

# The Future, According to Hollywood.

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Why do an overwhelming majority of futuristic movies dished out by Hollywood always appear so bleak and terrifying? And how will the future look like if Hollywood is indeed correct?



Published on  
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Tamal Dutta

**In 2008, Scholastic published a young-adult novel called *The Hunger Games* by screenwriter Suzanne Collins. Buzz for the book was intense even before it hit the shelves, and only intensified further in 2009 and 2010 when the sequels appeared. With the movie version of the first book becoming a runaway hit, the buzz is roar. Set in a future where the Capitol selects a boy and girl from the twelve districts to fight to the death on live television, the movie's inherently nihilistic nature begs two questions that I have been pondering over for quite some time : Why do an overwhelming majority of futuristic movies dished out by Hollywood always appear so bleak and terrifying? And how will the future look like if Hollywood is indeed correct?**

We know that a dystopia is a fictional society that is the antithesis or complete opposite of a utopia, an ideal world with a perfect social, political and technological infrastructure. Dystopia is a world with chaos, strife or hunger. Dystopia is a world where the individual potential and freedom is shunned and pushed to the background. Whether it is the **Matrix**, where machines harvested humans as sources of fuel, or **Terminator 2: Judgment Day**, which was about machines taking over the world, a hopeless desolate future forms a common backdrop for movies depicting the future. Futuristic movies generally display an apocalyptic setting where all the main protagonists are distinctly dystopian.

Similarly **Hunger Games** depicts a gruesome story of a group of teenage boys and girls who are pitted against each other in an idyllic set of woods in a not too distant future. The rules of this macabre game of survival are simple : the teenagers are supposed to kill each other and the last person to come out alive is declared victorious and showered with riches.

Experts believe such bleak depictions stem from our inherent cynicism. James Cameron's Terminator was actually meant to highlight our overwhelming dependence on machines which consequently precipitated such a scenario of machines ultimately assuming control over us.

Real life burning issues also get portrayed in the guise of dystopian future. District 9 was really about the pernicious effects of apartheid and drew from the real life events of District 6 in Cape Town where a forcible expulsion of nearly 60,000 blacks or mixed race took place, represented by the aliens in the movie, where they

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too were forcibly segregated.

Hunger Games is a radicalized version of high school drama. The hypercompetitive rat race in high school will make you either swim or sink, or in this movie's case - kill or be killed.

One may simply dismiss the ominous signs these films portend by labeling them simply as sick popcorn fantasies, but sociologists are of the opinion that the events shown in the movies, howsoever fantastical, are actually a reflection of a growing concern about the ills and abuses of the society that are occurring in front of our eyes. Filmmakers try to cushion the blow of this harsh reality by telling the audience that such untoward events will happen in a distant future. The futuristic films will definitely have narratives woven around on many compelling issues- apocalyptic natural disasters, genocide of epic proportions or a zombie infested land where only a handful of humans battle for survival. Children Of Men's adroit depiction of a chaotic, anarchic world where the entire human race have been rendered barren is another classic example that springs to mind.

Rather than outrightly dismissing the themes of these movies as silly fantasies and figments of moviemaker's imagination, the onus is on us to watch and listen more intently and take adequate measures to stave off such a disastrous future.

So, if such filmmakers are indeed correct, what can we expect in the future?

