

Playing to Survive: Examining the Role of Brutal Games in Dystopian Corporate Societies in the Movies *Rollerball* and *The Running Man*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 13 Feb 2025 Revised on: 15 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 20 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Dystopian Cinema, Media manipulation, Corporate hegemony, Televised violence, Commodification of human life</p>	<p><i>Dystopian films often reflect society's fears about corporate control, media manipulation, and the exploitation of violence as entertainment. This research paper examines the intersection of corporate dominance, media manipulation, and state-sanctioned violence in dystopian cinema through Rollerball (1975) and The Running Man (1987). Both films depict societies where multinational corporations wield absolute power, controlling not only economic and political structures but also public perception through brutal, televised competitions. These spectacles serve a dual purpose: they pacify the masses with violent entertainment while reinforcing authoritarian control by eliminating dissenters under the guise of sport. Through a comparative analysis, this paper explores key themes such as the commodification of human life, the erosion of personal freedoms, and the role of mass media as an instrument of oppression. Drawing on theories of dystopian literature, media studies, and corporate authoritarianism, this study argues that Rollerball and The Running Man serve as prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism, warning against the dangers of corporate-controlled societies where entertainment becomes a tool for subjugation. By contextualizing these films within contemporary debates on media ethics, corporate influence, and the growing spectacle of violence in entertainment, this research underscores their continued relevance in understanding the mechanisms of power and control in modern society.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Dystopian fiction has long served as a powerful medium for critiquing societal structures, particularly those related to power, control, and mass manipulation. In cinema, dystopian narratives often reflect contemporary anxieties about authoritarianism, corporate hegemony, and the influence of media on public consciousness. Among the most compelling portrayals of these themes are

Rollerball (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987), both of which depict futures where multinational corporations dominate every aspect of life, reducing individuals to mere instruments of entertainment and control. These films illustrate how corporate power, when left unchecked, can transform violence into a spectacle, using mass entertainment as a means of pacification and repression.

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Both films reflect the cultural and political concerns of their respective eras in which they were produced. *Rollerball*, released in 1975, emerged during a period of growing unease over corporate monopolization and the loss of individual freedoms in the wake of increasing globalization and economic restructuring. The film reflects post-industrial anxieties about the erosion of democracy and the rise of conglomerates that prioritize profit over human dignity. Its dystopian vision aligns with concerns of the 1970s, including corporate overreach, the depersonalization of labor, and fears of a society in which individual agency is systematically suppressed. Moreover, the film critiques the ways in which power structures eliminate resistance - not through overt oppression, but by creating systems that discourage rebellion, making citizens complicit in their own subjugation.

Conversely, *The Running Man* (1987) was produced during the height of Reagan-era media saturation, consumerism, and neoliberal economic policies. The 1980s saw an unprecedented expansion of television networks, the commodification of news, and the rise of reality-based entertainment, all of which blurred the lines between fiction and propaganda. The film's portrayal of a state-controlled, entertainment-driven society speaks directly to concerns about mass media as an instrument of manipulation, shaping public perception and diverting attention from systemic injustices. In addition, *The Running Man* reflects Cold War-era paranoia, where dissent is equated with criminality, and the government's grip on information serves to suppress rebellion under the guise of maintaining order. The film also anticipates the rise of "fake news" and media-driven narratives that distort reality, reinforcing ideological control over the population.

The role of entertainment in dystopian societies has been widely explored in literature and film, from George Orwell's *1984* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, both of which highlight how media and spectacle can be used to manipulate and suppress populations. *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* expand on these ideas, portraying societies in which public spectacles of violence serve to reinforce corporate rule. In *Rollerball*, the titular sport is designed to demonstrate the futility of individual resistance, while in *The Running Man*, televised death games serve as

both a distraction for the masses and a means of eliminating political dissidents. These narratives underscore the dangers of corporate-controlled societies, where the boundaries between entertainment, propaganda, and oppression become indistinguishable. Moreover, both films explore the commodification of human life, demonstrating how individuals are transformed into disposable assets for corporate or governmental gain. In *Rollerball*, athletes are stripped of their identities and turned into tools of spectacle, with their fates dictated by corporate interests. In *The Running Man*, criminals and dissidents are forced into a game where their survival is secondary to audience gratification, prefiguring the modern obsession with reality television and the erosion of ethical boundaries in media. This commodification extends beyond entertainment, reflecting broader concerns about the dehumanizing effects of corporate capitalism, where human value is measured solely in terms of productivity and profitability.

