Article

Hope, Dystopian Futures, and Covid-19 as the 'Event' that Changed the World (Forever?)

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Abstract

Film and series writers have for some time projected imaginative yet sometimes quite real possible end-of-the-world scenarios. The evolution of blockbuster science-fiction films from the mid-20th century onwards initially generated scenarios related to threats to humanity from alien invasions. Then, towards the 1990s and at the turn of the 21st century, there emerged climate-related catastrophes, impending meteorite or asteroid collisions, bio-attacks as well as the general collapse of politics, law and order and revision of social life on earth into some perpetual violent and hostile land. In the same vein, other possible futuristic apocalypses have also been depicted through the inception of 'unknown' and 'fatal' viruses which all but wipe out humanity save one brave hero or heroine who takes it upon themselves to rescue the future from the past: somehow, however, averting the crisis and the world is saved. In many of these films, the devastation left on the planet inevitably resets humanity and in the aftermath the dawn of a new future lies in the responsible hands of a few survivors. All the while, only 'hope' somehow got them through. Using such portrayals of end-of-world scenarios and dystopian future films and series as possible avenues for our potential trajectory, this paper speculates about our future in a post-Covid world using aspects of Žižek's critical discussions on *hope* and *hopelessness* (2018) and Tom Moylan's (2020) concept of the 'dystopian structure of feeling'.

Introduction

How humanity might end has for some time been the subject numerous dystopian films and series. Fritz Lang's seminal science-fiction film *Metropolis* (1927) characterises a failed utopia where an oppressive ruling class manages an underground enslaved proletariat. Lang's dystopian vision in fact is based on Marx's concept of class antagonism and the division of society. Though *Metropolis* was considered to be a science fiction film, it wasn't until the introduction of the *film noir* genres in wartime American cinema during the 1940s that a sub-genre of dystopian films began to emerge more frequently, often with more disturbing content. This amalgamation of science fiction and film noir *"reinvented the critical energy of the historical novel by allowing for a narrative model of history that positioned the present as the future's past"* (Leigh et al., 2013: 122). Thereafter blockbuster films such as *World Without End* (1956), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968) - all of which reflect themes of oppression, autocratic government and post-apocalyptic warnings - were to become among the most popular post-war science fiction-based dystopian films.

Such films were to form part of the evolution of blockbuster science-fiction films from the mid-20th century onwards. Then, towards the 1990s and over the turn of the 21st century, such films started to reflect climate-related catastrophes, impending meteorite or asteroid collisions, bio-attacks as well as the general collapse of politics, law and order and revision of social life on earth into some perpetual violent and hostile land. In the same vein, other possible futuristic apocalypses have also been through the inception of 'unknown' and 'fatal' viruses which all but wipe out humanity save one brave hero or heroine who has taken it upon themselves to rescue the future from the past: somehow, however, averting the crisis and the world is saved. In such films, the devastation left on the planet inevitably reset humanity and in the aftermath the dawn of a new future lies in the responsible hands of a few survivors. 'Hope' was to what we clung.

As the 21st century progressed, the more recent omnipotent presence of independent internet film and series streaming services started to alter the interpretation of many of these previous depictions, evermore focussing on dystopian futures. Likely related to what Mark Fisher (2009) terms as 'capitalist realism', these representations reflected a sense that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. It is probably no surprise then that, prior to 2020, much of the 'loss of hope' about a better world was mirrored by the grave infractions of 21st century neoliberal life: increasing global instability, war and conflict; sharpening inequality; manmade climate change; increasing unemployment and poverty; and swelling youth disadvantage and disaffection. All of this just seemed to be oscillating between a simmering and boiling point, ever more regularly supressed by an asymmetrical politics and thus appearing as sporadic and disconnected issues in the swirl of 24/7 news media reporting (Winlow et al, 2015).

And this was the world into which the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, and for many people in the West, it felt like the 'lived experience' of such films. As mainly an elderly cohort died of the virus, whole industries collapsed, millions upon millions of people lost their jobs, and people

living in poverty expanded as lockdowns, social distancing, self-isolation, curfews, and mask wearing became the uniform means of managing the transmission and spread of the new infectious virus. Public spaces and social life were symbolically redefined to generate 'compliance' to a 'new normal' in which we were told to avoid physical contact with people and instead encouraged to seek refuge in our own personal digital worlds by means of escape and therapy (Briggs et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the installation of these measures radically altered the global political economy as nation states threw seemingly unlimited money at furlough schemes and vaccinations. Life as we knew it was changing, *"transiently shattering the widespread sense that everything will continue to stay the same"* (Žižek, 2020: 34).

In the confusion, narratives such as the 'Great Reset' and 'Building Back Better' quickly became popular political mantras as there seemed to be new hope for a greener, sustainable and fair and more equal future. Freudian theory around the 'death drive' - or the drive toward destruction in the hope that something new and better could emerge - would suggest then that the Covid pandemic was in fact a desired endgame. Was this the opportunity to solve the myriad failures of neoliberalism and offer us hope for the future? For McGowan (2013), such political investment in a 'better future' and perfect social equilibrium is destined for failure. This is because McGowan suggests we misdirect our pursuit of such a future by focussing on its accomplishment rather than what impedes it, which, essentially continually delays its realisation or perpetually reproduces behaviours that veto its realisation.

Using such portrayals of end-of-world scenarios and dystopian future films and series as possible avenues for our potential trajectory, this paper speculates about our future in a post-Covid world: a world characterised by a 'potential reset' and 'new ambitions' for social organisation. The intention is to use popular culture as a framework to explore life under neoliberalism (See Wakeman, 2014; Raymen, 2017; Wakeman, 2017 for similar examples). The paper first addresses elements of the function of ideology in both a pre- and post-pandemic world and makes use of Žižek's critical discussions on *hope* and *hopelessness* (2018) and Tom Moylan's (2020) concept of the *dystopian structure of feeling*: described as our collective surrendering to the socio-political dystopia of neoliberal capitalism and the ensuing relinquishing of utopian aspirations. To do this, I then make use of a small selection of dystopian films made over the years to highlight these concepts. The paper then moves into a more concrete analysis of dystopian films some of which pertain to deadly, humanity-threatening viruses. Parallels and inconsistencies are made with the recent Covid-19 pandemic in this respect as I try to discuss how the thread of *hope*, and indeed, *hopelessness* depicted in the films are in fact the residual feelings we experience about the current political and social status quo.

