

AGENTS OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: A VISUAL RHETORICAL CRITIQUE OF
DYSTOPIAN MEDIA & AUTHORITATIVE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

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Abstract

Audiences have been turning to dystopian classics as evidence of dark times ahead for the United States, and guidance on how to respond to oppressive times. This thesis explores how political dystopian media can be a warning to what can happen in a world where policies and societies are established in a hegemonic and oppressive fashion. Through a visual rhetorical lens using Althusser's Ideological and Repressive State Apparatus, Bentham's Panopticon, and Gramsci's work on Subaltern groups, themes of agency and government control serve as a guide to viewers in times of real life duress and political uncertainty. By the end of the analysis, readers can use the examples in this work as roadmaps to forming their own resistance in a time when dissent and opposition to the established order are threats to those in power.

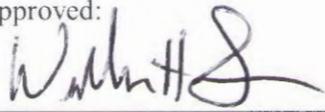
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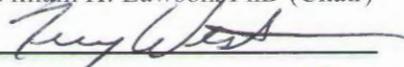
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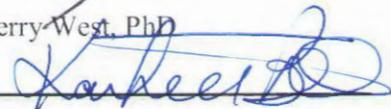
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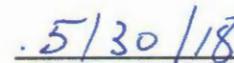
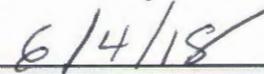
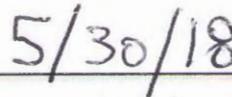


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Introduction

Welcome to Gilead, the new and improved America. Addressing a declining birthrate, women are stripped of all monetary and societal status and lead theological lives focused on fulfilling dutiful roles as wives, maids, and Handmaids. Handmaids are owned by powerful and childless couples, forced to abide by the government's laws through coercion and fear, and raped monthly in the hopes of bearing a child. If this sounds like a dystopian society, it is. The idea comes from Margaret Atwood's best-selling novel, 1990 movie, and Hulu original of the same name "The Handmaid's Tale." When Atwood explained the inspiration behind the dark, oppressive, and authoritarian Gilead, she revealed all elements of the story are based on historical events that happened at some point in history (Atwood, 2017). "The Handmaid's Tale" and other dystopian works, though always a popular genre, was brought to the forefront around the 2016 United States election. As a result, audiences began to notice a correlation between what they saw on silver and big screens to our own reality.

Since the day Donald Trump took office, we saw an increase of audiences have been turning to dystopian classics as evidence of dark times ahead for the United States, and guidance on how to respond to oppressive times. George Orwell's novel *1984* set in a dystopian future "...where critical thought is suppressed under a totalitarian regime" suddenly found itself on Amazon's best seller list two weeks after the inauguration (Freitas-Tamura, 2017). The speculation behind the almost 70-year-old book's sudden success was not just Trump's election, but a suggestion by his advisor that "alternative

facts” could re-define verifiable truths (Stetler & Pallota, 2017). Almost overnight “alternative facts” became a way of legitimizing the perceptions and opinions of citizens as a new reality, superior to a data or logically derived reality. From that moment, comparisons between our reality and dystopian texts have become more prominent and relevant to our understanding of contemporary politics.

This critique is not focused on uncovering the relation to dystopian media and Donald Trump’s presidency, but instead provide insight into the central question of how dystopian media is a warning to what can happen in a world where policies and societies are established in a hegemonic and oppressive fashion. In the future, this thesis has the potential to be “interpretive evidence” of latent fear and concerns for where our country is headed, combined with deep divides in ideological viewpoints (Houck, 2006). Through a visual rhetorical lens, themes of agency and government control in these texts explain the importance they have as not just products of consumption but how they represent and guide viewers in times of real life duress and political uncertainty. By the end of this thesis, readers will be able to take the theories and concepts outside the confines of these texts and understand the connection between what we consume and the effect it has on us as audience members.

My goal is to explore how individual agency is demonstrated in repressive governments in “The Purge” series, “The Handmaid’s Tale”, and “Mad Max: Fury Road.” Within agency, the texts all provide examples of how characters’ rights are limited and monitored, while understanding the role and function government plays in dystopian societies. The specific examples for each category are applied to three themes:

Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, subaltern groups meant to endure oppression, and methods of control and surveillance through panopticon.

Combining this approach within the key theoretical concepts provided, the goal of this critique is to explore the relevancy to examples of personal agency within dystopian societies and how these forms of resistance can be toolkits and guides for viewers. By analyzing these examples using the Panopticon, ISA, RSA, and Subaltern Groups, my goal is to bring awareness to how agency is not limited in dystopian societies, but instead becomes more a challenge of finding a form of change and resistance that promotes what is best for a society. This critique begins by setting the foundation for dystopian media and a foundation of the themes and theories used for each text. Using Sonja Foss's guide on conducting a visual rhetorical critique, the themes are then applied to each text and analyzed for their effectiveness, followed by an evaluation, and concluding with possible avenues of future analysis (Foss, 2004). To start, the first step is a historical review of dystopia as a term and genre.

Literature Review

History of Dystopian Media

Dystopian fiction was first introduced in the 20th century officially but owes credit to John Stuart Mill for coining the term in an 1868 debate (Claeysy, 2011).

Dystopia describes a society with negative or oppressive social or political climates and is a counterpart to a utopia. Utopias describe societies we all strive for, simply put is a place where evil does not exist and all things good reign. Popular forms of dystopian

media include major works such as “The Matrix” series, “1984,” and “Fahrenheit 451.” Within these texts, our world is in alternate realities rooted in suppression of knowledge, extensive government control, and ultimate domination. These works are just a small sample of the wide genre of dystopian media.

The word “dystopia” comes from 18th century Latin, meaning “an imagined place or state where everything is bad or unpleasant” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). The definition expands to apply the term to totalitarian or environmentally degraded societies. The term is also the opposite of “utopia,” a 16th century term invented by Sir Thomas More (More et. al, 2015). Although it is easy to assume that utopia is the exact opposite of dystopia, the literal definition is “nowhere,” implying the fictional societies the term represents. More used it to describe the political, religious, and societal norms of an island community. Since his use of the word, More’s definition of utopia has taken new meaning, signifying a nonexistent society that is both highly desirable and unlike contemporary societies.

Dystopian media fall into two categories; one is the variety where zombies, mutant diseases, and extreme natural disasters are the main plot driver. Fantasy dystopia with zombies and other extreme mutations and changes are often metaphors for the fear people associate with our lives. The zombie trope has metamorphic comparisons to our obsession with consumerism and attempts to master and control nature. 1970’s cult classic “Dawn of the Dead” highlighted America’s middle-class obsession by placing hordes of the undead mindlessly walking around a mall (Posey, 2014). American Movie Classic’s hit “The Walking Dead” approached modern day politics by examining how

different groups operated during the zombie outbreak. The groups demonstrated that in a world where all hell has literally broken loose, the line between “good” and “bad” deeds vanishes in the search of survival (Post-Kennedy , 2016).

The second category of dystopian media is “catastrophic dystopias”, born out of fictional catastrophes, and generally outside our influence. These “political dystopias” are more plausible, and even more alarming as we can see our own reality in some form. The focus of this thesis is to address political dystopias and their implications and commentary on our society.

Originally published in 1947, George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* saw a recent surge in popularity during and after the 2016 elections (The Artifice, 2015). Distraught citizens looked to the novel for any hint of what was to come with the upcoming Trump administration. *1984* told the story of a futuristic society where oppressive government surveillance and public deception were the norm. For today’s readers, it seems to be a story that hits close to home, based on the book’s resurgence in popularity. As with many best-selling novels, *1984* was remade into a film and became one of countless visual media representations of dystopian entertainment.

Another film with similar dystopian themes on government ideologies is the 2005 film “V for Vendetta.” Set in a futuristic fascist United Kingdom, the film focuses on the relationship between a lone anarchist known as V and a working-class woman who becomes entangled in V’s mission to overthrow the ruling party. In this world, the ruling party employs fascist strategies to oppress the community, including government controlled media, intolerance for minorities including homosexuals and immigrants, and

a government supported nationalistic rejection of globalization. The movie borrowed many themes and imagery from other dystopian classics such as *1984*, one of the biggest examples being the large screen display of a talking head giving orders, signifying another reach of government through technology. The film evokes the concerns felt during the time it was produced, using what was happening globally and in the United States to give it a more “realistic” feel (Manners, 2006). The ruling party’s control was established during a time when citizens chose security and protection in exchange for individual liberty. The filmmakers borrowed heavily from how America’s own views on national security and personal liberty were shifting following the September 11th attacks. The fictional government’s goal was to create a sense of fear so powerful that citizens would ignore the government “intruding into their personal lives” (Manners, 2006). This fear allows the government to control the narrative further, while citizens struggle to speak up and voice opposition. In other words, those in power perpetuate their domination by framing their actions for the betterment of the greater good, which in turn frames dissent as an action *against* the greater good.

Orwell’s novel *1984* is not alone in presenting dystopian societies with elements of government control and oppression. His 1945 book *Animal Farm* tells the story of farm animals who revolt against their farmer and ritualized power structure to establish their own set of rules known as Commandments (Orwell, 1945). At first, everyone adheres well to the new order, but soon the ruling pigs begin separating from their fellow citizen animals. They instead begin to act like and represent the oppressive humans they once overthrew. As the swine continue to benefit from and further entrench the societal

ladder they once outlawed, the Commandments begin to change to favor pigs as the ideal and dominant group (O'Halloran, 2017). The story explores the allegorical temptations of power, even to those who once warned of its corrupting influence.

“Dawn of the Dead” (1978) is one of the earliest cult favorites that makes a direct relation to the visually entertaining zombie narrative and Americans’ concerns of race and social oppression. A group of SWAT members are tasked with removing Puerto Ricans who defied orders to evacuate. The scene shows the racial and economic divide between the authoritarian SWAT and the Puerto Ricans. As the team meets their end in a zombie infested building, the scene allows fans to “...consider zombiedom as a condition associated with both racial oppression and social abjection and, therefore, sanctions socio-political interpretations...” (Harper, 2002). Movies like this were an early indicator of the dystopian genre resonating with audiences well beyond the gore and scare factor. Rather, what they saw on television become symbolic of their own struggles within reality.

Another zombie fan favorite, American Movie Classic’s “The Walking Dead”, begins right after the zombie apocalypse consumed the majority of the population and left survivors living in a state of fight or flight. The show makes very little reference to how the outbreak happened, why, or the future of the human species, but has no shortage of symbolism to what the zombies represent. Each group within the show can be seen as a representation of today’s struggle to maintain relations in an increasingly global community. Some groups attempt to just survive and do the best they can in helping strangers in a very dangerous time, while other groups and leaders fight to oppress fellow

communities and use means of dominance and power structures to force compliance. Rather than being solely focused on shock value, the fight for survival depicted in the series becomes a “...more allegorical and metaphysical challenge” (Post-Kennedy, 2016). This challenge inspires some to greatness, while others crumble under the pressure.

Other film examples of allegorical dystopias include young adult movies such as the “Divergent” series, set in a dystopian future version of Chicago where citizens are divided into factions based on desired societal virtues. The 2014 film “The Giver” is based on the 1993 book of the same name and presents a world where “Sameness” is favored, creating a world where pain is minimal. Though the societal elders intended for a better society, their restriction of individuality starved the society of their freedoms. This is a short list within the genre of dystopian media but demonstrates that dystopian media’s popularity is not a new phenomenon, but a longtime fan favorite that offers glimpses of our future society.

Movies such as “The Purge” series, “Children of Men”, “The Matrix”, “Watchmen” and more addressed many of our current political and social issues, warning viewers of potential for dire consequences. In the 2009 film adaptation of the “Watchmen” comics by the same name, viewers see an alternate universe where the Soviet Union won the Cold War. A distinct symbol and theme in the movie is that of a yellow smiley face with a bullet hole in the upper left corner (Snyder, 2009). Known as “The Comedian's Badge” for its place in the costume of a superhero by the same name, the image represents how on the outside, everything appears well, but just beneath the surface we are reminded of the darkness all around. The icon, though at first out of place

in a dark and dystopian world, was used to represent what it would look like if “...the real world [was] imposing itself on a cartoon...” according to the artist responsible for its creation (Serrao, 2017). The texts in this analysis also have the same touches of reality in their fictionalized world where small glimpses project something undeniably real. This connection not only makes the content more relevant to the audience, but also supports the argument that these texts have meaning and significance beyond their face value.

For fans of this genre, media they consume paints a simulated reality of their worst fears: an oppressive, authoritarian society with individual freedoms and liberty violently restricted by those in power. The examples highlighted in this thesis and in other dystopian media represent an allegorical allusion to dark times ahead. Although these works are an invented set of fictions, the fears and representations of modern society projected by these works are warnings.

