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The Pathology of Ideology: Authoritarian Leadership in Science Fiction Film

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About “IJLS Commentaries”

by KRISTIN M.S. BEZIO, Co-Editor, IJLS, University of Richmond

In the issue, we have included a section entitled “IJLS Commentaries,” a section devoted to a more casual—yet thoughtful—consideration of leadership and leadership phenomena in the world.

In this inaugural issue, Kimberly Yost offers us “The Pathology of Ideology,” a piece that considers some of the parallels between science fiction pandemics and authoritarianism and our modern sociopolitical conditions throughout much of the West. Dr. Yost draws from a selection of science fiction works to suggest themes that can teach us about the pitfalls and provide us with the possibility of hope in a world facing both a long pandemic and increased polarization and authoritarian rule.

It is our hope that Dr. Yost’s piece will provide a model for future scholars who want to consider similar thematic approaches to questions and problems of leadership, whether in relation to popular culture, social media, scientific advances, recent events, or other fields. In addition to publishing fully researched critical pieces, IJLS hopes that our “Commentaries” section will help scholars and teachers think about and have access to new ideas that are still percolating, ideas that reach across disciplinary boundaries, and ideas that might be more accessible to undergraduate or high school students without an extensive background in leadership studies.

IJLS COMMENTARIES

The Pathology of Ideology: Authoritarian Leadership in Science Fiction Film

by Kimberly Yost, Independent Scholar

Crises can exacerbate and lay bare social and political divisions, as witnessed in the United States with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Xenophobia, racism, classism, misogyny, religious fanaticism, rural/urban cultural differences, and other fractious beliefs became commonplace arguments to rationalize leadership actions designed to degrade and marginalize members of society as a distraction against the lack of an effective strategy to combat the virus. Though not all arguments were acted upon, the discourse hung in the air like a toxic fog blanketing social interactions and confounding social policy. In retrospect, we can untangle the rhetoric and realize the most insidious disease confronting the United States in this era is not a biological virus, but the unconcealed politicization of white male privilege. The pathology of this disease is *ideology*.

Within this concept, the leadership style demonstrated is one based on fear. This is a two-prong

ABSTRACT:

This article explores ways in which selected science fiction visual narratives depict white male privilege as a pathology affecting social systems and how those who are marginalized, oppressed, and traumatized in these dystopic social systems choose violence to overcome the authoritarian leaders.

application in that leaders stoke fear, specifically in terms of defining and demeaning the scapegoat Other, but they are also fearful of being removed from power due to incompetence or criminality. In addition, as identified in terror management theory, followers experience existential fear during social upheavals and desire leaders who will mitigate those feelings of impending death and bring meaning to their lives by making them feel special and influencing them toward a goal that typically can only be achieved through devotion to the leader.¹ The result of this fear-based leadership is an authoritarianism that clings to a romanticized past and strict social order.

It isn't difficult to see the arrival of an authoritarian leader, but by then it is often too late to prevent harm to society. The infection has taken hold, and the disease has been unleashed. There is a muddled compression of time as the dogged march of inconceivable egregiousness creates exhaustion and, inevitably, a tacit acceptance of this new environment as just the way things are—until the moment we discover the tyrant has arrived. We can only observe in retrospect all the minor events, discounted actions, and misinterpretations of harmlessness leading to this shock of recognition.

Nonetheless, an argument can be made for inoculating ourselves against the illness of authoritarian ideology and tyrannical leaders through examining fictional narratives as cautionary tales to inform our understanding about actual circumstances. Science fiction narratives, while not a prognosticator, allow us to mediate the tensions of our contemporary society and devise possible solutions to real-world dilemmas through interaction with a fictional future.² Increasingly, we are reverting to a visual civilization, and, particularly in the United States, culture is negotiated through media and technology. While the pathology of authoritarian ideology and the disease of white male privilege may be difficult to fully identify in real time, we can look to science fiction

visual texts for a map of future risks and examine potential resolutions. My purpose is not to critically analyze the films discussed in this article, but to draw a connection between how these films depict authoritarian leadership and how we might use them as a way to inform ourselves and contemplate real-world actions to resist the allure of tyrants.

