal viewings since the years of their respective releases, *V for Vendetta*, *Equilibrium*, and *Minority Report* are memorable for these themes of criminology and criminal justice. The various crimes and state of being that are persecuted by different, yet familiar, systems of government with particular interpretations of “justice” throughout the three films made them ideal for analysis. Said analysis follows with each of the next three chapters outlining one of the three films accompanied by a thematic analysis. This thesis then concludes with a discussion and brief conclusion.

## CHAPTER 4

### V FOR VENDETTA

The first film in this analysis is set in the nearest future and is arguably the most relatable in terms of time, landscape, and living conditions. *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue, 2006) is not an exception to dystopian films displaying present-day political and capitalistic aspects in its reflection of state violence, demagoguery, suppression of human rights, censorship and media control, militarization of police, mass incarceration, concentration camps, and criminalization of activism and protest (Brammer, 2014; Brayton, 2011; Frigerio, 2017; Ginszt, 2018). However, *V for Vendetta* is of particular note in its reflection of contemporary concerns in relation to pandemic related personal and political aftermath. Specifically, conditions in Trump era politics and pandemic conditions offer a unique comparison between dystopian speculation within the past 20 years and the current dystopic progress 6 years from the setting of the film.

Watching *V for Vendetta* today may leave viewers wondering how a film made in 2006 depicting life set two decades in the future offers such striking resemblance to the recent and current socio-political conditions of today. Quarantine, plague, pandemic, dictatorship, insurrection—these are all terms that have recently become part of U.S. citizens' common dialogue since 2020. Whereas, prior to that time the average person may have linked such terms to either the nation's early history or to world events, but not their day-to-day life. *V for Vendetta* then not only offers commentary about

contemporary socio-political conditions, but also offers speculation about future consequences of the continued or escalated state of those selfsame conditions.

The main events of the film take place in the year 2027, but a timeline is revealed throughout the film which begins around 2015 when someone could not only be gay, but also act in a LGBT+ film suggesting societal appreciation of individuality. The timeline then quickly reveals a U.S. initiated war in the Middle East, leading to a pandemic and viral outbreaks, and culminates in the Conservative Undersecretary of Defense Sutler's Hitleresque political speeches and rallies full of blind-faith supporters and subsequent election as the newly created High Chancellor coinciding with a "miracle cure" to the virus. It is later revealed that he orchestrated the production of the virus and agreed to use it against his own country in order to divide a fearful nation from which he obtains complete control. By the time Evey and V, the film's main protagonists who play an innocent bystander embroiled in a plot to overthrow the totalitarian government and the mastermind of said plot, respectively, make their appearance, London exists as an exclusively white, masculine, and god-fearing city. Sutler initiates the call and response phrase of "England Prevails" (reminiscent of "Heil Hitler"), and not "Britain Prevails," suggesting that there is no longer a union or kingdom or even a royal family. Sutler rules as High Chancellor and his government exists as an absolute hegemonic theocracy.

### **Political Power**

In his theocracy, visualized through frequent and repeated propaganda using the mantra of "Strength through Unity, Unity through Faith," Sutler replaces justice with his personal judgement derived from religious beliefs, racism, and oppression. This is



reflected in the criminalization of individuality and personal liberty discussed in the following sections. Sutler's representation through his speeches and rallies, visuals like that of his likeness dwarfing the television it hangs above surrounded by his party's flags in an (assumed) nursing home, and extreme censorship and absolute media control all serve as evidence of his totalitarian regime as well as his fear of loss of power and control. It is this control of information that served to perpetuate the fear and dependence that secured his election, which is not unheard of in recent history as well as current political tactics.

Sutler's control of the media and resources ensure that the citizens accept their need of him and his party as well as allows him to retain power over England. This control of information is evident through such tactics as requiring censors to sign off on the messages sent through entertainment and news programs even if they counter or fabricate what is true. For example, in response to V's imminent attack to destroy the building that most represents the government, Sutler orders a myriad of "news" stories depicting a second civil war in the U.S., a water shortage, an Avian flu outbreak, diseases outside the quarantine zone, and new "evidence" linking the original virus that devastated London to V. Other instances in the film reveal the political efforts behind these media representations. In one such scene, Evey reveals that a news reporter is lying about the reported events as she recognizes the anchor's mannerisms that confirm them to be untrue. In another, TV personality Dietrich is detained after he threw out a "censored approved script" to perform a satire with a Sutler look alike. Finally, and in the most straightforward instance, the head of the British Television Network declared,

“Our job is to report the news, not fabricate it. That’s the government’s job”  
(McTeigue, 2006).

Control of information is only one aspect in the power struggle evident in *V for Vendetta* as whoever holds the resources also holds the power of continued survival. Evey’s exclamation and declaration at the long-overdue tasting of real butter results in V’s revelation of the control of resources by Sutler’s government. This indicates that despite technological advancements the social, political, and environmental upheavals, resulting from the unrealized promises of capitalism and impossibility of a stable globalized economy, make material scarcity a reality in the current and future dystopia (Rottinghaus et al., 2016). This is significant as capitalism’s promise of abundance is unlikely to ever be realized due to liberalistic ideologies of the masculine racist hegemony with geopolitical conflict and global resource wars being more realistic in a dystopian future (Parenti, 2011; Raymen, 2018; Rottinghaus et al., 2016). Even though technologies exist to remedy material scarcity, it will remain unresolved to the point of the dystopic vision that is typical of films such as *V for Vendetta*. These events of the film serve as a spectacle reenacting the political conventions and liberal capitalistic tendencies of recent and current politics and economies in the U.S. (Rottinghaus et al., 2016).

*V for Vendetta* essentially depicts a government as a collection of party members answering to a religious head as he dictates what is allowed and what is undesirable, saving the best resources, legal and otherwise, for themselves. It is through this criminalization that the racist and conformist regime, sharing much of its vision and imagery with Hitler’s Aryan ideology, tries to create a country that reflects Sutler’s

ideal person, himself. Such ethnic cleansing reflects current events, and the dangerousness of such ideology is apparent through real occurrences such as in Darfur where in 2003 state militias began the systematic genocide of certain Darfuri ethnic groups with President Omar al-Bashir finally being ousted in 2019 (Watch, 2019). Through the violent arrests of deviants and the resulting incarceration and experimentation that resulted in the decimation of entire groups of people, it is clear that *V for Vendetta* reflects historical and current instances of such atrocities. The film also speculates at the reality that it is not always what people do that is wrong, but maybe that they are just wrong for the type of world that is being built.

