

リサイクル適性 (A)

この印刷物は、印刷用の紙へ  
リサイクルできます。

Political Messages in Hollywood Blockbusters:  
An Analysis of Political Themes in Science Fiction  
from the Last Four Decades

Matthew Allen

# Political Messages in Hollywood Blockbusters: An Analysis of Political Themes in Science Fiction from the Last Four Decades

ハリウッド超大作における政治的メッセージ：  
過去40年にわたるSF映画にみる政治的テーマの  
分析

Matthew Allen

## Abstract

An analysis of four representative science fiction films of the past four decades can demonstrate the surprising presence of antiestablishment messages in mainstream cinema. The four films selected, in chronological order, are *Robocop* (1987), *Starship Troopers* (1997), *Avatar* (2009), and *In Time* (2011). Collectively, they address such issues as media, racism, capitalism, and privatization. This paper examines the ways in which such big budget films can subvert the very system that produced them—as long as they turn a profit. Film theorists have long lamented the birth of the blockbuster and its effect on more artistic fare. They argue that films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) effectively killed creativity in Hollywood, leading inevitably to the era of comic book movies we are in today. It is interesting to note, however, that—at least within the genre of science

fiction—there is at least as much, if not more, countercultural subversion in cinema than there was during the heady days of the communist-written Western. The four films selected have been examined before. Previous analysis, however, has focused on the individual films or individual directors. This paper seeks to describe a pattern within the genre of science fiction that transcends the individual filmmakers. Rather than apply auteur theory to examine a particular director’s idiosyncrasies, as has been done in the past, it seeks to go beyond toward an analysis of political themes that exist in the filmic zeitgeist.

Keywords: Blockbusters, Film Analysis, Film Theory, Science Fiction.

Political Messages in Hollywood Blockbusters:  
An Analysis of Political Themes in Science Fiction  
from the Last Four Decades

Matthew Allen

**Introduction**

The genre of science fiction not only contains political messages but also potentially several messages or underlying themes per film. In comparison, James Combs looks solely at the genre of the historical war film—which is

limited to only one controversial theme that is relevant to the real history. While it is true that *Casualties of War* (1989), for example, had an antiestablishment political message, it essentially only had the one theme: war crimes in Vietnam (Combs 72). In addition, as *Al Jazeera* documented, the genre of historical war is hampered by its reliance on real-world military hardware. In order to gain access to such equipment, *Windtalkers* (2002) was required by the Pentagon to censor depictions of American war crimes in World War II. When *Thirteen Days* (2000) resisted similar censorship in regard to the Cuban Missile Crisis, its production values suffered: it was forced to rely on stock footage for several scenes (“Hollywood and the War Machine”). Science fiction such as *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*, on the other hand, can allegorically deal with the negative aspects of the same history while avoiding both controversy—due to the lack of critics’ understanding of the satire—and outside interference, due to story requirements that do not allow producers to even consider the temptation of the tradeoff inherent in Pentagon assistance. Kristi Bohannon writes of how *MASH* (1970) was only able to deal with the Vietnam War through the distraction of a Korean setting (5). As explained in an interview on *Democracy Now!*, *Avatar*, likewise, was able to address the controversy of the Iraq War by setting itself in the distant future (“*Avatar* Director James Cameron”). In comparison, *Green Zone* (2010) dealt overtly with the same controversy that *Avatar* did allegorically. While the latter was the highest-grossing film of all time, the former was considered a flop. Undoubtedly, factors aside from politics played a role in this. Nonetheless, *Green Zone* was critiqued (harshly) by *Time* primarily from a political standpoint (“Box Office”).

Those who have looked at science fiction films, such as Brian Crim, Dominic Alessio and Kristen Meredith, and Nurlita Hapsaari, have tended to focus on a particular film: *Starship Troopers*, *Avatar*, and *In Time*,

respectively. This approach, while offering several insights, lacks an overall sense of the genre's role in the film industry. Thomas Disch, looking at science fiction as a whole, identifies political themes such as feminism (115-136). Yet his analysis is focused on literature, not film. Disch's political analysis of *Starship Troopers* is that of the original book by Robert Heinlein (163-184). It is interesting to note that, while the book had pro-militaristic themes, the film adaptation is rare in attacking its own source material—in the form of a scathing, anti-militaristic satire which, as *The Atlantic* reports, critics are only now beginning to understand (“One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever”).