- Human lives will be dominated by an autocratic government, that suppresses free-will : Equilibrium shows a Fascist government that makes all emotions illegal. A Clockwork Orange depicts an experimental aversion therapy developed by the government in an effort to solve society's crime problem, through brainwashing. In Logan's Run, no one is allowed to live over thirty. Nineteen Eighty-Four has a government controlling masses by controlling their thoughts. They Live has alien beings controlling the minds of the masses by use of subliminal messages urging apathy and obedience. Dark City portrays that reality can be an artificial creation controlled by a fiendish underworld of ominous beings. Total Recall deals with false memory implementations too. Fahrenheit 451 paints a dark futuristic world, where literature, reading, and independent thought have been outlawed. Brazil is an Orwellian vision of the future, where the populace are completely controlled by the state. THX 1138 is a chilling look at a 25th-century totalitarian state where mankind is stripped of any individuality.
- Human lives, especially those of teenagers and young adults, may be at the mercy of reality shows or government programmes : Hunger Games has teenagers killing each other for survival and money. Battle Royale puts Japan in a state of chaos, where violence by rebellious teenagers in schools is completely out of control and the government hits back with a new law : every year a school class picked at random will be cast away on a desert island to fight it out among themselves, and only one will survive. Starship Troopers has school kids being put in the middle of a war against aliens. Rollerball, set in 2018, depicts a sport called Rollerball run by the Energy Corporation, one of the conglomerates running the planet in a time when countries and individual governments are obsolete. In Death Race 2000, the government sponsors a popular, but bloody, cross-country race in which points are scored by mowing down pedestrians, with bonus points for the elderly. The Running Man has a popular game show in which convicted felons race for their lives in decimated L.A. in hopes of a pardon.
- Diseases will be predominant : Leaves of Grass shows a strange new virus has appeared, which only attacks strains of grasses such as wheat and rice, and the world is descending into famine and chaos. In Le Dernier Combat, people can no longer talk. In Blindness, they can no longer see. In Children of Men, all women are barren. The Omega Man and I Am Legend has experimental vaccines wreaking havoc, killing the populace and deforming the survivors. 28 Days Later and Land of the Dead have that similar scenario too.

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- The line between the real and the virtual may start to thin, and in many cases, completely blur : In *Strange Days*, the protagonist sells dreams and hustles nightmares, dealing in real-life experiences through a new technology that makes every sensation immediate. *A Scanner Darkly* showcases a drug that causes its users to develop split personalities. *The City of Lost Dreams* has a mad scientist who kidnaps children and harvests their dreams. In *Ghost in the Shell*, a cybernetically augmented female agent tracks a virtual criminal. In the cult classic, *The Matrix*, reality is actually a simulated reality created by sentient machines to pacify and subdue the human population, while their bodies' heat and electrical activity are used as an energy source. *Avalon* has illegal virtual reality games where you can be trapped or lost.
- The machines will take over : *Blade Runner* has human clones revolting against the system. *The Matrix* has machines harvesting humans for energy. *The Terminator* has machines overthrowing human control in distant future. *I, Robot* details a world where the co-existence of humans and robots is threatened when the latter starts experiencing emotions. Sometimes it is not machines taking over. Like in *Planet of the Apes*, hyper-rational apes control Earth.
- There will be widespread poverty and inequality among classes : *Soylent Green* illustrates a future where people kill each other over food. *Delicatessen* has food being used as currency. *Akira*, set in 2019, builds Neo-Tokyo, a futuristic city that has arisen from ashes under Japan's new political system; but the glittering city is built on foundations of poverty, ignorance and despair. In *Metropolis*, people are divided into two groups : the thinkers who make plans, yet don't know how to operate machinery, and the workers who forward production without having any overview vision.
- Apocalypse will be knocking at the door : Be it through nuclear weapons as in *Mad Max* and *Dr. Strangelove*, through infertility as in *Children of Men*, through a worldwide plague as in *Twelve Monkeys* and *Contagion*, through zombie infestation as in *28 Days Later* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, through dimensional mishap as in *Quiet Earth*, or some undisclosed reason as in *The Road*, the fragility of human existence is brought out in futuristic movies.
- Out of the darkness, there will rise a hero : When the system controlling lives corrupts beyond repair, someone has to step up and take a stand. John Preston in *Equilibrium*, Snake Plissken in *Escape from New York*, Guy and Linda Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*, V in *V for Vendetta*, Kaneda in *Akira*, Mal Reynolds in *Serenity*, John Anderton in *Minority Report*, Neo, Morpheus and Trinity in *The Matrix*, John Connor in *Terminator : Salvation*, Deckard in *Blade Runner* are examples of such heroes who revolt against the system.

Within our contemporary political despair, each film can be read as both a mirror and an alarm, reflecting what some see as hopeless, or hopelessly complicated by war, immigration struggles, and environmental degradation. There has to be more to life, these films seem to be shouting. There will be oppression, bigotry, and small-mindedness in some form as long as there are political systems. In all these films, we are implored by example not to look away, but to witness the suffering of the world. And to take necessary steps to curb it. Because even in the darkest of dystopia, there is always a hint of hope.

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