Ideology in the pre- and post-pandemic world

Even though crises have long been a feature of capitalism, its most recent form (neoliberalism) was once again further exposed by the 2008 financial crisis (Winlow et al., 2015). This caused deepening levels of pessimism and cynicism in Western societies. From an ecological perspective, the capitalist system collided head-on with the material limits of the planet. Furthermore, we

have witnessed the unfortunate normalisation of detrimental situations for any human being, such as the withdrawal of our rights, increased work and social precariousness, economic inequality, and new consumption habits due to resource scarcity. War, conflict, government oppression, violence, social unrest and terrorist acts complement these uncertainties as we receive this standardised living experience through perpetual images of such myriad crises through the media and internet (Streeck, 2016). We are simply left with a situation absent of viable political economic solutions and a belief that there is no alternative (Fisher, 2009). Perhaps, as Walter Benjamin (2016) so accurately put it, humanity seems inseparable from its own barbarism and potential destruction. Yet all the while distracting consumer cultures and symbolic fictions instead govern our subjective realities as other spectres dominate our horizons such as the dissolution of truth, the erosion of shared values and a perverse and farcical politics which make it difficult to take seriously.

How might we back out of this seemingly troubling social cul-de-sac? Surely, there can be hope for a world falling apart at the seams. Surely, there is a way of reversing seemingly irreparable damage neoliberal capitalism has caused (and continues to cause)? Yet, despite tokenistic political moaning and persistent criticism, the system has remained stubbornly resistant to meaningful change, essentially continuing to deploy and promote market solutions to complex problems and accentuating consumer spending both as economic necessity and the source of subjective satisfaction. For some reason, in these troubled times, even the most pessimistic diagnosis of our future ends with an uplifting hint that things might not be as bad as all that. There is always that there is *light at the end of the tunnel*. Žižek (2018) argues that it is only when we have admitted to ourselves that our situation is completely *hopeless* - that the light at the end of the tunnel is in fact the headlight of a train - then can fundamental change emerge. As it stands, progressive hopes are currently wrongly directed towards fixing the existing situation not only because they involve patching up failed policies with the same approaches but also because everything we hope will not happen is, in fact, very likely about to happen (Žižek, 2018). That is, unless individuals, once again, summon the political resolution to act decisively. The fact we return to this utopian solution merely confirms our political stymie: stuck in a never-ending cycle of fetishizing a future we can't realise (McGowan, 2013).

Discounting everything that has happened in the recent times such as the calamitous and farcical state of politics, the two-year global pandemic which sent whole societies into economic freefall, the war between Russia and Ukraine that is generating millions of additional refugees clambering for safety, let's imagine a wonderful future every day. The problem lies in the abyss that separates *the reality of the things we deny from our own conscience* from that future to which we aspire. The utopia becomes an impossibility. Marxists would say that utopias are therefore unachievable because they are not connected to the concrete structural conditions of society and, as such, are dangerous. In contrast, sociologists and philosophers such as Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch believe that the transformative potential of utopias cultivate a desire for social changes and thus enable alternative ways to the actual the political economy of social life (Matos, 2012).

Conversely, dystopias or the imagined state or society where there is great suffering or injustice – are what Yates (2020: 16) describes as *"upside down utopias"* or *"bad utopias, imaginary societies where the conditions of existence are much worse than those of real societies."* It's hard to imagine a situation worse than our current trajectory especially when the hope initially galvanised at the beginning of the pandemic seemed to dissipate quickly as we regained our conscious cynicism and craved the old temptations of life pre 2020 (Briggs et al., 2020). Powerful commercial ideologies obfuscate the sinister and dark elements of our reality, and we are made to think it is 'not as bad as it is made out to be' when in fact it is worse. Yet dystopias are those societies in catastrophic decline where diminishing numbers of the human race are left to negotiate environmental ruin, the fight against technological surveillance, and oppressive and violent government control. We can directly relate resistance to Covid-19 policies and measures to this plight in this respect as people protested in countries such as the UK, USA, Italy, Germany and France among others against the increased prominence of digital identification and scrutiny for their activities and behaviours.

Now, two years later, despite the pandemic, everything seems to remain the same. Boucher (2020: 2) observes that there are *"the same multinational corporate capitalism, the same global state system, the same neoliberal economic policies, the same worldwide social inequalities"*. Perhaps then we are living in what Tom Moylan (2020) terms as a contemporary 'dystopian structure of feeling' in that we passively accept this return to neoliberalism as a collective surrendering to the socio-political dystopia of neoliberal capitalism and the ensuing relinquishing of utopian aspirations. Yet, by idealising such a utopian post-covid future, we merely underline our dependency on our corrosive relationship with the neoliberal system (McGowan, 2013).