Exploring current examples of literature and visual dystopian media provides a foundation for this critique. The texts in this paper support and add to the existing work on dystopian stories, while also applying a relatively new perspective and methodology. Dystopian stories bring to life our anxieties and fears as a society, so there is a certain level of curiosity to have these fears brought to reality (or some version of it). The dystopian texts considered in this critique contain two central themes that are not just controversial today, but throughout history: agency and the role of the government.

Historical Significance of Agency

My earliest example of personal agency was through children’s stories such as “The Lion King” or “Cinderella.” Children’s stories often have a protagonist that

overcomes whatever external forces and acts of their own recognizance to save the day and ultimately find virtue. The stories educate children on the role they play in their own lives and their right to stand up for themselves in the face of difficulties and adversities.

Agency is a theoretical element of the Social Cognitive Theory that argues people are self-aware and reflective within their environments, not just “reactive organisms” forced to confront external forces (Bandura, 2001). The theory explores the relationship humans form when they see a behavior and the resulting consequences. In other words, a single individual's actions are not isolated in a vacuum, but rather as a species we learn from each other and replicate the patterns which result in desired outcomes. Agency's role in Social Cognitive Theory is concerned with how much influence people have in their life and their ability to make free choices (Martin, 2004). The tension between psychological agency and deterministic agency brings what we believe our rights are into direct conflict with what society and social structures allow. Within both dystopian societies and our own, agency is bound by the limits governments set for their citizens. Our choices are formed within a sphere of preselected choices that promote and adhere to the dominant ideology. As a result, in many instances the choices citizens make are respective of the choices approved by those in power. In the case of Handmaids in Gilead, do they really have a choice to become a Handmaid if the only other choice provided is death by their government?

In countries that limit or severely oppress personal freedom, the result is a society that views itself and the outside world through a filtered lens the elite control. In America, freedom is a right granted by our Founding Fathers, but every day people are

defending their freedom in a variety of different situations. For this critique, agency relates to enforcements by the government and the limits we face as a result. From the inception of the United States Constitution, the first amendment within the Bill of Rights is the right to peaceful assembly, free speech and press (Bill of Rights Institute, 2017). Although these “inalienable rights” have recently been in the headlines, they have been a part of our history since the beginning. Protests ranging from our separation from England, the Civil Rights movement, wartime protests, and our own law enforcement’s ethics have had citizens using their voices and bodies as mechanisms of dissent.

This leads right into one of the questions of this thesis: how is agency limited in dystopian texts? In some examples, citizens’ freedom is nonexistent, or a new social order is created where simple acts of defiance against hegemony are suppressed. Our focus on agency within government’s control correlated with liberties granted as a basic human right. If we have the agency to be speakers of our own lives, how much liberty has society and government granted to exercise this right? Does it matter if we have written rules that provide these liberties, but as a society our actions suggest otherwise? To understand a citizen’s agency within society, their boundaries are often in direct relation to the government’s role. The more oppressive and hegemonic a government’s structure is, usually results in repressed agency for citizens.

The Panopticon

The panopticon was originally a concept for building a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. He argued for a prison constructed so that a single guard could monitor all cells and prisoners from one vantage point, without prisoners ever

really knowing if the guard was at the post. The prisoners would thus self-monitor their behavior based upon the fear of being watched at any moment. Bentham's concept of the panopticon was later used in Foucault's work on analyzing punishment. Foucault described the panopticon as a form of power that does not require chains, cells, or violence (Foucault, 1995). Rather, the panopticon finds control through a person's psychological state. This theory is applied in our very lives today; people behave in socially acceptable ways because there are not just officials representing law and order, but average civilians who enforce the social construct when it is challenged by deviant behavior. The concept can be seen in controversies surrounding surveillance, government monitoring, and the rights of private citizens versus what is done for matters of national security.

Less than a month after the September 11th attacks, Congress signed the Patriot Act into law and expanded the government's right to monitor and collect information from citizens. How the Act is explained is dependent upon the source used; while the government promotes it as an attempt to secure citizens' safety, other outside agencies present the Act as a potential breach of privacy. The American Civil Liberties Union positions the Act as allowing the government to "secretly search private records" and monitor communications, often for people who have not been accused of any crime (Post 9/11, 2017). The official Justice Department's web page on the Act lays out its policies in a lengthy explanation, but still rhetorically frames the Act as a measure in place to "preserve Life and Liberty"-even going so far as to incorporate the idea into the title of the act itself (Department of Justice, 2017).

Through the dystopian texts explored in this critique, the dominant use of technology to monitor and censor citizens' behavior created a form of panopticon where data and technology took the place of traditional walls and physical confinement. A brief overview of surveillance demonstrates government overstepping has become common news topics in our society. Major technology companies have become subject to scrutiny for their role in protecting consumer privacy and concerns that they are an accomplice to "spying" on citizens. After the 2016 San Bernardino shooting, Apple, one of the biggest tech companies in the world, clashed with the U.S. Government's request to build an operating system that would allow the F.B.I. access to a locked and encrypted phone belonging to one of the suspects. Amid mounting concern over the creation of such a system, the implications if it fell into the wrong hands, and public demand for answers, Apple CEO Tim Cook addressed Apple's position in a letter to the public. Apple accused the government of ordering the company to hack into their own customers' information and "undermine decades of security advancements" (Cook, 2016). In the end, the F.B.I. found another company to unlock the phone for them without Apple's assistance.

As technology increasingly imbeds itself into the daily life of our society, Bentham's panopticon is no longer a physical building to contain people. Gone are the days when monitoring, confinement, and control meant those in power needed proximity to their subjects. Society can now be monitored and controlled from across wide distances of time and space. The phones in people's pockets, the televisions in our living room, and the laptops or tablets we carry can all be used as methods of surveillance. In the interest of protecting citizen rights and matters of national security, how much good

has the abundance of surveillance done for us? What are we losing in exchange for a perceived sense of security? Along with the many opportunities created by the world wide web, it has also opened new doors to surveillance and a “data panopticon” that 30 years ago was nonexistent (Sullivan, 2013). Within my critique, the panopticon is used to illustrate how “The Purge” and “The Handmaid’s Tale” use modern and advanced technology to monitor citizens. The more we sacrifice our rights for security and control, the more it becomes essential to discuss how our institutions are structured and what messages they promote. Bentham’s theory also applies to the panopticon within our own minds, and how outside forces and community rituals create a mental imprisonment for characters within a dystopian society (Foucault, 1995). Within a dystopian society, “panopticons” demonstrate the ability of those in power to monitor and enforce their rule of law, but examples in these texts will demonstrate how characters were able to overcome the effects of surveillance and censorship and use their agency to fight for change. The following will explain the significance of dystopian societies using both “ideological” and “repressive” means to maintain control.

Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses

According to Althusser, societies have two main governing apparatuses: a Repressive (RSA) and Ideological State (ISA) (Althusser, 2006). The Repressive State Apparatus is coined from Marx’s theory on the State Apparatus which contains the government, army, police, and such public institutions. The RSA is a tool of violence and physical control, opposite its counterpart, the ISA, which functions through ideological influence (Durham & Kellner, 2012). These ISA institutions are seen in churches,

schools, and the press. Further examples of ISA and RSA presented in the analysis section are divided by examples seen in agency within government control. Though Althusser's theory does not account for individual agency in society, the framework does help explain how dystopian societies limit personal agency through control and repressive ideologies. ISA and RSA examples in government control explore what the government's initial goals were for their societies, and how as time went on, their treatment of citizens created clear winners and losers.

Antonio Gramsci explores a similar concept to ISA and RSA through the role institutions and civil society play in the roles of domination and direction of hegemony (Anderson, 2017). Gramsci divided the State into a political society comprised of institutions like the government, police, military, and a civil society that was "...an ensemble of organisms commonly called private" (Green, 2002). He argued civil societies comprised of private entities employ hegemony as a means to consent, while the State is more rooted in coercion through domination. Institutions such as churches and schools were civil tools that turned beliefs into hegemonic methods of mass acceptance within a society, while the State used physical threats to life and security that could drive compliance. He emphasizes that civil and political societies are not operating in a vacuum, but rather a sphere that highlights the realities of our own communities. Within the sphere, Gramsci's theory of subaltern groups explains how these members of communities' exercise little agency and free will and become some of the most oppressed within society.

Subaltern's Presence in Society

In Gramsci's work, the subaltern refers to any "low rank" person or group under the control of a hegemonic ruling class that is denied basic rights in participating in the influence of local history and culture that other members are afforded (El, 2012). At the time of his work, Gramsci applied the subaltern to peasant and lower farm workers, but today, his work can be applied to many groups who experience a denial of those basic rights. The subaltern lacks representation and a voice within society, becoming an object for the hegemonic elite to enforce their laws upon. They resist the elite's control, but due to their status within society their efforts are ineffective and result in very little change.

Subaltern groups within dystopian societies are not involved in the inception of law and order, but instead are forced to adhere to laws created by the elite. As some of the texts indicate, subaltern groups in dystopian societies have the most to lose because the removal of their rights grants the dominant even more relative power than in our own real-life society. Subaltern groups inherently lack agency within dystopian societies, so the analysis focuses on specific subaltern groups within each text such as women or minorities divided by class and racial divides. This critique explores the role of government in the lives of the subaltern as portrayed through dystopian texts. Through this lens, these texts can be understood as allegories on the fall of societies, and how citizens use their individual agency to rise from the collapse and fight for change.

Allegorical Significance of Catastrophic Dystopian Media

In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", a group of prisoners spend their days chained to the back of a cave, passing time by watching shadows dance on the walls (Emlyn-

Jones and Preddy, 2013). Because they know nothing else, they have no desire to leave the cave, until they eventually realize their reality was created from dancing shadows made by the fire. One person finally leaves the cave and realizes there is a whole world outside, hidden to them. He then makes it his duty to go back into the cave and show others the world outside. The idea that one must find truth through their own agency and not rely on perceived reality is also present in dystopian media. In a world filled with chaos and disorder, it becomes easy to assume all strangers and the unknown are a threat. For a society to move beyond pure survival and into rebuilding a civilization, it is everyone's responsibility to use their agency to guide others into the light of progress and achievement. By using allegories, these texts become applicable to everyday life and serve a purpose beyond entertainment. Similar to themes of love, heroism, and kindness in children's fairy tales, the allegory within a story long outlives the nuances of the actual story.

Catastrophic stories depict the absolute worst-case scenario, ranging from the complete obliteration of Mother Nature to the classic zombie or monster narrative. Zombies in particular have been used as allegorical symbols representing consumerism, the degeneration of human intelligence due to the rise of technology, and scientific advancements gone too far. The story of "Mad Max" depicts how societies outside the brink of an established modern community still struggle with issues of resource scarcity and environmental threats we see today. We create and consume these stories as both entertainment but also a hint into what our world might look like should the absolute worst become reality.

This overview of literature provides the foundation for analysis of the selected texts. Bentham's panopticon, Althusser's ISA and RSA, and Gramsci's subaltern groups support the analysis of dystopian texts and agency within political dystopias. The texts and their significance become tools readers can use to understand the world they currently live in, and the importance their agency has in being agents of change for the better. By using a visual rhetorical approach, we can spend time with each representation of panopticon, ISA, RSA, and subaltern groups to flush out the meaning in relation to the text and apply the meaning to our own reality.

Method

Visual Rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is a subset of rhetoric which studies the design, function, and effectiveness of messages within visual images (Foss, 2004). Foss introduces a three-step process to establish a visual rhetorical critique of an artifact: analyze the artifact, interpret what messages it is presenting, and finally, determine how effective the artifact was in delivering the message (2004). Foss claims that for an object to be worthy of a visual rhetorical critique, it should go beyond serving as just a sign, and instead be symbolic in nature and interpreted for its social contextual meaning. As our society becomes increasingly visual in both our preference for entertainment and source of information, film plays an important role in citizens' lives, and the messages from these visual frames easily have the potential to translate beyond the limits of the medium.

Marshall McLuhan coined the term “the medium is the message” to signify the importance of how mediums embed messages surrounding the message transmitted (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). In an increasingly visual world, even concepts derived from written texts (such as Hulu’s adaptation of Atwood’s novel) present different ideas than their visual counterparts. For example, even though Atwood describes life inside Gilead and the ritualization of rape and oppression, her representation is built within the confines of the novel (Atwood, 1986). Taking these words and creating visual representations of the emotions surrounding the rape and oppression within this dystopian society creates a relationship between the sender and receiver where the message is more persuasive visually. Another example of the importance of visual rhetoric and its use within this analysis is the ease of visual media for communicating lessons.

Understanding the process of visual argumentation allows both creators of visual content and consumers to understand the “...intended effects...” by the images created (Chryslée, et. al., 1996). It is important to distinguish the difference between the properties of pure oratory and written rhetoric to visual rhetoric. Verbal rhetoric has a specific structure that is based upon a format very similar to a speech; there is an opening, a claim, evidence, and the reasoning behind the speech. For images, the messages embedded in the visual do not rely on the properties of the visual, but what previous experiences, beliefs, and perceptions the viewer brings while decoding the image. Visual rhetoric is polysemic in nature where depending upon the viewer, the messages extracted from the medium can change.

