**GENRE ESSAY SCAFFOLD: DEVELOPMENTS IN DYSTOPIAN FILM**

**A genre studied this year is dystopian science fiction film.** Dystopian films are set in the future and contain societies very similar to present day but with subtle differences. Usually the dystopia appears to be beneficial in some regard to the human race but in reality it is oppressive and controlling of its citizens. The society is fundamentally flawed with only one elite group benefitting from the misery to which the rest of the society is subject. Dystopian films also tend to reflect an aspect of the society in which they were made and the concerns of that era. Dystopian science fiction films are often used as a vehicle for social commentary and as such are an extremely powerful mode of expression. These films also include impressive special effects which have improved dramatically over time due to technological developments.

**A significant development in the science fiction genre with the sub-genre of dystopian films can be shown through the aspect of theme.** For example the 1997 film *‘Gattaca’* directed by Andrew Niccol contains important themes such as a desire for physical perfection and fear of liberal eugenics. Liberal eugenics is the deliberate selection of the genetic makeup of children. This can be seen in the film through the character of Vincent Freeman. Vincent lives in a society where it has become commonplace for parents to genetically create their children, omitting undesirable qualities. This has resulted in the creation of a genetically superior race known as “valids”. Vincent is an “invalid” and as such cannot become an astronaut. His natural conception has left him with a shortened lifespan and impaired vision – he has to wear glasses. Occupations in this film are determined by genetic makeup as are the choosing of life partners. This has resulted in a society which discriminates based not on race or gender but on the quality of an individual’s genetic make-up. **This film reflects the concerns of the era in which it was made because at this point in time there had been rapid advancements in IVF technology and cloning.** In vitro fertilization (IVF) involves the fertilization of the egg by the sperm in test tubes, outside the mother's body. The world's first test tube baby was created in 1978. By using preimplantation parents can choose the gender, eye, skin and hair colour of the baby. Various other physical traits such as intelligence, beauty, height, freedom from mental illnesses, athletic ability can be also determined. By the early 1990’s this service had become readily available to couples seeking help to conceive. The National Director of Christian Voice, Stephen Green said, "The objection to the idea of designer babies is…there's a real sense in which it is playing God." Critics of IVF point out that the level of biodiversity in the human race will plummet. This can already be seen in China where the one child policy and the use of gender determining technology has seen the abortion rate of female foetuses skyrocket. The consequence of which is a severely unbalanced gender distribution. Another concern is that IVF could also result in an increase of fear or hatred towards anyone who appears different. People with genetic defects will be socially rejected leading to a genetic aristocracy. The fact that the price for each baby is $15000 to $18,000 is another factor which adds to this fear as often treatment is only a reality for the wealthy. Clearly ‘Gattaca’ and the experiences of Vincent Freemen reflect societal fears of IVF and cloning. It could also reflect society’s preoccupation with beauty and perfection as during the 1990’s plastic surgery was also becoming increasingly popular (especially in America). This is shown in the film in that “valids” are essentially flawless human beings whose genetic make-up has been designed to produce both mental and physical perfection.