Multiple layers of this *hope* in the face of *hopelessness* can be identified in current film and series productions. Bold and brave stories of how humanity can fight against climate change, settle wars, and do justice to grave inequalities. Yet very often such background catastrophes are generally moulded around foreground tales of love, sex, protection and tragedy, loss and suffering, thus reducing their potential impact. Viewers are solicited to empathise with the characters and their feelings than the far more graver situations of impending global doom. Films and series about how social consciousness that crosses the strands of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, animalist, environmentalist can prevail when faced with life and challenges in a harmful economic system seeking a world in which everyone has the same value as humans. Utopia breathes, it lives on and feeds this 'dystopian structure of feeling' (Moylan, 2020). By equal measure, the same mediums similarly project gone-wrong worlds of violent Artificial Intelligence (AI) robot governance, warped climate ravaged desolation, and, of course, the devastating spread of deadly viruses. Just like we experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, every alternative to many of these futures offered to us in these mediums is different, but they all have something in common: the loss of our freedoms. In this respect, if we:

> …want to see in a clear, distilled way today's ideology, look at Hollywood. It's a clearer image than in our much more confused real lives. It's simple, Hollywood as an indication of where we stand in ideology. (Gook and Zizek, 2020: 366)

The Covid-19 pandemic and the hopelessness of the future: Exploring the pandemic through dystopian films

Fittingly for this paper, Peck (2010) used the analogy of the living dead to describe neoliberalism's *"dead, but dominant"* post-crisis incarnation in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. If we recall, in the aftermath, riots and political protests rippled across several western states. Despite this, however, no political movement or body was able to seize the opportunity to bring about radical and lasting change to socio-economic life in the west (Winlow et al., 2015; Telford and Wistow, 2019). Indeed, in the years since, despite further protests - largely because continuing structural schisms characteristic to neoliberal capitalism continue to damage society - many western economies reasserted policies of fiscal consolidation and wage depression (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017). Despite its zombified state, neoliberal capitalism's *"limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too"* (Peck, 2010: 109).

And in the wake of Covid-19, still the neoliberal zombie spasmed and convulsed as, aside from the misery the virus brought, protection protocols failed and elite digital and pharmacological business interests got wise to take advantage of another crisis situation (Klein, 2007). The spread of the new virus left millions of health compromised and elderly people dead but simultaneously permitted for restrictions to be put in place to manage the virus which created a parallel damage. All the while, the populace were fed images of people dressed up in white protective clothing, masks and visors dealing with seemingly motionless bodies in heavily manned hospitals. We were also bombarded with daily briefings on the number of people who were infected, in hospital or dying. At the time, it felt like a dystopian film/series come true especially when such depictions start in some present-day form of orderly utopia before descending into dystopian situations of the rabid infected.

Once you choose hope, anything is possible

A good marker of measuring this Moylan's 'dystopian structure of feeling' is placing handsome, perfect-looking heroes in impossible situations which require impossible manoeuvres to overcome the impending doom. Known more simply as a 'happy ending', the journey against all odds and in the face of adversity is made not only to draw out foreground love relationships plots but to emphasise a sense that we invest in hope, we can do anything. Films such as *Armageddon* (1998) are emblematic of this. The all-star cast of Hollywood pin ups including middle-aged heart throb Bruce Willis (AKA Harry), the baby-faced Ben Affleck (or A.J,), and the innocence Liv Tyler (or Grace) – as well as billions of other people – face certain extinction as an asteroid cluster head towards earth. The protagonists are thrown into a scenario which demands that NASA sends them - a team of the world's best deep core oil drillers - to train as astronauts so they can forge a hole into the asteroid into which they will insert and detonate a nuclear bomb to split the asteroid in half. Improbable to say the least. While the story mainly revolves around the love between A.J. and Grace, and Harry's self-sacrifice as he remains on the asteroid to blow it up while the rest of the team escape, the film ends with the world being saved and life as we know it resuming to how it was – minus Harry of course. Science, technology and politics win the day. Hell yeah, high five.

However, in reality the post-political landscape which carries with it a structural sense that all politicians are mere administrators of the status quo means there is no interest in our rescue: only the concentration of political economic power at the expense of a growing precariat (Standing, 2021). In *Elysium* (2013) – a film set in 2154, humanity is acutely divided between two classes of people: a superior elite who live aboard a luxurious space station called Elysium, and the rest live a hardscrabble existence in a climate ravaged, violent and hostile Earth's ruins. In this respect, the parallels are significant with the *Hunger Games* trilogy (2013, 2014 and 2015) in which the super-wealthy elite live in the aesthetic paradise of The Capitol of Panem while the rest of the population live in the repressed poverty of earth's desolate wastelands. In Elysium, the air is pure, the houses are grand, the gardens are bountiful, and a select number of people are seemingly perfect. On earth, however, crime, disorder, decay and disease dominate a larger population of people who fight out a miserable existence of living in poverty or working for the elite on Elysium. Strict digital ID protocols and AI robot policing protect the citizens of Elysium and oppressively govern the people on earth. Periodically, there are attempts from earth's citizens to take down Elysium and install its systems of health remedy to cure its diseased population, but Elysium's hostile defence systems simply destroy spaceships seeking to take such a risk.

Despite these living conditions, there is little organised, collective action from the masses. Change can only come it seems from the meritocratic heroism of one person. When Max (Matt Damon) has his life hanging in the balance, he agrees to undertake a dangerous mission that could bring equality to earth's population, but Secretary Delacourt (Jodie Foster) vows to preserve the pampered lifestyle of Elysium's citizens, no matter what the cost. Max manages to highjack the digital system that governs Elysium and enters its atmosphere. Crashing into the perfect surroundings of its gardens, Max heads towards the technological control hub to install new instructions for Elysium's politics, policing and way of life. In the end, he heroically sacrifices himself in order to wipe away all the class distinctions that separate the earthbound from the Elysium-dwellers: Thanks to the code uploaded from Max's head, every slum rat on planet Earth is suddenly bestowed with Elysium-level citizenship. With hope and determination, anything is possible – even overthrowing an oppressive world system.