The visual rhetorical approach is the most effective methodology for this analysis because the chosen texts are all designed to be consumed visually. In 2015 alone, Americans were estimated to consume over 15 hours of media to a total of around 1.7 trillion hours in a year (Riggott, 2013). With no indication this trend will slow down, we will likely continue to increasingly prefer and consume visual entertainment. With dystopian media, there is no shortage for creative opportunity in producing scenes that are emotionally and visually suggestive of a larger “so what” embedded between the entertainment. By applying a visual rhetorical lens to “The Purge” series, “Handmaid’s Tale” and “Mad Max: Fury Road”, I focus on what symbolic representations are hidden in the storylines. This visual rhetorical analysis simply applies classical rhetorical elements - the presenting of an argument and using the available means of persuasion, the only difference is the medium is now visual.

A unique aspect of visual rhetoric is the idea that audience members are capable of making their own decision in being persuaded by the arguments presented (Blair, 2012). Blair describes how images we see on television and magazines elicit responses from audience members by providing a contextual frame. This frame taps into past experiences, emotional attitudes, personal values, and other character elements, generating an emotional context through which the viewer decodes the image. One of the earliest examples of this from my life experience is the image of “The Falling Man” from the 9/11 terrorist attack. As just one of countless thousands of images taken from that day, “The Falling Man” became a “taboo” image that “Americans were proud to avert their eyes to” (Junod, 2004). The image framed one of the worst days in American

history by forcing the viewer to relive the experiences, emotions, and trauma from that day. This image is virtually abstract in its own frame, showing only a man against a backdrop of concrete and windows. Without the contextual frame of the individual decoding the image, the falling man is almost nothing at all.

In this way, photos or film can be isolated and vague because a single frame may not take into consideration what happened before or after the event. So how do we account for this ambiguity in visual rhetoric? Even in verbal arguments, a certain level of vagueness or ambiguity is acceptable within the right context, such as advertisements announcing a sale; we know there is a sale and are provided enough information within the context to learn the specifics. In the case of the “The Falling Man”, given the context of the photo, there is enough information for viewers to understand the meaning behind the capture. We can also examine with the same lens the decoding of visual arguments through political cartoons. One method of deriving inspiration for cartoons is through likeness or familiarity the audience associates with the political message (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981). Following Donald Trump’s 2017 travel ban, one extremely political cartoon depicted Trump advancing towards the Lady Liberty Statue but being blocked by the Scales of Justice statue. The Justice looks back at Lady Liberty hiding behind her and says, “I’ve got this” (Dockray, 2017). For viewers who are aware of the political context through which the cartoon is framed, the message is clear. The messages within visual rhetorical frames are therefore of significant value when taken outside of their context, and used to bring awareness, understanding, or change to a societal issue.

There is vast literature and analysis using visual rhetoric as a lens to explore political cartoons, famous photographs, and even public monuments. Owen used visual rhetoric to examine Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" as a tool to present "secular American jeremiad" and a rhetorical response to American life post-Vietnam (Owen, 2002). Her analysis explores how a film about one of America's most infamous wars played a role in addressing realistic concerns and feelings viewers had surrounding the war. One question that arose is especially relevant to dystopian media as well: how does an artist accurately represent the horrors of war, without presenting war as barbaric? Owen argued Spielberg used realism as a rhetorical strategy to help viewers look at the effects of war from a nationalistic or indifferent perspective. For the texts in this critique, the challenge was a little different; audiences encounter worlds very similar to our own, but only on face value. The democratic differences in law and order were far enough outside our realm of comprehension that it captured our attention enough to wonder "what if?" What if this world is not that different than our own?

Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film "Olympia" is another film meant to convey a very specific message through visual rhetoric. Her film focused on visually celebrating the aesthetics of Olympic athletes, as well as the 1936 Summer Olympic events and wins. At the same time, Riefenstahl used the Olympics as the perfect backdrop to persuade viewers that Hitler had a "human" side to the brutal dictator he became known as (Barber, 2016). The Nazis wanted to put their best face forward by using the film to demonstrate their commitment to befriending other leaders and being a good host city. Her film became an influential primary source of insights into the 1936 Olympic games,

in part because she documented what happened visually. (Mangan, 1999). With this power, Riefenstahl used all available means of visual rhetoric to present the ideal Nazi Germany to millions of viewers.

Applying visual rhetoric requires addressing the role of rhetoric in the theory. Scott defines rhetoric as an “interpretive theory” that frames a sender’s given message with motives to persuade the audience (Scott, 1994). Aristotle defined the goal of rhetoric as the art of persuasion. He did not expect the rhetor to be skilled at logic, but he did require the speaker to understand the emotions and ideologies of the audience (Rorty, 1996). Aristotle’s definition is especially relevant because while visual media is often looked at as a form of entertainment, it has powerful means of persuasion. Aristotle wrote the foundational work on rhetoric in 350 B.C. at a time when performances were predominately oratory in nature. Fast forward a couple thousand years, the reason his work is still relevant today is because visual rhetoric still aims to persuade. You need look no further than political cartoons from the earliest years of American history to Super Bowl ads today, all trying to get people to think or react (or buy) into their message. Aristotle defined rhetoric further as the “...faculty of observing in any given case the means of persuasion” (Rhys-Roberts, 1984). He expands on this point by noting that rhetoric does not limit itself to any “special or definite class of subjects” (Kennedy, 2007). Unlike medicine or math that has a firm right or wrong answer, rhetoric allows readers to interpret subjects through the lens of their own experiences and beliefs. Advertisements, commercials, movies, television shows, music videos, and any other visual performance all convey messages we as audiences must decode and interpret. For

these reasons, Aristotle's view on rhetoric serves as the ideal theoretical foundation for my analysis.

Text Recap

This critique analyzes “The Purge” series, “The Handmaid’s Tale”, and “Mad Max: Fury Road.” Specific scenes are analyzed as they relate to the concepts of personal agency and government control. “The Purge” series and “Handmaid’s Tale” both enjoyed popularity around the time of the 2016 election, depicting concerns closely associated with controversies in reality. “Mad Max: Fury Road” stood out in this analysis because in addition to threats of agency, the movie described the absolute end all in a dystopian world; the end of political order and established communities in extreme environmental conditions.

“The Purge” movies

“The Purge” series began in 2013 with the first movie of the same name. It is the year 2022 and the United States has a new political party in power, the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA). The party came to power around 2015 as economic and social unrest heightened in the country. Their main political ideology consists of lowering unemployment, lowering the crime rate, creating a strong economy, and population control as an economic solution. One of the key policies the NFFA enacted was the commencement of an annual day known as “The Purge” where all crime, including murder, is legal. From 7:00 P.M. March 21st to 7:00 A.M. March 22nd, all emergency services are unavailable while people are encouraged to “...free themselves of their

sinister and violent urges and tendencies...” (Demanco, 2013). The fine print on the law states government employees with a status of Level 10 or higher are granted immunity from the Purge and shall not be harmed. None of the three films specify what Level 10 status means, nor if the employees are also forbidden from participating in the Purge. Only weapons below Class 4 are allowed during the holiday, which rules out weapons of mass destruction (Plotpendant, 2015).

The first film focuses on an upper middle-class family and their attempts to survive the annual Purge. The second movie, “The Purge: Anarchy”, introduces an opposing voice to the dominant ideology enacted by the NFFA and sets the scene for the third film. In “The Purge: Election Year”, we see a formal opposition to the NFFA with a presidential candidate who wants to abolish the tradition and directly challenges the ideologies the NFFA claims. With each sequel, we see more portrayals of both agency and government control as citizens fight to save their lives during the Purge. This concept of survival and fighting the current political system is also a major part of the next text, “Mad Max: Fury Road.”

Mad Max: Fury Road

“Mad Max: Fury Road” is the fourth installment and 2015 reboot of the “Mad Max” franchise. For analysis purposes, this thesis focuses on the 2015 remake only and not the whole series. Of the three texts, “Mad Max” is the most influenced by the catastrophic dystopian realm. I selected it for this critique because allegories within the movie are very relevant to today’s current affairs, and the extreme environmental pressures add texture to the analysis.

The film opens in a desert wasteland after a nuclear catastrophe wipes out civilization. Similar to “The Purge”, the film dives right into life after the catastrophe and describes how survivors come together to form a new community. We meet the title character Max as he is captured by a group of young men known as War Boys, an army employed by a tyrannical leader named Immortan Joe. As a captive, Max witnesses Joe’s control over his community’s most valuable resource - water. He meets one of Joe’s lieutenants, Imperator Furiosa, a trusted ally tasked with taking a crew into the desert to find more gasoline (another valuable and rare resource). As the raiding party sets out, Immortan Joe quickly realizes Furiosa had taken the five “wives” he kept as breeding stock and plans to free them from his control. The movie continues with ensuing battles between Max, who joins Furiosa in freeing the captive women, against Joe’s army and allies.

The film touches on several allegorical themes such as overcoming obstacles, maintaining a sense of hope, and the struggle of overcoming past demons while fighting to do what is right. Viewers notice the strong feminist presence that pushes the movie’s presumed protagonist, Max, to the background, while Furiosa leads the narrative. The film spared little expense in showing viewers a society where human value was based on a Darwinian preference for top mates, and where the few at the top lavished over the society's resources while the masses were left begging for enough to survive the day. While this text focuses on life after a catastrophe, the final text portrays for viewers the experience of life during and before a dystopic turning point in society.

The Handmaid's Tale

Hulu's "The Handmaid's Tale" is a new portrayal of Margaret Atwood's best-selling book of the same name. To remain consistent in the analysis and chosen texts, this overview will focus on the visual adaptation, while drawing context from Atwood's work and public statements. It tells the story of a new political party overthrowing the government of the United States and forming a fundamentalist Christian rule of order. What was once the United States of America is now Gilead. The inception of Gilead came after extreme societal pressure: birth rates were plummeting for unknown reasons and more and more women discovered they were infertile. The show has thus far not provided too much detail into why birth rates are declining and how, but instead focuses on what happens as a result.

The story is told through the eyes of Offred, a Handmaid in Gilead. Offred and other Handmaids are paired with wealthy, powerful, and childless couples to bear children. Each month during the Handmaid's most fertile time, a "ceremony" takes place with the wife and husband. For Offred, the husband is one of the highest-ranking Commanders in Gilead, Fred Waterford, hence the name, *of Fred*. During the ceremony, the wife sits on the bed with the Handmaid's head between her legs, grabbing her wrists in an attempt to "join" the two during the act. The husband penetrates the Handmaid from the foot of the bed. He is not allowed to touch either the wife or Handmaid, as the act is not meant to be sensual in any way, but rather a necessary task in the hopes of producing a child. In many ways, all the effort in Gilead is centered around women's roles as child bearers.

For women, the choices between class reside with being the wife of a commanding official in Gilead (the highest position), a Martha (similar to a maid or house servant), a Handmaid, or a wife of a lower-class male. Women are not given a choice in their place in Gilead's society, but have standard rules placed upon them regardless of their class. For example, women are no longer allowed to hold jobs, have property or money in their name, their outfits must be "appropriate" and they cannot give in to temptations such as flirting or premarital sex.

The show's first season is a mix of flashbacks to life leading up to the rise of Gilead and Offred's current situation. Through these scenes viewers piece together not just Offred's life prior to Gilead, but the slow and painful descent into a society where her very life depends on her ability to conceive. In the analysis section, specific scenes in the show illustrate their connection to personal agency and government control.

Violations of agency against members of the Other target women's rights, religion, access to information, and freedom of speech. In dystopian worlds, these are all threats to the established order and thus became targets of suppression by the government. Government's role in dystopian media explores fears of globalization, national identity, militarizing police, and advancing oppressing through technological advances to promote hegemonic rituals and beliefs. These texts provide allegorical examples of concerns surrounding individual agency and government control in dystopian societies. Through frameworks such as Bentham's Panopticon, Althusser's ISA and RSA and subaltern groups, the analysis explores how individuals within these texts

persisted in their dystopian communities, while also finding methods of resistance to the oppression.

Agency Analysis

One of the easiest ways to force citizen consent within a dystopian society is to take away their right to dissent. At the most basic level, agency is a fundamental human right to act (or not act) in our own best interests. In a society such as the ones in these texts, personal agency is a severe threat to the hegemonic beliefs those in power are upholding. Rhetorical agency “refers to the capacity to act” in such a way that is recognized by fellow members of a community (Campbell, 2005). The examples analyzed in the chosen texts are all acts the characters have chosen to perform and are meant to elicit a response from the established order. Though these acts of agency are within the visual rhetorical frame of the *story*, the artistic performances create through repetition a meaning which is fixed “through sedimentation” (Campbell, 2005). Using Campbell’s theory to this analysis, these repeated examples of characters using their own agency to enact change and resistance to oppression serve as toolkits and roadmaps for viewers to fight for their own change in society. Applying Campbell’s theory on agency, the more examples of agency presented and analyzed within visual performances, citizens can reclaim these performances as motivation and inspiration for their own acts of agency.

