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Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation 5:2026

CINEMATIC IMAGINATIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL ANXIETY: VISUALISING THE HUMAN COST OF INNOVATION IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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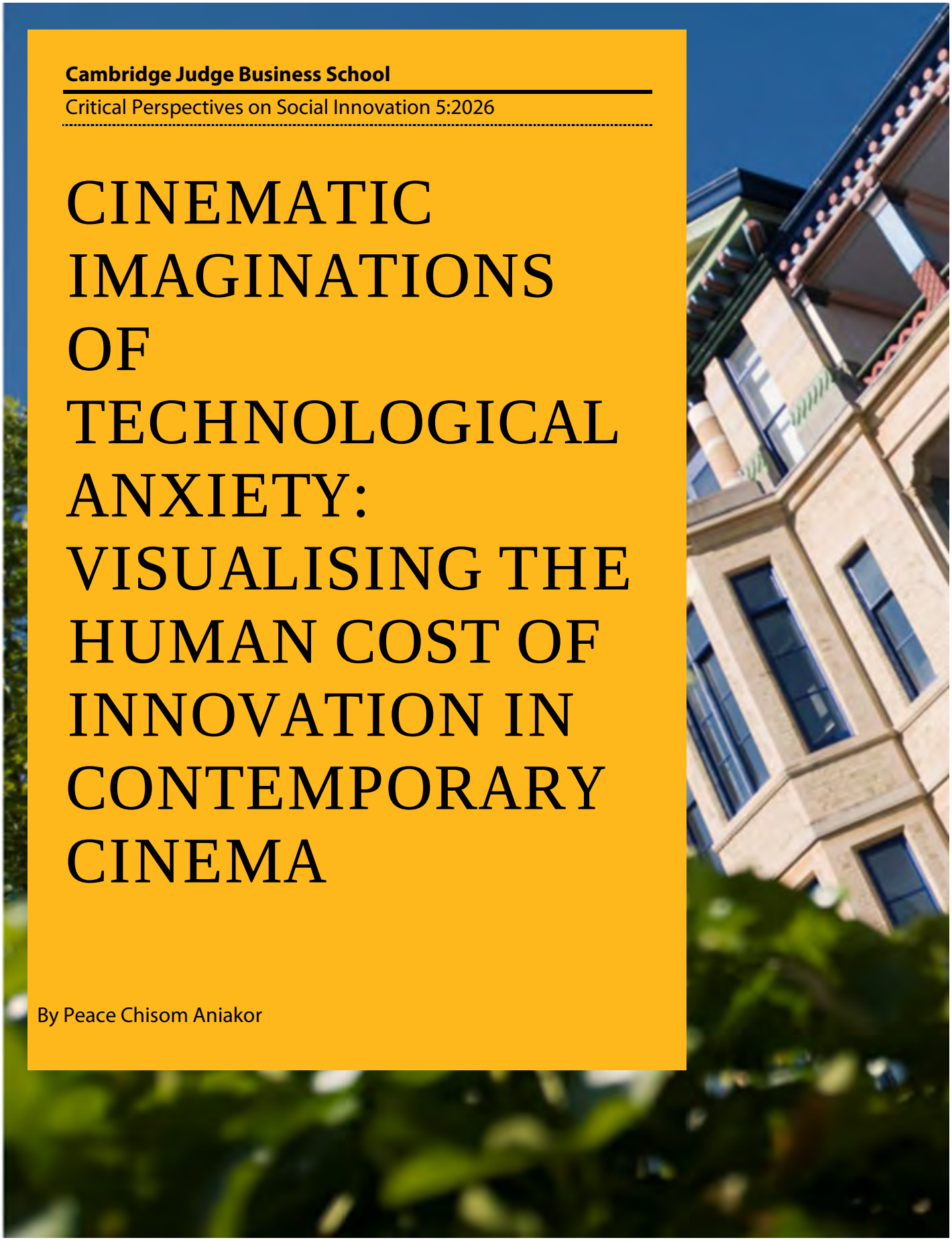

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Foreword

The *Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation* series of working papers is designed to provide rigorous and challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices, and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

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Cinematic imaginations of technological anxiety: visualising the human cost of innovation in contemporary cinema

After spending questionable amounts of time immersed in films about technological progress achieved over the last hundred years, swiping through social media feeds, and watching the same conversation about innovation delivered in different forms, I believe it fair to agree that contemporary screen media, specifically cinema, aptly captures our stories about the tools we create and the uneasy feeling that these tools are reshaping us in return. From the towering machines of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to the information systems of Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), films across varying genres repeatedly visualise worlds where innovation and technological progress brings both possibility and danger. This contradiction is not incidental but fundamental to modernity itself[1].