Emmanuel Malchiodi, while looking at several science fiction films, limits his discussion to those of a certain director: Paul Verhoeven, who directed both *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*. This seems to be due to a lingering belief in auteur theory, which William Goldman argues plays no role in the real world of Hollywood (100-105). A screenwriter himself, Goldman might have pointed out that those two Verhoeven films are also connected by having the same writer, Edward Neumeier. It is interesting to note that it is the writer, and not so-called auteur, that unites these films—through his technique of future-media satire, in the form of news broadcast. While it is true that, as Malchiodi asserts, *Total Recall* (1990) and *Show Girls* (1995) both demonstrate the director, Paul Verhoeven's trademark satirical attack on Hollywood violence and sex, respectively, both films lack the extreme political consciousness of the two selected here (50).<sup>1</sup>

For this article, the seemingly arbitrary number of decades was chosen as those are the only four that have transpired since the birth of the blockbuster in the 1970s. As Peter Biskind shows, *Jaws* (1975) and, to a lesser extent, *Star Wars* (1977) transformed Hollywood by getting studios to focus on fewer and bigger budget films (255-285, 316-345). Biskind blames this phenomenon

for having ended diversity among Hollywood films and their subject matter but, as shall be demonstrated, it also allowed filmmakers—through a focus on the previously sidelined genre of science fiction—to become even more subversive in their content, echoing (and creating a renaissance of the subversion present in) the communist-written Westerns of the 1930s (123). As Nurlita Hapsaari details, science fiction films such as *In Time* can be extremely critical—hypocritically or otherwise—of the very system that produced them (2).

While *Jaws* and *Star Wars* had both touched on political issues—the former on commercial interests trumping public safety and the latter as allegory for such things as the Nazi stormtroopers—neither had held the cautionary status of science fiction. Despite its setting and technology, even *Star Wars* was set in the distant past and thus is more accurately classified as space opera or fantasy. The subgenre of the politically dissident science fiction blockbuster was instead born with *Alien* (1979). Reflecting a fear of the emerging power of the late-20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon of TNCs (transnational corporations), *Alien* brought the motif of the evil corporation to public consciousness. Before it, science fiction had either been crypto-fascistically utopian—as in Robert Heinlein and Gene Roddenberry’s work—or expressed fear of Orwellian totalitarianism, in the form of unrestrained state power. *Alien* said something new: that the real danger was not governmental, but corporate. “The company,” styled as “Weylan Yutani” by concept artist Ron Cobb—as a reference to British and Japanese multinationals—has since been developed into “Weyland Yutani” in the *Aliens* franchise. And it has been copied countless times in the form of such fictional firms as *Blade Runner*’s (1982) Tyrell Corporation, *Robocop*’s OCP (Omni Consumer Products), *Avatar*’s RDA (Resources Development Administration), and *In Time*’s Weis Timelenders. And thus for four decades

has the genre of the science fiction blockbuster been used as a vehicle for criticism of the new corporate Establishment, a regime that has replaced state power as the dominant force in society during the same period. The very future of which these films have warned has become a reality as more films in the genre continue to be ironically produced by an industry characteristic of it.

### 1. Media in *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*

When comparing these two films, it is interesting to note that *Robocop* was made during the Reagan administration, and can be interpreted in that context, whereas *Starship Troopers* is more timeless, attacking imperialism through its exploration of themes of media and racism (Crim 111). And that is not to say these are the only two science fiction films of the past four decades that have done so. Films such as *Max Headroom: 20 Minutes Into The Future* (TV, 1985) and *V For Vendetta* (2005) have looked at media and censorship. And others, such as *Enemy Mine* (1985) and—as Zahid Chaudhary shows—*Children of Men* (2006) have dealt with racism and/or fear of the Other (76-79). The reason these two films written by Neumeier have been selected is simply that they address several issues each.

In terms of the first of these issues, media, both *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers* are interspersed with fictional news reports that satirize the societies in which they are set. In the former, the news reports take place within a relatively free capitalist society; in the latter, they depict the comical propaganda of an authoritarian one. It is relatively easy to see the satire in the latter: the “Why We Fight” segment near the beginning of the film is clearly a reference to the Frank Capra propaganda of the United States

during World War II (Crim 104). In addition, the military recruiting advertisements that bookend the film are an obvious reference to American recruitment propaganda during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, advertising that seems over-the-top by today's standards. In fact, it is this throwback to the American propaganda of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that ironically gives the feel of a future authoritarian regime more akin to North Korea than the United States of today. Noam Chomsky, whom Verhoeven explicitly acknowledges (in DVD commentary) being influenced by, argues that totalitarianism of this kind was justifiably present in the U.S. during the war.