Agency Seen in "The Purge" Series

The concept of the Purge started when a new political party took over the government. In response to the familiar societal anxieties of high unemployment and crimes, the NFFA took dystopian measures to build a strong economy. Their plan to address these concerns was to enact one night a year where all crime is legal. In the first few minutes of the first "Purge" film, a doctor describes the benefits of Purging as a way for people to release "...all the hatred and violence that they keep up inside them" (Movieclips Trailers, 2016 a). In other words, the goal of the Purge is to allow people to act upon their base emotions, without fear of retribution or regard for others.

People who choose to Purge have 12 hours where they may enact their most violent urges, or, they can hunker down in their homes and hope to end the night alive. On the surface, it appears the New Founding Fathers set up a law where people have the choice to participate or not. But not everyone has the same weapons, access to security, or targets on their backs. In the first film, the Sandin family lives in a gated wealthy community, largely thanks to the father's success in the Purge security system industry. Within their community, they share the same common characteristics with their neighbors: well off, traditional family dynamic, and supporters of the Purge. When their neighbors see an opportunity to seek revenge on the Sandins for their wealth, they take advantage of the holiday to attempt and kill the family (Moviepedia, 2013). Even though the family has the means to protect themselves, in a moment of weakness they are forced to confront the truth that their agency extends no farther than those in lower classes. Regardless of their wealth and security systems, to their neighbors the family was a

constant reminder of their second-place status. The Sandins were a cross between the subaltern groups who were directly harmed by the Purge, as members of the elite who benefited from that same holiday, and the government which helped secure their status within the society. During the beginning of the film, their status and income provided them safety that others in the society did not have, but in a moment of opportunity, that same status that granted them protection was enough motive for their neighbors to target them.

When their kids ask why they do not participate in the Purge, the wife Mary tells them she and her husband have no need to. So, while they family has the right to not participate, they lose their agency if others force them to defend themselves. Instinctively, if a person or their loved ones are threatened, they will do whatever they can to protect them. Thus, agency and free will against participating in the Purge is an illusion the second someone decides to attack.

For those who support the Purge, a recurring theme in all the movies centers around the patriotic symbolism of the Purge. When the Sandin family is attacked by their neighbors, they claim the New Founding Fathers gave them the right to kill others. In the second film, a woman kills her sister for having an affair with her husband and claims her retaliation against the sister and husband is her "...right granted to [her] by the government..." (Movieclips Trailers, 2016 c). Purgers were putting the government as a middleman between their actions and the consequences and using laws as justification for the crime, almost as a way of telling their victims they are not to blame for their impending deaths. In other words, citizens no longer became liable for their actions and

instead believed their agency in sanctioned murder to be an act of civic duty. Based on the level of support the Purge had the tradition is no longer just a law, but a way for citizens to elevate their status of a true patriot who Purges for the good of the nation.

The Purge is more about elite groups having the means and motive to participate without fear of harm, while the poor are left with whatever defenses they have. In the second film, we see how a lower-class family headed by single mom (Eva) is forced to protect her daughter and herself from harm. Within moments of the Purge commencing, the woman realizes her sick father is not at home, and finds a note telling her he sold himself to a wealthy Purge family in exchange for \$100,000. Unlike the Sandin family, Eva does not have the means to equip advanced security in her home. So, when her neighbor attempts to sexually assault Eva and her daughter Cali, there is little the two women can do to protect themselves. These are more examples that within this society, personal agency is nonexistent, and the safety of a person's life relies heavily on their socioeconomic status. Those in power do not need to endanger themselves by going out to Purge, but instead can have their "prey" delivered to them no different than takeout. The second film also shows how the wealthy hold auctions to participate in a Purge "hunt" with "prey" captured off the streets. The scene is set just as any auction, except the items up are actual humans who are placed in a simulated maze with no weapons while their hunters have swords, night vision, and guns. Their game is afforded to them by the best weapons of all - wealth and power. Those lucky enough to avoid the auctions are instead vulnerable to highly skilled militia groups instructed by the government to target low income neighborhoods in order to keep the population in control.

By the third film, the Purge tradition is threatened by an independent Senator Charlie Roan running for President. She sees the Purge as an excuse to slaughter the poor and helpless and sees the tradition as nothing more than government sanctioned murder. When the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA) realizes her message is gaining traction with the public, they decide to revoke government officials' immunity on Purge night. Roan spends the rest of the movie and night fighting not just to survive, but the right to stand up to the hegemony enforced by the NFFA.

Another truth about the Purge surfaces when a teenage girl attacks a liquor store after getting caught stealing candy earlier in the day. She had not only just "taken care of" her parents but explained the goal of the Purge as "me getting mine, you are getting yours and nobody stopping anybody" (Movieclips Trailers, 2016 a). She represents the argument that the Purge is not meant for the betterment of citizens, but instead creates conflict within the weaker masses, who fight each other for domination. Under the disguise of the Purge, those in power take advantage of the situation by murdering the lower class a building at a time. Her goal in attacking the store and the owner proves the point that she can get whatever she wants without retribution because the holiday is designed to take out the weaker or less fortunate members of society. This scene is especially persuasive because of the visual implications of the girls' blood-soaked outfits, lighted car, and flamboyant exaggeration of their weapons. While most people would actively do whatever they can to avoid purge night and protect themselves, these girls represent how the purge was becoming more of a spectacle designed to terrorize the community.

The teenager also highlights a shift in the Purge, from being known as a deadly day to be feared, to a spectacle of amusement. Since the beginning of the first movie, we see people who dress in masks and costumes while out Purging, but in the second and third movie, semiotics begins to play a large part in the presentation of the Purge. The liquor store teenager arrives at the store with a group of friends in a small car covered in Christmas lights, not exactly the best mechanism to hide, but the perfect choice if spectacle is the goal. The girls exit the vehicle wearing tights, fishnets, tutus, and other various items similar to styles worn at concerts and raves. They have no fear of being targets themselves, and clearly understand their right to Purge, but the girls reclaimed the fear associated with the holiday and turned it into a performance.

As with any type of highly divisive movement, the second and third films in the Purge series highlights a growing resistance to the NFFA and the Purge. These individuals and groups are taking a fundamental right granted to all Americans to protest but take it one step further by claiming the night of the Purge to get the word out for their movement. They echo a sentiment that viewers can resonate with: “change only comes when their blood spills. We are outraged, and we are fighting back” (Movieclips Trailers, 2016 b). In a system where the few benefits at the hands of the majority, the masses enact their agency to bring about change in a system designed against them. The same people who became targets since the beginning of the Purge have now formed their own efforts to not just protect themselves from the slaughter but work to remove the tradition altogether.

This movement, and the efforts of Senator Roan are the single greatest examples of agency in a system designed to stifle individual rights for the pleasure of the majority. These scenes highlight the dangers of the Purge to those without wealth or prestige. For the elite, it is a cause for celebration, a chance to enact evils upon innocent people, and to upend the established order. Regardless of the spectacle and intended message behind the idea of the Purge, the day symbolized a breakdown in agency. In many ways, the examples seen in “The Purge” highlight a false representation of agency, or a choice between two negatives. Whether they choose to participate in the actual purging, every decision they make is within the context of the Purge. False agency is also common in the next analyzed text, “The Handmaid’s Tale.” Unlike the Purge which happens once a year, citizens of Gilead live under a constant sense of false agency oppressed by the established order.

Agency in “The Handmaid’s Tale”

In Gilead, few choices made by the characters are a result of free will. Instead, many of their choices, from the way they dress to their daily rituals are a result of a dominant group enforcing rules and standards upon the community. They struggle every day to maintain some control in a male dominated society and hold hope that one day they will be able to work again, own property, have money, or at the very least make decisions about their bodies. Gilead is a severe threat to agency, but through the daily struggles of survival, characters manage to find slivers of opposition to the established order. Gilead’s main weapon for stripping people of their personal identity is to employ conformity across the board. The idea of conformity and standardization is also seen in

the theory of the “culture industry.” Adorno and Rabinbach argues “culture industries” have commodified culture, favoring sameness over originality to maximize both efficiency and bring order to a chaotic world (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975). Adorno initially used this idea of culture industry and conformity to address America’s mass production in television and entertainment, but his work is also relevant in this critique. Similar to a show or amusement park created in one way to attract a mass number of people, the same type of conformity and sameness in Gilead was used with opposite intentions. We see the effects of culture industries reflected in Gilead by their preference for sameness. If everyone is wearing the same style, adopting the same rhetoric, and following the same societal structure, they bring a simulated version of order. The use of such forces citizens to adopt the established rituals and buy in to the hegemonic order through repeated actions.

We first met Offred after her failed attempt to escape Gilead where she loses her husband and daughter. In a bland room with only a table, chair, lamp, and bed, her red outfit stands out as the only source of color or purpose in the room. But as her voiceover begins, the first and most striking loss of agency witnessed is the loss of her old name: “My name is Offred. I had another name, but it’s forbidden now” (Atwood et. al, 2017). Unlike the book, in Hulu’s production Offred’s real name is confirmed as June; the name Offred pays homage to the commander who she now “belongs to”, Commander Fred Waterford. Within Gilead, Handmaids are not given real names but instead take the name of the commanders they belong to and change if they go to a new household. So, June is no longer an autonomous person, but instead belongs to Fred Waterford, hence her name

'Of-Fred'. The maids who work in the wealthy households keep their given names but are often referred to as Martha, describing their role in society. The wives in Gilead hold the highest position and also keep their given names. However, all women in Gilead are confined to a strict dress code that visually represents their status within the society; Marthas wear gray, and wives wear blue.

The loss of identity and individualism by stripping the women of their birth identities is one of the first signs of a lack of agency in Gilead. Names are not just monikers used to grab our attention, but can hold religious, spiritual, historical, or familial importance. What makes this experience more significant is Offred has no identity unless her body is literally claimed by a man, and even then, her name changes depending upon the man. As Handmaids, the women serve their commander by fulfilling their role as fertile women, the only identity they are allowed to have, but neither represent the individual people they once were. Every time a Handmaid is called, she is reminded that her value and worth is dependent upon the Commander she serves, and even that is contingent upon her biological ability to conceive, which is outside of her control. For the Commanders, even though they hold positions of power, they too are confined to the restrictions set by Gilead's structure and held to standards relevant to their positions.

Another method of conformity and loss of agency within Gilead is through the outfits all women and men wear. Whenever a book is adapted to a movie or show, creators are often tasked with bringing what readers imagined to life on a screen while still adhering to what the original author intended. The visual rhetoric in "The

Handmaid's Tale" amplifies the importance of the characters clothing not just as a functional item, but as representations of their status within society. In the backdrop of the neutral colored scenes, the Handmaid uniform of white bonnets, blood red dresses and cloaks stand out for miles. The choice in outfit has the exact opposite effect of the naming convention, but the same end results. If everyone wears the same clothes, there is no room for individuality to shine through, yet even in sameness, clothing still has semiotic importance within visual texts. The choice in a shade of red resembling menstrual blood was meant to be seen "...coming a mile away, flowing down the street, like a river of blood" (Lincoln, 2017). Adorned in red cloaks, the Handmaids are easily visible and are walking advertisements of both their role and status within Gilead. For the Marthas, their outfits are shades of gray, implying their low status and rendering them invisible. For the commanders, classic black suits are the norm because they symbolize power and strength within the community. The visual rhetoric behind the choice of clothing reminds viewers every time they watch of the clear distinction between the societal groups in Gilead. The red outfits for Handmaids' represents part of what Foss was arguing in her theory on visual rhetoric; even when it comes down to the choice in clothing, the color blood red is a constant reminder to both viewers and characters that the Handmaids are literally walking targets of oppression based on their gender (Foss, 2004).

Clothing is often a form of free speech and individuality for the wearer to express themselves through dress. In Gilead's case, clothes are visible markers of the wearer's worth. Everyday women have a false sense of agency that they can decide to rebel against

the established order, but their only other alternative is inhumane forms of punishment, even public hanging. The Handmaids do not possess any clothes outside the accepted dress code, they are allowed to walk “freely” but must always have a fellow Handmaid with them, and while allowed to speak, their rhetoric must not raise any red flags about their allegiance to Gilead. Their worth is directly related to fulfilling Gilead’s end goal and maintaining their desired order. Offred “chose” to be a Handmaid, but as her only other option was to become an Unwoman, her choices were extremely limited (Colton, 2013). The lack of choices leads to the next role of agency in “The Handmaid’s Tale”, the role of agency influenced by societal norms and expectations.

Gilead’s structure is based on rules meant to better the country and address the declining birth rate. But in the process of tackling these concerns, Gilead’s commanders imposed a societal order that restricted women to more “traditional values” while commanders were exempt from those very laws. In Offred’s situation, the commander has control over the women in his home, but “...only so far as society allows” him to (Colton, 2013). Everything from the clothing to the rituals and ceremonies is extremely structured and with a specific purpose, with no one daring to stray from the norms for fear of being made a betrayer. Even if the commander did not want to participate in the monthly Ceremony, because of the established order and expectations his household and community saw, he has little choice but to participate.