While David Nye[2] insists Western technological culture has historically alternated between utopian visions of progress and dystopian fears of catastrophe, producing an ideal technologically-charged environment that inspires awe while concealing systems of domination, Neil Stott[3] presents the concept of social innovation as an alternate space where technology, Western and global, can transcend these extremes in the move from lethality (institutionalised death) to vitality (institutionalised life)[4]. Such contested realities are both dramatized and embodied through cinema, making the screen a place where anxieties and hopes about mechanisation, automation, and digital life are represented and navigated[5]. These cinematic representations become stories, not just about the future, but present-day concerns about how far innovation should go, who ultimately benefits from it, and whether alternative ways ensuring balanced growth can be optimised. In this way, cinema helps us make sense of the simple but persistent question, does technology really improve human life, or is technology quietly altering what it means to be human?

[1] Paul Valéry's quoted text in Benjamin, W. (2018) 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage*. New York: Routledge. p. 26.

[2] David, N. (2007). *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With.* Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. 32-33.

[3] Stott, N. (2025) 'Atoning for social harm: redemption and social innovation.' *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation*, No.2025/4. Cambridge: Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

[4] Stott, N. (2025). Organisational lethality/Organisational vitality - Part 1: Hidden organisational lethality: the existential challenge for social innovation organisational lethality. *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation.* No 3 2025. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

[5] Sobchack, V. (1991). *The Address of the Eye.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. pp. 57-96.

While highlighting the visual language of *The Hunger Games* (2012)[6], I argue in this essay that cinema does not simply mirror the technological anxiety encased in this question; it also frames and embodies it, helping us to envision what comes next, and imagine alternate realities. Through this visualisation emerges the question of individual and collective agency and action[7]. By analysing *The Hunger Games*, I aim to show how films can make the consequences of innovation visible while also pointing, however subtly, toward the possibility of social change. In doing this, I present cinema not only as a space of critique, but also as a starting point for imagining and executing more humane and socially responsible forms of innovation.

The Hunger Games (2012), the first installation in the Hunger Games series, follows Katniss Everdeen, a young woman from the impoverished District 12 in the dystopian nation of Panem. In this nation, the authoritarian Capitol enforces its power through an annual televised event known as the Hunger Games. Each year, children from the districts, *tributes*, are selected by lottery to fight to the death in a controlled arena. This spectacle is designed both to punish past rebellion and to reinforce the Capitol's dominance. When her younger sister Prim is chosen, Katniss volunteers in her place, entering the Games alongside fellow District 12 tribute, Peeta Mellark. Inside the arena, she must navigate a hostile environment shaped by technological manipulation featuring engineered terrains, surveillance systems, and gamemakers who control the conditions of survival. While alliances form and collapse, Katniss emerges as a complex participant, balancing survival with acts of defiance that subtly challenge the rules imposed upon the tributes.

As the Games progress, Katniss and Peeta's relationship becomes central to the narrative, particularly when the Capitol alters the rules to allow two victors from the same district, prompting them to perform a romantic bond for the audience. When the rule change is later revoked, the pair threaten a double suicide, forcing the Capitol to concede and declare them co-winners. This outcome disrupts the narrative of absolute control, and the head gamemaker who declared them co-winners pays the ultimate price. Though she survives the arena, Katniss' actions expose the fragility of the Capitol's authority and signal the possibility of resistance. The film ends on this tense note as her survival becomes tangled with the beginnings of political unrest within the nation.

[6] Ross, G. (2012). *The Hunger Games*. Lionsgate Films.