Nazi Germany never became as totalitarian as England and the United States did. In England and the United States it was a kind of voluntary totalitarianism. People were really committed to the war, so they were willing to give up the normal freedoms. You know, you had wage and price controls and so on, and they could carry out very effective mobilization. In Germany, they couldn't do it, because they didn't trust the population ("On War and Activism").

Perhaps the most interesting example of media in *Starship Troopers* is the way the embedded journalist hints to the audience that the humans may be the aggressors, reporting that "Some say the bugs were provoked by the intrusion of humans into their natural habitat, that a 'live and let live' policy is preferable to war with the bugs." To this, the hero, whose hometown was destroyed by the alien Other, replies, "Let me tell you something. I'm from Buenos Aires and I say kill 'em all!" The journalist raises an eyebrow at this, in a wink to the audience, the filmmakers using the convention of the to-camera stand-up piece to diegetically break the fourth wall in comically Brechtian fashion. As Crim notes, Chomskyan moments like this give us the

sense that there is more to this simplistic tale of good guys and bad aliens than meets the eye (115). Finally, the film also explores the limits of debate about war in media. In one sequence, pundits comically debate how to beat the bugs, leaving aside all uncomfortable discussion of whether we humans should be at war with them in the first place (Malchiodi 58-76).

*Robocop's* fictional news program, *Media Break* offers hidden jokes on three levels: 1) the obvious content of the news itself; 2) the format of the news; and 3) the advertising between segments of each episode. The core of *Robocop's* comedy lies in future events that seem outrageous and shocking being dealt with in a matter-of-fact manner. For example, there are the new American war with Mexico and Orwellian "Peace Platform"—a reference to Reagan's plans for the SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) or "Star Wars"—which accidentally misfires, "killing two former United States presidents who had retired to the Santa Barbara area." In terms of the format of the news itself, *Robocop* offers Chomskyan meta-jokes about the production of TV news within a capitalist framework. The *Media Break* slogan, "You give us three minutes, and we'll give you the world" takes the phenomenon of the pressure of advertising making news succinct to extreme lengths. TV news that was short at 30 minutes in 1987, becomes ridiculously so in the near future. In addition to this, the casting of *Entertainment Tonight's* Liza Gibbons as a serious news anchor plays with the audience's assumed knowledge of pop-culture in order to allegorically cast aspersions on the journalistic credentials of TV news contemporary to the production of the film. Finally, the advertising that has created this bizarre news format itself offers social satire. There is a wholesome family board game about thermonuclear war, the running gag of an American car with poor gas mileage, and a doctor selling hearts who seems somewhat less than sincere when he says with a smile, "And remember, we care."

While Malchiodi correctly identifies the elements above, he fails to note the core point of the satire: that the pressure of TV advertising can have a dispassionate, indirectly censoring effect (26-33). The documentary, *Manufacturing Consent* goes beyond the theory in the book of the same title, on which Malchiodi bases his analysis and which is largely focused on print media, to practical experience of TV news programs (29-30). TV's reliance on advertising keeps news segments so short that "concision" is prized, and only those views conventional enough to not require lengthy explanation are allowed on air (*Manufacturing Consent*).

Although mentioning the writer behind this commentary, Malchiodi only assigns him a supportive role (25, 51, 57, 59). Malchiodi, accepting the director's own self-attribution, views all of this satirical content as having originated with Verhoeven, when the fact that the style is present in only two of that director's films leads one to look at Neumeier instead (32). As Malchiodi himself notes, *Total Recall* did not exploit the motif to the extent that *Starship Troopers* and *Robocop* did (35). He overanalyzes what he recognizes as product placement for political significance—in a latently auteur-theory attempt to link it to the other two Verhoeven films (48). News and advertising are in that film used for mere exposition and set-dressing, not social satire. Unlike in *Total Recall*, *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers*'s news and advertising segments are not solely related to the plot and look.

## **2. Racism in *Starship Troopers* and *Avatar***

While both *Starship Troopers* and *Avatar* deal with the theme of racism, the latter does so from the standpoint of imperialism/colonialism alone, while the former looks both at those crimes and the internal ones of fascism

in Nazi Germany. The significant difference between the two films is that, as social satire, *Starship Troopers* is, at its heart, a comedy—and thus able to criticize its own heroes subversively; *Avatar*, on the other hand, uses its literalist science fiction premise and an orientalist paradigm to place the audience's sympathies vicariously with the victims of colonialism—and thus make many of the same points in a less subtle fashion. While Alessio & Meredith are correct to diagnose this Orientalism, it must be recognized that it allowed anti-imperialist themes to reach a wider audience (11-17). According to *Deadline Hollywood*, Writer-Director James Cameron was only able to resist controversy-averse studio executives' demands that he cut what they referred to as "hippy crap" due to his immense power as an A-list director ("James Cameron to James Murdoch").