And it's the same with *Geostorm* (2017). After an unprecedented series of natural disasters in the form of floods and tidal waves threaten the planet, the world's leaders - strangely and unusually almost incredibly willing to work together to halt a catastrophe instead of creating one - unite to create a successful intricate network of satellites to control the global climate and keep the world safe from devastating floods. As the film resolves in the inevitable happy ending marked by the floods receding, the astronauts hug, the control tower celebrates, and the US president looks quietly content as he can secretly celebrate another four years in office on the back of saving the world. The elation and relief are felt around the world even as far as India where a young poor boy is reunited with his dog he lost. The rich and poor are equally celebratory. The elation is summed up in this closing speech by Hannah Lawson (played by Talitha Eliana Bateman) about how hope conquered all:

> Everyone was warned, but no one listened. A rise in temperature, ocean patterns changed, and ice caps melted. They call it extreme weather. They didn't know what "extreme" was. In the year 2019, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and droughts unleashed a wave of destruction upon our planet. We didn't just lose towns or beachfronts. We lost entire cities. The East River swallowed Lower Manhattan. A heat wave in Madrid killed two million people in just one day. But in that moment, facing our own extinction, it became clear that no single nation could solve this problem alone. The world came together as one, and we fought back.

In reality, however, we know our political system could never operate so sublimely. In the context of virus films, we see similar representations of utopian resolve. In *Flu* (2013), made in South Korea, the film follows the evolution of a deadly new strain of flu virus. The inception of this new disease comes from the ugly and failed 'other' of neoliberal capitalism - illegal immigrants - who are purported to be the virus convectors when a container full of them are discovered dead. Yet the airborne virus escapes rapidly infecting people on metros, in shops, everywhere. Graphic depictions are made of the air particle transmission when the protagonist - who found the immigrants - indiscriminately passes the virus on to everyone in a pharmacy store where they all become infected. The pharmacist infects people on a bus with children. Some of them infect other children in their class. The next scene is one of the original contractors who throws up blood on the screen. Soon after, this very contact, is on a hospital bed where around him analyse numerous white-coat professionals with visors and masks. They conclude how *"all his organs are failing"* and report it to the public-health authorities who then warn the politicians who then laugh it off.

Suddenly, the hospitals convert into breeding grounds of viral death – all the while people of all ages, are indiscriminately infected and dying as the unstoppable virus takes no prisoners. Masks seem to do very little and social distancing is compromised as a panic ensues. Then the politicians finally decide to take action: the lockdown, only briefly doubted because of the impact of business, is immediately engaged. Those displaying symptoms are further isolated in an infected quarantine zone (IQZ) beneath a sports stadium to receive medical treatment, even though there is no known cure.

There is unease in the camp due to a communications blackout, difficult living conditions, confrontations with gasmask-wearing guards, sporadic gunfire, and rumours that infected people are being killed. Pressure from Leo Snyder of the WHO and politicians force the president to break a promise to release the uninfected after 48 hours, and fights break out. When an infected soldier is fatally shot by an officer, a mob becomes enraged and storms the camp - one of whom among them has developed anti-bodies (somehow). The rest of the film oscillates between oppressive attempts to curtail transmission involving the army and 'a mob' as they are described before the political realisation that hope may lie in a vaccine, summed up in this quote from the Defence Minister *"when cornered humans can't stay calm, if fear takes over after the report, it'll be scarier than the virus itself."* The infected are not only beaten but receive bombing from the airforce as a means to punish their resistance. All seems to be drifting massively out of control

and should the violence have continued; the end of the world would not have been far off. Not to worry, however, the film ends happily when a child makes an emotional plea about the treatment of the infected and suddenly everyone feels bad, planned attacks to kill off the infected are aborted and the protagonists are sent off to a medical complex to generate the vaccine.

Feel-good endings generate ideological hope and feelings of solidarity, however, during the Covid-19 pandemic such collective momentum quickly dissipated as everyone pretty much realised that there was no hope for change (see Briggs et al., 2020). We see similar components of a sense of improbable adversity and from it, comes hope in the film *Alive* (2020). While a dangerous virus ravages a Korean city, Joon-woo (Yoo Ah-in) tries to stay safe by locking himself inside his apartment. The mysterious disease that causes those infected to attack and eat those uninfected, starts to be broadcast in the news media. From his balcony, Joon-woo sees a panicked crowd fleeing and being attacked. When he opens the door to the hallway, a neighbour enters but he too succumbs to infection and attacks Joon-woo. Blocking his front door with the fridge, our hero posts a rescue request on social media and stocks up food, much like we did during the pandemic. As we saw during the coronavirus waves, high-populated, urbanely dense in the film multiplies infections. With zombies roving the streets looking for fresh meat and no fellow survivors that he knows of, our protagonist has no choice but to cut himself off from the rest of the world, as if in self-quarantine. Indeed, similar assessments were taken by some people during the Covid-19 pandemic who did not leave their place of residence for months, even up to a year and a half in a few cases (Briggs et al., 2021).

The doubt and loneliness eat quickly away at Joon-woo's psyche, and he attempts suicide after hearing his family might have been killed by zombies. Just as he is about to lose hope, he discovers another survivor in a nearby apartment. Kim Yoo-bin (Park Shin-hye) signals to him and together they try to escape. The ending scene rekindles a sense of hope from a hopeless situation. Joon-woo and Kim Yoo-bin shoot frantically at the blood-thirsty zombies who have cornered them on top of a building. Joon-woo runs out of the few bullets he has left in the gun but continues to pull the trigger in disbelief that he has run out. The music slows as the mad zombies run towards them, but the inevitability of their death is countered by the appearance of a rescue helicopter which not only quickly disposes of the infected but also pulls them aboard.

The crippling feeling of loneliness is a recurrent theme throughout *Alive* and all the characters display a sense of solitude and separation much like we felt during the pandemic lockdown experience. But the theme of hope is so strong that in one moment, one character, Lee Sang-Chul allays his own loneliness by refusing to let go of his zombified wife. In this respect, there is even a sympathetic juncture between coping with loneliness by developing attachments to distorted versions of their loved ones. But the hardship lived becomes the solidarity in the relationship between Joon-woo and Kim Yoo-bin and forms the feeling of hope at the end of the film.