**Another example of the thematic development in dystopian films can be seen in the 2002 film ‘Equilibrium’ directed by Kurt Wimmer.** Themes change in dystopian films to reflect the changing fears in society at the time the film was made. In this case fears have changed from liberal genetics to fear of technology and loss of freedom or privacy due to governmental control. ‘Equilibrium’ is set in a dystopian city-state of Libria. After a Third World War devastated the Earth, a totalitarian state emerged whose ideology determined human emotion to be the root cause of conflict. All emotionally stimulating material is banned and "sense offenders" are ruthlessly persecuted. Everyone is required to take daily injections of Prozium, an emotion-suppressing drug. The film follows John Preston, a warrior-priest and officer in the Cleric who enforces these laws. Preston stops taking his prozium injections and as he starts “feeling” starts to notice that the restrictions imposed on the citizens of libria in the name of safety are in reality oppressive. The laws put in place by the government in order to prevent a Third World War have resulted in severely impinged on privacy and personal freedom. This can be seen in the film in the way that no citizen is allowed to have pets, marriage is for reproduction rather than love and all objects which contain emotional content are destroyed. In the opening scenes for example we see Vincent Van Gogh’s Mona Lisa being set on fire and books of poetry by W.B Yeats being collected for destruction. The theme of social control and loss of privacy is further shown by the fact that large monitors across the city spread the word of the government leader named “the father. In Preston’s house there is a huge TV screen that spreads the same message. There is a very real feeling throughout the film of being watched. Every action is noticed and reported to “Father”. This is clearly shown when Preston’s younger son sees another child crying and asks if he should “report him”. Preston replies “without question”. The monitoring of the citizens through this technology and the restriction placed upon the lives of those in Libria helps convey the theme of loss of privacy. The themes of this film are a direct result of the concerns of the era in which it was made. During the early 2000’s a major world concern was in regards to terrorism and also the increasing availability of nuclear technology. In February 2001, the United States of America and the United Kingdom bombed Iraq on the pretense that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction ready for deployment and posed a great threat to the world. The 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States saw a US “War on Terror” emerge which also resulted in many precaution measures put in place in America to keep its people safe. These initiatives included the 2001 Patriot Act where the CIA was given the power to remote access citizens’ cell phones. This film is a clear reflection of the concerns many Americans had following the 911 attacks as to the extent the government would go to in order to protect its citizens but also the implications that might have in terms of personal freedom. As shown, the themes of a film change over time in order to reflect the real life fears or concerns which face society in the era in which it is made. In this case Wimmer is asking audiences to consider how much freedom they are willing to give up in order to feel safe and the potential ramifications which could occur if government controls are not kept in check. Wimmer also stated in an interview that the film conveys how people have become almost “numb” and “insensible to the environment around us” as a result of oversaturation by the media and mass use of medication. This can be seen in the film through the Librian’s use of prozium and clearly reflects the theme of fear of technology. The film shows that is that technology can change us in such a way that we become “less human”, consciously or unconsciously. Medication can dull the senses to such an extent that people have no feeling and no opinions at all, becoming almost robotic. The widespread use of medications to fix any issue we can think of is a huge concern. Rather than deal with emotional issues or let the body heal naturally people more commonly are choosing an assortment of pills to ‘fix’ the issue.

A further development in theme can be seen in “Surrogates” by Jonathon Moscow was released seven years later in 2009. The theme shown in the film is the increased use of social media to interact in society. The film is set in a future society where a company named VSI have developed androids called “Surrogates”. The “Surrogates” walk around living the life of their controller. This advancement is seen as beneficial because the controllers are able to stay at home safe from risk of disease or accidents. In “Surrogates” The main character Tom Greer has a wife called Maggie who uses her surrogate constantly. She distances herself from her husband to escape the pain of losing her son in a car crash. Their relationship deteriorates as Tom feels isolated and distant from his wife. He mourns the relationship and physical “human” connection he has with the real Maggie. Maggie is unwilling to unplug from her surrogate as it will mean facing reality and the pain she still feels due to the loss of her son. When Tom asks her to stop using her surrogate and spend time with him she says “Things have changed Tom…This is who I am now”. This results in Tom never actually seeing or talking to his wife face to face. Throughout the film we see that the “Surrogates” are actually oppressive because they result in people losing their communication skills. Surrogate operators (like Maggie Greer) do not fully participate in life. There is the suggestion that individuals have retreated from real life for the sake or a safer more preferable alternate reality in which they do not have to ever suffer from pain, aging or disease. They can look like and become whomever they want to be. This film reflects the concerns of society in 2009 because social media sites were becoming more developed. “Facebook” became active in 2004. On this site people create profiles about themselves. This includes information such as age, gender and relationship status. “Facebook” allows a person to interact with each other from the safety of their own computer. This resulted in fear for society because people began to lose face to face communication skills. This lack of face to face communication undermines skills such as reading body language. This concern is emphasized by the Director Jonathon Mostow who declared “We stay at home and we are controlling these things precariously from afar, and really its like a metaphor for the internet, for how were living our lives right now in this digital age”. Actress Radha Mitchell who plays “Agent Peters” in the film also highlights this issue by asking “It’s the question of are we abstracting our social relationships in such a way that we are losing a sense of humanity in exchange?.” She also believes that by using social media to communicate, we are unable to understand facial expressions and body language because we are limiting the amount of human interaction in our daily lives.