Dystopian futures are generally the most identifiable as science fiction texts serving as cautionary tales, with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* arguably the most famous example. In the Michael Radford film adaptation, the colorless, harsh, industrial environment of Oceania, devoid of sunlight, cleanliness, and joy, sets the tone for warning viewers against the palliative abdication of thought and free will in favor of authoritarian leadership and acceptance of lies. However, in some ways we have become inured to the tropes of Big Brother and postapocalyptic wastelands. In our hubris, we dismiss them as an impossible fiction and not a probable future. We don't live like that, so we aren't worried that the tyrant is present. Unfortunately, we lack a collective imagination that can delve that deeply into our own darkness.

This is not to say the concept of omniscient authoritarian leaders seen primarily through technology is eliminated from dystopian science fiction visual texts. In *V for Vendetta* (2005), British Chancellor Sutler's face is projected much like the face of Big Brother, playing on our collective understanding of the narcissism of a leader without humility and determined to hold power. Future Britain is ruled by a single authoritarian party, Norsefire, who appear to be a homogenous group of white men who have configured television content and technology to serve their own purposes of sowing fear and maintaining power at all costs in the wake of a global pandemic and violent conflicts, using these communication tools to hide their own culpability in creating the chaotic circumstances that brought them to power. The government imprisons, tortures, and executes people they deem undesirable and responsible for societal problems, such as immigrants, Jews, Mus-

¹ Cohen et al., "Fatal Attraction."

² Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 19; Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, 3.

lims, homosexuals, and anyone who dissents from government edicts. The primary purveyor of the Norsefire ideology is Lewis Prothero, a white male television pundit, who spews the pseudo-Christian ethos of the government and consistently creates existential fear as he reminds the populace how difficult life would be if not for the Sutler government's vigilance against the godless Others bent on destroying the British way of life. Any problem that might arise for the government is blamed on foreign religious extremists and not the incompetence of the government. Indeed, the government credo repeated by Prothero and plastered on walls across London is "Strength through Unity. Unity through Faith," a clear indication of how the Norsefire Party uses seemingly harmless patriotic and pious language to undermine secularist culture and push society toward acceptance of Christian theocracy and totalitarianism.

The subversiveness of James McTeigue's film is that it does not take place in a wasteland. People are seen living nice middle-class lives with no shortages. Indeed, in view of Maslow's hierarchy of motivational needs, physiological needs, safety, love/belonging, and even a level of self-esteem seem to be satisfied within this future.³ British society appears to be functioning much as it always has in the twenty-first century. The indications of difference are a curfew, television sets programmed to be controlled by the government when needed, and the censorship of music, art, books, and broadcast programs. This all seems harmless enough when contrasted with the television images of other countries experiencing riots, famine, pestilence, and war. Yet the overarching understanding of the film is that this society is just as dystopic as Orwell's Oceania. Ideas are just as dangerous and authoritarian leaders ruthlessly work to stamp out dissent by any means, whether through lies sent out through the media or criminal conduct. The ability of the populace to achieve self-actualization, the final motivational need within Maslow's

model, is not possible due to the oppression from the government. They maintain an undercurrent of fear that demands conformity, which the anarchist V accurately describes as "the ultimate tool of this government" (1:35:13).⁴

Cultivating fear through xenophobia, religious fanaticism, and pressures for conformity by an authoritarian government is also depicted in the film *Children of Men* (2005).⁵ The narrative is set in 2027 in a grey and tattered dystopic Britain desperately struggling to function under martial law. An unidentified pathogen has rendered women infertile, and no child has been born on the planet in eighteen years. In the face of global devastation and pending extinction of the human species, British media sends out messages that "only Britain soldiers on" (4:01). Civil unrest and economic collapse have broken out across the globe, and people are making their way to Great Britain for sanctuary. The risks of depletion of resources, increased crime, and other perceived social ills attributed to immigrants provide the rationalization for government leaders to close the borders to foreigners and abandon asylum seekers in a confined area of a coastal city surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, reminiscent of the Warsaw Ghetto in the 1940s. A nod to a more contemporary connection is the bus of apprehended immigrants marked with "Homeland Security" on the side.