[7] Jasanoff, S. (2015). 'Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity', in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, ed. by Jasanoff, S & Kim, S. H. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The world is currently shaped by technological inventions that continually redefine the concept of novelty, with every global economy in a race to invent the newest technology for advancing key areas of life including trade, life expectancy, and military strength. While exciting for countries leading in this race, this presents enormous danger to countries trailing behind as it threatens their flora, fauna, natural resources, and human life which are normally extracted by the former to maintain their lead. Such thanato-economy, 'a system fundamentally organised around practices that kill: now, sooner or later,'[8] commonly bury the cries of the dead under stories constructed to highlight the profits of extraction and whitewash the damages exacted. However, underneath these unheard cries emerges a fragmented technological anxiety defying control and demanding to be heard. While cropping up in several spaces, such fragmented concerns are most commonly depicted in contemporary cinema and informs my selection of this film.

The first time I saw *The Hunger Games* was in 2016 when I had not yet grasped the various ways of seeing cinematic images. At this time, it registered little more than an exaggerated sci-fi film seen during an afternoon of leisure. The next time I would see it however, I had understood the concept of film criticism and how to read and interpret cinematic images. This time, I was better equipped to interrogate its components frame by frame, and to see it, and cinema, differently. While I will not delve into a frame-by-frame reading in this essay for space, I have over time observed contemporary cinema to be a compelling conveyor of reality[9] because of its ability to translate complex concepts, and in this case, complex imaginations around innovation, into recognisable human experiences like love, fear, hope, anxiety, and resistance[10]. Whether the simulated reality of *The Matrix* (1999) or the advanced yet unequal world of *Black Panther* (2018), contemporary cinema often reflects the progressive influence of technology on human identity and power structures.

Thomas Elsaesser pointed to this tendency of contemporary cinema to return to familiar concerns, like surveillance and loss of freedom, as a technique for making abstract ideas about digital life and innovation feel immediate and personal[11]. *The Hunger Games* offer a particularly clear example of this dynamic. In the fictional city of Panem, technology is not just a background feature, it structures

[8] Stott, N. (2025). Organisational lethality/Organisational vitality - Part 1: Hidden organisational lethality: the existential challenge for social innovation organisational lethality. *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation.* No 3 2025. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. p. 4.

[9] https://allreaders.com/movie/the-hunger-games-2012. 1/05/2026.

[10] The Healing Phoenix. (2024). 'Film Analysis: The Power of Dystopia in the Hunger Games', *Medium*, https://monasaidi.medium.com/film-analysis-the-power-of-dystopia-in-the-hunger-games.

[11] Elsaesser, T. (2012). *The Persistence of Hollywood*. New York: Routledge, p. 24.

society. The Games are made possible by advanced systems of surveillance, media broadcasting, and artificial manipulation, all of which turn human suffering into entertainment as characters are forced to both survive and present themselves in ways that will appeal to the audience behind the screen. Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism provides a useful framework here as technology becomes a tool of distraction and control that shapes behaviour and limits freedom while disguising itself as spectacle[12].

Yet to see these films only as warnings about technology would be to miss an important part of the picture. While explaining the additional efforts required when innovating for social good rather than for profit, Stott points out that responses to harm, whether caused by technology or other forces, are often driven by deep human emotions such as guilt, anger, fear, and hope[13], which can motivate individuals and societies to imagine and construct better systems. Social innovation, in this sense, is not just about new ideas or inventions, but about addressing the damage caused by existing ones and increasingly finding ways to build just and inclusive futures. Seen in this light, films like *The Hunger Games* do more than expose the darker side of technological progress, they also invite reflection on how things might be different. By showing the human cost of systems and technologically mediated environments built on control and inequality which often blur the boundaries between authenticity and performance[14], such films open up space for imagining alternatives while simultaneously presenting possible blueprints for action[15].

Beyond technological progress

Stott's account of social innovation adds an important conceptual depth to how we might interpret the technological worlds imagined in *The Hunger Games*. Rather than treating innovation as a neutral or purely progressive force, he frames it as a response to harm, particularly harm produced by deeply rooted systems of inequality and exclusion. This position aligns with a fundamental shift in innovation studies that challenges the carefully selected celebratory and sanitising language often associated with technological advancement. Rather than promoting innovative practices that replicate these social harms, other scholars, like Stott, have taken to presenting the concept and practice of social

[12] Foucault, M. & Sheridan, A. (1991). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Books.