The indictment of the humans' racism in *Avatar* takes the form of a moustache-twirling antagonist who speaks of the blue-skinned indigenous people as "blue monkeys" and laments the fact that they do not seem to appreciate all of the technological advancements that invasion and colonization have brought them. He complains of them liking "mud" instead, living in trees, and believing in such things as a "sacred fern." His subordinate refers to the indigenous as "savages." Placing these words in the mouths of villains offers a direct rebuttal to any audience member's latent desires to excuse their own nation's imperialist past through appeal to the supposed beneficence of acts of colonization. In much the same way that another science fiction film, *V For Vendetta* inspired the Occupy Movement and hacktivist group Anonymous, *Avatar* led Palestinian protesters to paint themselves blue and hold up bows and arrows against the IDF (Israel Defense Forces)—their own version of the "Sky People" (as the humans in the film are known by the indigenous species). While Cameron does not endorse this Palestinian interpretation of his film, he did actively support

indigenous, anti-development protesters in Brazil in the wake of its phenomenal success (“*Avatar* Director James Cameron”).

*Starship Troopers* not only deals overtly with media depictions of the alien enemy as the misunderstood Other, but also weaves subtle threads of commentary throughout its length—by associating its protagonists with the Nazis. Paul Sammon quotes Neumeier as saying, “What I really liked about the idea of this movie was that it allowed me to write about fascism. I had a feeling that today’s film audiences would really appreciate Heinlein’s ideas. Because the message of the original book was pretty straightforward: Democracy is failing, and we need some strict controls on our culture” (Sammon 10). In addition to its being woven throughout the story, this fascist theme is communicated through costume design: the grey uniforms, Wehrmacht-style caps, and Gestapo-style trench coats. In addition, some of the propaganda has overtones of Leni Riefenstahl, substituting cockroaches for rats in a comically manic desire to kill the Other (Crim 109).<sup>2</sup> The militaristic society being so comically exaggerated perhaps explains why the film was misinterpreted by some critics as being pro-fascist (Malchiodi 51). Perhaps for similarly misguided reasons, the Japanese DVD omits a reference to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima; the reference in question appears to tout and gloat over that military action, but instead is actually a subversive critique of it. In response to such misinterpretations, Verhoeven remarked that “War makes fascists of us all” (Crim 110). In terms of more traditional racism and imperialist language, the film abounds. In one scene, a hero declares his hope that someday a human will kill the insects’ leader’s “whole fucking race.” In another, a commander orders his men to kill anything with “more than two legs.” One more sees a military leader proudly declare his intent that “human civilization, not insect, dominate this galaxy now and always.”

### 3. Capitalism in *Avatar* and *In Time*

While *Avatar* touches on capitalism—as it does racism—only in relation to its main theme of imperialism/colonialism, *In Time* focuses entirely on anti-capitalism, and was called by *Fox News* the “first Hollywood movie of the Occupy era” (“*In Time*”). Both films were, ironically, extremely expensive Hollywood blockbusters. Both the apparent hypocrisy noted by Hapsaari and lack of the kind of censorship reported on by *Al Jazeera* can perhaps be explained by filmmaker Michael Moore’s rephrasing of the old Marxist adage—in the documentary, *The Corporation*—that a capitalist “will sell you the rope to hang himself with if he thinks he make a buck off it.” (*The Corporation*). Both films did well at the box office, *Avatar* extremely so. Cameron remarked of his film’s message that his hope was that it “sort of goes out into the zeitgeist, and maybe it tips the tide very slightly just in, you know, human consciousness.” (“*Avatar* Director James Cameron”). And neither Cameron nor Andrew Niccol, director of *In Time*, are new to political message-making. Niccol’s screenplay for *The Truman Show* (1998) was an indictment of consumerism and reality TV; more recently, as *The Washington Post* noted, his *Good Kill* (2014) targeted the U.S. military’s program of drone warfare (“In *Good Kill*”). Cameron’s *Aliens* (1986) is considered a classic for its development of the motif of the evil corporation.<sup>3</sup> And it is not only Niccol and Cameron who target capitalism. More recently, science fiction director Neill Blomkamp explicitly told *The Telegraph* that his film, *Elysium* (2013) was an allegory about economic inequality (“Neill Blomkamp interview”). The only reason that film was not also chosen for this analysis is that its focus is largely parochial, it dealing with issues almost unique to American capitalism, such as mass illegal immigration and lack of access to health

care. In comparison, *Avatar* and *In Time* are far more universal in their critique.<sup>4</sup>