But government propaganda of British superiority in the face of catastrophe is not fully successful. Domestic unrest and violence are rampant, particularly from the militant group known as the Fishes who fight for immigrant rights. There is some question as to the true extent of their domestic terrorism, as Jasper, a former political cartoonist, remarks that "every time one of our politicians is in trouble a bomb explodes" (5:16). This suggestion of a government creating false flags is indicative of authoritarianism and a militarized state anxious to protect their precarious hold on power.

But this government must also combat infertil-

³ Schwartz, "Maslow and the Hierarchical Enactment of Organizational Reality."

⁴ McTeigue, *V for Vendetta*.

⁵ Cuarón, *Children of Men*.

ity to ensure the viability of the nation and their continued political survival. A solution is stymied by religious groups who consider infertility God's punishment and practice self-flagellation, not unlike groups that roamed Europe in the Middle Ages seeking divine forgiveness and relief during the Black Plague. Certainly, the Fishes appellation also evokes Christian concepts with the iconic image of a fish. Themes of faith permeate *Children of Men*, even to the extent of stating children are "faith put in praxis" (54:30). And yet, the government turns away from spiritual and moral arguments and warns citizens that "avoiding fertility tests is a crime" (4:25) to legislate obedience to a scientific solution even though the government does not appear to have any connection to the Human Project, a covert group of scientists based on a ship who are trying to discover a cure for infertility. This begs the question as to whether the government is truly seeking a solution to infertility or is simply engaged in demanding obedience and loyalty to their authority alone, reducing dissent with the convenient excuse of the infertility pandemic.

This intersection of infertility, religious fundamentalism, and the disease of white male privilege represented in a dystopian future of authoritarianism comes into unparalleled focus in the television series *The Handmaid's Tale*.⁶ *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a near-future portion of the United States that has been overtaken by a Protestant fundamentalist uprising and altered to an authoritarian patriarchal theocracy renamed Gilead. The revolution was prompted in part by the dramatic decrease in live births around the world. There is no clear understanding in the series of why so many women have become infertile, but the religious fundamentalists believe there is a connection to general societal godlessness and the advancement of women through education and paid work outside of the home. This ideology, reinforced through religious fanaticism, misogyny, homophobia, and fear-based leadership, demonstrates the insidiousness of the pathological

ideology of the white male privilege disease that can infect a society to the point of transformation to an oppressive dystopia for those deemed inferior or undeserving. While the ruling elite are not exclusively white, they are overwhelmingly white and the rare inclusion of a male of color in the patriarchy simply underscores the whiteness being portrayed. The depiction of Gilead's culture and the worldview of its leaders gives a profound impression of nostalgia, which Anne Applebaum discusses as a condition of demagogues and authoritarianism.⁷ In essence, this television series depicts the aftermath and consequences of a violent insurrection instigated by the white middle class who applied domestic terrorism tactics to advance their authoritarian social, religious, and political agenda.

In response to the infertility pandemic, reproduction is considered not only a moral imperative, but also a patriotic duty and national obligation. The subjugation of women toward that end is a primary objective of the leaders of Gilead. Women are not allowed to read, be employed outside of the home, wear clothing other than the approved uniform of their social status, drive a car, or travel without a companion. Girls are dressed in pink and not educated in any subject outside of domestic skills, such as sewing, cooking, and managing a household. Flashback scenes portray the weeks shortly after the insurrectionist coup when women are told to immediately leave their workplaces, have their bank accounts frozen, and are forced out of universities. The most heinous subjugation is the ritual rape of fertile women, called Handmaids, by men belonging to the ruling elite with the collaboration of their infertile wives. It is hideously evident the privilege of procreation belongs solely to the white males who hold power.