This paper aims to analyze *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* as cautionary tales about the fusion of corporate power and mass entertainment. By situating these films within their historical contexts, this study will explore how they critique late-stage capitalism, the commodification of violence, and the media's role in sustaining oppressive systems. Additionally, this research will examine the psychological and sociopolitical mechanisms that enable such dystopian realities to emerge, from desensitization to violence to the public's complicity in authoritarian entertainment. Through a comparative examination of their themes, narrative structures, and sociopolitical implications, this study will demonstrate their continued relevance in understanding the intersection of power, entertainment, and societal control.

II. DISCUSSION

Both *Rollerball* (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987) depict dystopian futures where corporations have supplanted governments, wielding absolute power over economic, social, and political structures. In these societies, individual freedoms are severely restricted, and citizens exist primarily as consumers and spectators rather than autonomous agents. Corporate hegemony is maintained through the strategic use of

entertainment, particularly violent spectacles that reinforce the illusion of choice while ensuring compliance with the status quo. In *Rollerball*, the eponymous sport serves as a mechanism of control, designed to demonstrate that no single individual can challenge corporate rule. Jonathan E., the film's protagonist, is an anomaly – his success threatens the very foundation of the game's purpose, which is to showcase the futility of resistance. His defiance exposes the fragility of the corporate system, revealing that the illusion of collective participation is a carefully orchestrated construct. Similarly, in *The Running Man*, contestants are given a false choice: participate in a state-sponsored death game or face execution. The game's structure mirrors real-world power dynamics, where economic and social disadvantages force individuals into predetermined roles. The audience, too, is complicit, as their engagement perpetuates the system. The illusion of freedom within these games parallels modern concerns about corporate influence in democratic processes, where choices are often constrained by economic and media-driven forces rather than genuine autonomy.

Both films illustrate how corporate-controlled societies employ violence as entertainment to desensitize and pacify the populace. The gladiatorial nature of *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* echoes historical precedents, such as the Roman Colosseum, where brutal spectacles served as a means of social control. The idea that violence can function as a form of mass distraction is not new, but these films present a future where it becomes the dominant cultural force, reinforcing the power of the ruling elite. In *Rollerball*, violence is highly ritualized, designed to showcase the supremacy of the system rather than the prowess of individual players. The game evolves to become increasingly brutal, stripping away rules to ensure that resistance - symbolized by Jonathan E.'s continued survival - becomes impossible. The corporations use the game to condition the masses, fostering a culture where submission is normalized and rebellion is unthinkable. *The Running Man* takes a more overtly media-critical approach, presenting a world where reality television has reached its most extreme form: human suffering packaged as prime-time entertainment. The show's host, Damon Killian, embodies the media's role in manufacturing consent,

manipulating information to shape public perception. Contestants are not only forced into a deadly game but are also subject to propaganda that distorts reality, ensuring that the audience perceives them as criminals rather than victims of systemic oppression. These depictions resonate with contemporary debates on media sensationalism, reality television, and the increasing commodification of real-life violence. In an era where news cycles thrive on spectacle and social media amplifies conflict for engagement, *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* remain disturbingly relevant. They warn against a society in which violence ceases to be shocking and instead becomes a means of reinforcing existing hierarchies.

One of the most striking parallels between these films is their portrayal of media as an instrument of corporate propaganda. In both narratives, information is tightly controlled, ensuring that public perception aligns with corporate interests. The media does not merely report events; it actively constructs reality, shaping how citizens understand the world around them. In *The Running Man*, the state-run television network not only broadcasts the deadly game but also fabricates narratives to serve the regime's agenda. Ben Richards, the film's protagonist, is framed as a mass murderer, his true story erased and replaced with a carefully curated version that justifies his participation in the game. This manipulation extends to the audience, who believe they are witnessing justice rather than state-sanctioned execution. The film critiques the dangers of media monopolies and their ability to manufacture consent – a theme that resonates in today's landscape of algorithm-driven news, deepfake technology, and corporate-controlled media conglomerates. *Rollerball* presents a subtler but equally insidious form of media control. The corporations dictate historical narratives, erasing any knowledge that might encourage resistance. Books are removed from circulation, and history is rewritten to serve the ruling elite. This erasure of knowledge ensures that the masses remain docile, unable to conceive of alternative political structures. The film's depiction of information suppression aligns with real-world concerns about censorship, the consolidation of media ownership, and the deliberate distortion of historical events for political gain. Despite their bleak portrayals of corporate-dominated societies, both films offer