[13] Stott, N. (2025) 'Atoning for social harm: redemption and social innovation.' *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation*, No. 4 2025. Cambridge: Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

[14] Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. London: Basic Books. 28/3/2026.

[15] Reed, S. K. (2023) *Encouraging Innovation: Cognition, Education, and Implementation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (2023), pp. 157–71. doi:10.1017/9781009390408.017.

innovation as a defined alternative. For Geoff Mulgan, new ideas that meet social needs more effectively than existing solutions while simultaneously creating new social relationships or collaborations, carry greater merit[16]. Caulier-Grice et al similarly emphasises social justice and sustainability rather than novelty in addressing systemic problems[17]. They extended their definition to include certain contextual clarifications, highlighting the possibility of social innovation itself to lead to unintended negative consequences. This important clarification then causes innovation to lose the shiny newness often associated with it, becoming instead more intentional, less hurried, less shiny, and ultimately, less harmful.

Read through this lens, the technological systems in the fictional city of Panem not only showcase the reaches of technological advancement, they point also to the failures of innovation because they intensify harm rather than resolve it. Stott's emphasis on atonement therefore reframes the film's dystopia as a space that calls, implicitly, for forms of innovation grounded in repair and responsibility[18].

If technological innovation is indeed driven by curiosity and profit, and social innovation by emotional and moral responses like outrage, empathy, or a desire for justice as Stott's framework suggests, then films like *The Hunger Games* can also be read and understood as contributing to the early stages of this process. As with most societal changes, social innovation frequently emerges from diffuse, grassroots responses to everyday problems where communities mobilise shared values to imagine and produce alternatives[19]. This underscores the importance of collective agency as the primary medium of challenging dominant systems and producing more inclusive forms of development[20]. From this perspective, the emotional intensity generated by the film images, inspired by the visibility of suffering and the stark inequalities between the twelve districts and the capitol can be read as a cultural resource that fosters critical awareness. However, as Stott suggests in his work,

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[16] Mulgan, G. (2006). 'The Process of Social Innovation', *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization*. 1.2, pp. 145–62, doi:10.1162/itgg.2006.1.2.145.

[17] The Young Foundation. (2012). Social Innovation Overview: A deliverable of the project: 'The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe.' *(TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme*. Brussels: European Commission, DG Research.

[18] Stott, N. (2025). Atoning for social harm: Redemption and social innovation. Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation. No. 4 2025. Cambridge: Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. pp. 2-5.

[19] Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*. Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press.

[20] Shockley, G. (2015). 'The International Handbook on Social Innovation: Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research,' Edited by Frank Moulaert et al., *Journal of Regional Science*, 55(1), 152–54.

awareness alone without pathways for collective action is insufficient as such affective engagement risks remaining contained within the realm of spectatorship[21].

This tension between critique and transformation is central to the argument of this essay. While Stott and other scholars position social innovation as a means of addressing systemic harm, *The Hunger Games* illustrates how deeply such harm can be embedded within technological progress and institutional structures, most of which are hurriedly set up in response to periods of rapid innovation. As structures built for collective good often require extensive efforts, resources and time to become beneficial to society, these rapidly constructed structures tend to produce significant social disruption before new institutional arrangements emerge to stabilise them[22]. Joseph Schumpeter described this break as 'creative destruction' which underscores how innovation can both generate progress and displacement[23]. By placing Stott's ethical framing of innovation alongside the film, its dystopian images can be read not simply as warnings, but as testaments of the result of severing innovation from social responsibility. In this sense, technological anxiety becomes inseparable from questions of accountability as the focus shifts from what technologies can do, to who they serve, who they harm, and whether meaningful forms of social innovation can emerge in response.

Seeing utopia, living dystopia in *The Hunger Games*

If technological anxiety is rooted in such questions of harm and responsibility, then the visual language of *The Hunger Games* provides a striking framework through which these concerns are made legible. The film's world is structured around a stark contrast between the apparent utopia of the Capitol and the lived dystopia of the Districts. This contrast is not only narrative, but also deeply visual. The Capitol is depicted through saturated colour palettes, elaborate costumes and controlled architectural symmetry, suggesting a world of excess, order, and aesthetic perfection. In contrast, the districts are characterised by muted tones, handheld camerawork, and material scarcity, producing a visual language of deprivation and instability[24]. This visual tension reflects what scholars in *Wastelands and Wonderlands* variously describe as the persistent entanglement of utopian and dystopian imaginaries, where rather than existing as opposites, they frequently coexist within the

[21] Stott, N. (2025). Atoning for social harm: Redemption and social innovation. Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation. No 4 2025. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. pp. 6-7.