### **Criminalization**

Throughout the film there are many references to different categories of people that are at best called “different” but are labelled as Other, Criminal, and Terrorist. Early in the film, the “Voice of London,” Lewis Prothero, lists the following groups of people saying that they were “disease-ridden degenerates” and had to go: “immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, [and] terrorists” (McTeigue, 2006). Later scenes depict the arrest, imprisonment, and deaths of members from these groups. Valerie (an LGBTQ actor) and her girlfriend, two gay men peacefully sleeping, Evey’s activist parents, and TV host Gordon Dietrich join the other minorities, gay people, activists, and freethinking individuals that differed from the god-fearing, white, and masculine hegemonic identity required by Sutler. Even being the child of an activist (Evey) or the son of an Irish woman (Chief Inspector Finch) is considered as Other and worthy of suspicion of terrorism and treachery. Even those that simply witness an event (like V’s destruction of the Old Bailey) are subject to detainment because they witness a reality

that Sutler wishes to deny in his attempts to exercise complete control over the information, distort reality, and maintain a level of fear that ensures the power of his political party. In addition to criminalizing race, religion, sexual orientation, and activism, Sutler also criminalizes the possession and creation of censored materials.

*V for Vendetta* is not the only film in this study that offers a speculative look at a future in which the government fears the emotional connection with objects and art. This suggests that the emotional response and connection that people have to these things are a threat to totalitarian governments as represented in dystopian films. A piece of music that someone finds moving also contains their undoing in a world like Sutler's England as it moves them away from the existence that he has designed for them. Film, art, music, literature, statues, and religious texts can all be found in Sutler's Ministry of Objectionable Materials, as well as V's Shadow Gallery after he liberated them. This indicates that expressions of individuality, political opinion, cultural and religious heritage, and artistic expressions are illegal as well. This is not unlike historical and contemporary policies and movements such as book burnings, legal bans, and other censorship tactics. For instance, in 2010, two Russian men were fined instead of facing a three-year prison sentence for curating an art show with works that inspired condemnation from the Russian Orthodox Church (Kishkovsky, 2010). In terms of criminalization, there is little digression from this instance and the film as one of the art pieces that brought forth the charges was a painting of Jesus Christ with a Mickey Mouse head, not unlike how *God Save the Queen* in the film depicts the royal image of the Queen with the face of Sutler. Therefore, criminalization in the film seems to exist

as a reflection of actual past and present criminalization as well as fears of continued or next-level control via criminal law.

Equally important and representative of concerns in contemporary lawmaking and social trends is what is *not* criminalized in dystopias. Expressing present concerns regarding governmental overreach and excessive use of force and biased discretion, *V for Vendetta* offers several interesting examples of non-criminalization of otherwise deplorable acts symptomatic of totalitarian regimes as well as other forms of corrupt political systems. Creedy's excessive use of force, warrantless invasion of private dwellings, and the experimentation of prisoners are all illegal in the U.S. today, but also continue to occur with justifications backed by the State (Alexander, 2020). For instance, while the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in 2020 prompted nationwide protest and revamped the #blacklivesmatter movement, it is sadly only one example of state violence inherent in police procedure and law aimed at criminalizing people of color. Relatedly, no-knock warrants continue to be a legal form of entry despite deaths of innocent people like Breonna Taylor. While the conviction of Floyd's killer is a victory towards culpability of officers of the state and cities like Louisville, KY banning the use of no-knock warrants increases the safety of private citizens, other violence remains "justified" and policies intact when murders like Taylor's remain tragic, but legal (Oppel et al., 2020; Pfosi & Allen, 2021).

Other incidences of complacency and non-criminalization include inaction of the police and other officials in relation to Prothero's stash of drugs, which are suggested to be highly illegal, and the routine pedophilia practiced by the priest. This is due to their status as two of the richest men in Britain as well as prominent party

members. Such actions by prominent citizens and political members, and the inaction by the government, are some of the most realistic representations of current corruption and discretionary bias experienced in the U.S. and elsewhere today. For instance, every decision by the U.S. Supreme court in favor of financial support in turn for political help, such as when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a lower court's ruling that Governor Bob McDonnell accepted "175,000 in loans, gifts, and other benefits" in exchange for political help, makes it increasingly difficult to prosecute such activity ("McDonnell v. US," 2016, p.1; Henning, 2018). Accompanied by trends in policing and punishment as represented in a dystopian film, *V for Vendetta* continues to act as a site of representation for contemporary dystopic socio-political conditions and speculation of what happens when people are afraid of their governments and not the other way around (McTeigue, 2006).

### **Policing and Punishment**

Policing in *V for Vendetta* is corrupt, brutal, and organized. This is evident by violent and unwarranted arrests and searches, excessive use of surveillance, reliance on artificial intelligence, and use of threats (Ene, 2016; McFarland, 2017; Tan, 2020; Williams, 2006). Creedy and his Fingermen exist as a secret police or other three letter type organization that have cart blanche when patrolling the streets during curfew or under direct orders. They are knowingly left to use whatever force desired and are free to sexually assault at will. Finch, as the Chief Inspector of police, struggles in his allegiance to Sutler's regime, but nonetheless plays his part in the corrupt policing of London through his unannounced breach of property and apparent warrantless search and seizures. Extreme surveillance is relied heavily upon by seemingly all departments

of Sutler's government in order to better control his public as well as perform consumer research as to the success of his zero tolerance social constraints. This surveillance also offers Sutler's law enforcement the opportunity to access visual and auditory information to identify anyone not conforming to societal standards and to perform retinal scans for the identification of these non-conformists as well as witnesses. Witnesses are on the same level as deviants as they serve as proof the government cannot control everything and is vulnerable to V.

Other representations of contemporary concerns include the use of police and prison tactics in juvenile institutions as depicted through Evey's experience as a child remanded to the Juvenile Reclamation Project. She was subjected to at least two rounds of solitary confinement, a month for anti-social behavior and the other for "non-conforming political views" (McTeigue, 2006). Also, Creedy's declaration that "arrests are as high as they've been since the Reclamation," produces unsympathetic results as Sutler remains unmoved due to the lack of desired outcomes, reminiscent of the controversial use of profiling to produce a result of maximum arrests in an effort to meet a quota (Alexander, 2020; McTeigue, 2006). These instances of policing and punishment are an extension of Sutler's terror tactics to ensure obedience and silence that continue well into the next stage of the criminal system.

In *V for Vendetta* prisons are referred to as detention facilities and the history of one, Larkhill, is revealed to have been a secret facility that experimented on the detainees resulting in the creation of a biological weapon in the form of a virus and its cure; thereby providing Sutler, its orchestrator, with the means to gain absolute control over an entire country. In an extreme effort to reveal the true danger of the government

and to separate her from her fear, V recreated the conditions of such a detainment facility and Evey was led to believe she had been detained by authorities. This process revealed the capture, interrogation, torture, and deprivation of identity experienced by anyone considered Other and therefore deviant. These depictions offer a challenge to the social practice of mass imprisonment and an interrogation of the industrial prison complex (Brown, 2009).