In fact, Commander Joseph Lawrence, a founding architect of the inequitable and cruel Gilead social system, admits that it is just about power. The dubious Christian values espoused and dogmatically incorporated into the everyday language

⁶ Miller, *Handmaid's Tale*.

⁷ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 74.

of their society, the fetish of homemade bread, the ceremonial ritualization of rape and domination of women, along with other systemic social changes, such as institutionalized classism through employment, housing, and dress codes, “is just the window dressing” (“The Crossing,” Season 4, ep. 3, 36:02) to allow white men to maintain control, power, and the privileges that come with power.

Within each of the works described above, authoritarian leaders generate fear as a foundational feature of their social system and demand conformity. Failure to conform results in imprisonment, mutilation, torture, banishment to an internment camp, or death. Women primarily, but not exclusively, experience the institutionalized oppression of the male leaders. These experiences are chronic and complex traumas that are repetitive and personally invasive, such as ritualized rape in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Racism, classism, and heterosexism combine to present a sociopolitical context in which those who are at the very margins of society experience deeper oppression, and consequently greater trauma from these experiences.⁸

And yet, each of these science fiction narratives includes protagonists who refuse to conform. From these narratives of possible dystopic futures in which we observe white men intent on preserving their privileges through fear-based leadership and institutionalizing flawed ideologies of religious fundamentalism, xenophobia, misogyny, and classism to gain and maintain power, we also witness the narratives’ potential solutions through personal empowerment and other methods to overcome authoritarianism. And each narrative recommends violence.

In *V for Vendetta*, the British Parliament is blown up in homage to Guy Fawkes, the seventeenth-century conspirator of the Gunpowder Plot, completing the vengeance sought by V. In *Children of Men*, the Fishes group kills police officers, members of their own leadership, and starts a violent uprising amid detained immigrants against the military. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the mysterious Mayday group

is held responsible for domestic terrorist attacks, and June, a Handmaiden and the main protagonist, commits multiple acts of violence against men in power. What are we to make of this? Is violent resistance to authoritarianism just a more interesting visual story? Does violent retribution allow viewers to experience a catharsis of pent-up uncomfortable emotions, so they are able to leave the movie theater or turn off the TV and blissfully return to their lives secure in the belief that good always prevails? Perhaps it is an expression of despair and cynicism about a future that will undoubtedly occur and there is nothing to be done about it except physically attack the powerful and burn it all down. In these futures, any notions of nonviolent protest, reconciliation, forgiveness, or diplomacy are refuted.

Yet there is another possibility of why violence is put forth as a solution to overcoming authoritarianism, providing a cautionary tale not for those who wish to avert a repressive state and prevent authoritarian men from seizing power, but for the privileged and powerful who wish to create one. The message may be that violent resistance is the future authoritarians will experience if they insist on oppressing and marginalizing their people. As V states, “People should not be afraid of their government. Governments should be afraid of their people” (32:22). The protagonists in these films are counterintuitively empowered by the trauma they experience and seek to obstruct their oppressors through the same methods as they have few other models of successful resistance to power. Violence is seemingly their only recourse against the emotional and physical violence of their oppressors. Authoritarians would be wise to consider the violent resistance of these films as the potential resolution to real-world dilemmas both present and future.