narratives of resistance, embodied by Jonathan E. in *Rollerball* and Ben Richards in *The Running Man*. Their defiance against the system serves as a counterpoint to the idea that oppression is absolute. However, their paths to rebellion differ significantly, reflecting contrasting views on the effectiveness of individual agency within oppressive structures. Jonathan E.'s resistance is largely symbolic—he refuses to lose, despite corporate efforts to eliminate him. His survival challenges the system's fundamental premise, suggesting that even within a seemingly omnipotent corporate regime, individual action can disrupt the status quo. The final scene, in which Jonathan stands alone in the Rollerball arena, victorious but surrounded by silence, is an ambiguous conclusion. It raises the question of whether one man's defiance is enough to dismantle systemic oppression or whether the game—and by extension, the corporate order—will simply adapt. Ben Richards, on the other hand, represents a more traditional revolutionary figure. His rebellion is not only personal but also transformative; he actively works to expose the regime's lies and incite broader resistance. His success in overthrowing the media apparatus suggests a more optimistic outlook on the potential for systemic change, albeit through violent means. The contrast between these two protagonists highlights differing perspectives on resistance—one that is introspective and symbolic, and another that is overtly revolutionary.

Though released decades ago, both films remain strikingly relevant in the modern era. The increasing dominance of multinational corporations, the rise of reality-based spectacle, and the manipulation of public perception through mass media are all issues that have only intensified. Contemporary parallels can be drawn to corporate-controlled digital platforms, where algorithms dictate information consumption, reinforcing ideological bubbles and shaping societal narratives. Moreover, the gamification of real-world struggles - whether through social media virality, competitive streaming cultures, or reality television - echoes the dystopian visions of these films. By critically analyzing *Rollerball* and *The Running Man*, this study underscores their status as prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism, media consolidation, and the weaponization of entertainment. These films serve as cautionary tales,

warning of the dangers that arise when power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and when entertainment becomes not just a distraction, but a tool for control.

III. CONCLUSION

The dystopian visions presented in *Rollerball* (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987) serve as powerful critiques of corporate hegemony, media manipulation, and the commodification of violence. Both films illustrate societies in which multinational corporations wield absolute control, using brutal spectacles as tools of oppression. By turning violence into entertainment, these regimes desensitize the populace, reinforce hierarchies, and eliminate dissenters under the guise of competition. The illusion of choice presented in these death games mirrors real-world concerns about corporate influence in democracy, the growing spectacle of violence in media, and the consolidation of power within a few dominant entities. A key theme in both films is the role of media in shaping public perception and maintaining authoritarian structures. The manipulation of truth, whether through state-controlled television in *The Running Man* or the erasure of history in *Rollerball*, underscores the dangers of unchecked media power. These portrayals remain alarmingly relevant in an era of algorithm-driven news, deepfake technology, and corporate-controlled digital platforms. As media conglomerates increasingly shape narratives and public discourse, the cautionary messages of these films take on new urgency.

At the heart of these dystopian narratives lies the struggle for autonomy. Jonathan E. and Ben Richards symbolize resistance against systems designed to suppress individual agency. However, their differing paths - one as a reluctant hero whose survival challenges the system's ideology, the other as a revolutionary who actively dismantles the media apparatus - highlight contrasting perspectives on rebellion. Their stories suggest that while individual defiance can disrupt oppressive structures, systemic change requires broader resistance and collective action. Ultimately, *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* remain prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism and the intersection of power, media, and control. Their

warnings are not merely speculative but deeply reflective of contemporary socio-political realities. As corporate influence expands, and entertainment continues to blur the lines between spectacle and control, these films remind us of the dangers of a society where power is concentrated in the hands of the few, and where the masses are pacified through violence disguised as entertainment. Their messages call for vigilance, critical media literacy, and resistance against the forces that seek to turn oppression into spectacle.

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