The film also reflects various human rights issues regarding punishment and incarceration. For instance, the experimentation of the prisoners of Larkhill is reflective of the long-running practice of using prisoners or people from certain populations as test subjects, the legality and justification being an issue regardless of their consent. One particularly comparable study to that of Larkhill is the United States Public Health's Tuskegee Study in which Black men were given placebos rather than effective treatment simply to study the untreated effects of syphilis (Brown, 2017). In the film, V is a representation of the long-running consequences of the experimentation he and others suffered at the hands of doctors and other officials in the name of science and country. Likewise, the long-running effects of the Tuskegee experiment is evident in the continued avoidance of study participation and even contributes to mistrust of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kirksey et al., 2021; Shavers et al., 2000). As such, the film successfully acts as a reflection of real-world atrocities as well as a speculative allegory of the cyclical nature of concerning socio-political conditions.

*V for Vendetta* is clearly a site at which allegorical narratives mimic and exaggerate modern-day global circumstances into premonitions from which today's society may draw inspiration in an attempt to avoid perpetuating the dystopia (Frigerio,



2017). Such allegories are particularly useful in times of political upheaval like that of Trump's presidential win in 2018, followed by another tight election in 2020. Also, in the midst of a pandemic that has killed more people than the fictional St. Mary's virus in the 2027 of *V* and Evey's London, it is more imperative than ever to heed the warnings that dystopian films offer. Analyzed in the next chapter, *Minority Report* is another film that speculates at the systematic corruption that occurs even in the most democratic of nations and the dystopic consequences of the powerful controlling people through criminalization and punishment in the name of collective progress.

## CHAPTER 5

### MINORITY REPORT

Dystopian films can depict societies that are far removed from the world today. Futuristic dystopias in particular have an otherworldly quality to lived spaces that once looked as they do now. It can be helpful then to analyze a film with a familiar political system and, though reliant on advanced technologies, reflects much of the same socio-political conditions that concern us today. One such film, *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002), offers a look at a future in which nothing is sacred, not even the inner workings of one's own mind as non-actions are criminalized based on blind faith in a system reliant on the ability of a few. It makes an interesting comparison to contemporary systems in which privacy concerns are real and the few rule over the many. By analyzing such a film, it is possible to recognize the speculative nature of the dystopia depicted and its reflection on lived experiences that are real and familiar.

The main events of the film take place in Washington, D.C. in the year 2054, though flashbacks and other scenes are shown that occurred at least 6 years prior. Murder is a thing of the past in *Minority Report* as D.C. houses a flagship Precrime program in which three individuals with extraordinary cognitive abilities are used as factories for premonitions that reveal murders that have not yet occurred. The program is on the verge of going national and the question of whether or not this is legal and justified is questioned throughout the film as Department of Precrime Chief John Anderton is hunted when a premonition of him is revealed murdering someone he has

never met. He unveils the true corruption within this system as he races to uncover an alternate possibility as the time approaches that he is supposed to commit this murder. As the time ticks down the audience is taken on a race through the city revealing recognizable class system struggles, a drug epidemic, corrupt state and police tactics, and an inhumane incarceration system. Thus, the D.C. of 2054 appears to be higher tech, but still recognizable with the same type of political system and related imagery along with the very same socio-political issues that concern us today.

### **Political Power**

The U.S. depicted in *Minority Report* is not typically dystopian in that the country appears to be similarly democratic as it is today, which makes the film more speculatively interesting than if it were to have portrayed a more extreme authoritarian regime. The key political figures in *Minority Report* reveal a familiar political territory through imagery such as interviews with white men in suits sitting in front of blue backgrounds decorated with national flags as they issue statements that affect millions of people. Also visually familiar is a black-tie event for congratulating Lamar, the head of Precrime, for the successful national launch of a program that will arrest and imprison people for something they have not actually committed. Overall, the events of the film reveal that a fictionalized futuristic U.S. is not unlike the democracy we live, participate, and concern ourselves with today, complete with concerns for privacy, governmental overreach, inhumane treatment of prisoners, corruption, and state violence. Many of these issues intersect in the overarching concern of state power through policies and practices such as surveillance, control of information, and infringement of personal rights and freedoms.

*Minority Report* differs from the other two films in this analysis in that the head of government is not a supporting character and the government depicted is not authoritarian in nature. As for the key political figures that are represented, the role of Attorney General is depicted as self-serving on both sides of the argument of whether Precrime, which was made possible by a federal grant, is justified. This is because he appears in an advertisement for voting “Yes” on the national launch of the Precrime program expressing complete faith in the system, yet he sends an agent from the Department of Justice to investigate whether the system actually works. This suggests a familiar society in which people are bombarded with suggestive political ads expressing confidence in a system while the politician privately expresses differing opinions and beliefs. Also, Lamar is a familiar presence in that he appears infallible to the public and presents his program as a smooth sailing ship, yet his private behavior is concerning and actions criminal. This is unfortunately quite representative of public figures who use their political power to cover up or dismiss their criminal behaviors such as sexual assault, lying under oath, and embezzlement (Anderson et al., 2021; Greene & Denniston, 2001; Reuters, 2021). Concernedly, this is indicative of how those in power are often focused on ensuring their continued dominance.

As with the other films in this study, the state displays its power, in part, through its control of resources and information. One glaring example is through the ad previously mentioned that urges the people to “Vote Yes!” on taking the Precrime program national. It is displayed on the sides of buildings in public spaces complete with sound announcing its unavoidable message. This ad references the previous homicide rate in the country over a blood-soaked map of the U.S. while superimposing

words and phrases like “Fear” and “Giving In” over individuals who claimed to have a loved one murdered and then uses words and phrases like “miracle,” “infallibility,” and “it works” to suggest the purpose and success of the Precrime program. Particularly troubling is the suggestive testimonials that other crimes like rape are able to be seen by the precogs, but it is later revealed that only murder is seen, making this miraculous program restricted to crimes that end in murder. Thus, the sense of security this ad displays is very limited and propagandist.

One other troubling display of misinformation and programming which is common in such dystopian films occurs when a group mainly made up of children with supervising adults are taken on a tour and shown a statue erected to represent the precogs and the “work” they do for the program. They are told that “D.C. is the safest city in the U.S. because Precrime works and has eliminated the need for conventional detectives” and that “most of what happens now is the verification and protection of future victims” (Spielberg, 2002). This is problematic in three respects, 1) the information given is directly related to the persuasive speech used in the “Vote Yes!” ad; 2) murder is not the only crime being committed in the city, so it is unclear how detectives are no longer needed; and 3) the “verification and protection of future victims” is made possible by the enslavement of three innocent victims otherwise known as the precogs. Overall, it is an example of handling a violation of human rights to justify the protection of innocent lives, with the added benefit of politicians retaining their positions of power. Another example of a rights issue that is a contemporary concern but freely used in this speculative dystopia is government and corporate surveillance of private citizens.