From the highest rank of commander to the Marthas and Handmaids, everyone in Gilead is bound by their class and Gilead’s law to restrain their agency and stay. Gilead was created with a goal to create a better life, but as Commander Waterford expertly

stated, “better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some” (Chadwick, 2017). His worldview of Gilead and the limitations of agency are skewed with the luxury of being at the top of their caste like system. It is a mentality that implies in order for a society to advance, some must inadvertently get left behind. But if everyone were to use the agency granted to them, it is possible to lead a world where no one is left with the short end of the stick.

Gilead’s structure and order are a far cry from the desert wasteland in “Mad Max: Fury Road.” Gilead was visually a society that we can recognize and feel some comfort in its familiar streets, cars, and “normalcy.” In “Mad Max” we see the most dire type of dystopia, a catastrophic event that takes our society to an unrecognizable era where civilization is built upon the need to survive in post-apocalyptic conditions.

Agency in Mad Max: Fury Road

Of the three texts analyzed in this critique “Mad Max: Fury Road” is the most closely associated with catastrophic dystopian media. The movie serves as the final and most severe warning of a total collapse of structure and agency. A desert backdrop with communities fighting over water and fuel serves as the perfect scene for the final analysis of agency’s role in a dystopian society. “Mad Max” demonstrates how a group uses their individual agency to not just begin their quest for a better life, but also help those outside their group grapple with their own choices.

“Mad Max” has strong female empowerment seen through actions women take to protect themselves. Rather than obey Immortan Joe’s orders, Furiosa steps outside the established order and takes Joe’s slave wives to safety. After a chemical disaster wipes

out the established order of the world before, Joe leads his community with traditional fascist strategy. Resources are controlled and limited to those at the top, while the masses are led to believe what little they do receive is by virtue of the leader who has their best interests at heart.

Joe takes the same approach to the “wives” and keeps them literally locked behind a vaulted room. The wives are Joe's property and "breeding stock" in the quest for a healthy male heir but as they began to fight for their freedom, they became agents in their own destiny. After the catastrophic event that signals the end of civilization, one of the first concerns survivors will have (after establishing food and shelter) is how to continue the species. In Joe's case, his concern is not about the women and the betterment of his community and humanity, but instead he views the women as property that he can force his will upon. Most of the society becomes disposable as a result, solidifying their place as members of the subaltern.

The wives symbolize what happens when a person loses all rights to agency and become the property of another human being. Agency is still within the confines of an established government and society that sets limits to personal agency that can be deemed dangerous or a threat to others' rights. In the case of dystopian societies, the established order threatens any form of agency that directly conflicts with their hegemonic oppression. Similar to Offred and the Handmaids, the accepted ownership of people means the owners will always dominate, while the oppressed lose agency over their own bodies and actions. For the wives in “Mad Max”, their right over their bodies was stolen in exchange for Joe to rape them in the name of preserving the species. But in a twist that

shows the true power of human perseverance, when Joe realizes his wives are with Furiosa and demands to know where she had taken them, he learns the wives “begged” Furiosa to take them to safety. The elderly woman who served as their mentor combats Joe’s rage by pointing out an obvious flaw in his plan: “They are not your property. You cannot own a human being. Sooner or later someone pushes back!” (Greydanus, 2017). The woman’s words are evidence that even in the darkest times, humans still find their way outside the allegorical cave of imprisonment and gravitate towards the light of their instinctual agency.

Furiosa and the wives collectively come together united under a single cause of freedom from Joe’s repressive regime. She is part of Joe’s elite Lieutenants granting her certain privileges and exceptions that the masses and the wives do not receive. Realizing her position of power and ability to enact change is larger than the masses or wives held hostage, Furiosa uses her agency and status to push against the hegemony to bring her community out of Joe’s shadow of terror. On the surface it might appear they were fighting for women’s rights, but their actions and the consequences of their victory supports the idea that “women’s rights are human rights”, a theme central in gender politics today which comes from Hillary Clinton’s 1995 speech at the United Nations (Grunwald, 2017). By the climax, viewers realize Furiosa and the wives were on a quest to save not just themselves, but the entire community from Joe’s terror. Their goal was not just to escape the slavery they were trapped in, but also bring about change in the community and end the violence Joe brought on (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

The men who accompany Furiosa and the wives in their freedom from Joe are characters whose choices are greatly impacted by the female empowerment in the film. Title character Max has a limited role compared to Furiosa and the wives. Initially he was held hostage as a blood donor for Nox, a sickly soldier in Joe's army who craves his moment of fame in Joe's eyes. Nox wants to capture the women and return to the community as a war hero, while Max wants nothing more than to be released and on his way as a loner.

Max reluctantly agrees to help the women when he's promised an escape from the wrath of Joe's army, but as the movie progresses, his role in their escape is no longer about the benefits he reaps, but instead about overthrowing Joe's rule. Max suffers from visions of the horrors he has seen since the end of civilization, and for him, this journey will just end in broken spirits. When Furiosa learns her end destination, the "Green Place", is now a radiated wasteland, the group devises a new plan to push onward and establish a new home away from Joe. Max warns Furiosa that hope is a mistake and attempting to fix what is broken will drive her insane. Ironically, he joins the women in their mission to stage a coup of Joe's community and reclaim it from his tyrannical rule. The final scenes show Furiosa and the women celebrated for their successful mission and Max, smiling slightly before disappearing into the crowd, no doubt to wander among the wasteland.

Max and Nox both had their own reasons for joining the fight. Max's change of heart is symbolic of his own agency while being haunted by his own memories of the past. In his mind, Max believed helping Furiosa and the wives would bring closure to his

own demons and represent that light of hope he himself lost long ago. Max had been in his own mental cave for so long he saw any attempt to break the status quo as futile attempts resulted in pain and suffering. He viewed Furiosa's determination for a better home and the wives' bravery to stand up against their enslavement as acts of agency in a world designed to keep them oppressed. By going his own way after the women succeeded, Max demonstrated how agents driven towards a common goal still do so for their own personal reasons. Max received little immediate benefit from helping the women in their journey, but from sharing this common goal, he was able to continue his own journey to find what mattered to him most.

Nox and his fellow War Boys, are obsessed with doing right by Joe and wants nothing more than his admiration and approval. Nox represents young men who go to war with a sense of immortality. He goes into war not caring if he lives or dies or understanding the consequences leading up to the battle. As he evolves in the movie, viewers learn his loyalty to Joe is based upon an extreme cult like mentality where Joe is a deity designed to help his followers into heaven. For Nox, his devotion to Joe was a result of intense influence and corruption from his environment. Once he saw the women and Max achieve their freedom, he found a meaning to his life beyond servitude.

I believe agency is at the heart of the American way of life but is still a constant battle for groups even today. We are all presented with free will and the ability to make our own choices, but due to the established order of civilizations, we often need official and explicit laws that protect our ability to exercise this freedom. The following analysis explores the role of government as presented in the chosen dystopian texts. The texts

analyzed in this section present how fragile agency and just how much dystopian societies rely on its collapse to enforce their agenda.

Government Control within “The Purge” Series

In “The Purge” we see a government that creates an illusion of agency by granting certain rights for a limited time. The movie begins with the introduction of The Purge as government’s attempt to solve a problem: increasing homeless populations, economic troubles, and soaring crime rates. The holiday is positioned as the one day a year people are allowed to release their animalistic desires for violence and revenge without consequence. As the series progresses, viewers realize the Purge is more about government sanctioned murder targeting specific groups through sophisticated technology. This technology allowed those in power to create a data panopticon, with which they carry out their hegemonic abuse of power. The technology became an instrument to carry out government sanctioned murder, in support of their goal to address America’s economic woes by simply removing the subaltern and the problems they bring. The government controlled the population and manipulated beliefs about both the holiday and citizens’ role in the public sphere.

Viewers first see government’s control in how the holiday is justified and presented to citizens. At the commencement of each Purge night, the announcement ends with “Blessed be our New Founding Fathers and America, a Nation Reborn” (T, 2016). In their very own version of propaganda, the public believes the Purge is all about their needs and freeing them from the chains of civility. This rhetoric sends a strong message that the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA) positioned themselves as the answer

to making America pure and right with the world and is seen throughout the movies as a recurring justification for crimes committed.

By allowing the holiday to become law, the NFFA took the right to life and liberty away from the people. The Purge is designed to pit citizen against citizen, parents against children, spouses against partners. Rather than encouraging diplomatic resolutions to conflicts that are bound to arise, the Purge allows citizens to act based on their first (and often violent) tendency. When the annual Purge commences, all emergency services (which are government sponsored) become unavailable. Viewers might assume the reasoning behind the closure is logistical due to the increase in fires, murders, and medical aid required. These closures are the first technique used to control the population and their access to basic, fundamental needs. The only true shelter citizens have from the holiday is whatever protection money can buy, but as the case with the wealthy family from the first movie, money can only go so far. Denying citizens access to aid and safety during the Purge further reinforces the government's commitment to target subaltern groups as much as possible.

In the second and third movie, we see the first signs that the state has not just enacted the holiday into law, but actively sponsors and endorses mass murder. In "The Purge: Anarchy", Eva and her family live in a lower income neighborhood which is one of the first targets during Purge night. The building and inhabitants are attacked by a highly skilled and heavily armed group who take hostages to have them executed with an automatic machine gun. In the third movie, Senator Roan and her bodyguard Leo Barnes are targeted by a supremacist militia group hired by the New Founding Fathers of

America (NFFA). They use bullets with tracking sensors and the city's cameras to not just seek out the Senator, but anyone vulnerable and alone on Purge night.

Class inequality becomes a defining feature in “The Purge.” The wealthy could afford to Purge within the comfort of their homes, while the Other lack even basic protection. In the case of Eva’s father, they may even sell themselves to a wealthy family as sacrifice to protect the future of their own family. When Leo was captured during the second movie and sold to an auction for wealthy Purgers, the simulated hunting ground demonstrated that even the Purge was no exception to the wealthy finding loopholes to benefit themselves.

“The Purge” showed a government that controlled based on a willing and compliant population. In “The Handmaid’s Tale” we see a government that controls mostly through oppressive and violent methods. Similar to “The Purge”, Gilead was conceived on the ideology that the new government could fix a societal problem.

Government within “The Handmaid’s Tale”

Gilead was the solution to address society’s regression of religious values that they believed was a reason for declining birth rates. Gilead's theocratic values focused on child rearing and abstinence from all pleasure, including sexual. Unlike “The Purge”, viewers witness Gilead’s progression into a theocratic state while abolishing current norms of our society such as women’s ability to own property, maintain lines of credit, and work (Kupfer, 2017). When Offred is forcibly fired from her job (along with all other women), she learns that Gilead’s new social order requires women to be completely dependent upon their husbands. In Offred’s case, this meant all her personal bank and

credit accounts were transferred to her husband's name. During the transition of power, heavily armed men associated with the theocracy were openly violent, turning civilian streets in to war zones.

The extreme militarization and display of power in Gilead was another method of controlling the population. During one protest where citizens demanded change, the scene unfolds like many we see during protests today; police armed in riot gear, shields, but no obvious deadly weapons draw. Within minutes, what looks like members of Gilead's own army break through the police barrier, heavily armed with automatic rifles pointed directly at the protesters (Miranda, 2015). With the crowds stunned by the unnecessary display of force, the men begin firing into the crowd, killing innocent protesters. The scene, an example of both Chryslie et. al. and McLuhan and Fiore's argument on the messages in visual media, becomes even more chilling as Offred and her friend hide in a coffee shop, watching citizens get shot in the back as they ran away (Chryslie et. al., 1996 & McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). When viewers see this scene, it does not look so different than images seen in our news of protests around the country. The only difference is we get a first-hand representation of what it is like for protesters (in this case Offred and her friend) running away terrified from bullets striking people right next to them. This visual elicits a strong emotion of how deeply resistant the society is to Gilead's rise.

The overt display of militarization and violence continued in Gilead. Heavily armed men in black clothing were a regular sight in the streets, grocery stores, even hospitals. The government also erected a symbolic and literal wall where unruly citizens

were hung for all to see. Though their heads were covered, they had signs across their chest that described their crime. Examples of criminals in Gilead include an abortion doctor, a gay man, or a woman who broke beyond her designated role (Schwartz, 2017). Almost every intersection and street is heavily guarded by Guardians, the modern police enforcement in Gilead, and Eyes, a group of covert enforcers who symbolically wear all black and are known for snatching people off the streets for any and all deviation from the social norms. Even the high-status Commanders fall under the watch of the Eyes and Guardians to ensure the leaders are upholding their commitment to Gilead's way of life.