Cameron's assault on capitalism comes in much the same form that George Bernard Shaw and Kurt Vonnegut's did more than a half a century and a century earlier, respectively: he places the author's voice in the mouth of the antagonist, fooling the audience into trusting the one character who seems unlikely to preach to them. His film's emphasis on imperialism means that the nemesis's ironically pro-capitalist message comes in the form of him channeling Alan Greenspan (as reported in *The Guardian*), effectively "admitting" to the audience that the Iraq War (i.e. invasion of the fictional planet, Pandora) was all about oil (i.e. the fictional substance, unobtainium) ("Greenspan Admits Iraq Was about Oil"). In another, deleted scene—one only available in DVD bonus features—the hero overtly states that, "This is how it's done. When people are sittin' on shit that you want, you make 'em your enemy. Then you're justified in taking it." To which, another protagonist replies, "They're fabricating a war." Cameron has explicitly confirmed that the allegory here is to Iraq and the alleged lies about weapons of mass destruction ("*Avatar* Director James Cameron"). In a further scene, the nemesis explicitly states that shareholders are more interested in profits than justice and human rights: "Killing the indigenous looks bad, but there's one thing shareholders hate more than bad press. And that's a bad quarterly statement." While obviously based on the American experience, these commentaries are relatively translatable to other colonialism and neocolonialism in other places and at other times. In addition to these elements, *Avatar* also touches on the effects of capitalism on the environment. The environmental destruction due the mining of the aforementioned unobtainium requires no dialogue, being communicated in starkly visual terms. It could also be said that the film references capitalism's role in

climate change, with it taking the Gaia hypothesis to an extreme extent. Whereas much of science fiction is metaphor and allegory, the literal nature of the sentient planet, Pandora, reverses this pattern—taking a real-world metaphor and making it literal. In one deleted scene, the absence of which was noticed by *The Artifice*, the characters reference Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, a book and film (2012) which explicitly connects capitalism to environmental destruction, in terms even a child could understand.

... Cameron put one book right into the movie, at least in the extended home video version: Dr. Seuss's landmark children's book *The Lorax* (1971). In the extended version of *Avatar*, Grace and Jake, in Na'vi form, explore the ruins of the old colonial school for the Omaticaya, and Jake picks up a dusty copy of *The Lorax*. Grace smiles at Jake as he holds the book, and says, "I love that one!" This praise takes on added significance because Sigourney Weaver has said that she's essentially "playing Jim Cameron in the movie....kind of channeling him" ("*Avatar's* Shock and Awe").

In *In Time*, the anti-capitalist message is at once less direct and more so. It is less direct in the sense that the fictional setting attempts to hide the true meaning through allegory. Instead of speaking relatively directly of such things as corporations and money—as does *Avatar*—it speaks of everything in terms of time. It is, however, more direct in that, instead of looking at other issues, such as racism and imperialism, it focuses entirely on various aspects of capitalism, such as usury and social class. Like in *Avatar*, the pro-capitalist message comes from the nemesis who, while defending the morality of the fictional economy based on genetically programmable units of lifespan, states that it is "merely Darwinian

capitalism.” In terms of social class, the film’s stylized setting eliminates realistic concerns of race—which, for example, *Elysium* deals with—in order to focus on the economic divide of people who are, to all intents and purposes, physically identical (both in terms of race and, due to the sci-fi conceit, age). The main character, upon being given practical immortality by a rich man tired of living, immediately gets into trouble for appearing out of place in a land of immortals (i.e. a rich neighborhood). Gary Westfahl details how, instead of the racial profiling of cities such as New York, where black people have been targeted when buying products they are statistically unlikely to be able to afford, *In Time*’s hero is subjected to class-based profiling due to his hurried movements, movements characteristic of poor people living genetic paycheck to paycheck (Westfahl). The point is that this differs from a mere commentary on economic disparity in that the character is no longer poor—and thus is acting according to habit programed before he became rich. As *Think Progress* notes, hurried movement serves as allegory for inherited aspects of class such as accent.

... the movie’s most incisive movements may be the social signifiers that show who’s grown up with wealth and who hasn’t. Watching Will wolf a meal in a gorgeous restaurant, a waitress tells him, “You’re not from around here, are you? You do everything a little too fast.” And Sylvia, who’s grown up drowning in languorousness, is drawn to Will’s haste. “I saw you run,” she tells him. “It reminds me of people who come from the ghetto” (“A Radical Statement”).