When John is told that he needs access to the precog who predicted the minority report (a differing premonition than what the other two precogs produce), he comments that he will “get eye scanned a dozen times before he gets within 10 miles of Precrime” (McFarland, 2017). This is a reference to the eye scan units that are frequently shown throughout the film everywhere from entrances to buildings and departments to public ads and commercial spaces. They scan the eyes and act as identification in lieu of paper or cards as there is today; the eye is the new fingerprint. There is no need to stop as they scan automatically as you pass. For instance, as soon as you walk into a store you are greeted by name and asked directly about your last purchase within earshot of other customers. Also, ads speak to you directly by name as you walk past. The fewer consumers in an area the fewer eye scanners suggesting a connection between liberal capitalism and government linking individualism to deviance by a scan of an iris. In one eye scan you could be greeted in Old Navy all the while a police unit is immediately alerted to your location. Data might therefore be collected by the scans and used not only for consumer research but also voter data and economic trends by region.

One real-world result of the link between liberal capitalism and state power can be seen in the U.S. government’s tendency to bail out corporations that are politically connected (Faccio et al., 2006). As such, *Minority Report* then offers speculation of how democracy, often promoted and used as foreign policy, is as susceptible to corruption or perhaps even more so than an autocracy (Rose-Ackerman, 1999, 2001). For instance, Lamar, the Attorney General, and all those supposedly important people at the party were able to work together in some way to succeed in the national launch of Precrime. It didn’t matter that Lamar broke the own law that he enforces or that his

program relies on the enslavement of three innocent people, because these acts were all done to ensure the safety of every American. As such, corruption negates the purpose of democracy and can often lead to criminalization that intersects with concerns for privacy and violation of human rights.

### **Criminalization**

As the political system in *Minority Report* is democratic, it is implied that the same type of actions, behaviors, or states of being that are criminalized in the U.S. today are also subject to the same level of scrutiny and process in 2054. For instance, rape, murder, and assault are mentioned in their understandable illegality. Illicit drug use also has a starring role in the film which is reflective of some societies today in which drugs and drug use are criminalized rather than treated as a social issue as others have done. It is also commentary on the social stratification of those that use drugs, such as when certain forms of a drug like cocaine carry higher sentences than other forms. This then leads to criminalizing certain populations that have easier access to one form over another. For instance, this results in higher arrests and conviction rates of Black folk and the poor and homeless in the U.S. who are more frequently arrested for crack cocaine related crimes due to the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity with powder cocaine related crimes (Alexander, 2020; Vagins & McCurdy, 2006). This is represented in the film when John, the Chief of Precrime is shown to be buying and using drugs as a response to untreated trauma. The fact that his superior not only knows he is using drugs but is seen to be understanding of the situation is in direct comparison to the eyeless man who sold John the drugs, suggesting the act was criminal and that he may have removed his eyes to counter identification efforts. However, the focus of this

film and its main criminalization is a particular kind of murder, the kind that hasn't happened and is not fully guaranteed to occur.

It is not unusual to hear a comment along the lines of "Oh, I could just kill him," or "I'll kill you!" while in an emotional state of anger or frustration. Rarely is it actually meant, but murder in *Minority Report* has created an environment where murder is not just a horrible crime, but such private imaginings are also taboo. It is based on a moral theory that murder produces a ripple in the connective fabric of humanity that is so strong that those with pre-cognitive abilities are able to see it ahead of time (Spielberg, 2002). This has led to the apparent eradication of murder in D.C. to the point it is rare for the Precrime unit to receive a premonition of premeditated murder as the whole city is aware that they would be arrested and detained before they would ever be able to act. It is unclear whether this affects other crime rates, such as assault, rape, or theft, though there seems to be little concern over those crimes in the film with almost sole focus being placed on these non-murders.

The emphasis on these non-murders is concerning in that criminalizing something that isn't real violates one's privacy and rights on two accounts. Firstly, agency is completely disregarded. In other words, it is suggested that a person may not change their mind when a course of action is set or even if they are made aware of the situation. Agency is especially an issue for contemporary criminalization concerns. Of particular note is when medicalization and criminalization work together as a method of social control that "fundamentally changes our collective perceptions about our own troubles, and invariably steers us toward the agents of criminalization/medicalization, from which we are given definitive answers" (Rafalovich, 2020). For instance,



medicalization can redefine actions as either a medical issue or social issue, but those actions that the state still deems undesirable and not covered by medicalization become criminal issues rather than social ones (Maturo, 2012). This leaves personal choices and identities like abortion and homosexuality to be medicalized or criminalized as either treatable or punishable rather than a social and personal issue for which support could be offered.

Secondly, by the end of the film it is revealed that due to loopholes and differing premonitions, there isn't any way of knowing what would really happen, only what would most likely happen. One such loophole that limits the Precrime system is that someone could just drive a person away to kill them in another city, inflating crime rates elsewhere while D.C. remains the clean and ordered city. This depiction of a system keeping criminalization in place despite concerns, and lack of results that suggest the law or policy is ineffectual, is not unheard of in real-world societies. For instance, research suggests that prohibition or the complete criminalization and removal of a substance or act from society does not work (Campos, 2011; Carroll, 2012; Reed & Whitehouse, 2018). However, the U.S.'s historically disastrous affair with prohibition and alcohol has not stopped the government from continuing to overwhelm the nation with a "just say no" approach to drugs through criminalization and other political processes (Naim, 2009; Reed & Whitehouse, 2018; Toynbee, 2003). Such criminalization can end in the further polarization of social groups rather than benefitting society. What is most concerning about the D.C. in *Minority Report* and its enforceable prohibition practice is that it concerns itself with protecting people, but to function it requires the enslavement and violation of three individuals.

According to the film, law in 2054 would focus on non-murder, but what is not criminalized and used as justification for an entire enforcement department is far more concerning. Precrime only exists because three innocent people whose only crime was to be born with the ability to see murder before it happens, are used against their will, and subjected to a horrible existence in which they must see and keep seeing one of the ugliest things about life. This is all in the name of protecting the innocent and is reflective of the histories of many nation's built, physically and/or financially, from slave labor such as the U.S. and England, for example. The speculation it offers is also compelling with the continuation of enslavement in countries that according to the Global Slavery Index (2018) include North Korea, Eritrea, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Mauritania, South Sudan, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Iran. This reflects the fact that more than half the countries in the world do not officially criminalize slavery (Schwarz et al., 2020). It is therefore concerning that the futuristic U.S. in *Minority Report* either no longer criminalizes slavery (unlikely) or practices selective slavery.

This selective slavery is evident in every aspect of the lives of the three precogs, Agatha, Arthur, and Dash. They are kept in a single room that they spend their lives in, laying there responding physically only to their visions. They are drugged into compliance that simultaneously enhances their visions. Their bodies and minds are not their own; they are objects to be used. As such, there is no compensation given as objects or tools have no use for money, privileges, or any sort of reward. Instead of sowing fields, mining for diamonds, domestic work, or having their bodies violated and sold, they see. They are used as instruments for a government that strives to make their

country safer if only by their enslavement. This institutional use of slavery to enhance their enforcement of laws has become essential to the national launch of the Precrime program.