Gilead's structure and ideologies are based on the desire to return society back to "traditional values", which the leaders believed were lost in the academic and professional ambitions of women. Commander Waterford and his wife Serena Joy were key architects in Gilead's creation who believed they were "doing God's work" and "saving [the people] from pain" (Atwood & Fiore, 2017). In Gilead there is complete abolishment of the separation between church and state, which grants authority to enforce strict religious teachings. From the Handmaids' education to abstinence of premarital sex and other societal virtues, Gilead designed their nation to focus on reproduction as a "moral imperative" (Atwood & Fiore, 2017). The propaganda in Gilead suggests the leaders are determined to have every trace of immoral thoughts and urges purged from people's minds. One such method of control is through the usage of ritualized greetings such as "May the Lord Open." This common phrase traces back to Biblical passages that suggest if people live a just life and devote themselves to God, the heavens will open up and they will be rewarded (Gibson, 2017). "Praised be" and "Under his eye" are other

common phrases used in Gilead with roots in religious contexts. “Under his eye” is especially relevant because it serves as a reminder that government monitoring is a constant threat in Gilead.

Gilead’s propaganda and censorship make knowledge a direct threat to the establishment of Gilead’s hegemonies. Handmaid “training” begins by drilling into the minds that lust, consensual sex, and pleasure are all sins against God’s will. Handmaids are trained by women called Aunts who fully support Gilead and their goals. Their job is to coerce Handmaids to accept their new role and taint memories of the past as sinful and the cause of declining birth rates. For much of the show, Aunts play an integral role as a mediator between the leaders of Gilead and the Handmaids. Aunt Lydia, the most senior Aunt, is a constant figure in the Handmaid’s training, their birthings, and their punishments.

In one episode, viewers learn how Mexico reacted to their neighbor country undergoing a complete transformation. When Mexican Ambassador Mrs. Castillo visits Gilead, every attempt is made to present the visiting nation with a simulated version of the country that hides the oppression and hegemonic beliefs. Handmaids are tasked with removing dried blood from the walls, while those with visible injuries are barred from attending the formal dinner party. If asked how they like Gilead, they are instructed to respond in a fashion that highlights the country’s achievements. When Mrs. Castillo asks Serena Joy and the other wives their experiences in Gilead, Serena Joy responds that “...an effective society requires sacrifice” (Locke, 2017). Just before this episode, we learn Serena Joy had an instrumental role in developing the framework of Gilead, but as

the nation came to be, sexism and patriarchy effectively shut her out. The perception is created that the Mexican government truly believes Gilead is a utopia with traditional values and an emphasis on preserving the population.

When Offred meets Mrs. Castillo alone, Offred paints Gilead for the repressive, murderous society it is. Surprisingly, when Offred begs Castillo for help, she reveals that her own town in Mexico has not had a single child born alive in six years. Whatever was affecting birth rates in Gilead also affected Mexico, and Castillo came to Gilead in the hopes of securing a trade deal for the ultimate commodity - Handmaids. Offred realizes the very society she's trying to escape is becoming a reality in other countries after Castillo appears to accept the fate of the Handmaids in exchange for a fertile community. Birth and fertility tropes are a common theme in dystopian media, where many dystopian societies are created after a mass loss of life. Often times, women bear the ultimate sacrifice and oppression when birth rate in a society collapses. Women lose their agency and become little more than birthing machines where a pregnancy is no longer a private matter but a tool of oppression by a repressive government. The same theme is seen in "Mad Max: Fury Road" and its portrayal of a society where one individual controls all of the resources needed for reproduction.

Government Control in "Mad Max: Fury Road"

This society's form of government is different from "The Purge" and "The Handmaid's Tale." "Mad Max" is the final collapse of any form of traditional government. In this society, we see a totalitarian ruler who uses his position of power to oppress his people and limit already scarce resources. He oppresses women by holding

them hostage as sexual slaves, and challenges people's biological dependence upon water for survival. He and his army use positions of power over their people to maintain control while giving the masses just enough to stay alive.

Immortan Joe's wives are kept in a vaulted room with no form of escape or interaction with the rest of the society. He also kept women connected to machines that constantly pump breast milk, which he used as medicine for himself and his soldiers. If a woman was not a milking machine or Joe's wife, she most likely was part of the masses living in extreme poverty. Furiosa was the exception to the rule because of her position as a Lieutenant in Joe's army. By separating the women and confining them both physically and mentally, Joe ensured he maintained his control over them and by association, the rest of his society.

Joe continues his dominance by controlling the group's most valuable and scarce resource, water. Instead of depending upon water for survival, Joe's rhetoric encourages his followers to believe he is their source of life and prosperity in this world. During the speech announcing Furiosa's trip to retrieve more gas, he reminds the group that he is "...their redeemer and it is by [his] hands [you] will rise from the ashes of this world" (J, 2015). As he moves to release the water, the people down below, dirty and extremely dehydrated, have almost manic expressions as they shuffle closer. Once the water begins flooding down to the mass, everyone uses whatever containers they have to catch the raining water. Even before the entire group has a chance to fill their containers, Joe shuts off the flow, instructing his people to not become "addicted" to water because it will take hold of them and they will come to "resent its' absence" (J, 2015). The visual of hundreds

of people scrambling to get every last bit of water supports Chryslée's et. al. argument of the messages within visual images, and the difference in presenting the same image rhetorically. It can be done, but as mentioned before, visual arguments illicit a specific response that viewers often cannot shy away from due to its' medium. It becomes difficult to read a story where people struggling for water, but when that story is brought visually, the severity of the message becomes much more persuasive and powerful.

Even though Joe's community is on the far ideological outskirts of any form of structured government, his War Boys display a type of allegiance and nationalism seen in other dystopian texts. War Boys are hand-picked, trained, and groomed to serve Joe and his deeds without question. War Boys have no other function, hobbies, or desires than to be at Joe's disposal in the hopes their heroic deeds will send them to Heaven in the afterlife. Similar to Joe, most War Boys are weak and suffering from a variety of illnesses. Nox, the War Boy who only wants Joe's admiration and acceptance, refuses to let his illness prevent him from joining the war. When he realizes his fellow soldiers are suiting up to go after Furiosa and the stolen wives, he demands to drive a war vehicle in the pursuit. When he is reminded of his weakness, he suggests tying his "blood bag" Max to his car so he continues to receive a steady flow of blood from him. For Nox, the highest honor would be to "die on Fury Road" (J, 2015). Regardless of his physical limitations and status within the War Boys, he joins the fight against Furiosa and the wives for the hope of just one second of acknowledgement from Joe.

During the chase through Fury Road, Joe reaches out to nearby communities The Bullet Farm, and Gastown to help recapture his wives. A common theme among all three

leaders is that compared to their armies, Joe, and the other leaders are all relatively immobile. Their physical deformities keep them from the mayhem they send their soldiers towards. Bullet Farm and Gastown joining the chase represented perhaps the only diplomatic action by Joe, who are bound by the common goal of stopping Furiosa.

The second step in a critical visual rhetorical study, according to Foss, is to interpret the analysis of what the texts' uncovered. We apply the examples presented in each text to Bentham's panopticon and Althusser's' ISA & RSA, and Gramsci's' subaltern groups. Beginning with agency, we explore how these theories help explain and understand the challenges within dystopian societies for characters fighting against the established order for change.

Agency Interpretation

Agency within Dystopian Society

Even though they are separate theories that stand alone, my analysis found that agency is a key foundation to all three theories and how they relate to our society. The common theme in these examples of agency deal with positions of power and the role agency plays within the power structure of the fictional societies. This helps us connect the structure of a society with the individual agency contained within it. Agency is bound by the ideology that we have a right to make decisions for our own lives, but when decisions are a direct threat to the wellbeing of a society, we are no longer discussing agency. Applying McKerrow's concept of a critique of domination that focuses on how discourse sustains social practices, this interpretation adds agency to the theory

(McKerrow, 1989). Those in power within a dystopian society control both agency and discourse to create a subservient society. Their dominance over individual agency is rarely challenged by the weaker class, and their discourse is powerful enough to turn ideologies into hegemonies.

Panopticon within Agency

Bentham's version of the panopticon helps explain how the idea of self-monitoring is often rooted within our own minds and societal structures. In “The Purge” supporters of the Purge left blue flowers outside their homes as a signal to outsiders of their support. By doing so, citizens participate in a ritualized tradition which allows outsiders to easily monitor who supports the Purge. At the time, the dominant ideology was to support the government and their plans to “Make America Great”, which included having public displays of support for the Purge. Anyone who did not place the symbolic blue flowers outside the door were threats to this dominant ideology.

Another example of mental imprisonment from the panopticon is the assignment of Offred's name in “The Handmaid's Tale.” Before the rise of Gilead, Offred's name was June, but within the structure of Gilead, her name is forbidden and instead becomes an homage to the Commander she serves. This example demonstrates the power of the panopticon is not within a physical structure of society, but actually within the mental self-monitoring that occurs as a result of those structures. In the prison layout, prisoners would behave based solely on the perception that they could be watched. Rather than employing traditional tactics of violence, order could be achieved just from a mental shift in the prisoners' thinking. In Offred's case, by losing her right to use her birth name, she

becomes an unwilling and voiceless prisoner within Gilead. Her old name was a reminder of a life that once was, but the name Offred is a check on her to remind her of the place she has within Gilead. When Offred introduces herself, “June” might run through her mind and almost reach her lips, but Gilead stripped her of that name, along with her right to remember life before Gilead. This type of behavior is in conflict with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which addresses the needs of humans based on tiers, with the most basic necessities of food, water, and shelter at the bottom (McLeod, 2007). When Offred is forced to forgo her given name and adopt a name that reinforces the hegemony and control of a repressive government, self-actualization (at the top of the pyramid) becomes self-objectification. This ritual causes Offred to gradually lose herself and memories of a time before Gilead.

In many cases, names pay respect to family members, heritage, religious upbringings, or even a fond memory. Many of us cannot even imagine being called by another name, and those that do change their name will often change it because of a memory or significance they do not want to remember. Names have the potential to place a group in oppression by those in power. Prisons have often used numbers to identify inmates as opposed to the prisoners’ name. One such example in history is the infamous concentration camp of the Third Reich, Auschwitz, and their policy of tattooing prisoners and only referring to them by that number. This continued the self-monitoring effects of the panopticon by forcing prisoners to respond and acknowledge their new “names” while further continuing the ritualized system of oppression at Auschwitz. Names can therefore be tools of empowerment for carrying familial importance, or as a means to

discriminate and oppress. A 2004 study found that resumes with “white sounding names” received 50% more call backs than the same resume with a “black sounding name” (Konnikova, 2017). A school teacher found that her students (often of color and from impoverished areas) would not correct her if she mispronounced their name (Strauss, 2014). She attributed this to a variety of reasons that included not correcting adults in a position of power, a racial divide, and even having their name mispronounced so much they lose interest to correct people. To take a reference from Shakespeare, it does matter “what’s in a name” because that name can easily be used to strip people of agency and instead used as a method of coercion and imprisonment.

Offred and the other women of Gilead are further subjected to effects of the panopticon through the strict and enforced dress code to which they must abide. Each group is required to wear a distinct outfit and color combination that shows outsiders exactly where they stand in society. The dress code has two implications for the women: it creates a form of unity and sameness that further strips them of their identity and takes the mental imprisonment further by being a visual reminder of their position every time they look in the mirror. Gilead’s use of the uniform creates a social panopticon where if the Handmaids or Marthas act beyond their role in public, their crime is easily identifiable.

The Commanders face their own social panopticon by virtue of the very laws they have created. Even though they hold power and influence, they are expected because of their role in Gilead to adhere to the laws they created. For example, Commander Waterford takes Offred to a secret nighttime lounge outside the city limits. Even though

these places are strictly forbidden, the commanders know about and participate in the club, but keep it far from prying eyes of the civilian watchdogs in Gilead. Within their homes, their agency only extends as far as the society allowed them. Just as in “The Purge”, patriotism became a weapon to enforce the will of the powerful. Anyone who dared to step outside the societal boundaries and challenge the hegemony is viewed as a traitor and threat to the ritualized society. This meant that everyone becomes the unofficial police and whistleblowers of Gilead. This is another example of the effects of a panopticon without actual walls and prison cells. Citizens in fear of retaliation for going against the established order inadvertently become compliant in the hegemonic rituals. Seeking any type of safety, people will sound the alarm on dissenters if it provides even the smallest sense of safety.

These examples illustrate that a prison is not limited to a building with four walls, as even our own minds can easily become prisons that prove more effective at suppressing our agency. Dystopian societies require compliance to further their hegemonic laws. In addition to the violence and physical threats witnessed in these examples, societies use methods that create a subtle but damning panopticon within their own citizens’ minds. This combination of mental imprisonment and controlling governmental violence is also seen in Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus.