**The significance of this thematic development particularly for the audience** **is** that science fiction films can always be seen as vehicles for social commentary providing relevant messages and warnings about the world around us. Science fiction is an evolving genre of film which is able to influence the thoughts and actions of the audience in regards to the issue or ideas being conveyed. Therefore the narrative of a science fiction film can be seen as an extremely powerful tool and mode of expression. Dystopian films in particular provide audiences with a rather bleak view of the future unless we evaluate carefully the consequences of our actions and the negative ramifications which may occur if we do not choose wisely.

**A significant development in the science fiction genre with the sub-genre of dystopian films can be shown through the aspect of Special Effects (SFX).** An example which helps show this development is the 1983 film “Blade Runner” directed by Ridley Scott. The film is set in Los Angeles 2019. At this point in time the use of computer generated special effects like we see in modern films were non-existent as the technology had not yet been developed. Special effects were created “in camera” using miniature models, costume, makeup and man-made sets, for example, the Los Angeles skyline and the Tyrell Corporation building. The police vehicles or hovercrafts were also created by filming man-made life size models. The futuristic cityscape was created on a large table using miniature models. The models near the front were large and 3-dimensional, as the scene went on the models became smaller. Forced perspective was used to make it appear that there was depth to the cityscape and tiny fibre optic lights were fitted to give the city a modern and realistic look. In comparison many of these images would now be created using a combination of CGI and green screen. Smoke machines were also used to blur the horizon and to give the city a dark, dystopian feel. The special effects used in this film were considered revolutionary and innovative at the time in which it was made. Although for modern audiences they seem unrealistic and unimpressive. The film even won a number of awards for its use of Special effects including…

**A further development in the aspect of Special Effects can be seen in the film**

“Gattaca” was released in 1997 when technology was developing quickly. Computer generated images (CGI) were just starting to be used to enable films to generate images on the computer without having to physically make them. The budget for special effects was still small and the use of CGI was very minimal. The only use of CGI was the rocket taking off in the launch and these effects are not very realistic. The majority of “Gattaca” uses scenery such as the set of the “Gattaca Space Station” to make the film appear futuristic. Low angles and low key lighting helped to create a dystopian society.

**As shown special effects technology is an aspect of the science-fiction genre which is constantly evolving.** This is largely due to the demand from audiences for increasingly impressive special effects and the invention of new technology. The significance and implications of these developments include high audience expectations and a need for realism. The audience must believe what they see on screen is possible and a type of reality in order to engage- hence the saying “Suspension of disbelief”. Another implication of this development on the genre is that filmmakers will strive to develop progressively innovative cutting-edge technology. Films become increasingly realistic and other genres benefit as a result. Impressive new special effects also attracts high audience numbers and therefore results in higher profits – which we all know is the major incentive behind the production of any film.

This development has been clearly demonstrated through the analysis of films such as the 1953 ‘War of the Worlds, 2005 ‘War of the Worlds, 2008 ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still’ and the 2009 film ‘Avatar’. James Cameron stated in an interview that the future of the film industry is to ensure that “movies can’t be replaced by what people see in their homes”. Therefore special effects technology must continue to advance and impress in order for this genre to survive.