In *V for Vendetta*, V is a victim of surreptitious biological warfare testing and is literally forged by fire and disfigured. He adopts the mask of Guy Fawkes as a symbol of his need for fiery vengeance against the government. But, more importantly, he uses the same tactics of imprisonment in conjunc-

⁸ East and Roll, “Women, Poverty, and Trauma.”

tion with physical and emotional torture to sway Evey, a woman he saved in a dark alley from corrupt policemen, to his cause. Evey has her own previous traumas, including the death of her brother and the abduction, imprisonment, and execution of her parents when she was a young girl. Her parents tried to protest government lies and the cover-up of their son's death through leaflets and street demonstrations, but were abducted by secret police in the middle of the night. Hiding under her bed, young Evey witnessed her mother being dragged away with a black hood over her head. This trauma was repeated when her employer and friend, Gordon Deitrich, is also violently dragged away for the crimes of publicly satirizing and embarrassing the chancellor, collecting illegal art, and being a homosexual. She tells V she is afraid all the time (42:45). Additionally, Evey is fascinated and sustained during her imprisonment by the story of a queer woman who refused to conform to society's dictates and was abducted, imprisoned, and killed by the state. The sum of these traumas pushes Evey to an extreme place of emotional emptiness, realizing nonviolent means of defiance are ineffective, and empowers her to fight against the authoritarian regime with V. She completes the plan to blow up Parliament and bring down the government.

Trauma also informs the violent actions of Julian and Theo in *Children of Men*. The couple had a son who died during a flu pandemic after the mysterious infertility plague had taken hold. The solace of having a child when so many others did not was shattered and they became estranged. Julian turned her energy to fighting for immigrant rights as the leader of the Fishes with no qualms about using terrorist tactics to counter government oppression. The Fishes discover that Kee, a young Black immigrant woman, is miraculously pregnant, and Julian determines the group must get her to the Human Project for her own safety and the survival of the human species. She enlists Theo's help in getting official documents, but the plan goes horribly wrong. The car they are riding in on the way to a safe house

is attacked, and Julian is horrifically killed in front of Theo. It is now up to him to get the young woman and her midwife to safety. In the immigrant detention camp, as members of the Fishes begin the uprising against the government, Theo and Kee, with her newborn child, navigate the bullets and bombs to get to a dock with Theo awkwardly taking violent defensive action when necessary. In this narrative, the violent resistance Julian engages in and condones is a means of assuaging the trauma of her son's death and the continual atrocities of the government against immigrants and nonconformists. Her grief finds an outlet by not conforming to the new society through violent actions. The actions Theo takes, both violent and physically risky, are beyond his normal behaviors, but informed by the trauma of losing his wife and child, his friend Jasper whose murder by police he witnesses as he flees with Kee, witnessing the military execute the midwife outside the detention camp, as well as being in the thick of a prolonged firefight between the Fishes and the military. He is empowered not only by his trauma, but also by the overwhelming desire to protect Kee and her child until he can get them to safety with the Human Project. Without the further traumatic motivation of witnessing and being subjected to government-sanctioned murder and being intentionally shot in the abdomen by a member of the Fishes, it is doubtful he would have had enough confidence to do what was necessary and complete the task that would thwart the government as well as the militants.

The most intriguing and complicated character who experiences chronic trauma at the hands of an authoritarian government is the Handmaid June/Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*. June suffers the same indignities as other women after the revolution: she loses her job, and authority over her bank account is given to her husband. She and her husband decide to flee to Canada with their daughter, but are stopped just a few miles from the border. June and her daughter run through the woods trying to reach the border, but they are found by the authorities, and her daughter is ripped from her arms. As it is clear

she is fertile, June is taken away to become a Handmaid to bear children for the glory of Gilead.