ISA/RSA within Agency

Modern governments tend to have both ideological and repressive characteristics. Schools and churches for example are centers for ideological education of the public,

while the military and police are methods of keeping order which sometimes calls for the need of force. Althusser's theory of the ISA and RSA is a continuation of his work on ideology and Marxist theory that in order to exist, there needs to be a social order that has the conditions to reproduce the means of life in a productive manner. In "The Purge" opening scenes, viewers come to understand the logic behind the holiday to allow society a release from its animalistic urges. Rather than promoting proper methods of addressing conflicts and anger, the holiday becomes a cathartic release of violent, uncontrolled urges that advocates for people to act upon their base instincts. On the surface, this justification is a representation of a government enacting policy for the betterment of the people, also known as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But further examining the law finds it is actually a law that creates a false sense of agency for the citizens.

If people choose not to celebrate the Purge, it does not keep them safe from becoming victims themselves, nor does the government step in to help protect the dissenters. Thus, people can Purge in the name of the government and the government gets away with having no metaphorical or literal blood on their hands. Citizens become instruments to carry out the government's ultimate goal of population control. Even public resources such as medical and fire personnel become instruments of the government, as their inaction is a result of the government's will. The Purge is not something you can opt out of, and the choice is false.

The choice to partake also creates a false sense of agency within the repressive nation of Gilead. While they have no gun pointed directly to their head, the choices they

have to either become a Handmaid or an Unwoman and sent to work in toxic wastelands do not leave a true sense of choice for Offred and others. Those in power create laws that support their Ideological State Apparatus, and they use it to control the Handmaids. Therefore, those with power in the dystopian society are more likely to view dystopian governments in a favorable light because they benefit from control over the apparatus.

The teenage girl who robs a liquor store and later returns to Purge the owner portrays purging as an activity of conspicuous consumption - something to be seen doing. In their eyes, the holiday had become no different than a festival or rave where their drunken antics can turn deadly without consequence. In Gilead, Offred and her fellow Handmaids routinely walk past a wall that is lined with the hung bodies of those who opposed the regime. At a certain point, violence becomes so commonplace that it loses the fear factor the elite hope to elicit.

In “Mad Max” we see the extreme version of a Repressive State where elite rulers control all of the society’s resources, rationing out just enough for the civilians to survive. Immortan Joe leads his followers to believe that water is not an essential part of living, but an addictive substance one should consume in moderation. This society also portrays an extreme case of human ownership that essentializes women as factories for reproduction instead of human beings. In Joe’s eyes, he knows what is best for the people and only his methods will prove to bring continuity to the group. His method of rule strips people of their agency to effect change in society and resembles a collapse into a total Repressive State. This topic is further explored in the last interpretation of subaltern groups and their agency.

Subaltern Groups within Agency

Gramsci described the subaltern as a group of people in a hegemonic society that lack the same rights as the majority. For the powerful, subaltern groups often become little more than property or pawns to fulfilling their hegemonic needs. Their total oppression defines their place in the subaltern, and the repressive state prevents them from class mobility. No member of the subaltern group chose to give up their consent and role within their society, but through means of oppression and hegemony, the dominant create situations where a few benefit from the current order, while many become disenfranchised members of the majority subaltern. The wives within “Mad Max” portray an extreme subaltern group, not only oppressed, but owned. They serve as breeding stock for Joe’s future army, but also draw a stark comparison to fiction and reality in the form of total sexual ownership.

The women fought for their freedom not only from the literal vault they were in, but also against the vault of human ownership and enslavement. Both they and the Handmaid’s are subaltern groups in a society that views them as property. Their existence is dependent upon their ability to serve out their function, and they have no way of climbing out of this role that does not involve death or other harm. The argument of agency within this is not limited to feminist rights, but on human rights in general. Women in particular have long been viewed as objects of desire to be commodified by the media and society, a theme seen in all of these texts. Offred’s very name in “The Handmaid’s Tale” is derived from her status in the subaltern group, where Handmaids are an object owned by the Commanders and the society at large. In the second Purge film,

Eva's father sells himself to a wealthy family in order to provide the money Eva needed to protect herself and her daughter.

Members of the subaltern can be part of this group without realizing it based on the surrounding circumstances they are in. In the case of the wealthy family targeted in the first "Purge" movie, though they began the movie in a place of power and influence, they easily ended up as the hunted. Their situation reflects that within a dystopian society, the difference between landing within the subaltern or the dominant group is dependent upon the means to protect yourself and the value you hold. Those in the subaltern are essentially powerless compared to the established order and find their agency goes so far in protecting themselves against the hegemony of a dystopian society. The Sandins represent how on the surface, money and status are enough to stay out of a subaltern group, but as soon as these societal concepts were washed away, they become no different than those who lacked the very things that kept them safe. In other words, characters do not need to lose power to be a part of the subaltern, but instead threats to their agency and safety make them part of the subaltern group. In the second "Purge" film, Eva and her daughter are immediately part of the subaltern because they cannot afford the resources to protect themselves against the violence brought by the Purge. The Sandins and Eva, though from very different socioeconomic circumstances, both become subaltern by the Purge. Their experiences are proof that "...better never means better for everyone" (Chadwick, 2017), a sentiment shared by Commander Waterford to Offred. In other words, the true establishment of dystopian societies is built upon the needs of the powerful, while members of the subaltern become casualties of the cause.

Government Control Interpretation

While we have discussed how characters exercise their agency in dystopian societies, government plays an integral part in determining what choices citizens have to make. As we will see in this section, government's role in a society can become so oppressive and hegemonic that citizens are often left with few choices that reflect true free agency. As an institution whose function is to create accepted rules and rituals for the people, government can easily determine how much agency citizens are offered. These texts describe government structures more focused on continuing a hegemonic society than putting the interests of the people first.

Panopticon Within Government

Bentham's Panopticon took on a whole new perspective and significance in dystopian societies. Technology allowed the government in "The Purge" to monitor and control citizens during Purge night. Eva and her daughter Cali discovered their apartment was deliberately targeted during Purge night using technology to pinpoint low income areas where the government could send in highly skilled teams to murder inhabitants. When Leo was shot in the second film, the government sponsored militia group tracked him and his group using the tracking sensor in the bullet they lodged inside his chest. From that bullet, they not only knew where he was, but also contributed to the government sanctioned exterminations by placing those around Leo in danger. When Leo and his group were captured by a different group and brought to the auction for high level Purgers, the simulated hunting environment they were put into gave the Purgers

technological advantages such as automatic weapons and night vision goggles, while Leo and the other huntees were left to fend for themselves.

In “The Purge”, the New Founding Fathers of America can argue the bullet tracers and targeting of low income neighborhoods is meant to continue lowering crime and unemployment rates. After 9/11, many of the increased security measures in place at airports were widely accepted because it gave us an illusion that we will be safer. When surveillance and monitoring citizen behavior is done for the sake of the greater good, citizens are more likely to support the lack of personal freedom. This is especially true when the greater good involves the need for increased security and safety. Citizens inadvertently become the greatest advocates for the relinquishing of freedom when they believe it is in their best interest to do so.

“The Handmaid’s Tale” portrays a society where surveillance and the panopticon are seen as advancing Gilead’s safety and security. Through the structure of their society, the Handmaids ability to give birth is the ultimate in security. Overt display of power and rule by Gilead’s guards and officers of law is the first form of panopticon observed. As their nation rises, the founders quickly and swiftly revoked every woman’s right to financial freedom by transferring all accounts to a male spouse or relative. As Offred and the other women are forced to leave their jobs, the overt display of heavily armed male guards created a strong visual reminder that from now on, a woman’s place would be directly dependent upon a man. In one of Offred’s flashbacks, Offred and her friend Moira are protesting with other citizens, demanding change and resisting the emerging government. As the protest escalates, Gilead officers began shooting at the crowd,

injuring and killing protesters as they attempt to run away from the violence. During Offred's many walks to and from the home and market, the Guardians were at virtually every street corner, ready to remove any threat to Gilead's social norms. Violators would often end up hanged on the wall, their crime against Gilead written for everyone to witness.

The overt displays of power create the circumstances for Bentham's panopticon, by imprisoning the people of Gilead in violence. In this society, any dissent is met with harsh consequences, leaving people afraid to speak out against the hegemony. Prisoners in Bentham's model behaved as expected because they were never sure when they were being watched. Citizens in Gilead obeyed the law because there was a constant presence of ideological enforcers and fellow citizens who might reveal their dissent.

The risk of violence restricts self-expression to the accepted rhetoric in the community, and also exposes those who do not accept the rituals. Handmaids are prohibited from using their old names and are instead named by the man to whom they belong. This type of oppression establishes a mental imprisonment for women by implying their given names are out of bounds and unacceptable in the new society. Before a Handmaid introduces herself, she reminds herself to not use her given name, remembers the "new" name she has, and the man who gave her that name.

Gilead continues to use rhetoric to create a mental panopticon and conformity through their accepted conventions. The common greetings "May the Lord Open", "Praised Be", and "Under His Eye" are the dominant style of language. Similar to our standard greetings and niceties, there is an established order and expectation from the

conversations that happen in Gilead. Any person who defies the established order and does not use the given phrases risks being perceived as disloyal to the cause. It also creates a form of self-censorship with citizens who might protest what is happening, but in order to avoid detection, conform to the standards.

In “Mad Max”, viewers see that physical confinement alone is not enough to control and deny people’s agency. Joe keeps his wives in a literal prison with no access to the outside world, similar to Bentham’s original concept of the panopticon, but it was not enough to keep Joe’s wives compliant. Even though their surroundings and situation left very little room for agency, their mind and will never fell victim to the mental imprisonment only a panopticon is capable of inducing. Joe’s imprisonment techniques provide insight to the role of physical methods of oppression versus a person’s mental ability to rise above. In the other texts, characters were by and large able to move freely, at least in comparison to a physical prison cell. In “The Purge” victims and Purgers were out in the open and move freely, but technology's reach outsmarted their ability to remain completely untouched by the Purge holiday. Handmaids and citizens in Gilead are under heavy security and surveillance but are still allowed to move about. For Offred’s friend Moira, this affords her the chance she needs to escape Gilead.

These examples of panopticon within dystopian media open a discussion on the correlation between physical barriers, surveillance, mental oppression, and resistance. In all three texts, there are varying degrees of freedom and surveillance, but characters find a way to push against the hegemony. A physical panopticon barrier used in “Mad Max”, technology used in “The Purge”, and mental censorship demonstrated in “The

Handmaid's Tale" were all not enough to keep people within the oppressed and repressive dystopian societies. Despite these means of control and monitoring, citizens used their agency to fight against the established order and resistance against the hegemonic beliefs of those in power. Through their agency, they fight for a society where one group does not benefit on the backs of the many.

ISA/RSA within Government

The very concept of a dystopian society relies on Commander Waterford's belief that "...better never means better for everyone..." (Chadwick, 2017). Dystopian societies are built upon achieving a communal goal which often times will lead to the oppression or suffering of another group, usually the less influential minority group. Gilead's commanders believed the society they formed would solve infertility in America by bringing society (especially women) back to a Biblical way of living. The New Founding Fathers believed that homelessness and crime would solve themselves if they could create a day where people could unleash their pent-up rage and violence. Even Immortan Joe led his community on the belief only he knew what was best. In this regard, the governments analyzed in this thesis are no different than what citizens today believe about their government's role, to create a society for the betterment of the citizens. As portrayed in "The Purge", "The Handmaid's Tale", and "Mad Max", the government can also create policies that establish a repressive society which benefits the powerful.

"The Purge" holiday is justified as a means to provide citizens with a release to their animalistic instinct. The holiday portrayed civil restrictions on violent behaviors as a chain restraining humanity from their desires. In the eyes of the New Founding Fathers,

the Purge was their solution to freeing humanity from those chains. While the wealthy benefited, the average citizens who the Purge was meant to help were left to their own devices. The nationalistic pride and duty associated with the Purge meant that anyone who deviated from the established order set by the NFFA was immediately silenced. During the commencement of every Purge, the public announcement concludes with the phrase “Blessed by our New Founding Fathers and America, a Nation Reborn” (T, 2016). By creating a holiday that both reduces humanity and sanctions wholesale acts of violence as key to a country's identity, the NFFA created a repressive society designed to benefit the powerful at the expense of all others.

Class inequality soon became a key determinant of who suffered and benefited during the Purge. Those with the wealth and status to participate upheld the ideological goals of the holiday and Purged to their heart's content, while the lower classes and masses were left to use whatever minimal defenses they had to survive. Eva's father's self-sacrifice demonstrated the severity of the income inequality and how the Purge had created a buyer's market on people's right to live. When Leo and his group were captured in the second film and sold to wealthy Purgers, the Purge's full repressive characteristics become apparent. In the auction, people paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to Purge on innocent people who were kidnapped off the streets. Once sold, Leo and his group were led into a large dark room with nowhere to hide, no weapons, and no escape from the night-vision enhanced wealthy Purgers. From the kidnapping to the simulated “hunt” of Purge victims, every part of this scene represents a repressive society where the hegemony disproportionately benefits the elite.