In *In Time*, usury takes the form of the nemesis’s “timelender” business, a thinly veiled reference to payday loans. The hero and heroine rob a timelender charging usurious interest rates in Robin Hood fashion. Yet all of their efforts

make little difference, and thus the film ends with them moving on to robbing big banks. As Nicky Marsh rightly recognizes, this ending to a film made in 2011 cannot but be interpreted as a reference to the role of big banks in the GFC (Global Financial Crisis). These two themes of usury and social class combine at the climax of the film with the nemesis's honest "admission" that the American Dream is a myth—that his moneylending business will continue to prosper as most people are foolish enough to "think they have a chance at immortality" (i.e. great wealth) within the existing system—"even though all of the evidence is against it." The OECD data on social mobility in developed nations could be seen as the real-world equivalent of that "evidence." In it, the U.S. is shown to have less social mobility than the home of *Downton Abbey* (OECD 188). In an earlier scene, another wealthy character confides in the hero the secret that not everyone can be immortal (i.e. rich), saying that, "For a few to be immortal, many must die ... Everyone can't live forever. Where would we put them?" This seems to be a reference to Greenspan's other infamous admission—quoted in Thomas Palley—the idea that a certain degree of poverty is not only not a problem for capitalism, but in fact required for it sustain itself (112).

#### **4. Privatization in *Robocop* and *Avatar***

Really an extension of the capitalist theme, privatization has been here analyzed separately in order to examine its role in *Robocop*, a film that is less generally critical of capitalism as a whole than is *Avatar*. While it is true that one minor villain in *Robocop* refers to "free enterprise" as the best "way to steal" (in, as Malchiodi notes, a satirical reference to the spirit of Reaganomics contemporary to the film's writing), the film as a whole is less

against capitalism than against that system being taken too far—in the form of the comical privatization of everything (Malchiodi 25). The irony is that, much as *V for Vendetta* accurately predicted the current day trouble in Syria, *Robocop* predicted the replacement of democracy in Detroit by unelected emergency managers (“From ‘Old Detroit’ to Delta City”). Conversely, whereas in *Avatar* privatization primarily and contemporaneously refers to the largely 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon of PMCs (private military companies), *Robocop* both makes a larger critique of the practice and successfully predicts it being taken to the extreme lengths that it has in the three decades since the film’s release.

In *Avatar*, the hero refers to the human soldiers in the film as having been Marines back on Earth, “fighting for freedom,” but now “they’re just hired guns, taking the money, working for the company.” A more explicit reference to the PMC, Blackwater, in light of the film’s other Iraq War references, couldn’t have been possible (Alessio & Meredith 7). The leader of the mercenaries in the film is shown to be part of the same company, RDA, which controls the entire colonization of Pandora. This has echoes of the British East India Company—in its combination of military and economic functions.<sup>5</sup> Adam Smith remarked of the contemporaneous colonization of the American colonies that it was not in the interests of Britons, but instead the “principal architects” of government policy, the merchants (468). But it is more likely that Cameron’s reference is to Halliburton and the controversy regarding its former CEO Dick Cheney blurring the lines between the government and private elements of the war effort in Iraq, a controversy that was well known before the film was made (Alessio & Meredith 7).

In one scene in *Robocop*, the nemesis’s henchman asks for access to military hardware; in response, the corporate villain proudly states, “We practically are the military.” Nonetheless, *Robocop* takes a much harder and

broader line on privatization, tying it to examples that are much less controversial—at least today, due to three decades of normalization. The irony is that the unthinkable world of the future of which it was warning has now come true. The nemesis in the film proudly talks of OCP’s record in investing in areas not usually seen as profitable—such as “prisons, hospitals, space exploration.” Today, around the world but especially in the U.S., prison privatization—of the kind warned of as late as the release of the science fiction film *Fortress* (1993)—has become standard. It is only recently that this phenomenon has become a controversial issue in mainstream politics with, at the time of writing, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton being reported by *Fusion* as having given campaign donations from private prisons to charity in order to disassociate herself from them (“Dirty Money”).