[22] Perez, C. (2002). *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital: The Dynamics of Bubbles and Golden Ages.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

[23] Schumpeter, J. A. (2013). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Routledge.

[24] Looper, (2023) *The Entire Hunger Games Timeline Explained.* https://www.youtube.com/sFuCKxEAbTI. 17/04/2026.

same system, revealing how visions of perfection are often sustained by hidden structures of exclusion and control[25].

This entanglement is central to technological innovations and how humans perceive and respond to imagined futures. As Matthew Leggatt notes, utopias are often misunderstood as static, harmonious worlds, yet in practice they can mask forms of coercion or stagnation where, what appears ideal on the surface, may, upon closer inspection, reveal dystopian qualities[26]. In *The Hunger Games*, this dynamic is literalised through spectacle, for while the Games are framed as entertainment, a festive national event, they are indeed built upon violence and systemic inequality. Here, rather than conceal this contradiction, the visual splendour of the Capitol aestheticizes it by transforming suffering into spectacle. This aligns with broader arguments in dystopian studies that contemporary audiences are drawn to such narratives precisely because they reflect anxieties embedded in current social conditions rather than in distant futures[27].

The more I study the visual language of this film, the more I see how it reinforces this utopia-dystopia tension through its use of mediated images. The *Games* arena is presented as a constructed environment constantly manipulated by controllers invincible to the tributes, with camera angles frequently shifting between their subjective experience and the omniscient gaze of the Capitol. This offers a dual perspective I find uneasy to possess as an audience-member because, though common with cinema, this makes me both a participant and an observer of the disturbing spectacle. From this dualistic position, I am further drawn into this technologically-influenced spectacle which appears to be a bad dream that increasingly traps modern society in chains by mediating social relations through images and relegating reality to representation[28]. In this sense, the film's dystopia is not only technological, but also perceptual, shaping how individuals see, interpret, and respond to the world around them.

I find it important to point out here that utopian and dystopian narratives do not simply impose meaning; they also invite interpretation and resistance, thereby complicating purely pessimistic readings of dystopian cinema. Rafaela Baccolini highlights this in her claim that 'critical dystopias' can

[25] Leggatt, M. (2026).'Introduction' in *Wastelands and Wonderlands: Utopias and Dystopias in Film and Literature*. New York: State University of New York Press. pp. 1-14.

[26] Ibid. pp. 163-68.

[27] McManus, P. (2026). 'The End of Dystopia,' in *Wastelands and Wonderlands: Utopias and Dystopias in Film and Literature.* ed. by Leggatt, M. New York: State University of New York Press. pp. 213-27

[28] Debord, G. (1967). *The Society of the Spectacle.* Trans. by Knabb, K. (2014). California: Bureau of Public Secrets. p. 7.

also retain a utopian impulse, preserving the possibility of hope even within oppressive systems[29]. While the visual disparities of the districts in *The Hunger Games* is acutely reflected, it also hints at the prospect of a reversal. Here, Katniss's defiance, however limited, gestures toward the emergence of alternative social relations which are forms of solidarity and resistance that resonate with the principles of social innovation. However, by embedding resistance within a highly artificial and commodified narrative, the film risks neutralising its own critique, transforming political struggle into consumable entertainment. Baccolini warns against this commodification of utopian and dystopian images which are often 'transgressive and radical,' but whose effect are downplayed when they are 'tamed, co-opted, and neutralized.'[30]

By bringing these perspectives together in this section, I strive to reinforce the essay's central claim that cinema operates as both a mirror and a mediator of technological anxiety. Through its visual contrasts, narrative structures, and affective intensity, *The Hunger Games* reveals how human perceptions of utopia and dystopia are shaped not only by associated conditions but by systems of representation. In doing so, it underscores the key tension at the heart of both film and social innovation which is the challenge of visualising better futures while remaining critically aware of the forces that shape, distort, and sometimes co-opt those visualisations.