This selective slavery is further portrayed through the precog's names only being used to differentiate one from the others and not to signify them as people. They are not really treated as human and to be a precog is to be non-human. Their "caretaker" named Wally and his behavior, which would be considered reprehensible and criminal today, is especially concerning as he tells Agatha about his life as if they have a relationship while he injects drugs to make her barely responsive. He also interacts with her by brushing her teeth and placing his face directly in front of hers as he assures her of his presence seemingly "playing house." This occurs within full view of officers of the law within the physical space of the Precrime unit. Such slavery seems a more historical or foreign concept to contemporary life in the U.S. but work conditions and expectations for inmates and prisoners keep the conversation relevant (Ahmad, 2020; Blackett & Duquesnoy, 2021; Plaisted, 2021). While prisons are not shown in the film, the policing and punishment procedures that exist as part of the Precrime effort also speculate at what the escalation and realization of current fears related to the enforcement of criminalization may look like.

### **Policing and Punishment**

The officers in the Precrime unit only seem concerned about completing their mission of stopping a murder before it starts and containing the individual that was shown to be the non-murderer. It is revealed at one point that these officers are not required to have any experience in investigating homicides, which is apparent when the

team does not recognize the fact that John has been set up. They also show no concern for others such as bystanders and non-victims, which is illustrated by their violent entry onto the non-murder scene. For example, the non-murder scene shown at the beginning of the film sees John race into the house without announcing himself or his purpose as his team makes entry through a glass ceiling or window showering glass onto the two others in the room. They then proceed to walk them through the glass away from the non-murderer.

This violence continues in other aspects of policing through the film such as when one of the Precrime officers tells an upset mother, who has confronted him about scaring her children, that if she doesn't want them to know true terror then she should keep them away from him (Spielberg, 2002). This threat of violence is backed by invasive robotic spiders that are able to seek out human bodies and perform retinal scans to determine identity. The normalcy of such a practice is evident as the mother previously mentioned is shown gathering her scared children and trying to keep them calm and instruct them to just stay still and keep their eyes open, however her own fear is obvious. Others just stay still, get scanned, and carry-on like nothing significant happened showing that they are used to such procedures. Such policing tactics are comparative to current trends such as threat of violence related to the militarization of police and expectations of compliance.

Though prisons are not depicted, speculation relating to public concerns of the imprisonment of others using inhuman methods is offered through the procedures and physical space of the Department of Containment (DOC). While the name would seem more suitable for an office within the Center for Disease Control or Environmental

Protection Agency, the DOC actually contains those individuals who were convicted and then arrested for committing non-murder. The sentence they've been given begins with the arrest as a "halo" is placed on their head rendering them unresponsive but still physically moveable. They are essentially in a technologically induced coma, clothes removed and replaced by a non-descript covering, heads shaved, and placed in computerized, transparent coffins. They are stacked in columns that are controlled and accessible by a system run by a single sentry able to view everything like each of their non-murders and what they dream about in their frozen state, the ultimate panopticon.

John's statement when he visits the DOC about forgetting there were so many he had detained, is suggestive of a system in which individuals are locked away and forgotten about. After all, they are in a state that prevents them from hurting themselves or anyone else and the fact that no information is given about the sentencing of these individuals suggests a permanent incarceration. This makes the ending revelation that all of these criminals were released, though some were watched for years afterwards, more significant as it not only revealed that non-murder was decriminalized and that freedom was given to individuals who did not actually commit murder, but also offers speculation of the abolishment of an incarceration system. Thus, the film acts as a site of speculation regarding current concern for the industrial prison complex and the abolishment of the prison system in the U.S. (Davis, 2011). *Minority Report* is therefore a speculative site of present and future concerns of socio-political conditions such as criminalization, predictive policing, and an overreliance on technology (McFarland, 2017).

A lot of futuristic dystopian films depict societies that are either in fictional locations or happen so far in the future under conditions fantastical enough that they are not as relatable as contemporary dystopias. However, *Minority Report* occurs in a setting 33 years from now and, despite more advanced transportations systems and roadways, it is not unlike the other two films in this study with futures reliant on personal surveillance, control of information, and the criminalization of individuality and certain populations. The events of the final film in this study transpire in the furthest future and consequently offer the most extreme interpretation of contemporary socio-political conditions through speculating what happens when a powerful few are able to dictate a person's every move via criminalization.

## CHAPTER 6

### EQUILIBRIUM

An opening sequence culminating in government agents authenticating and burning Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* along with other illegal historical and emotional artifacts situates *Equilibrium* (Wimmer, 2011) firmly within the realm of dystopic cinema and worthy of inclusion in this study. Though it is set the furthest in the future, this film reflects an argument that is being had on a daily basis today. As some grow frequently more concerned about governmental overreach in the U. S., particularly its involvement in the personal decisions of our own bodies, fictional dystopias like that depicted in *Equilibrium* offer speculation at how such a situation can end in criminalization. Though this may seem extreme, it is reflective of how the objective of controlling the poor and minority populations can come to rely on a strategy of criminalization. The aim to reach beyond controlling certain populations to controlling *all* of the population, through an injection-based medication no less, is the extreme set of circumstances in which the events of the film occur.

*Equilibrium* takes place in the year 2072 after a 3<sup>rd</sup> world war had put the fear of humanity in a powerful few who decided that the volatile natures of mankind could not continue if the world was to survive. A drug called Prozum – a telling combination of the brand names of Prozac and Valium – was created to control a person's feelings to the point of numbing one's individuality so that, finally, everyone really is equal. In fact, they are identical to the point that they dress the same, look the same, act the same, and walk the same having “shrug[ged] off individuality replacing it with conformity...

sameness, with unity... to lead identical lives” (Wimmer, 2011). Individuality simply became political waste to be discarded in this system orchestrated by a single figure, Father. Aside from a Council and the Grammaton Cleric to enact and enforce the law, Father is the sole authoritarian figure determined to rid Libria of any individual and collective resistance for the good of humanity.

### **Political Power**

The postmetropolitan cityscape of Libria is not unlike the metropolitan cityscapes of today, but there is a sterileness to Libria, an absence of color, decoration, and individuality that reflects the fortified site of power and control (Davis, 1998; MacLeod & Ward, 2002; Soja, 2000). It is within this landscape that Father, a constantly televised presence, runs an authoritarian regime that exudes domination as well as annihilation to those who refuse to acquiesce. Libria seemingly owes its allegiance to a Father and his council whose orders are followed obediently by its armed forces headed by the Grammaton Cleric. This oligarchic system is made possible by the militarized forces who control public resources. These resources appear to be mainly Prozium and Father’s televised presentations that are in turn used to control information and provide propaganda for the perpetual public obedience of Librians.