The core of *Robocop*’s critique of privatization occurs not in dialogue or imagery—as many of the themes in the films mentioned do—but instead is deeply integrated into the very plot. The main character becomes the eponymous cyborg police officer not due to his own choice, but because the police force has become privatized and thus owns his severely injured body. One corporate rep explains that, “He signed the release forms when he joined the force, he’s legally dead... we can do pretty much what we want to him.” Upon becoming a cyborg, the hero is programmed with a secret directive: that he never arrest any executive of the company that owns the police. Herein lies the essential critique of the conflict of interest allegedly inherent in privatization: that public goods such as security, when privatized, will be compromised by their control by private interests. Later in the story, his arrest of the nemesis’s henchman is compromised by the fact that the henchman is, by extension, an employee of OCP. The hero is only able to overcome this conflict when the nemesis is fired by OCP, making him a viable target for law enforcement.

## Conclusion

The four films, *Robocop*, *Starship Troopers*, *Avatar*, and *In Time* show a surprisingly countercultural trend in mainstream moviemaking. The genre of science fiction provides just enough allegorical cover for their messages to get through, either consciously or unconsciously, into the zeitgeist—without provoking any institutional or other forms of indirect censorship from the Hollywood system that produced them. As stated, in the case of *Avatar*, this was at least partly due to the filmmaker's bargaining power as an A-lister with a track record of successful films. And in all cases, it could be argued, the profitability of the films is what is prized above all by the system at large. As long as it looks likely to turn a profit, any film, no matter how radical in content (case in point, *V for Vendetta*), stands a chance of succeeding within that structure. For while there is indirect censorship in the form of access to the necessities of filmmaking, there remains none of the direct, governmental variety. In this sense, science fiction blockbusters can be considered another example of the meta-critiques that the director of two of the films selected, Verhoeven, is known for. As to how conscious audiences are of the messages contained in these and other mainstream films, further research is needed.

While the blockbuster can be seen as having killed Hollywood, it has ironically—in the genre of science fiction—allowed for a return to the kind of subversion present in Hollywood films of the pre-blacklist 1930s. Political themes are not unique to the auteuristic idiom of one particular filmmaker, and instead transcend personality, being more characteristic of the genre than individual directors. By looking at the last four decades of science fiction blockbusters rather than individual films in isolation, one can discern a fascinating trend. In the last ten years in particular, the rise in the number

of such cases as *V for Vendetta*, *Children of Men*, and *Elysium* indicates a response to the post-9/11 and Great Recession zeitgeist that warrants further study.

## Notes

1. Of his trademark style, Verhoeven remarked, “When I was making movies in the Netherlands my films were judged by the critics as decadent, perverted and sleazy... so I moved to the United States. This was ten years ago. In the meantime, my movies are criticized as being decadent, perverted and sleazy in this country... I am very glad that I got all these awards, because it certainly means that I am accepted here and that I am part of this great American society” (Malchiodi 50).
2. *V for Vendetta* was not included as one of the four films focused on, in favor of *Avatar* (which was released in the same decade), but it too deals with multiple themes. Most notably, like *Starship Troopers*, it has multiple references to fascism in general and Nazi Germany in particular. Unlike the other four films, which were all original screenplays (despite being based on a novel of the same name, *Starship Troopers* was original in that it was more of a parody than adaptation), *V for Vendetta* was based on a graphic novel. The dictatorial nemesis in the graphic novel is named Susan. In the film, this name was changed to Sutler, a clear play on “Hitler.” Going further than *Starship Troopers*, this post-9/11 film explicitly warns of the War on Terror becoming an excuse for fascism. The eponymous hero tells the public that he knows why they did it: “There were a myriad of problems which conspired to corrupt your reason and rob you of your common sense. Fear got the best of you, and in your panic you turned to the now high chancellor, Adam Sutler. He promised you order, he promised you peace, and all he demanded in return was your silent, obedient consent.” As Floris Van Den Berg notes, considering when the film was made, the name Sutler could easily have been replaced with that of George W. Bush or the Patriot Act (Van Den Berg). The artist behind *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore, is an avowed anarchist and once publicly feuded with Frank Miller, whose militaristic, eugenic, and overall laconophilic graphic novel, *300* was adapted by the same director, Zach Snyder, that adapted another of Moore’s works, *Watchmen*. The irony here being that one director adapted polarly opposite anarchistic and fascistic source material, Hollywood being happy with any subject matter so long as it sells.
3. The magazine *Slant* argues the genius of *Aliens* was influenced by the original Heinlein novel behind *Starship Troopers* and therefore not the auteur’s vision alone (“Summer of ‘86”).

4. Another Blomkamp film, *District 9* (2009) could also easily have been selected for this analysis. In that case, similar to with *Elysium* however, the allegory was almost entirely limited to the South African history of Apartheid (“Neill Blomkamp interview”).
5. Although not a science fiction film, the Hollywood blockbuster film franchise, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the list of highest-grossing series, includes the East India Trading Company as a proto-corporate villain.