False hope is better than no hope at all

Rendering the conclusion to a film with a utopian sense of hope dangerously endows us with a sense of false hope because it conceals the reality of a dystopic situation. This parallels directly with our experience during the Covid-19 pandemic where political ideologies and liberal messages of hope and resilience not only camouflaged the true damage - in the Real sense – but also sought to supress the possibility of the future damage (Ellis et al., 2021). Films like *Contagion* (2011) do exactly this when they typically foreground the intimate relationships and decisions of a few people and backdrop the suffering of the rest of the planet. The plot concerns the spread of a contagious virus transmitted by respiratory droplets which then demands medical researchers and public health officials to identify and contain the disease. It begins when Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) returns to Minnesota from a Hong Kong business trip, she attributes the malaise she feels to jet lag. However, two days later, Beth is dead, and doctors tell her shocked husband, Mitch Emhoff, (Matt Damon) that they have no idea what killed her.

Soon, many others start to exhibit the same symptoms and a global pandemic explodes. Again, the transmission of the virus – much like Covid-19 – was fast ahead of any interventions made by the scientific community and political elite. Doctors try to contain the lethal microbe, but society begins to collapse, and social order disintegrates into looting and violence as a blogger (Jude Law) fans the flames of paranoia. Interestingly, even in the event of the vaccine availability and some sense of hope, social life remains on tenterhooks and deeply fragile. In the closing scene for example, in which people are queuing for the vaccine, there is a mix of people wearing masks and looking forlorn – much like we witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic. One man starts coughing to which the woman turns around and says:

> **Woman**: *Would you mind covering your mouth, please?*
>
> **Man**: *Fuck off, lady.*
>
> **Announcer in white suit, mask and visor**: *We will only be allowed to give out 50 doses today* [there is a small scuffle in the queue and someone barges to the front before others rush forward].
>
> **Woman**: *Excuse me, there is a line here.*

Thereafter the mob crowd break into the prescription area, smashing the glass in the process, before stealing the doses. In the following scenes, a martial law governs and there seems to be no authority. People loot stores and steal food from supermarkets. Rubbish piles up in the streets, churches are empty, schools are vacant, airports are silent. Such is the desperation that in the next scene, in where Mitch is queuing for a food pack, there is an announcement from a man in a clinical suit and mask saying how the food aid has been exhausted – much like the empty supermarket shelves we witnessed during the pandemic as people panicked purchased. Suddenly the few people with one are wrestled to the ground and people try to raid the truck: Mitch says *"there is nothing in there"* as they shout in desperation. At the close of the film, we are given a stern

warning of the evolution of the following pandemic round the corner with the continued man-made disturbance of the world's eco systems. Is false hope really better than no hope at all?

Ten years on, *Contagion* was from withdrawn Netflix in the UK after its morbid popularity was associated with its similarities to the coronavirus pandemic. By March 2020 - which marked the general commencement of the pandemic across the West - the film was the seventh-most-popular film on iTunes, was listed as the number two catalogue title on Warner Bros. compared to its number 270 rank the past December 2019 and had average daily visits on piracy websites increase by 5,609 percent in January 2020 compared to the previous month. HBO Now also reported that Contagion had been the most viewed film for two weeks straight (Stolworthy, 2020). In February 2021, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock revealed that watching the scramble for vaccines in *Contagion* inspired him to order a much larger quantity of Covid-19 vaccines for the UK than his advisers recommended, thus accelerating the UK's eventual rollout of its vaccination programme ahead of other European countries.

Effective vaccines are also the solution to the zombie virus in *World war Z* (2013) which also features a global pandemic. The film begins around twenty years previously in China, which covers up the outbreak and engineers a military crisis with Taiwan to avoid appearing weak internationally. Much like the early labelling of the Covid-19 variants (UK, Indian, etc) the disease becomes known as 'African Rabies' when cases in South Africa become widely known. Other than Israel, which institutes a 'self-quarantine' and constructs a border wall, most of the world largely ignores the threat for the next year. Much like Trump's potential for re-election in 2020, in the film, the USA is depicted as overconfident and distracted by an election year, while a widely marketed placebo vaccine, Phalanx, creates a false sense of security.

The following spring, a journalist reveals that Phalanx does nothing to prevent zombification, and that the infected are not victims of rabies but rather walking corpses, sparking an event known as the 'Great Panic'. Order breaks down around the globe, with rioting, breakdown of essential services, and indiscriminate culling of citizens killing more people than the zombies themselves. South Africa leads other countries in implementing a drastic contingency plan which designates large groups of survivors as human bait, distracting the undead while small safe zones regroup and build up resources.

Seven years later, after a UN conference held off the coast of Hawaii, leading world nations decide to go back on the offensive. New tactics have to be invented for a war of extermination in which every last zombie must be destroyed to avoid reinfection, and casualties are high. An unnamed British Army general comments as the war ends that there are *"enough dead heroes for the end of time."* Ten years after the official end of the Zombie War, the world is still heavily damaged, but slowly on the road to recovery. Millions of zombies are still active, mainly on the ocean floor, mountains above the snow line, and in arctic areas. Numerous political and territorial changes have occurred, and the overall quality of life has diminished, including shorter life expectancies, limited access to running water and electricity, and an ongoing nuclear winter. Nevertheless, the majority of those who have survived have hope for the future, knowing that humanity faced the brink of extinction, and won. This resulting dystopia

still generates a kind of fake belief that somehow everything will be ok. At least, we are able to disavow in the ideological narratives which stem from these films which simultaneously block engagement with the depth structures that generated widespread suffering during the political mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fetishistic disavowal and embracing hopelessness

Rarely do out political representatives deal with the gravity and complexities of our current political and economic situation and frequently negate the implications of decisions they make which then exacerbate it. Žižek summarises this *fetishist disavowal* as, 'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know', as a complex process of subjective denial and the denial of one's position in the world relative to others. Such a subjective rejection of the gravity and reality of a situation on account of the potentially traumatic associations it may generate represents a turning away from truth (Kuldova, 2019). By ignoring such injustices and failing to establish political opposition and galvanising collective interest for change, we continue to be complicit with the same struggles thus reproducing the oppressive continuation of neoliberalism and the capitalist order.