From the moment they wake up until the moment they sleep, citizens of Libria are inundated daily with visual and audio recordings of suggestive propaganda with messages like “Awaken to... another step in our unified march into the unwavering purpose... [to] move ahead together into the certainty of our collective destiny,” and “Librians, there is a disease at the heart of man... The disease is human emotion” (Wimmer, 2011). Without feelings to guide one’s conscience, it is these constant,



directed messages of salvation, relief, and destiny that become a person's drive to live and serve. This provides the oppression necessary for their obedience within the context of the good of humankind, but also ensures they recognize the symptoms of this "disease" in others. The messages are successful in that when the protagonist and top Cleric, Preston, is asked what purpose there was to his life, his response is, "To safeguard the continuity of this great society. To serve Libria." This sort of programming of ideology is reflective of countries under authoritarian rule such as North Korea which uses its educational system, media, and technology to "portray the state-sanctioned version of reality to [its] people" (Kang & Twigg, 2019; Lee, 2018). Consequently, *Equilibrium* offers speculation about the future of these societies that rely on using their control of resources to promote state ideology to retain power.

While there is very little information given to Librians outside of the video and audio recordings, there does appear to be education of some sort and an information center or library is depicted, but they are unlikely to differ from the propaganda programs. Any other information like procedures, official records, and surveillance information is only for the council's use or viewable by officials like the Clerics. However, even the Clerics, "the last line of defense" for the Council and Father's security, are unaware of the inner workings of the oligarchy and that Father is now just a virtual figurehead for the paternal hierarchy and a council member is the true head of government. This member does not submit to the laws of Libria and in fact feels emotions, as does his right-hand cleric and presumably the rest of the council, suggesting systemic corruption throughout the government. Dystopian films often feature the protagonist(s) eliminating the head of an authoritarian government in order

to dismantle the regime. Interestingly, however, it is not Preston killing this member of council that frees the city, but it is with the destruction of the CCTV system and the Prozium factories that Libria finds liberation thereby breaking the control of information and resources that allows one group to maintain power over another.

Through control of resources and information, state-mandated propaganda, and early indoctrination, the Council is able to effectively maintain their power over Librians. This political system is not unlike military states or stratocracies the world has seen or currently knows; they are simply subject to a generalship by another name. If the only history they know is war, as shown in the frequent images of violence, Hitler, and nuclear bombings they are shown, then even subconsciously they are more inclined to be fearful of deviating from the norm. This is clear when after skipping several doses of Prozium, Preston experiences the beauty of a sunrise for the first time and fears this feeling so much that he runs away quickly intent on injecting Prozium. This desire to rid himself of the ability to feel again is telling of the programming to which they are subjected to from birth in that he is being an individual in that moment of beauty and not just a part of a whole. This need to re-program oneself is not only similar to other dystopian texts such as *Anthem* (Rand, 1938), when the hero, Equality 7-2521, has escaped and finds out about the word “I” after living a life of “we” dedicated to the betterment of the collective, but also to real, social systems that use criminalization as a means to uphold dominant ideologies.

The patriarchal political system in *Equilibrium* reflects many of the qualities of various political bodies throughout history and even today. Historically, Father’s mission to create a uniform body that reflects a perfect system is reminiscent of Hitler’s

aim to create a superior race of people. Also, the isolation of Libria from anything and everyone else that is not within the order of Father's law is not unlike North Korea's isolation and imagery of complete order and purpose as directed by the Kim's. As for the U.S., this 2002 film depicts a future in which a leader programmed an entire population to reflect the ideology that an unfeeling Libria was a great Libria, "For we embrace Proziom in its unifying fullness and all that it has done to make us great" (Wimmer, 2011). The U.S. has recently seen the outcome of a leader intent on "Making America Great Again" and currently struggles with whether the government should be allowed to make people get and prove they have gotten vaccinated against COVID-19. Therefore, *Equilibrium* provides speculation on how governments offer a controlled existence to people who fit within their norms and censure, or worse, for those that do not. It is through criminalization that those who exist beyond the government's dictated parameters are processed and punished for being individuals.

### **Criminalization**

The only real crime in Libria is emotion or the ability to feel. This inherent ability is criminalized and results in the criminalization of other actions and materials prompting the horrific process of state action and punishment discussed in the next section. Throughout the film, the sameness and emotionless state of Librians is shared through images of people wearing the same type of clothing in different shades of drabness as well as groomed and presented in the same aesthetically pleasing way. They also walk, (barely) talk, and act in identical manners realizing the complete unification required by the Council. Anyone that deviates from this state-mandated norm is labelled as a sense offender.

Sense offenders are individuals who are feeling as a result of not taking Proziium, which is also a crime. By experiencing and acting upon emotions, by being individuals rather than solely a part of a collective, they are criminals. This results in individualization itself being a crime. The very ideas, fears, and aspirations that drive us to live day to day are outlawed, and identity exists solely within the bounds of servitude to Father's vision. The only threat that the Council finds greater than "those who have forsaken their Proziium is the threat of those selfsame individuals united," referencing the resistance group The Underground (Wimmer, 2011). Uniting under any reason other than the Council's will is criminal and the desire for others to feel is the ultimate crime in Libria. The ability to feel is accompanied by admiration for those things that make us feel strongly, so to possess or make these objects is also criminalized in *Equilibrium*.

Any expression of individuality is criminal which is often depicted as possession of objects rated "EC-10 for emotional content... that might tempt [them] to feel again" (Wimmer, 2011). These articles are all hidden away either outside the city or within secret rooms within Libria. Among these items are paintings, poetry and children's books, records, advertisements, perfume, and even the frame of a mirror. Anything related to the past, like religious relics, icons, statues, regalia, and signs are all considered dangerous emotional content and prohibited. This is not unlike the analysis of *V for Vendetta* and comparison to contemporary incidents of suppression and censorship of expression and art. Any and all objects (and animals), that provoke a strong response or connect in some way to pre-Libria history is without value and only exists as a threat to the state. Such threats are destroyed as well as offenders, yet the systematic and violent murders are not thought of as murder, simply necessary.

To fully understand the divide from the totalitarian system and the people it rules via criminalization, one can look at the corresponding scenes of Preston killing guards who were intent on subduing him for saving a puppy from destruction and his partner, Brandt, calling them “murders.” These murders prompted Father and the Council to forgo any detainment of resisters in favor of massacring all of them onsite. The guards were murdered in comparison to the emotionless, systematic killing of resisters (who may or may not be armed) which is justice. This allows that the difference between “murder” and “justice” is simply a reflection of what Father decrees is best. This means that whatever actions taken by his forces is surely justice as they follow his will and murder is therefore lethal, unsanctioned action taken against him or his representatives. This is also reflective of various real-world conditions, where governments justified horrific actions or conditions by explaining their actions through tradition, religion, or biased laws. This includes throughout U.S. history and the government’s systematic slaughter of Indigenous people and the direct and complacent role in the deaths, enslavement, and torture of generations of Black folk and other minorities. Whereas these deaths were considered insignificant or even necessary for the expansion or stability of social order, any real or imagined actions against a white person or someone of authority was so high of a crime as to call for the death or enslavement via incarceration (Blackmon, 2012).