As previously mentioned, each Handmaid is subjected to ritualized rape each month by the commander and wife she is assigned to serve. They must surrender their own names and become known as the property of the commander,

which in June's case is Offred or "Of Fred." June submits to the rules, knowing she must stay alive to find her daughter and escape Gilead. The circumstances of her life are humiliating, demeaning, and frightening. She is condemned to a position designed by the authoritarian leadership to make her powerless over her body and denied her own free will in daily activities. She is continually watched by others to ensure she is following the laws and new social norms. Fear reigns over every moment of her life as she tries to navigate how to stay safe and sane in a world that has turned upside down and branded her as a commodity to be physically and emotionally abused. She is also co-opted into the institutionalized violence of Gilead intended to

stoke fear among the populace through ceremonies where Handmaidens are required to stone to death those who disobey the rules that govern them and witness numerous hangings of those who commit crimes against Gilead. Indeed, her own transgressions bring her to the gallows with a rope around her neck only to be reprieved at the last moment because of her value as a fertile woman in a macabre warning that she needs to behave and conform.

This is a slim recounting of the complex traumatic circumstances for June and others subjected to the dictates of the privileged white males who hold power in Gilead. Each episode relates another outrage and

another inescapable abdication of personal control building the trauma experienced to exceedingly high levels. Throughout the third season of the series, we witness the inevitable outcome of this constant exploitation and cruelty as June begins to lose her ability for empathy and compassion. Any emotions

she was still capable of expressing have been repressed in favor of a steely determination to find her eldest daughter through whatever power she can gather, including violently pushing the boundaries of conformity.

Tragically, her concept of power has been warped by the traumatic experiences and authoritarian patriarchy she inhabits. Fear, violence, and delivering pain is the model of leadership before her and has seeped into her consciousness as the only available choice to power. In essence, she becomes what she fears and abhors. This interpretation becomes visually clear as June fiercely confronts a detained Serena Joy, the wife of her former commander, dressed disconcertingly like a privileged commander's wife in a dark, teal-colored sweater with

her hair pinned up in a bun, and echoes the abusive words Serena Joy once shrieked at her ("Home," Season 4, ep. 7, 40:53). The series takes an incredibly dark turn as June moves to a place of carrying out violent murderous revenge, condoning torture, and giving in to her own unfounded fears. Her actions go beyond understandings of self-defense as her trauma has been internalized with dangerous notions of power and authority through fear, intimidation, and violence to enable her to reach her goals with relentless focus.

While the possible solutions to these fictional futures of authoritarian regimes is depicted as wor-

When crises confront societies, political divisiveness can be intensified as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders emerge who take advantage of and goad the discord of existential fears and anxieties, racial, gender, and religious prejudices to propel themselves to

risomely violent, a measure of hope is held out. In *V for Vendetta*, the people of London have donned outfits and Guy Fawkes masks in solidarity with V against the Sutler government and watch Parliament explode, indicating to viewers they intend to remake their society and reinstate liberty, inclusion, and justice. As Theo succumbs to his wounds in a small rowboat with Kee and her newborn in *Children of Men*, the Human Project ship emerges from the fog, and we are left with the impression that Kee holds the secret to human reproduction and the species will survive. As of this writing, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* series is not yet concluded so it remains to be seen whether June continues down her path of violence and destroys the government, much like Evey in *V for Vendetta*, or resolves to find a more peaceful outcome to ensure a liberated future for herself and her family. One suspects there will be a hopeful resolution to the story.

When crises confront societies, political divisiveness can be intensified as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders emerge who take advantage of and goad the discord of existential fears and anxieties, racial, gender, and religious prejudices to propel themselves to power with the understanding they hold God-like powers to solve the problems facing society. They maintain their power through stoking existing fears about otherness and creating a culture of fear that demands obedience and conformity. It only takes a small leap of the imagination to consider that a U.S. president with greater competence and a stronger work ethic could have manipulated American society during the COVID-19 pandemic into a scenario similar to the fictional futures portrayed in the films discussed. A strong argument can be made that politicians and pundits continue that task today. It is the project of those who value liberal democracy to remain vigilant against the pathology of skewed ideologies that produce the insidious disorders giving rise to authoritarianism. And if vigilance fails, we must also find the glimmer of hope and fortitude to be unwavering in pursuit of freedom, inclusion, compassion, and justice.

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