We see this most prominently in the denial to investigate the impact of lockdowns around the world and the fact that clear and credible evidence not only exists confirming lockdowns made almost no difference to infection rates (Bonardi et al., 2020) but also disproportionately impacted the worlds most impoverished people (Agoramoorthy and Hsu, 2020). Such *fetishistic disavowal,* as Žižek (1989) writes, confirms an excessive adherence to certain beliefs and practices and a simultaneous denial of the indisputable damage lockdowns produced. Presenting alternative arguments to how Covid-19 was managed resulted in half of the scientific world being labelled heretics, 'science deniers' and 'conspiracy theorists': a sad symbolism of the failings of our current political juncture.

This is because, during the pandemic, ideological compliance to government measures were categorically made dominant through government-funded media entities. The voices of the other half of science - represented in this case by world-renowned and prize-winning virologists, immunologists and pathologists who formed the Great Barrington Declaration - were muffled and still continue to be hushed. We see a similar characterisation of this *fetishistic disavowal* in the 2021 film *Don't Look Up* when the overwhelming efforts two low-level astronomers, Dr Randall Mindy (Leonardo de Caprio) and Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), have to warn mankind of an approaching comet that will destroy planet Earth and with it all of humanity.

At first, Randall and Mindy approach the president (Meryl Streep) with the warning but are denied time while a receptionist's birthday is celebrated. A day or two they get their moment, but are bitterly disappointed when their case is not taken seriously by the president or her staff because of its inevitability, the president jokingly responds, *"You cannot go around telling people that there is a 100% chance that they're gonna die."* They leave distressed and decide instead to send their message out through the media. In the process, they are invited to a series of appearances on a daytime morning show which trivialises the issue, making it farcical. Dibiasky loses her

composure and rants about the threat aptly summarised in her critique of the political elite's management of the virus and general posturing:

> The truth is way more depressing. They're [the politicians] not even smart enough to be as evil as you're giving them credit for.

Mindy, on the other hand, receives public approval for his looks and with that succumbs to fame and stardom and the plastic celebrity crowd surrounding the 'crisis', losing touch with his family and the initial mission of creating awareness about the comet. As how information was controlled about Covid-19, actual news about the comet's threat receives little public attention and the threat is denied by a top donor to the president with no background in astronomy. Then, the billionaire CEO of BASH Cellular and another top president donor (who is made out to be some equivalent to Elon Musk in real life) discovers that the comet contains trillions of dollars' worth of rare-earth elements. The White House agrees to commercially exploit the comet by fragmenting and recovering it from the ocean, using technology proposed by BASH in a scheme that has not undergone peer review. Again, we see similar parallels when all faith was placed in 'experts' from Imperial College who produced the core rationales for lockdowns in the UK from non-peer reviewed evidence (Ferguson et al., 2020) in the face of knowing that such modelling had major flaws (Ioaniddis et al., 2022).

All the while - and much like Covid-19 during the swirl of misinformation-disinformation - the world opinion is divided. There are those who believe the comet is a serious threat, those who decry alarmism and believe that mining a destroyed comet will create jobs, and those who deny that the comet even exists, crudely representing our post-political, post-pandemic context of a world in which truth is a myth and belief has splintered (Žižek, 2001; 2020). Becoming frustrated with the administration, Mindy finally snaps and rants on live television, criticizing the president for downplaying the impending apocalypse and questioning humanity's indifference. All the while, the world is seemingly stuck within this disavowal about the end of the world. Cut off from the administration, Mindy reconciles with Dibiasky as the comet becomes visible from Earth.

Mindy, Dibiasky, and the ostracised scientist Oglethorpe, organize a protest campaign on social media, telling people to 'Just Look Up', and call on other countries to conduct comet interception operations, while the president starts an anti-campaign telling people 'Don't Look Up' - thus validating fetishistic disavowal. In particular, the rhetoric in one speech doesn't even hide from its disdain and disgust for the electorate when one politician says at a rally *"They want you to look up because they are looking down their noses on you"*. The president then cuts Russia, India, and China out of the comet-mining deal, so they prepare a joint effort to deflect the comet only for their spacecraft to explode but BASH's attempt at breaking the comet apart also goes awry, and everyone realizes that humanity is doomed. And it is when the comet hits. Only at that moment, does Mindy, Dibiasky, and Oglethorpe savour the last few moments on earth with those they truly love and thus the inevitability and hopelessness of the moment becomes film's ending. Only by confronting the reality of the gravity of the situation, do Mindy et al. find resolve, a peace almost.

The hopelessness of the present situation is similarly evident in *12 Monkeys* (1995) - a film about how James Cole (Bruce Willis) - who is imprisoned in the 2030s - is recruited for a mission that will send him back to the 1990s where he is supposed to gather information about a deadly virus which will in the future exterminate the vast majority of the world's population. The information Cole gathers is to supposedly help scientists find a cure and to reverse the current misery the world seems to be in in the 2030s. The reason is because the said virus, somehow released in 1996, wipes out almost all of humanity, forcing survivors to live underground in hidden slums and it is conspired that a group known as the *Army of the Twelve Monkeys* is believed to have released the virus.

Cole arrives in Baltimore, 1990, not 1996 as planned; he is arrested and incarcerated at a mental hospital on the diagnosis of Dr. Kathryn Railly (Madeleine Stow). There he encounters Jeffrey Goines ('Goines junior' hereafter played by Brad Pitt), a mental patient with environmentalist and anti-corporatist views, perhaps because these views air the stark reality of subjective consumer dominance. He is the son of Leland Goines ('Goines senior' hereafter), a wealthy, respected scientist who is embarrassed by his son's severe mental illness and covers it up by giving Jeffrey a token job in his corporation in which he has little contact with the public. In one scene, he says:

> There's the television. It's all right there — all right there. Look, listen, kneel, pray. Commercials! We're not productive anymore. We don't make things anymore. It's all automated. What are we for then? We're consumers. Yeah. Okay, okay. Buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen. But if you don't buy a lot of stuff, if you don't, what are you then, I ask you? What? Mentally ill. Fact, Jim, fact — if you don't buy things: toilet paper, new cars, computerized yo-yos, electrically-operated sexual devices, stereo systems with brain-implanted headphones, screwdrivers with miniature built-in radar devices, voice-activated computers...