Genocides of ethnic populations, albeit via different methods, continue until today and is not unlike the conditions in other countries like Myanmar and Bahrain. When the Myanmar government wanted to rid itself of a Muslim minority, they sanctioned the military to terrorize, violate, murder, and otherwise displace them

(Abramowitz & Puddington, 2019). Not as physically violent but arguably as devastating is the attack on identity by the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain on the Shiite majority by revoking citizenship and outlawing activism and political opposition. Thus, the film reflects our socio-political past and reality as well as speculates on concerns for a future based on such criminalization. The response to such criminalization via policing and punishment is also speculated in *Equilibrium* and is equally concerning.

### **Policing and Punishment**

Throughout the film are striking images associated with policing and punishment. Sleekly dressed and manicured Clerics in charge of military style raids of resistance groups. Swat style police units gunning their way through emotional resisters who were mostly armed, but whose backs were sometimes turned. There is one particularly powerful image of a guard who has just executed a man, dead-eyed, unfeeling, with blood splattered on his faceguard, more machine than man. These images are more suggestive of domestic warfare than policing, if there is a difference, which reflects contemporary fears of continued militarization of the police as well as other institutions like education (Nguyen, 2016). Some research suggests that making military equipment available to local law enforcement agencies does little to enhance effectiveness and can even increase officer-involved shootings (Delehanty et al., 2017; Mummolo, 2018). Despite this, the U.S. government continues to allow the line between police and military to blur, a process that began as early as the 1980s when military involvement in police matters was legalized (Kraska, 2007; McElrath & Turberville, 2020). There seem to be no lines between the military and police in Liberia as they are essentially the same thing.

The Council's biggest weapon in their military arsenal is the Cleric, elite men trained to seek out those who feel and eliminate them. They are taught to perfect a statistically analytical gun-based martial art that when applied correctly has a maximum kill rate with minimum effort leading to "lethal proficiency." The power Clerics hold is evident when Preston calmly tells a roomful of people to leave and steps to the side as they, without question, comply to his order. More telling than their willingness to obey is his expectation that they all will do exactly as he has said. This suggests that Clerics seem to represent Father's law in that their direction is to be obeyed without question. This is not unlike the expectations that citizens will automatically comply when directed by police officers in the U.S. regardless of if there is probable cause or sound reasoning behind such direction due to the authority in the form of threat of violence (Correia, 2018). This means that U.S. citizens are expected and even demanded to comply when they feel threatened and are unaware of any criminality on their part.

One such case occurred in 2020 when Lt. Caron Nazario was directed to exit his vehicle despite fearing for his life and unaware of why he was pulled over. This resulted in him being pepper-sprayed while he showed his empty hands out of the window of his vehicle after initially not exiting due to fear for his life (Holcombe, 2021).

Contrastingly, police in the U.S. frequently use an often-successful legal defense based on fear for their lives when investigated for killing people of color in the line of duty, effectively illustrating the polarization of power between citizen and police (Starkey, 2017). Most Librians have no such fear, but those who do feel fear usually know better than to comply as their end is already assured.

There is no shoot to disarm or incapacitate. There is only shoot-to-kill through a devised system between the Clerics and other officers in which the officers starts with a heavy advance and the Clerics finish any loose ends. Destruction, preferably by combustion, seems to be the only punishment worthy of sense offense for people as well as objects and art. Perhaps it is the purging nature of fire that the Council finds suitable rather than long-term incarceration with no benefit to the state. Most likely, it is simply the literal purging of non-conformist, freethinking (read freefeeling) individuals from an exacting expectations of a violent regime. Though there is no pretense by the end of the film about how offenders will be dealt with, there does seem to be a system in place for prosecution though it is more a space of procession of death than justice despite the name.

The Palace of Justice needs only one thing known about it to render it a misnomer and that is that it houses the Hall of Destruction. It is a very clinical place, a virtual panopticon with walls of monitors guarded by officers placed every couple of feet. Offenders are cloaked in red, sentenced, and “condemned to suffer annihilation in the city furnaces” simply as if they are waste to be discarded and incinerated, or a ritual in which the damned are sacrificed to the fires of hell in order for the continued salvation of Libria (Wimmer, 2011). This highlights the notion that modern incarceration is another form of waste management, meaning that prisoners are societal waste, further supported by their second-class citizen status upon release (Lynch, 1998; Simon, 1993). In the futuristic Libria, this has escalated as there is no fail safe or emergency phone as there are in execution chambers in the U.S. for possible stays as none are needed. Condemned is a penultimate state only relinquished to a dead state.



Should Preston have failed in his mission and the regime rendered victorious, then there would have been little need for this place of processing as the Council had already decreed that all sense offenders were to be shot on site with no exceptions.

Trials are somewhat synonymous with justice in the U.S. in that through them, truth about someone's alleged criminality should be revealed. This could lead one to think there is no fear of being shot on sight or incinerated without trial, but this is not necessarily true. Incineration aside, the U.S. Criminal Justice System has a long history of offering unfair representation, cruelly long sentences, and executing individuals that may have been innocent, mentally incapable of necessary reasoning, or simply possessing a non-white skin color. Other concerning government actions used in the name of national security and public safety is when government agencies use obfuscated and disastrous tactics such as COINTELPRO, in which the Federal Bureau of Investigation infiltrated organizations like the Black Panthers to purposively instigate violence and provide information in order to destroy the group from both fronts. This is not unlike when the member of the Council that had taken Father's place maneuvered and manipulated Preston into infiltrating the Underground in order to secure its destruction. Thus, there is reason to fear and question even a democratic government given such warnings like dystopian films that depict a bleak, yet somewhat familiar future.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION

Based on the preceding content analyses of *V for Vendetta*, *Minority Report*, and *Equilibrium* the future looks fairly bleak due to the presence of familiar socio-political conditions. Instances of extreme violence and punishment, governmental overreach, control of information, and overcriminalization have all been noted and compared to current socio-political conditions using specific real-world examples. The overall analysis of these particular films suggest that futuristic dystopian films are speculation of the future based on how criminalization is used by the government in tandem with policing and punishment. Dystopian films therefore act as sites in which current criminalization is the basis for speculating the possible dystopic nature of the future. They are also sites of social commentary and warnings for disregarding the allegorical nature of such films in regard to their criminological themes. The fact that the films are set in various timelines also suggests that this commentary is not directed at a particular time, but the future as a concept.