From spectacle to social repair

So far, I have argued how *The Hunger Games* can be read not only as a representation of technological anxiety but as a critical bridge between spectacle, perceived progress, and the possibility of social repair. While utopian cinema indeed contain cracks of dystopic realities, they also carry the possibility of change, a dynamic clearly revealed through the film's visual language of spectacle and deprivation. Yet this is precisely where the film moves beyond representation into critique and repair. For while the spectacle of the Games, including its created violence, omnipresent surveillance, and mediated images all reveal the operation of modern power through images that both reveal and obscure reality, such visions can simultaneously enable counter-visions to challenge dominant narratives.[31] In this sense, the film positions viewers within a contradiction where they are implicated in the spectacle even as they are invited to critique it and perhaps identify measures of repair.

[29] Moylan, T & Baccolini, R. (2013). *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315810775. pp. 1-12.

[30] Baccolini, R. (2020). 'Hope isn't stupid': The Appropriation of Dystopia. *MediAzioni 27*, p. D40.

[31] Mirzoeff, N. *How to See the World*. London: Pelican Books.18/04/2026.

Given that social innovation arises from recognising and responding to harm, as Stott's framework submits, the cinematic rendering of technological systems in *The Hunger Games* can then be seen as part of this process of recognition and repair. While the film does not offer direct solutions, we have seen how, through its accentuation of the ethical failures of innovation when captured by systems of power, it ultimately provides a lens through which individual and collective agency might be navigated, and transformations forged.

However, the movement from spectacle to social repair is rarely linear and remains deeply contested as critics question whether representation can meaningfully translate into transformation. Langdon Winner famously argued that technologies are not neutral but embody specific forms of power and authority, often reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than challenging them.[32] His argument helps us understand the systems depicted in *The Hunger Games* as extensions of broader sociotechnical patterns rather than irregularities, which raises doubts about the possibility of reform from within. But, while these doubts are valid, it is important to note that reform does not necessarily have to be linear or simple. As these technological anxieties tend to appear as fragmented and sometimes unclear resistance, social repair can also adopt similar patterns, presenting first as unclear social outbursts before being consolidated into a defined alternative such as social innovation. Social repair is then differentiated from social harm from the design thinking that seeks to understand the composition of problems, attributing as much importance to this key step as their resolutions. This decries 'Solutionism,' the belief that complex social problems can be resolved through simple technological fixes[33], while agreeing that the same systems producing harm may resist or co-opt attempts at innovation.

In this context, the role of cinema in visualising technological harm risks becoming a closed loop as it can generate emotional engagement but ultimately leave underlying structures intact. Yet, even this underscores the importance of cinema. If, as Fredric Jameson argues, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of existing systems, then films like *The Hunger Games* perform a truly crucial, though limited, function by making these systems visible, contestable, and, hopefully, repairable[34].

Indeed, this movement from spectacle to social repair is, as we have seen, neither linear, nor assured. Rather, it is a contested process shaped by competing forces, such as the capacity of images to expose harm, the risk of their absorption into systems of power, and the uncertain translation of awareness into action. In navigating these tensions, *The Hunger Games* exemplifies how contemporary cinema

[32] Winner, L. (2007). 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?', in *Computer Ethics.* New York: Routledge. pp. 121-37.

[33] Morozov, E. (2013). *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don't Exist.* London: Allen Lane.

[34] Jameson, F. (2003). 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21. pp. 65–79.

both reflects and complicates the relationship between innovation and its human cost, positioning film as a critical, if uncertain, space in which the futures of technology and society are imagined and debated.

Conclusion

The deliberate interdisciplinary framing of this argument has shown how cinema functions as a mirror that reflects technological shortcomings while actively shaping how these are understood, navigated, and transformed. But, as with every balanced perspective, there is a critical limit to this function. Though cinematic representations can expose injustice and provoke reflection, they do not guarantee transformation and actually pose the risk of controlling dissent through spectacle. Yet, within this limitation lies the power of cinematic imaginations. By making the costs of innovation visible and emotionally resonant, cinema open up a space for questioning, critique, and, most importantly, the imagination of alternative futures.

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