In this scene, Jeffrey Goines seems to act as the voice of the Real, attempting to penetrate the veil of the consumer Symbolic Order. His 'delusion' is put down to his desire to create a new world where humans become extinct, and the world is instead governed by animals. Goines sees the world as insane as the people around him in the asylum: *"You're here because of the system. All the doors are locked too. They're protecting the people on the outside from us from the people on the outside who are as crazy as us"* he says in a rabble to Cole in one scene.

Goines junior is the supposed leader of 'The Army of the Twelve Monkeys', a group of animal rights activists who believe that the human race should be exterminated to make way for a 'new world' dominated by animals. Under Goines junior chaotic leadership, however, the group is merely a nuisance that commits small acts of vandalism. Meanwhile, mistakes and mishaps in the time travel means that Cole appears in various parts of history. Disoriented, he tries to explain that the virus outbreak has already happened while he is, meanwhile, troubled by dreams involving a foot chase and shooting at an airport which is to be the parallel reality of his own death.

Cole is then shunted back to the lab with the scientists. Told to glean information on the origin of the virus and re-correct the past - and thus establish a new future - Cole is handed a gun as he now suspects it has nothing to do with the army of the 12 Monkeys, when after several missions into the past, hypothesises *"so now it's not about the virus at all. It's about following orders, doing what you're told."* However, there is, it seems, no hope for the people Cole observes in his time-travels. As he says at one point, *"all I see are dead people"* referring to the future demise of humanity. As a result, it's tough to refer to the '30s here as the 'future', and likewise to call the '90s the 'present.' Cole goes out of his way to tell the residents of the earlier era that they're in the past and that the true present is the post-apocalyptic hovel from which he came. It is as if he has had the privilege of seeing how shit the world is in the future and has the bittersweet opportunity to visit the world before its rapid demise. At the same time, it is as if Cole reconciles with himself that no matter what he does, he cannot change the future and thus the film defers away from 'surviving a plague' more towards making a meaningful life on the eve of a crisis. It is a journey from hope to hopelessness.

A central message prevalent in *12 Monkeys* is that the past is fixed and can't actually be changed. Now, as in 12 Monkeys, it feels increasingly as though our minds are situated in the years to come, as though we are already looking back on what's happening to us right now in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic from the vantage point of the future calamities. People speak about the collapse of civilization with startling regularity. Some stockpile toilet roll, food stock and guns for the coming war of all against all, others merely summarize their depressed outlook by letting it out in forums like Twitter. In *Melancholia* (2011), another planet is on a collision course with Earth but the plot focusses on the individual difficulties of two sisters, one of them trying to recover from a heavy bout of depression and the other a failed marriage. Even though everyone on earth dies and humanity ends – its to say the situation is totally hopeless - the story is not about this but about the sisters' subjective resolve as this takes place. They make a symbolic stick tent, hold hands, cry a bit and then die in the flames from the collision. Like *Don't Look Up*, and *12 Monkeys*, we are drawn to feel more united by a feeling like anything good is living on borrowed time and, in the wake of the collapse of society, individualised peace and harmony is the best we can hope for: it almost feels like a kind of future therapy session.

Hoping for hope and the death drive

An incoming comet is also said to mark the potential end of humanity in *Deep impact* (1998). Unlike *Don't Look Up*, where levels of hopelessness continue to build to a climax of unavoidable destruction, in *Deep Impact*, the hopelessness is uncovered, and a plan is made to counter the end of the world. Even though the impending death of nearly everyone on the planet, the characters still act out a sense of *hope for hope* itself in the uncertainty. This time, and much like the real-life political disavowal around general social problems, the U.S. government keeps the crisis under wraps, but a savvy reporter Jenny Lerner (Tea Leoni) uncovers the truth - forcing U.S. President Beck (Morgan Freeman) to announce his plan. Grizzled astronaut Spurgeon "Fish" Tanner (Robert Duvall) and his team land on the comet, lay explosives, and hopefully deter the object from its doomsday course. If not, humanity will have to prepare for the worst.

In the end, however, the plan fails and from an almost-totally-demolished Capitol at the ruins of Washington, D.C., President Beck gives a speech about the massive damages of the first impact, which also included Europe and Africa; and the intentions and hope of rebuilding civilization. 'Hope survives' is the film's motif. Hope lives beyond hope itself.

And it's the same for *Omega Man* (1971) filmed more recently as *I am Legend* (2007). Robert Neville (Will Smith) is a virologist and a survivor of a man-made plague that transforms humans into bloodthirsty mutants. It's been three years since civilization came to an end, and the loneliness has taken a devastating toll on Neville. By day, he scours New York City for food and supplies while sending out desperate radio messages in hope that someone might respond, and by night, he attempts to find a way to reverse the effects of the virus by experimenting with his own blood. He is motivated by a future hope beyond the hope of his current situation. Once again, in this post-viral apocalypse, there is a feeling of desperate loneliness as Neville talks not only to his dog but to mannequins, he has erected in a local DVD store where he goes to make conversation with them. The film also oscillates between the present time and the traumatic death of his wife and son as the apocalypse was unfolding; he has their suffering on a kind of subjective playback akin to the 'drive to repetition' (Lacan, 1988).