Gilead uses class inequality differently in that instead of focusing on socioeconomic factors, one's gender and biological abilities are the deciding factor for social status. Fertile women are immediately forced to become Handmaid's, while anyone who is not fertile, disobeys, or represents a way of life not supported in Gilead, is an Unwoman and sent to the Colonies, a thus unseen toxic wasteland. The Handmaids straddle a fine line between privilege and oppression in Gilead. Because of their fertility, many women, especially the Wives whom the Handmaids serve, are envious of them, creating a power imbalance between the women. Though the Wives are of higher social status than the Handmaids, they are subjected to the same oppressive restrictions such as no access to books, television, money, or property. Even though they experience their own form of oppression, they are themselves oppressive as they participate in the ritualized sexual assaults Handmaids are subjected to monthly. It does not matter if you are a Handmaid or a Wife, Gilead is repressive to all women.

The New Founding Fathers ended every Purge commencement with "Blessed by our New Founding Fathers and America, a Nation Reborn" (T, 2016). If taken literally, the rebirth implies America died because of sins committed by citizens and was reborn to encourage citizens to live a more just and devout life. "The Purge" series do not explicitly mention any dominant religion, but through the rhetoric used by both the founders and citizens participating in the Purge, the holiday and the new government are credited to taking America out of the dark past of crimes.

Gilead's government established a clear connection between religion and their society. The theocratic government openly devotes themselves and their people to follow

laws based upon a dominant religion, though the show does not make clear what specific religion is dominant. When asked if Gilead was a Christian theocracy, Atwood responds that she believes the society did not follow some of the core Christian values of loving neighbors, enemies, and valuing the environment (Williams, 2017). The monthly Ceremony between the Handmaid and the commander has direct similarities to the story of Rachel and Bilhah in the Bible. In that story, Rachel and her sister are both married to Jacob. While her sister has no trouble giving birth to multiple children, Rachel, Jacob's true love, cannot conceive. She convinces Jacob to impregnate her maid Bilhah and use her to carry the children as a vessel. The verse continues in the King James Bible when Rachel, speaking to her husband Jacob, says "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (King James Bible). Gilead's superiors use both religion and the dire birth rate as tools to force the meek to comply with their laws. The end result was a repressive society controlled by hegemony believed to cure the problems of the world on the grounds of religious devotion and compliance.

Immortan Joe represents a society that has no allegiance to a formal religion but instead has a ruler who presents himself as a messiah that can both give and take life from his people. Apart from his opening scenes where he releases water for the community, there is very little reference to religion. Instead, Joe takes on the role of God himself. He claims to be the sole savior for his people to "rise from the ashes of the world" - most likely a reference to whatever disaster wiped out civilized society. As if on cue, he then releases the water to the desperate people down below. Once he shuts the

flow off, he urges his people to not become “dependent” upon water because they will come to resent its absence. Viewers do not have any interaction with the masses he controls but given the reaction of the community when the water flows, they are obviously deprived of it not because of scarcity, but because Joe wants to maintain control over the literal source that gives his people life. Joe is therefore an extreme example of how repressive ideologies in dystopian societies trap citizens in a cycle of benefiting the few at the cost of many. In these societies, the masses who do not benefit become a subaltern group, bound by the restrictions of their hegemonic government.

Subaltern Groups within Dystopian Government

Gramsci defined any subaltern group as low-ranking group under the hegemonic ruling class that denies the group from influencing local history and culture (El, 2012). “The Purge”, “The Handmaid’s Tale”, and “Mad Max: Fury Road” all depict societies built upon the oppression of subaltern group, clearly demonstrated by a distinct winning and losing group in each society. Rather than taking each subaltern group separately from the text, the analysis instead focuses on texts’ subaltern group and those who managed to overcome societal and governmental limitations to push for change.

“The Purge” established a holiday meant to erase the most vulnerable and least influential members of the community. To the NFFA, purging was not a release for the citizens but a mechanism of population control on the low-income minorities. For much of the first movie, viewers saw how the wealthy both benefited from the Purge and also became victims. By the end, it became clear that wealth was not a guaranteed pass out of harm on Purge night. After the second film, viewers might have come to the conclusion

the subaltern consisted of low income minority groups only. However, “The Purge” showcases that in a government where crime is not just lauded but sanctioned, the entire society becomes a subaltern group. Victims of the Purge crossed racial, class, and socioeconomic divides and were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a modern-day comparison, the subaltern consisted of 98% of the population, while the remaining 2% who remained untouched and directly benefited from their extreme wealth and status.

“The Handmaid’s Tale” subaltern groups was largely segregated by gender and status within Gilead. Women overall were not part of the decision-making process for laws and legislation but were still oppressed by the patriarchal limitations on freedom. Handmaids were further oppressed by additional laws condemning them to a life of sexual servitude, wasting away in a toxic land, or become an example of what happens to dissenters on the wall. Gilead was created and established by a group of men who used their position of power to create laws regarding women’s fertility, education, and freedom. In other words, an entire gender become part of the Other in Gilead, a subaltern group whose fate was decided by a select group who directly benefited from their oppression.

Gilead’s power structure further produced subaltern groups by restricting access to knowledge for anyone outside the power structure and establishing clear practiced rituals that reinforced control in everyday life. Gilead’s order of discourse is through controlling citizens’ rhetoric, monitoring information both inside and outside of Gilead, and oppressing subaltern groups’ voices. Abortion doctors, professors, and journalists

were all direct threats to Gilead's hegemony and met their fate at the public hangings. Rituals such as the hegemonic greetings or the monthly Handmaid Ceremony, help restrict power to the elite.

These restrictions reflect the "orders of discourse" proposed by Foucault on who can speak, how much is said, when, and even what subject is discussed (Mckerrow, 1989). If a society mimics this order, knowledge no longer has free flowing access but instead becomes filtered through the lens of those in power to continue maintaining their domination over the people. The rituals normalize oppression by making even the vilest acts a routine that becomes known and familiar. Because we only discuss and participate in rituals approved by those in power, we further establish the oppressive regime and create a panopticon where the only knowledge and acts are those that do not challenge the power elite. However, as we have seen from the texts analyzed in this paper, dissent and agency can bring about changes to the order. It becomes our job as scholars to take the examples of dissent and agency outside the sphere of media and apply it our own lives.

Real Life Implications

With contemporary politics as a backdrop, the real-life implications of this critique serve as a toolkit that anyone, not just fans of dystopian media, can turn to for guidance. Characters within "The Purge", "The Handmaid's Tale", and "Mad Max" all faced extreme oppression and hegemony within their societies, but through it all discovered the power of their agency in challenging the established order. For some

viewers, these texts have uncomfortable relevance to our current political climate and may account for some of the recent fascination with dystopian media.

Though Donald Trump is not the cause of our renewed interest in dystopian media, his election and the divided ideological environment it signifies are symptoms of a latent fear of our national future. This has created an environment ripe for the anxiety induced consumption of dystopian media. After his election, millions around the country and world mobilized to establish their firm dissent to what he represented. Up until this point, this analysis avoided mentioning Trump because he is not the cause of our fascination, but merely a symptom of a larger problem. Other issues, such as man-made climate change, are also represented in dystopian worlds.

Catastrophic dystopian narratives tell stories of survival and growth after societies collapse and die. In a world so different from our own, without the distractions of technology, social media, and the 24-hour news cycle, dystopian narratives find a way to relate to viewers in modern 21st century terms. Zombies have become common representations in popular culture of our obsession with consumption and mindless brand loyalty. Dystopian media is meant to be consumed within the confines of our own reality, far away as possible from actually living what was presented on the screens. As scholars and consumers of entertainment, our job is to take the theories and apply them outside of the screen. From the most light hearted romantic comedy to the darkest horror film, every form of media has messages and themes embedded into the content.

From a young age, we are taught what we see on television is not real; they are made up stories, characters, and situations. People like Margaret Atwood challenge that

assertion head on by creating stories ripped from our history pages. To bring the value of dystopian entertainment beyond passive consumption, the *reel* life examples need to impact viewers beyond the screen and bring their message to *real* life. A visual rhetorical critique of dystopian texts allows us to dive into the fine details of the *reel* life examples, while taking it out of the *reel* and showing why it matters. By analyzing these texts for their allegorical meaning, we free their message from the confines of the text. Once free, their messages have the potential to inspire everyday citizens to believe in change and the power of their voice. This is why representation in film and media is so important, and why it matters that Others have representation within entertainment. Even if the story is imagined, the feeling and inspiration we take away as audience members is as real as our ability to enact change.

Dystopian media is a warning of what can happen in a world where societies are established in a hegemonic and oppressive fashion. In “The Purge” series, citizens were led to believe they could violate others’ rights to safety and freedom because their government told them it was their “right” to do so. The government took it a step further and sanctioned their own murders by targeting subaltern minority and low-income communities. Gilead’s government established an entire society which repressed Others, while encouraging ritualized rape and sexist ideologies. Immortan Joe convinced his followers to challenge their biological need for water and instead inserted into their minds that he alone was all they need to “rise from the ashes” (J, 2016). These are powerful and oppressive hegemonies used by the few in power to culturally and violently force coercion among the citizens.

But with each step the government took to control, oppress, and monitor their citizens, a small handful rose from the oppression to resist against the hegemonic ideologies. Many of the tactics used by the government were designed to force citizens into submission. Senator Roan, Offred, Furiosa, and Max are all testament to the limits of oppression and hegemonies when it comes to individual agency and resistance. Even though their outside circumstances gave them every reason to comply and accept the status quo, these characters fought against the oppression for a better life. Senator Roan's fellow government leaders staged retaliation against her and literally sent a nationalist hit team after her. Offred was subjected to monthly ritualized rape and watched her fellow Handmaids endure the unspeakable if they spoke out against the government or otherwise resisted. Furiosa knew her role in leading the wives to freedom would almost certainly end in death for her, while Max found his own peace in helping strangers escape their tormentor. These average, everyday citizens serve as the inspiration and reminder that even in the face of the harshest and most oppressive realities, our situations are no worse than what we allow to consume our agency and free will.

As citizens, we can use these characters as inspiration for responding to our own forms of oppression. Senator Roan in "The Purge", Offred in "The Handmaid's Tale", and Furiosa in "Mad Max: Fury Road" represent the *reel* life examples of the power a single individual or group can have in enacting change through agency. Their job is to show the rest of us a way out of the darkness, and how we might change the world for the better. They give us the toolkit to prepare our own resistance and dissent to ideologies or policies that harm our communities. Leaders and marchers in the Women's March, the

#MeToo Movement, #NeverAgain #TakeAKnee, and more represent the person who left Plato's allegorical cave. As individuals, we can use these visual rhetorical examples of agency within repressive governments as a road map to navigate our own society. By focusing on the *reel* events depicted on the screen, we can tie the connection to reality and how it affects us as audience members. Our role in enacting positive changes to our society does not end at the ballot box or in transition from one administration to another. As evidenced both by the examples in this critique and real leaders of resistance movements, dissent, at any time for any reason, is a powerful and commanding force we can all utilize.

Where We Go From Here

This thesis is by no means an exhaustive approach to visual rhetorical critique on dystopian media and its relation to politics today. From here, I encourage fellow rhetorical scholars to further explore how this genre can be much more than the undead and creatures of the night. Dystopian media in general and specifically political dystopian media brings to life the very fears we hope never become reality, but also serves as a road map of ways to navigate a world filled with uncertainty. The texts in this critique serve as interpretive evidence to measure the country's response to our government's direction, policies, and the potential future. For those who want to pursue dystopian media further, the evidence and analysis in this thesis can serve as an interpretive archive of analysis on visual rhetorical media, and also a reminder that evidence can be found in unusual places (Houck, 2006).

Even though this paper's focus is not on Trump's role in the increased fascination of dystopian stories, his leadership and ideologies have gravitated citizens to media for answers. Scholars interested in relating this topic specifically to Trump's effects on dystopian genre, there is a case to be made on analyzing his relation to fascist dystopian societies and his continued oppression of dissent. There is also room in academia to pursue this topic more broadly and look at how dystopian media provides citizens answers and guidance to policies and governments enacted with repressive ideologies.

Most importantly, this critique is not meant to be confined to the scope of academia. Communication scholars already understand the importance of theory and rhetoric, but does the average citizen watching reality television in their living room? The average citizen may not realize the implications or messages behind the entertainment they consume, and if they do, they may still need a conceptual framework for applying *reel* life lessons to reality. For any type of critique to become effective, the influence and spread of knowledge needs to be far and wide. From the most academic rhetorical scholars to the Marvel and DC movie fanatic, everyone can use the tools presented in this paper to take what we consume and use it to build a world free of oppression and hegemony. As with any tool, the strength and effectiveness depends upon the user. We can look to the characters in "The Purge", "The Handmaid's Tale", "Mad Max", and other dystopian texts as inspiration. By taking our experiences out of the *reel*, we can empower our own resistance to hegemonic oppression. For even in the darkest of times, personal agency is a light to lead us away from the cave, as we become agents of change ourselves.

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