### Works Cited

- Alessio, Dominic & Meredith, Kristen. “Decolonising James Cameron’s Pandora: Imperial History and Science Fiction.” *The Johns Hopkins UP*. (2012). Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- “Avatar Director James Cameron Follows Box Office Success with Advocacy for Indigenous Struggles.” *Democracy Now!* 27 Apr. 2010. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- “Avatar’s Shock and Awe: Technology, Race, and Space.” *The Artifice*. 10 Dec. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- “Box Office: Alice Turns Damon a Sickly Green.” *Time*. 14 Mar. 2010. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- “Greenspan Admits Iraq Was about Oil, as Deaths Put at 1.2m.” *Guardian*. 16 Sept. 2007. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1998. Print.
- Bohannon, Kristi M. “Adapting to Vietnam: A Look at MASH and Heart of Darkness from Books to Films.” Thesis. U of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects, 2001. Print.
- Chaudhary, Zahid R. “Humanity Adrift: Race, Materiality, and Allegory in Alfonso Cuarón’s Children of Men.” *Camera Obscura* 24.3 72 (2009): 73-109. Print.
- Combs, James E. *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- The Corporation*. Dir. Mark Achbar & Jennifer Abbott. Big Picture Media Corporation, 2003. Film.
- Crim, Brian E. “The Intergalactic Final Solution: Nazism and Genocide in Paul Verhoeven’s Starship Troopers.” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28.4 (2010): 104-115. Print.
- Disch, Thomas M. *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*. New York: Touchstone, 1998. Print.
- “Dirty Money: Hillary Clinton to Stop Accepting Money from Private Prison Lobbyists.” *Fusion*. 23 Oct. 2015. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- “From ‘Old Detroit’ to Delta City: Robocop’s Dystopia in Detroit.” *The Hampton Institute*. 11 Dec. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.

- Goldman, William. *Adventures in the Screenwriting Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting*. New York: Warner Books, 1983. Print.
- Hapsaari, Nurlita. "Andrew Niccol's *In Time* (2011): Superficial Self-Criticism Toward Capitalism." Thesis. U of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects, 2011. Print.
- "Hollywood and the War Machine." *Empire*. Al Jazeera English. 9 Aug. 2012. Television.
- "In *Good Kill*, Director Andrew Niccol Reveals a Drone Pilot's Anguish." *Washington Post*. 22 May 2015. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- "*In Time* Is a Bad Action Movie, But a Radical Statement on Income Inequality." *Think Progress*. 28 Oct. 2011. Web. 5 Mar. 2016.
- "*In Time* -- The First Hollywood Movie of the Occupy Wall Street Era." *Fox News*. 27 Oct. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- "James Cameron to James Murdoch: Fox Exec Slammed *Avatar* 'Tree-Hugging Crap.'" *Deadline Hollywood*. 16 Mar. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- "Neill Blomkamp interview: '*Elysium* isn't science fiction. It's now'." *The Telegraph*. 19 Aug. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Malchiodi, Emmanuel W. "Paul Verhoeven, Media Manipulation, and Hyper-Reality." Thesis. The U of Central Florida Orlando, 2011. Print.
- Manufacturing Consent*. Dir. Mark Achbar & Peter Wintonick. Humanist Broadcasting Foundation, 1992. Film.
- Marsh, Nicky. "Paradise Falls: A Land Lost in Time": Representing Credit, Debt and Work after the Crisis." *Taylor & Francis Online*. 28.7 (2014) Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- OECD. "A Family Affair." *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth*. Apr. 27. 2010.
- "On War and Activism. With Charngchi Way." *Chomsky.Info*. 9 Dec. 2005. Web. 5 May 2016.
- Palley, Thomas I. *Plenty of Nothing: The Downsizing of the American Dream and the Case for Structural Keynesianism*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.
- Sammon, Paul M. *The Making of Starship Troopers*. New York: Boulevard Books, 1998. Print.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. Blacksburg: Thrifty Books, 2009. Print.
- "*Starship Troopers*: One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever." *The Atlantic*. 7 Nov. 2013. Web. 2 Mar. 2016.
- "Summer of '86: *Aliens*". *Slant*. 3 Aug. 2011. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.
- Van Den Berg, Floris. "V for Vendetta." *Philosophy Now*. Jan./Feb. (2009). Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Westfahl, Gary. "Eight Hours of Writing about Two Hours of Film: A Review of *In Time*." *Locus Online*. 29 Oct. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.