Neville knows he is significantly outnumbered by the nocturnal creatures and the odds are against him, because all the while, the infected wait for him to make a mistake that will deliver Neville into their hands. When there is some response to the messages, a seemingly convenient single woman, Anna (Alice Braga), and her son, make contact but after so much time alone, Neville struggles with the reintroduction of socialising much like we did after the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, respectively. As he discovers a potential cure with his newfound companions, the mutants get wise and invade his stronghold having learnt how to compromise it. But by a stroke of luck, Anna's arrival has coincided with the latest strain of antidote actually working, so when Neville, Anna, and her son barricade themselves in the lab, Neville is able to extract a vial of the cure to give to Anna and then sacrifices himself so she can escape the creatures. Neville is killed but the cure is safe and arrives at the encampment with Anna, his life's work was not futile, and Anna gives a speech essentially declaring Robert Neville a legend. Suddenly, society is reset and there is a chance to reconstruct a new future.

Both *Deep Impact* and *I Am Legend* emit a sense of *hope beyond hope*. Catastrophic global events are what we can only hope for as they permit us to transcend our current predicament of raging inequality and farcical politics. And it is hoped that the unknown chaos that ensues leads to the installation of an equitable and just society (Winlow and Hall, 2013). In this respect, they relate to notions of Freudian death drive in that the innate discontent and inequality produced by neoliberalism alongside its injustices yield only social destruction, from which a cleansing rebirth is sought. The pandemic, we thought (or were told) was to mark such this moment in history but more than anything it has, once again, confirmed the failures of neoliberalism and our ability to disavow those very failures.

Concluding thoughts

When Covid-19 started to spread across the world, the reporting followed all the same contours as the *Contagion*, *World War Z*, Alive and *I am Legend*. Suddenly humanity was in imminent danger, quarantines were issued, panic ensued, and the world suddenly lost all sense of normality. While this had the potential to create a sense of chaos and even though somehow the risk was everywhere, the restrictions and regulations gave a sense of security in our activities and decisions and we blindly conformed. People were told not to socialise, keep distance from each other and take other similar individual precautions as a means to deflect the wider, structural mismanagement of the virus. Even though research shows the transmission of the virus bypassed many of the restrictions including border closures (Liebig et al., 2021; Malapati, 2021), lockdowns (Briggs et al., 2021) and mask wearing (Bundgaard et al., 2020), authoritative white-suited, visor-adorned, mask-wearing subjects brought the fiction to life: we were living through the evolution of a global pandemic. Politicians even made decisions on how to manage Covid-19 having had inspiration from dystopian films!

In this paper, I have tried to suggest that in order to understand today's world, particularly in the context of a variety of future dystopian possibilities, such films discussed here are significantly important. It is only by engaging with these mediums that we confront fundamental existential and ontological components that we are unable/unwilling to confront in our own reality. We know that manmade climate change continues to do irreparable damage to whole countries, uprooting whole societies forcing them to clamber to other countries. We know that war, conflict and violence occur and perpetuate misery for millions of people around the world. We also know that our politicians cannot cope with these challenges and, although promises are made to remedy them, the continual pursuit of market interests make them empty. But it is easier and psychologically comforting to disavow; it is easier to suppress unpalatable information rather than confront it. Just like the political elite and media collectively disavow in *Don't Look Up*, it is easier for a Symbolic Order to operate around manufacturing peoples' interests and desires through consumer markets than confront the misery and social deficits generated by neoliberalism. So the structural sense of capitalist realism makes utopian change feel impossible and only reserved for fiction (Fisher, 2009) because our continual pursuit of it oscillates around its achievement rather than on its impediments (McGowan, 2013).

In this respect, the fundamental delusion today is not only *to believe* in such dystopian films but to also take such fiction seriously. In fact, it is not to take fictions seriously enough. We think these warped depictions are fictitious, but they tell something authentic about our current circumstances, acting as a broken mirror reflecting back a distorted reflection. Many of the films discussed offer us an ideological utopia, a place for belief in a world with no belief, a hero or heroine who can save humanity among a world if self-interested individuals. In this respect, the films simultaneously assist in our own real-life disavowal of the very real problems the world confronts. The ever-widening wealth gap, which is pushing more and more people into precarious poverty while, at the same time, consolidating the wealth and power of a few is a direct parallel with the dystopian futures of *Elysium* and *The Hunger Games* and other popular Netflix hits such as *Squid Game* (2021) and *Platform* (2019). The sense of isolation in a post-pandemic

world is felt hard in the films *Alive* and *I Am Legend* which both depict quarantines and curfews – when there is no one left, we can only invent our own company and playback/reconstruct our lives around our broken memories/traumas (Lacan, 1988).

Dystopian films are perceived as *another place,* but they become a more intimate place on to which we can project our beliefs, fears and things from our inner feelings. Is it really the brutal Real out there that disturbs us or is it the fantasy presented to us in these films? As Freud may have posited, it is through these mediums that we escape into a dream to avoid a deadlock in our own life. However, when we soon realise that the 'dream' is even more horrible than the reality, we start to crave the safety of the consumer distractions in the Symbolic Order. So in essence, escaping into the fiction of such dreams are for those who are not strong enough to cope with our reality and conversely reality becomes for those not strong enough to endure their dreams.

The lure of dystopian films therefore is their ability to portray what we currently experience and fear in a way that deceives us: the ultimate paradox of cinema being in the binaries of belief and hope in that *"I believe in conditional mode, I know well it is a fake, but I let myself be emotionally effected"* and, at the same time, *"it gives me a sense of hope, when I know things are in reality hopeless".* Rescuing the world from impossible humanity-ending scenarios such as *Deep Impact*, *Geo-storm*, *Armageddon* and *The Day After Tomorrow* do precisely this, thus lulling us into a false sense of our own safety and thus reinforcing the comfort of the Symbolic Order. So the loss of hope further aggravates the structural feeling of capitalist realism; nothing lies beyond the stultifying confines of a world characterised by global warming, war and conflict and growing disaffection and exclusion. We are either left to accept the impending doom and our mortality (*12 Monkeys, Melancholia*) or, in the wake of it all ending, left to hope for a hope that is perhaps already lost.

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