This project began with the simple realization that some of the same actions or states of being that are criminalized in the U.S. and other countries today are also criminalized in dystopian films. In exploring the connection, the intention of the analysis was not to do a timeline of dystopia through film, however, the film chapters were deliberately presented chronologically as it offers an interesting look at various stages of criminalization across various systems of power. In 2027 *V for Vendetta* depicts a familiar enough landscape and a similar social structure with extreme

criminalization across a variety of actions and circumstance as to suggest a life not unlike our own in the U.S. However, by 2054 the landscape of *Minority Report* is more futuristically hi-tech featuring advanced artificial intelligence, but with a familiar democratic system that experiments with invasive procedures that result in judgements without trial for actions that have not yet been committed. By 2072 liberty and individualism is a thing of the past in *Equilibrium* though you wouldn't know it because you are not privileged enough, existing as an object used to continue the cycle of power and control. This timeline offers a narrowing of the spaces in which individuals may exist as the breadth of power increases for a few. This speculates that the concern for governmental overreach and violations of rights and personal liberties in the U.S. is not unfounded. For instance, while wearing a mask for the safety of yourself and others during a pandemic is logical, it remains to be seen what doors mask mandates and vaccination requirements open, and whether they should remain open.

Individually the films offer unique opportunities at speculating future conditions based on specific issues and concerns that are troubling today. For instance, *Equilibrium* reflects concerns for vaccination requirements and the militarization of police that are frequently seen in the news and social media as well as motivation for social scientists concerned at the legal ramifications and long-term effects of such issues. Also, police brutality, systemic racism, and no-knock warrants are all current issues that are depicted in *V for Vendetta* that speculate at the possible outcome of continuing such forms of criminalization and punishment via political endeavors. *Minority Report* by itself offers an interpretation of current socio-political concerns such as rights of prisoners, unfair legal representation and sentencing, and criminalization of drug use. However, it is

perhaps more indicative of the usefulness of dystopian films as speculation by what the films collectively reflect.

While the films individually depict different systems of government, they collectively suggest that despite dystopic cinema's tendency to feature totalitarian regimes, democracy is also represented as a site of violence and oppression. While democracy is oft promoted as the quintessential political situation for the fair representation of a nation's people, it is not without its flaws and susceptibilities. If legal transactions between corporations and the state, such as tax breaks and big business donations to campaign funds, could be seen as a self-serving and cyclical quid pro quo system and considered corruption by design, then "whom does a democratic government in fact serve?" (Heymann, 1996). Such questions reveal that leaders of the "free world" use the control of information and resources to aid the criminalization of those who do not reflect the dominant ideologies of the racist masculine hegemony, just in different ways than obvious autocrats. This was made evident in the instances of controlling the media, misinformation to promote fear and obedience, and aggressive propaganda found in all three films. Such political tactics are methods that make criminalization actionable and useful in the pursuit of maintaining power.

The devastating destruction of entire groups of people worldwide through ethnic cleansing, genocide, denial of citizenship, and criminalization has been addressed throughout this thesis. Criminalization has been the focus because it is through this that governments are able to control what the population they represent looks and acts like, thereby securing their continued leadership. The criminalization of certain groups like minorities and the poor and homeless in the U.S. was particularly valuable in this

analysis to show the use of criminalization as a tool for ethnic cleansing (*V for Vendetta*), control (*Minority Report*), and uniformity (*Equilibrium*), and what a future may look like if their real-world counterparts continue. Overall, criminalization in dystopian film suggests a future in which individualism is outlawed and identity only exists through state edict. These particular films suggest that what makes us live, yearn, dream, acknowledge, speak, act, and feel are what will draw suspicion and become subject to criminalization in such a dystopic future. Dystopian films are then a site at which our current fears of future criminalization are reflected through the use of similar tactics of violence and punishment implemented by the state to promote fear and obedience rather than understanding and participation.

Policing tactics and methods of punishment throughout the films served to reinforce the concerns regarding police brutality, prisoner abuse, and attacks on identity that results from criminalization today. The experimentation and execution of entire categories of people in *V for Vendetta* for simply looking and acting differently than Sutler's norm, the continued social stratification of the poor and minorities as portrayed in *Minority Report*, and the complete domination of a population in *Equilibrium* are all reflective of the cyclical nature of crime and incarceration for populations targeted for their race, religion, or poorness in the U.S. This is evident by such facts that Black men and women are imprisoned at rates 6 and 2 times (respectively) than their white counterparts (Roesch-Knapp, 2020). The U.S. Criminal Justice System has designed spaces for certain groups of people and enacted policies to ensure they exist within them. Furthermore, the extreme sentences of life in prison and execution depicted in all three films reflect contemporary concerns for the fairness and sustainability of such systems

of punishment and whether or not prison abolition and defunding the police are more viable options. The ways in which criminalization is carried out and enforced continues to show the effects of such social controls and dystopian films offer distinctive speculation at what those effects might look like in the future.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

This study did not consider the previous manifestations of these films or the original creators' inspirations, such as the fact that *V for Vendetta* was originally a graphic novel and *Minority Report* was first a science fiction story. As such, any generalizations are specifically aimed at dystopian film. Also, the three films in this study were knowingly chosen for their possession of criminological themes and therefore are limited in their representation of dystopian film as a whole. A future study with a broader timeframe may facilitate a more exhaustive compilation of dystopian films allowing for a more random selection for the sampling frame. Other suggestions for study based on themes revealed during the course of this project include an analysis of collective violence as a response to dystopic conditions as depicted in film as well as exploring whether religion is used as inspiration for resistance purposes or solely by the autocrats depicted in dystopian film and what any discrepancy might mean.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

While the fictional futures analyzed for this project have presented bleak expectations, it should be noted that any speculation is meant as an allegory and not a prophecy. The moments of beauty and hope within dystopian films are as important as any heroic actions taken by the protagonists to dismantle the controlling regimes. While we are continually faced with the criminalization of the poor and minorities, inhumane conditions for the incarcerated, and lingering threats of violence, we still have a choice. We can choose not to disregard dystopian films as entertaining vehicles produced to make money and simply reflect popular social trends. We can choose to recognize them as speculation of possible long-term effects and future manifestations of current socio-political conditions resulting from overcriminalization by governments consumed with maintaining power rather than truly representing the people.

In conclusion, criminalization is used in dystopian films as it is used in contemporary society, a social control by which systems of government are able to use violence and other forms of policing in order to retain their individual and collective power. This aids speculation of future conditions based on current concerns for real socio-political trends. Further analyses should be undertaken to add to the conversation based on the conclusions of this one. As we deal with daily instances of state violence, criminalization of the poor and minorities, and lack of privacy, protection, and the ability to make decisions for our own bodies, we can use dystopian films as another tool for change. As the Trump's and Kim's of the world continue to ascend to power, it is

important as ever to not only look to the past to learn from our mistakes, but also examine the future so that we may curb systems of control and violence. In doing so, we can become agents of change today, so that the dystopian heroes of tomorrow are not needed. We can choose to build a future that we have no reason to fear.



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